



Author: **Nahuse**

Illustrator: **Gin**

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Mechanical Designer: **cell**

Rebuild World V

Total War



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Rebuild ***World***

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



"Oh, you're already here? Did I make you wait long?"

"Nah, you're ten minutes early. You're good."

"You're supposed to answer, 'No, I just got here,' remember?"

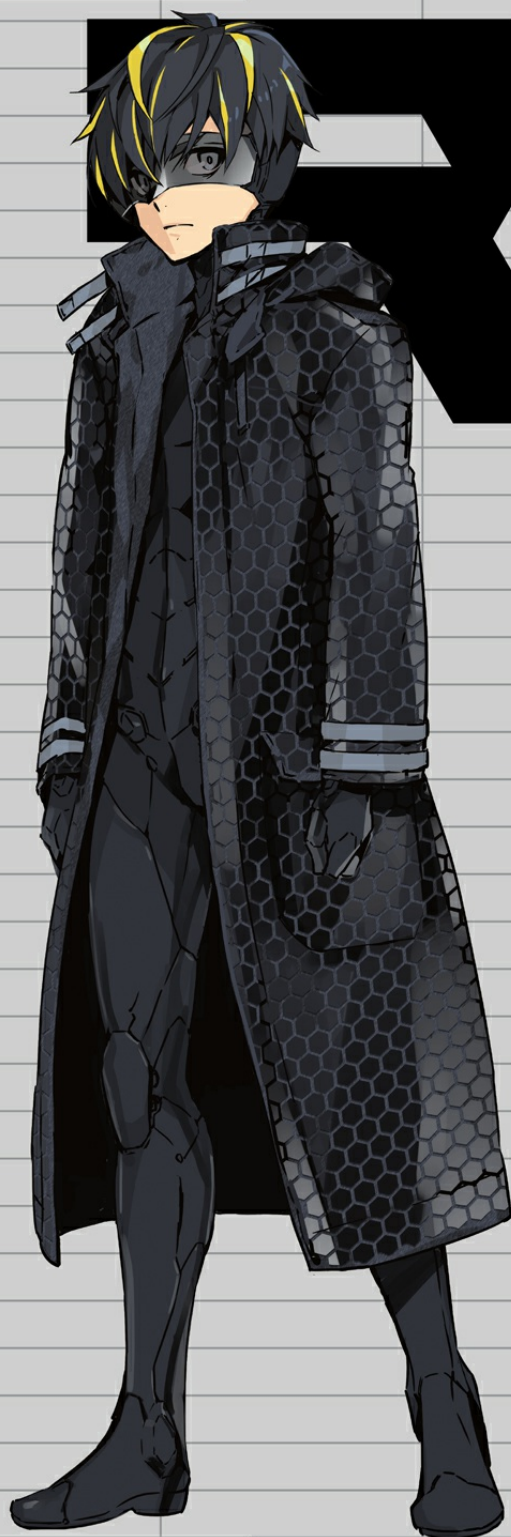
Akira was in the shopping district of lower Kugamayama, waiting for Carol. She showed up dressed in a modest, innocuous outfit—the polar opposite of the risqué Old World-inspired powered suit she usually wore in the ruins.

>Episode
005

Total War

Character

Rebuild World **RW**



>AKIRA

A boy who became a hunter in order to escape the slums. He's spent the six hundred million aurum he got for Monica's defeat to buy a brand-new set of gear.



>VIOLA

An information broker dabbling in a wide range of activities. She mainly negotiates on behalf of clients and sells info to a variety of buyers like gang leaders, merchants, and relic hunters.

Did **you** drag us into this?

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.

Total War

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Chapter 124: The Relic Business

Ever since Akira had met Alpha, his skill as a relic hunter had grown by leaps and bounds. After helping kill several powerful bounty monsters, he'd resumed his search for undiscovered ruins. But countless failed attempts had led him to turn his attention to the well-known Mihazono Town Ruins instead. There he'd become involved in yet another incident, one that had ended in a desperate fight against Monica, a hunter sporting powerful Old World gear. Just as she'd been about to kill him, however, Alpha had come through in the nick of time and brought him victory.

This fight had made him realize firsthand how impressive Old World equipment was. So afterward he'd asked Alpha if he, too, would one day need such powerful gear to complete the task she'd hired him for—to which she'd responded that it would be nowhere near sufficient. Stunned by the strength he would need for the task ahead of him, he'd resolved to continue improving as a hunter so that one day he could fulfill his promise to her.



The city had placed a bounty on Monica's head after her demise at the hands of Akira's team. Each hunter involved would be granted a large reward, but it would still be some time before they'd receive it—the city, Druncam, and Elena and Carol were locked in an intense negotiation over the rights to Monica's Old World possessions, delaying the process.

Still, a big payday was a welcome prospect for Akira. During the battle with Monica, he'd lost all the weapons he'd brought along, and his suit had gotten damaged as well. Until he replaced these, he'd have to put his search for unexplored ruins on hold yet again.

While he was waiting, he received some documents from Katsuragi via his terminal. They detailed a plan for his and Sheryl's relic venture.

“‘Proposal for Relic Business’?” Akira said quizzically, reading over the documents. He'd never discussed such a thing with Katsuragi. But then he

remembered asking Sheryl to sell the relics he'd collected from the Yonozuka Station Ruins, and he finally realized what had happened.

The relics he and Sheryl's gang had retrieved from the ruin were still sitting in his garage. After some time had passed without Sheryl coming by to pick them up, he'd called her to ask about the delay. She'd apologized but had asked him to wait just a little longer. Akira wasn't in urgent need of money, so he'd told her she didn't have to rush, thinking she was just having a hard time finding a buyer at the right price. He'd never guessed she was joining forces with Katsuragi to open a business instead.

"No wonder it was taking her so long!" Everything now made sense, but part of him wished she would've just told him her plans to begin with.

If you recall, you alluded to her sandwich shop when you asked her to sell those, Alpha commented. That was probably what caused her misunderstanding.

"Oh, was that what happened? Hmm... Well, at least she's making an effort. As long as they get sold for a decent amount, I don't care how she does it. And if Katsuragi's helping her, so much the better."

In his message, Katsuragi had also written that he wanted to go over the proposal with Akira once the latter had finished reading it, so Akira phoned him up.

The merchant answered in a cheery tone. "Oh, Akira! What a pleasure to receive your call! I take it you read the plan I sent you? What do you think?"

"Yeah, I looked it over. I can't say I understood much of it, but whatever—you and Sheryl do what you need to do."

"Wonderful! You can count on us! By the way, I have a small favor to ask, if it's not too much trouble. Could you hand the relics over now?" Katsuragi laid out his reasoning, explaining that he'd reached out to several acquaintances to help with the business, but most of them had said they wouldn't agree to anything until they saw the relics for themselves. And while he stressed that he didn't think Akira or Sheryl were lying to him, he also wanted to see the goods for himself. After all, knowing what he was working with would make it easier to convince his buddies.

“So what do you say?” he finished. “Since you already entrusted us with selling them, I don’t think it’s too much to ask.”

“All right, but you’ve got to come get them,” Akira replied. “There’s too much for me to bring myself.”

“No problem! I’ll be there as soon as I can!” Katsuragi sounded elated.

“Oh, and since I’m giving them to you on your request, you’re responsible if anything happens to them. If you’re okay with that, come on over.”

There was a brief pause. When Katsuragi responded, the cheer in his voice was gone. “Just to clarify, you’re saying that just about me, correct? Not me and Sheryl?”

“That’s right.”

“And on the off chance that something *were* to happen, what do you mean by ‘take responsibility’?”

“I’ll figure that out when the time comes.”

“Just a moment, I’m hanging up. I’ll call you right back.”

One minute later, the merchant rang him again. However, this time it was not Katsuragi on the line but Sheryl. She sounded anxious. “Sheryl here. I heard everything from Katsuragi. Would it be okay for me to come over and pick up the relics on Katsuragi’s behalf? I’ll take full responsibility for them.”

“Sure, no problem. Come and get them.”

“Thank you very much!” She sighed in relief.

Hearing her, Akira smiled sympathetically. “Oh, and by the way, all that talk about responsibility was just for Katsuragi. I don’t expect the same thing from you, so don’t worry.”

He briefly explained that since Katsuragi had asked to take the relics, any resulting trouble would have been on him, since he’d made the request himself. But Akira had asked Sheryl to sell the relics, not the other way around, and he couldn’t force her to be liable for a favor he’d requested. Even if the relics got stolen or damaged, he’d just consider it her original share of the loot—her compensation for all the trouble he’d put her through in the past. (Previously,

Akira had asked Sheryl and her gang to help gather relics in the Yonozuka Station Ruins, which had ended in a group of hunters kidnapping her and attacking her base.)

“That said,” he continued in a more serious tone, “let’s not assume the worst right off the bat. Contact me if you run into trouble, and I’ll do what I can before it gets out of hand. Back when you got kidnapped, I more or less handled the situation, right?” *If you can call what happened ‘handling the situation,’ that is,* he added to himself with a wry smile. *Well, at least it all worked out in the end.*

“That’s true. Okay,” she replied cheerfully. “I’ll still do my best to prevent any incidents on my end, but if something *does* happen, I’ll let you know immediately. Katsuragi and I are on our way now, so see you soon!”

After Sheryl hung up, Akira headed to the garage, where a treasure trove of relics were packed in cardboard boxes stacked up to the ceiling. “Fifty mil, huh?” he said with a small grin.

When he’d first obtained the relics, he’d expected he could get around fifty million aurum for the total load. Such a figure had seemed so impressive back then, but he’d since netted over a hundred million aurum from the bounty hunts, and the reward from the Mihazono incident, once decided upon, would surely be even higher. Now fifty mil was chump change to Akira, which was why he wouldn’t be too upset at Sheryl even if the relics got stolen. How bizarre it felt to have his views on money transform so radically in such a brief time!



After Sheryl got off the call with Akira, Katsuragi regarded her with surprise. “I didn’t think he favored you *that* much.”

“Well, we are lovers, after all,” Sheryl said with an air of pride.

The merchant and the gang leader looked each other in the eye, each attempting to suss out what the other was really thinking while taking care to conceal their own thoughts.

Katsuragi, for his part, failed to see through Sheryl’s dissimulation. *I didn’t think Akira was that keen on Sheryl, but perhaps I had the wrong impression? If so, taking the reins in this operation might be tougher than I thought.*

However talented she was, at present Sheryl was merely the leader of a small gang in the slums. She had neither the knowledge nor the connections to run a relic business. But Katsuragi did, and he'd been keen to leverage his experience and her inexperience to take control of the business. Then he could get a much larger share of the profits from the relics Akira would no doubt continue to bring to him. Asking Akira to give the relics to him ahead of time had been part of his setup for this plan—he knew just having those relics in his possession would give him more pull in negotiations than one might expect.

But after Akira's warning, Katsuragi had backed off and gotten Sheryl to request the goods instead, thinking that the boy might be a bit more willing to go easy on her. He hadn't expected Akira to be quite so soft on Sheryl, though—even if all the relics were stolen under her watch, Akira would have been willing to forgive her.

Is that really because she's his girlfriend? Katsuragi revised his impression of Sheryl and decided to change his course of action. *I might be able to turn this to my advantage too. I'll just lay low for now and see what happens.*

Sheryl, on the other hand, didn't believe for a second that Akira had been soft on her because of their relationship—in fact, she now felt more tense than ever. *Don't get it twisted, Sheryl, she told herself. He didn't say that out of consideration for me—since he simply asked me to sell the relics, he was just holding me to the same standard he would hold himself, that's all. It'll be bad if you misunderstand.* Then another possibility came to her mind, and her anxiety deepened. *And if he doesn't care whether you succeed, that means he doesn't expect anything out of you. Messing up is one thing, but if you fail and he's not even disappointed, that's even worse.*

She resolved to prove herself to him and then live up to the standard she had set. She *had* to pull this relic venture off and make Akira recognize her worth, or otherwise he really would abandon her.

Her eyes lit up with determination. Getting cut off or abandoned by Akira was, to her, the same as death. “Katsuragi, we shouldn't keep Akira waiting. Let's hurry.”

“Right,” he responded, and the two of them quickly prepared the trailer, both

acting much calmer than they really felt.



Soon after, Katsuragi and Sheryl showed up at Akira's house. The children from Sheryl's gang got to work carrying the mountain of cardboard boxes out of the garage and into Katsuragi's trailer. Many of these kids had been part of the relic-gathering operation at Yonozuka, and were now transporting the cargo with the utmost care—terrified that Akira might murder them in cold blood if they mishandled the boxes and broke an extremely valuable relic.

Katsuragi took a peek inside one package. Unbeknownst to him, the relics inside were from back when Yonozuka was still undiscovered—and so many of them were quite valuable. He eyeballed the box's contents, then scanned all the other packages the children were loading into the trailer. Then, assuming all the crates contained goods of similar value, he tallied up an approximate value for the entire haul—and his eyes widened in shock. "Akira, you were hiding this many valuable relics from me all this time?"

"I wasn't really *hiding* them or anything."

"Then why didn't you— No, first off, *where* did you—?"

Of course, Akira couldn't tell him the truth—that he'd brought them back from Yonozuka before anyone else knew of the ruin's existence. To keep Katsuragi from prying, Akira gave him a sharp look. "A lot happened, okay?"

"I-I see." Katsuragi didn't want to upset Akira, so he deduced there must have been some circumstances behind the relics that Akira couldn't divulge, and left it at that.

They delivered Akira's relics to a warehouse on the border between the slums and Kugamayama's business district. Akira came along on Sheryl's request, but was surprised when he saw the sheer number of other relics already stored inside. "I know your proposal said you'd already gathered some other relics to sell, but I didn't think you had *this* many."

"It's quantity over quality," Sheryl replied. "Even if they're cheap, we needed some to fill out our inventory. They're nowhere near as good as yours."

Akira decided to stick around while they recorded the new inventory. Katsuragi and the others took his relics out of the boxes and lined them up on the floor in rows, then snapped pictures of each one and entered them in the catalog. The boy observed the entire process curiously.

Feeling nervous under Akira's watchful gaze, Katsuragi moved to reassure him. "Hey now, no need to act so suspicious of me! Don't worry, I'm not gonna falsify the records and make off with your relics or anything. You gotta trust me that much."

"Nah, no worries. Just can't believe the variety we've got here."

Akira's offhand comment surprised Katsuragi. "Wait, what do you mean? You were the one who collected them, right? Shouldn't you be familiar with what's here?"

Sheryl's gang had carried the relics out of the ruins, not Akira himself, so this was basically his first time seeing them. He'd opened a few of the boxes in his garage out of sheer curiosity, but that was all. "I told you—a lot happened," Akira replied.

"I guess so." Seeing how stubbornly Akira was trying to dodge his questions, Katsuragi supposed that the boy must have obtained the relics under circumstances even more exceptional than the merchant had originally thought. Yet he didn't dare consider pulling the plug on this operation—the amount and quality of the relics involved had stoked his greed so much that he wasn't going to sweat a few details.

Once they'd cataloged around half of the relics, Katsuragi's acquaintances showed up at the warehouse. When they saw the spread of relics on the floor, they were even more surprised than Katsuragi had been. They'd heard about the relics from Katsuragi many times, but since he'd never offered to show them off to anyone, most had assumed he was just spinning a tall tale. So when they saw all the high-quality relics lined up on the floor, they were stunned—and the looks in their eyes changed.

"Katsuragi! This is incredible!" one exclaimed. "How'd you get your hands on all these?!"

“I told you before—I know a few skilled hunters.”

“But still, all these relics?!”

“Too many for me to handle on my own,” said Katsuragi. “Why else would I have called you guys here? Don’t tell me you thought I was just blowing smoke all this time?”

“N-No, of course not!”

In fact, Katsuragi had been just as surprised, but he could cover this up by insinuating that they were doubting him. And since his acquaintances couldn’t very well answer in the affirmative, the details of how the relics had been obtained remained under wraps.

Yet they were still curious about where the haul had come from. They turned their attention to the two Katsuragi had claimed had provided the goods—Akira and Sheryl, who were chatting a short distance away. Each of the merchants began drawing their own conclusions based on what they noticed.

One of them was particularly interested in the quality of Sheryl’s clothing. “Hey Katsuragi, that Sheryl girl over there—is that an Old World outfit she’s wearing?”

“No, it’s technically modern. However, it was *tailored* with material from Old World clothing.”

The merchant started in shock. “Material from Old World clothing?! No way! That would destroy the value of the relic it was made from!”

Katsuragi smirked to himself as he answered aloud, “Meaning she has enough money to not care.”

“She’s *that* rich?!” the merchant gasped, imagining what kind of coffers someone would require to deliberately trash a relic in the pursuit of fashion.

One of the other men knew Sheryl from when Katsuragi had introduced her to him, and looked confused. “Forgive me if I’m mistaken, Katsuragi, but didn’t you say that girl owned a small business before?”

Katsuragi frowned and spoke to him in a low voice. “Look, I can’t say too much, but I think I’ve given enough hints at this point. Figure out the rest on

your own.”

The supplier remembered that, once upon a time, Katsuragi had implied that Sheryl was the scion of a wealthy business executive, and that her humble sandwich shop was a way to get her feet wet before entering the world of business officially. “O-Oh, I see. You can’t say, huh?” He broke out in a cold sweat, afraid that he might have offended her in the past by misinterpreting her social standing.

“That’s right, my lips are sealed. So draw your own conclusions.” Katsuragi winked.

Inwardly, however, he was just as unnerved. *He still couldn’t see through Sheryl’s disguise?! Well, she fooled that Druncam exec Mizuha too, so I suppose she could fool anyone if they didn’t already know the truth.* Seeing how nervous his acquaintance was acting, he reminded himself that he needed to be careful around Sheryl just as much as, if not more than, he was around Akira.

Another of Katsuragi’s fellow businessmen had his eyes on the boy. “Hmm, that kid doesn’t look skilled enough to be in business with any rich folks. Katsuragi, did he *really* collect these relics? You sure he didn’t just get them from someone else?”

“Why should it matter to you who collected them, anyway?” Katsuragi retorted. “I brought the goods here. Don’t tell me you plan on taking the credit for yourself?”

“No, but I’d at least like you to level with me about where they came from. I checked his hunter rank, and it’s only 23! You’re telling me a hunter with a rank that low gathered all these? Bullshit!”

“That’s superficial—it doesn’t prove anything. Look at that suit he’s wearing. You really think a rank 23 hunter could afford gear like that?”

“*That* doesn’t prove anything either,” returned the businessman. “Anyone could get their hands on gear like that with the right connections—like knowing the daughter of a business exec, for instance. Sorry, but that kid looks like a weakling to me.”

“Like I keep saying, you gotta read between the lines a little. I told you guys

I'm not at liberty to discuss the details."

"Really?" The man looked doubtful, but said nothing further.

With just a few convenient words—*I can't tell you anything specific, so figure it out on your own*—Katsuragi had thrown his fellow merchants into confusion. It would have been one thing if they'd *only* had his word to go on, but the evidence before them made his claims more believable: the warehouse was full of high-quality relics, the girl had on an expensive outfit, and the boy was wearing a pricey-looking powered suit. But none of that seemed to fit with what they'd already known before coming here, so they felt perplexed.

Meanwhile, Katsuragi had just been saying whatever he could to dodge their questions. After all, he didn't know the details himself.



As Akira was talking with Sheryl, he received a call from Elena regarding Monica's bounty. This information was still considered classified by the city, so Akira had Sheryl step out of earshot.

Elena's news was surprising, to say the least.

"Druncam's going to pay the bounty instead?" echoed Akira. "Has that ever happened before?"

"It's unusual, that's for sure. But I'm guessing this is their way of gaining the upper hand in the negotiations."

Once the rights to Monica's Old World gear had come up, the negotiations over her bounty had become more complex, resulting in the three-way dispute between the city, Elena and Carol, and Druncam. Elena explained that Druncam had offered to pay their team on the city's behalf, meaning that Elena, Carol, and Akira would no longer have to haggle for a better deal. Each non-Druncam member of the team would be paid individually, and Akira's amount had been proposed at six hundred million aurum.

"S-Six hundred million?" Akira choked.

"Right. As long as you're okay with it, they can deposit the money in our accounts right away. Sara and I think the terms are pretty favorable, and Carol

says she's okay with whatever you decide since you hired her. You don't have to agree, but I think that's a decent sum."

"If you think it's a good deal, then no complaints here. But why would Druncam go that far?"

"Because a two-way negotiation would be ideal for them." She added the city had set Monica's bounty at one billion. However, the city wouldn't have to pay a single aurum if Druncam picked up the tab. In return, Druncam would ask for the credit for Monica's defeat, as well as special treatment from the city—such as access to high-paying jobs offered only to the most experienced and trustworthy hunters, including guarding important transport routes between other cities. For a hunter syndicate like Druncam, the long-term benefits would be well worth a billion aurum.

But as long as there were other parties involved, each haggling with their own interests in mind, an agreement like that would be difficult to reach. As individual hunters, Akira and the others didn't have anywhere near as much to gain as Druncam—if things went south and the bargaining broke down, they could just refuse to hand over the rights to the Old World equipment. Unlike Druncam, which had to negotiate with the organization's best interests in mind, Akira and the rest of his team weren't committed to any group at all. So Druncam had offered to pay on the city's behalf. Once they accepted the reward, Akira and the others wouldn't be able to lay claim to Monica's gear again by returning the money. The rights, originally divided among its members, would all go to Druncam.

Another reason Elena wanted Akira to know all this was so that he wouldn't be shocked if their pay turned out to be less than expected. Monica's bounty was a billion aurum on paper, but Druncam wouldn't necessarily have to pay that amount—depending on how the negotiations with the city went, the final sum could well be less than that. She warned Akira that he should keep that in mind before he agreed.

Akira had no complaints. While he didn't need the money right this instant, it was true he wanted to buy new gear as soon as possible, so he wasn't about to turn down immediate money in the bank. "I understand. Sounds good to me. Oh, but if there are any other downsides, let me know since I'm not the most

informed on this stuff.”

“Well, let’s see. For one thing, Monica’s bounty isn’t official in the Hunter Office records yet, so you’ll be called a liar if you go around claiming you took her down.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. I’ll be careful, then.”

“Still, you ought to be proud of yourself for taking down someone so strong. All right, I’ll let everyone know you’re on board. After that, it won’t be long before the money shows up in your account.”

“Perfect! Thanks, Elena. See you later.” Akira hung up, looking elated.

Alpha also wore a smile. *Good for you, Akira.*

Yeah. Man, I’m so excited! I’m gonna head to Shizuka’s the instant it hits my account. Six hundred million aurum, huh? Even if I can’t get Old World gear, that’ll net me some pretty good equipment.

It makes me happy to hear you say that, Akira. Keep up that enthusiasm, and we’ll be in good shape!

Really? Akira looked surprised. *Why did that make you happy?*

Because it means you’re seriously trying to improve yourself as a hunter. That’ll bode well for me in the future.

Oh, yeah. Akira nodded, not bothering to read any deeper into her answer.

To the average relic hunter—and at present, to Akira—six hundred million was a huge amount of money. Any hunter would be nuts to amass that much money and then drop all of it on gear, instead of using at least part of it to better their living situation or for recreation. Yet Akira hadn’t hesitated in his decision, as though he hadn’t even considered spending his money in any other way.

And Alpha was pleased.

This would be extremely convenient for her in the future.

Sheryl saw that Akira had hung up and walked back over to him. He was in a

good mood, which put her in high spirits as well. “Did something happen?” she asked.

“Yeah. You know that pay from the job in Mihazono I was telling you about? I thought it’d be some time before I got that money, but it looks like I’ll be receiving it now.”

“That’s wonderful! How much was it, if you don’t mind me asking?” Sheryl planned to praise him for a job well done regardless of the amount—she only asked so as to get a chance to flatter him.

“Hm? Oh, around six hundred million aurum.”

When Sheryl heard this, she nearly shrieked, “S-Six hundred million?!” It took everything she had not to choke, but remembering in the nick of time that she was supposed to be a prim and proper lady, she stopped herself. She couldn’t conceal her surprise completely, however—her smile went stiff. Aloud, she asked, “*Around* six hundred million, you say? Does that mean the final amount might be less than that?” Inwardly, she hoped this was so.

But Akira’s reply dashed her hopes. “Nah, adding everything up, I bet it’ll be more.” The figure he’d quoted was only Monica’s bounty—he was also waiting on Carol’s compensation for his damaged relic, the reward from the insurance company’s rescue job with Elena and Sara, and the pay from the city for investigating the factory district. Before subtracting ammo costs and replacing his damaged equipment, Akira expected his total yield from Mihazono would exceed well over seven hundred million.

From his nonchalant response, Sheryl could tell he wasn’t exaggerating. She could barely speak in surprise. “I-I see. That *is* a lot of money.”

“Yeah. But that’s just how tough I had it.”

Sheryl could sense from his tone just how difficult his ordeal had been, but this didn’t make her feel any better—after all, he’d amassed over six hundred million aurum in only a week’s time.

Akira had valued the relics in his garage at around fifty million aurum. Sheryl, however, had been thinking she could get around a hundred million if the relic business was a success. Once she’d deducted the shares for the merchants and

her gang, she'd expected to deliver around sixty million to Akira in all.

It was the sandwich shop all over again. She'd planned on giving the proceeds from that endeavor—around a million and a half—to Akira. But after seeing him shell out ten million aurum for medicine like it was no big deal, she'd reconsidered. Sheryl had to make sure she and her gang stayed useful to Akira, and offering him mere pocket change would be meaningless.

So she'd told herself she had to make the relic business succeed at all costs. Sixty million aurum, she'd believed, would surely win Akira's favor. But now that she'd heard how much Akira had netted in a single week, she was nervous. The degree to which someone valued money depended on the size of their income—would Akira consider sixty million aurum a lot of money or a pittance?

She wasn't sure.

Trying her best to look unconcerned, she continued talking to Akira until he pulled out his phone, checked the message he'd received, and beamed. "Okay, Sheryl. My job here's done, so I'm heading out. You guys can handle the cataloging and stuff from here on. Tell Katsuragi I said so too."

"Okay. If you're not doing anything else, please come by my base sometime. I'll be waiting," she said with a smile. But the moment Akira left the warehouse, her smile vanished. "I absolutely cannot screw up here," she muttered.

After all, even if sixty million *was* just chump change to Akira already, she'd still have to make that much and more to stay useful to him. So if she couldn't manage at least that amount, she had no chance of rivaling the kind of income he was making as a hunter. (This would also require her to grow her gang enough to keep pace with him.)

The success of the relic business would be a stepping stone to that end. Failure was not an option.

She returned to Katsuragi and the others with the confident smile of a rich, business-savvy girl—and with a newfound determination. Her zeal left the seasoned businessmen in awe.

Chapter 125: A Continuous Gamble

After parting with Sheryl, Akira headed straight for Shizuka's shop. A notification had come through from Druncam—they'd deposited six hundred million aurum in his account, and he was thrilled. *I know they said they'd pay right away, but that really was fast!*

Alpha also smiled cheerfully. *That's probably because Druncam wanted you and the others out of the picture as soon as possible. But it helps us all the same.*

You said it! I wonder what all I'll be able to buy with six hundred mil?

He entered Shizuka's shop brimming with anticipation. As always, Shizuka greeted him with a polite smile, but when Akira explained in the course of their chatting that he was here to replace his equipment yet again, her face clouded over.

"Elena and Sara already told me what happened, but you really had it rough, didn't you?" she said.

"Yeah," he replied. "It was super dangerous." This time he couldn't cover up or dodge how much he'd had to overexert himself in the face of peril, and in any case she could tell just from the weariness in his voice. "I feel like I finally get just how much of a difference having the right gear can make. Not simply the Old World items our enemy was wearing, but the anti-force melee weapons and ammo my teammates had as well. If it wasn't for those, I probably wouldn't have made it out alive. Thanks to this experience, I now know just how important equipment is to my survival." Telling Shizuka his honest feelings felt like removing a weight from his shoulders, and with a smile, he moved away from small talk and on to business. "So with that said, if you wouldn't mind, I was wondering if you could recommend some options?"

Even though he'd said "if you wouldn't mind," he didn't actually think Shizuka would turn him down. But when her expression remained troubled, he began to look unsure. "Er, or not?"

“Akira, what’s your budget this time?” Shizuka asked.

“Ah, r-right. Around six hundred million.”

“And is that everything you earned in Mihazono?”

“No, that’s just my share from Monica’s bounty. I also got a cut from the rescue mission with Elena and the others.”

“I see.” But she still looked conflicted.

“Um, Shizuka?” he ventured.

But just as he was getting anxious, she broke into her usual polite smile. “All right! Six hundred million aurum, you said? I felt hesitant because I’m not sure if a humble shop like mine is up to that task, but I’ll try my best!”

Akira looked relieved. “Thank you, I really appreciate it!”

“Also, it’s true that gear’s important, but don’t forget your own health comes first. I’m sure you’re exhausted after all that happened in Mihazono, correct?”

“Yeah, for real,” he replied.

“Then take a good long rest to rejuvenate your mind and body,” she said with a gentle smile, “since they’re just as important to your survival. Think of them as another piece of equipment to be serviced. If they aren’t well-rested and at their sharpest, you won’t be able to move like you want to when it counts. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Now then, can you tell me what kind of equipment you’re looking for this time around? With six hundred mil, you’ve basically got the pick of the lot, so no need to hold back.”

Realizing that Shizuka had only been concerned for him, he broke into a grin and told her what he had in mind.

Shizuka had indeed been worried for him, but not quite in the way Akira had guessed. She was feeling nervous about how he spent his money.

When gamblers won money from a successful wager, they put their winnings

on a larger bet for an even bigger payout. But most could not keep coming out on top in their continuous gambles, and ended up mired in debt or with their lives in ruins.

As a hunter, Akira was doing the same thing. Perhaps Shizuka wouldn't have fretted so much if he were buying high-quality gear for the sole purpose of avoiding danger. But she'd known ever since they'd first met that he was only upgrading his equipment in order to take greater risks. Over and over, he'd risk his life, receive a huge reward, and then turn around and invest it all into even better gear for his next roll of the dice.

This time, he'd earned six hundred million aurum—wasn't that enough for now? She'd been debating whether to tell Akira that he ought to take a break (the real reason she'd looked so conflicted). But she'd had a hunch that doing so would be a waste of breath, so in the end she'd decided against it and instead tried to get him to think of his well-being as one more tool he needed to maintain for his work. Since he'd recently realized the importance of equipment, she hoped he would now think twice before endangering himself once more in his continuous gamble.

Of course, she knew deep down he wouldn't stop. He was a hunter—eventually he'd be forced into his next wager and would undoubtedly risk his life yet again. But perhaps her advice would at least convince him to take a good long rest beforehand, so that he'd be in peak condition when the chips were down once more.

Meanwhile, as he and Shizuka talked, Alpha observed Akira's behavior intently.



Once all of Akira's relics had been inventoried, Katsuragi, Sheryl, and the businessmen moved to another room in the warehouse to discuss business plans in private. The merchants still wondered how Akira had ended up with such a haul, but there were enough valuable relics to pique their interest regardless of their doubts. Now that they'd seen the goods for themselves and knew Katsuragi hadn't been just blowing smoke, they were eager to get the ball

rolling.

“Katsuragi, are you really planning to set the shop up in the slums?” one man said. “I understand that it’s the most convenient place for you to sell relics acquired under unusual circumstances, but will they really be safe there?”

“Don’t worry, Sheryl here’s going to strike a deal with the gang that owns the territory in the area.”

The men all turned their attention to Sheryl, who smiled calmly as if to say, “Leave it to me.”

“I’ve also got a few hunters in mind to hire for security,” Katsuragi added. “And if that isn’t enough, feel free to pitch in and hire some hunters of your own for extra security. That should cover it, no?”

“Well, in that case—” the man began.

“Oh, actually...” Katsuragi cut him off, as though he’d just remembered. “Sorry, Tomejima, but you’re going to have to sit this one out.”

“Huh?! Why?! You invited me here! What are you trying to pull?” The man—who was indeed Tomejima, someone Akira had met when Shikarabe had invited him to participate in the bounty hunts—looked furious.

Katsuragi frowned, as though it pained him to deliver this news. “I just remembered—you got into a conflict with Akira before, didn’t you? I heard it was so bad that if he saw you again, he’d probably kill you on sight.”

Tomejima went rigid. “Th-That wasn’t...” He’d encountered Akira while negotiating with Shikarabe’s group at the bar. Kadol, a hunter Tomejima had invited along, had picked a fight with Akira—and nearly ended up dead as a result. So technically, Akira had beef with Kadol, not Tomejima.

But Katsuragi already knew this and shook his head anyway. “Do you really think Akira cares who started it? He may not have recognized you when he was here a little while ago, but what if he remembers down the line? I don’t know about you, but I’d rather not upset him. Don’t want to take any chances.”

None of the other businessmen said a word. They couldn’t defend Tomejima either—if Akira became angry, he might take his relics back, and the entire

operation would fall through.

“Look, Tomejima,” Katsuragi went on, sounding sympathetic, “I really wanted you to be a part of this too, so I’m just as disappointed. You gather up hunters in debt and get them to collect relics, right? I invited you here thinking your line of work would be helpful for acquiring more inventory, or even for extra personnel to guard the store or warehouse.” He looked apologetic. “But if you’re currently at odds with Akira, that’s a no go. Sorry, but you’ll have to pass on this one.”

Tomejima looked around at the others, but none of them seemed inclined to take his side.

“Although,” Katsuragi continued, “I’d reconsider if you were to strike a deal with Akira so that there’s no more bad blood. But I won’t be your mediator—you’re on your own. Like I said, I don’t want to piss that guy off. No thank you!”

With that, Katsuragi fell silent as though that was the last word on the subject. Tomejima, sensing that saying anything further would be pointless, left the warehouse with a dark look on his face.

Once he was gone, Katsuragi tried to lighten things up with a big grin. “Now then, I know I said all that to Tomejima just now, but the rest of you don’t have to worry. Even if you get on Akira’s bad side a little, he and I go way back, and we’ve been through a lot together. I should be able to smooth things over, provided you don’t tick Akira off as much as *that* guy did.”

The other men looked relieved. “I-I see,” one spoke up. “That does make me feel better.”

“Now then, let’s move on to the next topic, shall we? I mentioned hiring some hunters to work security earlier, right? Well, here’s what I’m thinking...” Now that Katsuragi had seized control of the discussion, he steered it in the direction most convenient for him.

As for Tomejima, Katsuragi had invited him with the intention of kicking him out from the very beginning. And Sheryl was the only other person present who realized this.

Once outside, Tomejima looked back at the warehouse with regret. “Shit!” he spat. “To think that idiot’s actions would screw me over even here!”

Kolbe was waiting outside the warehouse. “You don’t look too thrilled. What happened?” When Tomejima explained, Kolbe immediately understood—he’d witnessed the incident with Kadol as well. “So it’s that moron’s fault, huh? Well, what do you want to do, then? Should we tell Akira his address in case the kid wants to blow off some steam?”

At Kolbe’s casual suggestion that they assist Akira in killing Kadol, Tomejima gave the hunter a disapproving look. “No, no need to go *that* far...” He resented Kadol for what had happened and wouldn’t care if he ended up dead, but he didn’t want to be personally responsible for the hunter’s demise. “Say, Kolbe, back at the bar I saw you talking with Akira. If you’re buddies with him, would you be able to help me out?”

“Sorry, no can do. I just know him—we’re not close or anything. And I only know him ’cause one of my guys caused him trouble, so it’s doubly impossible.”

“That so? Damn! Got any other good ideas, then? I really want in on this operation—if it pans out, I’d be rolling in the dough. Don’t want to miss out because of some dumbass.”

“I don’t have any *good* ideas, no.”

“Meaning you have a bad one?”

“Well, if you’re really that desperate, you could always go to Viola. I’m sure she’d be able to manage something.”

Kolbe made his offhand suggestion merely in jest. He might as well have said, “Why are you asking me?” But Tomejima knew how much money the relic business might rake in, and craving for a piece of that pie, he took Kolbe’s advice seriously.



Akira soaked in the bath, looking conflicted. “Hmm... I honestly have no clue which to choose,” he groaned.

Many weapons were floating in midair before him. Naturally, they were not

real—Alpha had merely projected them into his vision—but the detail on the images made them indistinguishable from reality. Alpha was acting as a model, naked and holding each of the weapons to show Akira its features and functions while she listed their specs. Depending on what one was into, the sight could have even been classified as arousing.

Don't just give up, Akira. This is an important decision that'll affect your chances of survival, so put some effort into it.

"I know, but..."

These were all guns that Shizuka had recommended. With such a large budget to work with, there were so many options that even she couldn't suggest anything specific right away. So first she'd sent him a general list of weapons to choose from based on what features he'd asked for. Then, once he picked out those he liked and narrowed down his selection, Shizuka would give him a more specific list of weapons similar to what he'd chosen. They'd repeat this process until Akira finally found the gun he wanted.

He was still on the first list, which was only meant to show him his options and give Shizuka an idea of the direction he wanted to go. Yet he was overwhelmed by the variety on display, and had no clue where to even begin.

"I dunno. I mean, I've basically just gone with whatever Shizuka recommended until now. Does that mean that I normally would've had to choose from all these myself?"

She must have it rough, owning a store like that. She regularly has to choose from this list for her customers, and if she makes the wrong choice, those hunters could end up disgruntled—or even dead.

"Yeah, seriously." Reflecting on how much he'd relied on Shizuka until now, Akira took another stab at narrowing down his options.

These were all hybrid weapons called multifunction guns—the consequence of Akira doing as Shizuka had suggested and making a request without worrying about money. Thinking there was no harm in asking, he'd requested a weapon that could fire bullets as powerful as his CWH's, at a rapid rate that could match his DVTS, with the accuracy and range of a sniper rifle, and preferably also capable of firing grenades like his A4WM. In other words, he wanted a single

weapon that had all the features of every gun he'd used thus far.

Even Akira thought it was a ridiculous request. He hadn't imagined that such a convenient gun could exist. But he was wrong—Shizuka had recommended the multifunction gun.

Of course, an all-purpose gun had its downsides. For one, it was a jack of all trades and a master of none—in other words, none of its individual functions worked as well as they would on a gun built for only one purpose. And multifunction guns were expensive to manufacture because of their complex design. Considering there were cheaper single-function guns with better performance, many hunters thought most multifunction models weren't worth the high price.

Some of the pricier ones, however, performed better across the board. Such a gun was powerful enough to be truly all-purpose, and in the hands of a hunter skilled enough to take advantage of all its strengths, it became the ultimate firearm. Hence guns like these were best left to experts.

Part of being a hunter was learning how to select the right gear for each situation. But for Akira, who worked solo and often had to improvise in unexpected situations, Shizuka had supposed the multifunction gun might be a solid choice.

Alpha chose two of the guns floating in the air and pointed them at Akira. *Let's make it simpler, shall we? For now, choose between these two options. Or three, if you include the option to forgo the grenade launcher altogether.*

The gun in her right hand had only one barrel, while the one in her left sported two different ones. Why the difference? The left had separate barrels for bullets and grenades, while the right's could transform to fire either—or any other ammunition, of any size. The latter was convenient, but if Akira just wanted it to fire grenades, all that extra functionality would be pointless. And it wasn't like he *needed* a multifunction gun with a grenade-launching feature to begin with—he could just bring along an actual grenade launcher as a backup firearm.

However, that would mean carrying an additional gun, and after lugging around a CWH, a DVTS, an A4WM, and a backpack full of ammo during his last

excursion, Akira was looking to reduce his load as much as possible. After all, that was why he'd wanted a gun like this in the first place, and so having to carry another weapon just for grenades would defeat the purpose. He could also choose to not use grenades at all—if his other ammo was powerful enough, he wouldn't need them—but they were useful to have on hand. Otherwise, he wouldn't have shelled out so much money for support arms to carry the A4WM.

He groaned. Each of his options had its own advantages and disadvantages, and he had to keep price in mind as well. Even with only three options, he was still having a hard time making a decision.

Just then, a call came in from Shizuka. Akira had Alpha play the transmission from his terminal. "Akira speaking," he answered.

"Hi, Akira, it's Shizuka! Are you free right now?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"I was just calling to touch base with you about the list I sent. If you need some more time to look over it, that's totally fine, but if you're done, I'd like to hear your thoughts. I tried to pick the weapons I thought would best fulfill the requests you gave me. But if those aren't quite what you had in mind, please let me know."

"Actually, I'm going over them now." He then admitted to her he was having a hard time deciding, given the vast number of options.

"Well, at least that means you're satisfied with the selection," Shizuka replied wryly. "But hang in there, because we still have to talk powered suits once this is done!"

"O-Oh, right!" Akira winced, realizing he had *more* decisions ahead of him.

"Speaking of which, I tried to pick weapons that will leave enough room in your budget for a good suit and whatever else you might need. So if you'd rather spend more and get an even better gun, let me know and I'll send you a new list."

"No, this should be fine! I trust your judgment!" This wasn't a lie, as he really did trust her—but he also feared that if she revised it, he would be confronted

with even *more* choices.

“Glad to hear it,” she said with a hint of dryness—she’d seen through him completely. “Well, take as much time as you need to decide.”

“Thanks, I will. Oh, right—before you go, are there some guidelines or metrics hunters normally use when choosing a weapon? Having some kind of standard to judge by would be a big help.”

“Let’s see...” Shizuka thought for a moment, but then hesitated—her answer might inspire him to be even more reckless. Still, her gut was telling her to answer honestly, so she did. “It might be best to go with a titan killer.”

“A titan killer? Like, a weapon that prioritizes power?”

“Yes. None of your weapons were effective on that Monica woman, right? But with a titan killer, you might be able to put up more of a fight against someone like her.” Shizuka added that even if an enemy’s defenses were so strong that bullets would bounce right off, these extremely powerful shots just might pierce through those defenses and turn the tide of battle—or against especially dangerous foes, at least buy some time to escape. For this reason, some hunters thought it best to simply purchase the strongest weapons they could afford. “As for your budget,” she said, “I told you back at the store that I recommend spending four hundred mil on a suit, one hundred mil on a gun, and one hundred mil on ammo and energy packs.”

“Right. I was surprised to hear you recommend spending that much on ammo, though.”

“Well, what’s a powerful gun without powerful ammunition? In fact...” Shizuka trailed off, hesitating once more—she had a bad feeling that once she suggested buying the most powerful ammo he could, he’d run into a scenario where he’d need it. But then she reconsidered—even if that did happen, he’d be better off prepared for it. “If you had such a hard time in Mihazono, maybe you ought to forget about cost efficiency and buy a few magazines of the most expensive, most powerful ammunition you can afford, just to be safe.”

Akira nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense.” At first he’d thought one hundred million was an awful lot to spend on ammo, but had gone along with it anyway, trusting that Shizuka had her reasons. Now he understood.

“That’s just one option, though,” she continued. “Personally, I’d prefer it if you don’t get into a situation where you’ll need ammo that powerful. So just be careful from now on.”

“Um, I *have* tried to be careful until now...” he began. He knew his words sounded hollow after what he’d gone through in Mihazono, so he smiled weakly.

Shizuka could tell what he was thinking from the way his voice trailed off. She smiled wryly, but decided that as long as he wasn’t actively looking for danger, this was fine for now.

