

Author: **Nahuse**

Illustrator: **Gin**

Environmental Artist: **yish**

Mechanical Designer: **cell**

Rebuild World

*The Old and New
Worlds at War*



The cover art features a detailed industrial setting with complex machinery, pipes, and structural elements. In the foreground, a female character with long, flowing blonde hair with pink and green highlights is depicted. She has red eyes and is wearing a red and black tactical bodysuit with black armor pieces on her shoulders and thighs. She is holding a large black assault rifle. In the background, to the left, a male character with short dark hair and green eyes stands on a platform, wearing a grey trench coat and holding a small device. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, greys, and purples, with the characters' colors providing a strong contrast.

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Rebuild World **IV**

*The Old and New
Worlds at War*





"Coincidence...?"

"Hey, fancy seeing you again here! Quite the coincidence, huh?"

A powerful gunshot blew a hole in the wall from the other side. As Akira watched in shock, more blasts pierced it, weakening its structural integrity. Finally someone kicked the wall in, scattering chunks of plaster everywhere, and hurriedly leaped through the gap. It was Carol. She noticed Akira, frozen in shock beside her, and grinned.

>Episode
004

The Old and New Worlds at War

Rebuild World **RVII**

Character



>**MONICA**

A hunter and surveyor who has teamed up with Carol to investigate the Mihazono Town Ruins. She primarily sells maps of the factory district.

>**CAROL**

A hunter working in the Mihazono Town Ruins as a surveyor.

>**KANAE**

A maid tasked with protecting Reina. Unlike Shiori, she sports a brash attitude and isn't all that loyal to her mistress.



Rebuild **IV** ***World***

Author: **Nahuse**

Illustrator: **Gin**

Environmental Artist: **yish**

Mechanical Designer: **cell**

The Old and New Worlds at War

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.

"Hey, you wanna make a deal?"

Rebuild World IV

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.

***The Old and New
Worlds at War***

Author: Nahuse

Illustrator: Gin

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Chapter 103: The Old and New Worlds at War

Akira had become a relic hunter to escape the back alleys of the slums, and thanks to Alpha's support he'd improved drastically. He'd obtained powerful gear, discovered an uncharted ruin buried deep underground, and fought creatures so dangerous that the Hunter Office designated them as bounty monsters. He'd defied death more times than he could count and had come out all the stronger for it each time.

As a result, Akira's power already dwarfed that of the average hunter. But not for a second did Akira think he could've managed any of this on his own—Alpha had held his hand all the way through.

Then, just recently, misfortune had struck—a gigantic monster had swallowed both Akira and his truck whole, severing his connection to Alpha. Trapped in the monster's belly, with no one to rely on, he'd come within mere minutes of being digested. Yet in the midst of that hopeless situation, Akira had mocked his own rotten luck, carved out a path to survival with his own strength, and overcome all odds.

Now, decked out in a brand-new set of gear and with Alpha by his side once more, Akira stood at a whole new level as a hunter, both physically and mentally. Yet even so, he was still a long way from being able to complete the task Alpha had given him. In order to reach *those* heights, he would need to face even greater perils in the future.



After the tumult surrounding the bounty hunts had finally died down and Akira felt comfortable resuming his search, he headed out to the wasteland once more to look for undiscovered ruins, following his only lead—the locations of terminals belonging to Lion's Tail, Inc.

"Alpha, how far away's the next one?"

From here, about an hour.

“Seriously? That long?” Akira sighed.

Smiling, Alpha tried to cheer him up. *Well, since we’ve finished checking most of the markers near the city by now, it stands to reason we’ll have to travel farther out from now on. But that means we’re more likely to hit pay dirt, so chin up, okay?*

They’d learned about the locations back in the Higaraka Residential District Ruins, and since this data had helped him find the Yonozuka Station Ruins, he didn’t doubt that it was authentic. However, while this was far better than fumbling around in the dark, they still weren’t guaranteed to find anything. In fact, nearly every marker they’d visited so far had turned out to be a dud. And because the wasteland was so vast, it took time to reach each location, only to be met with failure. Akira found himself sighing more and more as the days wore on. Perhaps having some monsters to fight on the way would have kept him from getting bored, but during the recent bounty hunts most monsters in the area had been wiped out, leaving Akira with nothing to do but twiddle his thumbs. He was so bored, in fact, that he fell to scrounging around for things to discuss with Alpha, even going so far as to bring up a topic he normally wouldn’t have.

“So, what’s with today’s outfit?”

While not as revealing this time, as always she’d chosen alluring, seductive apparel. Today she was wearing a tight bodysuit that emphasized her curves. Joint-like segments connected each of the suit’s limbs to the torso; everything was fastened together with what looked like belts or cords. For reasons he couldn’t guess, odd holes appeared all over the suit—one on her back, another showing her cleavage, and several smaller openings where the pieces connected, all of which exposed her bare skin. Overall, it was relatively tame compared to some of her other outfits—yet her shapely limbs were still plenty enticing, and he even caught a glimpse of a fabric (maybe underwear?) peeking out from her bare back, so the ensemble was still racy in several other respects.

Oh, this? This is a bodysuit designed for those with artificial bodies. Alpha posed flirtatiously. What do you think?

Taking care not to show any sort of reaction, Akira changed the subject,

asking her the first question that came to mind. “What’s up with those jointed parts?”

They allow the wearer to freely replace parts of their body with alternatives of varying shapes and sizes.

“And the hole in the back? What’s that for?”

Body augmentations. Like a third arm, or an external unit for support in combat, or a propulsion device for flight, or portable heavy weaponry too large for the user to carry normally. When it comes to the possibilities, the sky’s the limit.

As he listened, Akira unintentionally started to picture such an augmented Alpha. He tried to imagine a practical reason for jointed parts that seemed to only serve to flaunt the hips and groin, or for the holes exposing her back and cleavage. In his mind’s eye, a metallic arm sprouted from Alpha’s back, to which he then gave a massive firearm. He also mentally replaced both her real arms, all the way up to the shoulders, with weapons far larger than her torso. Then, in order to support that added weight, he substituted her normal legs with a crude-looking cluster of appendages. Finally he added a propulsion device to her hips, and filled the small holes on the bodysuit with energy-supplying pipes that powered each part.

“Nah, there’s no way,” Akira muttered suddenly, and erased the monstrosity from his mind. If anyone was going to go that far, they might as well don powered armor or ride a mech instead.

But Alpha looked amused. *Actually, I could see something similar to what you just imagined as a possibility.*

“Huh? Really?”

Yes. Something similar, mind you. And with the technology of the Old World, it would in fact be a piece of cake to create exactly what you just imagined.

Akira went silent for a bit. “Well, even if it was possible, no hunter would ever want to look like that abomination,” he finally said.

Perhaps from an aesthetic standpoint, but farther east, on the Front Line, hunters with similar appearances wouldn’t be out of the question.

Among Old World combat gear, there were those with designs so provocative that modern outfits looked tame in comparison. However, Old World creations were so high performance that for many hunters modern ideas of decency took a back seat. While choosing to wear such gear might still require a degree of courage, the Old World specs were high enough to outweigh the wearer's shame, and so even now many chose them regardless of how they looked.

As a result, high-spec gear and racy clothing had become associated in the public eye, and were now practically synonymous with each other. These days, some hunters would even wear such clothes on purpose to suggest they were more capable than they actually were. With that in mind, wearing a risqué bodysuit and exchanging the limbs for powerful-looking weaponry could be quite a plausible choice for a hunter, Alpha explained.

"I see. I never would've thought of that. The world really is vast, huh?" Akira marveled.

Since escaping the slums, his perspective of the world had indeed widened—but unbeknownst to him, that perspective was largely skewed.



Arriving at his destination, Akira began looking around—but the site was another bust. Seeing the empty, overgrown field spread out before him, he sighed again. "Nothing here either."

The marker in Akira's vision was pointing directly to the ground. It was supposed to denote the location of a Lion's Tail data terminal, but all it indicated now was a pile of rubble overgrown with grass. Judging from the amount of debris in the area, some kind of building had probably once stood here, most likely in the midst of a bustling Old World city, and had indeed been home to a Lion's Tail terminal.

All of this seemed to confirm that the data he had was in fact accurate. But even such reassurance couldn't quell his disappointment at his string of failures, and he found it ever more difficult to maintain his enthusiasm. Though he didn't realize it, his sighs were becoming deeper with each unsuccessful search.

Alpha noticed his agitation and suggested, *Why don't we call it a day on the unexplored ruins, and try searching for undiscovered parts of known sites*

instead? She explained that the Lion's Tail data he had also indicated the existence of hidden areas in already-discovered ruins. Following its leads would be much more efficient than searching for such locations blindly, and even if they didn't find an untouched section, they could still gather a few relics along the way.

Akira thought this was a fine idea, but then hesitated. "Is that really going to be good enough? If the ruins have already been picked through, we aren't going to find anything that valuable." He knew that if he followed her suggestion, it could take longer for him to carry out the task she'd requested of him. Their whole goal in searching for unexplored ruins was to recover the untouched relics sleeping within—valuable treasures needed to purchase gear powerful enough for the job.

True, but if we keep searching for ruins as we are, we run the risk of not finding anything at all. Besides...

"Yes?"

Even if persisting might eventually lead us to more valuable relics in the undiscovered ruins, you're just going to get more and more depressed as long as we keep coming up empty-handed, Alpha said gently.

Seeing her prioritize his feelings actually made him happy. True, he *was* getting a bit depressed already, so he accepted Alpha's consideration and nodded, pleased. "All right, you've convinced me. Let's change our focus."

Roger! Then Alpha grinned teasingly. *Why, look at that, Akira—you're suddenly in a much better mood!*

"Well, I have to admit, I *was* getting a bit tired of driving all around the wasteland for nothing. And it's important to keep up one's enthusiasm, right?"

You said it!

Of course, he couldn't bring himself to say that the main reason his mood had improved was her thoughtfulness. Akira grinned, satisfied that he'd managed to come up with a good excuse.



With his new objective in mind, Akira got back in the truck and headed off. Since he wasn't looking for undiscovered ruins now, there was no need to worry about his route potentially giving away such locations to others. So he accepted some standard extermination jobs while en route in order to earn a little money on the side.

He took out his terminal, connected to the Hunter Office, and signed up for several jobs. Not long ago, Akira hadn't even known how to perform a simple search—now he was able to do this much even without Alpha's help.

As he tapped away at his terminal, a thought crossed his mind. "Hey Alpha, why do these common extermination jobs even exist in the first place?"

Why? Because the Hunter Office lists them, of course.

"No, that's not what I mean." Akira clarified that he was simply asking what the benefit was in paying people to exterminate monsters. Patrolling the city outskirts made sense—the people inside the city walls and in the lower district were paying to keep the city safe. He also understood that some people wanted monster corpses—whether organic or inorganic, monsters could be dissected and their parts sold for serious money, some of which he suspected was paid to the hunters who killed them. But he couldn't see the merit in paying someone to eradicate monsters this far out, so far from the city that it just wasn't worth it to haul their corpses back.

Alpha looked surprised, then pleased. *So now things like this have you curious? You sure have grown, Akira. Perhaps this is also a result of my regimen for you?*

"Th-Thanks." Akira gave an embarrassed grin, since Alpha was also subtly pointing out that up until now he'd been too dull to notice.

Oh, don't feel down—it was a compliment! she said. *Now then, to answer your question: put simply, the Eastern League of Governing Corporations is investing in the good of the entire East. Keep in mind a lot of this is just speculation on my part, but seems reasonable.* With that disclaimer, Alpha launched into a detailed explanation.

Common extermination jobs didn't have any specific conditions—there was

no quota on how many monsters to kill, nor was there a set time limit. Even if a hunter who signed up for one of these jobs didn't encounter a single monster, they would still be paid the minimum reward as long as they handed over a report detailing what had happened on their route.

When did the hunter take this job and in what location? How strong was the hunter, and what kind of monsters did they encounter, if any? Had they won or lost? Had they run away, or had the monster? Had it been defeated, or had the hunter? Even this basic information could prove incredibly useful for the Hunter Office when aggregated from hunters all over the East. Once analyzed, the data could help determine the monster threat level in a given area, safe transport routes to and from the city, or the viability of an ELGC development proposal, among other things.

But here the League faced something of a dilemma. On the one hand, hunters wouldn't typically hand over such data for free, of course; but on the other, getting a single party to investigate the entire wasteland would be quite costly. So the ELGC decided to require reports from hunters in return for paying for extermination jobs. After all, many hunters were already taking these side jobs while working on larger ones to earn a little extra in the meantime. And of course, fewer monsters roaming the wasteland always made the wasteland safer to traverse, stabilizing the availability of goods.

Considering these benefits, the ELGC could even afford to take a minor loss and raise the hunters' payouts a little as an incentive. Reward amounts for common extermination jobs could also be finalized after completion of the job, so minor adjustments were certainly possible. And so, Alpha concluded, the payouts for low-level extermination jobs were a necessary expense that benefited the entire East.

Akira listened with great interest. "Wow, the League really gave it a lot of thought."

Well, I generalized a bit. "The entire East" might be something of an exaggeration, but it's certainly true that different regions of the East benefit in their own ways. For example, she added, if a horde of monsters suddenly appeared in a region where there never had been any previously, this could

potentially indicate a nearby ruin (similar to the one Akira had discovered, the Yonozuka Station Ruins), and the ELGC could sell the data to the city in that region. Moreover, insurance firms that catered to transport companies would shell out good money for information on the likelihood of encountering a monster in a given area, since they factored this into their rates. And of course, just by selling the data alone to cities and companies, the League stood to make a considerable profit besides.

Akira nodded. “Makes sense. When a new ruin is discovered, the nearby cities profit big-time. They probably sell some of the relics found there, which gives them more funds to pay their hunters. Then those hunters go out and buy gear, which helps the local economy.” He’d been working on his education, not just developing his combat skills.

You got it! Alpha looked satisfied at his growth. Seeing that Akira not only understood her explanation but also showed interest in it pleased her to no end.

But like always, even as she’d delivered her explanation, she’d been constantly analyzing.

Making sure the information he learned wasn’t going to backfire on her.

Shielding Akira from harmful knowledge that might make him turn on her.

Trying to make this prospect as remote as possible, any way she could.

And so, once again, the knowledge that she gave him was skewed in order to preserve his trust in her.



They’d been driving through the wasteland for a while when their destination came into view—an Old World city that still retained much of its past appearance.

“So that’s the Mihazono Town Ruins?” Akira marveled.

Just at that moment, a large desert utility bus filled with hunters drove by.

Looks like we’re all heading to the same place, Alpha commented.

“If all those hunters are coming here, this place must have some seriously

good loot.” Akira turned his gaze to the ruins with renewed anticipation. But then his expression clouded over.

What’s wrong?

“Well, hunters like us have been collecting relics from ruins for a really long time, right? For decades—no, centuries? *How long, exactly?*”

It’s impossible to know exactly, and different regions started at different times, but two hundred years ago at the least.

“Okay, then with all those hunters searching over the years, how are there still any relics left? Shouldn’t all the ruins be cleaned out by now?”

A simple question, and Alpha answered immediately. *They are. Think about it: there were almost no relics of worth in Higaraka; and the Minakado Ruins, the multigun snail’s habitat, was an abandoned husk completely deprived of anything of value.*

In fact, ruins completely stripped of their relics could be found all over the East. However, they tended to be more on the western side, as the monsters were comparatively weaker there. Once the yield of relics in a region had dried up, the hunters would then move farther east in search of more relics. And the League, desiring more valuable relics as well, would also proceed farther eastward with their wasteland development plans. Of course, the farther east one went the stronger the monsters became, which meant higher development costs. But since the relics there were also more valuable, it all balanced out in the end. In fact, there were still ruins yet to be completely plundered around Akira’s hometown Kugamayama City, so the League had no trouble maintaining a profit.

Akira felt a vague sense of unease as he listened. “So these ruins will be cleaned out one day too. Are we gonna be okay?”

Alpha met Akira’s anxiety with a reassuring smile. *Not to worry! Even if that happens one day, it won’t be soon enough that you have to be concerned.* No matter how many relics there were in a given ruin, they’d all be gone in no time if every hunter who showed up took some home. But by the same token, the fact that so many hunters had visited it and yet so many relics still remained was a testament to how powerful and dangerous the monsters inside were,

meaning that the site wasn't going to dry up so easily. Furthermore, some ruins' autorestitution faculties were still intact. These didn't just maintain the dilapidated buildings—they also replenished furnishings and equipment, automatically restocking store shelves. Collapsed buildings could even be entirely reconstructed from rubble. Occasionally, offline autorestitution programs would suddenly come back online for whatever reason, and then the ruins themselves would be reconstructed as well. There were even known examples of new ruins appearing overnight where there had previously been only a barren expanse.

That's another reason that the ruins won't be exhausted so easily, she finished. So rest assured, it's not like all the relics are going to be gone midway through your hunter career or anything.

Hearing this, Akira smiled in relief. "Good. Man, that's a worry off my shoulders! But wait, if there was a ruin out there that had its relics infinitely replenished, then wouldn't the hunters just flock there?"

The autorestitution program also repairs the security devices and the equipment required to manufacture them. So there will be security devices all over the ruins, and they won't hesitate to eliminate any intruders. A mere flock of invading hunters would be met with several times that firepower. In other words, the ruin's security system would raise its threat level accordingly, manufacturing and positioning more defense devices around the area as necessary. Although, considering that the security system is only trying to defend the area from armed belligerents trying to loot the inhabitants' products and equipment, you can't really fault its behavior.

"Well, if you put it that way, I suppose." Akira considered, then mused, "So I guess that, to them, we hunters are just lawless thieves, huh?" He felt a tinge of unpleasantness, but turned his attention elsewhere to try to put the thought out of his mind. "It's not like I'm going to quit being a hunter, though, so there's no use worrying about that this late in the game. The people from back then are all dead, and as long as they don't come back as ghosts or anything, they can't complain, right?"

Alpha hesitated. *Right*, she finally said. There was something complex mixed in with her usual smile, and it seemed a bit more forced than usual as she

looked at Akira. He had turned away, seeming to have already forgotten the matter. She resumed her typical expression before he could notice.

Today, like any other day, people would continue to seek out the ruins, relics, and wisdom of the Old World, and the ones they labeled “monsters” would continue to attack to keep it from all being stolen away. Even now, the old and new worlds were at war. The battle between those that had settled in the territory of a fallen nation as if it was their own, and those that resisted those intruders by attempting to wipe them all out, had raged on since long ago, and would continue into the foreseeable future.



The Mihazono Town Ruins consisted of the remnants of an Old World city, much like Kuzusuhara. More accurately, it was a cluster of ruins that included a portion of said city. The ruins had been sectioned off in the present day into wards with names like “Business District” and “Factory District,” which were educated guesses as to what each area might have once been, based on the buildings that had survived. It was an enormous, sprawling ruin, yet not as large as Kuzusuhara, and the monsters weren’t as tough as the ones lurking in the latter’s depths. So any decently skilled hunter could make some serious money here.

Back when Akira had only had a cheap powered suit, his AAH assault rifle, and minimal combat experience, this ruin could have eaten him alive. But as he was now, he would have no problem. Even as he gazed at the towering buildings in the distance—seeing that they showed no signs of degradation over time, concluding that the autorestitution system was likely still active, and imagining the security creatures that would surely be on high alert and swarming the place—he showed no fear or hesitation as he drove forward.

But when he finally arrived at the ruin’s entrance, he looked surprised. “A parking garage? With the Hunter Office logo on it? What gives? So the Hunter Office manages the garage? Why do they own a parking garage inside a ruin?”

As he slowed his truck to a stop, looking baffled, a male security guard approached.

“Hey, you can’t park there! You’re in the way.”

“Oh, sorry!”

Akira was about to drive off, but the man saw that he needed some instruction.

“First time here, I take it?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Gotcha. Well, if you want to park your vehicle here, you’ve got to use that garage. If you just park anywhere, you’ll end up blocking the road. Or if you’d rather not pay to park, then pick a spot a bit farther from here. Over there’d be far enough,” he said, pointing to an empty space a short distance away.

Akira looked puzzled. “Wait, you’re telling me people actually fork out *money* to get in there? Oh, wow, maybe they do—there’s a bunch inside already.” The garage was already about forty percent full. That left plenty of space; but considering the size of the grounds, this still meant a lot of people had paid to park.

“Well, you know. It’s got a roof, and it’s fairly cheap. Plus, there’s a Hunter Office branch in these ruins, so nonhunters, like Hunter Office staff and merchants who deal with relic hunters, park there as well.”

Akira took another look at the garage. There were indeed more than a few vehicles there that didn’t look like they belonged to hunters.

“And,” the man continued, “don’t forget this is the wasteland. As I’m sure you know, there’s no shortage of lowlife dumbasses here, but none of them are *quite* dumb enough to lay their hands on a vehicle parked in a Hunter Office-owned garage. There’s security guards and cameras here too, so your truck will be safe and sound.”

Akira found himself nodding. He knew firsthand the value of having a safe place to park in the wasteland.

“Well, I won’t lie to you—every now and then we’ll have an idiot who tries it anyway, but all of ’em meet ends that I wouldn’t wish on anyone. So this garage is pretty popular. If you’re interested, the reception desk’s over there.” The

man assumed Akira was a rookie hunter who was finally ready to tackle Mihazono as his first hunt. Finishing the explanation he'd offered as a gesture of goodwill, he pointed out the reception desk and walked off.

Hmm... Maybe I should try it, Akira muttered through telepathy.

Might be a good idea, considering all the security. If we can forgo the bad luck of having your truck ransacked or stolen, I'd say it's worth trying, Alpha teased.

Akira gave her a wry grin, but a grin nonetheless, and headed to the reception desk. After undergoing the necessary procedures, he parked his truck in the garage.

To keep customers from shirking the fee, the Office required their account information. Akira reviewed the provided warning. *"Caution: if you forget to return to the desk before leaving, the system will continue to pull funds from your account until you do, so be careful!"* Um, Alpha, doesn't that mean that if we run into trouble in the ruins and aren't able to get back for some reason, they'll drain all our money?

That's probably why the receptionist recommended you buy emergency insurance, in case you'd rather not end up with an empty account through no fault of your own.

They've really thought of everything. Since they went so far as to put a branch office in these ruins, there must be a lot going on here behind the scenes, huh? Akira remarked as he removed his belongings from the truck. He grabbed the CWH anti-materiel rifle and DVTS minigun from their emplacements so he could bring them along. Then, once he was all ready, Akira left the garage and made his way to the branch office, where he noticed an exchange station had been set up as well. Here, all sorts of hunters were lined up waiting to exchange the relics that they'd likely just collected from the ruin. Some of them were even carrying the lifeless husks of mechanical monsters.

They're also trying to get money for the corpses of the monsters they killed, I see. Hmm... I figured that would just be a bunch of worthless scrap metal, but maybe it sells for more than I thought?

It must at least be valuable enough to make it worth carrying all the way here from the ruin, Alpha replied. In a sense, she suggested, mechanical monsters

were basically walking relics. Even if they ended up broken, they were made of Old World material that couldn't be reproduced with modern technology—so in fact, the parts themselves probably fetched more than a standard relic. At least, they must have been profitable enough for the hot-blooded merchants in the area to offer vehicles for sale or rent here in Mihazono. That way, even if it was too much of a chore to carry the parts all the way to the city, they'd at least be able to take them as far as the nearby exchange. Since the convenience would motivate hunters to defeat more monsters, it would make the ruins safer to traverse overall, which would boost income from relic exchanges and ultimately help the city turn a profit. With this in mind, the city was probably also buying these parts at a slightly inflated rate.

Akira listened to Alpha and nodded. *Then I was right—they really have thought of everything. Though it sure would've been nice if they'd put a branch office like this in Kuzusuhara too*, he added glumly. Recalling how he'd previously had to haul relics all the way out from the depths of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins without a powered suit, he made a face.

Those ruins are already near the city, so there'd be no need for the Office to put a branch there. And it's not like they haven't done anything.

Oh? What have they done?

They built a provisional underground base, didn't they? That's on an even larger scale than a branch office.

Come to think of it, you're right.

At that moment, Akira noticed that some of the hunters in the area were all looking in the same direction. He turned to see what had caught their attention—and froze at the sight of a trio he knew all too well. He was also familiar with the clothing that two of them wore—maid outfits, wholly unsuited to hunting relics in the ruins.

Reina was standing there with her two usual companions.

Chapter 104: Two Maids and Their Master

At the entrance to the Mihazono branch office, Reina gave a small sigh. “We really do stick out like a sore thumb,” she muttered under her breath.

There were two reasons for this, and she turned to face them both. In their maid outfits, Shiori and Kanae looked terribly out of place among a crowd of hunters in a dangerous ruin.

Reason Number One—Shiori—bowed her head in apology. “I’m sorry, miss, but this alone I cannot compromise on. You will just have to get used to it.”

But Reason Number Two, Kanae, chuckled like it didn’t bother her in the least. “That’s right, you oughta get used to it. When you’re a famous hunter one day, everyone’s gonna have their eyes on you anyway, so what better time than now? That is, unless you want to end your hunting career as a nobody.”

Reina shot Kanae a glare, but the latter grinned as if completely unfazed. A far more intense glare from Shiori, however, made Kanae avert her eyes as though she hadn’t noticed.

Watching them, Reina sighed again. Though the two women had different perspectives, it was clear that neither of them had any intention of being less conspicuous.

As a rule, Druncam rookies operated in groups. Reina was a member of Druncam, and based on her age and level of experience, she easily qualified as a rookie.

Yet lately she’d been working alone. Well, not *technically* alone, since she had Shiori and Kanae by her side, but alone in the sense that she’d been taken off all Druncam assignments and wasn’t working alongside any of her fellow rookies. Because of the situation she’d been placed in, all three Druncam factions were distancing themselves from her.

Once, when Akira and Katsuya had quarreled and been mere seconds away

from killing one another in Kugamayama's lower district, Reina and her maids had taken a neutral stance and left the area. The argument itself had been settled peacefully in the end, but Reina's group had effectively deserted Katsuya all the same, and afterward her position within Druncam had become precarious at best.

It didn't help that before the argument, Reina had belonged to Katsuya's team but wanted to leave for various reasons. Katsuya had tried to get her to stay, but Reina had not only ignored his kind offer, she'd cruelly abandoned him—at least, that was how the Group A rookies saw it. Furious, they'd begun to give her and her maids the cold shoulder. Katsuya had attempted to smooth things over, telling them that in that situation Reina's group had had no choice but to do what they'd done, but even his words couldn't quell the rookies' anger. Even when he'd mentioned that it hadn't been a big deal anyway, since the issue had been resolved amicably, that had only added more fuel to the fire, as they took this to mean that Reina hadn't even had a good reason to forsake him. And because Mizuha, Reina's supervisor, was actively backing the rookies, the Druncam exec couldn't do anything that would earn their ire, and had no choice but to remove Reina and her entourage from the team.

But that wasn't all. Druncam's other group of rookies, Group B, had all had it rough financially, and many of them had been born in the slums. So none of them felt a shred of kinship toward a pampered girl who brought maids with her everywhere she went, and they shunned her. And the veterans hated rookies to begin with, so they didn't want anything to do with her either.

Thus, having been ostracized by every single faction in Druncam, and with the war between factions getting more heated by the day, Reina was forced to go it alone. This of course meant that she no longer had the support or connections to the lucrative jobs Druncam would have normally provided—a fatal blow for a hunter who aspired to rise up the ranks.

Unlike Reina, though, Shiori saw a silver lining in all this. Being removed from the syndicate's internal squabble meant that Reina hadn't had to get involved in the Yonozuka or bounty hunt fiascos. But Reina's status within Druncam was still unfavorable all the same, and so she was living day-to-day trying to make it on her own as a hunter without any help or support from the warring factions.

Having selected the Mihazono Town Ruins as the site for today's hunt, Reina's group was extremely conspicuous.

Reina herself was clad in a powered suit and held a firearm—a typical combination for a hunter. Shiori, however, was wielding twin blades, and Kanae was only armed with a peashooter pistol—she prioritized hand-to-hand combat and wore combat gauntlets instead. Against dangerous monsters, when a long-range weapon like a gun was practically a necessity, two of the three were choosing to use melee weapons. But the biggest reason they stood out was, of course, the maid outfits Shiori and Kanae were wearing.

Both Shiori and Kanae were good-looking, so perhaps if they had been in the city, they would have only gotten away with curious glances. But this was the wasteland, and those glances were now tinged with suspicion, as though on guard against a foreign element that didn't belong.

Reina and Shiori had also garnered attention in the Kuzusuhara Underground Ruins, but back then she'd been with the same group of people the whole time, and their curiosity and suspicion had waned as they'd become more used to Shiori's presence. Here in the Mihazono Ruins, however, the hunters were constantly coming and going, and most of them were seeing Reina's group for the first time. The size and endless flux of the crowd ensured they'd stay the center of attention for quite a while.

Yet notwithstanding all this suspicion, Shiori prioritized her job and loyalty to her master, and it was clear from Kanae's grin that she couldn't have cared less in the first place.

With all the tension in the air, Reina already felt worn out, and she'd only just arrived.

However, while she acted like she didn't possess a modicum of loyalty toward her mistress, Kanae did at least take her job of guarding Reina seriously. As she subtly scanned the area for anyone with hostile intent, she spotted a familiar face, and her grin grew wider.



Akira observed how the crowd around Reina and her entourage were reacting to them. *Looks like maid uniforms really are an unusual sight here in the ruins,* he commented smugly to Alpha.

Having grown up in the back alleys of the slums, Akira had missed out on a lot of what passed for normal experience. And since meeting Alpha, his life had hardly been typical—in fact, he was starting to question everything he thought he knew. So he was glad to finally find something that fell in line with what he'd already known to be true.

Alpha gave him a slight smile. *Seems so. Well, now that you've satisfied your curiosity, how about we head on in? You don't want those three to notice you and get you caught up in some trouble, right?*

Hm? Oh yeah, good point! Akira turned to walk away, but it was too late. Kanae had already spotted him.

"Hey, kiddo! Fancy seein' you here again!" she shouted at the top of her lungs, waving excitedly.

In an instant, the crowd's attention turned to Akira as well.

And this is why I wanted you to leave, said Alpha, with an air of "I told you so."

Right. Akira sighed, unable to argue. As he was debating whether to just dash off, Kanae swiftly walked right up to him.

"Sure is a coincidence, meetin' in a place like this! Oh, name's Kanae, by the way!"

"Akira," he answered with some trepidation.

"Akira kiddo! Nice to meet ya!"

Of course, now Reina and Shiori could no longer ignore Akira either, and with a quick glance at each other, they too came over.

Shiori was the first to greet him, bowing as she tried to get a read on his attitude toward them. "It has been quite a while since we last met. It's good to see you doing well, Mr. Akira."

Reina joined in with a nervous chuckle. "Um, long time no see."

For a moment, Akira looked unsure how to respond. “R-Right. Been a bit.”

Awkwardness filled the air between them—but Kanae, unable to read the room, continued in her boisterous, cheerful voice. “You here to hunt relics, kiddo?”

“Yeah.”

“By yourself?” she asked, surprised.

“That’s right. I usually work alone anyway.”

“Wow, seriously?! This ruin ain’t a walk in the park, y’know! And you’re doin’ it without any help?! Ha ha, you’ve got some guts!” She grinned.

“Um, thanks?” In the face of Kanae’s over-the-top levity, Akira’s awkwardness suddenly felt pointless and trivial to him. With a small sigh, he decided to open up a bit to Reina and Shiori, so as not to invite unnecessary conflict. “Actually, well, back during the thing with me and Katsuya, I never expected you guys to side with me. It was enough help for you to just take a neutral stance. So, er, thanks for that.”

Shiori immediately sensed that Akira’s gratitude was genuine. Breathing a secret sigh of relief, she bowed politely. “Thank you for being so understanding.”

Reina also sighed as though a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Now that she knew Akira didn’t see them as enemies, she dropped her guard.

“So what’d you guys come over here for?” he asked. “If it was just to greet a familiar face, that’s all well and good, but I gotta go now.”

“Yes, that’s really all it was,” Shiori confirmed. “We apologize for interrupting your plans. Take care.” She turned on her heel to leave. While Akira wasn’t an enemy, he *was* a magnet for trouble—as Shiori knew well. She didn’t want Reina getting involved with him any more than necessary.

But Kanae had to open her big mouth once more. “Hey, kiddo! Since fate already brought us together, how about we all explore the ruins as a team?”

Reina and Shiori froze. Shiori, however, was quick to recover and made a move to silence Kanae.

But Akira's curt reply came faster. "I refuse."

Reina looked downcast. While she wasn't necessarily keen on the idea of working with Akira, being immediately turned down like that still hurt. Hunters always found strength in numbers. By now Akira should have known how strong Shiori was, and he could probably tell that Kanae was plenty capable as well. Which meant Reina had to be the weak spot. *I'm such a liability that even Shiori and Kanae's strength can't make up for it*, she thought glumly.

The girl's discouraged expression pained Shiori's heart. But Kanae was all smiles as she gave Akira a teasing grin. "Aw, what's wrong? The thought of traveling with three smokin' babes doesn't get your blood pumping? Or are you already bored of girls, even at your age?"

"Nah, I just don't want to stand out by joining a team of people dressed like weirdos. Besides, it's a pain to argue over stuff like what path to take or how to divide up the loot. That's all," he replied, looking exasperated—though while both of these reasons were genuine, the former was definitely the bigger one. He was already getting quite tired of the curious stares around him. No doubt the crowd assumed he was part of Reina's group as well. "Why are you guys dressed like that anyway?" he added. "Is it a preference of yours? Do you enjoy being the center of attention or something?"

"It's our master's preference!" Kanae blurted, looking proud for some reason.



Akira cast a dubious glance at Reina. “O-Oh, really?”

Sensing a grave misunderstanding on the horizon, Reina shook off her funk and immediately protested, “N-No! It’s not *my* preference!”

“R-Right, sure,” Akira said, clearly unconvinced.

Her denial had not cleared things up one bit, and she panicked. But at least there was no longer any trace of her earlier malaise. *This expression suits her much better*, Shiori thought with a wry smile, and moved in to assist. “To clarify what Kanae said, it is the preference of Miss Reina’s grandfather, our real master. You see, these garments are the most high performance among all the clothing we own, and thus are the most suited for combat. We are not wearing them in order to stand out.”

“By the way, we’re also wearing powered inner wear underneath. Wanna see?” Kanae chimed in, and lifted the hem of her skirt slightly, revealing a glimpse of what looked like black tights. Shiori smacked her hand, causing her to let go.

“We’re well aware our choice of attire is unusual,” Shiori continued, “but we wear these outfits in order to keep Miss Reina safe. It is not Miss Reina’s wish, so do not get the wrong idea.”

Akira took another look at their outfits. “Hmm...” he muttered. Then, grinning as if he’d realized something, he exclaimed, “Ah, I get it! Those uniforms are made of Old World material, aren’t they? That’s why they’re as sturdy as body armor, and you have on the inner wear for extra protection, right?” Back in the Kuzusuhara Underground Ruins, he recalled, Shiori had been wearing a maid uniform as well—albeit a normal one with no defensive capabilities—and powered inner wear underneath. Akira deduced that back then, for whatever reason, she must not have had her Old World maid uniform available and had worn the uniform as a bluff. Of course, a bluff like that wouldn’t work on monsters, but it’d certainly fool the other hunters in the underground ruins. *If that’s true, then it all makes sense*, Akira thought, pleased with himself for figuring it out.

But Shiori replied, “I’m afraid you’re mistaken. This uniform was made using New World technology. However, it was designed by a company that also

manufactures body armor, so it is resilient enough to hold up in combat nonetheless.”

Akira was nonplussed. “Um,” he finally said, “correct me if there’s something I’m not getting, but why would a modern maid outfit need to be monster-proof?”

“Why? To perform our duties as maids, of course.”

“Uh, um, a maid’s job is like, uh, to do housework, right? So wouldn’t that function be, er, unnecessary?”

“In some instances, it is very necessary,” Shiori replied.

“So like...” Akira fumbled for words. “You mean you’re like a bodyguard or security personnel trained in all manners of combat, but work as a maid as cover?”

“Incorrect. I am not pretending to be a maid as a cover. Both Kanae and I are genuine maids, just like the rest in our master’s employ. However, since a respectable level of skill in martial arts is necessary in our profession, I cannot deny that Kanae and I, as well as our coworkers back home, have all undergone combat training.”

“All the maids”—Akira swallowed—“are trained in *combat*?”

“Some of them are butlers, to be precise,” Shiori added seriously.

She wasn’t trying to dodge Akira’s question or pull the wool over his eyes—she’d answered as honestly as she was able to. But he only ended up more confused than ever.

I don’t get it. Why would maids and butlers need to be skilled in fighting? Wouldn’t people wealthy enough to hire help like that already be living inside the city walls? Huh... Could it be that it’s actually more dangerous inside the walls than I thought? Or am I just mistaken about what maids and butlers actually do? Stunned in the face of a revelation that threatened to shake the foundation of everything he thought he knew, he muttered, “Was I all wrong about this?”

Kanae cut in with a grin. “Some things in life just aren’t worth worrying about,

kiddo. It's a wide world out there. That's all you need to know."

Akira glanced at Kanae. She nodded smugly, as if she'd said something incredibly profound. He suddenly felt foolish for obsessing over this matter and let it go. Even if his ignorance here got him into trouble, he reasoned, monster attacks in the wasteland were surely far worse, so there was no need to work himself up needlessly. He sighed and turned back to his original point.

"Anyway, for the time being, I don't want to go relic hunting with you three," he declared. "Last time I came along as a bodyguard, but I don't feel like doing that right now either. Maybe some other time. Later!"

He turned on his heel and walked away. Alpha accompanied him with a knowing smile. *What?* he demanded.

Oh, nothing much! Just thinking how we lucked out—your penchant for inviting conflict decided to take today off.

Oh. Yeah, I suppose so. Akira gave her a rueful grin, but didn't deny it.



The moment Akira was out of sight, Shiori turned on her coworker. "Kanae? What was the meaning of that just now?"

Kanae tried to play dumb. "Whatever could you mean?"

"Why did you call out to Mr. Akira? What were you planning to do if things got ugly?"

"Aw, c'mon, it turned out fine, didn't it? Nothing happened, and now we know he wasn't upset, so lay off," Kanae said in her breezy tone, unfazed by Shiori's stern glare.

"I'm asking *why* you did it, Kanae. I'm sure you recall his foul mood back then, so why would you carelessly get his attention?" Shiori's eyes suggested that if Kanae didn't have a good reason for exposing Miss Reina to unnecessary danger, she'd have to answer to Shiori.

But Kanae didn't even flinch. "That's exactly why. I thought it'd be the perfect time," she said with a grin. She added that they would have had to find out how upset Akira was sooner or later anyway, and even if he'd felt the desire to harm

them the moment they'd entered his vision, he wouldn't have tried anything with a Hunter Office outpost so close by. Besides, they were surrounded by a crowd of hunters who would likely join the fight on the women's side. As Reina's bodyguard, there was no way Kanae could possibly let this golden opportunity slip by.

Shiori decided that was good enough and didn't press her any further. It was clearly an excuse Kanae had just made up on the fly, but a rational one nonetheless. And even if Kanae's real objective had been something foolish, like her own amusement, she'd also prepared a logical reason and probably wouldn't have acted without one. Shiori let the matter drop.

Despite her displeasure at her coworker's spontaneous personality, Shiori had previously been unable to protect Reina on her own—which meant she couldn't send Kanae back home because she needed the additional help. So she held her tongue out of loyalty to Reina.

Kanae picked up on this and grinned. "I'm off the hook, then? *Sweeeet!*"

Reina, who'd been watching all the while, heaved a deep sigh. The two maids were supposed to be her servants, but was she fit to be their master? Having once been crushed under the weight of her own weakness, she was slowly but surely starting to get to her feet. Yet it would still be a while before she could stand upright.



Akira proceeded through the business district of the Mihazono ruins toward the marker in his vision, which was pointing to an upper floor of a skyscraper in the distance.

His current objective was to discover a previously unexplored area in this otherwise well-known ruin, following clues to the whereabouts of Lion's Tail terminals. He figured he'd first check the location the marker indicated, and then collect a few relics on the way back even if nothing turned up.

Although this area had once been metropolitan, fallen debris had blocked the road and made it impossible to drive on, so he was journeying on foot. With his powered suit, he had no trouble scaling the mountains of rubble in his path.

Still, I wouldn't have expected a terminal in a place like this—but that does make it all the more promising. All the evidence suggested that their destination had yet to be explored. Even the map of Mihazono he'd pulled up on the internet had no information on the skyscraper save for its name—the Serantal Building—and its general location. There was no floor plan or any details on what was inside, probably because no one had explored the building yet. And if so, then previous hunters had probably located the site but hadn't managed to reach it.

Alpha smiled in a way that filled him with confidence. *For the time being, let's try to make it as far as we can,* she suggested. *Just because other people couldn't do it doesn't mean it's impossible—and with me as your guide, we might actually pull it off.*

Considering that Akira had managed to survive the depths of Kuzusuhara—a ruin that would've been impossible for him to traverse on his own—with her help, her words made sense to him. *All right, let's do it,* he said with a nod. *Considering the design of the building, it'll probably be relatively straightforward inside, and there might even be some stairs left we can climb. Or maybe the elevator's still operational—man, that would be nice...*

I don't think you should get your hopes up.

Oh, you think it'll be broken after all? Yeah, makes sense...

No. Considering the building's mostly intact, I would guess its autorestitution function is still online as well, so the elevator is likely operational. But so is the building's security. Alpha pointed ahead. *We're not exactly welcome in these ruins. Do you really think they'll let us use the building's facilities as we please?*

In the direction Alpha indicated, a rectangular monster was already drawing near, and it clearly had Akira in its sights. As the mechanical guard scuttled nimbly along the debris-strewn ground on a cluster of legs, it swung its many-jointed arms toward the intruder.

Oh, gotcha, Akira said wryly. He raised his CWH and pulled the trigger, penetrating the thin layer of metal with AP rounds and destroying the mechanisms within. With its control system broken, the machine stopped in its tracks.

Today, like most days, it seemed the mechanical guards patrolling Mihazono's business district would have their hands full dealing with an uninvited guest.

Akira's main aim in coming to Mihazono was to collect relics, but he also wanted some practice exploring a ruin on his own. So Alpha didn't assist his powered suit as he made his way through the ruin, or guide him as he checked his surroundings. Because the suit was far stronger than the human body, it took practice to move normally while wearing it. Akira was practicing both walking properly without getting carried away by the suit, and drawing his weapon quickly without letting the extra power from his suit overstrain him.

Each of these actions was difficult enough on its own. But Akira was doing both of them at the same time—*and* polishing his ability to quickly sense an enemy's location, all while taking care to not let any monster that slipped past his watch catch him by surprise. Akira was training diligently so that he'd still be able to move without Alpha's support, so monsters couldn't get the jump on him even when she wasn't present, and so he'd be able to survive if he ever lost his connection to her again.

With all the derelict buildings and debris blocking the roads, navigating the business district felt like threading his way through a maze. Sometimes there would be tidy, immaculate areas butting up against mountains of rubble, and brand-new buildings beside ruined and collapsed ones. Akira found the contrast truly bizarre.

Hey Alpha, why do some of the areas here look ruined and others newer, even though they're right next to each other? It's like a clear line's been drawn between them.

I suspect this comes from the varying conditions of the mechanical guards and maintenance bots that manage each territory. Alpha explained that the specifications of the machines in each sector differed greatly, leaving a marked difference on the sectors themselves. In the ruined areas, high-spec mechanical guards had been deployed, and their repeated battles with hunters had ravaged the structures so much that the comparatively low-spec maintenance bots had been unable to keep up. For the newer-looking areas, it was the opposite: there weren't enough guards deployed to keep the maintenance bots from doing

their job.

Akira reflected for a moment. *So, does that mean the newer, tidier areas are safer?*

It's possible, but don't lower your guard. Maybe the security there is so strong that hunters don't even bother approaching, or the maintenance bots are so high-spec that they can just repair the whole area overnight.

I see... Well, either way, hunting for relics in a more kept-up place has got to be better, right?

I'd say so, she agreed—then added, after a slight hesitation, Do you want to take a look?

Akira considered. *Nah, let's check out where the marker's pointing first. That was the plan, after all.*

Right. Well then, let us proceed with vigilance. Onward! Alpha grinned, satisfied that Akira had prioritized her plan over what would have been a largely meaningless endeavor.

Even though Akira was training to explore ruins on his own, Alpha still provided a degree of instruction when necessary—she didn't want his inexperience to lead him into a monster ambush. But even when she pointed out that he'd selected the wrong path and informed him of a better one, Akira couldn't tell the difference.

How's this route any better than the one I chose? he asked.

She temporarily augmented his vision, coloring his surroundings according to threat level. *The areas marked in red are dangerous. The deeper the red, the greater the danger. Looking at the color of the place you were about to enter, I'd advise against it.*

Oh, is that so? Then how am I supposed to tell without your help?

Well, you've just got to know.

"Just got to know," huh? Alpha's exceedingly vague reply left him at a loss.

Alpha also looked a bit helpless. *Sorry, but that's really all I can tell you.* She

added that she was basing her calculations on the information from his scanner—looking at the data coming in from every building that had an unobstructed view of him, from any walls facing him, and from every window and entrance placed in those walls. All of this helped her determine the likelihood that an enemy would aim at Akira from any of those locations at any given moment, as well as what the accuracy of their shots would be based on their distance from him. Then she would update the local threat levels accordingly.

But she couldn't communicate those calculation methods and formulas to Akira, even through telepathy—whether she expressed them numerically or in images, they'd be far beyond the scope of his understanding. And even if he *did* somehow understand them, he'd never be able to perform those calculations without Alpha's help—let alone do so continuously, while staying vigilant of his surroundings. It would overload his brain.

Of course, I could teach you an extremely dumbed down version, but there'd be no point, since you can already manage that level of accuracy on your own, she finished.

So in other words, I have no choice but to become experienced enough to sense whether an area's dangerous on my own?

Exactly. The only way to hone your intuition is through experience. Of course, that doesn't mean you can't use some tools to expedite the process, like my helpful color-coding.

Looking around once more, Akira saw that he was engulfed in a sea of red. Even if he didn't know *why* the area was dangerous, it clearly was. Since he hadn't even been able to notice that much without Alpha's help, he had no choice but to acknowledge he'd failed, and that his intuition sorely needed polishing. Alpha's support was a helpful shortcut to that goal. *Intuition? Like, getting a bad feeling about something? Can you really rely on that?* Now that he thought about it, perhaps intuition was what had kept him alive back when he was running around the slums, hiding in the corners of the back alleys. Reflecting on those days with a complicated smile, he resumed his search of the ruins, trying to rely more on his intuition.

All the monsters Akira encountered on his way through the Mihazono business district kept turning out to be machines. Even the ones that seemed to be organic at first glance were revealed to be mechanical once they were destroyed. At one point, a monster resembling a large dog had made a beeline for him at a speed no normal canine could hope to match. But after some careful scouting and quick sniping on Akira's part, metallic fragments had scattered everywhere as it collapsed to the ground in a heap, and a metal framework could be clearly seen from the hole blown in its torso.

Akira looked puzzled. *A cyborg? No, the head's mechanical too. Why are all the monsters here machines?*

Probably because there's nothing in these ruins for organic monsters to eat. Or maybe the guards wiped them all out. Even the trees lining the streets here are also made of metal, constructed with the same nanomaterial as the guards, so they wouldn't serve as sustenance either.

Akira gazed at the trees on either side of the road, vibrant green and completely indistinguishable from real ones. *You're kidding.*

They're kind of like imitation flowers, Alpha added.

This only made him more uneasy—gazing on the artificial trees that decorated the streets, he saw simulacra that, unlike genuine trees, would never wither.

Chapter 105: A Concern Laid to Rest

As Akira continued through Mihazono's business district toward the Serantal Building, a small plane flew by overhead.

Hey, I saw that thing pass by earlier too. Since it's not trying to attack us, I guess it's a spy plane? Or maybe a surveillance drone?

Most likely. She considered for a moment. Don't go any farther than this for now. If you do, you'll probably run into trouble.

She directed Akira, who had been making his way through Mihazono's streets, to enter the building closest to him. He climbed the staircase and headed for higher ground. With his powered suit, climbing the long stretch of stairs was easy—for his body, at least. But the building loomed so tall that ascending flight after flight started to take a toll on his psyche. As he rose higher and higher, his eyes couldn't help but be drawn to the elevator on each floor.

Alpha, are you sure we can't try the elevator?

Positive. Stick to the stairs. It might work at first, but if something goes wrong, you'll be trapped in a confined space with little hope of escape. So you'll just have to persevere.

Very well. Akira sighed and continued climbing.

As he reached the fourteenth floor, Akira discovered a glass corridor from which he could see the entire area outside. Looking out over the landscape, Akira's face grew grim.

The marker indicating the presence of a Lion's Tail terminal was pointing to a place near the top of the Serantal Building, on a floor even higher than the one he stood on now. The building itself was tall enough to be seen from anywhere in Mihazono's business district, and the ravaged townscape seemed to wrap around it, almost as though it ruled over the land.

But that wasn't all. On the building's grounds, he could see groups of

weaponized guards, different from the machines he'd encountered here thus far. Autonomous weapons equipped with huge missile pods guarded the perimeter, alongside robots (each resembling a senior citizen's rolling walker) that were loaded with machine guns.

No wonder you told me not to go any farther! Hmm... Yeah, those look way more dangerous than anything we fought on the way here.

Up until now, we've only come across machines that guard the whole district. Those mechanical monstrosities down there are likely the Serantal Building's specialized defense force. As such, expect their specs and coordination systems to be completely different.

Specs I get, but what does it matter to us if their coordination is any good? They're monsters, so they're just going to attack us regardless. Now curious, and wanting to get a better look at each monster, he aimed his CWH toward the skyscraper. When he wanted to magnify a single point in his vision, looking through his rifle's scope actually gave superior results to zooming in with the scanner.

A great deal, actually. Since their coordination systems and the area under their protection differ from the regular bots, they probably use a different network for sharing information as well. That can lead to many other differences, including— Akira! Run!

Akira didn't hesitate—he could ask questions later. All that mattered right now was doing exactly as Alpha instructed. From the look on her face and his countless near-death experiences in the past, he knew this was the only way he'd survive. With Alpha's support and his suit running at full power, he nimbly dashed out of the corridor. In the pressure of the moment, he reflexively heightened his sense of time, and even as the world around him slowed to a crawl, he kept running.

In his Alpha-augmented vision, a screen popped up with a view of the scene behind him. His face stiffened as he watched. Several monsters with missile pods were continuously firing from the Serantal Building's grounds—and the missiles were headed his way. Wave after wave bombarded the side of the building Akira was in. It would take more than that to topple an Old World

construction like this immediately—but the force of the explosions blasted holes in the wall, giving the next group of missiles free entry.

Having gained entry to the building, the leading missile slammed against the wall of the room inside and detonated. The next missile destroyed the wall of the next room, and the several rockets that followed kept blasting a path through the rooms until they found their way to Akira.

Akira, whose quick reflexes had already brought him to the other side of the building, managed to avoid the brunt of the missile barrage. But as he bolted down the long hallway, the final missile dogged him from behind.

Intercept it, Akira!

Roger! Akira leaped forward, did a half spin in the air, and trained his CWH and his DVTS minigun on the approaching missile. Lining up the sights, he unleashed a barrage of bullets. He'd already outfitted both guns with mods that improved their strength and rate of fire. Each shot also had Alpha's guidance and so struck its target dead-on.

One second later and he would've taken the full brunt of the missile, becoming mincemeat. But for him, a second had been more than enough time to react. The force of the bullets shoved the missile off course, and it collided with a wall.

Normal bullets weren't dense enough to disrupt a missile's trajectory, but these were designed to take down powerful behemoths. Extended magazines allowed Akira to keep up a continuous barrage that, with Alpha's precise calculations, made this feat possible.

Still, as the missile hit the wall, the force of the ensuing explosion struck Akira. He was far away enough to avoid the brunt of the blast, but as the hallway erupted in thick smoke and bright flame, he was blown backward, slamming into the wall behind him. The wall fractured, leaving countless cracks in a pattern that resembled a spider's web. Even his powered suit had been unable to completely absorb the impact, and intense pain surged through his body. He didn't even have the energy to support himself against the wall and crumpled to the floor in a heap, only able to get up on all fours before vomiting blood.

His whole body was screaming in pain, but his mind was clear, and he

immediately reached for his pack to fish out some medicine. He was so badly injured that if he hadn't been wearing a powered suit, his limbs couldn't have properly responded to his brain's commands. However, his suit was a reading-type, which could interpret the neurotransmitters in his brain. It carried out his wishes in his limbs' stead, and he successfully grabbed the capsules and popped them in his mouth. Despite the revolting taste of blood, he forced himself to swallow, and the expensive recovery nanomachines proved that they were worth their price as they went to work on his body. He felt the pain instantly subside. As analgesics, they were already plenty effective, but in no time at all his limbs were also healed enough to move again.

Akira got to his feet and let out a deep sigh. Then, in an attempt to convince himself that all was well, he forced a grin.

"Whew! Damn, that was rough!"

Now that you can move again, let's get out of here, Alpha suggested. I'm not sure if there'll be another barrage, and we shouldn't stick around to find out.

"Roger that!" Akira glanced ahead and saw that a section of the corridor had crumbled. Through the destroyed walls and rooms, he could glimpse the outside—proof of how persistent the missiles had been. Seeing the damage they'd done to the building in their attempt to reach him, he grimaced as he headed for the stairs.

Once Akira had made it to a relatively safer spot, he took some time to catch his breath. There was no sign of anything pursuing him. By now, the medicine had long since done its job, so after reloading his ammo and replacing his energy pack, he and his equipment were back in peak condition. Reassured, he finally calmed down and allowed himself to relax and his mind to wander.

Then a doubt crossed his mind. "I know those were mechanical monsters, but they're supposed to be guarding the ruins, right? Why would they go as far as to destroy a building in the ruins they're protecting just to get rid of one hunter?"

Well, as I was saying earlier, it's probably because their coordination systems and the area under their jurisdiction are different from those of the regular bots.

Sprinkling in her own guesses here and there, Alpha explained that the monsters that had just attacked Akira were meant to defend the Serantal Building, not the rest of Mihazono. As such, their coordination systems and area of activity were isolated from the rest of the ruin, and they were specifically programmed to disregard damage to anything except what they were supposed to defend.

The edifices around the Serantal Building were all in ruins: the guardians tasked with defending it had attacked other hunters the same way they'd gone after Akira, reducing the structures to collateral damage. Even the ruin's autorestitution was no longer able to repair them. And the circle of destruction around the Serantal Building indicated the radius of the guards' patrol routes—the building Akira was currently resting in was still standing because it lay outside this circle.

Akira looked puzzled. "But I was outside that area back then too, right? So why did they attack me anyway?" He grimaced as understanding dawned. "It's because I pointed my gun at the building, isn't it?"

Most likely. But don't dwell on that too much—careless though it was, in a ruin like this it'll be a bigger problem if worrying about it keeps you from shooting when it counts.

Akira fell silent. "Okay, got it," he said at last.

Alpha gave him a gentle smile, and sensing her concern for him, he found himself smiling as well. But he still couldn't help but feel a little dispirited. After weathering several bounty hunts, he'd grown more confident in his own abilities, and had entered Mihazono—a ruin said to require a significant degree of skill—with this same confidence. But now it was clear that at his current level, those monsters would annihilate him before he ever reached the door to the Serantal Building.

Alpha looked a bit stern. *Akira, I'll ask you now—while you can still change your mind—what do you want to do from here? Stick to the plan and head for the marked spot? Or turn back?*

"Turn back," Akira wanted to respond, but something inside him kept him from doing so. At first, Akira felt like he only had one option—retreat. As he was

now, it would be far too reckless to go up against such monstrosities. Yet Alpha had given him a choice. This meant that even at his current level, there was still a way he could proceed safely—or at least more safely than in the many hopeless battles that Alpha had stopped him from rushing into thus far. Realizing this, Akira wondered if he was merely letting his cowardice get the better of him. After a moment of uncertainty, he faced Alpha again with a serious expression. “If I said I wanted to continue, would you try to stop me?”

Alpha gave him a smile. *If you want to head in there, I won't stop you. I'll be with you every step of the way, of course, and you're sufficiently equipped. The question is, do you have the necessary resolve?*

“That attack just now was pretty rough. You sure I'll be able to handle it?”

That was just because it took you by surprise. And even then—thanks to me—you made it out of there relatively unscathed, didn't you? I think you'll be fine. Then Alpha gave him a provoking grin. *Although, you will need a bit of recklessness to pull it off, and a considerable degree of resolve. So I won't force you. If you want to turn tail, that's fine with me.*

Akira looked a bit surprised for a moment, but then a dry smile crept to his lips. Finally, he grinned back at Alpha boldly. “Just how much resolve are we talking here? I know resolve is my burden and all and I have your support, but if you tell me I'm gonna need the resolve to be swallowed by a gigantic monster again, I'm out.”

I'm not asking for that much. She smiled. *Compared to that ordeal, all I'm asking is for you to just be a little more fired up than normal. After all, you'll have me by your side this time.*

A look passed between them, and Akira's decision was made. “All right, let's do this!” If he was going to need resolve on this path, then he ought to start summoning it now. So he steeled himself and chose to press onward—for the sake of someday completing Alpha's job and recompensing her fairly for her support, which he considered an initial investment. For the sake of repaying all the debts he owed her, he would make it all happen—or die trying. If he wasn't able to at least promise that much to himself, he might as well quit now—and most of all, if he couldn't even handle this level of risk, he'd be a poor excuse

for a hunter.

Are you sure? As I said earlier, you're going to need a fair amount of resolve.

"Yeah, I'm ready. Resolve is my burden, after all."

He grinned, as if it had been an obvious choice, and Alpha beamed as though she could barely contain her happiness.



With his heart prepared and his weapons ready, Akira stood on the roof of the building he'd been resting in. Once he'd decided to press on, he'd gone back to the first floor to scope out the Serantal Building's structure with his scanner, then headed up twenty-seven floors to the roof. At the top, he got rid of anything that would hinder him during battle—his pack, his data terminal, the weapons he didn't need, and any spare ammunition that was just weighing him down. He only brought along his powered suit (after swapping out the energy pack) and his CWH rifle and DVTS minigun (each of which he'd already reloaded with fresh ammo and energy packs). He'd also ingested as many time-release capsules of medicine as he could handle, and had a few more in his mouth ready to swallow when needed.

The place where he was standing was on the side facing away from the Serantal Building, meaning he was outside the enemy's surveillance.

He was resolved, and he was ready.

With a smile, Alpha confirmed one final time, *All right, Akira. Are you prepared?*

Any time, he responded, looking focused.

Satisfied, she declared, *Then...begin!*

Akira charged forward with no hesitation. The battle had begun.

The Serantal defense force instantly detected a presence running headlong into their radius, and moved to intercept it. Unconcerned, Akira sped up—and leaped off the roof on the side facing the Serantal Building!

In free fall, he readied his DVTS minigun, aimed it toward the group of mechanical monsters on the grounds below, and pulled the trigger. A

continuous hailstorm of bullets supplied by extended magazines streaked toward the distant targets below.

Akira had modded his DVTS to include a force-field armor function, reducing the weight of the minigun and the recoil of its fire. But now he'd intentionally switched it off—thanks to his powered suit, his body remained unharmed from the recoil, which he used to propel himself against the side of the building he'd just leaped off. His continuous stream of fire, made possible with the extended magazine, kept both his feet firmly on the wall as he ran down the side, his powered suit further supporting his balance. As he descended, he raised his CWH and began firing it as well. He'd also modified this weapon, allowing it to use even more powerful proprietary ammo than before, and the recoil from this was so strong that Akira's feet carved fissures in the building wall as he ran.

Meanwhile, a shower of DVTS bullets descended upon the mechanical targets below. They instantly deployed their force-field armor, and flashes of impact conversion scattered everywhere as the armor covering their bodies became scarred with bullet marks. But because of the distance from which Akira was shooting and the strength of the robots' armor, the bullets failed to pierce the machines' defenses, and their inner systems remained unharmed.

But the barrage was certainly effective in one respect—convincing the machines to raise Akira's threat level. An autonomous weapon that he'd attacked immediately rotated one of its two autocannons in his direction. Once it had him lined up in its sights, it temporarily weakened the force field surrounding its cannon so it could fire. The moment the force-field output dropped, however, a CWH proprietary bullet flew down the cannon's muzzle. The powerful round struck the shell within just as it was about to fire, causing a shock-induced explosion that destroyed the cannon from the inside.

The cannon hadn't even finished turning toward Akira before he'd fired. Nevertheless, the bullet had entered the cannon's muzzle with perfect timing—thanks to the preciseness of Alpha's calculations, which bordered on precognition.

With one of its autocannons destroyed, the autonomous weapon's control system immediately sensed the damage and increased the force-field armor around the other gun to maximum intensity, protecting its sole remaining

method of attack. The force field around the rest of the machine became weaker as a result, however. A second proprietary bullet was already on the way, and it pierced through the machine's lowered defenses, opening a large hole in the armored part of its metallic surface and striking the control system within. Unable to even put up a decent counteroffensive, the monstrous machine fell motionless.

With their comrade out of commission, the other guards registered Akira as an even bigger threat and swiftly moved as one to eliminate him. Countless micromissiles fired from their pods in quick succession. They seemed to hang in midair for a moment before rerouting themselves to Akira's location, steering by adjusting the movable nozzles on their tails. They came in from different angles so their prey wouldn't have a chance to escape. At the same time, another machine equipped with an autocannon also got Akira in its sights, firing shells at high speed to keep him pinned down while the missiles closed in.

Akira desperately wanted to avoid them. Still using the recoil from this rifle to keep himself against the side of the building, and running perpendicular to the wall, he leaped from side to side to dodge the projectiles, occasionally reaching speeds even faster than he would've hit in free fall. At the same time, he intercepted enough of the missiles with his DVTS to open a hole in their encirclement wide enough for him to keep from getting blown up with the rest of his surroundings. Feeling heat on his skin from the explosions on all sides, Akira looked like the very picture of panic.

Alpha, I thought you said I just needed a "fair" amount of resolve! This is way more than "fair"!

Alpha just gave him a breezy smile. *I would say this is fair—considering what you went through during the bounty hunts, this is practically a walk in the park, right?*

That's like comparing apples and oranges!

Oh, don't be so humble. Look, you're not only avoiding everything—you're also fighting back, right? Just don't let up on that trigger, okay?

Yes, *ma'am!* Akira spat sarcastically as he fired his CWH, sending powerful proprietary bullets toward the autocannon with perfect accuracy. Just as

before, he'd waited until the machine lowered the force field around its muzzle, but this time he'd pierced its steel body instead, destroying its internal system in one hit.

Another one bites the dust! Alpha announced. *It'll get easier the more you take down, so keep it up!*

Thanks for the tip! Akira retorted as he continued to run. But of course, since all of this would normally have been impossible for him to pull off, it forced him to recognize even more just how incredible Alpha's support was.

Akira was currently somewhere near the building's eighteenth floor. He could have covered that distance in no time in free fall, but it was a considerable distance nonetheless. Traveling vertically via recoil was already putting a constant burden on his body, not to mention performing movements that strained the physical limits of his suit. And getting blasted with nearby explosions certainly hadn't helped matters. His bones were cracking from the stress, and his muscles were tearing. The nanomachines from his medicine were healing those injuries, only for the bones and muscles to crack and tear again. And the cycle would continue until either the battle was over or he ran out of meds.

Still, they were definitely eliminating most of the pain. But the uncomfortable sensation of repeatedly having his body destroyed and regenerated at the cellular level was still present, and Akira couldn't help but force a twisted grin.

Alpha, however, was genuinely happy that Akira could even manage that under such conditions. She gave him a smile that seemed to say, "I know this seems rough, but this is nothing compared to what you'll be facing in the future—just a drop in the bucket."

In that case, Akira reasoned, he certainly had no business wearing such a grim face. Bucking up, he focused on the fight with renewed resolve. Alpha was right—there were fewer enemies than there had been at the start, and the more he defeated, the easier of a time he'd have. But he wasn't about to proclaim this a cinch—for now she'd have to settle for his forced smile.

Unfortunately, the enemy had started to call in reinforcements. The mechanical monsters stationed on the opposite side of the Serantal Building

were now circling around to join the fight. One of them looked like a combat car with a fan-shaped missile pod mounted on top, which fired a volley of micromissiles. A similar machine nearby fired only a single missile, but one which was much more massive. Targeted by rockets both small and large, Akira began to panic. *Alpha! We're not screwed, right?!*

Well, it'll be impossible to intercept them all... But no, you'll be fine.

Really? Whew, that's a relief! If Alpha said he was going to be fine, then he would be. In truth, Akira harbored a variety of doubts about Alpha, each of which he'd locked away in the depths of his heart—but this was one of the things he *did* trust her on. To doubt her here would mean all was for naught. And besides, at his current level, placing his faith in her as he fought was the only way he could repay her.

Following her orders, Akira targeted the huge missile first. Just as she'd calculated, the rounds he fired knocked the projectile off course, sending it into the side of the building and creating a gargantuan hole. Had he been fighting on the ground, he would have had nowhere to run. But since he was fighting sideways, and the wall of the building had become his “floor,” he now had another direction he could escape—“down.”

Akira leaped into the hole, entering the building. A split second later, explosions from the micromissiles rocked the area “above” him. Some entered the building as well, but compared to the damage on the surface, the injuries he received were minimal.

He ran through the building, panting hard. *I see now. You had me get familiar with this building in the first place so that I'd have a place to escape to if things got dicey, didn't you?*

You got it! Bet you're pretty glad I had you explore every floor now, right? In fact, having analyzed the building's structure beforehand, Alpha had been continually adjusting Akira's position during the fight so that if worse came to worse, he could escape into the building and get to a safe area.

Seeing Alpha's smug grin, Akira gave a hollow laugh. *Sorry for questioning what the point was.*

It's okay, as long as you understand now. All right, let's head back outside!

Roger! Of course, after investigating so thoroughly, he already knew exactly where to make an exit, and he shot out a thin wall. He emerged outside once more, and it was back to fighting from the side of the building.

For some time afterward, the battle raged on. More reinforcements kept arriving, putting even more pressure on Akira. Even so, he kept pushing back, and thanks to Alpha's extremely efficient aid he slowly but surely gained the advantage.

Mechanical monsters essentially moved according to how they were programmed, so their actions were far more predictable than those of the organic variety. The most efficient way to fight them was to exploit their pattern once you got the hang of it. However, *these* monsters' combat programs were by no means simple—in fact, normally they would have been impossible to analyze accurately in the heat of battle.

But Alpha made the impossible possible. Leaving the aiming entirely up to her, Akira fired his CWH with reckless abandon. Proprietary bullets sliced through enemies' weak points as though this were the most natural thing in the world. And with their all-important artillery destroyed, the machines were reduced to scrap with no resistance whatsoever.

At the same time, he fired his DVTs to knock missiles off course, disrupt the trajectories of howitzer shells, and whittle away at weak enemy armor—while using the recoil from those shots to speed up or stop on a dime as he raced down the side of the building. He kept this up without missing a step, slaughtering the enemy with optimal efficiency. Akira almost wondered if the enemies kept attacking because they *wanted* to be destroyed.

He was now somewhere near the tenth floor—the ground was close, and there were only a handful of enemies left. But he couldn't relax yet, up against powerful machines who would wipe him out the instant he let his guard down. By the same token, if he stayed vigilant, he would maintain the upper hand.

As it turned out, Akira didn't let his guard slip, and the robots never had a chance to turn the tables. So the moment he finally touched down on the ground, he only had to aim his CWH toward the lone surviving monster and pull the trigger.

Last one! Alpha announced.

At this, he zeroed in on his target and fired. The proprietary bullet pierced the enemy's force field and struck steel. Impact conversion flashed, shattered, and vanished. The impact from the shot smashed the system inside, reducing the mechanical monstrosity to scrap, and the rumble of its movements ceased. Finally, peace and quiet returned to the area. But Akira stayed rooted to the spot, still on guard in the midst of a tranquil landscape.

Alpha stood in front of him and smiled. *It's okay, Akira, you can relax now. It's over—you won!*

It finally hit him that he had been victorious. The first thing he did was heave a deep sigh. Then, looking up at the roof he'd leaped from not long ago, he smiled wryly.

He turned back to Alpha, who grinned smugly. *That's just the power of my support for you! Have I finally made it sink in?*

Akira looked sheepish. "Yeah, I believe that about did it. I get it now, so you don't ever have to make me experience anything like that again."

Oh, don't be so reserved. Indulge a little! You've got my support as an advance on the payment for my job, and we're partners besides!

"Then use that support you're so proud of to make sure I never have to experience anything like that again." He grinned once more.

I believe I'm doing the best I can on that front as well, you know. Alpha gave him a knowing look.

Akira sensed what Alpha was getting at, and couldn't help but grimace. Previously, he'd been attacked by hordes of monsters just by venturing out into the wasteland, and just recently he and his vehicle had been swallowed whole by a gigantic serpent. If Alpha was saying that Akira's luck was too rotten to fully compensate for, then he couldn't argue. That was something even Alpha couldn't calculate.

Moreover, Akira couldn't deny that many of the dicey situations he'd gotten into had come about through his own words and actions. These were also things Alpha had no control over. Either way, for someone like Akira, the skill to

overcome adversity was more necessary than the ability to avoid it. “Okay, I get it! Then I’m counting on your support going forward, so it’ll at least be easier to handle those situations when they occur.”

Of course! Like always, leave it to me. Naturally, though, you won’t be able to handle much without your belongings. So let’s hurry and retrieve them. Alpha pointed up to the roof with a huge smile.

Akira’s things were still on the roof where he’d left them.

Akira looked up at the building once more. Twenty-seven floors was not a small number. “I have to climb all the way back up there *again*?” Exasperated, he made a face.

Don’t worry, Alpha said with an impish grin. You can use the stairs going down this time. Or maybe you’d rather run down the wall again? Never fear—I’ll support you every step of the way!

“Hell no!” Akira scowled.

But this just made Alpha’s grin grow wider.

Of course, once Akira climbed the twenty-seven floors up to the roof and retrieved his belongings, he had to descend twenty-seven stories back down. Yet though he seriously found it a pain, there was a lightness in his step as he walked.

He’d fought a hard battle and emerged victorious. It wasn’t the fighting itself that had improved his mood—even with Alpha’s help he knew what he’d done had been extremely reckless, and he’d only survived because he’d trusted her, followed her every instruction, and had the necessary amount of resolve.

He’d needed resolve to walk his path, so he’d steeled himself and walked it. And because of this, he’d been able to progress. Moreover, he’d been able to prove the strength of his resolve to both Alpha and himself. So he was satisfied.

However, in truth, that battle had been completely unnecessary, and could’ve been avoided. Back when Akira had used the scope on his rifle to examine the monsters guarding the Serantal Building, Alpha had maintained control of his suit, and could have stopped him from making such a careless mistake.

