

# Rebuild World **II**

**Part Two**

**Revengeware**



**Author: Nahuse**

**Illustrator: Gin**

**Environmental Artist: yish**

**Mechanical Designer: cell**



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The advanced civilization that once dominated the world crumbled to ruins long ago. As ages pass, the survivors have begun piecing together the fragments of its wisdom and glory as they struggle to rebuild their world.



There had been a time when he could  
only put up with being robbed and  
running for his life. Yet now he'd  
chosen to stand his ground, hold on  
to what was his, and kill.

# ***Rebuild World II***

*The advanced civilization that once dominated the world crumbled to ruins long ago. As ages pass, the survivors have begun piecing together the fragments of its wisdom and glory as they struggle to rebuild their world.*

## **Part Two Revengeware**

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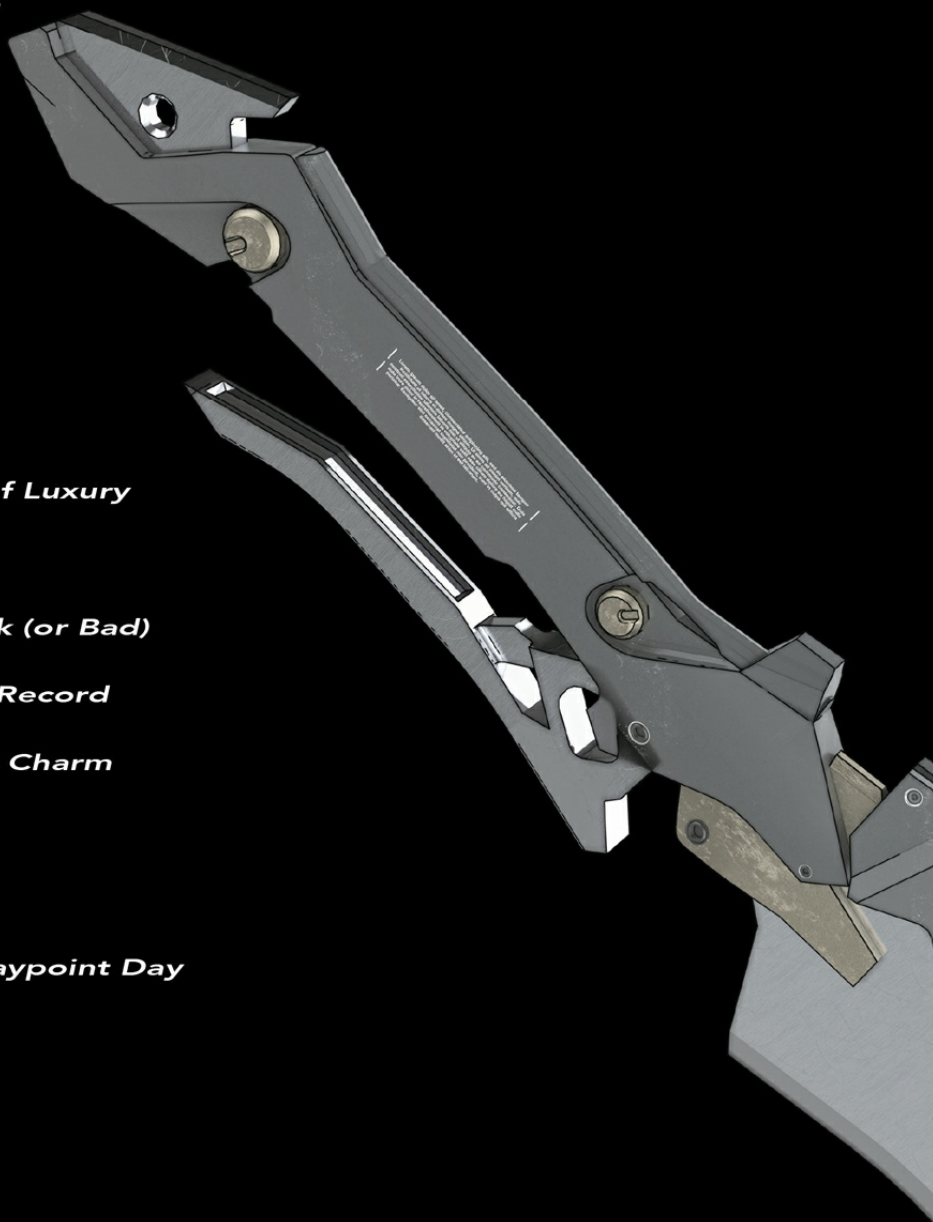
# >Episode 002

**Part Two** *Revengeware*

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The advanced civilization that once dominated the world crumbled to ruins long ago. As ages pass, the survivors have begun piecing together the fragments of its wisdom and glory as they struggle to rebuild their world.

**Rebuild World**



## Chapter 50: Intruders Underground

Kugamayama City's Department of Long-Term Strategy was determined to end the Yarata scorpion infestation beneath the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins. The DLS had recruited Akira by name to assist with the extermination. Roped into a weeklong contract, the young hunter had only narrowly survived swarm attacks on his first and second days in the underground districts.

Scorpions hadn't been his only surprise: a dispute with Shiori, a woman who hunted in a maid outfit, had nearly turned deadly, while Elena's and Sara's skill had astonished him during their patrol together. Yet he had come through it all more or less unscathed. Now, at the dawn of the third day, Akira headed back to the tunnels, hoping against hope that, for once, nothing would go wrong—and ignoring his own instincts, which said otherwise.

His first day on the job had seen Akira assigned to the security team, his second day to the recon team. Day three found him working security again, but not guarding a checkpoint. His current job was to install a new type of illumination. These lights, which doubled as basic relays and scanners, would not only improve communications in areas that had already been secured, but also enable headquarters to rapidly detect and respond to any changes in the terrain.

The system served as a countermeasure against certain difficulties that had recently cropped up: scorpions tunneling new routes to assault checkpoints in areas that had already been cleared, or disguising themselves as walls of rubble to convince scouts that cave-ins had blocked passages. Akira had gotten mixed up in both incidents, and he'd overcome them only by taking advantage of a certain clause in his contract—the one that obligated his client to cover his ammo costs—and burning through heaps of costly proprietary cartridges with his CWH anti-materiel rifle.

The new lighting would do much to restore people's trust in the safety of the



secured areas and the reliability of their maps. Yet the tunnels were extensive, and most of the lights already in place lacked any additional features. Replacing them all would take time. So the order had come down to start with the lights around headquarters and work outward from there.

At the moment, Akira was trudging through brightly lit tunnels with a group of other hunters, swapping out each light they came to for one of the higher-end models kept in the hand truck they lugged with them.

*Hey, Alpha, he said while he worked. I've been thinking: Why didn't they just put up these better lights in the first place?*

Alpha analyzed the question, weighed her options, and computed that satisfying Akira mattered more than accuracy. *It takes a lot of lights to cover all these tunnels. They probably went with lower-end models to save money.*

*Oh, I can see that.*

*They tried to be cheap, and it ended up costing them extra. It's a simple mistake—try not to repeat it,* Alpha added, with a knowing smile.

Akira responded with a taunting grin of his own. *You don't have to tell me twice, but I'll be depending on you to help me out with that.*

*Of course! You can count on me!* Alpha beamed confidently. Akira had accepted her explanation without question and responded just as she'd predicted. Slowly but steadily, she was learning how his mind worked.

Akira's group continued replacing lights until there were no more of the new models in their hand truck. Then they turned back, reloaded it, and began again. The hunters took turns pulling the truck, installing lights, or standing guard. Nothing too complicated, but they had to work in teams: the city was taking the recent scorpion attacks seriously and wanted its contractors to be ready to defend themselves. But more importantly, surprisingly valuable relics—discovered deep in the underground districts—had piqued the city's interest. In addition to exterminating the scorpions, the hired hunters were now tasked with retrieving this cache—which hopefully would justify the cost of installing the expensive new lighting.



As the day wore on, however, Akira found himself working alone. The rest of his team had finished their minimum shifts and gone home. Akira considered returning to base with them. But when he called headquarters, an operator told him to keep working—they would send reinforcements right away. Reflecting, Akira decided that he might as well keep at it. They'd only asked him to wait in a well-lit area that had already been cleared, not in the uncharted darkness.

So for a while, he continued on by himself. But by the time he had replaced most of the new lights on his hand truck with old models, his new crew still hadn't arrived.

*They're sure taking their sweet time*, he grumbled, managing to look suspicious, annoyed, and a little nervous all at the same time. He had been promised immediate reinforcements. Did their failure to appear presage something unpleasant in his future? He couldn't help but wonder.

*Try to be patient*, Alpha responded, cheerful and soothing. *I'm keeping a lookout, so don't worry about monsters getting the drop on you. And look on the bright side: this slow, safe solo task counts toward your work hours. You're in luck today.*

*I guess*, Akira reluctantly admitted. He noticed Alpha wearing the smile she always did when they were out of danger. Perhaps, he reflected, after two days of hectic action, it wasn't too bad working a shift so uneventful that it seemed downright dull.

But just as he mustered a grin of his own, Alpha's expression hardened. *Keep your guard up, just in case.*

*What's wrong?* Akira asked, instantly serious and alert. Alpha's smile hadn't faltered while he'd been fighting unsuspecting scorpions in the dark the day before. Her changed appearance now might mean he was already in more danger than he'd faced on his expedition with Elena's team.

*There's a suspicious person over there, and they're armed.* Alpha pointed down the corridor.

*That's gotta be a hunter*, Akira argued, bemused. *Nothing weird about running into another one down here, and there's nothing suspicious about a hunter carrying weapons.*



*Your work terminals identify each other at close range, Alpha explained earnestly. It helps you to locate anyone who needs rescue and to avoid friendly fire.*

*I know that. So what?*

*This person isn't broadcasting their coordinates. That means their work terminal is broken, they turned it off, or they never had one in the first place. What odds would you give that it's just a simple malfunction?*

The hunters' work terminals had to be built tough for the wasteland. And even if one did break in combat with monsters, the hunter carrying it was unlikely to keep prowling the tunnels without noticing the loss. If that wasn't the case here, Akira finally realized, he was dealing with someone who didn't want their location known.

Alarmed, he focused on the suspicious newcomer, and Alpha augmented his vision with an enlarged view. The other person was walking alone and didn't seem to have noticed Akira at this distance.

Akira hesitated briefly, then called headquarters. "This is Twenty-Seven. Come in, HQ."

"This is HQ. We've already dispatched your new team. Just sit tight a little longer. HQ out."

"Wait, it's not about that. I've spotted someone who looks like a hunter, but I can't exchange coordinates with them. What should I do?"

"Are you sure?"

"You think I'm making this up to kill time? You don't have to believe me, but I'll leave whoever it is alone unless you tell me what to do," Akira replied acidly. He could have gotten away with not reporting the potentially dangerous stranger—if not for Alpha, he wouldn't even have noticed them. But he was on the security team, and he wanted to do his job right. If headquarters didn't believe his report, that was on them—he'd done his part.

"Okay, okay," the operator said, convinced by Akira's tone. The scanners in the new lights hadn't detected anyone, but they didn't offer enough coverage yet for the operator to trust them over a man on the ground. "Their terminal

might be broken. Go check, and let them call us on yours if it is.”

“And if it’s *not* broken?”

“Bring them to HQ if you can. If they resist, you’re authorized to take suitable measures. We won’t complain about the results. Work with your reinforcements to bring the situation under control. Contact us if anything changes. Over.”

“Roger that. Twenty-Seven out.” Akira ended the call and heaved a sigh.

*Don’t hesitate to kill if you need to, Alpha cautioned. You have permission.*

*I figured as much.* Akira scowled. He supposed that HQ must have considered a malfunctioning terminal to be a real possibility, since it had been their first suggestion. But they also thought he might have to fight for his life, or they wouldn’t have given those orders so matter-of-factly. Deciding that it was still too soon to point a weapon at the stranger, he kept his AAH assault rifle—loaded with powerful overpressure ammunition—lowered but ready, prepared to raise and fire at a moment’s notice.

*Alpha, if anything happens, I’m counting on your support.*

*Sure thing. Leave it to me!* Alpha smiled, as spirited as ever.

Reassured, Akira took a deep breath, steeled himself, and shouted, “Hey, heads up! I’m not picking up your terminal! Is it broken?!”

His voice echoed through the tunnels, down to where the man was making his way through a passage farther in. The stranger gave a start. He looked around for a few moments, trying to find the source of the shout. At last, he spotted Akira, then looked from the boy to his terminal and back several times. Then he smiled, waved, pointed repeatedly to his terminal, and beckoned Akira closer.

He was behaving exactly like a hunter with a broken terminal—as if, alerted to the presence of another hunter by Akira’s shout, he had wondered why the boy hadn’t simply called him on his terminal, then realized that it wasn’t working and waved Akira closer so that he could contact headquarters. Nothing about him seemed suspicious. Nevertheless, Akira warily kept his distance. Suspecting a trap, he waited to see what the man would do next.



The man gave him a confused look, then stopped beckoning and walked toward him. Akira figured he was being paranoid, but he couldn't be too careful. He slowly trained his rifle on the man when the stranger got too close for his liking.

The man appeared to flinch and stopped in his tracks for a moment. He raised his hands slightly and shook his head from side to side. Then, despite the rifle pointed at him, he resumed his approach gingerly, like he was testing how Akira would react.

Akira relaxed. The man seemed harmless, and Alpha had issued no warnings, so he lowered his rifle again. The stranger's expression softened in relief, and he slowly lowered his hands as he kept advancing. He had already closed most of the distance between them.

Once the man reached a pillar in the center of the large room they both occupied, he smiled, held up his terminal, and pointed to it again. Akira stared at the device, and the man held it higher, as if trying to show him something. Without realizing it, Akira followed the terminal with his gaze, completely losing track of the man's other arm. He dropped his guard and relaxed his grip on his rifle, letting it droop until it hung limply at his side.

*Bang!* The man whipped out a pistol with his free hand, and a shot rang out, faster than Akira could react.

The first shot grazed Akira's cheek. The second struck the work terminal strapped to his left arm. The third hit the rubble beside him, smashing it with greater force than any normal handgun bullet. Every shot had been aimed straight at Akira, and they'd caught him too flat-footed to even think of dodging.

But Alpha had seized control of his suit, forcing him to take evasive action and narrowly avoiding the pistol fire. At the same time, she brought his right arm up to counterattack. The AAH spat a long burst of overpressure ammo.

Too late! The man had already ducked behind the nearby pillar, out of Akira's line of fire. And while the boy's powerful bullets could penetrate steel plates with ease, Old World construction was too tough for them. They ricocheted first off the pillar, then off the walls and floor, scattering around the room.

While Akira's right hand fired his rifle, the rest of his body also kept moving without his input. It swiftly dove into the rubble of an almost completely demolished storefront and took cover behind a fragment of ruined wall.

The man's arm appeared from behind the pillar and resumed firing.

Akira's rifle sight sent video to Alpha via its link to his scanner. Extrapolating from the information it provided, she determined that they had no chance of hitting the man. Yet she still kept firing, burning through ammo to limit the man's options and buy Akira time to come to his senses.

*Akira! Snap out of it!*

After several telepathic yells, Akira finally jerked back to reality. His face contorted as his head cleared and he felt pain—Alpha hadn't been gentle with him. Even so, this agony was the smallest price he could have paid to escape death. If Alpha had taken it slow to spare him some pain, a bullet between the eyes would have blown the contents of his skull out the back of his head.

Akira gritted his teeth to stop the pain from dazing him again, while his rattled mind tried to make sense of the situation. How had he landed in this mess? All he could remember was that he had an enemy out there, and that he'd done a pathetic job of fighting back. While Alpha had moved him out of harm's way, he had stared vacantly into the muzzle of his enemy's gun, too stupefied to act in a world that seemed to move at a crawl. All of his alertness had done him no good, and a self-reproving scowl crossed Akira's face.

Then, his back against the rubble, he faced forward and locked eyes with Alpha. *What's going on?*

Alpha flashed him a relieved grin. *It's good to have you back, Akira. Are you all right?*

*Yeah*, he replied, his expression thick with regret and remorse. *Sorry. I couldn't move.*

*Don't let it bother you. Supporting you through times like that is part of my job, remember?* Alpha's gentle smile seemed to say that it was no big deal.

*Yeah, you're right.* Akira roused himself with a forced grin. Resolve was *his* job, his burden—and getting discouraged would only make him more of a



liability.

Alpha gave a satisfied nod and began to explain. Their enemy, it turned out, was quite savvy. He understood the difference between fighting monsters and fighting fellow humans, and both his gear and his skills seemed adapted for the latter. His handgun allowed him to draw and fire nearly instantly with the minimum firepower necessary to kill. And despite their counterattack, the man was uninjured. He'd probably even planned the time and place of his assault so that he could immediately dive for cover if it failed. Finally, Akira's work terminal was broken, shattered when Alpha used it to shield him from one of his enemy's bullets—and the man might even have aimed for it deliberately once his target had dodged the first shot.

Akira realized that his enemy had taken no chances, even when trying to kill a kid like him. A lot of people had assaulted him in the past, but they had all looked down on him to some degree, and their arrogance had often saved his life. But not this one. Despite his obviously greater skill, he had stayed on his guard and even lulled Akira into a false sense of security. His performance had been perfectly natural, betraying no hint of hostility.

He'd refused to underestimate Akira, and in that sense, he was completely unlike any adversary the boy had ever faced.

Akira's face twisted, and not just with pain. *Now I know where I stand. Do you think I can take him?*

*Of course,* Alpha replied. He looked grim, but she met his gaze, her face fearless and decisive. *His luck ran out the moment his ambush failed.*

*That's good to hear.* Akira chuckled, his spirits buoyed. *Will my body hold up? I ache all over.*

*You'll be fine. Take a recovery capsule now—one of the pricey ones.*

*You're sure a cheap one won't cut it?*

*Sure it will, if you don't mind tearing your limbs clean off.*

*Pricey it is, then,* Akira quipped. He felt composed enough to banter again, even though the subject was no laughing matter.

To win this fight, he would need to push his suit-enhanced body so far past its limits that only medicine from the ruins could hold it together. He was down to the last of his Old World capsules, but saving them wouldn't help him if he died. So he gulped one down and felt his pain vanish as its effects spread through him. Then he popped another dose into his mouth and held it there without swallowing.

*All right, then—it's time to strike back, Alpha declared. Are you ready, Akira?*

*Yeah. That's my end of our deal.*

He *would* kill his enemy and survive. He had done it often before, and he would probably do it often again. Nothing made this time any different, he told himself—not even an expert opponent. And so, stifling his useless stress and fear with pure resolve, he shrugged off his backpack for ease of movement and waited for Alpha's signal.

*Get ready, Alpha said. Three, two, one...*

Grim and determined, Akira released his AAH and hefted his CWH instead. He knew what its cartridges could do—any hit from them could kill.

*Zero!*

Akira sprang out from behind the rubble.



Yajima could hardly believe that his perfectly timed sneak attack had failed. Nevertheless, he calmly assessed the boy's skill from his hiding place behind the pillar.

*He was definitely off his guard. No one could fake that look on his face. I took him by surprise, and I was as quick on the draw as always.*

Once again, Yajima looked for a flaw in his tactics and found none. Even the best scanner was no protection against someone its user failed to recognize as a threat. Yajima had seen the boy's rifle, and he *knew* that his calculated response had lulled his target into a false sense of security. He should have been able to kill Akira before the boy suspected his trick. And even if the kid *had* noticed, it should have been too late for him to do anything about it.



*But he dodged. His reflexes are off the charts! Is he on speed stims? The high-end kind that you can only buy with coron? Or does he have neural augments?*

Numerous drugs derived from Old World relics were bought and sold throughout the East. Their effects ranged from temporary bursts of strength or concentration to curing fatigue and healing wounds. And, in the case of speed stims, they could speed up the user's mental processes, allowing them to experience the world in slow motion. Some potent Old World speed stims even made it possible for their users to follow a bullet's trajectory with the naked eye.

In shoot-outs with powerful weapons, death was usually instantaneous for friend and foe alike. A moment's delay in action or judgment could prove fatal. Many hunters took speed stims to stretch out that vital moment and seize the initiative. Yet, while the drugs conferred massive advantages, they were also known for severe side effects. These were less of a concern with expensive stims, which were designed and manufactured with the user's safety in mind, but overdosing—or resorting to cheaper alternatives—carried a risk of brain death.

But for those Easterners willing to alter their own brains in search of greater mental processing power, there lay another possibility: neural augments. These came in a variety of forms: nanomachine injections to enhance neurotransmitters, mechanical implants to improve brain function, and more. These procedures yielded impressive results—when they succeeded. But any change to the brain naturally carried considerable risks, and these augments exacted a toll on the user's body and mind, in addition to the hefty medical bills.

The steep costs made both speed stims and neural augments a last resort, usually reserved for combat—or moments when conflict seemed imminent. It seemed impossible that anyone could even think of using either when caught completely off guard. Yet now Yajima wondered if he was fighting an exception to that rule. (And strictly speaking, he wasn't wrong: Akira was an Old Domain User, so his brain *was* augmented in the broadest sense of the term, the only reason he could benefit from Alpha's support.)

*Either way, what's someone who constantly overclocks his brain doing here? Or was that his base reaction speed? No, it can't be—the only hunters in this*

*area should be the pushovers stuck installing lights. There's no way one of them could dodge my— Suddenly, Yajima's expression hardened, a new possibility flitting across his mind. Could he be a municipal agent? Did the city get wind of our plan and send a veteran operative, placed in a cyborg body that looks like a kid? Maybe I'm overthinking this, but he's still bad news. I'd better make this quick.*

Yajima contacted his accomplices via a transmitter installed in his head. The device kept their conversation inaudible to anyone nearby. *It's me. What's your situation? Has the tunnel reached the surface yet?*

*We ain't even started,* came the equally soundless reply. *You told us to wait until the relics were almost here.*

Yajima clicked his tongue. *Change of plans. Get that hole open and transport the relics ASAP. And send Kain and Nelia to join me.*

*Hey now, what've you gotten yourself into?*

*Our plan may have leaked to the city. I ran into a guy who dodged my quick draw, and I can't figure out what he's doing here. Worst-case scenario, the city has agents mixed in with the security guards, and they're onto us.*

*City agents?! What the hell?! I ain't taking on Kugamayama! You said we'd be in the clear!*

*Shut up! We picked a fight with the city the moment we started swiping relics it'd staked a claim to. We'll be fine as long as we kill this guy now and clear out, capisce? So get to work.* Having delivered his terse order, Yajima cut off the call.

He and his accomplices were relic thieves. Some of their allies had already infiltrated the recon team, rounding up valuable finds under the pretense of exploration. The whole haul would undoubtedly sell for a fortune. Of course, they couldn't just carry their loot out through the normal exit—headquarters was in the way. So they had opted to gather relics in one place underground and then look for another way out. And all had gone according to plan—until the city's hunters had started installing the new, multipurpose lights. This network of cameras and motion sensors would hamper the thieves' ability to move relics through the tunnels, let alone smuggle them outside. And if anyone uncovered their hidden stash, suspicion would immediately fall on Yajima and



his crew, who had been working security and recon nearby. So they needed to hide their work while the old lights were still in place, wrapping up their task before the new devices could be linked into a powerful surveillance network.

Reluctantly, Yajima had called an end to the relic hunt and ordered his people to make a new route to the surface themselves. Then he had left them to transport the haul while he patrolled the tunnels, monitoring the situation and guarding their hidden relics. He had disabled his work terminal to prevent the people at headquarters from tracking him—this might have aroused their suspicions, but not enough for them to act immediately.

He had also taken pains to avoid other hunters' notice, although he didn't actually try to hide or do anything else drastic enough to invite awkward questions if he was discovered. Even so, he should have been safe—his body was equipped with enough camouflage to slip past most scanners.

But Alpha was no ordinary scout, and her scan had penetrated his cover.

So, although more rattled than he had let on when Akira called out, Yajima had pretended to be harmless and looked about for whoever had spotted him. To his eyes, the boy had seemed like any other rookie hunter—probably a member of Druncam or some other syndicate that had finagled him a job in the scorpion extermination. Relieved, Yajima had concluded that this kid had probably only noticed him by sheer luck. If he killed the young hunter before the boy could make a report, Yajima could buy the time he needed. Such was his train of thought, all of which passed in a moment's snap judgment. He had immediately acted on it.

Which had landed him in his present dilemma.



As soon as Akira cleared the rubble, he trained his CWH on Yajima. With Alpha's support, he could clearly perceive the man on the other side of the pillar. His aim was steady, even though the pillar still blocked his line of fire.

He pulled the trigger without hesitation.

Recoil slammed Akira back as the cartridge blasted into the pillar at close range. The bullet struck with a crash, boring a hole at the impact point, and the

sturdy column buckled and cracked around it. But the projectile still stopped short of its target—it would take more than that to pierce rugged Old World construction.

Not that Akira had expected it to, of course. He focused on his next shot, waiting for his opponent to break from cover—the man would have felt the deep impact against his back. But would he flee right or left? Most people would have had to bet on a fifty-fifty chance, with a wrong answer leaving them open to a counterattack. Akira, however, could see exactly what Yajima was doing. Moreover, there was a world of difference between his proprietary cartridges and the man's pistol bullets: Akira didn't need headshots to kill. So he waited, ready to put a bullet through the man's chest—a larger target—when he fled from cover.

But Yajima stayed put, shouting, "Wait! Don't shoot! I'm sorry! I pegged you for an enemy, but I was wrong! It's complicated!"

Akira frowned, perplexed—not because he believed a word of it, but because he couldn't understand why anyone would tell such an obvious lie.

"Let's talk!" Yajima continued, desperation in his voice. "We can work this out! I'm on the recon team, but another hunter broke my terminal so I can't call HQ! Call them for me! That'll clear up this misunderstanding!"

Not bothering to answer, Akira pulled the trigger again. Another devastating projectile struck the exact same spot. It still failed to penetrate, but the cracks in the pillar spread and widened.

*It sure is tough,* he remarked. *That's an Old World ruin for you.*

*But it won't hold out much longer,* Alpha gleefully responded. *Keep it up!*

Akira nodded and fired yet again. If Yajima wouldn't come out, then he would keep targeting the weak point he'd made in the pillar until one of his shots broke through and killed the man. If his enemy panicked and dove out of hiding, he would strike then. And if the man tried to get out of the line of fire by shifting position behind the pillar, he would blast the column apart and his target with it. Akira would take no chances. He had the man dead to rights, he told himself as he held his rifle steady and let loose another round. The proprietary bullet struck its target with another thunderous crash, leaving the

pillar closer than ever to its breaking point.



Behind his crumbling shield, Yajima continued to analyze his situation with perfect calm.

*He ignores my shouts and keeps attacking. No demand for surrender, no trying to capture me. Maybe he's not a municipal agent, then?*

A city operative would have tried to take Yajima alive for questioning. They were too professional to just kill a target and leave it at that, unlike his opponent. So maybe he was up against an ordinary hunter after all.

*I don't see him trying to contact HQ either. Is his work terminal broken? Or is he so pissed off he forgot to report in? But which is it? Is he just mad? No, there's nothing frenzied about these shots. In which case, I must have managed to take out his terminal earlier.* Yajima's grin broadened with one less concern to worry about.

*This pillar won't last much longer. I guess he's using some kind of anti-materiel warhead. CWH proprietary ammo, maybe? Why is a grunt who's putting up lights carrying something like that around?* He considered the question briefly, then dismissed it as unimportant. *Oh well. All that matters is that I know he's lugging a huge gun around. Still...* Yajima sneered. *Okay, okay. Things aren't looking too bad. As long as I kill him here, HQ will take a while to figure out what happened. I've got nothing to worry about.*

The pillar he had his back against shuddered. It could only withstand one more shot, Yajima realized. The one after that would blow it apart and hit him. He smiled, savoring his predicament, and raised his pistol to eye level. Then Akira's next bullet hit, and behind the now precarious pillar, Yajima sprang into action.



Akira noticed Yajima's movement. Assuming that the man had finally given up on the crumbling pillar, he prepared to shoot the moment his enemy broke cover.

But instead, Yajima spun in place, driving a savage roundhouse kick into the



side of the pillar. The column, already on its last legs after Akira's barrage, disintegrated into a cloud of airborne debris under the coup de grâce.

Akira instinctively jerked aside to avoid the chunks of masonry hurtling toward him, his face frozen in shock. Then he glimpsed Yajima taking aim at him through the flying debris.

Yajima saw the boy's CWH and grinned to himself, his guess confirmed. The rifle's barrel couldn't keep up with his movements—it was as heavy as its ammunition was powerful. The powered suit made it possible to steady and aim the bulky weapon with precision, but moving it still took time. Yajima couldn't shrug off a shot from a rifle that could put a dent in the pillar, but neither could his opponent fire quickly and accurately at a fast-moving target while dodging debris. He felt certain that the recoil-intensive proprietary ammo would never hit him, and he was right.

Yajima knew he'd won. Mildly accelerating his mental processes, he tried to align his weapon with Akira's head. A surprising number of hunters went without headgear, offering targets against which even a pistol bullet could be lethal. His smile deepened—this would be business as usual.

With a start, he realized that while the anti-materiel rifle wasn't pointed his way, it also wasn't in his target's grip—the CWH was about to enter free fall. Instead, though Akira was clearly surprised, his hands had shifted to his AAH.

Both hunters fired at each other through the screen of airborne debris. When the echoes of gunshots faded and the bits of pillar finished clattering to the floor, silence returned to the chamber.



After his shoot-out with Yajima, Akira somehow managed to take cover behind some nearby rubble. Alpha's forced maneuvers had hurt him like crazy, but most of the agony was already ebbing away, courtesy of a recovery capsule. She'd done everything without any say from him, although he had at least managed to follow and comprehend what was happening.

He'd dropped his CWH, quickly switched to his assault rifle, and opened fire—all while dodging his enemy's bullets and chunks of masonry. Then he'd caught the CWH in his free hand and retreated to his present hiding spot. He had

escaped death, at least for the present.

He let out a sigh of relief, although his expression remained grim. *Well, Alpha?*

*He's still kicking, unfortunately,* she replied. *We weren't able to fire effectively because the debris cloud got in the way. We still got a few shots in, but they don't seem to have done much damage—he must have pretty good body armor.*

*So he can shrug off overpressure ammo?* Akira scowled, displeased that his enemy outclassed him in gear as well as skill. *He must be tough, then—those cartridges pack enough punch to kill Yarata scorpions. Does that mean shooting him with an AAH is a waste of time?*

*Well, we did manage to wreck his spare gun.*

*Meaning his firepower took a big hit?*

*It's hard to say, since his main weapon seems to be that pistol.*

Akira exhaled. *Alpha, I know I've asked this before, but I can win this, right?*

*Of course you can! We had no trouble fighting off his surprise attack just now, remember?*

*I guess so,* Akira answered slowly. He gave a wry grin, reflecting that he and Alpha must have different standards for what qualified as “trouble.”

*Don't worry,* Alpha reassured him. *Nothing left in this room can stand up to multiple CWH proprietary cartridges. So let's overwhelm him with firepower!*

*On it!* Akira tightened his grip on the anti-materiel rifle once more.



On the far side of a different heap of rubble, Yajima scowled. Twice now, his target had surprised him by dodging an attack he'd felt certain would kill.

*It happened again! I definitely caught him off guard, but he reacted without a moment's delay. How can he pull off such a split-second response with that stunned look on his face? He couldn't be doing the same thing I am...could he?*

A jolt against Yajima's back cut his speculation short. Akira was bombarding his cover again, and although he'd hidden behind the densest rubble available,

it couldn't match the pillar's durability. Stealthily, he slipped away before the powerful rifle could penetrate his makeshift barricade. But Akira's next shot also flew straight at Yajima, despite the obstacles hiding him from sight.

*His aim's too good! He must be using a high-end scanner. But what's a hunter with one of those doing around here? And with proprietary ammo? Even if the city did send him, who brings a CWH to fight human targets? There's better gear for the job.* Then Yajima's puzzlement gave way to grim severity as another possibility crossed his mind. *Don't tell me he expected to need this level of anti-materiel firepower?! That means he's even onto them!*

Yajima hesitated. "I didn't want to use this, since it's not exactly subtle," he muttered. "Still, I guess I've got no choice." He made up his mind to use his last resort. The tactic risked broadcasting his group's presence and putting headquarters on alert, but they'd still have an easier time slipping under the radar with Akira dead.



Akira spotted something flying out from behind Yajima's rubble barrier and immediately shot it down, taking it for a grenade. It exploded, spewing white smoke and swiftly blanketing the whole area in dense fog.

Taken aback, Akira still aimed at Yajima the moment he saw the man spring from cover. Despite the concealing smoke, it should have been an easy shot, as his rifle sight was linked to his scanner. Yet just as he was about to pull the trigger, Yajima's red-highlighted figure blurred and vanished from his display. At the same time, the video feed from his sight lapsed into static.

Though startled, he still pulled the trigger, but his shot merely carved a path through the drifting smoke until it collided with a wall.

Bullets flew at Akira out of the cloud. The gunfire was mostly meant to limit his movements, and he avoided injury by quickly ducking behind debris. Even so, he looked grim.

*Alpha, what just happened?* he demanded. *My sight freaked out!*

*It's suffering the effects of jamming smoke,* Alpha replied. *That thing he threw must have been a smoke grenade.*

Jamming smoke, a byproduct of attempts to analyze the colorless fog, contained particles that impaired sensors and communications. The accuracy of Akira's scanner had dropped sharply, causing his rifle sight to malfunction. The smoke had been developed to combat monsters with scouting capabilities, but the popularity of scanners had led to its use in battles between humans as well.

*Jamming smoke is useless against Yarata scorpions down here, Alpha added. They don't have ranged weaponry, and they attack in great numbers. So a smoke screen would only make it easier to lose track of a swarm and get overrun. He must have brought that grenade with other hunters in mind.*

Akira pulled a face. *Ugh! We did pretty good against all those scorpions the last two days, but now this one guy is turning out to be a real hassle. I guess fighting people really is different from hunting monsters.*

*Naturally, Alpha agreed, with a shrewd smile. How do you think humans have survived with so many monsters roaming the wasteland?*

Akira considered, then flashed a rueful grin. *I guess you have a point.* Now that he was a full-fledged hunter with the gear and suit to prove it, he had almost come to see monsters as the only threats he faced—until this mess had come along to remind him how dangerous his fellow humans could be.

Akira's new insight made sense, however: the human race's tenacity and cunning kept it alive in the monster-infested East—and when humans fought, they turned those advantages on each other.



## Chapter 51: Turnabout

After the jamming smoke thwarted his shot at Yajima, Akira waited to see what his enemy would do next. Before long, several more objects, akin to the first, flew from behind the smoke-shrouded rubble. His CWH couldn't fire fast enough to intercept all of them.

His AAH did just fine, though.

One object exploded on contact with his bullets—an impact-sensitive hand grenade. The rest were jamming smoke grenades, which released their contents as soon as his shots destroyed their shells. Propelled by the gust from the explosion, the smoke rapidly spread to cover a much wider area.

Thanks to Alpha retuning the settings on his scanner, Akira had at last regained some ability to monitor his surroundings via its display. But this fresh wave of smoke put an end to that. The cloud now blanketed the whole chamber and beyond, and his sensors showed nothing but static over that entire area. Akira pushed his visor up onto his forehead—checking its display was a waste of time. The smoke was thinning as it spread, but he could still barely make out anything more than ten meters away.

*I'm guessing he can't see me in this either, Alpha,* he said. *Do you think he's planning to run away before the smoke clears?* If so, Akira was in luck. Although he felt a little conflicted about letting his enemy escape, he wouldn't have dreamed of trying to hunt the man down.

Alpha, however, quashed his naive optimism. *Jamming smoke can be tuned to minimize interference with specific tracking methods. If he calibrated his grenades to work with his scanner, he should be able to detect you almost as well as before.*

*So he can see me, but I can't see him? That's a handy trick!* said Akira sarcastically as he thought back to the time he'd rescued Elena and Sara. He'd been able to pick off the attackers with ease, while they were left groping for his position in the colorless fog. Now he found himself in their shoes. He

wouldn't be able to spot his enemy escaping, but if he tried to run, the man would notice and attack him from behind.

*Don't worry, Alpha reassured him, grinning smugly. We'll just wait for him to get overconfident, then crush him.*

Akira wondered what she was planning. Still, he couldn't think of any way out himself, and he'd made up his mind to trust her. Looking determined, he replied, *I don't know what you've got in mind, but I'm counting on you!*

*You won't regret it!*

Alpha gave him her usual confident grin, and Akira listened attentively to her instructions, his eyes fixed on her face, as he switched back to his anti-materiel rifle.



As the white jamming smoke cleared, sporadic bursts of gunfire rang out amid the scenery that was slowly emerging from the haze. Large chunks of rubble shattered under direct hits from the CWH's proprietary ammo. But although Yajima lurked behind one such obstacle, he remained completely unfazed.

*So, he's not going to run, the man mused. That'll make it easy to finish him off. It would be even easier if he made a break for it so I could shoot him in the back, but I guess that's too much to hope for.*

Yajima smiled complacently, even as another chunk of rubble disintegrated beside him. His scanner kept him apprised of everything Akira did, and the boy's firing stance indicated that the thief had little to worry about for now.

Keeping low to the ground, he crept behind another bit of cover. His jamming smoke had completely disabled his enemy's scanner—why else would the boy fire indiscriminately at potential hiding spots? Even so, he took care never to enter Akira's field of view as he skulked through the thinning smoke, lest the boy find him by accident.

He slipped around the chamber in a wide arc until at last he was in position to shoot Akira from behind. Viewing his target's defenseless back on his scanner's display, Yajima felt that now he need only strike the next time Akira wasted a shot, and victory would be his.

Then he changed his mind.

*Calm down. I had him dead to rights twice already, and both times he turned the tables on me. Next time, I won't take any chances—I'll strike once the time is ripe. The smoke will last. I can't rush this if I want to make certain he dies.*

Feigning harmlessness to get close enough for a short-range quick draw was a skill practically useless against hardy monsters—but highly effective against people. Yajima took pride in how he had honed his technique and successfully taken down many targets with it. So he felt all the more desire to eliminate the person who had defeated it. Yes, he'd called for backup in case Akira turned out to be a municipal agent, and yes, he could have fled to join his collaborators. But he had stayed to fight it out instead—at a subconscious level, he longed to kill the boy personally, to soothe his injured ego. So he took the utmost care, determined not to miss his next shot.

At the same time, he felt driven by a growing impatience. He told himself he just wanted to finish things up before headquarters caught on and dispatched a search party. In truth, however, anxiety gripped him over the possibility that his team would arrive before he got his kill, depriving him of his chance to prove his superior skill. He would have to strike, he decided, as soon as Akira turned to fire in the opposite direction again.

Just to be safe, he reloaded his pistol with armor-piercing overpressure cartridges. Not even a cyborg cranium, armored like a tank, could protect Akira against these. The knowledge calmed him as he concentrated on his target's movements. Yajima wanted his bullet to hit Akira right after the boy fired his CWH. But waiting until Akira pulled the trigger would be too slow for his liking. Yajima determined to launch his sneak attack just as the boy settled into his firing stance and focused his whole attention forward. He couldn't afford to miss even the slightest twitch from his target.

So just as Akira shifted position, preparing to absorb the recoil from his next shot, Yajima sprang out of hiding and sprinted toward the boy. Akira's rifle was pointed in the other direction. In his mind's eye, Yajima had already finished lining up his shot. He didn't need to adjust his aim after getting in position—thanks to his long experience and intensive training, he had no difficulty keeping his pistol pointing exactly where he wanted it to. And even if he missed,

as he had on his two previous attempts, he was close enough to dart in and kill his target in melee combat. He wouldn't give the boy time to fire his CWH again or to switch to his assault rifle.

Yajima felt certain of his victory.

His right arm flew off, still clutching his pistol.

Akira had swung the CWH behind him with one hand, firing without even turning to look. The devastating projectile pulverized Yajima's weapon and the hand that held it. Then it bored a straight line through his arm, shattering his wrist, elbow, and shoulder. Slivers of shredded machinery scattered all around him.

The impact flung Yajima backward onto the floor, electronics poking out where his missing arm used to meet his body. "Impossible," he stammered, his face a mask of astonishment. The shot had seriously damaged his body—even the parts it hadn't blown clean off—but it was the mental shock that paralyzed him. He felt no pain, but confusion left him rooted to the spot, unable to grasp just what had happened.



As far as Yajima could tell, his target had been tracking him with a powerful scanner but had lost sight of him in the jamming smoke. And sure enough, Yajima had in fact completely eluded Akira.

Alpha, however, had always known exactly where to find him.

She had never needed a scanner to scout the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins. Even underground, she could locate threats with greater precision than any ordinary sensor. And she had also applied her own superior analysis to Akira's scanner data, eliminating most of the jamming's impact on his equipment. Moreover, Yajima's smoke was tuned to allow a single specific tracking method—and Alpha had figured out which one, dramatically reducing the smoke's effects. Without knowing the smoke's composition ahead of time, performing this sort of analysis in such a short time would have been impossible for most people—but not for Alpha's colossal computing power. In her hands, even Akira's five senses could function as a scanner, since she detected and analyzed anything he perceived, including data that his brain normally filtered out as noise.



Thus, Alpha had almost completely neutralized Yajima's jamming smoke, tracking every move he made behind Akira's back. And she'd deliberately withheld that information from Akira, leading Yajima to believe he was undetected until an instant before the shot. If Akira had shown even the slightest hint of watching for an attack from behind, Yajima would never have attempted one.

Both hunters had been dancing in the palm of her hand all along.

Akira lowered his CWH, his face contorting in agony. The gun's recoil could shove his whole body backward even when he gripped it firmly in both hands. Firing it one-handed had been faster—and he'd needed to be fast—but he felt like his arm had been crushed. He fought to keep his body upright while he gulped down all of the recovery capsules stashed in his mouth. The effects of the healing nanomachines didn't spread evenly throughout his body—he could, albeit barely, sense them concentrating in his arm, prioritizing the most serious damage. Yet he noted uneasily that the limb felt numb and he had difficulty moving it.

Nevertheless, he looked down at Yajima and said, *So...did we beat him?*

*Define "beat,"* Alpha replied. *He can't attack us without his handgun or an arm to hold it, and he'll have a hard time darting around after the beating his body took. So I think we can safely consider him out of action. But if you can't relax until he's dead, shoot him in the head and finish him off.*

*You shot his arm on purpose, right?* he asked, puzzled. *Why didn't you shoot him in the head?* Sharpshooting while spinning around with a rifle was beyond Akira's skill. All he'd done was try to keep up with his suit as Alpha took aim. *Did you want to capture him alive, or was it just an accident?*

*Neither—I did it for safety. He's a cyborg, as you can probably see, and he could have been a remote-controlled puppet. They don't always die when you blow their heads off, so I prioritized disarming him.*

Like powered suits, Alpha explained, most cybernetic bodies incorporated some form of central control system. This core could be stored in the torso rather than the head. In some cases, each body part had its own control unit. Such bodies could continue attacking even after losing their head and brain.

Some cyborg bodies relocated the brain itself to the torso, exploiting the assumption that the organ was always found in the head. Others placed it in a small, durable life-support unit that could be separated from the main body, which was treated as a remote-controlled puppet. In any case, decapitation wasn't necessarily fatal to cyborgs. Hence Alpha's decision to go for the weapon instead.

When Akira heard this, he took another look at Yajima. Despite having his arm torn off, the man wasn't bleeding, and the metal fragments of his missing limb were indistinguishable from those of his pistol. He obviously wasn't flesh and blood. Yet his body looked so true to life that Akira would never have noticed otherwise.

*How did you figure out he might be a cyborg?* he asked.

*There were a number of clues, but the biggest giveaway was how good he was at lying without speaking,* Alpha replied. *Remember how well he fooled you the first time he shot at you? You would have died if I hadn't forced you to dodge.*

*I really appreciate it.*

*You're welcome!*

They chuckled, and Akira returned to the matter at hand. *So, what's deception have to do with it?*

*It just so happens that I can more or less tell if someone is lying, based on slight changes in their facial expression, gestures, tone of voice—that sort of thing.*

Akira looked impressed, then suspicious. *Hang on. If that's true, how come you didn't warn me before he started shooting?*

*Because he fooled me too.*

Akira didn't know what to make of that, and his expression let it show. *But you just said you can tell when people lie, right?*

*His face didn't give any tells, even though he was lying. In other words, he can completely disconnect his face from his thoughts. And that's only possible for cyborgs and androids, who have total control of their facial muscles. I suspect he*

*recorded natural expressions that he made in the past and replayed them.*

Everything finally clicked for Akira, and he nodded.

*Now, Akira, the medicine you took should have done its job by now,* Alpha continued. *It's time to stop resting and decide what to do with him.*

*Good idea.* Akira started to approach Yajima and felt a twinge of pain. He'd given the recovery capsules plenty of time to work their way through his body, but his injuries still weren't fully healed.



Yajima's central nervous system was just about the only part of his body he'd been born with. The rest he had swapped for synthetic components, both biological and mechanical. An ordinary human would need to don a powered suit to match his strength, and he was highly resilient—losing an arm was barely a scratch to him. His finely tuned cyborg body even spared him from the searing pain that would have paralyzed a flesh-and-blood human. All he felt from the stump where his pulverized arm had been was a minor ache, a mere warning signal. (Shutting down his pain receptors completely would have caused problems.)

Nevertheless, Yajima lay on the floor and clutched at his shoulder, his face contorted to simulate unbearable agony. Beneath the facade, meanwhile, he analyzed what was happening around him and racked his brain for a way to turn it to his advantage. When he sensed Akira approaching, rather than finishing him off from a distance, he decided that his helpless act must be working. So he kept up his fake groans of pain.

Yajima's wounds weren't actually so serious, of course. He was down an arm, and his torso couldn't deliver peak performance after eating Akira's bullet, but his cyborg body was still strong enough to kill any ordinary hunter. His injuries, however, made further combat with Akira risky, and trying to run would only get him shot in the back. And while he had already called his accomplices, he had no idea when they would arrive. He estimated that Akira could blow his head off before they could make a difference, anyway.

With a start, he realized he was out of options. But despite his terrified act, he went on calmly probing for an opportunity.

*What now?* he mused. *Should I play for time first?*

Yajima wasn't even close to giving up.



Akira stopped before he got too close to Yajima, holding his CWH ready in case the man suddenly leaped up to attack him. His adversary outclassed him, and he had no intention of letting his guard down until the man was dead.

Yajima didn't get up, but he did hold his remaining left hand feebly out toward Akira, pleading, "Stop! You win! Just don't shoot!"

"Why'd you attack me?" Akira demanded.

"L-Like I said, it was a misunderstanding. Please, hear me out. I know we can clear this up if you'll only listen," Yajima said brokenly, the perfect picture of a beaten man begging for his life.

His terror-stricken look, frail voice, and trembling hand didn't strike Akira as an act. Still, the boy wanted to be sure, and Alpha claimed that she could spot a liar. So he asked her, *Do you think he's telling the truth, or is he faking it all?*

*First, let me remind you that it's difficult to know for certain with a full-body cyborg,* Alpha replied. *He genuinely doesn't want you to shoot him, but the blubbering is fake. He really does want you to listen to him, but he's lying about trying to clear up a misunderstanding. Either he hopes to trick you or he's playing for time.*

"Playing for time, huh? How long do you need to save your neck?" Akira asked, with evident suspicion.

"You think I'm stalling?!" Yajima cried, shaking his head frantically. "No! I swear I'm not! Honest!"

*He's lying,* Alpha announced with alacrity.

Akira believed her, but he still had to decide what to do with Yajima. Confident in the knowledge that he held the man's life in his hands, he took the time to think carefully. And his commitment to his professional duties swayed his choice.

*The operator said to bring him to HQ if I could, so let's do that,* he proposed. *I*



*bet they can learn a lot from this guy if we keep him alive.*

*In that case, blast off his other arm and his legs, just to be safe, Alpha said.*

*I guess you've got a point, Akira admitted reluctantly. How would people look at him when he showed up at headquarters dragging a sobbing, limbless man by the hair? The mental image gave him pause, but he reminded himself that his safety was more important than appearances.*

*Akira started to center Yajima's left leg in his rifle's sight. Just then, a bolt of pain shot through his right arm, and he froze, grimacing.*

*Ow! Wh-What's going on, Alpha? he demanded. The pain hasn't gone away. Are the capsules not working?*

*It looks like you didn't take enough, Alpha replied. Firing a CWH proprietary cartridge one-handed must have caused a little too much recoil for your suit to handle.*

*Why'd you do it, then?*

*Partly because it was the fastest way to counterattack and partly because of the stance I had you take to put your enemy off his guard. Other reasons include —*

*Okay, I get it, Akira interrupted, sensing a tedious lecture incoming. Basically, you had a good reason, right?*

*Exactly. Now take another dose of recovery capsules. And use the good stuff—you shouldn't make do with cheap medicine if you're in that much pain.*

*Just to be safe, Akira backtracked a few steps before swallowing the capsules. Damn it! Those were the last ones I had, he grumbled, scowling even as he felt the medicine going to work. I should've put a clause in my contract about medical expenses, not just ammo costs.*

*Well, it's too late to change now. But as I've warned you before, Akira, this means you'll be in much greater danger when circumstances force you to take risks. Be extra careful.*

*I understand. Once again, Akira trained his CWH on Yajima's left leg.*



Yajima's mind continued to work calmly under the mask of panicked fear he wore.

*He must realize I'm stalling, because he won't listen to a word I say, he thought, observing Akira. At least he's not planning to kill me on the spot. Still, if he gets me back to HQ, I'll be done for. And it looks like he wants to scrap my remaining limbs before he lugs me there. He's not taking any chances.*

He could accept the loss of his limbs. The problem was finding a way out of his predicament. Talking probably wouldn't help, since his adversary refused to listen, and nothing he said was likely to go down much better with the city officials at headquarters. He had no hope of turning the tables on his own, and his wary opponent seemed unlikely to screw up badly enough to level the playing field.

*What now? Even if Nelia and Kain get here, this guy is so cautious he'll probably finish me off before he takes them on. And I can't contact them because of the jamming smoke. Maybe if I wait until we get clear of the affected area...*

Should he try to get in touch with his accomplices and have them approach in the guise of harmless strangers? Should he hope they would run into other hunters on the way? In any case, he needed someone else to shake up the situation.

And someone did.

"Stop, stop! Are you out of your mind?!"

A girl hunter and a woman (the latter dressed like a maid, of all things!) rushed toward him from the direction of the cry.

Akira instinctively turned to look and frowned when he saw Reina and Shiori. Anyone could see that he didn't welcome their arrival.

*Are they my backup for putting up lights?* he asked.

*It looks like it,* Alpha replied. *I wish they'd gotten here a little sooner, while you were still fighting.*

*You said it.*

In Akira's disgruntled expression, Yajima spied his chance. *They know each other, but they're not his friends—at least, not good enough friends to take everything at his word*, he speculated. *Does he think explaining this situation will be a hassle? Is he afraid they won't believe him?*

With a smirk in his heart and terror on his face, Yajima screamed, "Help! He's gonna kill me!"

Akira, Reina, and Shiori all turned to him. The man's cybernetic face, which had fooled even Alpha at first, made him look every bit the bewildered victim of a sudden assault.



Reina and Shiori had been installing lights in the tunnels together until headquarters ordered them to move to a different area. They didn't know that Akira was already working at their destination. And when they arrived, they found only an abandoned hand truck full of lights waiting for them. Their suspicions aroused, they searched the area and finally located the boy—only to find him apparently in the act of murdering a fellow hunter.

"Stop, stop! Are you out of your mind?!" Reina cried, unable to stop herself.

Akira jerked his head to look at her. He seemed—and was—annoyed that the women had arrived at an awkward moment for him.

Then Yajima screamed, "Help! He's gonna kill me!"

Akira's attention snapped back to the man, who shuddered, looking even more frightened than before.

"H-He... He shot me out of nowhere!" Yajima wailed to the women. "He tried to murder me!"

"No, I didn't!" Akira snapped. "Well, I mean, I *did* shoot him, but he tried to kill me first!"

"Liar! I only fought back because you were out for my blood!"

"Bullshit! *You* shot at *me* with no warning!"

"The only bullshit here is coming out of *your* mouth! You babbled some nonsense and started blasting away before I knew what hit me!"

And so the shouting match dragged on, an exchange of denials and blame without any semblance of rational argument. Without the facts, the women found it impossible to tell whether Akira or Yajima was in the right. They both felt equally bewildered: they'd showed up to help with a simple lighting job, and getting roped into this mess wasn't on their to-do list.

"Wh-What do you think we should do, Shiori?" Reina asked nervously.

Shiori didn't know who to believe. She found it difficult to doubt Akira—he had already shown himself willing to tell the truth and risk a fight even when a little white lie would have sufficed. Yet the other man didn't seem to be stringing together excuses to save his own skin either.

So she answered earnestly, "I believe we should begin by contacting headquarters. I trust you gentlemen have no objections?"

Shiori couldn't identify the liar, but objecting to this proposal would be grounds for suspicion. With that idea in mind, she watched closely to see how Akira and Yajima would react. Neither, however, offered any resistance.

"Great idea. Call HQ for us," Akira said clearly. "An operator there ordered me to check on a hunter who wasn't transmitting his coordinates, and they gave me permission to kill him if necessary. They'll back me up if you talk to them."

"You took the words out of my mouth!" Yajima shouted. "Call HQ! They'll tell you I'm in the right!"

The men glared at each other.

Reina's confusion deepened, and Shiori was at her wit's end. Nevertheless, Shiori tried to make the call, secretly relieved that figuring out the truth wasn't in their job description. This trouble was none of their business, and to keep Reina out of it, she need only explain the situation to the officials at headquarters and place the matter in their hands.

Except that she couldn't raise HQ.

Reina noticed Shiori's difficulty and tried to place the call herself, but with the same result. "It's not working," she said. "I can't get through."

"Because *he* used jamming smoke!" Yajima immediately shouted. "The rat



must've known communications were down when he asked you to call!"

"Cut the crap! *You* used that smoke, and you know it!" Akira snapped. "Search me if you want—you'll see I haven't got any!"

"Yeah, because you used it all up! I've had it with your bull!"

In a rage, Akira almost pulled the trigger, stopping himself at the last moment. Killing Yajima now wouldn't help him—it would look like he just wanted to silence the man. And Alpha had warned him against making things worse for himself than they needed to be.

While she watched Akira and Yajima snarling at each other, Reina was doing her best to puzzle out the situation. The men's stories didn't match up, but was either of them really lying? What if they had tried to kill each other over a misunderstanding? And since she had interrupted their fight, she had a responsibility to get to the bottom of it—or at least, she couldn't bring herself to turn a blind eye and tell the pair to carry on until one of them died.

"Why don't we bring them both to HQ, Shiori?" she suggested. "It would save time."

"Certainly, miss," Shiori replied, eager to keep Reina away from trouble. "Gentlemen, please accompany me. We should be able to contact headquarters again once we get clear of the jamming smoke. I trust you have no objections?"

"Sure, let's go," Yajima answered at once, nodding emphatically. He began to stand, tried to brace himself on his missing right arm, and lost his balance, toppling over again. Although he made another feeble attempt to rise, he stopped before he got to his feet, as if the effort had exhausted the last of his strength. A little cry—almost a scream—escaped his lips as he stared, terror-stricken, into the muzzle of Akira's anti-materiel rifle.

"Mr. Akira, would you kindly lower your weapon?" Shiori requested.

Akira scowled. *I should've killed him earlier, before they got here.*

*Well, you can't kill him now, so let it go, Alpha said, looking a little on-edge herself. Don't worry, I recorded everything, so he won't be able to frame you. And you were already planning on taking him to headquarters, so just think of this as a bigger escort for the trip.*

Akira considered. *I guess you've got a point*, he admitted, although his rifle remained raised and ready to fire.

"Mr. Akira?" Shiori repeated.

"Fine." Reluctantly, Akira lowered his weapon.

He was obviously in a bad mood, and that put Shiori on high alert. As she saw it, she and Reina had just stopped him from finishing a duel to the death, and they might very well become the next targets of his ire. She was so focused on the boy, whom she was determined to handle with care, that she neglected to watch the frightened, one-armed man on the floor.

Akira picked up on Shiori's wariness and likewise became vigilant, his attention so fixed on her that he lost track of everyone else in the room.

Yajima and Reina slipped both of their minds.

*Akira! Stop Reina!* Alpha shouted, but it was already too late. As Akira spun to look at the girl, she was already holding out her hand to the fallen Yajima.

"Here," she said. "I'll help you up."

Despite her temper and occasionally sharp tongue, Reina was a kind person. She'd approached Akira out of concern for his safety when he'd insisted on working alone at Checkpoint Fourteen. So of course she would offer a hand to someone struggling to stand up on his own. And though her kindness was a virtue, it was also a fatal flaw. Reina was in the wasteland, not behind the city walls, and she was still too naive to truly know the difference.

"Miss?!" Shiori cried. "No!"

Surprised, Reina turned to her attendant. The instant she took her eyes off Yajima, he grabbed her outstretched hand and yanked it toward him. Then, springing nimbly to his feet as Reina toppled over, he darted behind the fallen girl and seized her neck in his left hand.

"Nobody move," Yajima said, sneering at Akira and Shiori. His face gave no hint of the sniveling terror it had so recently displayed.

## Chapter 52: Dilemmas

Druncam's young hunters—Reina and Shiori among them—were taking part in the efforts to upgrade the tunnels' lighting. The pair worked alongside Katsuya's team at first, until headquarters reassigned them to a different area. As team leader, Katsuya refused the order. Druncam's policy, he explained, was to avoid mixing its rookies with hunters from outside the syndicate—an attempt at keeping trouble to a minimum.

The operator at HQ countered that Reina and Shiori were registered as a two-woman team and not considered rookies. Besides, they had chosen to fight alongside a hunter from outside Druncam just two days ago. Thus, their reassignment went through. Then Katsuya wanted to go with them, but as leader, he couldn't leave his post. So Reina and Shiori temporarily left the Druncam group and made for Akira's position alone. As far as Reina knew, they were only going to do a bit of installation work elsewhere and then return.

Now a man named Yajima had her pinned by the neck from behind. A moment ago, he had been on the ground, struggling even to stand after the loss of his arm, and she had been reaching out to help him. Here in the wasteland, her naive kindness had cost her dearly.



"Wh-What do you think you're doing?!" Reina demanded, her face contorted in shock and pain.

"What am I doing?" the man gripping her throat repeated scornfully. Unlike Reina, he understood he was in the wasteland—was so steeped in that awareness that he'd lost his inhibitions against deception, theft, and murder. "What, you need me to spell it out for you? Maybe you're a little slow, because it's all crystal clear to me. But I'll give you a quick rundown for your friends' benefit: I've taken you hostage, and now I'm threatening them." The sneer vanished from Yajima's face as he faced Akira and Shiori. Softly, but with unmistakable malice, he snarled, "If you move, she dies."

Akira scowled warily at Yajima.

Shiori glared daggers at the man. With great effort, she kept her expression cool and composed, but that merely focused all the rage she felt into her eyes. Animosity gave her gaze such force that it almost seemed to be a visible ray, boring into Yajima.

Even so, both hunters remained motionless.

“Very good,” Yajima said calmly. “I’m glad to see you’re both quick learners.” Turning back to Reina, he added, “Now, since *you’re* so slow on the uptake, I’ll spell this out: crushing your neck would be a breeze for me. So don’t make this any harder than it has to be, and don’t get any dumb ideas.”

Just as Yajima had divined from Akira’s expression that the women and the boy weren’t allies, the women’s looks had told him that they had no idea what they’d stumbled into. Spotting an opportunity, he’d resolved to use the newcomers to his advantage.

Even so, he couldn’t believe how well this had worked out.

Yajima had secretly rejoiced when Akira had lowered his rifle. Not in his wildest dreams had he imagined escaping the threat of instant death so easily. After that, he predicted, he had simply to wait for the jamming smoke to clear and then call in his accomplices to bail him out. And then Reina had walked right up to him, so utterly careless that Yajima had suspected a trap at first. But there’d been no trick—a hostage really had fallen into his lap. He blessed his undeserved good fortune and the girl who had brought it to him.

“I know, I know. I’m missing my right arm and I was lying on the floor until a moment ago. Maybe you figure you can get clear of me if you take me by surprise. And who can blame you? But guess again—I never let down my guard, and I’m too good to let *you* get the drop on me. If you ever thought I was helpless, that was your overoptimistic mind playing tricks on you.” Out of gratitude to his benefactress, Yajima concluded with a word of advice: “You might have a hard time believing anything I say, but the people who want to save you are hanging on my every word. I want you to be clear about what that means.”

Silence fell. Reina and Shiori couldn’t move, and Akira chose not to. That was

good enough for Yajima.

“Good,” he said. “Now, would you kindly ditch your weapons?”

“Shiori, don’t—”

Not bothering to tell her to shut up, Yajima just tightened his grip on her neck. Reina’s cry ended abruptly in a grunt of pain. Then, looking at Shiori, he kept squeezing until Reina’s groans ceased and her face twisted in agony.

Shiori’s furious expression instantly dissolved into grief-stricken concern. A moment later, she let go of her rifle. It hit the floor with a clatter, signaling that, once again, the shoe was on the other foot.

Shiori dropped all her remaining weapons, then kicked them toward Yajima. He loosened his grip on Reina’s throat, then began to slowly tighten it again, giving Reina a shake to hurry her along. Reina dropped her rifle, her face frozen in a look of terror.

Shiori never took her eyes off Yajima, determined not to miss even the slightest hint of an opening. Although the way he smirked each time she or Reina dropped a weapon stoked her rage, she strove to remain coolheaded for her mistress’s sake. But just as Yajima’s lips were starting to curl into a complacent smirk, his face suddenly hardened again. Baffled, Shiori slowly turned her head to follow the man’s gaze.