After Shizuka hung up, Akira turned his attention back to selecting a weapon. “A titan killer, huh? Hey Alpha, of those three options, which one would give me the most power, you think?”

If you just want a weapon that can take down dangerous monsters, I’d recommend forgoing the grenades altogether and looking at the guns that can fire the most effective armor-piercing bullets instead.

“Sounds good to me. All right, get rid of all the others.”

In an instant, the guns in the air that failed to meet his criteria disappeared. Yet many more remained.

“There’s still this many?” he groaned.

Just take your time, Alpha said gently.

“All right, I’ll try my best.” There was no need to rush, after all, so he figured he might as well relax and enjoy his bath while he considered his options.



In a room in an apartment complex in lower Kugamayama, Viola was chatting with one of her clients via terminal.

“Yes, of course! If that’s what you desire, I can certainly make it happen! Though I have to ask: Do you just want me to get Akira to the table to negotiate with you, or would you like me to handle the negotiating myself as well? I recommend the latter, personally.”

Her tone sounded cheerful—too cheerful for comfort, Tomejima thought on the other end of the line. “I’ll handle the negotiations personally. All I’m asking you to do is set things up, nothing extra.”

“Oh yeah? No need to be a tightwad, you know. Sure, I’ll have to charge more for the latter, since that’ll make more work for me. But can you really afford to be stingy at this point?”

“You and I both know that if I left the negotiations to you, you’d find some way to work it into your own schemes.”

“Well, if that’s your choice. Now then, I don’t mind being the go-between to bring you two together, but guaranteeing your safety’s going to cost a little extra.”

“What do you mean?” Tomejima asked warily.

“Isn’t Akira targeting you?”

Tomejima was rattled, and it took him a moment to respond. “Wait! I wasn’t the one who antagonized him! It was Kadol—!”

““Do you really think Akira cares who started it?’ Isn’t that what your friend Katsuragi said? If I’m wrong, I guess I misunderstood. My apologies.”

Tomejima wasn’t sure if she was talking about misunderstanding what Katsuragi had said or the fact that he’d said it. Viola’s words could’ve been taken either way, and this rattled him. And now that she had planted a seed of doubt in his mind by pointing out the potential danger, she guided him through the rest of the conversation exactly as she wanted.

“How much more would protection cost?” Tomejima asked.

“Well, let’s see,” Viola said, pretending to think. “Normally a service like that would cost a billion aurum—but since we’re such good friends, I’ll do it for free. In exchange for a tiny favor.”

“And what would that be?”

Grinning merrily, Viola detailed her request. Tomejima was well aware she was roping him into one of her schemes, but ultimately agreed—after all, the job itself was quite simple.

Chapter 126: Navigating a Minefield

Sheryl had asked Akira to come by if he was free, so after a bit of preparation, he headed to her base on foot.

He wore a powered suit that would allow him to topple an average building (at least) with his bare hands, was armed with two powerful guns (modified to deliver extra firepower), and had a small pack of spare ammo on his back. Since he wasn't heading into the wasteland, he figured he could get away with arming himself lightly. It never occurred to him that his perception of what counted as "lightly armed" was ridiculously off.

True, at the moment he wasn't carrying anything as powerful as his CWH, DVTS, or A4WM. Nor was he riding in his desert utility vehicle with them mounted on top, or walking around with support arms equipped. So compared to what he was used to, perhaps this *was* a rather modest look for Akira. But by slum standards, he was armed enough to be dangerous, and most people who saw him darted off to the left and right, trying to get as far away from him as possible.

Akira, however, didn't think he looked that dangerous at all. So when one passerby—a man—nonchalantly approached him (unlike everyone else trying to flee from him), Akira thought nothing of it.

The man passed him—and found his arm in Akira's grip. In the would-be thief's hand was Akira's wallet, pilfered from a compartment in his powered suit.

Akira gave the man a look that made it hard for the latter to tell if the boy was in a good mood or extremely upset. The man handed the wallet back, and Akira punted him into a back alley with a suit-enhanced kick.

Akira hadn't used his full strength, so the man was still alive. But he wasn't wearing any kind of protective armor, so his injuries were critical. Writhing on the ground, he coughed up blood. Akira tucked his wallet back into his suit and reflected that perhaps he'd overdone it a tad. *I was trying to hold back, but*

guess even that was too much.

You also crushed his arm when you grabbed him, noted Alpha, so you need to work on controlling your suit better. Remember, high performance powered suits require more finesse.

Yeah, yeah, I'll work on it. Let's get out of here. Akira left the area—and the man—behind. This time, he'd been able to prevent his wallet from getting stolen without Alpha's help. He felt satisfied that he'd been able to defend himself, but had no further interest in the man's actions.

He hadn't intended to kill the thief, but he didn't particularly care if the man died either. His only concern was that he'd failed to control the power behind his kick.

The man lay collapsed in the alley, moaning. "I wasn't told...he'd be that strong... That wasn't...part of the deal..."

But he was already on death's door, his voice so weak that no one could hear.



Sheryl was busy with gang-related work in her room when Aricia, her subordinate and one of her top brass, informed her that Akira had arrived. Sheryl couldn't help but break into a grin, until she heard Aricia's next words.

"What do you mean, he's acting strange?"

"I'm not really sure," said Aricia. "I just get the feeling that something's really eating at him. Maybe something about the relic business plan upset him? Be careful, Boss."

Now anxious, Sheryl headed to the reception room with Aricia. Akira was there, sitting on the sofa, along with Erio, Nasya, and Lucia. Like Aricia, Erio and Nasya were higher-ups in Sheryl's gang, and had been summoned here by Sheryl herself—the gang leader figured it was high time her officers got used to dealing with Akira. Lucia, who was not an officer, had been called by Nasya, and was holding a cup of coffee out to Akira with trembling hands.

Sheryl observed Akira's behavior from a distance. He was hanging his head

slightly, so he did look somewhat down. At any rate, he definitely seemed different than he normally did—she would have to treat him with extra caution. Bracing herself, she sat down in front of him with a smile. “Sorry for keeping you waiting. I really appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to come here.”

“Yeah, well, I had nothing else better to do.” He sipped the coffee he’d been given and sighed.

To Sheryl, his sigh sounded unusually heavy. She’d wanted to ask his opinion on her gang’s progress, the plans for the relic business, and the like (after some pleasant, mundane conversation, of course), but now she hesitated—first she needed to figure out what had Akira so down in the dumps. If she couldn’t yet satisfy him with her income, perhaps she could at least ease his mind a little. It had worked surprisingly well on Katsuya, after all: he’d been incredibly—almost unnaturally—cheerful afterward. If she could have the same effect on Akira, how wonderful it would be to have him look at her the same way Katsuya had! This deep-seated desire guided her decision.

“You don’t look too happy. Is something wrong?” she asked, looking extremely concerned.

“Hm? Yeah, a bit, I guess.”

“It doesn’t look like just ‘a bit’ to me.”

“Well, it’s no big deal,” he said. “Don’t worry about it.”

Normally, Sheryl wouldn’t have pressed any further for fear of upsetting him, but this time she didn’t back down. “If it’s no big deal, maybe I can help. Tell me what’s bothering you. If you’d rather keep it to yourself, I understand, but talking about your problems with others can sometimes make you feel better. Even if it’s inconsequential, it’s still on your mind, so let’s try to find a solution together.”

Akira found Sheryl’s sudden concern odd, but came clean anyway. He had no reason to hide it, after all—he just hadn’t thought it was worth talking about.

“It really isn’t a big deal, okay? I just ran into a pickpocket on the way here, that’s all.”

Lucia shuddered visibly. She'd nearly been killed when she tried picking Akira's pocket herself, so she couldn't help it.

"Well, I stopped it this time, so nothing got stolen. But this means they still see me as a mark, right? That's a little, well, depressing." Voicing his thoughts made him feel their emotional impact all over again, and his face became grave. "Might as well just ask: Do I look weak to you, Sheryl?"

"No, of course n—"

"Tell the truth," Akira cut her off, his face deadly serious.

Sheryl froze midsentence. She knew she'd already screwed up by doing so, but was unsure what to say otherwise. After all, she couldn't confidently respond, "No, of course not"—that would be more of a lie than the truth. And as Akira's gaze bored into her, she got the feeling that if she *did* lie, he'd definitely see through it.

That would seriously anger him, she knew. But would he like her honest answer any better? She doubted it. And staying silent would be the same as saying yes, which would also upset him. She was at a stalemate. Still, she could not anger him under any circumstances, or she'd lose everything. So she had to think up some excuse, but she was in such a panic that she couldn't think straight. No appropriate reply came to mind.

When Sheryl didn't give him an answer, Akira turned his gaze to the others in the room. And when he set his eyes upon Lucia, she clearly shivered.

"Um... Lucia, right? What do *you* think? I mean, I know I wasn't wearing a powered suit and only had an AAH when you mugged me, so looking back on it now, I can't blame you if you thought I was an easy target."

He was met with silence—she couldn't manage even the slightest response. Akira sighed and pointed to his powered suit.

"But I'm wearing one now, and I've got two powerful modded guns right here. At this moment, I could take down a Yarata scorpion without breaking a sweat." He held his AAH and A2D assault rifles up in each hand to show them to Lucia and the others. Then his gaze moved to Erio.

Erio knew well that Akira had annihilated Yazan's medium-sized slum gang

without even needing a powered suit. Akira already looked like he was in a bad mood, so seeing the weapons in his hands made Erio break out in a cold sweat.

“If we were talking about the old me, I’d understand,” Akira went on. “But when I’m armed like this, would a pickpocket really want to target someone like me?”

This time, Akira had avoided a repeat of what had happened with Lucia, and he’d done it without Alpha warning him beforehand. He’d taken care of the thief all on his own, and that in itself was cause for celebration. But it also meant the pickpockets still saw him as a mark, treating him no differently than a dropped wallet on the side of the road. That seriously depressed him.

“So what’s the truth? Do I really look that weak to everyone?” he repeated.

He didn’t think it was a hard question, and he hadn’t intended to intimidate anyone by asking. But Erio and Lucia had caused Akira trouble before, so his question opened old wounds. Feeling like they’d be in danger if they answered carelessly, they were too nervous to say anything.

Aricia looked at Erio worriedly. Nasya now regretted her decision to bring Lucia with her and racked her brain for a way to bail her friend out.

The incident with Lucia was water under the bridge, and Akira had already forgiven her for it. But she’d still angered him back then, and nothing would change that. Many of the gang members still regarded her with harsh, critical gazes. Nasya had invited Lucia to meet Akira today to show the rest of the gang once and for all that Akira didn’t hold any grudges toward the girl, hoping that doing so would pacify the gazes directed at her friend. But Nasya had never expected something like this to happen and was now desperately trying to fix her mistake.

Before she could say anything, though, Lucia gathered her courage and spoke up. “Forgive us, Akira. We already know how strong you are firsthand, so we can’t really evaluate you objectively.”

Akira nodded. That made sense to him.

“Besides,” she continued, “I have no way of knowing how good your equipment is—it’s not my area of expertise. Some suits and guns look stronger

than they actually are, but I'm not so knowledgeable that I can tell the difference."

Akira nodded again. That, too, made sense.

"Someone carrying a huge, heavy-looking gun would seem strong to me, but Erio or I could probably hold those weapons in your hands," she added.

In fact, she was right—the AAH assault rifle was so light that Akira could even carry it without a powered suit. But not the CWH or the DVTs. He realized he'd gotten so used to carrying those guns around in the ruins that he hardly noticed their weight. "So you're saying that if I'd been wielding an enormous gun—like a titan killer, for instance—you wouldn't have targeted me on the streets back then?"

"Right. I wouldn't even want to go near anyone looking *that* dangerous."

Akira glanced at his gear. He knew his equipment like the back of his hand, but now it dawned on him that someone who didn't wouldn't be able to tell at a glance how deadly it was.

Being strong and *appearing* strong were two different things. Carol's suit, for instance, was based on an Old World design, and was meant to make the wearer look stronger. But that bluff wouldn't work on someone who knew nothing of Old World suits—they'd just think Carol was wearing a racy outfit. The residents of the slums probably knew little about hunter equipment, if anything. So how formidable would Akira look to them with what he was wearing now? After some consideration, he concluded that he probably still looked just weak enough to be a target. "I see now. I never considered that. I'll keep it in mind, so thanks."

"Y-You're welcome," Lucia stammered.

Akira then looked over at Erio. "What about you? Do you agree with her?"

Erio nodded furiously.

"I see. And Sheryl?"

"Well..." Sheryl began by trying to soften the blow as much as she could without lying to him. "Each of us was surprised when we found out how strong

you are—stronger than we could’ve ever imagined. So I suppose it’s not wrong to say that you look weaker than you are. But think of it like this—you’re so powerful that we never could have guessed it.”

Rather than denying that he looked weak, she heaped praise on him, suggesting that he only appeared weak in comparison to his ridiculous strength. She was pleased with herself—she thought that the root of Akira’s concern lay in some complex he had about how weak he appeared to others, and she was sure her response would clear away his doubts. He might even grow more affectionate with her as a result, like Katsuya had. He might even look at her the same way! Her heart swelled with anticipation as she waited for his reaction.

“Oh, okay.” Akira’s response was lukewarm at best.

Having her expectations so thoroughly betrayed, Sheryl’s smile twitched ever so slightly. “R-Right. I’m glad you understand, then.”

“Yeah, I get it now,” he said, no longer looking dejected. “I guess it really pays to take a shot in the dark and share your worries with someone else. Thanks!”

“No, I’m glad I could be of some help.” Sheryl seemed unaffected on the surface. But inside, she was disappointed—this wasn’t at all the outcome she’d hoped for. *No good, huh? It worked so well on Katsuya, though! Akira really is a tough nut to crack. And it seems like he liked Lucia’s answer better than mine. Why? Because she praised his equipment instead of his skill? I don’t get him at all...!*

In fact, Akira had put more stock in Lucia’s answer because of how Akira evaluated his own performance. What looked like Akira’s own prowess from an outsider’s perspective was technically Alpha’s power, with a bit of Akira’s own strength mixed in. So being praised as if it was all his own didn’t make him happy.

Still, he was sure he’d grown quite a bit since the last robbery attempt. So when the thief had targeted him this time, Akira had been disappointed—even after all his progress, the pickpockets of the slums still saw him as an easy target. Lucia had suggested that Akira’s equipment was to blame, but Sheryl had said it was because Akira was so strong. To Akira, this just sounded like the thief had targeted him because he’d realized Akira’s true strength, which didn’t

exactly thrill the boy. The differences in the way Akira and Sheryl perceived the world made it as challenging as ever for Sheryl to win Akira over.

Another gang member entered the room, announcing that Katsuragi and his entourage had arrived to discuss the relic business for a bit, and that if Akira was present, the merchant would like for him to join in. Sheryl, desiring a change of pace and atmosphere, immediately agreed. She dismissed Erio and the other officers, thinking that there was no need to let them in on the details of the business at the moment.

Once Erio and the others were out of the room, they breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“Man, that was rough!” Erio said. “I never would’ve guessed that just exchanging a few words with him could be so intense! No wonder no one wants our position.”

Aricia and Nasya smiled wryly. Sheryl’s gang was considered small based on the amount of territory they owned. But in terms of connections and influence, they were already well on their way to becoming a midsize syndicate. So the number of kids wanting to join them was growing by the day. Since slum children couldn’t count on the city to protect them, most joined gangs to keep themselves safe. And the majority of them knew Sheryl’s gang had a ridiculously strong guy backing them up, and that his name was Akira.

Usually, when the membership of an organization swells, the larger part of those members aspires to climb to the top, since higher ranks offer greater perks—for instance, not having to scrape by on the synthetic rations served to everyone else. In a gang, the role of officer was also the best and most realistic way to gain influence and power in the slums, if one so desired. Normally, the children would’ve fought each other to the death for a chance to become one of a gang leader’s top associates.

But in Sheryl’s organization, hardly anyone was vying for the positions held by Erio, Aricia, and Nasya. After all, being an officer meant they’d have to interact with Akira more often.

Previously, as all the kids knew, Akira had gotten into a dustup with Shijima’s

gang, killed several of its members, and dragged their corpses back to Shijima's base. Later on, Yazan—the leader of a midsize gang—had convinced some of Sheryl's members to lead a coup against her. Akira had killed all the traitors, headed alone to Yazan's base, and massacred nearly everyone there as well. Most children in Sheryl's gang thought Akira was a loose cannon and completely nuts—they wanted his protection because he was strong, but would rather not have to interact with him in person if they could help it. They considered him reliable but terrifying. So while they wanted the safety he offered them as members of the gang, they left direct encounters with him to Sheryl or her top brass. As enticing as an officer position might sound, the kids didn't think it was worth losing their lives over.

Of course, a select few had sought the position anyway, well aware of the risk. But they'd turned out to be all talk and weren't skilled enough to cut it. So at the moment, the only officers were the original two, Erio and Aricia, and Nasya, who'd wanted a higher position so she could protect Lucia.

Nasya gave Lucia, who still looked anxious, a soothing smile. "That was a very impressive response, Lucia! Akira even thanked you in front of the boss, so I don't think we'll have to worry about your standing in the gang anymore."

"R-Really?"

"Well, probably. What do you two think?" Nasya asked the other officers.

"Hm? Well, I think it'll be all right," Erio said.

"Same here," Aricia agreed.

"Th-Thank goodness!" Lucia broke into a smile.

"Although," Erio added, "since you handled Akira so well, the boss might appoint you an officer without giving you a say in the matter."

"N-No! I don't want that!" Lucia had nearly been killed by Akira before, after all.

Nasya tapped her on the shoulder. "If that happens, let's do our best together." She smiled.

Lucia let out a weak moan. She couldn't say no to her best friend, but she

didn't feel like agreeing either.

Aricia turned to Erio and winked. "Let's do *our* best together as well."

He grinned back at her. "I'm on board with that." Apart from the whole having-to-deal-with-Akira thing, as officers the two of them enjoyed better treatment and higher security. After getting this far, they weren't about to give up their ranks so easily—Erio would keep his position for Aricia's sake, and she for his.

The two gazed at each other, as if sensing each other's emotions. Nasya and Lucia observed them warmly. Erio noticed them doing so, but couldn't manage to conceal his feelings for Aricia. Instead of getting angry, he changed the subject to hide his embarrassment.

"Anyway, when you think about how long Sheryl's been dealing with Akira, she seems all the more amazing, doesn't she? Can you imagine the guts she must have had to convince him to back a gang she'd just created? I guess gang bosses really are made of tougher stuff!"

Everyone present, including Erio, looked conflicted. Akira was frighteningly strong and seemed to have a destructive personality, like a land mine waiting to be stepped on. But Sheryl was always thrilled at the chance to see him.

For Erio and the girls, just talking to Akira felt like navigating a minefield. Yet Sheryl expertly and willingly stepped through that minefield and came out unscathed time and time again, and would likely continue to do so in the future. This astonished her officers and made them respect her even more.



Back in the reception room that Erio and the other officers had left, Katsuragi (who had more experience navigating the minefield known as Akira) was complaining to the boy.

"I wish you would've bought some of that gear from me," he pouted. "It's great that you earned six hundred mil in such a short time and all, and I'm impressed that you didn't hesitate to spend it entirely on new equipment, but it would've been nice if you'd sent some of that money *my* way."

"Sorry" was all Akira said.

Katsuragi hung his head and sighed dramatically. Then he glanced back at Akira to gauge his reaction—still no response. So the merchant pressed him further. “You probably already know this, but I only agreed to your request that I cooperate with Sheryl because I expected you to buy your gear from me once you were rolling in the dough. Well, I’m doing what I promised.” He hoped that reminding the boy of their deal might shake the latter up a little, and he glanced at Akira again.

The boy now wore a slight frown, but that was all.

Normally, Katsuragi’s next move would’ve been to threaten to quit helping Sheryl. But he knew that wouldn’t work in this case—Akira would just say, “Okay then, the deal’s off,” and immediately cut his ties with Katsuragi. So instead, the merchant took a different approach—he groveled.

“You made six hundred million aurum on your last gig—no, even more than that, right? Surely you can afford to buy just a *little* something from me? Please?”

Katsuragi’s earnest plea and ingratiating smile finally swayed Akira. “All right, then I’ll buy some more medicine from you—twenty million aurum’s worth,” the boy said. “And next time I bring relics in, I’ll let you decide which ones you want for your relic business, and which to buy from me on your own. How’s that?”

Perking up immediately, Katsuragi beamed. “Oh, that would be wonderful! That’s my Akira! Twenty million aurum, you say? You just bought ten million worth not too long ago—did you really burn through all that expensive medicine so soon? Then again, I guess if you got paid six hundred mil for your task, it must have been a doozy.”

“You could say that. That’s why I want the best medicine you’ve got. The meds you sold me before were two million a box, but if you’ve got even more powerful stuff, gimme however many of those twenty mil can buy.”

“Yes, sir! I’ll order them right away!” Katsuragi was over the moon—expensive purchases meant more money in his pocket. He had Akira pay in advance, and when the twenty million aurum hit the merchant’s account, he felt all the more thrilled. “Man, was I ever right to invest in you! I’ll be

depending on your patronage in the future too, okay?”

“You invested in me? I didn’t hear about that.”

“Oh, sorry—I meant Sheryl, not you. Well, you’re basically the same to me—my ‘investment’ in both of you is to look after you two, and the profit’s well worth it,” Katsuragi said, making sure to include another reminder that he was looking after Sheryl (and thus honoring his end of the bargain) before moving ahead with his main goal. “That being said, how would you like to invest in *me* a little? Don’t worry, I’m not asking for more money. This time, I just need your help with a little favor.”

Katsuragi’s real aim in all this was to rope Akira into helping with the relic business. Since the merchant had invested his own funds and involved his business partners in this venture, he was determined to make it succeed.



Akira was once again in the bath, groaning over the equipment that seemed to float in the air. Yesterday, he’d only been looking at guns, but now there was also a row of powered suits to choose from.

“These cost four hundred million aurum?” he said, astonished. “Truth be told, I was a little worried that the suits in this price range were gonna resemble Carol’s, but these look kinda plain.” Akira wasn’t much for fashion—normally all he cared about was whether a powered suit worked well—but he preferred not to parade around in an outfit like Carol’s if he could help it. There were some lines he’d rather not cross.

Floating above him stark naked, Alpha selected one of the suits and showed Akira an image of him wearing it. *How about this one? Does this one seem plain to you too?* The suit resembled inner wear, but was so skintight that every detail of the shape of his muscles could be seen through the material.

“Yeah, it’s plain—plain that I’m not gonna wear it,” he remarked.

Oh? But Shizuka went out of her way to choose this one for you, Akira, she teased. Are you really going to refuse her personal recommendation?

“She was probably just showing me all my options, that’s all. And suits like those are meant to be worn with armor over them. There’s no room in the

budget for that.”

Akira was correct. Shizuka hadn’t expected Akira to actually choose that suit, and she’d only included it on the list since it was so easy to move in (it felt like wearing nothing, after all), even if the design was a little bold. She’d also thought he might be more receptive to the design since Elena wore something similar, although Elena typically wore a protective coat over hers. And if he did decide on this option, she could always recommend cheaper guns or ammo if he needed more room in his budget for additional body armor to wear over the top.

“But wow, look at all these!” he went on. “Since they cost so much, I’m sure they’re all high-end, but you’d never tell just by looking at them. Like that girl at Sheryl’s said, you can’t guess someone’s true strength simply from how their suit looks, especially if you don’t know that much about suits. If I want to show others how strong I am, I need something more obvious, like a bigger gun.”

Just then, a call from Carol came through.

“Carol? What’s up?” He hadn’t been expecting to hear from her.

“Hi, Akira! You ran into a pickpocket earlier today, right?”

“Wait, how’d you know that?” he asked warily.

“Never mind that. You must have it rough, huh?” she said cheerfully. “You’re so strong, and yet the thieves of the slums still see you as a target. You look weaker than you are, which is useful for catching your opponent off guard, but it comes back to bite you at times like these, doesn’t it?”

“If that’s all you called to say, I’m hanging up,” he said, unamused. “Bye.”

“Now, now, don’t be so hasty! I have some info I thought might interest you. What if I told you that pickpocket had a hidden motive for targeting you?”

Akira was so stunned he couldn’t reply.

From his silence, Carol knew she’d succeeded in surprising him. “Sounds like you’re interested. Then let’s meet up tomorrow, and I’ll tell you the details.”

“You can’t tell me now?”

“Sorry, no can do. Y’know, most men would be thrilled if I invited them out on

a date, but I guess I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up, since it's *you* we're talking about."

There was a hint of exasperation in her voice, but he could tell she was just teasing him. Sensing from her attitude that she wasn't going to budge, he gave up on prying any more info out of her for the moment.

"All right, I'll see you tomorrow," he said with a sigh.

"That's more like it. Where and when would you like to meet?"

They decided on a time and place, and then Carol announced, "Okay, see you tomorrow for our date! I'm looking forward to it!"

She hung up, leaving Akira with a puzzled look on his face.

Hey Alpha, what do you think she means by a "hidden motive"?

Beats me. Maybe it's just an excuse to invite you out.

"Yeah, could be." Akira sighed again. He'd find out the next day, at any rate, so he put the matter out of his mind for the moment, focusing once more on narrowing down the huge selection of equipment.



Carol was also in the bath, now on a call with a friend of hers. "Yes, I convinced Akira to meet with me tomorrow, so that's one hurdle cleared. I'll give him the choice, but I'm not sure he'll agree. It's really up to him, not me."

"Oh? You don't sound too confident, Carol," said the mocking voice on the other end. "Perhaps you've been so busy with hunter work recently that you've lost your edge as a honey trap?"

"Well, there are always outliers in any line of work," Carol said with a smile. She didn't try to deny that Akira had eluded her.

Hearing the composure in her tone, her friend gave up on teasing her. "Well, fine, then. Just keep in mind I'm counting on you tomorrow, okay?"

"I'll do my best. See you later." Carol hung up and leaned back in the bath, sighing pleasantly. As she thought of her meeting with Akira the following day, a bewitching smile formed on her lips.

Chapter 127: Putting Money to Good Use

In the shopping district of lower Kugamayama, Akira was waiting for Carol to arrive. This area was closer to the city's walls, so there were more high-end shops targeting wealthier clientele. The security guards were only lightly armed, to keep from intimidating the customers. Slum residents, criminal ex-hunters, and any excessively armed individuals were considered dangerous and prohibited from entering.

Akira was wearing his powered suit and carrying his AAH, but that was all. The security personnel were only tasked with protecting this area, which was relatively affluent compared to the rest of lower Kugamayama, from lowlifes. Since Akira wasn't armed too heavily and didn't seem to be causing any trouble, they let him stay.

Still, people didn't typically walk around in powered suits here, so he stuck out like a sore thumb—everyone gawked at him as they walked by. Beside him, Alpha (who would have stood out far more than Akira, had anyone been able to see her) wore a knowing grin.

What's so funny? he asked, clearly irritated.

Oh, nothing! Just thinking that if you hate being the center of attention, maybe you ought to put a bit more thought into how you look next time.

I'll keep it in mind, he muttered.

At that moment, Carol showed up. She greeted him with a smile. "Oh, you're already here. Did I make you wait long?" She was dressed in a modest, innocuous outfit—the polar opposite of the risqué Old World-inspired powered suit she usually wore in the ruins. She carried herself with grace and elegance as she walked, and even her smile was dignified—a far cry from the inviting one she usually wore. Anyone who knew Carol from the wasteland would have been shocked to see this different side of her—and contrasting it with her typical seductive smile, they might have found her even hotter than usual.

But none of this had any effect on Akira. “Nah, you’re ten minutes early. You’re good,” he replied.

“I know that,” she said with a wry smile. “You’re supposed to answer, ‘No, I just got here,’ remember?”

“But I got here fifteen minutes ago.” He looked genuinely confused.

“That’s not the point. It’s just what you do on a date! Going through all the usual traditions is part of the fun!” She persisted in acting like they were on an official date rather than just meeting up, hoping Akira might follow her lead.

But Akira showed no such inclination. “I’m not sure what you think we’re doing here, but I just wanna hear why I was mugged. I didn’t come here to have fun.”

“Obviously.” She sighed. *I should’ve known, since he came here armed and all.* “Did you have to wear *that* getup, though? Normal people don’t wear powered suits to a place like this.”

“The guards didn’t chase me off, so it’s fine.”

“Oh, I get it—I bet you just wear your suit everywhere because it’s more convenient than changing clothes. Don’t tell me that even your loungewear at home is, like, body armor or something.”

Akira avoided her gaze.

“Seriously?! That’s no good, Akira. You should put that money you earned to good use.”

“I *am* putting it to good use.”

“Yeah, all on weapons and gear, I bet.” There was a hint of criticism in her smile. “I’m talking about spending some money on *yourself*.”

She clarified that she wasn’t suggesting he splurge on frivolous goods or anything. But with as much money as he had now, she suggested, he ought to spend at least some of it on upgrading his necessities—clothes, food, and housing. Striving to improve his quality of life would give him a reason to hunt relics out in the wasteland and more motivation to survive. Otherwise, he was just mechanically going back and forth between the city and the wasteland,

exchanging aurum for equipment automatically with no purpose. In Carol's view, a hunter might be as strong as they came, but they weren't much of a hunter if they lived day-to-day eating rations out of a back alley in the slums. If they wanted other hunters to look up to them, they needed a life outside of the wasteland that was just as fulfilling.

"It's all well and good to have nice equipment," she concluded, "but getting nice clothes, eating good food, living decently, and relaxing to refresh your mind and body are all just as important. Think of it like servicing another piece of gear: Even if the maintenance fee runs a bit steep, you need to keep your gear in tip-top shape, right? What I'm trying to say is, it's okay to treat yourself a little more." Carol made a living going out with men to extort them, so she knew that many also preferred to relax and blow off steam by spending money on women. But she hadn't seen any point in suggesting this to Akira, since he didn't seem too interested in such things to begin with.

Rather than dismiss Carol's advice, Akira took it seriously, partly because it echoed what Shizuka had told him earlier. "All right, I'll think about it," he said with a small smile.

Carol grinned back. "Glad to hear it! Well, I'd rather not stand here and talk, so let's go somewhere else. Why don't we sit down and enjoy a good meal?"

Akira agreed, and Carol led him to a nearby restaurant.

Just as one might expect from an eatery located in a high-end shopping district, the items on the menu were more expensive than at your average diner. Akira looked over the choices in excitement. Carol had offered to treat him again, but he'd decided to pay on his own this time—he was looking forward to seeing what kind of delicious food his own money would buy him. Of course, a mere restaurant bill would only be a drop in the bucket for him, but because he'd been so frugal in the past, he felt now like he was recklessly splurging. In the end, he ordered about fifty thousand aurum's worth of food—for the time being, that was the most he was prepared to indulge. He couldn't help but smile wryly.

Alpha intuited the reason for his smile. *It probably doesn't seem too luxurious*

for someone who just spent twenty mil on medicine, huh? she said with a grin.

You said it, he replied. After all, he realized, even the cost of the most luxurious meal he could manage was nothing compared to what he normally paid for the medicine that helped him survive the wasteland.

When the food finally arrived, Carol broached the main topic. “So I said earlier that there was a reason that mugger went after you.”

“Right. And what is it?”

“Before I tell you, how about we make a deal?”

“A deal? You’re charging for the info? How much do you want?” he inquired.

“Not quite. To be honest, I only know that your encounter with the pickpocket earlier was planned. I don’t know anything beyond that.”

“What?” he exclaimed, with a face that seemed to say, “You’ve gotta be kidding me—you invited me here for *this*?!”

Carol could understand his reaction. She explained that an information broker she knew had the details, not her. The broker had only asked Carol to offer the following deal to Akira: He was to meet with a man named Tomejima to negotiate with him and was not to harm Tomejima in any way during their discussion. In return, the broker would tell him what he wanted to know, regardless of whether the negotiations with Tomejima succeeded.

“Long story short, the information broker has what you’re after,” she finished. “So, what’s your answer?”

Akira looked bewildered. “First off, who’s this Tomejima guy?”

“You mean you don’t know? That’s strange—I heard you got into an argument with him a while back.”

As Carol described what she’d been told in more detail, Akira finally recalled the encounter at the bar, along with the identities of Kadol and Tomejima.

“Oh, *him*. Now I remember. But I got into a fight with the other guy, not him.”

“Really? Well, in that case, maybe he feels responsible for what one of his

guys did back then?”

“I guess.” Akira didn’t look that interested.

“So, what do you want to do, then?” she asked. “If what happened was really so unimportant to you that you forgot about him until now, it couldn’t hurt to meet him and see what he has to say. Plus, you’ll get your info.”

Akira thought for a moment. “Is there anything I need to be concerned about if I agree?”

“Well, if I was in your position, getting roped into meeting someone under the pretense of a questionable deal from a complete stranger would already be concerning enough in my book,” she replied honestly.

Akira immediately looked wary. “And you still agreed to be part of this, knowing that?”

Carol just smiled, unfazed. “Let me ask you something first: Do you really trust me that much to begin with? Can you say with confidence that you’re sure I won’t lie to you, and that everything I just told you about mediating this deal was the truth?”

“Well, I think that’s a little—”

“I said ‘if I was in your position’ just now, right? That’s because even I don’t think we’ve become acquainted enough yet for you to trust me.” She said it with a smile, but her gaze was serious, as though she could see through his true thoughts.

Akira groaned. It was just as she had said—she could be lying to him. He had to trust her if he wanted the information, but he also knew from experience that plenty of people tried to deceive others by preying on good faith. He realized that until Carol had drawn his attention to it, he’d automatically believed everything she’d said. Sure, he’d come to trust others more as of late, but did that really mean he’d grown—or that he’d just become even more naive?

Still, he had to make a decision. Turning to Carol gravely, he said, “Let me confirm: For now, at least, you’re not trying to deceive me in any way, right?”

“That’s right,” she affirmed.

There was no hesitation in her reply. But Akira still wasn’t sure. He wanted to believe her, but he knew wanting to believe and being able to believe were two different things—living for so long in the back alleys of the slums had taught him that much. After thinking for a moment, he asked Alpha to confirm.

She doesn’t seem to be lying, Alpha replied.

I see. He chided himself—they’d shared several near-death experiences in the ruins, and yet he had still found himself doubting her. But if she wasn’t lying, that made his decision easy. “All right, I’ll believe you. Tell your informant I agree. If there’s really something bigger behind my encounter with that pickpocket, I wanna know what it is.”

“Okay, I’ll let them know.” Carol pulled out her terminal and sent a message to her friend. Then she gazed at Akira curiously. “Hey, what you did just now—was that the same thing you did in Mihazono? Are you using some kind of trick to detect lies?”

“Oh, well, something like that.”

She looked thoughtful for a moment, but didn’t say anything further—she didn’t want to ruin his mood. “Anyway, I told her that you agreed, so she’ll probably message me later with more details,” she said with a smile. “That means my task is finished. But if you’re not doing anything else, want to hang out some more once we’re done here?”

“Sorry, but until I get my new gear in, I can’t do any hunter work.”

“That’s not what I mean, silly.” When Akira looked clueless, Carol rolled her eyes. “I’m talking about a date! I’m asking if you want to go around to some of these stores and shop a bit.”

“I’ll pass,” he said dryly. “You said it yourself—this isn’t a place where people walk around in powered suits.”

“You really are no fun,” Carol said with a fake pout. But she didn’t press him any further, so she couldn’t tell if that was really why Akira had turned down her invitation, or if he was just dodging the question. Still, the two of them enjoyed both their meal together and each other’s company. Anyone else

watching them would have thought they were simply on a normal date.

By the time Akira had demolished about half the food on the table, he was telling Carol about the plans for the relic shop. “So yeah, Sheryl’s trying to get it off the ground with Katsuragi and his friends, but do you think it’ll work? Wouldn’t I make more money off them just selling them like normal?”

“I guess it depends on how talented they are at running a business. But if it works, then yes, you could stand to make a good bit of money. You said they’re planning on selling out of the slums, right? Then it’s probably an illegal business. If they pay close attention to the trends of the economy and the like, they could probably turn an even bigger profit than the stores around here.”

“Even in the slums? How would that work?”

“More like it’d work only *because* it’s in the slums. I said it was illegal, right?”

Akira looked completely baffled, so Carol explained with a grin: The relic trade supported the development of the East, which meant that relic businesses typically flourished. Their clientele ranged from individual buyers to large corporations. Many such shops stood within the city walls, and bigger businesses would sell high-end relics in large storefronts just outside the walls as well.

Of course, the slums had relic shops too, but these were black market storefronts that could only be set up because of the low security presence. Their primary clientele consisted of hunters.

The Eastern League of Governing Corporations gave special perks to higher-ranked hunters, so that they’d survive the more dangerous ruins and bring back higher-value relics. Selling these relics at exchange shops raised a hunter’s rank because it proved the hunter was strong enough to survive even deadly ruins. But by using the money from selling off these relics to buy *more* relics, then selling those to buy even more, the hunter could potentially game the system and achieve a higher, unmerited ranking.

If this scheme grew in popularity, it would shake the foundation of the entire system. So the ELGC thought up a countermeasure—you had to sell your relics at a shop affiliated with the Hunter Office, or else your hunter rank wouldn’t be

raised. This way, the Office could check the transaction history of a relic and make sure it hadn't been sold before. Thus, if one wanted to buy his way to a higher hunter rank, he'd have to acquire relics with no prior history of being bought or sold. Most who wanted to do this headed to the relic shops of the slums.

The relic market in the slums also served other purposes. For instance, some hunters procured relics for other hunters on a contractual basis, and at times, the former couldn't secure enough goods in the ruins to satisfy their clients. If the procured amount was less than the contract had specified, they might receive far less money—or worse, even have to pay the total value of the missing relics. To prevent this, they'd buy extra relics from the slums to meet their quota. On the other hand, sometimes they'd collect *more* relics in the ruins than they'd expected to—but since their contract already specified a payment cap, the excess wouldn't bring them any extra money from their clients. So they'd fulfill their contract with the client, then sell the excess loot in the slums. (If they sold the relics through official channels, the relics' transaction histories could expose their business to the Hunter Office.)

The larger slum gangs also made use of this market—they generally paid the hunters they hired with relics instead of money. This was a win for both sides: the hunters could exchange the relics for money and higher hunter ranks, and the gangs would have high-ranking hunters on their side, increasing the former's power and influence. Most of the relics in these transactions were acquired from the slums, as doing so was faster and used fewer resources than collecting them from ruins.

The Hunter Office was fully capable of closing all of these loopholes in its system, but had determined that doing so wouldn't be worth it financially. So it focused on preventing the resale of relics and largely turned a blind eye to the illegal relic trade. As long as it kept the especially valuable artifacts—the ones that would actually be of significant worth to the League—off the black market, the rest were more or less beneath its concern. And if it put its efforts into expanding its network instead, making it more convenient for hunters to exchange relics, the hunters would be less inclined to keep them in their private possession for any given reason. Therefore, the relic shops in the slums were

effectively outside the Office's jurisdiction, and they profited quite well off the illegal trading that flourished both inside and outside the city.

Akira listened intently throughout Carol's entire explanation. "Now I get it," he said. "If Katsuragi stood to make that kind of profit, no wonder he was so keen to get the business going."

"Well, there are also those who aren't involved with anything shady, who simply want more money for their relics. When you sell to Hunter Office-sponsored shops, the increase in rank is considered part of the reward, so they don't pay you as much. So many people sell to the slums just to get more for their efforts."

"But doesn't having a higher hunter rank give you better perks?"

"It does, but your rank needs to be awfully high before you even start getting those perks. Better jobs are locked behind higher ranks, but if you're just wanting to make money hunting relics, stuff like that won't matter. That's one reason the Office allows the sale of higher-end equipment and ammo only to hunters with higher ranks, so that..."

As Carol was speaking, Akira received a message from Shizuka. He skimmed the contents: a quote for his ammo, totaling a little over thirty million aurum. He thought this made sense—he'd given her a budget of a hundred million for ammo, so she'd probably picked an especially expensive option that would work well with a titan killer. Curious, he took a closer look at the estimate—and nearly spat out his drink. "Five mil per magazine?!"

"Akira? What's wrong?" Carol asked, startled.

He recovered enough to respond, but his mind was still reeling. "O-Oh, nothing much. I just got the quote for my new ammo from the store I always buy from, and I can't believe one magazine of anti-force ammo cost five mil."

"Yeah, that makes sense," she said, unsurprised.

This proved to Akira that Shizuka hadn't made a mistake, and he sat open-mouthed in shock.

"Akira? Still with me?" Carol asked.

“Y-Yeah, I’m good. Wow... I never would’ve thought... You mean, back in Mihazono, I was using up such valuable ammo without realizing it? But wait, so were you! Wow, you’re able to afford burning through it like that?” He’d expected the ammo borrowed from Carol during their fight with Monica to be more expensive than normal bullets, but he hadn’t thought they’d be worth *that* much.

Carol looked amused by his reaction, but answered honestly. “I won’t deny I’ve got money, but in my case, it’s a bit different.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s true that the average hunter might pay around five mil for one magazine of anti-force ammo. But when you reach rank 50, you get a huge discount—you can get them for a mere five hundred aurum.”

Akira nearly choked on his drink again, but this time Carol expected it. “Oh, but just so you know, my rank’s not nearly that high,” she added with a grin.

“What the hell? Then how can you afford it?” The astronomical cost of the ammo, plus the news that rank 50 hunters got such a massive discount, had already left him stunned, but Carol’s revelation threw him for another loop.

“When your rank becomes 50, the Hunter Office starts offering you huge discounts on ammo,” she explained. “And that goes for special ammo too, like anti-force rounds. That’s how you get ammo priced at five mil for a mere five hundred.”

“But you just said you weren’t rank 50!”

“Right, *I’m* not. But I know hunters who are and can obtain that ammo on the cheap. I got the ammo from them, the same way you got it from me in Mihazono.”

Now it all made sense to Akira, and he visibly relaxed. Carol grinned, enjoying every bit of his reaction. She added that ammunition prices in the East were set by the government. This was one reason all the ammo in the slum district was cheap—lowering the price encouraged the residents in the slums to take up arms against any smaller, weaker monsters that attacked the district. If the residents died in the process, they’d at least serve as meat shields to delay the

monsters' advance—but if they were successful, they might learn how to fight, polish their skills, and become hunters one day. The relics they gathered would eventually be more money in the government's pocket. So the future investment was worth reducing the cost of ammo in the slums.

The other reason the government allowed the slums to have cheap ammo was because this didn't pose a threat to the city. Such low-quality rounds were ineffective against the force-field armor protecting the city's security—even a continuous hail of standard bullets wouldn't make a scratch. In a sense, though, this was a blessing, because the overwhelming inferiority of the slum district was the only reason the city allowed its existence. It permitted the residents to arm themselves solely because it could reduce the entire district to rubble at any given moment.

Anti-force bullets, on the other hand, were so expensive because the city didn't want the residents of the slums getting their hands on them. Had they been affordable, the gangs wouldn't have hesitated to bare their fangs at the city. But at current prices, even high-ranking hunters couldn't afford to equip themselves to survive monsters that were protected by force-field armor. So the Hunter Office stepped in to offer those hunters powerful, normally expensive ammo on the cheap. This perk gave hunters the incentive to strive for a higher rank and play by the Office's rules. Those that didn't wouldn't rise in rank and so wouldn't be able to get their hands on better ammo.