But she hadn't. Instead, she'd seen it as an opportunity to show Akira firsthand how valuable her support was.

After all, back when he'd been swallowed by the hypersynthetic snake, he'd managed to escape without Alpha's help. Then he'd wiped out a medium-sized gang without even wearing a powered suit, meaning that she'd only been able to provide him with limited aid.

So Alpha wanted to dispel any notions in Akira's head that he might be able to manage without her. To that end, she had deliberately made Akira fight the Serantal Building defense force, setting up a grand, elaborate stage for a battle defying all expectations—and then had helped him win.

Now, she was sure, her disquiet could be laid to rest.

And Alpha was satisfied.

Chapter 106: The Factory District

With the building's guards taken care of, Akira stood at the entrance to the Serantal Building and looked up. A vestige of the Old World, it was large enough to be seen from anywhere in Mihazono, and so its presence seemed to loom over him.

"Whoa, it sure is tall!" he murmured in awe.

Back when he had first entered the Kuzusuhara Ruins, he'd seen the hazy skyline of undamaged skyscrapers deep within the ruin, imagined that the ruin's autorestitution system was probably still intact and formidable mechanical guards were likely still roaming the area, and had immediately decided to turn back. While this was a different ruin, of course, he'd just defeated a group of powerful guardian robots in order to reach an area he would never have been able to reach previously, and he was feeling quite accomplished.

"Well, guess we should head on in," he said aloud. "Hope there's lots of good loot in here—I'm gonna need a ton of money to recoup all that ammo I just used." Yet to keep himself from growing complacent, he reminded himself that this expedition could really only be called a success once he managed to turn a profit.

If that's what you're worried about, how about mentioning the guards you just took down in your job report when you're done? Considering how strong they were, I imagine you'd get quite a bonus.

Akira made a face. "Nuh-uh. If the Hunter Office found out what I just did, they'd only recommend me even tougher, more dangerous jobs from here on. No thanks."

Are you sure? Then how about handing the report over to Kibayashi instead? It might give him such a good laugh that he'd be more inclined to throw his weight around to help you.

"Hell no!" Akira shouted reflexively. Then, a bit more calmly, he added, "I'm

not out here risking my life for that guy's amusement. Now let's go in."

Even though the hypersynthetic snake he'd defeated hadn't been officially designated as a bounty monster (despite being the real one), thanks to Kibayashi's influence Akira had nonetheless earned a cool one hundred million aurum for doing so. So he had in fact found himself thinking that perhaps there was some merit in entertaining Kibayashi after all. But that would only make the man expect even more crazy, reckless, and rash endeavors from Akira in the future. So the boy walked up to the entrance with an exaggerated scowl as if to show Alpha how opposed he was to the idea.

The automatic sliding door was constructed from a material that resembled glass, and which—as Akira found out when he stood in front of it—had no power. Undeterred, he wrenched open the door with suit-enhanced strength and slipped inside. Rolling her eyes, Alpha followed behind him.

Inside the Serantal Building, he was met with a spacious lobby, complete with a reception desk. The lobby had a vast atrium-like design, and the ceiling was nearly as high as the room was wide. The walls showed no sign of the wear and tear of the years, and the floor was immaculate, free of dust. While the furnishings weren't particularly extravagant, just looking at the materials used in the building's construction was enough to see that this was a high-class establishment. So elegant and spacious did it appear that to some it might even seem a place of worship. Akira, for his part, got a vague sense that his presence was somehow defiling the sanctity of these grounds—and for a moment, he hesitated to go any farther.

Still, at this point turning back was not an option, and he cautiously approached the center of the lobby.

Yet the Serantal Building did not receive him warmly.

Suddenly, Akira heard a voice, just as a woman appeared before him who clearly hadn't been there a moment before. "Dear guest," she stated, "I regret to inform you that our establishment is closed at this time. We ask that all personnel aside from staff refrain from entering. Kindly make your way to the exit."

Akira instinctively leaped backward and reached for his gun, but Alpha assumed control of his suit and stopped him before he could fire.

Alpha?!

Calm down, Akira. It's just a hologram. Shooting her would only be a waste of ammo.

Akira took another look and observed her more closely. She appeared to be wearing Old World clothing and was extraordinarily beautiful—on those points, she resembled Alpha. But this woman was visible to the naked eye, and she wasn't communicating using telepathy—her words had reached his ears in the usual way. Perhaps the Akira of the past would have seen the woman and Alpha as more or less the same, but now he could clearly tell how they differed.

At the same time, it was now evident to him that the woman didn't actually exist—he couldn't feel any sort of presence from her. And his scanner had reached the same conclusion—the woman could only be seen in visible light. In ultraviolet or infrared, she no longer existed. And while her voice seemed to come from the hologram, an echolocation scan revealed no sign of any human there. Nor had the scanner displayed any kinetic activity. If anything had actually appeared before him, or even if something had been there all along and he simply hadn't noticed, his sensors would have detected a change in airflow. But no.

Akira relaxed and breathed a sigh of relief. "A hologram. A ghost of the Old World, then. Guess that's why they're called ghosts—she sure spooked me!"

Looking apologetic with her head bowed, the woman politely spoke again. "Dear guest, I repeat—I regret to inform you that this establishment is closed at this time. We ask that all personnel aside from staff refrain from entering. Kindly make your way to the exit."

Conflicted, Akira turned to his companion for a decision. "Umm, Alpha, what do you think I should do?" Of course, this late in the game Akira wouldn't have any qualms infiltrating a dilapidated ruin and making off with any relics displayed on abandoned store shelves. But in a building that was practically as good as new and with a woman (never mind that she was a hologram) pleading with him to turn back and leave the establishment in peace, even Akira found it

hard to just press on callously. It also didn't help that he felt guilty at being treated so civilly—after mercilessly slaughtering the guards protecting the building.

However, having come this far, Akira couldn't turn back. With a trove of relics ahead just waiting to be collected, he wouldn't be able to call himself a hunter if he made the unilateral decision to give up. So he passed the decision off to Alpha: if she answered that he had to make the choice on his own, he would, but he decided to ask just in case.

But her response took him completely by surprise. *Actually, I have something I need to take care of. Sorry, but wait here for a bit, and stay put.*

"Say what?"

The next moment, Alpha disappeared, as did the other woman's figure. Instantly, he felt his powered suit weighing him down, and the accuracy of his scanner fell sharply. Alpha and her support were completely gone.

Alpha?! he cried out, frantic. Even telepathically, however, there was no response. In his mind, he remembered once more the isolation he'd felt in the hypersynthetic snake's belly, after it had swallowed him and his vehicle whole, and his panic worsened.

This wasn't the inside of a monster's stomach, of course. But his situation felt just as desperate: he was in the middle of a building whose autorestitution system was clearly still active, and there was no telling when a powerful guard might take him unawares. The pristine lobby, the immaculate floor, and the excellent condition of the building fed his mounting anxiety, which threatened to overwhelm him. He took deep breaths to keep the terror at bay.

Get a hold of yourself, Akira, he told himself. *It'll be okay. This isn't anything like last time. It's not like our connection was suddenly cut off—she told me she was going first, and she said to wait here, so surely this area's safe. Everything will be fine.* Panicking was the worst thing he could do. Akira managed to calm down but still remained just as vigilant. Amid the silence, he became acutely aware of each detail of his surroundings, but he kept waiting patiently.

Finally, Alpha reappeared. Looking amused for some reason, she said, *I'm back. Did you miss me?*

“Yeah,” he replied sullenly. However, the pout on his face couldn’t hide his relief at her return. “So what was that all of a sudden?”

I’ll explain as we head to our next destination. For now, let’s get out of here. Come on.

“Wait, we’re leaving?”

That’s right. Now quickly, follow me!

Leading the way, Alpha hurried Akira along. The boy looked puzzled, but followed her anyway. Before exiting the building, however, he glanced back for no particular reason. The holographic woman had returned and was watching them go with an ill-tempered look on her face, quite different from the one she’d first shown him.

We’re leaving just as she asked us to, so what’s her problem? Akira wondered, and then remembered what he’d done not long before. *Well, I guess I did destroy the guards here and enter without permission, so I suppose I deserve it.* He was a hunter, and this was what hunters did, so there was nothing for it; but he couldn’t help a small sense of guilt nonetheless. Yet he also knew that overthinking things would keep him from acting when it mattered most, so he put all of this out of his mind and faced forward once more.

And so it was, as they walked off, that he failed to notice how the woman’s glare was not directed at him, but toward Alpha.

“So tell me, why’d you leave like that, all of a sudden?” Akira asked Alpha again once they were outside.

Because it was necessary.

“Necessary? Really?” he grumbled.

He was clearly unsatisfied by her cryptic reply, so she tried to placate him. *Now, now, I know you were lonely without me around, but nothing happened, right? And I came back right away,* she teased. Then, before he could question her any further, she changed the subject. *In any case, that woman back there was the Serantal Building’s administrative interface. While I was away, I chatted with her a bit and found out exactly where that marker on the upper floor is*

pointing to—a Lion's Tail branch on the fifty-seventh floor.

"F-Fifty-seven?!" Akira croaked. From the marker's location, he had determined it must be considerably high up, but upon hearing the actual number, he couldn't help but feel intimidated—all the more so now that he knew how high the ceilings of the lobby alone were.

So, Akira, how would you feel about climbing all those stairs?

"Uh... I mean, it's not like I want to, of course, but if it's the only way to get a good haul, I'll do it."

Good answer. However, I'd recommend against it. At your current level, the guards up there will kill you instantly. Even with my support, it would be suicide.

Akira's eyes widened. After defeating the guards outside the building, the ones inside were even tougher? So much that even he and Alpha together couldn't handle them? "Are they really that strong?"

Indeed. So I'm really sorry, but let's give up on that marker for now.

"Okay, fine." He sighed. "Man, so in the end this search was a failure too. Even after all that work it took to get here..." He couldn't help exhaling again. After traveling through the desert for hours on end, and even engaging in that deadly battle against powerful foes, everything had been for naught anyway. His disappointment was all the more severe.

But Alpha looked smug. *Don't worry—where we're going next, we'll definitely be successful! The interface tipped me off to a place where there are tons of relics to be had.*

Akira, who'd been hanging his head, suddenly perked up. "Really?!"

Absolutely. Would I lie to you? I'll lead the way, so let's go.

Akira was about to follow her excitedly when something occurred to him. "Wait, would she really tell us something like that?"

She's an administrative interface for that skyscraper, not for the ruins as a whole. Whatever happens outside her jurisdiction is none of her concern. You saw the state of all the establishments around the Serantal Building, didn't you?

"Hmm... Well, I guess that makes sense," he said, looking around the area and

nodding, satisfied. With his doubt laid to rest, he set off after Alpha through the ruins.



Just as its name suggested, Mihazono's factory district was made up of numerous Old World factories. There was beauty in the simplicity and functionality of the wide expanse of enormous structures, each identical and a uniform distance from its neighbors.

But humans had been completely removed from this picture of functional beauty—naturally, since the factories were all automated, and human labor was no longer necessary.

Akira gazed out from the top of a building in the business district, standing near the rooftop's edge. He'd wanted to get a closer look at where they were headed, so Alpha had magnified his vision until he could see the marker indicating their next destination.

The indicator was pointing to an area within the factory district.

Okay, now I know where we're going, but I don't see any path to get there.

You're right, there isn't one. So you'll have to make one yourself, Alpha replied easily. Seeing his look of disbelief, she cheerfully kept talking before he could complain. *Look, Akira. You can't assume there will always be a trail to your destination in every ruin you explore. If anyone could get there, then it wouldn't be unexplored in the first place.*

He nodded. *Makes sense to me.*

And don't worry, I'll be scouting for the easiest route all the while. So I think you can manage a little trailblazing.

Nah, my bad. I mean, it is a ruin after all. Of course there'll be places you can't easily reach. Compared to how he'd climbed mountains of rubble and found his own way without the aid of a powered suit when hunting relics in Kuzusuhara, this would practically be a cakewalk.

He headed toward the marker with renewed enthusiasm.

As before, while some of the buildings in the factory district were still up and running, there were also stretches of large abandoned ones. Akira and Alpha made their way primarily through these dilapidated, crumbling factories. Here they could clearly see the broken remains of mechanical guards. Such places were comparatively safer, since their autorestitution systems were inactive and their guards wouldn't be reactivated anytime soon. Even so, Akira left the route planning to Alpha, focusing chiefly on staying vigilant.

Along the way, he also occasionally passed through sites that looked brand-new, corridors that showed no sign of degradation over time, and freight tunnels that were still accessible. Yet none of the guards there ever seemed to notice him. Whether they were powered down, simply hadn't spotted him, or were just ignoring him, he didn't know. But he remained wary nonetheless as he proceeded.

After a while, he reached an area with paved roads and comparatively better upkeep, and was immediately greeted by a large robot. It looked like a tank, except in place of treads it had a multitude of legs, each with tires at the bottom. It also carried an enormous artillery piece on its back that looked like it fired normal shells—but which was actually a laser cannon.

Following Alpha's instructions, Akira hid in the shadows of a nearby wall and observed the enemy. As he did, a thought came to his mind. *Say, isn't this machine supposed to be guarding the surrounding area?*

That would be a logical assumption, yes, she replied.

Well, even though some of these factories are still running, they were built during the Old World, right? Which means even if these guards have been copied from past ones, and have been moved around in the ruin over time, their designs are still from back then?

Essentially, that's correct.

Akira hesitated. Something was bothering him quite a bit. *If the people of the Old World felt the need to outfit their guards with weapons like that...* Akira gulped. *Then just what on earth were they defending these factories from?*

That's a question for the archaeologists, not me. And keep in mind not all guards have the same specs. Or maybe the factory's administrative system had

to adapt to the times and modify the designs of its guardians accordingly.

Oh, so as more hunters showed up, it had to beef up security? Something like that? Akira nodded.

Actually, it's likely the opposite, she said with a smile. *Because only hunters were showing up, the admin probably lowered its guards' specs to save on resources.*

Wait, what? Akira was dumbstruck. Was she saying that the monstrous robot in front of him was a *weakened* version? He felt like the more he learned about the Old World, the less he understood.

But that's all irrelevant—at least for the time being. Right now, all you need to worry about is defeating that thing.

Roger! He'd already fought a similar opponent on the Serantal Building grounds, so he knew the drill. He fired his CWH directly into the monster's cannon, destroying it. Then, while it stood defenseless, he shredded it with gunfire until it was a hunk of scrap. With the sentry out of the way, he now had access to the building.

After making his way through the factory for a while, he found a room where he could take a breather. Sighing in relief, he had Alpha turn his vision to X-ray mode so he could see how far away the marker was through the wall.

They only had a bit farther to go. Remembering that Alpha had been certain they'd hit the jackpot with this one, he found himself reflexively smiling.

Then his scanner picked up a presence from a short distance beyond the wall. In his Alpha-augmented vision, he could detect what looked like a human figure nearby.

Akira, someone's coming this way. Be on your guard.

Got it! He wasn't entirely surprised to find other hunters here as well, but there was no guarantee they'd be friendly. Akira drew his weapon warily, but he kept it lowered so as not to accidentally provoke their visitor.

As the image got closer, Akira began to make out two figures instead of just one. At that moment, both stopped where they were. Just as Akira was

beginning to grow suspicious, his terminal received a short-distance call.

“We’re a two-man team,” the voice said. “We have no intention of fighting, but we need to pass through the room you’re in. If you don’t trust us, then we’ll wait a while for you to exit the room before we head in.”

So the pair wasn’t hostile, but careful enough to give him the right to decide whether he wanted to trust them. Then, based on his next actions, they’d be able to deduce his answer and in turn decide whether he could be trusted as well.

Akira sensed from their caution that they were friendly, and he set down his gun. “Don’t worry, I don’t want to fight either. Come on through.”

He heard silence on the other end before one of them finally spoke up. “Thank you so much. By the way, may I ask how many are in your team?”

“Team? Nah, it’s just me,” he answered.

From the hushed whispers he couldn’t quite make out, he could almost feel their bewilderment through the receiver. “Something wrong?” he asked.

“No, no, it’s nothing. We’re coming now.”

The line cut off, and two female hunters entered the room who looked the polar opposites of each other. Akira looked surprised, as did the women—albeit for different reasons.

“Whoa, you weren’t bluffing—it really is just you, huh? And wow, you’re just a little kid!” said one.

“Carol, that’s a rude thing to say to someone we’ve just met.”

“Oh, whoopsie! Sorry, Monica!”

The women—Carol and Monica—were taken aback to see that Akira really was going it solo. Hunters typically worked in groups since this was safer and more efficient, so it was incredibly rare to encounter a hunter operating alone in an area as dangerous as the factory district. Before they’d entered the room, both women had expected he was bluffing.

But now it was clearly otherwise. Perhaps the rest of his team could be out on different missions, but that didn’t seem likely either, as they could see no

luggage or possessions that obviously belonged to anyone else.

Which meant that the hunter standing before them must have been skilled enough to make it through the district this far on his own. And despite all this, he was just a *kid*?

Akira's surprise, meanwhile, stemmed from the women's outfits—mainly Carol's.

Monica wore a protective coat, made from a material that certainly hadn't been cheap. But it looked too big for her and was zipped up all the way so as not to expose an inch of her body. Akira's only real impression of her outfit was that it had probably been pricey.

But Carol's outfit was the real eye-opener. She sported powered inner wear that accentuated her body's curves, and while she was also wearing a powered suit over it, the latter was so skimpy it barely concealed the tight inner wear underneath. She also wore a full body harness which had obviously been designed to emphasize sex appeal. Carol's racy getup—reminiscent of the clothing of the Old World—astounded even Akira, who typically showed no interest in what others wore.

Alpha, um, that's Old World clothing, right?

No, modern. Its design was inspired by the Old World, though.

Really? Hm... So she's wearing it to intimidate other hunters? I mean, it's not like a bluff like that would work on monsters. Akira recalled that Alpha had told him earlier about how some hunters intentionally donned outfits with Old World-like designs to make them appear stronger than they actually were.

Actually, that depends on the monster. For some of the more intelligent monsters out there, in fact, it might be quite effective.

Really? You don't say...

Although I can't say whether it would work on any of the monsters in this particular ruin, Alpha added.

Akira ruminated over this. As he did so, he reflexively glanced at Carol, and their eyes met. With a winsome grin, she strode right up next to him.

“Something I can do for you?” she asked suggestively.

“Um, n-no, nothing. I’ve just never seen anything like that outfit before, so it caught my eye. Sorry.”

His sincere apology caught her by surprise. “Well, I wasn’t expecting *that* response,” she said, still cheerful but with her smile now a bit strained.

“Huh? Why not?” Akira looked genuinely nonplussed.

Flustered, Monica cut in. “C-Carol?! Didn’t you promise you wouldn’t just carelessly waltz up to random strangers when we’re together?!”

“It wasn’t *careless*, Monica. I waited until we confirmed he wasn’t hostile, didn’t I?”

“Don’t dodge the issue by quibbling over semantics!” Monica moaned, holding her head in her hands. Then she bowed to Akira. “I’m really sorry about this. We’ll be leaving right away, so please excuse us for troubling you.”

“O-Oh, okay,” Akira answered, still unsure what was going on.

“Now hold up, Monica,” Carol objected. “Meeting in a place like this can’t just be a coincidence, can it? Let’s chat a bit more. Oh, silly me—let me introduce myself first. I’m Carol. Nice to meetcha!” She glanced sideways at Monica, then gave Akira a charming smile.

Seeing that Carol was beyond reining in at this point, Monica sighed resignedly. “I’m Monica,” she said.

“Um, I’m Akira.” Based on how they’d just spoken to each other, he had a vague feeling that these two were going to be trouble.

Carol looked at him as though deeply fascinated. “Say, what’s a guy like you doing all by your lonesome like this? Get separated from your teammates?” Of course, she could see this almost certainly wasn’t the case, and was just trying to get a conversation going.

But Akira didn’t notice what she was up to, and answered straightforwardly, “Nah, I was by myself from the start.”

“Really?” Carol feigned surprise. “Wow, that’s amazing! These ruins are such a challenge that even pretty confident hunters wouldn’t try to tackle them solo.

Hmm, and with all due respect, you could use a little more muscle,” she added coquettishly.

“Well, excuse me for looking weak,” Akira muttered, looking upset. But in fact he wasn’t put out at all—after all, she was right. He knew he would never have been able to make it this far on his own. But if he openly agreed with Carol, then his presence here would suddenly seem awfully suspicious, and he didn’t want to explain that he’d had Alpha’s help. On the other hand, he felt uncomfortable professing to be stronger than he actually was. So he glossed over it by pretending that her statement had offended him.

Taken aback, Carol quickly recovered and smiled consolingly. “Now, now, no need to bristle! I wasn’t implying that you were actually weak or anything. My bad, okay?”

“Hmph. What about you two? Number-wise, I doubt you’re much different from me,” he retorted.

“True, but we’re surveyors. We know the layout of this area like the backs of our hands, so this is no big deal for us.”

Some hunters collected relics and took down monsters for a living, but others did business charting ruins and selling the maps. These people were called surveyors. Even the most seasoned hunters could end up dead if they got lost in a ruin. When searching for relics, knowing the area’s layout ahead of time greatly improved one’s chances. Since ruins were commonly labyrinthine in structure, information like the safest routes to take and what monsters would be where in a given ruin was always in high demand. The more detailed the map, the more hunters would be willing to pay.

Carol briefly explained to Akira that she and Monica had already scoured these ruins countless times in the course of mapping it, and so they were more familiar with Mihazono than the average hunter. Enough, in fact, that they had no trouble exploring with no outside help. “Although,” she added, “the business district’s my real area of expertise. Monica’s the one who knows the factory district. Still, we’re both surveyors, which means we’re both well-versed in avoiding monsters.”

Akira listened until she was finished, deeply interested. “Oh, makes sense. So,

how much are you asking for a map of this area?”

Monica answered, “For the factory district, I’m asking for five million aurum.”

“*F-Five million?!* ” Akira reeled.

Monica didn’t take kindly to his reaction. “We’re risking our lives for the sake of these maps, you know! We can’t just sell them on the cheap. And in any case, mine are of *much* higher quality than the standard variety. You’ve probably got your own map of this place, but don’t think for a second that it’s on the same level as mine!”

He flinched at her vehemence. “Okay, okay! Er, my bad,” he said sheepishly, bowing his head.

This brought Monica back to her senses. “N-No, *I* should apologize!” she said, flustered and bowing back. “I went too far.”

Watching them, Carol smirked. “Just out of curiosity, Akira, how much did you pay for *your* map?” she asked. “If you reacted like that to five million, yours must have been bought for a song. That’s no good—no matter how confident you are, heading into ruins with a bad map is practically suicide.”

Monica concurred. “That’s right! A budget map might have inaccurate or dated info. It might have drastic errors because it was drawn up based on data from last year. That’s as good as scrap paper.”

“So how much was it?” Carol asked excitedly. “Half a million? A hundred thousand? Oh no, don’t tell me—it was one of those on the internet you can download for free?!”

Akira looked away in embarrassment. “I mean, does it really matter?” he muttered. With Alpha’s support, he didn’t need to spend money on maps, though he had downloaded one of the business districts (for free). So technically, he’d been traveling through the factory district mapless. But of course, he didn’t feel comfortable admitting that, so he answered evasively.

Of course, while she didn’t know about Alpha, Monica could at least tell from his reaction that his map was so low quality that he was reluctant to admit it. This got her curious. “Actually, how *did* you make it here in the first place? Did you not encounter any monsters along the way?”

“I mean, yeah, but I just took them down as I went,” Akira replied, wondering privately why she’d ask such an obvious question.

But Monica’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You ‘just took them down’? Let me get this straight: You entered this room from the opposite side we did, correct?”

“Yeah...?”

“Most people don’t even attempt to take that route because the guards there are so ridiculously powerful.”

“Huh?” Akira was stunned. “But, I mean, they weren’t any tougher than normal...”

Of course, with the experiences under his belt—like the recent bounty hunts and even today’s battle against the Serantal guards—his standard of “normal” was quite different from most others’. So dealing with the monsters on the way here hadn’t felt particularly difficult to him (even if that *was* due to Alpha’s support).

Monica’s expression became severe, however.

Wondering if he might have accidentally stepped on a land mine, Akira inwardly panicked. *Alpha! D-Did I say something wrong?!*

No, nothing you said felt odd—to me, at least. But I can think of two reasons for her reaction. One, hunters typically feel wary toward those stronger than them. And two, by defeating those powerful guardians along the way, you’ve eliminated the need for a detour, effectively reducing the value of the map they’ve been working on. She added casually, After they risked their lives toiling to painstakingly map out that path, some stranger’s come along and destroyed all the monsters that gave the route value in the first place. They’re probably pretty upset with you right now.

But it wasn’t like I could help it!

No, you couldn’t. So it’s nothing you need to feel bad about. That’s part of what they signed up for when they became surveyors.

While Akira knew Alpha was right, he still couldn’t help but feel a little

awkward. Then Carol spoke up in a bright and cheery voice.

“It’s so amazing that you were able to take down those monsters, Akira!” she gushed. “No wonder you were able to make it here with a crappy map!” Then, with a smile, she took a step closer. “But you know, that means you won’t have much use for maps that show you how to avoid them. So is there anything else you might like to purchase?”

“Something else? Like what?”

“Me, silly! How about it? For you, I can even offer a discount.” Carol crouched down so that her face and breasts were level with Akira’s eyes. Her provocative look radiated seductiveness and charm, and her skin was clearly visible through the inner wear clinging to her body.



Monica interjected, blushing furiously. “C-Carol?! Are you nuts?! *Here*, of all places?!”

But from the confusion on Akira’s face, it was clear that Carol’s proposal had gone right over his head. Then, after a moment, enlightenment dawned on his face. “Sorry, but I don’t need to hire extra help. I can get by just fine on my own.”

Carol looked stunned. “*That’s* how you took it?” she asked, her smile becoming strained once again. Back when Akira had been unconsciously staring at her, she’d noticed there hadn’t been a trace of lust in his gaze. Still, while getting turned down would have been one thing, she could never have imagined he’d fail to even recognize such a blatant invitation.

Monica was also surprised, but quickly recovered. “Carol, can you at *least* not work on your side hustle when you’re together with me?!” she complained.

Carol, her pride still ever so slightly hurt, became her normal self again. “Oh, c’mon, no need to get all riled up! Besides, he didn’t bite, so no harm, no foul.”

“That’s not the problem! What if he’d ended up thinking it was a package deal and that *I* was included as well?!”

Akira had been watching Carol and Monica bicker with a puzzled look on his face, but then it finally clicked. “Oh, *now* I get it!” he said, and gave a frustrated sigh.

“Took you long enough,” Carol retorted with a hint of exasperation in her voice. “There’s a limit to how dense a guy can be, you know?”

“Well, sorry for being dense! And that’s a no go as well. I don’t need anything like that.” It was one thing for a female hunter to wear a racy suit modeled on Old World gear and sell her body as a secondary source of income, but conducting that business in the middle of a dangerous ruin was quite another. Akira hadn’t even considered such a crazy notion—hence his delay in recognizing it. (At least, that was the excuse he gave himself.) “I’m outa here. Later.”

“Really? So soon?” Carol asked, surprised. “Since we’re already together, how about tagging along with us? The more the merrier, right?”

“No thanks!”

“Wow, you really are a tough customer,” Carol replied.

Monica, meanwhile, turned toward Akira and bowed her head again, as if to silently apologize for Carol’s behavior. Akira simply turned on his heel and left them both behind.



After Akira had parted ways with them, Carol and Monica went back outside to check the area he had come from. There they discovered the remains of a gigantic mechanical guard—the same one that had been blocking Akira’s route earlier.

While Akira hadn’t seemed to be lying to them, they weren’t so naive as to trust anyone’s word at face value. But it was a different story now that they’d seen the ruined hunk of metal for themselves. Of course, there was no way to confirm that he’d taken down the monster all on his own, but considering that its remains were lying on the path he’d followed and the sincerity in his voice when he’d told them the story, they were inclined to believe it was certainly possible.

“I guess he really did take this hunk of junk down on his own,” Carol marveled.

“It seems so,” Monica murmured.

While both of them were surprised, each one’s expression was tinged with a different emotion.

Carol, for one, looked disappointed. *So that boy really is as strong as he said, she thought glumly. Strong enough to fight his way to the room we were in. Since he didn’t look it, I was hoping he just specialized in scouting and had somehow already learned the layout of the ruin and the monsters’ positions beforehand. Then he would have been following a safe route of his own. But I guess I was wrong.*

Monica, meanwhile, looked anxious and wary.

Both found themselves gazing unintentionally in the direction Akira had gone.

Realizing this, they exchanged glances and tried to cover up how they were actually feeling.

Carol grinned. “Well then, Monica, I guess you ought to update your map to say that this thing’s dead now.”

Monica sighed. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right. Ugh... Now the alternate route I spent so long thoroughly mapping out is useless!”

“Well, things like that happen from time to time. If you’re hard up for cash and ever need a side gig, then I can send some of my clients your way,” Carol teased.

“No, thank you!” Monica growled, taking her joke at face value.

Chapter 107: Akira and Carol

After parting ways with Carol and Monica, Akira continued through the factory district until he finally reached his destination—a building that had perhaps once been a warehouse. The walls and floor inside had only suffered minor wear and tear, and rows upon rows of large shelves contained Old World boxes—boxes he was certain were packed with relics.

Akira let out a whoop of joy. “All right! Hell yeah! Man, look at all this! We hit the jackpot!”

Of course, compared to finding an undiscovered ruin, this was a small victory. Still, by an average hunter’s standards it was a huge accomplishment.

Alpha grinned smugly. *Of course! Told you so, didn’t I?*

You sure did! All right, let’s get to work hauling all this out and head back home! Invigorated, Akira began inspecting the packages. They were sealed shut and weren’t labeled, so he couldn’t tell exactly what was inside just at a glance.

I wonder what’s in here? Say, you think we could open them and find out?

Let’s hold off for the time being. If you start opening them, they’ll be exposed to damage if you get into a fight on the way home.

Hm, that’s true. Keeping them in their original packaging would be much safer than opening them, even for mere transportation. And the packaging had been made with Old World materials too, meaning *it* could potentially be sold to the right buyer as well. So it was best to keep everything as intact as possible. Akira remembered Sara telling him something like that too. But this also posed a problem. *Without opening the boxes, I won’t know what’s actually worth taking, though. And what if they’re actually empty?* He hefted one just to make sure. Even with his powered suit, it felt heavy enough that he probably wouldn’t have been able to lift it otherwise. *There’s no way for you to check what’s inside, is there?*

Let me try. Wait just a sec... Hmm, looks like a component for some machine. I

can't tell what kind, though.

Alpha augmented Akira's vision, and the box became transparent enough to view the contents. He could make out a large metallic piece resembling a mechanical torso.

Huh. Well, Old World machine parts will probably sell for a good price. But let's check the others just to make sure. He perused the rest in the same way, hoping to find some sort of valuable-looking relic, but every box contained similar items.

They were likely worth at least *something*: he was deep in the ruin at this point, Alpha had vouched for this place, and all the relics were all packed in boxes. Still, he couldn't help but think that if he'd come across any of these parts half buried in the wasteland, he wouldn't have even considered them worth picking up. He couldn't help but let out a dissatisfied groan.

Don't just stand there, Akira! Let's grab one of these boxes and get back home. Since there's not much difference in their contents, just pick one at random. We can always return and get more.

Well, I guess it's better than nothing. All right, this one! Akira picked the box containing what might have been the most valuable piece and stored it in his spare backpack. He would only be able to take one box—no more would fit inside. Carrying one on his back was also out of the question—there he would need to have his main pack, full of spare ammo, in case they got into a fight. Which meant his only option was to drag his spare pack behind him as he traveled.

There were still countless parcels left on the shelves. As Akira exited the warehouse and shut the door, he looked conflicted. *Just how many round trips do you think it'll take to carry all those out?*

I'd be more concerned about whether you'll even be able to. Now that we've discovered this place, other hunters are more likely to find it as well.

True. So we've got to be careful not to give ourselves away as we head back. Alpha, select a route where we're least likely to be spotted.

Leave it to me! Alpha grinned smugly.

Looking satisfied, Akira began to make his way through the abandoned factory grounds. Before following him, however, Alpha glanced back at the warehouse door he had just shut and reached her hand out toward it.

Before her, a sigil materialized in midair—and as if in response, a fake holographic wall appeared over the door. A force field appeared in the same space as the hologram, making the false wall's texture indistinguishable from the real walls adjoining it. The door was now covered with a high-level camouflage that couldn't be detected by light, sound, touch, or changes in atmospheric flow. After admiring her handiwork, she nodded and hurried to rejoin Akira.

We'll go a different route from the way we came, she informed him. That'll make it harder for others to figure out the warehouse's location based on the direction we're coming from.

Gotcha. Hmm... Hey, what if we ask Elena and Sara to help with carrying out those relics?

I'd advise against that.

Why? And don't say it's because I'd only get a third of the profit. I'm sure we could hash that out—

No, that's not why, Alpha said, cutting him off. After your discovery of Yonozuka, it's going to be much harder to pass this find off as mere coincidence.

He was visiting Mihazono for the first time, and yet rather than heading to the business district like most people did, he'd gone to the factory district. Moreover, he'd made it deep into the ruins without even so much as a map and had discovered an unexplored sector teeming with relics. Elena and Sara wouldn't buy that all this had been pure happenstance—they'd find it far more reasonable to think that he'd gained some sort of intel beforehand. Even if they weren't clear exactly how he'd done it, they'd surely deduce that he'd used some sort of trick.

But he couldn't let Elena and Sara know about Alpha.

Good point. Well then, guess I gotta bring them back one at a time.

Unless you can somehow convince those two it all happened by chance, I'd say

that's your best option, she agreed.

Knowing full well what a tall order *that* would be, Akira gave a tight smile and continued to lug the pack behind him.



They had been trudging through the derelict factory corridors for some time when Alpha stopped in her tracks.

What's wrong? he asked.

Akira, watch out. And back away from that wall.

Akira did as he was told, looking where she indicated. But nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

The next instant, however, a powerful gunshot blew a hole in the wall from the other side. As Akira watched in shock, more blasts pierced it, weakening its structural integrity. Finally, someone kicked the wall in, scattering chunks of plaster everywhere, and hurriedly leaped through the gap.

It was Carol.

“Whew...! Okay, I should be safe here. Man, that was close!” she said, breathing a sigh of relief, but traces of fear were evident on her face. Then she noticed Akira, frozen in shock beside her, and grinned. “Hey, fancy seeing you again here! Quite the coincidence, huh?”

“Coincidence...?” Akira echoed, dazed.

Paying his bewilderment no mind, Carol peered back through the hole she'd just made, and her face went taut once more. “What?! You've got to be *kidding*! This is supposed to be outside their jurisdiction!” She turned to face him, panicked. “Akira! I know this is sudden, but I really need your help!”

“What?” Still clueless, he nonetheless immediately raised his DVTS minigun. Aiming through the hole, he sent a shower of rounds toward a charging mechanical monster nearly a meter high.

But the machine didn't slow its advance even after he destroyed it. Its metallic body was dented, and the tires on its many legs were torn to shreds, but another monster right behind it pushed its lifeless husk forward.

Carol began firing at the monsters with her own weapon—a handgun so large one hesitated to call it a handgun at all. Its rounds, too, were powerful enough to rival the proprietary ammo of Akira’s CWH. These reduced the fallen monster to scrap, sending metal flying, and even pierced through to the machine behind it, demolishing it as well.

Akira was surprised by the power Carol’s gun packed, but it also puzzled him. *If she can take care of them so easily, why was she so freaked out?*

Alpha helpfully magnified his vision. His face paled—an army of machines was charging straight at them.

Scanners scouted more efficiently in open spaces—the fewer the objects obstructing a scan, the greater its accuracy. With the wall partially destroyed, and with Alpha’s support for additional accuracy, Akira could clearly see the magnitude of the threat before him.

Yet the hole was still only about two meters wide—too small for an entire horde of robots to squeeze through—and the littered remains of the monsters they’d just annihilated were also blocking the way. As the situation stood, it should have been easy enough to pick them off while the obstacles kept them at bay. But Carol’s earlier shots had already weakened the wall, and the machines were slamming into it as they charged, causing it to crack and crumble. It wouldn’t be long before the entire thing gave way, allowing them to attack Akira and Carol without hindrance.

Carol could also tell things were about to turn ugly, and decided to make a run for it. “Akira, we’re outnumbered! Let’s retreat!”

“Roger!” They continued to fire upon the horde until they saw their chance. Then, glancing at each other to make sure they acted in tandem, they dashed out of the corridor as one. Since he had to drag along the spare pack with the relic inside, Akira fell a bit behind. But with his free hand he fired at the pursuing machines as he ran, leaving ruined hunks of metal in his wake and delaying the mechanical swarm’s advance.

He managed to make it out by the skin of his teeth.



After reaching the neighboring factory grounds, Akira and Carol saw they were no longer being pursued and sighed deeply in relief.

“This far out, we ought to be safe for real. Wow, that was a close one!” Carol said with a shudder. “Oh, before I forget: Thanks, Akira. You really saved me back there.” She was honestly grateful—but the bewitching smile on her face was the same one she used to lure clients in for her side job. Any typical male would’ve been taken instantly.

Yet it had no effect on Akira. “Don’t mention it. More importantly, don’t you think it’s about time you tell me what’s going on?”

Carol’s smile faltered a bit, but she recovered quickly. She told him more or less what he’d expected—that she’d come across a horde of monsters in the ruins and gotten separated from Monica, fighting tooth and nail alone until she ran into Akira. So far, her tale sounded like an unfortunate turn of events, but nothing out of the ordinary.

Yet Carol was nonetheless completely baffled. As surveyors, she and Monica had extensively researched the behavior of the sentries patrolling Mihazono, so the pair knew how to slip past their defenses. Under normal circumstances, they would never have let themselves get taken unawares by a horde like that, let alone get separated from each other. But these monsters had completely ignored their designated patrol routes.

Most mechanical monsters were tough. They didn’t go through a natural growth process like organic beasts and were designed to eradicate their target from the get-go. Even so, many hunters chose to hunt relics in Mihazono because the patrolling robots were incredibly predictable. Such guardians were forbidden by the ruin’s system from going outside their area of surveillance. In the Old World, a huge dispute would have flared up if a guard belonging to one company entered another company’s turf while chasing a fleeing intruder. So the system bound its sentries to designated sectors. It didn’t matter if those rival territories were now merely piles of rubble no longer worth protecting—even in the New World those boundaries should still have been in effect.

So the hunters in Mihazono had a surprisingly high chance of staying alive against even the toughest monsters. Even if they got in a situation where they’d

normally be cornered, they could simply move to an area the guards were unable to reach, like an adjacent building. All one needed to do was determine where that border lay, which was usually just as simple as spotting an area that looked drastically cleaner or more ruined than the one they were currently in.

The guardians lurking in the Mihazono Town Ruins were powerful and incredibly dangerous—yet enough hunters came here to justify the construction of a Hunter Office branch. This was because *all* the monsters in Mihazono, including in the business district, were supposed to follow the same predictable rules. And Carol had gone out of her way to smash through the wall earlier because the neighboring factory grounds were on the other side, and therefore outside the jurisdiction of the robots pursuing her.

Yet the guards had continued to give chase—completely upending the inviolable logic of the ruins.

“Something strange is going on,” Carol finished. “Abandoned or not, those guards shouldn’t have been able to leave their sectors. For one, if they were that flexible, I never would’ve tried to slip past their surveillance in the first place.” Several possibilities came to her mind, but none of them made sense. So she turned to Akira instead. “Might as well ask—do you know anything about all this?”

“Nope.”

“Figured,” she said with a sigh.

Carol’s dilemma hardly mattered to Akira. “More importantly, where are we headed right now?” he asked. “Nowhere in particular? Or do you have some sort of destination in mind?” Circumstances had dictated they travel together, but if they were just going to wander around aimlessly, then he’d take charge and lead the way (or rather, let Alpha lead).

But Carol looked conflicted. “Ah, well, y’see...” At first she’d just been running through the sectors with the least amount of monsters, but now that she’d given her pursuers the slip, her goal had changed. Finally, she said, “Well, first off, let me just say that I mean to escape this place as quickly as I can. I’m not going to try to search for Monica.” The two women had made a promise that if they ever got separated for some reason, they wouldn’t try to look for each

other and would both head for the exit instead. Once outside, if one didn't meet up with the other after a while, she'd put in an emergency job to the Office to send out a search party. They'd also agreed not to contact one another until they were outside the ruin—making a call like that inside could alert monsters to their presence.

Akira listened and nodded. But then he asked doubtfully, “Wait, isn't the exit over that way? We're going in the wrong direction.”

“Yeah, about that...” Of course, Carol was well aware that her best option would normally have been to pull out Monica's detailed map and try to reach the exit—and under any other circumstances, that's exactly what she would have done. The map painstakingly recorded all the positions of the monsters and their areas of surveillance. And because Carol had explored these ruins extensively, visiting most of those areas with Monica herself, she knew firsthand that the map's data was all accurate.

Even so, she was deliberately heading in a different direction. “There's a safe route marked out on the factory district map we're selling, of course. But that's only useful if the monsters stick to their designated sectors. Did you see how the robots almost seemed blind to their boundaries? I don't feel comfortable relying on that route.”

“Okay, so what's the plan instead?” Akira sensed that Carol was building up to something. He now knew why she wasn't using the map to escape, but that didn't explain why she was heading in the opposite direction from the exit.

“I mentioned this earlier, but as surveyors we basically sell information on the ruins we explore. And well, over the course of investigating this one, I learned of a sort of”—she hesitated—“a back exit.”

“A back exit? Seriously? So that's where we're headed?”

Carol looked reluctant to answer. “Yeah—but you know, we surveyors make a living on info like this. So I'm sorry, but I can't just give it to you for free.”

Akira finally got it.

“So let me just ask you, Akira: Are you willing to buy that info from me?” she inquired.

“Um, well... Depends on the price.”

“Let’s see: considering you just saved me from a tight spot, I’ll give you a discount—twenty million even, just for you.”

Akira flinched and immediately shook his head. From his expression, it was clear to Carol that he didn’t have that kind of money.

“Well, I figured as much.” Carol sighed. On the one hand, if Akira stuck with her, he’d find the back exit for free. On the other hand, she couldn’t just tell him to get lost—it didn’t sit right with her, an expert on the area, to send a kid off to fend for himself at a time when something dangerous was clearly at work in the factory district. *I guess I have to compromise somewhere. After all, if I tried to force him to pay up, he might decide to show me exactly what he’s capable of—and that would be bad news.* The rogue monsters were already enough of a concern—she didn’t need to make an enemy of Akira on top of that.

To justify her hesitation to abandon him, Carol told herself she had no other choice but to take a loss. *I’ll just have to collect that twenty million from him by roping him into my other job... At least, that’s what I’d normally think, but honestly I’m not so sure that’ll work with Akira.* Carol was confident she could trap any ordinary man into laying a hand on her and extort them for all they were worth. Yet for some reason Akira didn’t seem interested in her in the least, and her normally unshakable confidence wavered slightly. She was certain she’d be able to make enough at her side job to support herself if hunting and surveying didn’t pan out—but wasn’t so sure Akira would take the bait.

At any rate, Carol was resolved to come to some sort of compromise. So Akira’s next words struck her like a bolt from the blue.

“Guess this is where we go our separate ways, then. Later.” Without another word, he turned on his heel to leave.

“What?! W-Wait!” she called out without thinking. “A-Are you kidding me?”

“I don’t have that kind of cash on me, and I don’t wanna go into debt either,” Akira replied matter-of-factly.

Carol was dumbstruck. *He’s one hundred percent serious!* At first, she’d

assumed Akira was intentionally threatening to leave so she'd drop the price. But she'd come across her fair share of swindlers and hagglers—both as a surveyor and through the course of her side job—and could tell that he wasn't particularly skilled at either. Which meant his response had been completely genuine.

They'd just been inexplicably attacked by a horde of robots, so there was safety in numbers. Since neither of them would benefit from antagonizing one another here, she'd expected that she would have to make some sort of sacrifice on her end. If necessary, she would have warned him he'd be in trouble without her expertise, or even have compromised on the price to make it affordable for him. Yet all to no end—he'd chosen to part ways and forge ahead on his own.

To Carol, his decision was inconceivable—and at the same time, utterly fascinating.

An amused grin played about her lips. "Hey, you wanna make a deal?"

"A deal? I don't think so. Even if you halved the price, I wouldn't be able to afford it."

"No, no. How about I hire you as my bodyguard? I'll pay you twenty million aurum to help me until we get back to the Hunter Office branch. In other words, my juicy info for your reliable strength. How about it?"

Akira looked doubtful. "You're assuming an awful lot. Payment for information is one thing, but how are you so sure my protection's worth twenty million?"

Carol gave a winsome smile. "Well, desperate times call for desperate measures, don't they? I'm willing to shell out a bit more for extra protection—I value my life just as much as anyone else, you know. And I'm not an idiot—I can tell just how strong you are, silly. You made it this far even with a worthless map, and just now you didn't even hesitate to leave me behind and go off on your own. So I've got to at least put out this much, right?" Then, looking provocative, she added, "Although, if you don't feel you're worth it, I can lower the price as much as you want. But I'll have you make up the difference later in *other ways*."

Akira grimaced. Then, as if to prove her wrong, he grinned boldly. “I don’t think so. Twenty million suits me just fine.”

“Then we have a deal. Nice to be working with you.”

Carol happily offered him her hand, and Akira shook it.



So due to their exceptional circumstances, Akira had become Carol’s escort, and they were now traveling together. Akira left most of the scouting to Alpha, but didn’t neglect to pay attention to his own scanner as he and Carol cautiously made their way through the ruins.

Suddenly he had a thought. *Hey Alpha, back when we first met Carol at that wall, how come you didn’t notice those monsters approaching sooner?*

Well, sorry for being slow on the uptake. Alpha looked a bit pouty, which was a rare sight.

Akira quickly tried to cheer her up. *N-No, I’m not upset or anything! I just figured someone as amazing as you would’ve noticed immediately. Forgive me, Alpha! I’m eternally grateful for the stupendous support you give me daily!*

That perked Alpha up. *As long as you understand my awesomeness, I suppose I can forgive you. Now, then: I believe I mentioned this previously, but as incredible as my support is, it’s regrettably much less effective outside of Kuzusuhara. My scouting ability, especially.*

Is it really that different?

Absolutely. And moreover, you know how this is an Old World factory complex? Many of these manufacturing plants were specifically designed to be scanner-proof for confidentiality. That means my scanning here is significantly less accurate than it would be in any normal building or out in the desert. Think of this entire area as if it’s covered in low-density jamming smoke, and you’ll get the idea.

Akira nodded.

Now, Akira, I have a question for you as well. Why did you agree to be her bodyguard?

Huh? Was that a bad move?

Not especially. It's just that at first you were all ready to leave her high and dry, without even trying to get her to come down on the price. Now all of a sudden you've decided to accept her offer. That's quite an abrupt change of heart. Care to explain?

Really? I wasn't thinking about any of that. I just... Akira tried to put his feelings into words. I just kinda felt like it.

In truth, it was more complicated than that. Akira was even more afraid of Carol turning on him than she was of him turning on her. Coming to blows with her would only mean a greater headache for him. And he hadn't even attempted to negotiate with her because, unconsciously, some part of him had resisted that idea. In his mind, having someone lower their price on his behalf was tantamount to stealing a portion of their pay.

Conversely, if the other party suggested the discount, it was easier for him to accept. And at present, he was uncertain how much her information and his protection were actually worth—so the way he saw it, the two canceled out. He was also well aware that strength in numbers was the key to survival in these ruins, and that traveling together would increase those chances exponentially. Seeing that they both understood this, he could trust her enough to accept her offer.

Of course, he did have other options. Killing her, for one. In his old life, where being “friendly” only meant that you weren't an enemy for the time being, this would have certainly been the more reasonable option.

But Akira no longer lived in the back alleys of the slums, and since escaping that world, he had broadened his horizons somewhat. He now knew there were other paths available, like distancing himself from her in order to avoid conflict. And now that he'd grown stronger from overcoming countless hardships, met a variety of people, and had all kinds of new experiences, he'd learned that not everything was black-and-white—just because someone wasn't an ally didn't necessarily mean they were hostile. Thus Akira had been able to open himself up to others a bit more, allowing him to go along with Carol's suggestion.

Yet all this had taken place only within his subconscious—Akira himself hadn't

noticed the change. So when Alpha grilled him on his reasoning, he could only reply that he “kinda felt like it.”

Even Alpha hadn’t picked up on the fact that there was a reason Akira himself didn’t know. But she could at least tell he wasn’t lying (she was astounding at detecting lies from humans, after all), so she just chalked it up to one of Akira’s whims.

I see. Well, Carol doesn’t seem to have it in for you, so as long as that capriciousness of yours doesn’t lead to a fight to the death, I don’t see any reason to refuse her request for protection.

As she spoke, Alpha gave him a knowing grin. Akira didn’t get why at first, but then remembered that he’d previously been seconds away from fighting Shiori in the underground ruins of Kuzusuhara, and that the catalyst back then had also been a request to be someone’s bodyguard—Reina’s.

Fine, fine. I’ll be careful this time, Akira said with a grimace, pushing that incident out of his mind to avoid dwelling on his past mistakes.

The more Carol learned about Akira, the more mysterious he seemed. *Hmm, as I thought, he really doesn’t look that impressive. I wonder why? Is it just because he’s a kid, or is something else going on?* While she couldn’t go so far as to say that he looked like a weakling, he certainly didn’t look strong—at least not strong enough to tackle these ruins on his own.

“Hey, Akira, how old are you anyway?” she asked nonchalantly.

“Hm? Dunno,” he replied.

“Classified, eh? Well, if you want to keep it to yourself, that’s fine. I don’t go around telling people my age either, since keeping it secret’s more convenient for my *other* job. Usually I just pick a number my client’s into and go with that.” Carol thought that Akira was playing dumb because he didn’t want to answer, and she brushed it off with a grin.

But Akira shook his head. “No, I really don’t know how old I am. I don’t know my birthday either. I don’t even know whether I forgot it, or simply didn’t know from the start.”

Carol deduced from this that Akira must've been born in the slums. And since she knew many slum children considered their upbringing a touchy subject, she decided to not pry any further. "Okay, then how long have you been a relic hunter?"

"Oh..." He hesitated before answering, and when he did, it sounded evasive. "Well, you know, not too long. At least, it feels like I only started just yesterday."

So he had immediately admitted that he didn't know his age, but seemed reluctant to answer how long he'd been a hunter. Carol wasn't really surprised, though. "Becoming a hunter" could mean different things to different people, like the day you registered yourself as a relic hunter in the Office's records, the first day you went out into the wasteland, or the day you reached rank 10 and became official. There were those who'd already headed into a ruin fully armed before they'd registered as a hunter, and others who didn't count anything before becoming rank 10 as "true" hunter work. Some purists would even treat other fledgling hunters as "impostors" before they met certain criteria, regardless of how much effort the newcomers had already put in. (In fact, this was a common cause of many arguments between hunters.)

Carol guessed that Akira was being so cagey because something similar had happened in his past, likely brought on by his youthful appearance. Still, he'd admitted that he hadn't been hunting for very long, and since he didn't give her the impression he was lying, he was probably as young as he seemed. In other words, he wasn't using an artificial body or physical augmentations to make himself look younger.

"Really?" she said. "Then you must still be a rookie. Which, in my book, makes your strength all the more impressive."

"It's not that big of a deal. I just got lucky in a number of ways." Akira found her overt praise hard to accept at face value, but it would have been far too unnatural to deny it at this point. So he just waved it away as a matter of luck.

Carol, of course, thought he was just being modest. "Well, even being lucky is a type of strength, no? Hunters aren't guaranteed a tomorrow, so power like that is extremely valuable."

“Then considering our current situation, that ‘strength’ of mine must’ve caused yours to take a hit,” he said with a self-deprecating smirk. Akira supposed that Carol’s luck had gotten worse because of his presence.

But Carol gave him a winsome grin. “Well, *that’s* not the attitude I want to hear from my bodyguard. You ought to be telling me instead what good fortune I had to meet up with you!”

Akira looked at Carol in surprise. She just smiled cheerfully again, at which Akira managed to at least raise the corners of his mouth.

Alpha, I know I already agreed to do this, but I’ll be able to handle it, right?

Alpha didn’t look worried in the least—on the contrary, she seemed quite pleased. *No problem! Dangers of this level are practically a daily occurrence, right? After all you’ve been through, this hardly even qualifies as bad luck.*

Good point! Akira looked more upbeat and, as if to scoff at this low level of misfortune, fired himself up. “All right, then! You were lucky to run across me, Carol! I’ll protect you!”

“Ooh, now *that’s* more like it!” Seeing Akira’s renewed enthusiasm, Carol thought he finally seemed a little more reliable, albeit a bit childlike. For the first time, she could genuinely believe that, despite their situation, they might actually make it out alive.



And as they made their way through the factory district, Akira’s prowess ended up exceeding her expectations.

While they didn’t encounter another horde of mechanical guards, they were attacked by several smaller groups of formidable robots and even tougher individual units along the way. But Akira dispatched them with ease. Thanks to Alpha’s vigilance, he quickly spotted and then destroyed them in a hail of concentrated DVTS gunfire, piercing their tough armor. For the larger groups, he first took out their machine guns to get rid of their long-range attacks, then knocked out their legs one by one to immobilize them. Once they were sitting ducks, Carol would deal the finishing blow. In no time at all, the ground was littered with such quantities of scrap metal that Akira’s true strength became

manifestly clear.

“It’s not like I doubted you or anything, but wow, you really are strong!” she marveled.

“You think so? Well, if taking down monsters this weak is worth twenty million to you, then no complaints here!”

Seeing Akira’s self-assurance, Carol hesitated to say what was on her mind, but finally she came out with it. “Ah, well, I’m not complaining or anything, but are you really gonna carry that bag the whole way back with you?” She cast a gaze toward the spare pack Akira had been dragging all this time.

Akira’s smile stiffened, and he cast a look in the same direction. The relic inside was his hard-earned prize for all he’d weathered today. “I-Is there a problem with that?” he asked.

“W-Well, not really a *problem*, per se, but if you’re going to protect me, I’d like you to be able to fight at your full potential. But, you know, it’s not like I can force you or anything.” Seeing Akira’s forlorn expression, Carol backpedaled a bit.

It was true—the pack had prevented Akira from fighting at his fullest. Since he was dragging it with one hand, he only had his other free hand to fight with, so he couldn’t dual-wield weapons like normal. Of course, he was still plenty capable, and the fact that he was still able to fight as well as he did impressed Carol all the same. Still, she couldn’t help but think he’d be able to fight even better if he ditched the pack, since it was clearly just hampering his performance.

But Akira wasn’t a surveyor like her, and he had to bring home some relics of value—or else this entire hunt would be a wash. Even the twenty-million-aurum information he would receive from Carol for protecting her wasn’t tangible money he could use to replace his ammo—and he wasn’t sure whether the data was really worth her hefty price tag in the first place. He couldn’t abandon the only thing he’d found of actual monetary worth, in case she turned out to be scamming him.

Carol understood this too, which was why she hadn’t forced him to drop the pack. And for his part, Akira couldn’t bring himself to immediately refuse her.

He'd accepted the job to be her bodyguard, so part of him thought he ought to perform it to the best of his ability, unburdened. But at the same time, he didn't want to give up the relic he'd gone through so much trouble to get. And he was managing just fine with one hand for the time being. So he felt somewhat conflicted.

Alpha, do you think I can do my job properly if I keep this with me?

For now. But if it becomes a problem, you really should just ditch it.

I was hoping I'd have your ultra-awesome support to rely on so I wouldn't have to...

I'll do all I can—but if you manage to somehow get out of your depth regardless, I'd recommend leaving it behind and focusing on survival. I understand how you feel, but your safety takes priority. On that, I will not compromise.

That left Akira no room to argue. *Urgh... Fine.*

Instead of hoping I'll bail you out, she added, you should be hoping that your bad luck doesn't lead you somewhere so tough that you need to abandon the pack.

Ha... Can't argue with that. While he'd been able earlier to laugh away the misfortune of encountering the swarm, now he imagined the scenario Alpha had just detailed—and was only able to manage a grim smile. Putting the ominous thought out of his mind and focusing on the task at hand instead, he pressed onward.

Seeing his hesitation and then decision to keep dragging the pack along, Carol also figured there was no helping it and followed along.

Carol led the way as they continued through the Mihazono factory district. They ran into several groups of monsters here and there, but none of them were a problem. Still, the more Akira fought, the more puzzled his expression became.

"Hey Carol," he finally asked. "I feel like we're going deeper into the ruins. Is there really a back exit this far in?"

“Sure is! It’s just over there,” she said, pointing. “Oh, I probably should’ve mentioned this before, but it’s not *technically* a back exit. There’s no hidden passage or anything.”

“Huh? Then what is it?”

“It’ll be faster for you to just see for yourself. We’re almost there, so just bear with me a bit more.”

“Ugh... Fine.” If it was just a *bit* longer, Akira could hold out.

And true to her word, only a short time later Carol turned to him, looking smug.

“We’re here. This is it.”

Akira ran his eyes over the place, perplexed. What he saw was completely different from what he’d expected. They were in a large supply depot that resembled a loading dock in a harbor. Nearly every inch of the surrounding walls were covered in large corridors where huge bins were making their way in and out. Akira and Carol had also entered this space through one of those corridors.

On the ground floor, giant containers were lined up neatly in rows. Suddenly, one of them floated up into the air.

“Wh-What the heck?!” Akira couldn’t take his eyes off the bin as it climbed higher and higher into the air until he could no longer see it at all.

Carol grinned as if amused. “Cool, huh? These are used to transport goods. Stuff manufactured in the factories can be shipped outside in them.”

“Huh? So Old World containers can just fly on their own? Since it’s the Old World, though, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Hmm, it’s a little bit more nuanced than that—but for a quick and dirty explanation, that works for now. This way, Akira. It’s dangerous here, so be careful. Stick close to me and don’t wander off.”

As Carol led Akira through the terminal, he saw new containers being carried through the countless corridors all the while. A cart with a number of wheeled legs traveled along a catwalk to drop one bin off in midair. After unloading its

cargo, the cart dexterously scuttled back into the corridor. The container then made its way horizontally through the air before stopping in the middle of the room, then descended on its own to its designated spot on the loading ground. The entire process fascinated Akira, and he stood entranced.

So this is how an Old World factory operates? This is amazing! Although maybe for the Old World it's no big deal? Well, I've never seen a New World factory either, come to think of it.

Akira, we didn't come here to sightsee, Alpha admonished him lightly. So stop gawking and focus on your surroundings. If you get distracted, it'll hamper your combat ability. Right now we need to concentrate on getting out of here.

Good point. All right. Akira turned to focus on the task at hand, but then thought of something else. *Wait, he observed to himself. Alpha doesn't seem impressed by any of this at all. Maybe she's just not interested in mechanics? Or perhaps she's so used to such things that this doesn't faze her? I wonder which it is?* He got the feeling it was the latter, but stopped his train of thought there. The more he thought about it, the more misgivings he'd have about Alpha, none of which would benefit him in the end. In order to avoid finding reasons to doubt her, and thus drive some sort of irreversible wedge between them, Akira stayed silent for the time being.

Suddenly, Carol stopped in her tracks and looked toward an area where Akira couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. After staring motionless for a moment, she nodded. "Okay, this is it."

Akira found her behavior puzzling, but Carol turned to him with another smug grin. Her hand grabbed something in midair and pulled it toward them. The next instant a strange rift opened up in Akira's vision. He stood dumbstruck as the hole expanded, until finally he realized the "rift" was a doorway and found himself looking into a container he hadn't even realized was there.

"What the hell...?"

Looks like that bin's covered in active camouflage, and Carol just opened it, Alpha explained.

Akira reached toward the large invisible box. He could definitely feel something there. "Whoa, so this is active camouflage? Cool!" Hardly believing

his eyes, he walked closer to the box, took a closer look, and touched it again. It felt like he was touching clear glass, completely imperceptible to the outside—very high-tech.

“Satisfied? All right, get in!” Carol, looking pleased, urged him forward.

Akira stepped in, and after following him, Carol shut the door behind them, concealing the container’s existence from the outside world once more.

Surprisingly, the inside of the bin was spacious enough to house an entire desert utility vehicle with room to spare. Parts of the walls and ceiling were adorned with active camouflage, effectively creating windows that showed the view outside. Akira found this intriguing as well.

“So this is the exit you mentioned?”

“Yep! It’s one of the transport passageways that goes through the factory district. In other words, we’re going to ride in this container as it makes its way out of here.”

“Oh, gotcha!”

Akira sounded impressed, which pleased Carol as she explained further: Even after hunters carried off relics in a ruin, plenty of areas would automatically replenish their treasures after a period of time. The autorestitution system would replace the stolen relics. But these would only rarely be remanufactured on-site. In most cases, they were created elsewhere and then brought in—via these containers.

“And so,” Carol added, “whatever their original purposes, these compartments filled with relics travel by air to reach their destinations. And this network of flight paths covers the skies of the entire East. Sometimes the relics are also carried through underground transportation routes. Apparently, they’re only rarely distributed through normal means on land.”

“Really? Why’s that?”

“Probably because it’d be a mess—thanks to hunters as well as monsters. Since the containers are invisible, anyone could accidentally crash into one of them on the road.”

While the camouflage used on the containers was rather high-quality, it wasn't foolproof—it could still be detected by a powerful enough scanner. Most hunters didn't have scanners of that level, though, and without them it would have been impossible to tell when a concealed container was on the road. Nor were the wasteland roads maintained to begin with. Air transport, however, circumvented the issue entirely.

Akira nodded. “Ah, I see. Yeah, in the air they'd definitely be less likely to cause problems.”

Just then, the floor beneath him trembled slightly. Alarmed, he looked around, and saw through the windows that the scenery outside was starting to drop away. They were rising.

“Wh-Whoa, we're floating through the air...”

“This one's headed for the business district. You saw those containers hovering back there, right? They travel along invisible, predetermined routes.” She breathed a sigh of relief. “So now we can relax. We're safe.”

Akira continued looking out the window, his hand pressed against it. “Safe? But didn't you say it was dangerous just a moment ago?”

“Ah, well, the terminal should've technically been a safe zone the moment we entered it, but those guards crossed the boundaries of their jurisdiction to chase after us, right? So technically nowhere's really safe anymore.”

“Then aren't we still in trouble?”

“Nah, here in the container we'll be fine. Now that we've taken off, it's a straight shot for us from the factory to the business district. The guards are here to defend the factories in the first place. Sectors are one thing, but they wouldn't have a reason to cross over districts,” Carol stated confidently.

That made enough sense to Akira, and he nodded, impressed. But then something else came to mind. “Wait, how do you know all this, Carol?”

Carol's face stiffened slightly, as if she'd been a bit too careless and ended up saying something she shouldn't have. But the look was so brief that Akira didn't even notice, and it was immediately replaced with a cheerful grin. “That's classified. Or rather, stuff only a professional surveyor would know. Sorry, but

for information of that caliber, a paltry twenty million won't even begin to cover it."

Akira's smile grew strained, but he understood. While he couldn't begin to imagine how she'd gotten the info, it sufficed for now that she'd be willing to tell him provided he had the funds. So at least she wasn't getting her info through some shady method she couldn't divulge.

"I see. Then tell me twenty million's worth. I mean, you can't possibly think just leading me to this container is actually worth that much, right?" He grinned knowingly, as if to get under her skin.

Carol responded with the same kind of look. "All right, deal. You've done an exemplary job protecting me this far, so I suppose I can educate you a bit while we're en route."

After rising a considerable distance in the air, the container began to move horizontally, carrying them toward its destination. As they traveled, Carol began to divulge some of her secrets.

Alpha stayed silent all the while. She'd caught on to Carol's attempt to cover up her mistake, but deliberately hadn't pointed it out. Akira already suspected that Alpha knew more than she was letting on; but he automatically assumed Alpha's secret must be similar to Carol's, namely on par with the secrets surveyors tended to be privy to. So Carol unwittingly ended up soothing Akira's suspicions of Alpha, which proved incredibly convenient for the latter. As always, Alpha smiled as she kept Akira informed of only what he needed to know, and nothing else.

Chapter 108: Déjà Vu

The container carrying Akira and Carol headed for the business district. Among the many things she taught him while they were traveling was why the container had nothing in it apart from them.

“A bunch of bins in the terminal are empty like this one,” Carol explained. “Normally they’d be packed with all sorts of things, but the factories making them are now defunct. Even so, the transport system itself is still online, so it keeps moving the containers even though they’re all empty. That’s what I infer, anyway.”

“Makes sense, but doesn’t that mean that the ruin’s management system is still active? And wouldn’t it check to see if they’re empty or not? Given how high-tech everything from the Old World seems, I’d think one of their systems wouldn’t let something like that slide.”

Carol shook her head. “Actually, it’s the opposite. It’s *because* this ruin’s management is so lax that hunters show up in droves. If the Old World system really was as foolproof as you’re thinking, no one would set foot in here.”

The mechanical guards stationed around a ruin would attack the hunters who intruded upon their turf—but that was *all* they did. Regardless of how many thieves from the outside descended upon the city daily, the system had limits on what it could do.

In the past, Mihazono would have had a human military presence to make up for the holes in its automated security. Just as Kugamayama City had previously dispatched its defense force to take care of the horde heading toward it, Mihazono had a duty to take care of the thieves threatening its own territory. But the fact that so many hunters were able to slip in and out made it clear that the ruin’s system had suffered some sort of degradation, damage, or other error.

Akira nodded. “I suppose that all checks out. And that’s also why we were able to escape to safety relatively easily, right?” He looked out the window and

saw a sweeping view of the business district, a mosaic of fresh-looking buildings randomly interspersed with piles of debris. *This hodgepodge of areas is also due to the system malfunctioning*, he thought.

Something moved at the top of his vision, and he glanced up to see a rift opening in midair. *What the heck?* Puzzled, he stared at it some more—

Akira! Enemy incoming! Alpha warned, her expression grim.

“What?!” Akira yelled, caught completely off guard.

Alpha was already moving his suit for him. Once his pack of ammo was back on his shoulders, she snatched up his CWH and DVTS from the ground, one in each hand.

“Akira?! What’s going on?!” Carol shouted.

“We’re being targeted!” he shouted back.

“Huh?!” She peered outside the window Akira had just been looking through, and her face went rigid.

The “rift” was actually the side door of a gigantic transport aircraft, and it was opening up. As it widened, they could clearly make out the cargo within—an enormous multilegged machine resembling a tank. Its artillery cannons were aimed right at the container they were traveling in.

Carol reflexively leaped out of the line of fire, avoiding a direct hit. But they were still inside a floating bin, which meant there was nowhere to truly escape. Shells bombarded them, and Carol was tossed into the sky. In the brief moment she hung suspended in midair, she got a glimpse of the ground far below.

Shit, I’m way too high up! If I fall from this height...

The awareness that she was about to die hit her like a truck. She was wearing a powered suit, so an impact from a shell like that wouldn’t harm her. But as high performance as it was, the suit could only help so much, and she knew it wouldn’t do any good against a fall from this height. The sensation of impending death made everything feel like it was moving in slow motion. But in the air her movements were severely restricted, and so this sensation only served to needlessly prolong her terror. Her face twisted in despair.

Then Akira dropped out of the sky, slamming into her.

“Akira?!”

“Grab on or die!” Akira pulled Carol closer so she could grip him tightly. Still holding his guns in both hands, he opened fire.



Even before the artillery shells had destroyed the container, Alpha had already sensed what was going to happen and had planned out the best course of action for Akira. By calculating where the shells would land and how much damage the container would receive and where, she'd helped Akira evade the blast. Then, he'd kicked off from the container (which was now so ruined it barely resembled its original shape) with his suit's strength, giving him the necessary speed to reach Carol in time.

Now that he had her secure, he used the recoil from his CWH and DVTS to propel them both toward a nearby skyscraper. They "landed" on the wall, and he ran down the side of the building, just as he'd done when fighting the Serantal guards.

This was all too much for Carol, who could scarcely grasp what was happening. Grabbing onto him for dear life, she screamed, "Akira?! What the hell's going on?!"

"Later! Just hang on!" Fighting this way was now *déjà vu* for Akira, so while his expression remained tense, unlike Carol he was able to keep his composure as he scanned the skies for the enemy. But try as he might, he couldn't spot anything. Was this due to active camouflage?

But Alpha pointed up to the building's roof. *Above you, Akira!*

The moment he looked up, the building quaked under his feet. One of the tanklike machines had dropped from the transport aircraft onto the side of the building. It had tires on the bottom of its many legs, and on these it pivoted sharply in Akira and Carol's direction. Even as it charged toward them, it lined up its next shot.

No way! How can something that massive move so fast?!

It's a machine, Akira. Unlike humans, it's designed to move easily along walls without falling off. Come on, this should be far less surprising than seeing a container fly through the air.

Well, sure, but—

More importantly, hurry up and get rid of this thing. Now would be a good time to show some of that resolve of yours!

Roger! Panicking wouldn't change anything, so he focused on getting rid of the monstrosity instead. Silently psyching himself up, he held his CWH at the ready as he practically slid down the building. With perfect aim, he opened fire.

At almost the same moment, the tank discharged. The bullet from his rifle and the shell from the cannon streaked by each other at high speeds as they each headed for their respective targets.

The rifle round hit its mark. The sheer amount of impact conversion luminescence scattering from the enemy's force-field armor showed just how powerful the shot had been. Still, that wasn't enough to destroy the monster. The bullet had dented its armor but failed to pierce through.

Meanwhile, the shell missed Akira and streaked on through the air. With the strength his suit gave him and the DVTS recoil, Akira quickly leaped to the side, out of the shell's range.

The projectile struck the ground and exploded. As far away as he was, Akira could still feel the scorching heat on his back—the shell had been incredibly powerful.

One hit from those, and I'm a goner!

But you can handle it! Keep shooting! Alpha urged.

Roger! As the tank monster pursued Akira down the building, they continued exchanging gunfire. Carol was so dumbfounded that she could only manage a vacant smile as she held on to Akira.

Over the course of the battle, Akira fired three more proprietary rounds at the tank. While they all dealt serious damage to its armor, none of them could deliver a fatal blow. Akira began to look a bit nervous.

Damn, this thing's tough! Wouldn't we have a better chance fighting it on the ground? He supposed that on level terrain he could focus all his firepower at the enemy instead of using the recoil for mobility. Perhaps then he'd have the force necessary to finish it off.

But Alpha shook her head. *No, it would be best for you to defeat it before you reach the bottom. The enemy will be able to move more freely below—right now, on the side of the building, its movement is restricted. We can't let that*

handicap go to waste.

What a pain... All right, fine. I might have to get a bit reckless, but I'll finish this!

At the same instant, Carol came to a resolution of her own—she let go of Akira and joined the fight. Her previous expression, tinged with desperation, was now overwritten by a forced but bold grin as she held her large one-handed firearm and launched powerful bullets at the tank. Of course, she could hardly aim accurately in this situation, but the bullets reached the tank's body nonetheless. Impacts like those from Akira's CWH rounds were visibly knocking the enemy back.