Akira stood there silently. He seemed almost relaxed, the rifle still in his hands.

“Mr. Akira,” Shiori said, “I beg your pardon, but please disarm.”

Akira said nothing. As if he hadn’t heard, he simply kept staring at Yajima.

“Mr. Akira?!” Shiori called again, sounding more agitated than she would have liked.

“I heard you,” Akira said, still not looking at her—and still gripping his weapon.

Yajima twisted Reina’s head toward Akira and began tightening his grip again. Reina gave a groan of pain which died off, though her face still twisted in agony.

“Mr. Akira!” Shiori pleaded, even more shaken. “Please! Disarm yourself at

once!”

Akira didn’t answer.

Instead, it was Yajima who spoke, icily demanding, “Have negotiations failed? I know I’ve made myself clear. But maybe you don’t care if she dies?”

“When will your demands end?” Akira asked. “When your buddies get here to kill us?”

That got a slight reaction out of Yajima. He loosened his grip on Reina and then said calmly, “I don’t know what made you think I have backup coming, but I don’t. Oh, I see now—I never explained when I’d release my hostage, did I? My apologies. If you drop your weapons, I’ll slowly fade away into the tunnels. Then, once I’m far enough away, I’ll let the girl go. You have my word. Does that satisfy you?”

“You’re here to steal relics, right?” Yajima fell silent again, so Akira continued. “I bet you’re rattled. When you attacked me, you didn’t even bother with excuses—you went straight for the kill. Because as soon as I saw your face, I needed to die.”

Yajima’s face didn’t reflect his true feelings, but he still couldn’t hide them completely. He could only dissemble perfectly when he replayed past expressions, not when he made them in real time. And while he could completely disconnect his face from his brain, switching to an expressionless mask this late in the game would have been a dead giveaway.

“Since you’re a cyborg, you’d have no trouble swapping out your face later. So, what could you be so desperate to hide from me—or from the city officials I’d report to back at HQ? I’m guessing you’ve got a stash of relics hidden near here.”

Silence was a type of answer, and Yajima’s spoke volumes.

“If the officials find out what you look like now, they can trace who you are in no time. So you’re out to kill everyone who’s seen your face—you don’t have a choice, unless you want the city to put a price on your head. Isn’t that right?”

At that, Yajima finally spoke up. “It looks like we’ve got a whole heap of misunderstandings,” he said, looking faintly exasperated and sounding like he



was trying to make some obstinate fool see reason. “Your logic’s full of holes. I could pick it apart all day, but I doubt you’ll listen to a word out of my mouth.”

“How much longer do you need to stall for?” Akira asked. “And how much firepower are your friends packing? Probably a lot, considering how confident you are. Enough to wipe us out easily, anyway.”

“Let’s say you’re right—which you’re not. What does that change? This girl is still going to die unless you drop your weapon.”

“If you kill her, you’ll be the next to die. But you still seem awfully sure of yourself. Your buddies must be real heavy hitters.”

Akira and Yajima locked eyes. After another brief silence, Yajima squeezed Reina’s neck. “This is your last chance,” he said coldly. “Drop your weapon.”

“No,” Akira replied flatly.

Shiori let out a silent scream, her face deathly pale. Yet Reina’s neck didn’t snap—Yajima actually relaxed his grip. Then he heaved an exaggerated sigh, belittling Akira.

*The kid’s serious, the man thought. He knows about the plan, and he knows I want him dead. So, what now? I don’t know when Kain and Nelia will get here. And the way things are going, the kid might blow me away—hostage and all—the moment they show up. I doubt my body’s up to dodging bullets after the beating it took.*

“Talk about a cold fish,” Yajima said, masking his anxiety with annoyance. “Don’t you feel anything for the hostage? She’s such a pretty young thing.”

“Says the hostage taker,” Akira countered.

“It doesn’t bother me. None of the awful things I do weigh on my conscience—a perk of being the bad guy. But goody-goodies don’t have it so easy.” Yajima had been keeping his tone casual, but now it took on a serious note. “Oh well. Since this hostage doesn’t seem to do it for you, I’ll ask someone who *does* care about her.” His gaze shifted to Shiori, and his voice turned cruel. “Kill him, or I kill her.”

Immediately, Akira shifted so he could watch both Yajima and Shiori. Yajima

responded by backing away slightly, holding Reina as a shield. Then he kicked Shiori's fallen rifle across the floor to her.

Shiori was at her wit's end, looking from Akira's face to Reina's in stunned confusion. Akira had chosen to hold on to his weapon. The next choice was up to Shiori.

Akira's rifle was still lowered. Would he point it at Yajima and Reina, or at Shiori? For the moment, he reserved his decision.

*Alpha, what do you think Shiori will do?* he asked.

*Attack you,* Alpha immediately replied.

*Why?*

*Because the hostage will survive longer that way. If she refuses, the hostage will have outlived her usefulness. And even if that man plans to kill you all eventually, Shiori still has a chance to save Reina as long as that girl is alive—a chance I doubt she'd willingly give up.*

*Agreed on all counts. Shit. I should've just killed that guy and not worried about how hard it'd be to explain.*

*It's no use crying over spilled milk. Let's do the best we can, and if worse comes to worst, kill them all. Agreed?*

*Fine by me.* Akira steeled himself.

Shiori was still struggling to do the same. Should she risk it all in an attack on Yajima, or obey him and kill Akira? Either way, Reina was probably doomed. Knowing that, she still racked her brains for a way to save the girl, but without success. All she could do was wait to gain time, clinging to the faint hope that something would happen to change the situation.

But Yajima was having none of it. "Really? You won't listen either?" he said. "I guess there's no point keeping this hostage, then. Well, that's life. I might as well kill her. You'll kill me, but my accomplices will get even for that."

He was only bluffing. Yajima didn't plan on dying, and Shiori knew it. But she also knew that unless she acted, his threats wouldn't remain empty forever.

Reina tried to cry out when she saw Shiori's tormented expression, but

Yajima's fingers closed on her throat, preventing her. "Keep your mouth shut," he said, voice dripping with malice. As far as he was concerned, anything she said now would just be a liability. If she begged for help, who was to say her companion wouldn't abandon her in disgust? And if she told Shiori to forget her and shoot Yajima, the woman might comply. So, to prevent his hostage from compromising her own value, he kept his grip tight. And to Shiori, that looked like a genuine attempt to kill Reina.

Shiori moved. With a look of anguish, she swiftly crouched, scooped her rifle off the ground, and leveled it at Akira.

Akira reacted on instinct. Swaying out of her line of fire, he trained his rifle on Shiori.

Shots rang out, and their battle began.



A CWH proprietary bullet whizzed past Shiori. It grazed her clothes, but left her unscathed. Against most opponents, her dodge would have carried her well out of harm's way with time to counterattack. Yet even with all her training and experience, this close shave was the best she could manage.

Shiori's maid outfit was ordinary clothing, not combat gear. And against a bullet that could rip through most armor, it might as well have been tissue paper. The fabric tore where the shot brushed it, and the blast of wind in its wake widened the rent, exposing the powered inner wear beneath.

Shiori couldn't hide her shock. Although her suit was as thin as a pair of tights, it significantly outperformed Akira's in both power and protection. How, with all that strength at her disposal, had she only dodged by such a narrow margin?

Nevertheless, she took aim at Akira. Her balance wasn't perfect after the evasive maneuver and the near miss, but her mind was accelerating. Her long experience told her that she would hit the boy easily, even if she wasn't happy about it.

Yet he dodged. Akira leaped backward, out of Shiori's line of fire, pushing his suit to its limit and even using the recoil from his own shot to gain speed.

*What reflexes!* Shiori marveled. *He's actually keeping pace with me!*

Akira aimed his CWH at Shiori again, finding his footing on the rubble behind him without even turning to look. She swiftly ducked behind a different heap of debris, evading his shot. The bullet struck another pile, shattering it.

And so the firefight continued. Shiori was closing in on Akira, relying on the thickest debris for cover and taking shots at the boy while she moved between them. If she picked the wrong heap to hide behind, she would end up blown to bits along with it. Nevertheless, she was gaining ground.

Killing Akira wouldn't improve her situation, she knew. Likely the opposite, if anything. Anyone could see that Yajima wanted her and Akira to kill each other. But Reina would die unless she fought—an unbearable thought. And while she would gladly have given her own life to save the girl's, merely sacrificing herself wouldn't solve this dilemma. Shiori's thoughts backed her into a corner. So, even knowing that she was half-crazed with devotion and despair, she continued her reckless advance.

Her rashness threw off the rhythm of Akira's shots. Up to that point, he'd had plenty of time to exchange magazines and keep firing. But now that Shiori was charging as if she was prepared to take a bullet, he was hard-pressed to raise his rifle and aim. Even so, he finished reloading, swung the weapon toward Shiori, and pulled the trigger.

Shiori's foot collided with his rifle. The kick spoiled his aim as he pulled the trigger, sending his bullet speeding harmlessly past her. The CWH flew out of his hands.

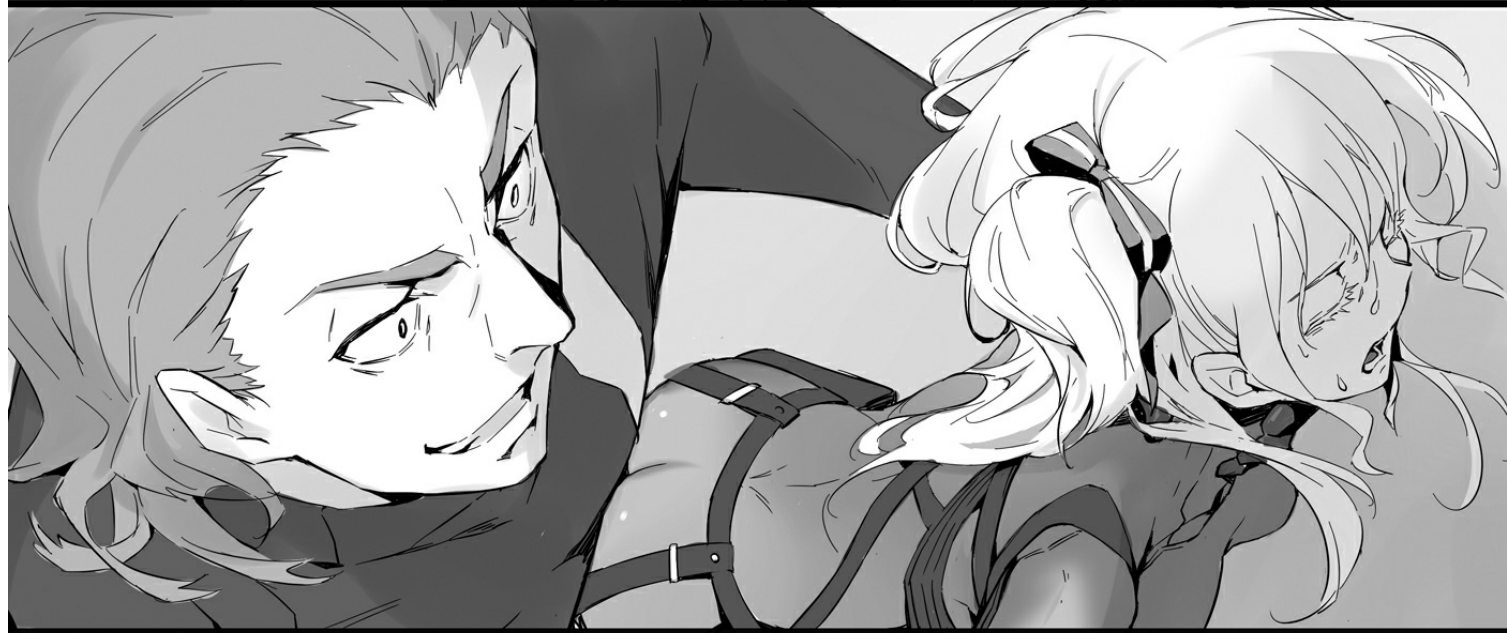
Shiori had deprived Akira of a powerful weapon, but her maneuver left her open for a split second. Akira darted in as if he'd been waiting for the opportunity and disarmed her with a kick of his own. The weapons sailed through the air, leaving both combatants unarmed.

A moment later, the fighters had closed for hand-to-hand combat.

Shiori stepped in with a straight punch. Akira hopped back out of range and tried to draw his AAH, but she advanced again, denying him the chance. So Akira moved in to meet her, wielding a fist instead of a rifle.

His suit-powered blow drove into Shiori's chest. But between her suit's defenses and her devotion to Reina, Shiori was ready for it, preferring to receive

a punch to a gunshot. She took his strike and immediately retaliated with an open-handed chop that grazed Akira's cheek.





Even in melee, without their rifles, the blows they traded could still be deadly. They both wore powered suits, and neither had a helmet—any hit to the head meant instant death.

Shiori fought on, a look of anguish on her face, struggling to win any chance she could to help Reina survive these dire straits.



Reina watched Akira and Shiori's battle through a haze of tears. None of this would be happening if she hadn't been taken hostage, and it would end if she died. Yet for the moment, she remained among the living. A myriad of emotions raged within her: fear that Yajima could end her life whenever he chose, regret for her careless actions, guilt because Shiori was fighting to save her and Akira was caught up in it, and a sense of her own powerlessness. Reina's mind was in tumult. But even in the throes of confusion, frustration, and panic, she felt a drive to make a difference. She *had* to do something.

Reina was already naturally impetuous, and her present feelings ignited her hatred of Yajima. Her loathing grew until it eclipsed every other emotion. Then, her face a mask of rage, she drove her elbow into Yajima's gut with all her might. The suit she wore gave her extraordinary strength, and when she lashed out in blind fury, her strike connected with more force than most bullets.

But not enough to take down Yajima, whose body could withstand overpressure rifle ammo. He staggered slightly, but no more. His hold on Reina's neck remained firm—firmer than ever, in fact, because he instinctively tightened his grip when he steadied himself. Pain replaced the rage on Reina's face with a fresh wave of agonized terror.

"Did I look like I let my guard down?" Yajima sneered as he strangled her. "Or was that a plea to put you out of your misery? Either way, too bad. It'll take more than that to put a dent in my body, and I won't kill my only hostage."

Reina couldn't hear even a hint of anger in his voice. His words would have stung less if she could.

"Oh, and don't bother with suicide either. You seem like you're flesh-and-blood, so you could kill yourself by biting your tongue. But even if you pull that

off, I know how to make it look like you're still alive. Oh, your friends will take a while to catch on—that's why I'm keeping you quiet."

The mocking voice entered through Reina's ears and pierced her heart. All thought of resistance, however feeble, fled. Tears went on flowing from her now soulless eyes.



Yajima sneered at Reina. With her will to resist gone, his hand on her throat seemed to be the only reason she was still standing.

*That bullshit was all it took to knock the fight out of her?* he thought, with exasperated contempt. *How soft can she be?! She might've forced me to leave myself open if she'd fought like hell. And even if I'd killed her, she could've let the others know by sobbing her head off beforehand.*

Being out of options was no excuse to give up, at least not in Yajima's view. A chance to turn the tables might come—but only to those with the will to seize it. While Reina had been foolish to let him take her hostage, throwing in the towel so easily was pure idiocy.

*Then again, I should be grateful such a brainless hostage dropped into my lap. I thought my number was up when that punk nearly killed me, but it looks like my luck hasn't left me yet.*

He barely even needed to keep an eye on Reina anymore, Yajima decided, shifting his attention to Akira and Shiori. A slight frown creased his face.

*That said, those two are strong—way too skilled to waste on putting up lighting. What are two hunters on their level even doing in this area? Could they be municipal agents after all? No, that doesn't quite fit.*

City operatives, sent to mingle with the lighting crews after the authorities had caught wind of his plan, would ignore his hostage and prioritize his capture. They would certainly never fight each other. Yajima dismissed the idea.

*I suppose there's an outside chance that only the kid is an agent, and the woman happened to be here for some other reason.*

That would explain why Akira had wanted to capture rather than kill him, and

why, when threatened with a hostage, he had held on to his weapon.

*If that's it, I hit the jackpot. Running into a hunter skilled enough to take down an agent for me is one hell of a lucky break.* Yajima's smile broadened. As far as he could see, Akira and Shiori were evenly matched. He wouldn't stand a chance if they ganged up on him. Yet here they were, fighting each other for his benefit. If they both died, he was in the clear. And if their stalemate continued, it would keep them occupied until his accomplices arrived. There was no downside.

*Go on, wear yourselves out. Keep whaling on each other. Is that the best you can do, woman? Try harder! Once that kid dies, the rest will be smooth sailing. So if you win this, I'll at least make sure to kill you painlessly.* Yajima grinned contemptuously, keeping a firm grip on the good-for-nothing who guaranteed his safety.



Akira scrambled to fend off Shiori's brutal assault. She looked like she was about to burst into tears, yet she dished out one swift, devastating blow after another while he frantically blocked, dodged, and struck back. Her suit obviously outperformed his—any clean hit from her would be fatal, and a blow to his head would splatter the contents of his skull.

Shiori's strength astonished him. He had counted on a swift victory after the shift to melee combat. Alpha had blown him away with her prowess in their endless drills, and now Alpha was in control of his suit, helping him to mimic her overwhelming strength. Yes, the drills had only been virtual training, and yes, he might be forced to push his body harder than he'd like, but he'd felt certain they would triumph. But now Shiori had upended all his expectations, going toe to toe with Akira despite Alpha's support. If anything, she had the upper hand.

*D-Did you know she was this strong, Alpha?! he demanded. Can we really pull this off?!*

*Don't you worry about that,* Alpha replied, her composure in stark contrast to his panic. *Just grit your teeth and keep up the good work.*

*This hurts like hell! I'm begging you, figure something out before my arms and legs tear off! If you told me they were already gone, I might believe you!*

The further Alpha pushed Akira's suit beyond the limits of his own skill, the greater the strain her maneuvers put on his body. And when it came to hand-to-hand combat, Shiori stood head and shoulders above him. In order to bridge the yawning gulf between them, Alpha was not only pushing his suit to the limits of its capabilities but forcing him to perform the most precise and extreme movements that she judged his body could take. So, with his stock of Old World medicine exhausted, Akira was steadily accumulating injuries at the cellular level. It felt agonizing.

Nevertheless, Alpha was smiling. *You'll be fine. I think.*

*What do you mean, you "think"?! Akira demanded, pulling a face at her.*

He kept dodging to counter Shiori's lightning-quick attacks, then shifting stances to strike back with equally blinding speed. His view was spinning with such dizzying speed that he could no longer distinguish floor, wall, or ceiling. All he recognized was Alpha's smile, because she maintained a fixed position in his field of vision. Flip upside down, turn a somersault, or even shut his eyes: he could never lose sight of her cheerful, confident face.

That was what kept him from losing his head completely—no matter how bleak things seemed, hope remained while Alpha smiled.

And although Akira didn't realize it, his mind was slowly but steadily catching up to Shiori's rapid strikes. He sensed death as he arched back to dodge one of her kicks.

*She's probably using a speed stim, Alpha explained, standing horizontally amid a world that seemed to move at a snail's pace. And given how quickly she reacted to dodge your shots, I'd say it's designed for high performance rather than endurance.*

*There are drugs that make you faster?! he exclaimed. Do I just have to hold out until her dose wears off?!*

*Yes, you should probably be able to beat her then.*

*I'm not gonna lose any arms or legs first, right?! They're starting to send me danger signals!*

Akira still had all his limbs for only one reason—the recovery capsules he'd

taken after his fight with Yajima were healing his injuries as soon as he got them. But the dose in his system wouldn't last forever. In fact, it was running out. Searing pain from partially healed wounds told Akira that his body couldn't take much more of this strenuous combat.

Alpha knew that too, and still she smiled. *Like I said, you'll be fine. I think.*

*Like I said, what do you mean, you "think"?!* Akira grimaced.

*I can't be sure whether she's using a speed stim or how long it will last, so I can't tell you anything more definite. Don't worry, just concentrate on the fight. Whining won't help, you know?*

*Yeah, I know!* Akira snapped, with the ghost of a smile. Then, motivated anew, he fought on, grinning somewhat desperately.

Akira had no reason to doubt her reassurances. And for her part, Alpha went all out to ensure events would unfold just as she had promised.

She smiled. She would keep smiling, even when a look of stern alarm would be more fitting—even when Akira was on the verge of death—if a graver expression risked eroding his morale and making his situation even worse.

To achieve an optimal outcome, she would do anything in her power.



Shiori had taken a speed stim, just as Alpha had surmised. The woman had planned to buy time by matching her fighting to Akira's level, keeping him alive while making it look to anyone else like she was trying to kill him. All the while she would be keeping a watchful eye on Yajima, ready to swoop in and rescue Reina as soon as his guard was down. But to accomplish this, she needed to completely outclass Akira. So she had resorted to a speed stim with considerable side effects.

A powered suit could physically allow one to dodge bullets—in theory. Actually pulling that off required a mind that could react to a bullet in flight and keep pace with the rapid, precise movements involved. Wearing her high-end powered inner wear to enhance her body, and downing a dangerously potent stim to accelerate her mind, Shiori should have been fine no matter how skilled Akira turned out to be.

*I can't believe it!* she thought. *How can he be so strong?!*

Like Akira, Shiori had felt convinced melee fighting would give her the upper hand. Hunters' combat skills were tailored for battling monsters, and that meant gunfighting, whether they sniped at distant targets in the wasteland or mowed them down up close inside ruins. Most never bothered training to fight fellow humans hand-to-hand. But Shiori was the exception. Although she had followed her mistress into the profession, she was no hunter—she was Reina's attendant and bodyguard. The intensive education *she* had undergone included a wide variety of martial arts meant to protect VIPs in situations where weapons were prohibited.

Even if Akira possessed the skills of a Rank 30 hunter, Shiori had felt certain she could handle him easily. No mere hunter was a match for her in melee combat. But her confidence had soon crumbled. Akira had met her attack with clearly trained movements, then countered with blows so swift and precise that they overcame her advantage in suit performance. Punches like bullets were tearing holes in what little remained of her maid outfit. Kicks slashed like blades, slicing up any fabric they grazed.

The enhanced strength that a powered suit provided made even ordinary actions challenging. Simply walking required precise control. Yet Shiori found herself facing a ceaseless barrage of masterful, full-power blows. She struggled to dodge and strike back, too frantic to spare any attention for Yajima. Unless she focused on her fight with Akira, Shiori thought, he would end her life in a flash. And she couldn't kill him—if she did, Yajima would use Reina as leverage to kill her and then Reina. Yet both options were becoming increasingly untenable. To her shock, Akira was too formidable for her to kill even if she hadn't been worried about Reina. She couldn't spare a thought for Yajima. And unless something changed, she would die when her speed stim ran out. She was supposed to be fighting to buy time, but time was starting to turn against her.

She'd believed attacking Akira at Yajima's provocation to be her best chance of saving Reina. But as her panic mounted, she found herself wondering about the other possibility. Had she attacked Yajima as swiftly as possible, Akira's skill might have helped her take down the cyborg before he could kill the girl. Regret pained her and dampened her will.



*I... I might not... I might not be able to save Miss Reina! What should I do?!  
What should I do?!*

Futility gnawed away at her heart, and her devotion to her mistress began to succumb to despair. Yet she would go on struggling, her face a mask of grief, until she reached her limit.

And she could see that moment approaching.

## Chapter 53: The Battle's End

Reina and Shiori hadn't been gone long when Katsuya's anxiety reared its head. Yet this wasn't quite the feeling he was used to—not an urge to run off immediately, but rather a faint, indefinable unease.

"What's wrong, Katsuya?" Yumina asked, noticing he wasn't quite himself. "I know swapping out lights isn't your idea of a big job, but keep your head in the game—you're still our leader."

"Hm? Sorry," he said. "It's just... Something's been bugging me for a little while now, and I can't put my finger on it."

Yumina sighed. "If letting Reina and Shiori go off on their own again bothers you that much, call in and check on them."

"Oh, yeah! Good idea."

"Jeez! You'd better get your act together once you've put your mind at ease."

Katsuya called Reina and Shiori on his work terminal, but they didn't respond. Again and again he tried to put the call through, to no avail. His face fell, and his worry deepened into certainty—something *had* gone wrong.

"Problem, Katsuya?" Yumina asked.

"I can't reach Reina or Shiori," he answered.

"That's weird. Maybe there's an outage while they switch our comms over to the new lighting system. Try waiting until the network stabilizes and—"

"I'll run over and check on them," Katsuya said, and took off running. Airi tailed him like it was the natural thing to do.

"What?" Yumina exclaimed. "Katsuya?! Wait!"

But Katsuya didn't wait. Other young Druncam hunters from their group stopped putting up lights, clamoring to know why their leader had just suddenly skipped out on the job. Yumina told them to keep working until she got back with some answers, then set off after Katsuya, scowling.



Yajima had broken Reina's spirit. Now he hardly bothered keeping an eye on the downcast girl, focusing instead on the fight between Akira and Shiori. He was riding high, with his most dangerous enemies helpfully at each other's throats and his accomplices en route. Burgeoning confidence opened his eyes to new possibilities and concerns—such as the CWH anti-materiel rifle on the floor. And once he'd noticed the weapon, it arrested his attention. After all, it *had* blown off his right arm.

He thought, *That thing packs too much punch to ignore. After the way it tore through me, I bet enough direct hits from it could damage even Kain's armor. I'd like to take it out of the equation, but I don't see how.*

Yajima took another look at the combatants. They were almost evenly matched, but it looked to him like Akira was starting to gain the upper hand.

*The kid might win, the way things are going. That'd be bad news for me.*

His hostage was only useful against Shiori. Akira, currently locked in a battle to the death with the bodyguard, probably wouldn't be overly concerned about her partner. He'd kill Reina without a second thought if it would give him a chance to get at Yajima—a scenario that was beginning to look inevitable as Shiori ran out of steam.

*Damn it! Will Kain and Nelia make it in time? I wish I'd told them to hurry. But after that jamming smoke I used, I can't reach them any more than these guys can contact HQ.*

Yajima wanted to throw his weight behind Shiori, but Akira had wrecked his pistol (along with his arm) and even destroyed his backup weapon. He was just thinking that he couldn't join in the melee while holding on to Reina when the CWH caught his eye again.

*The woman's worn out. Could I beat her one-handed now? Is it safe to ditch the hostage once that punk is dead?* Yajima mused to himself as he edged toward the fallen rifle, still following Akira and Shiori's battle. *Calm down. I've still got a ways to go, and they'll notice any big movements. If he catches on, he'll come straight for me, even if that means giving the woman a shot at his back. So, keep 'em in the dark. Easy does it.*

He didn't have to worry about Reina, Yajima thought as he slowly closed the distance to the CWH. She wouldn't make a fuss now—not with the fight beaten out of her. He kept his gaze fixed on the rifle that had taken his right arm. How sweet it would be to blast Akira to bits with that same weapon! He couldn't help fantasizing about the scene.

*I'll nail him with his own gun!*

Akira had evaded Yajima's perfect ambush, wounding the pride the man took in his own skill. That had planted the seeds of a grudge, and losing his arm had made them take root. Then he'd hit the jackpot—the women's unexpected arrival, which had not only saved him from the brink of death but also given him the upper hand.

Turning the tables had dulled his sense of urgency. Confidence and resentment twisted his thoughts and perceptions, blinding him to risks he had once weighed carefully. Now he saw only advantages. And that—although he didn't realize it—was why he set his sights on the CWH.

Suddenly Shiori was moving a lot slower—her speed stim was beginning to wear off. Yajima tensed as he watched Akira going toe to toe with her, solely focused on calculating the right time to dash for the weapon. Soon he would get his chance...

Now! Tossing Reina aside to unburden himself, Yajima sprinted for the fallen rifle. A fraction of a second later, Akira turned his back on Shiori and broke into a mad dash toward the same spot.

*Too slow! I beat you to it!* Yajima exulted, seizing the CWH before Akira could reach it and turning the weapon on its owner. Akira's bullet had weakened Yajima, but his high-spec cyborg body was still strong enough to absorb the mighty kick of at least one proprietary cartridge, even firing one-handed.

Nothing stood between Yajima and his target. At this distance, he wouldn't miss, and Akira couldn't dodge. In the slow-motion world of total concentration, Yajima sneered, knowing he had won, and pulled the trigger.

The rifle didn't fire.

"What the—?" Yajima exclaimed in shock and confusion. This *couldn't* be

happening. His face was a mask of surprise—until Akira’s fist struck it. Yajima was too stunned to react as the boy finished closing in, pulled back his arm, and threw a masterful haymaker. With all the force of Akira’s powered suit behind it, the blow lifted Yajima’s feet off the floor and sent him flying backward. The CWH sailed out of his hand.

But even that devastating strike did almost no real damage to the cyborg, whose armored skin could shrug off even overpressure AAH ammo. Nevertheless, the shock snapped Yajima back to his senses.

*Why didn’t it fire?! he thought as he flew through the air. It couldn’t be out of ammo—that punk reloaded it right before it got kicked out of his hand! He crashed into the wall behind him, but was too surprised to care. Don’t tell me he slotted in an empty magazine! On purpose?! In that situation?! No, I know he fired a shot after that! The gun couldn’t have been empty—unless he reloaded with one cartridge in the chamber!*

That was no accident, Yajima realized. Who would carry around empty magazines? Akira must have emptied the one in his rifle, then only pretended to exchange it while actually slotting it back into the weapon. The realization gave Yajima an even greater shock.

*The woman got close to him because he stopped to reload, and it looked like he fired that last shot in a panic. Was that all an act? Did he shoot to make me think the gun was loaded and then let her knock it out of his hands so I’d pick it up? There’s no way!*

Yajima leaned against the wall. He was too unsteady to stand without support—dizzy not from injury but from astonishment.

*Is this a trap? But how much of it? The whole thing? Has he been setting me up ever since the woman attacked him?! But that’s impossible!*

Each fresh discovery increased his confusion, a labyrinth of thoughts so bewildering that he forgot where he was. Until he glanced up at the boy who must have snared him, and all his speculations dissolved. Akira had the CWH, and it was pointed straight at him.

He’d punched Yajima, snatched his rifle out of the air, and swiftly replaced its empty magazine.

*Now, wrap things up before anyone else interferes!* ordered Alpha.

*Agreed!* Akira replied, smoothly sinking into a firing stance. Under the circumstances, Alpha's aim assistance made missing an impossibility.

Yajima had cheated death many times over, and he knew when he was done for. His vast experience told him, quite dispassionately, that he couldn't dodge.

But he *had* to know one thing: Were his speculations correct? Without meaning to, he opened his mouth to ask.

Before his lips could form the words, a bullet—just like the one that had wrecked his arm—hit him between the eyes, blowing apart his head and everything inside it. Yajima died without even a last request.



Shiori was almost dazed, her mind struggling to follow what had happened. But as soon as she recovered, she whipped her exhausted body into a run, crying, “Miss! Are you all right?!”

Reina was coughing too violently to answer at first. Yajima had choked her repeatedly—nearly squeezed her head off, in fact. Yet despite her injuries, her life was in no danger at the moment. Once she managed to steady her breathing, she asked, “D-Did I make it?” There was no joy in her voice—she hadn't followed the sudden change in their fortunes any better than Shiori had.

Shiori wanted to smile and reassure Reina that she was now safe. But she couldn't. Akira was stalking toward them, the muzzle of his AAH trained on Reina, and he looked anything but friendly.



After blowing off Yajima's head, Akira followed up with a few more shots to the man's limbs and torso. Some cyborg bodies could still carry out instructions after their owner's death, and Akira didn't want to take any chances. Only when he saw that Yajima's remains had been blasted over a wide area did he relax slightly and let his weariness show, convinced he had finally neutralized the threat.

But then he steeled himself again and switched to his AAH. He aimed the rifle

at Reina with one hand while fishing out a pack of medicine with the other. With a nimble twist, he tore open the container and guzzled its contents. Then he tossed aside the empty package and took another one—a massive dose to make up for the limited efficacy of the store-bought capsules.

All the while, he held his rifle steady. He'd learned a lesson from his last fight: if he wanted to stop Shiori, he should threaten Reina instead. Once he'd chugged all the medicine he had on him, he drew his other AAH with his free hand and pointed it at Shiori. Then he exhaled deeply and remained standing there, still and silent.

His latest battle had nearly pushed his body past his limits—beyond the ability to move without help. For the time being, his powered suit was the only thing keeping him on his feet. Even pulling the trigger would require an immense effort. And although he'd downed a boatload of capsules, the cheap medicine was slow-acting. So he breathed deeply, looking grim, while he waited patiently for it to work its way through his system. Akira didn't want Shiori to move until it had done all it could for his injuries and fatigue, although he knew he couldn't expect a full recovery.

*What shape do you think she's in, Alpha?* he asked. *Has that "speed stim" thing worn off?*

*Not completely, I think, although its effects should be much weaker by now,* she replied.

*Okay. After a pause, he suggested, Maybe we could call this whole thing off if I took my guns off 'em? We don't have a reason to fight anymore.*

Shiori's strength had left a deep impression on him, and he knew that she hadn't been looking for a fight any more than he had. What was more, if he killed the women, that would leave two fewer witnesses to explain things to HQ. In the end, it would become one more way Yajima had outfoxed him. All good reasons not to pull the trigger—but not good enough to lower his weapons.

And Alpha gave him more to worry about. *Reina and Shiori turned a fight you'd already won back into a toss-up because they didn't believe you,* she reminded him sternly. *Then Reina's mistake turned the tables, and Shiori*



*attacked you to protect her. I wouldn't be surprised if they think you're holding a serious grudge.*

*Well, I guess you have a point.*

*And you refused to disarm, so they might not feel too kindly about that either. Shiori couldn't afford to kill you earlier, but she has no reason not to now—especially since I'm sure she wants to shield Reina from any revenge you might take.*

*I'll bet.*

*Her speed stim has mostly worn off, but she might have another dose ready. If so, I doubt she'd hesitate to use it—even if the overdose might kill her.*

*Yeah, she doesn't seem like the type to start playing it safe now, after everything she just went through.*

*So, Alpha concluded, if you have faith that Shiori won't try a suicide attack on you the moment you lower your rifles, be my guest.*

*I can't bet on that.*

Not wanting to fight wasn't the same as convincing someone *else* you didn't want to fight. Or believing them when they tried to convince *you*. Akira, at least, couldn't bring himself to believe that the women would put any trust in him.



Shiori grimly watched Akira. One of his rifles was aimed precisely between her eyes. She couldn't blame him for that—they *had* just been trying to kill each other. But why didn't he fire? If she was lucky, he was merely wary and didn't intend to kill them unless he had to. And after he had saved Reina's life, she was willing to accept him putting a few bullets in her—or even killing her—to ensure his own safety, as long as he didn't harm her mistress.

But there were other possibilities. What if he had realized she was using a speed stim, and was just waiting for it to wear off so he could be sure of killing her? What if he was simply debating whether to shoot them? Either or both could easily be true.

Earnestly, Shiori pleaded, "Would you please lower your weapons? We have

no desire to fight you.”

Akira didn’t budge. His gaze merely slid slightly toward Shiori.

“You have every right to be angry, Mr. Akira. I deeply regret my actions, and I am willing to atone for them with my life, or in any other way you choose to name.” Shiori could accept death—either from a swift bullet or a slow beating—if that would satisfy Akira. Reina, however, was another matter. If he targeted the girl, Shiori would stop him at any cost. “All the blame for assaulting you rests with me. I beg of you, please show mercy to Miss Reina.”

Akira neither moved nor answered. The rifles he was aiming at the women moved not a hair. Only a tiny movement of his eyes showed that he was listening.

Shiori took his silence for refusal. Panic and fear clouded her face. Reina had arguably caused this whole debacle—she’d stopped Akira just as he was about to finish off Yajima, and her carelessness had given the man a hostage to extort Shiori with. After all that, Shiori found it hard to believe that Akira would let Reina off the hook so easily. And while the woman had nevertheless clung to a sliver of hope, his response to her entreaties only confirmed her fears.

*I should have known that was too much to ask. But what should I do now?*

Once again, Shiori readied herself. If she couldn’t obtain mercy, she’d have to fall back on her final option—a reserve dose of speed stim. This drug wasn’t without its issues, like having side effects that would probably kill her. It was highly effective, but at the cost of a short duration and exponentially increasing downsides to repeated use. So her reserve dose wasn’t just a spare—it was also a last resort for when survival was no longer an option.

She could ignore the side effects, since she was prepared to die anyway. But there was one other problem: While she’d kept her first stim ready for immediate use in an emergency, she would need to dig out the second one and administer it to herself. What would the wary Akira do if she tried to pull off such a suspicious and drawn-out process under the barrels of his guns? The answer was obvious.

And Shiori had a time limit. Her first speed stim was also designed to keep her conscious in battle, and while it did its job well, the aftereffects were severe. As

soon as the drug wore off completely, she would fall into a state of semiconsciousness in which she would be hard-pressed to remain coherent, let alone fight. So if she were going to use her second dose, she had to do it before her first one expired. And with Reina in Akira's crosshairs as well, failure was not an option.

"Mr. Akira, I am entirely to blame," Shiori said, crouching to prostrate herself. "Please—"

A shot rang out. Akira's bullet passed within a hair's breadth of Reina. Shiori froze.

"Don't move," he said, leaving no doubt in her mind as to what awaited her if she ignored him.

The color drained from Shiori's face. She realized Akira was onto her, and despair reared its head within her. She'd been trying to retrieve her spare stim under the cover of prostrating herself. Nevertheless, her supplication had been no act—she had planned to resort to the stim only if this last sincere entreaty failed. Yet Akira had shut her down, and with a harsh response that told her he suspected her plan.

Hopelessness suffused Shiori's face—she realized she no longer had any way to save Reina. Loyal though she was, she could not persevere in the face of that cruel realization, and as it sapped what remained of her strength of will, the last lingering effects of her speed stim gave out. She collapsed, vision blurred and mind hazy, and while she didn't faint, picking herself up off the floor was beyond her.

"Shiori?!" Reina cried, frantically rushing over to support her companion. "Are you all right?! Hang in there!"

Reina's voice didn't reach Shiori. But as the woman's consciousness faded, she realized they'd moved—in spite of Akira's warning.

"Miss, I'm so sorry. Please, run," Shiori murmured as she closed her eyes in resignation, praying that Reina, at least, would be spared.

But to her confusion, no shots came. When Shiori opened her eyes again, she saw that although Akira's rifles were still covering her, he was looking off at one

of the passages exiting the chamber.

Why didn't he fire? Shiori asked herself, studying Akira in bewilderment. He already seemed far less wary of her and Reina than before. The boy *had* been waiting for her stim to wear off, she realized, but not to kill her—he had merely kept his guard up until he could be sure he was safe from reprisals.

They still had a chance! The thought reinvigorated Shiori. To ensure Reina's survival for the time being, she need simply avoid provoking Akira and urge him to turn them in at headquarters (if he felt so inclined). Then Shiori would pay the price for this blunder, and all would be well. So, she decided, now was the time to negotiate with Akira.

But before she could speak, Akira scowled, swiftly turned his weapons toward the passage, and squeezed off a burst of gunfire. Countless bullets clattered against the far wall of a bend in the tunnel.

What had happened this time? Shiori wondered, with growing confusion and anxiety.

Then, from around the corner of the passage, a voice called, "Reina! Shiori! Are you all right?! I'm here to help!"

Hesitantly, Reina said, "Katsuya?"

A few moments later, Shiori put two and two together—Katsuya was around the corner, and Akira had fired to keep him at bay.

"Again?" Akira grumbled.

Shiori's blood ran cold. She could easily picture him thinking about how much trouble he would have spared himself if he'd simply killed Yajima and not stopped to argue. From his tone, she sensed his determination not to repeat his mistakes.

"Five against one," he muttered. "I don't like those odds."

Again, Shiori shuddered. She now knew that Katsuya had companions—probably Yumina and Airi—but that wasn't what mattered. Akira displayed absolutely no desire to explain himself. He was expecting a fight, and he counted her and Reina among his enemies. Though he'd relaxed his guard when

Shiori ceased to be a threat, his wariness had now returned in full force. He didn't look like he was preparing to use the two of them as hostages, and he'd said that five opponents were too many for his liking. It didn't take a genius to guess how he would start evening the odds.

*Mr. Katsuya, why now of all times?! Shiori lamented in spite of herself, realizing that Akira must have felt much the same at their own arrival.*



Akira tried to stay on his guard even after he saw Shiori collapse.

But then a cheerful Alpha said, *It's safe to lower your weapons now, Akira.*

*Really?* he asked. *What about that second dose you said she might have?*

*I'm far too competent to let her take one in this situation. Of course, if you want to shoot her just to be safe, I won't stop you. That way, she'd be in no condition to hurt you even if she did use another stim. She won't be able to counterattack if you strike now.*

*Nah, that seems like a little much.* Akira only wanted Shiori out of action. If he was going to shoot her, he would already have done it.

*Then let's get ready to face our next problem. I can't detect any threats nearby, but don't get careless—the jamming smoke is still in effect. That man acted like he had backup coming, so we'd better watch out for his friends.*

*Oh, yeah. Good point.* Akira peered down a passage. The white smoke had grown so thin that it was nearly invisible, but he thought the distance still looked a little hazy. *How long until that stuff stops working? Will it be a short wait, or do we have to put up with hours of this?*

*I'm not certain. The amount and type of smoke makes a difference, and so does the terrain. Still, this place is practically airtight, so it will definitely last longer than it would out in the open aboveground. Your best bet is to test its effects yourself. Try calling HQ.*

*Sure. I'll see if I can get through to them and— Huh?*

Although communications were still down, the smoke's effects on surveillance had lessened considerably. Akira's scanner had just picked up

someone approaching the hall by another passage.

*Someone's coming, he said. That guy's cronies, maybe?*

*Probably not, Alpha replied. Considering the direction they're coming from, I'd guess they're hunters who've lost contact with HQ and want to know why.*

As Alpha had conjectured, the newcomers were not Yajima's accomplices but Katsuya's team—technically not enemies. But the Druncam hunters didn't necessarily see things that way. No sooner had Katsuya peeked around the corner than he raised his rifle, ready to come to Reina and Shiori's rescue.

Akira was faster. His swift blast of bullets stopped Katsuya in his tracks.

"Again?" he grumbled. He couldn't help voicing his annoyance out loud. Just when he thought he had things under control, another intruder appeared to make his situation worse. Again.

Then he focused, determined to not mess up this time.

*Was it my fault those shots missed, Alpha?* he asked, puzzled. *Was I so off-balance that I couldn't aim right even with your help?*

*No, I opted for warning shots,* Alpha replied.

*What for? The other guy was ready to shoot me. I've got to at least get a hit in, even if I don't go for the kill.*

*He might have been about to fire a warning shot too. Besides, this is five against one. Try not to make any more enemies than you have to.*

Thanks to Alpha's support, Akira could see that it was Katsuya's team hiding around the corner. He doubted they were on par with Yajima or Shiori individually, but it still sounded like Alpha didn't want him to risk a fair fight with them at present.

"Five against one," he grumbled again, frustrated by yet another change for the worse. "I don't like those odds."

*If worse comes to worst, kill them all.* That was what Alpha had told him when Reina and Shiori got involved. But now she didn't want him to pick a fight—meaning this group was tough enough to worry her.

Akira scowled. Matters just kept getting worse.



The first thing Katsuya saw when he ran in was Akira, apparently on the verge of shooting Reina and Shiori. He'd hoped to get off a shot to stop the killing, but Akira's fire had pinned him down instead. The best he could do was to take cover against the wall of the passage and shout, "Reina! Shiori! Are you all right?! I'm here to help!"

Once he'd let the women know he was there, he reviewed the situation. But try as he might, he couldn't make sense of it.

"Why is that guy fighting Reina and Shiori?" he wondered. "What do you think, Yumina?"

"I don't know either," Yumina said, fixing Katsuya with a glare. "Just don't make any rash moves."

"Come *on*! We need to rescue them ASAP!"

But Yumina remained firm. "I'm telling you to be careful so that we *can* save them. Just calm down! Do you realize you almost died just now?! How is getting yourself killed supposed to help Reina and Shiori?"

Her intensity scared Katsuya back to his senses. "All right, I'm calm," he said. "Now what?"

"I wonder. Airi, can you raise HQ?"

"No luck," Airi replied.

Yumina had tried to call headquarters on her way there, hoping to make excuses for Katsuya leaving his post, but the connection had died before she could finish. She'd continued her pursuit, since she couldn't afford to wait around and lose track of Katsuya, and communications had never been restored.

"What in the world is going on?" Yumina muttered, at her wit's end. She could only be sure of one thing: their situation was dire.

An impasse followed. Katsuya urged Akira to surrender. Silence. He tried name-dropping Druncam, with the same result. He asked if Akira had conditions



for releasing the women, but got no answer, demand or otherwise. And he couldn't find any gap in Akira's defense either—whenever he tried to divert Akira by shooting around the corner, another burst of gunfire drove him back. Katsuya couldn't see any way to improve the situation.

“Shit! What can we do?!” he demanded.

Seeing his mounting frustration, Yumina came to a decision. “I know—I'll do some negotiating.”

“Negotiate? How?! He ignores everything I say to him!”

“Yes, but I have an idea I want to try. Airi, keep Katsuya under control.”

Airi looked nonplussed, but she said, “All right,” and took up a position beside the equally perplexed Katsuya. Anything to break the deadlock.

Yumina raised her hands, still holding her rifle. Then she made an obvious show of dropping the weapon, as if she wanted someone to see her do it.

Katsuya stared at her in bewilderment, unable to make sense of her actions. What she did next, however, surprised and panicked him. Yumina exhaled to steady her nerves and, looking deadly serious, walked around the corner with her hands up.

“Are you nuts?!” Katsuya shouted, scrambling to pull her back behind cover. But Airi did her best to stop him—it was already too late, and she didn't want him to go down with Yumina. Katsuya's face contorted in grief: he would never make it in time—Yumina was about to die.

But Yumina wasn't shot. To Katsuya's consternation, she relaxed slightly, as if relieved that all was going according to plan. Then she looked at Akira and said, “I'd like to talk. Is that all right with you?”

She could sense Katsuya's surprise behind her as she slowly walked toward Akira.



Akira could see Katsuya's team clearly—Alpha's support made short work of the wall that should have hidden them. So he knew when Yumina raised her hands and dropped her gun. And although he wondered what her game was, he

was still instinctively less wary of an unarmed opponent. When she rounded the corner, he was surprised but held his fire.

“I’d like to talk. Is that all right with you?” she asked.

“What about?” he answered slowly, finally realizing that she had dropped her rifle with such fanfare for his benefit. Yumina had known he could see her! The discovery surprised him—and made him slightly more cautious.

Once Yumina got within a certain distance of him, he signaled her to stop—by centering her face in his rifle sight. She halted and softened her expression slightly, as if to reassure him.



Yumina hadn’t caught on to Alpha’s existence. But she *had* noticed how Akira reacted to Katsuya’s attempts to catch him off guard, as if he could see them from around the corner, and deduced that he must have an extremely advanced scanner of some kind. If she’d been wrong, she would have gotten shot, but she’d been willing to take that risk.

And to her relief, Akira seemed willing to listen. He hadn’t shot Reina and Shiori, despite having every opportunity, so she’d speculated that he probably wouldn’t fire on an unarmed person. She also hoped that he would be more receptive to mediation from someone who didn’t pose a threat than with an armed group shouting from around a corner.

So far, so good. But the hard part was yet to come, Yumina reminded herself. She tried to look calm, concealing her nervousness, as she began negotiations still looking down the barrel of Akira’s gun.

“We’re only here to rescue Reina and Shiori there. We don’t want to fight you,” she said.

Akira’s answering look said that he didn’t believe that for a minute.

She tried again. “We’ll help them. We won’t fight you. Do we have a deal?” She could see Akira studying her suspiciously, trying to gauge her true intentions, so she added, “I don’t know what happened here, but you’re the one who beat Shiori, right? We don’t want any trouble with someone who can pull that off.” This was both another reason for her team to avoid battle and a

mild compliment to Akira.

*Alpha?* Akira asked.

*She means it,* Alpha confirmed.

Yumina spoke from the heart. She'd put herself in this dangerous position because she didn't want to let Katsuya fight Akira. If she left Katsuya to stew, he would ignore his own safety in his rush to save the other women. And against an opponent who could not only out-fight Shiori but had two hostages to hide behind, that would be suicide. Yumina was determined to prevent it at any cost.

"But we can't just give up on Reina and Shiori and leave," Yumina continued. "Our organization won't allow it. So we'd like to take them and get out of here as soon as we can."

*Alpha?*

*She's still telling the truth.*

"I realize they may have caused trouble for you, but there's nothing I can do about that. You're better off taking it up with HQ or Druncam's negotiators. What do you say?"

Akira hadn't finished off the women and made his escape, so he either couldn't afford to or didn't want to. If he worried that releasing his prisoners wouldn't guarantee him a safe retreat, or that he would have no peaceful means of settling the dispute afterward, then this offer should appeal to him. Yumina realized that she was operating mostly on guesswork and wishful thinking, but she still hoped for success. And to her relief, Akira did seem to be wavering, despite his scowl.

But suddenly Akira's expression hardened. Radiating wariness, he said, "You wanna rescue them and not fight me, is that right?"

Yumina hesitated a moment before answering, "Yes."

"That might fly between you and me." Akira was looking at something behind Yumina. "But it won't mean much if your pals have other ideas."

Yumina stiffened. *Katsuya, I told you not to make any rash moves! Airi, I told you to hold him back! Which one is it?! Both of them?! Or is he bluffing?!*

In fact, Akira was half bluffing and half distrustful of Katsuya and Airi. He could put some faith in a person who had disarmed and come forward to negotiate at gunpoint for the sake of her comrades. But that trust didn't extend to the others, who were still skulking around the corner, watching for an opening. And he also wanted Yumina to explain what she was going to do about them.

Yumina racked her brain. She couldn't simply throw in the towel and rejoin her team—she doubted Akira would let her. Unless she thought of a solution, she would end up as just one more hostage. And then it hit her—if she was as good as a hostage already, she might as well push her luck.

“A deal between you and me, you said? All right, then. I'll be your hostage instead of Reina and Shiori. How's that sound?” Yumina started advancing, her hands still raised. “Then Katsuya and Airi won't be able to chase you, since they'll have to bring the others somewhere safe. And you'll still have a hostage after you set them free. That should solve everything.”

“Stop,” Akira commanded. She halted, and he said, “Your powered suit.”

Yumina hesitated briefly, then she ejected her suit's energy pack and passed it to Akira. She'd strip down if he insisted, but she'd prefer to avoid that—it would incense Katsuya.

*Alpha?* Akira asked again.

*Her suit is off, and she'd need time to plug in a new energy pack.*

Out loud, Akira said, “All right. Turn around and back toward me slowly.”

Yumina did, and Akira grabbed her near the nape of the neck. Then, with an AAH in his right hand and Yumina as a shield in his left, he shifted his attention to Katsuya and Airi.

Keeping her hands up, Yumina yelled loud enough for her team to hear, “Katsuya! Airi! It's all right now! Leave with Reina and Shiori!”

Katsuya and Airi emerged cautiously from around the corner. They had been too far away to follow the negotiations, and they couldn't quite believe their ears. Their unease turned to alarm when, despite Yumina's shout, they saw Akira hiding behind her with his weapon ready.

“Yumina, what’s going on?!” Katsuya demanded.

“I’m fine!” Yumina insisted. “You two take Reina and Shiori back to the others and explain what’s happening to HQ.”

“Then *you* explain it to *me* first!”

“Don’t argue, just hurry! If the others can’t contact HQ either, then as leader, it’s *your* job to keep them in line.” While Yumina spoke, Akira was dragging her toward the passage Katsuya’s team had come from.

Katsuya glared at him. “What the hell is going on here?! What are you after? I don’t get why someone who hangs out with Elena and Sara would pull a stunt like this.”

Akira didn’t answer. He kept backing away from Katsuya and the others, still guardedly clutching Yumina and his rifle. Katsuya almost started to follow him, but Yumina gave him a look and shook her head emphatically.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said. “Get Reina and Shiori out of here! You left your post to come rescue them, remember? So you’d better see it through! Do you understand?”

Grief-stricken, Katsuya forced himself to assent. “All right.”

Yumina smiled, satisfied. Then Akira dragged her out of sight around a bend in the passage.

Despite a muttered “Damn it!” Katsuya wasted no time. He made to treat Shiori first, since her condition seemed more serious.

“Don’t mind me,” Shiori said weakly, shaking her head. “Get Miss Reina to a safe place. Please...” She paused for breath. “Please hurry! I beg you.” With that, Shiori lost consciousness, and Reina started to panic.

“Airi, take Reina! Let’s go!” Katsuya called, hoisting Shiori onto his back. Airi gave Reina her shoulder to lean on, and together they rushed off to rejoin their comrades. Katsuya was determined to leave Reina and Shiori with the others, report to HQ, and then immediately set out to rescue Yumina.

“I’m sorry,” Reina murmured. “It’s my fault.”

“Don’t be silly!” Katsuya said, trying to reassure her. “That guy’s the one who

took Yumina.”

“No, I made things worse. I...” Reina went on mumbling to herself in sorrow and regret. She stopped responding to Katsuya, leaving him with no choice but to give up on talking to her.

“Really, what the hell happened?” he wondered. He wore a confused frown as he hurried ahead.

He couldn’t stop worrying about Yumina.



Akira trekked through the tunnels, shouldering his backpack—which he’d retrieved—and still holding Yumina by the back of the neck. Once they got a short distance from the large chamber they’d started in, however, he released his grip.

“You’re letting me go?” Yumina asked, letting out her breath.

“No, keep walking ahead of me,” Akira said. “And call HQ on the way.”

“I can’t. I tried to call them back in that room, but I couldn’t get through.”

“That was because of the jamming smoke. We should be able to make contact again if we move out of range or the effect fades over time. That guy smashed up my terminal, so you call for me. Try right now.”

Yumina made the attempt, then shook her head.

Akira sighed. “We’ll walk to HQ, then. Keep trying to call them as we go. Get moving.”

“All right.” Yumina set out toward headquarters. Although she couldn’t use her powered suit, she wasn’t injured either, so she set quite a brisk pace.

Akira, meanwhile, did have the benefit of his suit, but his body was already at its limit. He had a hard time forcing himself to keep up with Yumina, and the effort caused him considerable pain.

After a while, Yumina realized—to her secret relief—that while Akira was very much on his guard against her, he didn’t mean her any harm. A great weight seemed to lift from her, and she decided to ask the questions she hadn’t dared

to earlier.

“So, how’d you end up fighting Shiori? What happened?”

“Ask Shiori later,” Akira said.

“Is there some reason you can’t tell me?” Yumina countered.

“Why ask me? You don’t know me well enough to trust anything I tell you,” Akira snapped—repeating more or less what Yumina had once said about him. One half of him was lashing out in frustration. The other half—the part that mocked and loathed himself—genuinely believed what he said.

Earnestly, Yumina said, “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, er...” Akira faltered, taken aback. Not in his wildest dreams had he expected a sincere apology. At last, he said, “My bad.”

An awkward silence followed, as both tried to work out how frank they could be with each other, until Akira asked a question of his own.

“Why’d you volunteer to be a hostage just to smooth things over back there?”

Yumina hesitated, wondering about his intentions and her response, but Akira took her silence for a refusal. “Just wondering,” he added. “You don’t have to tell me.”

He almost sounded shy, Yumina realized to her surprise. Despite his hedging, she went ahead and answered him honestly. “I just figured I could avoid a fight if I stepped up to negotiate, and I didn’t want to lose anyone because they tried to take on a guy who could beat Shiori.”

“Okay,” Akira said. He seemed to be pondering something. “But what would you have done if I’d shot you?”

“I couldn’t have done anything.”

“S-Seriously?” Akira faltered. He’d come to the same conclusion, but this didn’t strike him as something to just shrug off. It didn’t make sense to him.

“So, thanks for not shooting me,” Yumina added.

Thanks? Akira hadn’t expected that. A few moments passed before he could manage another “Okay.”



Watching Yumina walk ahead of him, he suddenly found himself thinking that she had offered her own life for her teammates, just as Shiori had for Reina—although Shiori’s sacrifice had been more dramatic. He couldn’t have done that, and at some dim level, he respected them for it. What kind of lives must they have led that made them think that way? He tried to imagine, but nothing came to mind. He chuckled at his failure.

Then Yumina’s struggle to contact headquarters finally paid off. “This is HQ,” said a voice from her work terminal. “What’s—?”

“This is Twenty-Seven!” Akira immediately shouted at the device. “Three wounded in battle with a suspicious individual! Unable to continue combat! The suspect is dead, but there’s a serious risk he has allies! I think they’re trying to steal relics from the tunnels! Request immediate rescue and support from combat specialists!”

Yumina was taken aback—first by Akira’s sudden yell, then by the details of his report. Akira kept shouting regardless.

“My terminal was destroyed while fighting, so I’m using another hunter’s! Oh, and Druncam hunters already recovered the other two casualties! Over!”

The operator’s voice continued demanding more details, but Akira ignored it. To Yumina, he said, “This is far enough—you’re free now. I’m returning to HQ. We can go together if you’re headed the same way.”

“Huh? Oh, umm... No thanks,” Yumina responded. Everything was happening too fast for her to follow, and this was all the reply she could manage.

“Okay, then I’ll give you one warning: don’t go back to that big room. You might run into friends of the guy who attacked us. Later!” Akira took off at a run.

“W-Wait! Don’t just leave me hanging!” Yumina shouted after him, anxious for details. “What—?”

But Akira had already vanished down the passage. From her work terminal, she could still hear the operator demanding explanations, but Yumina had no answers to give.

“Really, what in the world happened?” she murmured in bewilderment. Then

she exhaled and put headquarters on hold, shelving the question for later. First, she needed to let Katsuya know she was safe.

## Chapter 54: Revengeware

Not long after Akira had settled his differences with Katsuya's team and left, the cavernous room received two visitors no one would ever have mistaken for hunters on the job: Yajima's accomplices, Kain and Nelia.

Kain wore a massive suit of powered armor—less like Akira and Elena's formfitting suits and more of a miniature, wearable mech. It had two arms on each side, and all four of its hands held heavy weaponry. Its steel legs were reverse-jointed. Although technically a type of powered suit, it was closer to a large upgrade module for combat cyborgs.

The tunnels were quite wide, but they could barely accommodate Kain's hulking armor. He traversed them only with some difficulty by folding up its limbs. When the armor emerged into the chamber and stood to its full height, it loomed so large that it would have seemed impossible to maneuver it so far through the underground pathways. Such a journey demanded a high level of skill—and proved that this operator possessed it.

Nelia also wore powered armor. Although not nearly as large, her suit was still bulky due to the thick armor that encased it. And while the passages were large—by subterranean standards—they were also littered with all kinds of detritus that made them somewhat tricky to navigate. Traversing them smoothly in such armor proved that Nelia was as capable in this regard as Kain.

The duo were combat specialists, brought on to guard the getaway vehicle once the relics had been extracted. They wore their powerful-yet-conspicuous armor because they hadn't even planned to set foot in the tunnels—that was Yajima's job.

Kain swept a wide area with his scanner. "I found Yajima's corpse," he reported. "Or the bits of scrap metal that used to be his body, anyway. His head's blown clean off, so I think it's safe to say he's dead. No one would've taken just his brain."

"Okay," Nelia responded breezily. "Let's head back, then."

“What about the cache of relics near here?”

“Did you find any bodies besides Yajima’s?”

“No, none.”

“Then whoever killed Yajima is long gone, meaning HQ at least knows there was fighting here. The first thing they’ll do is send more hunters to investigate, and we can’t haul relics while fighting off a search party.”

“Well, you have a point,” Kain reluctantly admitted.

“You bet I do. So let’s get going.”

“You don’t seem too broken up that someone killed Yajima,” Kain remarked, equal parts curious and annoyed. “I thought you were lovers.”

“I don’t dwell on the past,” Nelia answered with alacrity.

Just then, a team of hunters appeared. Headquarters had grown suspicious after losing contact with Akira and ordered them to investigate. So when they found strangers in powered armor who weren’t broadcasting their locations, every hunter immediately trained their weapons on the pair.

“Don’t move!” one shouted. “What are you doing here?!”

Unfazed, Kain took aim at the hunters and fired his arsenal without hesitation or warning. Gunfire roared through the tunnels as a member of the search party perished instantly in a hail of bullets.

“Jeez,” Nelia grumbled. “Ever heard of subtlety?”

“I’m not cut out for finesse,” Kain replied. “Can’t you tell by looking at me?”

The hunters opened fire as soon as Kain moved, showering him with the powerful ammo they’d brought for the scorpion extermination. But every shot ricocheted harmlessly off Kain’s armor—sometimes right into Nelia’s.

“Watch it! You got some on me,” she griped, with all the urgency of someone complaining about raindrops from a shaken umbrella.

“Don’t blame me,” Kain responded, equally casual. “Take it up with *them*.”

The surviving hunters returned fire with even greater ferocity. Kain’s four arms went to work, annihilating them—and any nearby cover—with a wild

barrage of bullets and grenades.



At headquarters, Akira found himself on the receiving end of a thorough debriefing. When he told the officials about his encounter with Yajima, and how the man seemed to be waiting for backup, they informed him that a second search party had been attacked by those who were presumably Yajima's associates. Unlike Akira, who had merely spotted someone suspicious, the follow-up team knew that HQ had lost contact with its first agent. They had gone in expecting danger, armed like an extermination team and with personnel to match, but they had still suffered heavy casualties. Akira grimaced as he listened.