The perk started at rank 50 because hunters at that level would be well acquainted with the city and highly unlikely to revolt. (And such a skilled hunter wouldn't need anti-force bullets to cause havoc, so restricting their access would be pointless.) Carol added that the rank 50 requirement only applied to Kugamayama—a city with many weak force-field armor monsters nearby might feature a lower requirement, while in other areas it might be higher.

Akira listened to Carol as intently as before. “Oh, so that's how it works. And so you got your ammo from one of those rank 50 hunters?”

“That's right. But there are also limits to how you can share such ammunition.” For instance, she explained, if a rank 50 hunter bought a bunch of anti-force magazines priced at five hundred aurum and sold them to another hunter for fifty thousand each, the Hunter Office might find out and penalize

the rank 50 hunter by forfeiting their pay on future commissions. Let them try anything beyond sharing ammo with a team member, and they'd first be warned, then penalized. The Office was strict about this—after all, if anyone could get powerful ammo that easily, there'd be no point to pricing it so highly. However, the Office allowed higher-ranked hunters to share ammo with their friends. This encouraged large teams to form around individual high-rank hunters, which in turn made it easier for the Office to keep an eye on such groups.

“Basically, such ammo isn't as easy to get as you might think,” Carol finished.

“Wow. So you're a member of a high-ranked hunter team?”

“No, I don't belong to any team.”

“Huh? Then how'd you do it?”

“Oh, I have my ways. But I'll warn you—it's a method you wouldn't be able to copy.”

Akira looked confused at first, but when he saw Carol's suggestive grin, he got the feeling he knew. And his suspicions were right on the money—Carol had indeed obtained the ammo through her “other job.” She'd team up with a high-ranking hunter, get them to share their ammo, and then bounce. It was a simple technique, but since the Hunter Office had no way of knowing the details, she wouldn't be caught as long as she didn't try to resell the ammo she obtained.

“Actually, Akira, you wanna team up with me?” she inquired.

“Why are you asking all of a sudden?”

“Teammates can share ammo between themselves without restrictions. If you team up with me, you'll have all the anti-force ammo you need.”

“And what'd be in it for you?”

“Isn't it obvious? I'd have a hunter as strong as you on my side, and one I can trust. It's a win-win situation for both of us.”

“And why can't you just team up with one of these rank 50 hunters you're so friendly with?”

“I keep my side job and my hunter work separate. Besides, do you really think

a rank 50 hunter would want to work with me?”

“You’ve got me there.”

“And besides, I want *you*, Akira. Not just because you’re strong, or even because you’re trustworthy. You saved my life. You protected me like you said you would. That’s why I’m inviting you.”

“I get ya.” Akira sensed she was making an earnest proposal and decided to answer honestly. He looked right into her eyes. “I’m sorry. I can’t.”

Carol looked dejected. “Aw, and I thought it was a pretty good offer. Am I really that hard to trust?”

“It’s not that. I’m just more suited to working solo.”

“Yet you took on a job with Elena and Sara.”

“Well, yeah. I was promised a big payout, and the job sounded easy, so of course I did. But I mainly work alone. I was by myself when we first met in the factory district, remember? That’s how I usually operate. So I’m sorry.” He looked genuinely apologetic.

She smiled, relieved that he hadn’t turned her down because he didn’t trust her or she wasn’t good enough. The tension in the air relaxed. “So I can’t win you over with sex appeal, and I can’t have you as a teammate either. I can’t even take advantage of your appetite, since you paid for your own meal this time. Guess I’m at a stalemate. I don’t think I’ve ever met such a tough customer.”

Akira grinned back. “It’s a wide world out there. Even people like me exist.”

“I’ll admit it—I lost this round. But at least hang out with me until we’re both ready to head out. Don’t just get up and leave as soon as you’re finished eating. Can you give me that much?”

“Sure,” he said with a small smile.

Carol smiled back, and the two of them chatted for some time as they finished their meals—again, anyone would’ve thought they were on a typical date. As the conversation went on, their discussion shifted to relic hunting and ruins.

“Whoa, there are ruins in the sky too?” Akira said, utterly fascinated.

“That’s right! Floating fortresses and other giant aircraft left behind from the Old World. There are all sorts of things above us here in the East.”

The skies in the East were cloudless, but sometimes shadows would inexplicably cover the ground when the atmosphere above seemed empty. One popular theory held that there were a number of invisible Old World structures in the sky. Another said the colorless fog sometimes became especially dense because these structures were scattering it through the air.

“Ruins in the sky, huh? I bet they have some *amazing* relics inside.”

“I’ve heard a ton of hunters out there have their eyes on those sites. Of course, such places are far more difficult to explore than the ones on the ground—they require a large group of hunters with exceptionally high ranks. I wonder if hunters are drawn to such places because of that ‘romance of adventure’ thing men talk about.”

“Romance of adventure, huh? I think I kinda get it. Maybe.”

“Maybe you’ll get it when you’re older,” she teased.

“You think?”

“Sure. If that’s where you’re headed, though, watch out. I’ve already had three clients from my side job who bragged about going, and none of them came back alive.”

Akira guessed from her smile that she was teasing him and grinned back. “Sure. I’ll be careful.” He secretly hoped that the ruin Alpha expected him to conquer someday was not one of those. “But how do you get up there, anyway? I mean, it’s in the air, so I know you have to fly.”

“If you know the location of the ruin, you can go to an airport on the western border and take a plane from there.”

Akira found that odd. “Why would you have to go so far away?”

“Why? I mean, it’s dangerous otherwise, right?”

“Huh?”

Carol judged from his expression that once again he was ignorant of what was generally common knowledge. She explained with a small smile that how deadly the monsters in the East were varied widely, but there were a few general trends. First off, monsters got stronger the farther east one traveled. Second, they inhabited the sky, not just the ground, and those that frequented higher altitudes tended to be more dangerous. Finally, these creatures were more likely to flock to larger, faster objects. In short, an object traveling through the skies of the East at high speed would be extremely likely to encounter some powerful monster. In particularly unfortunate cases, planes at lower altitudes would attract flying beasts from much higher up.

This was also the reason modern goods were almost never transported by aircraft in the East. Flying in the skies of the East was more or less suicide—as demonstrated by all those who'd died trying.

For this reason, aircraft were mostly prohibited from flying near cities. Entering a city's no-fly zone without permission was regarded as a deliberate attempt to lure a powerful threat to the city, and the latter's defense force was fully authorized to shoot the aircraft down. Moreover, flying straight up from the ground to a ruin in the sky was extremely dangerous—one was more likely to encounter a monster while flying up, where the more dangerous creatures were found, than when flying horizontally. And going slowly didn't help, since it meant one remained in a deadly monster's territory that much longer. So even if it seemed more involved, the safest way to take to the skies was to approach from the west, where the creatures in the sky were weaker.

As Akira listened, he fervently hoped that the ruin Alpha wanted him to visit one day was on the ground. He didn't ask her, though—he doubted she'd tell him, anyway.

Chapter 128: A Reason to Refuse

The sun had set, and Akira was in downtown Kugamayama waiting for Carol. The shops near the city walls, where they'd met earlier that day, were patrolled by security forces who didn't want any heavily armed individuals around; but here security was more lax, and he could arm himself a bit better. Besides his usual powered suit, he'd brought his two assault rifles and a pack full of spare ammo.

After some time, Carol showed up. "Did I make you wait long?" she asked.

"Nah, I just got here.' Is that what you wanted me to say?" He smirked.

"If you hadn't said that last part, you would've gotten a perfect grade," she said, smiling. "Well then, shall we be off?"

With Carol leading the way, they headed to where he was to meet with Tomejima.

As they walked downtown, they passed several men. Carol didn't draw as many stares as she had in the wasteland, but she still looked quite alluring. Instead of her Old World-inspired powered suit, she wore at present a more modest one-piece bodysuit. Its zipper track particularly stood out: made in a different color than the rest of her suit, it traced a line down from her neck to her lower region, wrapped around to the rear, and went up to the back of her neck. The shiny, slightly dense material of the suit emphasized her gorgeous body's lines and curves.

"Care to comment on my outfit?" she asked.

"Hm? Well, it doesn't look like a powered suit. Body armor, perhaps? And maybe you've got powered inner wear underneath?"

"Why'd I even get my hopes up?" she said glumly.

"What do you mean by that?"

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Thinking that her typical bold choice of attire might have put him off (and that he might prefer more modest women), she’d chosen an exceedingly tame outfit for their previous meeting in the shopping district—yet even then he’d seemed as disinterested as ever. So this time she’d tried to strike a balance by keeping her sex appeal somewhere in the middle range. But in the end, this hadn’t made a bit of difference.

I should’ve known a mere change of clothes wouldn’t be enough to hook him. Back to the drawing board, I guess.

Mentally, Carol was tearing her hair out—Akira was unlike any male she’d conquered thus far. Yet that in itself made him so fresh and fascinating.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret,” she said with a coquettish grin. “I’m wearing this because I’m prioritizing you over everyone else. If I wore my regular powered suit here, men would climb over themselves to get to me, and I wouldn’t be able to guide you to the meeting. It’s all for you, Akira.”

“Sure, thanks,” he said indifferently.

She smiled bitterly in resignation.

She ended up bringing him to the bar Shikarabe had previously invited him to. Akira recognized the building and frowned.

“This place again? If a hunter’s age isn’t supposed to matter, then why does everyone want to meet up in bars like this?”

“Oh? Now, *there’s* a surprise. I didn’t think a little thing like a bar would intimidate you.” She wasn’t just teasing—she really was surprised.

He sighed. “Well, last time I was here, I almost got thrown out ‘cause I’m underage.”

“Oh, I see what you mean. Well, that won’t be a problem today,” she said confidently. “Now c’mon, let’s go in.”

They entered the bar together. The barman was behind the counter, just as before. His eyes only narrowed when he saw Akira come in, but when he

noticed Carol next to the boy, the man's expression hardened.

Carol saw this. "Aw, c'mon, can't you look a little happier to see me?" she teased.

"Wh-Why are *you* here?" the barman stammered.

"Just as a guide, a mere chaperone. A fellow named Tomejima's supposed to be here—do you know where we could find him?"

"Second floor, in the back," he muttered.

"Thank you. C'mon, Akira."

"H-Hey, please don't make a scene this time, seriously," the barman pleaded nervously.

"I won't do anything, I promise," she replied with a smile. "Neither will Akira here. Don't worry."

"R-Really?" The barman relaxed.

"Although I can't guarantee someone else won't."

"What?!" he exclaimed, tensing up once more.

"So I guess you just gotta hope the other party knows how to behave!" she said cheerfully. "All right, Akira, this way."

As they walked away, Akira turned back to look at the barman, who seemed worried—too worried to be concerned with Akira being underage.

"Carol, did something happen here before?" he asked.

"Oh, a minor commotion cropped up during my side job. I wasn't to blame."

"That's not how it seemed based on his reaction."

"Something also happened while you were here last time, and that wasn't your fault either, right? Same thing."

Akira couldn't argue with that, so he dropped the issue. They headed up to the second floor. The barman's gaze anxiously followed the two of them up the stairs.



Tomejima sat in the back of the bar's second floor, looking equally nervous and irritated.

"Relax a little, why don't you?" Viola said. She sat next to him with a mocking grin. "Lose your cool, and you won't be able to close the deal—even after I set everything up for you."

That irritated Tomejima even further. "I know. Now shut the hell up!" he snapped, then exhaled a long breath to calm himself. It worked somewhat, yet when he spoke again, his tone to Viola was no less harsh. "I might've agreed to let you come along, but don't you dare pipe up and cause any trouble. If you do, I'll hold you responsible. Got it?"

"Loud and clear. These lips are zipped *regardless of what happens today*," she said with a smirk.

Her cheeky response made Tomejima wonder if her silence might actually backfire on him in the upcoming meeting. He panicked for a moment, but quickly shook his head and put it out of his mind.

Calm down, Tomejima. This negotiation's no big deal. As long as she doesn't try to stir the pot, it should go just fine. And since we're at this bar, Akira won't cause any trouble either. Hopefully.

Tomejima had chosen to meet here for a reason. He'd done some light research on Akira and, to his horror, discovered that the boy had once headed to an enemy gang's base all alone and killed nearly everyone there. But Tomejima had also seen Akira hesitate to kill Kadol here, and the man was hoping that something about this bar had kept Akira's finger off the trigger.

Plus, I hired Viola to make sure Akira won't harm me. She's a conniving witch, but she knows her stuff, and her negotiation skills are the real deal. No need to worry—this'll work out just fine, he reassured himself again and again, as though trying to make himself believe it was so.

Then Akira and Carol appeared from the stairs. The moment Tomejima saw them, he leaped up from his seat, a cordial smile plastered on his face.



Akira sat down in front of Tomejima, unsmiling. "So, what are we

negotiating?” He didn’t seem angry, but didn’t sound like he was in the mood for discussion either.

“O-Oh, yes,” Tomejima said, smiling so that his fear wouldn’t show. “First off, I’m sure you’re already aware, but I didn’t call you here to ‘negotiate’ so much as to apologize for the trouble one of my men caused you.”

“I wasn’t told anything like that. I just heard you wanted to make a deal with me.”

Tomejima threw a startled look at Viola, who covered her mouth with her hand as if to say, “You told me not to speak, remember?” But it was clear from the look in her eyes that she was grinning.

Tomejima bit back his rage. He knew if he blew up on her here, he might ruin the meeting, so instead he took another deep breath to calm himself down. “I see. I’d have thought someone would’ve already informed you by now, but anyway, I trust you recall when one of my men caused a scene here previously? Well, I apologized to Shikarabe and his buddies about that, but I never apologized to you.”

Akira didn’t even so much as say, “Go on.” He just stared at Tomejima, unblinking.

“You’re probably wondering why I haven’t done so until now,” Tomejima continued, trying to keep the mood friendly. “Well, to be frank, at first—and I am sorry for this—I thought you were a no-name hunter Shikarabe had only hired to fill out his team. But just recently I learned how wrong I was, and how strong you really are! The moment I realized this, I scrambled to make these arrangements to meet you as soon as I could. When I said I wanted to ‘negotiate,’ you see, I meant it in more of a figurative sense. I do business with many hunters, you know, and it’d be bad for business if word got around that I was some jerk who neglected to apologize to a hunter I wronged. So it’s a ‘negotiation’ in the sense that I want to make sure things are square between us.”

Akira seemed to be listening, yet showed no reaction whatsoever.

By this point, Tomejima was getting nervous, but he didn’t let it show. “In fact, I heard your girlfriend’s planning to set up a relic shop. As a token of my

apology, let me help. Opening a business is expensive, right? I'll pitch in as best I can to help fund the operation. How does that sound?"

"Oh, is that all?" Akira replied.

Perhaps if Tomejima had simply answered, "Yes, that's all," everything would have ended smoothly, just as the businessman wanted. But he interpreted Akira's lukewarm response as dissatisfaction and made the wrong call.

"A-All right, fine." He set an envelope on the table and pushed it toward Akira with the open end facing him so the boy could see the money inside. "Here's a million aurum. I'm aware this is probably chump change to an accomplished hunter like you, but to someone like me, it's an enormous sum. Consider it a sign of how dedicated I am to putting this incident behind us. What do you say?"

"You want me to take the money and pretend like it never happened?"

"Yes, that's right. Do we have a deal?"

Here, Tomejima made his second mistake. Perhaps if he'd answered, "Not quite," and taken the time to correct Akira's slight misunderstanding, things might have turned out different. But he unthinkingly confirmed that Akira's interpretation of his words was correct.

Akira scowled. "Hell, no." The boy stood up from his seat with a clatter, turned on his heel, and headed for the exit.

"W-Wait!" Panicked, Tomejima tried to stop him. "W-Was that not enough? H-How much do you...?"

Akira turned back around to face him. The daggers in the boy's eyes shut Tomejima up.

"That's not the problem," was all he said before disappearing down the stairs. Carol followed him with a smile, leaving behind only Tomejima, frozen in place, and Viola, desperately trying to hold back her laughter.



As Akira stormed out of the bar, Carol addressed him with a smile. "Hey, why'd you leave? I'm pretty sure you could've gotten anything you wanted out

of him.”

“His guy tried to kill me back then. Like hell I’m gonna accept a bribe to pretend it didn’t happen,” he spat.

However, Akira had jumped the gun—the businessman actually hadn’t been asking him to go that far. All Tomejima had needed to say was “The incident wasn’t my fault; it was Kadol’s. I’m not to blame whatsoever. But I brought him along, so I’d like to apologize for that.” In this case, Akira would’ve accepted his apology. But to Akira, it had sounded like the man wanted him to forget the confrontation had ever happened, and Tomejima himself had hastily confirmed this. So while Tomejima had only meant “get rid of any hard feelings between us,” Akira had thought the man was suggesting that an attempt on his life was so insignificant that it could be erased with money.

That had ticked him off.

“Just to make sure, I’m gonna get my info like you promised, regardless of how that meeting went down, right?” Because he was so upset, his tone toward Carol sounded harsher than he intended. He knew she’d done nothing to deserve his ire, but he was in such a bad mood he didn’t feel like waiting to calm down before asking.

But Carol just grinned. “Absolutely. Even if the informant decides you don’t get the info because negotiations went sour, don’t worry—I’ll make her hand it over.”

“O-Oh, really?” Startled, he forgot all his anger.

“Back in the factory ruins, even the allure of coron wasn’t enough to change your mind, right? Of course a measly million aurum wasn’t gonna sway you.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess so.”

“I’ll get the info from her,” she reassured him. “Don’t worry.”

“O-Okay. Thanks.”

“Oh, and a guy named Kadol tried to kill you, correct? Should I ask her to get his address and send it over to you along with the info?”

“Nah, no need for that. I told him that if I ever see him again, he’s dead meat,

but I'm not gonna go out of my way to find him." In fact, Akira had completely forgotten about Kadol until he'd been reminded of the incident—perhaps even if he *had* seen Kadol since then, he wouldn't have remembered him and so wouldn't have done anything to him. "Even if I run into him in the future, I might let him go, depending on my mood. But he tried to kill me, so it's up to me whether he lives or dies. I just don't want anyone interfering from the sidelines." Even Akira hadn't fully realized why he'd walked out on Tomejima, but now that he'd said it out loud, it was all clear to him. His mood finally returned to normal, and the scowl disappeared from his face.

Carol was still in good spirits—so good, in fact, that now that he'd calmed down enough to notice, Akira found her excessive cheer unusual. "So that's the way you think, huh? Now I get it," she said. "I can get behind that—basically, once you've made a promise, you don't go back on your word for anything, money or otherwise. That's why you're so selective about what you agree to."

"Uh, I guess?" He sounded a little unsure, but didn't deny it.

"Oh yeah, that's got to be it. I'm sure of it," she said, sounding more hopeful than certain, but Akira didn't pick up on her tone. She bought a drink at a nearby vending machine and tossed it to him. "Well then, I suppose this is where we part ways. I'll get the info on the pickpocket from my friend and send it over to you as soon as I can. And it's not much, but consider that drink a token of my apology for involving you in something that put you in a bad mood."

"You're right, it's really not much," he said with a small grin, intending to make a joke.

Carol went right along with him and grinned back. "Oh? But even if I offered to treat you for real, would you really let me?"

Akira remembered her earlier quip about how she couldn't seduce him with sex appeal or by covering his food (since he'd paid for his own). He wasn't sure now if she was talking about treating him to food or...something else.

"Sorry, I'll pass," he said with a smile.

"You really are a tough customer, you know that? Oh well, suit yourself. Later, then!" With a parting smile and a wave, Carol walked away.

Akira headed home. Sipping the drink Carol bought him as he walked, he seemed to be in a much better mood.

Alpha observed his expression intently.



Back at the bar, Viola smiled at Tomejima's miserable expression. "Aw, sorry. Looks like that didn't go as planned, huh? That's why I recommended you let me handle it."

"That's enough out of you! That kid didn't even know why he was invited here! Care to explain that?"

"You don't need to know the details of a negotiation until you sit down at the table. When you hired me, you told me not to say anything unnecessary, right? In fact, you ought to be praising my skills for getting him to sit down in front of you without knowing what he was even here for."

Tomejima glared at Viola, but her smile didn't falter.

"So how would you like to proceed?" she continued. "If you want to set up another meeting with Akira and try again, I can make it happen. But I'll warn you: since the other party's attitude will make it harder, the fee will be much higher."

"Do you really think I'd be stupid enough to request anything else from you?"

"Hey, no one's forcing you. I offered out of the goodness of my heart, but if you don't want my help, that's that. Bye." A moment later, she was gone.

Tomejima remained alone in the bar, his face wracked with anxiety and anguish.

After leaving, Viola headed straight to her office, located inside an apartment building near the downtown area. She stared out the window at the bustling streets, waiting for a certain someone to arrive. After a while, she heard the door open. "Welcome," she said with a grin.

Carol entered the room, looking especially cheerful.



As Akira and Tomejima talked upstairs at the bar, Kurosawa and Shikarabe were hanging out on the first floor. One had left Druncam, and the other remained; but their relationship as fellow hunters and longtime friends had persisted. They occasionally got together like this to catch up, share info, and enjoy drinks together.

When Shikarabe told Kurosawa about what had happened in the Mihazono factory ruins, Kurosawa set down his glass, frowning. “Sounds to me like things are about to get heated at Druncam again.”

“Well, yeah,” said Shikarabe. “Although negotiations with the city are up to the syndicate’s bigwigs, so that’s their battle to fight.”

“I’m talking more about the power struggle *within* Druncam. The desk jockeys’ golden goose, their star team of rookies, succeeded in their mission to secure the Serantal Building. Since the city offered that job, I figured this success would more or less guarantee the pencil pushers’ position within the organization,” Kurosawa said. He spoke offhandedly—after all, it was no longer his concern. “But now, I’m not so sure.”

“You’ve got some balls saying that, considering *you* led that operation,” Shikarabe said with a wry grin.

“Hey, work is work,” Kurosawa replied cheerfully. “And you can’t take personal feelings along with you on a job. You get that, right?”

Hunters had to set their private likes and dislikes aside during assignments, but the two of them still had their own views on things. The veterans drained the dregs of their glasses in one go. They ordered another round, and then the mood of the conversation changed.

“Y’know,” Kurosawa picked up the thread of what he’d been saying, “your team’s bounty capture in Mihazono will cancel out all those accomplishments the desk jockeys have been working so hard to rack up. That basically guarantees this dumb power struggle’s gonna rage on.”

“Yeah, I know,” Shikarabe assented after a slight pause. The longer Druncam’s factions were at war with each other, the more the organization would suffer. Shikarabe was aware that the results of the Mihazono job would only fan those flames. But he wasn’t like Kurosawa—he could never abandon his personal

feelings completely and accept a commission to command an enemy team.

At that moment, they both noticed Akira and Carol leaving the bar together.

Kurosawa was the first to comment. “That the kid who you said took out this Monica woman?”

“Yeah. And according to him, he has no clue how he did it.”

“Doesn’t matter—he did it. Even if it was just a fluke, luck’s a big part of being a hunter. Still, she was fielding Old World gear, right? If he really took her down with one punch, I highly doubt luck had anything to do with it.” Kurosawa grinned, but then his expression became serious. “He was really that strong, though? In the brief period I spent around him, he never gave me that impression. And that’s not the first time my intuition’s been off either... Maybe it really is getting rusty? I gotta watch out if that’s the case.”

“Not the first time? What happened?”

“Well, during the Serantal job, I commanded a team of rookies led by that kid Katsuya—”

Shikarabe’s face immediately darkened. “I don’t want to hear that name. The bitter taste in my mouth’s gonna make my drink taste awful.”

“C’mon, this is serious! You’ve been talking about doubting your intuition recently too, so I think you’ll want to hear this.”

Now Shikarabe had no choice but to hear him out. He took a sip of his drink and leaned forward.

“Before,” Kurosawa began, “you were worried your intuition was growing dull because you misjudged Akira’s true strength, but I think there are just some outliers in the world. It’s not your intuition that’s out of whack, it’s the person.”

Shikarabe wanted to argue that his doubts began precisely *because* Akira’s case wasn’t that simple, but let Kurosawa continue anyway.

“But that Katsuya kid’s different. His case is far too bizarre, no two ways about it.” With a grim look on his face, Kurosawa elaborated further.

He believed Katsuya’s case was the opposite of Akira’s. Shikarabe doubted his own intuition because he’d misjudged Akira’s strength, and because his gut told

him that Akira was much weaker than his actual performance suggested. But to Kurosawa, Katsuya seemed *stronger* than he actually was. Not that Katsuya was weak—in fact, by Kurosawa’s estimation, he was probably just as strong as Akira. And because Katsuya was so talented, he would undoubtedly grow even stronger in the future. If that was all there was to it, Kurosawa might have pegged Katsuya as an outlier like Akira—someone who was just more skilled than anyone else.

But something else had happened that sheer talent alone couldn’t explain. During the Serantal operation, Katsuya’s unit under Kurosawa had moved with outstanding synergy—*too* outstanding. The individual members of the unit weren’t particularly capable on their own, and many, in fact, had shown themselves to be amateurs. But their coordination as a unit had been incomprehensibly high, as seen, for example, in the way they’d advanced on the enemy in perfect synchronization, with impeccable timing.

“I’m sure I don’t need to explain this to you, Shikarabe, but movements that precise can’t be pulled off just because you have a talented commander. One’s subordinates need to be skilled as well. A leader can give orders that are as precise as he wants, but if the ones on the receiving end are fools, they won’t accomplish shit.” Kurosawa buried his head in his hands. “Even if *I’m* the fool and just can’t recognize Katsuya’s talent as a commander, there’s no way I’d mistake the skill level of the rest of the unit. What the hell’s going on?! This is something way beyond what a dull intuition could explain. Dammit...”

A skilled commander needed to perceive and understand what his men were capable of. So as Kurosawa voiced his doubts, he realized even more acutely how serious the situation felt to him, and his expression became grim. Until that operation in Mihazono’s business district, Kurosawa had been confident in his ability to assess his underlings. But now he wasn’t so sure.

“Shikarabe, can you shed any light on this? You were assigned to lead—or rather, mentor—Katsuya’s group at one point, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, but I never had him lead a unit that big. I used to let him take charge if it was a unit with only a few people, but nothing on the scale you’re talking about.”

“But you’ve got to have *some* insight, right? Maybe something you wouldn’t be able to tell outsiders?”

“Even if I did, you left Druncam—you’re an outsider now too, buddy. There’s only so much I can say.”

“I don’t need the details. I just want to know if there’s some reason Katsuya’s unit is so eerily unified.”

Kurosawa sounded desperate, so Shikarabe considered for a moment. “Hmm... Well, I know they got brand-new gear just recently. The desk jockeys secured a deal with some big corporation—Kiryou, was it?—to supply Katsuya and his unit with powered suits so new that the designs are still in development. I think they’re called ‘all-in-one support suits’ or something. Maybe that’s why?”

“All-in-one support suits, huh? Sure, if the hunters’ powered suits were adjusted for a team setting, their mobility might get better. But could a suit really make them do what I saw? I mean, I looked over their gear specs before the operation, since I was their commander, and those suits didn’t look *that* capable. I even saw some rookies struggling to move with the rest of the team because their suits couldn’t keep up.”

“Like I said, it’s probably something they can’t divulge to outsiders. I’m guessing that Kiryou or whoever issued these suits to the rookies as a way of testing their product line. They probably want to advertise, ‘Even rookies can fight like pros if they wear our suits!’” Initially, Shikarabe had just tossed out this idea as the first possibility that came to mind, but the more he considered it, the more likely it seemed. “They probably sent you specs that were much lower on purpose. In reality, I bet the company lent Katsuya’s unit some special next-gen model. And you said some were being held back by their suits? I bet that’s ‘cause the supplier didn’t have enough of the new suits for everyone, so some in the unit had to settle for the older models with specs like the ones you saw.”

“I see. So that’s it?” Kurosawa had just wanted a reason that made sense, so he accepted Shikarabe’s guess with little scrutiny. “By issuing them ridiculously high-powered suits, and eliminating the team members who impeded their

coordination, they were trying to boost the unit's synergy? I mean, I guess I can see that."

"'Eliminating'?" queried Shikarabe. "What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, well, since I was in charge of Katsuya's unit during the business district operation, I also had access to previous battle records that are normally classified by Druncam. Some of their positions had been assigned so recklessly I can only conjecture that someone was deliberately trying to get them killed."

Kurosawa had reviewed Druncam's records from the hypersynthetic snake battle. He'd noticed that a girl named Lily had suddenly been reassigned immediately after she'd gotten into an argument with Katsuya. Then, during the battle, she'd charged at the gigantic serpent and lost her life. Her superior, one of the desk jockey execs, had issued the reassignment—resulting in her death. And Lily wasn't the only one who'd been moved around—Kurosawa had noticed several other similar reassignments as well.

He offhandedly suggested to Shikarabe that the superior on the field might have reassigned to the front line anyone who went against Katsuya and risked compromising the unit as a whole, then goaded them into making a reckless advance. If the person succeeded, Katsuya could take the credit. If they failed, the desk jockeys could use their death as a pretext in the future to remove any other teammate who opposed Katsuya (and to the desk jockeys themselves, who were controlling the rookies through him) by claiming they'd be a liability to the team.

Naturally, that made Shikarabe grimace. "They'd really go that far?"

"Well, just from the records, the coordination of Katsuya's unit dramatically increased after the ones who disobeyed his orders and just charged in died. So I can't say it wasn't an effective strategy, at least."

"C'mon, you know that's not the problem here. In the worst case, a scheme like that could've wiped out the entire unit. You're telling me they'd put the whole team at risk just to get rid of a few dissenters?" In that case, the desk jockeys would strangle their own golden goose—Shikarabe couldn't see how that would help them at all.

But Kurosawa had an immediate answer. "They probably just don't see the

risk involved. After all, these are people who've hardly gone out in the wasteland, making all their decisions from within the safety of the city. They don't get how easily someone can make a bad judgment call during battle because of fear or overconfidence."

Shikarabe didn't respond—he knew this was entirely plausible.

Kurosawa fixed him with a stern look. "I don't want to die because some organization decided it was convenient. That's why I left Druncam—I knew if I stayed, that's eventually what it would come to. Watch yourself, Shikarabe! This 'power struggle' you're involved in is just as dangerous."

"I know, I know," Shikarabe grumbled.

For a while, neither of them said anything else as they finished the drinks in their glasses. Then, after a sigh, a grin came to Shikarabe's lips.

"Changing the subject, would someone wearing a combat suit that was designed to look like a maid outfit count as a maid to you?"

"What? A combat suit that looks like a maid uniform? What are you talking about?"

"Well, I know you have a weird thing for maids and all, so I figured I'd ask. During the mission in Mihazono, there was a woman who looked like she was wearing a maid outfit on my team. So what do you think?"

"Nah, that's not a maid. Real maids gotta be doing maid work—otherwise it ruins the whole impression, you know? I bet she's just a hunter wearing an Old World maid outfit as combat attire."

"No, I think she's the real deal. She followed this girl named Reina around everywhere. But then again, I don't know the details. On the surface, at least, she's registered as a hunter belonging to Druncam."

"I heard that there was a woman in Druncam who wore a maid outfit, but is she really an honest-to-goodness maid? Hard to believe..."

"There wasn't just one, actually. There were two. Although only one of them acted like a real maid."

"Two?!" Kurosawa started. "You're saying there are *two* maids in Druncam

now?! What the hell happened after I left?!”

“Oh, a lot, believe me.”

“A lot? C’mon, I need to know! Tell me the details!”

Shikarabe had intentionally picked a foolish topic so that he could relax and enjoy the rest of his time drinking with his friend. Seeing Kurosawa’s eager reaction, however, he got the feeling he’d made a mistake. Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do about that now.

Chapter 129: A Hotheaded Hunter

Akira was about to leave the house to go retrieve the information he'd been promised about the pickpocket. He'd been shocked to see the address Carol had sent him, but after getting what he'd wanted despite having ruined the meeting with Tomejima, complaining hadn't felt right to him. So he'd kept his mouth shut.

But considering the destination, he was coming fully armed just in case. He wore his powered suit and carried his two assault rifles, and his pack of spare ammo was stowed in his desert vehicle. Just before leaving the garage, however, he got a call from Sheryl.

"Hey, Sheryl. What's up? If you're wanting me to stop by, sorry. I'm busy at the moment."

"Oh, is that so? W-Well, I was thinking about going to Shijima's to negotiate with him about the relic shop and was wondering if you could come with me. But if you're busy, perhaps another time."

Sheryl and her gang had been at odds with Shijima's gang, but afterward they'd formed something of a partnership. And when Akira had crushed Yazan's gang and Sheryl had then sold Yazan's former territory to Shijima, this relationship had become stronger.

Sheryl's gang had grown considerably since its founding, but they still lacked the power and influence to manage a relic shop on their own. Perhaps if Akira had lived at the base with them, things would have been different, but Sheryl knew that would never happen. So she planned to ask Shijima for help instead.

Since her gang still lacked influence in the slums, Shijima would definitely scoff at her if she just went up and asked on her own. But if Akira was with her, the gang lord would surely change his tune. Akira wouldn't even need to say anything—his presence alone would be intimidating enough.

But if Akira was busy, then there was no helping it—she'd have to wait for

another time. She was about to hang up when Akira said something unexpected.

“Oh, if that’s the case, then yeah, I’ll come with. I’ve got business with him myself. I’ll come pick you up.”

“R-Really? Thank you! But wait, you have business with him?”

“Yeah, so it seems.”

Carol’s message, after all, had told him to head to Shijima’s base.



Shijima was on the phone, looking furious. “Viola! What the hell do you mean, ‘Akira knows about the plan’?! What the hell happened?!”

“Jeez, you’re too loud. Is that any way to treat someone who thought enough of you to warn you beforehand?”

Viola’s jocular tone infuriated Shijima even more. But gradually his anger gave way to fear. “Bullshit! I thought I put a stop to all that a while back! Why is it coming back to bite me *now* all of a sudden?”

“I know you’re thinking you didn’t directly order anything, that you just spread a few rumors. But even if you stop spreading things through the grapevine yourself, word can still get around.”

“Okay, but how did Akira find out I was behind it? Wait—*you* told him, didn’t you?!”

“So close. More accurately, I’m *about* to tell him.”

“*What?!?*”

Shijima’s face twisted in horror. But just before he exploded with rage, Viola continued.

“I’ve been sworn to secrecy, so I can’t tell you the details, but this is all the result of someone making a deal with Akira. I’ve got circumstances of my own, see. Sorry I can’t say anything more.”

“I’d really like to be able to tell you, but there’s no way to do it without betraying this person’s trust” was how this sounded to Shijima. Hearing her

excuse, he just barely avoided losing his temper, but was still furious.

“Whatever your ‘circumstances’ are, do you really think I’m going to let you get away with this?” he growled.

“No, I don’t,” came her reply.

This was the answer Shijima had expected to hear, and he calmed down somewhat. She probably had a plan in mind, he figured. If she had gone out of his way to call and tell him this, surely she already knew a way to resolve the situation amicably. There was no need to panic—she’d have everything under control.

“Okay, so what do you plan to do about it?” he asked.

“Like I said, I’m going to tell Akira everything. And I already told him to go to your place to get his info.”

“Excuse me?!”

“If you don’t let me off the hook, I’ll contact Akira the moment he arrives there and tell him everything. That’ll be the end of you and your gang. He and just three other hunters took down a bounty worth three billion practically on their own—I look forward to seeing how you and your gang fare against him.”

For a moment, Shijima was too stunned to speak. When he finally did, his voice sounded weak. “Three *billion*? You’re joking! Yeah, that was what the monster was worth, but Akira didn’t take part in that hunt! A syndicate in the city took it down, so what do you mean ‘him and three others’? Viola, I swear, if you’re screwing with me again—”

“That was a different hunt. A new bounty showed up in the Mihazono Town Ruins recently. Did you not hear?”

“If that’s true, I would’ve heard about it—and I haven’t, so it’s a lie.”

“It’s not been made official yet. Here, I’ll send you the info for free, as a special service.”

When Shijima read the file Viola sent him, his face paled. It was an excerpt from the city’s records of the Monica incident—and classified information, which made Viola’s claim more convincing.

“Viola... Are you planning to use Akira to crush me? Who hired you?” His voice was laced with panic.

“Now, now, let’s not jump to conclusions,” she said cheerfully. “I told you, right? That’ll only happen if you don’t let me off the hook.”

“What are you getting at?” he growled.

“Simple. If you *do* promise to let me go, I’ll head there right now and explain everything to Akira so that no one gets hurt.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

“It’s true that you’re the reason that Akira was mugged. But things can change quite a bit depending on how I explain it—for instance, I could just say this was just an unfortunate incident you never meant Akira to get caught up in, rather than a deliberate attack.”

Shijima thought hard. Assuming Viola wasn’t lying to him, he and his gang would be done for if he refused her. But perhaps she was just trying to intimidate him into thinking he had no other option, so that she could manipulate him at will. He certainly wouldn’t put it past her.

But he could think of another possibility, one just as frightening—what if she was deliberately trying to make him doubt her, turn her down, and seal his own fate? She’d look down on his corpse with that mocking smile of hers, say, “I told you so,” then tell others about his fate as an example to anyone else who tried to refuse one of her offers—and she’d do it without batting an eye. He was sure of it.

After he had agonized over it for some time, Viola cheerfully pressed him for a response. “Well? What do you say?” Whether she wanted him to accept or refuse, Shijima didn’t know, but he was certain that either way, she was enjoying herself. This made him even angrier.

Just then, he got a call from a subordinate. “Boss, Sheryl and Akira are here. They both say they want a word with you. What do you want to do?”

Shijima froze in horror.

“Aw, too bad. Looks like time’s up. Well then, it was nice knowing you.”

“W-Wait!” he shouted on the spur of the moment. He immediately realized his mistake, but it was too late—from that outburst, he’d already more or less agreed to Viola’s terms. The receiver remained silent, but he was certain that on the other end, the woman was smiling.



When Akira and Sheryl arrived at Shijima’s base, a subordinate guided them to the reception room, where they waited for some time.

“He sure is taking a while,” Akira muttered.

“Considering we apparently showed up uninvited, I’m not surprised,” Sheryl commented.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Hearing that Akira had business with Shijima, Sheryl had assumed that the other gang leader already knew they were coming. And since Carol had specifically directed Akira to come here for the information, the boy had assumed the same thing. But it seemed they’d both been mistaken—that much was clear from the look on the doorman’s face when they’d approached the base.

As they waited together on the couch, Sheryl stole a quick glance at Akira. *We showed up with no prior notice, and they still let us in, she thought. They’re treating us like we’re important—but I bet they would’ve turned me away if I’d come alone.*

She’d been admitted into the same room as Akira and was sitting on the same couch, but the differences in their statuses here were like night and day. He was right next to her—close enough that she could reach out and touch him.

So why did he feel so far away?

The moment she became aware of these unbidden thoughts, Akira’s figure seemed to shrink before her eyes, drawing away from her and into the distance—so far off that she knew she’d never be able to catch up. She felt scared, but even more she felt depressed, aware that Akira had earned six hundred million on his last job.

Without realizing what she was doing, Sheryl stretched her hand out toward him. But before she could touch him, Akira noticed.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

Her hand froze in midair. “Huh? O-Oh,” she said nervously, dropping her arm. “N-Nothing. It’s nothing. Sorry.”

They were right next to each other, yet Sheryl couldn’t even reach him.

“If you say so,” replied Akira, oblivious to the sensitivities of others.

Sheryl knew staying depressed wouldn’t solve anything, so she gave him a bright smile. “Come to think of it, what business do you have with Shijima?”

“Oh, well, I told you I nearly got mugged by a pickpocket, right? I’m here to find out more about that incident.”

“Find out more? You just ran into a thief in the slums, right? Was there more to it than that?”

“Well, according to what I heard, there was some secret motive behind it.”

At that, Sheryl’s brow furrowed, but just as she was about to ask for the details, Shijima entered the room.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting,” he said, and took a seat facing Akira and Sheryl, halting any further discussion between the two about the pickpocket.

Exuding an imposing aura as befitted a gang leader, Shijima casually observed Akira’s and Sheryl’s clothing. *A powered suit and two guns—an AAH and an A2D. They both look modded. If my intel’s correct, he should also have a CWH and a DVTs in his possession. My men already checked his truck, and they didn’t find any extra weapons. If his other weapons aren’t on him, that means he deliberately came here armed lighter than usual. So is he not planning to start a fight?* Following this line of thought, he determined Viola hadn’t already fed Akira any information that might rile him up—for now, the boy wouldn’t stir up any trouble.

Sheryl, though—if I’m not mistaken, her outfit’s made with Old World material. Maybe she just wants to look fashionable, but that stuff’s even more

bulletproof than body armor. I hope she's not wearing it because she expects a fight to break out.

He had a few questions, but rather than risk stirring a hornet's nest by searching for the answers, Shijima wanted to hear her out first. "Now then, Sheryl," he said, addressing her cordially. "Since you're a gang boss like me, you're up first. Why have you come to visit me today?"

"As I'm sure you're aware by now, I'm planning to open a relic shop here in the slums, and I'd love to have your cooperation. If I could have a moment of your time, I'd like to detail what we have in mind."

"All right, then, let's get right to it. How—?"

"No, before we discuss that, I'd like you to talk to Akira."

Shijima's smile stiffened. By dealing with Sheryl first, he'd hoped to stall for time until Viola showed up. But now Sheryl had given the floor to Akira. *Stupid girl, can't you realize I had you go first for a reason?! Unless—she saw right through me and did that on purpose?! Dammit!*

Akira found Shijima's reaction a tad unusual, but was otherwise oblivious. "I was promised some info and told it'd be here," he said. "Didn't anyone give you a heads-up?"

"Yeah, I know that much."

"Then hand it over."

"H-Hold up. Is there really any need to rush?"

Akira narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "It feels like you're trying to stall for time by not telling me anything, and that's pretty concerning." The look in his eyes grew warier until it bordered on hostile. He hadn't been thrilled to learn that someone had deliberately sent a mugger after him, and even though he'd trusted Carol enough to come here, his patience was seriously wearing thin.

Shijima's experience as a gang leader tipped him off to Akira's state of mind, and the man grew anxious. "Whoa, whoa, relax!" he said, attempting to pacify the boy. "You and I both know you're smarter than some third-rate thug. I'm sure you can see that it's stupid to start a fight over something you can get

peacefully with a little patience.”

But after living in the back alleys of the slums for so long, Akira had developed something of a victim complex. Even now, it had yet to fade completely—there was still a small part of him that assumed anyone trying to negotiate with him was trying to screw him over, and this made him quick to anger. “You know what? Forget it. I don’t need your info. I’ll just assume you’re the one behind it, and that’ll be that.”

He didn’t necessarily mean this as a threat. Yet it was more than enough to intimidate Shijima, and the man’s mask of composure cracked, exposing the fear within.

And Akira noticed.

“So you really did do it.” He now turned wholly hostile eyes on Shijima.