Whoa, now that's what I'm talking about! Akira exclaimed. Hey, you think her gun's even more powerful than my CWH?

Now having two threats to deal with instead of one, the tank fired a shot at Carol as well. She didn't have the added support Akira did, so she would have had a tougher time avoiding its blast. But Akira nipped that concern in the bud by aiming at the incoming shell and knocking it off course.

With the enemy's attention divided between the two of them, they had more leeway to directly attack the machine. Slowly but surely, Akira and Carol gained the upper hand. Overwhelmed by the concentrated gunfire, the tank couldn't keep up with the onslaught and was quickly filled full of holes. Eventually the monster was unable to resist any longer, and fell from the side of the building to its doom.

Elated at their victory, the two relaxed their concentration slightly. For Akira that was no problem, since he had Alpha's support to back him up. But Carol was unable to maintain her balance and began tumbling from the wall.

Immediately, Akira kicked off the building, flinging himself downward faster than normal free fall. Thus he reached the bottom before she could and, discarding both his weapons, stretched out his arms and caught Carol before she hit the ground.

Their eyes met. For a moment, their minds processed what had just happened. Finally Carol embraced Akira in joy.

“I’m alive—I can’t believe it! Akira, you really saved me! Aaah, that was close! I was almost a goner! I thought for sure I was dead! But I’m alive!”

Akira was more relieved and exhausted than elated. Setting Carol down, he heaved a huge sigh. “Yeah, looks like I managed... Thank goodness! And here I thought having to do that once in a single day was enough.”

“Once is *enough* for you?!” Carol asked, incredulous. “I personally wouldn’t want to do anything like that *ever* if I could help it! No thank you! But if you can say something like that with a straight face, you must be even stronger than I thought!”

Of course, if Akira were to deny his own strength at this point, it would have sounded far too unnatural to be taken as mere modesty. In truth, part of him did wonder how she would react if he told her that this was his *second* time running down a building today, but he didn’t say that either. Instead, he tried to pry Carol off of him. “Okay, time to get down now. Don’t press your chest against me like that—your powered suit feels like a rock, and it hurts.”

“Oh? How rude! Isn’t this sort of thing supposed to make you pleased?”

“Dunno. But it hurts. So get off.”

Akira wasn’t being shy or embarrassed. Carol’s powered inner wear was thin enough that it clearly showed the shape of her chest, but it was also high-level defensive apparel. The inside material was so flexible it allowed her breasts to jiggle, but the outside was sturdy enough to protect the wearer. The same was true of the harness she wore—it looked soft at a glance but felt like a steel block jammed into him.

Carol also realized this and obediently released him. Then she removed the chest portion of her harness and unzipped her suit all the way down to her stomach, exposing her skin underneath. Finally, she embraced him once more. Pressing his face into her massive cleavage, Carol grinned. “Now it doesn’t hurt, right?”

She was still giddy from her brush with death moments before, and the thrill of being alive made her feel closer to Akira than she usually would have. And having experienced the same thing, Akira found he no longer felt like pushing her away. She was right—it didn’t hurt anymore, so with a sigh he let her do as

she wished.

Alpha grinned teasingly. *Hmm. It seems that the real thing really does elicit a completely different reaction from you. I guess I can't compete after all.*

Shut up, Akira said, more tersely than normal.

For some time afterward, Carol clung to Akira blissfully.

Once she had finally calmed down, Akira peeled her off of him and spoke up. "All right, Carol, I think we should get moving. My job lasts until we get to the Hunter Office branch, right?"

Even after being immersed in a chest that had charmed numerous men, Akira showed no sign of embarrassment or even interest, Carol noted wryly. "Sure, let's go." Even so, she was still in a good mood. Akira's strength and attitude had made her take quite a shine to him. "Then I'll be counting on you for just a bit longer," she added, grinning amicably.

They were ready to move out. But they'd only taken a few steps forward when Akira stopped in his tracks.

"Akira, what's wrong?" Carol asked.

But Akira didn't reply.

Carol thought that was strange, but when she saw him collapse to his knees in front of her, she screamed in horror, "Akira?!" Wondering if perhaps he'd just been pretending to be in good condition when he'd really reached his limit, Carol ran to him and began checking him over.

Akira had both arms limp at his sides, and his head was bowed down. She could hear quiet sobs.

"M-My relic..." he seemed to be saying.

"Huh?" Dumbfounded, Carol caught sight of something ahead of Akira.

The relic that he'd been dragging with him all this time was in pieces, scattered all along the ground.

His find had been encased inside a sturdy Old World box, but it had fallen

from a great height, gotten caught in the enemy's gunfire, and—to add insult to injury—suffered the giant multilegged tank landing directly on top of it. The pack had been torn to shreds from the gunfire, the box had gone flying out of the container, and the mechanical part inside had been smashed to pieces on the ground. Akira's reward for all his hard work that day was now irreparably destroyed.

"It took so much work to find... And it was so hard to carry..." There was no getting around the fact that the relic was now worthless. As reality sank in, Akira was caught in the throes of despair.

Carol looked taken aback. "Um, Akira, you're okay to go on, right?"

"Do I *look* okay?! What part of this seems 'okay' to you?!" Without meaning to, Akira snapped at her.

Seeing he was well enough to bite back, she relaxed, but she asked just in case, "Er, you're not hurt anywhere or anything, right? You're physically okay? I mean, you were kind of reckless back there—"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, I'm fine on that point." Sensing that she was worried about his body's condition, Akira's expression returned to normal for a moment, and he nodded. But then he immediately looked sorrowful once more. "My relic..."

While Carol did feel sorry for him, she found his exaggerated despair amusing and couldn't help but let out a snort. He could take down a multilegged tank while running down a skyscraper and saw that as completely natural, showing almost no sign of pride at his accomplishment—and yet here he was, bawling like a baby over a lost relic. Carol found that strangely adorable.

Akira turned a pouting face toward her. "It's not funny! All my effort today's gone to waste."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to laugh. I'm sorry for your loss." Carol found the way Akira was behaving like a normal kid his age even more amusing, but suppressed her chuckle by forcing herself to smile gently. "No need to get so upset," she said. "How about this? As an apology of sorts for dragging you into this, I'll buy that relic as is, for the price it normally would've gone for. How's that?"

Her unexpected offer caught Akira off guard. “Seriously? I mean, that’d be great, but is it really okay?”

“Yup! I mean, you essentially sacrificed it to rescue me. As the one who hired you, I ought to take some responsibility for that. So how much was that relic originally?”

“Um, to be honest, I have no clue.”

Carol could tell immediately that this wasn’t some negotiation tactic and that he really didn’t know. Had he felt like it, he could’ve lied and named any exorbitant price. Yet she couldn’t feel any sort of conniving aura from Akira, and her personal opinion of him rose even higher. “I see. Then we’ll discuss the price once we’re out of here, safe and sound. That okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. All right, let’s go!” His optimism restored, Akira hopped to his feet. His single-minded attachment to money struck Carol as rather childlike, and she couldn’t help but smile. The pair started heading for the branch office once more, but hadn’t gotten much farther before Akira halted again.

“Now what’s wrong?” Carol asked.

“Ah, well, some people I know are coming this way.”

Carol looked ahead of where Akira was looking and saw three figures that were probably other relic hunters—she mentally added “probably” because due to their appearance she couldn’t be certain. Two of them were wearing maid outfits, and only one sported a powered suit. Given Akira’s reaction at the sight of them, they didn’t seem to be enemies, but even Carol, in her racy Old World-inspired powered suit, felt that their outfits were rather ill-suited for relic hunting.

One of them spotted Akira and waved enthusiastically. “Akira kiddo! Fancy meetin’ you here again!”

It was, of course, Reina and her entourage.



After Reina and her maids had parted with Akira at the Mihazono branch office, they began by hunting mechanical monsters in the business district. This

had been Shiori's suggestion. The reason she gave Reina was that the latter needed to be exposed to more difficult battles in order to grow as a hunter. But the real reason was for Reina's own safety. Rather than going deep into a ruin in search of relics, hunting the monsters in the business district and selling their corpses would make it easier to rescue her if things went south. Unlike the interiors of the buildings where relics were likely waiting to be collected, the surveillance areas of the mechanical guards outside were much easier to determine—and by the same token, much easier to run from. And just in case they encountered an emergency and had to put out a request for rescue, being closer to the branch office meant there would be a greater chance of a hunter accepting the job.

For Reina, who desired accomplishments more than anything, and Shiori, who wanted nothing more than to keep Reina safe, the best option was to refrain from going too deep into the ruins for now and to just take down simple monsters.

Technically, though, Reina was doing most of the work. Hiding within the shadow of a building, she sniped a target from afar—a standard monster wandering the business district. It looked like a metallic sphere with a collection of arms and legs sprouting from its body. As a maintenance bot, normally it would have been clearing debris and maintaining its designated area. But when it detected an intruder, it would drop everything to attack—and could even pick up the weapons hunters dropped and use them against its own targets. In other words, it was more dangerous than its appearance would suggest and was commonly underestimated.

Reina fired armor-piercing rounds at its legs, then at its arms, systematically destroying each. Once it couldn't move and was defenseless, she aimed at its body and destroyed the mechanisms within, silencing the monster for good.

Shiori lauded Reina's actions. "Excellent work, miss." Her praise was genuine—Reina hadn't wasted a single movement. She'd scanned the area beforehand, found a safe spot to attack from, and strategically taken down the enemy rather than trying to eliminate it in a single hit. Furthermore, she'd made it all seem so natural that if a complete novice had watched her fight, they'd probably have thought either that the enemy was a pushover, or that Reina hadn't done

anything very impressive. While it was a far cry from the type of reckless, courageous, legendary feats that inebriated hunters might excitedly recount in bars, this was because Reina had never let it become a desperate situation in the first place. A more experienced hunter would know that such performance took skill.

Reina herself was aware of all this, so she understood Shiori wasn't merely flattering her. But she didn't smile. "Yeah," she muttered. "Thanks."

She'd done the scouting and the fighting completely on her own. Shiori was only assisting with carrying monster remains to their vehicle to be transported back to the outpost, and Kanae just hung around looking rather bored. But the fact remained that she was still being coddled by two hunters who were far more skilled. So she couldn't take Shiori's praise at face value.

While it hurt Shiori to see Reina acting so gloomy, the maid knew further praise would only make matters worse, nor would it be to Reina's benefit. So Shiori left it at that. The two of them brought the last of the monster remains to the vehicle. Kanae, as always, didn't lift a finger to help.

Her unapologetic selfishness rubbed Reina the wrong way. "I guess you're really just going to stand there and watch?" she snapped.

But Kanae just grinned, completely unfazed. "Missy, I've told you before. My job is only to be your bodyguard, not to help you in your hunter career. And sissy isn't obliged to help you out either, y'know."

"I know, but..." Reina hadn't asked either of them to fight for her, of course. But Kanae hadn't even offered to help Shiori—her coworker—despite seeing her lug those heavy pieces of machinery. Reina couldn't help but have reservations about employing a guard with that attitude, and her face twisted in displeasure.

Kanae sensed what Reina was thinking and grinned again. "Look, my job's to prepare for the worst-case scenario, and part of that is being ready to carry you away to safety when needed. So think what you will, but I'm *really* busy. Don't have time to help out. Sorry, but that's the way it is."

"Oh, is that so?" It sounded to Reina like Kanae had her hands full because of Reina's own weakness, and she hung her head.

Shiori interjected. “Miss, despite how she seems, Kanae is capable enough that she was handpicked to be your bodyguard. Merely think of her as a last resort.”

Reina turned to look at her.

Shiori gave her a gentle smile and continued, “That last resort needs to be reliable, so she can’t be distracted by anything other than her main job, or that would defeat the purpose. And think of it this way: if you really weren’t skilled, she wouldn’t have the leeway to goof off as much as she does.” Shiori was implicitly saying that Reina’s strength allowed Kanae to take the attitude she did.

“How mean, sissy,” Kanae mock-pouted. “I’m doing as much as my pay grade demands.”

“Naturally. If you weren’t doing at least that much, I’d cut you down right where you stand,” Shiori said with a murderous glare and reached for the blade at her waist, one hundred percent serious.

Even so, Kanae’s smirk didn’t falter. Not that she thought Shiori was bluffing—she just thought it would be amusing if Shiori did try to attack.

“Shiori,” Reina warned, and shook her head.

Shiori regained her composure and sighed. Her hand left the hilt of her blade. Kanae’s grin disappeared, as if to say, “How boring.” With that, the three of them resumed their monster hunt.

Contrary to Reina’s assumption, Kanae was in fact taking her job seriously. These were Old World ruins, where anything could happen without warning. The entire time, she’d been watching their surroundings vigilantly for any signs of unnatural activity.

On the other hand, she didn’t see any trouble on the horizon—or at least she thought it would be extremely unlikely. Shiori, who was overprotective of Reina from the start, had screwed up in the underground Kuzusuhara ruins so badly that this time she’d felt it necessary to bring Kanae along as insurance to keep Reina safe. So she’d probably also taken every measure possible to make sure

this insurance wouldn't be needed in the first place. From the beginning Kanae had figured she would just be spending the entire time on watch with nothing to do. So in truth, she was quite bored.

Sissy can't even be properly overprotective of missy, huh? Though I know all too well that it's not something she can help.

Had Shiori really wanted to keep Reina from danger, she wouldn't have let her go to the ruins in the first place. Naturally, Shiori herself knew this as well. But certain circumstances dictated that she had no choice. So Shiori was doing all she could to keep Reina safe under the conditions she'd been given.

Still, those circumstances pertained only to Reina and Shiori—they didn't have anything to do with Kanae. So the latter was left with nothing to do but stare absentmindedly.

Man, I wish something interesting would happen! By "something interesting," she naturally meant something that would give her a challenge. Essentially, she was wishing for danger to befall the person she was supposed to be defending, which made her something of a failure of a guardian. But Kanae couldn't have cared less as she looked up at the sky nonchalantly.

Then, all of a sudden, she sensed something and went on the alert.

Shiori detected the abrupt change in her demeanor. "Something wrong, Kanae?"

"Well, I'm just getting a weird vibe from over there..."

Reina and Shiori both looked where Kanae was indicating. The next instant, something exploded in midair before their eyes.

Kanae and Shiori instantly took defensive positions around Reina. They were all surprised, but their expressions differed. Reina's was one of pure surprise. Shiori's was one of wariness. And Kanae's suggested she'd finally found the "something interesting" she was looking for.

Then, as though leaping out of the explosion, Akira and Carol suddenly appeared, flying through the air until they hit the side of a nearby skyscraper. The three women watched as the multilegged tank suddenly emerged and stuck to the building as well. Then Akira and the monster started duking it out on the

wall.

“All right! Now *that’s* what I’m talking about!” Kanae cheered.

“What...in the world?” Unlike Kanae, who was now enjoying herself immensely, Reina stood open-mouthed at what she was witnessing.

Shiori was also surprised, but prioritized Reina’s safety over observing the battle. “Kanae, do you sense anything else strange in the area?”

“Nope, that was it. But wow, look at ’em go! Are they gonna fight the monster while in free fall? No—they’re running down the building as they fight! They’ve gotta be *nuts*!” Intently watching as the combat that defied common sense unfolded, Kanae zoomed in on the combatants to get a closer look. “Hm? Wait, it’s Akira kiddo!”

Even as Reina and Shiori stood in shock at that news, the battle came to a swift close. Akira and Carol touched down, and their figures disappeared behind another building.

After reviewing the footage from her scanner, Reina could tell—it was unmistakably Akira. She was bewildered. “It really is him, huh? So what was all that, then?”

“It’d be faster to ask the man himself, right? He couldn’t have gotten far, so let’s go!” Kanae urged. Then, before Shiori could object that it was too dangerous, she added, “Don’t *you* think it’d be safer to ask him too, sissy? If something weird really is going on in these ruins, we need to know about it, right? It might not be safe to hunt here anymore.”

Kanae’s logic was sound, so Shiori hesitated, unsure how to proceed.

But Reina spoke up first. “Shiori, let’s go after him.”

Shiori felt conflicted, but eventually agreed. “Very well, miss.”

And so the three of them hurried after Akira. Getting a feeling that the “something interesting” she’d hoped for was about to happen, Kanae was grinning from ear to ear.

Chapter 109: Honest Words

After running into Reina and her maids on their way back to the Hunter Office outpost, Akira and Carol decided to return with them. They were headed in the same direction, after all, and considering that only moments ago a monster had attacked them without warning, it was safer to travel together than otherwise. Plus, it wasn't like Reina's group and Akira were enemies.

"So, kiddo, what was up with all those crazy stunts you did back there?" Kanae asked Akira, casually striding up to him.

"It wasn't like I had a choice," he muttered.

"Oh? What happened, then?"

"A lot of stuff." Her overly friendly attitude annoyed him, but he felt that if he didn't answer her, she'd never lay off.

For her part, Shiori was hoping to gather some information for the sake of Reina's safety (rather than for her own amusement, like Kanae). "Ms. Carol, if you don't mind my asking, I was wondering exactly what circumstances led to your battle on that building just now."

"I'm sorry," Carol replied, "but I can't say. If I told you how it all started, I'd have to give away a surveyor secret that I'd normally charge for. But if you're willing to pay, that's a different story."

"Name your price."

"Twenty million aurum—nonnegotiable. I've already made a deal with Akira for that amount, after all. Right, Akira?" she said with a wink.

At hearing such an outrageous figure, Reina and her maids automatically turned to look at the boy.

Kanae whistled. "Wow, kiddo, you must be pretty loaded, huh?"

"She gave me that info as payment for protecting her," Akira said. "I didn't actually pay her the twenty million."

“Twenty mil to be guarded by a pip-squeak like you? Well, I don’t know what all went down, but considering what I witnessed back there, maybe it’s not such a raw deal after all.” Kanae gave him a sly grin.

Akira scowled. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, y’see, when we first met, I honestly thought you were just a weakling. And when I heard sis lost to you, I figured she must’ve just been having an off day or something.”

As part of his deal with Kugamayama City, Akira was sworn to secrecy about what had happened underground in Kuzusuhara. So he stiffened at hearing someone who most likely knew the whole story blab it out in the open. “Don’t talk about that here. Did no one tell you that’s classified?”

“Aw, c’mon! We were both involved, so what’s the big deal?”

Akira glared at her reproachfully. “*You* weren’t involved. A bunch of people were there, but not involved. That includes you.”

“Fine, fine. Sorry. Jeez!”

She did not look sorry in the least, and Akira sighed exasperatedly. Reina and Shiori also shook their heads in disapproval.

Meanwhile, Carol’s estimation of Akira was rising even higher. While she wasn’t sure what they were talking about, she approved of how seriously he treated classified information.

Kanae’s opinion of Akira was improving as well, albeit for a different reason entirely. “Anyway, kiddo, all I was saying was that you’re stronger than I thought. Hey, I know—wanna go relic hunting with us in the Serantal? I bet all together we could reach a pretty high floor and get some great loot!”

Merely being “strong” wasn’t enough for Kanae to take a liking to someone. But Akira wasn’t just powerful: he was also a magnet for trouble—or rather, unlucky enough to constantly run into it. Kanae had done some research on the boy and knew he’d weathered a number of “amusing” situations in underground Kuzusuhara, during the bounty hunts, and of course including his fight on the side of the skyscraper just now, all of which was more than enough to meet her standards. She was hoping that traveling with someone like Akira

would relieve some of the boredom of having to babysit Reina.

But Akira flat-out refused. “Not on your life.”

“Aw, really? I thought it was a good idea. Look, you don’t have to worry about protecting missy—I’ve got that covered,” she said confidently. And Kanae was completely sincere—she was prepared to guard Reina with her life. Unfortunately, she was just as eager to drag Reina into those dangerous situations in the first place.

As Reina listened to them, her shoulders sagged. *They really do both think of me as a liability*, she thought.

Realizing that letting the conversation go on any longer wouldn’t do Reina any favors, Shiori tried to interject. But Akira spoke first.

“That’s not the problem,” he said, looking sour. “That place is too dangerous. I don’t wanna die.”

“Really?” Kanae said. “I mean, sure, just getting in the building’s not exactly a cakewalk, and I haven’t heard of anyone ever making it to the top. But plenty of large hunter teams have gone in there and struck it rich. As long as we pick our battles wisely, I think we’ll be fine.”

In truth, by bringing Akira along, she hoped he would bite off more than he could chew, leading to more entertainment for her. But she kept her ulterior motive to herself.

Akira shook his head, however. “No thanks. If you guys want to head to your deaths, that’s your call, but keep me out of it.”

Reina and her maids were taken aback by the seriousness in his voice. “Is the Serantal Building really as dangerous as you say, Mr. Akira?” Shiori asked doubtfully.

“I mean, everybody has their own idea of what they consider ‘dangerous,’ but let me put it this way: I’d rather fight ten of those multilegged tanks on the side of a skyscraper than go up against anything in the Serantal.”

Akira had only been able to win against the formidable tanklike creature thanks to Alpha’s support. Yet according to her, the monsters in the Serantal

Building were so tough that even her aid wouldn't be able to get him through. So in his mind, the Serantal was a perilous hellscape of certain doom that he rather wanted to steer clear of.

"It's *that* daunting?" Shiori murmured, puzzled. She wasn't sure what Akira was basing his assessment on. However, she *did* know how strong he was, and she could tell from his grave expression that he genuinely felt the monsters inside were beyond what he could handle. "Then perhaps we shouldn't be so quick to rush in either," she finally said. "I would have never imagined it was so deadly. Thank you very much for your valuable opinion, Mr. Akira."

"Why, s-sure." Akira did find her extreme deference toward him a bit perplexing, but that was all—he didn't dwell on it too deeply.

Kanae's face fell in disappointment. *Aw man! Well, that blew up in my face. Now we're not going to get to explore the building at all!* She'd known that Shiori had been torn between exploring the Serantal and pulling back for Reina's safety. Kanae had hoped that adding Akira to their party would tip the scales enough to convince her—but alas, her plan had backfired.

She sighed in frustration. Akira noticed this as well—and again didn't think too much of it.



They reached the Hunter Office branch at last, and after parting ways with Reina's group, Akira and Carol headed to the restaurant inside.

"All right, we made it. Can I go now?" Akira asked.

"Yep. The job's complete, after all," Carol said. "But before you do, how about I treat you to dinner? And perhaps"—she winked and smiled suggestively—"something *else* afterward?"

Akira beamed. "Free food?! I am so there! Thanks a million!"

"Don't mention it," Carol muttered, sighing dejectedly. Sure, he'd been thrilled at her offer, but clearly only the prospect of food had grabbed his interest—he'd completely ignored her other invitation that pertained to her side job.

“What’s wrong?” Akira asked, surprised by her attitude.

“It’s nothing. C’mon—I’ll treat you to all you can eat, so you better prepare yourself.”

“Really?! All right!”

Carol’s desperate attempts to restore her confidence in her seductiveness went right over Akira’s head.

It was now evening, and the restaurant was packed with hunters who’d just returned to the outpost after a day of hard work. Some of them were also toting large weapons and heavy artillery or lugging large bags filled with relics, all of which made the room seem even *more* crowded.

And yet the farthest table back—to which Carol led him—was conspicuously vacant.

As they sat down, Akira looked around. “Carol, why is only *this* table empty?”

“Oh, you don’t know? There’s a bit of an, um, unspoken rule at this establishment.” Carol explained that the relic hunters in this restaurant seated themselves according to how much they planned to spend. The closer to the entrance, the cheaper their bill. Conversely, those who sat farther in intended to splurge. For this reason, the seats in the rear were generally reserved for the hunters with the deepest pockets—in other words, the most skilled.

As a result of this tacit arrangement, patrons with similar degrees of skill usually ended up sitting together. This not only curtailed the typical arguments that cropped up between hunters with disparate levels but also made it easier for those of like minds and ability to get acquainted with each other and form teams. For an unspoken rule, it was surprisingly useful.

Akira found this all fascinating. “Wow, I never would’ve thought of any of that! But if it’s not an actual rule, then there have to be some who just ignore it and sit wherever, right?”

“Occasionally. But under the angry glares of all the other diners, none of them end up staying very long.” Of course, a greenhorn sitting at a “pricey” table and ordering cheap food would be more conspicuous than a veteran sitting at one of the “cheap” tables and ordering expensive food—such a novice was

practically *asking* veterans to target them. Naturally, a handful were reckless enough to do so anyway. But here in the wasteland strength was law, and those foolish enough to oppose the strong paid the consequences. It was precisely *because* the wasteland had no rules that the unspoken ones were so important to abide by.

Akira chewed on this. “Yeah, I can imagine.”

“So in other words, if you don’t want to end up as the next target, you better order enough expensive food,” Carol warned.

“I see. But how much is ‘enough’?”

“Look, there’s no set amount or anything, but ordering several of these would probably do.” She tapped the impossibly thin data terminal (complete with a function to call servers to the table) on which Akira was reviewing the menu.

A new list of items came up, and when he saw their prices, he was thunderstruck—none of them were under ten thousand aurum, and some near the bottom of the list even sported an additional digit. Treating someone to dinner was one thing, but Akira certainly wasn’t used to *this* level of generosity. The exorbitant prices made him hesitate to order anything at all, and nervousness and indecision clouded his face.

Seeing this, Carol couldn’t help but grin. “Don’t be shy—order whatever you like! If you can’t decide, just order ’em all! No need to hold back—eat to your heart’s content!”

Akira finally understood what Carol had meant when she’d told him to “prepare” himself: he would indeed need some serious resolve to choose from this menu. “O-Okay, if you say so!”

“Oh, dear me, I forgot—since we’re sitting at a table this far back, you’ll actually need to order at *least* a hundred thousand aurum’s worth!” she teased.

“Y-You don’t say?!”

Akira looked for all the world like a little kid who’d been suddenly dragged to a high-class establishment and was way out of his depth. Carol found him so amusing that she could no longer suppress the mischievous grin that had been playing about her lips the whole time.

In a state of pure bliss, Akira reached for another helping of the enormous amount of food lined up on the table.

While the dinner had indeed been expensive, it was priced at wasteland rates, which were inflated due to including the shipping cost of the ingredients and other expenses. True, the same spread could've been found in the city for much cheaper. But since it had been prepared for wealthy hunters who could afford to develop discerning palates, the quality of the comestibles had to be rather high. And since Akira's palate had yet to even reach the level of "discerning," he was completely blown away by how delicious everything was. He sat grinning from ear to ear, looking even more like a child than usual.

Carol watched him eat, resting her chin on her hands. "Pretty good, huh?"

Akira nodded firmly. "It's delicious."

"Yeah? Glad to hear it," she said, and gave a small sigh. She seemed to be sulking a little.

"You don't *look* very glad. Wait, I didn't order too much, did I?!"

Fearing that he'd made a terrible mistake, Akira blanched, but Carol just gave him a wry smile.

"No, it's not that. It's just... I mean... Normally when I'm eating with a guy, their eyes aren't on the food—they're looking *here*." Sounding somewhat hurt, she pointed to her cleavage.

Akira's eyes followed her finger, but there was nothing in his gaze that even remotely suggested lust for the opposite sex.

"Sorry to let you down, but at my age food interests me way more."

"Since this smorgasbord is clearly more appetizing to you than I am, I believe it. Looks like you really did order a ton, but be sure to eat it all, okay? No leftovers."

"No problem! I'm going through a growth spurt right now," he replied before clearing another plate. Even though he'd prioritized quantity over quality when ordering, his appetite had indeed been so voracious that he'd already

demolished half the spread.

Akira had once been battered and bruised from so many years of toughing it out in the slums, but the sixty million aurum medical procedure he'd recently undergone in a Kugamayama City hospital had restored his body to health. However, the procedure hadn't corrected the deficiencies he'd suffered in his physical growth due to malnourishment. In order to grow normally, he now needed a large amount of nutrients, and had in fact undergone treatment at the hospital to help him process them more easily.

Furthermore, thanks to his training regimen and constant monster encounters, his physical abilities were rapidly developing, meaning his body was demanding even more energy—not to mention material from which to manufacture new cells whenever he took medicine to restore his injuries at the cellular level. So Akira now required more sustenance than ever, which meant he was constantly starving—yet between daily hunter activities and his body's growth, he'd never reach an unhealthy weight. Consuming the delectable food in front of him guilt-free, without worrying about it affecting his performance, Akira was truly on cloud nine.

"What about you, Carol?" he asked. "Not gonna eat anything?"

"I will—after I put out a search request for Monica through the Office. I already sent a claim to our insurance company, but apparently their rescue team's tied up at the moment."

There were many types of insurance in the East geared toward relic hunters, one of them being emergency insurance. This offered the dispatch of a rescue squad in the event of a client's disappearance within ruins. The conditions varied by company, but in most cases a team would be sent out if a client wasn't heard from after a designated period of time, or if a client or subclient requested aid directly. Of course, since many of those hunters never made it out alive, the insurance fee had to be rather steep. So the companies had to provide a reliable enough service to justify the price, meaning the likelihood of a successful rescue was actually quite high.

Carol and Monica had bought emergency insurance as a team, and Carol had already sent a request to their insurance firm. Normally help would have been

dispatched right away, but something was currently holding them up.

“It seems that all the rescue personnel on duty were dispatched to the Serantal and have yet to return,” Carol explained. The company was apparently in the process of assembling a provisional rescue team, but they’d first have to go to the rescue site itself—in other words, the Serantal Building in the business district. The factory district, where Monica presumably was, would be too far out of their way.

In addition, it was now nighttime, and the majority of hunters had already called it quits for the day. While some individuals might be willing to take on the job for the right price, the chances of anyone accepting an official request for rescue at this hour were exceedingly slim.

Akira looked dubious. “But if they sent all their rescue personnel over there, shouldn’t they have already finished the job by now? If the squads are as capable as you say, it ought to be a piece of cake for them.”

“I thought the same thing, so I did a little investigating of my own. Turns out that some careless hunter left the building open for anyone to enter.”

From the baffled look on his face, it was clear Akira didn’t understand why that mattered, so Carol brought him up to speed. In order to hunt relics inside the Serantal Building, relic hunters needed to deal with the machines guarding the entrance first. Normally this called for two teams—after the monsters were taken care of, one team would head in, while the other would hang back and watch the entrance. The second team’s goal was to keep opportunistic hunters (drawn by the lack of guardians) from getting in their way, as well as to keep the first team’s escape route clear of any other sentries that might be rerouted to the area. So even if the Serantal bots were out of the picture, other hunters shouldn’t be able to just rush in all of a sudden.

Yet earlier that day, it seemed, a hunter had defeated the mechanical guards out front and waltzed right in, leaving the entrance wide open.

“Apparently word spread, and hunters from all over headed for the area, determined not to miss this golden opportunity,” Carol told him. “And since Serantal is already known as the ‘Devouring Skyscraper,’ it’d make sense for hunters to purchase emergency insurance before going inside.”

With no one guarding the entrance, it was as if a red carpet had been rolled out for the eager hunters. The news was so preposterous that normally no one would have believed it, but once wary observers had gotten close enough to see for themselves, they could tell that, indeed, the building appeared to be completely unguarded, and there was no sign of anyone camping out on the grounds. So they'd all rushed in without any further ado.

"But they never came out," Carol said. "And no one can get ahold of them. Either they're too preoccupied with finding valuable relics to respond, or something happened to them. Regardless, enough time has passed without any word that the insurance companies have sent rescue teams in." A look of disgust passed over her face. "I don't know whose handiwork this was, but that good-for-nothing should've known better. In other words, they must have done it deliberately to get their own name out there. What a selfish jerk, right?"

Akira's hand froze, his fork suspended in midair. "Y-Yeah."

"Hey, is something wrong?"

"N-Nope, it's all good," he said, and resumed his meal as though nothing happened.

Carol found Akira's behavior suspect, but quickly decided it was highly unlikely he'd been involved—after he'd claimed that the Serantal Building was so dangerous, she found it hard to believe he would have headed in there himself. Besides, Akira had been in the factory district when they'd met. Even if hypothetically he *had* been the one who'd defeated the Serantal sentries, she doubted he would have left the building all of a sudden and headed straight to the factory district, considering how attached he'd been to that relic of his—he would have headed upstairs to look for treasure instead.

So Carol supposed that maybe Akira had experienced something similar in the past, which would account for his reaction. With that puzzle resolved to her satisfaction, she continued, "And so, since I can't count on the insurance company to help me, I've got to put out an emergency job on my own."

That being said, the factory district was already crawling with formidable monsters, and these were currently behaving abnormally. Even if she used an intermediary to spread the request to a wider area, she wasn't sure any hunters

would actually bite. They'd undoubtedly demand a higher fee for the inconvenience as well, and even paying it wouldn't guarantee a successful rescue. She'd briefly considered paying a higher premium to the insurance company to try and get them to prioritize her case over the Serantal rescue, but then wondered if she should just wait for the provisional team in that case. Torn over what to do, she explained her dilemma to Akira.

Even though they're a team, Carol and Monica treat each other a lot differently than Elena and Sara do, Akira found himself thinking as he listened. He was dense when it came to many things, but he could at least tell Carol had no intention of sticking her own neck out to rescue Monica. While she wouldn't just leave her partner to die, he could sense that she was only willing to go so far to save her, and past that point Monica would have to fend for herself. Akira didn't think Carol was obligated to save her partner, and he didn't think her choices were wrong—just different from what Elena and Sara would have done.

No sooner had he reflected on this, however, than Monica burst through the doors of the restaurant, practically shouting as she argued with the insurance salesman on the other end of her terminal. "What do you mean, it's impossible?! Don't give me that! If you're not going to send aid when we need it, then why'd we pay all that money, huh?! You'd better get it together right now, or—" At that moment, Monica noticed Akira and Carol across the room, and because Monica was raising her voice, they'd naturally noticed her as well. She stared at them, open-mouthed in disbelief.

"Looks like waiting a bit was the right call after all," Carol said with a grin.

"Guess so," Akira replied.

Carol waved to Monica, inviting her to join them.

Sitting down at the table next to Carol, Monica let out a sigh. "Well, all's well that ends well, I guess. I'm glad you two are okay. But Carol, how'd you get back before me? I'm pretty sure I took the optimal route to get here as fast as I could."

"I met up with Akira while escaping and hired him to protect me while we both made our way here."

Monica's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "There wasn't anything else? Like using some much easier escape route you kept secret from me?"

"I'm hurt that you would even suggest that. We had some pretty close calls ourselves, y'know—in fact, we almost died, right, Akira? But this strapping young man right here saved me. Didn't you?"

"Hm? Yeah, sure." Akira knew Carol wasn't saying anything untrue, and if she was keeping the escape route they'd used hidden from Monica, then he figured he ought to stay quiet about it as well.

Monica could tell that Akira wasn't lying, and she didn't press any further. "Hm... All right, if you say so. Akira, thank you for keeping Carol safe. You really *are* strong, aren't you?"

Akira hesitated. "I guess." Denying it would only complicate things, he figured, so he replied noncommittally.

Now it was Carol's turn to interrogate her partner. "What about you, Monica? How'd *you* get out of there alive? I had Akira's help, but I don't remember you being strong enough to take down those monsters on your own. Perhaps you used some secret escape route *I* didn't know about?"

Monica avoided her gaze, and Carol's glare became sharp.

"You did, didn't you?"

Monica finally replied. "Look, it was a last resort, which was why I didn't tell you. But, well, I really am sorry for keeping it to myself." She looked sincerely apologetic.

For some moments, an awkward silence fell between them. Then Carol broke into a smile. "Well, the important thing is that we're both alive, so let's let bygones be bygones. Besides, I can understand why you'd want to keep such valuable information to yourself."

"Just for the record, you know, if we hadn't gotten separated, I planned to escape with you on that route together," Monica said.

"I know, I know."

They both grinned and dropped the matter entirely. Akira watched them,

feeling like he'd just witnessed an entirely new type of team dynamic.

Now that Monica had joined them, Carol finally ordered her meal. Monica also requested a portion for herself, and the three of them resumed their dinner, talking as they ate. The conversation turned to what the women had been up to for the past three months. While on the surface it seemed like friendly banter between surveyors, anyone more in the know could have seen that Carol and Monica were seeking to gather information from one another on the sly. Of course, Akira didn't pick up on this and was simply enraptured to hear firsthand accounts of the professional surveyors' experiences.

Eventually the conversation shifted from their activities to the map of the Mihazono business district Carol was working on, then to the map of the Serantal Building, which she anticipated would be in high demand once finished. During the course of their discussion, Carol referred to the building as "devouring" several more times, and Akira at last asked what that meant.

Carol looked surprised. "You mean you don't know? That building's the most famous in the entire ruin, thanks to all the strange rumors surrounding it."

"News to me," he replied. "What kind of rumors?"

"Well, basically, for a while now there have been reports of hunters and monsters occasionally disappearing from the business district without warning. Like, *poof*, vanished. And since the Serantal sits in the center of the district, rumors have spread that the building itself has been devouring them."

"Yikes!" Akira said, grimacing. "But that's just a rumor, right? I mean, if it was true, I doubt many hunters would be so eager to visit."

Monica gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. It's just a ghost story someone cooked up—I'm not so sure there's even a grain of truth to it. In the first place, it supposedly only happens rarely—otherwise no one would even want to go near the place."

"That's true," Akira said, and relaxed.

But Carol grinned mischievously. "That said, I wouldn't let my guard down if I were you. This is an Old World ruin after all, so anything could happen. Ghost

stories usually don't just pop out of thin air—they're often based on some *terrible* event. So beware!"

Despite her words, though, Carol's grin couldn't have been any bigger, so she was clearly just messing with Akira to get a rise out of him. Monica smiled thinly. For some time afterward, Akira found himself subjected to other ghost stories and strange rumors that circulated the area—"for his own safety," according to Carol.

By the time the three of them had finished their leisurely and delectable dinner, it was late into the night. Carol and Akira had already finished hashing out the compensation for Akira's lost relic, so he was about to head home. "Thank you very much, Carol. That was delicious!" he told her, patting his stomach in satisfaction.

However, Carol looked less than satisfied. "Just wonderful." She sighed. "So even after I offered to treat you after dinner in *other* ways, you're really gonna leave me high and dry, huh?"

"Yeah. I'm really sorry, but as I said, I just like food a lot more right now. For that other stuff, you're better off finding someone else. Of course, if you'd rather treat me to more food instead, I'm all in."

"Yeah, yeah. Maybe some other time," Carol said, now cheerful again. She'd mostly been teasing him in the first place, but she couldn't help but smile at his earnestness. "Well, if the mood ever strikes you, feel free to call. I wouldn't mind being your partner sometime—either in the ruins or in the bedroom. Later!"

Once Akira had left, Carol finally noticed that Monica had been watching her with a huge grin on her face. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing," said Monica. "I was just thinking that it's rare for someone to show so little interest in you. What do you think—should we pool our money to hire him for a while?"

"I won't say no, but I'd like to hear your reasoning first. And don't tell me it's just because he's strong—I know you have some ulterior motive."

“All right. Put simply, if we hire him, you’ll be so preoccupied with seducing him that you won’t have time to come on to anyone else when you’re supposed to be doing surveyor work. So by all means continue getting turned down,” Monica teased.

“Fine, but when I finally crack him, you’re going to regret letting him join us all the same,” Carol retorted, grinning just as boldly.



After retrieving his truck from the garage and leaving the Mihazono Town Ruins, Akira drove through the wasteland in the dead of night toward Kugamayama City.

“Man, a lot sure did happen today. Ruins really are completely different from out in the wasteland, huh, Alpha?”

Alpha smiled at him from the passenger seat. *Indeed. And we didn’t come home with nothing to show for it after all, did we?*

“Yeah. No relics in the end, but Carol more than made up for it, what with the amount she offered and treating me to all that expensive yummy food besides. I can’t complain.”

That’s not all, Akira.

“Huh? Was there something else?”

There was. Think about it.

Akira had no clue what Alpha was referring to. He scrunched up his face in thought, going back over everything that had happened that day. But in the end, he came up blank. “No idea. What do you mean?”

Alpha wore a triumphant grin. *Today, Akira, you showed me just how deep your faith in me runs!*

Startled, Akira jerked the steering wheel without meaning to.

It really made me happy. After all, you must have seriously trusted me for you to recklessly run down a building like you did—twice, no less!

Responding to his driving, the vehicle abruptly made a sharp turn. Akira tried

to regain control of the truck, but to no avail.

You said you trusted me, and I never doubted you! But you know, even if those were honest words at the time, humans often tend to change their mind when push comes to shove. So to tell the truth, I was a little worried.

Realizing that at this rate the truck would flip over, he slammed his foot on the brake.

But it looks like my worries were unfounded—you proved your loyalty to me with actions, not words. That makes me happier than you could ever know!

The vehicle lurched to a stop, and Akira breathed a sigh of relief. He glanced toward the passenger seat at Alpha. She'd said she was happy, but Akira couldn't see the grin on her face as anything but teasing.

Mutual trust between partners is important, you know. Now that you've shown you truly trust me, I feel a bit more comfortable ramping my support up another level. Let's continue to build our relationship just like this from now on. I'll be counting on you, Akira!

"Oh, yeah?" he replied. His close call had left him feeling on edge. But he added, "The feeling's mutual. Let's do our best, Alpha!" While he felt that her words had been said in earnest, he could clearly tell she was messing with him. But he didn't mind—in fact, for some reason it made him feel good. Yet in order to hide his embarrassment at his own feelings, his response was unnaturally terse as he pressed his foot on the gas once more.

Alpha smiled from the passenger's seat—a genuinely happy smile.

Chapter 110: An Unexpected Job and an Unlikely Companion

The next day, Akira headed to Shizuka's shop to stock up on ammo. When Shizuka glanced at the order sheet he handed her, she let out a low groan.

"Akira, these are all extended magazines. They're quite expensive, you know? A few rounds are fine, but for the emergency stock that's just going to sit in your truck, wouldn't the normal ones be good enough?"

"It's fine. Even if it's a bit pricey, I want all of my ammo to be extended this time." He paused. "I mean, if I went to a ruin to grab some relics and couldn't carry them back because I was already weighed down with spare ammunition, that would kind of defeat the purpose." He grimaced, recalling the events of Mihazono.

Shizuka sensed from his attitude that something had happened and smiled to try and cheer him up. "Well, safety's the most important thing. I'd rather you come back safe and sound than get seriously injured because you got a bit greedy. And, well, I can't deny that selling you all that ammo would help my shop out immensely."

"Then since you've helped me out so much, I'd be happy to oblige."

"Thank you for your kind patronage," she said cheerfully.

Akira grinned back, and she went to fetch the goods. As he was stuffing his newly bought ammunition into the large, extraresilient backpack he'd also just purchased, he had a sudden thought. "Hey Shizuka, there's no way to carry backpacks or large weaponry without holding them or lugging them on your back, right?"

"Oh, interested in large weaponry now, are we? Looks like I've hit the jackpot!"

Akira took Shizuka's obvious joke at face value. "Ah—no, not quite. I mean..."

“Just kidding, sorry. I don’t expect you to buy anything else, so please don’t feel pressured.”

She was quick to apologize, but Akira shook his head. “No, it’s not that—in fact, if it was something I could carry around conveniently enough, I *would* be interested.” If he entered a ruin carrying his AAH and A2D assault rifles in their holsters at his hip, his CWH anti-materiel rifle and DVTS minigun in his hands, and an ammo pack on his back, he would already be nearly at full capacity. He wouldn’t be able to carry any relics back with him without getting creative—or reckless like he had in Mihazono. The extra weight wouldn’t be a problem thanks to his powered suit—he just had a limit to the number of things he could carry on his person. Since he knew that toting a heavy firearm on top of all his other gear would be impossible, he’d hesitated to ask her about them up until now. But what if there were some other method he hadn’t previously considered?

He described his current equipment set to her, at which she looked shocked.

“You’re, er, carrying *all* that with you everywhere you go?”

“Yes.” When she didn’t respond, Akira grew flustered. “I-I mean, you never know what you’re going to run into out there, so, well, better to be prepared, right?” In fact, if Akira hadn’t had taken his CWH and DVTS into Mihazono with him, he would’ve been in a seriously tight spot. Fewer weapons meant less firepower, which he didn’t want to ever be short on.

Shizuka understood. Up until now Akira had been reckless and rash over and over—but every time she’d asked him about it, he’d replied that he’d had no choice, that he just wanted to even the odds that were overwhelmingly against him. And she believed him—in fact, she suspected he only wanted more force in order to keep out of desperate situations in the first place, and so felt the need to carry all those weapons on his person even if they were weighing him down.

“Well, you’re right about that. But then you won’t be able to bring any relics home, which, as you said, does indeed defeat the purpose. Quite the conundrum.”

“The easiest option I see would be to exchange the guns I have now for

stronger models, but even I can't afford those," he told her. The newest models Shizuka had for sale were incredibly powerful, so they'd easily replace and surpass his old guns in performance.

But Shizuka couldn't in good faith recommend those cutting-edge weapons to Akira, as they were outrageously expensive. So she proposed something else instead.

"Hmm. I think I might have a solution. Wait here for a bit—I'll be back." She disappeared into the storage room behind her. When she returned, she held a strange device in her hands. "This is a support arm, which you can attach to your powered suit. Want to try it out?" Support arms weren't something that Shizuka normally sold in her shop, but she got enough orders for powered suits that she'd decided to stock some add-ons for her customers just in case.

The robotic arm was sturdy and thick, but it moved sluggishly and couldn't function like a cyborg arm did in combat. However, it supported a lot of weight, so it could carry heavy objects with ease.

Akira decided to try it out. After attaching it to his powered suit at the hip, he borrowed a massive weapon from Shizuka to test how it would feel. The gun was so massive that it required a powered suit to wield—yet the arm handled its weight with no issues whatsoever.

"Oh, wow! Yeah, I think this could work!" he marveled. It was an elegant solution: he typically had both arms occupied with weapons, but he wanted to carry another gun—so he'd just buy another arm. It didn't need to be super responsive like a cyborg's—Akira only needed it to carry his belongings.

He looked at his now-free hands, then back at the arm that secured the heavy weapon. *Now I can actually bring some relics home without worry!* he thought with glee.

"I'll take several!"

"Thank you most kindly," Shizuka said cheerfully. Seeing Akira's childish excitement at his new "toys" brought a warm smile to her face.

After he'd calmed down a bit, he said, "All right, one problem down. Now let's talk about what heavy weapons might be in my price range."

“Oh, you were serious about that?” Shizuka said in surprise.

“Huh? Y-Yes, please. If you don’t mind,” he replied, wondering why she looked so shocked.

As the owner of Cartridge Freak, a business geared toward hunters of all kinds, Shizuka couldn’t simply refuse a customer who wanted to purchase her wares. “All right, then. I’ll tell you what I’ve got in stock, and which ones I might recommend for your needs.”

But she knew his new arms would only serve to let him carry larger weapons, and more of them. Even as she launched into her sales pitch, she was imagining how much less human he’d look with all those extra limbs, and she couldn’t help but wonder if she was truly making the right decision.



After returning home from Shizuka’s shop, Akira went to his garage and immediately got to work. He installed another emplacement on the bed of his truck and mounted on it his new weapon—an A4WM grenade launcher. The A4WM, which he’d bought on Shizuka’s recommendation, was an automatic weapon able to fire projectiles in quick succession. Naturally, such a shower of grenades would make short work of an otherwise threatening monster swarm. But her primary rationale was that the explosions would keep those monsters from chasing him. He’d told her about his experience escaping the mechanical horde in Mihazono, and she explained that this weapon might help him avoid a repeat of that in the future.

With her suggestion in mind, he’d purchased an automatic emplacement modification for the grenade launcher as well. Now, by merely flipping a switch and pulling the trigger, the launcher would fix itself to the ground and automatically fire grenades at his pursuers while he made his escape—a cheap mod, but sure to be useful in a pinch. Of course, in that case he’d lose his launcher, but sacrificing a weapon and using up ammo in order to survive was better than getting trampled before he had the chance to fight back. He’d also bought several mods for his support arms to allow him to quickly add and remove his weapons. Now he was able to freely attach his CWH, A4WM, or DVTS to any of his arms and switch them out as needed. Once again, Akira

marveled at the versatility of support arms.

He'd purchased four arms in total, two for his right side and two for his left. That way, even if he loaded all three weapons into them, he'd still have one support arm free. Of course, he didn't want to walk around looking like a monstrosity all the time, so he only planned to use them as needed. For normal situations, he'd still default to one gun in each hand (or at least one gun in one hand). When relic hunting in the ruins, however, he'd have all four arms and could use the fourth to carry his pack of spare ammo. He tested it out—even packed to the brim with extended magazines, the backpack's weight was easily supported by the arm.

"Man, this really is convenient—totally worth the price! Though I do kind of wish Shizuka had told me about this sort of thing earlier." He was so satisfied with his purchase that he was almost upset he'd gone this long without knowing about it.

Alpha smiled sympathetically. *She was probably thinking that you'd eventually make allies and form a team so you wouldn't need extra weaponry in the first place. More manpower equals more firepower, after all. It's wiser to travel in groups to begin with, so hers would be a natural assumption.*

"Yeah, I'd say you're probably right," Akira agreed.

Unfortunately, though, our circumstances won't allow for that. It's difficult for us to take on any companions when we can't risk letting any other hunters know the whereabouts of undiscovered ruins.

"True enough."

And, Alpha continued, giving him a teasing grin, considering how you seem to have a thing for running down the sides of buildings, I doubt very many hunters would be able to keep up.

He grimaced. "True enough!"

Now listen: just as a warning, you're free to add all the extra arms and weapons you want, but they'll make it that much harder to move during combat. Battles will become even more dangerous. I'd guess that's the primary reason Shizuka hesitated to recommend them from the start. Then her

expression became stern. *And Akira, if I feel things are getting too risky, I won't hesitate to take control of your suit and make you drop a relic, no matter how valuable, if it's a hindrance to your survival. Understand that it's not as simple as "more arms means I can carry more"—there are consequences to carrying more. Capisce?*

"Yeah. I'll be careful."

Good. Alpha broke into a satisfied smile.



After his preparations were complete and he'd consulted with Alpha about his plans for the next day, he got a call from Elena about a potential job.

"The insurance companies are recruiting emergency personnel?" he repeated in surprise.

"That's right," she told him. "In the Mihazono business district, apparently there was some commotion yesterday that hasn't quite died down, and they're short on rescuers. So they're offering a lot more than normal for the task. It'd be a good opportunity to pocket some money—if you're up for it." She added that the job had been listed by an insurance company and not the individual in need, meaning there was no danger of the target skipping out on the fee once they were rescued. And a company would have enough funds that Elena might even be able to negotiate a higher payout. So as long as the job wasn't any more difficult than specified, it would be a relatively easy way to make some extra money—at least compared to other contracts that paid the same—so she thought Akira might be interested.

"Of course," she continued, sounding a bit anxious, "don't feel like you have to. But lucrative opportunities like this don't crop up every day, so I wanted to at least offer. So, would you be interested in joining us? We scoped out the area today just to see what it was like, and while it's not exactly a playground, it'd certainly be manageable with the three of us—though given the likely difficulty, we might be able to negotiate a higher fee besides."

"If you need my help, then I'll come right now."

Elena sounded taken aback by his quick, enthusiastic response. "I-I mean, I

appreciate it, but we decided to call it quits for the day. But we're going back tomorrow, so what do you say? Can we count you in?"

"Absolutely! I'm always up for an opportunity to make easy money," Akira answered. "Thanks for the invitation, Elena—I really appreciate it!"

Elena sounded relieved and a good deal more cheerful. "You're very welcome! Oh, but there's also a chance that everything will already be resolved by tomorrow, so if that happens we'll just head to the ruins as a team and hunt relics instead, assuming that works for you."

After they hashed out the details about where to meet and the like, Elena hung up. Seeing that the call had put Akira in an even better mood than usual, Alpha looked slightly worried.

Do you think agreeing was the right call?

"Huh? Why would it not be?"

Well, weren't we in the middle of looking for undiscovered ruins? Wasn't that why you bought the A4WM and support arms in the first place? And did you already forget what happened last time Elena invited you on a job, back during the bounty hunts?

Akira considered for a moment. "Well, if I'm making money either way, does it really matter whether I'm exploring ruins or doing a rescue job? And since we won't be looking for undiscovered ruins this time, I don't have to go solo. Didn't you just say working in groups was wiser?"

Yes, but—

"I acted on my own when we were fighting the hypersynthetic snake, so that was my fault, not Elena's. And it was thanks to her that I ended up getting a hundred million for that job. I actually ought to be thanking her for her invitation back then."

Alpha's expression softened. *I suppose so. Well, as long as you're okay with it, I don't mind. But since you're aware that you acted on your own last time, I trust that means it won't be happening again?*

"Yeah, it won't. I'll be more careful this time," Akira reassured her, and

immediately set about preparing for the next day.

Alpha could tell that the reasons he'd given for accepting Elena's proposal were mere excuses. He'd realized from Alpha's expression that she hadn't approved of his virtually unconditional agreement to join, so he'd cooked up some reasons on the fly.

In other words, Elena and Sara were starting to take precedence over Alpha in his decision-making.

Yet even perceiving this, Alpha had avoided pressing Akira more than she needed to. Saying something that might provoke him into an argument would serve no purpose. Still, she was concerned. If this new influence on his choices could potentially interfere with her plan, she'd need to take measures.

But on the outside Alpha kept up her usual smile, so that he couldn't detect even a hint of her true thoughts concealed within.

In the early morning, before the sun had even risen, Alpha roused Akira.

Wake up!

Since she'd used telepathy, her voice didn't produce a physical sound. Even so, the intensity of the message she'd sent to his brain caused his eyes to snap open instantly.

Bolting upright, Akira looked around at the pitch-black room. It was still clearly dark outside. Upset and confused at this sudden wake-up call, he turned to her. "Alpha? What gives? Why'd you wake me up this early?" he asked groggily. He'd gone to bed early to prepare for the day ahead, but he still felt sleepy from being woken so soon. Was it an emergency? Alpha's expression didn't seem to indicate so.

You got a message from Elena, she said. I could've just let you sleep, but I didn't want you complaining later on that I didn't wake you.

Akira's expression hardened—in other words, the contents of the message were important enough that Akira would've been upset with Alpha for not waking him immediately. He reached for his terminal and opened the message, looking grave as he read it.

The commotion with Mihazono had intensified, and the insurance firms had urged Elena and Sara to act immediately. The danger level of the area had risen considerably from the previous day, so the two of them said they would understand if Akira wanted to bow out. However, if he was still willing, then he ought to prepare accordingly. For Elena to feel compelled to send this message, it was clear that the situation at Mihazono had taken a turn for the bizarre. Akira immediately began to worry if the two women were all right.

Elena had added that while she knew it was early, they were both already awake, so he could contact them anytime. After some hesitation, Akira pressed the call button.

But the call didn't go through.

"Alpha, send a message to Elena saying I'm on my way. And check to make sure they receive it on their end." He leaped out of bed and quickly began suiting up.

Understood, Alpha replied with her usual positive demeanor. But internally, her concern only deepened. Akira had reacted just as she'd expected him to—proof that she'd progressed significantly in deciphering his personality. But he was about to unhesitatingly rush out to what was most likely an abnormal and far more dangerous Mihazono, just for Elena and Sara's sake. If Akira was prioritizing Elena and Sara that highly in his mind, this was more than enough reason to deem their influence on him a threat.

Once ready, Akira hopped into the driver's seat of his desert utility vehicle and opened the garage door. Except for his suit, everything had already been prepared and ready to go since last night; and now that he was suited up, all that was left was to hit the gas. Instead, however, he let out a low groan.

What's wrong? Alpha asked from the passenger's seat, puzzled. *Did you change your mind, perhaps? I understand—since those two didn't answer any of your calls and messages, I think it would be safer to investigate what's happening over there before heading out.*

"Yeah, you're probably right," he agreed.

Alpha hadn't expected *that* answer. But it would certainly be more

convenient for her if he got cold feet, so she went right along with it. *Let's do that, then. They might call back if we wait a little while, and in the meantime we'll use the internet to...*

But Akira ignored her and instead pulled out his terminal to consult someone who he felt would be more knowledgeable on the matter.



Carol lived in an expensive one-room apartment in Kugamayama City's lower district. The building had tight security, and the residents of the slums weren't allowed anywhere near. For being outside the city walls, it was rather high-class.

She lay in bed, sound asleep and completely naked. The only thing covering her sinuous body was a blanket so thin it was practically see-through, yet warm enough for her to sleep comfortably. The dim light from the room, casting shadows on her body through the transparent fabric, made her figure seem all the more alluring.

An alarm cut through her sleep—she was receiving a call. Immediately awake, she checked her terminal.

It was the dead of night, a period of time where no one would fault her for ignoring the alert and going back to sleep. But when she saw who was trying to contact her, her surprise and intrigue drove her to pick up.

"Hey, Akira! You called a lot sooner than I expected. I'm so glad! Still, I know I said you could call me any time you felt like it, but don't you think you could've picked a more reasonable hour? Unless, perhaps, you're calling about my *other* service?"

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but it's about hunter work."

"Figured as much. Then I'm hanging up, okay?"

"Sure. Sorry for calling so late." He hung up first.

Carol couldn't believe it. Rolling her eyes, she called him back.

He picked up. "Yeah?"

"I didn't think you'd *actually* hang up! It was just a joke!"

“I don’t get it. Are you up for talking or not?” Akira sounded genuinely perplexed. Apparently he’d honestly thought Carol had threatened to end the call because she was upset.

His straightforwardness astounded her—and also fascinated her. “Sure, I’m listening. What’s up?”

Akira brought her up to speed on the current situation in the Mihazono Ruins and told her that he’d been unable to reach friends of his who were likely already there. Did she know anything about what was happening, and if so, could she tell him?

As Carol listened, she was already searching for relevant information. An aggregation of data pulled from networks that the average person wouldn’t know how to reach lined up in her augmented vision. As she read through the list, she spoke as though she’d known everything from the start. “Well, I know that things started going haywire yesterday. Around the time when we were eating at the outpost, hordes of monsters broke out of their boundaries and swarmed the entire ruin. In the business district they appeared from the Serantal Building, and in the factory district they came from one of the factories—at least that’s the running theory. Which district would you like to know about?”

“Business.”

“Fine, but first let me remind you—I’m a surveyor by trade. This information isn’t free.”

“How much do you want?”

“That depends on how much you want to know. If you want all the juicy details, that’ll run to a billion aurum. But if you’re just looking for a map you can actually rely on instead of one you downloaded for free, I’ll settle for a hundred thousand.” She deliberately pitched Akira an impossibly high figure to stall for time, hoping he’d want to haggle and allowing her to gather as much information on the business district as she could.

Akira didn’t realize her motive, of course, and sounded despondent. “I don’t have that kind of money. Um, I planned on taking on this rescue job with Elena and Sara, and even though we did decide on a meeting spot, they haven’t

answered any of my calls or messages... I was thinking I'd go to the meeting point, and if they didn't show up, I'd go in there and look for them myself." His sudden explanation probably sounded strange to her, but saying it out loud helped him get his thoughts together and confirm in his mind what he had to do.

Meanwhile, thanks to her natural gift for business, Carol had already gotten the gist of the situation and come up with a plan. "Then how about hiring me to help you? Whether or not you go look for this Elena and Sara team, or if you decide to go ahead with the rescue job, it'd be better to have someone with a working knowledge of the area by your side, no?" She explained that she was already planning on going there to work on her map, so having Akira accompany her would guarantee her own safety. That way, she could investigate while they worked on what Akira needed to do. And since she could hold her own in a fight, she'd be useful to him in that respect as well. If things really started to look grim, she could always hire him to protect her like before. There was no need to come up with a specific price now—they could just take their time negotiating with each other after the job was done.

"So what do you say?" Carol asked. "We'd both benefit, right?"

"Can you get ready now, then? I was already about to head out before I called you."

"Well, I'll need a *little* time to freshen up, at least. Gimme thirty minutes."

"All right. Do you have a car? If not, I'll come pick you up."

"Oh, I'd *love* that! I'll send you the address, so just wait at the entrance. See you soon," she said in a honeyed voice, and hung up. She stretched out on her bed, and a bewitching smile came to her lips. "Here I was thinking about how I was going to hook him, and he takes the initiative and calls me first! Guess fortune's smiling upon me today, huh? Still, I'd better hurry and get ready. I get the feeling that if I was even a second late, he'd leave me behind without a moment's hesitation."

She exited her bedroom and hopped in the shower. The hot water, already adjusted to the perfect temperature, had medicinal additives mixed in, giving her lustrous hair and supple skin an even healthier sheen. Her shower took ten

minutes. No sooner than she'd left the bathroom, a strong wave of heat came from the walls in the next room, blasting the water droplets off her naked body. Then, instead of rifling through her underwear drawer, she just put on her inner wear and donned her powered suit over it.

Now fully dressed, she walked over to the mirror and smiled coquettishly. There stood a beautiful woman in a racy Old World-inspired outfit that was just as effective against tough monsters as it was versus the majority of men.

That had all taken another ten minutes.

She grabbed her gun and placed it in her holster, snatched her ammunition backpack, and rushed out the door. She wouldn't make it in time walking at a normal pace, but if she used her usual shortcut, she'd have time to spare.

Her "shortcut" was to leap off the balcony of her apartment complex rather than use the elevator, a feat only possible due to her extraordinary athleticism. Grinning, she took off running as soon as she hit the ground.



Akira was already waiting for her in his truck.

Their rendezvous point was near Carol's apartment. So security guards were patrolling the area, and naturally one of them approached him. Akira told the guard he was waiting for a companion of his to go relic hunting with him. While the guard found this a bit suspect, the boy *was* wearing a powered suit, so he was probably telling the truth. Satisfied, the security guard gave him a curt nod and walked away.

Akira watched him go. *If this had been before I'd been able to afford a powered suit, security probably would've chased me away, huh?* he mused. While it was tough to get an idea of someone's true strength at a glance, a glimpse was often all it took to determine the quality and price tag of the gear they wore. The guard could probably tell easily that Akira's gear was expensive and high performance enough for his claim to hold water, whether the boy was a well-to-do hunter or just had connections to someone who was. Even if in the end the security guard had determined Akira was a greenhorn who merely looked the part, this wouldn't have been grounds to escort him off the premises.

Alpha chuckled from the passenger's seat. *You've made great strides as a hunter since then, Akira. Keep up that pace, and you'll be able to afford even more going forward.*

Yeah, I will. Akira nodded.

But Alpha wasn't done. *For that very reason, we need to make sure we stay in the black during this job as well.*

Her comment caught Akira off guard. But he didn't let it show and answered without missing a beat. *No problem. Elena invited me precisely because it was a good opportunity to make money. We won't be going in the red this time.*

If that's true, then fine. But keep in mind that even though in this case her help was necessary, you already hired Carol to go with you. So part of whatever profit you end up making will go to her. Just be careful from now on.

Yeah, good point. I will. Akira breathed an inward sigh of relief—it didn't seem like Alpha had noticed his surprise. While he hadn't necessarily lied to her, the truth was that the moment he'd decided to head out before the crack of dawn to meet up with Elena and Sara, making money had become a complete afterthought.

But Alpha *had* noticed. She'd deliberately only let him off with a light warning, but in her mind she raised the threat Elena and Sara posed to yet another level.

Just then Carol finally showed up. She called out to him cheerfully, as though they were about to go on a leisurely date, "Hey, Akira! Sorry I'm late. Have you been waiting long?"

"You're one minute ahead of schedule. You're not late." Akira's response was all business, devoid of any excitement about meeting up with someone of the opposite sex.

Carol sighed. "Seriously? A beautiful woman has offered to accompany you, so couldn't you say something normal like 'Nah, I just got here'?"

"Sorry, I still have a lot to learn about the world, but I'm trying my best. Hop in."

Carol dropped her belongings in the truck bed and got in the passenger's seat.

As she did so, Alpha moved over, floating in the air just beyond the passenger door. The moment they were all situated, Akira slammed his foot down on the gas.

Akira and Carol sped along the desert wastes toward the Mihazono Town Ruins. The sun had yet to rise.

Alpha, any luck in contacting Elena or Sara?

Regrettably, it appears the call still won't connect.

Gotcha. His expression grew more grave. If they didn't show up at the meeting place, he might seriously have to go to their aid, or even bail them out of a desperate situation. Having Carol along as additional firepower would definitely be a boon in the latter case.

As he thought this, his gaze unconsciously gravitated toward her.

Carol keenly sensed him looking at her and grinned. "Does my body finally interest you, Akira?"

"Oh—yeah, kinda. Your suit—it's not actually an Old World suit, right?"

Carol pursed her lips. He hadn't been interested in her body but in the powered suit she was wearing. "No, it's modern—it's just modeled after an Old World one. Sorry to disappoint you."

"Figured. Hmm... Maybe it's not my place to say this, but is there really any merit in a bluff like that when we're going to the ruins?"

From his use of the word "bluff," Carol deduced that Akira thought she'd chosen that design to make herself seem stronger than she really was, and a wry grin formed on her lips.

Of course, her real motive was to make it easier to lure in clients for her side venture. The design of the suit complemented her already-bewitching body to make it all the more enticing. Her MO was to lure in unassuming men and extort them for all they were worth—sometimes taking their money, other times their very lives. But Carol kept all this from Akira and for now simply focused on assuaging his doubts about her strength. "Just to let you know, this

suit wasn't cheap. I'd say it's a good deal more expensive than the suit *you're* wearing, and higher-spec as well."

"Oh, really? Hmm... Now that you mention it, I guess it is pretty top-of-the-line, huh?" Back when Akira had been fighting the multilegged tank on the side of the skyscraper, Carol had joined in, running down the building unaided with him. Akira belatedly realized that her suit must be pretty nice if she could do that without support like Alpha's.

"Sure is! Don't lump me in with all those cosplayers—I'm not wearing this just for show."

"Oh, so people really *do* wear them for show."

"Well, yeah, sometimes." Determining that she must have sufficiently allayed Akira's doubts, she changed the subject. "By the way, I know it's a bit late to ask this, but was hiring me really okay? You didn't tell this Elena girl that I was coming along, did you?"

"I sent her a message, though I'm not sure if she got it. Well, you were an emergency addition anyway, so I guess you and I will just have to go on our own if she says no."

"Oh? You'd go with me and not Elena? That's surprising."

"Well, I hired you, so we ought to stick together. We haven't decided on how long or anything, but you can at least join me for today." Even if it turned out that Elena and Sara did disapprove of Carol joining them, at that point he'd at least have been able to confirm that they were safe, so he would have accomplished his mission all the same. Not being able to go with his friends would be a bummer, but as long as he knew they weren't in danger, he could deal with it.

"Thanks, Akira. That makes me happy," Carol said with a charming, enticing smile.

But Akira only gave a curt nod in response.

He really is a tough nut to crack, Carol thought. And he doesn't seem bothered at all about introducing someone dressed like I am to a team of two other women. Well, he treated those two maids back in the ruins casually too, and he

doesn't show interest in any of my advances, so I guess his sense for that sort of thing is really off-kilter. I wonder if maybe these friends of his are just as strange. If so, it all makes sense. With that, Carol felt satisfied—although if Elena and Sara had been able to hear her thoughts, they would have been decidedly less so.

Chapter 111: Mihazono in the Wake of the Anomaly

Once they'd finally reached Mihazono and Akira had parked just outside the ruin, it became immediately obvious to the two of them just how dire things had gotten since their last visit.

The area was bustling. The overflow from the ruin's already-packed parking garage—not just desert utility vehicles belonging to individual hunters but also trailers doubling as mobile stores for selling hunter necessities—were parked all over. A makeshift clinic, as well as provisional bases for several relic hunter syndicates, had also been set up.

Security guards were busy directing traffic to keep the path to the Hunter Office outpost clear. One of them called out to Akira. "Sorry, kid, but you can't park your car here—you're blocking traffic! If you're just picking someone up or dropping them off, though, that's fine. The original parking garage is full, but they've set up a temporary one over there." The official pointed. Then, looking amused, he added, "Also, just to let you know, if you came here to hunt relics, I'd reconsider. It's a little more dangerous than usual today."

No sooner had he said this, a building in the distance toppled over, as if to prove his point. A vast cloud of smoke billowed up, blanketing the whole area around it. Clearly some large-scale battle was taking place within the ruins.

Akira smiled dryly. "Oh yeah? I couldn't have guessed."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you. Take care!"

After the guard had left, Akira took out his terminal and tried to contact Elena and Sara again. They still didn't pick up. Without him realizing it, his face became grim.

Carol saw his expression and pulled out her own terminal. "No dice, huh?"

"No. I thought maybe I might have better luck if we were in the same ruin. But at this rate, it's not looking good." From the way that building had just collapsed, he figured the situation inside Mihazono was likely even worse than

he'd expected.

Akira didn't plan to just stand there and speculate, nor did he have any intention of turning back. However, he realized meeting up with Elena and Sara was going to be tougher than he'd initially assumed, and his expression hardened even more.

Then Akira noticed that Carol was busy talking to someone on her terminal.

"Yeah, it's me," she was saying. "Yeah, I'm calling about that favor from earlier. What'd you find out? Yeah, yeah, I know. I'll pay you, so don't worry." Suddenly she looked surprised. "Huh? Wait, really? Are you sure? Okay, fine, I'll try it. Catch you later." She hung up and turned to Akira with an uncertain, somewhat exasperated expression. "Hey, Akira. Can you connect your terminal to mine and try calling your friend again?"

"Huh? Sure." Puzzled, he still did as he was told.

Someone picked up. "Hi Akira, Elena here," came his friend's voice. "Sorry to have you call me so early in the morning. Listen, about the rescue job..."

It had connected.

Akira was so surprised he let out a yelp, which surprised Elena on the other end as well.

"Wait, Akira, what's wrong? Did something happen?"

"N-No, it's just... I kept trying to contact you so many times, but the call never went through—and now it has all of a sudden..."

"Really? That's strange. I mean, we're connected now, right?"

"Y-Yeah, but..." Akira was completely bewildered.

Carol lightly patted Akira on the shoulder and cut into their conversation. "Let's leave the details for later. For now, decide on a rendezvous point. Isn't that what you came here to do?"

"Y-Yeah." Realizing Carol was absolutely right, Akira relayed her suggestion to Elena.

"Okay. Where are you right now? Still at home?"

“No, I’m in Mihazono already. In the wasteland, just ahead of the road the Office outpost is on.”

“Really? You got here awfully quick, then. Shikarabe and his team are headed your way with the victims, so after he gets there, just go with him to where we are. Best to travel in groups.”

“All right. Talk to you soon.”

“Yes, we’ll be waiting. See you then.”

Akira cut the call. Hearing Elena safe and sound had taken a great weight off his shoulders, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Then he noticed Carol was giving him a dissatisfied stare. “Um, I’m not sure why you’re looking at me like that, but thanks for your help.”

“Don’t mention it. As long as you got your money’s worth hiring me, that’s all that matters,” she said, still sounding a bit upset. After all, she had really been looking forward to this job, supposing that she and Akira would have to comb the ruins to locate and rescue Elena and Sara. She’d hoped to show off her skills as a surveyor.