*That was a close one,* Alpha remarked with a sardonic smile. *If you'd stayed to argue with Katsuya's team any longer, you might have run into them.*

*You said it,* Akira responded. While he was glad he'd made it out in time, he felt less than pleased about how close he'd come to being part of the death toll. *Why does it always come down to the wire like this? Am I just that unlucky?*

Alpha met his lament with a teasing grin. *Maybe you aren't doing enough good deeds. Almost getting the lovely young hostage killed can't have done your karma any favors.*

*Oh, come on!* Akira snapped, annoyed. *Dropping my gun then would've been suicide!*

*Such a catch-22 is just another kind of misfortune.*

*Oh, really? What a shame. I guess not even your oh-so-incredible support can make up for my shitty luck,* Akira gibed. Alpha almost had him convinced, so he hid behind taunts.

*I'm ever so sorry,* Alpha said, cheerful and unruffled. *I try my best, but it's an uphill battle. You ought to know that better than anyone.*

*You've got that right.* Akira sighed, drawing a quizzical look from the official grilling him about what had happened in the large room. He dodged the unspoken question by saying simply—and truthfully—that he was tired.

The building that served as headquarters for underground operations also housed an infirmary. And although temporary, the facility was well-equipped to keep hunters in fighting condition. That was where Akira went once he finished his report. He had no obvious external wounds, but his insides were in rough shape—too rough for low-end medicine to fully heal. So he wouldn't pass up the chance for real medical attention.

On his way there, he mulled over a warning from the official. *He said to keep an eye on costs, 'cause treatment ain't free. Well, no surprise there.*

*He also told you to work out payment issues on your own—insurance coverage included,* Alpha added cheerily.

*Like I'd have insurance. Still, since he bothered to warn me, I'm guessing they charge wasteland rates. I bet this'll cost me.* Akira let out another little sigh.

All the medical facilities had been crammed into what had once been a large hall. They looked like a cluster of small clinics—each under the auspices of a different hospital or pharmaceutical company. There was even what appeared to be part of a maintenance hangar—not all hunters were pure flesh and blood like Akira, so the infirmary had to account for everything from nanomachine augments and natural-looking prosthetics to obviously mechanized cyborgs. Their repairs were considered medical treatment just as much as more conventional care was.

Akira followed signs labeled “unaugmented patients this way” until he met a man in a lab coat. There was something indefinably shady about this person. He seemed less like a doctor and more like a scientist with a penchant for human experimentation. The worn lettering on his name tag—which introduced him as “Yatsubayashi”—only made him seem less trustworthy. Akira had never been to a doctor before, so he had no standard for what to expect, but something about Yatsubayashi still seemed worryingly off to him.

*Think I should turn around and leave, Alpha?* he asked.

*I hate to break it to you, Akira, but every other clinic assumes you have insurance. This is the only place an unaugmented, uninsured person can get halfway decent treatment,* Alpha replied. She hadn't based her judgment on impressions—information gleaned from Akira's work terminal and her

assessment of the facilities told her whether the clinic could provide adequate services.

*O-Okay, then.* Akira resigned himself and kept going.

“Welcome to the Yatsubayashi Clinic, Kuzusuhara Branch,” Yatsubayashi greeted him amiably—once he saw that Akira was a customer. “I’m Yatsubayashi, the head physician. Now, I hate to rush things, but how do you intend to pay?”

“Take it out of my paycheck,” Akira replied.

“Understood. Oh, and the Kugamayama City Sales Department provides for free examinations, but nothing else. So don’t blame me if I find out what’s wrong with you and then stop because you can’t afford to fix it. Now, strip down for me.”

Akira obediently removed his suit, and Yatsubayashi began examining him with a device like a camera, another that resembled a scanner, and then other more dubious instruments. Akira didn’t know enough to tell whether they were, in fact, proper medical equipment. Either way, the examination only lasted about ten minutes.

“Good news,” Yatsubayashi announced. “Your injuries are minor. Still, I recommend treatment. How much would you like me to do for you?”

“Minor?!” Akira echoed, disbelieving. “My arms and legs have been hurting like hell for a while now, and cheap meds are the only reason I’m still moving!”

“A *serious* injury would send you straight to the hospital—a torn-off arm, a mangled leg, exposed or ruptured organs, that sort of thing,” Yatsubayashi said, dismissing Akira’s doubts with an offhand chuckle. “All *you* have are cracked bones, severe internal bleeding, extreme muscle strain, contusions, and near-total exhaustion. Yes, I’d call those minor injuries.”

Akira looked conflicted. He wasn’t sure he could accept the doctor’s explanation, which threatened to warp his standard of what qualified as being badly hurt. At last, he said, “Minor or not, it hurts to move. Patch me up good enough to fight.”

“Very good! Now, we have a number of treatment options. Personally, I

recommend the ones insurance won't cover. If you'd like to know why—"

"I don't have insurance," Akira said, cutting off what promised to be a long lecture on Yatsubayashi's medical preferences.

Yatsubayashi looked startled—hunters skilled enough to work in the underground shopping district were typically insured, often through whatever syndicate they belonged to. But his surprise soon gave way to a look of glee—hardly the expression of a doctor facing a patient.

"Why didn't you say so?!" he exclaimed. "In that case, would you mind trying a medicine I've invented?! I highly recommend it—I'll even throw in a discount! Most insurance won't cover privately made drugs, but what do *you* care?! You don't have any!!!" He snatched a nearby container and showed Akira the green liquid within.

It was the shadiest medicine the young hunter had ever seen.

"No way," Akira balked. "That stuff's gotta be risky if insurance won't cover it."

"Come on, it'll be fine! I developed this by analyzing Old World relics and replicating their effects, so you could even call it Old World medicine. And of course, I've tested its safety by taking it myself. It works like a charm—your run-of-the-mill cheap capsules can't hold a candle to it. Insurance plans won't cover it because they're mostly backed by Big Pharma. They exclude any drugs they don't make, in order to promote their own brand. It's not about safety concerns or anything like that." An odd note entered Yatsubayashi's voice as he continued, "So, why worry? It'll never get approved unless I record more successful trials. And putting a cheap, effective new medicine on the market would be a public service. You'll be healing up and helping people at the same time. Hunting is brutal work, I know. And a little good deed like this is just the thing to help you hold on to your humanity."

*Just so you know, Alpha interjected while Yatsubayashi droned on, I don't think he's lying. He's no cyborg, and I don't detect anything artificial about his expression. And he shows no signs of trying to trick or swindle you.*

*That stuff still weirds me out, even if he is honest,* Akira countered.



*Well, I don't blame you.*

Even if insurance *was* in the pocket of “Big Pharma,” approved, widely used treatments still ought to be safe. Yatsubayashi’s medicine might work, but Akira couldn’t bring himself to take it on faith from someone he’d just met. On the other hand, he knew firsthand what Old World medicine could do, so that detail of the man’s pitch piqued his interest. Part of him wondered if it might be worth a shot.

Yatsubayashi picked up on his hesitation and went for the jugular. “All right, how about this?! If you let me treat you with my medicine, I’ll sell you a relic! This Old World medicine is so good it might normally sell for coron—but for you, I’ll take payment in aurum! What do you say?!”

To prove his point, Yatsubayashi whipped out a package—which Akira recognized.

*Alpha, isn't that...?*

*Yes, that's the same type of recovery capsule you got from the ruins, Alpha confirmed. He doesn't seem to be lying, and the packaging is still sealed, so it's probably genuine. I'd like to get our hands on that, if we can manage it.*

“How many packages will you sell me, and for how much each?” Akira asked.

“Just one, for two million aurum,” Yatsubayashi replied. “To be clear, this isn’t normally for sale—I keep it on hand to treat desperate cases. So I won’t haggle.”

Akira felt torn. In the end, however, he gave in to his desire for more of the Old World medicine that had saved his life so often. “All right,” he said. “You have a deal. Take that money out of my pay too.”

“Excellent!” Yatsubayashi gleefully set about drawing some of the green fluid into a syringe. The sight gave Akira misgivings. Had he been rash? Nevertheless, he steeled himself to accept treatment.

The procedure itself was soon over. Yatsubayashi simply gave him injections in a few places, then wrapped him in bandages soaked in the green fluid.

“You’re good to go,” the man said. “Rest quietly for, oh, let’s say, about an

hour. Moving around won't kill you or anything, but you can expect better results if you sit still. Oh, and don't tell anyone I sold you that medicine—I don't want other hunters hassling me for more."

"All right," Akira agreed. "How much is this treatment gonna cost me?"

"One hundred thousand aurum, after I deduct your pay for assisting with my research—one of the perks of an unapproved treatment," Yatsubayashi said effusively, with a shifty smile. "Thank you so much for taking part in this clinical trial! I promise it will work wonders. And feel free to come again if you ever have the chance—I need all the trial data I can get."

Akira grimaced. Coming from such a dubious source, the phrase "clinical trial" made him more uneasy than ever.

Suddenly, a clamor broke out nearby. A group of wounded hunters had just been carried into the infirmary hall. Most were gravely injured. Some were drenched in blood, others were missing limbs, and one hunter had lost everything below the waist.

The sight sobered Yatsubayashi somewhat. "Sorry, emergency patients. Clear out. I'd like to save them all, and I don't need mild cases getting underfoot."

"All of them?" Akira asked hesitantly. "Some of those guys *have* to be dead."

"You'd be surprised. Some hunters partially cyberize their heads or install life-support nanomachines to stave off brain death for a while, even after decapitation. If I work fast, I might just make it in time."

Akira was shocked. What looked like corpses to him might, in reality, still have a chance at life.

"*If* they can afford treatment, of course," Yatsubayashi added. "Cyberization isn't free, so they might spend the rest of their lives working off the debt, but that's not my problem. Now, beat it!"

Akira left the clinic, frowning as he watched the stream of casualties going in the opposite direction.

*Aren't you glad your injuries were minor?* Alpha asked, smiling as usual.

Akira thought for a moment before answering, *Yeah*. One wrong move, he

realized, and he would have been among the hunters carried into the infirmary—a fresh reminder of the perils that surrounded him.

Before putting his suit back on, Akira replaced its energy pack. He had swapped in a new one just that morning, but it was already running low.

*It doesn't usually drain this fast, does it?* he asked.

*No, but that's no surprise after how hard I pushed it,* Alpha replied. *If not for my aid, the entire suit could easily have broken down.*

To save Akira's life, Alpha had resorted to maneuvers that shortened his suit's life span. And although he'd survived, her success had come at a cost. As he made his way back to HQ, Akira thought that his suit's movements felt stiffer than usual.

Yatsubayashi's examination had convinced the officials that his injuries were genuine. So, to give him some rest, they assigned him to guard duty at headquarters. Akira kept watch in silence, hoping against hope that the rest of his job would be this uneventful.



In the shadow of the densely jumbled wreckage that filled the Kuzusuhara outskirts rested a massive truck, easily capable of transporting tanks or mechs. Its armored frame projected strength, and its tires were as tall as a man. Built tough for the wasteland, it could plow through most rubble in its path. An armed band stood guard around it. These were Yajima's relic thieves, although Kain and Nelia now commanded them in the dead leader's place.

The truck was already loaded with a massive trove of relics from the underground district. The thieves had bored a new opening into the tunnel network to extract them. Once they were back aboveground, however, Kain and Nelia had collapsed the passage with explosives to hamper the hunters' pursuit. They'd had to cut short their work, and any underground caches that they hadn't retrieved yet were now lost to them—meaning they had no more reason to linger. Once they made a swift getaway with their loot, a fortune would be theirs. And the thieves all knew that the faster they got moving, the easier it would be to escape the city's manhunt.

Nevertheless, they were still here. They had a problem.

A connector linked Nelia's powered armor to the transport truck. She was trying to access the vehicle's control system, and a wired connection allowed her to hack a bit more strenuously. She'd been at this for a while now.

"Well?" Kain asked with undisguised irritation.

"It's hopeless," Nelia pronounced, raising her hands in mock surrender.

"Damn!" In his anger, Kain hit the truck. A mighty armored limb clanged loudly against its tough plating. "That bastard Yajima left us one hell of a souvenir!"

Yajima had provided the getaway vehicle. Such a large and powerful wasteland truck normally demanded considerable expertise from its driver, but even an amateur could handle this one, thanks to its advanced onboard control system. Now, however, that system—or the program Yajima had secretly installed on it—was an obstacle.

Revengeware, as it was usually called, was a popular type of automated recruiting software in the darker corners of the Eastern internet. These programs could be activated in a number of ways. Often, cyborg users selected a target for vengeance while they were still alive. Or they could configure their revengeware to identify one based on optical and other sensory data that their artificial bodies transmitted in their last moments. The software received the information and activated, carrying out preset instructions. Once the program registered the fulfillment of certain criteria—such as the murder of its user's target—it paid out a reward. Depending on the user's arrangements, payment could take many forms, such as a money transfer from a secret account or directions to hidden assets.

The revengeware running on the truck's system was meant to ensure Yajima had the last laugh if Kain and Nelia stabbed him in the back. But then Akira had ended up killing Yajima. Based on the last data the thief's body had sent before the jamming smoke cut off communications, the program had activated and latched onto the person it deemed most likely to have caused the man's death. And it rendered the truck inoperable until someone killed its target. Replacing the entire control system was a possibility, but that would have required

technical expertise and spare parts. The surviving thieves had neither.

The user dictated what criteria revengeware used to determine the death of its target. But when it came to standards of evidence, every program had its own idiosyncrasies. Destroying a disguised mannequin was enough to fool some shoddy software. Others might fail to register a genuine kill, turning the whole exercise into a waste of effort. The best programs would recognize and accept video of the target's murder, or of their corpse.

Nelia had been trying to hack into Yajima's software and trick it into concluding that his killer was dead, but all her attempts had ended in failure. The control system was a powerful computer, and the revengeware was a well-made program that Yajima had acquired online. Bypassing the vendor's authentication was beyond Nelia's ability, and she was the thieves' best hacker—excluding the late Yajima. If she couldn't crack the system, neither could any of the others. Knowing that only made Kain more furious.

Nelia sighed. "We're out of options," she told the others. "Let's give up."

"Give up?!" Kain erupted. "Like hell I will! Do you realize how much this plan cost?! And the relics we have here will sell for at least ten *billion* aurum! Maybe a lot more! I spent a fortune for this haul—and damn if I'll ditch it now!"

His display of rage panicked the thieves. Kain had them all outgunned. If he went on a desperate rampage, no one there could stop him.

But Nelia kept her cool. "What are you babbling about?" she said, with a hint of annoyance. "Of *course* we won't ditch the relics."

"What do you mean, then?" Kain asked slowly.

"I mean we should give up on fooling the software." Nelia pointed to a screen hooked up to the truck, displaying the revengeware's target—Akira. "Let's kill him instead."

## Chapter 55: Force-Field Armor

Standing guard at headquarters, Akira was surprised to find himself feeling much better after Yatsubayashi's treatment. His pain had already faded. And after his many experiences with Old World medicine, he could sense that this was no painkiller at work—he was actually healing. When flexing and tensing his limbs caused him no discomfort, he realized he was almost completely recovered.

*I guess that treatment really worked,* he mused.

*That doctor did say he based the tech on relics,* Alpha chimed in. *He must be more skilled than he looks. And we got Old World medicine out of the deal, so it all worked out nicely.*

*Meaning I got lucky,* Akira said, with a carefree grin. *Well, I guess this balances out the run of awful luck I've had lately!*

At last—he couldn't help feeling—his misfortunes were over for the day.



A tense atmosphere pervaded headquarters, and the commander of the underground expedition looked grim.

"You *still* can't make contact with the temporary base?" he asked a subordinate with some asperity.

"We're making regular attempts, sir," came the reply. "But we can't get through, and we won't be able to until the colorless fog around the base thins out. Perhaps we should dispatch hunters to the surface after all?"

"Not a chance. That could easily lead to a breach of contract—most of them were hired specifically to work in the underground district, and we aren't authorized to reassign them outside of it willy-nilly. Sending them to fight those relic thieves was already skirting the law."

Headquarters was at its wit's end regarding what to do about the thieves.

They had managed to chase Kain and Nelia out of the tunnels, but their hunters had suffered heavy casualties. And while the officials couldn't be blamed for that first unforeseen encounter, ordering a manhunt would exceed their authority. The hunters had signed up to exterminate Yarata scorpion nests, while their enemies included at least two heavily armed combatants in powered armor. And even if the commander could mount a local manhunt, he saw little hope of success—the thieves were likely long gone already.

“We'll just have to send someone overland to alert the base in person,” he said. “The city's defense force will probably act on this once they find out, and then it'll be their problem. Pick a hunter who can do the job and dispatch them immediately. Hash out the terms with them.”

“Yes, sir.” The subordinate turned to a terminal and began searching for a suitable candidate. It would take too long to recall a hunter working deep underground. Those affiliated with Druncam and other syndicates were also out of the question—assigning them tasks beyond their contractual obligations would require time-consuming negotiations with their organizations' higher-ups. The worker needed to find someone who had signed on individually, who was as close as possible to headquarters, and whose absence wouldn't seriously affect operations. And, conveniently, there was one close at hand.

The official hurried off to negotiate.



“So, all I have to do is carry my work terminal to the temporary base?” Akira asked.

“That's right,” the official confirmed. “Actually, you only need to bring it close enough to connect. Once it's in range, the terminal will contact the base automatically. So please do this for us, and you can call it a day. I see you received medical attention, so you must not be feeling your best. Just swing by the base on your way home, and then you can take it easy.”

This was just what Akira wanted. Unable to believe his good luck, he quickly accepted the job and started getting ready to leave. Then he left the building in high spirits and straddled his motorcycle, which he'd parked nearby. He hadn't even served half of his minimum shift yet, but with this deal, he could leave and

still get credit for a full day's work.

*Just a quick run by the base, then back to my hotel for a nice, long rest, he said cheerfully.*

*Sounds like a plan, Alpha responded, with a smile and a nod. And your suit is a little worse for wear, so I'd like to send it for repairs later. I hope Shizuka can handle emergency maintenance.*

*We'd better swing by Cartridge Freak on the way home too, then.*

Akira set off on his motorbike toward the temporary base. The road was smooth, having been cleared to make way for supply shipments to the underground expedition. Akira relaxed a bit, thinking that this wouldn't take long. The colorless fog didn't worry him, although it had taken a serious toll on his scanner's performance. He was aboveground, and Alpha would alert him to any threats. So he let her drive while he reflected on the events of the day.

He had fought Yajima, he had fought Shiori, and all told it had been another disaster. Then he remembered that yesterday had been an ordeal in its own right, as had the day before that. This job had been a series of bad days, he realized to his dismay, and it might go on that way until his contract was up. Yet now he allowed himself to take it easy, unconsciously clocking out. Today had been another fiasco, but at least now it was over.

Or not.

Without warning, the bike swerved under him, cutting a sharp ninety-degree turn that nearly toppled it. The wheels skidded sideways along the ground, screaming with the friction of this forced deceleration. Then, just as suddenly, the bike put on speed again, traveling perpendicular to its original course.

*Alpha?! What the hell?!* Akira shouted, too panicked to react but instinctively turning to look at her. Then the look of surprise froze on his face. To one side of his leaning motorcycle, as he looked up, he saw blue sky, crumbling skyscrapers, and a swarm of micromissiles about to rain down on him.

A moment later, the missiles struck, carving arcs through the air and crashing down all around him in a seemingly endless series of explosions. Crumbling structures collapsed. The paved road was blasted to bits. In the blink of an eye,



the entire area was engulfed in fire and smoke.

Eventually, the roar of the blasts faded and the smoke cleared, leaving only a heap of fresh rubble in their wake.



Kain and Nelia stood a short distance away from the impact site. An empty micromissile pod detached from Kain's powered armor and struck the ground with a crash. The weapon was too bulky to carry through the tunnels, but nothing hindered its use aboveground. And although the heavy pod normally required a dedicated mount on a tank or other vehicle, Kain's armor could equip it with ease.

Kain was in a good mood. Knowing that he'd removed the only obstacle between himself and a truck full of relics made the joy of blowing up an enemy all the sweeter.

*Talk about a lucky break!* he exclaimed. *Just when I was wondering how we'd get at him underground, he came out and saved us the trouble! That ought to unlock the control system!*

*So I put all that work into our infiltration plan for nothing,* Nelia chimed in, sounding just as usual. *Well, I am glad he spared us the hassle.*

Through his armor's cameras, Kain surveyed the scene he'd created for confirmation of Akira's death. He had fired a whole pod of missiles. The hunter *couldn't* still be alive.

*Is the lock on the truck gone, Nelia?* he asked.

Nelia had been streaming the view to the truck through her armor's camera. The vehicle was much closer than the temporary base, and she'd placed a small relay to counter the effects of the colorless fog, so communication wasn't an issue. Once Yajima's revengeware analyzed the video and registered Akira's death, the control system would be theirs to use. Nelia checked on its progress.

*Nope,* she said. *Still locked.*

*Why?* Kain demanded. *He couldn't have survived that.*

*Don't ask me. Either he's still alive, or it had trouble registering the kill. Kain,*

*move closer and find the body—that program will have to recognize a blown-off head. I don't mind your flair, but remember: it's your fault if we can't confirm the target's death because you insisted on overkill.*

*Okay, okay. I'll go fish out the corpse. Happy now?*

Kain's reverse-jointed steel legs crushed rubble to powder as he stomped off through the ruins in search of Akira's remains. On his way, a chunk of masonry fell from a crumbling building. It struck him squarely on the head—but didn't so much as scratch his armor. Once he reached the spot where Akira had been, he swept his cameras over the vicinity, looking for blood spatter or pieces of the hunter's body. Yet he found nothing of the kind.

*He's gone*, Kain muttered.

*What do you mean, "He's gone"? an exasperated Nelia demanded over their comms. He must have gotten buried under the rubble. Either dig it up or scan through it. Shifting that heap should be no trouble for your machine.*

*I know, I know. Hold your horses.*

Kain seized a chunk of debris in his massive hands and hurled it lightly to the side of the road, where it landed with a weighty thud. Akira's remains didn't lie beneath it, but his motorcycle's did. The mangled machine spoke to the micromissiles' power.

*I found his bike*, Kain reported. *This is definitely the place.*

*Not good enough*, Nelia said. *We need the rider.*

*I'm looking!*

Kain had opted for excessive force to blow off steam. Now he was starting to regret that choice. Returning his attention to the search, he reconfigured his onboard scanner, narrowing its search area and increasing its precision to pick out Akira's body under the rubble. Then he took a look around, tossing anything that seemed likely to interfere with his sensors to the roadside as he went. But he found nothing that even resembled a corpse.

*He's gone*, Kain murmured again. *Maybe the explosions sent him flying?*

He tried gradually expanding his scanning radius. Still no body. Yet he couldn't

move the truck without it. Frustrated, angry, and a little desperate, Kain threw caution to the wind and switched to a wide-area scan. Then, not far away, he got a hit.

*Found him!* Kain cheered as he swiveled his armor's head-mounted camera to look. He caught sight of the video feed and stiffened.

Akira held an anti-materiel rifle, poised to fire right at him.



Alpha evaded Kain's assault with every maneuver at her disposal. After calculating each micromissile's trajectory and determining that Akira couldn't dodge them all, she raced him to the spot where he would suffer the least damage. Then, pushing his suit to maximum output, she deliberately overbalanced the motorcycle, planted Akira's feet on the ground, and with the bike's momentum flung it up as a shield. The missile bombardment immediately reduced the vehicle to scrap, but it spared Akira from a direct hit. She leaped backward, riding out the shock wave, and did her best to soften the impact by taking a defensive posture before Akira hit the ground.

It was all over in a moment, yet the slightest misstep would have cost Akira his life. Alpha executed every step with perfect, superhuman precision. Nevertheless, he came through far from unscathed. Forcing his suit to move at full power put tremendous strain on his body, and while he had avoided the missiles themselves, their inescapable blast waves had still slammed him into the ground. Unable to endure this onslaught, Akira had blacked out, losing dozens of seconds when even one unguarded moment could be fatal. Ultimately, he survived thanks to pure coincidence, aka sheer luck. Alpha's support—the luck he'd enjoyed since their first meeting—had barely been enough to offset this latest bout of misfortune and save his life.

When Akira finally came to, he struggled to get his bearings. His mind felt hazy and confused. Despite the hard surface pressing on his cheek, he couldn't even grasp that he had fallen down.

*What?* he thought dimly. *What happened? Was I sleeping? Since when? And where? At home? I went home? Did I go home? Wasn't I still on the way?*

Akira posed himself an endless litany of questions he couldn't answer as his

muddled thoughts slowly regained their clarity. At last, he became aware that Alpha had been screaming at him for some time.

*Akira! Wake up! Akira! Unless you want to die, wake up now!*

Alpha was screaming. Alpha, who had kept her self-assured smile no matter how desperate his straits had seemed, was screaming at him. In an instant, Akira snapped wide awake. He tried to rise, and a jolt of searing pain shot through him. He couldn't suppress a grimace, but he forced himself to his feet regardless.

*Counterattack! Alpha shouted. Right now! Every second counts!*

As Akira stood up, his hand moved of its own accord to scoop his CWH off the ground nearby. His fingers were bent the wrong way, but his suit forced them back into position around the rifle. Experience had taught him that he had no time to waste on showing pain—either he carried out Alpha's instructions swiftly and precisely, or he died. So while his body cried out in agony, he moved it in sync with his suit, quickly sinking into a firing stance with his CWH. Without even pausing to wonder whether his target really was an enemy, Akira pulled the trigger.



Kain tried to dodge, but Akira's shot was faster. The CWH proprietary bullet scored a direct hit on his armor's torso. A flash burst from the impact point—proof that Kain's force-field armor had shielded him by converting some of the shot's kinetic energy into light. This mighty defense system was what made massive powered armor like his a threat to be feared when the East's plethora of overpowered firearms would otherwise have reduced it to a big target. The bullet's impact still knocked Kain's armor off-balance, but its auto-balancer kicked in and stabilized it before it could tip over.

Kain went back on the offensive, raising his four arms to annihilate Akira and everything around him with a burst of heavy weapons fire. His arsenal boasted size, recoil, and firepower that only powered armor could support, and the torrent of devastating projectiles it unleashed easily pulverized any walls or rubble in its path. But Akira had taken evasive action as soon as Kain's arms began to move, and he narrowly escaped the storm of gunfire.

*Kain? Nelia called over their comms. What's wrong? Did you run into a monster?*

*It's him! Kain yelled. He's still alive!*

*Really? I suppose you tweaked the missile trajectory to leave his corpse behind, so they couldn't quite finish the job. So, what was that, his last gasp? Did you put him out of his misery?*

*No! He dodged my goddamn missiles! Then he shot me and got clear of my counterattack too! My force-field armor took a massive hit!*

*That's odd. Why would he bring such powerful ammo into the tunnels? There's nothing to use it on down there.*

*He's got a CWH anti-materiel rifle, and the cartridge was probably proprietary. Kain paused. What the hell did he bring those underground for?! Was he hoping to bag tanks in the middle of a bug hunt?! It's crazy! he shouted frantically. His armor was nearly impervious to ammo meant for exterminating Yarata scorpions—but not to CWH proprietary cartridges. His undemanding task—mowing down a target from the safety of his impenetrable defenses—had just turned dangerous enough to be called a fight.*

*Before he died, Yajima did mention that he might have run into a municipal agent, Nelia mused calmly. Maybe this is who he meant.*

*She elaborated on the possibility further. Yajima had slipped up, and the city had caught wind of his plan, or at least the possibility of a relic heist. So, as insurance, it had planted an operative among the hunters in the tunnels. And it had equipped that agent with a CWH and proprietary cartridges, on the assumption that anyone willing to risk the city's ire might be well-armed.*

*If you're right, the defense force might come out here, Kain said, rattled. Nelia's theory was wrong, but it fit the facts well enough to convince him. What's our next move? You know we can't take them in a fight.*

*If the city was serious about security, they wouldn't have sent him alone, Nelia replied. Meaning they just put him here as an extra precaution. As long as we kill him quickly, we'll have nothing to worry about. And luckily, we have time, since the colorless fog is too thick around the base for him to get a call through.*

*So, kill him quick and get out?!*

*You've got it! Let's get to work.*

Kain and Nelia set off in pursuit. Staying too long might land them in a fight with the municipal troops, but their haul of relics was worth a fortune. They couldn't give up on killing the hunter until the defense force was breathing down their necks.

Slowly but surely, Yajima drew his noose around Akira from beyond the grave.



After evading Kain's assault, Akira ran through the ruins—he had no choice now that his bike was scrap. He gulped down the capsules he'd bought from Yatsubayashi as he moved, following Alpha's lead. The pain racking his body soon lessened, although only thanks to painkillers—his body was still a wreck. Akira was trying to move his limbs, but they were no longer in any state to obey him. His suit was propping up his body and forcing it to run.

*Alpha! Did you see that guy shrug off a shot from my CWH?! he demanded.*

*That was force-field armor, Alpha explained. The flash where your bullet hit is called impact conversion luminescence, and it occurs when the armor mitigates external force by converting a portion of the incoming kinetic energy into—*

*Who cares?! Skip the tech lecture and give me a game plan! What can I do after he blocks a CWH shot?!*

*Keep firing and hope he's not completely unscathed, I suppose.*

*Doesn't it have any weaknesses?!*

*For the purposes of our current predicament, no.*

Akira's scowl deepened. CWH proprietary ammo was overkill against any monster in the Kugamayama area, almost guaranteed to kill in a single shot. Akira had felt safe in the knowledge that he could defeat any opponent he could land a hit on. But now he was under attack from a foe who had not only survived a direct hit but actually returned fire. He felt shaken.

*For now, don't think about anything but gaining distance, Alpha instructed. And take all the recovery capsules you have. If I can get you out of this, I will.*

*Just like always.*

Akira took a moment to compose himself. *Okay. I'm counting on you.*

*You won't regret it,* Alpha responded. Her voice was firm.

But she wasn't smiling.

Akira followed Alpha into a partially destroyed building, up to a spot on its third floor with a view of the outside. Once there, he took a massive dose of the capsules he'd bought from Yatsubayashi.

*How do you feel, Akira?* Alpha asked gravely.

Akira tested his limbs with a few light movements. *No pain,* he replied, with a strained grin, *but I don't feel much of anything else either. I can move okay, but I'd rather not picture what I look like on the inside.* His suit would still move even if the limbs inside it were torn to shreds. He wouldn't know if he was really in decent shape until he took it off, and he was in no hurry to check.

*Try to move as little as possible—we want to make the most of that medicine. If the enemy pursues you, we'll make our stand here. Be prepared.*

*All right,* Akira said reluctantly. *I'm guessing I can't outrun him?*

*Based on my estimation of his mobility and the range of his sensors and weapons, I'd say it's a long shot. And judging by his first attack, you won't stand a chance if he lures you out into the open. I hope you realize how much of that blast I shielded you from by hiding behind buildings, rubble, and your motorbike.*

*You did all that? I don't remember that part.*

*The bike was our worst loss. We could have escaped if it was still in working order. Still, letting you die to save your bike would have defeated the purpose, so I considered it a necessary expense.*

*Oh, okay.* Akira considered. Then, with a hint of levity, he said, *And you're sure I can't outrun that guy?*

*Care to try it?* Alpha replied, not entirely serious. *It would be a gamble, but if you get very lucky and your enemy conveniently happens to be slow, have a tiny scanner radius, only carry short-range weapons, and maybe also be out of*

*ammo, you might just pull it off.*

Akira grinned ruefully. *I'll pass. I try not to count on any good luck apart from meeting you.*

His encounter with Alpha had cost him a lifetime's worth of good fortune. That was why he tried to supplement his meager luck with more or less good deeds, and why he relied only on that and her support to see him safely through his often-deadly profession. Akira honestly believed all this, and not only because Alpha had once told him something along the same lines. Unconsciously, he felt that someday he would run into a misfortune that Alpha's support couldn't counter, and that his own luck and skill would be nowhere near enough to survive it. He would still fight, of course. To his last breath if necessary. But his resolve to struggle, even against impossible odds, contained a kind of resignation—a sense that maybe no effort of his could change the outcome.

Without meaning to, Akira transmitted fragments of those unspoken feelings to Alpha during their telepathic conversation. She picked up on them and adopted a more forceful tone. *Let me make one thing clear, Akira, she said, almost angrily. I don't plan on losing. Do you think my support can't handle a little trouble like this? That it belongs on a shelf in the discount aisle?*

Akira stared hard at Alpha. She stared back.

Alpha wasn't physically present, Akira knew. She was using augmented reality to draw herself into his vision. Nevertheless, he stared at her. The Alpha looking back at him was merely rendered to appear that way. She didn't actually see him through her image's eyes. Even so, she was looking straight at him.

Alpha smiled. *Keep a firm will, Akira, she said, and it will be business as usual.*

In that smile, Akira saw the same trust she always placed in him. He was no longer anticipating an unwinnable last stand, but an all-out struggle for survival. Akira exhaled, grinned, and said, *I know. I mean, that is my end of our deal, isn't it? Sorry I got a little down for a moment there. Okay! Now I'm ready for anything!*

Akira steeled himself, resolved to survive a crisis far beyond his ability—to conquer the latest in a long line of perils.



*That's the spirit!* Alpha said. She smiled as she saw the determined look on his face—and to ensure his inner feelings matched it.

It was a smile born of the knowledge that her words had put him in a better frame of mind, and that all her calculations, conjectures, and predictions had allowed her to successfully manipulate him.

## Chapter 56: Means of Detection

Nelia and Kain couldn't go anywhere until they killed Akira and cleared the revengeware locking down their getaway truck. He'd escaped their first assault, but the powerful sensors built into Kain's armor easily tracked him to the building where he'd taken refuge.

*Looks like he's in there, the relic thief reported. Maybe he figured we'd outrun him out in the open.*

*Probably, Nelia agreed. He saved us the trouble of chasing him, so let's make this quick.*

*Good idea!*

The words were barely out of Kain's mouth when the first bullet hit him. His force-field armor flashed, converting the impact to blinding light. But though he staggered, he suffered no real damage—he had already raised the field's output to counter his enemy's CWH proprietary ammo.

But more shots followed.

*It looks like he's as eager to settle this as we are,* Nelia remarked, taking cover behind Kain.

*He doesn't know who he's messing with!* Kain snapped. His armor's computer calculated the direction the shots were coming from, and he focused his scanner to pinpoint the shooter's position. Then his cameras spotted Akira pointing his rifle out a window.

Kain's four arms swiveled toward the young hunter. High-caliber ammunition came flying from the gaping muzzles of weapons so massive that only mechs and the largest of powered armors could wield them. His sustained fire could tear through the thickest plating like tissue paper, and it struck the side of the building with the force of an artillery barrage.

Ducking behind a wall would normally have been no defense against it. Yet the building weathered the onslaught with no more than a few scratches.

*Now that's what I call sturdy construction, Nelia said, taken aback. The interior might not be quite as rugged, of course. Still, I wonder when it was built.*

Not all Old World buildings were created equal. The march of time saw major shifts in culture and technology, and similar variety existed between—and even within—geographical regions. And no one knew the precise dates of the civilization that had built Kuzusuhara Town.

The mystery piqued Nelia's interest, but Kain couldn't have cared less.

*Who cares?! he snapped. Just tell me if I got him!*

*Nope, Nelia replied. The control system's still locked.*

*Again?! What the hell is—?*

Another CWH bullet struck Kain. Akira had evaded his barrage, sprinted through the corridors, and resumed firing from another window.

*The little shit thinks he's hot stu—*

Again, a powerful impact cut Kain's griping short. Akira had predicted that he wouldn't return fire immediately and quickly squeezed off another shot.

*Damn it!* Kain steadied himself and went on the offensive. Nelia joined in the counterattack, still using him for cover. A storm of bullets that would have annihilated most tanks broke against the side of the building, right where Akira had just been. Part of the barrage slipped in through the window, blasting countless holes into the wall behind it.



Akira moved swiftly at Alpha's signal, avoiding the bombardment. The building's interior walls were weaker than its outer surface, and they began to crumble before the tempest of gunfire.

*Talk about firepower!* Akira exclaimed, grimacing. *If I got caught in that, they wouldn't even be able to ID my corpse!*

*Their ammo isn't quite as powerful as your proprietary cartridges, although it's probably in the same price range,* Alpha said.

*But I can only get off one shot at a time, and they've got rapid fire. And one hit*

*from them will kill me, while a clean shot from me just staggers them. This is ridiculous!*

Akira's rifle should have been overkill in the tunnels. Against these enemies, however, it amounted to a light shove. Even so, the weapon was his lifeline. He could fire his assault rifles all day, but their overpressure ammo would bounce off his foes like water from an umbrella. For better or worse, he still had to depend on his CWH. Akira considered briefly, then grinned down at the weapon in his hands and grumbled, *They told me that, with this gun and ammo, I could hunt tanks!*

*But no one promised you it could take down any tank, did they?* Alpha countered.

*No. Still, I've gotta wonder if my shots are even doing anything—it sure doesn't look like it. How effective are they? I mean, I am doing some damage, right?*

*You're fighting a large suit of armor. It has a generator to match its size, and I suspect the operator is diverting most of its power output to the force field. Your shots may not seem effective, but I promise you each hit is taking a toll on its energy reserves. So don't worry—just keep firing!*

*You got it!* Akira kept a low profile as he glided along the corridor to his next sniping spot. He couldn't be sure how much damage he was doing, but he had to keep at it—there was no alternative.

A sudden doubt struck him as he ran stealthily through the building. *You know, they tracked me here awfully fast, he mused. There's loads of ruined buildings around here. What tipped them off that I'm in this one?*

*They probably tracked you with a high performance scanner,* Alpha replied.

*Huh? But aren't we in colorless fog?*

*The fog impairs scanners, but not so severely that they can't identify nearby targets. Only distant objects are completely hidden.*

*But I ran like hell! That should've put me out of range.*

*It all depends on their tracking methods.* Alpha explained that Kain's missile

attack had left fumes and other substances on Akira. Infinitesimal traces of these remained behind him wherever he went, and a powerful scanner could detect them in the air nearby. So it wouldn't have been terribly difficult to follow the trail to his destination.

Akira nodded, convinced. *No wonder we can't shake them. Scouting really makes a difference, huh?*

*Of course, they can't use that method to track your precise location. So rest easy and shoot.*

*On it! I'll leave the scouting to you.*

*You're in good hands.*

Although Akira kept low and out of sight, he could see Kain and Nelia clearly through the wall as he moved. And thanks to Alpha's support, he could lean out a window and line up a shot on Kain in almost no time at all. He wouldn't have been able to evade Kain's counterattacks if he took the time to aim. So, as usual, he used her superhuman scouting ability to counter his enemies' obvious advantage in both gear and skill. And since a moment's delay would get him killed, he focused every nerve in his body to remain that crucial fraction of a second ahead.

Time seemed to slow down as he popped out of a window, took a quick shot at Kain, then immediately ducked back behind cover and raced to his next vantage point. A single mistake in any repetition of this maneuver would be his last.

In this deadly game of Whack-A-Mole, Akira was the mole.



On the side doing the whacking, Kain waited for Akira to show himself again. Each of his four arms aimed a heavy weapon at a different window, multiplying his chances of success. He chose his targets by guesswork—since the building had more windows than he had arms—but if one of his hunches paid off, Akira would die. And he could try as many times as he liked, since his force-field armor allowed him to survive Akira's shots when he guessed wrong.

He missed his first attempt. Akira popped up in a window he wasn't covering,

rattling Kain's armor with a rifle shot. He immediately returned fire, but by the time he'd lined up the window in his sights, Akira was gone. Yet Kain was in no hurry—the odds overwhelmingly favored him.

*Missed, he grumbled. I'll get him next time.*

The arms of his bulky powered armor were extremely heavy, as were the massive weapons they carried. And diverting most of his powerful generator's output to his force field slowed his aim.

*Missed again? Next time for sure.*

Kain went on powering through Akira's attacks and responding with his own. He could always hit the hunter next time—or so he thought. But as he missed shot after shot, a note of frustration crept into his voice.

*Next time. Next time. Next time! Damn it! Next time!*

He only had to guess which window Akira would snipe from. One right answer would mean victory. Yet he always chose wrong, although by simple probability he should have killed the boy at least three times by now.

Kain blamed luck. In reality, however, there was no chance involved—Alpha was precisely calculating the man's targets from his firing stance and then directing Akira to the safest windows. Kain failed to notice that he was an open book, because Akira never dodged his attacks by more than a hair's breadth. He would have grown suspicious if the hunter had evaded him too easily, but the sight of Akira's frantic escapes didn't inspire doubt. Instead, he found himself thinking, *Almost got him—it won't be long now!* Akira's inexperience acted as a smoke screen.

*Damn it! Kain screamed. Damn it! Damn it all to hell!*

*Pipe down, Kain, said Nelia. If you must wail, switch off your comms first.*

*Pull your weight, Nelia! Try to hit something for once!*

*I already am, and he's avoiding my shots too. Still, I'm amazed he's kept it up this long, Nelia answered without apparent concern. No wonder he was too much for Yajima. Perhaps he really is a municipal agent. And if so, could he be predicting our shots somehow? That would explain how he survived your*

*missiles too.*

*What do you mean?* Kain asked, his suspicions finally aroused. *How would being on the city's payroll help the brat dodge? Sure, an agent might have a high-end scanner, but there's still no way he could track our movements that accurately.* He couldn't swallow her explanation. The colorless fog wasn't thick in this area, but they were still under its influence. A scanner that could predict all their attacks under these conditions would have to be good enough for the Front Line.

*No, that's not what I mean,* Nelia responded. *Although I suppose you're not too far off the mark, after all.*

*What do you mean, then? Out with it!* Kain demanded, irked by her condescending tone.

*I shouldn't have to remind you that parts of Kuzusuhara Ruins are still operational—one look at the perfectly preserved skyscrapers in the interior makes that obvious. I hear those were key facilities in the Old World—although we can't even go near them now, thanks to their powerful defense systems. I've also heard that control of those buildings is Kugamayama's ultimate objective.*

*Even I know that! What's it got to do with killing this kid?*

*Apparently, one of the relics that the Kugamayama forces recovered displays a detailed map of the whole ruin in real time. Or maybe they only found tech to access the map? I can't quite remember.*

*Like I said, so what? Stop playing coy!*

*You're soooo slow on the uptake. I just gave you the answer: a detailed, real-time map of the entire ruin. And you know how ridiculous Old World tech can be. I wouldn't be shocked if it can display every bullet we just fired—and us too, of course.*

Kain mulled that over. *So?*

*So, the city could use that map as an unbeatable scanner in Kuzusuhara. And analyzing its data might tell their agent exactly where we're aiming.*

*Seriously?!* Kain exclaimed, taken aback.

*I'm only speculating. Oh, and that reminds me of another rumor that made the rounds at about the same time: a ghost story about Kuzusuhara's "Alluring Specter." Supposedly, it haunts and kills everyone who accesses the map. (This was merely one of the surprisingly numerous tales concerning the Specter.)*

Nelia continued, *You know, maybe the city spread those stories to cover up a leaked access method and to monopolize all the wealth of the ruins. And in that case, their agents might have secret access to—*

All at once, she noticed her accomplice had stopped responding to her smug recital. *Kain?* she asked, puzzled. *Hey, Kain?*

*He messed with the wrong guy!* Kain roared with sudden fury. His prey had played him for a fool, he realized. The mole had always known what holes he was going to whack! *I'll annihilate that goddamn punk!*

Deploying his armor's full arsenal, Kain channeled his rage into a massive barrage. This time, he would leave no hole safe.



Akira was en route to his next sniping position when a grim-faced Alpha shouted, *Quick! Move deeper inside the building!*

At the same time, she seized control of his suit, guiding his steps toward the structure's interior. Akira didn't resist, dashing headlong through cluttered inner rooms as he struggled to put as much distance between himself and the corridor as possible.

Only moments later, countless explosions roared behind him, unleashing raging blasts of wind and fire. Chunks of airborne debris shot past Akira. Then he vanished into the fumes.



Missiles flooded out of the two pods mounted on Kain's armor, all aimed squarely at the building. They poured in through the windows of the floor on which Akira was taking shelter, striking its interior walls in a cascade of explosions. The narrow confines compressed the blast, so that fumes gushed back out the windows.



*What do you think you're doing?* Nelia asked with some asperity. *I told you that Yajima's revengeware might not recognize the kill if you blew him to bits, remember?*

*Shut up!* Kain retorted. *If he's a city agent, his gear'll save enough of him to ID!*

*Well, you've got me there.*

*Anyway, the program must've detected its target was in there. If it doesn't count the kill after that, it's gotta be bugged. So, what's it say? Did that do the trick?*

*Hang on, I'll check.* Nelia paused. *No such luck. It's still locked.*

Kain snorted. *You mean that goddamn software thinks he's still kicking? Are you sure Yajima didn't tweak it so it's never satisfied?*

*Its recognition routines showed no signs of tampering that I could see.* Realizing that Kain was at his boiling point, Nelia sighed and said, *Oh well. I'll go take a look myself. A close-up of his corpse—or even a piece of it—should do the trick. And in the unlikely event that he is still alive, I'll finish him off while I'm in there. Wait here for me.*

*You're going in alone?*

*I don't want you atomizing him with another wild barrage like that. My blades will get the job done.*

The back of Nelia's armor opened, and a woman emerged. The bloom of youth seemed to linger in her beautiful features, and only a scant, translucent bodysuit covered her artistically sculpted figure. Thin cables extended from connection ports set into her bare skin, revealing at a glance that she wasn't flesh and blood. Like Yajima, Nelia was a cyborg.

Some of their kind felt unashamed to show skin, viewing prosthetic bodies as little more than clothing. Taking advantage of their condition, they flaunted beautiful or bewitching looks, the way most people might show off their taste in fashion. A handful even made a point to wear as little as possible, proving to themselves and others that their synthetic flesh was little different from the real thing—or drawing lascivious glances to reassure themselves that they were

still human. Nelia's appearance accomplished both.

She disconnected her cables and stretched, apparently limbering up. Then she looked up at Kain and said, "I'll contact you if anything comes up. Secure the building's perimeter, just in case."

"All right," Kain answered over his external speakers. "Are you sure you don't want to bring a gun for once? I could lend you one, although it might be a little big for you." He illustrated the point by hefting one of his massive weapons.

Nelia laughed. "No thanks. It'd only get in my way." Then she pulled her gear out of her armor and strapped it on. Her belt held a dull-looking knife and several handles that seemed to belong on edged weapons. "Don't touch my armor while I'm gone. Oh, but do chase off any monsters that come sniffing around—I don't want it damaged."

With that, Nelia took off at a run, her cyborg strength propelling her along the rubble-strewn ground faster than most vehicles.



Kain's micromissile barrage had engulfed Akira in fumes and slammed him into the floor. He lay there for a moment, facedown. Then his arm moved.

"*Again?*" he groaned, in pain but conscious, as he pushed himself upright. He wasn't happy about getting doused in explosion fumes twice in one day. "At least I didn't black out this time." Then he locked eyes with Alpha, who had crouched down to stare at him.

*Akira, she said, if you're awake, hurry up and get back on your feet.*

*Sure thing,* Akira responded. From the look on her face, he inferred that, while mortal peril had passed for the moment, he wasn't out of the woods yet.

*Once you're up, medicate. You don't need to move—just stay put and rest up.*

*Okay. But I thought I'd already taken all my capsules.*

*You still have some of the cheap stuff, remember? It's better than nothing.*

Akira obediently fished the recovery capsules out of his backpack and swallowed some. Then, out of idle curiosity, he read the warning label on the package: "Avoid taking large doses over a short period of time."

*This has to be bad for me, he said, with a rueful grin. I bet I'll collapse again, like that time Elena and Sara helped me out.*

*Alpha chuckled. If it really is the same, you won't pass out until you're safe and all your enemies are dead. Let's hope history repeats itself.*

*Good point.* Akira crumpled up the empty package and tossed it aside. Now he was out of the cheap meds too. The only healing he could expect was from the dose already in his system, and it wouldn't last beyond his current injuries. The next serious wound he suffered would be lethal.

*As he stood still, trying to make the most of the capsules' benefits, a question occurred to him. Hey, Alpha, why are these guys attacking me, anyway? Do you have any idea?*

*Sorry, I'm as much in the dark as you are, she replied. But if I had to guess, I'd say they're in league with the man you killed underground. He did say that his accomplices would avenge him, so perhaps he sent them some kind of message before he died.*

*They must've really liked him, then. Any chance they'll assume they got me with that last attack and leave? I mean, that would've killed most people.*

*They've already seen you survive—and even fight back—after attacks that would have killed most people. So they might keep coming until they have unshakable proof you're dead.*

*Oh, yeah.* After a brief silence, Akira grumbled, *Talk about unlucky—I would've been better off staying underground. Did ignoring a hostage really sink my luck this badly? Is that it? Gimme a break! I mean, she made it out okay in the end!* He sighed deeply, almost convinced by his own idle griping.

Alpha watched him with a wry smile.



Nelia stopped partway down a hallway. Although her cyborg body included a scanner, the device was no match for the one built into her armor and couldn't scout out the building's interior.

*Between that and the colorless fog, I'm not getting a very clear picture, she*

thought. *I might as well switch it off.*

Disabling her onboard scanner would leave Nelia reliant on the basic sensors that served her cyborg body as sense organs. Yet despite her dramatically reduced ability to detect threats, she wore a cheerful grin. The source of her confidence was a relic she had surreptitiously pocketed from the getaway truck: an access terminal for the map she'd mentioned to Kain.

*I never expected to use this so soon. Now, let's see how it performs.*

She booted up the device and set about converting its data format for her own augmented-reality vision. Soon, she could see the entire building in minute detail.

Nelia's grin widened. *It works like a charm. Restricting the data to just the one building and then filtering it leaves me with something I can process—although it's still a heavy load. I can't run my scanner and handle this much data at the same time. Still, what difference does that make? Time to find that boy. Wherever could he be?*

Within this single building, she could now see through walls with the same ease that Alpha's support gave Akira. Few people could have done as much, even with the access terminal—only Nelia's technical expertise allowed the device to work well with her own prosthetic body. So naturally, she soon located Akira.

With some surprise, she registered the boy and his companion. Then she called her accomplice. *Kain, anything to report?*

*Nothing,* he responded. *What about you? Did you find the body?*

*Kain, the revengeware's right—he's still alive.*

*What?!*

*I think the city really must have sent him here, probably using a high-end cyborg body made to look like a boy. That would explain how he blocked or dodged your attack.*

*Why would a city agent bother posing as a kid? An adult body'd be more powerful—or at least more cost-effective.*

*He was probably mingling with young hunters to mask his identity. I hear the tunnels are crawling with Druncam rookies.*

*That would explain it, Kain admitted. So, the city had at least enough info to justify sending an undercover agent as a precaution. How the hell did our plans leak?*

*Your guess is as good as mine. But I think I know what he was doing aboveground alone: alerting the temporary base to our attack. With the fog disrupting communications, he'd need to deliver any message personally.*

*Then we're lucky we struck before he got there—we bought ourselves that much more time before the defense force unit at the base shows up. So, what now? If the city sent him, he must be a real heavy hitter.*

*You have to ask? I'll kill him, of course. Or are you worried I might lose? Just keep watching the perimeter, Kain, and I'll make this quick.*

*Roger that. Don't waste time.*

Nelia cut communications and took another look at her quarry. Her confident smile betrayed both surprise and anticipation. "Still, two of them," she murmured. "I wasn't expecting that. I suppose that means he didn't pick this building at random—he came to rendezvous with backup." Through numerous walls, she saw Akira—and beside him, Alpha. She hadn't mentioned that to Kain because it might have tipped him off as to the relic she'd pocketed. "Not that it matters how many there are."

Cheerfully, Nelia drew a knife. Its rounded blade appeared to have no edge to speak of.

## Chapter 57: Dueling in the Height of Luxury

In the building's interior, Akira waited for the last of his medicine to do what it could for the damage he'd suffered in his narrow escape from Kain's bombardment. Then, out of the blue, he noticed Alpha had altered her appearance.

*What'd you change clothes for?* he asked.

*I thought matching outfits might be nice every once in a while,* Alpha said. *How do I look?* She wore what looked like a version of Akira's powered suit. It wasn't identical—their differences in age and sex necessitated some alterations—but the basic design was close enough to be instantly recognizable as the same model.

*How do you look?* Akira echoed. *I dunno. Normal?* He was remembering Alpha's Old World powered suit, which had shown so much skin it went beyond avant-garde and bordered on culture shock. Compared to that, her current outfit was utterly unremarkable. The way the suit curved to accommodate her full breasts barely even registered when compared to the inexplicable holes in the Old World model's bust.

*"Normal"?* Alpha seemed miffed. *Really, Akira, you need lessons in talking to women.*

*I don't know what else to tell you. Anyway, is this really the time?*

*You have a point. In that case, I'll keep this relevant. One of your enemies—the one in the smaller armor—has entered the building. The big one is standing guard outside.*

Akira tensed, forgetting all about clothes. *They stuck around, huh? That figures. Still, even the smaller one was pretty bulky. How'd it squeeze in here?*

*The operator entered alone—meaning we succeeded in taking her powered armor out of the equation by luring her into a confined space. But we don't know how much this has actually weakened her. She wouldn't have left her*

*armor behind unless she thought she could kill you without it.*

That thought frightened Akira, but he held firm and tried to look on the bright side. *I'm just glad we got her out of that wearable tank. Now that it's gone, a shot from my CWH should be lethal.* He'd found it nerve-racking not being able to tell whether his bullets were having any real effect. Now, at least, he had some hope of victory.

*You have a chance now, yes, but that doesn't mean you have the upper hand,* Alpha reminded him before his optimism could turn to wishful thinking. *Don't let your guard down.*

*I know. These guys are out of my league,* Akira said, partly to himself. *I won't get careless.*

Alpha looked at him, satisfied. *Ideally, I'd like to lure our enemy into a long corridor so that you can shoot her from the far end. We'll keep on the move, making a round of places that fit the bill.*

*Where is she now?*

*Over there.* Alpha pointed to Nelia. Several walls stood in the way, but Akira's augmented vision showed his enemy clearly. And although he was on guard against his more capable opponent, the distance and barriers between them—and the belief that she couldn't see him—gave him a faint sense of security. Then their eyes met, and alarm bells went off in his head. Nelia was looking at him, and she was smiling.

*Get down!* Alpha shouted.

Immediately, Akira dropped to the floor, his own movements and Alpha's control of his suit coming together in a burst of astonishing speed. Just before he fell, he saw Nelia preparing to swing a knife. Its blade was too short to reach even the wall in front of her—and multiple walls, sturdy enough to survive Kain's heavy weapons fire, stood between the two of them. Reasonably, he thought, there was no way she could cut him.

Even so, his instincts urged him to dodge. And the fear of being cut in half drove him to obey them without pausing to ask questions.

Unbeknownst to him, two primary factors had swayed Akira's judgment. First,

Nelia had moved with total assurance—she truly believed she could kill him with her knife at that distance. Second, Akira had once done something similar himself.

A moment later, Nelia cleaved the air with her knife, and a bluish-white flash shot from its glowing blade. The wave of severing light surged forward, instantly bisecting not only the nearest wall but also the exterior of the building and everything in between.

Akira narrowly escaped the same fate—the blade of light passed just over his head and slashed through his backpack. Neatly severed magazines spilled out onto the floor around him. The cut surfaces of his ruined cartridges were unbelievably smooth, as if someone had polished them to a mirror sheen. The blade had simply sliced and destroyed every object in its path.

*Where'd she get something like—? Oh,* Akira realized. *Actually, I guess it makes sense she has one of those. I mean, she was working with a relic thief.* He scowled, reflecting that while his enemy was less well-protected outside of her armor, her offense was more ferocious than ever. Then he noticed the growing red puddle on the floor.

*Blood?! Did she get me?! But I know I dodged that!*

He frantically checked himself over but found no injuries. Whose blood was it? Perplexed, he looked up—and froze.

“Alpha!”

The crimson stain on the floor was flowing from Alpha’s neatly bisected torso.



“Got him!” Nelia crowed, merrily surveying the aftermath of her Old World knife attack. “Or not—I only cut his bag. Oh well, at least I nailed his ally.”

The knife blade silently crumbled, unable to withstand the strain of discharging its entire power supply at once. It turned to dust as it fell, vanishing like a puff of smoke before it hit the floor.

“Still, if he dodged that, he really must be able to see me too,” Nelia mused, her suspicions confirmed. She blithely tossed the now-useless knife hilt aside



and drew two more from her belt—one in each hand. These weapons also lacked blades. “Honestly, don’t you realize I just wasted a perfectly good relic to kill you? And yet you survived. What extravagant taste! But it doesn’t matter—I have more Old World weapons where that came from.”

Nelia did something to her two hilts, and liquid metal gushed forth, defying gravity to form blades. More silver fluid ran along them, solidifying at their points until the weapons were roughly two meters long.

“Don’t go anywhere—I’ll be right along to slice you up.”

She swung her blades, and their silver edges cleaved the firm wall in front of her like jelly. A devastating kick followed, her cyborg strength demolishing the cut-out section in a shower of debris. She stepped through the hole into the room beyond and kept going, gleefully carving and smashing a path straight to her target—Akira.



Alpha was incorporeal—a purely visual entity. A hail of gunfire wouldn’t put a scratch on her. Yet there she lay, cut in two, in a pool of her own blood. Unable to believe his eyes, Akira forgot all about his foe and ran to her, shouting her name. He tried to raise her top half, but his hands passed straight through her to the floor.

*Calm down! Did you forget I’m virtual?* Alpha said, sounding just as usual. Her voice snapped Akira out of his panicked confusion. She still lay in two pieces, but her head turned and smiled at him. *I’m merely simulating what would have happened if I’d been a flesh-and-blood person caught in that attack.*

Even her gruesome corpse was a matter of appearance, fundamentally no different from her changes of clothes. Akira relaxed when he realized she was safe. But his look of relief soon gave way to bafflement. Alpha wouldn’t have done this just to scare him, surely. There must have been a point to it.

“What’d you—?”

*Questions can wait, she interrupted. I’m fine, you’re in a fight, and the enemy is closing in. Remember that and get ready to meet her. Oh, and I’ll stay like this for a while, but I can still talk and support you as usual, so don’t let it bother*

you.

Enemy. That word banished all of Akira's doubts and focused his mind on the woman bearing down on him. He leaped to his feet and raised his CWH. There was still a wall in the way, but after a moment's indecision, he centered Nelia in his sight and pulled the trigger. The proprietary bullet crashed into the wall at point-blank range. A crater formed and cracks shot outward from the point of impact, but that was all—the wall didn't even have a hole in it. Naturally, his shot came nowhere near to touching Nelia.

*This thing's tough!* Akira exclaimed in surprise. *How the hell did she cut through it?!*

*She used an Old World knife,* Alpha said. *You've done it yourself, remember?*

Akira had once used just such a knife to slice through an attacker—and the wall between them. Of course, he'd only had one wall to deal with, while Nelia had cleaved through many, including the outer wall that had repelled Kain's bombardment. Her relic had outperformed the one he'd wielded by orders of magnitude.

*One of those, huh?* Akira said. *It's no fun being on the receiving end. What should I do?*

*You'll just have to draw a bead on her somehow,* Alpha replied. *She's almost here. I don't know how well your suit can keep up with her, but I'm certain this will require some extreme maneuvers. Clench your teeth and try to hold out.*

*Whatever you say! But please, try to end this while my arms and legs are still in one piece!* Akira responded, an edge of desperation in his voice. Now he was out of medicine, the next time he exceeded his limits really might cost him his limbs.

*I'll do my best.*

Alpha lay in pieces on the floor, yet her voice still sounded like she was standing beside him. That familiar sensation calmed Akira somewhat—just enough for him to crack a grin and say, *Come on, give me better than that! Where'd all your confidence go?!*

*Don't worry,* Alpha told him. *Your suit can walk you home even if you do get a*

*little mangled.*

Akira grinned ruefully. He was too busy warily watching Nelia to see the look on Alpha's virtual face, but something told him she wore her usual, faintly teasing smile once more.



Nelia hacked her way straight toward Akira until at last she stood just outside of the room where he awaited her. She could see him through the final wall: he stood on the far side of the room, his rifle poised to fire the moment she broke in. Nelia pulled up short and smiled.

"If you're standing there, you must think I can't pull the same trick twice," she mused. "And you're right—I don't have another relic like that one. This would all have been so easy if you'd had the good grace to die with your partner, but you *insist* on making things difficult."

Nelia readied her blades. "You can't shoot me through that wall. I can cut it, but that would still leave you out of my range. So, I suppose you think we're at an impasse." She twirled in place, practically dancing with the weapons. There were other solid objects she could cut besides the wall, and she began sliding the silver blades smoothly through one of them. "You think all you need to do is keep this stalemate going until the fog lifts and you can call for help? Is that your plan? Sorry, my dear, but we're in a hurry. So, I'll be *right* with you."

With a bewitching smile, Nelia raised one foot high above her head, then slammed it down again. The impact dislodged the circle she'd cut out of the floor. It dropped, and she fell through the hole with it, the same enchanting look playing on her face.



Akira was nonplussed when he saw Nelia drop to the floor below. He quickly realized what she was up to, however, and his expression hardened as he sprang to the side. And not a moment too soon—silver blades flicked briefly in and out through the floor. They cut everything in their path: the floor, the air, a few strands of Akira's bangs, and the illusion that Nelia couldn't slash at him from outside the room.

Making the most of her cyborg strength, Nelia leaped again and again up to the ceiling—Akira’s floor—and slashed through it at her target. Her weapons’ silver edges made short work even of barriers that could withstand the CWH’s proprietary ammo, and Akira’s suit would naturally fare no better—any hit would slice clean through him. So he dodged the blades darting from beneath his feet, anxious to keep his rifle (and himself) out of harm’s way. If he lost his only means of attack, his hopes of victory would go with it. He didn’t fancy his chances in melee combat—the mightiest blow his suit could dish out had failed to incapacitate Yajima, let alone kill him, and the same would probably hold true for Nelia.