The gang boss’s panic intensified, but he disguised it with a dramatic sigh and acted put out. “Man, it’s because of that temper of yours that I have to bother explaining such a minor thing to you at great lengths. The info broker will tell you everything. She’s on her way here now, so wait until then.”

“Why does it have to be explained, and why here?”

“You’re suggesting we meet somewhere else, or that I just hand over the info with no context whatsoever? As hotheaded as you are, you’ll kill me immediately.”

Akira couldn’t argue with that, which took some of the wind out of his sails.

Shijima seized the opportunity to press him harder. “I already know that you picked a fight in a bar with a guy named Kadol. And he’s still on your shit list, right? So I gotta be careful around you.”

“Fine,” Akira said after some reflection. “I’ll wait. In the meantime, go ahead and talk to Sheryl.” He sighed deeply and calmed down somewhat.

Shijima breathed a discreet sigh of relief himself. “All right, Sheryl, let’s continue where we left off.”

Sheryl hesitated for a moment. “Okay.” She noticed how relieved Shijima was, but in the end she refrained from calling him out on it because she didn’t want

to stir up any trouble. “So, about the relic shop...”

Listening to her, Shijima occasionally threw cautious glances at Akira, all the while inwardly cursing Viola, who had yet to appear.



Meanwhile, Viola was leisurely sipping tea in the room of a building right next to Shijima’s base.

Carol, who’d come with her, gave her a wondering look. “Don’t you need to go, Viola? You’re making them wait.”

“So? Relax. I’ll just wait ten more minutes. If they haven’t all killed each other by then, I’ll head on over.”

“As considerate as ever, I see,” Carol said dryly.

Viola grinned. “You’re one to talk.”

“Well, I can’t deny *that*.”

The women exchanged conniving grins. They waited ten more minutes for any sounds of gunfire from Shijima’s base, and when they heard nothing, they left the building together.



A subordinate of Shijima’s announced Viola and Carol’s arrival. Shijima looked both irritated and relieved as he commanded the underling to bring them in. When Carol entered the reception room with Viola at her side, Akira’s eyes widened in shock.

Shijima saw this and immediately looked wary. “Akira, you know these women?”

“Yeah. Carol and I worked together in the Mihazono ruins, and I’ve seen the other woman once before too.”

“You don’t say.”

For a moment, Shijima suspected Akira and Viola might be working together, but then reconsidered—to him, Akira didn’t seem capable of such tactics. “This is Viola, an information broker,” he said. “She’s a real bitch, but she’s still alive

because she's good enough at what she does to be useful."

"How mean. Then I suppose you plan on killing me once I've outlived my usefulness?" she teased. But the look in Shijima's eyes remained dead serious. "Yikes," she went on. "Guess I'd better work hard to stay useful, then."

She strode over to Shijima and casually sat next to him. Carol stood behind the couch where they were seated, and waved lightly to Akira as if to say, "I'm on their side today."

"It's a pleasure to meet you—again, I might add, since this isn't our first encounter. I'm Viola."

"Akira. Now tell me why I was mugged."

"Simply put, some idiot went after a fake and ended up with the genuine article," Viola answered.

"Wha...?" Akira said, nonplussed. He certainly hadn't expected *this* answer.

With a pleasant smile, Viola set about explaining.

The slums had poor security, but so many people lived there that the place still needed law and order. The ones who made the laws, however, were the gangs: if you caused trouble on their turf, you were their enemy. And recently, someone had made their way through the back alleys and headed toward the lower district, indiscriminately firing a weapon so powerful that it was normally reserved for taking down monsters.

The gravity of this incident went beyond just the slums—in the worst case, the lower district's security could get involved, and the city could use what had happened as an excuse to raze the slums to the ground once and for all. Naturally, Shijima and the other nearby gang leaders had searched for the perpetrator—and had learned that it had apparently been Akira.

"Now, we say 'apparently,'" Shijima cut in quickly, "because not long after, we also heard this same person ran away from a group of kids in the lower district like a coward. Someone like that couldn't possibly have killed my men and dragged them to my base like you did. So it had to be someone pretending to be you."

Naturally, Akira found it hard to admit to the gang boss that no, it had indeed been him. So he stayed silent and listened.

Shijima added he didn't think it was too surprising for there to be an imposter Akira. One of the weaker children of the slums might have pretended to be Akira to escape the oppression of the adults, or maybe even to intimidate others into giving up their money. There were many reasons a kid might try this, and if anyone fell victim to a scheme on that level, it was their own fault for getting tricked. Normally Shijima would have ignored it.

But this incident was different. If Akira's impostor was rampaging around on gang territory, then Shijima couldn't let it slide—especially if this was all part of an elaborate scheme to pit the real Akira against him and the other gang lords of the slums. So he needed not only to locate the perpetrator but also to investigate why this had happened in the first place.

Yet countless kids all over the slums were Akira's age—finding the culprit wouldn't be so easy. So Shijima had tried to flush him out by orchestrating an incident of his own.

If this *was* all part of someone's scheme, the same thing might happen again. With that in mind, Shijima had spread rumors around to the local thieves, intending for them to target Akira's impostor. If the fake reacted by chasing the thieves down and firing his weapon like before, Shijima would have his man, and his gang would immediately move to crush him. And even if this fake turned out to have had nothing to do with the original incident, Shijima and the others could use his demise as a warning to all who attempted to wreak havoc on their turfs in the future. As long as Shijima showed everyone that he'd taken care of the problem, he'd save face as a gang leader.

"But one pickpocket screwed up and went after you instead. That was why you got mugged that day," Viola finished.

Akira thought this over, then looked at Shijima. "So basically, you *were* behind the attack, but you didn't actually mean to attack *me*?"

"That's right. It was my fault you got involved, but I didn't think anyone would be stupid enough to go after the *real* you. By the time they'd gotten close enough to take your wallet, they ought to have realized they'd be in trouble just

from one look at you.”

No, I probably looked weak enough to be a mark back then, he thought to himself. “If that’s all it was, why couldn’t you just tell me this like normal?”

“To someone who not only hauled the corpses of my subordinates to my base but also threatened to blame this whole incident on me because the conversation wasn’t going as smoothly as he wanted?”

Akira averted his eyes. Again, he couldn’t argue with this.

Shijima sighed. “I told you before, kid—even if the outcome of an event can’t be changed, the event’s context can completely alter what it means to you. You really need to open your ears when people are speaking.”

Akira sighed too. “All right, noted.”

Watching this, Viola found the boy quite amusing.



Once Akira’s business was concluded and Sheryl had wrapped up her discussion with Shijima for the time being, the two of them took their leave.

Shijima and Viola remained in the reception room, sitting opposite one another. Behind Shijima, the armed subordinates he’d brought for protection looked grave. Only Carol stood behind Viola, wearing a calm smile. It was clear at a glance which side had the advantage.

“Looks like that went well,” Viola said with a grin. “What do you think? Satisfied?”

“Like hell I am,” Shijima growled. “I could’ve handled all of this on my own if you hadn’t done anything unnecessary.”

“Aw, so harsh,” Viola said, mock-pouting—but wearing a knowing smile.

Everything Shijima and Viola had told Akira about the incident was accurate—except for the thought process and motive behind it. In truth, when Shijima had learned that Akira had backed down from Katsuya and the others in the lower district, the idea of an impostor had never even crossed his mind. Instead, he’d wondered if he’d actually been overestimating Akira all this time, worrying about him for nothing. To confirm his suspicions, he’d spread rumors through

town intended to bait thieves into targeting the boy. In the end, he'd concluded that Akira wasn't as strong as he'd thought, and since Sheryl had now gained some influence thanks to her sandwich shop, he'd planned to move ahead with assimilating Sheryl's gang into his own.

But then he'd heard Akira had scored big in the bounty hunts—and wiped out Yazan's gang all by himself. Shijima had reconsidered again, worried now that he'd been severely *underestimating* the boy. Before his plan could blow up in his face, he'd put a stop to the muggings and—until recently—had been relieved that he'd done so before Akira had gotten involved.

So when he'd learned that a plan he'd already scrapped was still going on without his knowledge, he'd found it rather suspicious.

Now, as they spoke, Shijima wanted to confirm whether Viola had played any role in the plan's revival—and in fact, she most certainly had. But she wasn't letting it show in her expression or behavior—since Shijima already thought of her as a conniving witch who held all the cards, she'd cleverly leaned into that impression by smiling knowingly and acting just like she always did. That way, his suspicions would remain just that—suspicions.

“Viola, I'm sure you know people tend to slip up when they're at their most confident?” he said.

He meant this as a threat, but Viola was completely unfazed.

“Yeah, I get that a lot. But in my experience, those that say it to *me* tend to end up dead first.”

Shijima couldn't tell if she really did know something he didn't, or if she was just bluffing. The presence of Carol baffled him as well: How capable was she? Was the gear she had on really as top-notch as it looked, or or was it just a ruse meant to psych him out? He spat on the ground to hide his mounting irritation. “Anyway, the job's over, so get the hell out of here.”

“Aw, kicking us out already? Can't we chat longer?”

“Out!”

Viola shrugged her shoulders and stood up. With Carol, she left the reception room.

She'd warned him before that without her help, his gang would be done for—and yet he'd been so fed up with her he'd kicked her out anyway. But then Shijima realized that this had likely been Viola's aim from the start, and his scowl deepened.



When Sheryl returned to her base with Akira, Aricia informed her she had a visitor. It was Tomejima, come to request that Sheryl mediate between him and Akira.

Akira thought for a moment. "Actually, Sheryl, can you ask him a few things for me?" He briefly detailed his recent meeting with Tomejima, then admitted that perhaps he'd been a bit too hasty. To make sure there hadn't been some misunderstanding, he gave Sheryl several questions to ask the businessman.

Sheryl had no reason to refuse, so she agreed with a smile. "Absolutely. Leave it to me!"

"Thanks. I'll be in that room over there, so if anything happens, you know where to find me."

As Akira headed to the room he'd indicated, Sheryl steeled herself. Akira had entrusted her with another important task, meaning this was a chance to prove herself to him. All fired up, she entered the room where Tomejima was waiting.

"I'm truly sorry for the wait," she said pleasantly. "Shall we get down to business?"

Tomejima was taken aback by how radiant her smile was—and by how determined she looked.

After they finished talking, Tomejima waited for the verdict. As Sheryl sat on the other side of the table, talking things over with Akira via her terminal, the man said a silent prayer.

"Yes, that's right," Sheryl was saying. "Mr. Tomejima wasn't trying to interfere with your right to decide whether Kadol lives or dies, nor does he think his death would erase what happened. Yes. Okay, I understand." She hung up with a small sigh, causing Tomejima's anxiety to skyrocket.

Then she smiled again. “Akira has accepted your apology. He no longer holds any resentment toward you regarding the Kadol incident.”

Tomejima exhaled in relief. “R-Really? Oh, thank goodness!”

“And yes, we’d be grateful to have your help with the relic shop. I’ll explain everything to Katsuragi myself.”

“Thank you so much! Oh, before I forget, here’s what I owe Akira as an apology, plus your pay for mediating for me.” Tomejima set an envelope bulging with money on the table and pushed it toward Sheryl. It contained two million aurum.

Sheryl pushed it back to him.

“Wh-What’s wrong? Is it not enough?” he asked, baffled.

“No, that’s not it at all. Akira said he doesn’t want any money, and I don’t feel like I earned this money just for mediating with him. So please keep it.”

“B-But—”

“Should you feel like your apology isn’t complete without paying us, please put it toward our relic shop instead. If our shop succeeds, Akira will be thrilled.”

“I-I see. All right, I’ll do just that!”

“In that case, please excuse me, as I’m going to have to take my leave here. I’m quite busy today, you see.”

“No, that’s no problem at all. I apologize for intruding on such short notice. Another time, then!”

Tomejima was on cloud nine. He couldn’t go back to Katsuragi, and he hadn’t had the guts to contact Viola a second time, so visiting Sheryl had been his last resort. And it had been an immense success—he even bowed to her in gratitude as he left the room.

Erio and the other officers, who’d been in the room with her the whole time, were shocked to see an esteemed businessman bow to the likes of a child from the slums. For the three of them, this was an eye-opening experience.

Chapter 130: The Warehouse

Sheryl and the others had stored the shop's wares—a massive stock of relics—in the warehouse. The building stood on the border between the slums and the city, but was still considered within the slums. That meant the level of security was also at slum standards. The many valuable relics inside would have been stolen in no time without someone standing guard. Well aware of this, Katsuragi and the other businessmen had employed security personnel to watch the warehouse.

Levin, one of the hired hands, sighed in irritation on the building's grounds as he kept watch. "Why the hell am I doing this?"

Naturally, he knew the answer. But remembering it certainly didn't make him feel any better...

After Akira and his companions rescued Levin's team during the emergency in Yonozuka, the latter ended up in the former's debt. But they were so afraid that Akira might come to collect the money by force that they chose to accept Katsuragi's offer to pay him on their behalf. This meant they no longer had the threat of Akira hanging over their heads, but they also had to accept a few conditions from Katsuragi first: they were obligated to buy all their gear and ammo from him, only hunt at the ruins he permitted, sell their relics at the outlets he approved, report their location to him, and more.

But for hunters saddled with enormous debts, such conditions were common—otherwise the indebted hunters might take the money from the relics they sold and use it for recreational purposes instead of paying off their debts, or even try to flee before everything was paid off. While Levin and his team thought Katsuragi's conditions were a tad harsh, they weren't surprised.

Perhaps if that had been the whole situation, Levin and the rest would've been able to pay off their debt in short order. But then came Katsuragi's scheme: the ruins he chose for them were always slightly above their current

skill levels, requiring them to upgrade their gear constantly. Moreover, Katsuragi persuaded them to buy more expensive gear by promising to lower their interest rate.

“I’m not gonna make any money off interest,” Katsuragi said. “And I have a vested interest in keeping you alive, so I don’t mind if you pay later. With better gear, you’ll earn more money, and you’ll be debt-free quicker. All I ask is that until then, you buy all your equipment from me.”

To Levin and his team, this didn’t seem like anything more than a plea from an average merchant desperate for some sales, and they saw no downsides. So they bought new gear—and sank even further into Katsuragi’s debt.

The high-powered equipment definitely gave their earnings a tremendous boost. Notwithstanding the help they’d received from Akira, they had already been skilled enough to make it out of Yonozuka alive without powered suits, so using such gear made their relic hunts even more productive. Katsuragi also showered praise on them after each expedition. With their confidence and abilities boosted, Levin and his team were eager to take on increasingly difficult ruins—and quick to purchase the increasingly more expensive gear Katsuragi recommended.

In the end, the money they earned mostly went to Katsuragi’s shop, and less and less of it was spent on paying back their debt. And when their ruin expeditions occasionally didn’t go as well as they’d hoped, the debt repayment was pushed back even further.

But Katsuragi kept recommending more gear to them, saying they could always pay him back with the sure-to-be-impressive earnings from their next hunts, and that they should just focus on earning as much as they could on the current one. Then, if they failed, he would tell them to buy even more powerful equipment so they could succeed at the next one.

Having tasted the nectar of excellent gear and huge payouts, Levin and his team forgot their sense of moderation and began taking bigger risks. If they lost one gamble, no big deal—they’d just make twice as much on the next one, right? So they kept buying better equipment—and their debt climbed higher and higher.

By the time Levin and the rest realized they were in trouble, it was already too late. Despite exchanging a ton of valuable relics, their debt had more than doubled from what it had been originally. True, their gear had made them much stronger, and it wasn't unheard of for debt-riddled hunters to threaten creditors with their strength. But this wasn't an option for Levin and company—Katsuragi had warned them that if they complained or tried to skip out on their debt in any way, he'd sic Akira on them.

They were trapped. Realizing this, Levin and the others had no choice but to pay back their mounting debt as best as they could, and they resolved to focus all their efforts and earnings toward paying it off from now on. But before they could visit any more ruins, they were roped into a new job: Katsuragi ordered them to guard the warehouse for the relic business. And saddled as they were with such an enormous debt, Levin and the others were in no position to turn him down.

Recalling all this, Levin sighed even deeper. What good was powerful gear when he was merely guarding a warehouse? Besides, now he and his teammates were prevented from going out and hunting relics on their own.

I didn't become a hunter to do ex-hunter work, dammit. The more he thought about this, the more upset he got.

Then several kids came into his view. They were all wearing the same kind of equipment—powered suits, at first glance. But these weren't really powered suits or even body armor, just regular clothes modeled after Akira's suit. Some of the children were even carrying heavy-looking backpacks that resembled Akira's, but which didn't actually have anything inside.

These kids were members of Sheryl's gang. Sheryl had ordered them to pretend to be Akira and to guard the warehouse in shifts, deterring any potential thieves. Katsuragi and his fellow businessmen had supplied the outfits.

Levin knew all this, since he, too, was guarding the warehouse, but they were really nothing more than walking scarecrows and would be completely useless in an actual fight. That Levin had been lumped in with these kids—and the fact

that he had no one to blame but himself—irritated him even more. Whenever they came near, he barked at them harshly.

“Hey, brat! Quit loitering around here!” he shouted to one kid who was passing nearby.

“Jeez, sorry,” the kid mumbled, and turned away looking angry.

The moment he did, Levin realized his mistake, and he blanched. This boy wasn’t one of the fake Akiras—he was the real one.



Akira had come to the warehouse at Sheryl’s request. But she hadn’t given him a specific task—she’d thought their bluff might be more believable if the real Akira was mixed in with the rest of the children, and so she only needed him to be present on the grounds.

She’d told him he was free to do whatever he wanted, so he was aimlessly loitering around. He looked no different from the other children who were slacking off and wandering away from their posts, which had incited Levin to yell at him. In a sense, the fact that he’d blended in so well meant Sheryl’s plan was working just as intended.

Akira roamed the aisles of the warehouse, looking at all the relics on the rows of shelves, when he glimpsed the kids outside, dressed exactly like him.

Alpha, since they can pass as my fakes, that means other people see me like I see them, right?

I suppose.

Figured. No wonder muggers still go after me.

Now able to see how he looked from his own perspective, he evaluated himself objectively and reconfirmed that, indeed, no one could tell how capable he was from his appearance alone. (However, even this objective opinion was filtered through Akira’s perspective. As a deterrent to normal thieves, the kids’ outfits were actually quite effective.)

I guess there’s no way around it—if I want to look strong, I need a bigger gun.

I can't keep fending off pickpockets every time I walk into town.

Choosing your weapons solely based on appearance isn't a good idea either, Alpha pointed out. *But, well, you've already ordered a gun that checks all your boxes, so we simply need to be patient.*

Right. Guess I just gotta hold out until then.

Akira had already chosen and ordered his new equipment, and was now waiting for it to arrive at Shizuka's. In the meantime, he was taking a break from the wasteland and helping prepare for the relic shop's opening.

The warehouse shelves were filled with many relics. Besides the ones Akira and the children in Sheryl's gang had collected, there were also a bunch from Katsuragi and his buddies. It was like a museum of the Old World, and since Akira rarely had a chance to look at relics other hunters collected, he walked down the aisles deeply fascinated.

As he turned a corner, he spotted someone else looking at the relics with just as much interest.

"These relics were probably taken from Yonozuka," the man murmured. "So I was right: that group back then was— Hm?" He noticed Akira, then looked surprised to see him.

"I know you," Akira said. "You're..." He searched his memory.

It was Dale, the hunter Akira had run across when relic hunting with Sheryl's gang in the Yonozuka Station Ruins. "Long time no see. Wait, you remember me?"

"Yeah. Your name was...Dale, right?"

"You got it! Wow, quite the coincidence to meet you here—or on second thought, perhaps not?"

Dale seemed to be implying something, but Akira looked confused.

"What do you mean by that?"

"If that's an act, then it's a mighty good one," said Dale. "Unless you really weren't involved?"

It would be more unnatural to know nothing at this point, Alpha observed, so act like you're playing dumb instead.

You mean pretend I don't understand? But I really don't know what he's talking about.

He realized we were collecting relics in Yonozuka that day, and that those relics ended up here in this warehouse.

Akira's expression hardened. Dale noticed the change on the boy's face.

You're letting your emotions show, Alpha warned.

And? What am I supposed to do about it?

Well, it's too late now, so just try to dodge the issue somehow.

Dale grinned. "Guess I was right."

"I'm warning you—don't go snooping around," Akira cautioned. "If there's any chance someone could think I leaked info to you, I'll silence you myself."

"Data on undiscovered ruins isn't something you can just hear about through the grapevine," Dale said. "If you knew about those ruins even then, you must have known someone with the connections to get that kind of intel. Maybe that Sheryl girl? She's the only one here wearing expensive-looking clothes, so I bet she's related to some corporation, or—"

"Like I said, don't ask me. It'll be a problem if someone thinks that info came from me. If you keep on like this, I'll have to take matters into my own hands."

Akira's threat made Dale finally back down. "A-All right, all right, I get it!" he said, shaking his head frantically. But then he grinned again. "I'm a hunter too, y'know. If you've got connections like that, I want 'em too. You understand that, right?"

"Sure, but—"

"Thanks to a crappy intermediary, I ended up on that job—and now thanks to another crappy intermediary, I'm guarding some suspicious warehouse on the border of the slums. So imagine what a godsend it is to run into you. I don't want to let this opportunity slip by, so please?"

Dale's plea sounded so earnest that Akira hesitated for a moment. The boy recalled that back when he'd encountered Dale's group in the wasteland, Guba had threatened Akira, but Dale had angrily silenced the other man. While this wasn't quite enough of a gesture to merit compensation, it did make Akira reconsider.

But then he had another thought: While Dale had already figured out a few things on his own, telling him any more than that wasn't Akira's call to make—it was Sheryl's. So he could let her handle it instead.

"One sec. I'm gonna talk to Sheryl and see what she says."

He took out his terminal and called her. Dale looked surprised but excited. He hadn't thought his plea would work at all, so to see things playing out so well fanned the flames of his anticipation even more.

Akira finished his call and put his terminal away. "She's coming here to talk to you. Handle the rest on your own."

"Seriously? Awesome! Thanks so much!" Dale was thrilled.

Akira had a feeling that just now he'd inadvertently set the other hunter up to be taken advantage of. But he didn't say anything to Dale—the boy wasn't *that* virtuous.



Sheryl headed to the warehouse in high spirits.

She'd asked Akira to blend in with the Akira impostors to deter any thieves, but if she was by his side, anyone would be able to tell which one was real immediately. So she'd chosen to do her work at the base instead. But if Akira was asking her to come, she couldn't avoid meeting him, right? Now that she had an excuse, it was fine to see him.

However, if she showed up by his side wearing a huge smile, she might give him away, so she reined in her enthusiasm on the warehouse grounds. As she approached Dale, she gave a smile befitting someone of a much higher status.

"Hello, Dale. It's been a while. Akira said you had something to discuss?"

Sheryl was wearing an outfit so nice that anyone could tell it was expensive at

a glance. And when she approached, Akira casually took a step back, as though handing the floor to someone much more qualified. These details both made Sheryl's disguise seem more believable.

Dale was stunned by the dignified aura she gave off. "Th-That's right," he replied after coming to his senses. His mistaken impression—that Sheryl was the daughter of some corporate executive—solidified even further in his mind.

Akira watched Dale and Sheryl from close at hand as they chatted, and was shocked at the skill with which Sheryl was handling him.

Wow... She's really something else, he commented to Alpha, his expression stiff. Had he not known the truth beforehand, he never would have guessed she was from the slums either. He was impressed by her acting ability—and frightened.

As she talked to Dale, she was cleverly wringing valuable information out of him. She casually asked him things like what the logos of the Old World corporations branded on the relics signified, what each might be worth based on its logo, and how to tell recent forgeries stamped with these symbols apart from the genuine products. All of this was information she'd normally have to pay a decent sum to learn, and she was coaxing it all from him with merely a smile. Moreover, Sheryl never gave Dale any accurate info on herself—and rather than dodging his questions or clamming up, she provided believable excuses, such as that she couldn't divulge info of the sort he was requesting to a temporary security hire. She expertly kept what she told Dale to a minimum, without raising his suspicions.

Of course, Sheryl's techniques were so effective partly because Dale was already desperate—desperate enough to divulge his own knowledge for free. But Akira thought Sheryl's knack for business was awe-inspiring—and terrifying.

She's not bad, Alpha agreed. *If she's already capable of that much, the relic shop should be pretty successful.*

Y-Yeah. Sensing that Alpha wasn't as impressed as he was, Akira calmed down.

In that case, as long as I'm careful around her, I should be fine, he thought to himself. He'd feared that perhaps Sheryl had also been manipulating *him* all this

time without him realizing it. But if Alpha didn't think it was any big deal, he was probably just worrying for nothing.

What Akira didn't know was that Sheryl was not only trying to conquer Akira with those skills of hers, she was constantly agonizing over how difficult a task it was.



As Levin continued patrolling the warehouse with a scowl, several people called out to him.

"Hey, Levin! What's with the frown?"

"Hazawa and Kolbe? Gimme a break! Why are *you* guys here?" he grumbled.

"Hey now, don't be such a grouch," Hazawa said with a grin. "We came to help."

"Help? Oh, you guys were put on security too, huh?"

"That's right. Now you guys can just take it easy. You ought to be more grateful."

"There's just two of you, though," Levin pointed out. "That's not gonna make a difference." Had they brought enough people to allow his team to duck out from time to time, they'd be able to rotate shifts at least every week and go hunt for relics when they were off duty. But with just two more people, that was out of the question.

"No, there's more than just us," Kolbe replied.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Four kids. Maybe five, I'm not sure."

Levin sighed. For a moment, he'd gotten his hopes up, which left him even more disappointed now. "What good are more kids gonna do? Add to the glut of decoys here? Seriously? Unless they're all as strong as the real Akira, don't even bother."

Kolbe responded to Levin's frustration with a small smile. "You could gather hundreds of children, and none of them would be as strong as that kid, I bet.

But according to Tomejima, these kids know how to fight.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I guess it’d be a problem if there weren’t a few strong decoys thrown in the mix.” But Levin’s mood didn’t improve—with such measly reinforcements, he and his team could never play hooky and head to the ruins.



There was another child in the warehouse besides Akira, and he didn’t belong to Sheryl’s gang. Tomejima had added him and several other children to warehouse security at the same time he’d brought Kolbe and Hazawa on board.

These children were also dressed like Akira. But they weren’t just wearing regular clothing—they had actual powered suits. Their weapons were also modded AAHs like Akira’s, and each one even had their own scanner. Unlike the other kids, they were actually suited up for combat, and they had experience fighting in the wasteland to boot.

This boy, named Tiol, was wandering around inside the warehouse. But he wasn’t slacking off like the other kids—he was sneaking about, trying to stay out of sight. He knew he’d be in serious trouble if anyone found out what he was doing.

Tiol had been paid to investigate the relics in the warehouse. He was checking each one on the shelves with his scanner and recording the information.

I knew it—these are all super valuable. Oh man, I’m in deep shit, aren’t I?!

The warehouse was located in the slums, where even the police were roughnecks. So while the money offered to him had been too good to resist, he couldn’t help but think that this time he’d crossed a line more dangerous than he could handle.

Just then, he heard a voice from behind. “You’re a new face. What’s your name?”

Tiol immediately whipped around in a panic. But then he received an even bigger shock—Sheryl was standing there, with Akira and Dale right behind her.



“You might be dressed like one of my kids, but I know you’re not. I’m not one to forget one of my member’s faces, and I’ve never seen you before.”

Tiol couldn’t manage a response. Sheryl gave him a smile, but her gaze grew suspicious. “And I believe I told all my members that they’re not to come in here without permission. So what are you doing here?”

Tiol stayed silent.

Sheryl’s eyes narrowed for a moment, but then she looked confused. “Um, hello? Can you hear me?”

Tiol was in a daze—he’d fallen for Sheryl so hard that he hadn’t heard a word she’d said. It was love at first sight.

Dale strode up to him and shook his shoulders. “Hey, kid! Are you listening?”

“Huh?! Wh-What’s going on?!” He came back to his senses, but now he really was too frightened to respond.

Sheryl had seen this type of behavior before and immediately realized he’d fallen in love with her. With a sigh, she lowered her guard—he no longer seemed like much of a threat.

“So, mind telling me who you are?” she said, forcing a smile.

“T-Tiol! I’m Tiol! Pleased to meet you!”

“R-Right... Look, that’s not what I mean,” Sheryl said, slightly taken aback by his enthusiasm. “You know what I’m really asking, right?”

“Huh? O-Oh, yes! Um, Mr. Tomejima put me on the security team starting today. Did he not tell you?”

“Oh, you’re one of his people, then. I see. But I believe they were all given specific instructions not to come in here as well.”

“S-Sorry.” He hung his head. But because Sheryl saw him as less of a threat now, she neglected to ask him whether he was apologizing for not having heard those instructions, or for entering even though he knew it was off-limits.

“At any rate, leave the building right this instant,” Sheryl ordered. “Understand?”

“Y-Yes, absolutely!” Tiol replied, and scurried away.

Sheryl watched Tiol leave, then turned to Dale and smiled. “The relics in this section are all incredibly valuable. So let’s see your talent for appraising—please estimate their worth.”

“Leave it to me! If there’s ever a point where I can’t make a living as a hunter anymore, I’m confident I could do so appraising relics. I’m sure I can be a huge asset to you in the future.”

“I’m expecting as much,” Sheryl replied.

Dale grinned, then went to work inspecting the relics.

“By the way,” he said as he worked, “that kid just now—he fell for you big time, huh?”

“It seems so. I was lucky enough to be blessed with beauty, so this happens often,” she replied.

Sheryl always tried to make herself as attractive as possible for Akira, so considering how she looked just then, Dale certainly didn’t doubt it. “This happens a lot, does it? That’s impressive. Although you probably find it weird, don’t you?”

“It’s not weird, or even a surprise. I’m used to it by now. But I don’t get it from everyone.”

“So you’re saying some people are immune to your charms?” Dale said, just as a joke.

But Sheryl fell silent. Worried that he’d struck a nerve, Dale quit speaking and focused on his appraisal. Akira, the only one who didn’t realize why the conversation had suddenly come to a stop, stood there looking perplexed.

And beside him, Alpha smiled like always.

Once Tiol was outside, he heaved a sigh. “Th-That was close... But I guess that means I’m in the clear?”

Under any other circumstances, that would have been the end of the line for

Tiol. Sheryl would have asked him why he was in the warehouse, and the fact that he'd been paid to snoop around would've come to light.

But Tiol falling head over heels for Sheryl had defused the situation. He hadn't been around girls much, so when someone as charming as Sheryl had spoken to him, his mind had gone blank. And upon regaining his senses, he'd panicked.

Both of these reactions had made him seem less of a threat in Sheryl's eyes.

Of course, he'd still entered a restricted area. But he'd kept them from finding out that he'd been hired to investigate the warehouse. Because Tiol had fallen in love with Sheryl, they'd thought he was just some foolish kid who'd stumbled into the warehouse despite knowing it was restricted, instead of a spy, and so he got to live another day.

But Tiol wasn't aware of any of this. He knew he'd had a close call, but he didn't realize just *how* close. Instead he recalled Sheryl's figure in his mind, and a dopey grin spread across his face. "Man, she was pretty. I didn't think girls that beautiful even existed!"

Tiol continued to smile and daydream about Sheryl, right up until Tomejima realized what had happened and stormed up to him, his face red with anger.



In a giant mansion on the border between the slums and the wasteland, a number of people were gathered around a long table. The room was lavishly decorated, giving the impression that the owner had immense wealth at their disposal.

Everyone sitting at the table exuded an air of importance, as of higher-ups in some organization. Some were bent over their terminals or watching the display on their smart visors, while others were staring at holographic images on the table or viewing something through their augmented vision. Each had their preferred methods, but they were all observing the same thing: the footage from inside the relic shop warehouse sent from Tiol's scanner.

"Didn't expect that many relics," one man said.

"And of such high value," said another. "How the hell did they get them all?"

“Probably because they’ve got that hunter Akira backing them.”

“Idiot, I know that much! I mean, what ruin did they get them from?”

“Judging from the lineup there, I’d say it had to be the ruins in Yonozuka, *duh*. Can’t you even figure that out?”

“The hell’re *you* saying? You think they could’ve nabbed so much in the middle of all that confusion? And Viola said this Akira was busy doin’ an emergency job from Druncam on the first day, so there’s no way he would’ve had time to hunt relics—right, Viola?”

All eyes turned to Viola, seated among them at the table. Apart from her, everyone at the table belonged to the upper echelons of Harlias, one of the two dominant gangs of the slums. Yet even faced with their stares, her calm smile didn’t falter.

“Actually, that emergency request came from Levin, a hunter in the area,” she answered. “And Akira was also helping a Druncam hunter that day. So you’re right—he couldn’t have collected those relics then.”

The man looked annoyed at being corrected. “Hmph. Well, who cares about the details, anyway? Akira couldn’t have gotten all those relics from Yonozuka. Bottom line.”

“But they’re right there in the footage, so how’s that possible?” said his peer.

“That’s why I asked *how* he got ’em, dumbass! Your ears on the fritz or somethin’? I know you sure as hell ain’t poor if you’re sittin’ at this table with the rest of us, so go get ’em repaired.”

“You wanna repeat that, shithead?!”

The two men at the table continued bickering. But before their argument could escalate any further, the person sitting at the head of the table—a man named Doran—tapped his fist on top of the table. The resulting sound wasn’t especially loud, yet the men immediately fell silent and straightened up in their seats, as if to show him they wouldn’t cause any more trouble.

Doran was the boss of Harlias, and from the nervous sweat on the two officers’ faces, it was obvious his title wasn’t just for show—he ruled his gang

with an iron fist.

“What’s important,” he said, his voice carrying as much authority as his status, “is that this ‘Akira’ must be capable enough to obtain all of these—and if so, he might continue to supply that shop with relics of the same quality, and in the same quantities. Most importantly, there’s a chance the store’s profits might fall into the hands of those Ezent hoodlums.”

“Y-Yes, boss,” muttered an underling.

“Those are the key points of this meeting, and they’re why I called you all here today. Any other discussion is pointless. Are we clear?”

“Y-Yes, boss.”

Doran’s piercing gaze then moved to Viola. “You have anything else for us? Like how they got those relics we saw in the video, for instance? Knowing that will give us an idea of how to proceed.”

“Sorry, that’s all I can offer at the moment,” Viola replied with a shrug.

“But you planted a spy in their ranks. You ought to have insider information.”

“I only planted him earlier today. I can’t get that kind of dirt so quickly—it takes time. If you don’t want to get caught, that is.”

Doran gave her a searching look. Viola smiled right back into his eyes, unfazed.

Tiol didn’t know Doran and his gang had received the footage from his scanner. For that matter, neither did Tomejima, or even the intermediary Tomejima had employed to hire Tiol and the others. If someone ever pried into how Tiol ended up on warehouse security, they’d never be able to trace him back to Viola. Even if someone tortured Tiol and made him talk, the names of Viola or Doran’s gang would never pass his lips.

It was a watertight plan, but it had taken time to set up.

“Why did you hire some runt from the outside as a spy?” Doran asked.

“Wouldn’t it have been easier to pay off one of Sheryl’s brats?”

“Perhaps it would have been in the past. But now that Akira’s wiped out Yazan and his gang, all those kids are terrified of him. No amount of money will

make them talk.”

“Hmm. By the way, how did Akira know Yazan was behind that incident? Who tipped him off?”

“No idea. It wasn’t me, that’s all I know.”

Even Viola found it odd that Akira had pegged Yazan as the culprit. He couldn’t have headed to Yazan’s base immediately after killing Zebra and the others unless he’d known where to go ahead of time, so someone had probably told him. But as to this “someone’s” identity, Viola couldn’t hazard a guess. This was another reason she’d hired an outsider like Tiol as a spy—even if her arrangements had taken longer, she’d wanted to take extra care and cover all her tracks to make sure her scheme wasn’t exposed.

Doran, for his part, just thought Viola was lying through her teeth. He was sure she’d leaked the information to Akira, manipulating him into killing Yazan so that her own involvement wouldn’t come to light. And Doran knew if she tried the same thing again, his gang would be the next target. His suspicious gaze told her as much.

But even a distrustful look from a powerful gang boss wasn’t enough to erase Viola’s smile. The other officers could hardly believe how calm she was.

“Well, that aside,” Doran said after a pause, “let’s get back to the matter at hand. Are you *sure* you have nothing else? I already know you told Shijima that Akira took down someone with a bounty of three billion, and you didn’t charge him for that info.”

“My, my—and after I gave him that intel out of the goodness of my heart. Loose-lipped men are so troublesome!”

Shijima’s gang actually occupied part of the territory of the Ezent family—the other gang dominating the slums—so he was technically under their control. Viola didn’t ask whether Doran had come by that information from Shijima directly or from some spy on the inside.

“Since you gave him a freebie, surely you can find it in your heart to throw us a bone as well?” Doran asked. His words carried an implicit threat: “If you’re giving free info to the Ezent guys and not us, that means you’re on their side,

and hence our enemy.”

Viola’s smile twitched for just a split second. “Fine, fine,” she said with a sigh. “Then I’ll give you a little something extra. That three billion you mentioned was only the officially announced amount. Druncam negotiated with the city to raise the bounty, so originally it was likely much less.”

“I get ya. An official bounty of three billion would make Druncam look better, no? But according to my sources, Akira was paid six hundred mil, which is quite the large sum. How do you explain that if the official bounty figure was inflated?”

“That’s a fair point. But since they had announced such a high bounty, wouldn’t it seem weird if they only paid Akira a pittance?”

“So you’re saying the woman he took down wasn’t actually worth three billion?”

“To begin with, Akira didn’t even accomplish the task by himself. Two Druncam hunters did most of the work, while he just provided ranged support. He dealt the finishing blow, but apparently it was a total fluke. I hear even *he* doesn’t know how he did it.”

“I see. Anything else?” Doran prompted.

But Viola shook her head. “That’s all you’ll get—for free, anyway. You want to know more, it’ll cost you.”

Doran’s face remained stern, and Viola kept smiling. For some time, they held each other’s gaze without a word.

The other officers in the room were silent. They all knew they would be mincemeat if they spoke up.

Finally, the gang boss’s expression softened. “No, that won’t be necessary. I have enough to go on now. However, I *will* pay you to do something else for me—I want you to get all the dirt you can on the Ezent family and what they’re planning. I already compensated you for your services today, so you should receive the extra amount shortly.”

“Consider it done. And I gotta say, I love clients who pay up front!”

“Now, then, the rest of this meeting concerns internal affairs, so leave.”

Several of Doran’s subordinates immediately appeared on Viola’s left and right.

“Oh? All right. Another time, then.” Viola stood up without further ado and allowed the grunts to lead her out of the room.

When she was gone, one officer looked at Doran worriedly. “Boss, you really think we can trust that woman?”

“I don’t trust her one bit,” Doran growled.

“Huh? Then why—?”

“I don’t trust *her*, but I trust her intel. She knows as well as I do that the accuracy of her information is the only reason we haven’t killed her yet.”

“Y-Yes, but—”

“What’s more, I only trust her facts. Opinions, guesses, or suppositions from her aren’t worth shit. Just now she threw some of her own guesswork in with her info, did she not? Never take those as fact.”

The officers at the table recalled what Viola had told them and frowned—they’d all accepted Viola’s guesswork just as readily as her information.

“But they’re not always entirely lies either,” Doran continued. “That’s where her sly nature comes in—the *intel* she provides is always accurate. Even if she mixes other info in with it to lead you to a completely different conclusion, the intel itself is trustworthy. Once you understand that, only *then* does she start to be of any use. Which is why we need to check for ourselves what’s fact and what’s fiction.”

“Yes, boss! I’ll get our men on it right away,” one officer said.

“Well, I understand why you guys would be apprehensive of a woman who likes to play with fire,” Doran added, a grin forming on his lips. “But if she ends up burning those Ezent bastards in the process, I’m willing to look the other way.” Then the glint in his eyes became dangerous. “The moment those flames reach *us*, however, she’s dead meat. And if there’s a chance that’s what she’s up to, we need to know, so I want this investigation to be *thorough*. Capisce?”

“C-Capisce, boss.”

“Now for our next order of business: we need to decide what to do about the relic shop—or more specifically, this hunter Akira. A war’s coming soon, and if possible, I’d like to have him on *our* side. But if he’s already in cahoots with the Ezent crew, we’ll crush him. That’s my plan—what do you all think?”

The officers voiced their own thoughts on the matter—and naturally, none of them dared to go against their boss’s opinion.



As Viola left the mansion, Carol immediately pulled up in front of her. Viola got in the car, and they sped away from Harlias’s base.

“Were you okay in there by yourself?” Carol asked. “You didn’t need me to guard you?”

“Nah. In fact, if I’d stepped foot in there with a bodyguard, it would’ve really pissed ’em off. I was actually safer going in alone.”

“Oh? You’re saying I’m so weak that I’d just be a liability, then?” Carol teased.

“Of course that’s not it,” Viola said with a grin. “I just know you’d charge me an arm and a leg.”

“Aw, won’t you let me make just a *teensy-weensy* bit of money off you? Guess we’re not friends anymore,” Carol said with a mock-pout.

“Oh no, we can’t have *that*! Well, if it’s money you want, just be patient a little longer. I’ve planted seeds here and there—now we just need to wait for them to bear fruit.”

“Playing with fire again, are we?”

“How’d you know?” Viola said, a wide grin spreading across her face.

Just from the size of that grin, Carol could imagine the scale of the conflagration that was to come. Not that she disapproved—after all, she and Viola were cut from the same cloth.

Chapter 131: Mysterious Trespassers

Shijima was walking up to the relic shop warehouse with several dangerously armed subordinates in tow. A group of Akira impersonators saw them coming and scurried out of their way to clear a path for them.

“What the hell are you brats doing?” Shijima spat. “Don’t just make way for me!”

“B-But—” one kid stammered.

“Did you forget? You’re all supposed to pass for Akira. You think he’d do something like that? Grow a pair and act tougher.”

“S-Sorry.”

“Akira wouldn’t apologize either!”

“O-Okay!”

Shijima gave the kids one last scowl before going to meet his other subordinates. They’d been dispatched here as additional warehouse security after Shijima had agreed to cooperate with Sheryl, and were all fully armed as well.

“Now, tell me what happened,” Shijima said.

“Yes, boss,” one subordinate replied, and gave his leader an update as he guided Shijima to a particular area.

Here bodies lay in a heap on the ground—all that remained of thieves who’d been aiming for the relics in the warehouse and had met their demise.

Shijima counted them and grimaced. “This many just today?”

“Yes, boss!”

“What the hell...?”

There were five bodies in all—and to Shijima, this was an impossibly high number.

Because the relic shops of the slums were so profitable, they naturally needed security. If a business's security wasn't as high as its earnings, thieves would pick the place clean in no time, and the owners would lose everything—their relics, their money, and even the store itself. A business's profits were only as good as the effectiveness of those protecting it.

Shijima had supported a smaller-scale relic shop in the past, one he now owned and operated himself. The proceeds had been a great asset in strengthening his own gang, but the shop had no potential for growth—in fact, he'd barely been able to keep it at its present size. But his problem wasn't a lack of business acumen—it was his lack of strong security personnel. Given the current size of his forces, larger organizations would immediately target him and crush him like an ant the moment he started making decent money.