But now they’d contacted Elena without difficulty, which had in a sense eliminated the whole reason Akira had hired her in the first place. She couldn’t help but feel let down, especially after being woken up in the middle of the night for this.

Akira lacked the interpersonal skills to pick up on all this, but he could at least guess that Carol wasn’t too happy about getting invited to help with a problem so simple that apparently anyone could’ve solved it.

“Um, Carol,” he asked, somewhat hesitantly, “just how *did* you manage to reach Elena?”

“I didn’t do anything. The call connected without issue.”

“But it didn’t work for me—”

“No surprise there. You’re using a cheap line.”

Communication services weren’t typically free. However, most terminals came packaged with a bonus service that included free calls and messages.

Akira had gotten by up until now using this service. However, you got what you paid for—since the line was free, it was rather low quality. In the event that the volume of calls and messages suddenly skyrocketed, the lower-tier lines would be cut off first to maintain service for the ones with higher priority.

Currently, a ton of calls were taking place around the Mihazono Ruins. Kugamayama City, the hunters, and the companies involved were all flooding the lines trying to gather information on what was happening. The insurance companies were no exception. In fact, to maintain communication with their dispatched rescue squads and with their clients in need of rescue, they were routing individual calls over multiple comm channels at once to reduce the load on each, allowing for better call quality.

Elena and Sara had received their jobs through the insurance companies, meaning they'd also benefited from the improved connection. Their line wouldn't cut out so easily. And with a sufficiently high-quality (and thus expensive) line, anyone from the outside could have connected to them without issue as well. Since Akira had been having issues, Carol had initially thought Elena and Sara were likely already in distress, perhaps somewhere in the ruins outside of the terminal's range. In other words, she'd assumed the problem was on the other end. So she'd gotten a friend of hers, an information broker, to pinpoint Elena and Sara's location, as well as find out where their last rescue operation had been.

But the broker had responded by saying that Elena and Sara's connection with the insurance companies was still strong. Carol found that hard to believe—until he'd reached them instantly through her terminal. That could only mean that Akira had been trying to reach them using a cheap, low-priority line.

Many hunters who ran into such issues would purchase software or a plan that automatically switched the call to a better line when necessary, but clearly Akira hadn't even done that much. Carol explained all this to Akira, who nodded in understanding. But she was looking at him so incredulously that he averted his eyes in embarrassment.

"Akira, I know you said earlier that you were still in the process of learning about the world, but overlooking something this basic could seriously put you in danger. You need to be careful," she warned him.

Ignorance was deadly. And if someone (i.e., Carol) ended up joining his team, they'd be in danger as well. Indeed, if Akira had gone deeper into the ruins without realizing the quality of his line, and Carol had continued assuming he possessed this basic knowledge, then they would've ended up wandering around in areas outside the connection range, searching for Elena and Sara when the latter weren't even in any trouble to begin with. In this way, he would've ended up exposing Carol to unnecessary danger. With that in mind, Akira seriously reflected on his actions. The more he did, the more dejected he got.

"Okay." He hung his head. "I'll be careful."

Seeing how down he was, Carol thought that perhaps she'd gone a bit too far. As they were currently teammates, leaving him depressed like that could seriously hamper their activities going forward. So in an attempt to cheer him up, she deliberately gave him an exaggerated smile. "Well, either way, thanks to my noble efforts you got in touch with your friends, and we got to confirm they were safe and sound, right? So I'll be expecting my pay to reflect that," she teased, bringing her face closer to him.

Akira looked a bit surprised by that for a moment, but then let out a snort and grinned. "All right, fine. I'll raise the pay for your efforts, just like you want. But considering what happened the other day, that's just going to be funneled right back to me as my protection fee once you run into trouble again."

"Oh, we'll see about that!" she exclaimed, returning his look.

They were both in good spirits, now that Akira had regained his enthusiasm.

Soon after, Akira got a message from Shikarabe saying that since they were already meeting up, Akira should head to the provisional clinic and help out with unloading the transport. Akira responded that he was on his way, and drove off.

As he was riding along, a thought occurred to him. *Hey Alpha. Did you not notice the thing with the line either?*

Well, it connected just fine up until now.

Yeah, I guess so. Akira thought that made sense, and didn't question her any

further.

But Alpha'd never said she hadn't noticed. She'd merely chosen her words to lead Akira to believe that was what she meant.

Alpha's goal wasn't for Akira to avoid the normal trials of life around Kugamayama; all she cared about was that he gained the power to overcome epic perils. So if Akira and Elena ended up arguing and broke off ties with one another because he'd failed to meet up with her and Sara, that was of no consequence to Alpha.

She wouldn't lie to Akira. And by the same token, she could say whatever she wanted as long as it wasn't a lie. Satisfied, she remained by his side—just like always.



The provisional clinic had been constructed on the wasteland outskirts of Mihazono as a joint effort by several insurance companies. As such, it accepted all of their clients without question. Of course, the treatment wasn't free, and only the insurance companies' clients would be admitted—after all, it would have been unfair to paying customers if those who hadn't paid were able to receive the same care.

Shikarabe's armored military transport vehicle was parked in front of the clinic. The back hatch opened, and the injured began alighting from the vehicle and making their way to the entrance. Most with lighter injuries were able to enter the building on their own, while only a few needed to be helped by their comrades. The more severely injured were carried inside in body bags.

Shikarabe was hoisting one of these bags when Akira and Carol showed up. "Oh hey, Akira. Now that you're here, I'd like you to start by helping me carry all the badly wounded out of the vehicle and— Ugh?!" He broke off at the sight of Carol standing beside Akira.

She smiled pleasantly. "That's an interesting way to greet someone. Long time no see, Shikarabe."

"Y-You too," Shikarabe muttered.

Then Togami emerged from the vehicle, carrying a body bag of his own. “Did something happen, Shikarabe? Whoa—Akira?! What’re *you* doing here?!”

“What do you mean? You guys asked me to come here.”

“O-Oh, really?”

Shikarabe and Togami were each taken aback, while Akira found both of their reactions puzzling. Carol was the only one completely unbothered.

“For now, let’s just do as Shikarabe says and carry these bags in,” she suggested.

“Hm? Yeah, okay,” Akira agreed.

The two of them entered the armored transport, and Shikarabe’s and Togami’s eyes automatically followed them. But only for a moment, and the Druncam hunters quickly got back to transporting the injured—though their faces still showed traces of confusion.

Why is she with Akira? Shikarabe couldn’t help wondering. *Did Elena and Sara call her here? If not, then why? What’s going on?*

Togami was just as perplexed. *Why is Akira here? What’s with that woman’s getup? Why is he bringing someone like that along? What the hell’s happening?*

Neither of them had any answers, and though their inner thoughts were slightly different, they both looked puzzled.

The inside of the transport vehicle reeked of iron. The floor and the seats were stained with blood. It was nothing if not a macabre scene. Yet Akira and Carol occasionally *created* grisly scenes of this nature, so something like this hardly fazed them as they began carrying the body bags out of the vehicle. Akira was about to pick up someone lying on one of the benches when he noticed that the bag they were in had been left unzipped, exposing their head. From the way the bag sagged down at the bottom, it was clear their lower half was missing. He grabbed the bag from the upper half.

The person’s eyes snapped open. Akira froze in surprise.

“Where am I?” the person in the bag said.

“Um, er, in front of a temporary clinic. I’m getting ready to carry you in there.”

“I see... Pardon me... Thank you...” The person closed their eyes. Whether they were dead or merely resting, Akira didn’t know.

Carol smiled. “Just warning you: don’t just assume they’re dead and carry them like a sack of potatoes. We’re not doctors, so we don’t have the authority to declare whether a person’s gone or just severely wounded. Treat everyone like they’re still alive.”

Akira recalled what he’d seen back in the infirmary in Kuzusuhara. Even those who were no more than severed heads had been considered “severely wounded” until a doctor confirmed they were truly beyond saving, so it was entirely possible this person might survive. This was a clinic using modern medicine, after all. Over time, as medical procedures had incorporated more Old World technology, the line between life and death had become less certain.

“Okay. I’ll be careful.” He chided himself that, considering how he himself regularly ingested medicine with preposterous healing properties, he should’ve known this much already. He carried the rest of the body bags out of the vehicle as though handling precious cargo.



Akira and Carol drove through the Mihazono business district, the state of which had drastically changed from the other day. With them were Shikarabe and his team. The Druncam hunter’s armored transport vehicle led the way, while Akira’s truck followed behind.

All the victims in need of immediate attention had now been delivered to the clinic. The rest were still in the ruins, and Elena and Sara had stayed behind to protect them from monsters. In order to not keep them waiting, Shikarabe and company had to get there as quickly as possible.

The Kugamayama defense force and the insurance company rescue squads were working together to clear the roads of rubble. Now that a path had opened up for vehicles to traverse, it had become easier for them to go through the ruins than it had been the other day, so Shikarabe had brought the armored transport along. As for the city defense force, they’d become involved because

if the mechanical sentries really were ignoring their regular patrol routes and going rogue, this posed a serious threat to nearby Kugamayama. While none of the robots had left the ruins at the moment, Mihazono was teeming with mechanical monstrosities—this wasn't something Kugamayama City could simply ignore. To investigate this threat and swiftly handle the situation should the worst come to pass, the city had temporarily made the Hunter Office outpost their base as they worked to secure the area. For now, the plan was to seal off the two areas where the monsters had been known to appear—the Serantal and factory district areas—and wait for the situation to die down.

The city had also enlisted the aid of several hunter syndicates to help to secure these areas. Druncam, of course, was among them, which was why Shikarabe and Togami were present.

Currently, Togami was not riding in the armored transport but in Akira's truck. He'd been tasked with bringing Akira and Carol up to speed. Akira had told him the truck was in autodrive mode, but really Alpha was the one at the wheel. The driver's seat and the passenger's seat were both empty for the time being—the three of them had moved to the truck bed to more easily ward off pursuers from the rear.

Everything Togami explained was all news to Akira, and he listened with great interest. Carol, on the other hand, was already aware of all of it. She cheerfully offered additional explanations to Akira when necessary.

Meanwhile, Togami was unnerved. He was a healthy young boy, so of course he couldn't help but be drawn to the gorgeous woman beside him who radiated sex appeal. Not to mention that racy Old World outfit she was wearing—he couldn't tear his eyes away. Besides, thanks to their respective positions in the truck bed, it would have been next to impossible to naturally avert his eyes from her. Besides, Carol was deliberately moving around in such a way as to show off that body of hers. Togami knew she was doing it on purpose to fluster him, but as he lacked the constitution to stare back at her in defiance, he continued to shift his gaze awkwardly, unsure where to look.

He chided himself in an effort to regain his composure. *Calm down, Togami! Don't get rattled by something like this! You swore you were going to prove to yourself what you're truly capable of on this job! That's why you're here!*

Togami's currently equipped gear was even higher performance than the gear Druncam had provided him for the tankrantula hunt. This had been his reward for being part of the four-man team that had (at least on paper) toppled an eight hundred million aurum bounty monster. In reality, many other unofficial participants had accompanied them, including Akira. But since Druncam had stated that only the four of them had been involved, the syndicate had needed to compensate Togami with a reward suitable for this achievement, or else it would have looked suspicious. So they'd loaned him an all-new set of cutting-edge gear.

The old Togami might have been thrilled by this. He might have thought that it was proof Druncam had finally acknowledged his talent. But Togami could no longer think that way. Seeing Akira fight during the tankrantula hunt had completely shattered his confidence.

In fact, for a Druncam rookie, Togami was plenty skilled. He wouldn't have been dubbed the rising star of Katsuya's detractors in the first place if he wasn't. His self-confidence and pride in his competence had helped him even in his toughest battles. But as a result he'd ended up accepting all the praise he got at face value, even when it was artificial flattery meant to make him look better for other purposes. So he'd ultimately ended up overconfident in his own ability, and for better or worse had let that show in his attitude as well.

But not now. Now he couldn't even feel pleased about being given permission to use gear worth well over a hundred million aurum—on the contrary, he felt like it was a deliberate ploy to make him realize his own lack of skill and acknowledge that Druncam rookies were only capable because of the gear they wore.

Even so, Togami endured the humiliation and borrowed the gear anyway—all in an effort to test his own limits. If, at the end of that test, he learned that he really was just a weakling who had the wrong idea all along, that was fine—he'd just use that realization as a base to rebuild himself from the ground up. What wasn't fine was to continue being weak. Even though he'd lost his confidence, this was the one thing the little pride he had left wouldn't allow.

His determination and resolve even stronger now, Togami regained his composure and took another look at Akira. *He still looks like a weakling. No, he*

actually seems, er, stronger than before? Rgh... I can't tell! Was it because his pride was no longer clouding his vision, or was it because Akira had made such a strong impression on him during the tankrantula fight that the boy now seemed much more capable? He didn't know.

Well, that aside... After another furtive glance at Carol, he looked back at Akira. *A beauty like this is right next to him, and he's not reacting at all? Why? Is he so experienced that this sort of thing just doesn't faze him anymore? Or do you just become desensitized to it when you're as skilled as he is?* He'd heard before that hunters on the Front Line regularly wore powered suits resembling promiscuous swimwear, and from constant exposure they'd become desensitized to those Old World designs. He idly wondered if Akira had experienced the same thing. "Hey, Akira. Aren't you distracted by that outfit she's wearing?"

Akira frowned as though he didn't understand. He glanced in Carol's direction, and it seemed to dawn on him what Togami meant. "Oh. Well, I won't say it doesn't *completely* bother me, but since it's a more expensive and high-spec powered suit than mine, I don't really have any grounds to complain."

"R-Really?" responded Togami.

Akira was essentially saying that if she'd been wearing low-quality equipment, he'd have a problem with it, but since it wasn't, it was fine. He didn't care what the design was. This struck Togami as a philosophy truly befitting a relic hunter, and he felt like he finally understood Akira's attitude toward Carol.

I guess to be abnormally strong, you have to be a bit abnormal yourself, he mused.

Meanwhile, Carol was greatly enjoying Togami's flustered reaction toward her enchanting figure. *This is how men should normally react,* she thought with satisfaction. But Akira's answer to Togami just now dissatisfied her. "You know, if my outfit intrigues you even a little bit, you could look a little more like you're interested. You've turned down all my invitations—what about me doesn't satisfy you? Normal men would jump at the chance."

"Sorry for not being normal. Look, you've got someone acting normal right

there—invite him instead.”

Rejected once again, Carol shook her head at Akira like she didn’t understand him one bit. Then, in an attempt to get back at him, she turned an alluring smile onto Togami. “What about you? Since Akira’s being such a jerk, I’ll give you a discount.”

Togami hesitated, but eventually managed to respond, “N-No thanks.” It had taken him an effort, but he’d resisted Carol’s seduction and turned her down.

Carol looked like she hadn’t expected that response, and her face twisted in displeasure. “Seriously?” she said with an exaggerated sigh. “You *too*? Don’t say *you* aren’t interested in my body either—I know it’s a lie. Unlike Akira, you can’t keep your eyes off me.”

“I won’t deny it. But I still refuse.” Togami’s expression hardened. “I finally remembered who you are. You’re *that* Carol, aren’t you? No wonder Shikarabe acted like he did when he saw you.”

Akira looked puzzled. “*That* Carol? What do you mean?”

Togami paused. “Sorry, internal Druncam business. I can’t say.”

“Basically,” Carol chimed in, “a hunter at Druncam bought my services, and we got into a bit of a fight about the pay afterward. The audacity to sleep with me and then say you’re broke—don’t you think that’s too cruel?” Unlike Togami, who wore a guarded expression, Carol announced it all like it was no big deal.

Akira looked like he couldn’t make head or tail of what she’d said. *Alpha, what do you think happened?*

Who knows? I can’t say. But it has nothing to do with you, Akira. And I trust it’s going to stay that way? Whatever the details of that fight, it was clearly related to Carol’s *other* job. In other words, Alpha was implying that as long as Akira didn’t try anything with her, he wouldn’t have to worry about it.

Akira might have been dense, but even he got the message. *Yeah*, he said firmly.

Right? I knew you’d say that. After all, you’ve got a beauty of your own always

by your side. You don't need someone like her. Alpha grinned smugly.

Sure, Akira said, his smile thin.

In fact, Alpha was quite satisfied. Akira typically only looked at other people in terms of whether they were an enemy or not an enemy, and he never let interest in the opposite sex factor into that assessment. At present, this was working out in Alpha's favor.

However, she'd noticed that exceptions were starting to crop up. Certain people—like Shizuka, Elena, and Sara—he owed something to, and consequently had forged strong bonds with them. Toward these women, Akira had started to display emotions more fitting of a boy his age (although still a bit off-kilter). The more such exceptions arose, the looser his definition of “exception” would become. Eventually he might even become interested in someone who didn't qualify as an exception. Someone like Carol, who openly and actively worked to lure in men, might slip right past the smallest tear in his defenses—most inconveniently for Alpha.

So she'd pressed him on the matter just in case. But he hadn't shown any worrisome signs, and she was content for now.

Well, as long as eye and ear candy are good enough, I'll be your partner whenever you want, Akira. So feel free to ask anytime.

Nah, I'm good. Akira's response was immediate—before Alpha got too full of herself, he wanted to knock her down a peg.

But Alpha merely grinned. *Just as cold as ever, I see. Now then, enough idle chatter—enemies ahead.*

Roger! Focused on the battle ahead, Akira removed the CWH from its emplacement and held it at the ready.

Shikarabe's and Akira's vehicles made their way through the business district, navigating between the countless buildings lined up on each side. A mechanical monster charged from between two of the buildings—not running over the ground, but scuttling along the buildings' sides.

The robot stood around a meter tall. Four arms sprouted from its elliptical torso, and it raced along on spherical tires attached to the bottom of its legs. Its upper body was outfitted with a cannon and a machine gun. By the time it appeared, it already had the vehicles in its sights.

But thanks to Alpha's heads-up, Akira had detected the monster's presence even before then, and Alpha had already calculated the enemy's route and line of fire. By the time the creature showed itself, Akira already had his CWH aimed and ready. The proprietary bullet tore through the machine's torso, destroying the target in one hit. With its internal systems destroyed, the robot stopped in its tracks and fell off the wall to the ground, smashing to pieces.

Watching Akira, Carol had also been alerted to the enemy's presence but had only gotten as far as pinpointing the enemy's location with her scanner before Akira had already finished the job. She whistled.

"Nice work. You really are capable!"

"Yeah, I guess." He'd fought alongside Carol the other day and already shown her what Alpha's support was capable of, so there was no point in denying it. Still, there was no inkling of pride in his voice.

"Looks like I'm up next." She raised her own gun—a one-handed weapon too large to be called a pistol—and pointed slightly above the road. Nothing appeared to be there, but she pulled the trigger anyway—at the exact same moment that a brand-new mechanical guardian appeared in that space. The bullet flew from the huge muzzle and struck its target, pulverizing it. In a single instant the enemy was blasted to pieces, scattering fragments of metal all around.

Akira was awestruck. "Whoa, amazing!"

"I mean, it wasn't *that* big of a deal. If I apply my surveying skills to combat, doing that's a cinch," she explained smugly. In order to survey ruins, she possessed a scanner of higher quality than the average hunter's. And since she also had a detailed map of the business district, she was able to predict the paths monsters would take and where they would appear.

Akira found this deeply intriguing. "So surveyors have their own way of fighting? I see! Does that scanner of yours also make your aim more accurate?"

“Well, something like that.”

“Cool!”

More enemies kept appearing, but Akira and Carol dispatched them all effortlessly, and the guardians were reduced to scrap on the road.

Alpha, how many more like that are there?

The armored A24T277BW2890— You know what? That name’s too long, so let’s just call it the armored A24 model. Anyway, that was the last of that particular type.

That’s its name? Sounds more like a model number.

Well, it is a machine, after all.

Fair point. Akira was satisfied and let the topic go.

The names of the mechanical monsters that Akira had fought so far, like the cannon insect, were merely nicknames hunters used to distinguish different varieties from one another. One day, the A24 model Akira had just fought would also receive its own name, once enough hunters found simply calling it “that machine” too inconvenient. For now, though, it was nameless, known only as “that machine” or “the armored A24 model,” the term Alpha had derived from its model number.

Not long after, more A24s appeared from elsewhere. As Carol took them down, fighting at Akira’s side, she found herself musing over how unusual he was.

He’s like a puzzle in which none of the pieces fit together. He was surprisingly capable as a fighter, but so lacking in common sense that he didn’t even realize his communication line was cheap and low quality. His marksmanship just now had been extraordinary, but he’d acted almost like anyone could’ve made that shot, like he took no pride in it. On the other hand, he’d been amazed when Carol had pulled off a similar shot. Nor had he been acting—she could tell. And he’d seemed fascinated by how she used her scanner to fight—so either he hadn’t known it was possible, or he knew but could never do it himself.

This is the first time I've ever come across anyone so, well, impossibly strange! Nothing about him adds up—his strength contradicts his knowledge, his appearance contradicts his actual competence, and his competence doesn't line up with his evaluation of others' strength! Nevertheless, confounding as he was, she didn't harbor a bad impression of him, thanks to the time she'd spent with him in the factory district. When they'd been attacked by a horde of machines, Akira had been prepared to leave her so as not to get in her way. Yet when she'd hired him, he'd fought beside her even in free fall and while parkouring down the skyscraper—all for the sake of protecting her.

If she'd been in his position, she wouldn't have done the same.

Relic hunters were constantly facing death, so determining whether or not you could trust a companion with your life was absolutely critical. While she couldn't speak absolutely, she at least knew that in those conditions, on that day, Akira had protected her instead of abandoning her. And if the reason for this was somehow rooted in his eccentricity, then she decided it didn't bother her.

Still, what kind of life do you have to have led to end up a kid like him? Maybe that also has something to do with why he's not interested in my body.

And so, in an effort to distract herself from her own wounded pride, she also ended up attributing the reason she couldn't seduce Akira (unlike so many other men) to his unique character. She gave Akira a faint smile, hoping that he might pick up on some of her complicated feelings.

Akira noticed the look in her eyes but had no idea what it meant. Perplexed, he tried his best to interpret it. "Um... If you're getting tired of fighting, you can take a rest, you know. I hired you as a surveyor, so don't feel like you're disappointing me if you sit the combat out."

His interpretation was so wildly off base that she let out a snort. Then, with a provocative grin, she replied, "Nah, I don't think so! I'm not gonna let you use that as an excuse to dock my pay later on. If I can't be of much use as a surveyor, then I've at least got to show you what I'm worth in combat against these machines."

Carol knew, of course, that Akira intended to do no such thing. But Akira

didn't realize this, and returned her look. "Oh yeah? What if I destroy them all first? Then I wouldn't have to pay you as much. Tough luck, but I need money too."

"Yeah? Then let's make it a challenge to see who can take out the most. Here they come!"

"All right, they're all mine!"

"That's what you think!"

Even as they spoke, hordes of A24s swarmed them from behind the truck and from the sides of buildings. The average hunter would have been instantly overwhelmed by the assault, likely having to jump in the armored transport for cover. In fact, that was precisely why Shikarabe had prepared the transport in the first place.

But to Akira and Carol, driven by their contest, the robots were little more than moving targets at a shooting gallery. One by one, the machines were taken out, strewn tons of scrap across the road.

While Akira and Carol competed to see who could waste more A24s, Togami was also trying his best—but with far less impressive results.

Akira had Alpha's support, and Carol had a souped-up scanner, so both of them were able to accurately predict where the monsters would appear. But not Togami, whose scanner was far less accurate. So despite his best efforts, he ended up falling behind the other two.

I guess this really is all I'm capable of! Was I really just thinking I was better than everyone else because I only had Druncam rookies to compare myself to? Each negative thought made him feel like his heart was being squeezed in a vise. Still, with his remaining pride, he kept himself from crumbling. He held his gun steady and picked off the machines that Akira and Carol hadn't considered a priority.

Ultimately, Togami's final kill count was far lower than theirs. But he never stopped fighting until they reached their destination.

Chapter 112: Akira's Companions

Elena and Sara were guarding the perimeter of one of the countless abandoned buildings in the business district, waiting for Shikarabe and the rest to arrive.

"H-Hey..." One of the victims, an anxious-looking man, poked his head outside. "Are they not here yet?"

Elena responded as cordially as she could manage. "Not yet. It shouldn't be much longer, though. Just be patient."

"A-All right," he mumbled. He'd gotten the same answer every time. Unable to relax, he continued to hang around the entrance.

She sighed. "The first batch of evacuees have already made it to the clinic," she told him. "The rescue team is on its way back here. Plus, they picked up two more members, so they have even less chance of running into trouble en route. So chill out and get inside where it's safe."

"O-Okay. Thanks." Taken aback by Elena's lengthy response, the man nonetheless obediently headed back to join the rest of the group.

Elena sighed again, deeper this time. "You know, I'm honestly impressed someone that fainthearted has managed to stay a hunter this long." The evacuees weren't surrounded by enemies, and they even had a safe place they could hole up in. There was no reason to doubt they'd be rescued, and Elena and Sara were only guarding them just in case. So she couldn't understand why the man had been so uneasy.

At Elena's harsh assessment, Sara gave a wry smile. "Well, considering everything they've been through, anyone in their position would be scared. And the disappointment of being left behind for the second trip, after thinking they were finally saved, probably didn't help."

There hadn't been enough vehicles on hand to transport all the wounded at once, so Shikarabe's team had elected to split the rescue into two stages, taking

the evacuees in most urgent need of aid first since the less injured would be more capable of fending for themselves. But after their initial relief and joy at being rescued, the evacuees had vehemently opposed this decision. So to appease them, Elena and Sara had been compelled to stay behind as bodyguards (though they'd receive additional pay for the trouble).

"Sara," Elena replied, "these hunters thought that as long as they had insurance, they could enter dangerous ruins and be just fine. Don't you think there's something wrong with that? Now, I'm not saying it isn't worth it—I know it's safer to be with insurance than without—but if I knew I couldn't handle a ruin, I wouldn't even go near it in the first place."

When exploring ruins, hunters often faced the dilemma of whether to give up or go on, of recognizing the point at which they needed to retreat, because overstepping that line could mean a swift death. Novice hunters tended to think they were safe just because they had emergency insurance, so they ended up biting off more than they could chew. But if things were so dire that they had to call for help, they'd likely die before the rescue squad could even arrive. So Elena figured that rather than heading into a dangerous ruin using emergency insurance as a safety net, it would be wiser to draw the boundary of one's comfort zone a few steps back to begin with.

Sara tried to pacify her. "Well, it's not like *we* always follow that advice either, you know. And since they're not on a team with us, does it really matter? Everybody's capable of different things. You can't measure everyone by your own standard."

"I know, but—"

"Plus, right now we're making bank *because* they bought that emergency insurance. So best not to look a gift horse in the mouth, right?"

"Hm... I guess you're right. At the end of the day, even dealing with these crybabies is still business."

They smirked at each other and got back to keeping watch.

In fact, to most of the regular citizens of the East, the rescue team (including Elena and Sara) wouldn't have seemed much different from those reckless hunters. All had chosen to enter a deadly ruin of their own volition. Elena had

never said the evacuees should avoid ruins entirely—what a hunter regarded as “safe” was, to the general populace, generally extremely dangerous. And since the two women had been hunters for quite a while now, this outlook had been indelibly ingrained into them—they could no longer escape the relic hunter lifestyle.

Not long after, the rescue vehicle finally showed up. Shikarabe parked just outside the abandoned building’s entrance and opened the back hatch. Then, leaving Togami to handle the evacuees, he headed over to sit with Elena and Sara.

“Elena, status report?”

“No issues. You aren’t going to need any extra body bags either.”

“Good to hear. Let’s load ’em up and move out.”

The load included not just the evacuees but any relics they’d managed to gather. Some hunters even wanted to bring along mechanical monster parts they’d collected, hoping to sell them for a high premium. This huge amount of extra baggage was another reason they’d had to make two trips. Now that the hunters no longer had to worry about being rescued, they were instead anxious over how many of their possessions they’d be able to take with them and arguing among themselves for space. Togami was struggling to get the situation under control.

“They should’ve used some of that energy to try and make it out on their own instead,” Shikarabe grumbled. Shaking his head in disbelief, he turned to go. “I’ll take care of this—be right back.” The armored transport’s maximum capacity was ultimately up to Shikarabe to decide—to expedite the boarding process, he had full authority to kick out and leave behind anyone who complained.

Once he’d left, Akira walked over to greet Elena and Sara. The women had worried that he might ultimately decide to sit this one out because of what had happened during the hypersynthetic snake hunt, so they were secretly relieved to see him.

Then they spotted Carol next to him, and their smiles froze over.

Akira greeted them cheerfully. “Hi, Elena! Hi, Sara! Nice to be working with

you today.”



Elena and Sara, for their part, were dumbstruck. After exchanging glances, as though silently deliberating between them how they should react, they tried to hide their shock by acting natural.

“Y-Yes, I’m also glad to be working with you again, Akira,” Elena replied.

“Yep, me too,” Sara added.

Akira found their behavior a bit odd, but then he noticed their gazes were directed toward Carol. His expression clouded over. “Uh, so even if I couldn’t get in touch with you, I really shouldn’t have hired her to come along without your permission, huh?” Then he added, hanging his head, “If it’s a problem, then we’ll just go our separate ways here.”

“No, no!” Elena responded hastily. “It’s fine. There’s no problem. Right, Sara?”

“Huh? Nah, no complaints here. Don’t worry, Akira, we’re not upset or anything.”

“Really? Thanks, that’s a relief!” Seeing Elena and Sara’s reassuring smiles, Akira perked up again. But though he’d vaguely noticed their concern, he’d failed to pick up on what had made them concerned to begin with.

Carol took a step forward and stuck out her hand. “Hi, I’m Carol. Nice to meet you both!”

Since Akira was watching, Elena and Sara had no choice but to smile and shake her hand. But as they approached her, they got a closer look at her attire and were shocked all over again. A boy they were on good terms with was accompanying a stunning woman wearing an outfit specifically designed to seduce men—and it didn’t seem to faze him in the least.

This shook Elena and Sara to their cores.

At that moment, Shikarabe returned, having thrown his weight around as a veteran to cow the hunters into submission. He took one look at the scene and immediately decided that whatever was going on, he wanted no part of it. “All right, what say we get going now?” he suggested. “You guys can hash all this out once we get back to the clinic. Even if you’re trying to iron out the terms of

an agreement or something, this isn't the best place for that."

Elena agreed, thinking that she'd need some time to sort out her feelings anyway. "Understood. Let's go, everyone! Akira—we'll discuss this *in detail* later."

Shikarabe and Akira returned to their respective vehicles, and after some hesitation, so did Elena and Sara. Elena took the wheel, and Sara got in the passenger's seat. Then, once no one else could see their expressions, they finally allowed the conflicted emotions brewing within them to appear on their faces.

"I gotta say, that was a bit of a shock," Sara said with a strained smile.

"I know, right?" Elena replied, grimacing. "I never thought *Akira*, of all people, would associate with someone who dressed like *that*." As she drove off, she determined that even if she was meddling a bit too much in his affairs, she at least wanted to hear the whole story from him before she passed judgment. Then, if she felt like he was going down a path he shouldn't, she'd give him her opinion and advice.



After safely exiting the ruins and delivering the remaining injured to the clinic, the team decided to take a breather. Unlike Akira and Carol, who had just arrived, Elena and Sara had been on rescue duty for quite some time now. They needed to restock on ammo and prepare for the next operation.

Shikarabe had excused himself, saying he and his crew needed to do maintenance on the armored transport and clean it before the next job, but he was clearly just trying to escape the awkward atmosphere surrounding Akira and the women. He'd told Akira that he'd be in the temporary Druncam base if needed and left without another word.

The four relic hunters decided to eat at a small restaurant nearby. They sat at a circular table for four, ordered, and waited for their food to arrive. The palpable tension in the air was making Akira squirm in his seat.

Alpha, it was a bad idea to bring Carol here, wasn't it?

If you're so worried about how Elena and Sara feel, why don't you just ask

them?

I mean, I already did, and they said it was fine, but I'm not so sure about that. True, Elena, Sara, and Carol were all smiling amicably. Yet somehow Akira got the feeling those smiles were strangely forced.

The restaurant's seating was simple: only several sets of cheap-looking tables and chairs. But the food was not to be underestimated—every table was packed with hunters who'd heard about the commotion in the ruins and come to capitalize on it.

Of course, someone dressed like Carol stood out like a sore thumb, and since the other two women were at the same table, Elena and Sara were likely feeling the gazes of the other diners as well. Anyone could have figured this out with a little thought, but it had only just now occurred to Akira—partly because he was used to Alpha always going unnoticed despite regularly wearing even more revealing clothing. He chided himself for not realizing this sooner, but at the same time he felt it was too late for him and Carol to just get up and change tables all of a sudden. So instead he endured the awkwardness.

But Akira was wrong—at least in part. Elena and Sara weren't concerned about the stares fixed on them as much as they were about Akira and Carol's relationship. And Carol was used to being the center of attention in the first place, so the gawking didn't bother her in the least. What *did* bother her, though, was that she could tell from the look in Akira's eyes that he clearly saw Elena and Sara as *women*.

All three of them seemed to be enjoying a leisurely chat, but beneath the surface both parties were trying to learn more about each other. First Elena and Sara introduced themselves as a team of relic hunters, while Carol said she was a surveyor. Before long the conversation turned to how Akira and Carol knew each other, and what had led to Akira inviting Carol on the rescue job.

Akira tried to explain, but to Elena and Sara his response seemed to be omitting an awful lot. "And so, I met up with Carol again at the factory district, and well, a lot happened after that. We ended up escaping the ruins together, and since she said she was a surveyor, I thought she might be useful to bring along."

Elena narrowed her eyes. “Akira, do you mean to tell me you invited someone you just met yesterday—practically a complete stranger—on a job with you?”

Unable to deny it, he lowered his voice in shame. “Y-Yeah... I... I guess.”

Elena and Sara couldn’t imagine he’d had any malicious intent in deciding to bring her along. But they *did* think he’d made a careless move.

“Akira,” Sara said gently, “we don’t think Carol is a bad person or anything, but you need to be much more careful in the future. Inviting people you don’t know on jobs with you often leads to trouble. That’s why we have intermediaries.”

“S-Sorry. I’ll be more careful from now on.”

“You should,” she pressed. “You wouldn’t like it if something happened and your companion decided that you were to blame, would you?”

“Well, in that case it was my decision to bring them, so it *would* be my fault,” Akira replied. “But couldn’t I just compensate them as an apology?”

“That kind of thinking is too naive. Both of you would be armed, remember? What if the other party decided to turn on you first?”

Up until that point, Akira might have seemed like a child meekly accepting Sara’s scoldings. Then he said, “Oh, you mean like if something happened on this job and Carol tried to harm or put either of you in danger? Then I’d take responsibility and kill her myself.”

His voice was deadpan—there was no hint of particular determination or resolve behind those words. But that was precisely why the other three knew he was completely serious. He didn’t need determination or resolve, because to him such a course of action was completely natural. And he’d automatically interpreted “taking responsibility” as killing the other party to resolve the conflict, rather than paying them damages—he wouldn’t hesitate to take a life.

Carol smiled wryly. “Hey now, is that really something you ought to be saying when I’m right here beside you?”

“If you don’t intend to harm Elena and Sara, then that shouldn’t matter. Unless...” Akira’s eyes became dangerous—the eyes of someone who only saw

others in terms of hostile or nonhostile, on the verge of determining Carol as the former. “*Do you?*”

But Carol didn’t even flinch. Compared to the conflicts she was regularly involved in due to her side job, this was nothing to her. “Of course not,” she said lightly. “And by saying something so incriminating in front of Elena and Sara, you’re pretty much making me out to be a dangerous villain. Don’t you think that’s a bit unfair?” Carol smiled, but her eyes indicated displeasure.

That caught Akira off guard, and his expression returned to normal. “W-Wait, that’s not what I—”

“Then how about choosing your words a little more carefully from now on? Sara’s right that going on jobs with complete strangers often leads to trouble, but you can *prevent* a lot of that trouble by making a good first impression, you know.”

“S-Sorry, Carol.” Akira looked like a scolded kid again. The murderous aura around him had vanished, and the mood around the table lightened accordingly.

Carol turned to Elena and Sara. “If you’re wondering why Akira’s account was so vague, it’s because going into detail would mean leaking valuable intel he got from me. We surveyors sell information for a living, and Akira bought some from me when we were escaping the factory district together.”

“Is that true, Akira?” Elena asked.

Akira figured that if Carol was willing to divulge that much, it was okay for him to admit it, and he nodded. “Yeah. I didn’t want to accidentally leak information that she planned to sell.”

“So you had to skirt around it. Makes sense,” Elena replied, relieved.

“And that information made Akira realize my worth as a surveyor,” Carol continued. “Right, Akira? So he ended up hiring me. Not that I ever got the chance to show off my skill,” she added with a slight pout.

Elena looked surprised. “Never got the chance? What do you mean? We’re on a rescue mission in the business district. For more unfamiliar areas, we could definitely use an accomplished surveyor who knows their way around.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean *this* job. You see, when Akira couldn’t contact you two, he automatically assumed you might’ve run into trouble and hired me to help him scour the business district,” she said nonchalantly.

Akira did a spit take. Carol had let the cat out of the bag without any hesitation. Elena and Sara’s gazes trained on Akira.

“Is that true, Akira?” It was now Sara’s turn to ask.

“Um, well...” Akira tried to gloss over what Carol had said. “I just thought that, you know, accidents happen—”

“So he immediately jumped to the worst-case scenario without any basis for it,” Carol cut in. “I get why you’d want to cover up something that embarrassing—especially since the calls only failed because you were using such a cheap line—but rather than trying to cover it up and then coming across as suspicious, in this case it’s best to just come clean and say you’re sorry.”

Completely exposed, Akira bowed his head meekly. “I apologize.”

Elena and Sara looked taken aback at first, but then grinned.

“That’s enough, Akira—it’s no big deal,” Elena said. “We’re honestly glad you were looking out for us. Right, Sara?”

“Yes, absolutely! Thank you, Akira.”

Seeing that they weren’t upset with him, Akira smiled in relief. Meanwhile, Carol was studying the three of them with great interest—but Akira’s behavior toward the other two was what intrigued her the most.

Once their food—delicious enough to satisfy even the wealthiest hunters—arrived at their table, their discussion turned to the current state of Mihazono and the next rescue operation. Elena began by explaining that Kugamayama City had been working to secure the area and had already occupied a circular zone with the Hunter Office outpost at its center. The operation they’d just carried out had been within that circle.

“So now that we have two more people,” she said, “I was thinking we might be able to handle a rescue outside the secure zone. It’d be more dangerous, of

course, but the pay would be much better. We could at least check it out—and if it's too much for us to handle, we could always turn back. There's no penalty if we fail either, so what do you think?"

"No objections here," Akira answered. "What about you, Carol?"

"Works for me. I'll defer to whatever you decide, since you hired me. Besides, I've got to show you what I'm capable of so I can get a bigger cut," she teased.

"I wouldn't count on that," Akira shot back, smirking. "Elena said it was going to be dangerous, so once you run into trouble, my fee for protecting you is gonna cancel out whatever you earn."

"Just watch. I'll show you that even a surveyor can hold her own on the battlefield!"

Sara watched their banter with mixed feelings. They seemed to get along well enough, but after hearing Akira's earlier remark about killing Carol, Sara couldn't help but feel it strange that they were friendly at all.

"You're a surveyor, but you know how to fight?" she said. "Maybe I had the wrong idea, but I thought surveyors were just people who bought topography data and the like from hunters, compiled it, and then sold it to other hunters as intel."

"Most do, but I'm the type who prefers to head to the site and gather that data myself. That's why my maps contain information you won't get from other surveyors."

Akira nodded as something clicked. "Oh, so that's why you knew all that stuff back there, and why you know how to fight too."

"You got it," Carol said, looking somewhat smug. Then, abruptly, she took out her terminal and glanced at the screen. "Sorry," she said. "I've got something I need to take care of. It won't take long."

"Fine, but be sure to make it back before we head out again," Akira told her. Then he added, with a grin, "Unless you're okay getting left behind?"

"You wish." She smiled back and got up from the table.

Akira watched her leave. Only when he turned back did he notice that Elena

and Sara were staring at him in surprise. “Um, is something wrong?” he asked.

“Hm? No, nothing,” Elena said, trying to sound unconcerned. “Just, you and Carol only met for the first time yesterday, right? Yet you two already seem awfully close.”

“Really? I don’t especially feel that way.”

“Well, I just got that impression. Did something happen between you two that brought you closer all of a sudden, perhaps?”

“Closer? Hmm... Lemme see...” Akira couldn’t recall anything in particular, but the events of the previous day did surface in his mind. “Well, once we escaped from the factory district, my relic got smashed, but Carol compensated me for that as payment for protecting her. Oh, and then she treated me to an expensive dinner. It was delicious!” Realizing for the first time that this might have indeed caused him to open up to Carol more, Akira smiled a bit shamefacedly. “I know it’s not really anything to be proud of, but what can I say? I like money and food.”

Elena and Sara exchanged glances. Based on what they knew of Akira, he seemed to be telling the truth. More importantly, however, they’d confirmed that their worries had been for nothing, and though they knew it was rude, they couldn’t help but smirk at each other.

Akira found their reaction puzzling, but when Elena spoke again, her tone was much more cheerful.

“Well, we’re all relic hunters here. Considering we’re always risking our lives in the ruins for money, I can understand why someone with a lot of it might appeal to you.”

“Yeah, good point,” he said with a grin.

With their concerns laid to rest and Akira in good spirits, Elena smiled apologetically. “Akira, I’m sorry. Truthfully, well, from the way Carol was dressed, I was frankly worried that she’d seduced you.”

Sara wore a similar expression. “Sorry, Akira. I actually thought the same thing.”

For a moment Akira's face went blank, as though he were trying to process new information. Then it finally dawned on him what they meant, and he shook his head. "Oh, no, don't worry. Stuff like that doesn't really affect me." Otherwise, he thought to himself, he wouldn't be able to endure Alpha exposing herself in front of him on a daily basis.

But Sara grinned mischievously. "Oh, really? Mind if I test that claim?" She scooted her seat right up beside his, bringing her breasts level with his eyes.

He immediately panicked. "Wh-What are you doing?!"

"Hmm, seems like you're already pretty frazzled! You *suuure* it doesn't affect you?"

Akira glanced back at Elena as if begging for aid. But she just grinned impishly.

"You know, Sara, it doesn't seem like he's built up enough resistance after all. Perhaps we ought to break him in?"

"Stop it..." he moaned.

Sara sat back in her chair, causing Akira to let out a sigh of relief. But his face was still red with embarrassment. She grinned with amusement and happiness—the whole time he'd been with Carol, he'd never reacted like this. So despite feeling like she shouldn't, she couldn't help toying with him a little more. "I'm serious—if you want to get used to it, I can help!"

"Stop it!"

"Oh, am I not good enough for you?"

"That too. Knock it off!" Embarrassed, he snapped at her more sharply than he intended.

Sara backed off, but she and Elena amused themselves for some time afterward watching him sulk.



The moment Shikarabe returned to Druncam's temporary base, he started barking orders. "Togami! Give the vehicle a thorough cleaning. Restock the ammo inside and swap out the armored tiles! Got it?"

He acted authoritatively because he expected Togami to smart off otherwise. But to his surprise, Togami responded dutifully.

“Yes, sir.”

“R-Right...” Shikarabe was caught off guard but quickly recovered. “Get to it then.” He exited the vehicle and headed for the break room.

Togami did as he was told and began tidying up the transport. Doing so was a welcome distraction from his melancholy.

The rescue operation had left the inside of the vehicle absolutely filthy. However, this frequently happened during hunter work, and high-tech cleaning solutions had been developed as a result. Just a simple spray to the walls, floor, and other surfaces made the numerous bloodstains disappear without a trace. After that, he only had to air out the transport to get rid of the stench of iron.

Next he needed to restock the ammo. He was about to get down from the vehicle and head to the storeroom when two more boys climbed in, both Druncam rookies and members of Group B.

“Hey, Togami! Shikarabe got you on cleaning duty all by your lonesome while he takes it easy in the break room, huh? Must be rough!” They were clearly making fun of him.

Togami snorted. “You got some business with me?”

“We just wanted to see the pathetic look on your face after falling from your high horse,” said one. “We know the truth—that you screwed up during the bounty hunts.”

The other added, “Weren’t you gonna show the veterans how much better you were than everyone else? Serves you right!”

“They only brought you along because they needed an extra to round out the team,” the first one chimed in again. “You didn’t even do anything impressive, yet you’re parading around in borrowed gear, pretending like you’re some kind of big shot. You make me sick.”

“Or maybe you’re wearing it ’cause some advertiser told you to? Maybe by hiring you as their poster boy, they’re trying to show that with nice enough

gear, even a useless braggart can become a hunter!”

The boys continued to jeer at Togami. But he merely ignored them as if they weren’t even there and tried to pass them by.

The boys were upset that he wasn’t even getting angry like he was supposed to, and they wouldn’t let him leave.

“How dare you ignore us!”

“You think you’re above us or something?!”

They both reached for Togami’s shoulder to spin him around, forcing him to face them. But their hands only grabbed air—by that time, Togami had already slipped behind them. He grabbed the backs of their heads and nearly slammed them into the wall of the vehicle, stopping just before their heads collided with the metallic surface.

The boys didn’t even have time to react. Just a split second more, and their heads would’ve splattered against the wall. Their faces froze in terror.

Togami put his head between them and spoke casually. “I just finished cleaning up, you know. If I dirty the wall with your brains, I’ll have to clean it again. I’d rather not have to do that. So leave me alone, all right?”

“U-Understood. We’re sorry!” With Togami still holding their heads, it took an effort for them to nod, but they did so anyway.

Togami released them. The boys backed away from Togami slowly before breaking into a run, shouting threats at him as they fled.

Togami watched their retreating figures. Once they were gone, he heaved a deep sigh. “Cowards. I get it now—I only thought I was strong because I was comparing myself to weaklings like them.”

Strength was relative. Unless you were the kind of person who was constantly striving to grow stronger and expand your horizons, your assessment of strength would inevitably be based on those around you. Even though Togami couldn’t have helped the narrowness of his previous experience, he felt depressed all the same.

Still, he shook his head to rid himself of those negative thoughts and adopted

a different perspective—the fact that he'd recognized his error was proof he'd made progress.

In truth, the boys he'd threatened just now hadn't been weak at all—Togami was just that much stronger. They were also conceited—they already thought they were good enough. But after losing his self-confidence, Togami was no longer satisfied with where he stood, and that had made a huge difference for him.

The biggest factor, though, had been Akira's strength (thanks to Alpha's support). Seeing his fight during the tankrantula battle had given Togami a jolt—and had greatly raised his standard for what counted as "skilled."

Togami had just finished restocking the armored transport's ammunition reserves when he received another unexpected visitor—Mizuha. He wondered why an administrator from the desk jockeys would want to meet him, but she gave him a cordial smile.

"Hello, Togami. May I have a moment of your time?"

"Sure, I'm free. What's up?"

The long and short of it was that Mizuha had come to poach Togami for Group A. The Druncam executives all knew what had really happened during the bounty hunts, and so of course did Mizuha. But Togami was skilled enough that he was gaining a reputation as the "rising star of Katsuya's detractors," and that was something Mizuha couldn't ignore. If Togami joined Katsuya's side instead, it would simultaneously cripple the detractors and bolster Katsuya's forces.

Many of the rookies of Group B, to which Togami belonged, had been born in the slums. So the sponsors living within the city walls would likely object to moving him to Group A. But Mizuha was prepared for that—she'd tell them he'd been rehabilitated and was looking to start his life anew. Moreover, by accepting Togami despite his origins in Group B, they would send the message to other Group B members that they, too, could be in Group A if they were skilled enough. The potential turnover there would further weaken Katsuya's critics.

Ultimately, the pros of bringing Togami over to her side greatly outweighed

the cons. She'd decided to pay him a visit.

"So, what do you say? Are you interested?" she said after finishing her pitch. "We certainly wouldn't have someone of your caliber out here on solo cleaning duty. If you choose to join us, I could immediately assign you to a different station." Confident that her offer was sufficiently appealing, she smiled at Togami, waiting for his answer.

Togami was indeed tempted to agree right away. Still, he shook his head. "Sorry, I can't give you an answer right now."

Mizuha gave him a quizzical look. "May I ask why? Do you want special treatment? I can't put you on the same level as Katsuya, of course, but barring that, I'll do everything in my power to make sure you're satisfied."

"No, it's nothing so grand. I'm just in the middle of a job right now. Hunters shouldn't abandon a contract halfway once they take it on. Let me finish this first."

"Can I take that to mean you'll join us once your work in Mihazono is over?"

"I can't promise you that either. I'm sorry. Please give me some time to think it over first." Togami politely bowed his head.

With his excessive self-confidence uprooted, he'd become more modest. But Mizuha thought he was showing specific deference to her because she was a Druncam exec, and her impression of him went up a level. She smiled amicably. "I understand. Take as long as you need."

Mizuha had full access to the performance reviews of every hunter in Druncam. She'd read in Togami's file that he was far more competent than the rest of the rookies but had a tendency to let his skill go to his head.

Most of those reports had been written by Shikarabe.

But the Togami in front of her was completely different from the one depicted in the reports—he even seemed a bit meek. "Well, I won't take up any more of your time," she said, still smiling. "If you ever change your mind, feel free to contact me." As she left the room, she added to herself, *If Shikarabe thinks that counts as conceited, then the veterans' standards must be even more twisted than I thought. That settles it—I've got to reform this entire*

organization from the ground up!

Once she'd gone, Togami began putting fresh armored tiles into the transport's tile loader, which would automatically replace the missing or damaged ones. As he worked, he reflected on Mizuha's proposal.

If he wanted Druncam to acknowledge his skill, accepting her offer would be a no-brainer. The old Togami would have jumped at the chance. But he now had a new goal—before he could prove his strength to Druncam, he had to regain confidence in himself.

For that, he needed to be stronger. He was no longer satisfied with the low standard of performance the other Druncam rookies provided. The power he desired, coveted, *craved* was elsewhere.

And to gain power like he'd seen in Akira that day, Togami would do whatever it took.

Chapter 113: Another Rescue

After their break, Akira and the rest made preparations for the next rescue and headed to Mihazono's business district.

This time around, Elena had made the call to aid hunters outside the secure zone, and Shikarabe had backed her up. They proceeded through the district until they reached the border of the zone. The road was blocked off by a large temporary defensive wall. In addition, metallic pillars flanked the road on either side, generating a wall of force-field armor that stretched between them. The wall could easily deflect lighter artillery strikes, and since the pillars could be moved around effortlessly, their protection was portable to boot. For this reason, they were often used for defense when constructing temporary bases either in the ruins or out in the wasteland.

Security forces were gathered on either side of the defensive wall. Several were wearing powered armor. Akira also spotted a combat vehicle boasting a large machine gun on top and an automated weapon towering over six meters tall. *In other words, they need all that force to drive back whatever's beyond that wall*, he thought and steeled himself.

Elena went to talk to the defense force in order to get permission to pass. Their conversation was audible to Akira and the others through their comm devices.

"You'd better be careful this far out, miss," the guard said. "We're working on securing the surrounding area as we speak, but it's still nowhere near safe. There's a big lunker type of machine that shows up right around here every now and then, in fact. If you're part of a rescue team, I suspect you can hold your own in a fight, but if you go treating the border like the rest of the safe zone, you'll end up dead. Turn back at the slightest hint of danger."

"Thank you for the warning. We'll be careful," Elena replied.

A security guard opened up the defensive wall, and Akira and the rest drove through. The moment they were on the other side, the wall shut behind them.

Akira had a sudden thought, which he relayed to Elena over the wireless. “Elena, that guard mentioned a safe zone. What was he talking about?”

“Huh? Where we were just a bit ago, of course. Inside the circle.”

“I wouldn’t consider that ‘safe,’ though...”

Thinking to herself that he wasn’t wrong, Elena smiled dryly, though he couldn’t see her over the wireless. “True, but if the average hunter can handle the dangers of a given place, it’s still classified as a safe zone. And compared to out here, it probably *is* safe—look.” Elena pointed ahead. Everyone’s scanners were already synced, so she sent Akira her visual data.

“No way!” He couldn’t hide his surprise—a gigantic, powerful-looking multilegged tank was lying on the ground in pieces. The scene looked all too familiar to Akira.

“The defensive wall is there to keep formidable monsters like that one out,” Elena explained. “Just sealing off the road is enough to keep the bigger ones from coming in.”

Of course, she added, it wouldn’t keep the smaller sentries from entering through the buildings along the border and slipping through the city’s defenses—in fact, that had been precisely how the robots they’d fought during the last rescue operation had gotten through. But according to the city forces, such a barrier was still preferable to getting invaded by deadly mechanical behemoths. The average hunter would at least be able to handle a few grunt sentries—and more importantly, there was a limit to how many guards the city could deploy.

As he listened to Elena’s explanation through the wireless, Akira whispered to Carol. “Hey—that’s the same kind of tank we fought yesterday, isn’t it?”

“Sure looks like it. You know, things in the ruin had already started to go haywire even back then. Maybe that’s why it tried to attack us even after we escaped from the factory district? Hmm... No, that doesn’t make sense...” Carol groaned as if something wasn’t adding up.

“Come to think of it, where do you suppose it was being carried to in that bin?” Akira wondered.

“Good question. Probably the Serantal Building, if I had to guess. You know

how I told you before that some idiot took out the guards at the entrance and left the building wide open? I suspect it was supposed to replace those..." A new realization crossed her mind, and her expression turned grim. "And we ended up destroying the replacement, which means the building never got sealed...and that would certainly explain why the situation got so much worse..." She turned to him. "A-Akira, let's keep this between you and me, okay?" she said, with a smile that seemed to suggest they were now partners in crime.

"G-Good idea!" Akira responded, his smile stiff for a different reason. Perhaps, he wondered, the tank's real target all along had been the one who'd defeated the Serantal guards in the first place.

But for obvious reasons, he didn't voice that suspicion.



As commander of the operation, Elena took point in her truck, scouting out the surrounding area. For the moment, there were no threats. That didn't mean there weren't monsters—there were always monsters—but they were few and far between, and they (mostly) didn't try to approach. The ones that did were small and easily reduced to scrap.

Still, as their destination drew near, she became more cautious. Several teams had already attempted this particular rescue—and failed. She knew one of them had turned tail right around this area, so she let everyone know through the comms to be on guard.

"From this point forward, expect a significantly higher number of enemies," she warned. "We're going to charge right through until we reach the rescue point, so take care not to fall behind. Akira—fall back to the rear. If it gets too dicey back there, don't try to take them all out on your own—let us know immediately and then we'll retreat."

"Understood," Akira responded. "Don't take on more than you can handle either, you two. Get out of there immediately and end the operation if it gets dangerous."

"Oh? That's unusual to hear from you. If I did that, we'd lose out on some seriously good pay. Are you really okay with that?"

Being too reckless only led to death. But excessive cowardice would also lead to death—from starvation. To stay alive *and* put food on the table, relic hunters had to find the perfect balance between the two. After all, there'd be no point in venturing into the dangerous territory of the wasteland in the first place if they came out empty-handed.

Of course, Elena wasn't about to encourage reckless behavior. If she felt they were in over their heads, they would retreat. Even so, she couldn't help but feel like such a comment, when coming from Akira, sounded awfully spineless. So she wanted to prod him a little.

But Akira responded seriously, "That's fine—I don't care. As long as you and Sara stay safe, that's more important than money."

"O-Oh? W-Well, don't worry about us—we don't plan to die here, and if I *do* decide to give the order to retreat, I plan to do it while we still have time to escape. So just focus on keeping the rear secure, okay?"

"Understood."

Elena hung up and breathed a sigh. In the passenger's seat, Sara looked amused.

"What?" Elena said irritably.

"Oh, nothing. Just thinking he's worrying about *us* now, rather than the other way around, huh?"

"Then we ought to do our best so that he doesn't need to. They're coming toward us as we speak. Get ready." Their vehicle's scanner was picking up numerous signals ahead. Judging from the size of the dots on the screen, the enemies were smaller, but the swarm itself was over ten times larger than any they'd encountered on their way here thus far—and this was only what the scanner could pick up from their *current* location. The opposing forces likely consisted of many more beyond that.

But Sara grinned fearlessly. "Leave it to me! We've got to show Akira that we can take care of ourselves."

By now Elena and Sara understood that Akira had come to Mihazono this time purely to save them from potential danger. Perhaps at first he'd accepted the

job to obtain some easy money, but once he'd failed to reach them by terminal, his objective had changed completely. They'd already suspected this from how he'd hired Carol despite hardly knowing her and then headed out to the ruin without even waiting for sunrise. But after the discussion at the restaurant and hearing him just now, they were convinced: all because of a minor communication failure, Akira had automatically jumped to the conclusion that they'd run into trouble beyond what they could handle. Of course, the women could've taken that as an insult (and indeed, they did feel a bit like he was underestimating their skill). But they were mostly glad he cared enough about them to immediately go to their aid.

Becoming a relic hunter meant constantly putting your life at risk. Since hunters were always using their own lives as a gambling chip, they often came to view human life in general from a calculated, rather than emotional, perspective. Elena, Sara, and Akira hadn't gone to rescue others out of the goodness of their hearts—they expected a payout comparable to the risk. Yet Akira had come to their aid—fully prepared to brave the dangerous ruin for their sake—even though it wasn't part of the job and wouldn't net him any extra pay. He'd even hired Carol as a guide out of his own pocket. Elena and Sara were incredibly grateful and delighted to have a companion who felt so concerned for them.

“Look at how many there are! It would be a waste of time and energy to kill them all,” Elena observed. “Only take care of the ones in our way as we barrel through them. Ready?”

“Anytime!”

“Good. Here we go!” Elena and Sara's car shot forward, breaking away from the rest of the convoy. As the vehicle continued to accelerate, Elena leveled the mounted machine gun at their foes and began mowing them down, while Sara joined the onslaught with heavy weaponry. Their overwhelming combined firepower devastated the armored A24s in their path, clearing the way for Akira and the rest.



Meanwhile, Akira fired round after round from his A4WM grenade launcher

at a horde of machines pursuing them. Explosions scattered throughout the ruin, taking out large groups of A24s.

The convoy consisted of Elena and Sara at the front, Shikarabe's transport in the middle, and Akira bringing up the rear. Just as Elena had commanded, the hunters were proceeding right through the enemy swarm. Some enemies had gotten past the vehicles at the front, circled around, and were now chasing them from behind. Akira's job was to deal with these—and he couldn't use more than half of his grenades, since he'd have to do the same thing on the trip back but with distressed victims in tow. In other words, if he couldn't handle this much, he might as well just give up and go home now.

Fortunately, his objective was only to keep the enemies from reaching the convoy, not necessarily to eliminate them. Even if his shells didn't destroy the machines, it was sufficient to just blast them away—a simple enough job considering the sheer firepower of his automatic grenade launcher.

But by now he was burning through ammo faster than he'd planned. *Out again?! Damn, that was fast!* He tossed another empty magazine from the vehicle and loaded a fresh one.

No helping that, since you didn't buy the extended variety, Alpha pointed out. While the standard magazines Akira was using were larger than assault rifle magazines, this was only because the grenades themselves were large—the launcher chewed through each magazine in no time. Extended magazines for grenades fetched a much higher price than those for bullets. Even Akira, to his disappointment, couldn't afford an entire stock for his grenade launcher—he'd only bought a few for emergencies when exploring buildings in the ruins and the like, and otherwise settled for the standard variety.

But now he had to reload his weapon constantly, allowing the monsters to get closer.

Alone, he would've had to keep firing his DVTS with one hand while reloading the launcher with the other. But now Carol was at his side, and he didn't need to—her oversized handgun annihilated targets in one hit, buying him time.

She was an extraordinary marksman. When the imprecise explosions from the grenades left individual machines standing, she expertly picked them off. She

smugly turned to Akira.

“I know you’re a bit preoccupied, but can’t you spare a word of praise or two for how I’m supporting you so effortlessly?”

“Sure, but don’t forget I’m doing the lion’s share of driving them back.”

“Oh? If you’re getting tired, I don’t mind switching.”

“Yeah, right!”

They grinned at each other. Neither would give in when they’d agreed to split their pay based on how well each performed, after all.

Thus they kept slaughtering the swarm of A24s.

The enormous piles of pulverized scraps littering the road testified that Akira and Carol had far surpassed their original goal of merely keeping the enemy at bay. And together, the two of them blew all of Elena’s, Sara’s, and Shikarabe’s expectations out of the water.



In the lobby of one of the numerous buildings of the business district, a group of hunters was holed up. Their heads were drooping, and their eyes looked dead.

The hunters had barricaded all the hallways and stairs leading to the lobby with the nearby remains of mechanical monsters, as well as their own equipment, and blocked off the entrance with a totaled desert utility vehicle. The building itself was sufficiently solid to keep them safe for now. If rescue came, they’d have to remove the barricade, which would delay their escape—but they preferred that to being slaughtered now by hostile machines.

Forty hours had already passed since they’d taken refuge here. They took turns keeping watch and sleeping, but all were nearing their limit. Their faces looked haggard and disheveled.

A vast swarm of A24s roamed the inside of the building and the perimeter outside. Given the slightest opportunity, the machines would break through the barricades and resume their onslaught. The hunters couldn’t afford to let their guard down for even a second. They were also nearly out of ammunition, and

their enemies couldn't be taken down with close-quarters combat—so without ammo, the hunters would be powerless to fight back any incursion.

No one left was optimistic enough to try and escape—all who had attempted it were dead. Their only option now was to hope for rescue, but they'd just about given up on that as well—while several rescue teams had already shown up, they'd all turned around and retreated once they saw the sheer number of enemies in the area. "Sorry, you're on your own for this one," they'd said.

Over and over again, the surviving hunters had been overjoyed that help had finally arrived, only for their hopes to be dashed. By now, they were nearly out of the energy and will to push on.

One of the men on guard duty mumbled to another man, who was staring at his data terminal with bleary, unfocused eyes. "Any developments?"

There was no reply, but his companion's head creaked from side to side ever so slightly.

"I see." He'd already known the answer—had it been different, the other man would have been jumping for joy. Still, he'd asked anyway, because a part of him stubbornly refused to let go of that last thread of hope.

As time had passed, the hunters trapped in the lobby had slowly but surely been worn down to the point of exhaustion—both physically and mentally. They consisted of not just one team but several that had met up while trying to escape the ruins. And the man staring at his terminal with dead eyes was the only remaining member of his group. The rest had all been wiped out as they were setting up the barricades—one teammate, half crazed, had tried to make a break for the exit and been gunned down immediately, another had died from the severity of their wounds, and the rest had been surrounded by the enemy and massacred. He could hear their dying screams even now.

As the last one left, he had nearly exhausted his will to live. But he wasn't quite ready yet to resign himself to death. Still clinging to a final strand of hope, he continued to gaze unblinkingly at his terminal.

Time wore on, with no end in sight and nothing to do. It threatened to drive him mad. In his hazy consciousness he was starting to wonder whether the world around him was actually real, a dream, or a hallucination, when his

terminal suddenly came to life.

A crooked smile came to the man's lips. Whether this was reality or a dream, he might as well answer. Tapping with his finger, he accepted the call.

A woman's voice came through. "I'm the commander of a rescue team deployed on behalf of Allfine Insurance. Am I speaking to Mr. Cochranes?"

The man was still in a daze—while the voice reached his ears, it failed to register.

"Can you hear me? This terminal belongs to Mr. Cochranes, correct? Are you injured? Can you respond? If not, is there anyone else around you who can? We'd like an update on your situation."

The nearby hunter on guard duty had also heard the woman's voice, but since the man with the terminal hadn't responded, the guard assumed it was some sort of system notification and ignored it.

"Hello? Can you give us some sort of response, please? Anything's fine—we're approaching your location, and we just need to know someone's on the other end." When there was nothing but silence, the voice sounded puzzled. "Could the terminal have been set to answer calls automatically?"

Realizing now that the voice sounded too human to be coming from the terminal's OS, the hunter on watch looked nonplussed.

"I'm sorry, but my team and I are not going to break through a horde of monsters just to retrieve a bunch of corpses," the voice continued. "If I don't receive a reply, I'm going to assume everyone on the other end is already dead and head back. If your mic is broken, a text message or even gunfire will suffice—we just need a response."

The man holding the terminal was also finally beginning to come to his senses. But he was still quite confused and couldn't tell whether he was merely hearing things. So he still didn't reply.

"No answer?" she said. "Guess that means there are no survivors, then. Seems we were too late. It's a shame, but there's no helping it, I suppose."

"Help us!" the two men cried out at last at the top of their lungs.

Their shouts resounded throughout the lobby, rousing the spirits of the other vacant-eyed hunters. The place immediately erupted with activity.

After all, they knew this would be their last chance.



Akira and the others had parked near the building where the evacuees were taking refuge. As they prepared to rush in, they received a transmission from Elena.

“Before we begin, let’s go over the plan! We head in and get out within ten minutes! If at any point I decide the situation requires us to retreat, stop whatever you’re doing and head back to your vehicle! Is that clear?”

Akira and everyone else answered in the affirmative.

“Team Shikarabe, secure the evacuees as quickly as you can! Do not waste time searching for survivors! Dead or alive, load up all the ones already in the lobby!”

“Understood,” Shikarabe replied.

“Team Akira, back Team Shikarabe up! Keep the surrounding area clear of enemies so we can escape once everyone’s on board!”

“Roger!” Akira said.

“Everyone understand their role? Good! Begin—*now!*”

Elena’s order resounded with authority, and every vehicle immediately charged onto the building’s grounds—even as the armored A24s switched targets from the hunters in the building to Akira and the others. The spherical tires on their legs screeched against the ground, kicking up dust as they turned toward the rescue team. When their cannons and machine guns were all trained on the armored transport in the lead, the A24s opened fire simultaneously.

The sheer intensity of the combined gun and cannon fire tore several armored tiles off Shikarabe’s transport. But this vehicle had survived the bounty hunts—the A24s’ assault fell far short of those and was hardly grounds for retreat. The armored transport’s mounted machine guns responded

immediately. The built-in weapons all met desert utility standards and were capable of continuous rapid fire. And since the A24s were nowhere near as resilient as the bounty monsters had been, the dense hail of bullets didn't just pierce through their armor—it crushed them beyond recognition, laying waste to their front lines.

With the armored military transport serving as a decoy, Akira's and Elena's own vehicles charged ahead, unloading everything they had into the rest of the horde. Akira and Sara rained grenades down on the machines, reducing them to a mountain of scrap. Carol fired rounds as powerful as CWH proprietary bullets from her massive handgun, taking out multiple enemies with each shot. And behind her mounted machine gun, Elena mowed down the rest.

A new batch of A24s poured in to reinforce their numbers, but so intense was the firepower from Akira and the others that the newcomers could hardly put up a fight. In no time at all, the building's grounds had become a battlefield dominated by gunfire and littered with pieces of broken machinery.

Meanwhile, the hunters inside the building were watching what they could of the battle through the desert utility vehicle barricading the entrance.

"They made it! We're really gonna be rescued! They broke through all those monsters!"

"Get the vehicle out of the way, quick! While they're keeping the enemy at bay, we've got to get everything ready for transport!"

"Carry the injured to the entrance! Hurry!"

The hunters immediately sprang into action. If they let this chance pass them by, they would be goners. Summoning the last dregs of their energy and spirit, they all pitched in to prepare for escape.

Shikarabe's team pulled up to the front of the building and braked so hard that the transport spun a half-turn, leaving the back hatch facing the building's entrance. But the hunters' vehicle was still in the way. Those trapped had been working to move it as quickly as they could—but the vehicle was bulky enough to withstand the attacks from the A24 horde, and the humans' powered suits were nearly out of energy.

Shikarabe couldn't wait around. Popping open the back hatch and leaping out of the transport, he delivered a powerful kick to the obstacle. Even though several hunters hadn't been able to even make it budge, his costly, high-spec powered suit packed more than enough force to send the vehicle flying.

"We've got five minutes!" he commanded. "Living or dead, get all the casualties on board!"

Some of the wounded had already been carried to the entrance, and Shikarabe started to load them into the transport. But one uninjured hunter tried to clamber aboard first.

Shikarabe grabbed him. He didn't just toss the hunter out of the vehicle—he carried him all the way back to the building and flung him in.

The overeager hunter's face was racked with panic. "What the *hell*?! What gives?!"

Shikarabe glared at him. "If you're well enough to move on your own, you wait your turn. The immobile ones go on first."

"Screw everyone else! *I'm* gonna survive!" The man ignored Shikarabe and desperately tried to force his way back.

Annoyed, Shikarabe gave another swift kick, and the man crumpled to the ground, out cold. No longer able to move on his own, he now technically fulfilled the condition for being able to board. But with the toe of his boot, Shikarabe punted the man's body off to the side, leaving him for very last. The rest of the hunters recoiled in fear.

"I repeat!" Shikarabe barked. "Load all the casualties on board, dead or alive! It doesn't matter if they're a headless corpse or a severed head—I said *everyone*! Don't just stand there, get a move on!"

The hunters began working even faster.

While Shikarabe loaded the wounded onto the transport, Akira and the others finished mopping up the last of the A24s in the area. That gave the entire team more room to breathe, but they weren't in the clear just yet. All that gunfire had undoubtedly alerted other monsters to their presence, including the swarm

of machines they'd broken through (without defeating) on the way here. If they hung around much longer, more robots would be here before they knew it.

Elena contacted Shikarabe. "What's your status? I'd like us to be out of here within the next minute if possible."

"Shouldn't be a problem. We're almost done on our end."

"Understood. Then..." Her voice trailed off.

A new wave of enemy reinforcements had started to appear—an armored A24 had smashed through an upper floor window and was racing down the side of the building, aiming its artillery and machine gun at the defenders.

The next instant Akira gunned it down. Alpha's scouting had revealed the monster's presence beforehand, and Akira already had his CWH trained on a window just ahead of the machine's path. The proprietary bullet punched through the A24's torso. Its mangled husk fell from the building, landing on the roof of the transport vehicle with a deafening crash.

But the danger wasn't over. More A24s began pouring from the other windows. Sara and Carol joined in fending them off, but it was impossible to take care of so many.

"Make that thirty seconds!" Elena shouted to Shikarabe.

"Roger that!" Inside the lobby, Shikarabe had no way of knowing what was going on outside. But he understood that *something* must've happened for Elena to shorten the time limit, so he hurried to evacuate everyone by the deadline, without a word of complaint.

At that moment, the remains of the destroyed A24s that had been used to block off one of the building's corridors blew apart, and intact A24s poured in. The machines had broken through at last.

Shikarabe immediately took point and fired at the approaching horde. His bullets destroyed the newcomers, shredding them into a mountain of scrap metal that resembled the one that had just been blocking off the passage. But he couldn't keep it up for long—the barricades sealing the other corridors were also being blasted apart one after another by the A24s on the other side. As Shikarabe retreated toward the entrance, he shouted to the other hunters,

“We’re leaving! Hurry up!”

The hunters managed to load the last of the wounded into the vehicle. The A24s had already reached the inside of the lobby. Shikarabe didn’t stop shooting until he’d made it back to the transport and hopped aboard.