The blades hounded him. It took all he had to keep evading slashes that seemed to come from every part of the floor. And while ordinary swords would eventually lose their edge on the tough flooring, these fruits of the science of a bygone era had no such limitation. Formed of a specially formulated liquid alloy held in place by force fields, the weapons dissolved and reformed with each swing, ensuring that they always maintained the keenest possible edge.

Akira had no answer to this assault from below. The barrel of his CWH was too long to aim at a target beneath his feet. And even if he could have drawn a bead on Nelia, he couldn’t shoot her through the sturdy floor. For the moment, his only option was to keep running, putting his life first and narrowly avoiding the deadly slashes. But while the blades limited his options, his CWH still played a crucial role of its own. If he could only line up a shot, the rifle would kill Nelia as surely as her weapons could kill him—but if she destroyed it, she would undoubtedly return to his floor and slice him to ribbons.

He was so focused on defending his anti-material rifle that he let his AAHs fall prey to the silver swords. A blade passed through them so quickly that the rugged metal hardly seemed tangible. He couldn’t help grimacing when he saw his face in the mirror-smooth surfaces its impossibly sharp edge had left behind.

*Alpha! My legs can’t take much more of this!* Akira shouted. Dodging Nelia’s slashes required a series of sudden starts and stops—maneuvers which relied on his legs, and which taxed them severely. They were already numb to every sensation but pain. Both his flesh and his suit were approaching their limit.

*Grin and bear it, Alpha* responded, sounding as calm as he did frantic. *Don’t*

*worry, your legs are still in one piece. Just a little longer.*

*You mean “just a little longer until I get a chance to fight back,” right?! Not “just a little longer until my legs are mincemeat”?!*

*Naturally—although I can’t guarantee what shape you’ll be in after we strike back.*

*Come on! Find a way to guarantee it!*

*That’s a bit of a tall order.*

As far as Akira was concerned, Alpha’s reassurance boiled down to this: he’d get his chance to fight back, but it might cost him dearly. He pulled a face as he continued desperately evading Nelia’s onslaught.



Time and again, Nelia struck at Akira, but he dodged her every blow. Yet despite her surprise, her smile never wavered—she knew she had the upper hand. Although she made it look as if she was just doggedly pursuing Akira, not all her slashes were meant as direct attacks. She was working on the ceiling above her head—and thus the floor beneath his feet. With a series of precisely angled cuts, she carved out an isolated section that caught on the surrounding surfaces, preventing it from falling. She would lure her opponent onto it, then launch the section upward with a kick. Once Akira was airborne and off-balance, unable to run, she would go in for the kill.

When her preparations were complete, Nelia began angling her strikes so that Akira would dodge into her trap. He had no choice but to take the bait—he couldn’t keep clear of all her slashes unless he took the easiest way out.

As soon as he was in position, Nelia’s smile widened. She leaped, channeling her cyborg strength—greater than most powered suits’—straight upward into a devastating midair kick. The floor cracked beneath Akira as her foot struck it with enough force to crumple steel—and more than enough to launch the cut-out section with him on it. Yet it didn’t budge.

Nelia let out a startled cry, her face a mask of surprise. The force of her kick recoiled against the unexpectedly stationary object, throwing her off-balance. Then the section of ceiling, already weakened by her cuts, shattered under the

powerful impact. Through the falling debris, she saw Akira—airborne and off-balance, just as she was. And he was looking straight at her.



When Nelia slammed into the ceiling from below, Akira kicked the floor from above. Alpha had seen through the woman's gambit and turned it into a chance to counterattack. Just before bringing his foot down, Akira fired his CWH straight upward, using his suit's full power to absorb the recoil and add it to the force of his strike. The resulting kick canceled out the combat cyborg's blow and held the unsecured ceiling in place.

Time seemed muddled to Akira. As the force of his kick shot him up into the air, he watched the ground he'd just been standing on fall away below him in slow motion. The floor, already battered from the fierce battle, split into large chunks as it continued its leisurely descent. Even the wait for his rifle to chamber its next round seemed interminable. He could see Nelia through the debris, but that meant he still didn't have a shot.

*What now?* he asked himself, still flying upwards. *I can't hit her like this, and I'll fall unless I do something. Will she cut me out of the air? How am I supposed to dodge that? I'm stuck without something to stand on. What should I—?*

Before he could finish his thought—which only lasted a moment but seemed to drag on forever—Akira's body moved on its own. Alpha had taken control of his suit.

Akira landed on the ceiling and immediately kicked off it, propelling himself straight downward. Then he pulled the trigger, using his CWH's recoil to gain speed as he plummeted to the floor below, with the debris between him and his assailant.

Nelia tried to fling her blades at him, but the force of Akira's fall slammed the rubble into her and foiled her counterattack. Both fighters hit the floor so hard they rebounded off it, and the impact sent their weapons flying out of their hands. They snatched what armaments they could out of the air before righting themselves, landing, and squaring off. Nelia held a hilt—now minus its blade—in her left hand. Akira gripped an identical weapon in his right.

Nelia looked at him and laughed as she did something to her hilt, releasing a

torrent of liquid metal which reformed into a silver blade. “Too bad,” she taunted him. “What will you do with just a hilt? Did you expect the blade to shoot out automatically when you grabbed it? Sorry to disappoint you, but even Old World weapons have safeties. That one won’t do you any good unless you know how to release it, and it takes more than a little fiddling to figure out—”

To her surprise, a blade sprouted from the hilt in Akira’s right hand.

“Oh, I see now,” she said slowly. “You already knew. That’s fairly classified information—most municipal agents wouldn’t know it, let alone your average hunter.” She paused. “Who are you?”

Akira didn’t know a thing about the weapon. But Alpha did. He had no idea how she’d come by that knowledge, and he didn’t care to find out. And who *was* he? Just some no-name hunter. Only Alpha made him more than that, and he couldn’t talk about her. So he kept his mouth shut.

“I see,” Nelia resumed, taking his silence for a refusal. “Would you at least tell me your name, then, to mark the occasion? Fate brought us together, so I won’t forget it.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he said, “Akira.”

“Good. I’m Nelia. I’ll remember your name as long as you live—which should be about thirty more seconds.”

Suddenly, she was gliding toward him, sweeping her sword point upward from where she’d let it hang just above the floor. Akira sprang sideways out of its path. Had he backstepped, believing he knew Nelia’s reach, he would have been cut—the sword point extended for an instant in mid-swing.

Nelia’s blade made a sharp turn and pursued him, but he blocked it with his own. The two blades crashed together, and Nelia’s broke at the point of impact, instantly dissolving into silver liquid. She still advanced, thrusting with the remaining stump. Akira ducked under the blow. Again, if he had stepped back, she would have skewered him—by the time she completed her thrust, her blade was back to its original length.

Akira quickly slashed from his awkward position, and Nelia hopped back out of reach. His blade didn’t extend.

They squared off again, Akira scowling grimly, while Nelia wore a confident smile.

“That would have killed most people,” she remarked, with a surprised chuckle, as she finessed the distance between them. “Really, who *are* you? Only someone who knew how to use—and dodge—a sword could have moved like you did. And that’s not a skill ordinary hunters bother to learn.”

Akira kept silent. He couldn’t give answers he didn’t know.

*Alpha, what happened to that counterattack you promised?* he demanded.

*At least we can counterattack now,* Alpha replied. *I’d hoped to shoot her with the CWH while we fell, but the debris didn’t split apart neatly enough to pull that off. If only we’d been just a little bit luckier, we could have finished her off with a clean shot then and there.*

*I guess I really am low on luck, then. No wonder I keep running into trouble! By the way, how come my sword doesn’t stretch?*

*Because it’s running low on liquid metal to form the blade. She must have used this one more when she was attacking you from below, either because she’s right-handed or for some other reason.*

*Did I draw the short straw because she went for the better one first, or was that just chance?*

*Chance, probably.*

*Oh. What the hell is wrong with my luck, anyway?*

*I’ll do my best to make up for it.*

*Thanks.*

Akira would die the moment his misfortunes overpowered Alpha’s support. And as he watched the undaunted grin on Nelia’s face, he found himself thinking that it might be getting close. Yet he refused to give in.

“It’s been more than thirty seconds,” he taunted, giving her the best sneer he could muster. He hoped against hope that a wisecrack from a less-skilled opponent would rile her enough to make her smile slip or her movements just a little sloppier—anything to tip the scales in his favor.



But Nelia seemed to be enjoying herself. “I’ll remember your name a little longer, then. Aren’t you glad? I know I am.”

Akira grimaced. *What the hell is going on in her head?* he wondered, cowed by her unexpected response.

“Still, I can’t believe how well you’ve evaded my attacks,” she continued cheerfully. “And now you’re holding your own against me in a knife fight. That’s quite an achievement for your age. Or are you actually much older than you look, and just wearing a youthful prosthetic? Not that I really care. Anyway, are you single?”

“Wait, what?” Akira asked, baffled by the sudden non sequitur.

“If you are, how would you like to start dating me? My last boyfriend just passed on, so I’m in the market. Strong people are my type, and your skills fit the bill.”

“You must be real sure of yourself if you can crack jokes like that.” Akira grinned. Nelia *couldn’t* be serious.

But she laughed off his retort. “Oh, I’m not joking. I’m hitting on you, and I mean every word. So, what do you say?”

“Would you help me out if I said yes?” Akira asked hesitantly. Even if this was all an act to rattle him, playing along might lead to new options.

“No, I’ll kill you,” Nelia answered, as if nothing could be more obvious. “Why would us being an item change that? They’re completely unrelated.” Beaming, she advanced toward Akira.

He backed away with a strained expression. Her argument flew in the face of his common sense. “Why hit on someone if you’re gonna kill ‘em anyway?” he said, forcing a stiff smile. “You must have a screw loose.”

“You think so? People kill their dearest loved ones after years together, so what’s so odd about killing someone I’ve just started dating? And lovers fighting to the death can be tragedy or comedy, but either way, it’s a rare touch of spice to stave off boredom. You only live once, so make the most of it.”

Akira didn’t think Nelia was lying, although he couldn’t say why. He

considered asking Alpha, then thought better of it—he didn't *want* confirmation that his opponent was in earnest. Her baffling ideas left him feeling even more overwhelmed. He'd started this conversation to rattle his opponent, and it had backfired.

"So, how about it?" Nelia asked again, closing in with an aggressive smile.

A tinge of indefinable fear welled up in Akira. To banish it, he shouted a firm "No thanks!"

"Oh. What a shame." Nelia's smile turned genuinely regretful. Then she darted forward and slashed. Akira dodged and struck back.

The blades they wielded could easily slice through objects that held up against CWH proprietary ammo. Unused, they would have fetched a considerable price. But even Old World relics lost value as the energy and material they needed to function depleted. Akira and Nelia were squandering a fortune to kill each other, raising the price of life and death. They were truly dueling in the height of luxury.

## Chapter 58: Time to Go

Ever since Nelia had entered the building to kill Akira, Kain had been guarding its perimeter. After quite some time had passed, his armor's onboard scanner detected a change in the area: a portion of his augmented vision alerted him to a sharp reduction in the density of the colorless fog. Soon, the whole area would be clear—bad news for the relic thieves. They needed to make their getaway before the underground expedition could restore communications with the temporary base and alert the defense force to their presence.

“What’s taking Nelia so long?” he grumbled. “This oughta be a cakewalk for her.”

Kain had a high opinion of Nelia’s skill, especially in melee combat. She probably could have taken out the entire rest of their gang at close quarters, assuming that no one wore powered armor. And the terrain here would work to her advantage, so he’d expected her to make short work of Akira. Yet she still hadn’t returned—quite a strange situation, as far as Kain was concerned.

She *would* make contact before long, he told himself. He refrained from calling her because he didn’t want to distract her in the middle of combat. But eventually his growing suspicions overrode other considerations.

*Nelia!* he barked over their comms. *Get this over with already!*

*Kain, I’m just getting to the good part,* Nelia answered blithely. *Can this wait?*

*No way in hell! The fog is lifting! If the base has good enough hardware, their comms might be back up already! So stop toying with the brat and finish him off! Or did you chop him up so bad you’re having trouble IDing his corpse?*

*I’m not toying with him. That’s not my style.*

*So, there’re hang-ups confirming the kill? You think that bastard Yajima really did rig the program to reject everything?*

*That’s not it either.*

*Don't tell me...* Kain murmured as Nelia's situation finally dawned on him.

*Now you've got the picture. Still, this is the last place I expected to meet someone who could go toe to toe with me in melee combat. No wonder Yajima bit the dust. He wasn't quite on my level, but he was strong—strong enough to handle anything in those tunnels, I would've thought. But I guess luck wasn't on his side. Well, I need to focus, so I'll sign off now. Ta-ta.* Nelia cut communications.

Kain considered what he'd just learned from her. With no one around to hear him, he spoke very differently than he did to the other thieves. "Yajima's death alone was enough to throw a spanner in the works, and now we've got this mess on top of it," he mused. "Did my comrades give me a bad tip? Or have there just been too many unforeseeable accidents? Either way, the plan needs revising."



"Sorry to keep you waiting," Nelia said, darting forward and slashing at Akira. "My partner was just bugging me to hurry up, so I had a little chat with him. Did you mind?"

During her conversation with Kain, she'd kept her distance, and her movements had lost some of their edge. Akira had dared to hope that his opponent was nearing her limit too, that she was contemplating a retreat from this fruitless battle, but her fresh assault dashed his fragile optimism.

"Keep talking forever for all I care!" he answered, frantically fending off her blows.

"Don't be such a cold fish," Nelia cooed as her blade flicked out again. "You won't charm any women with that attitude."

"I don't *want* to charm any women who kill their boyfriends for fun!"

"That's not my idea of romance either. But as I told you, it's the spice of life. Don't you ever tire of the dry, bland day-to-day?"

"Sorry, but lately my life's been more of a rollercoaster ride!"

"Really? All the more reason to enjoy it, then!"

Nelia gleefully slashed at Akira. Her prosthetic body—built for combat and tuned for mobility over defense—flexed gracefully, accelerating her liquid metal weapon with a blend of simple elegance and feminine allure. Her blade was so thin that it seemed almost translucent, yet it sliced through tough rubble with impossible ease as it closed in on Akira.

Relying on his suit, Akira forced his body to dodge the sword. His limbs no longer hurt, but that wasn't due to the painkillers in his medicine—he'd pushed himself so hard that he wouldn't even be able to lift a finger once his suit's energy ran out. Even though he was in combat, his brain kept pushing him to black out, and he desperately struggled to resist this instinctive defense mechanism.

Akira was approaching his limit, while Nelia was nowhere near hers. If the fight dragged on, he would almost certainly die. But then something happened that tipped the scales: their battle arena gave way before Akira did. Nelia had already cut a ton of gashes in the ceiling, and simultaneous kicks from her and Akira had collapsed a section of it. And in the course of their sword fight, countless stray slashes had weakened the floor as well.

The ceiling caved in first, crumbling into debris of all shapes and sizes which rained down on the combatants. Normally, Akira and Nelia could have dodged it with ease. But not now—each knew that their opponent was waiting for the rubble to distract them, creating a fatal opening. So to gain the upper hand, both ignored the rubble falling toward them.

The ceiling's crash brought the weakened floor down with it. Akira and Nelia never took their eyes off each other, never relaxed their guards, as the destruction enveloped them.



Something moved in the heap of debris on the floor below. Nelia stood, pushing a chunk of rubble off her.

"What an inconsiderate building, interrupting our date like that," she grouched, looking down at the hilt in her hand. Her silver blade was gone, and although she tried to reactivate the weapon, it did not reform. Perhaps the impact had broken it, or perhaps she'd exhausted its supply of metal or energy. Whatever

the reason, it was useless now, so she tossed it aside and took her bearings.

She couldn't see Akira, so she assumed he was buried under the rubble. Neither of them could have gotten clear and prepared an ambush in the middle of that collapse. Then her gaze lighted on Alpha, visible in the augmented reality overlay from the Kuzusuhara Town map. The woman lay motionless atop the heap, still neatly bisected at the waist.

*That's his partner—the one I killed in that first attack, Nelia reflected. I suppose it was worth wrecking a valuable relic to get her out of the picture. I don't know how skilled she was, but if she was on his level, I couldn't have beaten them two-on-one.*

She took a closer look at Alpha. The woman vanished from her sight for a moment, then reappeared—Nelia had briefly toggled to viewing only her own visual feed.

*My onboard sensors can't detect her, so she must have quite advanced camouflage. Even her blood is invisible, which would take something far beyond simple active camo—most likely Old World tech. Perhaps I only got such a clean cut in because she assumed she was safe from detection.*

Nelia was convinced of Alpha's physical presence. She had actually seen her attack slice the woman in two, and no blade could cut mere virtual imagery. The natural way the blood pooled left no room for doubt.

Now she knew where she stood, Nelia shifted her attention to her top priority: Akira. The boy staggered to his feet from behind a piece of debris, then crumpled to the ground. Nelia walked unsteadily toward him—her synthetic body had also suffered heavy damage from the falling rubble.

"Well, speculation can wait. First..." Nelia smiled faintly. Akira's blade was gone. And while he held his CWH instead, he was leaning on the rifle as a crutch and struggling to stand. "I need to kill you!"

Grinning, Nelia broke into a sprint toward Akira. Her damaged body moved less smoothly than before, but she judged that it was still more than capable of ending Akira's life as she darted forward to continue—and finish—their fight.



Akira crawled out of the rubble, then collapsed without meaning to. He scrambled to rise, but he couldn't move steadily and made little progress. Countering Nelia's attacks had already subjected his body and suit to tremendous strain, and the falling rubble had been the final straw.

*Alpha, I'm having trouble moving, he said. Can you take over my suit?*

*Unfortunately not, she replied. Between how hard we've been pushing it and that last attack, your suit has lost some of its functionality and part of its control system. It won't fully obey my commands anymore.*

*Hell of a time for it. Akira grimaced and clenched his teeth. Losing most of Alpha's support for his suit was a massive blow to his combat ability. I can still move, right?*

*You should be able to operate the suit yourself—it still has power, and your commands use a different system than mine. You only need the will to move.*

*Really? So, I fell down because I wasn't trying hard enough?*

*The damage certainly makes your suit harder to operate. I'll keep trying to regain control somehow. I promise I'll create an opening, so whatever it takes, keep buying time until we're ready to strike back.*

*Sure thing. Just make it quick.*

Akira hauled himself upright, using his CWH as a crutch. His whole body still felt debilitating pain, but he gritted his teeth and struggled through it, glaring at his approaching enemy. Nelia's cyborg body was running far below its peak performance, yet she still closed in at superhuman speed.

Akira raised his CWH and pulled the trigger. But fighting through agony, and without Alpha's support, he couldn't hold a candle to the speed with which he'd evaded Nelia's blades. She kicked his rifle before he could finish firing, throwing off his aim. His shot whizzed harmlessly off in the wrong direction, while his weapon flew out of his hands and tumbled to the floor a short distance away.

Nelia followed up with a flurry of blows. Akira blocked them all, but only barely. Although training with Alpha had done wonders for his skill as a hand-to-hand fighter, he wasn't accomplished enough to strike back at Nelia. So he kept up a desperate defense, even as every hit he stopped made his bones

creak and his muscles tear. And when Nelia saw she had him on the ropes, she continued her assault with even greater ferocity.

*That crash must have taken quite a toll—he moves like a different person than when he was dodging my blades!* she exulted as she struck. *I'll finish him off before he has a chance to recover!* She couldn't know that this was merely Akira's true ability, stripped of Alpha's support.

Which meant she overestimated the extent of his injuries.

Akira continued to stand his ground and weather her brutal assault. He couldn't run—not only because he feared a blow from behind, but because his CWH lay nearby. If he fled, Nelia would steal his rifle, leaving him with no way to harm her and no chance of victory. And Kain was waiting outside, with powered armor that could withstand his high-end ammo. If the thief learned that his enemy could no longer fight back, he would move in for the kill.

Akira's eyes and mind could keep up with Nelia's attacks, but his body couldn't. As agony and fatigue dulled his movements, Nelia pressed her advantage, inflicting even greater pain on him. His suit was slowly but steadily breaking under the repeated strain. Akira didn't know whether his body or his suit would give out first, but as soon as one of them did, he would be killed.

*Alpha, I can't take much more of this!* he yelled. *Where's that counterattack you were working on?!*

*We don't have unlimited chances,* Alpha replied. *Just a little longer. Look behind her.*

Akira did so. Alpha stood a short distance behind Nelia, although he couldn't see what good that did them. She couldn't distract Nelia, since the woman wasn't aware of her, and no attack from her virtual body could so much as scratch the relic thief.

But Nelia picked up on his look. She inferred someone was sneaking up behind her, even though her onboard sensors detected no one. After killing Alpha, Nelia believed she was facing an advanced stealth system. At the same time, her connection to the Kuzusuhara Town map alerted her to a woman behind her—though based on the newcomer's movements, she didn't realize Nelia was onto her.



Nelia spun in a quick half-turn, unleashing a roundhouse kick that should have taken her attacker completely by surprise—

She was facing the same woman she *knew* she'd killed earlier.

Her kick passed through her opponent without encountering any resistance.

And just as the whiffed blow threw off her balance, Akira delivered a perfectly timed kick of his own.

Three surprises, none of which Nelia had seen coming.

Akira kicked with all the strength he could muster, and while his blow couldn't damage Nelia's prosthetic body, it did send her flying—and change the tide of battle.

Nelia's mind was in chaos. A rush of questions filled her head, robbing her of the power to think clearly. Not even a hard landing in a heap of rubble cured her confusion. But when she looked into Akira's eyes—and down the barrel of his rifle—all her other worries vanished.

As soon as his kick had landed, Akira had dashed to his CWH and deftly lifted the rifle into a firing stance. Then he took aim at Nelia and pulled the trigger, striking her squarely in the torso and blasting her abdomen into a shower of broken machinery. The force of the impact ripped her in two and hurled her top and bottom halves in different directions.

Akira kept firing until his magazine was empty. But although he destroyed her arms and legs, none of his bullets struck her head. He clicked his tongue. He hadn't spared her deliberately. Nelia was a cyborg—anyone could see that—so he couldn't relax until he'd at least destroyed her head.

Yet he'd missed every shot.

Alpha had been in control of Akira's body when he'd delivered his kick. She had already restored her access to his suit, but held back from actively helping him fight so as to lull Nelia into a false sense of security—they would never have been able to catch the relic thief off guard otherwise. Furthermore, Akira had put up a better fight than Alpha had expected, so she'd had all the time she needed to find an opening. Their efforts had paid off as they turned the tables and snatched Akira from the jaws of death.

When Akira realized Alpha was back in control of his suit, he assumed her aim assistance had returned with it. Yet no matter how many times he fired, he couldn't hit Nelia's head.

*I keep missing!* he snapped, frantic and confused. *What's going on?!*

*Recoil is throwing off your aim, Alpha replied. Proprietary ammo kicks hard, and with your suit on its last legs, you're not strong enough to counteract it anymore. You couldn't even have landed that shot to her gut without my help.*

Akira reloaded while he listened. *So, what should I do?*

*You'll have to get closer and try again. I wouldn't advise leaving her—even in that state, she's perfectly capable of operating the powered armor she left outside.*

*Think the other one will run if I finish her off?*

*That would be a pleasant surprise.*

Despite their upbeat banter, neither Akira nor Alpha expected to be so lucky.



Kain was still keeping watch outside. The colorless fog had thinned back to normal levels, meaning that the communication between the temporary base and the underground districts was probably back online. And he hadn't heard from Nelia since his earlier call. He could only draw one conclusion.

"It's time to go."

The back of his powered armor opened, and he ejected, folded into a compact block—he hadn't been wearing the armor so much as he had been built into it, functioning as its central control system. But his limbs extended in midair, and he landed on his feet.

In contrast to his hulking armor, Kain was spare in the extreme, with spindly—almost insectoid—limbs and a long, slender torso to match. His head was bare of hair and skin. Unlike his accomplices' prosthetics, which were designed to mimic the appearance of flesh and blood, no one could mistake him for anything but a combat cyborg. Even his most human features—his five-fingered hands—were exposed metal skeletons.

A heavy machine gun and a sniper rifle launched from the rear of his armor. Neither weapon had been designed with unaugmented users in mind, as their bulk and heft made plain. Kain lifted one lightly with each of his slender arms, maintaining his balance perfectly despite the seemingly ill-supported weight—proof that his body boasted far greater power and performance than its slim exterior suggested.

Nelia's armor started walking on its own. Kain guessed that she was operating it from within the building, confirming his suspicions. Remotely controlling his own armor, he trained its heavy weapons on Nelia's. A torrent of bullets burst from the massive guns, reducing Nelia's armor to scrap in mere moments.

"Sorry, but I don't take chances. I wouldn't want anyone tailing me," Kain said as he set out away from the building, leaving his own armor behind.



Even after losing both arms and everything below her chest, Nelia was still alive. Her cyborg body was designed to last for days as a severed head. This damage wouldn't kill her—but it did tank her chances of survival. Akira was coming toward her, anti-materiel rifle in hand. He was determined to finish her off, she knew. He hadn't left her head intact to torment her—fatigue, injuries, and equipment failures were to blame for his string of errant shots.

Akira raised his weapon, took aim at Nelia's head, fired, and missed again. Scowling, he inched warily closer and tried again. Under normal circumstances, he would have walked up, pressed the muzzle of his rifle to his enemy's forehead, and ended the fight with a single pull of the trigger. He only bothered with these repeated attempts because he was terrified of what Nelia might do. She clearly outclassed him, and after the way she had cowed him earlier, he wasn't ready to declare her harmless just because she'd lost all her limbs. Yet his concerns were delaying her death.

Even in these straits, Nelia smiled. To Akira, she looked confident, like she still had a way to win. That spooked him, and he slowed his approach even more. Yet Nelia wasn't grinning in anticipation of victory—her mind simply wasn't built to see her own demise as anything special. She could smile because death was the end and nothing more. But even Nelia didn't *want* to die, so she

intended to do her best to avoid it. That was why she had summoned her powered armor from outside, even though she didn't believe it would arrive in time.

Then her connection to that last hope went dead.

*Did something destroy my armor?* she wondered. *What's happening outside?*

Just then, she received a call from Kain, using internal comms to keep their conversation inaudible. *Nelia, what's your situation?*

*Kain? To tell the truth, I'm having a bit of trouble. I hate to ask, but would you mind lending me a hand?* she responded, keeping her tone casual to maximize her chances of a favorable response.

But Kain immediately saw through her ruse. *Oh, so you lost.*

*I'm only struggling,* she insisted airily, well aware that Kain would never bail her out if she told the truth. *I wish you would hurry, though.*

*At minimum, I'd guess you're too badly damaged to move effectively on your own,* Kain continued calmly. *And the kid did that to you in melee combat—your specialty. You'd never call your powered armor into a building too cramped for it otherwise. Oh, I destroyed it, by the way. So don't hold your breath.*

*Well, that wasn't very nice of you. I told you it was off-limits.*

*Sorry, but I had my reasons.*

Both relic thieves spoke nonchalantly, with a bizarre disregard for both their own lives and those of others.

*Still, I do feel bad for wrecking your armor without asking you,* Kain added. *So, I'll send you mine to make up for it.*

*Much appreciated.* Nelia paused. *What do you mean, "send"?*

*Just what I said. I'll send my armor your way on autopilot while I make a break for it—I'm in no hurry to tangle with someone who beat you at melee. Oh, and I set it to attack indiscriminately. The fog's lifted, meaning someone might have already tipped off the defense force. If they're nearby, my armor going on a rampage should make an excellent decoy to lure them in. Well, take care.*

Kain ended the call. Nelia tried to raise him again, but without success.

“Jeez,” she muttered in annoyance. “If you’re going to send in your armor, you could at least give me the access code.”

Nelia pondered on the brink of death, calmly weighing her options for survival. One of Akira’s bullets struck nearby, knocking her aside with the force of its impact, but she continued thinking without an iota of panic or fear.

“Well, I suppose it’s worth a try,” she said, smiling almost cheerfully as she pinned her hopes on one last gambit.

## Chapter 59: The Fruits of Good Luck (or Bad)

Akira took another shot at Nelia's head. His bullet struck the ground beside her, sending her tumbling a short distance.

*I missed again?! he snapped.*

*Calm down, Alpha said with a soothing smile. Frustration will only make your aim worse.*

*Can't you give me a hand with this?*

*All this damage has destabilized your suit. It might malfunction if I try to force through any more external commands—tearing off your arms if you're not lucky. Would you like me to try anyway?*

*No thanks!*

Looking as she usually did, Alpha stood at Akira's side once more. Nelia couldn't see her now that Akira had destroyed the relic that allowed the thief access to the map of the ruins.

Just as Akira raised his rifle to fire again, Nelia started speaking out loud.

"If you kill me, you'll die too," she said with a smile.

Akira pulled the trigger anyway. Once again, his shot flung her a short distance.

Yet Nelia continued, "My accomplice just stabbed me in the back. He wants us both dead, and he's sent his powered armor into this building on autopilot to do the job. It has a self-destruct system designed to take his enemies down with it. The bomb will go off as soon as you're within its kill zone, and it's at least powerful enough to collapse this building—probably to blow the whole place sky-high. And the armor will chase you to the ends of the earth, so don't even think about running."

Akira ignored her, stepped closer, and took another shot. This time, he hit her chest, disintegrating everything left below her neck. The blast sent her severed

head rolling across the floor.

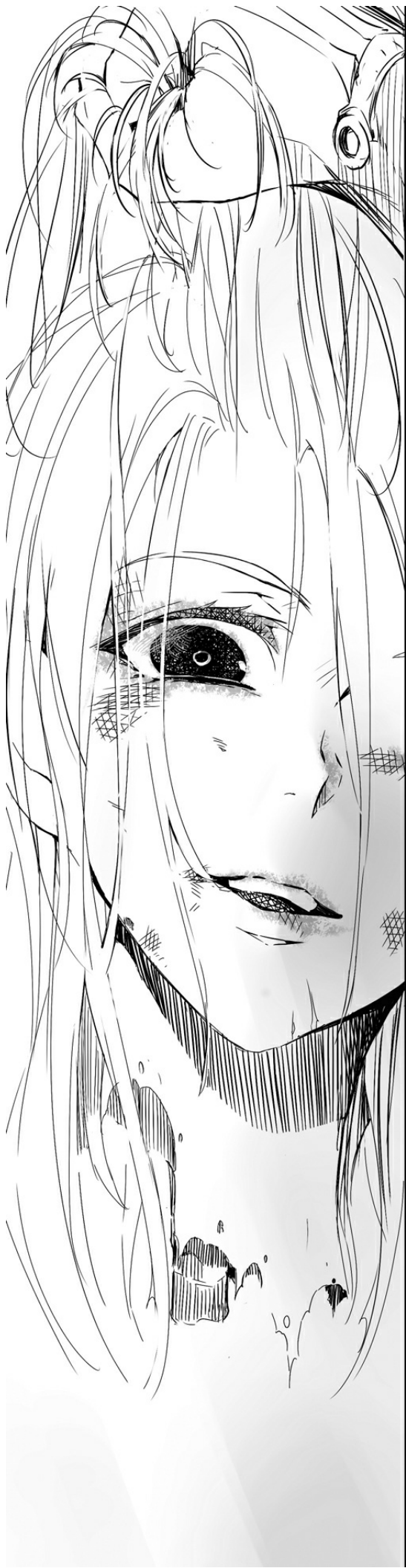
“There are only two ways to prevent it from detonating: destroy the control system, or hack in and shut it down. The computer is somewhere in its torso, but finding and smashing it through that heavy armor won’t be easy. I can hack it—in fact, I’ve already started, and I’m delaying the blast as we speak. If you kill me, it will go off immediately.”

Akira stepped closer and fired. His bullet grazed Nelia’s ear and struck the floor, flinging her disembodied head aside again.

“Oh. Well, suit yourself—it’s your choice to make. I wouldn’t mind dying with someone I’ve flirted with,” Nelia said, with the same smile she’d worn while hitting on him.

He was already quite close to her. Now he walked up and lifted her head by the hair, glaring straight into her eyes. “Got any proof?” he asked. What was to say she wasn’t lying to save herself?

“None,” Nelia answered.





Her honest answer left him no nearer to the truth. Was she lying? Akira couldn't know.

But before he came to any conclusion, Alpha interrupted sternly, *Forget that and move! Right now!*

Akira obediently started running, still clutching Nelia's head. The building shook as Kain's armor began forcing its way inside. Running on autopilot, the massive machine acted without any concern for self-preservation, smashing its steel bulk against a weak point Kain's barrages had left in the building's facade. Its colossal head and arms scraped along walls and ceilings as it blasted through all obstacles with heavy weaponry, ignoring energy consumption and safety standards to blaze a trail toward Akira with incredible power. The machine didn't know exactly where to find its target, but with the colorless fog lifted, its scanner could once more track his approximate location.

The hulking unmanned weapon, taller than the ceiling, unleashed a wild volley in Akira's direction. Devastating projectiles flew from its titanic arsenal, pulverizing everything in the vicinity. The building's interior wasn't as tough as its outer shell, so smashed chunks of walls, floor, and ceiling filled the air. The autopilot didn't try to conserve its remaining ammo supply—it would just keep shooting until it had nothing left to fire.

Akira's prompt flight had gotten him clear of the armor's attack. "Why's your friend so dead set on killing me?" he asked Nelia as he ran. "Or is he just doing this to buy time for his getaway?"

"It's nothing like that," she replied. "He can't leave with our relics unless he kills you first."

"What's my life got to do with moving relics?"

"Yajima—the man you killed—registered you to his revengeware. So the program will keep our getaway truck locked down until we kill you."

Akira recalled Yajima's promise of vengeance and pulled a face, realizing it had been no empty threat. "What a pain in the ass," he grumbled. "I didn't even know they *made* programs like that."

"Oh, they do. We would never have gone out of our way to hunt you down

otherwise. Now, if I've answered your questions, let's strike a deal: I'll stop Kain's armor, but in exchange, I want your help."

"All I have to do is run. If I go outside while it's still fighting its way through narrow hallways, I can lose it no problem."

"But you know you can't. Isn't that why you fled to this building in the first place?"

"Say you do hijack that suit. What's to stop you from attacking me with it as soon as you've got control? Killing me'll net you a load of relics, right?"

"You'll just have to trust me. I'm not interested in going another round with someone who already scrapped most of me." Even reduced to just a head, Nelia wore a smile that had lost none of its confidence. "It's not a bad bargain, if I do say so myself. We'll both get out of this alive. Oh, and I won't insist you agree to start dating—threatening my way into a relationship isn't my style."

Akira grimaced. How could she *still* be going on about that?

*Alpha, do you think she's telling the truth about that self-destruct system?* he asked. *You can more or less tell when someone's lying, right?*

Alpha shook her head. *Not in this case, unfortunately. As I've told you before, it isn't always possible to read a cyborg's expressions. Oh, I'd say she's serious about the boyfriend thing, though.*

*Who cares about that?*

Akira wavered. Taking Nelia up on her offer would mean not only letting the opponent he'd fought so hard to corner escape but also giving her a chance to strike back. Yet fleeing the building offered no guarantee of survival either—Kain's armor might easily overtake and kill him. *Should I bet on taking her help?* he asked himself. *Or on making a break for it?*

*Aren't you forgetting the third option?* Alpha interjected. *You could bet on fighting.*

*But won't it blow itself up if I try that?*

*Not necessarily.*

In the first place, Alpha elaborated, they couldn't be certain whether the

armor really was rigged to self-destruct. Even if it was, Nelia might not be the reason it hadn't gone off yet. In that case, the blast's kill zone might be set to cover such a small area that they could prevent a detonation by keeping their distance. They also didn't know whether the self-destruct system used onboard explosives or whether it converted the armor's energy reserves into destructive force. The latter would draw on the same power supply that maintained the force-field armor—meaning they could reduce the size of the blast by forcing the machine to waste energy blocking CWH proprietary ammo. If they got lucky, they might even manage to take out the control system while they were at it.

Alpha merely described possibilities—she had no hard evidence on which to base her suppositions—but at least Akira had more options now.

*Three choices, then, he said. Ask for help, run, or fight.*

*That's all I can offer you—I can't advise you which way is best, Alpha responded. They all involve too much luck. But whatever you choose, I'll be with you all the way.*

*I know.* Akira tossed Nelia's head to the floor. "Sit tight. I don't wanna ask for your help until I've tried my luck," he said, then dashed off to fight.

Nelia rolled to a stop with her neck pointing down. A smile played on her lips as she watched him depart.

The autopilot on Kain's armor wasn't particularly bright. It knew only that its target was someone or something inside the building, and it turned its weapons on any potential match its onboard scanner picked up. The machine wasn't even hunting Akira—merely identifying humanoid entities and obeying its preset priorities. It didn't detour around obstacles to reach its targets, instead making use of its brawn and its arsenal to forge a new path of destruction. Two of the massive weapons in its four hands were already out of ammunition, reduced to blunt instruments. Even Akira could tell that much as he watched the rampaging armor from a short distance away with his Alpha-enhanced vision.

*If we wait long enough, maybe it'll empty its other guns too,* Akira mused.

*Just hope it doesn't self-destruct the moment it fires its last cartridge,* Alpha

said. *We'll be in trouble if this building collapses on top of us.*

*That sounds too believable to risk it. Oh well, let's go.*

Akira kept behind cover, taking potshots at the armor while its wild barrage tore up the building's interior. The huge unmanned machine made slow progress through the rubble-choked hallways. Even in his ragged condition, Akira could hit such a giant, lumbering target. His proprietary bullets struck the armor's torso, and its force-field armor stopped each with a thunderous crash, converting the impact into a burst of light. The machine tried to return fire, but its arms and armaments got caught on debris, giving Akira plenty of time to dodge.

He kept moving and shooting, unloading proprietary cartridges into his opponent. For every shot he fired, a hail of massive projectiles filled the air around him. Walls crumbled and ceilings collapsed as the firefight dragged on. Although Akira seemed to be dominating the engagement, one hit from his enemy's weapons would finish him off, while Kain's armor could take shot after shot from his rifle and then counterattack without even flinching. And every salvo it fired left him with one fewer place to hide. He had no illusions about having the upper hand.

The perilous combat continued until the sound of Akira's shots striking the armor abruptly changed. The machine's energy was running so low that his bullet had pierced its weakened force-field armor and bored into its body. Its movements became visibly less coordinated.

Akira seized his chance, firing more proprietary ammo into the armor's torso until, at last, he damaged its control system. The malfunctioning computer sent abnormal instructions to the armor's components, making the steel colossus writhe as if in agony. It flailed wildly, emitting a strange sound like a death rattle. Then, after a few more desperate shots from Akira, the gargantuan armor finally fell still and silent. He put yet another bullet in the machine, and it crumpled, crashing to the floor in a grand declaration of his victory.

Akira scrutinized his fallen opponent while he exchanged magazines. It showed no sign of movement. Hesitantly, he asked, *Did I win?*

*I believe so, Alpha replied. You should be safe now. At least, you have nothing*

*more to fear from that powered armor.*

*All right!* Akira cheered, thrilled to have escaped near-certain death. He couldn't help rejoicing that he had defeated such a strong opponent even when it had caught him off guard.

*It's not over yet, Akira. Don't relax until you've solved all your problems.*

*I know. Let's get to it,* Akira said with conviction. He dashed off to take care of his unfinished business.



Nelia simply waited for her stratagem to play out. It was all she *could* do. After some time, the outcome became clear as Akira came within range of her sensors.

"It's good to see you again," she said, smiling at him. "You must have disabled Kain's powered armor—quite a feat in your condition."

She was right: Akira was a wreck. Both his flesh and his suit were a hair's breadth from giving out completely. Yet there he stood, still alive—and puzzled to see her still looking so cheerful and confident.

"You don't seem too bothered," he said, drawing his own conclusions. "I guess dying doesn't scare you, then."

"Not one bit," she confirmed. "Although I do consider it unpleasant."

"Yeah? Me too."

"We have so much in common. Are you *sure* you wouldn't like to start dating?"

"No thanks. Hitting on someone I'm about to kill isn't my style, and I'm not into dating the dead," Akira said flatly and trained his CWH on Nelia. He wouldn't miss at this range. One pull of the trigger was all it would take, and he could still do that much, even in his current condition. He had won. He knew it.

But Nelia kept smiling. "That won't be a problem."

In spite of himself, Akira stayed his trigger finger, baffled. "What won't?"

Before Nelia answered, Alpha shouted, *Akira, don't move a muscle!*

A moment later, his rifle jerked aside. To his shock, a man suddenly appeared from empty space—or at least space Akira had thought was empty. The newcomer was armed, and he had just shot Akira's rifle out of his hands. While Akira stood there, stunned, more people equipped like the man blinked into visibility in rapid succession.

*Alpha, where'd these guys come from?! Akira demanded. They weren't here before, right?!*

*They just entered, Alpha replied. You didn't notice them because they're all wearing stealth gear.*

*St-Stealth gear?*

*A combination of camouflage systems, including thermo-optical, fluid control, sound-wave elimination, and more, designed to avoid detection by enemy—*

*I'm not asking for a definition! I wanna know—*

"Freeze! We're with the Kugamayama City Defense Force!" one of the newcomers barked, answering Akira's question. "Surrender peacefully! Failure to comply will be considered a hostile act against the city and result in immediate termination!"

More municipal troops appeared, surrounding Akira and Nelia. The underground district headquarters had dispatched multiple messengers apart from Akira. And while he had failed to establish communications, the others had arrived safely. The commander of the temporary base had taken a grave view of the subterranean attacks and mobilized the defense force, his most valuable asset.

A party of soldiers had immediately set out to search the underground district and its surroundings. On their way, however, they had detected sounds and fumes from what seemed to be explosive weaponry—traces of Kain and Nelia's assault on the building where Akira had taken refuge. Considering that the relic thieves might be battling monsters, a detachment of soldiers had split off to investigate. And they had arrived to find Akira pointing his anti-materiel rifle at Nelia.

Akira looked at the troops encircling him and sighed. The soldiers were clearly

better trained and equipped than he was, and they kept their weapons trained on him, ever alert. If he did anything to arouse their suspicions even slightly, he could kiss his life goodbye, and he knew it.

*I feel like I've been through this before,* he grumbled.

*What a coincidence,* said Alpha. *So do I!*

They were thinking of how they'd had Yajima dead to rights and should have shot him on the spot. Making the wrong choice then had landed Akira in a fight with Shiori. But while pulling the trigger had been the right answer to that dilemma, it wasn't an option in this one. Still, he didn't want to end up in hot water again just because someone beat him to the punch with a lie.

Before Nelia had a chance to speak, Akira raised his hands and shouted, "My name's Akira! I'm a hunter hired to work in the underground districts! I was on my way to contact the temporary base when relic thieves attacked me and I fought back! You can check my story!"

"Restrain him!" a soldier barked. "If he resists, you may shoot to kill! We lost a lot of hunters in the tunnels, and not all of them lived to tell about it! Don't let your guard down!"

"I'm telling you, I'm not—"

Several soldiers held Akira down and clapped sturdy cuffs on his wrists and ankles. He didn't resist. Then they started hauling him away.

Akira felt totally relaxed, he realized—whatever the outcome, his fight was over. And once the tension left his exhausted mind and body, he was easy prey to fatigue. His eyelids drooped, overcome by the urge to rest.

Before his consciousness faded completely, Alpha said, *Don't worry. You've earned a nice, long nap.* Her reassuring smile told him that the danger had passed.

*Okay,* he mumbled wearily. *Good night.* Then, peacefully, he passed out.

"Target has lost consciousness!" shouted a soldier, scrambling to catch him as he suddenly toppled.

"Check his vital signs and take any measures you deem necessary to keep him

alive!” the leader commanded. “He’s probably a relic thief, so don’t let him die until he’s told us everything he knows! Contact the med team and tell them to stand by! We’ll split into two teams! Team A will escort the target to underground district HQ and hand him over to the med team! Team B will sweep this building—there could be more thieves in hiding! Hunt them down and capture them alive if possible! If not, kill them!”

The soldiers sprang into action.

Nelia got the same treatment as Akira. She was just a head, but the soldiers still placed her in a restraining device that blocked external connections. Although she couldn’t move, she caught a coincidental glimpse of Akira as they carried him off.

*I told you it wouldn’t be a problem*, she thought, chuckling to herself. She’d calculated that the defense force would offer her a chance of survival, assuming she could buy time until they arrived. And her attempt had paid off.

Had Nelia’s luck kept her alive—or had Akira’s? Either way, if death was a misfortune, their luck was good—for the moment.



Kain reached the outer edge of the ruins, having evaded the defense force’s pursuit alone. And he hadn’t run blindly—he had business here.

Several men awaited him. All were armed, mechanized to some degree, and had the air of hardened soldiers.

“It’s good to see you, comrade!” they called with disciplined salutes when they noticed Kain.

“It’s good to be back, comrades,” Kain responded softly, saluting them in turn. “Give me the latest.”

“Yes, sir! We’ve withdrawn everyone we had in position. According to reports, all of our comrades who infiltrated their ranks have successfully escaped as well.”

“Good! In that case, we’ll pull out too. To be safe, we’ll avoid returning to Kugamayama and instead make for another city. Move out!”



“Shouldn’t we dispose of them first?”

“Them” referred to the gang of relic thieves Kain had been working with. The bandits were still waiting by their getaway truck for Kain and Nelia to return.

But they were no comrades of his.

“No, the city defense force will take care of them,” he said. “We’ll run more risk of exposure if we finish them off ourselves. Discovery wouldn’t mean much to me, but it would create difficulties for our comrades elsewhere.”

“Understood. Move out!”

Kain departed with the men. While they traveled, one said to him, “May I ask why the plan failed, comrade? Our latest reports claimed that it was proceeding smoothly.”

“The immediate cause was the killing of a man named Yajima. He was the key to our getaway plan, and his death caused a cascade of difficulties which became increasingly unmanageable until I unfortunately had no choice but to call off the operation.”

“Was his death unavoidable?”

“Not in our original plan—I was going to leave him alive until he transported the relics to us.” Kain paused. “Comrade, if you’re implying that my failure to predict his death doomed the operation, I accept your judgment.”

“N-No, comrade, I feel certain that events transpired too suddenly for even you to deal with. Forgive me for my misleading remarks.” Convinced that he had offended Kain, the man asked no further questions.

*Still, Kain wondered as they traveled on, why did we fail? According to our comrades in the Kugamayama City Department of Long-Term Strategy, no hunter in the tunnels should have been a match for Yajima or Nelia. Were they mistaken? I doubt they would have knowingly given us false intelligence.*

As a matter of fact, the leaked data had been entirely in order. Not even the DLS could gauge what Akira was capable of with Alpha’s help.

*Nelia brought up the possibility of municipal agents mingling with Druncam’s young hunters. I’ve heard a new faction has emerged in that syndicate, and that*

*an extremely promising rookie is at the heart of it.* Druncam, in fact, had recently begun strengthening its ties to the city and further expanding its influence. The syndicate's desk jockeys had ingratiated themselves with those inside the walls. *Did the city plant an undercover operative to take over Druncam from within? Did we just happen to run afoul of him? That would explain that hunter's skill, but I need to investigate.*

"Comrade," Kain said aloud. "I heard that one of Druncam's rookies performed admirably securing the zone around the temporary base. He supposedly rescued numerous other hunters all on his own, displaying skill one would hardly expect from a child. Given the hunter's youth, there was talk of recruiting them for the propaganda value. Do you know of anyone who fits that description?"

"Yes, I do," the man replied. "His name is...Katsuya, if I remember correctly. I hear he's unbelievably skilled for a boy his age, and that he saved many hunters single-handedly while doing rescue work. Do you need files on him?"

"No, I'll go over them thoroughly myself later and issue orders if the need arises."

"Understood." The man said no more, anxious to not ruffle Kain's feathers again. And so Kain lost an opportunity to clear up his misunderstanding.

The group left the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins and vanished into the wasteland.



Nelia found herself incarcerated in a solitary cell. Her prison was under Kugamayama City's management and built to hold even combat cyborgs under lock and key. She remained a severed head, and although she was secured to a table in her cell, she had no way to move even if she broke free. An array of cables extended from the stump of her neck, but most were for life support, and none provided communication. Being completely cut off from the outside world was boring Nelia out of her mind.

A man entered her cell. The newcomer was no guard—he wore a suit and a vaguely insincere smile—but he radiated the distinctive aura of a person in the upper echelons of command and gave an impression of deep experience which made it difficult to dismiss him as an upstart despite his youthful appearance.

“Nelia, isn’t it?” he said cordially. “I’m Yanagisawa. How do you feel?”

“Not very well, I’m afraid,” Nelia replied, equally pleasant. “I’m bored to tears. Won’t you give me an outside line? I don’t even mind if it’s monitored.”

Yanagisawa chuckled and shook his head. “Sorry, I don’t have the authority to make that call. But I’d be happy to help you kill some time. I was hoping for a nice little chat anyway—an interrogation, essentially, but there’s no rule against enjoying it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind a chat, although I think I’ve already told all I can. Not for free, mind you—I expect a reduced sentence for my cooperation,” Nelia said cockily.

“Naturally,” Yanagisawa acquiesced, still cheerful. “I believe in human rights, even for the bad guys, and I guarantee your right to bargain. It’s a valuable skill, you know, being able to strike a deal. Bargaining is precious. It binds people together. Even enemies can work out all sorts of exchanges. Anyone who can’t might as well be a monster. I mean, you can’t work with someone like that.”

Something about his tone rubbed Nelia the wrong way. She stopped smiling and probed, “So, what would you like to know?”

“Oh, I’d love to know all about the person you call Kain.”

“I know I’ve been over that before. Do you want me to repeat myself?”

“Yes, I’ve heard what you—and your accomplices—have to say on the subject. And based on your stories, I’ve attempted to track down this supposed fugitive named Kain, to investigate his activities and his origins. And would you believe it?” Yanagisawa made a theatrical show of surprise. “I discovered that there is no such man. I don’t just mean that Kain is an alias, mind you—in that case, there would still be a record of the real person using it.”

“Don’t ask me to explain your poor detective skills.”

Yanagisawa abruptly stopped speaking and began staring intently at Nelia. His silence and unflinching smile both unnerved her. At last, she couldn’t suppress a suspicious “What?”

“Tell me, what do you imagine fate has in store for you?” he asked.

“Let me think,” Nelia mused. “Perhaps forced labor, stuck in a body whose admin privileges belong to the city? And in some extremely dangerous ruin under the city’s control, I don’t doubt. There, I’ll spend my days as an expendable minion, retrieving relics for my superiors until I’ve paid off the debt I incurred in this little escapade. Does that about cover it?”

“To a T.” Yanagisawa nodded affably. “But that would be your sentence as a relic thief operating in a ruin under Kugamayama City’s management. It’s a fate reserved for petty criminals of no consequence to the East as a whole.”

Nelia scowled—something she hadn’t done even moments from death, at the point of Akira’s gun. “What do you mean?”

Yanagisawa’s grin broadened, unsettling her. “We believe this man ‘Kain’ to be a member of a nationalist group. And not just any underling either—we think he holds a leadership position.”

Nelia’s face registered mild surprise.

“Quite a number of nationalists are causing similar incidents across the East,” Yanagisawa continued, seemingly enjoying himself more than ever. “They incite two-bit bandits to plunder city-controlled ruins, then steal the loot for themselves. The losses have reached levels that the ELGC can’t ignore, and all that money goes straight to the nationalist cause. Did you know that?”

“Yes, so I’ve heard,” Nelia said slowly.

“And someone is directing these thefts—a mastermind who almost certainly exists, but whom we can’t identify. And we suspect that the man you call Kain is that someone. You must have noticed the impressive equipment on the soldiers who apprehended you. They were kitted out to capture that elusive nationalist leader.”

A creeping dread rose within Nelia. Yanagisawa watched her face contort with emotion as he blithely continued, “At the moment, you’re thought to be on friendly terms with our target—and to possess information that would enable us to identify them. You’re under suspicion of belonging to an organization opposed to the ELGC, not just a single city.”

“M-Meaning?”

“If you can’t disabuse people of that notion, your fate will be most unfortunate indeed. Specifically, you’ll become a test subject for the Rebuild Institute.”

“B-But wasn’t that disbanded?” Nelia asked, her voice trembling with fear as the color drained for her face.

“Of course it was. Officially, anyway. But its researchers weren’t massacred, and their creations weren’t scrapped. They’re still hard at work, although their experiments are quite a bit more ethical than before—the sort that we can turn a blind eye to in consideration of their results.”

What was the Rebuild Institute? What experiments had it performed? Nelia knew, as her terror made plain.

“Under the ELGC’s supervision, they achieve great things by sacrificing the human rights of a mere handful of people. All their test subjects are heinous criminals, of course—mostly guilty of defying the League and inflicting serious harm to the whole East. People, for example, like nationalists and their collaborators.”

Nelia was too horrified to communicate clearly. Yet she struggled to respond with her trembling voice. “I...I’m not a...”

“I know,” Yanagisawa said agreeably. “I’m *sure* you’re not one of them. You have *nothing* to do with nationalists, do you? So, try to prove it. Tell me something that will convince me.” With obviously feigned regret, he continued, “As I told you, I firmly believe that even bad guys have basic human rights—that they at least deserve to die from being chopped into mincemeat or drinking deadly poison or being eaten alive by monsters. So, personally, I can’t approve of anything so inhumane as sacrificing you to the Rebuild Institute’s experiments.” He looked resigned, though there was no hint of sincerity about him. “Still, I have my duties. So I’d like you to cooperate with me for your own good. Oh, and to tell the truth, even I don’t know what the Rebuild Institute would do to you. The ELGC keeps that information classified.”

Nelia was frozen in terror.

“So, will you tell me what you know?” Yanagisawa smoothly prompted her. “Don’t worry, we have plenty of time. And you were bored anyway, right? Don’t

worry about that either—time will fly.”

A long confession followed as Nelia desperately pleaded her case, regretting her survival all the while.

Had Nelia’s luck kept her alive, or had Akira’s? Either way, the jury was still out on whether it was *good* luck.

## Chapter 60: The Price of a Combat Record

Akira was in a world of white. His mind was hazy, but he was vaguely aware that he was dreaming, and that he had seen this before. Alpha stood a short distance away. As in his earlier dream, she was unaware of him as she said:

“Commencing evaluation of attempt number 499. Estimated probability of subject achieving goal: less than one percent. Estimated probability of subject surviving failed attempt: less than one percent. Unsuitable. Will continue developing subject’s combat potential.”

As she uttered this, her face remained perfectly expressionless.

“Planning guidance procedures for present subject. Recommend considering previous subject’s motivations for breach of contract. Speculate that former subject reached and affirmed decisions based on the following factors: the potential to attain and prolong the happiness and salvation of an unspecified large number of humans in the event that subject’s actions succeeded. Advise caution to prevent present subject from acquiring an ideology that would justify emulating former subject.”

Her voice, like her face, betrayed no sign of emotion.

“Conclude that present subject is unlikely to share former subject’s beliefs. Conclusion based on present subject’s misanthropy, lack of concern for others, and tendency to prioritize subject’s own needs. Given this personality, risk of present subject developing ethics, tolerance, morality, and philanthropy equivalent to former subject falls below danger threshold.”

Alpha concluded, “Recommend monitoring changes in present subject’s personality to prevent repeat of attempt number 498. End of report.”

Akira’s consciousness was fading. The world went dark, and his dream ended.

Akira woke up in a hospital room. He thought he’d had a dream, but he couldn’t remember what it had been about—all that remained was the

sensation that he'd experienced something similar before. His hospital room was private and meant for treating flesh-and-blood humans.

*Good morning, Akira,* Alpha said, smiling, as he sat up in his bed. *Did you sleep well?*

*Morning, Alpha,* he answered. *Yeah, I haven't felt this rested in ages.*

Akira was in perfect health: wide awake, energetic, and without a twinge of pain from his wounds, which had fully healed. He looked around the room: no bars on the window, and the surveillance camera was there to monitor patients, not catch escapees.

He was being treated well, but he still had a lot of questions.

*So, where are we?*

*The city hospital,* Alpha replied. *You were brought here for treatment.*

*Really?*

Kugamayama boasted a major general hospital, run under the joint auspices of the city and the Hunter Office. Treating both the unaugmented and cyborgs of all stripes inevitably required massive facilities. The hospital's main function was to treat injuries, not illnesses. It regenerated limbs lost in combat (at exorbitant prices), repaired and calibrated patients' synthetic bodies or transplanted its clients into new ones, installed more powerful and obviously mechanical components, and even converted non-cybernetic patients into cyborgs. Its clientele consisted mostly of hunters, security personnel stationed in dangerous areas, and others whose professions required them to be versed in combat.

Given that Akira had passed out while the city defense force marched him off under suspicion of stealing relics, he wouldn't have been surprised to wake up in solitary confinement.

*So, what've they decided to do with me?* he asked.

*Someone will be along to explain that shortly,* said Alpha. *Right now, you're in a safe place, and no one thinks you're one of the thieves, so don't worry about that.*



*Well, that's good news.* Akira felt relieved.

He was perfectly fit, but that was no excuse to leave his room and wander around. So he passed his time chatting with Alpha until a city official entered. It was Kibayashi, and he was in high spirits.

"Long time no see!" the man said. "Glad to know you haven't lost your crazy streak!"

Akira responded with a blank stare—he didn't remember the official, and he didn't understand why this stranger was greeting him like an old friend.

"It's me, Kibayashi," the official explained, noting his confusion. "You know, from that emergency job? I gave you a motorcycle as an advance payment, remember?"

*When that horde of monsters swarmed out of Kuzusuhara, you took that emergency job and rode off alone on your bike,* Alpha supplemented. *He's the Hunter Office employee you spoke with then.*

Kibayashi only seemed vaguely familiar to Akira, but with Alpha's prodding, he finally managed to fish a memory of the man out of his hazy recollection.

"I remember you," he said. "You were the Office guy driving our patrol truck, right?"

"The very same!" said Kibayashi happily with a tip of his head. "I was representing the Hunter Office then, but I'm here on city business now. Nice to meet you again!" He held out his hand. When Akira took it, Kibayashi gave an enthusiastic squeeze and jerked the boy's hand energetically up and down. "Now, I'd personally love to chat, but work comes first. I'm here to negotiate."

"With me?"

"Yup. Let's start by going over your situation. I'm guessing you've got a lot of questions, like why you're here and what happened to the relic thieves."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Akira said, nodding emphatically.

Kibayashi handed him several sheets of paper—a thorough report of the incident. "You'll find the details there. Listen while you look 'em over."

The official held up his own copy of the same document as he began to

explain Akira's situation. After capturing him and Nelia, the defense force had handed them over to the medical team at the underground district headquarters for first aid, then shipped them straight back to Kugamayama as material witnesses. Nelia's involvement in the theft had soon come to light—her accomplices had made a clean breast of their crimes. And she had been extremely cooperative as well, giving honest, precise answers to questions about the details of their planned heist, the number of her accomplices, the structure of their gang, how many relics they had cached and where, the location of their getaway vehicle, and more. She had even volunteered a wealth of useful information she hadn't been asked for—although not before requesting a reduced sentence in exchange, of course.

"Was she—Nelia, I think she said her name was—really that up-front about it?" Akira asked, somewhat curious about how the woman he'd so nearly fought to the death was taking her situation.

"Yeah, I hear she's been a model suspect," said Kibayashi. "I mean, sure, she did it for a reduced sentence, but she was so unbelievably cooperative that, after they were done questioning her, a different official asked her why she'd been so forthcoming."

"What'd she say?"

"That she 'doesn't dwell on the past,' apparently."

"I guess it takes all kinds," Akira said, with mingled annoyance and admiration. "She's tough—or at least, she doesn't let things get to her."

"She certainly made the investigators' jobs easier. That's why you got cleared of suspicion so quickly. Normally, they would've put you through the wringer. Of course, it could just be that whoever questioned Nelia was amazing at their job."

"Either way, I don't feel like thanking her—she came way too close to killing me." Akira fell silent for a moment. "So, what's gonna happen to her? I mean, you made it sound like she's getting off awfully lightly, so I guess she'll live, but they're not just gonna let her loose again, right?"

"Not a chance. She escaped execution, but she'll still get forced labor under the city's oversight."

To set Akira's mind at ease, Kibayashi gave a brief rundown of Nelia's sentence. She could look forward to exploring perilous ruins and exterminating monsters for bosses who considered her expendable. Even bodily autonomy would be stripped from her while she worked, with a body programmed to put municipal authority above its user's and a bomb implanted in her brain. Her punishment had an end date, at least on paper: she was to work until she'd fully repaid the damages she'd caused. But her debt was fixed at an astronomical sum—hardly surprising, since she'd made an enemy of the city—so she might as well have been serving a life sentence.

“Well, she might get released if she works hard enough,” the official concluded. “She'll probably die first, though.”

It took Akira a few moments to process all of this, and he found his only response to be a terse “Okay.” Although he felt less anxious about his failure to finish off Nelia, something didn't sit right with him. He wasn't quite happy with the thought of someone so capable being subjected to a life of penal servitude, deprived of control over her own body—even if she did deserve it.

“Something wrong?” Kibayashi asked, noticing Akira's conflicted expression.

“Nah,” Akira answered listlessly.

“Oh, I get you—you're annoyed you couldn't kill her yourself! Well, she's in the city's custody now, so don't even think about tracking her down to finish the job. Worst-case scenario, they'll saddle you with her remaining debt. If you want revenge, wait until she's done her time.”

“Don't worry. I wouldn't pick a fight with the city over something like that.”