So when Sheryl had asked him to support her endeavor, he'd jumped at the chance—here was an opportunity to use Akira as security for his own relic business! If he played his cards right and cleverly mixed his own shop's operations in with Sheryl's, or even gained access to Akira through a joint partnership, he'd wield the power of the boy who single-handedly took down a bounty worth three billion aurum—and he wouldn't even have to deal with the boy directly, since he could just leave all that to Sheryl. So her offer had been incredibly convenient for him (and even if it hadn't, he would have found it hard to turn her down with Akira right beside her).

Naturally, if he wanted to attain these benefits, his first order of business was to set the shop on the path to success. But an unexpected incident had brought all this to a halt.

The news that the city had put a bounty of three billion on Monica's head had already gone public. Since it had happened after her death, however, there had been no initial call for her capture, so not as many people knew about the bounty. Plus, Druncam had claimed responsibility for her defeat—Akira's involvement hadn't been mentioned. So Shijima had spread the news throughout the slums that Akira had been part of the team that took her down and that, as Sheryl's backer, he was working security for the relic warehouse. The gang lord had been confident that any thief would now think twice about

targeting the operation.

But he'd been wrong.

Still staring at the pile of bodies on the ground, Shijima looked grim. "What the hell's going on? No one in their right mind would try to steal from a warehouse guarded by a hunter who took down a three-billion-aurum bounty, so why are there so many? I definitely leaked that information—did it not spread?"

"We roughed 'em up and made 'em talk before killing 'em," his subordinate answered, "but only half of 'em knew about Akira. The other half didn't."

"But if half of them knew, why the hell would they—?"

"Apparently they didn't buy it. They thought they'd be fine."

Shijima scowled. But now that he had some explanation for this bizarre mystery, he could calm down and look at the situation rationally. "They didn't believe the info? Maybe the rumors I spread during the pickpocket incident got twisted and are still circulating? Shit... What a pain! Next idiot who comes in here, beat him to within an inch of his life. Then let him go so he can head back home and tell everyone not to mess with us. And make sure he lets 'em all know he got lucky—next time we won't be so generous."

"Roger, boss!"

"Now where's Sheryl? Oh, my bad—*Miss Sheryl*," he said with a smirk.

His subordinate returned the look. "*Miss Sheryl* is waiting inside, boss."

"Well, I best not keep a lady of her stature waiting, then, huh?"

During his last meeting with Sheryl, Shijima had agreed to play along with Sheryl's "rich girl" act, and afterward had ordered all his subordinates to do the same. But he'd delivered the news mockingly, as if to reassure them (and himself) that it was only an act, and that even if she had Akira on her side, Sheryl was in no way superior to them.

Shijima met Sheryl in the warehouse's meeting room, where they briefly discussed what was going on.

“So the problem hasn’t become serious,” Shijima said, “but I’d still like to nip this in the bud right away.”

“I agree,” Sheryl replied, “but how do we plan to do that? Certainly, they’d learn how strong Akira is if we had him take down an attacker that only someone with his battle record could defeat, but if we’re already assuming such a strong foe is coming to attack us, we’re putting the cart before the horse.”

“Well, that’s true,” Shijima mused. He thought a bit: having Akira take down a bunch of small fry wouldn’t serve as proof of the boy’s strength either—in fact, it might have the opposite effect and make the enemy think grunts were all he could handle.

Shijima and Sheryl continued brainstorming but didn’t get anywhere.

“I’ll try asking Katsuragi and his partners to see if they have any ideas,” Sheryl finally said.

“Sounds good. You also called that Tomejima guy here like I asked, right?”

“Yes. He should be here any minute.” And indeed, no sooner than she’d said so, Sheryl received a message informing her that Tomejima had arrived.

When Tomejima was led into the meeting room, he was a bit surprised to see someone like Shijima there. The syndicate leader certainly didn’t look like an honest, upstanding man, and based on the air he gave off, he wasn’t just some third-rate crook either. Yet the businessman wasn’t unnerved—and not just because he’d dealt with such people before.

Well, considering Sheryl’s pretending to be a gang boss of the slums, it makes sense she’d have a few contacts in that world.

Sheryl had told Tomejima (and anyone else who’d asked) that she was the daughter of a rich corporate executive, but that she was disguising her upbringing by acting as the leader of a gang in the slums. This explanation allowed Sheryl to switch between personas as she saw fit. Tomejima had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker—which was why, when he’d asked Sheryl to mediate between him and Akira, he hadn’t found it strange that he’d had to meet her in the slums. Nor did he think it was odd that a capable hunter like

Akira was backing a small gang like hers—he guessed Sheryl probably had some reason she needed to gain influence and power in the slums, and buying Akira’s protection was part of that plan. In his head, this all made sense, so he’d swallowed Sheryl’s story without a hint of doubt and assumed that she was just a rich girl with some unusual circumstances.

Katsuragi said he got those relics through Akira; but judging by the amount and quality, I bet he actually got them through Sheryl. Akira might’ve collected them, but he wouldn’t have had any other reason to hand them over to Katsuragi. After all, if Katsuragi really was as acquainted with Akira as the merchant claimed, Tomejima reasoned, then why hadn’t Akira bought any gear from him? Katsuragi definitely would’ve given the boy a good discount for relics, yet Akira was buying all his equipment from a different store and only purchased medicine from Katsuragi. (Tomejima knew this because he’d heard Katsuragi himself complain about it.) This only reinforced his suspicions that Katsuragi had obtained those goods through his connection with Sheryl instead.

“You said you had something you wanted to discuss?” Tomejima asked her.

“Not me, actually. Shijima here wanted to ask you something.”

Tomejima looked at Shijima, who glared back at him with all the authority of a gang boss. Tomejima flinched.

“Shijima, do you mind *not* intimidating one of our financial backers?” Sheryl chided.

“Sorry,” Shijima muttered, looking sullen.

From the way they spoke to each other, Tomejima could tell who was really in charge here, and he relaxed. “Very well, what did you want to ask?”

“Oh, nothing much. You know that witch Viola, right? I heard you asked her to set up a meeting with Akira. That true?”

“It is. Though negotiations broke down, so I asked Sheryl to mediate for me instead—”

“Tell me what Viola asked for in return.”

“I-I apologize, but I can’t divulge that. I’d be breaching confidentiality.”

“Need I remind you that the other day, one of your brats on our security team went snooping around inside the warehouse, which was supposed to be off-limits? If you don’t answer right now, we’ll assume that you’re in cahoots with Viola and trying to gather dirt on us.”

“I-I had nothing to do with that! The runt acted on his own!”

“You ought to know how conniving that woman can be,” Shijima replied. “We can’t suspect everything, obviously, or we’ll never get anywhere. But I find it awfully suspicious that you’re not even attempting to clear up our doubts.”

Tomejima couldn’t argue with that—he knew Viola wasn’t above trying to plant a spy.

“In fact,” Shijima continued, “ever since you added your kids to the security detail, we’ve had more and more idiots targeting the warehouse, and disposing of their bodies every day is getting to be a real pain. Sure doesn’t seem like a coincidence, so I’d answer if I were you.”

Tomejima threw a look at Sheryl hoping she’d bail him out, but Sheryl just smiled without saying a word. Finally, he caved in. “All right, fine. But you can’t breathe a word of this to anyone, okay? I’ve got a reputation to uphold.” He cleared his throat. “Viola asked me to”—he hesitated—“finance a loan.”

“Finance a loan?” echoed Shijima. “Bullshit! She wouldn’t demand anything so harmless.”

“Judging from the amount of the loan, who’s borrowing it, and what they’re gonna use it for, I’d say it’s not. I trust you’ve heard the rumors that Harlias and the Ezent family are about to go to war again soon? My guess—and it’s just a guess, mind you—is that’s what the money’s for.” Tomejima added that neither of the gangs ever borrowed money directly. Smaller organizations and supporters under their umbrella, as well as other gangs with a vested interest in one side’s victory, would make the loans through unaffiliated go-betweens. “Of course, I can’t say which side I lent the money to, or the specific amount. *That* I won’t budge on.”

His meaning was not lost on Shijima. “Naturally,” the gang leader said. “If it gets out whichever side you backed, you’ll make an enemy of the other side.” Shijima himself was in a similar position—he didn’t want to get involved in the

two gangs' feud either. "I'm not gonna ask, and I don't wanna know. All right, you're clear. As long as Viola wasn't the one who instigated your brat's misbehavior, we're golden. Sorry for suspecting you."

In truth, Shijima still wasn't sure Viola hadn't had a hand in it. But if Tomejima wasn't involved—or at least, wasn't aware he was—then Shijima had no more reason to doubt him.

Tomejima sighed in relief, but asked just in case, "By the way, which side are *you* on? If you don't want to say, I certainly understand—but if you *are* in a position to clarify where you stand, there's a lot I have to consider depending on your answer." In other words, if Shijima's gang—or perhaps even the others involved with the relic shop, including Sheryl—were clearly backing one gang over the other, then Tomejima would have to adjust his actions accordingly.

"My answer to that," Shijima replied, "is 'Don't ask.' I'll just say I don't want to get involved in any of that mess."

"Good enough for me," Tomejima said.

Neither had any desire to get caught up in the gang war—they'd just bow down to whoever won. Both Shijima and Tomejima were sure they saw eye to eye on that point, at least.



When Akira got the message from Shizuka saying that his order had arrived, he quickly headed to her shop. As he pulled up to her warehouse, Shizuka came out to greet him with a smile.

"Hi there, Akira! Come this way," she said, and disappeared through the open doors of the warehouse.

Akira got out of his truck and followed her inside. Shizuka led him to a mechanical storage pod that resembled a closet. She pressed a few buttons on its terminal, then turned around and gave Akira a dramatic bow. "Once again, this humble store appreciates your patronage. Behold, your new powered suit!"

The door slid open. With a smile and a sweeping gesture, Shizuka invited him to take a look.

The powered suit was entirely black, with a protective coat already fitted over it. It had been made of thick material similar to that of a bodysuit, complete with a visor display that connected to the rest of the suit behind the neck. The protective coat was composed of black fabric and metallic hexagonal plates; its interior was spacious, designed to leave plenty of room for storing weapons and spare ammo.

Anyone could tell at a glance that the garments were expensive—and powerful. “Wow!” Akira exclaimed, his eyes wide with excitement.

Satisfied by his reaction, Shizuka smiled gently—he reminded her of a little kid receiving a present. Then she launched into an explanation of the outfit’s specs.

“This is a TL Series 2A-2N powered suit—product name Neoptolemos. Including the cost of the add-ons, it’s a four-hundred-million-aurum outfit. But I think you’ll find that in terms of performance, it’s well worth the price.”

Compared to his previous suit, which hadn’t even been worth a hundred million, the leap in performance was so great that in terms of raw numbers, it would raise his physical strength by orders of magnitude. In addition, the suit could generate powerful force-field armor and included a myriad of other features designed to help him make the most of his augmented strength. It didn’t have a built-in scanner, but the one he’d bought as an add-on was specially made for the suit. Each function on the device (like zoom and passive sonar) worked even better than on models made solely for those tasks.

The protective coat also boasted powerful defenses, thanks to having its own layer of force-field armor; and it was quite sturdy, so attaching heavy weapons to the outside was no problem either. With the force-field armor from the hexagonal plates fixing the support arms in place, the wearer could easily attach and detach weapons at will.

The storage pod came with the outfit and even included an automaintenance feature. As long as the gear only suffered minor damage, there was no need to shell out money for repairs—the pod would fix the suit and coat while they were being stored inside.

The complete set was quite expensive, but each feature made Akira’s previous powered suit look like a bargain-bin model.

When Shizuka finished explaining the suit's specs, she smiled. "So, Akira, ready to try it on?"

"Absolutely!" Akira exclaimed. He stripped down to his underwear—and then noticed Shizuka gazing at him. "Um, is something wrong?"

"Pardon? Oh, no, not all. I was just surprised by how much you've grown."

"Really? Hmm... Guess I can't really tell, myself."

In fact, Akira had become so fit that his body hardly resembled what it had once looked like. He was no longer the malnourished child he'd been just after leaving the slums. While his muscles weren't yet as tough as steel, Shizuka could tell how hard he'd worked and how much he'd trained. His old scars had even disappeared.

"No doubt about it," she said. "You've gotten taller—and certainly more strapping—than before."

Akira grinned. "Well, I can afford food now, so I'm eating well, and hunter work's good exercise. That's probably why." Pleased with Shizuka's praise, he spoke with a hint of pride in his voice.

But hearing Akira downplay his achievements, Shizuka let her smile slip a bit. Akira had encountered so many hardships at this point that the average person would probably think he'd been cursed. Yet he'd overcome them all. Shizuka felt like he should take even more pride in this, but Akira was acting like it was no big deal. She concluded that he was already used to such danger—that by now, it just seemed like another day at the office to him. Perhaps he'd been taking similar risks even before he became a hunter, and had become so desensitized to peril that, without his realizing it, the threats he encountered in his hunter work no longer fazed him.

This was what Shizuka's intuition was telling her, and her intuition was often right.

If all that suffering had earned him so much money that he could blow four hundred million without batting an eye, wasn't that enough? Shouldn't he quit while he was ahead? Shizuka was about to suggest this to him but stopped herself at the last minute—somehow, she already knew it would be pointless.

She considered saying it in a joking manner, just to see how he'd respond, but refrained from this as well—she knew he'd take her seriously and that the worry would only add to his burden.

She didn't want that.

Her inner thoughts cast a shadow over her outward cheerfulness—even Akira, generally oblivious to shifts in others' emotions, noticed something was off.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, concerned.

Shizuka snapped back to the present. "Sorry, Akira," she said, forcing a smile. "I couldn't help it—I felt a little infatuated just now. I don't get many chances to look at the bodies of muscle-bound men, you see."

"O-Oh yeah?"

Shizuka hadn't even so much as blushed, so Akira could tell she was messing with him. His cheeks reddened.

"Now then, if I stare any longer at such radiance, I might go blind, so let's get dressed, shall we? Raise those arms!"

Akira did as he was told, and Shizuka dressed him in his new powered suit. It automatically adapted snugly to his body, and the coat adjusted itself to fit Akira's size as well. Looking at himself in the mirror, he grinned in satisfaction.



“You look so cool, Akira!” Shizuka exclaimed.

“Thanks,” he replied, and bowed to her in gratitude. “Thanks for everything!”

Shizuka smiled, but her tone grew more serious. “With this, you’ve gone up another level. But even though you’re more powerful now, don’t get carried away. Don’t use this equipment to take bigger risks, but rather to avoid them.”

“Right. I will.”

“Also, I gave you your powered suit since it’s already here, but don’t resume hunter work until you get your new weapon. No heading out to the wasteland until you’re fully outfitted, okay?”

“Absolutely!” he agreed with a firm nod. “I’m not gonna head out there without my gun.”

“Excellent.” She smiled. “It’s often said that a hunter’s body is their greatest asset. Be sure to take care of yours. Good luck!”

“Thanks. I’ll work hard.” Shizuka’s concern for him had Akira in high spirits, and the grin he gave her was full of energy.

“But don’t work *too* hard, now,” she warned. “Like I said, wait until all your equipment’s in. Understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” Akira replied, looking a bit chastened.



When Akira got home, he set up his new powered suit’s storage pod in his garage, then took the suit off and placed it inside.

Alpha, this work for you?

Yes, that’s fine. Just leave it in there, and I’ll handle all the adjustments. Alpha had already used Akira’s terminal to take over the pod’s system, so now she could rewrite the suit’s OS from inside the pod.

“Great. Now I just gotta wait for my gun to come in, and then we’ll go looking for more unexplored ruins. We *are* gonna find some this time, right?” Recalling how they’d fruitlessly searched so many places before heading to the ruins in Mihazono, he couldn’t help but groan.

About that, Akira. I've been considering it, and I think it's time to head deep into Kuzusuhara.

"What? But last time you said it was too dangerous!"

That was then, this is now. With six hundred million worth of gear, you shouldn't have a problem. And you've also gotten much stronger since then.

"Yeah? All right, then, let's do it! Kuzusuhara depths, here we come!" he exclaimed, now fired up. He was thrilled to hear that he was now capable of tackling ruins he couldn't have previously. But he'd also be venturing into an area dangerous enough to require that level of prowess, and to tackle its challenges head-on, he'd need enthusiasm.

If I can be greedy, Alpha added, I'd really like you to get a nice bike as well. It'll be hard to get to some places with just a truck, and too dangerous to go on foot.

"I guess I'll look into getting one, then. I blew most of my money on gear, so I can't get anything expensive right now, but a few more trips to ruins and I should be good."

Awfully gung ho, aren't you? I like it!

"But don't make me do anything reckless, okay? You heard what Shizuka said."

All right, Alpha said. But her smile seemed to add, "Considering your track record, you'll probably get forced into being reckless, anyway."

Akira smiled wryly—he had no rebuttal.



In another slum warehouse the size of an aircraft hangar, about ten men—or maybe a little more—were gathered. They were all fully armed. Based on their equipment alone, they merely looked like average hunters. But there was an aura around them that said here were men who'd left their ethics and morals behind in the wasteland—the type who found getting hired by criminal organizations to kill other humans far more enjoyable than hunting monsters or gathering relics. They were as proficient as any law-abiding hunter, but that just made them even more dangerous.

One man received a call. “Zalmo, you’re up,” the voice on the other end said.

“Huh? Already? I heard we still had some time before we could go wild.”

“Don’t worry—this is just a warm-up. You should be able to handle such a simple task; if you can’t, you might as well forget the main event.” The voice then gave Zalmo his instructions.

“Understood,” Zalmo replied. “By the way, just *how* wild are we allowed to go on this one?”

“As much as you like. Whether this is just a warning to them, or to anyone *other* than them, depends on how well you do on the job.”

“Meaning we can crush ‘em, right? Good! If we don’t have to hold back, then this’ll be a cinch! And you said we can have their relics as payment, so once we crush ‘em, we can take ‘em all back with us, right?”

“That’s fine.”

“Hell yeah! Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about! We should be ready in no time. Don’t worry, we won’t let you down.” Zalmo hung up and turned to the rest of his team with a grin. “Hey guys, we’re on the clock! If you want the client to pay us big for the main event, then show me what you can do on this job! You better work your asses off!”

Zalmo’s enthusiasm got the other men all fired up. Raucous whoops and shouts echoed throughout the vast warehouse.

There was something else in the warehouse as well—something that was normally never seen within the slums. In the middle of the building stood an eight-meter-tall humanoid weapon: a mech.



Having made yet another trip to the relic shop warehouse, Shijima held his head in his hands. “There’s even more this time. What the hell’s happening?”

The pile of corpses on the ground—all would-be attackers or trespassers—was now even taller than it had been previously.

Shijima’s subordinate shook his head. “No idea, boss. We roughed up one guy and let him go just like you said, and we beefed up security by adding more

men. We even parked an armed desert vehicle nearby to scare 'em off."

"Yet it didn't do any good, huh?" Shijima muttered. "Guess it's not just that they think Akira's a pushover. There's another reason."

"Agreed. Even if they were underestimating us, seeing all those bodies on the ground should've made 'em think twice. Yet they keep tryin' to take the relics anyway. Somethin's screwy here."

Shijima's expression became grim. "You interrogated them, right? What was their motive? Why were they targeting the warehouse?"

"They were deep in debt, boss. They planned to take the relics and sell 'em so they could make their payments. I mean, sure, they'd have a better chance stealing 'em than finding 'em in a ruin, but there's gotta be more to it than that."

Shijima felt the same. Even if the intruders had thought attacking the warehouse would be an easier option, that didn't entirely explain the strange scenario unfolding before them.

"Boss, I've got a bad feeling about all this. You think we ought to pull out while it's not too late?"

Normally Shijima would have considered this a ridiculous suggestion, and he would've berated his underling for being so spineless. But the situation here gave him pause. He shook his head. "We can't. That would be bad for my image. It's one thing if we back off 'cause our enemy's too strong, but if we turn tail now, even the small gangs will look down on us. We can't have that."

"Then could we talk Akira into not going home and staying here for a while? It's just a hunch, but I get the feeling the thieves only come to attack when he's not here."

If this was true, then the bandits knew when Akira was at the warehouse and when he wasn't—meaning someone on the enemy's side had considered such details important enough to find out. An uneasy feeling crept over Shijima. "All right. I'll get Sheryl to ask him," he said.

"Thanks, boss!" his subordinate said.

Now regretting having gotten involved with this venture, Shijima entered the warehouse and called for a face-to-face meeting with Sheryl.



While the increase in the number of bandits attacking the warehouse—which was basically a suicide run—was eerie, it didn’t make much difference to Levin, since none of the trespassers had presented any challenge whatsoever. Today he was guarding the warehouse once again, looking glum. Now and then he would chat with Hazawa, who was on guard duty with him, and at one point in the conversation, Hazawa shifted the topic to Akira.

“Man, that kid’s crazy strong, ain’t he?” the man mused. Back when Akira had been patrolling the city outskirts, Hazawa had ridden in the same vehicle. How could he not remember Akira, after what he’d seen the boy do?

“Yeah, he’s crazy all right,” Levin spat.

“Why’re you so pissed at him? He saved your life, remember?”

“Yeah, and if he and his friends hadn’t asked fifty mil for the rescue, I wouldn’t be here right now,” Levin grumbled.

Hazawa looked at the powered suit Levin was wearing and smirked. “Yeah, I know that landed you in debt and all, but wasn’t it actually for the best?”

“Excuse me? In what way?”

“You used to spend every penny you earned on women and booze, and none of it on gear. Now look at yourself—you’ve got on a nice, fancy powered suit. Don’t you think that was thanks to going into debt, in a way?”

“Well, maybe,” Levin grumbled, “but it’s not like I’m gonna be grateful for being up to my eyeballs in debt. And why are *you* here, anyway? Don’t tell me that now you’re too chicken to even go to the wasteland.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but lately I’ve been making money in ruins just like everyone else,” Hazawa said, pointing to his own powered suit—one that he’d earned with his own money.

“Hmph. Finally quit being a coward, huh? Then it makes even less sense for you to take this job.”

“To make money, you gotta know people. If I wanna make as much as I used to, I have to repair the connections I lost. This is a step toward that goal.”

Levin snorted but said nothing further.

They were both quite skilled, but one had let his cowardice get the better of him, and the other had been reckless with his spending. Yet once they’d met Akira, it had changed their lives—for better or for worse—and even now, they were still talking about him in their conversations together.



As Tiol patrolled the warehouse grounds, he sighed. “She’s not here today either.”

Ever since falling in love with Sheryl at first sight, he’d wanted to get closer to her. But he rarely had any opportunities to see her—except working warehouse security, which he’d nearly been fired from after getting caught. With much begging and pleading, he’d finally gotten Tomejima to let him stay on.

Despite still being a child, Tiol was a capable hunter and a valuable asset to the security team. Plus, if Tomejima fired him, the others might think the man was trying to hide evidence of his involvement in Tiol’s snooping. So Tiol just barely got to keep his job.

Still, entering the warehouse had been forbidden, and Tomejima had Tiol sign an agreement that he wouldn’t do so again. If he did, Tomejima had threatened, his penalty fee for breaching the contract would be so high that the boy would wish he were dead. Tiol didn’t want to lose his only point of contact with Sheryl, so reluctantly he’d agreed.

“This time I’ve gotta work hard,” he muttered to himself. “If I do well and Sheryl recognizes my efforts, I might get closer to her!” Brimming with newfound hope, he diligently examined his surroundings for anyone suspicious, while his eyes darted around trying to get a glimpse of Sheryl in case she might be nearby (which made him look rather suspicious himself).

Finally, a car belonging to Shijima’s gang pulled up, and Sheryl got out. Seeing her, a grin spread across Tiol’s face, and he fell for her all over again.

“She’s just as pretty as ever!”

Meanwhile, someone else was observing Tiol from afar—Zalmo.

Beside him, a subordinate was also viewing Tiol through his optical head-mounted display. After reading the data on the display, he snickered. “Yes! I searched the data log on that brat’s scanner. Most likely, Akira ain’t there.”

“He’s not, huh?” Zalmo said with a hint of disappointment.

“What’s wrong?” the other man asked. “Ain’t that more convenient for us?”

“I suppose it is,” Zalmo said thoughtfully. “All right, let’s do this!” he yelled, his enthusiasm renewed. A wide grin spread across his face.

Zalmo’s subordinates all leaped into action. Soon afterward, several trucks were barreling toward the relic shop warehouse at top speed.

Chapter 132: The Four-Hundred-Million-Aurum Powered Suit

Shijima had called Sheryl to the warehouse to propose that they ask Akira to stay over. When the gang lord explained what he had in mind, Sheryl looked doubtful.

“I’ll talk to him, but I don’t think he’ll want to. For one thing, this is a warehouse, not some cozy hotel.”

“I get that,” Shijima said. “But we don’t really have any other options.”

Both Sheryl and Shijima knew they would be asking a lot of Akira. But more and more trespassers had been attacking the warehouse, and Shijima was getting desperate.

Then their discussion came to a screeching halt.

“Boss!” Erio shouted as he ran into the room. “We’re under attack! Shit’s going down!”

For a split second, Sheryl thought, *Again?* But she sensed from Erio’s panic that something was different this time around. “Calm yourself, and start from the beginning,” she ordered him. “Do we need to summon Akira to fight a particularly strong person?”

“N-Not people—monsters! And not just grunts—they’re seriously bad news!”

“Are you kidding me?!”

This bolt from the blue left the two gang leaders visibly shocked.



A few minutes earlier, an oncoming truck ignored the angry shouts and warning shots of the security guards and crashed into a desert utility vehicle near the warehouse. Shijima and Sheryl’s subordinates surrounded the motionless truck with their guns raised.

“Think you’re hot stuff, huh? We’ll show you! Got a death wish?!”

“Get out of the truck now, and we might let you go after roughin’ you up!”

But even faced with angry jeers and demands to submit, the truck’s driver showed no response.

Then a loud screech came from the rear of the vehicle.

“What the hell? What was that noise?”

“It came from the back of the truck. W-Wait, it’s opening up!”

The lock on the truck’s back door had disengaged, and the door slowly opened. Even before it finished, however, an organic behemoth smashed it open from the inside and leaped out.

“A monster?!” The security personnel had been prepared for attackers, but only of the human variety. This sudden appearance threw them for a loop.

“Sh-Shoot it! K-Kill it!” one of them shouted, snapping the others back to their senses.

Too late! By the time they could recover, the monster had had plenty of time to attack. Its massive claws pierced through the nearest guard’s torso, and its fangs tore off another guard’s head.

One man fired desperately at the creature, landing every hit with pinpoint accuracy, but the damage was far from fatal. Even as the bullets tore the beast’s flesh and flung its blood into the air, the beast continued to roar and maul anyone in its path.

That was only the beginning. Not long afterward, more trucks appeared in quick succession—colliding with vehicles near the warehouse and even with the warehouse itself—each carrying more monsters. One by one, the creatures leaped out: some filled the entire back of a truck, while others were so small that around twenty could fit in one vehicle. The moment their feet touched the ground, they flung themselves wildly upon the security personnel.

Usually, monsters like these would scatter around the area and disperse once released. But these creatures stayed put—thanks to the threat magnets

attached to the backs of the trucks.



Unlike most of the other security guards, Levin was an actual hunter, so while he was just as startled as the rest when monsters started showing up out of the blue, the beasts didn't scare him. He worked to dispatch the rampaging beasts one by one like it was just another day on the job.

"Really, though, what the hell's going on?" he muttered after taking down the last enemy nearby.

He spotted the truck's driver slumped over and motionless, and decided he would take the man in for questioning as a suspect. But just as Levin was about to grab him, the man sprang to life and pointed his gun at Levin's head. The driver had merely been playing dead, waiting for Levin to drop his guard.

Before the enemy could pull the trigger, however, Hazawa blew the man's head off.

"You okay, Levin? Get careless there?"

"Hmph. I was trying to capture him *without* killing him. I could've handled it on my own," Levin grumbled.

Hazawa grinned. If Levin was calm enough to retort, then he was probably fine.



Dale (who had been added to the warehouse security team by Katsuragi and his business partners, through Sheryl acting as a middleman) was also busy slaying the monsters around him. He shouted at some kids nearby, "Hey, you brats! If you're not gonna fight, get inside the warehouse where it's safe! If you're standing around shivering and shaking in your boots, you're not acting like Akira! Right now, you're just a nuisance!"

Unable to fight, but thinking they shouldn't abandon their posts, the children had stayed frozen to the spot. Now they'd been given a reason to move, and they scurried away to the building that housed the warehouse. Dale covered them as they escaped, prioritizing any monsters about to attack the fleeing kids.

“Damn, they’re strong! Where’d these bastards come from, anyway?” he wondered. His gun was powerful—meant for killing creatures in the wasteland—yet no matter how many shots he fired into these monsters’ torsos, the beasts didn’t fall. He could only deal the finishing blow once their movements became sluggish enough for him to land a perfectly accurate headshot.

Dale began to reflect. Monsters of this class couldn’t have found their way in from the city outskirts—the hunters patrolling the area would’ve taken care of them first. So these creatures had to have come from far off in the wasteland, which meant that capturing them and carrying them here in the trucks had required a significant amount of effort.

Who was behind it, and why? He couldn’t fathom the answer.

But while he found the entire situation bizarre, he didn’t let up on the trigger for an instant. This situation had already escalated beyond your typical firefight or scuffle in the slums. It was a hunter’s job to take down monsters—so as a hunter, Dale had a job to do.

Curious how the other hunters were faring, he looked around for Kolbe, who should have been somewhere nearby—and frowned. “What the hell’s he doing?”

Kolbe had been fighting a short distance away. Yet all the monsters around him were now dead—and he was firing shot after shot into the lifeless corpse of one, screaming like a madman. “Die, you bastard! Drop dead! Die already! Die!”

Dale hurried over to him. “Whoa, whoa! What the hell’re you doing?! Can’t you see it’s already dead?”

His shouting brought Kolbe back to his senses. The hunter stopped firing, but was still panting heavily—he’d clearly lost his composure.

“You okay?” Dale asked worriedly.

“Y-Yeah,” Kolbe finally managed. “Apologies. I’m fine.”

So Kolbe said, but to Dale, nothing about him looked fine. The man looked haggard.

“I don’t know what happened to you,” Dale replied, “but if you can’t fight

properly anymore, guard the people in the warehouse—they're all kids."

"A-All right, I'll do that. Sorry. I'll leave the outside to you."

"Don't worry, I got this. Take care of yourself," Dale said, and ran off to hunt for more monsters.

Kolbe heaved a deep sigh. He remained rooted to the spot for a moment, then shook his head and unsteadily made his way to the warehouse.

Some distance away, one of the assailants had Kolbe lined up in his sights. Thinking that anyone freaking out over a puny monster like that must just be some two-bit hack, the man sneered as he prepared to pull the trigger.

But before he could fire, Kolbe shot him right between the eyes, killing him instantly. Cool and composed—as if he were an entirely different person from just moments ago—he took out the enemy sniper with no trouble whatsoever. Kolbe breathed another heavy sigh.



Among the children belonging to Sheryl's gang, only the Akira impostors, who were unable to mount any resistance on their own, had fled to the warehouse. The kids who could actually put up a fight—Sheryl's capable subordinates like Erio—couldn't abandon their duty. Fighting the creatures alongside Shijima's men, they were afraid—but they stood their ground.

"Shit! Erio, what's happening?! Why're there *monsters* all of a sudden?!"

"How should I know?!" Erio snapped. "Just keep shooting! Hold 'em off until Akira gets here. Don't worry about running out of ammo—fire, fire, fire!"

"When's he coming?! How long do we have to hold out?!"

"H-He'll be here any minute! Just a bit longer!"

In fact, Erio had no idea when Akira was going to show up. But he had to give his teammates hope.

Unlike the other children, who only *looked* like Akira and weren't actually armed, Erio and the rest of the gang's combat specialists were fully kitted out. They wore powered suits—albeit cheap ones—and the guns Katsuragi had issued them were considerably powerful. But if that had been all it took to fight

like a hunter, anyone could have done it. Taking cover behind a vehicle and biting back their fear, they were giving the fight their all, but they were still clearly amateurs.

Up ahead, they spotted another group of boys, who were expertly taking down monster after monster—Tiol's group. These were professional hunters, so this turn of events didn't intimidate them in the least. Tiol, in particular, was going all out—if he performed well here, Sheryl might be impressed, and then he could get closer to his crush.

Erio and the rest of his group watched them from a distance. "They're really something else," one murmured.

"Yeah," another agreed. "Guess that's the difference between wannabes and the real deal. Hey, Erio, you think we should leave this area to them and head back to the warehouse ourselves?"

Erio stared at him. His teammate clearly wanted to flee—it was written all over his face. While Erio didn't think this was a good attitude for one of Sheryl's fighters to take, he understood where the other boy was coming from.

"Okay," Erio said after some thought. "You guys head back and report to the boss. Then do whatever she tells you."

"Wh-What about you, Erio?"

"I'm staying here. It'll be bad if we *all* leave, and if we're the only ones fleeing while Shijima's guys are fighting around us, we'll look so pathetic that he'll try to take over our gang even *with* Akira on our side."

Erio couldn't bring himself to add, "So you guys man up and fight too." He knew firsthand how terrifying a monster attack could be. Still, he could voice his own desire to stay—his intent to protect the gang he belonged to and his girlfriend Aricia.

Erio's comrades exchanged glances. Half ran off, while the other half remained where they were. Erio was surprised—but pleased—to see how many still had some fight left in them.

"Don't worry," he said with a big grin. "Akira will be here soon. Until then, it's up to us to hold the fort down. Let's do this!"

With his pep talk finished, Erio and the others continued fending off the monsters as best they could.



The situation had gone from bad to worse. Back inside the warehouse, Shijima looked grim.

“Sheryl, you get in touch with Akira?”

“I have requested his help, yes. He was already on his way here, so he shouldn’t be much longer.”

“Yeah? Then I guess we’ll just have to manage on our own until then.”

At that moment, one of Shijima’s subordinates burst in with a report. “Boss! Enemies have entered the warehouse!”

“The monsters got in?! Shit! What’re those idiot guards outside even doing?!”

“No, not the monsters—humans! Thieves going for the relics! They sneaked in while we were busy dealing with all the shit outside! There’s a bunch of ’em, and they ain’t your garden-variety—they’re all armed to the gills!”

“What?!”

The enemy was now running rampant both inside and outside the warehouse—Shijima’s and Sheryl’s acumen as gang bosses was about to be put to the test even more.



When the attackers entered the warehouse and saw the treasure trove of relics, they grinned.

“Whoa!” one man marveled. “There’s even more here than I thought.”

“Duh,” another one retorted. “If they were gonna start up a relic shop, they’d need at least this much to fill out their stock.”

“Hell yeah! Let’s grab ’em all!”

The men began scooping up relics at random and stuffing them in bags. Shijima’s subordinates arrived to stop them, but the difference in equipment and skill was too great, and the defenders were easily defeated.

As the rest of the thieves were seizing relics, one of them stopped to give Zalmo a call. “Zalmo, you on your way here? What’s the holdup?”

“I’m lying in wait for Akira. Why? You get into a fight and need my help?”

“Like hell we do. I was just inviting you to taste the smorgasbord we’ve got over here.”

“Sorry, no can do. Grab enough for me too—and enough to satisfy our client.”

“Roger,” the man said with a chuckle, and hung up before going back to gleefully stuffing goods into more sacks.

After his conversation with the man in the warehouse ended, Zalmo looked off into the distance and grinned. “Seems like he’s finally here. Kept me waiting, didn’t you?” He turned to another man nearby. “He’s here! Fire it up!”

On his command, a gigantic humanoid figure behind Zalmo started to move.

“Now then, let’s see just how good you are,” Zalmo said, a grin spreading across his face.

With his magnified vision, Zalmo could make out the figure of Akira, driving his truck across the wasteland at full tilt.



Having heard from Sheryl that the warehouse was under attack, Akira was en route to the scene. Now, even as he drove, he got another call from her.

“Sheryl? Yeah, I’m nearly there. I’m going as fast as I can. If you don’t have any updates, I’m hanging up. Right. I don’t care if you have to run from them or hole up in the warehouse. Just do your best to hold out until then. Later.” He hung up, then turned grimly toward Alpha in the passenger’s seat.

Alpha, what’s the situation look like over there?

The hunters have their hands full just dealing with the monsters outside, and inside the enemy’s far too strong for Shijima’s men to handle. It’s looking rough.

Hmm... Time is of the essence, then. Never thought an opportunity to test out my new suit would come so soon. If only it had waited for my gun to come in too, he said, cracking a wry smile.

Well, just think of it as a chance to really see what the suit can do, Alpha replied cheerfully. With a powerful gun, it would be harder to determine how much of your combat strength was from the suit alone.

Good point. Oh, there they are! Yikes, what a mess!

The scene at the warehouse came into Akira's zoomed-in vision. This was clearly no longer a mere firefight—seeing the hunter security guards struggling against such formidable monsters reminded him more of the deadly encounters in the wasteland.

Letting Alpha take the wheel, Akira got out of the driver's seat and on top of the truck, his AAH and A2D assault rifles at the ready. Focusing to slow his sense of time, and training both rifles on the closest monster's head, he fired one weapon. Despite the irregular swaying of the vehicle, the bullet struck its target just as intended, revealing the monster's skull. Immediately, he fired the other rifle, blasting a hole in its cranium and pulverizing the creature's brain.

The monster had been one of the more resilient types—typically able to keep fighting no matter how many bullet wounds it received—but even so, it couldn't function without its brain. It crumpled to the ground in a lifeless heap.

And Akira had pulled this off entirely on his own.

Excellent work, Akira! So you're finally able to accomplish that without my help, huh? You've seriously made great strides.

You were driving the truck, though. So I didn't do it all without your help.

Still, that was an impressive display. You've definitely improved. Keep going at that pace, and we'll be in good shape.

Hearing Alpha's words of praise lifted Akira's spirits. He started to aim at the next monster—and a puzzled look crossed his face.

Huh? The hell's that?

A truck was parked a short distance away from the warehouse. Its rear had opened, revealing a huge white humanoid object lying inside.

That's what they call a mech, right? Why's that here? Akira felt bewildered—something like this certainly didn't look like it belonged in the slums.

The white mech began to rise up and got out of the truck, then reached down into the space next to where it had been lying—and picked up its massive weapon.

Slowly, the mech aimed its gun toward Akira.

Dodge! Alpha cried, and wrenched the truck so that it turned sharply to the side. Against the inertia of the turn, Akira ducked down. A moment later, the mech opened fire. A humongous projectile the size of an artillery shell erupted from the gun's barrel, streaked over Akira's head in an arc, and crashed into a nearby building, toppling the structure with one shot.

Damn. Akira grimaced. *What're they thinking, setting that thing loose here?!*

The shortest route from Akira's place to the warehouse was through the lower district. But he was in a hurry, and if he went speeding through there in a desert vehicle, he might trigger the security systems of the buildings along the way, which in turn could slow him down. So he'd taken a slight detour, driving instead through the wasteland on the slum side. That meant the slum district was behind him—any buildings collapsing here wouldn't alert the security forces in the lower district. Still, using a mech in a place like this seemed beyond the pale to Akira. Even if bloody gang wars frequently broke out in the slums, he'd always assumed they would use guns.

Never mechs.

The sight in front of him completely overturned what he had thought to be true.

Meanwhile, Alpha wore her usual calm smile, which reassured Akira that this was no big deal. *Yep*, she said. *There's your enemy—and it couldn't have come at a better time. Something like this is perfect for a warm-up—Akira, it's time to see what your new suit can do! Destroy that thing!*

Huh? You've gotta be kidding—you want me to defeat that?! It's a mech! Such a confrontation would be like a child facing off against a giant. Alpha's order baffled him—surely taking on an enemy of that size would mean death.

But Alpha gave him a grin. *Oh, come on. This is nothing! Didn't you just defeat someone using Old World gear not too long ago? Compared to that, this'll be a*

walk in the park.

Y-Yeah. But—

Look at it this way: If there was a bounty on that mech, it would probably be worth around a million or two at most. Now, think of the bounties you've already brought down. By comparison, an enemy of this level shouldn't even register as a threat, right?

At this, Akira took another look at the white mech.

He could have argued back.

He could have objected that he'd been fully equipped and had others helping him during the bounty hunts.

But his new powered suit was much more advanced than his old one—he already felt stronger than he had back then. More importantly, now that Alpha had put things into perspective, he found he was no longer afraid. And from her placid smile, he could tell that she was sure he could win.

Yeah, you're right. He grinned, feeling invigorated. *I can do this—I'm wearing a four-hundred-million-aurum powered suit, after all! If my opponent wasn't a challenge, this wouldn't be much of a warm-up!*

Happy to see his enthusiasm, Alpha flashed him a confident grin. As the mech fired round after gigantic round (though with a reduced rate of fire because of their size) and leveled the buildings nearby, Akira and Alpha nodded knowingly to each other.

Even though the debris from the crumbling buildings around him seemed to fall at a snail's pace, thanks to his slowed sense of time, he could converse with Alpha as usual. Through telepathy, what would take dozens of seconds to get across orally or otherwise with human language could be communicated in an instant. But to do so, both parties needed to be able to parse the rapid, normally unintelligible stream of information—otherwise it would just come across as meaningless noise.

For Alpha, of course, this wasn't an issue. She had no trouble parsing and responding to long strings of information, even compressed into a single instant of communication, that would take seconds or even minutes to communicate

by mouth. Yet Akira was keeping up without breaking a sweat—proof that he could already control his sense of time so well that this instant’s discussion felt no different from conversing normally.

Now then, Akira, shall we begin?

Hell yeah—let’s do this! He leaped from the vehicle. His feet hit the ground, and he dashed toward the mech at full speed.

Even with Alpha’s expert maneuvering, there was only so much she could do to evade, and the size of the truck made it more likely that it would get hit. But now that Akira was on foot, he could dodge more precisely, and he presented a smaller target—not to mention that, given how strong his legs had become, he could cover short distances even faster than his truck could.

Propelled by his new suit, which greatly enhanced his natural ability, Akira was racing along the ground. Normally, no human body could have kept up with the way he was now moving. But thanks to all the fast-paced battles he’d fought so far, he’d learned how to manipulate his sense of time to move with more precision.

He was in total control.

On top of that, the suit had a stabilizer function that aided Akira’s movements. The soles of its footwear generated force-field armor for extra ground support, allowing the wearer to run at full strength even on unstable terrain while maintaining their momentum. And by strengthening the force field’s output, the wearer could temporarily adhere to any surface, allowing them to brake when moving at high speeds or even run along ceilings and walls, among a myriad of other possibilities.

As Akira made a beeline for the white humanoid war machine, he put this function to good use, sporadically darting left and right to throw off his opponent’s aim. The mech tried to target Akira, but a small child was much harder to hit than a large truck, and he was moving so quickly it couldn’t get a bead on him. Each shot went wide, blasting enormous craters in the ground.

As he ran, Akira fired extended magazines of anti-machine AP rounds—ammunition specifically for penetrating mechanical monsters’ tough armor—at the giant mech. This wouldn’t have done much against the resilient beasts that

could quickly regenerate and continued to charge no matter how many times they were shot—but it was the perfect ammo to use against a mechanical monster with armor so tough that it wouldn't typically need to regenerate. By piercing its defenses and damaging the parts within, one could impair its power to move.