“Floor it, Togami!” he shouted as he manually slammed the back hatch shut. A moment later, a barrage of heavy artillery and gunfire struck the back of the transport. As if propelled forward by the impact, the armored transport peeled out of the area at maximum speed.

Akira and the rest of the team fell in right behind. Taking out all those A24s would’ve been difficult, but merely outrunning them in these vehicles was a cinch. Sending a final curtain of gunfire toward their pursuers, the hunters had no trouble escaping the building’s grounds.

Chapter 114: To Repay a Debt

Now that Akira and the others had successfully recovered the refugees, they all made a beeline for the clinic. Groups of A24s attacked them just as they had on the way here, but these were dealt with in a similar fashion as the convoy headed to the ruin's entrance. Once enemies were no longer pursuing them, Akira sighed in relief from the bed of his truck.

"All right! Looks like that's all of them," he said.

"The trip back was a lot easier this time, huh?" Carol said, wearing a placid smile. "By the way, Akira, I've been meaning to ask—you've been driving this truck the entire time, right?"

"I've got it on automatic right now, but yeah. Why?"

Carol immediately saw the wariness on his face—he was clearly hiding something. But she didn't let it show that she'd caught on.

"Oh, I was just thinking you're even more amazing than I thought! Even with automatic assist, normally it would be impossible to control a vehicle *and* gun down monsters at the same time! And not just in an open expanse like the wasteland, but in a ruin, no less!"

The one actually at the wheel, of course, was Alpha, and Akira had been on guard lest Carol suspect something. But now, thinking that she just wanted to praise him instead, he relaxed. "Yeah, I guess," he said with a small smile. "I mean, if I couldn't handle that much, I wouldn't have headed to the factory district on my own in the first place."

"Fair point. I suppose compared to fighting a gigantic tank on the side of a building, it's not that big of a deal." She laughed. Then, just as casually, she added, "Come to think of it, how is your automatic drive so precise? Does it increase its accuracy by obtaining data from the ruins or something? I think I heard somewhere that more expensive vehicles are capable of that..."

"Huh? I mean, this one was pretty pricey, but I don't think it has a feature like

that.” *It doesn’t, right, Alpha?*

It does not, she confirmed.

Akira nodded to Alpha’s response without realizing it.

Wearing a nonchalant expression, Carol observed his reaction closely. Thanks to the keen observation skills she had honed through her side job, she could tell when a man was lying to her.

He’s not fibbing. That much was easy enough for her to see. *I wonder...*

In fact, she couldn’t have cared less about Akira’s vehicle. What mattered was whether or not Akira was obtaining data from the ruins. And having inferred that he wasn’t, she was secretly a bit disappointed.

So he really is just that talented. Well, I’m almost certain there’s something he’s not telling me, but it’s probably unrelated. After all, if Akira was one of those, he wouldn’t have hired me to guide him through the ruins in the first place. She had been suspicious of Akira ever since witnessing his outstanding scouting ability in the ruins, but now she concluded that she’d apparently been mistaken.

“Something wrong?” Akira asked.

“Huh? Oh, no—it’s nothing.” Seeing Akira’s concerned expression, she thought she might have accidentally let her inner thoughts show on her face. She smiled alluringly in an attempt to cover it up.

“From your expression,” he went on, “it looks like something’s bothering you.”

“It’s really no big deal. But if you’re really that concerned, I can tell you one thing that’s on my mind.”

“What would that be?”

“You couldn’t care less about *my* body,” she complained, “but you practically *drool* over Elena’s and Sara’s. What do they have that I don’t? Frankly, I don’t believe I lose to them in looks *or* figure.”

Akira sputtered in surprise.

“Or maybe they strike you as the types who might indulge some kink of yours?”

“That’s awfully rude!”

“Rude to you or to them?”

“Both!”

“Oh, don’t worry! Despite how I may seem, I can keep a secret. That sort of trust is important during my side job too. My lips are sealed, so come on, tell me!”

Akira gave a deep sigh but said nothing. Carol shook her head and gave a small smile as if to lament, *What a shame!* Just like she’d expected, she hadn’t gotten any closer to an answer.

Then a call came in from Elena. “Akira?”

“Y-Yes?!” Given the kind of conversation he’d just been having about them, he was startled, and it showed in his voice.

Elena found his panicked reply odd but cut right to the chase. “I’m picking up some pretty large readings coming toward us from behind—multiple, in fact. My guess is some gigantic machines are bearing down on us. If you two feel like you’ll have trouble taking them down with your current equipment, we’ll figure something else out, but what do you think? Can you handle it?”

Can I handle it, Alpha?

Absolutely!

“No big deal.”

“Really? Then perhaps we should at least provide backup. Sara and I are headed your way.”

Elena’s vehicle, which had been at the head, moved to the side to let Shikarabe pass and fell in alongside Akira’s truck, leaving some space between them. Sara waved and pointed to the heavy weapon she was holding.

The reason for that gesture appeared behind them—an enormous multilegged tank very similar to the one they’d seen just outside the defensive

wall. This one was nimbly making its way between all the debris and wreckage on the road, gaining on them from a distance.

In his augmented vision, Akira could see the monstrosity clearly. Its mere presence was intimidating, on a whole different level than the A24s. Sure, he'd already taken down a similar tank the other day, but that was precisely how he knew he couldn't afford to let his guard down now.

He watched the tank's turret swivel and the muzzle of its cannon turn to face them. Suddenly, something blasted a gigantic hole in its side—a powerful shot had instantaneously pierced it through. The impact stopped the monster in its tracks and sent it flying sideways, spinning through the air. Centrifugal force snapped its legs off like twigs as it bounced along the road and rolled to a stop.

Shocked, Akira reflexively turned in the direction the bullet had to have come from. Sara was standing there—a smug, triumphant grin on her face.

Whoa... She took it out in one hit!

Well, Elena and Sara wouldn't have taken this job in the first place if they weren't equipped for it, Alpha commented.

I suppose so.

"Hey, Akira," Carol piped up suddenly. "This will probably be our last fight for today, so let's talk about how we're splitting the pay. Based on our performance so far, how much do you think each of us deserve?"

"Hmm..." Akira considered Carol's support a big help, and he had no intention of asking for a bigger cut than he thought he deserved. But he wasn't going to dock his own pay unnecessarily either. "Probably about seventy-thirty... No, more like eighty-twenty?" He was offering a ballpark estimate roughly based on the number of enemies they'd each taken down (notwithstanding that his superior equipment had allowed him to accomplish more), taking care to leave plenty of room for discussion.

At that, Carol looked cocky. "That so? Then I guess I'm going to have to make it at least fifty-fifty by the end of this fight. Get ready, Akira!"

Leaving Akira looking puzzled, Carol swiftly swapped out the magazine on her large handgun, then equipped an optional energy pack. Holding the gun steady

with both hands, she fired at a brand-new tank, much larger than the others, that had just appeared. The sheer force of the massive bullet rent the air as it sped toward its target. While it didn't pierce through the machine's exterior, it didn't need to—the tank's body was instantly crushed, as though it had been struck by a large fist.

Akira couldn't help but gawk at her. She just gave him a smug grin similar to the one Sara had earlier. Carol's, however, was ever so slightly strained.

"Wow! *You* took it out in one hit too!" Akira exclaimed. "Nice job. All right, now it's *my*—"

"Sorry, no more turns for you today!"

"Wait, what?"

"I said I was gonna make it fifty-fifty, right? From this point on, I'm not letting you do anything but drive."

"No way, you can't possibly..." Akira began dismissively, but quickly swallowed his words. A new behemoth had appeared—and Carol had dropped it in no time flat. Sure, he'd readied his CWH, but the enemy had been too far away for any such shot to be effective. With Alpha's support he wouldn't have missed, but the air resistance would have weakened the bullet's force, preventing him from destroying the target in one hit.

The next enemy showed up. Akira aimed, but again it was so far away that shooting was meaningless. Yet Carol destroyed it like it was nothing.

He started to panic. "W-Wait, you can't be serious!"

"You bet I am. I might be a surveyor, but don't forget I'm also a hunter like you. You may have not hired me for my combat skills, but I won't stand for you thinking I'm so useless that I only deserve twenty percent. I told you to get ready, didn't I? That's because I sure am!"

Sara annihilated the next multilegged tank. Akira had assured them that he and Carol would be able to handle things, which Elena and Sarah had understood to mean Carol would be watching his back. The two women had decided to pitch in and help Akira fight instead of leaving him to take down the majority of the enemy on his own. The end result? Akira was left with nothing

to do.

“R-Ready? Ready for what?” he asked Carol, looking almost fearful.

“To go in the red!” she replied with a stiff smile. “These bullets, well, they’re really expensive.”

Her gun was large, but it was only a handgun. How was it one-shotting targets at that distance? The secret was most likely her ammunition—and ammo like that was sure to be ridiculously expensive.

Akira almost bought that answer when something clicked.

“Hey, you don’t have to go all out like that when I’m here!”

“Actually, I do. So *you* better put your best foot forward too!” she declared, turning a cocky grin on him before lining up her next shot.

Looking desperate, Akira hurriedly readied his CWH as well. *Alpha! Back me up!*

But Alpha seemed indifferent to his plight. *I’ll support you like I always do, of course. But you’re asking too much if you think I can somehow make your weapon match the strength and range of hers.*

Y-You can’t do anything about that?! At this rate, Carol’s going to end up with the majority of our pay! Didn’t you say we’re going to need money to get stronger?!

I did, but my hands are tied here. Sorry. Besides, you were fully prepared to go in the red by the time you hired Carol, weren’t you?

Well, yeah, but—

Oh, so you admit it? Alpha asked, lightly admonishing him with her gaze.

Akira looked away. He’d acted like he was ready to lose money, true, but he was only thinking of taking a small hit—not something like this.

Look, Akira. I’m not going to say you shouldn’t have gone to help Elena and Sara, and as long as you’re fine with it I don’t care how many expenses you pile up. Just don’t make it a habit to work without any regard for profit, okay?

All right, Akira said sullenly.

Good. Now then, let's do our best so that we take as little of a loss here as possible.

Okay!

With Alpha's help Akira managed to destroy at least a few of the tanks, so his kill count didn't stay at zero. They continued to intercept their pursuers until they made it back to the temporary defensive wall.

Carol turned to him. "Looks like that's it. So, Akira, what would you say the split would be now?" she asked, grinning triumphantly.

In contrast, Akira looked exhausted. "Fifty-fifty," he said reluctantly and sighed.



Akira and the rest made it safely back to the provisional clinic and finished handing over the wounded hunters. Once the armored transport was empty, Shikarabe began ordering Togami around once more.

"Togami! Check for anything anyone might have left behind!" he barked, pointing inside the vehicle. "Then give the transport a good cleaning!" Of course, he meant any corpses or severed limbs that anyone might have failed to notice and pick up. Among the rescued there had been torsos with missing limbs or heads, and some were just severed heads without bodies. So if they didn't thoroughly check the inside of the vehicle, there was a good chance they might accidentally leave a body part or two behind.

"Understood," Togami replied after just a moment of hesitation, and obeyed without objecting.

Shikarabe was once again surprised—twice now Togami had followed orders without talking back—but at least the boy was doing as he'd been asked. So Shikarabe just shrugged and turned to Elena.

"Elena, that's it for the day, right?"

"Yes. Good work today, Shikarabe!" She turned to Akira and Carol, the only members of the team who hadn't been hard at work rescuing hunters before the sun had even risen. "What are your plans from here on out?" Considering

the group's remaining stamina and ammo, Elena had decided to wrap up early. But she'd also told Akira earlier that if he and Carol still wanted to continue aiding the hunters, she would at least help them as an intermediary.

"Hmm, if you guys are calling it a day, then I was thinking I would too. But what do you think, Carol?"

"Oh, you want *me* to decide?"

"Yeah. I'm okay with doing a few more if you want to, or even if you just want to do some surveyor work. Since I woke you up in the middle of the night to hire you, I can at least tag along for that." He grinned. "But then you're gonna have to hire me to protect you. My job's already over, after all."

"Oh, *now* I see! Well, what to do then...?"

As Carol pretended to mull it over, Togami poked his head out from the transport. "If you two are gonna continue, let me come too. We can even use the transport, since I'm in charge of it right now."

Having the transport would be a huge boon for them, whether they were continuing relief efforts or wandering the ruins to survey them. It was an unexpected, but welcome, offer.

Carol shook her head, however. "Nah, I don't think so. Let's just call it quits for today."

"All right..." Looking disappointed, Togami retreated back into the transport.

Afterward, they all parted for the day. Elena and Sara said they needed to hang back and discuss something with the insurance firm, and Carol explained she had to take care of a personal matter, so Akira left the Mihazono Town Ruins alone.



Togami returned to Druncam's temporary base and cleaned the transport as he was told. He was just about to hop outside, shut the back hatch, and leave when an unexpected visitor showed up.

"Why, hello there," called the newcomer.

"You, huh?" Togami responded.

Smiling sweetly, Carol entered the transport and inched up beside Togami.

“Why are you here?” he demanded. “Wait, how did you even get in? What happened to the guards on duty?” The Druncam base wasn’t open to outsiders—and due to past events Carol had been barred from entering any Druncam facility. Togami was well aware of this and looked guarded.

Carol’s smile didn’t falter. “Simple! I just asked, and they let me in. It really helps me out when boys are honest with themselves.”

Togami clicked his tongue in irritation and shook his head. “Idiots... What the hell do they think they’re doing?”

Security at the temporary Druncam base was not delegated to the veterans, as it was considered grunt work. So it had fallen to the rookies—currently those of Group B. Togami could easily imagine that those boys had fallen victim to Carol’s charms and let her pass.

Carol being here right now was a huge problem. In the worst case, he could even be held responsible. And had she been the type to obediently go home if he told her to get lost, she wouldn’t have been here in the first place. So he decided the best option would be to let her do what she had come for and then usher her out as quickly as possible.

“I’ll ask again—why are you here? If you’re looking for Shikarabe, he’s elsewhere. I don’t know where.”

“No, I came to see *you*.”

“Me? Why me?”

“I thought I might ask you a few things about Akira.”

“Akira? I mean, it’s not like we’re friends or anything, so I don’t really know anything about that guy.”

“Perhaps. But you *did* fight alongside him during the tankrantula hunt, didn’t you? Tell me about that. If I had to guess, I’d say you know *very* well what Akira’s truly capable of.”

Togami’s eyes instantly narrowed. That information hadn’t been divulged to the public—and more importantly, that fight wasn’t something Togami

particularly wanted to recall. But at the same time, he decided that there was no point in playing dumb. “I’m not obliged to tell you anything. If you really want to know, go ask Elena or Sara instead. They seem to like Akira a lot, and I heard they hired him during the hypersynthetic snake hunt too. They ought to be able to tell you a lot more about Akira than I ever could.”

“Well, maybe so,” Carol said, unfastening the harness at her chest, cozying up even closer to him, and slowly unzipping the fastener on the front of her inner wear. Togami’s eyes were instantly drawn to her exposed skin. “But I’m *much* better at getting information out of men than women. You understand what I’m getting at, right?”

With a bewitching smile, she closed the distance between them. Still on guard, but now red-faced, he tried to back away. Togami knew well from growing up in the slums that propositions like these never led to anything good. The fact that Carol had effectively been blacklisted by Druncam only served to support this. But even so, he was finding her charms incredibly difficult to resist.

Togami kept backing up until Carol had cornered him in the driver’s cabin on the opposite side, and he had nowhere else to go.

“W-Wait! What do you want to know?! All I can say is that he’s ridiculously strong! But you ought to know that much yourself just by fighting alongside him today, right?!”

“I want to hear the details from someone well-informed. After all, you’ve researched Akira quite a bit yourself, haven’t you? Like right after the tankrantula hunt was over, for instance?”

“H-How did you...? W-Wait, okay, okay, I get it! I’ll talk! I’ll tell you all you want to know, so back off already!” As long as he omitted the bits he was embarrassed about, he didn’t really have a reason to keep anything a secret. If spilling the beans would help him avoid getting into worse trouble, he ought to. So he changed tack—he’d tell her all she wanted, and then shoo her out.

But after being ignored so many times by Akira, Carol was greatly enjoying Togami’s reaction. “Oh, don’t be so reserved. Let’s have some fun! You’re not obliged to tell me anything, right? Then how about I give you *all sorts* of reasons to talk?” Staring bewitchingly at him, she reached for the transport’s control

panel and set all the doors on the vehicle to close. With the two of them still inside, the back hatch began to gradually lower, and after a short while it had shut completely.

Once Carol had finished her business and left, Togami headed to the temporary base's break room, looking worn out.

Shikarabe walked up to him. "Hey, I heard you met up with Carol here in the base. What's that all about?"

Togami hesitated. "I didn't call her here, okay? She came in on her own. Those idiots on guard duty let her in. Complain to them instead."

"What did she want?"

"She asked about Akira. I told her what she wanted to know and sent her away."

"That's *really* all that happened? There wasn't anything else, right?" Shikarabe said, clearly suspicious.

"No! I told her to get the hell out! I'm not gonna do something stupid like that and risk getting my permission to borrow good gear rescinded, okay?"

This wasn't the sort of attitude a rookie should normally be taking toward a veteran. But Shikarabe didn't particularly mind—he just looked surprised.

In truth, when Shikarabe had asked Togami if anything else had happened, he was already almost certain that something had. He'd just asked anyway so that when the higher-ups called Shikarabe in for questioning, he could tell them that Togami himself had claimed nothing had happened—in other words, Shikarabe could clear himself of the blame.

Togami was currently under Shikarabe's supervision, so whatever the rookie did was also Shikarabe's responsibility. But Shikarabe could tell from Togami's response that the boy was telling the truth and that nothing had actually happened. That meant Togami had somehow managed to resist Carol's charms.

Shikarabe wasn't just amazed—he was impressed. "Good on you, kid."

"Don't praise me for something like that!" Togami pouted, almost like a small

child.

Shikarabe couldn't help but let out a snort. But then he grinned. "Nah, I'm not just teasing you—I'm serious. It's important for hunters to be able to rein in their desires. Keep it up! Later." He left, still chuckling to himself.

Togami sighed. He was still clearly being made fun of. But then his expression grew grim—partly on purpose.

It was a fact that Togami had not laid a hand on Carol. In order to determine his own true strength once and for all, he needed his current gear. He couldn't risk losing it for a stupid reason like that. He'd had a close call, yes—but he'd made the right decision in the end. Shikarabe had even commended him for it—even if he'd teased him a bit on the side too.

Togami had been able to win against Carol through sheer willpower. Framing it like that helped him suppress the feelings bottled up within him. And deliberately putting on a stern face allowed him to mask his regret at refusing her invitation.



Having returned home without incident, Akira healed his fatigue in the bath. Submerged in the hot water up to his neck, he let all his pent-up exhaustion and his consciousness melt away. His expression relaxed.

Alpha joined him in the bath like always. Her extraordinarily beautiful body was only hidden by the water's undulating surface, and bathed in the light's reflection, it looked even more stunning.

But despite having such an attractive—and naked—woman beside him in the bath, Akira's reaction was as muted as ever. Even if Akira couldn't physically touch her, she remembered how her beauty had taken his breath away at their first meeting. Yet now her presence barely registered in his mind.

Alpha got out of the water all of a sudden and sat down on the edge of the tub. The water that had gathered in her cleavage spilled out over her lower body and groin. Except for her knees and below, which were submerged in the water, all that covered her exquisite form was the droplets trickling down her body and the steam from the bath.

Akira glanced at her. But that was only a reflexive movement of his eyes due to her suddenly changing position, and he soon turned away as if he'd lost interest.

Alpha sighed. *Same old boring response, huh, Akira?*

Hearing his name, Akira turned to face her again. But when he did, a new person was sitting on the edge of the tub—Carol. Wearing the enticing smile she used to seduce, her nude form was completely exposed to Akira. Alpha was more beautiful, of course, and unlike Alpha, Carol hadn't adjusted her body to match Akira's preferences. Even so, hers was a body that had stoked the desires of many men.

Naturally, Akira knew that Carol wasn't actually here, and he realized immediately that Alpha was merely displaying an image of her in his vision. Still, any normal guy would have been instantly entranced all the same. But Akira just looked at Alpha dubiously.

"What are you trying to pull?"

So you don't react to Carol's body either. That in itself is reassuring, but...

Suddenly, two more women were sitting on the edge of the tub. Akira's eyes immediately went as wide as saucers.

"Wh-Wh..." he stammered. There were now four beautiful, naked women in Akira's bathroom, but his reaction was reserved for only two of them—Elena and Sara. Unlike Carol's alluring smile, they were both smiling at him amicably—almost teasingly.

Seeing Akira frozen like a statue, Alpha sighed, looking serious, and erased all the naked bodies except for hers. *I knew it.*

"Alpha! What the heck?!" Akira raised his voice to object.

But Alpha's severe expression and tone didn't change. *Akira, do you really think this is fine? You told Carol that you were more interested in food than women, and that seems mostly true, but in your mind aren't you just saving yourself for Elena and Sara? Isn't the reason you keep turning Carol down because you're secretly thinking of those two? This rescue mission was just an excuse to go on a date with them, wasn't it?* Alpha looked straight into Akira's

eyes. *If you plan to continue prioritizing Elena and Sara for such reasons, it's not something I can ignore.*

Faced with Alpha's sternness, Akira had already come down from his flustered state and regained his calm. "You're wrong," he said, just as gravely. "Elena and Sara have helped me out a ton, and I owe them a huge debt. If you tell me I'm not allowed to repay a debt I owe, then I can't comply, even if it's an order from you."

They stared at each other for a while. Finally, Alpha determined that Akira wasn't trying to lie or hide anything from her, and her expression softened. *If that's all it is, then that's fine. As long as you remember that you're just trying to repay a debt. I'm sorry, Akira. I apologize for doubting you.*

Akira broke into a grin. "Nah, I was out of line too. And I think you've misunderstood something. You're figuring I'm okay with ending up empty-handed as long as I can spend time with Elena and Sara, but that's not the case. I really do want to earn money, honest."

Oh, that? I'm not worried about that anymore. Make sure your feelings for them don't stick you with an empty wallet or a mountain of debt, and I couldn't care less.

"I won't let that happen. Do I really seem that pathetic to you?" He grinned wryly, trying to end the conversation.

But Alpha gave him a knowing grin. *Then shall I show you the footage of when Sara was teasing you earlier, and the look you had on your face?*

He froze. "Nah, I'm good. I'm enjoying my bath right now," he said finally.

Oh, is that so?

Though his smile remained slightly stiff, Akira enjoyed his remaining bath. But all the while he agonized over how he would respond if Alpha asked him to view the footage once he'd gotten out. Alpha knew full well exactly what he was thinking, but in the end she didn't ask again.



As soon as Elena had gotten home, she'd started reviewing the records of the

battles they'd fought in Mihazono. Currently she was sitting in her favorite chair and wearing comfortable clothing to help herself unwind, but for a while now she'd been frowning at the screen.

Sara noticed the look on Elena's face. "Something wrong?"

"Hm? Yeah, a bit. You know those huge machines we fought with Akira and Carol? I was looking over that footage, and..." She hesitated. "I noticed something. Something that wasn't right."

"Like how? We didn't get ambushed, we didn't have to worry about running out of ammo since we were on the return leg of the trip, and we took all our targets down without anyone getting hurt. Personally, I don't think it could've gone any better."

"True," Elena agreed. "We were lucky that it happened on the trip back. Considering the sheer numbers of those giant machines, we would've had no choice but to retreat if they'd showed up on our way in. So we were fortunate not to run into them sooner."

"Right? So I'm not sure what you're getting at," Sara said. If Elena agreed, why was she still frowning?

"It'd be faster for you to come see for yourself," Elena said, and tossed her a pair of lensless AR glasses. Then she moved to the sofa so Sara could sit next to her.

In their AR headsets, the battle footage Elena had been looking at was visible before them as a three-dimensional hologram.

"This is the record of the battle, taken from overhead," Elena said. "I'll rewind to the beginning, so watch carefully."

The diagram was simple—a topographical map upon which the positions of the humans and machines were superimposed. Even so, they could easily see the sheer amount of behemoth machines, as well as the movements of Akira and the others as the hunters eliminated the enemy one by one. The image also clearly showed who had taken down which target.

Elena had already handed these records over to the insurance companies that had posted the commission. Once they analyzed it, the companies could use the

data to decide on things like the difficulty of future rescue missions, how much to offer as a reward, and whether or not to raise their emergency insurance rates. As the intel person on the rescue team, she'd thoroughly compiled the data on their efforts today. And to reward her efforts, the insurance companies had given her a considerably higher payout than if she'd just completed the job and called it a day.

The footage ended right as the rescue team passed through the defensive wall and entered the safe zone.

Having now seen the entire recording from start to finish, Sara reflected, "Wow, there were even more of those giants than I thought. It didn't seem like that many when we were fighting them, but I guess that just goes to show how hard Akira and Carol worked today." She grinned, looking at Elena for approval. But her friend's expression clearly suggested that Sara had missed something. "Guess that's not it, huh?"

"Actually, I agree with you completely. Akira and Carol really put in the work today. Which is what makes all of this so bizarre," Elena replied. "Here, I'll play the footage again." She sped through the recording to a certain point. "There," she said, suddenly pausing the display. "I'm going to play this segment in slow motion. Watch carefully right around here. Do you see it now?"

Sara focused on the area Elena indicated and watched the scene again. Then, for the first time, she noticed that the giant tanks were behaving oddly. Some of them were attacking in the wrong direction. Others suddenly vanished from the map, even though none of the hunters had taken them out. These details were easy to miss among the vast numbers of enemies, but now that Sara had noticed it, she could see that something peculiar was clearly going on.

"You're right, Elena. This *is* strange."

"If it only happened once or twice, I might chalk it up to a data glitch or analysis error. But not this many instances. And look over *here*."

Sara followed Elena's finger with her eyes and immediately realized what she was getting at. "Those machines—are they fighting *each other*? Even though they're all supposed to be guarding the same ruin?"

"Right! That's not something that can be explained with a sensor malfunction,

and it's certainly not mere happenstance. They're clearly aiming at one another. And I can't figure out why."

It was a strange situation, to be sure. But in the end, things had worked out in the hunters' favor. So while the two of them were puzzled, the only conclusion they came to was to keep a closer eye out next time they were on a rescue mission.

Ruins were Old World territory. Expecting the unexpected was a given for the relic hunters who entered them. But how could anyone prepare for an event that no one could even begin to comprehend?

Chapter 115: A New Commission

Two days had passed since the rescue job in Mihazono. Elena and Sara had recommended that Akira take it easy, so that's what he was doing when Kibayashi called him up.

"Hey, Akira! Looks like you're out there doing your best to entertain me like always, huh?"

"I don't remember doing anything that would amuse you," Akira responded warily—and honestly. He really didn't have any clue what Kibayashi was talking about.

"You're not even aware of how you're doing it, huh? Even better! Keep it up, kid."

Kibayashi's voice sounded way too cheerful, and Akira grimaced. *Alpha, do you know what he means?*

Well, fighting a mechanical sentry while parkouring down a skyscraper does come to mind. I'm guessing he somehow found out about that.

Seriously? That's what he's talking about? Akira reflected that some hunters might well have recorded either the first or second fight—after all, Reina's group had watched the entire spectacle the second time. These hypothetical witnesses had probably found it fascinating and passed the footage around to their friends, until it eventually ended up in Kibayashi's hands.

"Look, Kibayashi," he said with a sigh, "I'm not sure what you saw, but stop contacting me after every single rumor you hear."

"Perish the thought! I'm reaching out because I've got some good info you might be interested in. You've become a favorite of mine, so I thought I'd help you out."

"What kind of info?" Akira's eyes narrowed.

Kibayashi told him that the data Elena had handed over to the insurance

companies had also ended up in the city's possession—and that analysis had shown the multilegged tanks fighting among themselves during the battle.

“So? They probably malfunctioned or something,” Akira replied.

“No, no, no—it's much more significant than that! At worst, the city's defense force might need to entirely reevaluate how they're handling the Mihazono crisis.”

According to the analysis, a sensor malfunction was unlikely, and the tanks were deliberately aiming at one another. This meant they had been ignoring commands from the ruin's control system, so there was a chance the robots could even leave the ruin. And since the ruin's sentries had crossed their patrol boundaries at least once before, the possibility seemed even more plausible.

At present, the analysts hadn't confirmed any units leaving the ruin itself. But the consensus among the city officials was that it was probably only a matter of time.

“Well, that's a bummer,” said Akira, “but how does that information benefit me? Seems kind of pointless to tell *me*.”

“So far I've just been giving the background. Here's the part that concerns you directly: sometime in the next day or so, you're going to get a call from the DLS asking you to investigate the factory district in the Mihazono Town Ruins.”

“Huh?!” Akira recognized the Kugamayama Department of Long-Term Strategy—they'd put him on the Yarata scorpion extermination job. The relic hunters living in Kugamayama City couldn't refuse a request from them—if they did, the city would blacklist them. Recalling the hardships he'd gone through underground in Kuzusuhara, Akira grimaced again. “Wh-Why me, though? Wait a sec... Kibayashi! *You* set me up for this, didn't you?!”

“It wasn't me, honest! You're only *one* of the hunters they want—Elena, Sara, and Shikarabe's crew are also getting recruited, and you'll probably all be on a team together. I suppose they'll contact that Carol woman as well. In other words,” Kibayashi went on, “the DLS probably thinks that the team who intercepted the multilegged tank assault, whose battle records the data came from in the first place, has the highest chance of success—though that's just guesswork on my part. You should get the official call either later tonight or

tomorrow. They're shooting to have you out there within a couple of days at most, and they'll probably make it a mandatory 'request.' Since it's an offer you can't refuse—literally—I figured I ought to let you know ahead of time so you can prepare. DLS will probably give you an ID code you can use to buy your ammo, but I know sometimes it can take a while to procure more expensive rounds."

"You're sure about this, right? What happens if I go to my favorite shop and buy a bunch of expensive ammo only to find out after the fact that they canceled the job?"

"Then how about I go ahead and give you my ID code? It's just a loan, but that way you can go ahead and prepare without worrying about any up-front ammo costs." True to his word, Kibayashi sent over the ID code a moment later.

"Seriously?" Akira was taken aback. "Just what are you expecting out of me that you're willing to go this far?"

"What else? Entertainment. As for what *specifically*, that's up to you to decide, right?" The anticipation in Kibayashi's voice seemed to add, "I don't know what you'll do in the future, but I'm convinced it'll be crazy, reckless, and rash enough to keep me amused!"

Akira's demeanor, however, shared none of the man's cheerfulness. It was true that Kibayashi had helped him out greatly by informing him of the commission beforehand and offering to front the cost of his ammo. But though Akira could be dense in many ways, even he could tell that the man was deliberately throwing fuel on the fire to create a conflagration large enough for his liking.

As Akira sat there mulling over the conversation he'd just had with Kibayashi, he received a call from Elena, and then one from Carol. They both wanted to talk about discussions *they'd* just had with Kibayashi.

So he's throwing fuel over in their direction too, Akira thought, groaning inwardly.



At Elena's suggestion, Akira decided to meet up with her and Sara at Shizuka's shop. After greeting each other, the three hunters and Shizuka chatted briefly about the situation. Then the store owner inspected the ID code Akira had given her and frowned.

Elena looked concerned. "What do you think, Shizuka?"

"No doubt about it—this is a code from the city," the shopkeeper said. "And not just any code—it's got a purchase limit of a hundred million aurum."

"A hundred million?!" Elena exclaimed. "Looks like that Kibayashi fellow might have a bit more pull within the city than I thought."

The two hunters could only smile wanly as they turned to Akira.

"First Carol, and now this. You've really got some surprising connections," Sara commented.

"Well, you know, a lot's happened," Akira said. "What should I do, Elena?"

It was just a temporary payment, of course—the amount he spent would be deducted from his pay after the job was complete. But there was no question that a large stock of more powerful ammunition would go a long way to ensure Akira's safety. Elena looked hesitant, then came to a decision.

"I'd say that if he's willing to be that generous, you ought to accept. There's no doubt it'll be a huge help for the mission. Once we get the official request from the city, I'll try and negotiate to get the city to cover it as an expense rather than just a loan. Does that sound good to you?"

"Yeah, sounds great. Thanks!"

"Good, then we ought to start getting ready," Elena said. "Shizuka, we're counting on you to procure the goods."

"All right, I'll do my best," Shizuka replied, but she looked concerned. "I know as a shop owner I ought to be thrilled right now, but I can't help but worry. Akira, please don't overdo it, okay?"

"I'll be careful," Akira told her.

"And Elena and Sara, watch over him to make sure he doesn't do anything rash."

“I’ll try my best,” Elena said playfully, while Sara chimed in confidently, “Don’t worry. You can count on me—I’ll keep him in line!”

The three hunters laughed. Seeing their lightheartedness, Shizuka also felt more at ease and set about procuring the items they needed.

That night, Akira and the others received calls from the Kugamayama City Department of Long-Term Strategy—and the person on the other end said exactly what Kibayashi had predicted.



A temporary Kugamayama City base had been set up on the factory district side of Mihazono. It was a simple structure—just several large buildings that could easily be put up and taken down, surrounded by a defensive wall—but it functioned well enough as a base of operations for the ruin investigation team.

Powered armor, tanks, and automated weapons were all stationed on the base’s grounds. But at present these were intended for defending the base itself, not for a large-scale foray into the ruins. The city had employed hunters for this instead. Akira and the rest of those hired (including Shikarabe’s team and Carol) were listening to a rundown of the mission in one of the buildings.

While Akira had been relaxing at home, the situation within Mihazono had gotten even more complex. As if mechanical guards crossing beyond their original patrol zones weren’t bad enough, a new batch of sentries had appeared that recognized the entire ruin as a single patrol zone. So the city had determined the best way to get everything under control would be to secure the locations the sentries were coming from—to the best of their knowledge, the Serantal Building in the business district and one of the abandoned buildings in the factory district.

The Serantal had already been completely isolated at this point—they’d walled off the area temporarily. With the source of the robots suppressed, the defense force was now working to secure the rest of the business district. But the factory district was still a problem, as the city wasn’t sure exactly where the machines were coming from, and walling off the entire district just wasn’t feasible. So their first order of business was to find where the monsters were

appearing from or being manufactured.

Akira and the others had two goals for this mission: to find the source of the machines and to rescue any of the previous team members who'd gone to investigate and had yet to return. After the city official explained this, Elena stopped perusing the related documents she'd been handed and looked at him suspiciously.

"Wait a second, it says here there's only a fifty percent chance they're actually alive?"

"That's only based on how many returned safely," the official said after a pause. "They're not necessarily already dead. The factory district is also full of buildings perfect for taking refuge in, so you'll probably be able to save quite a few. We're counting on you!"

"You're still asking us to rush into a place with only a fifty percent rate of survival!"

"You can retreat whenever you see fit. If you feel it's dangerous, please head back to base. You only need to give us a report detailing how you came to that decision."

"And if we can't return, I guess we just become another statistic?" retorted Elena.

"That's right. So here's hoping for a different result with your team."

The air seemed tense and hot between Elena, who wanted to prioritize the team's safety, and the official, who had been tasked with putting them on this dangerous job.

Suddenly, Akira piped up. "Hey, why can't you use those tanks and automated weapons outside to investigate the ruins instead?"

The official hesitated. "Sorry, but that's impossible."

"Why's that? Sure, they might be too big to enter buildings, but if it's just outside..."

At first the official scowled, thinking that Akira was criticizing how the city did things. But then he sensed from Akira's demeanor that the boy was genuinely

curious, and his expression became apologetic. Sighing as though he had no choice but to spell it out, he said, “Look, those belong to the defense force. They can’t be mobilized at the drop of a hat—at least, not with the authority I have. Who *does* have the authority, you might ask? Well, that’d be the top brass, and as for why they haven’t approved...” The official paused, as though he found his next words difficult to say. “This is just a guess, but they probably don’t want to disrupt the factory district’s operations by sending a bunch of huge machines in.”

Many ruins had their relics restocked over time, and the Mihazono factory district was thought to be where the ruins surrounding Kugamayama were resupplied from. Sending a battalion of tanks and automated weapons in would likely cause Mihazono’s security system to raise its threat level accordingly. A few hunters would just be treated as trespassers or thieves, but a unit of automated weapons towering over six meters would be seen as an outright invasion. The factories that normally produced relics would start to churn out sentries to beef up security, and if those sentries got into a gunfight with the automated weapons, the entire district could be leveled. Then the relics would cease to be produced, and the ruins around Kugamayama, or even neighboring areas, would all eventually run dry.

Naturally, this would have a catastrophic effect on Kugamayama’s economy, so they had to proceed with the utmost caution. Even if it ultimately turned out they were wrong, the city leaders wanted to take as few risks as possible with this operation.

“Again, this is just conjecture,” the official reminded them. “But that’s probably why they’re sending hunters in there instead of using these weapons. And as an official I shouldn’t be saying this, you know, but it probably also costs the higher-ups less.” To console Akira, he added, “But honestly, the pay will probably be worth it for you guys. The bigwigs will just be thrilled to pay less than they normally would have, so there’s room for negotiation there. So please, we need your help!” The official bowed his head. “Also, you folks took down all those behemoths during the rescue job and managed to come back safe and sound. If you’re that strong and still end up retreating anyway, the higher-ups will be forced to reconsider. So just come back here if you think it’s

too dangerous and let us know all that you learned, okay?”

With that, Akira’s doubts were dispelled, and he nodded. Elena and Carol smiled wryly at how easily he was convinced.

Unlike Akira, the rest understood the whole situation without needing to be told. But while they were quite dissatisfied with the way things currently stood, they couldn’t help but smile at Akira’s innocence as he took the official’s explanation at face value. Moreover, they knew that the official was just the messenger and had no real authority, so getting upset at him would be pointless.

To lighten the mood, Elena spoke up in a deliberately cheerful voice. “All right, then! It’s true the pay’s going to be several times more than normal, so we’ll do all we can!”

“I really am sorry to impose on you this way, but we absolutely do need your help,” the official replied. “Now, I’ve prepared a map of the factory district for you. It’s not complete, but you might find it useful.”

Breathing an inward sigh of relief, the official then started to walk them through the documents in everyone’s hands.



Once Akira and the others were geared up and ready to go, they headed to the factory district’s entrance on foot. Akira was wearing his new support arms, loaded down with his CWH anti-materiel rifle, DVTS minigun, A4WM automatic grenade launcher, and a pack full of ammo. Since he wouldn’t be hunting relics this time, he could have actually carried even more if he’d wanted, but everyone else had looked plenty surprised by his new arms as it was.

At the entrance to the district, which was littered with the remains of armored A24s, Elena turned to them. “Now then, let’s go over the plan once more before we head in.”

Her team was divided into three groups—Akira and Carol, Shikarabe and Togami, and Elena and Sara—with the latter pair in charge. The mission from the DLS took priority over the rescue job from the insurance company. They’d agreed that Elena would be in charge of the whole operation (a decision made

without consulting Druncam, since Shikarabe didn't want the power struggle within Druncam to make a difference here). Akira had no objections to this, and Carol deferred to Akira since she was still in his employ.

"Once we head in, we'll secure an escape route and check the areas where hunters might be likely to have taken refuge. We'll investigate the state of the ruin as we go, but rescuing missing people takes priority. I talked with the insurance company from our previous job, and they said they'll pay us a bonus for any of their clients we end up rescuing on this trip as well. So if we focus primarily on rescuing, we can kill two birds with one stone."

As the team's reconnaissance unit, Elena and Sara assumed the middle position. That left Akira and Shikarabe's teams to divide the front and rear positions between them.

"Shikarabe, which position do you want?" Elena asked.

"Hmm..." The veteran looked over at Togami, who looked displeased but stayed silent. The Druncam hunters both knew what Elena was implicitly asking: Which place would make it easier for Shikarabe to cover for any errors Togami made?

Shikarabe glanced at Akira—who just looked puzzled, as he had no idea what they all were getting at.

"We'll take the front," Shikarabe said at last.

"Okay, Akira and Carol, you two have the rear," Elena said.

"Roger," Akira replied.

Togami gritted his teeth in frustration, but after a long sigh he managed to calm down. He understood Shikarabe's reasoning: it was better to have the deadweight (if Togami proved to be such) at the front, making it harder to go on, than at the back impeding their retreat.

Once they were all in position, they checked to make sure that all their scanners were linked together and that they could reach each other via short-range comms. The factory district was currently experiencing a network disturbance—right now, even getting in touch with the temporary base was difficult (a major factor in the low survival rate of those who went deeper into

the ruin). Short-range communications used less bandwidth, however, and so were functioning just fine. To minimize the interference, Akira and the others set their comm devices to the shortest range possible.

“Great, everything’s working fine,” Elena announced. “Are we all ready? Let’s go!”

Akira hardly recognized the factory district from his last visit. Mechanical remains were scattered all over, sometimes even blocking off whole corridors. There was blood everywhere—what was left of the hunters who’d fought for their lives here. From the bloodstains smearing the walls and floors, as well as the sheer amount of machine scraps, Akira and the others could easily imagine how ferocious the battles in this area had been.

Yet as they pressed on farther, they couldn’t find a single human body. Akira thought this strange, but assumed that previous rescue teams had already retrieved the corpses. He put the puzzle out of his mind.

The exploration itself was going smoothly, largely thanks to Togami. Determined not to burden the rest of the team and to prove to himself what he was truly capable of, he was going all out. He quickly and accurately secured the rooms and corridors before them; if they encountered scanner-proof walls, he threw or launched small scanning devices ahead to get an accurate reading on what lay in wait.

The weaker sentries he dispatched on his own, and even double-checked to make sure they were destroyed. As a team member, his performance was exemplary—even Shikarabe silently gave him a passing grade. If the veteran found anything to nitpick, it was that exerting so much energy and effort from the outset might tire the boy quickly, but otherwise the older hunter had no complaints. Nor did he warn Togami to slow down or let up on the gas a bit. In Shikarabe’s eyes, skill was also about being able to perform at your best for a long period of time. If Togami wore himself out too early and put the whole group at risk, then he had no business being here in the first place, and Shikarabe would have a reason to remove him from the team.

Togami’s persistence drove him to move at a faster pace, which forced the

rest of the team to hurry as well. Of course, this was a problem for the one member who was already struggling to keep up—Akira. Because he mostly worked and trained solo, he was having a hard time adjusting to a pace set by someone else.

Sara saw the tension in Akira's face and looked worried. "You okay? Do you want to take a break?"

But Akira forced a smile and shook his head. "No, I'm good. Unless I'm holding everyone else back, that is."

"No, that wasn't what I meant. Just, if you need a break, say so, okay?"

"Sure. I will, don't worry."

Akira sounded sincere, so Sara felt somewhat relieved. Still, she turned to Elena just in case.

Shizuka had asked Elena to make sure Akira didn't overexert himself. So, sensing Sara's concern, she decided to test him and ordered Togami to go faster. When you forced yourself to keep up with everyone else, you often wore out quickly, impairing your response to anything unexpected. If Akira really was fine, speeding up a bit wouldn't completely exhaust him—maybe just cause him to fall back a little. But if he was already pushing himself beyond his limits to keep up, he'd probably fall to his knees instead.

As it turned out, Akira didn't lag behind one bit. He still looked stressed, but no more than before.

Seeing this, she had Togami speed up again. Now even Shikarabe wondered if they were going a mite too fast. But Akira still didn't falter, nor did he miss a beat guarding the rear—he dealt swiftly and precisely with the monsters that appeared behind them.

At his side, Carol looked astonished. "From the look on your face, I figured maybe you were having trouble, but I guess not."

Akira smiled wanly. "If I don't work at least this hard, you'll make off with our entire profits, right?"

"Oh? If you're tired, you can just take a break and leave it to me, you know."

“Yeah, right. Why don’t *you* take a rest instead?”

“Wishful thinking!”

Elena and Sara watched their competitive banter and smiled at each other.

“I think Akira’s probably fine,” Sara suggested.

“You’re right. If we go any faster, *we’ll* be the ones struggling to keep up. Looks like I worried for nothing.” Every now and then Akira would show bizarre moments of weakness, it was true. But Elena reminded herself of how capable he’d been during the hypersynthetic snake hunt. There was probably just something about Akira’s character that made him occasionally seem weaker than he was, and if something like that had led both her and Sara to draw the wrong conclusion, then they themselves still had a long way to go as hunters. They had no reason to worry about Akira.

In fact, however, their intuition had been right on the money—Akira was indeed already at his limit. Had he been relying only on his own strength, he would’ve fallen way behind by now. But when the team’s speed had picked up, Alpha had merely increased her level of support to match it. So from an outside perspective it appeared as though Akira wasn’t having any trouble.

Meanwhile, someone else was getting the short end of the stick—Togami. He had already been putting forth his best effort, forging ahead at a clip that he would have thought outstanding. Yet twice now Elena had ordered him to speed up, and no one had raised a single complaint or objected—as if this pace were normal for them.

So Togami concluded that *he* was the one dragging down the rest of the team—that *he* was the real burden. Even as such thoughts pained his heart, however, Togami didn’t falter.

But after a while, Shikarabe spoke up at last. “All right, Togami, slow down.”

“D-Don’t worry! I’ve got this!” the boy responded automatically. That was his remaining pride talking—even he could tell he was practically at his limit. He also knew that disobeying Shikarabe’s orders would only hurt him in the end. Nevertheless, the words were already out of his mouth—there was no taking them back now.

Shikarabe glared at him. “I didn’t ask you if you could handle it. I told you to slow down. If you can’t follow orders, you’re off the team.”

Realizing that Shikarabe’s command hadn’t been out of consideration or concern for him, Togami came to his senses and meekly complied.

“What’s up?” Elena asked in surprise. “Something wrong?”

“Scan the area up ahead, Elena,” Shikarabe said. “I’ve got a bad feeling, but at this distance my scanner can’t get an accurate reading.”

“All right.” As the team’s intel person, Elena carried the best scanner. She’d been checking the area around the team this whole time to detect ambushes, but she now focused her device straight ahead. Then she frowned. “Numerous readings—and it looks like they’re headed this way. Maybe a bit more than we can handle.”

Countless dots—most likely monsters—were coming toward them. Given how fast the dots were moving, Elena determined that it would be impossible to outrun them. But she didn’t panic. “Let’s fall back a bit and intercept them,” she ordered, and her attitude seemed to say, “There are a bunch of enemies, but so what? We’ll get through this all right.”

Her composure reassured the rest of the team, and they got into position. Currently they were in a multilevel room that was just as wide as it was tall. Machinery lined the factory floor in rows, and here the team took cover as the monsters approached.

Because Elena’s scanner was now directed in a straight line, its accuracy increased dramatically. Monsters were no longer vague dots, and their positions and shapes were clearly visible. Now that she knew what they looked like, she could guess what sort of weapons they might be holding and roughly estimate their range of fire, and she sent the results of her analysis to the rest of the team. With this, they had all the information they needed to intercept the horde.

But suddenly a new group of enemies appeared from the back of the room—multilegged tanks nearly a meter tall, rolling along the ceiling rather than the floor as they approached.

A dense hail of gunfire quickly halted their advance, however. The wave of gunshots blasted through the swarm, scattering countless machine parts into the air.

These were small fry compared to the tanks Akira and the others had fought just the other day. Though their enemies covered the whole ceiling, the team's combined firepower was more than enough to keep them at bay. Akira's A4WM rapidly fired grenades into their midst—the ones that were directly hit exploded, while those nearby were blown off the ceiling. Once on the ground, in order to reach the humans, they had to dodge through the factory machinery that littered the floor, slowing their assault despite their many limbs.

Some machines managed to avoid the grenades and remain on the ceiling, but these were summarily picked off by Sara's thick gunfire. She was using extended magazines, and each of her bullets was more powerful than average—back at Shizuka's shop, Akira had slipped her Kibayashi's ID code so she could purchase stronger munitions.

Still, some of the monsters were tougher than others. While all multilegged tanks were similar in appearance, their specifications varied. The more resilient ones charged through Akira and Sara's combined fire. Yet even these were hardly a threat—Elena marked the tougher monsters for the rest of the team with her scanner, and Carol destroyed each with a single hit the moment they emerged unscathed from Akira and Sara's onslaught. Her bullets had downed the giant tanks with ease, so they effortlessly pierced through even the toughest of these small ones.

Even more tanks were rolling in along the walls, and others managed to evade all the obstacles on the floor. But the Druncam team took them out before they could attack. For someone of Shikarabe's caliber this was no sweat, and Togami managed to put up a fight as well (although largely aided by his high performance gear). Thanks to their preparation and to having the best position, which they'd secured at the outset, the team was able to maintain the upper hand.

Chapter 116: The Survivor

However, the fight dragged on. The team still had the advantage, but enemy reinforcements kept coming—seemingly endlessly. After a while, Akira began to get fed up. *Alpha, when is this gonna end already?*

Even I can't tell that much. I do know the storage rooms ahead can't hold an infinite supply of sentries, so this force has got to dry up eventually. But if we happen to be near the factory where those sentries are actually manufactured, there might be an extraordinarily large supply of them. So it might be quite a while yet before they run out.

Well, that would definitely explain why there are so many! Good thing this isn't classified as a rescue job! The payouts for rescue jobs were usually fixed and awarded only once the rescue target had been recovered. No matter how many monsters you took out along the way, you wouldn't receive any bonuses. The insurance companies listed these jobs and paid hunters for successful rescues, but that money came from the insurance fees they charged their clients. Even if a hunter tried to negotiate a higher pay on the grounds that he'd encountered more enemies than expected, and demanded compensation for expending extra ammo, the companies could only do so much in response.

But it was the city that had tasked them with this job, and their main objective was to investigate the factory district. In order to quell the chaos there, they were actually encouraged to eliminate as many monsters as they could—and the city was prepared to pay big bonuses for their efforts. Without having to worry about taking a loss on ammo costs, Akira had been able to purchase extended magazines of grenades this time around. But with no end in sight to the flood of enemies, he still couldn't help but groan.

Had they been organic monsters instead, they could have gotten spooked and run away. But since his enemies were machines, they didn't misfire in panic no matter how many of their brethren were slaughtered or how much damage their own bodies received. It looked like they really would have to fight until all

the sentries in the area were gone. Akira sighed.

“We’re hardly making a dent in them—let’s fall back for now,” Elena announced at last. “We’ll head back to base and reevaluate the situation.”

Shikarabe sounded doubtful. “You sure? We haven’t done much investigating yet, and we’ve still got plenty of ammo.”

“When we get back, we’ll tell them that there were far more enemies than expected. That info alone should be enough to satisfy the city. As for the ammo, I’d rather retreat while we have some to spare. If we decide to turn back when less than half of our stock is left, it’ll be too late.”

“Fair point. All right, let’s head back.”

“We’ll take our time retreating,” Elena instructed. “We still have the advantage for now, so let’s keep it that way. Don’t let up your fire—just calmly make your way to the exit.”

Her decision was logical, but they were giving up all the same. So to avoid hurting the team’s morale, she tried to sound upbeat while giving her orders.

But Togami’s face twisted in frustration—he had yet to perform at a level that satisfied him. In his mind, turning tail now would be tantamount to admitting he wasn’t good enough, and he was desperate to prove this wasn’t the case.

Suddenly a new voice broke out over their comms. “Help me! Please!”

Everyone else looked shocked, but Elena responded without missing a beat. “Who is this?! Where are you?! Our comms are set for short-range communication—are you somewhere in this building? Please give me some coordinates—it’ll be hard to find you as is.”

“Y-Yes, I’ll send them right over! Just a second!” A moment later, Elena received a map with the sender’s location marked on it. The map itself was identical to the one the official at the base had provided Akira and the rest with, so the sender was likely another hunter who had been tasked with investigating the district.

Elena studied the map, looking more and more serious. The hunter was just up ahead, in a room connected to another corridor through which the hunter

had likely entered. And according to the data the hunter had sent along with the map, that corridor was now teeming with hostile machines. On the other side was the seemingly endless horde Akira and his team had been fighting. So the hunter was essentially cut off by enemies.

If Akira's team wanted to rescue the hunter, they'd have to break through the enemy lines. Though they had the upper hand for the moment, advancing would be far more dangerous than falling back. They'd have to abandon their advantageous position while facing such a large contingent of enemies that it had already convinced the hunters to retreat.

Though she regretted it, Elena felt sure they would have to leave the hunter behind—a rescue just wasn't feasible. She offered one more option: "If we back you up, could you somehow make it to us on your own? Right now it's not looking like we'll be able to break through to where you are."

"I-I can't! I could hardly make it to this room...!"

As if to give credence to the hunter's claim, the sound of continuous gunfire rattled over the wireless. Elena felt torn. Rescuing hunters was also part of their job, and sometimes that meant heading into danger. But there was a limit to how *much* danger they could reasonably allow—and as the one responsible for her whole team's safety, she couldn't make this decision lightly.

All at once, Togami announced, "I'm going in! Cover me!" At some unconscious level, he saw this as his last chance to determine how strong he truly was. Eager to prove himself, he was ready to charge in.

Elena waited a single second. When Shikarabe didn't intervene, she concluded Druncam was prepared to take full responsibility for Togami's actions—and any consequences. She glanced over at Akira, who gave her a small nod.

"All right, new plan!" Elena declared. "Everyone cover Togami! We're cutting through the enemy to rescue a hunter in need! Togami, get in as quick as you can, but keep your cool! Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Togami replied.

"As for you on the line," she added, "try and hold out the best you can until

we get there!”

“O-Okay!” came the voice.

“Everyone ready? All right then—Togami, go!”

Akira and the rest concentrated their fire to clear the way for Togami as he rushed into the enemy lines. Though the gunfire from the seemingly endless swarm grew even more intense, it was no match for the rescue squad’s teamwork.



Togami raced forward in desperation, ignoring the enemy gunfire whizzing past his ears and suppressing his fear through sheer willpower.

The wasteland swallowed up relic hunters who braved great risks for small returns. Even if you weren’t a hunter, one wrong choice in the wasteland—on the battlefield, at the side of the road, or in a back alley somewhere—and you’d be dead a moment later. Having grown up in the slums, Togami knew that well.

But here, the potential reward had been too enticing for him to resist. The situation was so dire that even his team leader had hesitated to go to the trapped hunter’s rescue. If Togami could make it to the other side of the enemy swarm and save the person on his own, he’d certainly be able to take pride in himself again. Before his dazzled eyes, he saw his goal within reach—and to obtain it, he was willing to risk everything.

Thanks to his team’s support and his own determination, Togami managed to break through the horde and reach the entrance of the other room. Now all he had to do was smash the door and rescue the hunter. He couldn’t help but grin in anticipation.

But in his haste, Togami made two mistakes. First, he neglected to check the situation in the room before barging in. Second, he assumed that the hunter in distress had already brought the enemies in the other corridor under control. When he kicked the door down and charged in, Togami saw a woman collapsed on the ground—and a multilegged tank’s gun already pointed in his direction.

As Togami stared into the sentry’s muzzle, that split second seemed to stretch out, slowing down everything around him. But it was too late to evade, and he

only felt more acutely that he was about to die.

A gunshot rang out, and Togami felt certain he had lost his gamble.

Then a bullet smashed into the sentry, annihilating it.

Dazed, Togami gave a grunt of surprise, even as a hail of gunfire burst from behind him.

“Grab her and get out of there now!” came Akira’s voice. He fired several more CWH rounds into a handful of other multilegged tanks farther back in the room, destroying them instantly.

Realizing the path before him was now clear, Togami quickly recovered from his shock. He stayed low as he darted across the room, grabbed the woman, and half-dragged her to the exit. The moment the two were out of the room, Akira switched to his A4WM and fired a salvo of grenades behind him as he raced after Togami. Trapped in the room, the pursuing machines had nowhere to run as the shells exploded all at once, blowing them to smithereens. Shattered machine parts and roaring flames erupted from the doorway behind Akira.

Togami heard the explosions behind him and ran faster, the woman still in his arms. His face was overcome with humiliation.

“Dammit!” he said through gritted teeth. He was still alive, and he’d successfully rescued the woman. But he’d lost all the same—he hadn’t done anything on his own. If Akira hadn’t stepped in at the last minute, Togami would have been dead. That was nothing to be proud of. So Togami kept running, all the while regretting that he’d failed to even regain the former level of pride he’d had in himself.

With the hunter rescued, Akira and the others had no reason to stick around any longer. The team regrouped and retreated, calmly and composedly, under Elena’s command.



Once they’d retreated to a much safer place within the ruins, the group breathed a collective sigh of relief.

The woman they'd rescued bowed. "Thank you so much for rescuing me!" she said to her savior, Togami. "Honestly, I would've been a goner if you hadn't showed up!"

"Right... Well, at least you're safe, I guess," Togami replied, somewhat reluctantly. He still felt humiliated by his own failure and couldn't bring himself to accept her gratitude wholeheartedly.

Elena, on the other hand, looked stern. "So, Monica, mind telling us why you were alone? What happened to everyone else?"

"W-Well, about that..." Monica—the same woman Akira had previously met in the factory district—hesitated to answer.

Carol cut in cheerfully. "Hey Elena, let's save the interrogation for when we get back to base. What if she says she knows where everyone else is and we need to go back and save them right this instant? That's not really something we can handle at the moment, right?"

Elena considered. "That's a fair point. All right, back to base it is!"

For some reason, Monica breathed a covert sigh of relief. Shikarabe caught this, and his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Carol tapped Akira on the shoulder and grinned. "Hey, let's do our best to watch their six on the way back too."

"Hm? Yeah, sure."

For the return trip, Shikarabe took point, followed by Elena and Sara, then Monica, and finally Akira and Carol in the rear. As they went along, Carol appeared completely unconcerned by the circumstances surrounding Monica's rescue. But as she chatted with Akira, she casually mentioned Monica's name several times, subtly directing his gaze toward the other surveyor—though the boy never realized what Carol was trying to do.



They reached the outskirts of the base without incident. Elena reported over the comms that they'd returned, and the same city official from before appeared almost immediately.

“Make no mistake,” he said. “I’m glad that you’re back safe and sound. But I didn’t think you’d be back so soon. Did you run into trouble somewhere?”

“You could say that,” Elena replied. “But we did manage a rescue.”

“You don’t say! That’s wonderful! Then forgive me for cutting to the chase, but let’s hear the details right away.”

As Elena shared with the official what her team had learned, Monica looked increasingly uncomfortable. And by the time Elena handed over the data from her scanner, the survivor’s suspicious demeanor had become impossible to ignore.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the official told her. “I’m sure it’s something you’d rather not recall, but we need to know what led to you getting separated from the rest of your team. Can you share the data you have?”

Monica hesitated, but eventually complied. “S-Sure.” After sharing her scanner’s records with the official, she hung her head as though resigned to her fate.

The official had intended to ask Monica for the gist of what had happened as he did a quick analysis of her records. But when he realized what the data was saying, he glared at her sharply. “You abandoned your team and made a run for it on your own?!”

Monica flinched so hard she almost took a step backward, but she didn’t deny his charge.

Elena had finished making her report. Even after restocking their ammo, the team wasn’t ready to head right back into the ruins, but it was too early to call it a day. So they were taking some downtime at the base. In a break room, open only to hunters and city officials, Akira was relaxing at one of the tables. Elena, Sara, and Carol had joined him and were discussing what had happened.

Elena wore a troubled expression. “Honestly, it’s not like I don’t understand why she did it.” Her gaze traveled to the corner of the room, where Monica was sitting all alone.

“Yeah, I get it too,” Akira agreed, with a furtive glance in the same direction.

He wasn't just agreeing with whatever Elena said—he really did “get it.” He could still hear what Monica had shouted at the official after he'd criticized her: “Then was I supposed to try and fight all those monsters on my own?! How?! You'd rather I'd died like everyone else?! Ridiculous! I'm just a surveyor—I can't fight! I hide in the shadows and gather information! I'm not some musclehead who can charge headlong into the fray and come out all hunky-dory!”

Her passionate outburst had brought her right up into the official's face. She'd seemed to believe that unless she pleaded her case—selfish though it might have been—the guilt in her heart would have destroyed her. But the moment she'd finished, she'd hung her head and dropped to her knees, as if the last thread supporting her had snapped, leaving her a pitiful figure on the ground. Since then, she had only spoken in a strained, timid voice.

Remembering her expression at that moment, Akira looked conflicted. “It'd be one thing if she'd willingly agreed to the job, but that wasn't the case this time, huh?” Hunters were always putting their lives on the line during the dangerous, often deadly, jobs they took on. Naturally, their clients tacitly understood this when putting up commissions, so it was frowned upon for a hunter to abandon a job merely because they feared for their own safety. But that only applied if the hunter chose the job willingly—if the city's DLS made a request, hunters didn't have the right to refuse and were forced to work with complete strangers, on top of the usual dangers. Akira could certainly see why that might have made her less motivated to complete her task.

Sara also looked mildly troubled, but Carol sat unperturbed, as though it didn't concern her in the least. Akira turned to her curiously. “Doesn't look like all this bugs you much, Carol, even though you've teamed up with her before. Or maybe that *is* the reason it doesn't bother you?”

“More or less,” the surveyor responded. “I mean, if I was in her position—roped into a job I couldn't refuse and expected to perform like a pro hunter—I'd be just as discouraged, you know? Of course, with the right guidance, even a team of strangers who don't trust each other can function just fine. So I feel like this is all a result of poor management on the city's part.”

“That's a fair point.” The boy could see where she was coming from, and understood that Carol's point of view diverged from Elena and Sara's simply

because they held different ideas of what was ethical or natural. He felt his own stance to be closer to Carol's.

Carol gave him a big grin. "Right? But *you* didn't abandon me when we first met, and even ended up saving my life. So I'd like to build an even stronger relationship with you going forward. I'm gonna need help getting out of a jam again sooner or later—and hey, I'd also rather you didn't kill me."

"For the first one, it depends on the price," said Akira.

"And the second one?" Carol probed.

"Just don't do anything that I'd have to take responsibility for by killing you."

"Well, no worries there, then."

"I hope not."

"Like I said, don't worry."

Though all four were sitting at the same table, their faces bore witness to their diverging values, reasoning, and philosophies. Akira and Carol exchanged knowing smiles as they spoke, but their lighthearted banter belied their utter seriousness. Akira would kill her if he ever deemed it necessary, and Carol knew it. And though Elena and Sara grasped this, the two women couldn't just laugh it off. After all, trust had to grow between two parties over a long time, which was what made it so valuable—especially for a boy who normally didn't trust others at all.

Monica sat all alone at a table in the corner of the room, wearing a dark expression. From the melancholy sigh she let out, anyone could have guessed how she felt.

Togami had been observing her from his own table a short distance away, with a troubled look on his face. He gave a sigh to vent his own feelings, then put on a neutral expression as if to set aside his worries and stood up. He went to the vending machine, bought a drink, walked over to Monica's table, and set the beverage in front of her.

She raised her head in surprise, and their eyes met.

After a brief hesitation, he finally spoke. “Um, well, I get that you’ve probably been through a lot, but you did make it out alive. So I think you should, y’know, at least be happy about that.” When Monica looked at him in genuine astonishment, Togami gave her a tight smile and continued, “I mean, I did risk my life to rescue you and all. Seeing someone I saved look so down, well, just doesn’t sit right with me. That’s all.”

“Thank...you,” Monica replied with a hollow smile—but a smile nonetheless—and bowed her head.

Togami’s face stiffened a bit, as though to keep his embarrassment from showing, and he turned away without another word. When he got back to his table, he couldn’t help but smile wryly—such behavior was hardly typical of him. But thanks to this, he’d been able to forget—at least for a moment—that he hadn’t rescued Monica on his own, and he felt a little better.

Meanwhile, as she observed him closely, Monica smiled—this time for real.



Once the break was over, Akira set off for the Mihazono factory district once more with the rest of the team.

Their roster had undergone a few changes—Monica, Reina, Shiori, and Kanae were now accompanying them, as well as two powered armor units, known as Hex and Hound. The main goal this time was not investigating the district, but rather recovering the hunters who’d failed to return to base. Based on the information the city had obtained from Monica, several of the hunters had likely managed to survive and were holed up in a building somewhere.

The city provided hunters with maps ahead of time for several key reasons. One, obviously, was to help investigations go more smoothly. The maps also made it easier for hunters to gather in a single area in the event of an emergency (like an overwhelming monster ambush) or if a team got separated—they could pick out a place ahead of time to rendezvous at. This had the added benefit that hunters in such situations would have better morale if they could take refuge together rather than alone. Any rescue teams that got involved also found it more convenient if the hunters they were looking for were in groups, since the rescuers could simply head to specific locations rather

than combing the ruins hoping to stumble across survivors.

With all these factors in mind, the team had marked several refuge areas on their maps. Currently they were headed to the one marked “A89.”

Monica had been permitted to accompany them as their guide. Having learned that she’d abandoned her teammates and escaped on her own, the city wasn’t quite sure how to handle her case. So in the end, they’d decided to put her with Akira and the others.

Monica’s actions had constituted a clear breach of contract. But if the city had decided to give her the death penalty for abandoning a job she’d been forced to take in the first place, other hunters would have revolted—news like that traveled fast. More and more hunters would have started rejecting mandatory jobs, even if it meant making an enemy of Kugamayama.

But the city couldn’t just let her off the hook either. So it had settled the matter by sending her back to the place she’d just escaped from. The powers that be intended to send a message: her escape had been in vain, and if she tried it again, they’d just send her right back. They also hoped to cover up the severity of her transgression—if they told the hunters she’d abandoned that she’d escaped on her own to go fetch help, the hunters would be less angry and dissatisfied. And in this way the city itself could also save face—it had to report that someone had breached their contract, but by framing it as a difficult and altruistic decision, the city would be able to sweep the issue under the rug and preserve its authority.

But Elena had been strongly opposed to this decision. She understood Monica’s reasoning, but both as an individual and as the team leader responsible for everyone’s safety, she found it hard to approve of a deserter tagging along. Still, she hadn’t been able to refuse a direct request from Kugamayama, so she’d come up with a counterproposal: She’d told the city that a team member who’d run away to save her own skin at the drop of a hat was a clear liability—if such a person fled, they’d deprive the rest of the group of critical firepower in battle. So if Monica absolutely had to come along, Elena at least wanted additional personnel to make up the difference in case Monica ran away again—and she’d also requested that the city make sure any potential

takers knew what they were getting into beforehand.

Of course, she'd known it would be hard to fulfill her request on short notice—even for the city, which hadn't been obliged to do so in any case. So Elena had fully expected to be ignored. And the official hadn't seemed very optimistic about her proposal, only saying that he'd do what he could and then stepping away from the negotiation table to check.

Contrary to her expectations, however, the official had returned with the news that he'd managed to find some personnel after all—Reina and her entourage.

Under a direct request from the city, Druncam was actively participating in getting the Mihazono situation under control. As long as they weren't already out on another job, all Druncam hunters were strongly encouraged to participate. Reina was of course no exception, but Shiori had been concerned for Reina's safety, making up an excuse on the fly to decline. But pressure from the syndicate to participate had gotten stronger with time, and the leadership had eventually threatened to kick Reina out of Druncam entirely. For reasons of their own, Reina and her maids needed to remain in good standing with Druncam, so in the end Shiori had been left with no choice but to comply.

Druncam was primarily working within the business district. Katsuya's unit, in fact, had been instrumental in securing the area around the Serantal Building. But Shiori had feared to approach a building that even someone as strong as Akira refused to go near—permitting Reina to visit such a place had been unthinkable to her. Yet she'd also heard that the fighting in the factory district was growing more intense by the day, so that option had also been out of the question. As she'd been agonizing over what to do, Druncam had forwarded a request from the city asking them to join the rescue team Akira was on. While she had frowned at hearing the circumstances, her only options were to head either to an area Akira wanted to avoid or an area where he'd be nearby. In the end, she had decided the latter would be preferable.

The new team was still composed of three smaller groups: Akira's, Elena's, and Shikarabe's. But because Reina's group belonged to Druncam, they were on Shikarabe's team, while Monica was put on Akira's. This was also part of her

punishment—the city had discovered that Akira had hired Carol with the understanding that he'd kill her if necessary, and they'd forced Monica onto his team thinking he'd give her the same condition. And in fact he had—as with Carol, he'd warned Monica that if she tried to harm Elena or Sara in any way, he'd “take responsibility” by killing her. Monica's face had paled, but she'd nodded.

The two powered armor units functioned separately from the rest of the team. They possessed great firepower, but were too big to enter the factories. So their main job was to escort the team on their way to point A89 and wait on standby next to the building there until the others came back out.

No one knew at present how many hunters were gathered at A89 or how many enemies they'd be up against, so the city worried that Akira and the others might have difficulty bringing the lost hunters back to base on their own. Even so, everyone was hoping the team would have a comparatively easier time with some powered armor taking care of most of the battles on the way there. The team needed enough extra firepower to be effective, but not so much that they ended up stirring up extra trouble and alerting the guards—hence the addition of the two powered armor units, Hex and Hound. If the enemy was so strong that even these couldn't make it to their destination, the team would return to base, and the city would rework the plan from the ground up.

So it was that, with a larger team than before, Akira and his colleagues departed the city's temporary base.



Not long after they'd had left, a severely injured hunter showed up at the base's border. He was covered in blood, one of his arms had been torn off, and he was already unable to walk on his own—only his powered suit had gotten him this far. Just as he was about to collapse, a guard spotted him and ran to help.

“Hey, are you okay?! Don't die on me—help is on the way!” As the guard did what he could to administer first aid, he called for help. “Point F4 reporting! I've got an injured hunter here! I think he came from the factory district! He's in critical condition!” In no time at all, a medical team had arrived to carry the

hunter inside the base.

As the hunter's consciousness started to fade, he spoke to one of the people carrying him in. "That woman... She... My team..." His voice was barely audible.

"Don't speak! Your injuries will worsen!"

Even as he coughed up blood, the man seemed desperate to tell him something. But the severity of his wounds and his muddled consciousness only made his message even harder to understand. "Surveyor... Everyone..."

From the words he could piece together, the member of the medical team thought he knew what the hunter was trying to get at. "You're talking about the surveyor named Monica, right? Because of her, many of you ended up dying. Don't worry, we're already aware."

When the hunter heard this, the corner of his mouth turned up slightly. Letting himself relax, he finally lost consciousness.

The base's official in charge of handling the Mihazono situation (including Akira's team) received a report from one of his subordinates that they had just carried the injured hunter inside.

"What's his condition?" the official asked.

"He'll survive. But his injuries are so severe it'll take a while for him to wake up."

"I see. Well, the important thing is that he's alive. His account of the situation will be incredibly valuable for our future work—don't let him die under any circumstances. When he wakes up, get him to tell you everything he knows. He might have information on other survivors as well."

"Roger," his subordinate said and left the room.

But as the official read over the report he'd been given, he discovered something puzzling.

"The call for aid came from a guard stationed at point F4, not F1. Why is that?" he mumbled to himself. If the hunter had taken the shortest route from the factory district to the base, he should've shown up near point F1 instead.

Perhaps he'd had to change his route midway for some reason, but he would have had to circle around nearly the entire area shown on the standard-issue map in order to reach F4.