“Glad to hear it! Some people would, you know? Not that I don't get where they're coming from.”

Kibayashi resumed his explanation. Most of the relic thieves had been rounded up without difficulty. The city had also seized their getaway truck and its precious cargo. A few thieves were still on the run, carrying a handful of relics with them, but the city was already aware of their activities—courtesy of tips from Nelia—and their capture was only a matter of time.

Kain's whereabouts, however, were a total enigma. Investigators had

followed up on all the personal information Nelia knew but only succeeded in proving that every detail of the man's identity had been falsified. An analysis of the powered armor he'd left at the scene of his crimes had yielded no helpful information either. The only thing they really knew about Kain was that Yajima, the thieves' ringleader, had brought him on board.

The investigation had more or less concluded while Akira was out cold. Once the officials had satisfied themselves that he had nothing to do with the thieves, they had removed him from their list of material witnesses and left him to the care of the hospital, where he had now awoken.

"That about wraps it up," Kibayashi said. "Any questions?"

Akira considered, and a thought struck him. "You went over that Kain guy's armor, right? Did it have a self-destruct system?"

"A self-destruct? Let me check." Kibayashi played his fingers over his data terminal, bringing up the relevant reports. "I don't see anything like that here. At least as far as the defense force techs could tell, there wasn't any on board."

Akira grimaced slightly, realizing Nelia's whole story about an impending explosion had been a pack of lies.

*She put one over on us,* Alpha said, looking a little rueful herself.

*Well, we won the fight, so who cares?* Akira's expression didn't match his words. Nelia had duped him, and he'd fallen for it. She'd simply been a step ahead, Akira thought, even as his lips bent in a frown—a change not lost on Kibayashi.

"Is that a problem?" the official asked.

"No, it's nothing," Akira said.

"Oh, yeah? By the way, what made you ask?"

"No real reason. The armor charged straight at me without even trying to dodge or defend itself, so I thought maybe it was gonna blow itself up."

"It was probably just a decoy to buy time. I mean, you couldn't exactly ignore that huge thing bearing down on you."

"Makes sense," Akira said casually. "Well, I don't think I really have any other

questions.”

Kibayashi decided that the first stage of their negotiation was over. In a more serious tone, he said, “In that case, let’s cut to the chase. Look at the last paper in that stack I gave you.”

Akira did so, and the color rapidly drained from his face. It was a bill addressed to him, and it bore an itemized list of the various treatments he had received since his hospitalization. It also charged him for the duration of his stay, which had lasted more than a week. And on top of that, he was required to pay a cancellation fee for the Yarata scorpion extermination—he had signed a seven-day contract, and he had spent four of those days unconscious. Compared to his medical bills, however, this penalty was a paltry sum.

The total came to sixty million aurum—more than enough to justify Akira’s ghastly pallor. He nearly fainted for a moment, but rallied. If he’d been in less than perfect condition, the shock would have been too much for him.

“That’s your debt,” Kibayashi said, chuckling at the boy’s reaction, which he’d anticipated. “You may not be happy with the amount, but I can tell you right now that grumbling about it will get you nowhere.”

The hospital was free to determine whether it could treat unconscious patients and how. This policy was intended to prevent urgent cases from dying simply because they were in no condition to consent, but it gave the provider a lot of leeway when it came to how much treatment was strictly necessary. In practice, casualties deemed able to pay were given effective-yet-costly procedures as a matter of course. Even so, Kibayashi stressed, Akira had an obligation to settle his bill. He had already received treatment, adequately performed and at a fair price.

“B-But there’s no way I can afford it!” Akira protested, shaking.



Kibayashi had foreseen this response too. With a reassuring grin, he said, “Don’t worry so much! The hospital wouldn’t have gone overboard like that if they didn’t know you had some way to pay for it. They’re not a charity, and even charities need money to run. They reckon you can afford all this—by taking it out of your paycheck, to be precise.”

“What paycheck?”

“The one I’m going to tell you about. I told you I came to negotiate, remember?” Kibayashi beamed. “The long and the short of it is, if you agree to our conditions, we’ll cover that bill, and you’ll get to walk out of here a hundred million aurum richer on top of that. Sounds like a good deal, right?”

Akira couldn’t believe his ears. First the official saddled him with sixty million in debts, then offered to cancel them and throw in an extra hundred million in pay. The boy sat blankly for a while, at a loss for words.

*Akira, it’s high time you came to your senses*, Alpha prodded him at last, and he snapped out of his daze with a start.

“Now that you’re back, mind if I get on with my explanation?” Kibayashi asked, grinning.

“S-Sure. What’re your conditions?”

“Simple: we want your combat record from this incident. And we want you to tell anyone who asks that you spent an uneventful day on guard duty in the tunnels until you got injured and sent here.”

Akira had performed so remarkably well while underground that some had suspected him of being a municipal agent. Kibayashi was asking him to give up all record of that achievement. The fact that he’d been hospitalized before he could serve out his contract would remain, but there was a world of difference between wounds suffered in a scorpion attack and those earned fighting off a gang of thieves. Losing that part of his record would have a serious impact on his reputation.

“Your work history in the Hunter Office registry will show the same thing. Some other hunter could potentially even get credited with the record you sold. If that happens, it would end up on their page.”

Information from the Office carried a lot of weight. A low-ranked hunter might claim exploits that would get laughed off as tall tales, but their claims would gain credence if they appeared on that hunter's personal Office page. Most hunters would have found the loss of those records difficult to accept.

"And this should go without saying, but you'll be required to keep this quiet—you can't go around blabbing that you really did all that stuff. Don't volunteer the information, and if someone asks about what happened to you on that job, either say you were guarding a checkpoint or tell them it's confidential and you can't answer."

With that explanation out of the way, Kibayashi waited for Akira to respond. He wouldn't have been surprised if the boy flew into a rage after what he'd said, so he watched carefully for signs of trouble. But Akira barely reacted to the offer. He waited a moment or two, expecting further explanation. Finally, he gave a puzzled look and asked, "Is that all?"

When Kibayashi heard that, he couldn't contain himself—he burst into a chuckle, which rose to a good-humored laugh. The official covered his mouth with his hand, trying to restrain his mirth before it got any louder. Akira, who didn't see what he'd said that was so funny, looked increasingly confused.

At last, Kibayashi got his laughter under control and exclaimed, "Yes! That's all! All you have to do is give up the credit for fighting off the three masterminds behind a relic heist—all on your own and despite two of them wearing powered armor!"

A hunter's rank summarized their skill, but combat records were also valuable indicators of one's prowess. A history of bagging powerful monsters or selling fortunes' worth of relics demonstrated abilities that couldn't be reduced to a number. Clients hiring for battles against fellow humans prized applicants with a relevant track record, since it demanded a different skill set than hunting monsters. They would leap to hire someone who had defeated combat cyborgs and powered armor. Records of such battles therefore became a feather in any hunter's cap—especially when the Hunter Office and Kugamayama City vouched for their accuracy. So, Akira was being asked to give up something more valuable than he realized. Yet even if he failed to appreciate its value, the dismissive way he treated it made Kibayashi's spirits soar.



“Glad to see you’re still crazy, reckless, and rash!” he said. “So, credit for a little dustup like that doesn’t matter to you? Most hunters would be *furious* if they had that taken from them!”

“I can’t see how it’s worth a hundred mil—or a hundred and sixty, I guess, once you factor in the bill,” Akira responded. “If this isn’t a scam, tell me why that price makes sense.” In contrast to the official, he sounded uncertain. More than ever, he suspected that something lay behind this deal. Realistically, he couldn’t refuse—doing so would leave him sixty million aurum in debt, and whatever pittance he earned for his work in the tunnels wouldn’t come close to covering that. He realized the reason he’d been given so many expensive treatments was to make this offer irresistible—not that there was anything he could do about it. So Akira didn’t expect Kibayashi to give him a straight answer.

But the official responded with a breezy “Sure. But that explanation falls under the confidentiality agreement, so I can’t tell you until we have a deal. Can I take it you’re on board?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Then sign here.” Kibayashi handed Akira some paperwork and a pen.

Akira took them and started to read the document but soon gave up—it was absolutely *covered* in fine print. Alpha examined it for him.

*It’s safe, she pronounced. No tricks. Roughly speaking, it’s a litany of clauses warning you not to tell anyone because the city might turn against you if you do.*

Reassured, Akira signed the document.

Kibayashi accepted it back with a glad smile. “Great! Now that’s settled, and my job’s done! Oh, wait a sec for that explanation—I’ve gotta report our agreement. They were hassling me for results.” He whipped out his terminal and sent a message. A short time later, another official entered, retrieved the papers Akira was holding and the contract he’d signed, slipped the documents into a briefcase, and left.

With his business taken care of, Kibayashi relaxed, stretched, and said, “That’ll do wonders for my reputation. If you want anything extra, just ask—I’ll put in a good word for you as my way of saying thanks for making this so quick. I’ve got

more pull than you'd think. Remember that motorbike I gave you as an advance? You need pretty serious authority to make calls like that."

"For now, just answer my question," said Akira.

"Whoops, almost forgot! A hundred and sixty million aurum's quite a sum, so I can't blame you for getting suspicious about what's behind it. Well, long story short, that payment includes hush money and publicity expenses."

The problem of the subterranean relic heist was settled for the moment, Kibayashi explained. Fortunately, the city could count its losses as slight. But the full scope of the incident encompassed a plethora of errors and negligence on the city's part. They hadn't been swift enough to collect the relics discovered in the tunnels. The thieves had remained hidden among the hunters for far too long. The municipal intelligence department had failed to detect the planned robbery in advance. For Kugamayama, the whole affair was a serious loss of face.

A cover-up was infeasible—multiple syndicate-affiliated hunters had died, and the city had dispatched troops. Yet they couldn't simply reveal these facts to the world. By sheer coincidence, a hunter working in the tunnels had met and killed one of the gang's ringleaders. Then that same hunter had fought the remaining two leaders aboveground, disabling one and scaring off the other. The city's contribution had been nothing to brag about—they'd merely cleaned up the mess. Unless something was done, the city's executives would have to make a public announcement to the effect of "We were incompetent, but through a series of lucky coincidences, things worked out."

Delivering news like that—to the numerous customers who paid exorbitant defense fees to live in Kugamayama; to the executives of other cities, with whom they exchanged periodic communications; and to their umbrella organization, the ELGC—could prove disastrous. So the city's leaders had scrambled to devise some way out of their predicament. And amid a flurry of investigations and adjustments, the people tasked with bringing the situation under control had learned that the masterminds behind the heist had mistaken Akira for a municipal agent. In their rush to lessen the blow to the city, they had latched onto that misconception. What if the hunter *hadn't* been just anybody and *hadn't* just happened to defeat the thieves? What if, having learned of the

robbery, the city had planted an undercover operative in the tunnels, and that operative had thwarted the gang? The debacle would actually *improve* the city's reputation.

Luckily, they'd determined, rewriting the record would be a simple task. All they had to do was strike a deal with Akira. The young hunter wasn't affiliated with any syndicate, and he had taken the job solo. If he gave his consent, the city could take care of the rest. So, to pave the way for their negotiations, they had given Akira costly medical treatment—which the hospital hadn't balked at because the city guaranteed payment. Thus, Akira had acquired nearly sixty million aurum in medical debt. With that debt as a stick and the promise of relief and wealth for a carrot, the officials had considered a wide range of factors and settled on what they considered a reasonable offer for the hunter's combat record: 160 million aurum. At that price, the deal had gone through without a fuss.

## Chapter 61: The Benefits of a Lucky Charm

When Akira sold his combat history and got a rundown of the whole business from Kibayashi, the official naturally hadn't let him in on everything going on behind the scenes—there were parts he couldn't even hint at to an outsider, and he dutifully avoided them. Even so, Akira managed to satisfy his curiosity. He didn't much care what secret moves the city had been making to resolve things. Sure, they'd bent the truth a bit, but that was no skin off his nose. To a boy who had spent most of his life in the slums, events that involved not only all of Kugamayama but other cities and even the ELGC might as well have happened in a different world. They barely registered for him.

"Well, that's pretty much the gist of it," Kibayashi concluded. "If you want more detail, I can put you in touch with the right people, but it won't be free. The city's internal info doesn't come cheap. So, what'll it be?"

"No thanks," said Akira. "I've heard enough."

"Okay. Any other questions or requests? Bring 'em all up now, because it'll be too late later. As soon as one of us leaves this room, time's up, so don't hold back."

"Easy for you to say, but I can't come up with anything on the spot."

"Well, you won't get many chances like this, so ask for *something*. Oh, but no extra pay—not even the city has unlimited funds. If you didn't like the price, you should've haggled before you signed. But I've taken a shine to you, so I'll play favorites and try to get you anything without a price tag."

"What about me do you like so much?" Akira asked, baffled by Kibayashi's evident favoritism.

The official burst into an exuberant explanation. "What about you?! Your way of life! You're crazy, reckless, and rash, taking life and death at breakneck speed! It's marvelous! Just what I like to see!"

Using his professional authority, Kibayashi could view more data about Akira

than even the young hunter himself could—and these private logs provided him with great entertainment. Akira had fought cannon insects armed only with an AAH, charged into a building full of Yarata scorpions without backup, killed over five hundred of the bugs in the underground tunnels, and single-handedly defeated three leaders of a relic heist. And to top it all off, those criminals had been combat cyborgs operating powered armor. When the defense force took him into custody, he'd had sixty million aurum worth of injuries. All this proved Akira wasn't merely capable. In fact, they revealed he wasn't all that strong—and kept barely avoiding near-certain death anyway. Akira's feats easily surpassed the high-risk, high-return jobs that had made Kibayashi himself infamous. Here was the true daredevil spirit the official had been looking for!

"I used my position to look over your work history," Kibayashi explained. "You've done things way beyond the level of any hunter at rank twenty—or thirty, for that matter. Of course, all those stunts left your body a wreck, but luckily you're all patched up now. I'm guessing you'll go right back to putting yourself through the wringer. Still, try to take care."

Akira pulled a face and asked, "Was I really *that* messed up?"

"Yup. That's why you ended up with a sixty-mil hospital bill. I told you they charged you fair prices, remember? You even got regenerative treatment, and that's usually reserved for people with limbs torn clean off. After all those procedures, you're as healthy as someone living in the central districts. But without them? Well, you wouldn't have dropped dead today or tomorrow, but I'd have given you maybe another year to live."

Akira was speechless. He'd never imagined his injuries were so severe.

Kibayashi savored the boy's reactions as he continued, "I bet you're feeling great right now. You can thank your treatment for that. You're from the slums, right? You probably got most of your meals from the ration centers."

"Y-Yeah."

"Those places'll feed you some dangerous shit if you're not lucky. Monster meat that hasn't been checked for safety, output from Old World fabricators the researchers are still studying to figure out why and how they work... You know the drill. Nothing so bad it'd kill you on the spot, of course, but some of it

can hurt you if you eat a lot of it for long enough.”

Akira frowned. While this was more or less common knowledge, having it spelled out for him wasn't pleasant.

Kibayashi didn't seem to care. “It even causes minor mutations sometimes. People blame those on nanomachines that current tech can't remove from monster meat or can't detect in the food those dodgy machines pump out. Ring any bells?”

Akira grimaced. The question did bring one case to mind: being an Old Domain User might qualify him as a kind of mutant. Something from the Old World, undetectable by modern science, might have altered him in some equally unfathomable way. If so, it had been one of the factors that enabled him to meet Alpha. Yet he couldn't celebrate it with his whole heart.

“The city really feeds us stuff like that?” he asked.

“You know what they say: there's no such thing as a free lunch,” Kibayashi answered. “The rations are your pay for participating in clinical trials, so thanks for your cooperation! You know, they actually put that in fine print on the distribution center signs and the ration wrappers. Of course, most people who can read the warnings don't need rations, and those in the know keep it to themselves, since they can't afford to risk kicking up a fuss and maybe losing their food supply.”

Akira recalled his meals there. The official was right—there had been something written on them, although Akira hadn't been able to read it at the time. He knew that he would have starved without the rations, but that didn't mean he felt happy about it.

“Some people distribute decent food out of the goodness of their hearts,” Kibayashi added. “But not many, and the movers and shakers of the slums always find out and take it for themselves. Still, that's what passes for law and order there, and it's not my place to argue with it.”

The city generally took a hands-off approach to the slums. As long as the slum-dwellers didn't negatively impact Kugamayama as a whole, they were more or less free to govern themselves and provide for their own safety as they saw fit. Although technically on the fringes of the lower district, the slums were

so near the wasteland that they were effectively considered part of it—hence the robbers who had attacked Akira in broad daylight.

Was it a completely lawless zone, then? Hardly. Might made right, and governing corporations were the mightiest things in the East. In the case of the slum Akira had called home, that meant Kugamayama City. Both it and the ELGC detested disorder. So if the slums ever became such a threat to public safety that their mere existence was judged harmful to the city, the powers that be would annihilate the district along with its residents. And so, the slums' numerous gangs did the bare minimum to regulate their turf, maintaining a fragile semblance of order.

"I don't know if your diet's to blame," Kibayashi continued, "but your residual nanomachine count was off the charts. I know overmedication's pretty much an occupational hazard for hunters, but you must really chug recovery capsules."

"Yeah," Akira admitted. "I'd die without 'em."

"I doubt you'll stop anytime soon, but you should at least go in once a month for an exam and get the residual nanomachines flushed. Most hunter meds are full of them: recovery capsules, speed and strength stims... You name it."

"Is leaving them in me that big a deal?"

"It depends on the dosage and type, and there are always exceptions, but buildup is usually a step short of contamination. Consider them hazardous."

Kibayashi gave Akira an overview of the dangers. In rare cases, nanomachines could be so compatible with their users' bodies that they latched on and retained their beneficial effects almost indefinitely—a state called "adaptation." When harmful effects persisted in the same way, that was "contamination." Residual nanomachines had ceased functioning but remained in the body anyway. Some considered the inert robots harmless, but that was a mistake—the buildup often impeded any new medicines the person took. Reduced effectiveness led to more and larger doses, which in turn deposited more residual nanomachines. In some cases, this vicious cycle continued until medicines had no effect at all. Residual nanomachines could also trigger reactions with other types, not meant to be taken together, and cause horrible side effects.

Since embarking on his career as a hunter, Akira had been gulping down recovery capsules in bulk with flagrant disregard for the recommended dosage. And unbeknownst to him, the cost of his overmedication had been accumulating inside him.

“Hunting is a business, and your body is your capital,” Kibayashi said gravely. He wanted Akira to entertain him for a long time to come, and so he advised him sincerely. “Some people put off maintaining it because they figure they can get by on willpower. But if you want to survive, take good care of your body. It’s just like weapon maintenance—get lazy, and your shots might fly off in wild directions or misfire. You end up having to gamble whether your gun’ll blow up in your face every time you pull the trigger. I wouldn’t enjoy hearing you died over crap like that, so be careful!”

“I understand,” Akira said. “Wait. My gun?” Then, it hit him—he was totally unarmed and wearing a hospital smock instead of his powered suit. He took another look around the room but saw no sign of his belongings. “Hey, do you know what happened to my gear?”

Kibayashi didn’t, but he called up another official via his terminal and asked around. What he learned was enough to ruin Akira’s mood.

“It’s gone?” the boy repeated dully.

“Yup,” Kibayashi confirmed. “And not just your gear—you’ve got no personal property to speak of. They didn’t retrieve everything from the scene when they took you into custody, and what they did bring back—like your suit—got disassembled as part of your background check. What’s left is in an evidence locker now. You could get it back, but that’d take at least a month with all the red tape. And given how banged up it’s supposed to be, there wouldn’t be much point—unless you want a souvenir.”

“Is my hunter ID in there?”

“No clue. It could be lying in the wasteland or it could be sitting in that locker. Either way, getting it reissued will be faster.”

“Okay. I’ve got my request: a new copy of my hunter ID, a data terminal I can use right away, and some decent hunter clothes. I’ll look like an escaped patient if I go outside dressed like this.”



“Sure thing. I’ll have them delivered to you here later. Anything else?”

*What do you think, Alpha?* Akira asked.

*Why not ask for gear?* Alpha suggested. *Guns, a new suit, that sort of thing? I’d kind of rather buy that stuff from Shizuka if I can.*

Alpha knew that Akira was just being superstitious. But shopping at Cartridge Freak meant something to him, so she wouldn’t quibble if she didn’t have to. He would be unarmed until they procured new weapons, but she judged her support could keep him safe on the way from the hospital to the store. Akira could no longer risk so much as setting foot outdoors if even that journey were too dangerous for him.

*In that case, ask him to recommend you a good rental property for a hunter,* she said. *It’s high time you stopped living out of hotels.*

Akira agreed. To Kibayashi, he said, “Find me a good rental property for a hunter. I know my rank’s not quite high enough to land a nice place, but get me somewhere I can live decently for cheap. Oh, and make sure I get my payment right away—I’m gonna spend it on new gear. That’s it for my requests.”

“You got it! And your payment’s already in your account. See for yourself once you get your new ID and terminal. As for that rental place, I’ll hook you up with a real estate agent under the city’s umbrella. I’ll send the details to your hunter code, so that’s another thing to check once your terminal gets here.” With that taken care of, Kibayashi asked one final time, “Anything else? If not, I’ll leave, and you won’t get any more extras once I’m out of the room. Are you *sure?*”

“Yeah.”

“All right, then. Take care and good hunting! Keep me entertained with more of those crazy stunts you pull!” Kibayashi departed with a breezy wave.

A few minutes later, Akira felt ravenous. He hadn’t eaten anything during his hospital stay. And while an IV drip had kept him supplied with nutrients, his stomach was empty. As soon as he realized that, it started growling. But he had no cash on hand. And even if he had, he couldn’t go anywhere until he’d received his new ID and the other items he’d requested.

*Damn it, he grumbled. I should've asked him for something to eat.*

*Now that you mention it, Alpha said, you haven't eaten in about a week. I wish you'd said something.*

*Did you forget too?*

*I don't need to eat, and I can't sense your hunger. So, since you didn't complain, I assumed it wasn't bothering you. Now you'll just have to put up with it and wait, although probably not for very long.*

*Oh, I should've asked him when my stuff would get here too! I guess this stuff always seems obvious in hindsight.*

*That's how it goes.*

So Akira waited, enduring his hunger. A city employee arrived with the things he'd requested about an hour later.



It was another typical day for Shizuka, minding her store and selling her stock of gear and ammo to any hunter who came looking for it. Yet she caught herself sighing more than usual, and she could guess why—Akira hadn't been by in a week. That in itself was hardly unprecedented, but since he'd gone off to exterminate scorpions, he'd been coming regularly just after opening time to resupply.

Her shop generally had pretty good business. Many of Shizuka's regulars stopped in to gear up on their way to the wasteland, and she thought she gave them the best service she could provide. Nevertheless, many hunters kitted out in her wares failed to return alive. Some were only passing acquaintances, people she'd come to recognize after numerous sales. Others she'd grown quite friendly with, listening to their concerns about equipment and recommending them weapons. A few had hit on her, and a handful had gone so far as proposing marriage. All sorts of hunters had set off in search of wealth and glory only to be swallowed by the wasteland, and Shizuka remembered them.

For the sake of her business—and her own mental health—she chose to ignore the lives lost. Her customers were always at risk, and she couldn't keep the lights on if she let each death get to her. She would grieve, for a time, but

rarely lost her self-possession. Some might have called her heartless, and she wouldn't argue—she could accept that label. So it wasn't often that she breathed so many sighs just because a familiar hunter hadn't shown his face in a while.

*I've gotten a little too attached to him,* she thought as she minded her store. *I wonder why?*

She could think of several reasons. Perhaps Akira's youth made her protective. Or she might be grateful, since he had saved her friends Elena and Sara. Seeing all his scars up close could have played a role. So could the hug she'd given the boy before he set off into the wastes wearing the gear she'd sold him. Yet none of those possibilities told the whole story. Shizuka's speculations yielded no answers. The more she thought, in fact, the more bewildered she became—until the cause of her worry himself appeared to put an end to it.

Akira slunk into the shop, looking vaguely sheepish.

"Come in, Akira. It's good to see you again," she greeted him. Her smile and tone were just as usual—or at least she meant them to be.

Akira, however, seemed slightly intimidated by her welcome. "Huh? Oh, er, hi," he said. "It's nice to see you too."

Although his awkwardness piqued her curiosity, she slipped into her usual sales routine. "Back for more ammo? Are you still working that same job? I have a decent stock of CWH proprietary cartridges I could sell you, but shouldn't your contract be over by now?"

"Oh, yes! That job's over."

"Okay, then. Would you like your usual assortment of standard and armor-piercing ammo?"

"Well, actually, about that..." Akira faltered in spite of himself. Then he met Shizuka's puzzled stare and looked away again before finally looking her in the eye once more, steeling himself, and saying, "I lost all my gear. Would you pick me out a new set?"

"All of it?" Shizuka echoed, nonplussed. "Could you be more specific?"

“All my rifles, my powered suit, my backpack and everything in it, the terminal I’d been using, the scanner I got from Elena... Everything I had. All I own right now are the clothes on my back, this stopgap terminal, and my hunter ID.”

Shizuka was stunned. She knew Akira had funneled most of his earnings into new equipment. If it was all gone, he might as well have announced that he was now destitute.

“Hold on,” she said. “What in the world happened?”

“It’s kind of, er, complicated,” Akira replied. “So, would you be willing to kit me out?”

“I don’t mind, but, um, would you tell me your budget?”

Shizuka felt bad for Akira’s loss, but that didn’t mean she would give him her merchandise gratis or even defer payment. She was in business and had her own bills to pay. As a shopkeeper and a merchant, there was a line she refused to cross. Nevertheless, she was determined to at least recommend him the best equipment his meager funds could buy—until he bowled her over when he answered:

“I’d like to keep it under eighty million aurum.”

For a moment, Shizuka said nothing. Then, “I’m sorry, could you please tell me your budget one more time? I want to be sure I heard you right.”

“Up to eighty million aurum.”

Akira wasn’t joking, and Shizuka hadn’t misunderstood or misheard him. He really had said “eighty million aurum.” When the reality of the figure sank in, she couldn’t help scowling. She stared hard at Akira, and although he winced slightly, Akira stared back at her. From his firm gaze, Shizuka intuited that at least he wasn’t offering to pay her in dirty money. But that would mean he’d legitimately earned a sum beyond the reach of any rookie hunter, and which even veterans would have found it hard to come up with on the spur of the moment. Shizuka couldn’t imagine what kind of risks he must have run to acquire so much.

“Akira, *what have you been up to?*” she demanded sternly. “I know I don’t have to tell you what a ridiculous amount of money that is. You can’t expect me

to believe you made that on your last job. Even if you'd slaughtered a *mountain* of Yarata scorpions, your client can't have given you much per kill if they were paying for your ammo. What kind of crazy stunt did you have to pull to net *eighty million aurum*?!"

Her harsh tone was an expression of her concern. Akira felt glad to know she cared, but he answered regretfully, "I'm sorry, there's a nondisclosure clause in my contract. I can't tell anyone, not even you—it would hurt my credibility. I trust you, of course, but it's all so confidential that even saying it's confidential is kind of toeing the line." This was the most he considered it safe to reveal, torn between his desires to be truthful with Shizuka and to honor his agreements.

*Akira was working for Kugamayama City, wasn't he?* Shizuka thought, eyeing the sheepish boy. *He probably did act like a daredevil again, but it wouldn't be right to force answers out of him if the city wants him to keep quiet.* Again, she inspected him. *He doesn't seem injured or worn-down. I'd honestly like to know more, but the long and the short of it must be that Akira pulled off whatever his job was and got paid a fortune for it. I can't bring myself to praise him for that because I'm worried it will go to his head and make him even more reckless, but perhaps I'm just being selfish.*

"I understand," she said hesitantly. "But tell me: Do you have any injuries? Any lingering symptoms?"

"Don't worry about that," Akira answered firmly. "I got good treatment, so I'm in even better shape than before, if anything."

That allayed Shizuka's fears for the time being. Akira must be in a complicated position, she thought. But he was still safe and sound, so providing good customer service was the best thing she could do for him.

"All right, then." She resumed her usual friendly smile and said, with a touch of mischief, "Do I have carte blanche to pick out your gear for you, as long as I stay within your budget? It's quite a sum, so I really will go wild with it. Don't say I didn't warn you!"

Akira grinned back. "Go right ahead. I'm sure you'll pick better stuff than I would, no matter how hard I thought about it. But I do have one request about

the powered suit: I want it to last me a few years, so pick one I can still use even if I grow a bit.”

“Sure thing. Well, it’s too late to back out now. Wait just a moment!” Shizuka vanished into her back room and returned with two rifles. “Here’s an AAH and an A2D assault rifle. In my opinion, they’re the best weapons for unaugmented users, so make do with them until your new suit comes in. I won’t go into detail about the AAH since we’ve been over that before, but would you like to hear about the A2D?”

“Yes, please,” he answered, as Shizuka had expected.

She cheerfully launched into a rundown of her merchandise. The A2D assault rifle was built to the same basic spec as the AAH but engineered for greater accuracy and firepower. Unlike the gun it was inspired by, its rugged construction allowed it to fire armor-piercing and overpressure ammunition without modifications. Its grenade launcher—another default feature—was also compatible with a wide variety of munitions. And it was built light enough for a flesh-and-blood human to carry without a powered suit, making it a popular upgrade from the AAH. It was also compatible with a selection of AAH custom parts, yet another factor that made it easy to use.

“These two are both stock,” Shizuka added. “Take some time to get a feel for using them without a suit. If you find the weight bothers you, hold off on adding any mods that will increase it. You’ll need weapons you can use when you’re not wearing your suit, even after your new one comes in. Otherwise, you’ll be in real trouble if your suit breaks down deep in some ruin.”

“Should I swap out the sights now?” Akira asked.

“Not if you plan to link them with a scanner like you did before. The stock sights will get the job done while you only have your naked eyes to use them with. I’ll pick out a new scanner and matching sights for you along with everything else—unless you’d rather choose one yourself?”

“No, please get me the whole setup.”

“Okay. I’ll be in touch as soon as I have a quote for you, so wait to hear from me. And allow two weeks or so for delivery.”

For two weeks, then, Akira would be going back to life without a powered suit.

*I shouldn't have to tell you this, but hunting is on hold until you get your new equipment,* Alpha said pointedly.

*I know, I know. You can't afford to take my bad luck too lightly, right? I don't wanna fight hordes of monsters, or guys in powered armor, with this gear either.*

Alpha naturally didn't want him to leave the relatively safe confines of Kugamayama before she could offer him her full support once more. And after the things he'd experienced—getting swarmed by monsters during a simple training exercise outside the city and dragged into a fight with heavily armed bandits when he'd been recruited for an unrelated job—Akira felt similarly inclined.

While at Cartridge Freak, Akira purchased everything he'd need for the immediate future: medicine, ammo, tools to service his new weapons, and a new backpack to cram it all into. It amounted to a considerable load when he strapped it on along with his new rifles. The dragging weight was a fresh reminder of how much he'd come to rely on the enhanced strength that his powered suit provided.

He then exchanged contact information with Shizuka on his new terminal and asked her to send a message to his hunter code if she still couldn't reach him.

Shizuka looked Akira up and down. Even with this stopgap gear, he was far better equipped than he'd been on his first visit to her store. Yet he seemed vulnerable to her eyes. The boy kept landing in more—and worse—trouble, and she had a feeling his current arsenal wouldn't be enough to handle whatever came his way next.

"Do you plan to fight like that for the time being?" she asked. If so, she would give him a stern talking-to.

Akira shook his head. "No, I think I'll take a break from hunting until I have my new gear. I'm not skilled enough to risk a trip to the wasteland when I'm not at my best."

“Good! It sounds like you’ve been through a lot, so treat yourself to a rest every now and then.” Shizuka smiled, relieved that Akira was playing it safe.

Akira bobbed his head respectfully and left. Watching him go, she recalled that Elena and Sara had been concerned for him as well. “He lost his scanner too, so I ought to ask their opinions on the best equipment for him,” she said to herself. “I’m sure they’ll find fault with something if I choose it all myself. And learning Akira’s alive ought to cheer them up.”

Shizuka pulled out her terminal and typed out a message inviting her friends to consult with her about Akira’s new kit.



After leaving Cartridge Freak, Akira decided to drop by Sheryl’s base. He’d been out of action for a while, and since he’d switched to a new terminal, Sheryl couldn’t contact him. He wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d assumed he’d died. So he reckoned he ought to put in an appearance before any awkward misunderstandings set in.

On his walk through the slums, he reflected on how extravagantly he’d just thrown his money around. *Seriously, though, sixty mil for a hospital stay and then another eighty for new gear? That’s most of my payment gone in no time flat. Since when am I such a big spender?* He chuckled at himself, knowing well that these sums would have floored him not too long ago.

Alpha laughed with him. *You should be happy you’re earning enough to foot those bills. Although, when you consider that you had to bet your life and everything you owned on long odds, and only barely won even with my help, it hardly seems like a big enough payout.*

*You think so? Well, maybe you’re right.*

*Regardless, this should leave you with a pretty solid set of gear. And after that treatment you had, we don’t have to worry about all the risks you’ve taken coming back to bite you anymore. So, as rough as it was, I’d say things worked out for the best.*

*I dunno. I can’t quite make up my mind about that.*

Akira had lost everything he’d owned in this fight—stuff he’d risked his life



for, and some of which he'd gotten attached to. Yes, he'd made a fortune, but he couldn't wholeheartedly rejoice—especially given the number of times he'd nearly died in the process.

Then he recalled the charm he'd bought from Shizuka. *That was supposed to be for Old World gamblers, wasn't it?* he mused to himself. In games of chance, higher stakes and lower odds generally translated to bigger payouts. And after a series of close calls, Akira had won big. *What if that charm helped me pull this off? And what if part of its effect was giving me more chances for bigger gambles?*

Even the most unforgiving of high-risk, high-return wagers could be a stroke of good fortune for the destitute and those who sought success beyond their means. Most in their position fell by the wayside and expired without ever getting such a chance. Akira understood that, but he wasn't happy about it.

*Most of the time, even risking my life only pays pocket change,* he reflected. *So in a way, the charm did bring me good luck. But still...*

At that point, Akira decided to stop worrying. It was bad for his mental health. Besides, he told himself, he'd lost the charm, so there was no sense dwelling on it now.

Alpha watched him with curiosity. *What are you thinking about, Akira?*

*Oh, nothing,* he said. *Just about that lucky charm I bought from Shizuka a while back.*

Without meaning to, Akira sent a jumble of information along with his telepathic reply: the charm; his speculation that it had gotten him into that series of desperate battles; his wish to avoid more of them, even if they did pay well—and the fact that Alpha had recommended that particular charm to him. Alpha received it all loud and clear.

*Don't blame me!* she said, ostentatiously looking away from him.

*I know. It's not your fault.*

Akira chuckled. It wasn't every day he got to see Alpha sulk.

## Chapter 62: Sheryl's Panic

Sheryl was in her room at her headquarters, taking care of business. As the boss of her gang, she had a lot on her plate: assigning personnel to assist Katsuragi, managing income from their sandwich sales, and planning future ventures—to name just a few. She worked zealously, though with a scowl on her face, as if trying to take her mind off something.

Not that there was anything new about that. Sheryl had been in this foul mood for days now, and everyone in her gang knew why: Akira hadn't visited their base lately. Her infatuation with the young hunter was common knowledge among her subordinates. And until recently, he had been by frequently to pick up and drop off his motorcycle. But then he'd started renting cars and taking buses to Kuzusuhara, leaving him with far fewer reasons to visit. So far as the children knew, this was the reason for his absence—and for their leader's displeasure.

She, however, took a far grimmer view.

Sheryl had forced herself to act like she was merely irritated. But Akira was their lifeline. And while her performance had fooled her gang, she couldn't deceive herself much longer.

She was alone in her room—no underlings to impress—yet she continued feigning a scowl for her own benefit. Akira might be dead. She couldn't prove otherwise, and the thought had become an inexhaustible spring of panic, unease, and fear—feelings she struggled desperately to hide under the pretense that she just missed seeing him.

She'd tried to reach Akira using the terminal he'd given her, but none of her calls had gone through. Nervous, she'd risked his anger by going to his hotel, but he wasn't there. Nor had he checked out. He'd been gone so long the hotel had thrown out his things—a common occurrence when a hunter died.

Once, Akira had told Sheryl to assume he was dead if she couldn't reach him for a long time. Now a whole week had passed since she'd lost contact. That

seemed long enough to the panicked, uneasy, and frightened girl. She was deeply, powerfully dependent on Akira, able to display her full talent for leadership only because she had him to lean on. She doubted she could sustain herself without him. With a shudder, the core of her spirit began to crack. Once it snapped, she would break down sobbing. Knowing this only fed her desperation.

The cold, rational part of Sheryl's mind calculated how much longer she could endure: a few weeks at best—more likely a few days or even hours. A voice in her head counted down the time, wearing away at her spirit. So she shut herself up in her room and threw herself into her work, doing everything in her power to avoid facing reality. She no longer had the strength to look at her situation head-on.

In the midst of this, Erio burst into her room without knocking. To mask her inner turmoil, she rounded on him more harshly than his infraction merited. "Erio, I *know* I've told you to knock before entering!"

"S-Sorry," Erio said, clearly intimidated. "I'll be more careful."

"Now, what do you want?"

"Akira's here. Should I bring him up to you?"

And just like that, Sheryl's menacing aura vanished.



Akira sat down on Sheryl's sofa, looking not quite at home. She had her arms around him again, and while that wasn't really a surprise, her embrace was much stronger than he'd anticipated. She straddled his lap with her arms around his neck, pressing against him with a look of bliss. He remembered the death grip she'd once held him in at his hotel and conceded to letting her have her way for the time being.

A little while later, when Sheryl was more or less satiated, she moved her hands to his shoulders and leaned back slightly, beaming at him face-to-face. "It's so good to see you again! I realize you're busy, but I'd really, *really* appreciate it if you could visit more often! Oh, I tried calling you, but I couldn't get through! Were you tied up? Would you mind telling me what happened?"

“Sure,” said Akira. “I almost died.”

“I’ve heard that one before. It’s not funny.” For once, Sheryl frowned at Akira. To her ears, his casual words were only a poor attempt at humor. But from her perspective, his survival was no laughing matter. Looking earnest and sorrowful, she pleaded, “Please don’t say things like that, even as a joke!”

Sheryl was only half-sincere. She modulated her gaze, voice, and expression, using techniques she honed daily to convey her intended impression. Even so, her request came from the heart. Her art was so convincing because it was only an embellishment, meant to communicate her authentic feelings. If she’d tried this on one of the kids in her gang, her beauty would have enhanced the effect, leaving them feeling guilty for upsetting her with a silly joke and thrilled that she felt such concern for them.

But Akira was unfazed. “I’m not pulling your leg. I really was at death’s door.”

For a moment, Sheryl froze. Then she saw that Akira was serious and began to panic. “A-Are you all right?!”

“I’m fine. I wouldn’t have let you hug me if my wounds still ached,” he said, pulling back a little. Her unvarnished, frantic concern seemed excessive to him.

Once she realized that he really was safe, Sheryl let out a sigh of relief and embraced him tightly again, murmuring, “Please don’t scare me like that.”

“Easier said than done. Hunting’s a dangerous job, and these things happen.”

“I...I know that,” Sheryl said, a little sulkily. “But we’re a couple, so I wish you’d at least hug me back and say something reassuring.”

“Come again?” Akira looked nonplussed.

“I mean, that’s what we want people to think, to explain why you’re helping my gang,” she added, slightly depressed at his denseness.

“Oh, right. That makes sense.”

Mentally, Sheryl heaved a sigh. Then she rested her chin on his shoulder, holding him so that he couldn’t see her face. His denial that they were lovers hit harder than she’d expected, and she wasn’t confident she could keep smiling. She’d entertained a faint hope that their relationship would gradually develop

into intimacy, and she regretted that it hadn't. And she couldn't help wallowing in fruitless speculation about *why* it hadn't.

Akira was so unresponsive to her embraces that, at one time, she'd even doubted her own appearance. Perhaps her looks were only good by slum standards and nothing special in the grand scheme of things. Katsuragi's remarks that Akira must have high standards and that he knew gorgeous women hunters had magnified those fears. But now, after her experience serving customers out of the sandwich truck, she believed she needn't have worried. *Some* hunters, at least, considered her attractive.

She wished Akira would try something when she hugged him like this—she was more than willing. Yet he never did. She wondered almost obsessively what she was doing wrong.

Akira, for his part, found Sheryl's behavior perplexing, and his cynical mind naturally drew its own cynical conclusions. He assumed she showed an interest in him so as to protect and expand her gang. Knowing how brutal slum life was, he could empathize with her desperation. She needed a powerful hunter's patronage to keep the position he'd forced her to take. In that light, her frantic efforts to maintain a relationship with him seemed natural enough.

So, once her gang was strong enough to get by without his help, she would just as naturally push him away.

"I promised I'd help you, so as long as I'm alive, I won't hang you out to dry," he said. "But I hunt for a living, so I might not have much say in when I end up dead. If you ask me, you oughta work on beefing up your gang so that you can get by when I'm gone." Based on Akira's understanding of Sheryl's motives, this was the best advice he could give.

She pulled away from him slightly, looked him in the eye. There was a hint of grief in her expression as she said, "I plan to build up my gang. I know how much I depend on your help. But please, don't talk about your death."

"Umm, okay."

Akira was vaguely aware that he'd said the wrong thing, but he didn't understand how or why he'd messed up, much less how he should have responded. So he said nothing more.

Sheryl fell silent too, her arms once more around him. Once, she had cried to Akira for help, and he had answered. Once, she had sought someone to cling to, and he had offered himself. Once, harsh reality had shattered her heart, and she'd pieced it back together with the salvation and relief and dependency he'd given her. Ever since then, she'd found a new motivation. On the surface, she seemed to do the same old things, but now she built up her gang so that she could give Akira the benefits of a full-blown syndicate.

At the same time, she was already offering him her body, although he consistently rejected it. Sheryl knew she qualified as attractive. By slum standards, she was well-developed (well, all except one part of her), and her clothes were neat and clean. Taken as a whole, she was far prettier than the average lower-district girl. The comparative luxury she had enjoyed under Syberg's protection had mostly preserved her natural beauty from the wear and tear of life in the slums. Yet when she'd told Akira he could use her as he pleased, he had turned her down, saying that she wouldn't make a worthwhile ally—or even decoy—when monsters attacked. So she couldn't use her body to bind him to her, or to repay her accumulated debts to him.

And Sheryl didn't understand *why* Akira helped her. That he was motivated by a groundless superstition—that he could improve his poor luck through doing good-ish deeds—never even occurred to her. His continued aid seemed merely the result of whim and habit. So she believed that unless she expanded her gang and repaid him—that is, made him glad he'd helped her out—he would eventually forsake her without a second thought.

In reality, neither was as eager to sever ties as the other believed. Yet their misunderstanding, their mutual expectation of abandonment, fueled Sheryl's attachment to Akira.

To fill the awkward silence that followed their last exchange, she repeated, "So, umm, I tried to call you, but I couldn't get through."

"Oh, yeah. My old terminal got broken," Akira said. "I only stopped by today to give you my new contact info."

He slid Sheryl off him and fished out his terminal. She fetched hers from the desk she'd left it on, and they exchanged contact information. Then Sheryl

moved to straddle Akira's legs and sit facing him again.

"Hang on," he said. "You *still* wanna hug me?"

"Yes," she replied. "We took care of what you came for, so why not?"

"Haven't you had enough? You already let go once."

"No. Hearing about your close call scared me half to death, and I won't let go until I recover from the shock. I was already mentally exhausted from running the gang, so this calls for longer hugs than usual." Sheryl hoped that being true to her desires would help her return to normal.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" Akira demanded, a little rattled by her insistence.

"I'm tackling my top priority as we speak. By hugging you, I'm curing my fatigue and showing the rest of the gang how close we are at the same time. This is vital if I want to stay in charge and on good terms with the other slum syndicates."

"Seems kinda pointless, since nobody's watching us."

"Shall I call someone?"

"No, thanks!"

Akira could understand the significance of the gesture, but he wasn't so used to Sheryl's hugs that he felt comfortable flaunting them. Shutting himself up alone with her and letting others infer the rest was as far as he would go.

Then Erio entered, remembering to knock this time.

Sheryl gave him a chilly look. "Erio, I know I told you to knock, but I meant that you should *wait for permission to enter*."

"S-Sorry," Erio said, once again flustered, although for a different reason this time.

"Now, what do you want?" Sheryl's glare left no doubt that it had better be something important, and her underling flinched.

"Katsuragi is here, and he says he's got business with you. I showed him into the reception room." Hesitantly, he added, "Should I tell him now's a bad

time?”

Katsuragi didn't take precedence over Akira, but he was still important. The gang owed most of its income to his connections, so she couldn't afford to give offense. “Say I'll be right with him,” she said.

Erio hurried out of the room, leaving Akira vaguely relieved—and Sheryl vaguely annoyed.



Katsuragi sat on a couch in the base's reception room. A table stood before him, and Sheryl and Akira sat facing him across it. Erio and Aricia stood behind them. These two had become more or less Sheryl's lieutenants, helping to keep the other kids in line, and she'd taken to bringing them to meetings with important outsiders like Shijima and Katsuragi. Eventually, she planned to have them mediate internal and external disputes on her behalf—but for now, standing behind their leader was the most they could manage.

“I wish you would have let me know you were coming, Mr. Katsuragi,” Sheryl said, opening things with a tranquil smile. “I could have spared you a wait, and I may not always be at home. Oh, if you did inform one of my subordinates, and the message miscarried, I apologize.”

“No, I just dropped in because I was in the neighborhood,” the merchant responded. “Sorry to inconvenience you.”

“Please, don't be. Now, what brings you here?”

Katsuragi darted a glance at Akira. “Like I said, I was just in the neighborhood. Anyway, since Akira's here, I'll just have a word with him before I head home.”

“I see.”

Katsuragi had been slipping Sheryl's underlings some spending money in exchange for information on how often Akira visited her base. When they reported the hunter hadn't been by in a while, he'd come to see for himself. If Sheryl had lost her connection to Akira, he planned to end their business relationship and recoup his investment. He hadn't announced his visit because surprising her would make it easier to extract the information he wanted. He thought Sheryl had grown too shrewd for comfort recently, and giving her



advance notice would only allow her time to take precautions.

His intentions weren't lost on Sheryl, but she opted not to press him. She found it more convenient to let him imagine he'd wasted a trip trying to verify baseless suspicions.

"So, Akira, what happened to your relic-hunting work?" Katsuragi asked. "Do you know when you'll have something to sell me? Or are you still working on the temporary base?"

"I finished that job, and I don't plan to take it again," Akira replied.

"That's music to my ears."

"That said, I'm taking a break from hunting until my new gear comes in, and that'll take about two weeks. So wait a little longer for those relics."

"New gear?" Katsuragi glowered. "Come on, if you're in the market for upgrades, you should have come to me! You know what business I'm in."

"I already have another store I go to for that. Sorry."

Katsuragi's scowl deepened. His bad mood was partly an act, but he didn't enjoy hearing that a customer he'd hoped to win over by working with Sheryl was kitting himself out elsewhere. Unwilling to let his investment in the girl go to waste, he adopted a harsher tone laden with implications. "Listen, Akira. We went to hell and back together in that fight, but I still have my limits. You don't sell me relics, and you don't buy from my shop. If that's your attitude, I'll have to reconsider our arrangement."

Akira reflected that the merchant had a point. He remained unwilling to buy his gear from anyone but Shizuka, but he had to buy *something*—or at least consider it—if he wanted Katsuragi to calm down. So, what could he buy?

"All right, then, sell me recovery capsules," he ventured.

"A piddling purchase like that every now and then won't cut it," Katsuragi retorted, making it clear that he wouldn't be placated by such a paltry offer.

But Akira put a swift end to his aggrieved posturing. "I'll pay ten million aurum."

"Come again?" Katsuragi blurted out, unable to hide his astonishment at the

sum on offer.

“I’m not looking for cheap pills that might not even work for all I can tell,” Akira continued earnestly. “I want high-end medicine—on par with Old World tech—that can fix broken bones on the fly. You stocked up on the Front Line, right? Were there any meds in that shipment?”

“What about payment?” Katsuragi asked, now wearing his business face.

“I’ll pay right now if you’ll take my hunter ID. And the goods?”

“I have meds that go for two million a package. They’re in stock, so there’s no shipping time; I’ll just run and grab them from my shop.”

“Gimme five packs.”

Akira held out his ID. Katsuragi took it and waved it over his compatible terminal, completing the payment. Until it went through, the merchant doubted whether Akira really had ten million to offer. But a smile creased his face when he saw the transaction finish processing without issue.

*So, he’s willing to put down ten mil on recovery capsules without a second thought, the merchant mused. Even if he only did it to show off for Sheryl, he must be raking it in. My investment paid off. Keep it up, now!*

Katsuragi returned Akira’s ID and stood up. “Okay, give me a sec to get the goods. I assume you’ll still be here?”

“Yeah.”

Before he left the room, Katsuragi looked back at Akira and added, “You paid up without a fuss. What’ll you do if I take your money and run or bring you crummy meds?”

“If you run, I’ll hunt you down and kill you,” Akira answered honestly and easily. “If you bring me junk, I’ll have to reconsider our arrangement.”

“I see. Sounds like we’ll continue to get along just fine.” Katsuragi flashed a satisfied grin and left the room.

Erio and Aricia had watched the ten-million-aurum deal play out in slack-jawed amazement. They were used to earning a mere pittance for a full day’s work. Once Katsuragi took his broker’s fee and the gang received its cut, they

had less than a thousand aurum left for themselves. Seeing Akira and Katsuragi so casually exchange a sum orders of magnitude greater than any they could ever hope to earn left them feeling conflicted. The children knew that Akira came from the slums—no different from them in his age or circumstances. Yet here he was, light years beyond them. The sight didn't give them any hope that, with luck, they could follow in Akira's footsteps—it made them wonder how they had ended up as miserable as they had, despite starting in more or less the same place.

Sheryl feigned composure, but beneath the surface, she was panicking—Akira was earning even more than she'd imagined. Any hunter who could casually pay ten million aurum was clearly a cut above the average. And her gang was using such an elite hunter without providing anything meaningful in return. She believed that Akira would cut them loose one day, unless they made helping them worth his while. And the greater his skills as a hunter, the more compensation they would need to provide. What was a fitting payment for a hunter who made at least ten million aurum? It boggled Sheryl's mind.

Katsuragi returned with the goods in short order.

"Thanks for waiting," he said. "Here's your medicine, at two mil a pack."

The packages he placed on the table were all small enough to hold comfortably in one hand. They didn't look like they'd hold many capsules each, but Akira reckoned they were potent enough to make up for that. He examined the packages with interest. Then he counted them, frowned, and said, "I paid for *five* packs."

Only four packages lay on the table—one short of his order.

"It turned out I only had four in stock. So..." Katsuragi plopped three packages of a different medicine onto the table. "To make up for it, how about three packs of meds that go for a million aurum apiece? That's an eleven-million-aurum value for just ten mil. What do you say?"

Akira considered. "Well, all right. I'll take it."

"My apologies."

Akira didn't see a problem with getting more capsules than he'd paid for. And

Katsuragi could afford to throw in a freebie, since he'd still turned a bigger profit than he would have selling only four packages of the more expensive medicine. More importantly, though, he was anxious to erase his failure to fill the hunter's order after accepting payment. As far as the merchant was concerned, that blemish demanded more than a simple refund.

But with his worries assuaged, he was all business once more. "If you plan to buy more medicine in that price range, I'd be happy to stock up on it. How's that sound?"

"If you have more next time I can afford it, I'll probably buy from you. And if you're out of stock then, I guess I'll look elsewhere. I'm still a hunter, so I can't predict when or if I'll have that kind of money. Figure out what to stock yourself—that's what you're good at, right?"

"Fair enough. I'll keep my hopes up, so give me a call when you're in funds." Katsuragi gave his customer-service smile, although mentally, he clicked his tongue. Akira had slipped out of the reservation a verbal agreement to purchase would have implied. But the merchant let it drop and changed the subject. "Oh, I almost forgot. You're going back to the ruins once you start hunting again, right? Apart from relics, I'm also in the market for locations or internal maps of any ruins that aren't common knowledge. If you don't already have an info broker you work with, bring that sort of thing my way."

Akira started slightly—he knew something that fit the bill perfectly.

Katsuragi took that as a sign of interest and continued, "I can even act as a middleman if you want to sell to other hunters. I'll take my cut as a broker's fee for handling price negotiations and all the other nitty-gritty, but I bet you'll have an easier time earning some extra cash that way."

"When it comes to maps of ruins, is my scanner data good enough?" Akira asked. "What about formatting and stuff?"

"I've got contacts who are in the business of breaking down that kind of data, so it should be fine unless the format is really out there. This way, you won't have to go home empty-handed if you don't find anything worthwhile on a hunt. Even if the ruin itself is well known, more detailed data will at least net you some pocket money."

“Got it. I’ll give that a try if I feel like it. Still, you sure get up to a lot.”

“Building up a governing corporation will take more than just money—although I’ll need plenty of that. I’m always accepting loans too, you know?”

“Sorry, I don’t have that kind of money.”

“I figured.”

Katsuragi exchanged contact info with Akira’s new terminal, then left.

Akira set about stuffing his purchases into his backpack, but he paused when he picked up the last package of million-aurum capsules. After a moment of deliberation, he handed the medicine to Sheryl and said, “Here. Use ’em however you want.”

“Th-Thank you very much.” Sheryl smiled, although it cost her an effort. The resulting expression was on the stiff side, and anyone who knew her well would have recognized it as forced. At the very least, it wasn’t the way she normally smiled at Akira.

He picked up on her ambivalence and realized he’d made another mistake. But once again, he couldn’t figure out what he’d done wrong.

*Alpha, did I screw up again?* he asked. *I figured Sheryl could use that freebie in case she gets hurt, or someone in her gang does.*

*I don’t see anything wrong with that either. Let me think,* Alpha replied. *Oh, isn’t Sheryl supposed to be your girlfriend or your mistress or something along those lines, as far as the rest of the world is concerned?*

*Yeah, I guess?*

*Then maybe she thinks medicine isn’t romantic enough for a gift to your lover. And if something you got half off shows half the love and gratitude, you could argue something you got for free is free of both. But I could be overthinking it.*

*Do I really have to give it that much thought? What a pain! Then again, I definitely wouldn’t have given it to her if it hadn’t been free.*

*If you needed something to show off as proof of someone’s affection, a pack of pricey medicine might not impress others the way a ring or a necklace would.*

*Oh, that makes sense. Well, I said I'd help her out, so I guess I'll give her some kind of jewelry later.*

Akira and Alpha weren't quite on the mark. Looking at the package of medicine in her hands, Sheryl reflected that this was yet another debt she couldn't repay. Properly rewarding Akira had just gotten even more difficult. She could lift the package easily in one hand, yet it felt terribly heavy—like it could crush her under its weight.

Once again, Sheryl was in a panic.

## Chapter 63: Outsourcing Altruism

For a short while, Sheryl remained frozen, still clutching the million-aurum medicine Akira had given her. As soon as she recovered, she shooed her subordinates out of the room. To all appearances, she simply told Erio and Aricia they were free to return to their duties, but the menacing aura she projected as good as said, “Get out and stay out,” so they scrambled for the door.

Sheryl had already left her seat. Now she came and stood in front of Akira. He expected another hug, but she sat in the chair opposite him, looking grave, and asked, “Is there anything you’d like me to do for you?”

“That’s sudden,” he said.

“You’re always helping me, and now you’ve given me this wonderful gift, so I wonder if there’s any way I can repay you. It can be something from me personally or from my gang as a whole.” Despite her words, Sheryl gave no impression that she was pleased with the costly gift. Instead, she exuded a sort of desperation.

Her attitude baffled Akira. He still tried to come up with a request, but none occurred to him. So he said, “Nothing right now. I’ll let you know if I think of something.”

That answer would normally have made Sheryl back down, but not this time. “Are you *certain*?” she persisted, practically pleading and looking more serious than ever. “You can ask for *anything*. It doesn’t matter if it’s simple or nearly impossible. So please, just say whatever comes to mind.”

Part of her had felt that there would be plenty of time to reward Akira for supporting her gang after it grew larger and more powerful—that delivering significant benefits after a bit of a wait would make a bigger impression. That carefree optimism was no more. He would abandon her unless she did something, anything, to repay him immediately. But what? She didn’t know, and so panic spurred her on.

Her joy at reuniting with Akira had driven it from her mind, but Sheryl had planned to give him her earnings from the sandwich business later. But the total fell short of two million aurum—the amount Akira had given her between his settlement with Shijima and his gift of medicine. Even in simple monetary terms, she couldn't fully repay him, let alone reward him. And that was reckoning without her immaterial debts. Besides, Akira had given her the medicine so casually that the million aurum it cost must have meant nothing to him. The pocket change she could offer would only strike him as a desperate play for time. So, having mentally backed herself into a corner, she'd resorted to pleading directly for a suggestion.

Sheryl was so frantic not to lose Akira that she would have done anything he asked, no matter how difficult. She was prepared to strip naked, grovel on the floor, and lick his feet if necessary. Yet he asked for nothing—and thereby drove her to new heights of desperation.

Akira felt somewhat overwhelmed, but he did his best to think of something to ask for. He realized she would never back down until he did, although he doubted just any request would satisfy her. So Sheryl's intensity stirred the wrong response in him, making him hesitate to ask for a simple favor like, say, a shoulder massage. Then, after racking his brain for a little while, he had an inspiration.

"All right," he said tentatively. "In that case, give the slum kids something decent to eat, and teach 'em to read and write too."

Sheryl was taken aback. She'd been ready to do anything, but she hadn't expected this. She couldn't begin to guess how Akira would benefit. After a brief silence, she asked, puzzled, "Are you sure that's all?"

"It seems like a tall order to *me*," Akira said, looking a little surprised himself, "but if you think you can pull it off that easily, I'd appreciate it. You can decide how much ground you wanna cover and how nice you wanna make it, but try to keep things reasonable."

Earnestly, Sheryl responded, "All right. I'll do the best I can!"

"Oh, and don't tell anyone you're doing it on my say-so. If anyone asks for a reason, just brush 'em off with excuses."



"I understand. I won't tell a soul!" Sheryl nodded firmly. She didn't know why Akira had made such a request—he hardly struck her as the philanthropic type, and keeping his name out of this charity rendered it useless for self-promotion. What he expected to get out of this remained a mystery to her. But as far as Sheryl was concerned, that hardly mattered. The important point was that Akira considered it a serious challenge, meaning that she would be amply rewarding him for his protection if she pulled it off. So Sheryl resolved to grant Akira's request at any cost.

But Alpha felt a hint of alarm.



*Tell me, Akira, why was that your request?* Alpha asked curiously, her casual tone giving no sign of her feelings. She was always watching Akira, trying to grasp what made him tick, and she had learned to more or less predict his actions. But the favor he'd just asked for didn't accord with what she thought she knew of him. To improve her understanding, she needed to discover what had motivated his decision.

*Oh, just an idea I had,* Akira replied carelessly. *I hope it'll do something to boost my luck.*

*How so?*

*How should I put it? Umm, feeding and teaching slum kids is a good deed, right?*

*Well, I suppose most people would think so.*

*I figured that if I asked Sheryl to do that for me, it'd count as me indirectly doing good deeds, which might make me a little luckier.*

Essentially, Akira was trying to outsource altruism. If inciting evil was evil, he thought, then inciting good must likewise be good. So, by asking Sheryl to help others, he hoped to alleviate his own misfortunes. It was a truly self-serving plan, with a purely superstitious end in view.

*And why did you ask her not to mention your name?* Alpha pressed.

*Because I figured I'd get mixed up in trouble down the road if she did,* said

Akira. Once again, his request had been for his own benefit. Stories often glorified those who helped others for no reward and left without giving their names, but Akira was enough of a cynic to wonder if such mysterious saviors just wanted to avoid crowds beating down their doors for more free heroics. He planned to let Sheryl deal with any trouble her generosity stirred up while he reaped the benefits (if there were any). He'd told her he considered the project difficult for much the same reason.

*I see. Now I understand your plan, although I have my doubts about its efficacy,* Alpha remarked, relieved to learn he hadn't undergone a sudden change of heart. She didn't want a budding saint on her hands—a selfish streak made his actions easier for her to control.

*I don't expect much. It was just an idea, and I won't lose anything if it doesn't pan out.*

*True. Well, I won't mind even if you do suddenly discover your heroic side, as long as you don't get yourself killed saving someone. You're all I've got, and I'd hate to lose you for such a silly reason.* There was something pointed about Alpha's smile.

*I wouldn't do anything like that! You know I'm heartless enough to abandon an innocent hostage, remember?* Akira flashed a wry smirk of his own, which he was careful to hide from Sheryl. He knew he could be callous. After all, he hadn't dropped his weapon to save Reina in the tunnels.

*Oh, of course. Silly me.* Alpha seemed to agree. But she also remembered other incidents. Once, in Sheryl's base, Akira had unflinchingly gunned down a man who'd threatened Shizuka. And during the massive monster attack on the city, he had turned down the emergency job at first, but then rushed to take it—alone—when he'd learned Elena and Sara were joining in the defense. Would he have abandoned Shizuka, Elena, or Sara in a hostage situation? Alpha wasn't so sure.

And then there was Sheryl. Akira had given her medicine worth one million aurum, even if he had gotten it for free. Alpha couldn't decide whether he was merely following her own advice to help the girl, or whether there was more to it. She had made that suggestion hoping that Sheryl would uncover new facets

of Akira's character for her to study. Yet she was beginning to worry, ever so slightly, that she had made a mistake.