And since a mech was also a machine, the same principle held true here.

Akira was targeting the hand in which the mech held the gun. Not that doing so would silence the weapon directly—the gun had a trigger, but this served mostly just to simulate the feel of a gun for the pilot's sake. Most guns for mechs didn't need an actual trigger to fire and could be controlled directly from inside the mech itself, if necessary. But as long as the weapon wasn't integrated into its arm, the mech needed to hold the gun steady with its fingers. Damaging either its fingers or the hand as a whole would cause it to loosen its grip on the gun, greatly disrupting its aim.

Which was exactly what happened.

Akira had no need to dodge shots that were already going to miss, so he closed the distance between himself and the mech with ease. Then, leaping high into the air, he kicked the machine's torso with all his might. Normally the difference in weight would've sent Akira flying from the recoil, but his powered suit rendered this moot: the stabilizer function on his suit allowed him to solidify the vapor in the air—which contained a trace amount of colorless fog—with the force-field armor under his feet, creating a sturdy foothold. The force-field armor generated by his suit also served to increase his weight, strengthening his attack and making it even less likely that he would bounce off.

Thus, Akira could do the impossible and knock the giant off its feet. As if struck by a large vehicle, the mech flew into the air and crashed to the ground on its back.

Akira landed and couldn't help but crack a grin. *Holy shit...! I sent a mech flying with this suit. No wonder it was four hundred mil!*

It's not just because of the suit, Akira. It's because you were skilled enough to use the suit's functions to their fullest.

Alpha hadn't helped him get close to the mech, shoot it, or kick it—Akira had

done that all on his own. She *had*, it was true, been handling the output of his suit's stabilizer. Still, this was the first time Akira had accomplished this much on his own, so he was proud of himself regardless.

Yeah, you're right. Guess we can call our little warm-up a success!

The mech tried to get back up, but Akira kicked it down again, and for good measure, kicked its gun away as well. Then, just because he felt like it, he kicked the mech once more.

A child had faced off against a giant, and—against all expectations—the child had won.



The hunters fighting on the warehouse grounds, including Dale and Levin, had watched Akira's entire duel—from charging at the mech to knocking it to the ground—in awe.

Dale was astonished, but not particularly surprised. "So he really *is* that capable. I kind of figured as much, since Sheryl said she felt safe enough under his protection alone."

Sheryl had once told him (with a radiant smile) that she had the utmost trust in Akira's ability to guard her, and this had stuck with Dale. Now, at last, he felt like he understood *where that confidence came from*. And if she had the money to keep such a powerful hunter by her side, then how could he doubt that she was indeed the daughter of some wealthy corporate executive?

Meanwhile, Levin was holding his head in his hands. "You're telling me if I'm overdue on a payment, I could have *him* after me?" he muttered to himself. He grimaced at the mere thought.

Hazawa was astounded to see Akira topple the mech, but glad to see that, after the impression the boy had left on him, Akira had grown even stronger and more courageous. Sensing what Levin was thinking, he turned a wry smile on him. "You know, I'd work hard to pay off that debt if I were you."

"Can it," Levin spat, scowling.



Akira had toppled the mech, but it wasn't down for the count just yet. Still, all he had to do to win was continue firing at the cockpit and make sure it didn't counterattack.

Akira was churning through the rest of the armor-piercing ammo he'd prepared for investigating Mihazono's factory district. The rounds were powerful, and he had them in bulk. Of course, a handful of leftover bullets wouldn't destroy the mech itself, but with enough rounds, he could certainly put a few holes in the control cabin—and the pilot—even though the cockpit was designed to ensure the pilot's safety.

The door to the cockpit was on the back. And since the mech was lying face up, Akira couldn't aim there. Instead, he stood on top of the mech's chest, aimed both rifles downward, and pulled the triggers. Pressing his foot down on the mech's body to keep it from retaliating, he peppered its body with a hail of AP rounds. The sturdy armor dented, warped, and weakened. It would only be a matter of time—seconds, in fact—before the bullet storm penetrated to the pilot's seat. Then Akira could say he hadn't just toppled the mech but defeated it.

But all at once, Akira leaped backward. An instant later, a shot streaked through the space where he'd been.

An enemy sniper!

Still in mid-dodge, Akira sent a spray of bullets in the direction the attack had come from. Then, landing and crouching behind the mech for cover, he grimaced. *Did I get him, Alpha?*

Sadly, no. He avoided your fire.

The sniper had predicted Akira's counterattack and made a run for it. None of Akira's shots had even grazed him.

Bummer. Akira was now a skilled enough marksman to know that his shots would have taken care of a garden-variety enemy without difficulty, which meant he was facing an opponent with higher than average skill. He frowned.

Then he noticed someone was trying to raise him on his terminal. He answered the call.

“Yo, Akira. Way to go, taking down Shirousagi so quickly!”

“Who the hell are you? And who’s Shirousagi?”

“My name’s Zalgo—the guy who just shot at you. Shirousagi’s the name of that mech. Cheap model, but pretty damn good for the price.” His tone was casual and cheerful—but then he switched calls and addressed the pilot inside the mech, and his attitude did a one-eighty. “Boze, the hell’re you tryin’ to pull?! I let you pilot Shirousagi because you wouldn’t shut up about it, and you couldn’t even put up a fight! Pathetic piece of shit!”

“S-Sorry...” came the meek reply.

“I’ll cover you, so get your ass in gear! Like hell will I let our client look down on us!” He switched the call back to Akira, and his tone became cheerful again. “Hope you’re ready for round two. Good job with the prelude—but from here on out, it’s the main event!”

The line went dead. Akira looked grave—he’d taken down a mech by himself, and yet his opponent had still been confident enough to attack him. Now wary, he spoke to Alpha. *Hey, if it looks like I’m in trouble, help me out, okay?*

Alpha was at present keeping her support to a bare minimum—she’d determined that at Akira’s current level of gear and skill, providing too much support would only hamper his growth. Still, she didn’t want him to struggle any more than necessary, so she gave him her usual calm smile. *Naturally. Leave it to me!*

Seeing Alpha’s expression, brimming as it was with confidence, Akira’s tense look relaxed into a fearless grin.



Just as the “warm-up” ended and the fight outside was about to get serious, the situation at the warehouse also took a turn.

Levin and the other hunters had their hands full eliminating the monsters outside, so they couldn’t help fend off the intruders within. Shijima’s subordinates were there, but the enemy was far stronger—the defenders could hardly put up a fight. In their desperation, the gang members started shouting at each other.

“Shit! What’re we gonna do?!”

“We gotta do *something*, or we’re screwed! You know how much just one of those relics is worth?! If they get stolen, the boss’ll definitely sic Akira on us!”

“Then charge in there and handle it!”

“Like hell! I ain’t got a death wish!”

Things were going from bad to worse, and the defenders had reached their limit.

Then Kolbe showed up, having been reassigned from his post outside the warehouse to handle the situation inside. Passing by Shijima’s bickering subordinates, he strode toward the thieves like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“H-Hey!” an astonished gang member called out to him, but Kolbe didn’t so much as turn around, and just kept on walking.

One of the thieves noticed someone approaching. But when he saw it was Kolbe, the wariness on his face vanished. “Yo, Kolbe! Long time no see!” he said with a sneer.

“Who the hell are you?” Kolbe didn’t recognize him.

The man snorted, as if to ridicule him for his idiocy. “You’re telling me you don’t remember the faces of all the hopelessly indebted hunters you had scurrying around gathering relics? What a surprise.”

“Oh, right,” Kolbe muttered, “you were in *that* group. When I heard you’d survived, I thought maybe you’d successfully paid your debt and gotten free, but you quit being a hunter and turned to crime instead? Moron.”

“Well, maybe if I’d killed you back then, I would’ve escaped a lot faster. I saw how you freaked out fighting that monster just now, y’know. So I guess the rumors are true—you almost got eaten by a beast one time, and now you’re scared to death of ’em.”

Kolbe’s face darkened. The man, seeing he’d hit the nail on the head, grinned wider. “To think we were fooled into imagining our monitor as some kind of

badass, when in reality he's just a scaredy-cat. I feel like a fool for being so desperate to gather those relics." Kolbe didn't respond, so the man doubled down on mocking him. "At first I was surprised to see you here, but now I get it—I bet you're too afraid just to head out into the wasteland. Some hunter you are!"

It wasn't unusual for relic hunters to suffer trauma from an encounter with a monster, become too frightened to return to the wasteland, and retire from hunting. Recognizing Kolbe as one of these washed-up hunters, the other thieves joined in the ridicule and snickered at him.

Kolbe heaved a sigh. "I don't get you guys at all."

"Say that again?"

"Well, you *are* right that I nearly got devoured. The experience was so traumatic that I couldn't fight properly for a long time. It was terrible—I was this close to throwing in the towel and quitting hunting." He took a deep breath. "But I didn't want to quit. So, to rehabilitate myself, I took the job to monitor the relic-gathering operation. I can't go into ruins or the wasteland on my own, and I can't fight monsters without panicking, but as long as I could help other hunters do so, I figured I could make a comeback."

Even after finally saying what he'd kept to himself for so long, Kolbe didn't look the least bit relieved, just ashamed. "Gradually, I got used to the hunter life again, and I was even thinking I might have recovered. But just as you said, this monster incursion seriously spooked me. Maybe partly because it looked a lot like the monster that nearly ate me, but that's no excuse—I lost my composure, and I'm frustrated with myself."

He breathed another deep sigh, then raised his head. Now he had a deep scowl on his face.

"So unfortunately for you, I'm gonna need to blow off some steam."

Kolbe closed the distance to the man in an instant, grabbed his head, and slammed him to the floor. No one else had time to react.

"Y-You bastard!" one of them cried. The men, having pegged Kolbe as a dropout hunter, had let their guard down; but now they sprang into action once

more and immediately opened fire. Bullets went flying throughout the warehouse, but Kolbe didn't so much as flinch.

"Like I said, I don't get you guys at all. This isn't the wasteland, and you guys aren't monsters, so why'd you think you even had a chance against me? I don't understand."

As he spoke, he knocked two more men unconscious. The remaining thieves' faces twisted in panic and fear.

"You guys brought this fight on yourselves," he continued. "So I'm not gonna hold back."

Screams and gunfire echoed through the warehouse. None of the screams were Kolbe's.

A few of Shijima's subordinates were keeping tabs on the situation from a distance. After some time, they heard the gunfire and screams, which eventually stopped. The men were looking at each other, unsure what to do, when Kolbe came back.

"I left a few of 'em alive," he muttered. "You guys handle the interrogation. I'm out." He walked away without another word.

When the men reached the scene, they saw several men lying in a heap on the warehouse floor. Half were beyond saving, and the other half would die before long without treatment. Shijima's subordinates called for reinforcements, who took the men in—the gang members at least needed to make sure their prisoners didn't die before questioning.

One subordinate sighed. "Damn! That guy took all these men down by himself? First Akira, now him—hunters really are somethin' else, aren't they?"

"That's 'cause they make a living fightin' monsters to the death," another replied.

Shijima's subordinates were astonished at Kolbe's handiwork. But if Kolbe had heard their musings, he would've hung his head in shame.

Chapter 133: One Surprise after Another

Akira hid in the mech's shadow, waiting for Zalmo to show himself. Whenever the machine tried to get up, he kicked it back down.

A couple of huge readings appeared on his scanner without warning. He looked ahead to see two desert ground vehicles in the distance hurtling toward him—through the air. His vision zoomed in past them and onto the figure of the man in the background who'd thrown them—Zalmo.

Akira immediately fired at the incoming automobiles. Armor-piercing rounds peppered their exteriors, filling them full of holes, but this weakened the bullets' trajectories so much that they either failed to reach Zalmo or didn't harm him at all. And even a hail of AP shots wasn't enough to knock the vehicles off course. Akira might have reduced their momentum slightly, but this wouldn't keep them from slamming into him, and at the angle they were heading toward him, the mech's body wouldn't serve to shield him.

With no other options, Akira leaped from the cover of the mech to evade the attack. The vehicles, already weakened from his gunfire, crumpled into twisted hunks of metal as they smashed into the ground and bounced right back up toward the sky. Scrap metal scattered—or in Akira's slowed sense of time, floated—into the air. Through the debris, Akira and Zalmo locked eyes and grinned—Akira to psych himself up, Zalmo in anticipation of the battle ahead—then trained their weapons on each other.

A close-range firefight ensued. Each leaped in different directions—up, down, left, right, or sometimes even forward—to avoid the opponent's gunfire, all while firing back. Both tried to prevent the other from backing away and taking cover, sending volleys of bullets to cut off any escape routes. Yet they were also skilled marksmen, capable of predicting each shot's trajectory and dodging accordingly.

Akira was the first to fire a bullet that didn't miss—he'd timed it so that Zalmo couldn't evade. But Zalmo anticipated it, placed his hand right in the line of fire,

and activated a device concealed in his palm. A small rectangular force-field shield materialized in front of his hand, angled so the bullet would bounce away harmlessly.

The shield was not particularly tough. In fact, if its user even slightly misjudged the timing or angle of its activation, the enemy bullet would pierce through, so the shield was a risky tool to use in fast-paced combat. But Zalgo had deployed it perfectly. And from his confident grin—reflected in the luminescence from the bullet's impact—Akira knew it hadn't just been a fluke. Zalgo's unexpected show of skill caught the boy off guard.

Zalgo seized his opportunity. With Akira momentarily stunned in surprise, the man had ample time to line up his shot. His bullet—powerful enough to eliminate a formidable beast from the wasteland in a single hit—struck Akira with flawless accuracy.

Akira, however, didn't receive a scratch. Alpha had seen the shot coming and had momentarily raised his protective coat's force field to maximum output—but only at the point of impact, optimizing its defensive capabilities for minimum energy cost and reducing the spread of damage to a single hexagonal plate.

That shot should've decided the victor, and yet it had been effortlessly blocked. Zalgo and Akira were equally surprised. Yet neither of them stopped firing—in fact, each inched even closer to the other. Bullets whizzed past, inches from their heads. What they couldn't avoid, they blocked. One false move could mean death, but Akira didn't back down—though he couldn't exactly manage a grin either.

Alpha, I'm getting the feeling this guy might be even stronger than that mech!

You're stronger than that mech too, so what's the problem?

That's not the point!

Eventually Akira got close enough to land a direct kick on Zalgo, putting all the strength from his four-hundred-million-aurum powered suit into the attack. His blow sent Zalgo flying backward, wiping the cocksure grin from the man's face. Akira immediately followed up with a string of shots toward the airborne Zalgo, but the man blocked every bullet.

My kick's more effective than my gun now? I mean, I suppose it would be, considering what I paid for this suit, but still... He recalled that some hunters chose to use martial arts to fight, even though combat in the East had largely developed around guns; and with mixed feelings, he wondered if his latest upgrade had inadvertently sent him down that path as well.

Just a heads-up: the battle's going to get a bit tougher from here on, Alpha suddenly warned him. Be prepared.

Before Akira could ask why, the answer presented itself. He suddenly sensed an oncoming projectile and leaped backward. Less than a moment later, a massive projectile—the size of an artillery shell—struck the ground where he'd just been standing, sending chunks of concrete through the air.

Naturally, the white mech had fired that round—while Akira had been busy with Zalmo, it had gotten to its feet and retrieved its weapon. In fact, the very reason Zalmo had engaged Akira at close range was to give the mech time to recover.

He baited me into kicking him just now, didn't he? With the mech recovered, Zalmo's role as a decoy was over, so he had no more reason to stay up close. Akira suspected that Zalmo had *let* him land a blow in order to gain some distance, and he scowled.

In contrast, Alpha was all smiles. *Perhaps, but that strike had to have done some serious damage all the same. It wasn't a total loss, so relax.*

Yeah? All right! In that case, I won't dwell too much on it.

From this point on, the fight would be two-on-one. Akira was facing down both a humongous mech and a human who was even more dangerous than the machine.

Normally, he would've felt threatened—even called it quits. But Alpha was smiling like always, so he knew he had nothing to fear. With newfound courage, he trained the rifle in his right hand on Zalmo, the one in his left on the mech. Then, with the most confident look he could muster, he pulled both triggers.



It was now two-on-one—Zalmo had the numerical advantage. He grinned—

on the surface. He seemed to be in good spirits, perhaps even enjoying the fight.

But that was only to keep up appearances. Inwardly, he was thinking the opposite.

Shit—he's stronger than I thought! His file said he only won against that woman in the Old World gear because of a malfunction, but could he have actually done so on his own strength?! Apart from the fact that Akira's gear was now much better than it had been in Mihazono, the boy's combat prowess was so impressive that it was making Zalgo doubt his own intel.

He'd indeed used Akira's kick to put some distance between them—but only upon realizing he wouldn't be able to dodge the blow. He hadn't originally planned for it, and the boy's attack had been much more powerful than he'd bargained for—his gear had suffered critical damage, and now he wasn't moving as quickly as before. So despite the difference in manpower, the two sides were evenly matched.

Those kids at the warehouse were dressed like Akira to create the illusion that he was present. But the outfit he's wearing now doesn't match theirs, so he must've just gotten it. But that means...he's already adapted to it?! No way! No one can get used to a new suit that quickly!

When powered suits boosted the user's strength beyond what the person was accustomed to, the difference was jarring at first. The wearer found it difficult to move naturally—sometimes they would even need to relearn how to walk. After all, without ever thinking about it, humans always learned how to move in a way suited to their unaugmented bodies.

The more expensive powered suits had auto-balancers built in, which automatically regulated the suit's output to match the capabilities of the wearer's body. This made adjusting to a new suit easier—but only when it came to everyday movements. As pricey as the suit was, the Neoptolemos's auto-balancer alone couldn't account for the accuracy and speed with which Akira was moving. Zalgo knew this and was stunned by the boy's abilities.

One reason for Akira's shocking show of strength during this fight was the

rigorous training he'd endured and all the deadly battles he'd survived. But Alpha's support was another big factor—while she wasn't controlling him through the suit in real time, she *had* overwritten the suit's software while it was in storage to raise its specs even higher, and she'd optimized it for Akira's movements. This, combined with Akira's own aptitude, had granted Akira the power to take down a mech—even while testing out a new suit for the first time.



The white mech fired another enormous round, blasting the pavement to pieces. Akira dodged while spraying the mech with fire from his AAH. The giant machine leaped away from the hail of AP bullets, shielding its chest with its arms. Its armor was sturdy enough to repel normal ammunition, but wouldn't last long against ammo that could chew through the mechanical guards patrolling the ruins.

Meanwhile, Zalmo also fired at Akira to keep him from dodging or attacking the mech. But Akira avoided Zalmo's shots as well, then turned the A2D in his other hand on Zalmo. Zalmo just barely evaded the spray—only to be blasted by a grenade that Akira had covertly fired, using the AP rounds as a distraction.

Unlike the A4WM, the A2D's grenade launcher wasn't automatic—it could only fire one grenade at a time, and a direct hit from a single shell wouldn't take out someone as experienced as Zalmo. But it *did* knock him off his feet and into Akira's line of fire. Zalmo defended against the stream of AP rounds, twisting his body in midair and deploying his force-field shield—but because he was busy blocking, he lost his chance to fire back.

Akira frowned. *I had extra grenades on hand, so I figured I'd use 'em, but maybe that's a bad idea. I can only fire one at a time, and I gotta reload after every shot. Doesn't seem worth it.*

Agreed. Maybe you ought to invest in another A4WM then.

But that'll be one more weapon I'd have to lug around. The new gun I bought is already gonna be big enough on its own.

No one's saying you have to carry it around with you everywhere. Why not keep it in your truck, just in case? You already use both your AAH and A2D when

you're not wearing a powered suit, so you can afford to have at least one more gun in your arsenal while all suited up.

That's a good point. Maybe I should.

The fight was two-on-one, yet Zalgo was clearly moving much slower than before, which made Akira even more certain that he could beat the man. He felt so calm that he was even chatting leisurely with Alpha as he fought. And Akira was right—at this rate, he would surely win. As the battle had progressed, he had gotten more comfortable with his powered suit. The longer he fought, the more polished his evading and attacking became, pushing Zalgo and his ally further into a corner.



Zalgo had also realized he was about to lose the battle, and he began considering his options. *Should we retreat for now? I started this fight intending to crush him, but it's not part of our mission.* He hated to leave a fight unfinished, but their two primary objectives here were already complete—they'd attacked the warehouse to threaten Sheryl and the others involved, and they'd learned how powerful Akira truly was. So perhaps he should cut his losses here and have his team fall back for the time being.

No, I'm getting my priorities mixed up. If we can kill him here, we ought to, so that he doesn't become a problem later.

Akira had provided him with one surprise after another. Zalgo hadn't expected him to be so formidable, or to be capable of fighting with upgraded gear immediately after acquiring it. Perhaps the biggest surprise of all, though, was that Zalgo was actually considering fleeing from the boy.

A surprise—an outcome so unlikely and uncommon that one couldn't possibly have predicted it. But Zalgo knew that the world contained outliers who were full of surprises.

He hated surprises.

The fewer variables—and outliers—in the picture, the better.

The events of underground Kuzusuhara, and the fight afterward. The commotion in Yonozuka, then the bounty hunt fiasco. The unpredictable turn of

events in Mihazono, and the situation in the factory not long after. These were all out of the ordinary—and Akira had been involved in every single one. Even if he hadn't wanted to, he'd been roped into—or instigated—them all, and survived them to boot.

Which left Zalmu wary of a certain possibility. What if someday Akira ended up opposing the cause and had to be eliminated? What if his presence triggered another surprise that somehow kept Zalmu and his comrades from killing the boy? What if this proved fatal not just for Zalmu but for his entire organization?

He had a much better chance of killing Akira right now. Sure, he'd encountered a few surprises, but now that they were all out on the table, everything was business as usual. More importantly, if he let this chance slip by, it might seriously come back to bite him later on. There was no better time than now.

I won't let some bolt from the blue squander all our efforts toward the cause, dammit!

He'd nip this worry in the bud before it blossomed into a problem.

His decision was made. His primary aim now was killing Akira.



Akira detected a change in Zalmu's movements and grew cautious. For some time now, the man had only been firing at Akira from a distance, preventing him from getting near the mech, but now Zalmu started closing in.

Akira didn't know what Zalmu was planning, but he couldn't let this chance pass him by. With no more gunfire getting in his way, he got right up under the mech. Now he was safe from the mech's projectiles, and he could hide behind the mech's massive body for cover as he fired at Zalmu. Things were looking up.

But something nagged at him. Why was Zalmu letting him have such an immense advantage?

Zalmu continued to close in. From the cover of the mech, Akira pelted him with AP rounds. But these didn't slow Zalmu down—he blocked the gunfire with his force-field shield, which covered his entire body, and kept it active throughout the entire volley.

Akira was nonplussed. From his previous battles, he knew Zalmo was using his shield inefficiently. Keeping it active—and around his whole body, no less—would exhaust the shield’s energy reserves in no time. Why would he be so careless?

Just as Akira predicted, Zalmo’s shield dried up in no time. But right before it ran out of energy, the man leaped a gigantic distance onto the mech, climbed around to its back, and opened the door to the cockpit. Then he grabbed Boze—his ally inside—and tossed him out.

Before Boze hit the ground, Akira shot him dead, just to make sure he wouldn’t cause any more trouble. But Akira still couldn’t make head or tail of Zalmo’s actions. He understood Zalmo wanted to pilot the mech instead, but why throw away his numerical advantage? Akira had not only already triumphed over the mech once, he was no longer trapped by Zalmo’s gunfire and thus free to attack the machine.

Zalmo seemed to have made a foolish move.

But Alpha was no longer smiling—in fact, she looked worried. *It’s best to assume he has a plan in mind, Akira. Be careful.*

Her warning purged the needless doubt from his mind. If the enemy was scheming something, he needed to be alert. He dashed toward the gigantic mech, intending to knock it down again before it could make a move—but his kick only met air.

What the—?!

With unbelievable dexterity for such an enormous machine, the mech hopped out of Akira’s way. The moment it landed, it crouched down and executed a sharp roundhouse kick. Out of habit, Akira jumped over the large metallic leg heading for him.

And Zalmo sprang his trap. Now that Akira was in the air, he couldn’t dodge as quickly. The mech slammed the heel of its palm into him, cleverly using the momentum of its earlier kick for more power. Rending the air, the attack sent Akira flying. His powered suit and protective coat had deployed force fields just before impact, yet blood still erupted from his mouth.

But the mech wasn't done. Right before striking, it had tossed its weapon up in the air—it couldn't land a blow properly with its hand full, after all—and the gun was now making its descent. The mech caught it as it fell, readied it instantly, and aimed at the airborne Akira. Staring into the barrel of the gigantic weapon, Akira's face tensed in fear.

Dodge! Alpha cried.

The moment the massive projectile erupted from the gun, Akira kicked the air with all his might. The force of doing so nearly shattered the force-field armor that his suit's stabilizer had generated under his feet, and just barely launched him far enough away to avoid the enemy's shot.

Had the round hit him, he would have met his end then and there. But though he felt a relentless wind blast right past him, he was still alive. The moment his feet hit the ground, he broke into a run.

Holy shit! That was a close call! Hey Alpha, any idea why that mech suddenly got a lot deadlier?!

Because it has a different pilot now, of course.

That seriously made such a difference?!

Well, imagine that the past Akira—the one who had just met me—somehow acquired the gear you have on now. Without factoring in my support, do you think he'd still stand a chance against the current you? It's the same thing, really.

She had a point, but he couldn't help but smile wryly. If this situation really was "the same thing," then the mech he'd fought earlier had been the "past Akira," and now—with Zalmo piloting—it was the "current Akira." In other words, according to her, such was the degree to which its power had been boosted. And based on what he'd seen the mech do just now, he believed her—it was moving like an entirely different machine.

All right, I get it! But with my current equipment and your support, I'm still stronger, right?! Right?!

Naturally. I'll support you when the going gets tough, so don't worry.

Uh, I think what happened just now counts as plenty tough already, so where was your support then? That attack seriously hurt, you know.

Be glad it only “seriously hurt” and that you’re still alive, thanks to your gear. Besides, I let you know you needed to dodge—that counts as support, right?

To Akira, it sounded like she was saying that the opponent was so wimpy that she thought he could win even with minimal support. In other words, if Akira ended up losing anyway, it would be his own fault for not putting in enough effort.

He smiled wryly. *Yeah? Then never mind. Keep up the good work, and keep supporting me from here on out.*

I intend to.

Good to hear!

If Alpha’s assessment was correct, then he had no business losing. There was no more doubt in his mind, and a grin came to his lips.

In the real-time instant it took to have that telepathic conversation, Akira’s motivation had been completely restored. With newfound determination, he sped up, ready to face the mech again, even if it had a different pilot this time. The rematch between the giant and the child had begun.



With Zalmo at the helm, the mech charged at the rapidly approaching boy. The distance between the two closed in an instant.

The white mech launched a kick toward Akira. But this wasn't the tap one might deliver to a pebble—it was the sharp blow of an experienced martial artist, made more frightening by the sheer mass of the mech's metallic leg.

Akira sped up and leaped forward, barely dodging it. Behind him, the metallic foot slammed into the ground like a massive pillar. His suit's strength, combined with the force fields stabilizing the ground underneath him, had allowed him to rush underneath the foot right before it touched down.

Akira had planned to jump onto the mech's rear side and fire into the cockpit. But Zalmo anticipated his train of thought and pivoted the mech's weapon behind its back, with the barrel pointed at the ground. He fired—the humongous projectile instantly blasted the pavement to smithereens.

Since Akira was already in position to jump, he leaped upward. He narrowly avoided the blast, but missed his chance to hop onto the mech. With nothing to grab onto, he was a sitting duck in the air.

The mech kicked its massive foot backward. It had just blasted apart the ground beneath it, so its footing was unsteady, and its kick off-balance. Still, the attack could have leveled a small house with ease—if it hit Akira at full power, he'd be in bad shape.

But he countered the mech's kick with a kick of his own. As force-field armor enveloped his leg, giving his attack more weight, he put every ounce of power from his suit into the strike. And since his opponent was already off-kilter, he once again overcame the massive difference in weight between himself and his opponent. Just as before, the impact knocked the mech off its feet, and it flew backward through the air before crashing to the ground.

But in an instant, the giant rolled to the side and fired at Akira. Then, while the boy was preoccupied with dodging, it rose to its feet. For a long moment, Akira and the mech stared each other down without budging an inch, as if waiting for an opening.

I never would've guessed a mech could move so precisely, Akira said with a

sigh. *How do you control that thing, anyway?* He'd thought steering a mech was like driving a car, so seeing one make such lifelike movements had quite surprised him.

It's a lot like controlling an artificial body, Alpha replied, *just on a much larger scale.*

Oh? Well, that explains why it's moving so much like a human, and probably why they call it a humanoid weapon— Wait, are you sure that's right? Akira knew how hard it was to move properly with a powered suit boosting one's strength, so part of him had a hard time swallowing the idea that someone could control an object ten times their size with such accuracy.

A mech's movement depends on the skill of its pilot, Alpha replied. *If you recall, the mech was moving a lot more stiffly—more like a doll than a human—until the pilots switched out. Not just anyone can recreate lifelike movements with such a machine.*

Makes sense. Akira chalked this possibility up to some people in the world just being more amazing than others, and left it at that. Then, as precisely as though they'd agreed on the timing beforehand, Akira and the mech stirred to life at once. Both moved quickly: the mech seemed like a giant well-trained in close-quarters combat, while Akira had the outstanding capability of his powered suit on his side.

Their gunfire sent stray shots all over the battlefield. Akira's small bullets peppered nearby walls and surfaces, while the mech's massive projectiles smashed through entire buildings. At close range, each negated the other's kicks with his own, bounced off, then instantly kicked again. When they touched down, their feet made craters in the ground, sending deep fissures through the terrain. As the carnage spread around them, the giant and the child remained evenly matched.

In the heat of battle, however, Akira suddenly got a call from Dale. Akira was too preoccupied to accept the call himself, so Alpha did it for him.

"What is it?" he answered. "If you need me to help you all out over there, I'm sorry—I'm a little preoccupied at the moment."

"Actually, we were thinking about coming over there to back *you* up instead."

“Then you’re all done on your end?”

“No, not yet. But the mech’s a bigger threat, so we should take it down first. Right?”

“Then don’t bother. If you want to back me up, at least wait till you’ve taken care of all the monsters.” With that, he hung up, looking a tad sour.

He sighed—there was no helping it. It was time to go all out.

Alpha, go back to full support.

Oh? Giving up already? Awful soon to throw in the towel, don’t you think?

Apparently, I’m taking too long, so let’s hurry and end this. Plus, I’m gonna get an earful if our battle devastates this whole area. I’m supposed to protect the warehouse, not help level it.

During the fight, several of the mech’s stray shots had struck the warehouse as well. Of course, the building had been chosen specifically for its sturdiness—it would be housing incredibly valuable relics, after all—so it was still standing. But the damage wasn’t exactly minor either. The warehouse had only remained intact because Zalmo had switched his focus to getting rid of Akira. If he’d prioritized destroying the warehouse instead, he could’ve done so easily—even Akira wouldn’t have been able to stop him.

In that case, guess I have no choice, Alpha said. Training’s over—let’s take down this hunk of metal as quickly as we can! She grinned, and Akira’s scanner suddenly updated. Various commands, routes, and battle positions filled his augmented vision. *Follow my instructions to the letter, and you’ll win in no time!*

Roger!

And, Alpha added with a teasing grin, even if you can’t do all these tasks on your own yet, don’t worry—I’ll take control of your suit for you.

How utterly reassuring, Akira replied wryly. In other words, what she was about to have him do would push his skill to its absolute limit. Gathering all the resolve he could muster, he sped up—it was time to finish the fight.



Zalmo noticed the slight change in Akira’s movements. *What’s he up to?*

Akira had started moving according to Alpha's instructions. But the change wasn't jarring—it was subtle, barely imperceptible to the eye. Only someone as skilled at observing details as Zalmo was could have picked it out.

Unfortunately, merely noticing it didn't help him out in the least.

Akira shot toward the mech, which sent another sharp kick toward him. But Akira dodged it—more precisely than he had dodged anything thus far in this fight. He hadn't had to think about the timing, because he was moving exactly how Alpha told him to. With the optimal path already laid out for him, he closed in on the mech so quickly that Zalmo's movements seemed sluggish in comparison.

Not good! Panicking, Zalmo quickly brought the mech's weapon hand around behind the machine to prevent Akira from running around to the rear of the giant and attacking its cockpit like he'd attempted before. He didn't really think he'd make it in time, but he nonetheless aimed down at Akira—who should've been on the ground—as fast as he could.

But Akira wasn't there. Rather than heading around to the back of the mech, he'd leaped onto the front.

Shit! He's going for the damaged chest piece! Zalmo thought. The mech had suffered significant injuries to its torso when Boze had been at the helm, but its armor was still tough enough to repel most projectiles, and Zalmo was normally a sufficiently skilled pilot to block any close-range attacks. But in his desperate haste to shoot Akira, he'd thrown his mech off-balance. And he could only strike with one hand—the other was holding the gun. So Zalmo aimed the mech's free hand to knock Akira off its torso.

But Akira wasn't there either. The mech's gigantic palm only swiped the empty air in front of its chest.

I was wrong?! Then what's he aiming for?!

At that very moment, Akira flew into Zalmo's vision, displayed on a feed from the mech's head cam.

Akira was targeting the giant's head! With a devastating kick, utilizing every ounce of the power from his costly powered suit, he struck. A single hit

crumpled the head like a tin can, and the multiple sensors attached were scattered to the wind.

A mech could still fight without its head—its control system was located farther down in the body, and there were other sensors all over its exterior. But if piloting a mech really was just like a cyborg controlling their own body, Akira had reasoned, then the sensors on the mech's head had to be important. If a sensor acting as an eye or ear was placed on the torso or a knee, for example, the pilot would have a harder time controlling the mech accurately. In order to move a mech as if it was their own body, the pilot absolutely depended on those high-precision sensors on the head.

Now that those sensors were gone, Zalgo temporarily lost the mech's ears and eyes. He could switch the roles of a few of the other sensors on the body to replace the ones he'd lost, but the adjustment would take time—ten seconds at least.

But he was in the middle of combat. Ten seconds of not knowing the enemy's location would be fatal. As Zalgo moved the mech's body violently to shake Akira off (wherever he was), he struck the places Akira was most likely to cling to—the head, the chest, and the back. But all his attacks met only air.

He's not on the mech?! Then where is he?!

The sensors finished switching over, and Zalgo located Akira at last—in the sky above the mech's head, pulling his leg back to kick a gigantic object suspended in midair.

It was a projectile the mech had fired earlier. After it had landed, a stray volley of gunfire had sent it rolling across the ground. Alpha had instructed Akira to pick it up, and now, poised above the mech, he kicked the round straight down as hard as he could.

By this point, the mech had nearly lost all the armor on its head—both from Akira's earlier kick and from its own attacks when Zalgo had assumed Akira was clinging to its body. The massive object hit what was left of the machine's head with the force of a bullet from a gun. It crushed it, blasted through it, and pierced the torso in an instant—striking Zalgo in the cockpit.

The mech lost power and shut down. Still inside the silent cabin but missing

the right half of his body, Zalmo's face was twisted in horror.

"N-No way... He was holding back that much power? U-Unbelievable... This goes way beyond a mere 'surprise'! Who the hell *is* that kid?! The organization... I have to let...my comrades know...before—!"

Just then, Akira pried open the cockpit door, pointed his gun at Zalmo, and pulled the trigger. Before he could contact his allies, Zalmo's consciousness—along with his head—was blown away by a hail of AP rounds.

Bereft of a pilot, the remains of the gigantic machine crumpled to the ground with a deafening crash.



After finishing Zalmo off, Akira let out a breath of relief. Beside him, Alpha smiled with satisfaction.

You won, Akira! Congratulations!

Right, thanks. So how much of that just now was because of your support? Since he'd won almost immediately after asking Alpha to switch to full support, he couldn't help but wonder.

That depends on what type of support you're talking about. In some respects, I basically carried you, and in others, I hardly helped at all.

Then I'll rephrase my question: How much of my movements did you correct through my suit? Besides adjusting the stabilizer, I mean.

Oh, around twenty percent, I'd say. But while it's true I had to help you a bit, I still think you performed admirably.

Even though Alpha had only corrected twenty percent of his movements, he'd trounced Zalmo almost instantly simply by following her instructions. It made Akira realize all over again how valuable Alpha's guidance truly was—without it, he would've had to come up with those strategies himself. And even as far as he'd come, Akira knew, he wasn't experienced enough to make calls like that on his own—he still struggled to decipher the meanings and reasons behind her commands, even the ones that seemed simple at a glance.

Thanks, he replied, genuinely grateful. While he knew he still had a long way

to go, he figured that this time a measure of praise wouldn't hurt.

Chapter 134: The Yatsubayashi Clinic

With Zalmo out of the picture, Akira headed to the warehouse. He was thinking that if the other trespassers hadn't already been taken care of, he'd help out. But by the time he got there, the fighting was over.

Still, the warehouse was in a state of panic and disarray. Corpses were lying all over, and a portion of the relics in the warehouse had suffered from collateral damage. People were running around this way and that, trying to confirm the extent of the carnage.

When Akira met up with Sheryl, she bowed to him politely. "Thank you, Akira. Truly. You really saved us. It was only thanks to you we survived this."

"Glad it all turned out all right. Well, 'all right' may not be the best way to put it," he added, looking around at all the corpses on the ground.

Sheryl looked melancholy but shook her head. "No, if you hadn't shown up, things would've been worse—much worse. In fact, we should be thankful we escaped with so few casualties." She reflected for a moment, then added, "Considering we were up against not only human trespassers but monsters and a gigantic mech as well, I don't think we could've ever prepared for this attack."

"Yeah," Akira agreed. "Come to think of it, why *did* all this happen, anyway?"

Neither of them had the answer, so Sheryl smiled, as if to clear the depressing air between them. "The important thing is that we're all grateful to you, Akira. Thank you so much!"

Akira smiled as well—if Sheryl was satisfied, then as her gang's supporter, he could safely consider his job here done and dusted.

"Hey, Akira," Sheryl said after some hesitation, "we're going to be taking the injured to the clinic from here on out, but can I ask you to tag along? I, um, hate to say this, but I have to keep up appearances, and I don't want to look like I can't afford the treatment for my own members."

"Yeah, sure," Akira said. He figured that financial support (probably) also fell

in line with his duties as her supporter.

They gathered up all the wounded and loaded them up in vehicles outside the warehouse. Among the injured was Erio. Aricia clung to his side, with tears in her eyes. “Erio! Stay with me!” she sobbed.

“Don’t worry,” Erio rasped weakly. “I’ll be...fine. I’m not...gonna die...from a scratch like this...”

In fact, Erio had lost so much blood from his stomach wound that his face was pale. But he didn’t want his girlfriend to worry, so he somehow managed a smile. Aricia realized what he was doing, of course, and she sank into an even deeper anguish.

Nasya and Lucia were also present. Neither of them believed Erio would make it, and they looked grieved and depressed.

Akira saw them all standing around Erio. At first, he thought they were all overreacting, but he quickly realized *he* was probably the odd one out for not recognizing Erio’s injury as severe. “Oh, he’s probably not gonna make it, then,” he muttered to himself. He pulled out some medicine and crammed a few capsules in the boy’s mouth. Erio was slightly surprised to see Akira even care for him, but swallowed them down.

At that moment, Aricia belatedly realized Akira had shown up. “A-Akira, what did you just—?”

“Just a few capsules of medicine. They were pretty expensive, so they’re good stuff.”

Indeed, just as he’d said, the medicine immediately went to work dulling Erio’s pain, and before long, his consciousness was no longer hazy. His wounds were healing rapidly. The color in his face had yet to return, but he no longer looked like he was on death’s door.

Erio was surprised by how effective the medicine was. “Whoa, that *is* some good stuff, all right.”

“Erio?” Aricia asked worriedly. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine now. I told you, didn’t I? A mere scratch isn’t gonna kill me.”
He grinned.

That was good enough for Aricia. A wave of relief washed over her, and she hugged him, sobbing for joy. “Oh, thank goodness!”

Erio embraced her back. For the time being, the two were in their own world.

Their public display of affection left Akira feeling slightly awkward and out of place, and he handed the box of medicine to Nasya. “Use these on anyone else who’s gravely injured. It should at least keep them alive until they make it to the clinic.”

“A-All right, we’ll do that,” Nasya replied. “Thank you. Lucia, let’s go.”

“R-Right,” Lucia stammered. They still didn’t quite know how to conduct themselves around Akira. Happy to have an excuse to leave, the two girls bowed awkwardly in gratitude and fled the scene.

Sheryl smiled at Akira apologetically. “I, um, really am sorry for all this trouble.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. All part of the job,” he replied with a wry grin. The two of them got in his truck, and they headed to the clinic.



This clinic, situated in the slums, was recognized as a neutral zone. The staff there would see or treat anyone—even if they didn’t have money on hand, the patients could put it on their tab—so for the residents of the slums or people who couldn’t go to the hospitals in the lower district, the clinic was a godsend. And no one wanted such an important establishment to get caught up in a gang war, so the syndicates had an unspoken agreement to keep the clinic out of their feuds.

Akira stood outside the front door, looking dubious. “Sheryl, is this really the right place?”

“Yes. I understand your misgivings, but this is most certainly a medical facility.”

“If you say so,” he said, sounding unconvinced.

There was no word to describe the outward appearance of the clinic but “fishy.” The building looked more like a research facility than a hospital, for one thing. Many incomprehensible instruments and devices of unknown purpose were attached to the roof. One look at the place and anyone would suspect shady experiments were conducted there daily.

The sign on the door, its letters faded and barely legible, read “Yatsubayashi Clinic.” When Akira and the others entered, a man in a white lab coat was preparing to stab a bedridden patient with a syringe of green liquid. The patient—also a man—panicked when he saw the ever so slightly luminescent liquid inside.

“H-Hey, what’re you about to put into me?!” he yelped.

“Medicine, of course.”

“I’ve never seen medicine with a color like *that*! And why’s it glowing?!”

“This medicine’s special. I invented it myself.”

“Excuse me?! W-Wait, stop! Don’t inject that shit into my body!”

“You can’t afford treatment, right? Then beggars can’t be choosers! But never fear—this batch is perfect! The cheap stuff on the shelves pales in comparison!”

Without waiting for the patient’s response, the man in the white lab coat jabbed the syringe into the man and injected the green substance. A short, terrified yelp issued from the man’s throat.

“That should do it,” the man in the lab coat said. “Now just lie down and rest for a while. Sweet dreams!”

The medicine began taking effect almost immediately, and the anguish on the patient’s face gradually subsided. But he didn’t know what he’d just been injected with, so he still looked anxious as the bed automatically wheeled him back to his hospital room.

Then the man in the coat noticed Akira and the others. “Sorry, I’m all booked up today. If you were well enough to make it here on your own, you can wait another day.”

“No, we’re not the ones in need of treatment,” Sheryl said. “We have a group

of wounded outside. I'm here to discuss their treatment fee."

But before Sheryl could even start haggling, the man noticed Akira beside her. "Hey, it's you... Been quite a while, hasn't it?" he said.