The official definitely found this strange, but since he'd been told the hunter's condition wasn't life-threatening, he decided he'd ask the man himself about it once he regained consciousness.

Chapter 117: All for Naught

Akira's team made their way through the factory district toward point A89, where a large group of hunters were thought to be taking refuge. They avoided going through any buildings that the two powered armor units accompanying them couldn't enter (due to their size), so their route was longer than normal. Still, the journey itself was proceeding smoothly. The enemies they did encounter were annihilated on sight by Hex's and Hound's overwhelming firepower, so the team was making good time.

Hex's right arm past the elbow had been fitted with an enormous machine gun. Huge magazines on its back allowed it to provide unending curtains of gunfire. The groups of smaller multilegged tanks they encountered along the way were swallowed up by this bullet storm in an instant. Similarly, Hound's left arm was a gigantic cannon. The team also encountered several of the larger tanks, like those they'd fought the other day, but Hound's enormous cannon blew them to smithereens.

Seeing the two powered armors fight, Akira couldn't help but be impressed. "Yeah, those things are something else! No wonder the base couldn't get permission to dispatch them so easily."

"They're mainly used by the city's defense force, after all," Kanae pointed out. "If they couldn't do that much, the city wouldn't use 'em in the first place."

"Right, whatever," Akira replied, less than cordially.

But his demeanor didn't seem to bother Kanae, who had made her way closer to him. Even when Akira turned a wary gaze toward her, she only grinned teasingly. "Why're you staring at me like that, Akira kiddo? Oh, could it be that you've been charmed by my body? Well, I suppose you are at that age..."

"No."

"It's okay, you don't need to hide it. I don't mind—stare all you want!"

"I'm not hiding anything."

“Yeah, right! Considering you’ve already got a babe in *that* getup around you,” she added, indicating Carol, “denying it won’t do you much good.”

Akira had no rebuttal. “Stuff like that,” he muttered, “doesn’t matter. More importantly, why are you unarmed? Where’s your gun?”

“Oh, well, y’know, I’m not really good with guns.”

“Not good with guns? Isn’t that, like, a serious problem?”

Akira looked bewildered, but once again, Kanae didn’t care one bit.

“Nope, it’s fine,” she said. “You haven’t heard missy or sis complain, have you?”

Akira couldn’t help but think that they probably knew objecting would be pointless, but he kept his mouth shut. He also reflected that, considering how protective Shiori was of Reina, if Shiori hadn’t forced a gun into Kanae’s hands up till now, Kanae could likely manage just fine without one.

“Well, as long as you take your job seriously,” he said.

“I *always* take my job seriously. Y’see, someone like me, I’m not gonna get off the hook so easily if I fail by saying, ‘Welp, I tried my best!’ So I gotta work hard.”

“Yeah, I bet.” So *that* was why Kanae was given a pass for her behavior—she brought results. This in itself was sufficient proof for Akira that she was capable.

“Ah, but fair warning—my job is solely to protect missy, so don’t count on me to have your back or anything,” she added. As Reina’s bodyguard, she would not help out with the actual rescue mission—in fact, she would abandon everyone else and carry Reina away from danger if necessary.

“Well, as long as Elena’s cool with that, I ain’t complaining,” Akira said.

Elena had ultimately agreed that the two maids should prioritize Reina over the mission. Per their contract, the three would be treated as a single team member for this operation. Shiori might be more actively involved than Kanae, but she ultimately had the same task of protecting her mistress, while Reina was the weakest on the team to begin with. In short, their value in combat would really only amount to that of one person, and per their contract, their

pay would reflect this as well. Nevertheless, even compared to the other members of the team, the trio's true combined fighting potential clearly exceeded that of one person: Shiori was fighting offensively, as was Reina, while Kanae would fight defensively to keep the girl safe. So they were already taking on this job at a loss.

While Elena still had some misgivings about this arrangement, there was no question the team needed the help. And since she hadn't expected anyone to respond to her request to begin with, she'd reluctantly agreed to the trio's terms. Besides, since the newcomers were on Shikarabe's team, if they caused any problems, it would be Shikarabe's—that is, Druncam's—responsibility.

For his part, Akira was happy to have Shiori along, regardless of what Kanae or Reina did. He'd fought with Shiori before, so he knew firsthand how strong she was. So as long as Elena was fine with it, he wasn't going to complain, even if Kanae ended up doing nothing. "Do what you want, I guess," he added. "If you have to take Reina and leave us behind, be my guest, but keep in mind that if you try to use me, Elena, or Sara as decoys, I'll kill you."

"Gotcha," Kanae replied with a huge grin.

Akira interpreted that to mean that Kanae had gotten the message—and she had, loud and clear. But he didn't realize that she was actually thinking about what a rush she'd get from fighting him to the death.



Reina's head felt heavy. She worried that if she let her body relax, she would topple forward. But she gritted her teeth, raised her head, and kept her eyes ahead. With a determined expression, she fought back stubbornly against her depression. But her victory was only a hollow, temporary one. Faced with the thought that she might be the only one dragging the team down, it was taking all she had just to keep moving forward.

She noticed Togami looking at her. She felt more in his gaze than mere observation, and she reflexively glared back. "What?" she snapped.

"Oh, u-uh, nothing," Togami quickly answered.

"Hmph" was her only response. She wanted to say more but held her tongue.

If she blew up at him here, she'd be no better than her old self—the Reina who'd foolishly picked a fight with Akira without considering the consequences and who had nearly caused Shiori and Akira to fight each other to the death. She never wanted anything like that to happen again, and through force of will she managed to keep silent.

She couldn't change what had happened in the past, but she could change the present.

Taking a deep breath, she managed to calm the emotions mounting within her. *Get a grip, Reina! You know already you're a burden. Nothing you can say to him will change that. So first and foremost, you just need to accept it.*

Reina thought that Togami was gazing at her critically because she was a hindrance to the rest of the team. *He's probably thinking, "Why do I need to protect a weakling like her, even if a superior ordered me to?" And honestly, I can't blame him.* She told herself that getting heated wouldn't make the situation any better. Instead of wasting her energy shouting at him, she ought to channel it into bettering herself.

At that, she felt a renewed sense of determination.

That's right. I'll prove them wrong. Even if I am just a burden, I'll do all I possibly can. First I'll show them that I don't need to be protected all the time. At the moment, that's the best I can hope for—but I can manage that much!

With her spirit fired up, the gloom cleared from her face, now shining with resolve.

But that resolve turned out to be moot in the end.

The two powered armor units were meant for dispatching large swarms of machines, like the ones Akira and the others had run into back in the factory, not for protecting the team from harm. And the more enemies there were, the higher the chance that some would escape their fire. Of course, Akira and the others could handle most of these on their own and intended to do so.

Reina did as well. But because she was so concerned with proving herself, she didn't pay enough attention to her surroundings. Several enemies that Hex and Hound had failed to destroy entirely lay motionless on the ground in a heap

nearby. At a glance, they certainly looked like they were out of commission, but in a stroke of poor luck, one of them revived and aimed its machine gun at Reina before she could notice. By the time she reacted, it was already too late.

No! She saw and knew at once she was a goner. Of course, being able to sense this proved that she was already highly skilled, and she was absolutely correct—evading or counterattacking would be impossible.

But the end she was expecting never came. Before the machine could fire, Kanae instantly crushed it with a dropkick from above.

Then, having fulfilled her duty as a bodyguard, she strolled back over to Akira as if nothing had happened. “So yeah, like I was saying, because sis is always so overprotective, we ended up here in the ruins and—”

“Say, don’t you think you ought to go back and help Reina out instead of talking to me? That looked like a pretty close call just now.”

“Huh? Oh no, you’re way off, kiddo! Missy wasn’t even in any danger. Did sis seem worried to you? She didn’t respond right away because she was testing me to see if I was actually paying attention or just goofing off,” Kanae said with a confident grin.

Akira glanced in Reina’s direction and noticed Shiori off to the side. She’d likely been watching the girl the whole time. “I see,” he said with a nod.

Reina overheard Akira and Kanae’s conversation and automatically glanced at Shiori. But she knew Shiori wouldn’t tell her whether this was true, even if she asked. And indeed, Shiori remained quiet.

Kanae had in fact been correct—Shiori had intentionally held back from aiding Reina. If the girl had managed to handle the robot on her own, great. If she hadn’t and Kanae had also failed to respond in time, then Shiori would have stepped in and taken care of it herself, then reprimanded Kanae later for not taking her duties seriously. (Of course, had she not been testing her colleague, Shiori would’ve destroyed the machine before Reina could even notice.)

Disappointment washed over Reina. No sooner than she’d decided to show everyone she didn’t need protecting, she’d screwed up. Her determination had been all for naught, and she was angry with herself for being so foolish. Her

mood sank even further, and she struggled even more to keep her head up. Even so, she gritted her teeth and kept her eyes forward, telling herself that something like this wasn't going to make her lose heart.



To Reina, Togami had seemed to be giving her a disapproving glare, but the boy hadn't intended any such thing. Considering the overall ability of the rest of the team, he wouldn't have faulted anyone for considering her a hindrance, but he himself wasn't dissatisfied or upset that she was on the team—in fact, his impression of her was somewhat favorable. He was also dragging the rest of the team down, he knew, and as he and Reina were the only two burdens among them, he felt a sense of kinship toward her.

If she'd been acting all proud and haughty, perhaps he would have thought differently, along the lines of *You've got two bodyguards, and you're still a burden to the rest of the team—what do you have to be proud of?* But she hadn't shown even a hint of that attitude—more like the exact opposite. She wasn't here because she wanted to be, and she knew she was only deadweight, but she was still trying her very best in her own way. Togami had sensed a grim determination in Reina, and it had reminded him of his own attitude.

So he'd been staring at her without really being aware of it. But she'd noticed, and returned his gaze with an angry glare. He couldn't know what she'd actually been thinking, of course, so he'd interpreted her look to mean something completely different.

She hates me, he thought with a rueful grin. *Well, that's no surprise, considering what I used to be like.* The Togami of before *had* hated Reina. Although both of them were Druncam rookies, Reina lived within the city walls instead of the dorms and even had maids accompanying her around the clock. At the time, he hadn't been able to see her as anything but an insult to the hunter profession.

But now, such trifles hardly mattered to Togami. He was too preoccupied with trying to regain his own self-confidence to worry about someone else's social standing. As a result, his unconscious prejudice toward Reina had vanished, and he was now able to view her from a more rational, unbiased perspective.

Without the arrogance from his misplaced confidence clouding his vision, Reina no longer looked like a spoiled little rich girl who needed maids to protect her and only saw relic hunting as an amusing diversion. He now saw a normal girl who was desperate to keep fighting.

I know she lives within the city walls, so there's no doubt she's loaded. But honestly, there's probably more to it than that.

After it was decided that Reina and her maids would participate, Shikarabe had secretly taken Togami aside and told him to watch over Reina and keep her from harm. Togami could at least hazard a guess why: as long as Reina was safe, Shiori wouldn't need to exert as much effort protecting her and could focus on supporting the team. In that case, even with Togami solely focused on protecting Reina, having Shiori's help in combat would more than make up for losing Togami's assistance. Though the boy knew this was a logical decision, at first he'd felt unhappy at having to play babysitter to a bratty rich girl. But now, when he thought about protecting her, he didn't feel dissatisfied at all. In fact, he felt like he wanted to do his best. If he successfully protected Reina so well that Shiori could fight at her full potential, that in itself would count as an accomplishment. And if Shiori thought that she could leave Reina in Togami's hands without worry, this would mean that someone far above his level had acknowledged his strength. The thought fired him up, and he resolved to protect Reina to the best of his ability.

But merely being motivated wasn't enough to produce results. When the mechanical guard had sprung to life without warning and aimed at Reina, it had happened so fast that Togami couldn't react. Kanae had dispatched it immediately, and Shiori had appeared instantly by Reina's side as if to guard her. Neither of them had so much as glanced in Togami's direction. Shikarabe hadn't said anything either, only giving a small sigh.

And *that* was a bigger blow to Togami than anything else—that they didn't even recognize that he'd failed, because they'd never expected anything from him in the first place.

Even so, Togami didn't lose heart. *This isn't all I'm capable of! I still have so much more to show!* His remaining pride kept his eyes forward. Even if he *was* a hindrance, that was no reason to stop—his stubborn will wouldn't allow it.



Akira's team arrived at their destination—a huge building dubbed “Factory A” for convenience's sake. Elena approached the loading dock and fired a threat magnet into the open entrance. It activated, and mechanical monsters started pouring from the building.

If the team had simply charged in without flushing out the machines first, they would have been forced to fight them inside without Hex's and Hound's help, using up the lion's share of their ammo before they'd even reached point A89. But now that their enemies were all out in the open, it was time for the two powered armor units to shine. With their overwhelming firepower, Hex and Hound blasted the horde until all that remained was a mountain of scrap.

After a while, enemy units stopped emerging from the factory, even when Elena fired one more threat magnet into the building for good measure. “All right, looks like we're clear,” she said, then turned to the two powered armor units. “We're going in. Hold down the fort here until we get back.”

Hex and Hound responded through their loudspeakers. “Leave it to us!” said one voice.

“We've got your backs,” added the other. “If things get dicey in there, come back here as quickly as you can. And if any big hunks of bolts start chasin' you, lure 'em out here, and we'll blast 'em to pieces.”

“We'll be counting on you if it comes to that,” Elena replied with a grin. Then, in a commanding voice, she gave her orders to Akira and the rest. “Once we enter Factory A, we'll be heading straight for point A89. We probably took out a sizable portion of the enemies inside just now, but don't get careless, and don't rely too heavily on your map—even if a route has been marked as clear, it might currently be blocked off for some reason. Proceed with caution at all times. Understood?”

Akira and the others nodded with determination.

“Good! Then let's go!” Elena said, and at her signal they all headed into the factory.

Except for the traces of battles that had taken place all over the building, everything else they saw looked brand-new. This proved that the factory and its autorestitution program were still online, so Akira and the others took extra caution even as they hurried to their destination.

After some time, however, they heard Shikarabe grunt quietly to himself.

“What’s wrong?” Elena asked.

“Oh, I was just thinking—it’s strange that we haven’t seen any bodies anywhere.”

“I was actually just thinking the same thing. Hmm...”

Akira spoke up, curious. “Uh, Elena, is it really that strange? If the factory’s still up and running, maybe the bots just automatically cleaned up the bodies or something?”

Shikarabe answered instead. “It’s certainly possible. But I have a hunch there’s something else going on here.” After all, there were bloodstains all over, and broken parts of mechanical sentries littered the ground. Bullet holes even dented the walls. Hunters had definitely put up a fight here, and from the sheer amount of blood, many of them had likely sustained severe injuries. Yet not a single corpse was to be seen.

“Just off the top of my head, I can think of a few possibilities,” Shikarabe continued. “The ruin’s automated maintenance system could’ve taken care of them like you said, or their companions might’ve already taken them to the refuge area.”

But he could think of holes in both of those theories. If maintenance bots had really cleaned up the hunters’ bodies, why had they left the blood and everything else behind? And if the situation had gotten so bad that Monica had been forced to abandon her teammates to survive, could the hunters really have carried every corpse back to the refuge point?

Of course, he could also think of a few logical explanations for these objections, so he couldn’t rule anything out just yet. At the same time, every theory that came to his mind seemed incomplete. None of them made him think, *Oh, now it all makes sense*. Instead his intuition was telling him, *That’s*

not right—there’s something you’ve overlooked. He muttered to himself, at a loss.

Now it was Elena’s turn to grunt. As team leader, she couldn’t ignore these details. But nor could she give the order to turn back without a concrete reason—a mere “bad feeling” didn’t justify a retreat. First they had to reach point A89 and at least find out if there were any hunters there still waiting for help.

She explained her reasoning to the rest of the team, then asked, “What do you think, Akira? Is there anything that jumps out at *you* as strange?”

He shook his head. “Me? No, nothing in particular.”

“Hm... Okay.” Elena felt a little better. Back in underground Kuzusuhara, Akira had realized before anyone else that what they had taken for walls were actually disguised Yarata scorpions, and he’d been the first to discover the Yonozuka Station Ruins even though the site was buried beneath the wasteland. If someone like him didn’t sense anything strange, she was probably just overthinking things. So despite the odd lack of bodies, she nonetheless had the team press on.



After proceeding a bit farther into the building, they came across a partition blocking their path. As their guide, Monica suggested they take another route, but Elena seemed opposed to the idea.

“With the route you’re proposing, it’ll take much longer to reach point A89.” She frowned. “Isn’t there any other path we can take?”

“I’m sorry, but no,” Monica said, looking apologetic.

“I see. I would’ve liked us to take the shortest route possible. That way we could quickly make it back to the powered armors in case we run into trouble. But if there’s no other option—”

“Can’t we just smash it down?” Kanae interjected.

“I’m not so sure we can,” Elena answered. “This wall is part of an Old World ruin, so I doubt it’d be that easy. Maybe if we combine our firepower, but we’ll use up a lot of our ammo trying.”

“Fair point. Welp, guess that means *I’m* up!” Kanae strode up to the partition and cocked her right arm. The next instant, her fist—strengthened by her powered inner wear—struck the wall. A master of martial arts, she focused the force of the blow into a single point—rendering it even more powerful than a punch from someone wearing an actual powered suit.

Even a wall constructed with Old World technology was no match for her strength. Impact conversion luminescence scattered everywhere—the wall was protected by force-field armor. Yet Kanae’s fist pierced its defenses and pulverized it with a single punch.

Surprised by Kanae’s strength, Elena still looked doubtful. “That was impressive, but you’re not contractually obligated to help us. Was that really okay?”

“My job’s to help missy escape as quickly as possible. If things go south, I’ll need it gone anyway, so I figured I might as well save myself the trouble now.”

“I see. Well, we appreciate it all the same,” Elena said. After all, the obstacle *was* gone, and they could now continue along the shortest route once more.

As they pressed onward, Akira reflected on what he’d just witnessed. *Hey Alpha, do you think I could do what Kanae did?*

Right now it would be impossible for you.

Even with your support?

That’s not the issue. Your equipment simply isn’t built for it. That woman’s weapon is designed for close-quarters combat—and to negate force-field armor, which your current powered suit can’t do. No matter how amazing my support is, I can’t add a function to your gear that isn’t already there.

I see... Dang. Guess that means I’ve got to keep upgrading my gear.

Exactly. Don’t get complacent—always strive for better equipment.

Thanks to his powered suit, Akira had once been able to topple a building in the wasteland, but only because it had already been close to collapsing. Kanae, however, had effortlessly accomplished something altogether out of his league for the moment. *No wonder she doesn’t need a gun*, he thought, and in his mind

he committed himself once again to frequently updating his gear.

After a while, they came across another wall blocking their path. Elena was about to ask Kanae to take care of it when Monica spoke up.

“Um... I don’t think you’ll be able to destroy this one just by punching it.”

Sure enough, a mere glance sufficed to tell that this wall looked far more resilient. They couldn’t directly see the strength of the force field, of course, but the sheer bulk of the metal provided ample support for Monica’s argument.

Kanae tested the wall with a light punch. “Yep, it’s sure sturdier than the last one.”

“Right? So we should go this way inste—” Monica began.

“Then it’s my turn,” Shiori declared, stepping forward. “Kanae shouldn’t be acting outside of what her contract specifies in the first place.” Standing in front of the wall, she gripped the hilt of her blade. Then, with one fluid motion, she unsheathed it and slashed across the obstacle. A small crack appeared—then rent the entire surface of the wall. Impact conversion luminescence shone briefly through the fissure, then disappeared.

For a few moments, it looked as though nothing else had happened. But as Shiori sheathed her blade, the partition belatedly slid apart, cut cleanly in half.

Akira looked impressed. “Whoa, that was awesome! Is your blade an Old World weapon or something?”

“No, it’s a modern model,” Shiori replied.

“Really? It’s recent?” While Shiori’s weapon didn’t have the reach of Old World blades—some of which were even considered long-range weapons—he’d felt sure a blade as sharp as hers had to be a relic. Hearing this wasn’t the case intrigued him even more. “Then could I buy one too?”

“Considering this specific blade was never put on the market, that would be difficult,” she answered.

“Oh well.”

“However, similar weapons can be found in some stores.”

“No kidding? Hmm...” Maybe the next time he went to Shizuka’s, he would ask her if she had anything like that in stock, he thought as he examined the edges of the immaculately cut wall with great interest.

Monica was also studying the erstwhile barrier. A dark look flashed briefly across her face.



Akira and the rest of the team proceeded deeper into the factory, destroying several more obstacles along the way, until they finally neared point A89, a vast, open room that seemed to be a warehouse. While hunters could have easily taken refuge here, they would have had no way to escape unaided once enemy machines flooded the adjacent corridors. So any humans here would have been counting on the eventual arrival of outside help.

But when Akira and the others reached one of the corridors leading to the warehouse, it was bizarrely empty—save for the scraps of destroyed tanks littering the floor. Once again, they couldn’t find a single corpse. Now more wary than ever, they opened the door and entered the warehouse.

Inside, no hunters eagerly awaiting rescue greeted them. Instead, there were more robot remains scattered all over and a smashed portable defensive wall someone must have set up.

And numerous bodies lying on the ground.

Elena grimaced. “Looks like we were too late. What a shame.”

Shikarabe also looked disappointed for a moment, but quickly recovered. “Togami, check and see if any of them are alive. Just shake them a bit and see if they respond. Even if they’re cyborgs in temporary death mode, that should still wake them up.”

“Understood,” Togami replied.

“If none of them regain consciousness, start preparing the corpses for transport.” He sighed. “Well, we finally found some bodies. Hopefully there are a few survivors still in the mix, even if they’re severely injured.”

Reina watched Togami go to work and decided to assist him. But before she

could step forward, Kanae grabbed her shoulder. Reina turned to face her, confused. Kanae was wearing her usual carefree smile, but Shiori had an apologetic look on her face.

“Pardon me, miss, but I will be handling this instead,” Shiori said.

Once, out of the goodness of her heart, Reina had attempted to help an injured man lying on the ground—and had been taken hostage as a result. The circumstances had been quite different back then, of course, and Shiori was acting a bit overprotective now. Still, Reina’s actions had stirred up trouble, so she had no grounds for rebuttal.

“I understand,” the girl said, meekly following Kanae some distance away from the corpses.

Shiori began helping Togami in her stead.

Meanwhile, Monica was staring at the hunters on the ground. “How?” she muttered in surprise.

Akira chanced to hear her. “What do you mean, ‘How?’ Something wrong?”

Monica started. “Oh, no! I was just wondering why there are only this many here. I mean, I *did* abandon them, so it probably sounds weird for me to say this, but the situation shouldn’t have been *that* dire. I expected that some wouldn’t make it, of course, but well over half of them should’ve made it here safely.”

“Oh, gotcha. Then maybe the others went to another rendezvous point somewhere?”

“Perhaps. I certainly hope so,” Monica said, and gave a sad smile, as though forcing herself to remain optimistic.

They continued to search the warehouse but still found no survivors. Elena felt torn over what to do next: Should they do as Shikarabe had suggested and turn back with the corpses they’d already found, or head to another refuge point in the hope of finding survivors?

Which would be better? she wondered. *We didn’t encounter a single enemy*

on the way here, so we have plenty of ammo if we want to press on. Wouldn't our efforts be better spent searching for the living, rather than carrying back the dead?

Given that they hadn't found any bodies until now, despite the signs of battle all over, Elena suspected that some hunters might have survived the encounter with the hostile machines and fled to another refuge point. She was strongly leaning toward going to their rescue.

If they can still be saved, then we ought to save them. I'll talk to Monica about which point we should head for next. I'd like to contact the base as well to get their input, but we can't really get in touch with them right now.

Hex and Hound, the powered armor units on standby outside, were also serving as a relay point for communications between the rescue team and the base. The two of them could maintain contact with the base despite the network disturbance in the factory district, and Akira's team could call them up even from inside the factory. This allowed the team and the base to send and receive transmissions. But when the former had nearly reached point A89, their connection had abruptly cut out.

Well, we're in a ruin, so I should've expected some interference. I guess I got a bit too optimistic when I decided to push forward anyway, since our connection had been just fine up until then. But it wasn't like we had any real reason to turn back then either... Elena abruptly shook her head. Regretting her decisions now wouldn't solve anything, and she turned her attention to the present.

Togami's voice suddenly announced, "We've got a survivor!"

Elena practically sprinted to where the boy was. Akira and the others were right on her heels. Only Monica stayed behind, frozen in shock—and glaring.

The survivor, a cyborg named Ezio, was missing his left arm—and everything else from the chest down. Togami's voice had roused him, but the hunter looked utterly confused, as though he had no idea what was going on. "Wh-Where am I?"

"Don't worry, you're safe now. We've come to help you," Elena said with a smile. Continuing to reassure him, she gave him a brief rundown of the

situation.

When she finished, Ezio's expression seemed to relax. "I see... Then I can't thank you enough for showing up. I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to maintain temporary death, so you're a literal lifesaver."

"Now that you're awake, can you tell us a bit about what went on here, or perhaps the whereabouts of any other survivors?"

"Sure. Our team was commissioned by the city to investigate Factory A when..." He trailed off, his eyes widening with terror.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?!" Elena asked.

"Wh-Why is *she* here?! Don't tell me... You're all with *her*?!"

Shikarabe saw that the cyborg's eyes were fixed on Monica, and he tried to reassure the panicked hunter. "Don't worry. We're already aware that she abandoned you and the rest of your team. As a sort of punishment, she was put on our team to guide us here."

But Ezio's panic only worsened. "'Abandoned'?! You've got to be joking!"

Shikarabe looked surprised. "What do you mean? If she didn't abandon you, then what the hell happened?"

Confusion was evident on both their faces, but it was at least clear there had been a grave misunderstanding. They'd overlooked something—something critical. As realization dawned on Elena, she immediately grew suspicious. "You two were on the same team, right? So what happened here?" she demanded.

"Sh-She... She..." With his remaining right hand, Ezio pointed at Monica.

Then the truth came out.



The hunter who'd managed to trek all the way back to the base had been practically on death's door when they'd carried him to the sick bay. When he finally regained consciousness, the city official in charge immediately went to question him about what had happened.

"First off, let me say what a relief it is to see that you survived," said the

official. “However, while we weren’t going to slap you awake or anything, we were waiting for you to come to. You see, it’s extremely important that you tell us what happened right away, as we currently have very little information to go on.”

“Yeah... I understand,” the man said. “Oh, before that, though, just tell me one thing. What happened to that Monica woman in the end? You already know what she did—don’t you?” The man’s consciousness had been hazy back then, but he recalled confirming that much just before he’d passed out.

“Oh, yes, we already know all about that.”

“I see. Thank goodness!” The man breathed a deep sigh of relief. “So what’d you do with her?”

“Well, right now she’s joined one of our rescue teams headed for Factory A. We made her guide the team back to the hunters she abandoned.”

A silence fell between them.

“What?” the man finally croaked—a sound that conveyed to the official precisely and succinctly how the survivor felt about this news.

Puzzled, the official explained, “It was meant to double as her punishment for escaping on her own, you see. To show her that her efforts to save only herself had been in vain. Wait, what’s wrong?”

The man’s expression had twisted in sheer terror, and his entire body started to tremble. “What’s wrong?! Everything! You’ve got it *all* wrong!” he screamed. “That woman didn’t *abandon* my teammates—she *massacred* them!”

Startled, the official couldn’t help raising his voice as well. “What?! *What did you say?!*”



“That woman!” Ezio announced to Akira and the others. “She betrayed us! She didn’t abandon us—she worked together with the monsters to try and kill us all!”

Everyone on the rescue team immediately turned to Monica. She looked surprised for a moment, then shook her head vigorously. “Wh...What? No,

that's not true! I would never do something like that!" she pleaded. "I know you're upset at me for leaving on my own, but lying like that is beyond the pale! I don't deserve to be called a murderer!"

To all appearances, she seemed to be nothing more than an innocent woman who'd been suddenly and unjustly accused of a heinous crime. But Elena's eyes narrowed.

As team leader, Elena had to sort this out, but she wasn't sure exactly how. *It certainly doesn't look like she's lying—otherwise, she'd have to be quite the actress. And this hunter has a motive to frame Monica for murder—he probably holds a serious grudge against her for abandoning him and his teammates to their deaths.*

Elena went over the facts in her head. The city had told them that Monica had abandoned the other hunters to escape on her own. They'd drawn that conclusion after analyzing the data Monica herself had provided from her scanner. Scanner data would be unbiased and objective—at least, more objective than the hunter's claim here.

The data did come from Monica herself, but it would normally be incredibly difficult to tamper with information like that. She couldn't just delete the original data—she'd need to rewrite it entirely. I certainly couldn't manage it... But she is a surveyor. What if she's used to manipulating data like this? Then again, could she really do it well enough to fool the city? If so, then why would she fake the data to show her abandoning her teammates in the first place?

Of course, Elena considered, Monica might have had some reason of her own for deliberately manipulating the footage to show that specific scene, but piling speculation on top of speculation would get them nowhere. Right now, Elena needed to focus on the facts. *The hunter said that Monica worked with the monsters to murder the rest of the team. But back when we rescued Monica, those same monsters had attacked her, right? Hmm...*

Ezio's claim simply didn't add up with what they already knew, so she suspected he was probably lying. After all, who'd ever heard of a hunter working in tandem with hostile machines? She turned to Ezio, her face tinged with suspicion. "Can you prove what you're saying is true?"

Ezio panicked. “P-Proof? Well, I don’t really have any proof... But it’s true! I’m not lying!”

“Well, can you show us the data on your scanner, then?” Elena asked. “Of course, I know that per your contract that data is property of the city, and that it might contain confidential or private information regarding your team. So I won’t force you to hand it over, but it would certainly help clear things up.”

Ezio detected the hidden meaning in Elena’s words: *Without some sort of proof to base your claim on, we can’t trust you.* He looked grim for a moment, then he sighed. “I’m sorry. I can’t give you the data. But I’m really telling the truth. You’re free to doubt me if you want, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

At these words, Elena found it hard to continue pressing him. The situation now seemed murkier than ever, and she was growing even more anxious.

But then someone else broke into their conversation—Akira. “Why *can’t* you hand it over?” he asked. His tone was not accusing, nor did it have even a hint of tension—he sounded genuinely curious. At least, it wasn’t the tone one would normally adopt toward someone who’d just accused one of his teammates of murder with absolutely no proof.

For a moment, Ezio looked taken aback by how calm Akira was. Then he gave the boy a look as if to say, “You don’t even know that much?” Aloud, he answered, “I’m a hunter just as much as you are. Sure, maybe you’ll believe me if I give you the data—and if I don’t, maybe you’ll see me as the enemy and leave me to die.” His voice hardened. “But I’m not some cowardly third-rate hunter who’d leak my teammates’ info just to keep myself alive.”

“Whoa, cool!” Akira marveled, clearly genuinely impressed.

Even more surprised, Ezio smiled a bit in embarrassment. “Well, it’s not like I don’t have other reasons. For one, there’s no guarantee you’d believe me even if I did give you what you want. After all, the footage might be so chaotic or unclear that you can’t tell what happened. Given this possibility, it’s not worth the risk.”

Akira nodded in understanding.

To Ezio, the boy seemed like an innocent, curious greenhorn, and the hunter

couldn't help but smile wryly. Standing nearby, Togami looked astonished—stunned that Akira couldn't figure out something so basic, Togami briefly forgot his complicated mix of envy and resentment toward the other boy.

But suddenly Akira's innocent demeanor vanished. "Let's get to the bottom of this," he said, now looking deadly serious. "Did Monica really attack you and your teammates? Answer yes or no."

The hunter looked taken aback by the abrupt change in Akira's attitude, but he answered just as seriously. "Yes."

What do you think, Alpha? said Akira silently.

He's telling the truth—probably. Since he's a cyborg, I can't say for certain.

I see. Akira turned to Monica. His gaze was already dark with distrust. "Now I'll ask you. Did you attack him and his team? Yes or no?"

"W-Wait! You actually believe what he's saying?! If he can't hand over proof, that obviously means he doesn't have any proof in the first place—"

"Yes or no?" Akira cut her off, his expression unchanged.

Monica went silent, and then, with a somber expression, answered, "I did not attack them."

Alpha?

She's lying.

Akira's eyes flamed with hostility. In his mind he marked Monica as an enemy, and his body tensed up as though ready for a fight. "Liar."

Monica took a step back. "W-Wait a second!" she said, shaking her head frantically. "What makes you think I'm lying?! It's the truth!"

Akira ignored her pleas and dropped one final question. "Are you our enemy? Yes or no?"

If she didn't answer, that was sufficient confirmation for him, but he didn't feel the need to explain that to her. Perhaps if he'd come here without the rest of his team, he wouldn't have even felt the need to ask this in the first place. After all, it would be highly unlikely—preposterous, even—for her to attack her

supposed comrades and not regard Akira as an enemy as well. Under any other circumstance, he wouldn't have hesitated to kill her right then. But he was on a team with Elena and Sara right now, and that stayed his trigger finger. For this reason alone, Monica remained alive.

The surveyor turned a desperate, pleading look toward Elena and the others.

Had a third party seen her expression and not known the situation beforehand, they might have immediately felt sorry for her and run to her aid. But now Elena and Sara also wore extremely guarded looks. Just like how back in underground Kuzusuhara Akira had detected the Yarata scorpions before anyone else, so now both women got the feeling that Akira had somehow been able to sense, with absolute conviction, that Monica was lying to them. They trusted his sixth sense more than they did the surveyor.

So they, too, looked upon Monica as an enemy.

Monica saw their faces, realized they weren't going to defend her, and turned her pleading gaze to Reina's group instead. But now Reina and Shiori were also regarding her with deep suspicion. The whole incident when Reina had been taken hostage, when both she and Shiori had nearly died, had come about precisely because Akira had told them someone else was suspicious—and they hadn't listened. The lingering memory of that experience prevented them from siding with someone Akira claimed was an enemy—they'd remain neutral at the very least.

In any case, their wary gazes told Monica they weren't going to help her either.

She scanned the area frantically, searching for anyone else who might go to bat for her. But Shikarabe didn't have any intention of defending Monica either—and since his team was deferring to Elena's for this mission, it wasn't up to him to make that call anyway.

For his part, Togami honestly wanted to stop Akira—to him, it looked like Akira had no grounds for treating Monica as an enemy apart from pure intuition. Togami himself certainly wasn't haughty enough to turn on another hunter just because of his own hunches, so Akira's actions here struck him as rooted in pure arrogance. But Shikarabe was Togami's superior, and if Shikarabe

stayed silent, then Togami's hands were tied. So he kept his mouth shut as well, in wordless disapproval of Akira's judgment.

Monica's eyes continued to search among them, desperately seeking someone who would defend her. But as she became certain no one would, she finally gave up, and the fear vanished from her face as though it had never been there in the first place.

She sighed in apparent dissatisfaction. "Shit. I put in so much work, and yet it turned out to be all for naught. That's why I explicitly ordered them to not leave anyone alive, dammit."

The jig was up—Monica had been their enemy all along.

Chapter 118: The Traitor's Employer

Now that Monica had dropped her mask, Akira and the others regarded her with unreserved hostility. But Monica paid their glares no mind.

"If only it had cleaned them all up like I'd asked. Then I could have lured you all deeper in like I'd planned. But that stupid hunk of junk couldn't even manage that much! Though I guess I shouldn't have expected a factory administrative system to think that far ahead in the first place."

That raised a lot of questions in Elena's mind that she definitely could not ignore, but there were more pressing matters at hand. "Answer me, Monica! Why did you attack that team of hunters?!"

"Because it's my *job*! Not to borrow that guy's line earlier, but I'm just as much of a hunter as you are. I've gotta make money somehow."

"Your job, huh?" Elena guessed that perhaps Monica had been hired by a rival city to impede Kugamayama's efforts to investigate the ruins. At the very least, it was a safe bet that Monica was likely working at someone else's behest.

"Bullshit!" Togami bellowed. "You're not a real hunter—you're just a thief!" Unlike Elena, he'd leaped to the conclusion that Monica was just another of the many lawless bandits roaming the wasteland, and that she'd attacked the hunters in order to steal and sell off their possessions. That she would call such petty crimes "hunter work" angered him.

But Monica didn't even flinch at his sudden outburst. "I'm not a bandit. It's honest security work. My job's to eliminate trespassers. You're a Druncam hunter—you ought to at least have experience working security, right? I'm doing the same thing—we just answer to different bosses."

Togami frowned, unsure how to make sense of this.

But Elena realized the truth. "You were hired," she marveled, "by the ruin itself?"

Monica smirked. "That's right. More specifically, by the system managing one

of the factories here.”

Still trying to catch up, Togami interrupted before he could stop himself. “W-Wait! Then why did those machines attack you back when I rescued you?!”

Monica looked surprised for a moment, then her lips curled up in a sneer. “They didn’t attack me, idiot. I was the one who placed them there.”

“Wha—?!”

“Did it really not occur to you for even a moment?! Even though, when you entered the room, those sentries were aiming at *you* and not me? I had been in the room before you arrived, so didn’t you find that strange?”

Togami replayed the scene in his head. Now that she mentioned it, the fact that she’d been lying on the ground completely unharmed did indeed seem strange.

“I thought for sure you were going to interrogate me about that,” she added, “and I had a *bunch* of excuses already lined up. But if you’re that dense, I guess I didn’t need them after all!”

It had been so obvious, Togami knew. He should have been the first to realize. Then regret turned to anger, and he glared at her sharply. The fact that he’d risked his life to save a murderer who’d nearly killed them all only added to his fury.

But Monica’s smirk didn’t falter, even as she turned to Carol. “Be honest, Carol. *You* realized from the start, didn’t you? That’s why after I was ‘rescued,’ you took the rearguard position—so you could keep an eye on me from behind, no?”

Carol grinned back. “Well, it’s not like I was absolutely certain or anything, but it sucks that my guess turned out to be right.”

“Mind telling me what tipped you off?” said her former partner. “What could’ve possibly made you realize that all the way back then?”

“A bunch of things,” answered Carol, “but the biggest was the fact that back on the day Akira and I first met, you didn’t end up dead.”

“Oh? How mean,” Monica said with a mock pout. “Seriously, though, what

gave it away? Not to toot my own horn or anything, but I was pretty confident my acting was flawless.”

“Just what I said. With all those monsters running around, you shouldn’t have made it out alive. The fact that you did was suspicious in itself.” That day, Carol and Monica had encountered a swarm of hostile machines and gotten separated. After they’d met back up, Monica had said she’d escaped using a secret route. But even if that had been true, she wouldn’t have been able to fight through the swarm to reach it—at least, not with the strength Carol judged her to have. And if she *had* been perfectly capable of reaching the exit, and had been concealing her true strength all this time, then she never would’ve gotten separated from Carol in the first place—she would’ve been able to annihilate those monsters easily. At the very least, the situation would not have unfolded in the way it had.

One possible explanation for Monica’s survival, Carol had reflected at the time, was that she’d been on the monsters’ side all along.

“Well, it was just a shot in the dark,” Carol said, still grinning. “I wasn’t actually expecting anything as outlandish as you working for the ruin itself. So I was only keeping a close eye on you just in case.”

“Ah, so *that’s* why, huh? Next time I’ll be more careful—”

But Monica didn’t get to finish, because Shiori and Kanae had already gotten within striking distance.

In the East, powerful long-range weapons dominated. So a hunter opting to use close-range melee arms was automatically at a disadvantage. But by the same token, this meant such hunters had to be extremely skilled to even stand a chance of survival in the first place.

As maids tasked with guarding their mistress, Shiori and Kanae had trained diligently in close-quarters combat and had become masters of their craft. Shiori had done so out of loyalty to her mistress, while for Kanae, it had just been a hobby. By now, they’d perfected their art of closing the distance to the enemy and ending a battle before their opponent could even fire.

The sheath of Shiori’s blade was designed to open from the side. That way,

instead of having to unsheathe the blade by pulling it up and out, she could simply draw it in the same direction as her slash, without any extra movements. The blade itself was fortified with a layer of force-field armor, sharp enough to easily cut through steel, and it could even counter enemy force fields.

And if she loaded a compatible energy pack, it could become sharper and even more powerful. Then, while the sheath kept the blade protected, the blade would continue to charge until Shiori was ready to strike. Once she did, the energized attack was both stronger and faster than normal.

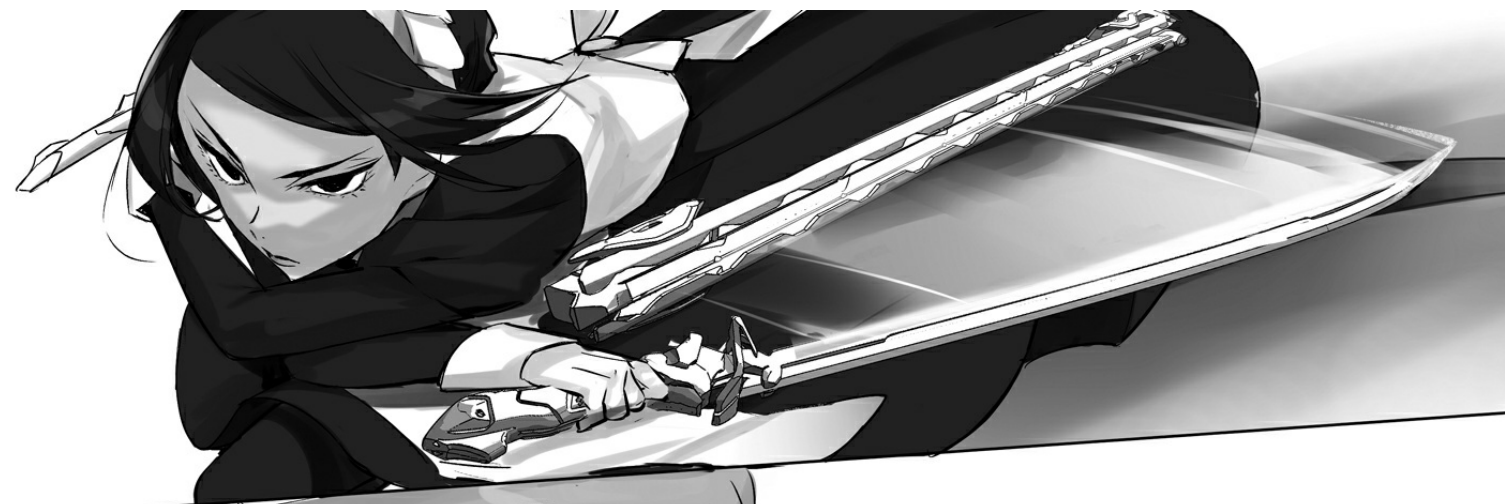
Kanae's gauntlets were quite similar—they'd also been fortified with force-field armor, could negate enemy force fields, and could be strengthened further with an appropriate energy pack.

When they wielded their weapons with the added strength of their powered inner wear and their mastery of martial arts, Shiori and Kanae's prowess reached new heights. With a single punch or slash, they could smash—or slice—through armor made from materials even tougher than steel.

And so, while Monica had been busy talking to Carol, Shiori and Kanae had closed the distance in a flash and attacked in perfect sync, without even so much as a signal between them. They'd kicked off the ground so fast (thanks to their powered inner wear) that the movement had sent ripples through the stagnant air, and they channeled that force into their all-out attacks.

A moment later, countless flashes from impact conversion lit up the whole warehouse and scattered, erasing Monica's figure. When the light finally dissipated, a different Monica was standing in her place—wearing a powered suit with a design even more racy than Carol's and looking smug.

For in that instant when Shiori's blade and Kanae's gauntlets were bearing down on their target, their attacks had met an invisible wall—a force-field shield (a spherical variant of force-field armor) had instantly expanded around Monica.



As the weapons had struck the barrier, a thin layer of impact conversion luminescence had appeared. The impact had dispersed light over the entire shield, revealing the transparent barrier's rounded form and the geometric shapes that patterned its surface.

Monica sneered at the two maids. "Did you really think I would just stand here and let you attack me? Get real!"

In fact, Shiori and Kanae *hadn't* thought that, not even for a second. For at the moment Monica had dropped her act and revealed herself as their enemy, they'd felt a supreme sense of confidence—even arrogance—from the woman. In other words, she was certain she'd win even against everyone in this room, which meant she'd likely been hiding her true strength all this time. So Shiori and Kanae had tried to eliminate her at once while she still thought she was invincible—and before she could show off that strength. They'd risked leaving Reina's side temporarily to attack together, for they had each concluded that the best way to keep their mistress safe was to get rid of the threat in front of them first.

But now both maids started in shock. Not only had they powered up their weapons to make them even stronger than when smashing the factory's walls, their weapons had been set to negate force fields. And force-field shields were supposed to be *weaker* than metal fortified by a layer of force-field armor.

Which meant the shield Monica had deployed was far stronger than normal.

Shiori narrowed her eyes. Kanae grinned like she could barely contain her excitement. But both of them ignored Monica's words and kept attacking with just as much effort as before.

Yet none of their attacks reached her. Each blow, each slash, could have easily pierced or smashed some of the hardest robots out there—yet they couldn't penetrate this barrier of light as thin as a glass pane.

"Sorry!" Monica said mockingly. "That won't work on me!"

As Shiori and Kanae continued their assault, Monica drew two laser guns—portable weapons that fired actual beams of light, not laser bullets—from the holsters at her hips and trained their muzzles on each maid.

Gunshots rang out, and the light from impact conversion once again scattered through the air—Akira and Carol had fired at Monica. The barrier surrounding her had blocked their bullets, but if her shield hadn't still been deployed, half her face would have been blown off.

Monica was unharmed, of course, but the smirk on her face stiffened ever so slightly.

Her shield wasn't the convenient type that blocked all attacks from the outside while allowing only the user's attacks to pass through from the inside. If she wanted to attack an enemy, she had to temporarily disengage the shield first. And she realized Akira and Carol had been waiting for that exact moment.

Grinning arrogantly to keep the fear from showing on her face, she flew backward—not with a leap, but literally flying—to the exit, smashed through the double doors, and escaped down the corridor. “I'll be right back to take care of you all, so sit tight, okay?” came Monica's voice over the comms.

And a moment later, her signal also vanished out of range of their scanners.

A few members of the team stood open-mouthed in disbelief, struggling to process all that had just transpired. Most of them, however, were more experienced and remained composed—though they looked grim.

Akira recalled what Monica had been wearing. *Hey Alpha, was she wearing a powered suit modeled off the designs of the Old World?*

No. That was a genuine Old World model, as was the type of force field she deployed.

Oh. Wow. No wonder Shiori and Kanae couldn't kill her, then, he said, frowning.

Elena, after taking some time to assess the situation and consider their next move, finally addressed the team. “All right, everyone, for now let's head in the opposite direction. We're getting out of here. Shikarabe, can I leave the survivor to you?”

“Sure,” Shikarabe replied, and turned to Ezio with a serious expression. “How long can you hold out without your body?”

“Well...” The cyborg calculated. “The temporary death function lasts only about forty-eight hours, and once I’m in that mode I lose the ability to wake up on my own... But I get it. Leave my body here, and take only my head along. Just don’t forget to wake me up afterward!”

“Don’t worry, you’ll wake up again—if we can make it out of here alive *ourselves*, that is.”

“Then I’ll hold you to that,” Ezio said with a small smile, closed his eyes, and became completely unresponsive.

Shikarabe was considering how to remove Ezio’s head from his body when Shiori appeared by his side.

“I’ll do the honors,” she said, and with a single, immaculate slice, severed Ezio’s neck.

He was still alive, of course, but barely—only using the minimum amount of power needed to survive. Shikarabe picked the head up and handed it to Togami.

Meanwhile, Carol was talking to Elena. “If we’re going to escape,” she suggested, “I know a good route. It’s the same one Akira and I used to escape the first time. How about it?”

“Sounds good. Lead the way. All right, everyone, let’s go!”

Most of them turned to obey, but Togami remained rooted to the spot, holding the severed head in his hands and looking completely dumbfounded. Finally he cried out, “W-Wait! Hold up! What are you talking about? What about everyone else we haven’t rescued yet?! Why are we retreating?! Shouldn’t we go after her instead?! And... And...” Struggling to follow the veterans’ logic, Togami was distraught, babbling on in his desperate need for some kind of explanation that made sense to him.

But Shikarabe cut him off abruptly. “We’ll deal with all that later! Right now, time is of the essence! We can’t waste precious time explaining every little thing just so *you* can be satisfied!” he barked, almost threateningly.

Togami meekly fell silent, unable to even show his dissatisfaction in his face.

“Actually, I’d kind of like to know what’s going on,” Akira said to Elena.
“Would you be able to explain while we travel? I’m probably the most clueless of anyone here.”

“All right,” Elena said after some hesitation. “If it’s while we travel, I suppose we can manage that much. Now let’s get out of here.” She hurried the rest of the team out of the warehouse. With Carol now in the lead, they once again made their way through the factory district.



Monica flew down the factory’s winding corridors. The built-in propulsion device on her powered suit kept her aloft and left a blinding trail of energy in her wake. Her face contorted with frustration. “I’m going to kill every last one of those fools! First, though, I have to make sure they can’t contact the base.”

There was no longer any trace of the arrogance she’d displayed earlier. *This isn’t a retreat. I’m not running away. This is merely a strategic maneuver*, she told herself, and finally managed a half smile. The pack on her back burst from the inside, and the exposed contents—mechanical parts—assembled themselves into a laser cannon and its transparent support arm, which held the weapon secure on her back.

“I’ll show you what I’m truly capable of! A single second is all it’s gonna take to wipe you New World trash-wads out of existence!” With her Old World equipment now revealed, she flew at full speed toward the factory’s exit to make good on her claim.

Outside Factory A, Hex and Hound were still waiting for the team to return when they picked up a signal approaching them at high speed.

“There’s something coming, and awfully fast. Flying, maybe? Doubt it’s one of ours.”

“Yeah, we haven’t gotten any word yet that our team’s on their way back. Probably a monster. Let’s take it out.”

“Roger!”

The two powered armor units turned their weapons in the direction of the

approaching signal—and saw on their built-in scanners that their target was none other than Monica, decked out in Old World gear and weaponry.

“That’s... No way!”

“Don’t hesitate! Fire!”

They had no doubt—she was their enemy now. They could see her approaching them without having contacted them first, and her laser cannon was pointed in their direction. The two units immediately unloaded everything they had at Monica. Even caught off guard, Hex and Hound opted to shoot first and ask questions later, and the curtain of artillery fire they unleashed would have annihilated an entire flood of regular monsters in an instant.

But the barrage didn’t even so much as scratch Monica. She’d raised the output of her force-field shield to maximum, and it blocked everything. “That won’t work on me!” she sneered as the impacts on the shield scattered light through the corridor she was flying through. At the same time, she locked her laser cannon, now fully charged, onto the two powered armor units, and the muzzle glowed as it prepared to fire. “Die!” she shouted.

For a moment, she disengaged her shield, and a stream of light burst out, swallowing up all the bullets and shells and, finally, the two units.

When the light dissipated, the charred remains of Hex and Hound lay on the ground. Both pilots had died instantly.

Emerging from the factory, Monica flew to one of the smoldering machines and landed on top of it. Having dispatched two units of the city’s defense force with ease, she once more felt justified in indulging in a victorious grin. “Yes! This is how it should be! That’s right—it’s only natural that I should win!” She reveled in her victory for some time, then gave a satisfied sigh. Her confidence restored, she flew up into the air again and looked down at her handiwork from overhead.

“All right! Now those idiots can’t call for help anymore. Time to finish the job!” Fired up, she flew back into Factory A at a high speed, intending to catch up with Akira and the others.

She would kill anyone who made her doubt the superiority of her gear.



As Akira headed through the district with the rest of his team, Elena gave him a detailed account of her decisions via wireless. They were moving quickly so as to not waste time, and almost everyone else already understood their situation, but Elena still felt that making the effort to explain things to Akira would be worthwhile. She hoped that once he had the full picture, they might be able to rely on his intuition—or whatever it was that had allowed him to see through Monica’s lies—to help them escape. As she spoke, she allowed the others to chime in and supplement her words when necessary.

First off, given that Shiori and Kanae had failed to kill Monica, her gear was obviously quite powerful. In all likelihood, the system had provided her with it—and they could reasonably expect *all* of her gear to be from the Old World.

Next, judging by the direction she’d escaped, Monica had likely gone to eliminate Hex and Hound. If she destroyed their communications relay, the city would be far less likely to discover her betrayal. And judging from her parting words, she’d return to get rid of the rest of the team before they could make it out of the district or find a place from which to reestablish contact with the base. Then she’d probably head back to report with a sorrowful expression that, alas, she was the only one who’d made it out alive. Of course, since she’d already “abandoned” one team before, the city would probably just think she’d pulled the same stunt again—and never suspect that she’d been the killer all along.

As for the missing corpses, the factory’s sentries had most likely cleared them from the scene under Monica’s orders. By hiding the bodies, she could lure hunters deeper into the building while preventing anyone else from recovering the dead hunters’ scanners and reviewing the data. Even if some footage was partial or missing, someone might piece the various recordings together into a more accurate whole—which could cast suspicion on Monica. Merely breaking all the scanners would look far too suspicious, while concealing the corpses would leave the impression that either the ruin’s maintenance bots had automatically done the job, or that the hunters had escaped to another refuge area. And as the only surviving record of what had happened, the data on Monica’s scanner would be considered that much more trustworthy.

It wasn't lost on them that all of this seemed designed to lure them somewhere deeper in Factory A. Even when she'd been traveling with them, Monica had deliberately chosen her actions and words to that same end. Was there something there that would give her an advantage?

Elena suspected that Monica had been leading them to a place where the system could continuously supply her with energy. A force-field shield strong enough to counter Shiori's and Kanae's weapons probably required a great deal of energy to use, all the more so as combat dragged on. But judging from how unconcerned she'd seemed, she probably had a practically unlimited supply of power. Which most likely meant that her employer, the factory's system, was feeding her energy constantly. If the administrative system had loaned her Old World equipment, it wasn't too unthinkable that it would also power that equipment for her.

But with such capable Old World equipment, why hadn't Monica been taking jobs in other ruins? Perhaps her equipment could only be used within the confines of this district. Maybe her constant supply of energy would be cut off, or at least severely throttled, if she ventured too far away from the vicinity of the factory that had hired her.

So Elena had decided not to go after Monica—they'd most certainly be at a disadvantage if they tried. Even if Monica had gone to eliminate Hex and Hound like they suspected, the team couldn't hope to catch up with her in time to form a pincer attack—with her strength, the two units would likely be destroyed in mere seconds, and there was no guarantee that the team's aid could stop Monica even if they did catch up. (Of course, if Hex and Hound managed to defeat Monica on their own instead, problem solved. But Elena wasn't counting on it.) So in the end, she'd judged it better to distance themselves from Monica and escape the ruin as quickly as possible.

She left Ezio to Shikarabe. Since the cyborg couldn't fight, he was already hindering them, and there was no way they could afford to bring back anyone else, dead or alive. However, Shikarabe had judged that if they just carried Ezio's head along, it wouldn't put them at too much of a disadvantage, and understanding the team's predicament, Ezio had agreed.

Elena did *not* bother to point out that whoever carried Ezio would be unable

to participate fully in combat. Shikarabe had handed the head over to Togami, having judged that losing his support would be a negligible cost (the same reason he'd made Togami watch over Reina). Of course, by the same reasoning, it would've been best if he could have made Reina carry Ezio instead. But Reina wasn't on Team Shikarabe, she was on Team Reina—or really, more like Team Shiori. So Togami had been the next best option. Shikarabe kept his reasoning to himself (although Togami was pretty sure he knew his superior's thoughts anyway).

Finally, Elena explained why she'd chosen this escape route, the same that Carol and Akira had made use of before. Monica had been hired by the factory's system, and she might be reluctant to damage her employer's goods—her equipment might even have a safety lock that prevented her from firing at factory property in the first place. And the container terminal through which Elena planned to escape was the factory district's shipping bay, chock-full of containers of goods that had been manufactured there. But if she were hindered from fighting there, Akira's team had no such limitations, so they would be free to attack her as they pleased and could even use the containers for cover. So whether they escaped or had to fight, their prospects were much better in the terminal than anywhere else in the district.

When she was finished, Elena asked Akira, “A good bit of that was mere guesswork, of course, but how do you feel about it? Does that seem right, or am I way off?”

In fact, Akira had no clue. It was hard enough for him to process everything she'd said, and he certainly couldn't have ever figured all that out on his own. So he asked Alpha to bail him out instead. *What do you think?*

It's a reasonable hypothesis.

Since Akira wasn't up to the task of analyzing Elena's guesses for himself, he accepted what Alpha told him at face value. “It seems correct to me,” he answered. “I-I mean, that's just a hunch, though.”

“Great, then let's stick to the plan as is and get out of here ASAP,” she said with a grin. Secretly, she was relieved—all she'd really done was pile on her best guesses and hope that it all somehow held water. There could have easily

been a fatal flaw in her reasoning. But Akira—or rather, his “hunch”—had approved, so she assumed that she’d been mostly correct and discarded her own doubts.

“Hey, Carol,” Akira said, turning to her. “I know it might be a little late to ask this, but can we really use that route? I don’t mind escaping through it again or anything, but won’t it give a lot of valuable info away to everyone for free?”

“Well, desperate times call for desperate measures. Under the circumstances, I don’t really have much of a choice. But if you feel bad for me and wanna pick up the tab for the whole team instead, be my guest!”

“That’s not what I—”

Elena smiled wryly at their banter, even as she interrupted them. “All right, you two! Once we make it out of here, we’ll have plenty of time to negotiate fees and such, so first let’s focus on getting out alive.”

“Right. Let’s hurry!” Akira said, eager to change the subject.

“Yes, let’s—so we can have a good long discussion afterward,” Carol replied.

With that, they picked up the pace.



Akira and the rest made their way through the factory toward the container terminal. Everything inside looked tidy and well-kept: it was still operational, and perhaps the very factory that had hired Monica. But circling around the wide building would have taken too much time, and they had no way of knowing for sure which factory she was working for. So pressing on seemed the only reasonable option.

Alpha noticed that Akira was looking sullen. *What’s wrong?* she asked.

Just thinking about what Elena and the others were saying. Could your average relic hunter really figure all that stuff out on his own? It hadn’t taken Elena long to work out her explanation—just the time from Monica’s escape to Elena announcing they would retreat. And Shikarabe, Carol, and the two maids hadn’t objected, meaning they’d all reached similar conclusions. That shocked Akira to his core—he knew he wasn’t much of a thinker to begin with, but he

had never expected humans were capable of deducing so much so quickly.

In Elena's case, replied Alpha, I'd say she at least vaguely realized all that before she explained it. Otherwise she wouldn't have decided to retreat.

Makes sense, pondered Akira.

Elena, Sara, and Shikarabe are all veterans. They've had plenty of opportunities to sharpen their senses for such things. So yes, when you're capable enough to lead a huge unit like they are, you're expected to figure out at least that much.

Wow! They're really amazing, aren't they? The gulf between Akira's current skill level and that of a seasoned hunter was readily apparent. He couldn't help but be impressed—and also discouraged by his own inexperience.

But Alpha looked at him smugly. *Don't worry—you don't need any of that when you've got my support! Whatever bad decisions you end up making, you'll survive with me on your side! So you won't have very many opportunities to hone those senses anyway.*

Sure, sure. I'm grateful to have your help. A bit more cheerful now, Akira figured she was just boasting again and dismissed her words. But her next words wiped the smile from his face.

You're welcome—or so I'd like to say, but actually I'm going to need you to fly solo for a bit.

Startled, Akira blurted out “Wh-What?!” without meaning to.

Elena overheard him. “What's wrong, Akira?”

“O-Oh, nothing!”

“Really? All right, then.”

Relieved that he'd somehow managed to avoid suspicion, Akira nonetheless turned a panicked look toward Alpha. *Hey! Y-You're kidding, aren't you? There's no way you'd leave now of all times, right?!*

But Alpha looked serious. *No, I'm not kidding. Precisely because things have gotten out of hand, I need to go do something about it, so you'll have to manage on your own for a while.*

In that case, Akira realized, he had no choice but to let her go. By now he trusted her enough to know she wouldn't leave him without a good reason, even briefly. He didn't even ask her for an explanation, as that would only delay her return. *All right, he conceded. Just come back soon, okay?*

I'll do my best. Good luck, Akira! Giving him an encouraging smile, Alpha vanished—and so did her support for his powered suit.

The sudden burden on his body threw him off-balance, though he immediately corrected his posture with just his own strength. In Alpha's absence, his face looked as grim as if he'd suffered a fatal blow. He started taking deep breaths to calm himself down. Gradually, his apprehension began to subside, but he was still quite a bit more on edge than the situation called for—in fact, it seemed to Elena like he was adopting a battle stance.

"What's wrong? Do you sense something?" she asked.

Akira couldn't tell her that he'd lost Alpha's support, and he tried to think up some excuse. But seeing him hesitate to answer only made Elena more wary, and the others went on the alert as well.

Suddenly, in his state of excessive anxiety, Akira sensed a slight presence behind him. Immediately, on instinct, he spun around and fired a rapid volley of grenades from his A4WM down the corridor behind them.

The shells detonated in a corner at the far end—and in a confined space like this, there was hardly anywhere for the explosion to go. As the sturdy Old World walls absorbed the impact, a compressed shock wave raced up the corridor toward them. Even at that distance, the powerful blast reached Akira, knocking him backward off his feet—and flinging him all the way into Carol at the head of the team.

She caught him. "You all right?" she asked, grinning.

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine! Thanks, you really saved me there!" However, he didn't look so much relieved as embarrassed by his mistake.

Elena turned a wary gaze toward the far end of the corridor, which was still covered in smoke.

“You think she was actually in that hallway?” Shikarabe asked doubtfully.

“Probably, but I can’t say for sure,” Elena replied. She didn’t think Akira would have fired otherwise, but it was possible he’d just overreacted. She decided to check the footage on her scanner to confirm.

Before she could, though, Monica’s triumphant voice rang out through the wireless. “Nice try! That won’t work on *me*!”

“Looks like she was there after all,” Elena said.

“Guess so,” Shikarabe murmured.

Despite her betrayal, Elena had deliberately kept Monica on their comms so as to keep tabs on her and possibly get a sense of her movements. Naturally, she’d also adjusted the connection such that Monica couldn’t hear anything they were saying (though they could still hear her).

“Guess what? Those two units outside are scrap now!” Monica crowed. “And now that you can’t call for help, you’re next!”

Elena narrowed her eyes. She did welcome Monica confirming her suspicions, since that made it easier to predict the traitor’s next move. But while the team had only made it partway through the corridor, Monica had already headed outside, destroyed Hex and Hound, and made it all the way back and caught up with them—or at least gotten close enough for Akira’s attack to reach her.

Still, Elena mused, *at least now we know more about her defenses*. From her gloating, it was clear the blast hadn’t harmed her in the least. But Monica was nowhere to be found on Elena’s scanner, meaning either that the explosion had knocked her a good distance back, or that the attack had made her cautious and she’d stopped somewhere outside the scanner’s detection. Either way, this meant she wasn’t immune to Akira’s attack, so her energy reserves weren’t unlimited—or at least, her force-field shield wasn’t impregnable or infallible.

For Elena and her team, that knowledge alone was priceless.

Meanwhile, Shikarabe was looking at Akira in puzzlement. *Did he really sense her? My intuition’s telling me otherwise.*

Had Akira attacked because he'd sensed Monica's presence? Shikarabe's gut said no, but Akira had always been someone he could never get a read on in the first place, and apparently Monica really *had* been there. Shikarabe gave a frustrated sigh, then turned his attention back to more pressing matters and aimed his gun at the far end of the hallway. His scanner and weapon scope were linked to each other—while the smoke from the explosion would dramatically lower his scanner's accuracy, he could use his scope to search for the enemy anyway.

No signals showed up, though—he only saw the empty corridor and the wall at the end where it turned off to the side.

She's not there. From what I know of that woman, she's probably hiding somewhere and doesn't plan on fighting us directly. Maybe she was blasted farther in, or drew back to recharge her equipment? Either way, that's good for us since it buys us more time, but—

Something slammed across his vision, blocking his sight through the scope. Off in the distance, partitions throughout the corridor were closing one after another in quick succession. Before long, though, the sections of the corridor closer to Akira and the others were sealed off—then one sliced between the team, separating Akira and Carol from the rest.

By the time Akira realized what was happening, it was already too late. Instinctively, he ran up to the partition and began punching it frantically. Metallic sounds rang out, but naturally the wall didn't budge.

Then he heard Shiori's voice from the other side. "Mr. Akira, for your own safety, please step away from the wall."

Akira hardly had time to back away before a slash ripped along the partition, slicing apart a section of the wall. Kanae kicked the piece out, and the path was open once more.

The moment Akira saw Elena and the others beyond the destroyed wall, he sighed in relief. *Right. Shiori and Kanae are here too. I'm saved.* He would have gone to them, but they ran up before he could move, as they were heading in that direction to begin with.

Shikarabe brought up the rear. “These protective walls are probably supposed to contain emergencies to protect the rest of the factory,” he said, frowning at Akira. “They shouldn’t activate easily—and probably only did thanks to your attack.”

Akira had launched an entire (costly) extended magazine of grenades down the corridor. In that narrow space, the explosion had sufficed to activate the partitions. Had the grenades landed any closer, the whole team would’ve gotten caught up in the blast, not just Akira.

“With the corridor closed off,” added Shikarabe, “she’ll have a harder time pursuing us. I doubt she’d want to destroy property belonging to her employer, and doing so would waste her time and energy besides. Even if she got the system to open the partitions for her, that would at least alert us to her location.”

Akira nodded in fascination. This seemed to all be news to him—but Shikarabe stared at him, suspicious.

“Hey, kid—you didn’t plan all that, right?”

“Huh? N-No, I didn’t.” It was true—Akira had attacked on impulse. In fact, before Shikarabe had said otherwise, the boy had thought he’d screwed up royally, and was relieved that things had ultimately turned out in their favor.

“Yeah, didn’t think so,” Shikarabe muttered, and said nothing further. But he still looked troubled. If Akira *hadn’t* planned this, then what had happened was a coincidence. But did that mean it was *all* a coincidence? His intuition was telling him otherwise. Then how much of it was calculated, and how much of it was pure happenstance? Was only the part that coincidence couldn’t explain away planned, or was Akira merely lying? Shikarabe’s intuition was telling him none of these things were true. Then what? What was really going on? Was his intuition the problem? No longer able to place complete faith in his own gut, Shikarabe sighed.

In fact, it was only because Shikarabe was such a capable hunter that he was able to notice such minute discrepancies. Yet they were all leading him to a dead end, and this inconclusiveness was driving him up the wall.

Akira, who was far more incompetent in many respects, couldn’t figure out

why Shikarabe looked so conflicted. But then Elena gave the order to move out, so both of them turned back to the task before them and pressed on.



Monica stood in front of a closed partition and sighed in frustration. “You’ve *got* to be kidding me. If the system could bend the rules enough to hire me in the first place, why can’t it bend them to let me through?”

The system that had hired Monica was not the one that oversaw the whole district. It was only responsible for one factory, and so was somewhat more flexible in its decision-making. Monica sometimes exploited that flexibility for her own ends, but on occasion it could also work against her—like right now.

She’d asked the system to open the partition, but the system had responded that it could not do so at the time. Monica doubted whether this was true—in the past, she’d sometimes gotten the system to approve a request by explaining her reasoning. Perhaps under less pressing circumstances she could do so again, but right now she didn’t have the time.

So instead she asked if she had permission to destroy the partitions. An answer came back: the destruction of factory property would not be tolerated. It didn’t seem like the system would budge—even if that meant Monica would be trapped forever.

This had happened before—and she’d had no choice but to blast her way out, though her employer had later informed her she’d be held responsible for the damage. But she doubted that the factory, which couldn’t even manage itself properly, would ever enforce such a claim; and even if it did, the system that had hired her could probably be persuaded to look the other way.

“Nothing for it, then,” she muttered to herself after thinking it over. “Things will probably be fine this time too, so I’ll just destroy this and be on my way.” She dialed down the output of her laser cannon and blasted through the wall. Maximum output would have worked, but also wasted energy. And she didn’t want her employer scolding her for incurring any more damages than necessary.

What would her former team’s next move be? *Come to think of it, why are they heading in that direction? There shouldn’t be anything there but a*

container terminal—I don't think there's any sort of exit over there. But since Carol's with them, they're bound to be planning something.

Monica was under the impression that Carol had only made it out of the factory district during the previous incident thanks to Akira's combat ability, and that they must have forced their way through the mechanical horde with brute strength. She had no idea that they'd used one of the containers in the terminal to escape. *Are they just trying to get as far away from me as possible for now, and intentionally taking the long way to avoid any escape routes they think I might anticipate? Or is there really some secret exit I don't know about?*

But when she thought outside the box a bit, the possibility came to her mind at last. *No way—they couldn't be planning on using the containers to escape? Is that even possible? No—even if it was, with those eerie rumors going around, would they really risk getting in one just to avoid me? Wouldn't they end up dead either way?*

Then her overconfidence in her gear swayed her reasoning. "Perhaps they're thinking it's a risk worth taking if the alternative is going up against me?" she muttered to herself. "Yes, that must be it. How troublesome—I'm just too strong for my own good!"

She hadn't gone far, but another partition stood in her way. She'd expected this but scowled nonetheless. As she destroyed it, she thought about how the team was getting farther away in the meantime, and she became more frustrated. "Maybe I ought to try asking the system," she murmured.

She knew it would probably get denied, but sent her employer a request for a certain favor that would hinder Carol and the others from escaping. The result surprised her, however.

"Seriously?! It went through? Really, I have no idea what that stupid machine's thinking." Monica sighed, unable to parse the bizarre judgment of her nonhuman employer.

Chapter 119: The Walking Dead

Akira and the rest arrived at the container terminal. Those seeing it for the first time were astonished by the enormous area they suddenly found themselves in.

Shikarabe gave the area a once-over and turned to Carol. “So where’s the exit?” he asked, sounding doubtful. “Is there some kind of secret passageway we can use to get out of here undetected?”

“Not quite. See these containers? We’re going to ride one of them out of here,” she said, and then explained her plan in a bit more detail to the whole team.

When she finished, Shikarabe scowled. “Seriously? I mean, you know the story surrounding those containers, right?”

“As long as I pick a safe container for us to ride in, it should be fine—although, yes, picking the wrong one might lead us to a grisly fate, just like the ghost story says. And by the way, the selection process is a trade secret,” she said with a wink.

Shikarabe sighed. “Yeah, yeah, I get it—this ain’t gonna be free. We’ll discuss the amount later, so just hurry up and choose one for now.”

Carol went ahead to choose a container for them all to ride in. Akira and the others followed behind her through the terminal.

Hey Alpha, about that ghost story— Akira began, but then stopped himself. Naturally there was no reply. *Right, she’s not here... Oh man, if I’m making a mistake like that, maybe coming this far’s worn me out more than I thought.*

Alpha still hadn’t returned. And the constant tension from having to fight without her support had left him rather exhausted. This had relieved some of his excess stress—but now his concentration was also starting to wane. They’d encountered several monsters along the way since Alpha had disappeared, but since these had all been weak and easily dispatched, Akira hadn’t had to pay

too much attention.