After leaving Sheryl's reception room, Akira found himself back in her private quarters, tight in another embrace. He'd planned to leave now that his business was done, but she had swept him away before he got the chance.

Now that she had a way to repay Akira for the time being, her natural intelligence was in full force once more. She had been quick to notice the twinge of guilt Akira felt for saddling her with such a challenging task, and a request to discuss the matter, delivered with a self-assured smile, had been all she needed to get him back in her room.

They were discussing plans—and occasionally making idle chitchat—when there came another knock at the door. This time, it wasn't opened without permission.

"It's not locked," Sheryl said.

Aricia took that as her cue to enter. Seeing Akira, she worried that she might be intruding, but she still opted to make her report. "Do you want to use the bath, Sheryl? It's your usual time, but I'll let someone else use it if you're not interested."

Sheryl's base had baths, and her whole gang took advantage of the facilities in turn, but the baths weren't nearly numerous or large enough to accommodate all of the children. So, except while they were being cleaned or refilled, the baths were always occupied. And recently, as the gang's ranks swelled, it had become difficult for everyone to get a turn daily, even when they bathed in groups.

Nevertheless, Sheryl reserved one hour every day for a leisurely, private soak—one of the privileges of leadership. She had her underlings clean and refill the tub for her, so her bathwater was always clean and fresh. By the slum children's standards, this was the height of luxury. She at least kept her bathing to a regular time, since kicking her subordinates out of a large bathroom and forcing them to clean it on a whim would sow more resentment than she cared for. As a leader, Sheryl would be as heavy-handed as necessary to preserve and expand

her gang, but her position wasn't secure enough to take the same liberties in personal matters.

Now the tub had been cleaned and filled. If Sheryl wouldn't use it, Aricia would take a dip with Erio, then open it up to the others.

"Is it already that late?" Sheryl asked, surprised. She had lost track of time while clinging to Akira. "All right. Wait a second, I'll be right there." She pulled away from Akira and started getting ready for her soak.

"A bath, huh?" Akira murmured, watching her. "I should head home and take one too."

He picked up his backpack and was about to leave when Alpha asked, *Where are you going?*

*To my regular hotel, Akira said. Where else?*

*The nights you paid for ran out while you were in the hospital. You'll have to find a new room before you can head home to one, at least if you want a roof over your head tonight.*

Akira froze. Then he sighed, realizing that he'd lost both his now-familiar room and all the belongings he'd left in it. *I've gotta look for a new room now? I mean, I guess some places must have vacancies, but still.*

The sun was setting, and the higher-end rooms furnished with bathtubs were probably booked solid. Perhaps he could still get a cheap room with only a shower, or a suite that cost over a hundred grand a night, but neither option appealed to him. He pictured himself roaming the lower district in search of a hotel that could still meet his needs and immediately lost the urge to go anywhere. He had set his heart on going home for a rest, and his backpack full of ammo now seemed unbearably heavy to him. Without his powered suit, its full weight fell squarely on his shoulders.

Sheryl noticed his despondency and asked, "Is something wrong, Akira?"

"Nah," he said. "I just realized I've gotta go hunting for a new hotel room, is all."

Sheryl intuited how he really felt and smiled. "I'd be happy to put you up

here, if you don't mind sharing my room. We don't have all the conveniences of a hotel, but I can at least offer you a bed."

"Are you sure? Oh, but I'd really like to take a nice, long soak."

Akira wavered, and Sheryl astutely guessed why. Fully expecting a rejection, she said, "If you get in with me now, you can relax until it's someone else's turn. The tub is big enough to stretch out in. And if you're worried about your things, you can always leave them nearby—not that I think anyone here would be stupid enough to steal from you. You'll be able to see them through the frosted-glass door."

Akira still worried, mostly about his own safety and that of his belongings. He was in the slums, and while Sheryl's base was a far cry from the streets, he didn't know how secure it truly was. Safe enough to be worth considering, he believed, but not so safe that he could decide easily. Sheryl's assurances had lessened his suspicions, but not banished them.

Then Alpha chimed in. *Don't worry. I'll be watching for threats like always. And I'll know immediately if someone tries to rob you.*

*Yeah? I guess it can't hurt, then.*

The scales had tipped for Akira—a change not lost on Sheryl. To help make up his mind, she added, "The longer we wait, the less time we have in the tub. What do you say?"

The look on his face told her his answer before she heard it.

So Akira had ultimately succumbed to his longing for a bath and agreed to join Sheryl. He stretched out his limbs and sank up to his neck in her base's tub, basking in the pleasant heat of the water. He could feel his fatigue leaving him, dissolving into the bathwater, even though he'd barely exerted himself since his hospital stay. This was mental exhaustion—just a trick of his mind. Yet the relief he experienced was genuine.

He'd left his belongings in the changing area, and Erio and Aricia stood guard outside the door to make certain no one touched them. Sheryl always posted guards when she or the other girls were in the bath, anyway. She had already

kicked someone out of the gang for trying to spy on her.

Akira stared vacantly ahead. He could see Sheryl carefully washing herself in preparation to get in the tub. He had already borrowed her soap to do the same. For a moment, he wondered if she really needed to scrub so thoroughly, but the naive question soon faded from his mind as the pleasure of the bath took hold. The answer no longer mattered to him.

Sheryl meticulously cleaned herself from head to toe. She realized what an asset her beauty could be at the negotiating table, and Akira's presence made her even more attentive to it than usual. The samples of soaps and makeup Katsuragi had given her were incredible luxuries by slum standards, and she worked with them daily to improve her looks. Her hair and skin had already regained much of the luster that slum life had taken from them. Naked and flushed with the heat of a bath, her pristine beauty was so alluring that at one point, a boy from the slums, who knew full well the benefits of belonging to a gang, had risked them for a glimpse of her. (He had lost his bet. The gang had tossed him out with only the clothes on his back and his moaning that he wished he'd at least gotten a peek for his pains.)

Sheryl finished washing and turned toward the tub. Akira caught the movement and focused on her. She felt his gaze, and her cheeks flushed before she entered the hot water. She felt embarrassed to be seen naked by a boy her own age, even if she wanted it. Yet she made no attempt to cover herself with her hands as she walked up to the tub and bashfully flaunted her well-proportioned figure for Akira's benefit as she slipped into it.



All the while, she watched his reactions. He had absentmindedly followed her movement with his eyes. Now that she was still again, however, he was back to staring into space. With one exception—namely, her bust size—Sheryl had confidence in her body. So Akira’s apparent indifference came as a shock. Even so, she ventured to ask, “So, umm, what do you think?”

Akira glanced around the room before answering, “It’s big.”

His mind had started dissolving into the bathwater, and his partially boiled brain had put its own linguistically challenged spin on Sheryl’s question. But although his vague response wasn’t what she’d been hoping for, she immediately perceived its meaning: Akira was satisfied with her spacious bathtub. And completely uninterested in her naked form. She’d had to swallow her embarrassment to ask, and yet he only considered her body something that took up a bit of space in the tub. Her spirits sank as she slid deeper under the water.

*I know I talked up the size of the tub, but what normal person would think of that first?* she wondered, dipping below the water to grumble. The full tub reduced her complaints to bubbles. Then she glared sullenly at Akira. Although he realized that he’d put his foot in his mouth again, he was too enraptured with the bath to reconsider the question or come up with a better response.

Sheryl could have asked again, but she refrained—she doubted it would do her any good. And she was right. The most that even Alpha had gotten out of Akira under similar circumstances was a brief remark that her breasts were large. He would only have told Sheryl that hers were small. So her wise choice spared her unnecessary misery.

Akira’s disinterest did do a little to mitigate Sheryl’s embarrassment, so she shifted gears and resumed calmly observing him. He looked at ease, soaking blissfully in the bath. Just an average boy—or at least, not an elite hunter who casually spent millions of aurum. As she watched him, she found herself thinking that if he were an ordinary boy, seducing him here and now would solve so many of her problems. She might have to come on strong, but he would end up wrapped around her finger. If she took his hands and ran them over her skin, twined their legs together, and pressed her lips to his, maybe



even Akira would get in the mood. She knew most men found her attractive enough. Surely Akira wouldn't *really* object.

She pictured her approach. In her mind's eye, Akira accepted her with only token resistance. His defenseless appearance allowed her imagination to run wild, twisting assumptions and predictions to her own convenience. The change of setting was throwing off her normally astute judgment. Although she couldn't recognize it herself, she was mildly turned on.

Then, just when she was about to reach out for him, Sheryl noticed Akira watching her. His steady, silent gaze noted her every move, trying to decide whether she was a threat. Unconsciously, he had sensed that she meant him...not quite harm, but *something*—and snapped alert. Before her eyes, the ordinary boy had vanished, replaced by a merciless hunter who would kill his enemies without hesitation.

Sheryl froze. In the same moment, her optimistic daydreams vanished.

Then Akira's gaze returned to normal. He hadn't noticed the change in himself, so he merely thought that Sheryl was acting a bit odd.

"What's up?" he asked, puzzled.

"N-Nothing," Sheryl said. "Nothing at all."

"Oh, okay."

He returned to the pleasures of the bath, unbothered by her somewhat awkward answer. The momentary tension left his face, and his soul began dissolving into the hot water once more.

*That was close!* she thought, relieved. *I can't believe I had such a brain-dead idea! What was I thinking?! If coming on strong was all it took, he would have gotten physical with me ages ago. I'd better be careful.*

Sheryl pictured her forceful approach again. This time, in her fantasy, Akira seized her throat and lifted her up one-handed. She abandoned the vision before he slammed her imaginary self into the floor.

*I guess I need him to make the first move after all, or at least get his permission before I do.*

They had grown close enough to bathe together, anyway. She contented herself with that for the time being and spent the rest of their time in the tub snuggling against him. He was used to her hugs by now and didn't push her away.

## Chapter 64: A Red-Letter Day, a Waypoint Day

After their bath, Sheryl walked back to her room with Akira. As she led the groggy hunter along by the hand, she noticed boys they passed giving him sharply jealous looks. When she hooked her arm through his to show off how close they were, the glares intensified.

Their attention stung Akira into wakefulness. He looked around suspiciously, and the rubbernecks hastily scurried off. A cheery smile played on Sheryl's lips as Akira drowsed again, and she guided him straight to her quarters. By the time she got him inside, he had almost succumbed to his sleepiness.

"I'm gonna turn in now, Sheryl," he said. "Mind if I borrow your couch?"

"Feel free to use my bed," Sheryl offered, beaming. "It's big enough."

"Yeah? Thanks."

Akira dropped his things on the floor nearby and began crawling into the bed. He hadn't picked up on Sheryl's implication that she would share it with him, and she had been careful not to spell it out for him. Observing him, she decided to push her luck.

"Would you mind undressing?" she asked. "Laundry will be a lot harder if your clothes get dirt on the sheets."

"Sure," he groggily agreed and stripped down to his underwear, too sleepy to consider the consequences. Then he crawled under the covers, and his eyelids, weighted with fatigue, began to droop.

"Good night. Rest well," Sheryl said, with a look that could have been joy. Or regret. She would get to sleep side by side with Akira, yet he barely paid attention to her.

"Night," Akira mumbled and swiftly fell asleep.

Sheryl worked for a little while longer: checking the progress of tasks she'd assigned to her underlings, reviewing the results of completed jobs, and

divvying up new ones. She suggested improvements when problems arose, adjusted plans to reflect her gang's overall activities, and mediated disputes between her subordinates. There was more to a workload than simple volume, but Sheryl was nevertheless the most industrious person in her gang.

Once her tasks were done for the day, she returned to her room and locked the door. She then stripped down to her underwear, slipped into her bed beside Akira, and embraced him quietly, careful not to wake him. She could feel his body heat clearly—it had already warmed the bed, and neither of them was wearing enough to get in the way. Basking in his warmth with a satisfied smile, she closed her eyes and reflected on the day's events.

*It's been a busy day, but a satisfying one. I'll have to keep working hard to stay in Akira's good graces.*

Sheryl was still considering her future when sleep took her. Her slumber seemed pleasant.



The next morning, Akira woke with a suspicious frown. He didn't recognize his surroundings, and it was strangely difficult to move.

*Good morning, Akira,* Alpha greeted him, smiling. *Did you sleep well?*

*Morning, Alpha,* he mumbled back. *Where am I? Oh, wait, I stayed over at Sheryl's, didn't I?*

Akira extricated himself from Sheryl's embrace, got out of bed, and dressed. As he did so, he happened to glance over at Sheryl. She was still lying there in her underwear, looking blissfully contented that she'd gone to sleep with her arms around him.

*What does she think I am?* Akira wondered in exasperation. *She hugs me who knows why, takes a bath with me, and even climbs into bed with me barely clothed. Is she that confident I'm not gonna try anything?*

He couldn't believe how careless she was, but Alpha looked like she couldn't believe *him*.

*Are you kidding, Akira?* she demanded. *She's hoping you'll try something! She*

*already said you can do whatever you like with her, remember?*

*Did she? Well, even if she did say that, why go out of her way to make it happen?*

*She probably hopes you'll grow attached to her if you two get physical. And as a matter of fact, I'm inclined to agree that you would.*

*You think so? Akira gave Sheryl a conflicted look. But still, I mean...*

*Well, I don't care if you get involved with Sheryl, as long as you don't get so obsessed you forget about your agreement with me. Keep that in mind if you decide to go through with it.*

*Don't worry. I'd never break our deal over something like that.* He spoke in his normal tone, which belied the earnestness he felt.

Alpha read his feelings from his expression and from stray thoughts mixed in with his telepathy. *I'm glad to hear it,* she said, beaming. *Still, you don't seem fazed by sleeping next to a nearly naked girl your age. Aren't you interested at all?*

*Oh, you know. A certain someone's always lounging naked around me, so I've built up a tolerance.* Akira flashed a vaguely sarcastic grin.

Alpha gave a mischievous laugh. Akira felt a creeping dread, which proved well-founded a moment later when she deleted her clothes before he could stop her. Being virtual and artificial, her appearance was a thoroughly, precisely—even artistically—calculated pinnacle of female beauty. And it reflected everything that constant observation had taught her about Akira's preferences. In his eyes, no one came close to her in terms of purely visual appeal. And she stared seductively at him, striking an alluring pose and wearing a bewitching smile.

Akira blushed and looked away.

*What happened to that tolerance you built up?* Alpha asked, laughing at his look of frustration.

*Shut up! It depends on who, when, and where,* Akira snapped, masking his embarrassment with a show of irritation. *Hurry up and change back.*

Alpha did, but only after she'd thoroughly assessed his reaction. She could see that, while Akira didn't like being made fun of, he had no other complaints.

*If you ever want another look, you only have to ask*, she whispered seductively in his ear.

Akira looked away again and sulked.

Alpha was always studying Akira, and she knew that his libido and interest in the opposite sex were as strong as the next boy's. And Sheryl was undeniably attractive. Her hugs, bathing with her, and the sight of her lying unguarded in her underwear all failed to move him for one simple reason: he didn't see her as a potential partner. Akira divided most other people into two basic groups—either they were his enemy, or they weren't. And he couldn't feel attracted to anyone in either division.

But a few people fell into neither category. They were his allies, or something like it, and he responded to them in his own way. As far as Alpha knew, he had shown such affection for Shizuka, who had demonstrated unselfish concern for him; Elena and Sara, who had saved his life; and Alpha herself, who supported him in so many ways. With these four, he behaved like a typical adolescent boy—albeit one with a contrarian streak—such as when he had seen Sara scantily clad in her home, Elena in her skintight powered suit, Alpha's AR projection of their naked bodies, or Alpha's own recent bout of nudity.

If by some chance Sheryl joined these exceptions, she might have Akira eating out of the palm of her hand in next to no time. That worry had motivated Alpha's probing questions. She determined that at present—and barring considerable unforeseen circumstances—Sheryl would most likely remain not-an-enemy to Akira. Whatever the girl's own intentions, his attitude toward her wouldn't change while he viewed self-interest as the basis of their relationship. So, Alpha concluded, she could afford to leave things be.

Sheryl woke up not long after Akira. Puzzlement clouded her joyful expression when she realized that he was no longer in her arms, where she'd expected to find him. Instinctively, she started groping around in search of the missing

hunter, but her hands grasped only bedsheets, and her face fell. As her mind cleared, she sat up, glanced quickly around the room, and spotted Akira on the couch, already geared up to depart.

“Oh, you’re awake?” he said, looking up from whatever he’d been doing on his data terminal and noticing her. “Morning.”

“Good morning,” she responded. “Are you leaving already? You could at least stay for breakfast.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll grab a bite on my own.” Akira opted for a polite refusal. He knew how precious food was in the slums, and that anything he ate would come out of someone else’s share.

“All right. In that case, I’ll escort you out of the base.”

Akira cracked a grin. “Dressed like that?”

Reminded that she was still in her underwear, Sheryl dressed hastily—and with a hint of embarrassment.



Kibayashi had put Akira in touch with a real estate agency, and they’d sent him a message about the rental property he’d asked for. So after leaving Sheryl’s base and grabbing a light breakfast, Akira made straight for the company’s office.

*What kind of place are you looking for?* Alpha asked as he walked. *They’re definitely going to ask you, so you’d better consider your answer now.*

*Good question,* said Akira. *First off, I want an enormous bathroom. I guess I’ll need a large garage too, for when I get a car. And space for my gear and ammo. Apart from that, I figure a place to put my other stuff and a bedroom should do it.*

*Don’t forget about the rent. Kibayashi should have explained the situation, but you wouldn’t want them assuming you have a hundred million aurum to spend because of that.*

*Yeah, that’s a good point.* Akira paused to consider. *Come to think of it, I blew through ninety mil yesterday, didn’t I? What happened to the me who freaked*

*out over two hundred grand?*

*You didn't spend it wastefully, so let's call that a sign of growth.*

Akira's expression grew overcast. *Growth, huh? Do you really think so? I sure don't feel like I'm growing. I mean, I depend on you for everything. Are you certain I haven't just upgraded my gear without getting much better at using it?*

He didn't believe he'd grown weaker—the opposite, if anything. But if someone asked him how much stronger he was now than when he'd started, he could only answer, without much confidence, that he'd improved “a bit” or made “all right” progress. He had cheated death time and again, besting enemies whose power terrified him and earning sums of money that boggled his mind. Yet he'd done all that with Alpha's support, which he'd gained through sheer dumb luck. And even blessed with an ally who could lead an ordinary kid back from the ruins alive, he'd only barely pulled it off.

So, in terms of pure skill, how much stronger was he? Maybe he hadn't really changed much from his days of skulking in back alleys. That doubt constantly haunted Akira.

*Don't worry, Alpha said, with a reassuring smile. I promise you, you are improving.*

Akira believed her, but he couldn't completely shake the fear that he was still as weak as he'd ever been.

*If you're that worried, double down on your training. Underestimating yourself and staying on your toes is better than overestimating yourself and getting careless. And keep relying on me!* Alpha concluded, upbeat as usual, *Don't let it get to you! Hunting is always life-threatening work, so a little anxiety is perfectly natural. But that's all the more reason to stick to your guns and keep at it.*

*Yeah?* Akira said. *Yeah, I guess you're right. I hope you'll keep watching my back.* Feeling a little relieved, he shook off his gloom and grinned back at her.

At the real estate office, Akira gave Kibayashi's name to the receptionist, and an agent immediately appeared to greet him. The man was taken aback when he saw Akira—who hardly looked like a hunter who merited an introduction



from Kugamayama City, and not only due to his youth—but he soon recovered his affable customer-service manner and ushered the boy into a room reserved for important clientele. After a brief discussion of Akira’s housing preferences, they went to inspect a property the agent hoped would meet his needs.

He took Akira to a freestanding house on the wasteland side of the lower district. The East had more land than anyone knew what to do with, but *safe* land was in short supply—hence the night-and-day difference in the cost of living within or without a city’s protective walls. So the farther from those walls a lower-district property stood, the less it cost to rent. There were exceptions, but private security firms maintained the peace in most neighborhoods, meaning that safety still cost a premium.

The house was more than large enough for Akira to live in alone, with a huge bath, numerous rooms, and a spacious garage. It even came furnished, ready to live in without any additional shopping. Akira couldn’t wish for more.

While he traipsed through the rooms, mildly elated, the real estate agent gave him a rundown of the property. It had been built for hunters, composed of sturdy materials to minimize damage from weapons misfiring and similar hazards of their trade. Akira was free to install heavy weaponry for his own defense, but the agency would not be responsible for any disputes with neighboring hunters he provoked by doing so. A security firm contracted by the agency theoretically patrolled the area, but it generally left people to fend for themselves against robbers and other human assailants, charging an additional fee for backup in such cases. The agency would arrange to repair battle-damaged buildings or dispose of bodies—for a price.

The rent was five hundred thousand aurum a month, including the cost of water, heating, electricity, security, and several types of insurance. Akira could purchase heavier patrols, armed support in emergencies, and other services at an additional charge. The agency ordinarily reserved this property for hunters ranked 30 and above, but would make an exception for Akira in deference to Kibayashi.

“That concludes the tour and summary,” the agent finished. “Do you have any questions, Mr. Akira?”

“I’ll take it,” Akira replied. He knew that he would never have been offered a place like this under normal circumstances. And while he wasn’t sure how far Kibayashi’s influence extended, he doubted that he’d get another chance if he passed on this one. “When can I move in?”

“As soon as you’ve made your first rent payment. Right now, if you choose to pay on the spot.”

“All right. I’ll do that, then.” Akira handed the agent his hunter ID.

The agent took the card, scanned it into a device he carried, and deftly completed the contract. Then he returned Akira’s ID and bowed deeply. “I have confirmed your payment. Thank you very much for choosing to rent one of our properties. Here is your house key—please contact us immediately if you lose it.”

Akira felt almost overcome with emotion as he accepted the key. He now had a house to himself, even if he didn’t own it.

“Beginning next month, your rent payment will be automatically deducted from your account,” the agent continued. “Please bear in mind that if your payment is so much as one second overdue, your rental contract will be immediately canceled, and the management company will assume ownership of all goods on the premises.” High mortality among hunters made the agency especially strict in such matters. “Feel free to use the furnishings however you see fit. We are willing to purchase any you consider unnecessary.”

“Hang on,” Akira said hesitantly, “is all the stuff here...?”

“Yes, it belonged to previous customers who rented this property.”

Akira took another look around him. Every piece of furniture he saw was a memento of some dead hunter who had lived here, and if he died, his own belongings would join them.

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me. Please don’t hesitate to call if anything comes up. And thank you once again for choosing our firm.” The real estate agent gave Akira another deep bow and departed.

Akira locked the door. Then he returned to the room, set down his backpack, stripped off his gear, sank into a chair, and let out a long, heartfelt sigh. “A

house,” he murmured. *“My house.”*

Alpha beamed. *Congratulations, Akira. You finally have a place to call your own.* Then, to light a fire under him, she added, *Of course, it’s only a rental.*

“That’s all right,” Akira said, unruffled. “It’s still mine. I used to live on the streets of the slums, and now I’ve got a whole house to myself.”

He’d been through a lot since becoming a hunter. Dreaming of a better tomorrow, he’d fled the back alleys for the wasteland. And after meeting Alpha in the ruins, his life had taken one unbelievable turn after another. Looking back, he realized that the life he now lived had once been beyond his wildest dreams.

He stood up straight, bowed earnestly to Alpha, and said, “I couldn’t have done any of this without you. Thanks for that, and for everything to come.”

*You’re welcome. Let’s make this partnership last,* Alpha responded, with her usual smile.

This was a red-letter day for Akira, and his face showed it. But for Alpha, it was merely a waypoint of little significance, and her expression reflected as much.

Akira spent the rest of the day on errands: making a shopping run to the lower district for some around-the-house clothes and other sundries, fiddling with his new terminal so that Alpha could access it, taking another tour of every room in his house, and so on. By the time night fell, he had finished settling into his new home. He wrapped up with a nice, soothing bath, stretching out to soak in his new tub, which was every bit as spacious as he’d hoped.

Alpha was purely virtual, but she still got in with him. Her naked body had flustered Akira that morning, but not now. To him, it had become just a normal part of bathing.

*Let’s go over our plan,* she said. *You’ll stay here, training and studying, until your new gear arrives. Any problems with that?*

“Fine by me,” he answered. “But what’ll I do for training?”

His house didn't seem cut out for firing practice at any range. He might be able to do hand-to-hand combat drills in his empty garage, but they'd be extremely limited without a suit. He couldn't figure out what Alpha had in mind, and her answer didn't enlighten him at all.

*You'll work to deliberately compress time as you experience it, including conscious, subconscious, and conditional shifts.*

"Sorry, you lost me. What am I actually supposed to do?"

*Oh, it will make sense once you try it. We'll start tomorrow.*

"Okay." Akira still couldn't picture what his training would entail, but he asked no more questions—Alpha'd said he'd figure it out, so he probably would. His silence indicated his trust in her.

Alpha noted his reaction with a satisfied smile.

Akira's training began the next morning, in his garage. He waited, unarmed and wearing only his body armor, while Alpha explained:

*You're about to start learning to control your perception of time.*

That left Akira none the wiser, so she elaborated. In extreme circumstances—such as when facing imminent death—heightened concentration sometimes caused discrepancies in the way people experienced time. They felt as if the world moved in slow motion, while only their own minds worked at normal speed. Akira would practice triggering that state reliably, both at will and in response to certain conditions.

Once he mastered that, he would work on further compressing time as he perceived it, until he could make one real second feel like ten, and eventually a hundred. He wouldn't shorten his perceived time; he would compress it. While his world slowed to a crawl, he would not panic in fear but remain perfectly calm, wringing the most he could from every passing second. And he would learn to maintain that state while minimizing the burden it placed on him. Mastering this ability would allow Akira's skill to grow by leaps and bounds.

Alpha explained the whole process matter-of-factly, but Akira balked.

“You make it sound easy,” he said, “but can I really pull that off? I honestly kind of doubt it.”

This task struck him as even more impossible than telepathy had when she’d first introduced him to the concept. Secretly, he felt that she might as well have casually ordered him to fly.

But Alpha laughed off his doubts. *You can do it*, she reassured him. *In fact, you already have—you just don’t realize it. All you have left to learn is control.*

“I can already do this stuff?” he repeated incredulously.

*Yup. For example, remember your fights with Shiori and Nelia?*

Akira thought back. At the time, Alpha had been guiding his powered suit through a series of masterful maneuvers, and he had been struggling to keep up, desperately pushing his body to match movements several grades above his skill level.

*Shiori was using a speed stim when she fought you, and likely quite a high-end one*, Alpha continued. *She was able to fight with such precision at those speeds because it compressed her experiential time as well as dramatically enhancing her reflexes. Nelia had a body tuned for high-speed combat, so she probably underwent brain modification when she was transplanted into it.*

“What’s that got to do with this?”

*Your eyes were able to track their movements, and you did your best to match every move I made with your suit. You were too flustered to notice then, but you could never have done that if you’d been perceiving time at a normal rate.*

Akira gave a start.

*I suppose feeling in mortal peril pushed your concentration to the limit*, Alpha continued, grinning smugly. *And in your desperation to escape, you managed to compress your experiential time without realizing what you’d done.*

Despite his surprise, Akira accepted her explanation. It seemed to make sense—more or less—and he trusted her. So, whatever the truth, he believed what she had told him, his mind accepting it as fact—and with that, his task no longer felt impossible. When the surprise faded from his face, a look of determination

remained.

Satisfied, Alpha moved on to the specifics of his first exercise. *You'll start by tricking your brain into thinking you're in danger, then take advantage of that state to control the way you experience time deliberately, rather than unconsciously as you've been doing. Once you have that down, you'll be able to do it regardless of the situation you're in.*

"I get the idea," Akira said slowly, "but could you be more specific?"

*It will make sense once we get started, so let's get right to it!*

Alpha immediately changed into her training wear: an overly ornate dress, or perhaps an unusually voluminous dancer's costume. Her face was the lone patch of exposed skin—a floor-length skirt covered her feet, while her hands hid within extremely long sleeves, from which protruded the keen-edged blades of the two swords she held.

She thrust her right-hand weapon at Akira, holding its tip right under his nose. He knew that the gleaming blade wasn't real, but it looked so sharp that he flinched anyway.

*I'm going to dance, she said. And while I'm dancing, I'll slash at you without warning. So watch me closely and dodge. Understand?*

"Y-Yeah."

*And the point of this exercise is to compress your time as you experience it, so don't merely try to keep your distance. No matter how close I get, stay right where you are until I strike.*

"Okay."

*Good. Then, let's begin.*

Alpha retreated a few steps and made a reverent bow to Akira. With a dignified look on her lovely face, she slowly began to dance. She looked preternaturally beautiful, moving amid the whirl of her billowing garments. Lustrous fabric and jewelry gleamed as her limbs shifted, producing bands of otherworldly light, and each elegant sweep of her swords left a dazzling trail. Akira didn't need a reminder to watch closely—he couldn't take his eyes off her.

The way Alpha danced—eyes closed, face set, never faltering even slightly—almost seemed a form of prayer that went beyond faith or worship. The fact that she was giving this graceful performance in a decidedly unrefined garage made it no less entrancing.

By the time Akira snapped back to reality, Alpha had already struck, seemingly lopping off his head with the blade in her right hand. He had failed to react at all. If her weapon had been real, he would have died without even realizing he'd been cut.

*Don't forget to pay attention, she teased.*

Recovering from the surprise, he shook off his daze and said, "I know." He couldn't afford to be completely off his guard while someone waved blades around so close to him. He ought to be observing Alpha, not admiring her. So he forced himself to concentrate, determined not to miss even the slightest change in her movements as she backed away and resumed dancing.

But soon his intensity gave way to puzzlement. A strip of cloth had fallen from Alpha's costume. It fluttered in the air and dissolved into light before it touched the ground. But everything Alpha wore was virtual—mere visual data. It couldn't fall off on its own, so she must have removed it deliberately.

"Alpha," he said, "why'd you get rid of that bit of cloth?"

*I just lowered the difficulty a bit, she replied. This outfit makes it harder to see what I'm doing, including tells that might give away my attacks. The more of someone you can see, the easier it is to anticipate their moves, right?*

"Yeah, but I thought the whole point of this training was for me to see your attacks coming so I can instinctively do that time compression thing and dodge them."

*I know what I'm doing. You can't feel like you're in danger if my strikes completely blindside you. They can't trigger a change in your perception of time unless you at least realize you're under attack.*

"Well, you've got me there."

*So I'll remove a piece of cloth from my outfit every time one of my strikes hits you.*

“Wait, what?”

*If you're just dying to see me naked, feel free to slack off.*

Alpha flashed a dazzling smile and resumed dancing before a somewhat flustered Akira. He kept a stoic look on his face as he watched her magnificent performance, struggling not to let his feelings show.

The training continued. Akira scrutinized Alpha's every move, determined to spot any sign of an attack, yet he failed to dodge so much as a single slash of her swords. Her gaudy, flowing garments hid her movements, making her extremely difficult to predict. And to make matters worse, his eyes couldn't keep up with her. So by the time he noticed one of her strikes, he found that he had already been “cut.”

Akira was doing his best to focus, to see through her tricks, but his best came nowhere close to the concentration he displayed in battle, when he sprinted desperately along the border between life and death. Alpha kept exploiting his slight lapses with pinpoint accuracy, and as she'd promised, she let a strip of cloth fall for every blow she struck. Before long, her voluminous, ornate costume had lost all its decorative elements. And as Alpha's garments fell away, her bare skin appeared. First her arms and legs, then her back, hips, cleavage, and buttocks began to briefly peek through the gaps.

The more skin she showed, the more alluring she made her dance. She smiled bewitchingly, casting sidelong glances at Akira, while her limbs swung in wide, distracting arcs. An instant later, she would be slashing into him.

Akira tried to concentrate and dodge, but Alpha never struck when he was focused, and he couldn't stay fully alert for long. As soon as his concentration gave out or he wavered even slightly, her blades were in him. He was supposed to keep his eyes on her, read her subtle tells, and use her imminent attacks as triggers to enter a slow-motion world where he could track and avoid them. So far, however, he had utterly failed.





As the exercise wore on, his reflexes grew sluggish. At last, he reached a peak of mental and physical exhaustion where he could barely react to Alpha's slashing swords at all. Detecting that, Alpha decided to end their training session.

*I think that's enough for today.*

Akira exhaled, not even trying to hide how tired he was. Then he took another look at Alpha and sighed deeply. She wore nothing but sparkling jewelry, hardly adequate to cover her skin. Barely a trace remained of the excessive dress she'd started in. Her bewitching figure was clear proof of how thoroughly he'd failed. He felt depressed.

*This isn't something you can master overnight,* Alpha reassured him, as cheerful as usual. *Just be patient. Your training will pay off.*

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Akira said, forcing himself into a semblance of good spirits. He knew moping wouldn't help him.

*Rest for a while, then we'll continue your studies in the house. Or would you rather take the remainder of the day off?*

"Nah, I'll study. I'm taking a break from hunting, so I figure I should at least make it count."

*All right. Now, what should I teach you today?*

Akira went back to his room and rested until he felt ready for his lesson.

*Let's focus on math today,* Alpha said as they began. *A hunter needs to be able to calculate his pay, if nothing else.*

"First, how long do you plan to stay like that?" Akira asked hesitantly.

Alpha still wore the same alluring appearance she had at the end of their training session—hardly conducive to a productive lesson.

*I thought you liked it,* Alpha teased. *You never told me to change, so I didn't.*

"Fine. From now on, I'll remind you as soon as we finish training."

*There's no need to deny yourself.*

"Just get dressed already!"

Alpha changed into something like a teacher's outfit—technically much less revealing, but in many ways still distractingly seductive. Her shirt was unbuttoned daringly low, and a slit ran nearly all the way up one side of her skirt.

“Good enough” was the extent of Akira's reaction. People can get used to anything. He proceeded with his lessons as usual, despite his decidedly *unusual* environment.

## Chapter 65: Confirming Nothing

Akira spent his first five days in his new rental home training to control his perception of time, although he achieved no results worth mentioning. Alpha still started their sessions lavishly overdressed and ended them when she was nearly naked and Akira was sluggish from fatigue. He had yet to dodge a single one of her attacks. His reactions had improved slightly, but only in ways that had nothing to do with his sense of time and were therefore irrelevant to the exercise.

Now he was resting after his latest attempt, and his frustration was beginning to show. Alpha insisted he could do it, and he believed her, yet success eluded him. He felt no closer to it than he had when he'd started, and he sighed heavily, disappointed in himself.

Then Alpha made an unexpected announcement. *Akira, you just got a weird job offer.*

"Weird how?"

*Read it and see for yourself.* Alpha pointed to Akira's terminal, and its screen flickered through a series of pages before stopping on his official profile. A message on it alerted him to the new invitation.

Akira reached for the device. Suspicion entered his face as he looked over the offer—it had come from Shiori, and was listed as "Consultation (misc.)." Included was the address of a restaurant, along with a note that she wished to discuss the details of the job in person, and that she would treat him to a meal there by way of payment. Akira reread the offer, sure he must have misunderstood, but it was unambiguous.

Neither Akira nor Alpha could fathom why someone they'd fought nearly to the death now wanted to hire them, however.

"What the hell?"

*Beats me,* Alpha said. *I suppose it could be a preliminary to get you to discuss*

*the terms of a bigger job, but we won't know unless we ask Shiori.*

“To me, it just reads like she wants to talk, and she’s willing to buy me dinner to make it happen.”

*You may be right.*

“But what’s she wanna talk about?”

*Don't ask me. So, what now? Alpha asked. Will you go? I doubt you'd be in any danger, considering the meeting spot.*

The restaurant in question was on an upper floor of the Kugama Building—a skyscraper built into the city’s defensive walls, and which also housed its largest Hunter Office branch. Starting trouble there would have serious consequences. So even Akira could see that, whatever Shiori wanted, her choice of location meant she didn’t plan to fight.

*You could always just turn her down or ignore her. It's your decision,* Alpha added. She really meant it—meeting Shiori might be a good change of pace for Akira, but she wouldn’t insist. She would respect Akira’s choices unless they stood in the way of her own goals.

Akira considered the offer, rereading it yet again. After a few moments of indecision, he gave in. He couldn’t help wanting to know why Shiori had gone through the formalities of the Hunter Office for such a simple request, and he was willing to play along if he could satisfy his curiosity in safety. Besides, Shiori had invited him to a fancy restaurant—and was footing the bill. The chance to enjoy costly food, without dipping into his own funds, played a larger role in his decision than he cared to admit.

Being part of Kugamayama City’s walls, the towering Kugama Building housed many businesses that catered to the high-ranking hunters who made their homes in the middle district. Some actually barred their doors to those below a certain rank, and the floors where they operated were generally no place for low-ranking hunters like Akira.

The restaurant Stelliana occupied one such upper floor. No minimum hunter rank was required to enter, because the exclusive eatery served all the wealthy

residents of the walled districts: corporate executives, elite hunters, and other members of the rich and powerful. Its luxurious decor daunted Akira when he arrived outside its doors on the day of his appointment.

*Want to turn back after all?* Alpha teased.

*Nah, I'll go in. It's not like it's a ruin, so what've I got to be afraid of?* Akira answered—partly to convince himself—and entered.

Inside, everything about the restaurant radiated class. A hunter could enter the average lower-district bar fresh from the wasteland, still spattered with a bit of dust and monster blood. But, Akira thought nervously, trying the same thing here would get him tossed out on his ass. (As a matter of fact, he'd merely be approached by a waiter who would ask him to clean up and change his clothes. The restaurant offered showers, rentals of clean clothes, and even laundry services—hardly unusual for a high-class establishment that catered to hunters' needs.)

One of the servers soon spotted Akira. "Thank you for choosing to dine with us today," he said, with courtesy befitting the fine decor. "Do you have a reservation?"

"Huh? Oh, er..." Akira faltered, flustered despite the waiter's genial tone. "A lady named Shiori should be here, I think."

"Ms. Shiori? May I ask your name, sir?"

"I'm Akira."

"Very good. Well then, Mr. Akira, may I take your baggage?"

Akira had left home equipped as he would have been for a wasteland expedition. He handed over his ammo-stuffed backpack, but the waiter held out his hand for more.

*Your guns too,* Alpha prompted.

*O-Oh, right.* After a moment's hesitation, Akira relinquished his rifles.

"Thank you for your cooperation. I will show you to your table. Please, follow me." The waiter led him through the elegant restaurant. Every detail showed how far it outclassed run-of-the-mill eateries. Each time Akira's foot sank into

the lush, soft carpet, he felt like he was walking into another world. At the tables, which were spaced far apart, sat all kinds of diners, enjoying luxurious banquets. Even those who were clearly cyborgs, and who appeared incapable of eating and drinking, sat before elaborate feasts.

*Alpha, what do you think that guy's gonna do with all that food?* he asked idly.

*Who knows?* Alpha replied. *His body may be capable of eating, even though it doesn't look like it. Or he may have assumed it's designed for daily life when it isn't. Maybe he plans to have his companion eat it and send him their taste data—or to just enjoy looking at food he can no longer eat.*

*Oh, okay. But I doubt it's that last one—sitting in front of a delicious feast you can't have sounds like torture.*

*It takes all kinds. A lot of things don't make sense unless you actually experience them.*

Akira would have liked to know the truth, but he could hardly go in for a closer look, so he gave up and followed the waiter.

Shiori was already sitting at a reserved table. The server pulled out a chair and motioned for Akira to sit. Once Akira hesitantly complied, he placed a menu on the table before each of them.

“We'll call you when we've made up our minds,” Shiori said without touching hers.

“Certainly, ma'am.” The waiter bowed and departed.

Akira felt like the odd man out—everyone else seemed to know what they were doing.

Stelliana was well-regarded as more than just a restaurant. Its location made it a popular venue for powerful rival hunters to negotiate settlements without worrying that their confrontation could turn violent. Even enemies ready to kill each other at the drop of a hat could peacefully talk out their differences here, kept calm by the threat of retribution from both the city and the Hunter Office.

Shiori wore a prim, stylish suit. Between her outfit and her presence here, it

was hard to see her as anything but a sheltered resident of the central districts—the polar opposite of Akira, who looked ready to go straight from the restaurant to the wasteland. Looking at her, Akira wondered once again why someone who could afford her wardrobe had dressed like a maid in the tunnels. But it soon occurred to him that her maid outfit could have gotten her mistaken for an employee here, so he gave it no more thought. And on closer inspection, he realized that Shiori's hands were bare—no sign of powered inner wear on her.

He relaxed his guard.

Shiori, meanwhile, grew wary when she saw Akira's body armor. The clothes didn't appear to offer much protection, but they were still combat gear, and she read them as a statement of his intent. Akira hadn't meant to send a message, of course—he simply had nothing to wear except these hunter clothes he'd asked Kibayashi for.

Realizing that she might find it difficult to proceed on friendly terms, Shiori steeled herself and faced Akira. Her dignified expression concealed her strong determination, which nevertheless enhanced her beauty.

"Mr. Akira," she began, "thank you very much for agreeing to my request. As promised, I will cover the cost of your meal, so please order whatever you like."

Akira glanced down at the menu, but then pulled himself together and looked back at Shiori. "Let's talk first. I still don't know if my answer will be worth paying for."

"Very well. In that case, I'll be direct." Shiori tensed, certain that Akira was indeed wary of her. Seeing that she had his attention, though, she gave a profound bow and said earnestly, "I realize that no apology will ever be sufficient to make up for the trouble I caused you the other day, but I am truly sorry—and truly grateful to you for saving Miss Reina. I don't doubt you have many complaints against both of us, but all the blame rests with me. Should you wish it, I will offer you my fortune, my body, or even my life in compensation. So please, have mercy on Miss Reina and do not hold her responsible!"

Shiori meant every word. She was prepared for the worst. Reina's careless actions had not only spoiled Akira's hard-won victory but forced him into a life-



or-death struggle with Shiori herself. Although all three hunters had fortunately survived the encounter, he had every right to resent her bitterly. And if he was the type to hold masters responsible for their servants' failures, he might blame Reina for Shiori's actions as well. Shiori was determined to prevent that at any cost.

Akira realized how sincere Shiori was—that she would give him anything in her power to spare Reina from his ire. He found her heartfelt appeal a little overwhelming.

“Before I give you my answer,” he responded, “tell me one thing: Why did you bother making this a formal offer through the Hunter Office?”

“Because I believed you would act in good faith if you had accepted a job.” Shiori had hired Akira once before, in the tunnels. And while his criticisms of Reina had infuriated her, she knew they had stemmed from a desire to do his job well. He had refused to compromise himself with insincere flattery, even at the risk of starting a firefight with his client.

Now she *wanted* to hear how he truly felt. If he was hostile, she needed to know. She couldn't afford to have him feign indifference while secretly plotting Reina's murder. If Shiori's wealth, body, and life were sufficient to quench Akira's anger, all well and good. He had saved Reina's life, and Shiori would have resigned herself to repaying him with her own. But if not, then no matter how much Shiori owed Akira, she would need to ready herself to fight him for Reina's safety once more. She would sacrifice herself to kill him if necessary. Would it be necessary, though? She couldn't know unless he answered her truthfully.

Akira couldn't read Shiori's mind. Still, he understood that she'd brought him here to get an honest answer. “Okay,” he said, “then I'll tell it to you straight, although I don't know if you'll like it. Look up and listen.”

Shiori raised her head and waited. She looked grave and determined, which gave him pause. Even so, he answered:

“I've got no hard feelings about things that didn't happen, and I'm not gonna do anything about them either. End of story.”

In spite of herself, Shiori lost her composure and blurted out the word that

best encapsulated her thoughts: “Pardon?”

“Oh, right. I guess I’ve gotta explain,” Akira added, somewhat awkwardly. “Okay, I’ll tell you as much as I can, so hold on to your questions for now and just listen.”

Shiori took a moment to collect herself. “I’m listening.”

“Since you hired me through the Hunter Office, you must know my hunter code, right? Go to my page on the Office site and check my record for that last job in the underground district. I’ll lend you my terminal if you don’t have one on you.”

“Very well. I can check it myself. Please wait one moment.”

Although puzzled, Shiori pulled out her terminal and did as Akira asked. When she saw his page, shock suffused her features. “What on earth?!”

The Hunter Office’s public record of Akira’s subterranean battles bore little resemblance to Shiori’s experience of them. It said only that he had taken a job from the city and been injured and hospitalized on his third day in the tunnels. That wasn’t inaccurate, but it also wasn’t the truth—vital information was missing. Yet this was the official version of events, verified by the Hunter Office itself.

Shiori’s own combat record, meanwhile, was almost entirely correct—except that where Akira’s name should have appeared, it read only “another hunter.” This alleged other hunter’s profile was unviewable, supposedly set to “private” by their own request. And where the report touched on her conflict with Akira, it said only that a Druncam member had had a dispute with an unaffiliated hunter, and that the details were private at the request of both parties. Shiori was at a loss.

“I can’t tell you the details because my client—Kugamayama City—put a nondisclosure clause in my contract,” Akira continued. “But you’ve seen my record for that underground job, and there’s nothing there. I can’t get upset or try to even the score for something that didn’t happen, right?”

Akira’s deal with Kibayashi had replaced all references to his subterranean battles with a totally unremarkable account, and he had no intention of

revealing the trick. He would treat his altered records as fact. So, as far as he was concerned, he had never been at odds with Shiori and Reina. Or at least, not in a way he cared to revisit. He couldn't honestly claim to have no hard feelings, but he wouldn't act on them. He had put the matter behind him.

"If you can't take my word for it, go ahead and ask the city. Leaving me out of it, obviously—I won't pick a fight with Kugamayama," Akira concluded, insinuating that any probing Reina and Shiori did would only land them in the city's crosshairs.

Shiori looked repeatedly from Akira's record on her terminal to the boy himself, racking her brain to work out where she stood. Could a lie, oversight, misunderstanding, or clash of tacit assumptions still cause the situation to fatally deteriorate? At last, gravely, she asked again, "May I take it, then, that nothing happened?"

Akira nodded firmly. "Yeah. Nothing happened."

"I understand. In that case, thank you for joining me here simply to confirm that. As a token of my gratitude, please order whatever you like." With a smile, Shiori gestured toward Akira's menu.

"Okay, then. Thanks."

To Shiori's relief, Akira picked up the menu. By demonstrating his will to accept payment, he had banished her remaining doubts. They had a deal. And now that they had agreed on a story, Akira wouldn't do anything to challenge it. At the very least, he would seek no reprisals against Reina.

Akira groaned as he studied the menu. It listed myriad dishes, but he couldn't guess what any of them were from their names alone.

*Alpha, what's this thing?* he asked. *"Alanduse grillé avec ellianes à la Nouveau Pariés"?*

*Some type of meat dish, I think. But that's all I can tell you.*

*Well, duh. It's on the meat page.*

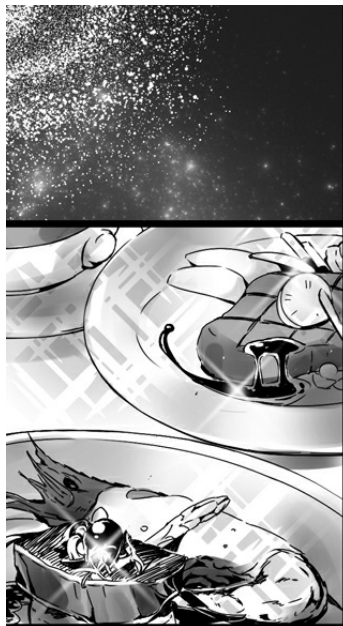
Akira's dilemma wasn't lost on Shiori. "Mr. Akira, I plan to order the chef's

choice today,” she said with a cordial smile. “It’s always a pleasure, so if you’re in doubt, I suggest you do the same. You can always order more if you’re still hungry, but why not start by sampling the pride of the house?”

“Yes, please,” Akira answered. He could have chosen a dish off the menu at random, but he knew how bad his luck was. Why pick a dud and waste this golden opportunity?

Shiori summoned a waiter and placed their orders. A short time later, a host of dishes were laid on the table before them. Akira didn’t recognize a single one, but all looked as expensive as they apparently were delicious. He cleared his throat, then reached out with his fork toward the mouth-watering contents of one bright-white plate and nervously took a bite.

An almost violent surge of flavor assaulted him. Akira nearly lost himself in the shock of unknown tastes on his tongue, but he narrowly clung to self-control. Numerous experiences had taught him that losing his cool was the first step toward losing his life. He chewed slowly, savoring ingredients he’d never heard of prepared in ways he couldn’t imagine, then swallowed. These magnificent, luxurious flavors were unobtainable in the slums, and they threatened to rewire his sense of taste from the ground up.



*Are you all right, Akira?* Alpha asked, sounding concerned that his enthusiasm would cross a line.

“I...I’m fine,” he answered out loud rather than telepathically—a slipup that proved he was anything but “fine.”

“Mr. Akira, does your meal not agree with you?” Shiori asked, baffled by his apparent non sequitur.

“What? Oh, no, I’m okay. I just can’t believe how amazing this food is.” Akira shook his head, suspiciously flustered.

“I’m glad to hear that the meal I recommended meets your standards.” Shiori gave a relieved smile, although his behavior still somewhat puzzled her. “We aren’t subject to any time restrictions, so please enjoy it at your leisure.”

“W-Will do!” was all Akira could manage before he resumed eating. Once again, everything tasted overwhelmingly delicious, and it filled him with such joy that Alpha again felt concerned for his mental well-being. This time, however, she held her peace—he might easily give her away again if she spoke up.

Shiori observed Akira while she ate her own meal. Sitting there, beaming as he shoveled food into his mouth, she found it hard to believe that he had been a match for her even when she used a speed-stim—her secret weapon. He looked like an ordinary boy, maybe even a bit young for his age. Yet seeing this side of Akira made Shiori no less wary of him. Quite the opposite, in fact. After this meeting, she would regard him with greater caution than ever.

The records of his combat in the underground districts had been rewritten to tell an unflattering—almost shameful—story that had no bearing on reality. That was public Hunter Office data, and not even Kugamayama City would have dared alter it without Akira’s consent. They must have struck some kind of deal. And since Akira had explained his situation to her without a hint of animosity or resentment toward the city, his profits must have been vast enough to erase any ill will. So, Kugamayama had won Akira’s compliance with bribes rather than threats—a sign that the city respected his skill.

Kugamayama would never have dealt so generously with a hunter it considered a pushover.

Druncam's desk jockeys were promoting young hunters in an effort to expand both the syndicate's power and their own. They were also proactive about scouting rookies with promise. Yet there was no sign that they had ever set their sights on Akira. They should have leaped at the chance to recruit a boy of his ability, even if his conduct left something to be desired. The more Shiori thought about it, the deeper her doubts grew.

Had Druncam's scouts simply overlooked Akira? Or did they see something wrong with him that outweighed his considerable skill? Both scenarios seemed plausible.

*Perhaps I should investigate this further, she mused. But that risks stirring up a hornet's nest. I must ensure that no trouble reaches Miss Reina.*

Unlike Akira, Shiori's thoughts were undisturbed by the pleasures of fine dining. She remained calmly focused on how best to handle the person seated across from her. And all the while, she herself was the unwitting object of Alpha's scrutiny.

Akira, oblivious to both of them, kept wolfing down a feast beyond his wildest dreams.

## Chapter 66: His Real Skill

Akira continued his meal at Stelliana. By the time he was full, satisfied, and beginning to develop a tolerance for fine dining, only the dessert course remained on the table. He could have ordered more—but feared he wouldn't be able to clean his plate. So, after wrestling with himself, he decided against it.

His dessert was practically a work of art, and he savored it one tiny bite at a time, waxing sentimental as he realized that all good things must come to an end.

"You mean you've always operated alone?" Shiori asked between mouthfuls of her own identical dessert.

"Yeah," Akira replied, half his mind occupied with enjoying the flavor. "I've always worked solo—not that I've been a hunter all that long."

"And you don't plan to recruit allies or join a syndicate? Whether you hunt monsters or relics, working alone must pose many challenges."

"Yeah, I guess, but it suits me better for now. I never have to argue over dividing pay. And I tend to do my own thing, so I'd rather not be tied down working in a team."

As Shiori chatted with Akira, she sprinkled her talk with personal questions in an effort to learn all she could about him, hiding her cautious probing behind a friendly smile. Although her queries struck Akira as merely light banter, she had chosen them with care.

In the course of their conversation, Akira raised questions of his own to satisfy his idle curiosity on several topics. At one point, their discussion turned to the syndicate Shiori and her teammates belonged to. Akira inquired, "Oh, so you're looking for rookies?"

"Yes, Druncam policy favors recruiting young hunters," Shiori replied. "These days, even complete amateurs are welcome."

"I know I'm not one to talk, but why round up a bunch of newbies who barely



know how to hold a gun? Won't they die in no time?"

Akira and Shiori had very different ideas about what constituted an "amateur." So they ended up talking past each other a bit, though not enough to completely derail their conversation.

"They would if we sent them straight to the wasteland, but Druncam gives them a training period first," Shiori explained. "We also loan recruits equipment to bolster their abilities."

"Gear, huh? That *does* make a big difference," Akira said with feeling. To a boy who'd set out for Kuzusuhara with nothing more than a beat-up handgun, and nearly died as a result, having gear provided to him sounded almost irresistible. "I'm kind of surprised. I figured all hunter syndicates just chewed up their grunts and spit 'em out, but I guess some do things differently."

"In the long term, they'll more than justify Druncam's investment. Still, some of our veteran hunters seem disgruntled. They believe we coddle our rookies too much."

Equipment loaned to the newbies wasn't free. Since fresh recruits weren't big earners, even with training, the brunt of the cost inevitably fell on more successful and experienced shoulders. And because the novice hunters reaped those benefits from the moment they joined, they tended to take the preferential treatment they received for granted. So the tension between old hands and new steadily built over time.

"But this policy has also attracted many highly capable young hunters," Shiori added. "And most of the executives who chart Druncam's course are veteran hunters themselves. So it's not as simple as one side being entirely right or wrong."

"Is that why Shikarabe and Katsuya—I think that's his name—were at each other's throats?" Akira asked, reflecting that there might have been more to the bad blood between the pair than he'd realized.

"Mr. Katsuya and Mr. Shikarabe?" Shiori frowned slightly. "Mr. Katsuya was once under Mr. Shikarabe's command, but I hear they got on extremely poorly. I have nothing against Mr. Katsuya, but..."

Shiori launched straight into her thoughts on the young hunter, subjecting Akira to her griping. Katsuya had already proven himself, over and over, to be more than just another rookie. Even in the underground districts, he had ultimately been reassigned to an extermination team, where he'd demonstrated his skill by holding his own among its elite ranks. Druncam's desk jockeys celebrated him as proof that their approach to recruitment and training was effective.

But if that were the whole story, Shiori wouldn't have been frowning. Her problem was with the side effects of Katsuya's success—specifically, his popularity with women. He was one of Druncam's most skilled rookies, with nearly limitless potential and the syndicate's business executives on his side. And to top it off, he was good-looking. All that would have been enough to make anyone popular. Throw in Katsuya's dedication to perilous rescues, and you had the makings of a star.

Hunting was always dangerous work, and many a hunter found themselves praying for help in desperate straits. So someone who would come running to their aid, put himself on the line for them, and ask for nothing in return but the joy of seeing them safe and sound naturally drew gratitude and admiration from all his peers. In the opposite sex, however, those feelings were often accompanied by more romantic sentiments. Women often approached Katsuya out of self-interest but ended up genuinely falling for him, or began with a healthy respect for his skill that then blossomed into personal affection. So the young hunter had many admirers, even if some—like Reina—failed to recognize their own feelings.

"If Mr. Katsuya were to enter into a proper, committed relationship with Miss Reina, I would make no objections whatsoever," Shiori continued bitterly. "But he shows no interest in choosing a partner, nor does he clearly reject anyone who approaches him. His evasive answers merely raise their hopes, and he leads more of them on by the day! He may not realize what he's doing, but ignorance doesn't absolve him of responsibility!"

"Y-Yeah? You don't say," Akira responded noncommittally, sipping his coffee. He was already on his third cup, and his dessert was long since finished.

Shiori ordered two additional helpings. Her tone grew harsher as she

continued venting her frustrations—something she evidently had few opportunities to indulge in. “I’ll be the first to admit that Mr. Katsuya is extraordinarily talented. And his dedication to helping others is laudable. I cannot blame young ladies for being taken with him. But it hardly matters that he isn’t going out of his way to seduce them, or that they approach him on their own! All that is no excuse! Don’t you agree, Mr. Akira?!”

Akira honestly couldn’t have cared less. Besides, who *wouldn’t* feel a little closer to someone after surviving a brush with death together? But saying so would obviously antagonize Shiori, and he wasn’t eager to repeat past mistakes. So he kept his answer as diplomatic as he could make it without compromising his commitment to treat clients with sincerity.

“Well, er, I’m at an age where I’m more into food than girls, so I don’t know enough about that kind of thing to have a real opinion. I don’t wanna stick up for Katsuya or anything, but, umm, you can’t avoid life-or-death situations when you’re out hunting. So I figure things are gonna get messy no matter what, you know?”

“But Mr. Katsuya even tried to seduce *me*! And in front of Miss Reina too! And what’s more...”

Hadn’t she just said that Katsuya didn’t try to seduce people? Had he really hit on her, or had she just decided to take it that way? Akira couldn’t help wondering, but he held his peace. Shiori seemed a little overwrought, and he didn’t want to provoke her.

“...it’s simply beyond the— Hm? Excuse me.” Shiori took out her terminal and checked something. Then she seemed to recollect herself and said, with her usual calm demeanor, “Please forgive me. I’ve just received a message from a colleague and must now take my leave. Would you like to place any additional orders? If so, this is your final opportunity.”

“No, I’ll go too. I already ate plenty. Thank you for the delicious meal.” Akira bowed politely, thanking his lucky stars for the reprieve.

Akira’s dream had ended, booting him back out into the real world. Outside Stelliana, he looked back at the restaurant with heartfelt emotion.

*That food really was amazing, he said. I've wondered what rich people eat, and I guess now I know.*

*If you liked it so much, buy yourself dinner here next time,* Alpha responded with a pointed smile.

Akira's face turned somber. *No way could I ever afford it.*

He'd heard Shiori discussing prices with a server when she'd settled their bill, and he couldn't believe his ears at the astronomical figures. That anyone could spend so much on a meal shocked his financial sensibilities again.

Alpha chuckled expectantly. *Get good enough, and you'll earn that much in no time. Train hard, now.*

How skilled would Akira need to be to complete his job for Alpha? He still had no idea, but apparently he would need to hunt well enough to easily afford a meal at Stelliana. With that in mind, he grinned back and said, *I'll do my best.*

*I'm counting on it,* Alpha good-naturedly replied, and they returned to Akira's house together.

After parting ways with Akira outside the restaurant, Shiori whipped out her terminal and called her colleague.

"It's me. Please tell Miss Reina I'm on my way back."

"Sure thing," came the lackadaisical reply. "So, how'd it go? Lose any limbs? Missy Reina was worried, you know?"

"I'm fine. I trust you haven't been putting ideas in Miss Reina's head, Kanae?" Shiori's expression hardened slightly. No normal explanation of her errand should have alarmed Reina. In fact, there had been no reason to inform the girl that she had gone to see Akira at all.

"Missy Reina and I were just chatting. Going over how things stand, you know?"

"Chatting about what?"

"All sorts of things, like Missy Reina's hunting career or some hunter named Katsuya who she's apparently got the hots for. And about what happened in

those tunnels. I hear you nearly died. And you were just meeting with that guy, right?”

Shiori made no attempt to mask her displeasure as she snapped, “I believe I specifically instructed you to *avoid* bringing up events in the underground districts with her?”

“It merely happened to come up in conversation. I’m just hired muscle, remember—you can’t expect me to handle all the touchy-feely day-to-day stuff like you do. If you’ve got a problem with that, please hurry on back.”

“I’ll be right there,” Shiori said tersely and ended the call.



In a room in an apartment within the protective walls of Kugamayama’s middle district, the woman called Kanae smirked at the terminal on which she’d just been speaking to Shiori. “Well, *someone’s* in a bad mood.” She pictured the look on Shiori’s face and smiled with a hint of childhood innocence—albeit the mischievous glee of a little prankster.

Kanae wore a maid outfit, just as Shiori had in the tunnels, but Kanae’s was a match for the body armor worn by most hunters. Woven of enhanced fibers, it provided excellent defense against projectiles, edged weapons, and blunt impacts, allowing her to shield the person she guarded with her body if the need arose. What appeared to be black tights peeking out from under the hem of her skirt were actually powered inner wear. Like Shiori, Kanae served as Reina’s bodyguard—but unlike Shiori, who tended to Reina’s needs as a genuine maid, Kanae’s only duty was combat.

Once she’d finished checking in with Shiori, Kanae rejoined Reina—she had briefly stepped out of the room to prevent her call from being overheard.

Although most Druncam rookies lived in a dormitory, this was not compulsory. Syndicate subsidies simply made it the cheapest option. At Shiori’s insistence, Reina had rented a private apartment. And although she hadn’t seen a problem with dorm life at first, she was now glad to be free of it. Sharing space with two maids there would have been too cramped for comfort. Besides which, she was currently taking a break from hunting after her ordeal underground, and holing up in the dormitory would have absolutely destroyed

her reputation.

Reina was in the living room, studying with a textbook in one hand, when Kanae called, “Missy, sis says she’s on her way home.”

“‘Sis’? Oh, you mean Shiori,” Reina answered. “Is she, umm, all right?”

“Don’t worry. She says she’s not hurt and she’ll be right back.”

“Thank goodness.” Reina breathed a sigh of relief, then shot a reproving glare at Kanae, who had previously intimated that Shiori might not return alive.

“Honestly, you had me worried sick. Don’t scare me like that.”