The man in the white coat—and the doctor practicing at this clinic—was none other than Yatsubayashi, who'd previously treated Akira at the temporary clinic in Kuzusuhara after the Yarata scorpion emergency job.

While Yatsubayashi treated the injured patients, Akira and Sheryl explained to him what had happened.

"In that case," the doctor said when they finished, "don't worry about the fee for now—you can just pay me later. Even if you were broke, it's not like I'd turn them away. We'll discuss the specific amount another day."

"Thank you so much, Doctor," Sheryl said with a deep bow.

"Don't thank me just yet—if your relic business hits the jackpot, you can bet I'll be asking you to foot the whole bill." He added teasingly, "This building won't pay for itself, so whenever I get a client who isn't broke, I have to squeeze them for all they're worth."

Sheryl could tell he was joking and smiled wryly, but her expression grew warmer as she turned to Akira. "I'm going to go see how the other patients are doing. Want to come too?"

"Nah, I'm good. I'll just wait here."

"Oh, really? Okay, then," she said, mildly disappointed. She'd thought the patients might want to thank Akira in person for saving their lives with his medicine, but he didn't seem interested in seeing them. Still, she didn't press the matter. Whatever Akira wanted took priority—everything else was an afterthought.

She excused herself, leaving Akira and Yatsubayashi behind. The doctor injected the next patient with a dose of the same green liquid as before and looked at Akira questioningly.

"Do you require treatment as well, by any chance? If you fought a mech like you said, I imagine you couldn't have gotten away completely unscathed."

“No major injuries, at least. I coughed up a little blood, but I already took medicine after the battle, so I should be fine.”

“Coughing up blood sounds major to me. It’s dangerous to downplay or disregard severe injuries, you know?” insisted the doctor.

“Didn’t you just say that if I was well enough to walk, my injuries were minor and could wait until later?”

“If your body were augmented, perhaps so. But upon closer inspection, your limbs still look natural to me.”

“I’m fine, okay? I took meds—”

“Even the more expensive over-the-counter medicine isn’t perfect. Don’t expect the same level of efficacy every time, or one day you might fatally misjudge how serious a wound is. For instance, if you consider getting half your torso blown off a ‘minor wound’ because medicine will patch it right up, it means you think of medicine as a safety net. That’ll cause you to grow overconfident, take greater risks, and perhaps even end up dead.”

Akira knew firsthand that the doctor was right, and he looked guilty.

Yatsubayashi saw his expression and said in a more consoling tone, “How about at least letting me give you a checkup? The body’s a precious resource, and not just for hunters. Whether you’re flesh and blood or mostly mechanical, maintenance for your body’s important either way.” He smiled gently.

Yatsubayashi’s advice sounded awfully similar to Shizuka’s, so Akira gave in. “All right, I guess that’s fine.”

“Great! Just leave it to me!” the doctor replied, elated.

Akira removed the top half of his powered suit, and Yatsubayashi checked him over with an unusual-looking instrument. “Your residual nanomachine reading is quite high,” he murmured. “This type usually disperses right away—it’s as if you’re attempting to keep them in your body. Are you trying to become superhuman?”

“Superhuman? Because I have a lot of nanomachines? What are you talking about?” Akira asked, genuinely bewildered.

Yatsubayashi spluttered, “You mean you’ve been doing a superhuman training regimen without even realizing it? Now I’ve heard *everything!*”

It turned out, as the doctor explained to Akira, that a select few in the East were so strong they could send enormous tanks flying with a single punch, even without the aid of a powered suit. These were the superhumans. While a surprising number of people nowadays had inherited the aptitude to become one, most ended up dead before their innate talent could bear fruit, because becoming superhuman required training oneself well beyond the average person’s limits. If you neglected to train or if your training never took you past the capabilities of normal humans, you’d have no chance.

So, to become superhuman, one needed a superhuman training regimen, such as repeatedly injuring oneself to the point of death and then healing with excessive medicine. This could efficiently cultivate the body beyond the threshold of what was normally possible.

But there was no guarantee that this would make someone superhuman, because they needed the aptitude to start with. Without it, they’d simply experience hellish pain day in and day out while splurging on medicine, with no results to show for it.

So almost no one achieved a superhuman state through that method, save for a number of hunters out on the Front Line who were transformed by fighting arduous battles every day and downing meds to heal themselves afterward. There were cases of hunters reaching superhuman status purely through training rigorously, but these were rare exceptions, certainly not the rule.

Besides, there were many easier ways to gain superhuman power—wearing a powered suit, strengthening your body with augmented parts, or simply becoming a cyborg. So even if people had the natural aptitude for it, most didn’t think it was worth the effort to push their bodies to that extent.

Akira listened intently to Yatsubayashi, deeply fascinated. “Oh, now I get it! But are there really that many people out there with the required aptitude?”

“Yes, but most aren’t aware of it. The bodies of the denizens of the Old World became highly adaptable over time, and they passed these genes on to their children and grandchildren. In fact, most people in the East have the *genetic*

potential for a superhuman physique, though some more than others.”

He went on to say that even without the genetic potential, there were many other methods throughout the East by which one could receive the highly adaptable body that was essential for becoming superhuman. One way was to volunteer for clinical trials aimed at reproducing the properties of Old World bodies in New World humans; another was to dope up on Old World meds. Even a previously unknown type of nanomachine from the water, sky, or food might do the trick—or some combination of nanomachines might cause a mutation with the same effect.

“Which is why some people call the East the land of mutants, or a hive of bioweapon spawn. And since most people here are technically mutants (and the biological monsters *literally* are), I suppose that’s not wrong,” he added with a chuckle.

The technology of the Old World had been so advanced that it had redefined, redesigned, and rebuilt what it meant to be human. As descendants of the Old World, the people of the East were also products of that technology—in other words, they themselves were relics. And like all relics, they were precious. This was especially true of Old Domain Users, and until the tech they held was fully analyzed and considered common knowledge, Users would continue to be highly coveted.

Akira looked concerned. “For a long time, I survived on rations in the slums. Do you think that could’ve messed with my body somehow?”

“I wouldn’t rule it out, at least. Eating that stuff isn’t much different from participating in a clinical trial, so I’d say it’s certainly *possible* it caused a mutation that allowed you to become superhuman.” Then the doctor shook his head. “But if that’s your goal, I’d suggest going about it a different way. With rations, it’s far more likely that you’ll end up with some dangerous mutation instead. After all, that stuff hasn’t been tested—that’s why it’s handed out as rations.”

“Fair enough.”

“Furthermore, even if eating such ‘food’ somehow increased your body’s adaptability, the fundamental source is a technology we know nothing about,

making it even more dangerous.” He grinned. “Personally, I’d recommend a method that’s already tested and safe, and I happen to know one myself. Want to try it out? Unfortunately, insurance won’t cover it, but I’ll give you a discount if you agree to test it—”

“Hell no,” Akira snapped at once.

“No need to be so wary,” Yatsubayashi sulked. “It’ll be *fine*—I guarantee that it’s slightly safer than the other methods!”

“At least promise it’s completely safe,” Akira retorted. “But if you’re wanting me to test it for you, that means you can’t guarantee anything.”

“Oh, come now! Of course there’s always a *slight* risk. But don’t you hunters take risks for a living? If the odds are good that you’ll end up with overwhelming strength, this wager might be worthwhile. Weaklings are far more likely to die out in the wasteland.”

“Nope, not happening,” Akira flatly refused him once more.

“Why does everyone turn me down?” Yatsubayashi sighed. “Take that green medicine I was using earlier, for instance. Even though it’s far superior to anything Big Pharma’s got on the market, it’s so unpopular I have to resort to using it on freeloader patients just to gather any worthwhile clinical data.”

“You don’t think that might be because it looks radioactive, do you?”

“What of it? I think that makes it look cool!”

Akira sighed. “Just tell me whatever else you found. Any other problems besides the residual nanomachines?”

“No, everything else looks fine. Just drink this, and it’ll get rid of those excess nanomachines. It’s a hundred thousand aurum, but I’ll throw in some extra medicine as a bonus.”

“Medicine? It better not be more of that green stuff.”

Yatsubayashi looked hurt. “I’m giving it to you for free, so quit your whining.”

“I don’t want it. Just the nanomachine remover is fine.”

Yatsubayashi sighed again, but reluctantly handed Akira the liquid. Then he

smirked. “Fine, if you’re going to take that attitude, then I’ll just use it all on the patients you brought here instead.”

“If you’re using it to threaten me, that makes me even more leery of it.”

“Oh, shut up! I’m giving it to them on the cheap, and it’ll cure them completely!”

Akira reflected: this would only work out in Sheryl and the others’ favor. He said nothing more and let the doctor do as he pleased. Then Sheryl returned to pick him up, and the two of them left the clinic together.

On the way back to the warehouse, Sheryl updated him on how the others were doing. “Many lost their lives during the attack. But your medicine kept many more alive until they made it here. Provided they didn’t lose any limbs in the fight, they should all be able to make a full recovery.”

“Really? Glad to hear it!”

“But they seemed uneasy about taking the green liquid. I want to say they’ll be okay, but I honestly don’t know.”

“O-Oh, well, I’ve taken that medicine once before too, and I turned out fine...I think.” Akira remembered well how effective it had been—after all, had it not healed his wounds, he likely would not have survived the battle against the relic thieves later that day. But since he’d received another much more thorough treatment shortly thereafter at the Kugamayama city hospital, there was a chance the green medicine *had* given him side effects—and then the hospital’s treatment, worth sixty million aurum, had healed them afterward.

“Well, I’ll let them know you took it before—that might help them relax,” she said, smiling wryly at his uncertainty. Maybe it *could* cure patients to full health, but even so, Akira had a hard time defending the dangerously glowing liquid, she thought.



While Akira and the others were at the clinic, Shijima and his subordinates interrogated the thieves in the warehouse.

As the questioning went on, Shijima’s irritation mounted. The trespassers

remained brazen, even cracking occasional grins despite practically being tortured by Shijima and his gang. Their attitudes made Shijima even angrier—and increasingly worried.

“You’re probably tired of being roughed up by now, so I’ll give you an out: talk now, and we’ll put you out of your misery,” he demanded. “Why did you guys attack us, and under whose orders? Answer me.”

“Simple,” one man said. “We heard there was a large warehouse with a shit ton of relics inside. How could we resist?”

“Yeah,” another chimed in. “It’s closer than heading out to a ruin, and we heard you guys were all pushovers. We just misjudged things a little, that’s all.”

Shijima kicked the man in the face—hard. He didn’t hold back: at this point, he didn’t particularly care whether he killed the man.

But even as blood dripped down the bandit’s face, the man continued to grin.

“Don’t give me that horseshit!” Shijima roared. “There’s no way you could’ve transported those monsters and gotten a hold of a mech on your own! Spill it! Who was it?!”

On the surface, Shijima’s gang had a clear advantage over the group of bandits. But their attitudes said otherwise. While Shijima’s team raised their voices and became angrier, the bandits were all smiles, even throwing in a few sneers for good measure.

Shijima knew his desperation was showing on his face. He tried to cover it up by acting even angrier, but the bandits saw right through him. One thief, in fact, was so eager to take the opportunity for revenge that he let something slip:

“Even if we told you, it wouldn’t matter. You guys are finished now that you’ve pissed *them* off.”

One of his allies followed his lead. “You said it! You’re all gonna die *real* soon! Until then, tremble in fear!”

The two bandits were sure they were going to die here. So they wanted to at least have a little fun with their captors, watching their reactions at the news of their impending doom. One announced:

“After all, you guys picked a fight with the Ezent family.”

At the same moment, his buddy declared, “You’ve made an enemy of Harlias.”

“What?!” Shijima was floored.

But the two bandits also gasped.

“Ezent? What’re you talking about? We’re workin’ with Harlias!”

“What’re *you* smokin’? We’re helpin’ the Ezent family!”

“Look, if this little relic operation here succeeds, the profit might end up in the hands of those Ezent guys. To nip that in the bud, Harlias hired us to—”

“That’s not what I heard! These people are planning on double-crossing the Ezents and currying favor with Harlias by handing them a share of the shop’s profits. Which is why the Ezent family hired us to...”

As the bewildered pair tried to correct each other, the other bandits looked equally confused. “Are you two nuts?” said one. “Weren’t we here to prove how strong we were to prospective clients by killing that big-shot hunter who was guarding the warehouse?”

“That’s right!” said another. “Zalmo said if we succeed, Harlias would pay us at our asking price!”

“Harlias? I could’ve sworn Zalmo said it was Ezent...”

“Huh? No way! Are you crazy?”

“That’s my line!”

By now, they’d completely forgotten about Shijima and the others.

“What the hell’s going on?” the gang boss growled, holding his head in his hands. The only thing he knew for certain was that none of this made any sense whatsoever.

At that moment, one of his subordinates got a call. “Boss, apparently Viola’s here to talk to you. Should we let her in?”

Viola was a conniving witch—but also a damn good info broker, Shijima knew. Surely *she’d* have some intel that might shed light on this mystery. “Let her

through!”

He was so desperate for some sort of lead to shed light on things that he wouldn't have turned her away even if, hypothetically, she'd caused all this trouble in the first place.

When Viola entered the room with Carol, Shijima glared at her. “What do you want? As you can see, I've got a lot of shit to deal with, so make it snappy.”

“Oh? Well, if you're busy, I wouldn't want to keep you. Another time, then.” Viola turned on her heel and headed for the door with her companion.

Shijima scowled and called after her. “Wait! Let's hear what you have to say first.”

“Oh, well, it's a long story, and since you're so busy, I doubt you have the time. Sorry for showing up with no notice—we can talk again when you're free.”

Shijima's scowl deepened, but he managed a response through gritted teeth. “All right, I'm sorry. Is that what you wanna hear?”

“Good enough for me, as long as you've learned your lesson. Now we can quit these silly games and cut to the chase,” she said with a calm smile.

Viola had merely pretended to leave, knowing Shijima would definitely stop her, and he too had known it was an act. But he had no choice—if he let her go back home, that witch would surely engineer a situation where she could throw his decision back in his face. He knew she'd say something like “If only you had stopped me back then, you could've avoided this fate.” Then she'd make an example out of his demise for anyone else who might refuse her or turn her away, so that she could more easily manipulate them into doing as she pleased.

In other words, Viola already had Shijima in the palm of her hand before the negotiating had even begun.

Attempting to maintain his composure, Shijima heaved a deep sigh. “So, why did you come here?”

“Business, of course. I heard you were in a tough spot, so I thought I'd offer to

sell these thieves' assets for you."

"Sell them?" Shijima echoed.

Even in a wild region like the East, one could hold someone else responsible for damages compensation. So Shijima's syndicate could have theoretically demanded that the bandits pay for all the trouble they'd caused. The problem was that such claims would be hard to enforce. Even if the gang drew up a contract for a large sum and forced the bandits to sign it, the document would be worth no more than scrap paper. If someone tried to use an agreement like that as grounds to seize another's personal assets or houses within the city, the security companies would consider it an act of theft. The banks wouldn't touch an agreement like that either, so acquiring their bank accounts would also be out of the question.

The syndicate also couldn't sell off the bandits' debt—no one would buy it. Even companies who purchased the outstanding debts of others—in order to force them to take part in human experiments (or, as they were known publicly, "clinical trials") without their consent—were ethical enough to stay away from such illegitimate claims.

And above all, the Eastern League of Governing Corporations wouldn't allow it.

The ELGC considered crime an act of hostility against the League itself and the prosperity of the East's economy. It openly declared that it wouldn't permit anything impeding its efforts to maintain a healthy, fair, free, and stable market. But its definitions of "fair" and "free" were skewed—for example, the League considered high-level scams and large-scale pyramid schemes more severe crimes than robbery or murder, because these were greater threats to the economy as a whole.

It was also a severe crime to saddle someone with an illegitimate debt. Yet proving that a claim was legitimate wasn't exactly easy either. Had it been, people would have pinned enormous debts on random people left and right, especially in the lawless wasteland or the slums. But by the same token, if there was any suspicion that someone had been forced to sign an agreement with a gun pressed to their head, the contract would hold no legal weight. Normally,

Shijima and his gang wouldn't be able to do anything to the bandits beyond torturing them to death.

But if Viola were to sell their assets, that was another story. This meant she would draw up documentation claiming the bandits were responsible for the damage to the warehouse, negotiate with the city to get them to accept it, execute the foreclosure of the bandit's assets on Shijima's behalf, and find and negotiate a buyer for those assets. If a claim on someone's assets was judged to be legitimate, the banks and the Hunter Office had to cooperate as well. Unpaid claims could even be sold off to the Hunter Office if need be.

The only issue was whether she could convince the city the claim was legitimate. But based on her reputation and what Shijima knew of her skill, he was sure she could pull it off.

He shot a glance at the group of bandits. Up until now, they'd looked calm and acted bold, despite knowing they were going to die. But now panic was showing on their faces.

"And what would be your share?" Shijima asked Viola.

"Let's see: It'll be a big job, so how does fifty percent sound?"

"Fifty percent?! Hey now, don't you think you're asking for a bit much?"

"What are you talking about? That's a heavy discount. Normally, I'd charge eighty for a job like this. I'm only lowering it so far since we're such good friends."

Shijima snorted. "Look, I know my fair share of liquidators, including some who are in the human trafficking business. I can just sell these guys to them, and I won't even have to dirty my hands with their blood. I have no reason to hire you for that price."

Shijima did know people like this, but the rest of what he said was a complete bluff, and Viola saw through it right away. "That won't work. And you already know why, don't you?"

"I mean, they might not be as good as you, but they'll get the job done," Shijima said, his tone somewhat forced. "Even if they ask ten percent, that's still way less than fifty, and way more money in our pockets."

But Viola smiled and shook her head. “That’s not what I mean. Oh, I see—perhaps you’re having a hard time saying it out loud, so you want me to say it instead? Very well, I’ll tell everyone here, just for you.”

Shijima’s subordinates had no idea what was going on anymore and wore clueless faces. Shijima, on the other hand, felt himself tensing up. He had a feeling he knew what Viola was about to say, and was hoping against hope that his guess was wrong.

“No garden-variety liquidator,” Viola announced, “would sell the assets of anyone affiliated with an attack *approved by the city itself*.”

The other gangsters’ mouths dropped open. But Shijima, who’d already come to that conclusion, only looked grave.

Chapter 135: Liquidation

Shijima couldn't help but shoot Viola a suspicious glare. The city had been complicit in the attack on the warehouse? "Say, Viola, just how much of this do you know for sure?"

"It's just a guess. Perhaps saying the *city* approved is a bit of an exaggeration. But whoever ordered the attack is certainly in league with the security companies in the adjacent area." She smiled as she added, "After all, even if this area's outside their jurisdiction, normally they'd never stay quiet when a bunch of monsters and a mech are running amok right next door."

Shijima stayed silent, but not because he disagreed—he would rather have not known the truth. He might not have been sure whether the city had really been involved in the attack either, but he did know that private security companies cooperated with the city to keep the lower district safe. With such a huge commotion going on, they would have had a duty to report the incident to the city.

Why hadn't they made a move, even knowing the city would reprimand them for neglecting to file a report? Only one possibility had come to mind—the city had known about the attack from the start, as Viola had suggested. Whoever was behind the bandit attack, then, likely had enough influence to get the city to turn a blind eye. Such an entity would also have the pull necessary to round up those monsters and acquire a mech. Everything added up.

Shijima hadn't wanted to admit that he'd been caught up in such a large-scale incident. Though he'd more or less realized the truth, he'd tried to ignore it. But now that Viola had now pointed it out in front of his subordinates, he couldn't hide any longer.

"All right. I'll leave their assets to you," he said begrudgingly.

Viola smiled again. "Smart decision. Trust me—I promise you'll be adequately compensated. First, I'd like you to remove their equipment, possessions, and anything that's valuable from all the bandits, whether dead or alive. And be

gentle—they sell for higher prices when they're in better condition. Got that?"

"Before that, wait just a minute," said Shijima.

"What's wrong? Sorry, but the commission fee's nonnegotiable this time. I've already lowered the percentage from eighty to fifty—I can't go any lower than that."

"That's not it. I just can't make this decision on my own. I need to talk to Sheryl first, so wait until then."

Even Shijima didn't quite know why he felt like he needed Sheryl's opinion first. Perhaps it was one last weak attempt at preventing Viola from getting her way, or perhaps he simply didn't want to be the only one involved in this mess. Either way, he reached for his terminal and explained the situation to Sheryl. When he finished, her voice came through his terminal's speaker, reverberating through the warehouse.

"I understand. Let her do the job. But she leaves the mech behind."

At that, Viola's smile twitched ever so slightly. "The mech will surely be the most valuable asset of the lot," she said. "Are you sure? Besides, it's already broken, and I doubt you know of anyone who can repair a mech. You'd benefit much more by selling it."

"I don't care," Sheryl said. "I want it as proof that Akira defeated it."

"In that case, you don't have to worry. I'll spread the word that your warehouse is guarded by a hunter capable of taking down a mech all by himself."

"Except we already tried that," Sheryl pointed out, "and instead a pickpocket went after Akira and numerous bandits have tried attacking the warehouse. I want the destroyed mech to remain here as glaring proof of Akira's strength."

"I understand, however—"

Shijima noticed Viola was being oddly stubborn on this one point, and a certain possibility came to him. "Hey Viola, don't tell me your real motive here is to recover that mech?"

Viola paused for a moment before answering. "Recover? Why would I want to

do that?”

“Then how about a different question? Who exactly do you plan to sell that mech to?”

“That’s classified,” she said pleasantly. “Information like that needs to be kept confidential to protect the buyer. That said, I’m not above telling you for a fee, but I’ll warn you—it won’t come cheap.”

Shijima didn’t press her, because he knew doing so would be pointless. Even if she was connected to the bandits attacking the warehouse, a woman as conniving as her wouldn’t slip up at this stage in the game. “Nah, forget it. Just do the job, and leave the mech here, like Sheryl said.”

Viola hesitated again before responding. “Oh well, you’re in charge. I was offering to sell that mech for a high price out of the goodness of my heart, you know. I just hope you don’t regret your decision later.”

“Sheryl’s the one who refused, not me. If you want to convince someone, talk to her and Akira, all right?”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” she said.

The smile spreading across her face seemed to suggest she was already scheming something, but inwardly, Shijima was relieved. Even if, in the worst case, he ended up regretting his decision to turn Viola down, he could just pass the buck to Sheryl and Akira. For now, things would be fine. Probably.



When Akira returned to the warehouse with Sheryl, he saw the bandits being led away. Their arms and legs were bound, and their eyes were lifeless. One by one, they were shoved into a nearby truck. The mech was there, of course, but Viola had hired men to retrieve everything else related to the bandits and their attack—their corpses, their vehicles, and even the monsters’ corpses—and haul them away.

As they worked, one of these hired hands stepped inside the mech, angering a subordinate of Shijima’s.

“Hey!” the gangster called. “Don’t touch that machine! Didn’t you hear that’s

not going?! It's off-limits!"

"Oh, shut up!" the other man shouted back, poking his head outside. "I already know that—I'm just getting the pilot's corpse out! My orders were to retrieve everyone, dead or alive! Every piece of them—that goes for their brains and artificial limbs too! Damn, this guy's splattered all over the cockpit. What a mess. Couldn't his killer have done a cleaner job?"

Akira was nearby and heard him complain. "Sorry," the boy replied. "He gave me such a run for my money that making a clean kill was the least of my worries."

"Huh? O-Oh, is that so?" The man gave a weak, embarrassed laugh and immediately went back to work. When he was finished, he grabbed the body bag he'd filled up and fled the scene as quickly as he could.

Carol was also present. She watched the man beat a quick retreat and snorted with laughter. Then she turned and smiled at Akira. "He was only doing his job, you know. You didn't need to freak him out like that."

"Did I? I really didn't mean to, though."

"Remember when I warned you about paying more attention to what you say? When you're that strong, some people will take anything you say as a threat. Keep that in mind, for your own sake." Carol scolded him like she would a child, but gently and with a hint of teasing.

After giving this some consideration, Akira smiled wryly. "All right. I'll be more careful."

Meanwhile, Sheryl was shocked to see Carol and Akira talking so amicably with each other—especially since she'd only previously known Carol as an acquaintance of Viola's.

"Akira, you, um, know this woman, I take it?"

"Oh, yeah. We were on the same team during the Mihazono job."

"I'm Carol. Nice to meet you," Carol said, holding her hand out for a handshake.

Sheryl felt bewildered but took her hand, and Carol looked her over

appraisingly. The girl returned her gaze with a confident smile.

“Wow, she’s cute, Akira. Is she your girlfriend?” Carol asked.

“Yeah, more or less,” he answered. Akira and Sheryl were pretending to be lovers because it gave him a convenient excuse for backing her gang. He figured someone as sharp as Carol could read between the lines and deduce the real meaning behind his reply.

“Yes, we’re dating,” Sheryl said, leaving no room for interpretation. *She* wanted Carol to know that the two were indeed a couple.

“I see,” Carol said with a hint of amusement. In fact, Carol had correctly deduced the intent behind Akira’s answer—as well as Sheryl’s—and had determined that there was no need to restrain her own advances in Sheryl’s presence. “Still, wow, you really took this thing down all by yourself, Akira? Guess I shouldn’t be surprised, though, since we’re talking about someone as capable as you.”

“Well, compared to fighting Monica, it was a breeze. You probably could’ve done the same thing, right?”

“Hmm... I won’t say I couldn’t, but I certainly wouldn’t be reckless enough to try to fight it on my own.”

“Hey, neither was I!”

“Then why did you?”

“Um—well, I just thought it’d be a good warm-up exercise for my new powered suit,” he said with a grin.

Carol burst out laughing. “A little intense for a warm-up, don’t you think?”

“Not with a powered suit I paid four hundred mil for. An easy fight wasn’t gonna help break *that* in.”

“And these bandits wound up on the receiving end of your ‘warm-up.’ In other words, their luck ran out when they ran into you. It was their own fault, of course, but since they’re getting sold off by Viola of all people, I can’t help but feel for them just a little.” She cast a pitying gaze toward the men getting shoved into the truck. She’d spoken in a lighthearted tone, but there had

indeed been a hint of sympathy mixed in.

Akira followed her gaze. “Are they really gonna have it that rough?”

“Absolutely. Oh, right, I forgot you’re clueless about the world. Let me tell you just what’ll happen to them, then.”

Even in the East, the concept of human rights existed. However, one’s wealth had a big impact on whether such rights applied to them. The rich were treated better, and could live happy, healthy, fulfilling lives within the city walls. The poor, on the other hand, lived in the back alleys of the slums, fearing for their lives every day. Money made all the difference.

However, even if you had no money to your name, you still got off comparatively easy—at least you were still considered human. Those with negative balances—those in debt—were treated like subhumans.

And the deeper in the hole they were, the worse their treatment became.

One common fate for people in outstanding debt was to become guinea pigs for clinical trials. Medicine that could heal wounds and broken bones with a single dose was miraculous, to be sure, but tragedies and accidents would occur if all the medicine’s kinks hadn’t been worked out. Some unfortunate souls ended up full of nanomachines that gradually broke their bodies down, but were unable to die because the medicine continued to heal them. As their limbs and insides were overrun with nanomachines, their bodies grew weak and deformed. Every day they’d experience unending, hellish pain, but even as lumps of flesh they were kept conscious, because their clinical data was vital in order to correct the medicine’s flaws.

And that was one of the *less* severe examples—depending on how enormous their debt was, some met with even worse fates.

Akira looked revolted. “*That’s* how they’re going to end up? Jeez, it freaks me out just imagining it!”

“Well, those bandits were probably prepared to die if they lost—but you could also say that was *all* they were prepared for. Perhaps that would have been all the resolve they needed, if only Viola hadn’t gotten involved. Their luck just ran out.”

She explained that Viola was going to use all sorts of methods to saddle them with legitimate damage claims, extorting from them the highest possible amount she legally could. She'd hold them responsible for the damage to the relics in the warehouse, the treatment fees for the critically injured security guards, reparations for the loss in personnel, and the pay for the surviving security guards (Akira included), just to name a few.

Naturally, the bandits couldn't pay back such a large amount. So Viola would sell off their debts at around ten percent of the claim, and the buyers would treat the culprits according to the severity of their debt. In other words, what awaited them was treatment so unethical that death would be a more preferable option.

"I know this is going to sound bad," added Carol, "but those guys really should've killed themselves the moment they lost, while they still had the chance. But I know it's hard to muster up that much resolve, so I don't blame them for not doing it."

"That's seriously terrifying," Akira said.

"I know, right? So you better make sure you don't fall into debt either. The more hunters earn, the easier it is for them to go down that path. If you end up with a debt you can't pay back, you'll be in trouble."

"Yeah, I'll keep that in mind."

Their conversation turned to much lighter topics. Sheryl listened nearby; she wore a smile, but her emotions were growing darker by the second.

Then Carol received a call. "Looks like I'm needed, so it's time to go. See you later, Akira!" She rejoined Viola, who'd just emerged from the warehouse, and the two women left the grounds together.

Sheryl turned to Akira, looking slightly anxious. "Akira, are you sure she's just an acquaintance? You two looked awfully friendly just now."

"Well, we did cheat death on the battlefield together, after all."

"Cheat death? Yes, I suppose that makes sense," she reflected. Still, his response left her feeling slightly melancholy—since she couldn't fight, she'd never forge the same kind of bond with him.

“It’s the same with Katsuragi and his guys,” Akira continued. “We were together when monsters attacked us, and we barely managed to survive. That’s why Katsuragi listens to my requests, and why he agreed to look after you.”

“Is that so?” She knew he was being completely forthright. Yet even if his close calls with Carol and Katsuragi had been similar, Sheryl could tell—there was a clear difference in how he treated each of them.



After Viola left the warehouse, she and Carol hopped in the truck and headed through the wasteland with the thieves in tow.

“Viola, we’re heading to drop these guys off with the buyer you found, right? Why the wasteland?” Carol asked.

“Who knows? The buyer decided where to meet, not me.”

“In other words, we’re taking part in some shady stuff.”

“Which is why I hired you to protect me. If you want your big payout, you better work for it.”

“Yeah, yeah. And don’t you forget that if it looks like it’s not worth the pay, I won’t hesitate to leave you behind.”

“Oh, I’m well aware.”

They might have been friends, but both were shrewd women. The moment one of them tried to cheat the other, they’d cut ties without further ado. But they’d known each other long enough to share a degree of trust—and to know how far that trust would take them before breaking down—and so they’d been able to maintain their friendship until now.

“Hey Carol, is that Akira kid your next prey?”

“Prey? How rude! I prefer to think of it as ‘supporting my clientele.’”

“Oh, my bad. But laying your hands on a kid, huh? I didn’t know you were into that.”

“Don’t judge my kinks, and I won’t judge yours. Deal?”

“Deal!” Viola replied.

Through their lighthearted banter, Viola determined Carol wasn't merely targeting Akira on a whim. She also judged that Carol wouldn't object if Viola involved Akira in her own hobby of playing with fire.

And in fact, Carol didn't care. If Viola's intrigues resulted in Akira's or Viola's death, that would be a shame—but either way, life would go on.

Carol and Viola reached the designated meeting point five minutes before the scheduled time. They got out of the truck and looked around for their client, but couldn't see them anywhere.

"Hey Viola, is this really the place?"

"Yes, no doubt about it."

They waited some more, but no one showed up. Carol tried a sweep of the area, but nothing appeared on her scanner. "If I can't detect them yet, there's no way they'll be here on time," she said.

"Let's wait until the scheduled time and see what happens," Viola replied. "If they don't show, we'll head back to the city and look for another avenue of sale. Seeing as how they got in touch with me right after the incident, I thought this arrangement would work out, but perhaps I overestimated them."

If a party arrived late to an exchange meeting, it meant they weren't capable of showing up on time, couldn't keep a promise, or both. Either way, unless her aim was to trap them, Viola couldn't make an agreement with such a person. So this deal was most likely a wash.

But Carol looked surprised. "This exchange wasn't part of your plan from the start? I figured you were involved with the warehouse attack from the get-go, and that was how you set up the deal with Shijima so quickly."

"Actually, I had nothing to do with the attack. I did predict it would happen, and had already planned to head over to negotiate once all the dust had settled, but the other party came up with the proposal to sell them the bandits dead or alive. This is just my guess, but I bet they called me the moment the attackers failed their mission."

"Ah, I see. And you pretended to be oddly adamant about taking the mech

with you so that Shijima wouldn't realize the bandits were your primary goal."

"Something like that. But it doesn't matter now, because I don't think this deal's going to pan out. Any readings, Carol?"

"Nada. They've only got thirty seconds to show up. Really, inviting us all the way out here for nothing? Talk about inconsiderate—"

Carol's face suddenly went taut, and she leaped in front of Viola, drawing her weapon.

"Carol?!"

"I'm getting a reading! But how?! I didn't see it enter my scanner's range—it just appeared in the center all of a sudden! There's no way I could've missed its approach!"

Before her, a section of the air warped, and a man in a black coat appeared. It was apparent at a glance that he was a cyborg—his head was wholly made of metal. He stared at Carol and Viola intently before speaking. "Please, lower your weapon. I'm not your enemy—I'm the one who arranged this exchange. You are Viola's bodyguard, I take it?"

Carol tucked her gun away. "If you didn't want us to regard you as an enemy, how about not using your camouflage to sneak up and appear right in front of us?" she teased.

"I apologize for that. However, I didn't want anyone to see me, and I did try to deactivate the camouflage when I was close enough for you to detect my approach."

"Guess there's no helping it, then," Carol said with a shrug. She was acting nonchalantly toward him, but inwardly, she was terrified of him. Even if he'd used active camouflage, her advanced scanner should have picked him up—especially as near as he'd been when he appeared. But the man hadn't given her any sign of his approach: he had equipment capable of deceiving her scanner and was skilled enough to use it. Had he wanted to ambush them, Carol would probably have been dead by now. She broke into a cold sweat.

"Now then, let's get things underway, shall we?" the man said. "The goods are in the truck, I presume?"

Viola responded with the smile of a negotiator. “Correct. The back door’s already unlocked, so see for yourself.”

The man looked in the truck. “Yes, excellent. What account should I send the money to? I can pay in cash as well if you prefer, but the amount being what it is, it might take a little longer.”

“Direct deposit is fine. Send it here, please.” She selected an account with her terminal, and immediately received a notice that the money had been deposited in it.

“I have sent the money to the account specified. Please confirm,” the man said.

“Yes, I’ve received the right amount.”

“Then that concludes our transaction. Pleasure doing business with you. I’ll be heading out now, but just a friendly warning: I strongly recommend that you do not try to follow me.”

“Naturally. Just as we agreed beforehand, my bodyguard and I will wait here while you take the truck and make your getaway.”

The man got in the driver’s seat and sped off—not toward the city, but deeper into the wasteland. When the truck was gone, both women sighed in relief.

“Viola, I know you like risks, but isn’t this a bit *too* dangerous? I was seriously considering making a run for it, you know.”

“What are you talking about? It turned out just fine in the end, didn’t it? There’s always risk involved with transactions like these.”

“Even if you end up dead in the process?”

“I don’t need a hunter lecturing me about *that*. Even I took several precautions to ensure my safety here. At the very least, I was more cautious than a reckless hunter braving a deadly ruin,” she said with a smile.

“Can’t argue with that,” Carol said cheerfully.

After waiting there for a while as promised, they called a car from the city to come take them back home. But just as they were about to get in, an explosion

rose from the wasteland, so large that it registered on Carol's scanner.

"Hey Viola, do you think that was the truck?"

"Most definitely."

"You think he was trying to silence the bandits? Destroy the evidence?"

"Probably both."

"We didn't cause the explosion, right?"

"Of course not."

"Good. Then let's get out of here."

If it hadn't been their fault, then there was no need to worry about it. By the time they reached the city, they'd both put the incident out of their minds.



After the man had completed the exchange and driven for some time, he stopped the truck in the middle of the wasteland, opened the back door, and climbed inside.

The bandits—both the living and the dead—were crammed in the back of the truck. The survivors regarded him with fearful eyes.

The man opened one of the body bags and took out a small mechanical device from inside—it looked like a microchip, or perhaps a memory stick. There was still a piece of brain matter attached to the end. Then, after carefully pocketing the device, he addressed the terrified men.

"No need to worry. I don't belong to a corporation. You all helped my comrade with his mission, so I won't mistreat you."

"R-Really?" Hearing that the man wasn't here to sell them off, the bandits' faces showed signs of hope. Before long, they were all smiling, save one who looked puzzled by the man's words.

"You're not from a corporation? And what do you mean by 'comrade'? What's going—?"

The cyborg opened fire on the survivors. Each of them died instantly from a single headshot, so that they wouldn't feel any pain.

“Now you won’t suffer in the hands of the corporations. Rest in peace.” The man exited the vehicle, planted a bomb on it, and left.

The subsequent explosion blasted the truck and everything in it to smithereens.

By now, the man was on a call. “It’s me,” he said. “Yes, I’ve recovered our comrade. There were no issues. Prepare a new body for him.”

Apart from the man and his comrades, only Viola and Carol knew about this transaction. But even if they’d seen the explosion and deduced what had happened, they couldn’t have found any proof. Dead men told no tales, and all the evidence had been destroyed.

The organization had thoroughly covered its tracks, just like always.



Even with the bandits gone, the situation at the warehouse remained hectic. However, things had at least calmed down enough that Sheryl didn’t have to remain on-site to issue direct orders to her gang, and so she could return to her base.

She asked Akira to come along with her, and he agreed. When they got back to her room at the base, Sheryl gave an exhausted sigh. Then she embraced him. Not a lover’s embrace—it was more like she was clutching him in desperation.

Akira wasn’t the most sensitive to others’ emotions, but even he could tell Sheryl wasn’t acting like herself. “What’s wrong, Sheryl?” he asked.

“Sorry,” she said weakly. “I’m just a little overwhelmed.”

“Oh, okay.” Akira let Sheryl cling to him as he moved to the sofa to sit down. “Well, you can do as you like until you calm down, I guess.”

“I appreciate it,” she said with a hint of gloom in her voice.

At that, Akira hugged her tighter.

Back when she’d seen Akira and Carol pleasantly chatting with each other, Sheryl had suppressed the ugly emotions welling up from the depths of her heart. Under no circumstances could she let herself act on those feelings—

doing so would be taking one step closer to her destruction. Anxiety, jealousy, hate, fear, depression—these would only cloud her judgment. Poor judgment would lead to repeated failures, which would only give Akira a reason to abandon her. She'd been able to endure until now by reminding herself of these things.

She was afraid that someday, Akira's whim to support her would suddenly end.

Sheryl knew Akira didn't particularly consider her a friend, let alone a lover. He also had no interest in her body, nor had he saved her with any expectation that she could be of use to him. He didn't even see himself as Sheryl's ally. His decision to save her back then had been an ephemeral one—more or less on impulse—and even in Sheryl's eyes, Carol had looked extraordinarily beautiful. The girl could easily see how men would flock to her, and Carol even seemed to have gotten her hooks into Akira as well.

Akira had met and gotten to know the woman during his hunter work, without Sheryl's knowledge. All this time, Sheryl had averted her eyes from the possibility that Akira had been forging relationships with other women in places she couldn't see. But now she was forced to face the truth—any female might seduce Akira and make him her lover at any point. If that happened, Akira's whim would most likely end, and he'd drop Sheryl in a heartbeat. Seeing Carol, with her alluring figure, flirt with Akira, Sheryl had no choice but to face her worst fear.

If Akira had asked even a little more of Sheryl, whether it be her body, her status, her wealth, or her talent, she would have offered it to him with pleasure. But he didn't want anything from her. Her heart—her everything—hung by the single thread of Akira's caprice. Would that thread give out before she could finally strengthen their bond with something more reliable? She wasn't sure—and desperate to flee from her mounting anxiety, she continued to cling to Akira.

Chapter 136: Yanagisawa Takes Care of Business

The crisis in Mihazono had started when the ruin's mechanical guards began running amok outside of their designated patrol zones. But thanks to the city's efforts, the situation was now nearly under control.

However, that didn't mean things had returned to normal. Part of the factory district was currently inaccessible to the public, and in the business district the area surrounding the Serantal Building was walled off with temporary protective barriers. To ensure the mechanical monsters inside couldn't escape, the Kugamayama forces had also set up camp out front, blocking the entrance to the building.

At first they'd wanted to secure the building's ground floor and make their base in the lobby. But the sheer numbers of monsters inside had overwhelmed them and driven them back outdoors. So they'd compromised, sealing off the entrance instead. They walled off the building's environs, but the battle only grew more difficult—in fact, merely securing that small space near the entrance had required nearly every resource they had. In the end, they had settled for barricading the building's entrance and constructed a temporary base in front to keep it sealed.

Currently, Druncam was tasked with defending the base, with Katsuya's team as the primary unit.

Yumina was on break for the moment. She sighed. "I'm just holding them back, aren't I?"

Katsuya's unit was defending the Serantal Building grounds with impeccable coordination. They were performing perfectly—*too* perfectly, according to their commander Kurosawa. But that didn't mean that everyone was performing at the same level without exception. Some were finding it too demanding to keep up with the rest of the unit and couldn't execute the precise movements required of them, hampering the unit as a whole. Yumina was one of these.

“Could it be that I’m just not compatible with the all-purpose powered suit?” she wondered aloud.

Their superior, Mizuha, had outfitted the entire unit with brand-new powered suits from a corporation named Kiryou. She’d explained to Katsuya and his team that these suits had yet to hit the market and were still in development. Kiryou had only agreed to share them because it needed to see how the product performed out on the field, meaning the Druncam unit was essentially testing a brand-new product. Katsuya had looked genuinely thrilled to be chosen, but Yumina had been concerned about using gear that had yet to be tested in live combat.

Yet there was no denying the suits were quite powerful. And Yumina couldn’t bring herself to voice her objections to Mizuha, who was the unit’s superior and biggest supporter, and who was trying to come back from her failure at the battle with the hypersynthetic snake.

However, once the action began in Mihazono, Katsuya’s unit had performed outstandingly, surprising even Kiryou. Even though they were ultimately outnumbered and pushed back from the lobby, Katsuya and his team had successfully entered the building and rescued the remaining hunters trapped inside, even making it as far as the entrance to the upper floors.

Reminding herself of this, Yumina shook her head, as if to rid herself of her negative thoughts.

“What’s wrong with me? Why am I blaming my weakness on my suit? I can’t think like that—that’s not like me. Get a grip, girl!”

Katsuya was walking nearby. Seeing her troubled and downcast look, he called out to her. “Hey Yumina, you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Don’t worry,” she answered. “I’m just sorry that I keep holding the team back as of late.”

Katsuya judged this was probably what had been bothering her, and he smiled gently. “Everybody makes mistakes. And since we’re teammates, we’ve got each other’s backs, right? Even if you mess up, I’ll cover for you. So don’t worry.”

“Right. Thanks, Katsuya,” she said, returning his smile.

She looked happier now, so Katsuya figured the problem was solved, and he nodded, satisfied.

Indeed, Yumina was happy that Katsuya was concerned for her. But his attempt at encouragement had only confirmed to her she really was dragging down the rest of the unit. What she’d really wanted was for Katsuya to deny it, and his actual response had hurt her even more.