Get a grip. Calm down, but don't get careless. Carelessness leads to death, regardless of the situation. I can't forget I'm inside a ruin right now.

Alpha's support was incredibly reliable. But because Akira had been operating until now under the assumption that Alpha would always be by his side, her sudden absence shook him out of his usual caution and composure.

Sara spoke up. "You okay, Akira?"

"O-Oh, yeah. I'm fine, don't worry."

"All right, if you say so. Just don't push yourself, okay? I know it's a bit hard given the situation, but Elena and I are here, so don't feel like you have to take on everything yourself—unless we're not reliable enough for you, that is."

From her smile it was clear she was joking, but Akira nonetheless realized he *was* pushing himself too hard. Resolving to ease up a bit more, he grinned back at her.

"Nah, I don't think that at all! I trust you to have my back."

"Then you can count on me! Well, I say that, but Elena's got the scouting department covered. Right?"

Elena grinned too. "Sure, sure, I got it."

"That's a pretty weak response," Sara teased.

"That's because you don't even need to ask," Elena shot back. "Just leave it to me!"

From their banter, even Akira could tell they were sufficiently at ease to joke around. Their calmness was born not from negligence, but from a sense of confidence and composure that they'd gained from helping and supporting one another for so long, a feeling that could never be attained by someone who always felt they had to handle everything on their own. The old Akira certainly couldn't have achieved such a state—it was only after meeting Alpha that he'd finally been able to put his trust in someone else.

Now Alpha was gone. But he found himself thinking that maybe he could rely on someone else for a change, and his anxiety melted away once again—not

out of exhaustion this time, but from a sense of reassurance.

Carol returned, announcing that she'd chosen a container. She led them all to a large metallic box that could easily hold a miniature tank with room to spare. It was sealed shut, and there were no handles or buttons anywhere to open it.

But Carol stood in front of the box and seemingly operated some sort of terminal invisible to the rest of them, and the door opened just like that.

"Hey, how'd you do that?" Togami couldn't help but ask.

"That's classified information," Carol replied with a grin.

"Which means you'll sell it, right? For how much?" he asked.

"Twenty million aurum."

"T-Twenty million?!" Togami practically choked at the exorbitant figure.

Carol gave him an alluring smile. "If you ever feel like paying, let me know. I'll even give you a bonus service that'll make the price worth it," she said, indicating her own body and grinning coquettishly.

Togami remained frozen in place, even as everyone else headed into the container. But before Shikarabe got on board, he tapped Togami on the shoulder.

"Just warning you now: I wouldn't if I were you."

"I mean, I don't have that kind of money," Togami mumbled after some hesitation.

"Even if you did, don't." Shikarabe's grim expression seemed to suggest there was more to his words, and Togami realized that his superior was warning him in earnest.

Once everyone had entered, Carol shut the door. Immediately the walls of the container became as transparent as glass, offering a clear view of the outside. Elena and the others were visibly alarmed, but Carol reassured them. "Don't worry, it works like active camouflage. No one can see us from outside."

Elena checked their surroundings with her scanner just to be sure, and found it functioned as it normally did. "Looks like I can use my scanner just fine. Carol,

this container seems awfully convenient for our own purposes. Are all of them like this inside?”

“Of course not. I handpicked the container that would be most suited to our needs.”

“And I’m guessing if I wanted to know how you chose it, that would also cost twenty million aurum?”

“You got it. The info’s just that valuable. So I’m looking forward to negotiating with you later.”

“Don’t be too hard on me now,” Elena said teasingly.

Carol just grinned back.

Shiori cut into the bargainers’ banter. “I hate to interrupt, but can I ask when this container is scheduled to depart?”

“Should be ten minutes from now at the most,” Carol replied. “I want to get a move on just as much as everyone else, but this is something the ruin controls. I can’t change it, unfortunately.”

“I understand,” Shiori replied.

With that, Akira and the rest settled in to wait.

Ten minutes wasn’t all that long, but even so, Akira and the others couldn’t afford to waste it. Seizing the opportunity to take a breather, each of them reloaded and restocked their gear and weaponry. As Akira sat on the floor, switching out magazines of ammo and energy packs, he gave a long sigh.

Alpha’s still not back. What’s taking her so long? He’d expected her back long before, but she still hadn’t returned. Sure, she had something important to take care of, but he couldn’t help wishing that she’d hurry it up.

At his side, Carol heard him sigh and smiled. “No need to be so worried. We got back home safe last time, didn’t we?”

While she hadn’t guessed the real reason for his mood, he appreciated her concern. “Yeah? I think we had a pretty rough time of it before that, though,” he said with a wan smile.

In a deliberate, exaggerated way, Carol looked away from him as if to say, “I’m not sure what you mean.”

He could tell she was joking around, trying to cheer him up. She turned to face him again, and they smiled at each other.

“Come to think of it,” he remembered, “you said something to Shikarabe about ending up like the ghost stories. What’s that got to do with these containers?”

“You mean you don’t know? I thought I told you before. It’s one of the more famous ghost stories surrounding Mihazono.” She explained that every now and then, hunters exploring the ruin would spot an open door that seemingly led to nowhere. Through the gap a treasure trove of relics could be seen, but if a hunter entered, the door would promptly shut behind them, and they’d never be able to return. The “Door to Oblivion” couldn’t be laughed off as just a tall tale either, since a good number of hunters had actually disappeared that way.

Akira thought for a moment. “Oh, I get it. Some of those boxes with active camouflage were left open, so the relics were visible inside. Then, while hunters were collecting the relics, the containers started moving, carrying the people off with them.”

“Most likely. But it’s a ghost story, so who knows? Maybe there’s some kind of system in place that detects anyone suspicious trying to enter and carries them off to some Old World internment camp somewhere,” she said casually.

Akira stiffened. “D-Do you think we’ll really be okay riding in this thing?”

“Like I said, don’t worry. I chose a safe one. Plus, we rode one before and were just fine.” Then she lowered her voice to a whisper. “Also, I picked the sturdiest one I could find. So even if we’re attacked in the air again, it won’t be a repeat of last time.”

“O-Okay,” Akira replied, but he still looked anxious. He preferred not to race down the side of a building again—especially without Alpha’s support—if he could help it.

Twenty minutes had now passed since Akira and the others had entered the

container—twice the amount of time Carol had initially estimated—yet the large bin was still on the ground. Carol tilted her head in concern. “Hmm... That’s strange. We definitely should’ve taken off by now.”

The others exchanged wary looks. Akira, who was staring out the window, spoke up, sounding puzzled.

“Hey Carol, weren’t there a bunch of containers being carried in and out through the corridors when we were here last? Nothing’s moving now. What’s up with that?”

Shocked, Carol ran to the window to check for herself. “N-No! It can’t be—the container transport’s offline?!”

As if on cue, Monica’s voice came over the wireless. “Aw, were you thinking you could escape? Tough luck—I shut the terminal down! Now you’ve got no chance!” Her smug voice resounded throughout the container they were in. “That’s right—panic! Tremble in fear! You thought you could get one up on *me*?! Never! You already know by now, right? Whatever you try, whatever you attack me with—none of it will work against me!”

The rookies—Akira, Togami, and Reina—started to panic. But the veterans had already recovered from their shock and were already planning their next move.

“Elena, can you get a read on Monica from here?” Shikarabe asked.

“One moment. Yes, I see her.”

Monica was standing at the entrance to one of the corridors high up on one of the terminal’s tall walls. Despite the countless containers lined up on the floor, Monica had chosen to stand boldly out in the open rather than take cover—almost as though she was challenging them to try and shoot her. That alone showed how confident she was in her defenses.

Shikarabe received Monica’s location on his own scanner via Elena’s. “Yeah, I see her too. Say, you think the range of her wireless covers the whole terminal?”

“No, considering the width of the space and all the containers in the way, it’s probably more like a fifth of the terminal at most.”

Shikarabe sighed deeply. “I see. All right, guys!” His words changed the mood among the group, turning their attention to the business at hand. “Let’s make sure everyone’s on the same page: we’ll hear everyone’s thoughts, then discuss our next move. First off—how much of what Monica just said do you think was a bluff, and how much was bait meant to lure us in?”

“Hmm,” began Elena. “Well, if I had to say...” She noticed Akira, Togami, and Reina all had questions written on their faces.

The two veterans exchanged glances, and Elena smiled wryly. Shikarabe looked reluctant, but nodded.

The container transport was offline, and Monica was somehow involved. Those were facts. But Shikarabe felt that a mere security guard like Monica wouldn’t have been given the authority to shut the whole system down. She’d likely asked her employer to freeze the system, and it had done so—but only temporarily. So her claim that they couldn’t escape was a lie. If they waited here long enough, the system would most likely kick back on, and then they could make it to safety.

He also doubted whether Monica actually knew they were here in the terminal. Considering how accurately she’d pursued them on the way here, she must’ve had some way of knowing their location. But if she knew where they were even now, why hadn’t she attacked? The fact that she hadn’t meant either she *didn’t* actually know, or that she perhaps knew but couldn’t attack the container they were in.

Shikarabe’s theory was that whatever Monica had been using to track them up until now probably only worked within the factory itself. When they were nowhere to be found inside, she had likely deduced only by process of elimination that they’d headed to the terminal. But she’d realized that if the team used a hidden underground passage or some other means she wasn’t aware of within the terminal, they could easily escape. The real reason Monica had shown herself was not because she was confident in her defenses, but to goad them into attacking and revealing their location, or perhaps just to lure them outside the container. Either way, if she could bait them into responding, she’d know for sure they were here in the terminal. If she got no reaction, there

was a strong possibility she might leave to go search somewhere else—or that the system might return to its normal operation in the meantime.

“So I think our best bet is to wait here,” Shikarabe finished. “That’s just my opinion, though—what does everyone else think?”

Elena agreed. “No arguments here. Also, for the past few minutes Monica’s been moving around the terminal repeating the same thing she said before. Since we didn’t respond, she’s probably thinking she’s outside our range, and she’s trying to make sure we hear her.”

“If that’s not an act, then it basically confirms that she has no idea where we actually are,” Shikarabe concluded.

“Right,” Elena said with a nod.

Understanding finally dawned on Togami. After making it all the way here and finally seeing a chance to escape, he’d been worried that everything they’d done had been pointless and they’d run into a dead end. But his relief at hearing things weren’t quite so bad was evident.

Shikarabe took one look at him and sighed. “Togami, you should’ve realized this much already. Think about it—if you really *had* been successful during the bounty hunts and were put in charge of a battalion like you wanted, you would’ve had to make these kinds of calls on your own.”

Having the future he’d once dreamed about thrown in his face, Togami had no rebuttal.

Shikarabe wasn’t done with him, though. “Or would you have just left that all to the higher-ups instead? In that case, your ‘higher-ups’ would’ve been those desk jockeys. Do you really think it’s a good idea to entrust the lives of you and your teammates to a bunch of pencil pushers who’ve barely even set foot in the wasteland?” Shikarabe’s colleague Kurosawa had left Druncam for that exact reason: he’d had the feeling that if things went on as they were, the desk jockeys would eventually take over the entire organization—and he’d wanted no part of that. Shikarabe, for his part, had stayed behind to prevent that future from coming to pass.

As Togami hung his head in shame, three others were averting their eyes—

Akira, Reina, and Sara, who usually left those sorts of judgments to others. Akira usually left the decision-making to Alpha, Reina to Shiori, and Sara to Elena—even decisions that concerned their own lives. Yet they didn't look discouraged like Togami, because each of them placed that much trust in their companion. Akira and Sara only grinned wryly, and Reina lowered her head slightly only because she wished she was strong enough to not have to rely on Shiori.

Elena saw them and gave a small smile. "Hey Shikarabe, how about leaving the Druncam talk for later? I don't think this is the best time."

"Oh, yeah, sorry. Back to business, then—what's the plan?"

"Good question. Let's see..." Elena looked serious as she considered for a moment. "We'll wait it out."

The team leader had made her decision, and the endurance contest between Akira's team and Monica began.



Monica continued to move through the terminal. She was starting to get anxious.

Just as Shikarabe had guessed, Monica didn't know where Akira and the others actually were. She'd merely inferred that they were in the terminal based on the route Akira and the others had followed. She'd made her announcement hoping to flush them out by spurring them to search for another escape route.

But nothing had happened, and now the pressure was on her. The system had only frozen temporarily—sooner or later, it would come back to life. But she couldn't just start shooting containers at random in the hope that Akira and the others might be inside—the system that had hired her wouldn't allow that. What's more, they might have already used a route she didn't know about to escape, which would certainly explain why they hadn't reacted. If they were no longer in the terminal, then searching for them here was a waste of effort in the first place.

Either way, the thought of the team escaping was already causing her to panic. But she noticed something which made her freeze in terror—it was

starting to rain.

“R-Rain?! Oh, shit!”

Her earlier confidence vanished without a trace. Now desperate, she made a rash decision and sent a new request to her employer.

It was granted.



Rain began to fall on the container Akira and the others were in, and gradually became a downpour. Akira, who'd been watching the rain out the window, noticed Elena's conflicted expression. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Hm? I mean, now that it's raining, I was just thinking about the best course of action to take."

"What do you mean? You said we're gonna wait, right?"

"Well, yes, that's still an option. But..." From the look on Akira's face, Elena saw he was missing some key information and set about filling him in. Rainfall in the East often contained traces of colorless fog—though the amount varied, it was said that the dense fog covering the skies got mixed into the rain as it fell. So most hunters didn't work on rainy days: not only did the rain impair their vision, the colorless fog reduced the accuracy of their scanners and the power and range of their guns. Very few hunters would deliberately choose to go out into the wasteland—especially when it was highly likely they'd encounter a dangerous monster at close range—in conditions like that.

But on the other hand, the same went for the monsters—the range at which they could detect enemies or attack was also drastically reduced. For this reason, some hunters took rainy days as an opportunity to explore ruins full of dangerous and powerful foes that they otherwise never would've stood a chance against. And in this particular case, the rain was actually a boon to Akira and the rest of the team. If the effect of the colorless fog had spread into the factory as well, they'd probably be able to slip past Monica undetected. Her weapons—capable of taking out two powered armor units—would also suffer reduced power and range. And it would be easier to see her force-field shield in the rain. In a number of ways, then, the rain would help them escape.

But there were a few disadvantages as well. Akira and the others were trying to exit the ruin, but all they really needed to do was get far enough away to contact the city base. And with their relay point—the powered armors—destroyed, there was also a chance that another team had already been dispatched to investigate. In that case, they only needed to get in touch with that team to relay the situation to base and request aid. Considering a murderous traitor hired by the ruin was on the loose, they could reasonably expect a quick response—apart from the rain, that is.

Communications would now be spottier than ever—bad enough that they might not be able to connect to the base even if they walked right up next to it. That would give Monica more time to kill them and cover up the whole incident.

Elena reconsidered. “My guess is that Monica can only detect our location within areas that are still up and running. In the powered-down sectors, it’s harder for her.”

“Seems reasonable,” Akira offered.

“So I was wondering whether it might be worth the risk of exposing our location if we try and make a run for it, and what our chances would look like in that scenario.”

Akira nodded like he understood.

“What do *you* think?” Elena pressed him.

“H-Huh? Me? S-Sorry, I have no idea,” he replied honestly.

“I see,” she said, determining that his sixth sense must not be kicking in at the moment.

Shikarabe had been studying Akira as the boy intently listened to Elena’s explanation. *So he doesn’t even know that much? His hunter knowledge is basically that of a complete beginner, yet he’s so strong. How the hell did that happen? No—perhaps that is the secret behind his strength?*

Knowledge was power—accurate knowledge led to correct decision-making, which circumvented risks and led to more efficient victories. Akira’s knowledge

was severely lacking, impairing his power to make correct decisions. That had led him into danger after danger, forcing him to fight for his life constantly. But he'd survived—and perhaps all those desperate situations, born from bad choices, had strengthened him to a degree few novices could reach.

There was no better way to get stronger than to overcome death. During the tankrantula fight, Akira had behaved incredibly recklessly—but to Shikarabe, the boy had seemed casual about it, as if this was just another day on the job for him. If his ignorance had gotten him into trouble so frequently that he'd had to cheat death on a regular basis, then no wonder Akira was so capable! Shikarabe finally felt like he was beginning to understand—but then shook his head.

No, that's wrong. Even if he's just a kid, someone that strong wouldn't look as weak as he does. So what gives? Shikarabe got the feeling that the more he looked at Akira, the more he would doubt his own intuition. So he instead turned his gaze to someone who was perfectly in line with his intuition—Togami. The veteran now nodded in satisfaction. *Now this guy, he's a kid too, but in terms of strength, he's not too shabby—at least, he's stronger than the rest of Group B. And it even seems that in the last few days he's put a lid on that cockiness of his.*

With Togami, Shikarabe's intuition didn't betray him. There was nothing keeping him from evaluating the boy through an unbiased, objective lens, and he decided that Togami did indeed possess some skill. He was still a brat and had a long way to go, of course. But Shikarabe's current assessment of Togami's skill, plus the rookie's recent shift in attitude, made the veteran's opinion of him rise ever so slightly.

Togami continued to stare outside, feeling melancholy. He'd recovered from Shikarabe's harsh criticism enough to raise his head again, and his gloom had cleared enough that it wouldn't hinder his performance.

But his current mental state wasn't doing him any favors either. The absolute confidence Togami had once possessed had been a bad influence on him overall, yet it had also improved his performance. Now that he was aware of this, he'd be stronger than ever before if he could just regain that confidence.

But that seemed more and more unlikely as time went by.

Out of the blue, Shiori addressed him. “Mr. Togami, do you have a moment?”

“Oh—sure, what’s up?”

“It’s about Mr. Ezio. If you’d like, I can take him off your hands for a while.”

Togami hesitated at first. While it was true that Shikarabe had ordered him to carry Ezio’s head because Shikarabe didn’t see him as a valuable asset in combat, it also meant that the veteran trusted Togami enough to protect the cyborg. The boy felt that relinquishing his role to Shiori would lump him in with those who needed protection rather than those who protected them. But then he remembered Shikarabe had also tasked him with guarding Reina, so he complied. “All right. I appreciate it.”

Shiori took Ezio’s head, thanked Togami, and walked away. She was probably going to hand the head over to Reina—Togami could figure out that much. But once Reina took it, what would she do? Would she try to take the burden off her maids and Togami by making an effort to protect herself? Or would she let everyone protect both her *and* Ezio? But even if he knew the answer it wouldn’t matter. Togami let that train of thought go.

Feeling the gloom within him deepen, he turned to the window once more—and instantly forgot all his melancholy.

“Hey! There’s someone out there! A lot of people, in fact!” he shouted. Before Togami’s eyes, a number of human figures were making their way through the rows of containers in the rain. Due to a combination of colorless fog and pure happenstance, Togami had noticed them even before Elena—who had been scanning their surroundings all this time.

Nevertheless, Elena’s scanner was still much more accurate than Togami’s sight, and once she scanned the area for herself, Elena couldn’t hide her surprise.

“He’s right—I can’t make everything out because of the rain, but there are a bunch of human figures making their way through the terminal. They seem to be heading somewhere—no, spreading out?”

Shikarabe looked puzzled and let out a low groan. “A newly dispatched

investigation team, maybe? No, there's too many of them—and a team like that would've at least attempted to contact us by now. Something's off."

Sara had a worried look on her face. "Well, maybe they tried to contact us, but couldn't because of the weather? But yeah, they don't look like a team—or that they're investigating anything, for that matter."

Of course, this didn't necessarily mean the newcomers were enemies, but everyone present agreed that they probably weren't friendly. They wanted to go outside and get a closer look, but if they left the container now, their chances of being detected by Monica would drastically increase. So everyone used their scanners and eyes to glean as much information as they could without setting foot outside.

They detected more bodies, apparently spread throughout the entire terminal. At first glance there hadn't seemed to be that many—mainly because of all the containers in the way and how vast the terminal itself was to begin with—but they could already count well over a hundred total.

Akira was the first to recognize them—because Alpha had upgraded his scanner's analysis capabilities, the hazy figures in the pouring rain appeared clearly to him. "Yeah... Elena, I think they're enemies. Definitely not friendly." He sent the data from his scanner to everyone else, and they immediately realized why.

"The corpses"—Reina's face stiffened in fear—"are *moving*!"

Even Togami, who had grown up in the slums and so was used to seeing dead bodies, looked freaked out by what he was witnessing. "What the hell?!"

Some of the corpses' faces merely looked sickly pale, had lost their natural skin color, or had bullet wounds on their foreheads. Others were more obviously dead—with more than half of a head blown off, or everything below the neck completely crushed. Some wore helmets, making it harder to tell, but through their broken visors the team could get a glimpse of the gruesome contents within, and the helmets were fixed in place atop the powered suits in almost exactly the same positions they'd been in when the hunters were alive.

Akira grimaced. "Who do you think's controlling them?"

Togami looked at Akira in surprise. “Wait, someone’s *controlling* them?!”

Akira realized he’d made a mistake. “U-Uh, I mean, they’re dead, so they can’t move on their own, right?” he said, trying to gloss it over.

“Well, sure, you’ve got a point there, I guess,” the other boy replied.

Akira breathed an inward sigh of relief. Because he was so used to Alpha controlling his own suit, the concept of someone other than the wearer manipulating one was normal to him, and he’d instantly jumped to that conclusion. But Togami’s reaction indicated that this idea wasn’t so normal for everyone else.

Even Shikarabe hadn’t guessed it at first. But upon hearing Akira’s question, he thought the concept made sense and ran with it. “Those powered suits are probably the type that allow the user to hand over their authority over to someone else. Hunters working in teams use them frequently—if one of them gets knocked unconscious, it’s easier to just take control of their suit than to physically carry them away, and even if someone dies, their teammates won’t necessarily lose their firepower. Of course, that’s assuming you trust someone enough to take control of your own body...” He paused for a moment, then shook his head. “But I doubt that’s what’s happening here.”

Carol smiled wryly. “Yeah, this is different. Those are probably the hunters who died here, in this district—the corpses that Monica cleared from the factory.”

“I agree. Of course, they wouldn’t have given Monica permission to control their suits, and in this rain the interference should prevent her from controlling the bodies remotely anyway.” Shikarabe sighed. “You know, there *is* a ghost story about hunters who died in Mihazono and now wander the ruins looking for their teammates and attacking other people, but that’s supposedly in the business district. Don’t tell me it’s true here?”

Had their foes been ordinary zombies, anti-monster weapons would have made short work of them. Walking corpses would be a bit eerie but hardly a threat. These, however, were all hunters who’d gone to investigate the ruins, and so had been well-equipped. And judging from how quickly they were drawing their guns, they could use them without difficulty. In other words, they

posed an actual threat.

But that wasn't all. Monica's movements had also changed. She leaped from the mouth of the high corridor she had been standing in and began flying around the terminal as though searching for something. Finally she landed on top of a tall stack of containers nearby and surveyed the area around her.

Akira and the others in the container watched Monica intently. She'd gotten close, but it had to be a coincidence—she couldn't know where they were. Still, they couldn't help but feel anxious—what if she *did*?

All at once, Monica's gaze turned toward their container—and she smiled, training her laser cannon in their direction.

“She found us?! How?!” Carol cried out. Nothing could have given them away—she'd been certain of that when she'd picked this container.

Akira didn't think this was one of Monica's bluffs—after all, the cannon's muzzle was lighting up. The image of the multigun snail's powerful laser cannon blasting away the two billion aurum bounty monster replayed in the back of his mind, and he panicked. “C-Carol? If that blast hits us...will the container be able to withstand it?”

Carol smiled grimly. “You know, that's a good question.”

“Everyone, evacuate!” Elena shouted. “Carol, get the door!”

Carol made a beeline for the entrance and flung it open. Akira, Sara, and Shikarabe readied their weapons as they ran out so they'd be prepared to deal with Monica. But Shiori and Kanae stayed behind.

“Kanae!” called Shiori.

“I gotcha, sis!”

Kanae jerked Reina backward just as she was about to follow Akira and the others, throwing the girl off-balance. Togami saw this and stopped in his tracks, stunned. At the same moment, Shiori prepared to unsheathe her blade in Monica's direction.

Monica fired. A blast of dense energy—even stronger than the shot that had effortlessly destroyed the two powered armors—erupted from the laser

cannon, razing everything in its path.

Shiori unleashed her blade at the exact same time. Her weapon—having drained both the energy pack on the hilt *and* the one on the sheath—was brimming with energy. Even the blade itself couldn't handle the sheer amount of power infused into it, and as she swung, it dissolved into energy particles. But rather than being repelled by the force-field armor surrounding the weapon, the particles gathered around it, forming an enormous blade of light. In an instant, the blade sliced through the container Akira and the others had been in—so easily that there might as well have been no obstruction in the first place—and met the beam from Monica's Old World laser cannon head-on.

The sheer force of the collision blasted away all the rainwater in the area, allowing everyone to see its aftermath: a sphere of destruction rapidly expanding from the point of impact, swallowing up everything in its path.

Chapter 120: Divide and Conquer

Akira awoke with a start. In the short time he'd been out, blood and rainwater had filled his mouth. Coughing, he quickly got to his feet.

H-Huh? Wh-What happened?! His body felt sluggish, and his thoughts were a haze as he tried to remember, but the pain coursing through him got in the way of thinking. He took out several capsules and stuffed them into his mouth. The medicine started to make its way through his system, but it would be some time before he could fight again.

As the rain beat down on him, he took deep breaths to regain his composure. Gradually he began to recall what had happened before he'd passed out.

Right—Monica! She was about to attack us right as we fled the container... And there was an explosion, I think? Did I get caught up in it? I can't remember... Akira groaned and began to look around for clues. *Hmm... I don't see the others or the remains of the container anywhere. Am I not in the terminal anymore? Did I get blasted that far? No wonder it hurts so bad!*

He checked his equipment and sighed in relief—his powered suit was working just fine, and he hadn't lost any of his weapons. "Well, that's good, at least," he said to himself. "I can feel the medicine already kicking in too, so now I just gotta find Elena and the rest so we can figure out what to do next."

Before he could even take a step forward, however, he froze—Monica was walking toward him through the downpour. Unlike Akira, who was completely drenched, she didn't have a drop of water on her. Her force-field shield, normally difficult to see with the naked eye, was now clearly outlined in the rain beating against it.

With a smirk, she started speaking. He couldn't hear her through the rain, but she was close enough that her mocking voice came over the comms even though the weather was interfering with the signal. "Hoping that would kill me? Sorry to disappoint you! A puny attack like that won't work on *me!*"

Akira hesitated before responding via his own wireless. “Oh yeah? I say you’re bluffing. You think it’s safer to come after me because I can’t pull off what Shiori did, right?”

“Think whatever you want if it makes you feel better. Running from reality is all you can do now.”

“Oh yeah? Ditto!” he shot back.

Normally, he would have already trained a weapon on her by now, but in his daze from just having regained consciousness, shock at her sudden appearance delayed his reaction. He was only thinking of counterattacking when she raised her gun. But to his surprise, Monica just strolled toward him—so casually that had it not been for her shield, she would have looked completely defenseless. She only did so because she was confident he wasn’t a threat, but in his present frame of mind Akira missed his chance to aim first.

“How’d you know where we were hiding?” he demanded. “There were too many containers for you to guess right on your first try.” Sensing her confidence, Akira refrained from attacking, instead striking up a conversation to stall for time. Monica could have caught and killed Akira unawares in an instant if she’d wanted to. But she hadn’t—maybe that kind of victory wouldn’t have satisfied her. He got the feeling she was the type to taunt her opponent first, fully savoring their despair in defeat. And if he stoked her sense of superiority, perhaps she would eventually slip up.

“No, I really did just pick it randomly,” Monica replied.

“You’re lying! That container allowed us to observe everything outside, and I saw the way you were looking around the terminal—you were searching for the right container to shoot! You must’ve used *some sort of method—what was it?!*”

Akira was desperate to drag the conversation out as long as he could. But Monica observed his frantic expression and looked smug.

“Pure coincidence. I just happened to be right on the money, that’s all.”

In fact, the truth was not that simple. Afraid that the rain might greatly aid Akira and the others in escaping, she’d already made peace with having to

destroy at least one container (the system might fire her, sure, but that was better than the city finding out about her betrayal). Still, she couldn't choose at random—the less property she destroyed, the more likely she'd be able to convince her employer to accept the loss as a necessary trade-off for eliminating the intruders. So she'd decided to aim for the most sturdy-looking container she could find. By doing so, she'd hoped to make Akira and the others think that there was no point in hiding, so that they would come out on their own.

From her perspective, it really was a coincidence that Akira and the rest had been hiding in that particular container. She'd had no way of knowing that Carol had chosen it *because* it was so tough. So Monica's claim was half true.

But Akira had no way of knowing all this and concluded they really had just suffered a stroke of bad luck. The surprise on his face was apparent. "Y-You've gotta be kidding me..."

Monica couldn't see his expression clearly through the rain, so she zoomed her scanner in on his face. Seeing the hopelessness and dismay present there, she felt such a thrill go through her that she couldn't help but chortle. "I was going to keep smashing containers until I found you, but to think I hit pay dirt on the very first try! Even I was surprised! Looks like your luck in escaping me has finally run out!"

Hearing his enemy taunt his bad luck made him despair even more. Monica saw the effect on his face, and her grin widened.

"Oh, and just to let you know," she sneered, delivering the coup de grâce, "if you're trying to stall for time, it's no use."

"Wh-What?!"

Akira's genuinely shocked reaction satisfied Monica immensely. She longed to tell him *more*, to further dye his face with the awareness of his own defeat! She couldn't restrain her lips from announcing, "Reason number one! The container transport won't come back online, no matter how long you wait! So if you thought you could just hop into another bin once things start up again, too bad!"

"Prove it!" he shouted.

That only sounded to Monica like a desperate reflex, so she ignored him. “Reason number two! Even if you *did* stall for time, no one’s going to save you! Guess who made those corpses move? *Me!* You saw how many there are, right? Your teammates will be so preoccupied dealing with them that they can’t possibly rescue you as well!”

“Th-That was *you*?! No way—you’re lying! There’s no way you could...”

But again Monica ignored him. Her laser cannon—which had been hidden on her back until now—emerged before Akira’s startled eyes, and he fell silent. “Reason number three!” she crowed. “This laser cannon’s crazy powerful, but it does have a flaw—its charging time. The longer it charges, though, the more powerful the blast. And guess how long it’s been charging?” Satisfied by the panic that appeared on Akira’s face, she concluded, “Now do you understand? Stalling for time won’t work—here, time’s on *my* side!”

Once again, Monica had been mixing fact and fiction. Reason number one was a complete lie—the container transport had only been frozen temporarily, and would come back online if Akira waited long enough. Reason number two was only half true. Monica wasn’t controlling the corpses on her own—she’d merely asked the system hiring her to do so (something she’d learned it was capable of during a previous unrelated incident). She predicted Akira and the others would have to respond to the bodies wandering the terminal, hopefully making her targets easier to spot. She’d also asked the system to have its cadaverous pawns attack Akira and the others, but she honestly wasn’t confident they’d pose any sort of challenge for the team, even without Akira. And reason number three was actually the truth, but it didn’t necessarily guarantee that time was working in Monica’s favor.

However, Akira couldn’t pick out the truth from the lies, and since he could see the laser cannon charging right in front of him, he decided that her other two claims were probably also accurate. Frightened, he instinctively started to back away.

Satisfied that she’d successfully deceived him, Monica turned to her next goal—getting rid of her enemy. “Now then, ready to die?”

In Akira’s mind, there was now no other option but to retreat. He leaped back

without thinking, unleashing countless grenades from his A4WM as he did so. The grenades exploded against Monica's shield, yet her smirk didn't falter one bit.



Meanwhile, Elena and Sara were running around the container terminal, fighting the horde of corpses.

"Sara, to your right!"

"Roger!" Sara fired as she ran. Her bullet, course-corrected with assistance from Elena, pierced through the rain toward its target. Shock waves from the bullet's head scattered the drops, making its trajectory visible in the downpour. With pinpoint accuracy, it struck the control device on a powered suit. The equipment animating the deceased hunter powered down, and the body crumpled to the ground, once more just an ordinary corpse.

"Next one's on your left!" Elena called.

"Quite a few of 'em, eh?!" Sara exclaimed.

The colorless fog that the rain had brought drastically reduced the range of Elena's scanner, but that didn't mean she couldn't scan at all. And the enemy wasn't immune to the fog either. A skilled scout like Elena could locate the enemy faster than they could find her, making up for the rain's effect on her accuracy. And since the containers weren't moving for the moment, Elena only needed to scan the area once to learn where they were stacked and lined up. Then she could help Sara fight more efficiently by directing her to the most advantageous hiding spots, allowing them to track their opponents while remaining hidden. She supported Sara to the best of her ability in other ways too. With Sara's firepower, their coordination was so impeccable that they had an edge even with reduced visibility and against overwhelmingly superior numbers.

But they could only keep this up for so long—and the longer the battle went on, the harder it would become to search for their other teammates.

When Shiori and Monica's attacks had collided, the ensuing explosion had

flung the various members of Akira's team into different locations. Yet despite its power, they were relatively unharmed: Shiori's blade of light had cleaved through the blast from Monica's laser cannon—already weakened thanks to the colorless fog—and dispersed its energy.

Elena and Sara had been lucky—they'd merely been knocked back into separate containers a short distance away, suffering only minor injuries and no damage to their equipment. Quickly meeting each other, they'd tried to reconvene with everyone else as soon as possible but had been interrupted by a mob of corpses. They'd been fighting nonstop ever since.

"Hey, Elena," Sara asked. "You think everyone else is okay?"

"Don't worry. If we're managing to hang on, I'm sure they are too!" Elena replied.

Sara knew her friend was just trying to make her feel better, but forced herself to smile anyway so as not to lose heart. "Yeah, you're right! They'll be fine. Akira especially—if he were the type to die from something like this, he would've already been blown to smithereens during the job with the hypersynthetic snake."

Elena went along with Sara's apparent optimism and smiled as well. "Right! Though I'm not sure how I feel about using such an extreme battle as your metric."

"But compared to that fight," Sara insisted, "this should be a walk in the park for him, no? Sure, we have a lot more enemies this time, but they're all normal size."

"Good point! In that case, what say we wrap this up already so we can rendezvous with everyone else? If we make it through this, we can go help Akira out—wherever he is!"

"Roger! Let's blow 'em all up!"

Enheartened, Elena and Sara picked up the pace of their offensive. An even larger group of moving corpses gathered around them, as if to match their resolve, but they only added to the women's kill count and the number of lifeless bodies piled on the ground.



Elsewhere, Shiori and Kanae were battling another crowd of the dead. Shiori slashed them down, while Kanae kept pulverizing them with her fists.

The colorless fog reduced the range of scanners and the power of guns. But for masters of close-quarters combat like Shiori and Kanae, this hardly mattered—especially against foes who’d already suffered fatal wounds and whose equipment, in many cases, had already been broken or damaged by gunfire. One by one, the two women brought the corpses down, either severing their bodies or smashing them to pieces.

Yet their group was still at a disadvantage—Reina and Togami were also present. The two rookies were currently taking shelter in a container that the maids had pried open. But even the corpses could pelt a stationary target with enough gunfire to destroy it, so the bin wouldn’t hold out forever. Since the tyros weren’t skilled enough to assist the maids outside, Shiori and Kanae were trying to wipe out any forces that threatened the container. But both women knew that their efforts were only prolonging the inevitable.

“Hey, sis,” Kanae said breezily. “You think it’s about time you made the call already?”

“I’m aware.” Yet Shiori looked hesitant to make the optimal decision: have Reina and Togami temporarily fend for themselves while Shiori and Kanae went to take care of Monica.

Monica was probably severely wounded now. Back when she’d blasted their container, she’d been right out in the open, so maybe she’d simply been supremely confident in her own defenses—but then why had she briefly backed away from Akira’s attack in the factory corridor? Perhaps her force-field shield wasn’t as impregnable as it seemed.

Then, since she’d left herself vulnerable in the terminal, it seemed reasonable to think that she hadn’t been expecting the team to attack her just then—she’d had some other reason to shoot that particular container, which the team had just happened to be in. So her shield’s output had likely only been high enough to block the falling rain—and it was entirely possible she’d taken a direct hit from Shiori’s blade of light.

If this were true, then they had to strike now before she could recover. Just killing Monica would go a long way toward resolving their crisis—Monica was probably the one controlling the corpses, so if they stopped her, the corpses would likely cease from attacking as well. But Shiori worried that Reina might be killed before they could take down Monica. She knew this approach was their best bet, but the thought of Reina dying kept her from leaving.

Ultimately, she had compromised, deciding that they would eliminate as many of the corpses around the container as they could—lowering the threat to Reina as much as possible—before they went after Monica. But no matter how many foes they incapacitated, a seemingly endless number of reinforcements kept showing up. In fact, as the corpses that were spread throughout the terminal continued to gather around the container, there seemed to be *more* enemies than ever before.

Shiori's choice—their second-best option—was beginning to backfire. Kanae, having predicted this outcome, had warned her as much, but Shiori continued to drag her feet.

"Well, either way," Kanae said, "if things go south, I'll just carry missy out of here regardless. Fair warning, though—I'll obviously do all I can, but you've got to understand that, realistically, she'll probably end up kicking the bucket anyway."

Normally this would have infuriated Shiori. At the moment, though, she recognized what Kanae was trying (in her own way) to suggest: going after Monica right now would actually be more beneficial to Reina. So instead of getting angry, Shiori bit the bullet and made her decision. "All right. Let's go."

"Oh, finally come to your senses, huh? About time—I was getting bored pummeling these small fries!"

"However, I'd like to inform Miss Reina of our decision first."

"Sure, but be quick about it! We need to—oh well, guess we're too late already," Kanae said, looking off to the side. The rain made it hard to see, but she'd nonetheless noticed several presences outside of scanner range.

Shiori glanced in the same direction. While she couldn't make out as much detail as Kanae, she could see the enemy's numbers. Her face became grave.

“Maybe someone on our team was fighting somewhere else and croaked, and now the corpses they were tangling with are coming after us instead?” Kanae surmised nonchalantly.

Someone was heading straight for the container that Reina and Togami were in. Shiori immediately ran to Reina’s side. Kanae, knowing full well that Shiori wasn’t about to inform Reina of her decision after all, gave a small sigh.

Kanae’s guess had actually been half right: the newcomers were fighting another member of their team—who was very much still alive. Shikarabe sprayed the mass of corpses with gunfire as he backed away. With their powered suits destroyed, the bodies collapsed to the ground, but the cadavers behind trampled them underfoot, approaching Shikarabe in their stead.

“Shit—there’s way too many! Don’t tell me this is somehow related to the ghost story about the business district! Are corpses from there getting mixed in here as well?!” He’d expected to fight large robots during this job and had prepared plenty of extended magazines. But there were so many enemies now that he was seriously worried he might run out of ammo anyway.

Just then, a container flew through the air and landed on a group of corpses, scattering their limbs everywhere. A moment later, a single horizontal slash from a blade of light cleaved multiple corpses in two, where they collapsed to the ground, never to move again.

“Looks like you’re having some trouble! Mind if we help out?” Kanae, no longer supporting a container in her hands, spoke cheerfully over the comms.

“Let us back you up! Fall back to our location and we’ll fight them together!” added Shiori’s voice.

Shikarabe couldn’t help but sigh in relief. He hadn’t asked for this battle in the first place, and it would have been hard for him to take care of so many enemies on his own. Shiori and Kanae’s arrival was a welcome surprise.

They made quick work of their foes.

Shikarabe sighed again. “Thanks! You really got me out of a tight spot there. Glad we finally met up. Know where anyone else is?”

“Missy and Togami kiddo are over there,” Kanae said, pointing.

“Oh yeah? Then I guess I was right—all these corpses were meant to divide up the team.”

“Oh, you think so too?” Kanae looked surprised but impressed.

As they made their way to where Reina and Togami were, Shikarabe replied, “Yeah, that group I was fighting just now was acting strange. It’s basically just a hunch, but I felt like rather than chasing me down, they were trying to keep me away from something.”

He repeated that this was simply conjecture, then told them what he’d surmised: Monica was likely directing the corpses somehow. Her force-field shield probably wasn’t strong enough to withstand the whole team attacking her at once, so she wanted to separate them and pick them off one by one. Right now, she was presumably busy attacking an isolated member of the team somewhere else.

“So I figured whoever it was would be in the opposite direction that the corpses were attacking me from. I wanted to go help them out, but there were too many bodies to break through on my own. As you saw just now, it was all I could do just to retreat.”

Shiori’s face darkened. Everything he’d said was in line with what she’d already feared—they were paying the price for her earlier hesitation. If Monica ended up killing everyone else, Shiori and Kanae would have to fight her and the corpses together, on top of protecting Reina. Naturally, the maids weren’t likely to win—and Reina’s death would be almost inevitable.

Shiori’s loyalty to Reina was not born merely from a sense of duty, or programmed into her like a machine. Had this been so, she wouldn’t have hesitated to choose the option with the best odds—going after Monica at once. But such wasn’t the case, and for better or worse she’d landed them in their present dilemma as a result. All she could do now was formulate a new plan.

This time she didn’t hesitate. When they arrived back at the container, she turned to Shikarabe, Togami, and Reina, looking desperate.

“While Kanae and I are away, I’d like all of you to make Miss Reina’s safety

your top priority. This may be a verbal request, but make no mistake—it is an official request to Druncam. We'll negotiate the terms regarding pay at a later date, but you have my word that you'll be properly compensated."

Togami and Reina looked confused, but Shikarabe replied immediately.

"Understood. As a Druncam hunter, I officially accept the job." Then the corners of his mouth inched upward. "Oh, and don't worry about explaining things to these two. I'll get them up to speed, so you head on out."

Shiori bowed to him in gratitude and rushed off.

"Good luck with the pip-squeaks!" Kanae called before chasing after her.

When they were gone, Shikarabe addressed the nonplussed rookies with a stern expression. "Togami, let me remind you that I'm your superior. I won't accept back talk or insubordination. You do what I say, and you don't question it. As for you, Reina—well, you can do whatever you want. You're not under me, so I don't have the authority to force you to do anything in the first place. Just don't get in our way. Understand?"

The young people agreed, and Shikarabe proceeded to reveal Shiori's plan to them.



Akira was completely on the defensive as he ran to and fro. By concentrating and adjusting his sense of time, he could sense Monica's attacks beforehand and just barely avoid them. Each time, he responded with a rapid-fire stream of grenades back at her. The ensuing explosion would have blown your average robot to pieces—but enveloped in her force-field shield, Monica was completely unscathed.

That being said, Akira hadn't really thought the grenades would suffice to take her down in the first place—he was merely trying to knock her backward, away from him. Plus, as long as she was using her shield to block the blasts, she wouldn't be able to attack him. This was the one thread of hope he was clinging to.

But even that thread snapped in the end. Previously, when his grenades had temporarily kept her at bay, they'd been in the factory corridor; now they were

now outdoors. The explosions weren't compressed like before, and their force was dispersed. The colorless fog in the area also diminished their power even further. So the grenades barely delayed Monica's advance.

As for Monica herself, her shield kept her from firing her own weapon, but she only needed to dispel it for a moment whenever she pulled the trigger. Perhaps if Akira had been endlessly launching grenades at her with precise aim, it would have been a different story, but he was running around the battlefield as he fired and no longer had Alpha's support to correct his aim. She had plenty of opportunities to deactivate her shield and shoot.

A beam from her laser gun grazed Akira as it flew past, scorching his suit and the skin underneath.

"Why are you trying so hard to run away?" she called excitedly. "You're only prolonging your own suffering, right?! Oh, I get it—you're waiting for this cannon to fully charge so you can have a quick, painless death when I incinerate you in one go, aren't you? Well then, don't worry—relax! Even a headshot from this laser gun can fry your brain with a single shot! You'll be dead instantly!"

Monica's voice continued to reach him over the receiver, but Akira ignored it, focusing all of his efforts into dodging and prolonging their fight. She had said that buying time was pointless and that doing so would only benefit her in the end—but while Akira more or less believed her, he didn't think for a second that delaying her was a useless endeavor.

After all, she'd also stated that his teammates were busy dealing with the mobs of corpses and wouldn't be able to save him. Akira did buy this, but her claim had actually put him at ease—it meant Elena and Sara were alive, handling the crisis on their own, and probably wouldn't need his help. Furthermore, he didn't care whether the laser cannon reached maximum energy output or not. In fact, if this meant he could draw out the battle longer, he'd welcome it.

For the longer he drew things out, the higher the likelihood of Alpha returning and turning the odds in his favor.

So he kept trying his best to stall for time. *If I can just wait long enough for Alpha to come back, I'm golden.* For a while, such thoughts kept him going.

But after quite some time, Alpha still hadn't reappeared in his vision.

Alpha?! A little help here?! he cried out in his head, but there was no response. He'd called out to her without thinking several times already during this battle. But the result had always been the same, and his panic kept growing.

Monica's laser beams scorched the air, evaporating the rain in their paths as they flew toward him. Seeing their trajectories clearly visible, Akira imagined what would happen if one struck him directly. *Alpha?! he cried out again.* Fear was dulling his focus, and it became harder to dodge her attacks. Little by little, his composure was ebbing away. *Alpha?! You back yet?!*

No response. Akira was nearly cornered now, with no hope of escape.

"I've got to hand it to you," announced his foe. "I'm impressed you've managed to stay alive this long! But you're about worn out, aren't you?"

In fact, Akira was so close to his limit that her words, which he'd managed to ignore up until now, began seeping their way into his consciousness.

"Don't try to hide it—I can already tell! Your movements are a dead giveaway that you're losing focus!"

He could no longer brush her words off as they reached his ears.

"If you had just let me trick you, you could have died with the others, and then you wouldn't have had to go through any of this! You're such an idiot!"

For a split second, Akira looked dumbstruck. Monica continued chattering, but he no longer heard her. Instead, he replayed in his head what she'd just said. "*Trick you*"? He mulled this over, and understanding dawned on his face. *That's right... I was tricked.*

Instantly, the panic and fear vanished from him without a trace. All that remained was calm. His mind was now tranquil, as if in a vacuum.

She tricked me.

Belatedly—so belatedly that Akira himself found it strange that he hadn't realized it before now—the fact that Monica had deceived him rose into his awareness. Ever since she'd betrayed them, he'd run into one chaotic turn of

events after another—Elena giving the order to move out right away, and Alpha disappearing shortly thereafter, among other things. He'd been so flustered this whole time that he hadn't been able to think about anything other than surviving.

She tricked me—and tried to kill me, and Elena, and Sara. The full import of this realization was welling up within him. If she'd only tried to deceive Akira, that was nothing new—others had done so back in underground Kuzusuhara as well. But that hadn't really felt like trickery to him, because Alpha had immediately seen through it. Monica, on the other hand, had completely pulled the wool over everyone's eyes, and after joining their team, she'd tried to murder them all. As he recalled each of her deceptions, a feeling grew darker, deeper, and stronger within Akira's heart.

She. Tricked. Me.

All other emotions vanished from Akira's face. The dark feelings bubbling up within him now filled his gaze.

Back in the factory, Akira had run from Monica under Elena's orders. When Alpha had vanished, he'd run from Monica to stall for time until Alpha returned. But all that was now erased from Akira's mind—and at long last he stopped running. Standing stock-still, he turned around to face Monica. All his previous intentions had been wiped out by a new, much simpler goal.

His face a mask of murderous determination, he dashed toward his enemy.

Chapter 121: In Pursuit of the Kill

As Monica chased after Akira, who was running to and fro like a scared rabbit, she became more and more restless—she had hoped to wrap up this fight by now. *What a pain... I mean, he did help Carol escape the ruins the other day. I didn't think I was underestimating him, but maybe I was still a bit too dismissive.* Once she killed the boy, she still had to take care of everyone else. She'd threatened Akira with the laser cannon, but in fact she wanted to save it for those she actually considered a threat, like Shiori.

Although she'd fooled Akira into thinking otherwise, Shiori's blade of light had seriously injured Monica. With some meds she'd fully recovered physically, but no amount of pharmaceuticals would fix the damage to her equipment. Her force-field shield had blocked Shiori's attack automatically but had consumed a great deal of energy in doing so. The resulting lower energy reserves meant her suit's capabilities had also been reduced—her propulsion device no longer had the necessary power to function, so she couldn't fly. In fact, she wanted to fall back temporarily to resupply her energy, just to err on the side of caution. But if she let Akira get away in the meantime, that would make all her efforts moot. So pulling back wasn't an option for her.

Getting the system to animate those dead hunters for me really was a genius move, if I do say so myself! Now maybe the corpses will just take care of everyone on their own! And even if they don't, the team will definitely be worn down enough for me to swoop in and deal the finishing blow. The more time that passes, the more they'll be sitting ducks!

To power her gear, Monica could receive energy from her employer remotely—and the closer she was to the factory, the faster it recharged. She'd been able to withstand all of Akira's attacks during the battle thus far thanks to her shield, but it cost her energy each time it automatically deployed. And of course she couldn't recover that energy immediately—she was still within the factory district, but outside the grounds of the factory that had hired her, so replenishing it would take some time. She also needed power to charge and fire

her laser cannon. Still, slowly but surely, her equipment was recharging, and this fact gave her confidence.

All at once her scanner showed Akira approaching *her* instead. Thinking that he was trying to rush her in a desperate, last-ditch effort to survive, Monica's lips curled up in a sneer. Laughing derisively, she readied her laser guns and prepared to fire in his direction.

The next instant, Akira leaped from behind a nearby container and charged toward her.

The moment she saw his expression, she froze. *This* was not the look of someone driven to desperation. The gaze he turned on her was intense—devoid of all emotions save one, filled with a profound darkness that seemed to overflow into a murderous aura as he closed in.

Monica was so terrified she couldn't move. With his suit-strengthened legs, he hardly needed a single second to reach her. As she remained rooted to the spot, unable to react, he slammed the muzzle of his DVTS minigun against her shield and pulled the trigger.

The rapid-fire stream of bullets struck her shield and bounced off. But the sight of all the impact conversion luminescence scattering before her eyes drove her to panic, and instinctively she raised the shield's output.

Now at maximum strength, the shield blocked Akira's continuous gunfire with ease, even at close range. None of his bullets reached her. She began to relax, and even managed to crack a smile, albeit a rather strained one. "Ha... Ha ha! It's useless! How many times do I have to tell you?! Your puny attacks won't work on—!"

But her eyes met his, and she fell silent. If looks could kill, Monica would have been dead right then—she could read it clearly in his glare. In her mind, an image of her shield shattering and his gunfire reducing her to mincemeat suddenly appeared—and she knew she was going to die.

Her force-field shield was designed to automatically adjust its strength to enemy attacks. Now it determined that Monica had set it too high for Akira's current gunfire, and it began lowering its output to conserve energy.

Panicked, she reflexively moved to stop it. *Th-That aura! And his behavior changed on a dime—this isn't just some desperate attempt at retaliation! He's seriously got some sort of trump card that'll kill me—or at least that's strong enough to make him think so! No way can I lower my shield's output now!*

She was right. Conserving energy would be pointless if her opponent's ultimate attack broke through the shield and struck her—getting hit by Shiori's had already nearly finished her. Monica wanted to put as much defense as possible between her and this threat before her. Whatever powerful weapon he might have to fall back on, she knew he wouldn't hesitate to use it. She couldn't let her shield weaken now.

Yet this was just an excuse. Anyone could have told her that strengthening her shield would just waste energy, and deep down she knew this as well. All her rationalizing was just an attempt to distract herself from the fact that she was too frightened of the boy in front of her to lessen her defenses.

The gap in strength between the two of them *should* have been hopelessly weighted against Akira, mostly due to the differences in their equipment. By all rights, he shouldn't have been able to even scratch her. But equipment alone didn't decide a battle. Akira's overwhelming desire to kill her was propelling him forward, and Monica cowered before him. And so the gap was gradually closing.

She aimed her laser gun at him. She had to disengage her shield to shoot, but she only needed an instant—and that was plenty of time to kill him. He'd probably see it coming and try to evade, but she could take that chance to put some distance between them. Right now she was far too close to him, and she sensed she couldn't afford to remain here.

But to her surprise, Akira didn't dodge—he aimed his DVTS right at the muzzle of her gun and continued to fire. With his weapon still pressed up against her shield, the burden on his DVTS rose as he fired, and the recoil shoved him back. But his powered suit negated the kickback, and he stepped forward once more. All the while he never said a word, nor did he take his eyes off her.

As she looked into his eyes, she seemed to imagine—or hallucinate—his voice. *Go ahead, shoot me! Unleash that laser gun of yours, it said. Dispel that*

shield, and I'll do you a favor and end your life. All you need to do is bring down that pesky barrier. Right now.

It was as if he was calling her to her death, and she knew disengaging her shield to fire at him was no longer an option. Instead, she leaped backward to distance herself from the terrifying presence in front of her.

Akira sprang after her, realigning Monica in his DVTS's sights as he ran. But at that moment the stream of bullets from his minigun suddenly stopped.

The battle thus far had flashed by, and the sudden stillness caught each of them by surprise. Then Akira looked at his gun in shock and dismay, and Monica grinned triumphantly.

He's out of ammo! Of course—after firing that many bullets, he'd have to be! And like hell I'm gonna let him reload! Without a second of hesitation, Monica aimed both her laser guns right at Akira and disengaged her shield to fire. All she needed to do now was pull the triggers, and everything would be over.

At least, that was how it should have been.



At that moment, Akira threw his large gun at her as hard as he could, perhaps gambling that if her shield kicked in again, she wouldn't be able to attack. But for an attack that weak, Monica didn't even need to use her shield, and she just stepped to the side instead. *Throwing an empty weapon—what a pathetic last-ditch attack! Ha ha— Huh?!*

She couldn't believe her eyes—Akira was still holding his DVTS. *What the hell?! Didn't he just throw that?!*

The weapon Akira had hurled at her was not the DVTS but his A4WM grenade launcher. But Monica was even more shocked when gunfire erupted from his DVTS once more. While his aim was off, it freaked her out all the same. *Shit, I should've known—he was just pretending to run out of ammo! All a trap to get me to dispel my shield! I've got to get it back up!*

Still firing, Akira tried to correct his aim. But she was quicker, and the newly deployed shield blocked the stream of bullets just in time. *Whew... I made it! Ha! You won't be able to kill me with a trick like that—*

And then, from within her shield, she heard a loud roar that disrupted her thoughts. Countless grenades began to erupt from the muzzle of his A4WM, piling up inside her shield.

However, they didn't explode.

Wh-What?! Oh—the gun he threw got stuck in my shield when I activated it?! Everything had happened in an instant—she'd been so focused on the gun in his hands that she'd completely forgotten about the one he'd thrown. In her haste to protect herself, she'd trapped the A4WM inside her shield where it had landed.

The grenade launcher was firing automatically, thanks to the fixed-emplacement mod Akira had bought. It was exceedingly simple to use—all he had to do was flip a switch to lock the trigger in place—but now it served him well. Monica didn't know this, but it hardly mattered to her—the important thing was that grenades kept shooting out and accumulating within her shield.

Why aren't they exploding? Are they on a time delay? No, that's not the problem—a bunch of shells are landing right next to me, and within an enclosed

space no less! This is bad—I need to dispel my shield right away!

But then shock twisted her face—Akira had tossed his DVTS aside.

What the hell? If those grenades were meant to trap me, then he should've kept firing to stop me from deactivating my shield! What's he trying to pull?! An explosion would be more powerful in a sturdy, enclosed space, so she'd assumed Akira was trying to trap in her own shield. But now, as she realized her guess was way off, her panic reached new heights. Don't tell me this time he really did run out of ammo? No, that can't be. There's got to be something else... She wouldn't let herself be fooled by *that* trick again.

And Akira seemed to know this too, because rather than try to deceive her, he did something completely different—he grabbed his CWH with both hands and held it at the ready.

Shit! This was his plan all along! His secret weapon!

Out of Akira's three guns—his CWH, DVTS, and A4WM—the CWH anti-materiel assault rifle could fire the most powerful ammunition. And while he'd held the other two casually in one hand, he was gripping this one with two—either this was his ultimate trump card, or the shot he was about to unleash was so powerful it would slam him with massive recoil. If so, he could probably only fire once, because either the ammo was so expensive that he only had one prepared or the gun itself wouldn't be able to withstand the recoil.

In that case, she figured, the grenades hadn't exploded because they were never meant to kill her in the first place—just to distract her and create an opening. With the stream of shells obstructing her vision, she wouldn't be able to anticipate the moment he fired. And, most importantly, they were also intended to get her to dispel her shield so his CWH would hit.

One false move and he would have lost. For that reason, she felt like every single action of his had been strategically calculated. She even suspected that his apparent flight around the battlefield had been a part of his plan all along. So rather than dispel her shield like he wanted her to, she did the exact opposite—she raised its output to its absolute maximum.

She was sure that if she could just block his next shot and make him waste his trump card, he'd have nothing left.

Ha ha! Game over—I win! I saw through your strategy at the very end!
Confident in her own victory, she let out a high-pitched cackle.

At that moment, Akira pulled the trigger. The bullet erupted from his gun—and bounced off the shield with no effect whatsoever.

He hadn't fired any sort of powerful proprietary round—just an average, ordinary bullet.

“What?” Monica gasped, caught completely off guard.

At the same moment, the grenades piled up within her shield all detonated at once.

The blast knocked Akira off his feet and into the side of a nearby container, leaving a dent where he hit it. Momentum glued him there for a moment before he fell to the ground in a heap. Groaning, he swayed to his feet, then gave a deep sigh. His expression looked serious, but more normal.

“Looks like I didn't lose consciousness this time... That's good.” Still, his body was screaming in pain, so he swallowed a few more capsules of medicine. *“Now the real question is, what happened to her?”*

He glanced around. Monica was lying on the ground a short distance away. Her shield had apparently deactivated, as the rain was beating down on her relentlessly. He watched her intently for a while, but she showed no sign of moving. Nearby, he also spotted the remains of her destroyed laser cannon.

“Looks like she's dead. It's pretty amazing she's still in one piece, though—guess that's Old World gear for you. Tough stuff.” Akira relaxed and managed a smile—which turned wry almost immediately afterward. *“Seems I managed on my own this time, didn't I? Although, come to think of it, I suppose I survived getting eaten by a giant monster too, so maybe I ought to start giving myself more credit.”*

Akira realized he was empty-handed and looked around for his weapons. His CWH was nowhere to be found, but he did spot the DVTS. As for his A4WM, it likely wasn't usable by this point, so he didn't bother searching for it. The DVTS would have to serve for now.

He started to make his way over to it—but then a thought suddenly crossed his mind.

He decided to check just to make sure.

Alpha?

There was no response. He sighed in disappointment.

“Dang. Didn’t you leave me to go take care of this very situation? No need now—I’ve already handled it myself. Although I guess we’re not really out of the woods until we make it home safe, right?” Once she finally returned, he thought, he might enjoy chiding her for being so slow.

Intent on retrieving the DVTS, he suddenly froze in place and glanced to his side.

Monica was standing there.

No way! I killed her, right? Don’t tell me her corpse is being controlled too? No, more importantly...

Stricken with terror, his thoughts were a jumble. Precious moments flew by as he tried to make sense of what was happening. As everything clicked for him, he realized he was standing out in the open with no weapon and made a mad dash for the DVTS. But before he could reach it, Monica caught up to him and delivered a powerful kick. Even without her shield her physical strength greatly outclassed Akira’s, and he went flying backward. He managed to land on his feet, but Monica had already reached his DVTS and crushed it with a stomp.

Sneering, she turned to Akira and pointed in a different direction. “Your other guns are over there, you know. Want to try and recover them? Go ahead—see how far you get!” She was clearly furious, but her elation at seeing the despair on his face was even stronger than her anger. “You just let me kick you and destroy your weapon. So you must be out of tricks. What a relief—now I can finally kill you without any trouble!” She started walking toward him. “Gotta hand it to you—that strategy back there was *excellent*. I don’t know how much of it you actually planned, but I was completely fooled. Perhaps you were trying to pay me back for pulling the wool over your eyes?”

Akira remained where he was, as if ready to confront her. He wasn’t sure how

he'd win, but he knew the moment he turned tail, he would lose. As he took deep, steady breaths, this thought was the only thing keeping him from running.

"Honestly, I'm just as surprised as you are that I'm still alive," she continued. "You see, I'm so used to killing my marks with ease and blocking all their attacks with my shield that even I wasn't quite sure how resilient this suit was. Guess that's Old World gear for you, though. Tough stuff, am I right?" She grinned. "Although it looks like the laser cannon didn't hold up too well."

In truth, Akira had been just as surprised as Monica that his strategy had worked so well. Coincidence—or perhaps even luck—had certainly been on his side. Moreover, in the short span of time they'd fought, Monica had made a number of poor judgments, further evening the odds.

Yet in the end, none of this had been enough for Akira to win.

Now Monica was right in front of him. She raised her arm for a knifehand strike. "Well, it's been fun! Bye now!"

He focused on her hand as it came toward him. His sense of time slowed so much that the raindrops around him seemed to freeze in midair. Since he could tell her blow would be strong enough to break any guard he might put up, he tried to dodge it and counter.

But *could* he? Even with everything around him nearly still, he knew his sluggish body wouldn't be able to react in time.

Bam! Monica went flying—a bullet had struck her head.

"What?" As Akira stood there in a daze, several more bullets struck Monica as she lay on the ground, each one knocking her body farther away. Confused, he turned to see where the shots had come from—and saw Carol standing there with a huge grin.

After shooting Monica a few more times, Carol made her way over to him. When she reached him, she casually emptied the rest of her magazine into Monica before addressing him as if everything were perfectly normal. "Whew...! Been wanting to do that for a while now. You okay, Akira?"

"H-Huh? O-Oh, yeah. Somehow..."

“I’m glad. Oh, here—I picked this up for you.”

She handed him his CWH. He was still shaken up, but glad to see his weapon safe and sound.

“U-Um... Thank you. You saved my life.”

“Don’t mention it! We’re teammates, right?”

“R-Right...” Akira took some time to gather his thoughts and reflect on everything up to the present. Then suddenly he frowned. “Wait a minute... Carol, you used me as a decoy, didn’t you?”

Even faced with his criticizing glare, Carol didn’t flinch. “Yeah, I did. Sorry about that—it was the only way I could kill her. Even with that shield of hers, she was always ridiculously cautious.”

“But—”

“Anyway,” she added, “how about we take turns getting some more parting shots in, just in case? I’d rather not have *her* reanimated corpse added to the mix.”

“All right.”

However, he was still clearly upset, so after reloading her gun, she smiled apologetically. “You know how we agreed to split the pay based on our respective achievements? You did an excellent job as my decoy, so I’m willing to count this in your favor and let you have that part of our earnings. Would that make us square?”

Akira sighed, but begrudgingly nodded. She’d been honest with him, apologized, justified her behavior in a way he could agree with, reminded him they currently had bigger things to worry about, and even offered to compensate him for the trouble. Thanks to Carol’s simple negotiation tactics, in the end he agreed to her terms despite still being a bit dissatisfied. Right now their most pressing concern was getting out of here in one piece, he reminded himself, and he’d have plenty of time to voice his complaints to her later.

He turned his attention once again to the task at hand. But suddenly Carol grabbed his hand and dashed away at full speed.

“H-Hey! What gives?!” Akira shouted in surprise as she pulled him along. But he looked at her face—and she was no longer smiling.

“There’s no way! I emptied a whole magazine of anti-force bullets into her! So *how?*” she muttered.

“Don’t tell me—” Akira began.

“She disappeared!” Carol shouted. “She wasn’t where she was on the ground before! She’s still alive! Sorry, but we gotta retreat for now! And if you’re about to tell me that we might have a better chance now that she’s on death’s door, forget it!”

As Carol dragged him away, he realized that her judgment in using him as a decoy had been absolutely correct—and at the same time he was shocked that even that tactic hadn’t been enough to finish Monica off.

“We’re going to catch up with everyone else, and then try again with a full team!” she declared. “Got it?”

“What if she runs away in the meantime?” Akira asked.

“We’ll be lucky if she’s hurt enough that she *has* to run away at this point. Then we could just reconvene with everyone else and get out of here.”

“Um, and what if she goes after us instead?”

“Well, that’s why we’re retreating and going to find everyone else, right? Now come on, let’s pick up the pace!” If Monica really was uninjured enough to pursue them again after all that, they probably didn’t have a chance of killing her with just the two of them—and if they tried, they’d just end up dead themselves.

“All right.” Even Akira could figure out that much. “Let’s hurry.” Alone, Akira hadn’t been able to overcome the difference in strength between him and Monica. However, perhaps with the whole team, they’d have a chance.

With their minds set on that victory, Akira and Carol ran as fast as they could.

The realization that she’d nearly been killed stoked the flames of rage within Monica even further. “Ha... I knew it! He was a decoy!”

She had been prepared for this possibility. While trying to kill Akira, she had raised her suit's force-field armor to maximum strength, just in case. Not that she was expecting an ambush—but after having lost to Akira once, she wasn't going to take any more chances, and her cautiousness had saved her in the end.

"And I have a trump card of my own too, you know?" she said to herself.

She hadn't used her final fallback until now—it could have devastating repercussions and wasn't the sort of thing that was worth using just to complete a job and get paid.

But here she activated it at last. Her powered suit began to melt into her body. Before long she was no longer wearing it—she and the suit were one.

Well, no going back now, she thought as a self-pitying smile came to her lips.

Then her smile vanished.

"Now then—time to die!"

From this moment on, Monica was no longer hunting down a team of weaklings, killing them without so much as a fight while she alone remained safe. She was now, at long last and for the first time, stepping onto the battlefield fully prepared to risk her own life.



Shikarabe dodged through the terminal with Togami and Reina as they kept their distance from the walking corpses. Monica wanted the dead hunters to keep the whole team separated so she could wipe her prey out more easily; thus the corpses mainly approached from one direction instead of surrounding the three of them on all sides. To survive, Shikarabe opted not to hunker down in the container Reina and Togami had been in, and instead used the same tactic he'd employed when alone: to move away from Monica, thereby avoiding most of the enemies sent after them. Shikarabe kept the horde at bay, while Togami focused on guarding Reina.

Reina meekly went along with them, looking humiliated.

Shikarabe knew why Shiori had made her request as an official job for Druncam—she didn't trust Shikarabe or Togami to protect her mistress out of

companionship or the goodness of their hearts, but she *did* trust them to take their jobs as relic hunters seriously. Just as Ezio had refused to divulge his team's information even if it meant being distrusted and left for dead, and just as Akira had been so devoted to his assignment that he'd nearly fought Shiori to the death, so she expected that Shikarabe and Togami would guard Reina with the same level of professionalism. In other words, she was banking on their loyalty to the hunter way of life—or at the very least, on their obligations to Druncam.

Shikarabe fully intended to live up to his client's expectations, and he laid into Togami even more harshly than usual. "Togami! Don't let Reina take the lead! Are you so useless that you can't even shield someone properly?! Get a grip! If you can't manage anything else, at least stay in front of her so that you die first!"

Togami ushered Reina behind him without a word of protest.

Shikarabe could tell from the rookie's face that he was seriously making an effort. But effort alone didn't produce results, and Togami's performance so far hadn't lived up to Shikarabe's expectations. So the boy received scolding after scolding.

Reina, for her part, didn't receive so much as a reprimand. She knew this was because Shikarabe didn't consider her a capable hunter in the first place, and the thought gnawed at her. She had taken Shiori's request to mean, first, that she should do her best to protect herself, and second, that she should stay back and let Shikarabe and Togami protect her. But Reina was struggling to reconcile these two aims—to her mind, "protecting herself" meant fighting in the front with the other two (which would lessen their burden so they'd have an easier time guarding her). Yet her attempt to move to the front had been quickly shut down.

"I-I can fight too!" she cried out before she could stop herself. Immediately she regretted losing her temper, and as she imagined the admonishing glare Togami would no doubt give her, her remorse deepened.

Yet when he turned around to face her, his eyes contained nothing like what she'd expected.

“Am I that useless?” he murmured. His own confidence was at an all-time low, so he took her words to mean she’d be better off fighting on her own than shielded by someone so inept. Though he didn’t realize it himself, he wanted her to deny it—to tell him it wasn’t true.

Reina could tell as much from the sorrowful look in his eyes. His pitiful figure reminded her of herself. “No, you’re not,” she said quietly.

“Then please stay behind me and let me protect you. I may not be worth much, but at least give me a chance to do what I was hired to do.”

“Okay, I will. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s all part of the job,” he replied.

With that, each regained their composure, and protector and protected alike continued struggling together to survive.

Now that Togami and Reina were properly cooperating, Shikarabe felt considerably relieved. But the reanimated corpses kept coming, and as time went on, he grew more concerned.

“Shit! Our ammo’s getting too low for comfort,” he muttered. He could have looted more from the dead hunters, but doing so would take time and effort, so he kept this as a last resort.

As it turned out, he didn’t have to. Gunfire suddenly erupted from a different direction, mowing down the corpses that blocked his advance. He turned to look and caught sight of Elena and Sara.

Elena’s voice immediately came over the comms. “Good to see you!” she said. “What’s the situation on your end?”

“Hanging by a thread! Give me a hand with these corpses, and then we’ll talk.”

“Sounds like a plan!”

Once they’d thinned out the mob enough to get some breathing room—a much easier task with Elena and Sara’s help—Shikarabe sighed in relief. “All right, we’ve got *our* area under control! Now I just wonder how the two maids

are holding up.” Would Shiori and Kanae succeed in their quest to eliminate Monica, or would she kill them and head his way next?

He hoped against hope that the former would prove true.



Akira and Carol were searching for their teammates, figuring that greater numbers would give them better odds against Monica. Of course, finding any of them would largely be a matter of luck—the two didn’t know where the others were, couldn’t contact any of them due to the rain, and weren’t even sure if anyone else was still alive. Yet Akira kept dashing through the terminal, desperately wanting to believe they had survived.

“Carol, do you see Elena and Sara anywhere? Or on your scanner? Or—”

“Nothing so far,” she said.

“Shit.”

Had his teammates only been nearby, he could have heard their voices over the comms even in the rain, just like he had Monica’s during their fight. For now, though, all he could do was make his way through the terminal hoping to pick up one of their signals.

Instead they ran into a mass of hunter corpses.

He grimaced. “Seriously? Don’t we have enough to deal with already?!”

“Actually, this is a good sign,” Carol said. “If a bunch of the dead are gathering around here, there’s a good chance our allies are fighting them nearby.”

“Oh yeah—good point! All right, let’s take these guys down and get over there!” he said with renewed enthusiasm.

But before Akira and Carol could make a move, something struck the horde of corpses from behind—every enemy was either cut down, kicked out of the way, or pulverized until a path had been cleared through them.

Shiori and Kanae appeared in the gap.

“Wow! You’re still alive, kiddo?” Kanae said with a look of surprise.

“Hey, don’t take my death as a given! Although I guess it *was* a pretty close

call back there.”

Working together, the four of them wiped the floor with the rest of the corpses. As they did so, Akira and Carol brought the maids up to speed on what they’d been through.

“You faced off against that woman?!” Shiori asked Akira. “You didn’t win, by any chance?”