“You never know when someone’s number will be up,” Kanae answered nonchalantly. “Especially if they’re a hunter. So whenever she leaves the walls, you’d better prepare for the worst.”

Reina frowned. “Well, you do have a point.”

She’d originally asked Kanae where Shiori was going because she’d felt uneasy when her companion had gone out saying only that she had “errands to run.” And Kanae had given a straightforward account—albeit after her own fashion and without touching on any information she had a professional duty to conceal. Alarmed by what she heard, Reina had ordered Kanae to check on Shiori. Now that she knew all was well, however, she figured that Kanae had either been teasing her or attempting to impart a harsh lesson.

Kanae read Reina’s thoughts in her expression. She was careful to keep her own face from giving away what was on her mind as she thought, *Missy Reina’s still so naive. Sis could totally have died doing this—in fact, she ordered me to assume she had if she didn’t make contact within twenty-four hours, and she even made arrangements for her replacement.*

It was true: Shiori had issued instructions for all steps that would become necessary in the event of her death, considering these essential precautions before meeting with Akira.

As far as Kanae was concerned, Reina was an extremely spoiled child. Not that she minded—she could (unflatteringly) claim that she put food on the table by cleaning up this naive little girl’s messes. And the more trouble Reina caused, the more often Kanae could be in her element. She was something of a battle

junkie, and she knew it, so she felt no need to rebel against an employer who provided her both ample pay and suitable battlegrounds.

When Kanae heard that Reina had screwed up again in the tunnels, she'd wished she could have been there to enjoy it. Teaching Reina to avoid unnecessary risks was Shiori's job—Kanae had no intention of correcting the girl's reckless streak.

On her return, Shiori immediately changed back into a maid outfit, then gave Reina a thorough explanation of her absence and the reason for it. She took particular care going over her arrangement with Akira—if Reina unknowingly brought the matter up again, they would be right back where they started.

"So, umm, Akira's not mad?" Reina asked when she had heard the whole story.

"Mr. Akira's stance is that he has no opinion on events that never took place," Shiori confirmed. "And to be clear, miss, you must not thank him or apologize to him for what took place in the underground districts. Please avoid the subject altogether."

"I can't even say thank you?"

"No. Nothing happened. If you bring up events stricken from the public record, even to express your gratitude, Mr. Akira may believe you intend to threaten the confidentiality agreement he reached with the city. Please exercise the utmost caution."

Reina found that hard to bear. Akira had saved both her and Shiori, yet she couldn't give him so much as a word of thanks—and might actually inconvenience him if she tried. But as unhappy as she was, she was in no position to complain. So she nodded firmly and said, "All right. I understand."

Shiori sensed how Reina felt and gave her a consoling smile. "I've already expressed our remorse and gratitude to Mr. Akira. He seems to have enjoyed his meal, so you needn't trouble yourself about it any further, miss."

"And if you're nursing a grudge because he nearly let you die, I could always sneak up and deck him for you," Kanae cut in merrily.

Reina and Shiori shot her reproachful looks, and she pretended to recoil. “*Whoa*, tough crowd! I was just trying to, you know, do my best to clear up any hard feelings you’ve still got even though he saved you? I mean, none of us are saints, so you must mind at least a *little*. Oh, but if you don’t, then my mistake.”

“Stop it,” Reina and Shiori said in unison, glaring at Kanae. Neither of them could honestly claim to have *no* complaints about Akira’s conduct—he *had* nearly let Reina die, even if he had been under no obligation to save her. Of *course* they had hard feelings. Yet they were ultimately the ones at fault, and Akira had ended up saving their lives. In hindsight, they saw clearly that he had done everything in his power to ensure their survival. Neither Reina nor Shiori wanted to do anything so shameless as trying to settle their grudges with Akira after that.

“Just kidding,” Kanae said lightly. “I took that too far. I’m sorry.”

The bodyguard felt intensely curious about the young hunter who had gone toe to toe with Shiori even after the latter had used her secret weapon. She had been hoping to start something with him later, feigning ignorance, but her companions’ attitudes made her think better of it now.

*Missy Reina is one thing, but sis is obsessed with her—and even so, she doesn’t want a piece of this Akira guy, she thought. Is he really that dangerous? Hmm. This makes me want to know more.*

Unlike Shiori, Kanae felt no loyalty to her employer—although she appreciated what they had done for her—or to the girl under her protection. She was willing to die to protect Reina, but only because it was her job. Her dedication was predicated on good pay and a comfortable work environment.

Yet Kanae knew the depths of Shiori’s devotion, even if she didn’t share it. She realized that the other woman must harbor *some* ill will toward the boy who had nearly let her precious mistress die. So she was shocked by Shiori’s refusal to let those feelings show.

Why had Shiori chosen this path? Because Akira had ultimately saved Reina, and Shiori’s gratitude blotted out her resentment? Or because she was so wary of Akira that she hesitated to even let that resentment show? Kanae didn’t know which explanation was the true one, but she smiled faintly, hoping that it



was the latter.



“What do you mean ‘nothing happened’?!” Katsuya demanded, scowling.

When he’d reported the incident in the tunnels to Druncam, Mizuha had ordered him not to make any rash moves—the syndicate would investigate. Druncam had its own reputation to consider, and it couldn’t take the near-murder of its hunters by an outsider lying down. But management needed complete and accurate information to determine the appropriate response. So Katsuya had been told to wait for the time being.

He had reluctantly complied.

But now, after all that waiting, here he was in a Druncam office, being told that the investigation had drawn a blank. This he couldn’t accept.

“I’m so sorry,” Mizuha said, bowing to underscore her remorse. “I realize how outraged you must be—I feel the same way. But there’s simply no other way to put it.”

“I...I still can’t accept it,” Katsuya retorted, but the edge had gone out of his voice. He couldn’t maintain his anger in the face of such sincere courtesy, not from someone who had done no wrong. Even so, his dissatisfaction remained.

“I really am terribly sorry, but Druncam’s official position is set in stone: nothing happened. I hate to say it, but this is out of my hands. And since you’re a member of Druncam too, I need you to go along with their decision.”

“B-But...”

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

Katsuya didn’t blame Mizuha. In the face of her profuse apologies, he had no choice but to back down. “I understand.”

Mizuha let out a sigh of relief and smiled. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“No, I’m sorry for lashing out at you. I know it’s not your fault.”

“Don’t mention it. Passing on bad news is part of my job. Please, don’t hesitate to tell me whenever anything else comes up.”

“I will. Excuse me.”

Katsuya left the office. Outside, Yumina was waiting for him.

“Are you satisfied now, Katsuya?” she asked.

“Well, at least I know that the higher-ups are dealing with their own problems, and nothing I say will make a difference.” Then, turning to her, he asked kindly, “Are you okay with this, Yumina? You’re the one he took hostage.”

“I don’t mind,” Yumina replied, smiling calmly. “As long as you’re safe.”

“Y-Yeah?” Katsuya faltered slightly, embarrassed by this frank declaration.

“Yes. So don’t start anything just because this doesn’t sit right with you.”

“I know.”

If Yumina could put up with this, then he had no reason to get hung up on it, Katsuya told himself. He would be better off making himself stronger, so that she would never have to experience something like that again.

Yumina was surprised that Druncam had chosen to sweep the clash in the tunnels under the rug, but unlike Katsuya, she wasn’t outraged by it. She had turned the incident over in her mind and concluded that Akira was probably one of the victims. True, he had definitely fought Shiori, and Reina must have gotten mixed up in things as well. But Shiori would never have let him off the hook if he had been clearly in the wrong—and she wouldn’t have let an order from Druncam stop her from taking revenge.

And although Yumina had asked around and investigated to the best of her abilities, she saw no sign that Shiori had made any moves against Akira. In which case, either the fault lay with Reina and Shiori, or the clash had been the result of an unfortunate coincidence. And *that* meant that the women were probably still alive only because Akira had made an effort to avoid killing them.

Then Katsuya’s team had barged in, expecting trouble. Part of her couldn’t blame Akira for the way he’d received them.

Yumina hadn’t shared her speculations with Katsuya because she suspected they would spark fruitless arguments. Katsuya might easily declare that he

couldn't believe a story like that unless he met Akira to confirm it in person. She didn't need him running off to pester the other boy. Something told her that the more Katsuya and Akira saw of each other, the more conflict would ensue. The orders preventing Katsuya from questioning Akira were therefore a blessing in disguise—as long as they were in effect, she doubted he would make any rash attempts to get in touch.

So Yumina decided against saying anything that might change Katsuya's mind.

Once she had finished convincing Katsuya, Mizuha exhaled and smiled.

"Now we're in the clear," she said to herself. "Honestly, what a lucky break."

After Akira had sealed his deal with Kibayashi, Kugamayama City had put pressure on Druncam to play along with the narrative of its fictitious agent. But the syndicate had been only too happy to oblige. Hostage situation or not, one of its members had sided with a relic thief against a fellow hunter. That was a disgrace, and they welcomed the chance to wipe it from the record. The facts would remain in the classified municipal records, but the city was as anxious as the syndicate that they should never see the light of day. The only remaining concern was that a Druncam hunter might talk.

Reina and Shiori had already agreed to secrecy. And reports indicated that Shiori had also secured the consent of the unaffiliated hunter involved through a private settlement. That left only Katsuya's team, and Mizuha had just dealt with them. As a result, the desk jockeys' ascendancy had come through the crisis unscathed. If anything, they were more deeply in bed with the city than before. So, despite the string of unforeseen events in the underground districts, Mizuha was satisfied with this outcome.



Akira relaxed in his bathtub, smiling even wider than usual. He was reliving his meal at Stelliana.

"I can't believe how good that food was," he said. "I wanna go back. Guess that's one more reason to make money."

As always, Alpha was bathing with him. But Akira—at whose age food

counted for more than sex—was so absorbed in remembering flavors that he paid the naked goddess beside him even less attention than usual.

“Hey, remember that cyborg in the restaurant?” he asked. “I never did find out if he could eat that food. And if he could, what would happen to it?”

*A body with a biofuel converter would break it down for energy or use it to support organic components, Alpha replied. Otherwise, they’d just take the food out again later.*

“And what then?”

*They’d throw it out, I suppose.*

“You mean they just eat for *pleasure*? Rich people sure think different.” Akira’s expression was unreadable. After his life in the slums, where eating was a struggle against starvation, he found such luxury almost disgusting.

*They can’t always help it, Alpha added. Giving up your organic body doesn’t mean you stop getting hungry.*

“Really?”

*Yes. Remember how you said that sitting in front of delicious food you can’t eat would be torture? They need to do something to mitigate that, even if they can’t take nourishment from what they ingest.*

Appetite was a problem for all cyborgs, no matter how well they passed for flesh and blood. Specialized rations and other solutions had been developed to meet the demand, and these had become essential to cyborgs’ mental well-being.

“Makes sense.” Akira nodded. “Those cyborgs I fought were crazy strong, but I guess they had to give up a lot to get that way.”

*Well, that’s the cost of cyberization. Some especially high performance synthetic bodies avoid those drawbacks, but you can imagine how astronomical their price tags are. Only a handful of people can afford those: executives at major corporations, the richest of the rich, and the most successful hunters on the Front Line.*

“I bet I could sell a mountain of relics and still not be able to afford a body like

that. Maybe that's what those thieves were hoping to buy. I mean, they were willing to pick a fight with the city to get rich."

Perhaps Yajima and his accomplices had lost their bodies in some unfortunate accident or monster attack, condemning them to live without the ability to eat. Perhaps they had dreamed of selling their stolen relics and buying the high-end prosthetics that would allow them to taste fine food once more. Akira couldn't help wondering. It was only speculation, but after the blissful meal he'd had, such a motivation seemed plausible.

That night, Akira dreamed he was fighting Nelia in a rubble-strewn building, frantically evading her nonstop barrage of slashes. Nelia's furious onslaught left him no openings for counterattacking. It took all he had just to survive against an opponent whose skill so vastly exceeded his.

Nelia held a blade in each hand, but Akira was unarmed. And he knew he couldn't beat her bare-handed—a punch or a kick from him couldn't dent her prosthetic body, and he might lose an arm or leg in the attempt.

"Where's my gun?!" he shouted frantically. "Where's my CWH?! I've got no chance in hell without it!"

*You lost your CWH, remember? Alpha reminded him. You'll need to buy a new one from Shizuka.*

"Oh, right!"

A lot about this situation didn't add up, but the inconsistencies were lost on Dream-Akira.

"Wait, weren't we in Cartridge Freak just the other day?! Why didn't I buy one then?!"

*Because it would be too heavy to carry without your powered suit—which you also lost.*

"Oh, right! Hang on..." Akira cast a puzzled glance down at himself. He wore not his suit but the body armor Kibayashi had given him. And without a suit, he realized, he couldn't benefit from Alpha's support. His movements immediately lost their edge.

When Nelia's next strike closed in on him, he had only his own unaugmented body to draw on. In his eyes, the keen edge of the blade appeared to approach in slow motion.

*Oh, I'm dead*, he thought, as if it were somebody else's problem. Then the blade lopped off his head. As he looked down at his own decapitated corpse, the last thing that passed through his fading mind was: *I wish I could've tasted that food one more time.*

Then Akira woke up. His room was dark. It was not yet dawn.

He sat up and felt his neck. Once he was certain it was still whole, he finally realized what had happened.

"A dream?"

*Are you all right?* Alpha asked, giving him a worried look.

"Yeah, it's nothing. Just a weird dream." Akira said no more, but he kept looking at her. Although he'd survived his real battle with Nelia, he had just envisioned himself dying without Alpha's support.

*Did that dream show my real skill?* he wondered. He wasn't much better off now than he had been in the dream—if real life threw a similar predicament his way, he would probably die just as easily. This experience had been a fresh reminder of his current condition. He was scraping by because he'd had the good fortune to meet Alpha and gain her protection, but how long would that luck hold? He didn't know.

Alpha responded to his silent stare with a teasing smile. *What's wrong? Have you finally fallen for me?*

But Akira remained somber. At last, even Alpha grew perplexed, and a note of concern entered her voice. *Akira, what's wrong?*

Slowly, he answered, "Alpha, how long are you gonna look out for me?"

*I'll support you until you finish the job I hired you for. Really, Akira, what's gotten into you?*

"Well, I was just thinking that you could probably have pulled it off in no time if you'd partnered up with a top-notch hunter instead of a kid like me."

Alpha stared hard at Akira, and he met her gaze.

“You picked me because I’m an Old Domain User, right? But I can’t be the only hunter who can do that stuff. I bet you could find another one. Actually, it wouldn’t even have to be another User—you could just get me to hire someone for you.”

Akira fell silent, apparently waiting for an answer. For a while, Alpha merely looked at him. Then, earnestly, she said, *I won’t ask what’s made you so concerned that you might lose my help, and I won’t trick you into telling me either. But let me be clear: my support is an advance payment on the job I hired you to do. I intend to stick with you—and make you stick with me—until that job is done.*

“Yeah?” Akira said hesitantly. “Yeah, I guess you did say that.”

*It’s the truth.*

Between the lines, Alpha implied that since Akira had accepted her support, he had a moral and professional obligation to see his end of their bargain through. She wouldn’t accept anything else, even if he thought she’d be better off working with another hunter—and even if he was right about that.

Akira had felt something like guilt for all she’d done for him—which was more than he thought he deserved. Hearing her response put his mind a bit more at ease. Alpha had known it would, he realized. That was why she had said it. So he grinned and responded, “Okay. Night.”

*Good night,* Alpha said, smiling as always. *Have pleasant dreams this time.*

“I don’t think I’ve gotta worry.”

Akira lay down, and before long, he was fast asleep again. Even if he had the same dream, it wouldn’t end the same way. He felt certain of that, although he couldn’t say why.

The next day, Akira resumed training to control his perception of time. As before, Alpha was overdressed and carried a sword in each hand. Then she began her elegant, awe-inspiring dance, which flowed seamlessly into a decapitating strike. Akira still couldn’t dodge her blades, but his reaction was

nothing like it had been before. He didn't move a muscle, not making so much as an attempt at an evasive maneuver. He simply scrutinized Alpha.

*Akira?* she asked.

"I'm fine. Keep going," he said, deadly serious.

Alpha could see that he wasn't fooling around and hadn't given up. So, although puzzled, she got back into position, shed a strip of cloth, and resumed dancing without any further questions.

Akira remained immobile, intently watching Alpha while he suffered her attacks. Each time her blades passed through his body, another piece of her costume vanished. Her ornate adornments fell away, and even more integral fabric began to disappear, revealing more and more of her skin. In the process, her outfit increasingly resembled the one Nelia had worn when Akira had faced her in Kuzusuhara.

*Remember, he willed himself. Remember that battle. Remember how you felt in that dream. Remember how tense you were when you fought her. I managed to do it then, and even in my dream, so I must be able to pull it off now! Alpha told me I could!*

Akira was striving to recall, recreate, and maintain the concentration he'd experience when in mortal peril, that tense sensation of straddling the line between life and death. He kept his gaze fixed on Alpha—and on the swords in her hands, which had passed through him so many times.

Then, out of the interwoven fast and slow steps of Alpha's dance, she launched a sharp, left-handed slash, aiming for another decapitation. Coincidentally, this was the same strike Nelia had used in Akira's dream. He watched the razor-sharp blade, fully aware of its slow progress toward his neck. He arched back, anxious to get out of its path. Even if the murderous sword had actually existed, it wouldn't have left a scratch on Akira.

He dodged the blow, but overbalanced and toppled backward, smashing the back of his head into the floor. He lay there, grimacing in pain and clutching his head in both hands.

*Are you all right?* Alpha asked, sounding concerned as she rushed over to him.



“I-It hurts like hell! Where’s the medicine?”

*On that shelf.*

Akira staggered upright and grabbed the package of medicine he’d left on a shelf nearby—one of the million-aurum boxes. He opened it and pulled out a tube of healing paste, which he smeared onto his excruciating bump. The pain in his head swiftly began to recede. The actual damage wasn’t healed yet, but Akira appreciated the analgesic effect in the meantime. Soon, he would be fully recovered. He didn’t even need to wipe the remaining paste off his hair, since it would gradually absorb into his skin.

“It sure is handy to have medicine I can put right on wherever I’m hurt,” he remarked.

*Topical and oral medications both have their trade-offs, Alpha said. It depends whether you need to just treat an injury or to cure your exhaustion too, and whether you can get your clothes off to apply paste in the heat of battle. Then her tone changed. More importantly, Akira, you succeeded, didn’t you?*

It was a question, but her beaming face said that she already knew the answer.

Akira returned her smile. “Yeah, I pulled it off. Although because of that, I couldn’t move right and ended up nearly cracking my skull open.”

*You couldn’t help that. Just because time seems ten times longer to you doesn’t mean you can move ten times faster. Your actual movements got out of sync with what you thought you were doing.*

“Oh, so that’s why I was so clumsy.”

*While controlling your perception of time, you’ll need to consciously perform movements you’ve always made without thinking. Get a firm grasp on what your body is doing, even though it suddenly seems so much less responsive, and then make that slow-motion body do your bidding. And the only way to get the hang of that is practice.*

“Yeah, practice makes perfect,” Akira agreed, pressing a hand to his head. He was no longer in pain, but the spot where he’d hit his head still felt off.

*Want to take a breather? It looks like you took quite a bad bump.*

“No, let’s keep going. I want to do it again while I still remember the feeling.”

*All right, but don’t push yourself too hard.*

“I won’t.”

The training resumed, as did Alpha’s dance, which grew more beguiling with each bit of cloth she shed. Akira kept his gaze fixed on her, his face set in a stern expression, as he strove to follow her movements.

By the time Alpha announced that training was over for the day, she wore merely a revealing dress. This was more than she’d had on when she had concluded previous sessions—but it wasn’t because Akira had kept dodging her attacks. Rather, he had become too exhausted to continue before Alpha could remove her last scraps of clothing. Now he lay splayed out on the floor, breathing heavily. He had succeeded in compressing his perception of time more than once in the course of the exercise, and each success had forced him to tax his brain with intense concentration.

The more he compressed his perceptions, the longer he had to focus. And moving in that state was no different from prolonged, strenuous activity. Naturally, the resulting fatigue was equally extreme, leaving his mind and body so worn out that he found it difficult to stand.

*Come on, Alpha called to the prone boy, still in her scandalous attire. Training is over, so let’s go. Put in a little more effort and get back on your feet.*

“I can’t,” Akira groaned. “Let... Let me rest here a little longer. It won’t take long.”

*All right, but I’ll hold you to that. You’ll fall asleep there if you don’t get up soon, and you’d regret that in the morning. At least drag yourself into bed first.*

Life on the streets had given Akira ample experience of sleeping on hard ground, so he knew exactly what Alpha meant about regret. Now that he’d grown used to soft beds, he’d lost the knack of mastering his fatigue without one. If he nodded off where he lay, he would spend the next day wishing he hadn’t. So he took deep breaths until his breathing was steady, then gathered his willpower and struggled to his feet. After trudging straight to his bedroom,

he tumbled into bed as if it had sucked him in the moment his feet crossed the threshold.

Alpha stood beside him, still dressed in the provocative remains of her training costume (since he hadn't told her to change). Daringly cut holes in her dress offered glimpses of underwear that radiated luxury.

Akira currently lacked the energy to complain. He had managed to keep his drooping eyelids open on the walk, but now, succumbing to his accumulated fatigue and the soft touch of his bedding, he shut them at last.

"I'm gonna nap," he mumbled. "Wake me when it's lesson time."

*Just sleep, Alpha replied. You've done enough for today, and you won't learn anything if you force yourself to get up and stumble through your lessons tired.*

"Kay."

With that, Akira abandoned himself to slumber.

Alpha watched and pondered as his breathing settled into a regular rhythm. She had calculated that Akira would require half a year at least to learn perceived-time manipulation. Now he'd upset her predictions. Was this turn of events expedient? Or was it undesirable because it exceeded her expectations? Alpha couldn't make up her mind. But in either case, she decided, she would need to revise her plans. As she weighed the various potential adjustments, she was not smiling.

## Chapter 67: Despair

Akira trotted through the slums toward Sheryl's base. He no longer had a bike to stash there—and his newly rented house had a garage, anyway. Still, he suspected that Sheryl would become a real pain in the ass if he didn't put in the occasional appearance, even when he had no real need to. And since a trip to the wasteland was out of the question until Shizuka received the new gear he'd ordered, dropping in on Sheryl was a welcome break from his days of training and study.

After all the years he'd lived in the slums, he was surprised to find himself feeling nostalgic for their sights—a sign that he thought he had finally left them behind.

His mood was not lost on Alpha. *Sentimentality is all well and good, she said, but don't forget to watch your back.*

*I know, I know. I'm not the kid I used to be—I've grown,* he retorted, convinced that if he looked laid-back, it was a result of confidence, not carelessness. He knew that he could handle an attack now.

Passing by the Hunter Office exchange, he glanced down a nearby side street, which led into the back alleys, and cracked a grin. *If someone tried to jump me in there like before, I bet I could take care of 'em without your help now. What do you think?*

*I think you should aim higher,* Alpha teased.

*Guess you've got a point.* Akira chuckled. He found himself thinking back to that day...



Akira had just completed his first relic sale to the exchange. It had netted him three coins—a measly three hundred aurum. The same went for all rank one hunters, with their flimsy paper IDs—a fixed advance of three hundred aurum, regardless of the quantity or quality of their finds. Once the appraisal was

complete, they would receive the balance at the time of their next sale.

Those three coins weren't much, but Akira had still risked his life for them. He made sure they were stowed safely in his pocket, then decided to call it a day and trudged back to the alley where he made his bed, determined to return to the ruins in the morning and finally get some decent compensation for his pains.

That was when the quintet of robbers had jumped him. They'd spotted him coming out of the exchange and assumed he must have money on him.

They were all kids around Akira's age. First, they surrounded him—three in front, two behind. Then their leader, a boy called Darube, grinned at their prey and said, "How's about you fork over the cash? We know you've got some."

Akira had expected as much, but it still made him scowl. "I'm broke," he said, still hoping to discourage them. "Can't you tell by looking at me? If you wanna shake someone down, pick a better target."

Akira certainly *looked* broke—he didn't even have a decent set of clothes yet. Anyone would have pegged him as down on his luck, even for a slum dweller. The paper bag he clutched contained a knife, some medicine, and other Old World relics he'd kept for himself, but to any observer it looked like nothing more than a way for a street kid to keep his few meager possessions on hand and away from thieves. So unless the would-be robbers were only demanding money as an excuse to torment a weaker boy for sport, Akira's answer should have been a serious blow to their motivation.

But Darube sneered and gave a mocking little shake of his head. The group had seen Akira leaving for the ruins and staked out the exchange, lying in wait for their potential quarry. "Quit fibbin'. We saw you comin' out of the exchange. And we know you went out toward the ruins yesterday and today. You didn't stop at the exchange yesterday, but you did today, so you must've found something to sell. And that means you oughta have cash on you."

More than a few people reckoned that ambushing a returning relic-seeker was safer than braving the ruins themselves. Not that Darube and his crew could risk attacking an adult hunter, of course—they only targeted other kids, like Akira. Muggings like this were yet another reason why few children made

repeated relic sales, even if they survived one trip to the ruins.

Akira sighed, realizing that he couldn't bluff his way out of this. So he announced, "I've only got three hundred aurum."

"Say what? Are you pullin' my leg?"

"I ain't kidding, and I ain't lying either. They only paid me three hundred aurum for the stuff I brought in—said that's the rules. That's not even worth stealing if you've gotta split it five ways. So go bother somebody else."

Darube eyed Akira suspiciously, but the other boy didn't seem to be lying. Besides, he remembered hearing something like that before, now that he thought about it. "What the hell?" he grumbled, clicking his tongue in irritation. "We haven't had a big score in a while, and you went and got our hopes up. Don't lead us on like that, asshole."

"Sorry. Can I go now?"

The other kids had lost their motivation, but Darube was the ringleader of this robbery, and he was still determined to get *something* of value from Akira. Yet looking over his prospective victim again, he saw only tattered clothes—not worth taking—and a grimy paper bag, which seemed unlikely to contain anything he could sell at a decent price. Normally, he would have given up like his buddies. But he'd convinced them that Akira would be their first easy mark in ages, and realizing he'd misjudged things made him more irritable than usual.

"Oh, hell! I don't care anymore!" he shouted, letting his anger take control and drawing his gun. "Gimme that three hundred aurum if you wanna live!"

Akira's scowl deepened. "Shooting me won't help you—especially since I'll shoot back. Give it a rest. Three hundred aurum ain't worth it."

"Shut up and hand it over!"

Darube knew killing the destitute would just leave him out the cost of a bullet, and that a desperate counterattack might leave its mark on him. But he wanted to vent his frustration, and he'd already drawn his gun, so he kept going. He took comfort in the knowledge that it was five against one and that their victim wasn't even holding a weapon yet, and his overconfidence made him rash.

Akira's scowl became a grimace. He knew that three hundred aurum wasn't worth fighting for. But he'd already risked his life for that paltry sum—his first pay as a hunter. He felt it would be inauspicious to cave to their threats and hand the money over. He was caught between a rock and a hard place.

Then Alpha moved in front of him and smiled. *Akira, answer in a whisper, she said. And don't worry, I can hear anything you say, no matter how quietly. Got that?*

Akira had yet to learn telepathic communication. In a voice so soft that he himself could barely make it out, he answered, "Okay."

*I'll back you up if you need it. What do you want to do? Give them what they want, escape, or kill them? It's your choice.*

He could give up his hard-won earnings and survive, but then he would need to pay again the next time they accosted him. He could make a run for it, but then he'd have to run again if they crossed paths. Or he could try to kill his enemies, though that might get him killed instead.

Akira chose without hesitation. "I'll kill them."

Alpha beamed confidently. *All right! I'll tell you just what to do, starting with breaking through their encirclement. You'll slip between the pair behind you—they're complacent and standing fairly far apart. Turn around and then, as you take your second step, crouch down and roll past them. Once you're through, immediately dive into the alley on your right. Then it will be time to strike back. And hang on tight to that paper bag. Did you get all that?*

"Yeah. When do I turn around?"

*Right now.*

Akira spun around and put out his right foot—his first step. Startled, the duo behind him froze for an instant. Then came his left foot—his second step. The boys reached out to grab him, but their arms snatched only air as he tumbled forward into a crouch. Darube opened fire, not even bothering to aim, and his bullets likewise passed harmlessly over Akira's head. The shots also shocked the other boys, who froze, giving Akira the opening he needed to dive into the alleyway on his right and start running. By the time the would-be robbers had

gathered their wits and looked around the corner, he was out of sight.

“Hey! Watch it!” shouted one of the boys Darube had come close to shooting.

“Shut up! It’s his fault for bolting like that! That jackass messed with the wrong guy! Come on! We’re gonna hunt him down and kill him!”

“Forget him,” another kid grumbled. “What’s the point of going after a broke guy? Anyway, he’s long gone. If you wanna go after him, wait till he shows up at the exchange again—he oughta have money after that.”

Darube cursed, frustrated by his comrades’ indifference, and gave up on pursuing Akira. As they started to walk away, he took a last, reluctant look back at the alley down which the boy had vanished.

His jaw dropped. Akira had just burst out of the alleyway, gun pointed straight at him.

Darube’s coincidental look back allowed him to jerk out of the way of Akira’s shots, but some of his buddies weren’t so lucky. The bullets hit them cleanly, and they went down, crying in pain.

“You again?!” Darube screamed, raising his own gun to return fire. But Akira was already gone, leaving Darube’s muzzle pointing at an empty street.

His enemy’s disappearance took the edge off the shock and confusion of the sudden attack. Darube’s anger swelled, blotting out the terror of his brush with death. His gun, trained on nothing, trembled with the fury of the boy who held it. The alleys echoed with his rage-fueled roar:

“I’ll teach him to screw with me!”

Akira ran through the back alleys, looking grim. He hadn’t even stopped to check whether he’d hit anyone before racing off again, so he’d already put a fair distance between himself and Darube.

“Alpha, how’d it go?!” he demanded.

*You hit three of them, Alpha replied. Two are out of action, but they’re all alive.*

“Okay. That’s a good start.”



Akira was no gunslinger, so such quick, accurate shooting should have been beyond him. After darting out of the alleyway, he would normally have had to look for his enemies, slowly line up his shot, and then stick around to see if he'd aimed true. And his targets would certainly have struck back before he could pull off such an amateurish maneuver.

But Alpha had changed that. She had gone ahead of Akira and stopped in an effective firing position, pointing at Darube's group. He had used her as a marker to leap into place, then raised his gun in the direction she'd shown him and pulled the trigger exactly as many times as she'd told him to—and then zipped back to safety. His obedience had made his sneak attack a success. But his enemies were still out there, and the fight was still on.

*Hurry to the next position, Alpha instructed. This way.*

"Right." Akira sprinted through the alleys after her.

Darube peeked into the alleyway where Akira had vanished, his gun at the ready. Akira was nowhere in sight, but he might have been hiding somewhere. Darube and his companion—the other boy who had been lucky enough to come through the attack unscathed—advanced warily. As Darube made to go farther in, his buddy nervously objected, "H-Hey! What about the others?! Are you just gonna leave 'em there?!"

"Killing that asshole comes first!" Darube snapped, glowering. "We can't move 'em to someplace safe while he's on the loose! What if he shoots us while we're carrying 'em?!"

"O-Oh, yeah. Right." The boy paused, then asked hesitantly, "You're *not* gonna ditch 'em, right?"

"If I was gonna ditch anyone, I would've run for it on my own already."

"G-Good point."

The boy seemed mollified, but Darube was still seething at his companions. If they hadn't stopped him, he selfishly thought, none of them would be in this mess.

Akira returned to the scene of his attack, taking a circuitous route to avoid his pursuers. Warily, he approached Darube's fallen comrades. Now he could take the time to aim carefully at their heads.

One was already dead, one merely unconscious, and one noticed Akira and tried to murmur something. He pulled the trigger regardless. Three gunshots later, he stood over three corpses with holes in their heads.

"Three down, two to go."

*Don't waste time, Alpha reminded him. Hide.*

"On it."

Once again, Akira took cover in an alleyway, pressing his back to a wall and steadying his breathing while he awaited Alpha's next instruction.

*Akira, get out that medicine and swallow some of it. The stuff I told you not to sell.*

"But I'm not hurt," he said.

*Just take some. Ten capsules should do it.*

Akira didn't understand the direction, but he still fished a package out of his paper bag, unsealed it, and poured the capsules inside onto his palm.

*These are relics too, right? he thought to himself. I mean, they're Old World meds, so they're probably worth a fortune. It feels like a waste to take 'em when I'm not even hurt, but she said to, so oh well.*

Akira figured Alpha must have her reasons, so he obediently gulped down the capsules.

The sound of gunshots brought Darube rushing back to his friends' sides, only to find their lifeless bodies.

"Shit! He beat us here!" he shouted, face contorted in rage.

Behind him, his companion backed away slowly, his face a bloodless mask of terror. Once he'd gotten far enough from Darube, he cried, "I-It's... It's your fault! This only happened because you attacked him!" He turned and ran as fast

as his legs could carry him.

Gunfire! Akira had shot at him and missed.

The boy shrieked as he vanished into the depths of the slums.

Darube could have gotten away too, if he'd wanted to. But hatred for his friends' killer and scorn for the boy who'd fled spurred him on. He let his fury overwhelm him and roared, "I'll make you wish you'd never messed with me!"

There was only one side street from which Akira could have shot at the fleeing boy. Darube smothered his fear of combat with hatred and charged toward his enemy.

Akira tried to shoot Darube as the other boy entered the alleyway. He couldn't yet use augmented reality to see targets through walls, so Alpha kept him apprised of Darube's rough position by standing ahead of him and pointing. He held his pistol firmly in both hands, waiting to fire as soon as his enemy poked his head around the corner.

What happened next surprised him. He'd expected Darube to stop and try to warily scope out his hiding spot. But the enraged boy threw caution to the wind and barreled headlong into the alleyway.

Darube was just as startled. He'd figured that Akira would already have run off down the alley, and he'd been racing to catch up. But there was his enemy right in front of him.

This double miscalculation left them facing each other down at point-blank range. And despite their surprise, they aimed their weapons and fired almost simultaneously. Two gunshots rang out as one.

Akira and Darube hit the ground, both seriously wounded in the side, both grimacing in pain, and both thinking the same thing: My enemy isn't dead yet. I didn't finish the job, and I need to change that soon—before he can. So they fought through agony to rise and fire again. And when Darube scrambled up and started to raise his weapon, he found himself already looking down the barrel of Akira's gun.

Akira shot first, and he was too close to miss. The bullet didn't kill Darube

instantly, but it did rob him of the strength to resist. The boy dropped his gun and crumpled, ending his short life in a pool of his own blood.

After killing Darube, Akira looked at his own wound. There was a hole in his now blood-soaked shirt—clearly a serious injury. Yet while he felt sluggish, the pain was almost gone. He was still marveling at it when Alpha gravely said, *Akira, treat that injury right now.*

“Are you sure, Alpha?” he asked. “It doesn’t really hurt much.”

*That’s just the capsules you took earlier dulling the pain. You haven’t actually healed.*

“Really? Oh, so that’s why you told me to take ’em early?”

The painkillers in the medicine had allowed Akira to move despite his injury. Because he’d only just taken the capsules when he’d been shot, they had immediately gone to work. Only a slight edge—but to him, the difference between life and death.

*Take another ten capsules immediately, Alpha instructed. Then open up another ten and sprinkle the powder inside on your wound. Finally, cover it with medical tape. And hurry—if you pass out before you finish, you’ll never wake up.*

Akira pushed his flagging body to retrieve the medicine from his paper bag, poured out ten or so capsules, and swallowed them. Next, he tore more open with trembling hands and dusted the contents on his injury. The pain hit him immediately, no less excruciating than getting shot had been. He gritted his teeth, then turned a worried look toward Alpha.

“D-Did I do that right?”

*The painkillers don’t do much when you apply them directly, she explained. But the medical nanomachines work faster and more efficiently this way than when you take them orally, so put up with it.*

Finally, Akira took a roll of bandage-like medical tape from his bag and plastered it over his wound.

*That does it for your treatment, Alpha informed him. Let’s hurry and get out of here. You’ll be in danger if you stay.*

“I don’t know if I can, but I guess I’d better, even if I’ve gotta drag myself clear of this mess.”

Akira struggled unsteadily to his feet, then slowly began to walk. Each step meant another wave of agony, but he somehow found the will to keep going. It was a surprising feat, given the severity of his wound, and a testament to the shocking speed with which the recovery capsules had taken effect. Akira, however, was in too much pain to marvel at technology. His face contorted in agony as he walked on, looking ready to collapse at any moment.

*Hang in there,* Alpha encouraged him, her expression grave.

“I’ll try,” he said.

Akira just barely made it to a different sleeping spot than he’d used the day before. He half fell into it, taking care not to black out while he prepared his shelter with more than usual care. If anyone got close to him before he healed, he was done for. So he arranged himself in a corner of the back alleys, taking pains to hide from prying eyes. Once his bed was made, he toppled sideways onto it.

“Alpha,” he groaned, “I can’t take any more. I’ve gotta sleep. Night.”

*Good night. Rest well,* Alpha replied, her expression concerned and her voice gentle.

Akira closed his eyes, exhaustion bleeding through his grim visage, and darkness soon took him. *May I wake up again,* he prayed, although to who or what he did not know.

The next morning, Akira awakened feeling more refreshed than he’d believed possible. But as surprised as he was, he felt more grateful to have woken up at all.

“Guess I’m still kicking,” he murmured, moved. Then, “Huh?”

His side felt strange, so he ran his hand along it and felt something hard where he’d been shot the day before. Whatever it was lay under the medical tape, so he gingerly peeled it back to reveal a slightly deformed bullet. Although the projectile looked like it was sinking into his body, it was actually being

pushed out.

“Is this the shot I took yesterday?” he wondered. “It must’ve still been inside me.”

*Looks like it, Alpha chimed in. The medical nanomachines tried to force it out of you, but the tape was in the way. You’d better pull it out now.*

Akira was startled to find her suddenly beside him, though not as shocked as he had been the day before. He’d started growing used to her presence. When he plucked out the bullet and resealed the tape, he found that his pain had vanished completely.

*Good morning, Akira, Alpha said, smiling again. I know yesterday was rough, but did you sleep well?*

“Yeah, I slept great,” he answered. “Although I think I slept too much.”

The sun was already high in the sky. Akira usually rose long before this, and his empty stomach was protesting. He’d gone without dinner, and unless he acted fast, he was set to miss breakfast.

“Crap! I’m not too late for rations, am I?!” he shouted, sprinting toward the distribution center.

He made it just in the nick of time.



Even back when he’d been a weakling, Akira had still fought desperately. There had been a time when he could only put up with being robbed and running for his life. Yet now he’d chosen to stand his ground, hold on to what was his, and kill. And he’d gone through with his decision, risking his life to defend his hard-won prize. That choice had led to who he was now. He had grown stronger through intensive training, matured after numerous brushes with death, and gained things he’d once only dreamed of. As he came out of his reverie, he felt more certain than ever that he’d made the right call.

In the meantime, a girl passed by him.



Even the slums, home to the city’s most impoverished class, had a functioning

economy. Many shady businesses found the nearly lawless zone more congenial to their operations, and vast sums of money changed hands in pursuit of demands that could not be met by any conventional means. Of course, such fortunes were not for those who lived on the streets. They went to the elite of the slums—gang leaders who ruled their turf with wealth and violence. Even so, they had enough of an impact to fatten the wallets of the grunts who did the slum lords' bidding. And where there was money, there were people bent on taking it.

Some, confident in their capacity for violence, turned to armed robbery. After a string of successes, they sometimes grew foolhardy enough to try for juicier prey—like hunters—and get themselves massacred in the attempt. But those who didn't fancy their chances in a fight favored subtler forms of thievery, and the girl called Lucia was one of these.

Lucia was lucky enough to be a natural-born pickpocket and unlucky enough that she had to rely on that talent to survive. Her hard life allowed her to justify her actions, while her skill ensured her thefts were successful and undetected. She had honed her craft with each pocket that circumstances drove her to pick, and now easily qualified as a master.

In one sense, Lucia had had a string of successes too—and success had made her careless. One day she'd made a big mistake—sharing her loot with someone she only knew slightly. Not everyone could keep a secret, and when the group she belonged to discovered her skills, they had demanded ever greater contributions from her, until she was expected to bring in enough money to support the whole organization. At that point, she had run away.

Ever since then, Lucia had worked alone. She had personal friends, but she avoided joining any gang. Yet the slums were a harsh place for a girl on her own. There were few ways to make money, and even fewer to keep it. To secure food, shelter, and the means to protect herself, Lucia had no choice but to become even more dependent on her rare gift.

That day, she'd gone out hunting for marks as usual. Lucia didn't simply pick every pocket she came upon—she sought out people who seemed both relatively affluent and easy to rob. Most of her fellow slum dwellers had nothing worth taking, and the few exceptions who walked around with small

fortunes in their pockets were too dangerous to risk offending. So slum pickpockets usually targeted outsiders of all stripes: customers en route to shops that couldn't do business in any decent district, self-assured fighters who saw no need to avoid the slums on their way to the wasteland, visitors on shady business, people who wandered in out of idle curiosity, pursuers whose quarry had fled to the slums, and bargain hunters sifting through the open-air stalls. Such people carried more cash than the locals and more benevolent morals—a pickpocket caught robbing them might get off with merely a savage beating. To the lighter-fingered slum dwellers, they made ideal prey.

Lucia was seeking just this kind of game when she set her sights on a lone hunter.

Hunters ran the gamut from seasoned veterans, who didn't bear provoking, to washouts who wasted their meager earnings on booze and could barely afford to keep their gear in order. Both types were accustomed to the wasteland. Muggers rarely went after hunters because, while their equipment would fetch a high price, they were far more likely to slaughter their attackers than give it up.

Pickpockets, on the other hand, had no such aversion. They never took weapons or other gear—hunters depended on these tools of their trade to keep themselves alive and thus kept a close eye on them. But that same wariness made many less attentive to their other possessions—such as wallets.

To Lucia's eye, this particular hunter looked like an easy mark. He dressed the part, but his spotless clothes showed no sign of wasteland expeditions. The rifle he carried was brand new and equally pristine. He looked young, and exuded none of the menace or sharpness that marked a battle-hardened hunter. Lucia pegged him as a rookie who'd thrown together the bare minimum he needed to apply for a rank ten ID.

*He'll do, she decided. If he's out for a look around the stalls after finishing his registration, he might have a fair bit of cash on him. I think I'll help myself to it before he wastes it all.*

She approached her prey as usual, in the guise of a coincidental passerby, and lifted his wallet with the consummate skill born of natural genius and long



practice. The hunter never even noticed he'd been robbed.



Having lost his entire kit and not yet received his new one, Akira looked a poor shadow of the figure he'd once cut wearing his powered suit and toting his massive rifle. And since he'd never been to the wasteland in his current getup, it all appeared fresh off the rack. Add to that his lack of a master's intimidating aura, and no one could be blamed for mistaking him for a newly registered rookie. So he suffered a fate all too common when newly minted hunters wandered the slums.

*Akira, you just lost your wallet,* Alpha blithely informed him.

*Huh?!* Akira immediately thrust his hand into his pocket and froze. Sure enough, his wallet wasn't where it should have been.

*Keep it together,* Alpha said with a hint of annoyance. *When you're back in a powered suit, I can control it to stop thieves, but you'll have to fend for yourself until then.*

The loss of his wallet had only cost Akira about a hundred thousand aurum. He would once have considered that a fortune, but given his current earnings, it was no cause for panic. Alpha considered it merely a somewhat steep tuition for correcting Akira's overconfidence. Akira thought differently.

*Akira?* she asked.

He still stood frozen in shock, trembling faintly. He didn't seem to have heard Alpha's remonstrance. Then his trembling stopped—he had finished processing the situation.

"Who was it?" he demanded, not realizing how darkly chilling his voice was or how much it startled Alpha. His nearly deadpan expression mirrored the piercing intensity of his pitch-black hatred. "Alpha, where's the thief? Can you tell?"

*I can. There she is,* Alpha answered. If she denied it, Akira might have directed his animosity at her, so she pointed to his current target without hesitation. Augmented reality gave him a view—through several obstacles—of a girl already moving off into the back alleys.

“Okay, I see her,” Akira muttered. A moment later, he was running, his rage on full display.



Once Lucia judged she was far enough from where she'd done her work, she paused in a back alley to check her prize.

“Wow! There's a hundred grand in here! Talk about a lucky break—this'll keep me afloat for a while.” She beamed at her own good fortune. But her smile soon dimmed. “For a while. And after that...” She let her words trail off, not wanting to think about what the future held in store for her, though she knew it all too well.

Rising out of the slums wasn't easy. Those who lived there didn't dream of riches—merely enough money to lead a more or less decent life. Yet to those like Lucia, even that was nearly unattainable. Landing a decent job required knowledge and education, both of which took money and connections to obtain. Yet most slum dwellers had neither the funds to acquire knowledge nor the knowledge to acquire funds. Lucia could spy no ray of hope in her future.

Part of her knew she was courting disaster. She couldn't support herself by picking pockets forever. Eventually, she'd be caught and forced to pay the debt she'd accrued. Would she be beaten and left to lie in some alley? Raped and dumped on the roadside? Killed outright? Tortured to death? Or put through a hell that made death seem preferable? She didn't know what form her payment would take, only that it would inevitably come due.

But so what? Lucia didn't know how to survive without picking pockets. And she was good enough at it that her skills had sustained her until now. A dour expression crept unbidden over her face.

“Forget it,” she told herself, shaking her head to dispel it. “There's no sense brooding now. I've got money, so I might as well grab a bite to eat. Hunger will just make me more depressed.”

Lucia started off toward a familiar eatery. Then she heard a loud crash behind her and turned to look. There stood Akira. He had run all the way at such a breakneck pace that his feet had punted junk lying on the floor of the alleyway.

His sudden arrival took Lucia aback. And her shock turned to amazement when she realized that this was the same hunter she'd just robbed—and that he was after her.

*How did he know?! she wondered. He seemed totally oblivious! And even if he realized his wallet was missing later, he couldn't tie that to me! And look at him! He didn't happen to run into me while searching at random—he knew right where I'd be! How?!*

In her confidence, she'd believed she was too skilled to be detected, and it shook her to realize she'd been wrong. But astonishment and all other emotions were almost immediately swept away as her eyes took in Akira, holding a gun in each hand.

He was going to kill her.

Lucia was left with no room for doubt. His unmistakable lust for her blood filled his gaze, movements, expression, and attitude. While she stood still, paralyzed by his sheer animosity, Akira raised his weapons and steadily pulled the triggers.

Gunfire echoed through the back alleys as bullets pelted around Lucia, some drawing thin red scratches on her cheeks and legs. The pain snapped her back to her senses, and she let out a scream. Then, terrified at the roar of gunfire behind her and the bullets whizzing past, she ran like hell.



Akira had believed he'd gotten stronger. Now that conviction lay strewn across the depths of his mind in a muddled mess of conceit, overconfidence, self-mockery, and self-flagellation—the corpse of a cocky fool's pride.

Once, he had fought alone against five opponents and won to protect his hard-earned pay. He'd had Alpha's help and still nearly died, but he had pulled it off—unlike this time. Now, he'd let someone just walk off with money he'd earned at the cost of multiple close calls, losing all his gear, and a hospital stay. He could no longer do what he once had. The old him would never have let a passerby swipe his wallet. Forget improvement! Forget growth! He was *weaker* than before!

Such was the realization that had come crashing down on him the moment he realized his wallet had been stolen. From deep within himself, he could hear the voice of despair. That's all you'll ever be, it said. You thought you'd gotten stronger when you were just letting someone else carry you. You've gotten worse, not better. You're hopeless.

*That's wrong*, he couldn't help retorting. But his protest was feeble—easily drowned out by the voice of despair.

Even so, he felt a response: Prove it. Take back what was stolen from you. Take back your money, your confidence, your skill, and your conviction. Prove to yourself that you're no longer among those who are trampled underfoot.

Akira agreed with that voice in the innermost recesses of his mind. And he did its bidding, dashing off to reclaim what had been taken from him. Hatred, not resolve, spurred him on.

With Alpha's support, he tracked Lucia down. The moment he spotted her, he gripped his rifles, steadied them, and squeezed the triggers. Hate so dominated his thoughts that he didn't even consider demanding she return his wallet before he opened fire. He would simply kill her and reclaim it from her corpse.

But he failed. His AAH and A2D assault rifles were anti-monster weapons, too powerful for him to aim one-handed without a suit. Trying to hold them as if he wore one threw off his aim. And even loaded with standard ammunition, they kicked too hard for him to control both at once, knocking him off-balance the moment he fired. The result was a wild, wasteful burst that went wide of its mark. Lucia fled around a corner without a single bullet in her.

You can't even hold a gun right without Alpha's help, said the mocking voice of his despair.

*Shut up*, he snapped, gritting his teeth. Then he shifted to a two-handed grip on his AAH alone and gave chase.



Lucia was running for her life. She hadn't lost it yet, but neither could she shake the tenacious hunter on her heels.

She dashed on through the labyrinthine back alleys—terrain far more advantageous to pursued than pursuer. More than once, she took a series of forks, then ducked into a side street once she was certain Akira couldn't see her. Yet he never lost her trail. He would already have overtaken her if not for her smaller build, better suited to navigating narrow alleyways. That and the fact he stopped every time he took a shot at her.

Lucia knew that he would already have caught her if he hadn't bothered with his gun. Yet she couldn't bring herself to hope he'd just keep firing.

*How?! How does he always know where I am?! she asked herself with mounting desperation. Don't tell me he's using a transmitter?!*

If Akira kept a tracking device on his wallet, that would have explained his unerring pursuit. So, just as he burst out of a side street behind her again, she flung her prize as far away from her as the passage would allow.



Even with two hands on his AAH, Akira couldn't manage to kill Lucia. Steadying his stance and taking proper aim delayed his shot and gave her time to escape. Yet hurrying to get off a shot would spoil his aim. Moreover, Akira's marksmanship training had focused on hostile monsters charging toward him, and gunning down a fleeing target demanded a slightly different skill set.

The hatred driving him didn't help. Without a cool head, he found it difficult to aim effectively. And with each resulting miss came the sneering voice of despair: See? Look how much ammo you've wasted with nothing to show for it. That's the only "skill" you've got.

*Shut up,* he repeated, tightening his grip on his rifle.

He kept chasing Lucia, never losing sight of her thanks to his augmented vision. But then a puzzled look passed over his face. Lucia, who'd done nothing but run so far, had just stopped and seemed to be winding up to throw something. He braced himself for whatever she planned to hurl his way. And thanks to his cautious attention, he recognized the object that went sailing over his head as his own wallet.

Should he keep chasing Lucia or stop to pick it up? Akira wavered, then chose

his wallet. Killing Lucia was a means, not an end. As long as he got back what she'd taken, he would wipe away some of his humiliation. He could have contented himself with resolving to be more careful from now on. Making sure he never repeated this failure would have become his priority. But it was not to be—he checked the wallet and found all his money gone.

She outfoxed you again. You really are hopeless, his despair taunted him, more mocking than ever.

*Shut up! Shut up!* Akira buried it under hatred.

“Alpha,” he growled.

*She went that way, came the reply. If you keep chasing her, cut down on the gunfire. You're nearly out of the slums, and security officers will mow you down if you shoot wildly in a district they patrol.*

“Fine,” Akira answered, his voice glacial, and resumed running.



Lucia fled toward the lower district, driven by the unconscious assumption that her pursuer would hesitate to open fire in a more law-abiding neighborhood. He'd stand a better chance of catching her if he held his fire, but she preferred that to being shot.

She raced along until her breath ran out and she had to pause. Then, gasping for air, she glanced behind her. Akira wasn't there. And by the time she got her breath back, there was still no sign of him.

“D-Did I finally lose him?” she wondered, with a relieved smile. “Maybe he really did have a tracker in his wallet. Not that I care now—I'm just glad to be rid of him.”

But her cheerful face soon fell. Akira had reappeared at the end of the passage, running faster than before now that he'd stowed his gun.

“No way!” Lucia broke into another mad dash, her face a mask of shock and terror. After all that, she still hadn't shaken him. And now he was serious about capturing her. She ran frantically, half-sobbing. She had no idea where she was, but she just kept going.

Then her wild flight took her out of the alleys and onto a street in the lower district. She cannoned into a pedestrian.

“Hey! Watch it!” he shouted.

Timidly, Lucia looked up to see who she’d hit. He was a young hunter—and a good one, if his gear was anything to go by. He was upset, but the anger vanished from his face when he saw the fear on Lucia’s.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, sounding concerned. “I shouldn’t have yelled at you. Are you all right?”

One look at the reassuring smile and the boy’s handsome face, and Lucia was entranced. She forgot her predicament as the terror faded from her face, her cheeks reddened, and a faint sigh escaped her lips. But the sound of Akira approaching down the alleyway soon snapped her out of her daze. Then her gaze wandered from the oncoming horror to her smiling hope, and she decided to gamble.

“Help!” she screamed, clinging to the boy. “He’s after me!”

At almost the same moment, Akira charged out of the alleyway.

## Chapter 68: On the Verge of Battle

Katsuya's team drew stares as they toured the lower district. Two of their party stood out like sore thumbs—including their guide, Kanae, a recent addition to Reina's party. She and Shiori still insisted on dressing as maids, and the quality of their outfits—made of lustrous fabric a cut above anything the locals wore—only made them seem more out of place. And while one oddball might have drawn attention to herself alone, two inspired curiosity about their companions as well.

Reina had expected this, but she still couldn't help sighing. "Kanae," she said, "do you honestly plan to follow me around in that getup?"

"Sure I do," Kanae blithely responded. She didn't mind the stares one bit.

"Have you considered changing into something else?"

"Nope."

"You're sure?"

"If you dip into your own earnings to buy me combat gear on par with this outfit, I might consider it."

Kanae's maid outfit was cleverly disguised body armor, and in terms of performance, it easily beat out the average hunter's gear. Naturally, that put it well beyond Reina's personal purchasing power. She couldn't provide a replacement, and she couldn't order Kanae to downgrade her gear on a whim. Kanae knew that as well as Reina did.

"I know you both have casual clothes," Reina said anyway. "Would it kill you to wear them, at least at times like this? Nothing's stopping you from putting on a suit of powered inner wear underneath."

"You're wearing a powered suit instead of normal clothes yourself, missy," Kanae retorted.

"I...need to, even at times like this. I wouldn't be safe otherwise."



In fact, this neighborhood was secure—for the lower district, anyway. A powered suit wasn't out of place but hardly necessary for a normal walk. After the underground debacle, however, Reina wore hers as a reminder to think like she was in the wasteland.

"Then, speaking as your bodyguard, I'd better keep this on," Kanae said, lightly teasing. "This maid outfit is built tough so I can shield you when you're in trouble. I can't do that in my everyday wear."

Reina thought she caught an implication between the lines: blame yourself for being so weak you need guards. Her head drooped a bit. Shiori noticed and glared daggers at Kanae, who looked elsewhere not quite naturally and changed the subject.

"Anyway, what a crying shame. I've heard so much about what our boy Katsuya can do, and I'd hoped sticking with you would give me a front-row seat to see for myself. But then you go and quit his team."

"I'm so sorry for you," Reina snapped, shooting Kanae a disgruntled look that didn't perturb her in the least.

"About that, Reina," Katsuya interjected in a more serious tone. "Are you sure you want to leave?"

"Yes," Reina answered, her voice clear despite the dark cloud that seemed to fall over her face. "I know I forced my way onto your team, so I'm sorry for bailing on you like this. But my mind's made up."

A moment of silence followed before Katsuya responded merely, "I see."

Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have tried to stop her. He would have regretted her departure, but everyone on his team put their lives in each other's hands. An unwilling teammate would only slow their maneuvers, disrupt their coordination, and cause trouble for the whole group. This time, however, his experiences in the tunnels drove him to say a few words more.

"Maybe I'm overthinking things, but if you're leaving over what happened underground, maybe you should just forget about it. Weird as it is to say, nothing happened down there, y'know? And, well, I know this might not sound convincing coming from me, but if something goes wrong again, I promise I'll

take care of it somehow.”

Katsuya wanted Reina to know that if she was quitting out of a sense of guilt, she needn't bother. He still didn't know what had happened underground. Maybe he'd let Reina down by arriving too late. But if so, he was determined to help her the next time.

Reina understood and said, “Katsuya, that means a lot to me. Really, it does.”

Katsuya didn't think she was lying, but looking at her, he found it hard to take her words at face value.

“But am I really *that* useless?” Reina continued. She still looked distraught, and her voice suggested she might even be emotionally unstable. “I already had Shiori, and now I have Kanae with me too. Am I so good-for-nothing that I need you to guard me too? Is that how you see me?” She looked at him seriously, her eyes asking—begging—him to deny it.

“No,” said Katsuya. “You're a good hunter, and the team will be a lot weaker without you. I just hoped you might change your mind if I swooped in and bailed you out.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Okay.”

Their conversation fell off. Neither Katsuya nor Reina could bring themselves to say more, and no one else broke the silence. Yumina couldn't find the words to say to them, while Airi saw no problem with Reina quitting if she wanted to. For her part, Shiori judged that a careless word of comfort would backfire, and her glare kept Kanae's mouth shut.

Katsuya found himself wondering how things had ended up like this. In his mind's eye, he pictured the person he held responsible: Akira. He couldn't help blaming the boy who had taken Yumina hostage. And in a way, Akira was also the reason why Reina had run off at Checkpoint Fourteen, and why Katsuya had missed his chance to go scouting with Elena and Sara. Then Akira had attacked Reina and Shiori and held Yumina at gunpoint. And Druncam officially denied that any of it had even happened, leaving Katsuya in the dark.

Now Reina and her guards were quitting the team. And the more Katsuya

thought about that, the more certain he felt that Akira was somehow at fault. His growing resentment put him on edge.

Then a girl ran out of an alleyway and barreled into him.

“Hey! Watch it!” he shouted, more harshly than he meant to.

The girl looked up at him, terrified. Had he sounded *that* angry?

“Oh, sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. Are you all right?” he hastily amended, hoping to comfort her.

The girl relaxed, and Katsuya gave her a relieved smile. (He failed to notice the looks he was getting from Yumina and Airi, which clearly said, “Again?”) But the girl’s fear soon returned.

“Help!” she screamed, throwing her arms around Katsuya. “He’s after me!”

To Katsuya’s shock, he saw a boy emerge from the alley the girl had just fled. Immediately, his expression turned grim. The boy was Akira, but the unexpected encounter wasn’t what concerned him—it was the chilling look on Akira’s face and the murderous hostility he exuded like an inky cloud.



Akira was staring at the Druncam group. That alone was enough to make not only Katsuya but Yumina, Airi, Reina, and her bodyguards prepare for combat. In the wasteland, they wouldn't have hesitated to draw weapons. Here, however, they merely held their hands ready to do so. Akira wasn't holding a gun, and this was one of the safer parts of the lower district—where drawing might antagonize the private security firm that kept it that way.

Lucia, the girl who'd stolen Akira's wallet, was begging Katsuya for help.



Akira spotted Lucia as soon as he came out onto the lower-district street. He could see her clinging to Katsuya, but he didn't care. He didn't even think, *You again?* His only feeling toward the other boy was that a friend of his enemy was an enemy.

He surveyed the group simply to count his opposition and gauge how much of a threat they posed. His gaze swept over Airi, Reina, Shiori, and Kanae. Their answering looks—alarm, fear, alarm again, and delight, respectively—didn't faze him, although he was a little annoyed to see Shiori again. But then his gaze fell on Yumina. Her look of intense wariness made his face twist in a scowl and put a slight damper on his murderous rage.

Then Alpha spoke up.

*Akira, calm down. If you must kill her, at least try to avoid making more enemies than you need to. You aren't fully equipped, and they outnumber you seven to one. Six of those are combat personnel, including a woman who held her own against you when you were wearing a powered suit. This is reckless, even for you.*

"Seven to one," Akira muttered, processing the situation.

*That* got a reaction out of the Druncam hunters. Akira was clearly after Lucia and spoiling for a fight, and he spoke as if he'd decided to take them all on without even demanding they hand over his quarry.

His words made a particularly strong impression on Shiori. He'd called five against one poor odds when Katsuya's team had barged in on them in the tunnels, but now he'd made no such comment about facing the seven of them.

Why? The first thought that came to her mind was that he felt certain he could kill them all this time.

Akira's rewritten records proved that he'd struck some sort of deal with the city, and she feared that the settlement might have provided him with funds to acquire even more potent gear. Although he didn't seem to be well-equipped, experience had already taught her not to trust appearances where Akira was concerned. A mistake of that kind had nearly cost her Reina's life once already, and she was determined never to repeat it.

"No, Mr. Akira, not seven against one," Shiori declared, pulling Reina behind herself and Kanae. "We will remain neutral and refrain from assisting either you or Mr. Katsuya in any way."

All eyes turned to her—Akira's suspicious; Katsuya's, Yumina's, and Airi's shocked; Reina's confused; and Kanae's somewhat surprised.

"Mr. Katsuya," she continued, her face set in a look of firm resolve, "you are quite free to aid a complete stranger whom you've just met. I consider such behavior admirable and respect your intentions. But involving Miss Reina is another matter. Thus, I request that you rely solely on your own discretion and ability in this instance." Then she added in the same tone, "Mr. Akira, we promise not to oppose you so long as you do not attempt to harm us—and especially Miss Reina. I pray you will make the wise choice not to engage in needless combat."

Shiori's message was simple: Both Katsuya and Akira could choose to avoid conflict. They were free to fight anyway if they so wished, but they shouldn't involve Shiori, Kanae, or Reina.