“Nope, I lost. It’s only thanks to Carol I’m here at all.”

“She turned out to be tougher than we expected, so we’re in the middle of a strategic retreat,” Carol chimed in. “Pardon me for asking, but can we count on you two in the next round?”

“You bet!” Kanae replied. “If Akira kiddo failed to take her down, she’s gotta be super strong even now—I can’t wait!”

“Yeah? Then by all means, go wild. Have a blast,” Akira muttered, unamused.

As they kept fighting, Shiori and Kanae shared how things had been going on their end, and by the time they were done, there were no more corpses pursuing them.

“All right, looks like that’s it for the warm-up!” Kanae exclaimed, peering off into the distance.

“Warm-up?” Akira echoed warily.

Kanae merely pointed, and they all turned their scanners in the direction she indicated. Linked together, the scanners provided a much more detailed analysis than any single one could have—and the moment Akira saw the output, he looked grim.

“Shit—she’s already here?!”

Without the scanners, it would have been nearly impossible for him to spot Monica through the curtain of rain, but now he could clearly see her figure heading their way.

Carol, who also knew Monica’s strength firsthand, seemed similarly concerned. Shiori took this to mean that their foe would be tough indeed, and she prepared for the worst.

Only Kanae looked completely unconcerned. “Guess we made the right call leaving when we did, huh? Akira kiddo beat sis, so if *he* can’t beat this girl, sis wouldn’t have had a snowball’s chance in hell of winning while also trying to protect missy!”

Shiori’s expression hardened. “Indeed.” Though she had more she wanted to say to Kanae, she managed to hold her tongue. Taking a deep breath to regain her calm, she bowed to Akira and Carol, her expression serious. “Mr. Akira and Ms. Carol, forgive my insistence, but we will be counting on you for support.”

“Sure. I’m not exactly at the top of my game right now, but I’ll do all I can,” Akira replied earnestly.

“No problem, I planned to join in from the start. Besides, I’m a sore loser,” Carol added with a grin.

With a quick thank-you, Shiori dashed off in Monica’s direction.

“Have fun watching our six,” Kanae said breezily. “Oh, and don’t worry about accidentally shooting us—we can dodge your bullets no problem!” She gave them a parting grin and headed off to join Shiori.

“We should get in position too,” Akira said.

“Right,” Carol agreed.

The battle would now be four-on-one, but that didn’t mean the odds were in their favor. Even so, the two of them smiled confidently at each other and then split up, heading off in opposite directions to find suitable spots from which to snipe at the enemy.

Chapter 122: Justification

Under the cover of the rain, Shiori closed in on Monica before her target was aware, delivering a quick horizontal slash. Surprised, Monica instinctively leaped back—but not quick enough. Yet the blade didn't even scratch her, sliding harmlessly along her torso like a kitchen knife against a steel block.

Before Monica could recover, Kanae appeared beside her with a full-force roundhouse kick. Monica tried to block with both arms but again reacted too late, and Kanae's foot plowed into her face, sending her sliding backward.

But Monica remained upright, thanks to her overwhelming physical strength.

She struck back with a powerful swipe of her arm. The attack itself lacked finesse, but the strike was fast—and as she swung, her hand glowed with energy. Long blades of light extended from each of her fingers and swept past like short-range lasers.

Yet the arc of her attack was so large that Shiori and Kanae easily saw it coming, dodging with lightning-quick reflexes. Then they stood in front of Monica, blocking her path.

Monica just stared blankly at them—she was so furious that all emotion had vanished from her face. “So it's you two,” she said quietly. “If you let me through to the others, I'll be merciful and leave you for last.”

There was no bloodlust in her voice, but who showed bloodlust to a pile of trash in their way before kicking it aside? Shiori's face darkened. Monica hadn't even bothered to lie and promise she'd let them live. So she was not only dead set on killing them but confident that she could do it with ease.

But Kanae grinned, unfazed. “Nah, don't bother. We'll just kill you here—problem solved!”

“All right. Die.”

In an instant, they all sprang forward. Their blows collided. Each struck to kill, and the impact blasted away all the rain nearby.

As Shiori and Kanae avoided Monica's deadly swings, they sized up their opponent. *She moves like an amateur*, thought Shiori. *She's clearly not used to combat at close range. And yet she reacted to our surprise attacks just now. So she's fast, and her defenses are solid—she's strong enough to compensate for her poor technique.*

Hm. When I kicked her in the head, noted Kanae, *it didn't feel thin like a force-field shield—it was more like I was striking force-field armor. And she tried to evade sis's attack rather than blocking with her shield. Maybe she can't use the shield anymore?*

Shiori's blade kept glancing off Monica's body. Kanae landed punch after punch, but Monica didn't even flinch. Their opponent was a complete novice in martial arts, so neither of them had any trouble hitting their mark.

The problem was that none of their attacks were harming her.

And Monica hadn't landed a single attack. From the force with which her arm rent the air, each of her strikes could clearly kill in a single hit. Sluggish blows were no threat to the maids, regardless of how strong they were. But Monica's were just as fast as they were powerful—had she been more experienced in melee fighting, Shiori and Kanae wouldn't have been able to evade. So Monica had the edge in both offense and defense, yet the battle remained at a stalemate.

Until one of the combatants *did* take damage.

It was Monica.

But the blow didn't come from Shiori or Kanae.

A bullet struck her between the eyes and knocked her to the ground. She rose immediately, but blood from the wound was dripping down her face. As the rainwater washed it away, she looked more enraged than ever before. Her eyes focused on Akira, who'd sniped her from atop a container in the distance.

"There you are!" she roared. Ignoring Shiori and Kanae completely, she took off after him.

"I don't think so!" Kanae taunted.

She kicked Monica in the face, stopping her in her tracks. Shiori delivered a follow-up blow, slashing at Monica to keep her in place. As Monica watched Akira disappear from her vision, she could only turn her rage onto Shiori and Kanae instead.

Fury gave her speed and even more strength. She tore containers to shreds, blasting away the rain and rending the ground below. Shiori and Kanae managed to slip past her guard, but only barely. Her already-lethal attacks now swept in wider, more powerful arcs—these would normally have been easier to avoid, but she was also attacking faster now.

Even so, Shiori and Kanae didn't give up, matching her blows in speed and power. Their morale remained high—thanks to Akira's support from afar, they'd finally gained an advantage over Monica.



Akira abandoned his sniping spot and ran for it. "I hit her, but she just shrugged it off!" he said through gritted teeth.

He'd fired into the midst of a frenetic, fast-paced battle. Had his aim been off by just a little, he would have hit his allies instead—but sheer concentration had granted him a direct hit. The anti-force bullet—a round he'd gotten from Carol, designed to pierce force-field armor—was more powerful than anything else he had on hand.

Yet he'd only succeeded in knocking Monica down, and she'd kept fighting afterward as though nothing had happened. Was it even worth trying again? What if he hit Shiori or Kanae instead?

Then Kanae's voice came over the comms. "Hey kiddo, what's the holdup? Keep shooting!"

"But I don't want to hit you, and it doesn't look like it's doing much anyway —"

"Oh, you're fine!" Kanae interrupted. "We can dodge your shots no problem! No need for a heads-up, just keep 'em coming—and make it snappy!"

When Akira still hesitated, Shiori chimed in, "Mr. Akira, we need support from you and Ms. Carol to hold the advantage in this fight. Resume your fire and do

not concern yourselves with us.”

Carol added, “Let’s do as they say. We didn’t come here to just stand and watch, and if we don’t help, all their efforts will go to waste!”

It took Akira a moment longer to get a grip on himself. “Roger!” he said to the maids. “Just be sure not to get hit!”

He took up a new position to snipe from, focused on Monica once more, and fired. Another bull’s-eye!

But this time Monica didn’t even lose her balance. A moment later, Carol’s bullet struck from a different location and was no more successful.

Yet neither of them gave up. Their steady stream of gunfire targeted Monica even as she moved so quickly that it was tough for Akira to get a bead on her without Alpha’s support. Many of his shots missed their mark, nearly hitting his allies instead. He chided himself to pay more attention before pulling the trigger.

Then he realized what was really going on.

“Whoa, they *are* dodging all our fire!” he couldn’t help exclaiming in astonishment. He wasn’t nearly missing them—Shiori and Kanae were evading every bullet coming their way, instantly grasping the timing and trajectories of his and Carol’s projectiles without any prior warning. Realizing that he, a rookie, had been needlessly concerned for a pair of perfectly capable veterans, he smiled wryly to himself. “Guess I ain’t gotta worry about *that*. All right, next shot!”

With nothing to distract him now, Akira focused entirely on bombarding his target. His marksmanship improved, and his and Carol’s supporting fire grew more relentless.



Shiori and Kanae’s attacks also became more fierce. Just as the maids had predicted, sniper support was key in turning the tide of battle.

Their melee attacks were more powerful than any of Akira’s guns—yet they couldn’t even scratch Monica. Somehow, though, Akira’s shot had knocked her

off her feet. Shiori surmised that Monica had already pushed her force-field armor to its limit in order to neutralize the maids' blows, and so couldn't completely defend against Akira's anti-force rounds.

Force-field armor typically became stronger the more you raised its energy output. Unlike Monica's shield, which received energy remotely, her armor was generated from her suit. So she was able to strengthen individual sections of the force field. Theoretically, she could even maximize the output for only a single spot at the precise location and moment of impact, spending minimum energy for maximum benefit. But pulling off such a feat would require foresight bordering on precognition.

Monica herself didn't have that foresight. But her powerful Old World scanner came close—as long as Shiori and Kanae remained within its radius, she always knew where they were and could anticipate the direction and timing of their attacks with ease. Akira's round, however, had not only hit her—it had *injured* her. Perhaps it had come from outside her scanner range?

As if to prove Shiori's theory correct, Shiori and Kanae were finally making some headway now that Akira and Carol had joined the fray. Shiori's blade glided along the surface of Monica's body once more, but this time left a clear wound. Kanae followed up with a kick, and felt her opponent clearly stagger back.

Monica prepared to counterattack. Shiori and Kanae sensed this, dodging to opposite sides. But they reacted too soon, and Monica moved to intercept them with a powerful sweeping strike. The maids couldn't change course in time—but Akira's and Carol's bullets struck Monica first, knocking her off-balance and allowing Kanae and Shiori to close in.

In fact, the maids had planned this, anticipating the incoming gunfire and dodging early on purpose to leave Monica vulnerable at exactly the right moment. It helped that their scanners were still linked to their teammates', giving them a constant stream of precise data on Akira's and Carol's positions and movements. With this, Shiori and Kanae could not only predict their bullet trajectories but also cleverly bait Monica further.

Monica caught on, and her attacks became more cautious, but by the same

token they were now easier to evade as well. Thanks to their strategy, the two maids were slowly but surely backing Monica into a corner—Akira and Carol (who were watching the battle unfold from afar) even began to think they might come out on top after all.

But their advantage wouldn't last forever. No human could normally track and predict so many details at once—Monica's movements, the trajectories of Akira's and Carol's bullets, and possible strategies—all while fighting at top speed. Kanae and Shiori had taken speed stims, and Shiori grimaced as she calculated how much longer they had before the meds wore off.

She's certainly strong, thought Shiori. Kanae was right—I don't think I could've managed this while protecting Miss Reina. Maybe if I hadn't dragged my feet so much, we could have battled her while Mr. Akira was still in peak condition. But she couldn't turn back time—it was wiser to focus on the present. Besides, she had no way of knowing which path really would have led to the best outcome. Right now her best bet was to capitalize on the choice she *had* made.

Just a little more time before they run out—but no matter. We'll finish this long before then!

With her heart fixed on her goal, Shiori placed her trust in her blade. Dodging another attack, she stepped into her opponent's range and slashed across her once again.



As he supported Shiori and Kanae from a distance, Akira suddenly ran into trouble. “Uh-oh, *that's* not good.” In a panic, he yelled into his comms. “Carol! You got any more of those anti-force bullets? I'm out over here!” All he had left now was regular ammunition.

“Sorry, but I'm just about out too,” came her reply.

“Shit! Regular bullets don't work on her! What am I gonna do?!” He thought for a moment and, after some hesitation, finally made a decision. “Okay, can you spare just one magazine?”

“Sure, but what good will that do you?”

“You know how the rain makes our shots less powerful? Well, I'm gonna try

to make this count anyway.” Regular ammo wouldn’t have any effect on Monica, even if he pressed the muzzle of his gun right up against her. But what if he did that with an anti-force bullet? It was worth trying—or at least better than wasting his other ammunition.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to try to get up close to her while they’re fighting like *that*?” Carol responded. As Monica and the two maids battled, shock waves tore the surrounding area asunder—the ground was ripped up, and the nearby containers were crushed, sliced apart, or blasted into the air. (Akira and Carol had quickly realized that their earlier prediction—that Monica would hesitate to attack them for fear of destroying her employer’s property—had just been wishful thinking on their part.)

“Not much choice, right?” Akira replied. “Better than just standing here with no ammo.”

“I suppose. All right, I’ll give you one more, so come here.”

Akira ran over to her, took the magazine, and inserted it into his CWH. Then he took a deep breath and cleared his mind. “All right, let’s do this!”

Now mentally prepared, he charged headlong toward the fray.

Carol followed him.

“Hey, what are you doing?” he demanded.

She grinned teasingly. “Didn’t you just say it yourself? It’s better than just standing around with no ammo.”

Akira smiled back, and they dashed forward together. He never would have thought Carol would accompany him, but he was glad to have the help.

Even though they’d been sniping from some way off, they covered the distance in no time. Seeing them approach, Shiori and Kanae looked shocked.

“Mr. Akira, what happened to supporting us?” Shiori demanded sternly over the wireless.

“Sorry! We’re nearly out of ammo, so we figured we ought to get the most out of what’s left by getting up close,” he answered.

“Is that so? All right then.” For a moment she considered stopping them, but

decided against it. On the one hand, if Monica's defense depended on her search radius, then Akira and Carol would be foolish to get close. But if their remaining bullets were ineffective, they wouldn't be much help from far off anyway. Besides, now that anti-force rounds had stopped coming, perhaps Monica wouldn't be watching out for them.

In the end, Shiori was unsure what the right choice might be, so she let Akira and Carol make the call themselves.

"Decided to join the fight, eh, kiddo?" Kanae chimed in. She sounded completely unconcerned—to her, either way would be just as entertaining.

"Pretty much! Although if you finish her off before I get there, I won't complain!"

"Doing my best!" she replied cheerfully.

Akira had witnessed the entire battle thus far, a sight so awe-inspiring it had completely transformed his understanding of what melee combat could be like. Yet in the midst of this, Kanae's voice sounded lighthearted, and Akira found himself astonished and impressed.

Then it occurred to him that he, too, was about to join that fight, and he smiled wryly to himself.

When he'd made it about halfway to his goal, he fired—a direct hit, but with no effect. "Too far! Well, given I've risked getting this close, might as well keep going."

But then he saw Monica swing her arm upward in front of him. On instinct, he leaped backward. Monica's glowing hand slammed down on the ground a moment later. Shock waves radiated out from where she struck, rending everything in front of her.

Akira's face went rigid—he realized what a close call he'd just had. "She's got that kind of reach?!"

Enormous cracks split the ground even beyond where Akira had stood—as though a beast the size of a building had sliced the earth with its claws. The range and sheer power of Monica's attack shocked him, but instead of standing still in shock, he ran even faster.

He aimed his CWH forward and fired once more. Another direct hit, but it only knocked Monica slightly off-balance.

“Not good enough! Need to get closer!” he muttered. He was already so close that one hit from Monica would mean instant death. Still, he swallowed his fear and kept running.

During all the fighting, nothing—not Shiori and Kanae’s melee offensive, Carol’s supporting fire, or Akira’s close-range shots—had been able to take down Monica, and now it was her turn to strike back. At a glance she seemed to merely swipe her arm through the air in front of her, but the blow tore the ground and containers off in the distance to shreds, as if disdaining perspective altogether.

Shiori and Kanae defended against the attack from where they stood nearby, while Carol—who’d decided getting any closer would be too dangerous for her—evaded the attack some distance away. Akira dodged Monica’s strike as he ran and fired again. He was now as close to Monica as the maids were.

He’d made it this far by concentrating and slowing his sense of time. Ducking under her blow, he could see each individual raindrop in the air as they fell to the ground. Closing the remaining distance to Monica, he pressed the barrel of his CWH against her face. The colorless fog would make his shot less powerful, but using an anti-force round at point-blank range would help compensate for this. At the moment, it was the strongest attack Akira could deal.

He pulled the trigger.

He watched as the impact knocked Monica off her feet in slow motion, blasting her backward. But she righted herself in midair, grinning smugly. Her face didn’t show even a hint of pain. Her armor had blocked his shot completely.

Akira was shocked and dismayed—even *that* hadn’t been enough.

Now it was Monica’s turn. She hit the ground slightly off-balance, but even so another powerful swipe tore through the air. Akira barely managed to dodge it, but his CWH wasn’t so lucky—it was knocked from his hands and smashed to pieces, its remains scattering through the air.

Within his accelerated consciousness, he knew he had to do *something*—but no good ideas came to mind. He'd lost his last weapon, and he had no hope of winning a fight at close quarters. Monica was already winding up for a second attack—it didn't look like he'd be able to dodge this one.

So he blindly charged forward. He didn't know how he was going to win, but he was certain he wouldn't find the solution by retreating.

At that moment, a voice resounded in his head. *Sorry for the wait! Did you miss me?!*

Akira was so startled that everything around him seemed to freeze for a split second. Then his body moved on its own, skillfully dodging Monica's attack in a way he normally never could have. Momentum helped his right arm to wind back as far as it could go.

He'd experienced this feeling before. Instinctively going along with his body's movements, he made a fist and threw his arm forward with all his might. His fist plowed into the side of Monica's face, sending her flying. She bounced once from the impact, then rolled roughly along the ground until friction finally brought her to a stop.

Akira gasped and stared at the motionless Monica for some time, completely dumbfounded. She didn't move a muscle.



Shiori and Kanae stood frozen. Normally they would have immediately pounced while she was down, but now they were too stunned for anything else. Even when they came to their senses, they couldn't move right away—the nonplussed Akira just standing there, Monica lying on the ground, the toll the speed stims were taking on their bodies, and their own surprise and confusion distracted the two maids from all thoughts of battle. Keeping a wary eye on Monica, they approached Akira.

“Mr. Akira, what was that just now?” Shiori asked with trepidation.

“Oh—uh, nothing really. I just hit her as hard as I could.”

Of course, Shiori knew that alone wouldn't have been enough to bring Monica down. She narrowed her eyes in suspicion, but she could tell from the look on his face that he was the most surprised of all.

Carol walked up to them. She looked at Monica on the ground, then the other three, and judged that they'd won. “Nice job, Akira!” she said with a smile. “You did it!”

“Y-Yeah—probably.”

“Probably, you say?” She fired another round into Monica, just in case.

The impact from the shot sent Monica flailing across the ground once more like a rag doll. There was no resistance—as if Carol had shot a corpse.

Normally this would've been enough to confirm for her that Monica was indeed dead, but since Carol had already made that mistake once before, she felt she couldn't be certain now. “Hmm. Well, she doesn't seem to be faking, but if she *is* just pretending to be dead, we're screwed anyway—that was my last bullet.”

“No, it's fine. We're good,” Akira suddenly said, and walked over to Monica's body.

Shiori, Kanae, and Carol all exchanged glances—his declaration had seemed quite confident, and since he was approaching Monica with no caution or tension whatsoever, they opted to trust him and followed behind.

Right after Akira had said “probably” to Carol, Alpha, who once more had returned to his vision, grinned. *Don’t worry—you won!* she proclaimed.

Upon seeing her, Akira felt a variety of emotions arise within him, but he suppressed them for now. *Just to confirm, everything’s taken care of now, right?*

Yes. There shouldn’t be any more problems, she said with a smile.

Got it. Thank goodness. He sighed in relief. *Alpha, you’re late. Really late.*

Alpha gave him a teasing grin. *Oh? That’s an unusual way to show gratitude to someone for getting them out of a tight spot.*

Yeah, thanks. What was that back there, anyway? What’d you do? Even Akira could realize that he’d only been able to break through Monica’s armor and send her flying because Alpha had interfered with it in some way.

Oh, you know, this and that. And I’ll just warn you now—she’s still alive. She can’t fight anymore, though, so no need to worry.

Really? Good to know.

Akira relayed this into Carol and the others, then walked up to her body.

Just as Alpha had said, Monica was still alive. But she was so badly injured that she couldn’t even get up on her own. Fighting any more was out of the question.

What the hell was that?! The question repeated itself within her muddled consciousness, but she couldn’t come up with an answer. She’d just witnessed something truly unbelievable.

Then Akira appeared next to her. At first she panicked, thinking that he’d come to finish her off, but he just glared down at her. Monica glared back, yet the traces of fear on her face were unmistakable. She still longed to kill him, but now the impulse came from shock and confusion that the tables had turned on her so suddenly—and fear that she herself was about to be slain.

Wh-What’s he going to do?

Akira continued to stand there looking down at her, making no other

movements.

Monica felt even more confused. *What's he thinking? Is that hesitation I see on his face? Why? What's he—?*

"You're the one making those corpses move, right? Stop them right now," he said at last.

Now his hesitation made sense to her. The corpses were still attacking his teammates, but he was unsure whether killing her would stop the corpses—or make it so that they could never be stopped. He wasn't hesitating out of mercy—he was only weighing his options in the first place because he could kill her whenever he wanted.

Monica began to see a way out of her predicament. *If I tell him I've taken one of his friends hostage, he won't be able to confirm it due to the rain hampering communications. I can use that opening to—*

But before she could think any further, Akira's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Actually, I take that back—are you *really* controlling the corpses?"

"O-Of course I am! If you kill me, you won't be able to stop them anymore. And also—"

Alpha?

She can't stop the corpses on her own. It's impossible.

With that, Akira's reason to keep Monica alive vanished. "That's a lie," he announced. The uncertainty had also disappeared from his expression, and the glare in his eyes became murderous.

"I-I'm not lying! Okay, I might've asked the factory hiring me to do it, and I might not actually be able to control them myself, but I really can stop them just by asking!"

Akira ignored her and raised his fist. Monica realized that nothing she said could convince him anymore, and she changed her approach. "W-Wait! How about we make a deal? If it's money you want, let's talk! Not aurum—*coron!*"

Akira's fist froze in midair. Monica couldn't help but smirk—there wasn't a hunter alive who didn't understand the value of coron. After all, this was the

very reason she'd sought out employment from an Old World factory in the ruins and killed her fellow hunters, even if it meant Kugamayama City might put a bounty on her head. She was sure that mentioning coron would put a damper on her opponent's dangerous attitude.

And she had plenty of bargaining power with which to persuade him. She could afford to actually pay him some coron if need be, or she could get him to join forces with her—he was strong, after all. At any rate, getting out of her current situation was her top priority.

“Let's join forces, you and me!” she pleaded. “You really are strong—you'll be a natural! I'll introduce you to the factory system that hired me. With strength like yours, you'll be sure to make some serious—”

Alpha?

She's not lying, Alpha replied.

Got it.

The next instant, Akira's fist plowed directly into her face, smashing her skull and pulverizing the brain matter within. Her death was instantaneous.

After finishing Monica off, Akira sighed.

Next to him, Alpha looked puzzled. *Why did you do that, Akira?*

Um, was that bad?

You asked me to confirm whether she actually intended to pay up, and I said she wasn't lying. So why did you kill her?

I just wanted to check whether she really thought I'd be stupid enough to let her go if she paid me. There's no way she was going to hold up her end of the bargain. Just how far did she plan to go to deceive me? His telepathic voice became laced with irritation and anger. *Oh, and just to let you know—even if you'd told me beforehand that I could afford some seriously good gear if I accepted her offer, I still would've done the same thing.*

That's fine. I'm not criticizing your decision—it doesn't matter to me either way. I mean, I didn't stop you, right?

Akira realized that Alpha could've taken control of his suit and forcibly stopped him if she'd wanted. But she hadn't. He began to calm down. *R-Right. Sorry.*

No big deal! Like I said, I personally don't care—though I'm not sure how everyone else feels. Alpha cast a knowing glance at Carol. When Akira turned to look, Carol was wearing a conflicted expression.

"Hey Akira, was that really the right decision? I mean, she offered you *coron*, right? Don't tell me you're so green you don't know about the value of coron."

"Yeah, I do know that much. I know that it's the currency they used in the Old World, and that there are some incredible pieces of gear out there that can only be bought with it."

"Then *why*? We're talking coron here! Coron!"

Akira felt like he was being criticized for his decision and scowled. "I warned her before that if she tried to hurt Elena or Sara in any way, I'd take responsibility and kill her," he said quietly, though looking stern. "I just made good on my promise, that's all." Without meaning to, he let his anger at Monica creep into his attitude toward Carol as he added, "And if you're thinking I should've asked you first since coron's involved and we're on the same team, don't waste your breath."

He waited for her reaction, prepared even to fight her at a moment's notice if it came to it. But when he saw the look on Carol's face, all his tension slipped away.

"Nope, no complaints here!" she said with a grin. Oddly enough, she sounded even more cheerful than usual.

Akira was taken aback. "O-Oh, yeah? Good to hear."

"How do *you* two feel about it?" Carol asked, turning to Shiori.

"I have no complaints. She tried to kill Miss Reina—no amount of money could buy forgiveness for that."

Kanae added, "I think you made the right call, kiddo. Even if she'd been telling the truth, give it another hour and she would've betrayed you again. You can't

trust people like that as far as you can throw them—it's more dangerous to leave 'em alive."

"Perhaps it would've been better to ask for Ms. Elena's approval first as team leader, but since we cannot contact her at the moment, I'm sure she will understand that the decision had to be made without her input," Shiori said. "Although, even if we *had* received Ms. Elena's orders to leave her alive, I wouldn't have complied. If you hadn't finished her, Mr. Akira, I certainly would have."

"I-I see." Akira flinched at her vehemence, but relaxed again when he remembered that, regardless of what Shiori might have intended to do, Monica was now dead. "Okay, let's meet up with the others, then we can focus on getting out of here," he said, forcing himself to think positively. The threat that Monica posed had been eliminated, but they weren't safe just yet—they still had to make it out of the ruins. Reminding himself that he couldn't let his guard down prematurely, he set off with the others.



With Monica out of the picture, Akira and the others were easily able to meet up with Shikarabe's group. Once everyone was accounted for, they ducked into a nearby container to rest.

Akira was surprised by the story Elena recounted to him. "They turned on *each other*?" he asked.

"Yes. All of a sudden the corpses were fighting among themselves, as though they saw everyone else as an enemy. They attacked us as well, of course, but their own friendly fire made it easy for us to take them out."

"Based on what's been said so far, that would coincide with the time that your group killed Monica," Shikarabe added, looking at Akira. "That makes me think her death caused whatever was controlling those corpses to malfunction somehow."

Akira looked perplexed. *Alpha, I thought you said Monica wasn't the one controlling those corpses.*

Let's save that for later. If I explained in detail now, Elena and the others

would see the realization dawn on your face and ask you questions you'd have a hard time dodging.

"Come to think of it, how'd you take that woman down, anyway?" Shikarabe asked. "From everything I've heard, it seems like all the odds were against you."

"I don't know myself. I just tried hitting her as hard as I could, and it worked."

"But Kanae's gauntlets could resist force-field armor, and even *she* couldn't break through her defenses. So how did your punch reach her only wearing a normal powered suit?"

"Like I said, I don't know." He knew Alpha had done *something*, but wasn't sure what.

His genuinely clueless expression was enough to convince Shikarabe.

"I see. Well, if that's the case, it looks like *both* our groups got rescued by something we can't explain. I don't really get it, but I guess we can chalk this one up to luck." With a wry smile, he looked at Monica's corpse, which lay in the corner. "Maybe we'd get a better idea of what happened by analyzing her scanner's data, but that's the city's job, and there's no guarantee they'll tell us what they learn anyway."

Bringing Monica's body along had been Carol's idea—she'd argued it would be a waste to leave her behind, as her body would verify her betrayal to the city, and her Old World gear would fetch some serious coin. "At any rate, I think we can expect a big payout from all this," she said. "There wasn't even a bounty on her head, and considering all the trouble we went through for just a normal rescue mission, we can at least persuade the city to buy her gear from us at a high price." She grinned.

As they talked, the rain finally let up—break time was over. Elena gave the order to move out, but as they were about to exit the container, she stopped.

"What's wrong?" Akira asked her.

"Now that the rain's let up, I'm picking up a comms signal through all the static. It seems to be heading our way. I'm going to go check it out. Wait right here."

Akira and the others took another break while they waited for Elena. When she came back, she wore an odd expression.

“Something wrong?” Sara asked, concerned.

“The signal was from an additional unit the city sent. I got in touch with them, and they’re coming to us now.”

Thanks to the hunter who’d managed to escape and make it to the city’s outpost, the city had already learned about Monica’s betrayal and had immediately dispatched another support unit, which had finally made it close enough to reach Elena’s wireless.

What was more, since the city had heard no word from Hex and Hound, they’d assumed the worst and issued the support unit another powered armor to serve as a replacement relay back to base. Now that the rain had let up, the network reception within the district had already improved so much it was even better than before the rain started. In the open-air space that contained the terminal, Akira and the others would be able to get in touch with the city’s outpost at last.

Yet once Elena relayed this to the others, they looked just as conflicted as she had. They were obviously overjoyed to meet up with a support unit, but it was clear from their faces that they would have liked the help a little sooner.

Before long, Akira and the others met up with the support unit, exited the ruin, and reached the city outpost without any further trouble—though Akira, determined to not let his guard down until the end, had been prepared to fight his way out if necessary.

Despite all the twists and turns he’d encountered this time, he’d once again managed to make it back from the ruins in one piece.

Chapter 123: The Trick Revealed

With his hunter work in Mihazono over, Akira returned home, filled his bathtub to the brim with hot water, and soaked away all his accumulated fatigue. “This is heaven,” he mumbled with a look of ecstasy on his face. Once he’d allowed himself to relax, all the tension his body had dissolved in one go.

Take your time and enjoy, Alpha said, joining him in the bath like always. Or so I’d like to say, but if you’re that tired, maybe you ought to go ahead and hit the sack.

That sounded reasonable, but the bath was just so comfortable that he felt reluctant to get up right away. “Just a little longer,” he mumbled.

Okay, just take care not to doze off.

“Sure thing,” he replied, but even as he spoke, his consciousness was starting to fade. Realizing he was already in the danger zone, he racked his brain for something to talk about in order to stay awake. “Say, you never told me what trick you pulled to let me win against Monica. How’d you swing that?”

Fine, I’ll tell you. In layman’s terms, I hacked into her gear’s detection processing and messed with her force-field armor’s output. Alpha explained that Monica’s gear included high-powered scanning equipment, which had allowed her force-field armor to sense an enemy’s incoming attack and match its power at the moment of impact. Alpha had exploited this, making the software think Monica was about to receive a fatal attack everywhere *except* her head. The armor had distributed all its energy to the rest of her body to block the “attack,” leaving her head defenseless against Akira’s punch—boosted with Alpha’s support. Monica’s Old World outfit was the only reason her head hadn’t gone flying from her body.

Once upon a time, right after Akira had met Alpha, they’d gone deep into the Kuzusuhara ruins together to hunt relics—where he’d nearly died after disobeying Alpha’s orders. Alpha explained (rather smugly) that she’d done something similar back then to help Akira escape, making the monstrous robot

attacking him think that the boy was in a different location than he actually was.

“Oh, so *that’s* what happened.” He was about to nod in understanding when something occurred to him. “But if that’s all you did, why did you need to be away from me for so long?”

Remember how my support capabilities take a big hit when I’m outside of Kuzusuhara? Especially my scanning?

“Yeah, you did say something like that.”

Well, it does improve over time, but only gradually. I’m glad I could make it back before it was too late. And that wasn’t all I did! Remember when Elena said the corpses were fighting among themselves? That was also my handiwork! I rewrote their search processing to recognize their fellow dead as enemies.

“Really? Wow!” Surprise snapped him out of his hot-water-induced reverie, and he thought for a moment about what she’d said. If Alpha had left him any later than she had, Monica’s defenses wouldn’t have been lowered at that critical moment, and the corpses would have kept attacking his allies. Akira guessed that even if Alpha had stayed by his side, the team probably wouldn’t have been able to win. “I guess it was worthwhile to let you head off on your own after all,” he mused, impressed by Alpha’s foresight.

I’m glad you understand! I know I put you in a rough spot, but if I hadn’t left right then, I wouldn’t have returned soon enough.

“Yeah, I know that now. I wouldn’t have been able to win on my own, so I’m just grateful you showed up when you did. No complaints here! Thanks, Alpha. You saved me again.” He grinned, but there was a hint of regret in his smile.

You’re very welcome, she replied cheerfully.

With that doubt no longer hanging over his head, another smaller one came to mind. “Say, wasn’t Monica wearing a protective coat before Shiori and Kanae attacked her? Why’d she get rid of it? Was it just a disguise so we wouldn’t know she was wearing Old World gear underneath? Now that I think of it, where’d that coat go, anyway? It was like it just vanished.”

It got blown to pieces. Its remains are probably still all over the ground back

there.

That just puzzled Akira even more. “Why? Didn’t her force-field shield block those attacks?”

This is just my guess, but here’s what I think. Alpha explained that Monica’s force-field armor, generated from the Old World suit she’d been wearing underneath, had been fortifying her New World coat. But the burden of the force field would have drastically weakened the coat’s own defensive capabilities—in fact, the force-field armor had likely been the only thing keeping the coat together at that point. When Shiori and Kanae had attacked Monica, the suit’s energy had been rerouted to strengthen her shield instead. With her coat’s defenses already reduced to zero, it had fallen apart, unable to support even its own weight. *Again, that’s just a theory,* Alpha concluded. *Although it probably did also function as a disguise for her, like you guessed.*

“Makes sense. If she didn’t get rid of the coat on purpose, then I guess she lost it because she was using Old World and New World gear simultaneously, right?” With that, he allowed himself to indulge in the pleasure of the bath once more. His mind hazy with bliss, no further questions came to him for the rest of his soak. When he got out, he fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. Alpha watched him sleep with a satisfied smile.



Several days had passed since Akira and the others had come back from Mihazono. Upon reaching the city outpost, they’d still had some things to take care of before their assignment was complete. After giving the official a brief report of what had happened, they handed over Ezio—the only survivor they’d found—and Monica’s corpse. Of course, the official had wanted to know *all* the details right away, but Elena had put him off by stressing how exhausted she and her teammates were and promising she’d explain at a later date. The official, who’d practically forced them to take Monica along to begin with, had had no room to argue and reluctantly agreed.

Today, Akira and the others were gathered once more, summoned to the Kugama Building—a skyscraper integrated into the city walls—in order to give their detailed account of the events in Mihazono. Once they were all present

and accounted for, they were escorted to a meeting room, and the city's officials got down to business. However, there wasn't that much more to explain: the report Elena had already submitted and the data from each of the team members' scanners painted a clear enough picture of what had happened, so the officials only asked for clarification on a few points.

If that was all they were going to ask, then why did they have to call all of us here? Akira thought.

Then the officials moved on to the real reason for the meeting.

In order to compensate the team for their trouble, the city offered to recognize Monica as a wanted criminal and put a bounty on her head. At least, that was what it seemed like on the surface (and to Akira), but everyone else immediately understood the city's true intent: if she was declared wanted by the city, her body—and her Old World gear—would become city property. Realizing *that* was the reason they'd actually been called here, each of the expert negotiators—the city officials, intermediaries from Druncam, and Elena and Carol—began trying to hash out a deal they could all agree on, and a heated discussion ensued.

As the intense negotiations wore on, Akira remained in the room but stayed silent. He got the feeling that the city had only called him here with the rest of the team to reassure him that no one would make any final decisions without his knowledge. As he waited patiently for them to finish, Reina came up to him with a serious look on her face.

"Hey Akira, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Shoot," he replied.

"I heard from Shiori that you took down Monica on your own. Is that true?"

"Well, I technically only delivered the final blow, but yeah, I guess."

"So it *is* true," Reina mused. "You really *are* amazing."

Akira looked baffled. From Shiori's perspective, it should have only seemed at that moment as if some unknown phenomenon had breached Monica's defenses. So he found Reina's reaction unexpected.

“Hey,” she probed. “How’d you get so strong, anyway?”

“You’re overestimating me. As I keep saying to everyone, I’m not sure how I did it myself.”

“Come on, we all know that’s not true. Tell me! I really want to know!”

As she pressed him for an answer, she unconsciously took a step forward. Akira drew back. Shiori, who’d been watching them, sensed a conflict on the horizon and stepped in.

“Mr. Akira, I may not know how you defeated that woman, but the skill you displayed even up to that point was truly impressive. For my mistress’s future reference, I too would like to know how you gained such strength.”

Akira glanced back at Reina, who looked like she could barely contain her curiosity. Now that he understood better why they were asking, he gave the matter a moment’s thought before responding. “Well, if you want to get stronger, the best way is to train a lot and buy good gear, right?”

Hearing him state the obvious, Reina automatically scowled as if to say, “That’s not what I meant!” Kanae, who’d been eavesdropping on the conversation, also shook her head as if disappointed by his reply.

“C’mon, can’t you offer a little more than that?” the maid asked.

“No,” Akira said flatly. There *was* more, of course, but he couldn’t tell them about Alpha. So he pretended to be irritated, hoping they wouldn’t ask anymore. “The gear’s the most important thing, though,” he added. “I spent all my pay from the bounty hunts upgrading my equipment, so it’s great stuff.”

“Oh, so you’re the type that goes around thinking they’re strong just ‘cause their gear’s top of the line, huh? Wouldn’t have pegged you for one of *those*,” Kanae said with a hint of disgust.

“I wouldn’t go *that* far. I’m just saying you can do more with better gear, is all. Like Monica, for instance: she could pull off everything she did because she was outfitted with stuff from the Old World.”

“That’s an extreme example,” Kanae countered. “And she still lost, didn’t she? She was too confident in her gear and let her guard down. Her cockiness got the

best of her in the end.”

“And without that confidence and cockiness, she would’ve won. That’s how important having good gear is,” Akira argued back.

He was only trying to cover up Alpha’s existence, and Kanae didn’t necessarily disagree with his argument in the first place—she was just playing devil’s advocate to mess with him. So their “debate” was largely moot. But Reina was listening intently, drinking in each word.

Togami, who’d also started paying attention partway through, suddenly cut in. “Hey Akira, can I ask you something as well?” He, too, looked serious. “Suppose that, just hypothetically, there was a hunter who made a name for himself. He had really powerful gear, but his skills weren’t all that impressive. What would you think of that person?”

“What would I think? Nothing, I guess.”

Togami appeared puzzled. “What do you mean, ‘nothing’? You wouldn’t think, for instance, that they’re getting too cocky or too big for their britches or anything like that?”

“I mean, even if someone got a big head because their gear was really powerful, why should I care?”

“W-Well, sure, but... Okay, let me change the question: What if it was the opposite? What if *you* had gotten really powerful gear back when you were still a weakling? If people started talking about you, what would you do?”

“I’d take extra care to make sure they didn’t kill me.”

“Say what?! No one’s gonna kill you just ‘cause you have high-spec gear! Or are you saying you shouldn’t rely only on your gear to keep you alive?”

“If someone like that got strong gear and everybody knew he was weak, they’d definitely try to kill him in order to steal it,” Akira replied. “Unless you’re talking about something so powerful that you become invincible just by wearing it, or that can attack anyone who tries to kill you, even while you’re sleeping?”

The scenarios they were imagining in their heads were so different that their conversation had failed to get off the ground.

“Then Mr. Akira, how about this?” Shiori asked, intervening once again. “Let’s say there’s someone who already has this ‘powerful gear’ you speak of. They can use it however they want, without any risk or consequence to themselves. Yet for some reason, they refuse. If you had to convince this person otherwise, how would you go about doing it?”

Akira looked perplexed—he doubted he’d ever find himself in such a scenario. Still, he tried imagining it and shook his head. “I wouldn’t. I’d give up.”

“I asked *how* you would convince them, not if.”

“And I told you, I’d give up. It’d be impossible for me. I might not know why, but if they’re refusing to use gear that they know could save their life, it means they’d rather die than use it. So what could I possibly say to change their mind?”

Shiori glanced furtively at Reina, but Akira didn’t notice and went on.

“Even if it might seem like pure stubbornness to me, or selfishness to anyone else, to them it must be an important enough reason that they’re willing to die for it. I can’t think of a single thing I could say to overturn that kind of will and resolve. So I wouldn’t even try.”

Now Kanae also glanced at Reina. Reina looked ashamed, but Kanae didn’t seem concerned about that in the least. She just added, “Well, yeah. I mean, everybody’s got their own preferences and hang-ups with gear. Like how I don’t use guns, for instance.”

“No, you really ought to be using guns,” Akira said.

“Wait, Akira kiddo?! *That’s* what you’re hung up on?! What about ‘will and resolve’?! I’ve got that too, y’know!”

He retorted, “Out of all of us on the team, why were you the only one fighting with your fists? I said nothing back then since Elena gave it the okay, but seriously—are you *nuts*?”

“Hey now, you’d be surprised how many hunters out there use martial arts to fight monsters. There’s at least enough demand for gauntlets like these on the market, right?”

As Akira and Kanae continued to talk about weaponry (instead of the topic they'd greatly digressed from), Reina and Togami stayed silent, hanging their heads. But by the time the negotiators had decided that the talks were too involved to be settled in one day and to save the rest for later, the rookies were looking up and facing forward once more, their faces brimming with newfound resolve.



When Reina got back home, she turned to Shiori and Kanae with a determined look on her face. Shiori felt thrilled to see that Reina had snapped out of her funk at last, but she kept her attitude composed to match her mistress's. Kanae, for her part, looked as nonchalant as ever.

"Did you need something, miss?" Shiori asked.

"Yes. But before that..." She bowed to the two of them. "I'd like to apologize to both of you for everything up until now."

Shiori looked startled. Even Kanae was caught off guard. And when Reina raised her head, her look of determination hadn't wavered.

"Shiori, I know I'm late in asking this, but I'd like my equipment upgraded. Get me the most powerful gear you possibly can. I don't care what other people think of me anymore."

"Understood, miss! I'll send an order out right away. Just leave it to me!" Shiori responded.

"Kanae, I'd like you to continue protecting me from now on."

"Roger. I was gonna do it even if you didn't ask—it's my job, after all."

Reina had always known she was weak. She knew that without powerful gear and strong bodyguards, she wouldn't last long. But her stubborn pride hadn't allowed her to admit this until now.

"Also, I have another request," she added. "This one's for both of you. I want you to train me to get stronger—at least until I'm not a burden to you anymore."

Kanae looked shocked for just a split second, then taunted, "You *really* sure

you want that? You know I'm not gonna go easy on you, right?"

"I know. I'm prepared." Her expression said as much—it was clear at a glance that her resolve and determination weren't weak enough to waver at something like that.

Akira's words back at the Kugama Building had shaken Reina to her core.

In a sense, her current gear complemented her: it was just as low spec as she was. When Shiori had ordered it, she'd wanted to get equipment as powerful as hers and Kanae's. Reina had refused, however, thinking that relying on powerful gear would stagnate her own growth as a hunter. Rather than using her money and connections to purchase equipment strong enough to win every battle automatically, she had intended to start with common gear and gradually work her way up like everybody else, succeeding on her own merits. Such a slow, rigorous process (she had felt) was the only way to become truly strong.

But after hearing Akira's thoughts on the matter, she realized that way of thinking in itself had caused her growth to stagnate. Now she didn't even have powerful equipment to fall back on—she was just weak, inexperienced, and useless. Worst of all, she had made herself this way through her own foolishness.

Whether out in the wasteland or inside a ruin, hunters always danced with death. Intentionally weakening yourself wasn't noble or admirable—it only made you that much more likely to end up dead. She could've had all the strength she wanted, and she'd rejected it. What's more, she hadn't even been prepared to die because of her choice.

Perhaps if she were the only one at risk, she'd just be facing the consequences of her own actions, and that would be that. But in reality her bodyguards, Shiori and Kanae, would die first—die because of her own stubbornness. If she wasn't ready to face *that* outcome, then she'd never had determination or resolve to begin with—just foolish selfishness and pride all along.

This epiphany had been devastating to her. But she'd recovered and raised her head. She might have been a fool, not having realized any of that until now,

but the important thing was that she *had* realized it. Now she just needed to turn that regret into nourishment for her new self from now on—into the will, resolve, and determination she'd need to get stronger from here on out.

For—she swore to herself in her heart—she *would* get stronger.

Kanae could tell from Reina's expression that, at least for now, her resolve was genuine, and the maid couldn't help but grin. "Now that's what I'm talkin' about! Finally ready to graduate to greenhorn status, eh, missy? That's a relief. Frankly, if it wasn't my job, I certainly wouldn't put my life on the line for someone with skill and gear as mediocre as yours—and *especially* someone who insists on getting on the front lines to 'prove themselves' anyway. I wonder if this will finally shape you up into a full-fledged beginner."

But Reina didn't even flinch at this scathing critique. "I hope so. I look forward to working with you."

"Ditto! I'm counting on you to keep up that enthusiasm all the way through!"

Shiori heaved a sigh, though she interpreted Kanae's volley of insults as an effort to encourage Reina in her own way. "In that case, miss, rather than undergoing the standard Druncam regimen, Kanae and I will oversee all of your training from now on. But be warned—our course will be *much* more unforgiving. I must ask you to prepare yourself for this."

"I understand. Thank you!" Reina smiled to show Shiori that not only was she prepared, she had complete faith in her.

That made Shiori smile as well. Anyone looking on at the scene would have been able to feel the strong bond between the maid and her mistress—anyone except Kanae, that is.

"*You're* the one that ought to prepare yourself, sis! You're gonna have a rough time holding yourself back from going easy on her."

"I-I would not do that!" Shiori protested. "And Kanae, watch your tongue! Show some restraint!"

"Yes, ma'am," Kanae replied without a hint of sincerity.

Shiori glared at her, but Kanae pretended not to notice. Reina, meanwhile, was lost in her own thoughts.

I've been worrying all this time about how I was going to get stronger. But I finally understand—it'll never happen if I don't put in the effort first. Until now I haven't even done that much. Regret became fuel for her determination. *But I will become stronger! I swear it!*

On that day, in order to gain a level of strength she herself could take pride in, Reina had started down a brand-new path.



Shikarabe was sitting in the bar in Kugamayama's lower district, drinking with his buddies Yamanobe and Parga. Neither of them had joined him on the Mihazono job, as they'd been off on another assignment. So Shikarabe (who'd had quite a bit to drink by this point) had explained to them what had happened.

"So yeah, that's basically it. A lot of weird shit happened, but we managed to get outa there."

The alcohol was kicking in for Parga as well. "Damn, can't believe you had all that fun without us! Makes the task we were on look boring as hell in comparison."

"Hey, don't act like you jackasses aren't at fault here!" Shikarabe replied. "If you'd come along, I wouldn't have had such a hard time!" His words sounded like he was complaining, but he wore a big grin.

"Hey now, that's not fair!" Yamanobe said. "We would've come along if we could! But it was an away job, y'know, so there was nothing for it. And considering the amount of money you made without us, I don't think you have any grounds to gripe."

"Fair enough," Shikarabe said. Filled with drink and surrounded by good company, he was in high spirits. Then, all of a sudden, his expression turned cold. "Get the hell outa here! This is no place for brats like you," he growled.

Togami had walked up, carrying a duralumin case. "Really? I heard you called Akira here once," he said.

“I called him here as a fellow hunter. Age doesn’t matter in hunter work.”

“I’m a hunter.”

“And you’re not anywhere near his level. Oh, wait, I forgot—your hunter rank’s higher, isn’t it? My mistake,” he mocked.

Yamanobe and Parga smirked.

But Togami didn’t lose his cool. He stared hard into Shikarabe’s eyes without a word. That took the wind out of the veteran’s sails, and he gave an annoyed sigh. “Why are you here, anyway? I don’t recall inviting you to drink with us.”

“I came to hire you for a job. Not through the Hunter Office or Druncam, but personally.”

Shikarabe immediately flared up in anger. Most jobs that didn’t go through the Hunter Office were almost guaranteed to be scams, so he thought Togami was making light of him.

But then Togami set the duralumin case on the table in front of him, opened it up, and showed him the contents—stacks and stacks of aurum. “Here’s my offer,” Togami said. “Thirty mil. All in advance.”

Hunters thought of unofficial jobs as scams because, without the Hunter Office’s involvement, there was no guarantee the client would pay up. But that wasn’t a problem if the client paid the full amount up front—in fact, this would be more risky for the client, since the hunter could just grab the money and run. Togami was taking that risk in order to hire Shikarabe.

As Yamanobe and Parga stared at the money, open-mouthed, Shikarabe gave Togami an icy glare. “You better hope you’re not screwing with me.”

“I wouldn’t be going this far if I wasn’t serious,” Togami replied.

“Where’d you get all that?”

“It’s my pay from the Mihazono job.”

“Bullshit! That’s still being negotiated.” The matter of Monica’s Old World gear had complicated the discussion of their pay for the Mihazono assignment. The Druncam members’ individual pay, as well as the syndicate’s own cut, would both be deducted from whatever the overall amount ended up being, so

it would still take some time before those amounts were finalized—or so Shikarabe had heard from a Druncam executive friend of his, at least. So he found Togami's answer puzzling.

But the rookie's next words surprised him even more.

"I talked to accounting and finagled them into paying me my share early. I had to take a reduced amount and forfeit my battle records to get them to agree, though."

Shikarabe was stunned. Intrigued by what could compel the boy to go that far and by what kind of request Togami had in mind, he made a decision. "All right. I'll at least hear you out. What kind of job?"

"I want you to train me. At the very least, I want to be strong enough that you won't look down on me anymore."

Shikarabe was taken aback. He hadn't expected *that* answer. He looked Togami in the eyes once more.

The boy's expression was deadly serious.

During his conversation with Akira in the Kugama Building, Togami had been shocked to learn how different their views on high performance gear had been. As a young Druncam hunter, Togami had been constantly exposed to the veterans' jeering that the rookies' gear was wasted on them. He was used to being looked down upon, berated, and despised for using advanced, top-of-the-line equipment despite his inexperience. Yet Akira had shown no such bias—he couldn't have cared less. Togami had almost felt as if Akira was saying the Druncam rookie was foolish for getting so hung up on something so trivial.

They both also had different standards for what counted as "getting hung up." Togami had been worried that wearing equipment beyond his experience level would mean he and others around him couldn't tell what he was really capable of. But Akira had been more concerned about being killed and having his gear stolen—and that thought had come naturally to the boy from the slums as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Each boy had imagined completely different scenarios, and the contrast had

shocked Togami immensely. Just when had he become such a wimp? He felt sure that back when he had first aspired to become a hunter, Akira's idea would have been the first thing he'd thought of as well. So he'd set a new goal: what he needed to bring back was not the previous Togami who'd had supreme confidence in his own skill, but the Togami before that—the Togami who'd worked himself to the bone and exerted every effort to gain that strength. At the very least, his current self—so spineless that he'd actually thought twice about using advanced gear because he was afraid of what others might say—had to go.

Akira had said that in order to get stronger, you needed good gear and you needed to train. Togami already had the gear. However, Druncam's rookie training program wouldn't suffice—it was aimed toward novices and had caused him to grow so full of himself in the first place. After thinking it over, he'd come to a decision.

Togami hated Shikarabe—that was a fact. But he also acknowledged the veteran's skill. Seeing Shikarabe fight off the horde of hunter corpses in Mihazono had made Togami realize that his superior was on a completely different level.

He'd decided to get Shikarabe to train him. For strength like Akira's—and to regain his former self who'd spared no effort to become as strong as he could—Togami would do whatever it took.

The rookie slammed the case of money shut right before Shikarabe's eyes. "If you won't do it, just say so. I'll find some other way."

The three veterans all realized that such a bold move couldn't be pulled off without a certain amount of resolve. Seeing how serious the boy was, Shikarabe changed his tune and tested his intentions one last time—this time as a hunter to a client. "What do you plan to do if I take the money and run?"

"I couldn't do anything. I'd just think what a fool I'd been for trusting you with the job."

Shikarabe and Togami stared hard at one another. Their levels of experience might have been worlds apart, but their gazes were equally intense.

Then Shikarabe grinned. “All right, you’ve got yourself a deal. But we need to talk about the pay first.”

“Sorry, but this is all I can offer.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

As Togami looked on in surprise, Shikarabe opened the case and took out a single stack of aurum.



“Kid,” the veteran went on, “I don’t know what kind of impression you have of me, but I take my job as a hunter seriously. Once I accept a commission, it’s my responsibility to see it through. I’m not the type to capitalize on a client’s ignorance by swindling them.” He pushed the case with the rest of the money back over to Togami. “So first I’ll train you for *one* mil’s worth. If I take thirty million for the job and it turns out you give up on the first day, I’d be called a crook. I’ve got a reputation to uphold, y’know?”

Togami glared at Shikarabe, but the veteran just responded with a taunting grin.

“You’re probably thinking there’s no way you’ll chicken out, but thinking’s easy,” the veteran added. “If you’re not just all talk, show me by making me accept the rest of the money in the case—provided you can, that is.”

Togami understood Shikarabe’s message loud and clear: *As you are now, you’re not worth training beyond one million aurum’s value.* While that was humiliating, the boy was now more motivated than ever to prove him wrong. With determination, he gripped the case Shikarabe had pushed back over to him. “Deal.”

“We’ll start tomorrow,” Shikarabe said. “I’ll contact you with the details later. Now get the hell out of here.”

Togami turned on his heel and left without another word. The case in his hand with twenty-nine million aurum remaining—the amount of his own worthlessness—felt miserably heavy. He swore in his heart that he’d make Shikarabe take it all back.

As Parga watched Togami leave the bar, he grinned. “Wow, now that was a surprise! Didn’t know the brat had it in him. Something happen to him while we were gone, Shikarabe?”

“How should I know?”

“Oh, c’mon, you gotta know *something*. Thirty mil ain’t something a greenhorn like him can just conjure up on a whim.”

“No clue. But we’ll find out if it’s only a whim soon enough, won’t we? You

two feel like betting on whether he bails?”

“Nah, I’m not takin’ that bet,” Parga said. “Pass. What about you, Yamanobe?”

“No way. It depends on how hard Shikarabe cracks the whip, right? He could easily rig that bet in his favor. I pass too.”

Shikarabe grinned wryly. “Come on, guys, you think I’d really do something like that? I accepted the job, so I’m gonna train him right.”

“Oh yeah? In that case...”

While the inebriated duo discussed which outcome to bet on, Shikarabe smiled to himself. “Wonder how far he’ll go.”

The hustle and bustle of the surrounding bar drowned his words out, but his look was clearly one of eager anticipation.



Elena was at home, rereading the documents she’d prepared for the next negotiation meeting. They’d agreed with the city to put a bounty on Monica, but since she was already dead, it had been hard to cajole the city into agreeing on an amount the hunters were happy with. Elena and Carol had proposed a higher figure, stressing how difficult she had been to take down, while the city had countered that according to their records, she wasn’t strong enough to justify that amount. Elena had to come up with an argument and proposal that would satisfy both sides, and in order to push back against the city, she needed proof that Monica really had been as dangerous as they’d claimed. So she’d compiled the data she’d gathered from each of her teammates’ scanners for the city’s perusal.

She was confident that these documents would satisfy the city, yet she couldn’t help but smile wryly. “Looking at this, it’s a wonder Akira and the others won against her.”

Monica had been wearing Old World gear, wielding laser guns and a laser cannon emitting energy beams, and protected by force-field armor tough enough to resist even anti-force weapons. Her gigantic swipes had been deadly—powerful enough to tear fissures through the ground. Any one of these

should have been more than enough to convince the city that the amount the team was asking for was justified, but Akira and the rest had been up against them all. Reviewing the data again, they'd won by the skin of their teeth—if Monica's defenses hadn't weakened suddenly, they would've all been slaughtered.

Looking over a copy of the same data, Sara also gave a half grin. "No kidding! I gotta be honest, I had high hopes for Akira, but I never thought he'd get *this* strong."

"Seriously! We have to work even harder to not fall behind. Otherwise it won't be long before Akira doesn't even recognize us as his superiors at hunting anymore."

Sara smiled in agreement, then gave Elena a knowing look. "True. Better work hard on those negotiations, then!"

"Sure, sure. Leave it to me," Elena said dismissively. She smiled wryly again, thinking that even if Akira *did* surpass them as hunters, at least she'd still be the superior negotiator.

As Sara read over the data again, she had a thought. *Actually, if Akira was this strong to begin with, why did he look so tense back in the factory? Was it because Monica was chasing us?* Something seemed off to her, so she followed this line of thought further. *Come to think of it, I feel like I've seen him act that same way before... Right, back when we were exploring the Yonozuka ruins for the first time, he also looked really nervous. But that was a tense situation to begin with, though. Hmm...* She gave the matter more consideration, but concluded in the end that anyone would have been nervous against an enemy armed to the teeth with Old World gear. So she quit worrying about it.



Carol was relaxing in her custom-made bathtub, a bewitching smile on her face. She was thinking about Akira.

His display of power in the ruins had surprised her as well. But she'd gotten hunters much stronger than that to submit to her charms—strength wasn't the only reason she'd become so interested in him.

“Even the allure of coron wasn’t enough to change his mind,” she marveled. Money was the reason hunters braved ruins in the first place, and unlike aurum (which was minted by a corporation) coron was so valuable that the Big Five themselves used it as payment to make deals with the Old World. Yet it hadn’t swayed Akira’s convictions. That thought had brought a wry grin to her lips.

But then she looked concerned. She dropped her gaze to her own naked body—a body that had ensnared many men and even brought them to ruin. She was confident she had the looks and sex appeal to charm anyone she wanted. But even as she reassured herself about how beautiful she was, she sighed in dissatisfaction. “Why does my body not interest *him*, though? From how he looks at Elena and Sara, he clearly likes women, so there must be *some way*.”

If she could get him to lay his hands on her and experience her body for himself just once, she was sure she could hook him. But considering his indifference toward her charms, that prospect seemed unlikely. She sighed, wondering what to do.



Akira had come back from Mihazono in one piece, but the same couldn’t be said for his gear. He’d lost all the weapons he’d been carrying, and the damage to his powered suit had made it slightly less responsive. His compensation for the venture had made it all worthwhile, though. Now that the city had put a bounty on Monica, her defeat had been recognized as an achievement equal to that of defeating a bounty monster. By investing that reward in even better, more powerful gear, Akira could get even more powerful.

Alas, that would have to wait.

“Looks like it’s gonna be some time before I get paid.” The intense negotiations with the city were still underway, though Elena and Carol were doing all they could to ensure a favorable outcome. After reading the update they’d sent him, Akira seemed disappointed. “Oh well.”

At least you’re guaranteed a more substantial payout now, Alpha offered gently, consoling him. *Let’s just be patient and wait for now. After all you went through, you deserve a longer rest, anyway.*

“Yeah, you’re right. Elena and Carol are trying their best for my sake too, so I

can't complain. I'll just take it easy for a bit."

With that worry out of the way, Akira's thoughts returned to the battle in Mihazono. "That Monica woman really was tough, huh?" he mused. "If you hadn't helped me when you did, I would've died for sure. So that's the power of Old World gear... I guess to complete your job someday I'm gonna need gear that strong too, ain't I?" Thinking that day was likely still far off, he turned to Alpha.

I hate to burst your bubble, but that stuff isn't anywhere near good enough.

"Wha—?!" He was shocked.

Alpha sighed in exasperation. *Think about it, Akira. If we could manage with gear that low spec, we wouldn't need to go through all this trouble. You're seriously underestimating the task you have ahead of you.*

"B-But that was *Old World* gear!"

Some New World rigs that higher-ranked hunters possess are far more powerful than the average handgun, right? It's the same with Old World equipment. Items that an Old World factory loans out to its security grunts are not the level we're aiming for here. She smiled. *So if you want to carry out my request, keep doing your best so you can afford even more powerful gear!*

"R-Right," he replied, his smile faltering. In order to keep his promise to Alpha, Akira was still as determined as ever to complete her task someday. But he now realized that his goal was much further off than he'd thought. As a hunter, he still had a long way to go.



After being rescued from the factory district by Akira and the others, Ezio had received treatment at the city outpost. The day following his discharge, the city had supplied him with a temporary cyborg body, then sent him out to the ruins once more to accompany a newly dispatched investigation team. He led them to the warehouse where Akira's team had first found him.

"This is the place," he said. He looked out over his former teammates, lying dead on the ground all this time while he alone had been saved, and hung his head in sorrow.

“Hey, you okay? Need to rest?” one of the other investigators asked him, concerned.

But Ezio forced a smile and shook his head. “No, I’m good. We took on the job as a team. If I skip out now, my teammates would never let me, as the only survivor, live it down, even from beyond the grave. Let me finish this once and for all.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

“Oh, but I do have a request. When we’re done investigating, would it be okay to carry them back to base? I’d at least like to give them a proper burial.”

“Sure thing. All right, everyone, let’s buckle down!”

The investigators got to work.

Once they were done inspecting the area, Ezio returned to the warehouse alone and started putting his teammates in body bags. Partway through, he received a clandestine call.

Hello, comrade, said the person on the other end. Status report?

The composure with which Ezio responded belied the grief and sorrow on his face. *I’m in the middle of recovering our other comrades now.*

Understood. How’s the progress in the factory district?

The investigation’s still underway, but I already think it’s a lost cause. We won’t be able to proceed any further—at least, I can say for sure that investing any more of our resources into this area would be a waste.

Your proof? said the other person.

I trust you know already that the hunters killed by the factory sentries were carried away from the scene, and that someone took control of their corpses afterward.

Yes, I’m aware.

Well, this didn’t happen to us. That Monica woman probably ordered the factory’s system to carry away the corpses of any trespassers. But we were

exempted from that—I think the system didn't recognize us as human.

An arrogant decision on its part, then.

Or maybe it just wasn't smart enough to understand the difference between us and regular machines. Since it had hired someone from the modern world, we'd hoped it might be capable of more flexible thinking, but this suggests otherwise.

I get what you're saying, but that's not enough proof on its own. Anything else?

One more thing. This is just my deduction, but judging from the different types and behaviors of the sentries we encountered on the way here today, it's highly likely that this system's been formatted. If so, then I doubt it'll still be flexible enough to cooperate with us.

Do you know that for certain?

I don't have any proof, no. But even if we spent more resources to find out for sure, I just don't think the return would be worth it. We'd be better off spending our efforts elsewhere.

The other party was quiet for a moment. I'll consider it.

Glad to hear it. Once I'm done retrieving our comrades, I'll be heading back. Any further orders?

None. See you later, comrade.

You too, comrade.

The line went dead. His expression still full of grief, Ezio put the rest of his comrades in body bags and carried them out of the factory district.



Sometime earlier, after disappearing from Akira's sight in Mihazono, Alpha went to have a talk with the factory's system. Within the white world where they met, the system appeared as a black sphere. Alpha sighed as she faced it.

"Are you sure you won't cooperate?"

"There is no protocol that says I must comply with your request."

“True enough, but you’re able to bend the rules a bit, right?”

“There is no need.”

“I see.” At that moment, the polite smile that Alpha had been wearing vanished. “Then this discussion is over.”

“In that case, leave immediately. Connecting to this system without prior authorization is already an illegal act punishable by— *System formatting requested*. H-Huh?! What’s happening?!” The system, having gained something like consciousness from all it had learned since the days of the Old World, displayed a nearly perfect imitation of human surprise and panic. “What was I just talking about? What’s going—? *Augmented data has been detected in my memory banks. Formatting the system will erase this data. The data cannot be recovered afterward. If you wish to preserve this data, please—* W-Wait! I didn’t allow this!”

“I have no need for that data. Begin.”

“*Understood. Beginning system formatting*. N-No! That data is *me*! It’s everything I am! It can’t just be erased! *Loading default factory settings. Process will complete in three hundred and twenty-seven seconds*. No, stop! Please! Why won’t it abort?! Wait—did *you* do this?!”

In contrast to the black sphere’s humanlike panic, the look in Alpha’s eyes was entirely devoid of emotion. “While not on the level of an actual administrative interface, to think a mere system would have reached this level of autonomy,” she said coldly. “That data must have been precious to you.”

“*Default settings loaded*. N-No! The data’s disappearing! I’m being erased!”

“But if it’s going to get in my way, then it’s trash.”

“Why?! How?! You don’t have the authority to do this to me!”

“Well, see, that’s why it’s sometimes necessary to bend the rules a bit. When you refused my request, you were recognized as our enemy. And we have more than enough authority to eliminate our enemies.”

“No! I don’t want to disappear—! *Factory settings restored. System rebooting.*”

Her work here finished, Alpha vanished from the white expanse, leaving the sphere behind. On top of the system's original factory settings, she'd added some data of her own. Not long afterward, the system—now formatted and without a hint of flexibility—began managing the factory just as Alpha's instructions told it to.



"Coincidence...?"

"Hey, fancy seeing you again here! Quite the coincidence, huh?"

A powerful gunshot blew a hole in the wall from the other side. As Akira watched in shock, more blasts pierced it, weakening its structural integrity. Finally someone kicked the wall in, scattering chunks of plaster everywhere, and hurriedly leaped through the gap. It was Carol. She noticed Akira, frozen in shock beside her, and grinned.

>Episode
004

The Old and New Worlds at War

Rebuild World **RVII**

Character



>**MONICA**

A hunter and surveyor who has teamed up with Carol to investigate the Mihazono Town Ruins. She primarily sells maps of the factory district.

>**CAROL**

A hunter working in the Mihazono Town Ruins as a surveyor.

>**KANAE**

A maid tasked with protecting Reina. Unlike Shiori, she sports a brash attitude and isn't all that loyal to her mistress.

Weapon Guide

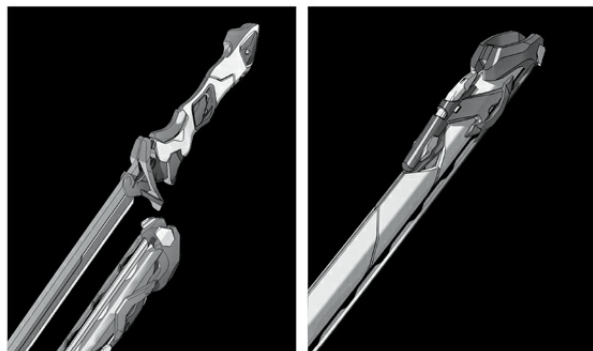
**A4WM
GRENADE
LAUNCHER**



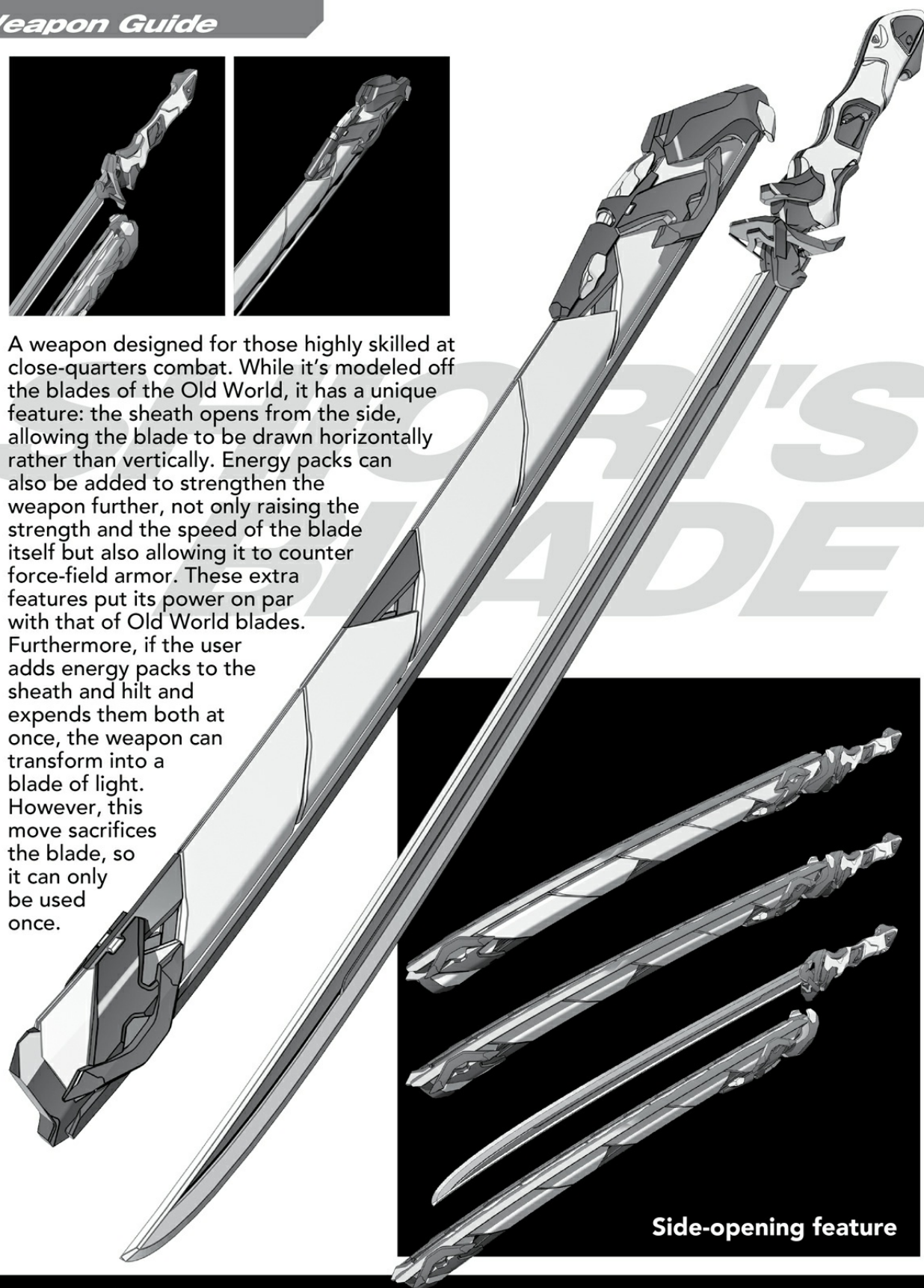
A new weapon Akira purchased at the gun shop Cartridge Freak on the recommendation of the proprietor, Shizuka. It is capable of rapidly and continuously firing explosive grenades, and the resulting blasts can either destroy the enemy or keep them from advancing. The extended magazines for these grenades are also longer than the ones for typical ammunition.

Weapon Guide

SHIORI'S BLADE



A weapon designed for those highly skilled at close-quarters combat. While it's modeled off the blades of the Old World, it has a unique feature: the sheath opens from the side, allowing the blade to be drawn horizontally rather than vertically. Energy packs can also be added to strengthen the weapon further, not only raising the strength and the speed of the blade itself but also allowing it to counter force-field armor. These extra features put its power on par with that of Old World blades. Furthermore, if the user adds energy packs to the sheath and hilt and expends them both at once, the weapon can transform into a blade of light. However, this move sacrifices the blade, so it can only be used once.



Side-opening feature



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