"Let us be going, miss," she said, hurrying Reina along with a hand on her back as she led her bewildered charge slowly but steadily away from the two boys.

"B-But..." Reina felt loath to leave Katsuya's team and—for all intents and purposes—run away. But that was all. She couldn't make the choices that would follow if she stayed, couldn't even clearly picture them. So she couldn't find the words to continue her protest.

Shiori saw right through her. "Forgive me, miss, but I will remove you from

this situation even if I must render you unconscious,” she said severely. “Do you plan to repeat the same mistake as before?” She deliberately avoided specifying what that mistake was, leaving Reina to concoct her own nightmare scenario.

The worst thing Reina could imagine was another hostage situation. Lucia might take her hostage, forcing Akira and Shiori into another brutal contest. Or perhaps this time Akira would take her hostage and pit Shiori against Katsuya’s team. Either way, she would be forced to witness another vicious fight for which she was responsible.

Reina might have stood her ground if she could have convinced herself that such was impossible, that she would never screw up like that again. But she couldn’t—her experience in the underground districts had obliterated her confidence. Instead, she acted on the remorse that had been building up in her since that day.

Would Akira back down when he was so clearly out for blood? Never. Would Katsuya cave to his threats? Equally inconceivable. That left a fight to the death as the only possible outcome. So should Reina stay and get involved, dragging not only herself but Shiori and Kanae into the fray? She couldn’t bring herself to do that. Her crush on Katsuya wasn’t strong enough for her to risk her own life and her bodyguards’. Heart-wrenching as it was, she made her decision.

“Katsuya, I’m sorry. I can’t go that far for you. I can’t put my life on the line for that girl.”

“Hey, I wouldn’t mind joining you, Katsuya,” Kanae chimed in brightly, absolutely refusing to read the mood—until she felt the brunt of Shiori’s wordless menace. “Scratch that! Sorry, but my job’s guarding Missy Reina, and I’m on the clock! Okay, today’s little get-together is over! Come on, missy, let’s go home!”

Kanae placed her hands on Reina’s shoulders and briskly marched her away. Shiori bowed to Katsuya’s team, then followed.

*Akira, Alpha cut in again, still serious. Don’t do anything rash just because you only have four people to worry about now. Three of them are still hunters in powered suits, remember? Think of the difference in firepower. Akira? Are you listening?*

“Four on one,” Akira muttered, sending Katsuya’s anxiety skyrocketing.



Yumina needed to do *something* about this mess, but she was at her wit’s end trying to think of what. Their best fighters—Shiori and Kanae—had just left. And while she could appreciate their motives for doing so, that left her team between a rock and a hard place.

She couldn’t see Katsuya abandoning the girl. He would never just hand her over, even if she turned out to be clearly in the wrong. Any attempt at convincing him to was a waste of breath—Yumina’s long experience of Katsuya had taught her that.

So she would have to talk Akira around instead. But he was radiating hostility as he never had in the tunnels and looked like he’d completely dismissed negotiation as a possibility. Yumina seriously doubted she could get him to back down without a fight. Still, she would have to try, she thought as she stared at him, racking her brain for a solution.

Then Akira reined in his hostility slightly. “I’ve got business with her,” he said, striving to sound calm. “Would you give her to me?”

His demand gave Yumina hope that there might be room to talk things out after all. But it also started Lucia shaking like a leaf, and feeling the trembling girl cling to him bolstered Katsuya’s determination. His growing drive to protect Lucia added fuel to the fire of his animosity toward Akira.

“You must be crazy if you think we’d just hand her over,” Katsuya retorted, already convinced that he stood between a blameless innocent and her vicious, unreasoning pursuer.

“Okay.” Akira decided that negotiations had failed. He was already poised for combat. Now he slowly reached for his rifles, keeping a wary eye on the Druncam hunters’ movements—a change not lost on Yumina.

“Wait,” she hastily interjected. “Why are you chasing her in the first place?”

Akira shot an extremely surly look at Yumina, but he seemed a little less belligerent as he replied, “What do you wanna know for? Are you gonna hand her over if I’ve got a good enough reason?”



He felt sure they would do no such thing, as his tone made plain. Yumina sensed his reply was born from his conviction that they would never believe a word he said. Yet he'd still bothered to ask, and she hoped that meant he also wished they would hear him out. Before she could respond, however, Katsuya intervened.

"No way in hell!"

Akira's gaze shifted back from Yumina to Katsuya—and back to watching for his chance to strike.

"Katsuya! Shut up for a second!" Yumina snapped, determined to ensure that chance never came.

"Y-Yumina?"

"How many times do I have to tell you not to pick fights over every little thing?! If you want to keep that girl safe, keep your mouth shut!"

Yumina was genuinely angry, and her yell made Katsuya falter—as well as taking the edge off his temper. He glared at Akira but said no more.

Yumina studied Akira, who looked slightly confused. Partly to calm him, she said, "I can't promise anything until I've heard you out, but would you at least tell me your side of things?"

Hesitantly, Akira answered, "She stole my wallet."

All eyes turned to Lucia.

"Did you?" Airi asked curtly.

"No!" Lucia cried, desperate to defend herself. "He came after me out of nowhere with a look on his face that scared me half to death! He chased me all the way here! It's the truth! Please, you've got to believe me!"

Was Lucia shaking with fear because she'd just been falsely accused out of the blue, or because her crime had been exposed? Katsuya didn't know, but he believed her terror was genuine, so he couldn't bring himself to doubt her.

Yumina felt torn.

Airi felt more inclined to suspect Lucia. To Akira, she said brusquely, "Any

proof?”

Yumina panicked, wishing Airi had been more diplomatic, but to her surprise, Akira took no offense.

“Proof, huh?” he mused, trying to think of something he could show them.

Airi decided that he couldn’t have anything definitive, so she rounded on Lucia and said, “I’ll search her. If she robbed him, she might have a wallet or something on her.”

“A-All right. Please do,” Lucia responded, stepping away from Katsuya and spreading her arms in front of Airi. Her gesture reinforced Katsuya’s faith in her.

Before Airi could start, Akira interjected, “You won’t find my wallet. She tossed it while she was running away—after taking all the money out.”

“How much was in it?” Airi asked.

“About a hundred grand.”

Airi sized up Lucia and considered. A wallet wouldn’t be hard to find on her, but she’d have no trouble hiding bills. And her decent clothes set her apart from the lowest class of slum dwellers, who might not even have a hundred aurum to their name. Even if a strip search turned up a hundred thousand, there would be no proof she’d lifted it from Akira. Lucia could merely say that she’d hidden it for fear of robbers.

Airi knew that Katsuya wouldn’t abandon Lucia, even if she turned out to be in the wrong. But Lucia might run for it if her crimes came to light. Then Akira would give chase, making this whole mess someone else’s problem. So Airi had hoped to find some evidence, but since that was proving difficult, she looked to Yumina.

“Could this be some kind of misunderstanding?” Yumina asked Akira. “Are you absolutely sure she did it?”

“Yeah, it was definitely her,” Akira answered clearly.

“Would you tell me why you think so?” Yumina asked, keeping her voice calm and non-accusatory. “What makes you so certain? Did you catch her with her hand in your pocket before she started running? Was she the only person

nearby when you realized your wallet was missing?”

“No. You see, umm...” Akira faltered. He was sure because Alpha had told him, but he couldn’t say that. Nor could he chalk it up to vague instinct.

“Did you base your conclusion on scanner logs? They would show what happened, assuming you keep one on you and active in town for self-defense.”

“No, that’s not it. My scanner got busted up in that last fight.”

“Then did someone you were with tell you? Would they testify to that if we went to see them now?”

“No. I mean...” Akira was gradually losing steam.

“Could there be security cameras near where you were robbed? They’re not too unusual on the bigger lower-district streets, so it might be worth checking.”

“No, I got robbed in the slums, so I don’t think there were any.” Akira’s fury dwindled as Yumina piled on suggestions that might prove his case, and he was forced to reject every one.

“I won’t accuse you of lying or even making a mistake. I think that something did convince you but that you can’t share it with us for complicated reasons of your own,” Yumina said, according the greatest possible respect to Akira’s position. “Nevertheless, we can’t accept your story at face value and hand her over to you without proof. I’m really sorry. I know this must be hard to accept, but please try to see where we’re coming from.”

Akira couldn’t respond. Over the course of his conversation with Yumina, his rage had mostly subsided, his hatred faded, and his hostility relaxed. Now that he was thinking more or less calmly, his dark, murderous aura faded. He was a relatively normal boy again—albeit a seriously disgruntled one. Although he was still too sour and contrary to simply agree and back off, he no longer felt strongly enough to refuse and draw his rifle.

Then Alpha gave him a push.

*Let’s withdraw for now, she suggested. You really can’t expect them to take you at your word when you can’t explain anything.*

After a long pause, Akira replied, *I guess not*, and made up his mind to leave,

telling himself that he couldn't ignore Alpha's advice. He shifted his posture accordingly, and once the tension and wariness left him, he seemed so ordinary that it was hard to imagine him being a match for Shiori. He was once again a land mine camouflaged as a run-of-the-mill weakling to be dismissed and despised.

And Katsuya stepped right on it.

"Even if she *did* rob you," he said, with a derisive snort, "any hunter who gets that careless only has himself to blame."

His taunt was a show of frustration as much as anything. Akira had shown up hell-bent on murder and driven off Reina and her bodyguards. And after all that, a little talking-to was all it took to make him give up? Why had he even bothered, then? Katsuya wasn't conscious of these thoughts, but the loss of tension and Akira's apparent weakness exacerbated them.

"Katsuya!" Yumina snapped, annoyed that he had to open his big mouth just when everything had been going so well. Flustered, she turned to apologize to Akira—and froze, unable to speak.

Akira looked even more murderous than when he'd first emerged from the alleyway. His face was an expressionless mask—not of hatred, but of dark determination—and he was looking at an enemy.

## Chapter 69: Ways of Looking at the World

*You only have yourself to blame.*

Experience had taught Akira that this was how most people regarded him. Whenever something went wrong and they had to choose between blaming him or someone else, they held him responsible. When there was no proof, it was Akira's fault. When the circumstances were unclear, it was Akira's fault. When blaming him was a stretch but a group wanted a scapegoat, it was Akira's fault. They all made up their minds that he was the problem.

On the harsh streets of the slums, belonging to a group had many perks that made life more bearable. Most people who got kicked out of one didn't last long. Akira knew that, but his distrust of others ran so deep that he'd chosen to go it alone anyway. So, when he'd chased Lucia out onto the street, Katsuya's reaction had come as no surprise. He'd assumed that, as usual, neither of them would be willing to negotiate.

That was why Yumina and Airi had shocked him. They'd put him so out of his element that he'd almost forgotten his murderous hatred in his confusion. Then, just when he'd relaxed his guard, Katsuya had twisted the knife.

*You got robbed? You only have yourself to blame.* Akira had been forced to accept that verdict so many times that he'd grown resigned to it, and here it was again. He was to blame for being robbed, for being cheated, for being weak. Even if it got him killed, it was his own fault. For just a moment, Akira had forgotten that basic fact of life. Now it came flooding back to him.

Airi had acted as if she believed him, offering to search Lucia. Yumina had spoken as if she understood his position. So, without meaning to, he had gotten his hopes up that this time, just maybe, things would be different. But this time was no exception. He'd gotten the same disappointing result as always, just by a slightly different route, and he mocked himself for ever, however faintly, expecting anything else.

Here he was, about to slink off without even taking back what had been

stolen from him—about to sink back into his old habits as one of the downtrodden. As he realized this, he cursed himself. He'd gotten where he was because he'd chosen not to pony up, not to run away—he'd chosen to kill. He was here to prove to himself that he'd made the right choice. So he would kill, would slaughter all his enemies. If he would only have himself to blame for getting killed, then the same went for them.

He was so intent on murder that he entered a state of total concentration, compressing time as he perceived it. In that slow-motion world, he focused all his senses on ending the group in front of him. Alpha telepathically pleaded with him to stop, but his inner voice drowned her out, resonating with the one that welled up from the depths of his being. Warily, he watched the Druncam hunters' movements as his hand drifted toward his rifle. Only three steps remained: aim, fire, kill.

But then Akira saw something strange: one enemy advancing on another. Alarmed at something so inexplicable, he turned his attention to its source.

A moment later, Yumina slugged Katsuya. With a harsh *crack*, he sailed through the air and collapsed onto the street. Confused, Akira lost focus and coordination.

Then Yumina shouted, "The *thief* is to blame, obviously!"

Akira froze.



Yumina knocked Katsuya for a loop, furious that he had spoiled her nearly successful negotiation and hoping to appease Akira before talks broke down completely.

"The *thief* is to blame, obviously!" she yelled, refuting Katsuya's provocation. To Akira, she added frantically, "Wait! We didn't mean that! We'll apologize, so..."

She let her words trail off. To her bewilderment, he stood riveted in shock, looking like he'd just witnessed a miracle. His chilling bloodlust had completely vanished, taking his anger and animosity with it.

Yumina was nonplussed. Had her gambit been *that* effective? Still, she

preferred this to Akira wanting her dead, so she took a step toward him and asked, “Are you, umm, all right?”

At that, Akira recovered from his paralysis and retreated a step, almost recoiling. The two of them remained at that awkward distance, her baffled and him totally lost.

“So, uh, really, are you all right?” Yumina tried again.

Akira seemed to recover somewhat, although he still looked disoriented. Pointing at Lucia, he said haltingly, “Do...”

“‘Do’?” Yumina echoed.

“D-Don’t think this means she’s off the hook!”

With that parting remark—an excuse worthy of a two-bit goon—Akira backed away, then broke into a run and hurried off down the same alleyway he’d appeared from.

Yumina stood speechless, totally at a loss.

Katsuya finally picked himself up off the ground. Despite the suspicious look he cast after Akira, he exhaled, satisfied that their quarrel was settled for the present.

“What was that guy’s problem, anyway?” he grumbled. Turning to glare at his teammate, he added, “And what’s *your* problem, Yumina?”

That snapped Yumina back to reality. “What were you thinking, Katsuya?!” she demanded angrily. “If you don’t stop putting your foot in your mouth, I’m gonna sock you!”

“H-Hang on! Y-You *already* punched me!” Katsuya protested, shrinking back from Yumina’s intensity.

“And I’ll do it again!” she shouted, clenching her fist.

“O-Okay, I get it! I wasn’t thinking!” Katsuya cried, desperate to placate her. “S-Say something, Airi!”

“I’ll carry him if you knock him out.”

“Don’t encourage her!”

“E-Excuse me!” Lucia nervously interjected. “Th-Thank you so much for saving me.”

Yumina heaved a sigh, her anger spent, then turned to Lucia and smiled. “Don’t mention it. I’m sorry Katsuya turned things so tense.”

“Oh, no. I ought to apologize for getting you mixed up in my problem.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Katsuya said, smiling kindly at Lucia and hoping to sweep recent trends in the conversation under the rug. “I’m glad you’re safe. You aren’t hurt, are you?”

“N-No! I’m fine!” Lucia gazed at Katsuya with smoldering eyes. She was quite taken with the boy who had rescued her from the brink of death, and his good looks didn’t hurt.

Yumina and Airi took one look at her and sighed. *Again?*

“If you ever pull a stunt like that again,” Yumina said, stern even though her anger had subsided, “I’ll swap out your mouth and throat with prosthetics and make it so you can’t talk without my say-so. Is that clear? Well?”

“Cr-Crystal,” said Katsuya, nodding frantically.



Akira stopped a short way into the back alleys. He still hadn’t gotten over his confusion, and he stood stock-still, unable to sort out his rampaging thoughts and feelings. Nevertheless, he had recovered sufficiently for Alpha’s voice to reach him.

*If you’re that worked up, try some deep breathing,* she suggested.

She had been beside him the entire time, but he reacted like she’d just appeared out of thin air. Then, while she let him know how exasperated she felt, he took her advice. *Inhale, exhale.* Each drawn-out repetition made him a little calmer. His emotions settled, and his stray thoughts faded. He was still bewildered, but he was able to grasp the reason, understand it, and process it. He let out one last long breath. Then, with a clear head, he murmured the answer that came to him naturally.

“That’s right. It’s not my fault, is it?”



In a sense, this was a novel concept to Akira. Everything and everyone in the world he knew had heaped blame on him until, at some point, he'd come to believe it himself. Part of him had accepted it, though turning contrary and defiant.

But today, someone had said otherwise.

Coming from any random stranger, that would have made no difference to him. But someone willing to sacrifice herself for her comrades had decked one of those same comrades to say it. Her words had shaken Akira to his core. Not that they had changed him much—in the depths of his soul, long experience had laid down layer upon layer of conviction, packed too hard and thick for a mere jolt to shatter them. Still, the sediment had cracked. Only time would tell whether inky sludge would seal the gaps, or whether a wedge would split them wide open and transform him. But the gaps were certainly there.

Yes, Alpha said. *You're not to blame.*

"Course not." Akira nodded in emphatic agreement.

*So, what do you want to do now? Call it a day, since you ran into unexpected trouble? And be careful—you're talking to yourself again.*

*Oh, right.* Akira switched back to telepathy, then paused to consider. *I'll swing by Sheryl's like I planned. I already told her I'm coming, and I bet she'll be a pain next time I see her if I call it off now.*

*All right. In that case, let's take a detour. I'll show you the way.*

*A detour? Why?* Akira asked, surprised.

*Because people notice a maniac running around firing anti-monster rifles, even in the back alleys,* Alpha replied with obvious annoyance. *Whatever gangs or security companies claim that area will be out looking for the cause of the disturbance. Don't make this any harder than you already have.*

Sorry, Akira said sheepishly. Then he set out, following Alpha's guidance and giving the scene of his wild gunfire a wide berth.



Sheryl's gang was still small, but its potential for growth drew interest from

children throughout the slums. Its entire membership—including the boss and her hunter patron—were young enough to count as kids, yet it remained a functioning organization. That should have been impossible.

The gang was armed, but only with pistols designed to take out human targets. They had no skilled fighters, and unlike Shijima's gang, they lacked the firepower to defend themselves. Under normal circumstances, they would have been squashed.

They could operate in relative safety for only one reason—the other slum gangs had heard about Akira's dealings with Shijima, and they were wary of antagonizing the hunter. Many concluded—albeit with varying degrees of concern—that as long as Sheryl had Akira's backing, picking fights with her wasn't worth the risk. This guaranteed the children a modicum of peace.

Safety alone was enough to make membership attractive. Add to that an ample supply of guns and food, and even basic lessons in reading and writing, and it sounded too good to be true. Most slum kids couldn't help feeling suspicious. But according to those who had joined up despite their doubts, the rumors were pretty much true, and the gang wasn't too hard on new recruits. Word spread, and kids started journeying from distant parts of the slums in hopes of gaining admission.

Lately, word on the street had it that Sheryl's gang had even opened a shop at the temporary base and was raking in money. The ranks of hopefuls swelled with those seeking a share of the profits.

Once things reached that point, Sheryl couldn't accept all comers. She expanded gradually, taking in only as many as she could manage. The rest would have to wait their turn—and money and connections determined when that turn came. With the help of a best friend who was already a member, plus the hundred thousand aurum she'd just acquired, Lucia had applied for membership. Now she was in the base, meeting with her friend Nasya.

"I know I've been inviting you to join for a while, but are you sure?" Nasya asked, looking concerned. "You were so dead set against joining any gang. Did something happen?"

"Yeah. You see..."

Once Nasya heard the details, she understood her friend's decision. "You had a real close call. This is why I told you to stop picking pockets. Of course, I know it's not that easy for you. And anyway, it's too late now. So, where's the money you're going to give the gang?"

Lucia handed over the hundred grand, and Nasya frowned.

"You're making way too much, Lucia," she said. "No wonder someone tried to kill you. Do you have a death wish?"

"I know! That's why I can't keep doing this! I need to join a gang that will protect me or...he'll kill me." Lucia took a moment to pull herself together. "The hunter who looks out for you guys is unbelievable, right?"

"Well, I suppose you could say that." Nasya flashed a wry grin. She was thinking less of Akira's strength than of the insanity he'd demonstrated by dragging a corpse into Shijima's headquarters.

"The guy after me looked like a hunter, but he was dressed like a rookie. He wouldn't want to mess with a veteran that tough over a measly hundred grand," Lucia said worriedly. Her analysis included a lot of wishful thinking, but she could only pray she was right.

Nasya gave her a reassuring smile. "True. I don't think you have to worry about that. Now, wait here a sec while I go tell the boss about you." She stepped out, then returned a short time later.

"Boss says Akira will be here soon, so she's rounding up all the newbies to meet him. Come on, Lucia."

Nasya led Lucia into the base's main room, where she awaited Akira's arrival with the other new recruits. Not long after, Akira entered with Sheryl. And while she began her usual explanation, his eyes met Lucia's.

A moment later, Lucia was running for her life. But Akira also sprang into action, and this time he didn't let hatred throw off his movements. He ran calmly, swiftly overtaking Lucia, and tackled her to the floor.

"Caught you," he said happily.

At that, despair spread across Lucia's face.



Akira looked contentedly at the hundred thousand aurum in his hand and cheerfully stowed it in his wallet. This wasn't quite how he'd pictured things playing out, but he *had* reclaimed his stolen property, and he couldn't have been happier.

Sheryl, meanwhile, was pale-faced and trembling. She had almost let someone into her gang in exchange for a gift of money stolen from Akira—a horrific blunder.

"S-So, Akira," she said hesitantly. "What shall we do with them?"

"Huh?" Reminded, Akira turned his attention to the offending girls. Sheryl's underlings held Lucia, who was weeping with the look of a convict awaiting execution. Nasya was likewise restrained, although she looked grave, racking her brains for some way to save her friend.

He looked at Lucia. Her terror grew and the flow of tears down her cheeks swelled.

Then he looked at Nasya. She earnestly returned his stare, begging him to spare Lucia.

"Good question," Akira said. Now that Sheryl wanted him to decide the girls' fates, he felt genuinely unsure. Although he could hardly believe it himself, Lucia no longer mattered to him. His shocking encounter with Yumina had left him in an unprecedented good mood, and retrieving his stolen money had made him feel even better.

But while he no longer felt a need for vengeance, he realized that he couldn't afford to let Lucia off the hook completely. If word of such leniency got out, every pickpocket around would single him out as an easy mark. The standard response would have been to shoot Lucia, but he found the idea extremely unappealing. He didn't want to kill her. He felt no drive to save her either—he'd lose no sleep over her death, as long as he hadn't caused it. Yet he felt reluctant to take a life Yumina had stepped in to save. And beating Lucia to within an inch of her life would be no better—he knew she wouldn't survive long with such injuries.

Akira was still groping for a solution when he noticed Sheryl staring earnestly at him, anxious to make up for her error. He decided to delegate.

“Okay, Sheryl, she’s all yours.”

“Huh?” Sheryl responded, nonplussed. “I’m, umm, not sure I follow you.”

“She planned on joining your gang anyway, right? You deal with her.”

“Do you mean that I should, umm, kill her as I see fit?”

“Nah. I mean, you don’t have to make sure she survives, but don’t get her killed on purpose.”

“I...I see.”

“Well, I’d better get going. See you, Sheryl.”

“A-All right. Take care.”

Akira left in high spirits, pleased that he’d solved his problem.

Sheryl, who now had to deal with said problem, was ready to pull her hair out. She thought that she ought to be glad for the chance to redeem herself. Yet Akira had tasked her with finding a solution that would satisfy him when he probably didn’t know quite what he wanted himself. She would need to handle Lucia and Nasya with care. She couldn’t entrust too much responsibility to people who had robbed Akira. But if she treated them roughly and they died as a result, how was she to convince him that she hadn’t orchestrated their deaths? She couldn’t be certain that he would accept the pair fleeing either. Such news might make him lose faith in Sheryl’s ability, even if it didn’t infuriate him.

Sheryl stared at the girls who had brought this tricky problem on her. Lucia and Nasya looked back with fear in their eyes.



Akira returned to his days of training and study while he waited for the gear he’d ordered from Shizuka to arrive. His ability to compress his perceptions of time was steadily improving. He succeeded more and more often, and fewer training sessions ended with him being too exhausted to move.

Even so, Alpha was once again nearly naked when he finished today's exercise. As ever, the overelaborate mass of fabric she'd started in had lost a strip for each cut she landed on Akira. The last shred of it had just vanished silently into thin air.

*That's enough for today, she announced. You did well.*

Akira let out a long sigh. Then, while he caught his breath, he assumed an unhappy expression.

*What's wrong?* Alpha asked.

"Nothing," he grumbled, "but that outfit."

*Oh? Does this look not do it for you? I suppose you'd rather leave something to the imagination.*

Alpha wore only jewelry, which did nothing to cover her naked skin. Viewers with certain predilections might easily have found her too bare for their tastes. Akira shared that sentiment, although for a different reason.

"That's not it," he said dejectedly. "I was just thinking that even though I've sort of got a handle on my time perceptions now, I've still never gotten through a training session with you decently dressed. Tell it to me straight: Am I really getting any better?"

*Don't worry, Alpha replied, cheerful as usual. You're steadily improving.*

"Then how come I always get the same result?" Akira demanded suspiciously.

Alpha gave him a smug smile. *Because harsh training is more effective. Wouldn't you agree?*

"Oh, so that's it." He saw it now: Alpha had been ratcheting up the difficulty to ensure the outcome of their sessions remained constant.

*Harsh or not, this is still training. And considering how brutal your battles have been, pushing you to the brink makes for ideal practice.*

Akira sighed, only half-convinced. "If you say so."

He left the garage, then took another look at Alpha. Her outfit—or lack of one—hadn't really bothered him during training, but now it was a different story.

“Put your clothes back on,” he said.

*Fine.* Alpha reverted to what she’d been wearing before their session.

Akira looked at her outfit and sighed again. “Are you gonna make me say that every time?”

*I don’t make you.*

“Well, I’ll keep saying it.”

They exchanged their usual banter as Akira returned to his room. Then he took a break to eat. The frozen food wasn’t much of an improvement on what he was used to, although he’d splurged a little on rations, both in quantity and quality. Dining at Stelliana had raised his standards, and his appetite seemed to have grown since his hospital stay.

“What’s today’s lesson about?” he asked. “More of that social studies stuff from yesterday? What was it again? ‘Resource distribution and trade between corporate cities in the effective territory of the Eastern League of Governing Corporations’?”

When he’d met Alpha, Akira hadn’t been able to name an Eastern city apart from his hometown of Kugamayama. Under her tutelage, however, he was acquiring a store of common knowledge—although compared to those who lived within the city walls, he still had much to learn. And Alpha determined what he would learn and when. When she designed her curriculum, she took care to impart no knowledge that might hinder her own objective.

She had planned another day of lopsided education, but not anymore.

*No lessons today,* she announced. *Shizuka just messaged to let you know that she has your new gear, so let’s go pick it up.*

“Yes! Now I can finally get back to hunting! Let’s go!”

To achieve her goals, Alpha needed Akira to grow stronger—to acquire better equipment and wield it with greater skill. That took precedence over any information she might share with him. So she watched Akira rejoice at the prospect of his new gear, wearing her usual smile.

Akira got ready to go out and made his way to Cartridge Freak.

“It’s great to see you, Akira!” Shizuka welcomed him with a cheery wave.  
“Come right this way.”

He beamed while she showed him into her back room, bursting with expectation for his brand-new eighty-million-aurum kit.



Since dashing out of the slums to become a hunter, Akira had gained skills and wealth beyond anything he’d ever known. Yet even after renting a house, his spirit had remained in the back alleys. The view from there had been his whole world.

But through events beyond anything he could imagine, his cowering soul had finally risen to its feet. It had taken a half step out of the alleys and poked its head around a corner to peer timidly at what lay beyond. Akira’s change in perspective didn’t alter reality, but by shifting his feet and by turning his head, he had certainly transformed his view of it.

Though he’d already gained the life he’d once dreamed of, his hunting career would go on. And it would change him, whether he liked it or not.



In an utterly white world, Alpha looked somewhat miffed.

“Our subjects nearly destroyed each other twice in a short span of time,” she said. “And both times, your subject was responsible.”

“The first clash, possibly, but I determine your subject was at fault in the second instance,” replied the girl Alpha was looking at. Her voice and expression were businesslike and somehow lacked emotion.

“Your subject ruined a chance for mine to withdraw.”

“Oh,” the girl said briefly, showing how little the conversation concerned her.

Alpha let a moment of silence elapse before continuing, “I’d hoped you would take steps to prevent our subjects from butting heads.”

“I am, to the extent that’s feasible. But unlike your subject, mine has difficulty



even perceiving me. Our connection is weak, and our contract is based on my arbitrary interpretation of his general behavior, so my ability to interfere is limited. I can only respond that guiding him is difficult.”

“I do understand that.”

“Your subject is aware of you. I request that you control him with greater precision as an extension of your trial.”

Alpha’s frown deepened. “We have a formal contract, but I don’t have a free hand either. I’m obligated to honor the terms of our agreement.”

“I realize that. This incident arose due to the limitations of our ability to interfere with our subjects. We must accept some risks as features of the trial.”

In a way, this was the response Alpha had expected. She judged that she had done the bare minimum to share information and unify purpose, so she brought the communication to an end. “Well, I’d like to reduce low-value test results, so please do all you can—including continuing any measures you’ve already implemented.”

“Understood. This is goodbye, then.”

“All right, but one last question: Does your subject have potential to achieve the objective?”

“He does. I wouldn’t have included a subject who lacks the transmission capabilities to fully perceive me in the trial otherwise. Unlike you, I based my selection on more than signal strength.”

“I see.”

“Well then, farewell.” The girl vanished from the world of white.

Alpha remained alone, frowning slightly. It was true that she had chosen Akira purely for his signal strength, but he was growing more formidable than she’d anticipated—proof of an error in her calculations. And she judged any discrepancy in her predictions to be a cause for concern. She would take extreme measures for her goal, if the circumstances required it.

This wasn’t the first time she’d had such thoughts. While she pondered what those measures would be, Alpha, too, blinked out of the white world.

## Side Story: The Sandwich Sales Scheme

Sheryl's gang had at one point been at odds with another slum syndicate. Akira had escalated the conflict by killing one of the other gang's men and barging into its base, but the deal he'd struck with its boss, Shijima, had brought the clash to a more or less peaceful resolution—at the price of a million-aurum settlement, which Akira had paid. Sheryl had then sold part of her territory to Shijima for a million aurum.

After an intense internal debate, she decided against giving the payment to Akira. To her gang, it was a fortune—but to him, she realized, it was pocket change. Passing it on to him would have been simple, but repaying a small sum he'd most likely already written off would hardly compensate him for all his support. At the very least, she would need to return his investment with interest if she hoped to prove her value to Akira—and stop him from eventually abandoning her. She needed to increase her value. So Sheryl steeled herself and resolved to use her million aurum as seed money.

While performing her duties as a gang leader, Sheryl spent her days browsing the internet on her terminal, looking for ways to multiply her fortune. She found investment schemes promising absurd interest but wrote them all off as obvious scams. Even if they had been genuine, they wouldn't pay out fast enough—she couldn't afford to wait years. And slum dwellers couldn't open bank accounts anyway. So investment funds were out of the question.

Sheryl decided that she would have to grow her cash herself, and that meant some sort of business. In her mind, she tested out a variety of enterprises—but all ended in failure. The slums were hardly fertile ground for most business operations. And even if she managed to turn a profit, she would only lose it to robbers unless she had the muscle to deter them. Akira was her patron, but he wasn't always on hand at her base, and neither Erio nor anyone else in her gang was up to the job. In the lower district, security would chase off any slum children trying to set up a stall, while catering to hunters in the wasteland

would leave them open to monster attacks.

Stumped, Sheryl still kept gathering info on her terminal. More knowledge meant more options, and she wasn't about to give up. Then, one day, she caught wind of the new forward base in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins and saw a way out of her dilemma.

She gathered all the intel she could get her hands on and ran mental simulations, calculating her odds of success. While she worked, bathed, lay in bed, and even while she dreamed, she kept racking her brain to work out every last detail. The next morning, Sheryl awoke with a finished plan and the certainty that it was worth gambling on.

"It's the only way," she told herself, her mind made up.



Katsuragi looked taken aback when Sheryl showed up at his truck with a bunch of questions.

"Yeah, we're planning a move to the temporary base," he answered. "One of the perks of a mobile store is always being able to go where the business is. Why do you want to know?"

"As it happens, we're thinking of doing business there ourselves," Sheryl said, with her most ingratiating and confident smile. "I hoped you would be willing to help, so I stopped by to explain what we have in mind." She then launched into an explanation of her sandwich shop plan.

Katsuragi listened, then let out a derisive chuckle. "So, you want me to tell you if that's a good idea? I'm sure you did your best to think it through, but the answer is no way in hell. From where I'm standing, your plan looks full of holes."

"Really? What sort of holes?"

"First of all, how would you get out there? You might think Kuzusuhara's so close that you've got nothing to worry about, but the trip out there can still kill you. Especially now, since that big attack brought tougher monsters to the neighborhood."

“Yes,” Sheryl replied, her calm smile never faltering, “that’s why I asked if you would be going to the temporary base. I hoped you’d be kind enough to give us a lift in your truck.”

“Oh,” Katsuragi said slowly. “But you know, hunters won’t shop just anywhere. No one will line up to buy from a stand some slum kids set up.”

“Exactly. So I hoped we could rent out part of your truck. I doubt we’ll have difficulty attracting customers if we’re part of your mobile store. Naturally, we’ll prepare uniforms as well.”

“I...I see. But you can’t stock up without connections.”

“I know. That’s why I hoped you would introduce me to a trustworthy supplier.”

Katsuragi raised other questions, but Sheryl had answers for them all. Although her plan depended on the merchant’s support, it was also so eminently feasible that it gradually wiped the smirk from his face.

“Well, I’ve got to admit, it might pan out,” he said. “But it’s still just a plan. And I’ll never agree to put up the money for it, so a plan’s all it’ll ever be.”

“We’ll provide all the necessary funding,” Sheryl assured him. “I have one million aurum set aside for this.”

That shocked even Katsuragi. “Hang on, how do *you* have that kind of money?” he demanded suspiciously. “Where did you get it from?”

“I can’t reveal the precise details, but I sold a section of my gang’s territory.”

“I don’t know much about running a gang, but are you sure that was a good idea?”

“No gang wants to lose territory, but we lacked the resources to manage that area, and someone would have taken it from us if we’d left it alone. So I simply converted it into cash before we lost it for nothing.”

So Sheryl had a plan, and she had funds. Katsuragi was starting to look at her like a fellow businessman. Even so, he saw little reason to cooperate.

“Your plan basically depends on my help,” he pointed out. “I know I promised Akira I’d look out for you, but I never agreed to stick my neck out that far.

What's in it for me?"

"As I said earlier, we can't hold our territory unless we can fight for it," Sheryl answered seriously. "I can recruit all the members I need, but I still need to arm them. If my plan succeeds, we'll use the profits to buy weapons from you. And of course, we'll continue to do so regularly."

In other words, the cost of failure wouldn't come out of Katsuragi's pocket, but the fruits of success would go straight to his shop. His mercantile spirit made the decision for him. "All right, I'll give you a hand."

"Thank you very much." Sheryl bowed deeply, beaming now that her plan was finally coming together. "Well then, I won't intrude on you anymore today. I need to return to base and explain this plan to my subordinates, so I'd prefer to discuss details at a later date."

"Yeah, all right." Katsuragi frowned slightly. "But first, mind if I ask you a weird question?"

"Not at all. What is it?" Sheryl cheerfully replied.

"You *are* Sheryl, right?"

That question threw even Sheryl for a loop. She looked startled, then somehow amused as she replied, "Of course I am."

"Right. Sorry for the weird question. I hope you pull this off—I could use the business."

"I'll do my best. Goodbye." Sheryl bobbed her head again and departed.

Katsuragi watched her go, remembering the girl who'd shivered in fear of his threats at their first meeting. She was clearly the same person, yet so transformed that he might believe someone who told him otherwise. He murmured incredulously, "Was she always like that?"

No one answered.



Sheryl was up to something. The news spread through her gang like wildfire, although only a select few knew anything specific—Sheryl had imposed a gag order. The rank and file knew only that her *de facto* lieutenants and a small,

handpicked group had been excused from their normal duties to do something else inside the base. All the others were forbidden to ask, discuss, or pry into the details, and they obeyed the prohibition. A warning that Akira's money was involved helped to keep them in line. So those left out of the sandwich-shop plan eyed the participants and let their imaginations run wild as they went about their daily tasks.

Meanwhile, those actually working on the plan were equally in the dark. For the moment, they merely carried out Sheryl's instructions, which included meticulously cleaning one room of the base, thoroughly washing themselves in the tub, learning the rudiments of reading and writing, and practicing standing and walking with proper posture.

This particular day found Aricia once again cleaning herself in the bath on Sheryl's orders.

"Hey," said a girl bathing with her, "hasn't the boss told you *anything*?"

"Nothing," Aricia replied. "Erio and I have asked her more than once, but she won't open up to us."

"If the two of you don't know, then the boss really must be the only one who has any clue what she's up to." The girl sounded vaguely nervous.

To cheer her up, Aricia said brightly, "Well, it may be a mystery, but at least it comes with perks. Otherwise, the boss would never have given us permission to use her special shampoo."

"Yeah, you've got that right. Still, it bugs me, not knowing why."

The somewhat expensive body soaps and other beauty care paraphernalia that Sheryl had obtained from Katsuragi were normally reserved for her and her alone. Yet Sheryl hadn't merely given Aricia and the other girl permission to employ her private collection—she had *ordered* them to. The soaps had restorative properties, and using them daily had done wonders for the girls' skin. If that had been all, they could have celebrated it as a benefit of life in the gang, but Sheryl's secrecy kept them in doubt and overshadowed their joy.

"I dunno," the girl said. "I just can't help wondering. We don't have anything to worry about, do we?"

“You’ll be fine,” Aricia replied, “as long as you wash up like the boss told you. She yelled at you for not scrubbing hard enough the other day, remember? So use plenty of soap and get to work!”

“Yes, ma’am!” The girl relaxed, considerably relieved.

Aricia smiled faintly at her, then took a serious look at her own skin. The improvement was obvious, even to her untrained eye, and her hair had become far more lustrous as well—all thanks to Sheryl’s fancy soaps. She was prettier than before, and she’d genuinely enjoyed the new compliments that Erio was giving her. Yet Sheryl’s plans for her remained an enigma. She could be certain only that her leader was going to involve her in *something*—something that meant more to Sheryl than her soaps. So despite what she’d told her companion, Aricia herself was actually quite anxious.



Even though working alone gave her followers misgivings, Sheryl continued to lay the groundwork for her sandwich shop on her own. Today she was visiting a supplier of commercial foodstuffs, courtesy of Katsuragi’s connections. After giving her a brief rundown in his shop, the man presented her with a variety of samples to inspect. She selected tidbits from tables lined with breads, sauces, and synthetic meats, feeding them into a semiautomatic preparation machine before she tasted them. Then she pondered the near-limitless combinations, endeavoring to choose the best as earnestly as if her life depended on it.

Katsuragi and the supplier watched her from a short distance away, chatting.

“By the way, what’s your connection to her?” the supplier asked, casually fishing for information. “I thought I was cutting a deal with you, but it looks like you’re letting her do all the negotiating and decision-making. She doesn’t look like a regular employee.”

Katsuragi had approached his acquaintance claiming that he hoped to sell hunters some light meals as a side business. Yet his apparent indifference and Sheryl’s intensity led the other man to question that story.

“What would you say if I told you that her father is quite an important businessman, and this is part of her learning the ropes?” Katsuragi asked, with a sly smile he reserved for professional dealings.

“I don’t buy it,” the man answered with a grin of his own. “You only need to look at her to see she’s no high-society girl. She holds herself all wrong.”

“Damn, I should’ve known I couldn’t fool you.”

“Of course not! She’s wearing nice clothes, but I’m guessing they’re rentals. So all in all, I’d say her parents run a mom-and-pop store somewhere.”

“You got me. Well, don’t go too hard on us!” Katsuragi laughed, as if trying to smooth over the fact that he’d angled for preferential treatment by passing off Sheryl as the daughter of a major executive.

The man felt satisfied that he’d seen through the trick and relieved that he could safely treat the girl like any other customer. Katsuragi smiled along, although inwardly the merchant was astonished—not that Sheryl had been seen through, but that she hadn’t been.

She had completely hidden that she came from the slums.

Katsuragi had arranged for the rented outfit, but it had been Sheryl’s idea, and she had footed the bill for it. He hadn’t even contributed advice. Yet even with a change of clothes, one’s attitude and behavior had a habit of exposing who someone really was, and businessmen, who needed to choose their partners with care, were skilled in divining the truth from as little as a gesture that was slightly off. Under normal circumstances, they would have taken advantage of a kid from the slums, even with Katsuragi to vouch for her.

Sheryl had cleared that hurdle. She’d fooled the man completely and seized her chance to strike a reasonable deal. But although her plan was on track, she refused to get careless. She had arguably funneled Akira’s money into this venture on her own initiative—so failure was not an option.



Once Sheryl arranged for a source of ingredients, she finally unveiled her plan to the children who would be taking part in it. Erio, Aricia, and her other subordinates were surprised—but relieved. They’d felt so nervous about what she had in mind for them that venturing into the wasteland to sell sandwiches didn’t even unnerve them.

“But will they sell, boss?” Erio asked uncertainly.



“We’ll *make* them sell,” Sheryl answered severely. Her gaze and tone made it clear that she would brook no argument.

“O-Okay,” Erio said, rattled.

“Take this as seriously as if the gang’s survival depended on it. I’ve made all the arrangements, so all you need to do is what I tell you. If the shop fails anyway, I’ll take the blame. But if you screw up and spoil this plan, be ready to face the consequences.”

Sheryl radiated determination so intensely it bordered on hostility. Her subordinates nodded wordlessly.

The next day, Sheryl launched her venture in earnest. Working backwards from the time Katsuragi’s truck would depart for the Kuzusuhara Ruins, she drew up a schedule for preparing, wrapping, and transporting sandwiches, and then put it into practice. Renting semiautomatic cooking equipment was expensive, so she’d instead opted for the specific utensils her gang needed to cut, grill, spread, and combine their ingredients themselves. She also established a strict sandwich-making procedure to ensure the end result tasted just as good no matter who prepared it. She oversaw the operation herself and kept her subordinates in line.

While they worked, Erio took a look at a sandwich Aricia had just made—and he swallowed audibly. “Hey, boss,” he ventured, “can I eat just one?”

“As long as you buy it first,” Sheryl replied. “They’re one thousand aurum apiece.”

“A thousand aurum?!” Erio blurted out, too startled to control his voice. “Hang on! Are you seriously gonna charge that much?!”

His shout attracted attention, so Sheryl took the opportunity to issue a general warning. “I am, and that’s what you’ll pay if you eat one without my say-so. And don’t think I haven’t counted how many you’ve each made.”

For a moment, all the other children froze. Then they resumed work, several looking like they’d had a close call but none looking guilty. Sheryl surveyed them and nodded to herself.

Once the group finished their work at the base, they took their boxes of sandwiches and climbed aboard Katsuragi's truck. Sheryl, Erio, and Aricia would man the store on its first day. All three looked nervous, although for different reasons.

The two lieutenants were concerned about venturing into the deadly wasteland. Having experienced its terrors once, Erio was determined to protect Aricia if anything went wrong. Aricia appreciated the sentiment but was doing her best to calm him down.

The perils of the desert didn't bother Sheryl one bit—she was more worried about her sandwich sales, and inspected her uniform and boxes of product as a hunter venturing into the ruins for the first time might double-check gear.

The truck reached its destination in a relatively short time. The ground was level—a side effect of the recent monster onslaught—and the city had cleared a shipping route to the construction site. A cluster of other vendors and vehicles already surrounded the temporary base, so Katsuragi pulled in among them and set up shop. Sheryl's group did likewise in their rented section of the mobile store. Once their preparations were complete, Sheryl took her place at the service counter.

Before long, a customer arrived. Sheryl mustered her interpersonal skills, smiled for all she was worth, and said, "Welcome! One order costs 980 aurum."

Her battle to sell sandwiches had begun.

On the first day, many sandwiches remained unsold. Sheryl told herself that she was only getting started as she racked her brain for ways to boost sales.

On day two, they had only a few leftovers. Sheryl reflected that offering Katsuragi and Darius sandwiches to eat in front of their own customers had paid off, but she still sought to do better.

On day three, they almost sold out. Sheryl had left Aricia to man the counter while she pretended to take a look around the other stands—all the while nibbling on a sandwich. She had spent a long time honing her acting skills, and

she looked as though she'd never tasted anything more delicious.

On day four, they sold out. Sheryl decided to increase production and carefully went over their sales to decide by how much.

On day five, they had a few leftovers again. Sheryl was pleased with the upward trend—but still made Erio dress as a hunter and loiter, munching sandwiches, around the bus stop that linked the base to the city. She rented his equipment from Katsuragi and kept the merchant fed in lieu of a fee.

On day six, they sold out again. Sheryl decided to increase production once more. She also appointed Aricia to walk around eating this time, thinking that Erio would appear less enthusiastic once he got used to a daily diet of sandwiches. Erio stayed close to Aricia, looking serious.

On day seven, they had leftovers. Sheryl had remained at her base, leaving Erio and Aricia to handle sales. Thanks to the daily baths and expensive soaps she'd prescribed them, both children's hair and skin looked so much healthier that they were hardly recognizable. The hunters who came to buy sandwiches didn't mark them as slum kids, so they had no difficulties running the counter.

On day eight, they sold out. Sheryl decided to increase production yet again. She renegotiated with the food supplier and succeeded in upping her purchase volume in exchange for lower unit prices.

On day nine, they sold out. Sheryl decided to increase production even more.



After day nine, Sheryl's sandwich shop continued to run without encountering any major difficulties. She didn't sell out and ramp up production every day, of course, but she did sell enough to recoup her initial investment. Now she only had to work to keep her business in the black. So, judging that she had cleared another hurdle, Sheryl sat in her room and tallied up the money she would give Akira—repaying him had been, after all, her initial goal.

Sheryl's profit margins were large, since she charged "wasteland rates" and her labor costs were virtually nonexistent. Even after subtracting various expenses and the cost of the weapons she had agreed to purchase from Katsuragi, she calculated that she'd have a cool million and a half aurum left for

Akira—a fifty percent increase on the million she'd started with. A smile spread over Sheryl's face as she reflected that she had every right to sing her own praises and imagined how Akira would react to the fruits of her success. In her mind's eye, he was astonished by the thick stack of bills she handed him. Anxiously, he asked her how she had come by the money, only to be even more shocked when she told him that she had sold part of her turf and used the proceeds to turn this profit. Then he joyfully exclaimed how glad he was he'd helped her.

"Oh no, this is all thanks to *your* help! I could never have done it on my own," she said, so caught up in the vision that she unknowingly answered her imaginary Akira out loud. "No, really, I can't take credit. I used Mr. Katsuragi's connections, and I wouldn't even have been able to do that much if not for the arrangement you made with him. So you could say this is yet another success I owe to you."

Her fantasy Akira was starting to act less and less like the real one. His grateful, smiling face began to glow, and romantic passion crept into his gaze. And the further he diverged from reality, the dreamier her face and voice became.

"Really?" she replied to the vision. "In that case, I know the perfect way. Everyone already thinks we're a couple, so we ought to double down."

"Boss?" Aricia called softly. She had knocked three times—and gotten no response—before entering the room. At first, she assumed that Sheryl was speaking to someone on her terminal, so she kept her voice low.

Sheryl carried on unawares. "Some people are still suspicious, so we might even want to show off a little."

"Boss? Sheryl? I've got today's sales report." Aricia tried again. Then she realized that Sheryl wasn't holding her terminal—she had her eyes closed and a look of dreamy contentment on her face.

Sheryl simply continued, "When it comes to making them understand what we mean to each other, there's no such thing as overdoing it! And in any case, word will spread faster that way."

Slowly and silently, Aricia started to back away, deciding to forget what she'd

seen. Something told her that if Sheryl realized she'd been here and overheard this, she wouldn't like the consequences. So she cautiously—albeit hurriedly—left the room.

“Yes, I have spare rooms, but mine is the nicest in the base. You could save on hotel bills if you moved in with me!” Sheryl went on spinning her ideal future for a little while longer, until Aricia found a pretext to knock again—loudly, this time.

Soon after, Sheryl would lose contact with Akira and nearly break down under the strain. When they reunited, he would pay ten million aurum for medicine right in front of her without batting an eye—and even casually give her one of the million-aurum packages. The realization that a mere million and a half aurum meant almost nothing to him would send Sheryl into a panic.

But not quite yet.

>Episode  
002

Part Two Revengeware

Character

The advanced civilization that once dominated the world crumbled to ruins long ago. As ages pass, the survivors have begun piecing together the fragments of its wisdom and glory as they struggle to rebuild their world.



> AKIRA

A boy who turned hunter to escape the slums. In the ruins of the Old World, he meets the enigmatic and beautiful Alpha and forges a contract with her.



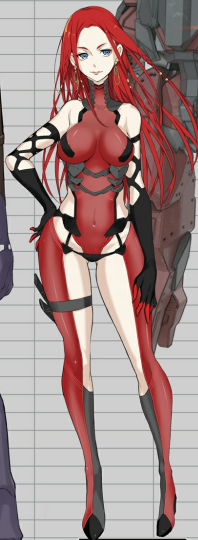
> KIBAYASHI

A Hunter Office employee who met Akira during the defense of Kugamayama City and took an interest in the young hunter's crazy, reckless, and rash way of life.



> YAJIMA

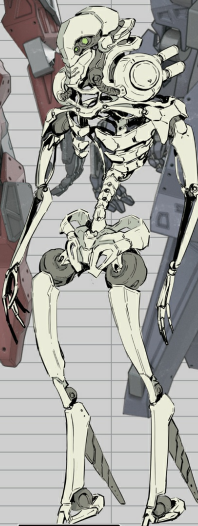
A relic thief who appeared in the tunnels beneath the Kuzusuhara Ruins. He specializes in catching opponents off guard through his deceptively easygoing demeanor.



NELIA'S  
Powered Armor

> NELIA

A peculiar female relic thief who doesn't dwell on the past. She hits on Akira—sincerely—during a fight to the death...but tries to kill him anyway.



KAIN'S  
Powered Armor

> KAIN

A cyborg relic thief who resembles a bare metal skeleton. He pilots a hulking, four-armed suit of powered armor and annihilates his enemies with its overwhelming firepower.



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An orphan from the slums, Lucia is a genius pickpocket who's never been caught. But she may have bitten off more than she can chew when she targets Akira.



Nelia let out a startled cry, her face a mask of surprise. Through the falling debris, she saw Akira—airborne and off-balance, just as she was. And he was looking straight at her. Akira landed on the ceiling and immediately kicked off it, propelling himself straight downward.





>Episode  
**002**

Part Two **Revengeware**

**Weapon Guide**

## **LIQUID METAL KNIFE**

Old World knives used by Nelia. When activated, liquid metal flows from the hilt to form a thin blade roughly two meters long and held in place by force fields. The blade dissolves and reforms with each strike so that it never loses its edge.



Hilt  
detail



## **A2D ASSAULT RIFLE**

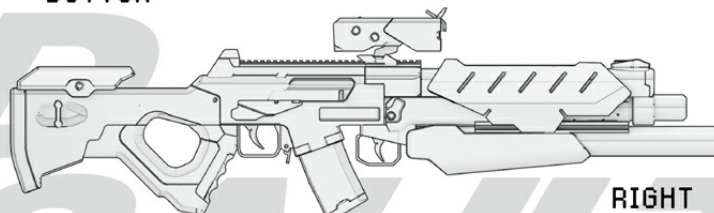
A redesigned assault rifle built on the AAH template. The stock A2D features a grenade launcher and improved accuracy. Its significantly more durable components allow it to fire armor-piercing and overpressure ammunition without modifications. The A2D is also compatible with many AAH mods, making it a popular choice of weapon.



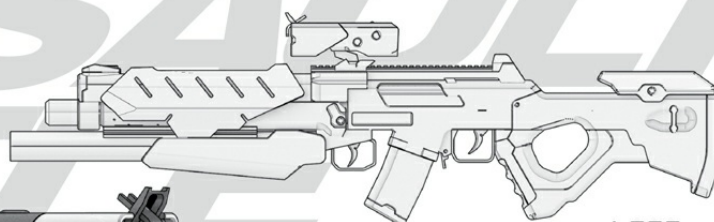
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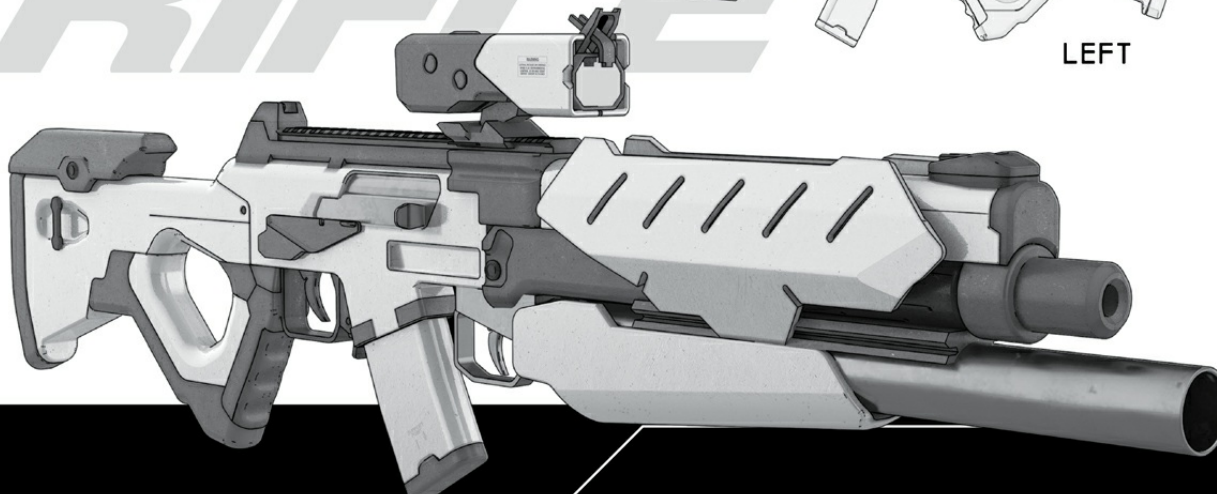
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RIGHT



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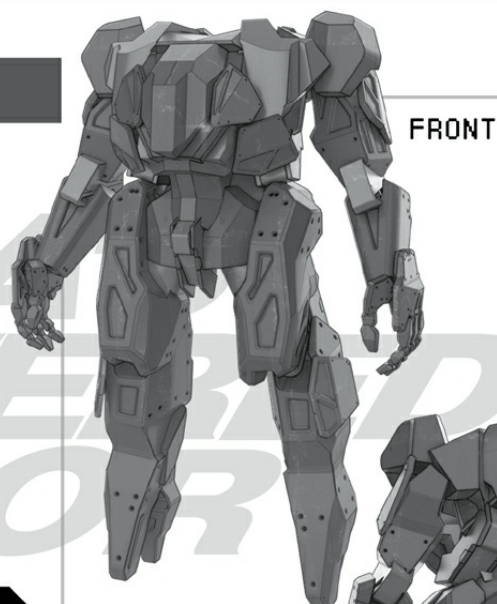




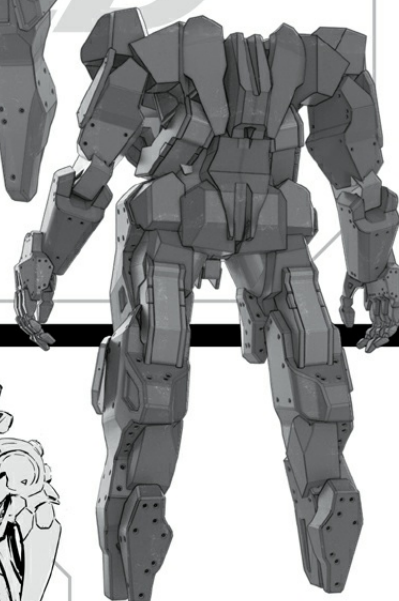
**Weapon Guide**

**NELIA'S  
POWERED  
ARMOR**

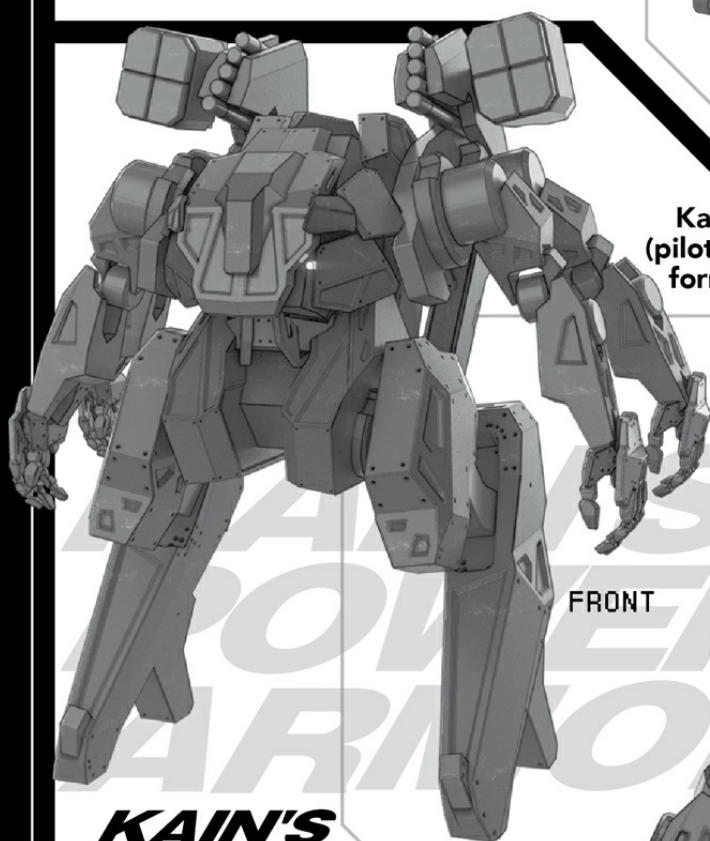
Three-meter-tall powered armor worn by the relic thief Nelia. The machine's control system can connect directly to a cyborg's brain via link cables. It also supports wireless remote operation.



BACK



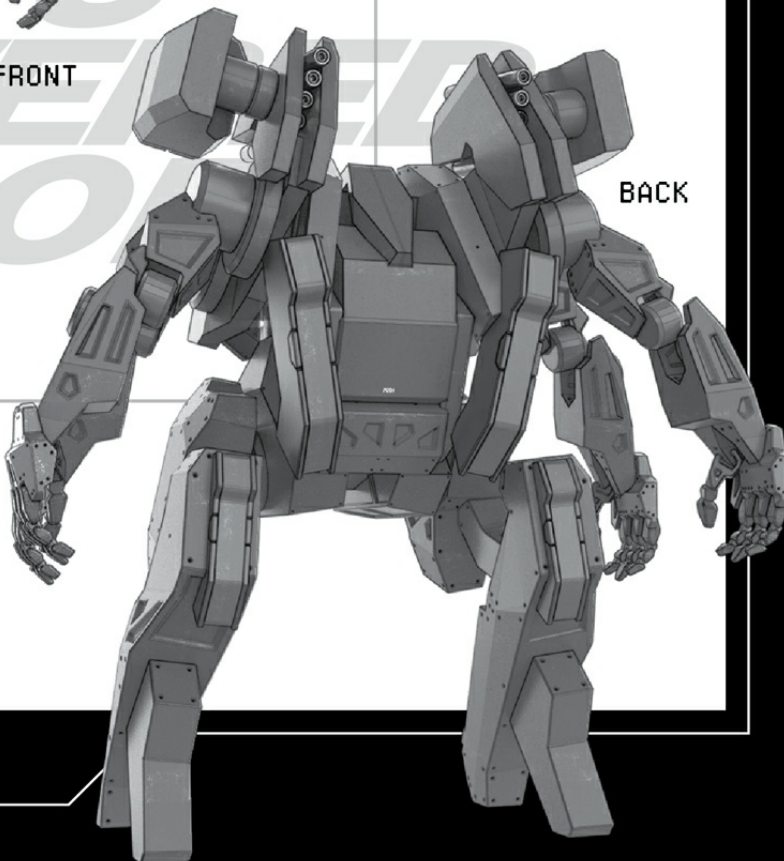
Kain  
(piloting  
form)



FRONT

**KAIN'S  
POWERED  
ARMOR**

Cyborg-only powered armor worn by the relic thief Kain. The five-meter-tall machine is equipped with missile pods and can carry a different heavy weapon in each of its four arms. Although its movements are sluggish, its built-in force-field can deflect even CWH proprietary ammunition.



BACK





>Episode  
002

Part Two Revengeware

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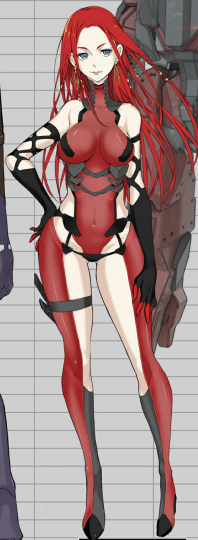
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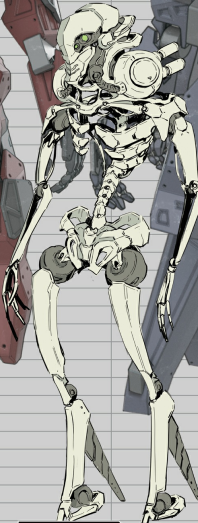
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REBUILD WORLD Vol. II Part 2: Revengeware by Nahuse

Translated by William Varteresian Edited by NegativePrimes

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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2023