At that moment, several other boys walked by. Katsuya looked abashed as they approached, as though he wasn’t sure how to act around them.

“Something up?” he asked.

“W-Well, M-Mizuha just called,” one boy replied. “She wanted us to tell you that a bigwig from the city is coming here, and to be prepared for his arrival.”

“Gotcha. Thanks for letting me know.”

“Y-You’re welcome.”

The boys looked just as awkward around Katsuya as he did around them. They were former Group B rookies who had transferred over to Katsuya’s team. When they’d heard Togami would be accepting Mizuha’s invitation and transferring to Group A, they’d followed suit—they’d be treated much better in Group A, after all, and with Togami as a go-between, they wouldn’t have to answer to Katsuya directly.

By the time it was announced, shortly afterward, that Togami had turned down Mizuha’s offer, the boys had already completed all the paperwork for their transfer to Group A. It was too late to go back to Group B now, so even though they felt like the rug had been pulled out from under them, they’d had no choice but to pledge their allegiance to Katsuya. Katsuya, meanwhile, rather liked seeing his former detractors kiss up to him. So while they hadn’t exactly gotten along, they’d at least avoided butting heads while working to secure the business district. The former Group B boys had fallen slightly behind the rest of the unit, but had still worked together with them to make the mission a success.

However, after seeing firsthand the incredible ability that Katsuya’s unit had

demonstrated, the newcomers had revised their opinion of them. At first, they'd thought Katsuya and his teammates were unfairly favored by the desk jockeys. They'd subscribed to the notion that the team's hunter ranks were high only because of the easy, lucrative missions and excellent gear they were issued—in other words, the very reasons all rookie hunters got a bad rap. But because it was the corporation Kiryou who had issued everyone the same gear for this mission, the equipment that Katsuya and the former Group B boys were using was identical. Witnessing the overwhelming strength of Katsuya's unit under these conditions, the boys had no choice but to acknowledge its superiority—as well as their own shortcomings.

Because of the harsh environment they grew up in, people from the slums respected and obeyed the strong. In fact, this was why the boys tolerated Shikarabe and the other Druncam veterans—as irritating as they were, they were undeniably skilled. The boys could endure being looked down upon by the strong, because the strong had a right to be arrogant. In the slums, morality and righteousness wouldn't protect you—strength was the only law.

Thus the boys had now begun to see Katsuya in a new light. He was so strong, they'd realized, that his own assessment of his talent now seemed rather humble in comparison. The way that he deliberately used that strength to help his comrades, rather than flaunting his own skill, impressed them even further. So instead of hostility and ridicule, the former Group B boys were now treating Katsuya with kindness and respect.

Naturally, Katsuya had appreciated this, and he had revised his own attitude toward them as a result, which in turn made the boys like Katsuya even more. So even though, thanks to their past disagreements and rivalries, they were still a little awkward around each other, slowly but surely the bad blood between Katsuya and the former Group B boys continued to improve.

Yumina was another story, however. To the boy who had delivered the message, she said, “Um, I don't know who this ‘bigwig’ is, but it sounds like you're basically saying that they're coming to observe us, and we need to perform at our best so we don't embarrass ourselves?”

“Isn't that obvious?” the boy snapped.

“Y-Yeah,” she replied meekly. Given their attitude toward her, she thought she might unintentionally provoke them if she pressed for details, so she didn’t say anything more. She’d just contact Mizuha and ask her later instead.

The boys did indeed look down on Yumina. Their attitude toward Katsuya had changed, but that was only because they were dragging the team down, and Katsuya wasn’t—why should they show any respect to someone else who was also holding the team back? In fact, they thought even less of her—she’d been in Group A from the start, so why couldn’t she keep up? Pathetic! The boys were careful not to scorn Yumina in Katsuya’s presence, but their disdain was written all over their faces. And of course, Yumina wasn’t oblivious to this. She knew exactly what they were thinking.

Katsuya sensed some friction between Yumina and the former Group B boys, but he didn’t step in. Group A was still at odds with Group B, so he thought it was only natural they wouldn’t get along right away. Because his own attitude toward the boys had improved so much, he figured that, with time, they’d come around eventually.



Yanagisawa had come on behalf of the city to the temporary base on the Serantal Building grounds. He himself was unarmed, but the group of subordinates following behind him certainly weren’t.

“Sorry for showing up on such short notice,” he was saying. “I’m just as busy as you guys are, so I know how it is. But there was a small opening in my schedule, so I figured I’d use it to take care of some business.”

Mizuha walked beside him, responding as politely as she could in order to curry favor with the Kugamayama executive. “No, no, it’s no trouble at all! In fact, when I heard a city official was on their way here, I volunteered myself to be your guide—I want our syndicate to continue good relations with the city, you see. But I never expected someone as esteemed as you to show up, Mr. Yanagisawa!”

“Yeah, sorry about that too. Because of my status, my whereabouts have to stay classified. I couldn’t let you know in advance, or it would have given away my location.”

“No, that’s no problem! I completely understand!” In truth, Mizuha *had* found it unusual that he hadn’t announced his arrival beforehand—even a municipal official should’ve been able to manage that much. But because he was much higher up the ladder than she was, she felt it wasn’t her place to say so.

She led Yanagisawa and his subordinates to the very back of the base, where the defensive wall was blocking the entrance to the Serantal Building. Katsuya and the rest of his team were already in formation. (Mizuha had ordered them to form up when Yumina had called earlier for more details, and Yumina had relayed the command to the rest of the team.) The Druncam executive, having assumed Yanagisawa was here to inspect the barricade and make sure the building was properly sealed, wanted to show him that the syndicate was continuing to monitor the area diligently as promised. She was also eager for a chance to advertise Katsuya and his team to a city official.

But Yanagisawa’s interests—and his reason for coming here—had nothing to do with Katsuya’s unit. Instead, he pointed at the defensive wall. “Mind opening that up for me?” he asked Mizuha pleasantly.

Mizuha was taken aback. “N-No, that keeps the monsters inside, so it isn’t meant to be opened—” She remembered who she was talking to and corrected herself: “I-I mean, yes, right away! We’ll have it open in a couple of minutes!”

Yanagisawa’s sudden request perplexed her, but whatever an executive of the city wanted took priority. She was about to rush over to the barrier when Yanagisawa stopped her.

“Nah, I’m on a busy schedule. If it’s going to take time, don’t bother.” He turned to one of his subordinates behind him. “Nelia, would you do the honors?”

A cyborg woman stepped forward from the rest of the group. She had a beautiful face, and all of the skin above her neck was natural and unblemished. Below, however, the skin looked artificial, with a sheen suggesting metal or rubber. She wore a bodysuit slightly more revealing than most, but the exposed limbs were clearly all mechanical.

She was Nelia, formerly part of the group of relic bandits who’d attacked the Kuzusuhara Ruins, fought with Akira, and finally been arrested by the city.

With a sour expression, she strode past Yanagisawa to the barricade and gripped her blade with both hands. In the span of a single instant, she slashed through the wall a number of times. Several seconds passed before the barricade, sturdy enough to withstand an artillery shell from a tank, belatedly collapsed to the ground.

Katsuya's unit, watching from afar, looked shocked—as the ones who'd fought to seal off the entrance, they knew the barrier's strength better than anyone else. Mizuha's mouth had dropped open.

But the rest of Yanagisawa's subordinates didn't look surprised in the least, and Yanagisawa himself only wore a big smile. "Excellent job! Truly impressive. Now, Nelia, shall we head in?"

The two of them strode to the Serantal Building's entrance, leaving the rest behind. Mizuha attempted to follow them, but one of Yanagisawa's people standing in front of the now-destroyed wall kept her from going any farther.

The monsters in the Serantal Building had forced the units from Druncam and Kugamayama to retreat. Yet here was one of the city's top brass sauntering in practically defenseless. Mizuha panicked, worried that if something happened to him, she'd be held responsible.

Nelia had destroyed the defensive wall in front of the building entrance, but the entrance itself was unharmed. This wasn't because the glass-like material of the automatic door was especially resilient, but rather because she'd deliberately left the door intact.

During her battle with Akira, she'd lost everything below her neck. Yanagisawa had provided her with a new, highly advanced cyborg body, and a new weapon to match—the blade's sharpness was on par with those of the Old World. She'd lost to Akira, as relatively weak as he'd been at the time, but her new gear had boosted her strength exponentially.

Yanagisawa stepped in front of Nelia and stood before the glass door. Akira had needed to pry it apart with his powered suit's strength when he had been here last; but for Yanagisawa, the entrance automatically slid open.

"Get in," he ordered. "If the door shuts, you won't be able to open it again

without me.”

Nelia did as she was told and entered. The ground floor, the building’s lobby, looked just as uncannily pristine as when Akira had visited. There was no trace of the battles that had been fought here since then—after every clash, the building’s highly capable auto-restoration system had tidied everything up almost immediately.

A hologram of a woman appeared in front of Yanagisawa and Nelia—Serantal, the AI managing the building.

“Welcome to the Serantal Building,” she said. “I regret to inform you we are closed for the time being. Visitors without a prior appointment, please refrain from entering. Otherwise, please state your name and the reason for your visit.”

“Yanagisawa. I have business on floor sixty,” he said with a smile.

“Mr. Yanagisawa, I’m very sorry, but we do not have an appointment scheduled for you today.”

Yanagisawa’s smile stiffened. “R-Really? That’s odd. I know I submitted a proper application. Are you sure?”

“I’m very sorry, but we do not have an appointment scheduled for you today,” Serantal repeated, bowing deeply in apology.

Yanagisawa continued to smile, but inside he was racking his brain furiously. *What the hell? I’m sure I submitted that application correctly... Don’t tell me it won’t work if you’re not fully connected to the network? No, the building let me in with no problem, so it must’ve gone through. The building just won’t let me go through to floor sixty—but why? I checked to make sure it was accepted right after submitting, so why only floor sixty?!*

Taking what Serantal had just told him into account, he speculated further. *She said she doesn’t have an appointment scheduled for me, yet the application was accepted? Wait, don’t tell me—only my appointment to visit floor sixty was erased?! But that means...!* For a split second, Yanagisawa’s face darkened. But a moment later, his smile returned. *First, let’s see if there’s some way I can still enter floor sixty. If so, it might not be too late.*

He took a black key card out of his pocket and showed it to Serantal. “I have business on floor sixty. Let me through.” His smile contained a trace of anxiousness as he awaited her response.

“Certainly, sir,” she said, bowing to him once more.

Yes! Yanagisawa grinned—genuinely this time.

Yanagisawa and Nelia got on the elevator that would take them to the sixtieth floor. As the door shut behind them, Serantal sent her guests off with a polite bow.

In the wide elevator cabin, Yanagisawa breathed a sigh of relief and addressed Nelia cheerfully. “You know, that really was some outstanding swordsmanship back there. I was extremely impressed. Care to join me for dinner sometime?”

Nelia glared at him coldly. “I’ll pass.”

“Playing hard to get, huh? We city execs have access to all the best food and booze, y’know. Sure, a lot might’ve happened between us, but don’t you have a creed that says not to dwell on the past or something?”

Nelia’s glare became even more icy. “Unfortunately, you’re mocking me right now in the present, so I can’t ignore it. If you really want to curry favor with me, you can start by giving me a body worth a damn.”

Nelia’s cyborg body was designed for combat—and nothing else. That meant she could no longer eat or drink. Naturally, Yanagisawa had known that when inviting her to dinner.



“Now, now, don’t get so upset. I might have a lot of pull within the city, but even I can’t give such special treatment to a brand-new hire. You’ll have to work your way up from rock bottom and pay off what you owe first, like everyone else.”

As a former relic thief, Nelia had caused enormous damage to the city throughout her career. To eradicate the debt she now found herself in, Nelia had agreed to work for Yanagisawa.

“You know, I’ve been wondering: Why did you only take *me* with you?” she asked.

“Oh, that’s easy,” he replied. “Because, unlike with the others, I can just blow *your* head off with the press of a button if need be.” A bomb had been planted inside Nelia’s head, and it would remain there until she successfully paid off her debt. It was more or less a prison sentence.

“Makes sense,” she muttered.

Her tone was devoid of emotion. Yanagisawa had taken Nelia along and left the rest of his subordinates behind because, while all of them could handle themselves in a fight, she alone was easily dispensable—she’d at least realized that much. But privately, she was curious—if the secrets of the sixtieth floor were really so confidential that she might need to be silenced, she couldn’t help but feel excited over what she was about to witness.



The Serantal Building’s sixtieth floor was a gigantic, open space. The floor, walls, and ceiling were all pure white, with a faint glow that illuminated the room. Because everything was uniformly white, the room seemed to expand infinitely in all directions, as though the concept of distance didn’t apply here.

Nelia leaned against the wall as she waited for Yanagisawa to finish his business. He was standing in the center of the room with his back turned to her. She couldn’t hear his voice, but from his gestures and body language, he seemed to be having a conversation.

Who’s he talking to? Nelia wondered. She knew white rooms like this displayed augmented reality. AR was more advanced than virtual reality

because it incorporated all five senses, so barren spaces like these were more suited to the AR experience. Watching Yanagisawa talk to someone she couldn't perceive made Nelia think of Akira—and of Alpha, the mysterious entity surrounding him.

As part of her plea bargain, Nelia had spilled the beans on their relic theft operation and sold out her former teammates. She'd given up information to the city, hoping they'd reduce her sentence—her debt—in exchange.

But she hadn't said a word about Alpha.

First off, that entity was likely supporting Akira, and Nelia wanted Akira to survive. Second, Nelia had grown fond of Akira—so fond, in fact, that she'd tried to hit on him. And by the time the city had arrested her, Akira had ceased to be her enemy.

But the biggest reason for her silence? She'd sensed that telling Yanagisawa about Alpha would be extremely dangerous.

Alpha was a ghost of the Old World who had appeared in the Kuzusuhara Ruins, a relic of the past only visible to those who could connect to the ruin's map system. Most likely, she only existed within the Old Domain, the internet of the Old World. Based on how Yanagisawa had interrogated Nelia about Kain, Nelia was sure of one thing—if he sensed she knew anything about Alpha, he'd use any means necessary to obtain that information.

Now Nelia felt confident she'd made the right call. Yanagisawa had casually stepped into the upper floors of the Serantal Building—an Old World domain that most said was impossible to reach—and hadn't looked surprised at all to see the white expanse that was the sixtieth floor. Moreover, he'd headed right to the center of the floor and begun his conversation like he'd already done this before.

He had to have known about this place beforehand.

He's probably using AR to speak to an entity within the Old Domain. But who, and for what purpose? I'm intrigued, but I suppose it would be too dangerous to ask.

That was probably another reason Yanagisawa had taken along the

subordinate with a bomb planted in her head—in case she asked too many questions. But even so, she couldn't quell the curiosity welling up within her.

Yanagisawa had established a partial connection to the Old Domain via a device he wore on his person. Now he was regarding the AR entity in front of him with a grim expression. "There's nothing you can do?"

The woman only Yanagisawa could see repeated her earlier response. "You are not connected to the network. A connection is required for authentication. Please connect and submit your request again."

Yanagisawa brandished his black key card. "Sorry, due to various circumstances, I can't fully connect to the network right now. Are you sure the device I'm wearing isn't enough? Can't you make an exception since I have this card?"

"Unable to recognize the user's authority. You are not connected to the network. A connection is required for authentication. Please connect and submit your request again."

Yanagisawa tried several more times. While the woman's responses varied slightly each time, he was unsuccessful. Finally, he gave up. "Shit!" He tore off the device he was wearing. The woman's figure disappeared from his vision.

What now? Should I just get treated so I can connect to the network on my own like before? But if I connect to the Old Domain again, they will definitely notice. Should I authenticate through another User, then? What if that person betrays me? After agonizing over the conundrum and weighing his options, Yanagisawa shook his head. No—I'm jumping the gun. No need to take either of those risks just yet. I'll just give up for today.

With a deep sigh, Yanagisawa walked back to the elevator.

"I see you're not smiling anymore," Nelia said with a grin.

Yanagisawa looked at her for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then his smile returned.



The two of them returned to the first-floor lobby. Nelia was headed for the exit when she noticed Yanagisawa had stopped in his tracks. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Just a sec,” he said, and after looking pensive for a moment, he flashed his black key card once more. “I want to talk. Is that okay?”

Serantal’s figure appeared in front of him. “Mr. Yanagisawa, this building is currently closed. If you are finished with your business here, kindly make your way to the exit.”

“How about we strike a deal?”

“If you remain here any longer, I will have no choice but to recognize you as a trespasser.”

“This concerns the defense of the Serantal Building as well, so I’d really like you to listen. I’m going to keep talking—I only ask that you hear me out.”

“Please leave. This is your final warning.”

Nelia, sensing trouble on the horizon, readied her blade. But Yanagisawa held up a hand to stop her, then flashed his black key card in Serantal’s face.

“Now then—”

Continuing to hold up his key card to keep Serantal from summoning the guards, he started talking. The Mihazono Town Ruins had fallen into chaos after many mechanical monsters had ignored their designated patrol zones, but another group of monsters had actually exhibited similar behavior even before then—the sentries guarding the Serantal Building. He explained that while they’d never left the building’s grounds, the sentries hadn’t hesitated to destroy the neighboring buildings in the area to keep the territory safe, which meant they weren’t much different from the machines that had gone rogue. The hunters had just never found the Serantal guards’ behavior unusual because that was how it had always been.

A factory’s management system wouldn’t normally manufacture sentries that ignored orders. The system was programmed to follow the rules, and it wouldn’t go against its own programming. That meant the sentries wouldn’t go out of bounds to chase down or attack any trespassers (which was why

Mihazono was considered an easier ruin despite how deadly its monsters were). But if a system was creating mechanical guards with thought patterns that were flexible enough to ignore their programming, that system would also have to be capable of flexible thought.

Yanagisawa guessed—and he stressed that this was just a guess—that someone, for some reason, had influenced one system in the factory district to develop autonomy. Then, with a new sense of self, the system had manufactured equally autonomous sentries. Everything until this point was likely according to plan. But in its autonomy, the system had ended up hiring a hunter from the modern world, gone berserk, and caused the recent incident.

“Curiously enough,” he continued, “it was reported that a legion of corpses swarmed the factory district during that incident—something that had only occurred before in the business district. And based on its most recent behavior, the factory system in question appears to have been reformatted.”

Implicitly, he was accusing Serantal of being the one to originally interfere with the factory’s system. If the events detailed in the ghost story originating from around the Serantal Building had also occurred in the factory district, she would have had to be involved. Furthermore, he was insinuating that with the system reformatted, she could no longer create flexible sentries that would willingly protect her building at the expense of the other structures in the city.

“As it happens, I’m one of Kugamayama City’s higher-ups, and the city is currently occupying this area. That might upset you, but think about it—from a defensive perspective, it actually works out in your favor. As long as we’re occupying the territory surrounding your building, no hunters will try to enter.”

Having finished laying the groundwork for his proposal, Yanagisawa pocketed the key card.

“So how about we join forces? It’s true that my allies and yours are enemies. But if you’re as capable of flexible thought as I think you are, I don’t think a temporary alliance would be out of the question.”

He waited for Serantal’s response. After several seconds, she answered.

“Let me hear what you have in mind.”

“Thank you very much,” Yanagisawa said with a wide grin.



Yanagisawa and Nelia headed back outside to the base, where Mizuha was waiting on tenterhooks. She breathed an enormous sigh of relief upon seeing them and ran up to Yanagisawa. “I’m so glad you came back safe! I was so worried!”

“Oh? Yeah, yeah. Sorry,” Yanagisawa flippantly replied. “Well, I’m done here, so I’ll be heading home now. You guys can leave this base behind and go back too.”

“E-Excuse me? What do you mean?”

“I struck a deal with the AI managing this building. From now on, the city’s defense force will guard this area instead. You’re not needed here anymore, so you’re relieved of duty. Thanks for all your hard work! See you later!” Looking especially cheerful, Yanagisawa took his leave with his entourage in tow.

Mizuha stood there, dumbstruck. When she finally came to her senses, she immediately began making calls to report about this new situation.

On their way back to the city, Nelia spoke to Yanagisawa. “That was a pretty dangerous area, and you returned safely, right? I’d call that a worthy achievement, so you think you could do something about this now?” She tapped her head with her finger, indicating the bomb planted inside.

“Nope,” he replied.

“Then could you at least give me a body that’ll let me eat and drink again?”

“Hmm, let me think about it—nope!” he said with a grin.

“Cheapskate,” Nelia muttered.

“Don’t worry, it won’t be too much longer. You just need to prove your worth a little more. I mean, you’ve got a big job coming up in the slums soon, right? If you come back from that in one piece, I’ll get your body upgraded to something more sensible. How does that sound?”

“All right,” she said with a sigh. She was still unsatisfied, but that would have

to do for now.



Under Yanagisawa and Serantal's agreement, the city's defense force would guard the Serantal Building grounds permanently, closing the book on the Mihazono incident at last. Druncam also no longer needed to dispatch its members to the ruin, and they gradually resumed regular hunter work.

Furthermore, because of their exchange, Yanagisawa was now convinced that the reason for the anomalies in Mihazono—especially how Akira and the rest of his team had taken down Monica in the factory district, when such a feat should have been impossible—was that Serantal had interfered, in order to shut down a plan she herself had let get out of hand.

Chapter 137: Poisoned Money

Following the attack on the warehouse, Akira was now living on its grounds in a nearby RV Katsuragi had provided. The RV was built for the desert, and only a rental, but the living quarters were surprisingly cozy. However, Akira had been away from the back alleys of the slums and living in his own place for so long now that not having a large bath seemed like an immediate downgrade.

Still, he figured the warehouse would receive far less damage during attacks if he was present, so he'd agreed to stay on the premises until his new weapon came in.

His job was mainly to loiter in and around the warehouse. The children tasked with posing as Akira had not yet received new disguises to match Akira's updated gear, so until that was taken care of, Akira would have to flaunt his own presence instead. He was outside, scouting the surrounding area to practice using his new scanner, when he stopped in his tracks.

Off in the distance, he'd spotted the destroyed mech standing on display.

He grimaced. *I know it's a little late to be wondering, but really: When did the slums get so dangerous that they're using mechs now?* The slums had always been rough—back when he'd lived on the streets, he'd frequently heard gunfire, and even monsters had shown up occasionally. Then he'd watched hunters with powered suits and enormous guns take them down, and he'd trembled in fear. But even so, he'd never seen a mech make an appearance. Akira was shocked at how drastically his former home had changed since he'd left it.

A lot has probably happened here since you went out into the world, Alpha said with a grin. *Good thing you got out when you did, no?*

You said it, Akira replied wryly. Ever since that day he'd left the slums to become a hunter, Akira had gotten into one dangerous situation after another. But when he thought about how he might've ended up dead one day from a mech's stray shot if he'd chosen to remain in the slums, he couldn't be more

grateful for his decision.

Then his scanner picked up another reading, this time a nearby human. From their movements, they didn't seem hostile, but when Akira realized who it was, he was taken aback.

The other person looked just as surprised to see Akira. Yumina couldn't pretend she hadn't noticed him at this point, so she approached him instead. "Um, I-long time no see," she said.

"Y-Yeah. Been a while, hasn't it?"

They both sounded uncomfortable—perhaps only natural, considering how they'd parted after the hypersynthetic snake battle.

Yumina was the first to shake off her awkwardness. "I didn't get a chance to tell you this before, so I'm going to say it now. Thank you so much for saving Katsuya back then, and for saving me. I'm seriously grateful to you for that." She bowed deeply, figuring that in this case, rather than apologizing, the proper course of action was to show him her sincere gratitude.

At that, Akira cracked a smile. "Don't mention it. It was part of the job. If you're worried you owe me or something like that, don't be. I got my pay for that gig already, so it's all good."

"Really? Well, that's great to know. Thanks."

They both smiled. Now that they knew there were no hard feelings on either side, the mood between them lightened, and they began to chat more comfortably.

"So why are you here, Yumina?" Akira began. "You got business in this area?" Even though they were near the district border, they were technically still in the slums—not a place he would have expected Yumina to visit. So he was a bit surprised.

"Yeah, I'm here for work. I was thinking about taking a job to work security for a warehouse out here. I haven't officially accepted, but I wanted to at least meet the client before making my decision. They told me to come out here for an interview... But I never would've guessed you'd be here too, Akira."

Now he was *really* surprised.



Since the Mihazono operation was over, the desk jockeys granted the rookies of Druncam some time to rest and recuperate—only natural, after so much time on the job in a dangerous ruin. But Yumina had no intention of taking a breather. She wanted to use all of her downtime to train and get stronger—she even turned down Katsuya’s invitation to go out and have fun.

But when Yumina explained why she’d declined, Katsuya suggested that he help her train instead. While she hated to have Katsuya waste his own vacation on her shortcomings, she felt glad he’d offered, and so she agreed. However, seeing Katsuya—the central pillar of the unit—training so diligently, the rest of his teammates ended up following his lead. More and more people joined their training sessions, until there were enough participants to split into groups and stage mock battles. This was also a splendid opportunity for them to get used to their new all-purpose powered suits.

During the mock battle, though, Yumina fell behind once again. That alone didn’t discourage her, but then she realized that she only seemed to mess up whenever she was on a team with Katsuya. *That* bothered her. Using her performance as an excuse, she told them she didn’t want them to waste their hard-earned break on her anymore, ending the training sessions. But she still needed to get stronger, so she began taking some simple jobs on her own.

Right now, she was alone. If she only fell behind when she was on a team with Katsuya, she worried, perhaps it meant she was unconsciously relying on him too much—rather than each supporting the other, she was depending on him to clean up her messes. In order to nip that fear in the bud, she set out for the warehouse by herself.



When Yumina said she was thinking about accepting the security job at the warehouse, Akira was shocked. “By guarding a warehouse, you don’t mean *this* warehouse, do you?”

“Yeah. They said this was where I needed to come for the interview...” She glanced at his face. “But judging by your expression, maybe I shouldn’t have?”

“Nah, it’s not that you *shouldn’t* have, but...” Akira was a little torn over how to explain it, and chose his words carefully. “Look, I’m not saying you can’t handle it or anything, I swear. But are you sure you *want* to? I mean, that thing attacked us just the other day.” He pointed to the mech turned monument.

Yumina winced, understandably. “Um, yeah. I heard the warehouse came under fire recently. The job description said they’d tell me the details at the interview, but they were probably thinking anyone who came here, saw that mech, and turned tail wasn’t gonna work out anyway.”

“Probably so. So are you gonna go home, then?”

Yumina gave him a confident smile. “I’ll at least hear them out first. If I run from something like this, it’ll look bad for Druncam. I want to see if it’s worth what they’re offering.”

“Oh, okay.” Akira smiled, a little more cheerful.

“The client’s a man named Tomejima,” she said. “Do you know where he is?”

“He should be inside. Follow me.”

Together, Akira and Yumina entered the warehouse.



Inside the building, Sheryl, Katsuragi, and Shijima were gathered around a table discussing what to do going forward. Behind each stood the people who reported to them: Erio and the rest of Sheryl’s officers, Katsuragi’s partner Darius and his business acquaintance Tomejima, and Shijima’s subordinates.

The chief topic of discussion was how to protect the warehouse in the future. They’d successfully convinced Akira to stay over, but only for a short time. Once he had all of his new gear, he’d go back to regular hunter work. They had to come up with a plan of action before then.

But as the meeting progressed, no one could come up with any good ideas. The three of them sat around the table, at an impasse.

Shijima’s subordinates or Levin’s team could handle an average group of bandits, no problem. But if another mech showed up, that would be a different story—out of everyone involved, Akira was the only one capable of taking one

down, nor did they know anyone else as capable who they could hire. The discussion ground to a halt.

Finally, as they were on the verge of giving up, Shijima offered one last suggestion. “Guess there’s no other choice—let’s just bite the bullet and swear allegiance to either Ezent or Harlias so we can gain their protection. They’ll probably take over half of our profits, but it’ll definitely bolster our defense force. I’ll handle the negotiations.”

Sheryl looked reluctant, but gave in. “I suppose there’s no other choice, given the situation. But which gang will we side with? One of them had to be behind the attack the other day, right? Which one was it?”

“I don’t know,” Shijima admitted. “I tried grilling their guys, but their answers were all over the place. Their leader Zalgo probably knew the truth, but Akira killed him. I doubt there’s any way to find out now.”

Katsuragi seemed reluctant as well. “I think we ought to just get Akira to stay at the warehouse longer. I’ll try to convince him.”

“That’ll certainly be our best option, if it works out. But what if he says no?” Sheryl asked.

“He doesn’t have to remain permanently. Those two gangs are going at it again soon, right? We just need him to stay until the end of their war, then side with the winner. It’d be bad if we joined a side only for them to lose, after all. I think Akira would accept that.”

“Again, that’d be great—if it worked out,” Sheryl replied.

They all groaned. As much as they wanted it to happen, they all knew how Akira ticked. No one was holding their breath.

Just then, one of Sheryl’s underlings came into the room, announcing that a hunter from Druncam had arrived for an interview.

Katsuragi looked surprised. “Tomejima, you’re hiring Druncam people now?”

“I thought I’d give it a shot, yeah,” Tomejima replied. “Lately the syndicate’s really been in good with the bigwigs inside the city walls, so I thought adding a Druncam hunter to security might lead to better connections. But because

they've been moving up in the world lately, I didn't think they'd want to work in the slums, so I wasn't actually expecting any takers. What a pleasant surprise!"

The others nodded, thinking that in any case this sounded more likely than convincing Akira to stay at the warehouse. Sheryl informed her underling to let their visitor in.

But when Akira and Yumina entered, Sheryl's eyes went wide with shock. *Wh-Why is she here?!*

Yumina thought the same thing when she saw Sheryl. Bizarrely enough, each seemed to get along with the boy the other had feelings for. Because Sheryl had seen Akira fraternizing with Carol the other day and Yumina had only been dragging Katsuya down as of late, matters like these were a bit of a sore spot for both of them right now.

Watching the two girls staring at each other in shock, everyone else present looked puzzled. But then someone else entered the room.

"Hey! You can't just enter without permission!"

"Out of my way!" Ignoring the cries of Sheryl's subordinates outside, Katsuya barged in, followed by Airi.

"Katsuya?! What are you doing here?!" Yumina cried.

"Yumina! Are you okay?! Why'd you take a job on your own all of a sudden?!" Beside himself with worry, he ran to her. They had been teaming up all this time, yet now she'd suddenly chosen to go solo. And he knew she hadn't been herself lately—she'd been acting rather down. This was more than enough reason for Katsuya to be concerned.

On top of this, she'd signed up for a job in the slums. Afraid she was about to get involved in something shady, he'd originally headed to the interview site to talk her out of it. But when he'd gotten there, he'd seen Shijima's men—dangerous-looking hunter dropouts—guarding the premises. His worst fears confirmed, Katsuya had charged in, now intending to rescue her.

But just as he saw that Yumina was safe and sighed in relief, he noticed Akira with her. "You! Why are *you* with—? Huh? *Sheryl?!!*"

Katsuya was surprised to see Akira with Yumina. However, he was more interested in why Sheryl was in a warehouse in the slums.

“Katsuya?” Sheryl looked just as nonplussed to see Katsuya. “So the three of you accepted Tomejima’s job?”

“Huh? N-No, we didn’t.”

“Then what are you doing here?” she asked.

But at that moment, more people charged in. “Hey! The hell do you think you’re doing?!” barked Shijima’s subordinates outside, but their cries fell on deaf ears as Mizuha strode right through the door, followed by a few bodyguards.

“Katsuya!” she shouted. “Return to base right this instant—that’s an order! I told you, someone with your standing should not set foot in a place like this!” Katsuya was the center of his unit, and the chief reason the executives inside the city walls were backing the rookies. If anyone saw him setting foot in an area like the slums, they might spread rumors. Mizuha had shown up to stop him before this happened.

Then the Druncam executive noticed Katsuragi—and Sheryl—among those present. “Sh-Sheryl?!” she sputtered.

“Hello, Mizuha. It’s been a while,” Sheryl said pleasantly.

Mizuha was taken aback. Katsuragi aside, Sheryl most likely lived within the city walls, and she seemed to get along extremely well with Katsuya. She panicked, worried that reprimanding Katsuya here might have been a mistake.

Then yet another trespasser entered the meeting room. “Katsuragi!” the man yelled angrily. “What the hell do you mean, ‘It’s going to be hard to compensate you for the relics damaged in the attack’?! Was this all another one of your scams from the start?!”

This was one of the businessmen participating in the relic shop project. He’d been leery of the plan from the get-go, but had finally come around upon learning about Sheryl’s well-to-do background and Akira’s strength as a hunter. When he’d heard about the attack on the warehouse, however, he’d immediately grown suspicious and headed there to interrogate Katsuragi.

“Get the hell out, now!” Katsuragi bellowed. “I told you we’d discuss it later! That doesn’t mean show up on my doorstep and barge right in, dumbass!”

“Enough excuses!” the man screamed. “I want answers, and I want ’em now!” Strongly suspecting the business he was backing was actually a front for a relic resale scam, he wanted to know what was really going on. The other businessmen followed behind him, their thoughts much like his. Yet they stayed silent, merely casting doubtful, accusatory gazes at Katsuragi and the others.

With newcomers piling in one after another, the room quickly fell into complete chaos. None of them understood the complete picture, and so shock, panic, doubt, and confusion ran unchecked among them.

Then the final interloper stepped through the door.

“Sorry for intruding,” she said with a smile.

All eyes instantly gravitated to the newcomer. When they did, the room seemed to gain some semblance of order. More specifically, those who didn’t know Viola all gawked at the racy apparel of her companion Carol, while the ones who *did* know her fell utterly silent—they knew that if a conniving witch like her was here, it could mean nothing good.

As all eyes in the room remained fixed on Viola and Carol (for more than one reason), the two made their way to the table where Sheryl and the others sat.

Their arrival had brought Sheryl back to her senses. Determined not to slip up in front of Akira, she quickly resumed her role as a rich girl with unusual circumstances. “Why, hello, Viola! I don’t believe we were expecting you today.”

“Sorry about that. I just have a little business to take care of. It won’t take long at all, and then I’ll head right back home. So I hope you can forgive me.” She turned to her companion. “Carol?”

Carol had been carrying four large suitcases all this time, and when Viola called her name, she set them on the table. Then she opened each one, as if to display the contents to everyone present. They were all packed to the brim with stacks of bills.

Many in the room let out audible gasps. During a transaction, stacks of

physical bills always made more of an impact than numbers on a screen, even if the amount was the same. Even those used to seeing large numbers in their bank accounts were visibly floored.

Viola smiled at their reactions. “This is just a portion of the sales proceeds. Help yourself.”

As most of the people in the room continued to focus on the money, Sheryl summoned every bit of willpower she possessed to remain levelheaded. Continuing her rich-girl act, she gave the cash in the suitcases a disdainful look. “Is *that* really the best you can do?”

Viola, staying calm so she could gain the upper hand in their negotiating, smiled sweetly. “I said ‘a portion,’ didn’t I? These things take time—I can’t just get it all in one go. Surely you understand that much, don’t you?”

“Is that so?” Sheryl replied, exerting every effort to keep her gaze on Viola and away from the money on the table. “Then, Shijima, you take one suitcase. I know you have personnel fees and losses to cover, but please make do with this for now.”

“All right,” Shijima replied, a bit reluctantly. They had not yet decided on how they would split the profits from the bandits’ liquidation, so technically, he could have argued for a bigger cut. But once Sheryl had alluded to the security personnel, he’d decided to hold his tongue.

Shijima’s gang had suffered far greater losses from this attack than Sheryl’s. And his principal contribution to the warehouse team was supposed to be defense. But Katsuragi’s hires (the group that included Levin) and Tomejima’s (the one including Kolbe) had eliminated most of the monsters this time. More importantly, Akira had taken care of the mech. If Shijima complained, Sheryl could throw these events right back in his face and say that he didn’t even deserve one suitcase. She might even rescind her offer and give him less—or worst of all, give his entire share to Akira instead. So rather than complaining, he determined it was best to just take the offer—this way, even if Akira complained later about Shijima getting one whole suitcase, Shijima could pass the buck and tell him to take it up with her.

“Sheryl, I don’t see any point in further discussion today, so I’m heading out,”

he said. "Later."

"Okay. Then we'll reconvene another day," she replied.

Shijima nodded to one of his subordinates, who picked up the suitcase. He and his men then left the room.

"We'll be heading out as well," Viola said. "Ciao!"

She and Carol also walked out. All eyes followed them as they went, and then were immediately drawn back to the enormous amount of money on the table.

"Now, Katsuragi, you take the rest," Sheryl declared.

"Huh? I-I mean, yes, thank you very much." For a moment, Katsuragi was bewildered, but then he played along with Sheryl's act. She obviously had to pay Akira as well, so he deduced he would only be taking the money for the time being. He wasn't entirely sure what she was planning, but for now, he'd follow her lead.

Before he could shut the suitcases and carry them out, however, the businessman who'd shouted at Katsuragi earlier interfered, snatching up one of the bills.

"Hey!" Katsuragi roared. "What do you think you're doing?!"

The man ignored him and began inspecting the bill, under the impression this all might be an act to make the scam seem more believable. He had suspected the bills might be ordinary pieces of paper, just printed on both sides to look real. But they were completely genuine.

Then he thought that maybe only the first layer of bills was real, and the rest were fake. But soon he had verified that they were all the real deal. So he checked the other trunks, picking up bills at random. None of them were fake.

All the money was real.

"It's all genuine," he murmured, frozen in shock but still holding the last bill he'd checked.

Sheryl sighed exaggeratedly. When she did, the man gave a jolt as if electrocuted, and trembled with fear.

“I don’t know what you thought was going on here, but are you quite finished?” she demanded.

“W-Well, I...” the man stammered.

“Fool!” Katsuragi shouted, taking the cue Sheryl had given him. “How dare you treat Sheryl like some criminal! Such impudence! You know what? Fine! You want your compensation for the relics, I’ll give it to you! But you’re off the project for good! Darius, take him away!”

Darius grabbed the man and dragged him away. “Wait! Katsuragi!” the man pleaded. “I’m sorry! I was wrong! Please give me another chance!” As Darius’s powerful grip dragged him farther and farther away from the money on the table—a glimpse of the profit he could have earned—he was consumed with regret at his own foolish doubts.

When they were gone, Sheryl spoke to Tomejima next. “Would you please handle negotiations with Druncam? Not here—somewhere more suitable.”

“Oh, right. Yes, absolutely. Now then, Mizuha, was it? Let’s speak more in detail once we move to a better location. All Druncam hunters, please follow me as well.”

Mizuha and the Druncam rookies, sensing they wouldn’t be permitted in this building any longer, obediently followed Tomejima out the door. Katsuragi also took his leave, asking the other businessmen in the room to carry the suitcases out for him. Feeling the weight of the suitcases they held, the businessmen were all smiles—if this was any indication of the profits the relic shop would make in the future, then they’d hit the jackpot!

Of course, the money in the suitcases was what Viola had gotten from selling off the bandits. But since Viola had only mentioned “sales,” the businessmen had assumed she meant the proceeds from the relics themselves. Thanks to her vague wording, they were all confident that the relic shop would be a success, and felt relieved that their gamble had paid off.



Yumina and the other Druncam members went with Tomejima straight from the warehouse to Druncam’s headquarters, where Mizuha and Tomejima had

agreed to hold their negotiations. On the way back, the Druncam rookies in the vehicle couldn't help voicing their shock at the amount of money they'd just seen.

"Man, that was a *ton* of cash back there," Katsuya mused. "Each of those suitcases probably held a hundred million aurum, so..." He did some rough estimating in his head. "Four hundred mil in total? No, considering the size of the suitcases, it was probably even more."

"At least that much for sure," Airi agreed.

Yumina would normally have joined in the conversation, but there was a more pressing question on her mind at the moment. "Katsuya, were you so desperate to keep me from taking a job on my own that you even brought Mizuha along?"

"No, that's not— I mean, I didn't ask Mizuha to come, and I wasn't even trying to stop you, really. We've just always taken on jobs as a team, and when you suddenly headed off on your own..."

"He was worried," Airi finished, summing up Katsuya's beating around the bush in a single succinct statement.

Yumina had all sorts of things she wanted to say to that but held her tongue. Instead, she sighed and smiled. "Look, I really do appreciate your concern. But don't you think you could've used a little more discretion instead of barging right in at the drop of a hat? A commander shouldn't act rashly just because they're worried about a teammate."

"Oh, yeah, good point. Sorry about that."

"As long as you understand." Yumina nodded, putting an end to that conversation, then turned to Mizuha. "What's going to happen with the warehouse job?"

"We'll decide on that once we hear the complete story. We don't know anything about the circumstances on their end, but with that giant demolished mech outside, *something* has to be going on there."

"Oh, right. I get it."

With nothing further to say on that topic either, the rookies chatted idly among themselves for the rest of the drive. But during a lull in the conversation, Yumina looked out the window and thought of Reina: *This must be how she felt back then*. When Reina had left Katsuya's team, she had seemed resentful of her own weakness, hating how she made Katsuya feel like he needed to protect her. Yumina was starting to understand why Reina had felt the need to leave the team.

Yumina's face was turned toward the window, and Katsuya couldn't see her sad smile.



As soon as they'd left the warehouse, Carol gave Viola a quizzical look. "You're charging them fifty percent for your services, right? Yet what you handed them just now had to be way more than that."

The women had crossed a dangerous bridge, so to speak: handing the bandits over to an enigmatic, definitely shady client—but even with all the money that this risky play had netted Viola, Carol was sure the information broker had given Sheryl and the others a lot more.

"You're right. I let them have it all," Viola replied without missing a beat.

"Why? Awakened to your Good Samaritan sensibilities all of a sudden?" Carol joked.

"Perish the thought!" Viola grinned. "Don't worry, I'll be taking my share when it's time to collect. I just never said when that would be."

Viola had only sold the bandits themselves so far—she had yet to sell their personal assets. As agreed, she would only take half, but she was waiting to do so until everything was sold. So she'd given Sheryl and the others their entire half up front, intending to pocket the rest. Even if the other party was expecting more later, it wasn't her fault if they misinterpreted what she meant by fifty percent, she explained with a sly grin.

But that wasn't all. She went on to say that if the warehouse was ever attacked again, Sheryl and those working with her would probably rehire Viola for the same services, thinking they'd receive an amount just as impressive—or

more. That would lead to even more money in her pocket.

Carol listened to Viola's scheme and grinned in amusement. "You really get off on screwing people over, don't you?"

"Carol, I'm hurt you would even suggest such a thing," Viola said with a mock-pout. "These are tough times, and I'm sure they're struggling, so I just wanted to come up with a way to let them pay me later."

The two major slum gangs were currently trying to amass all the resources they could for the war ahead, meaning it was increasingly important for the smaller gangs to have money. The more they saved up, the more they could invest into the major gang of their choice in the hopes that it would lead to even greater gains. But larger gambles also led to more devastating losses.

Viola had handed Sheryl and the others massive stacks of aurum—money laced with poison. But even if the latter neutralized the toxin and came out winning in the end, Viola wouldn't particularly care. After all, there'd been no grand motive behind her scheme to begin with—she'd just wanted to cause trouble for her own amusement. Even back when she'd been deliberately vague about the "sales" at the warehouse—leading those businessmen who didn't know better to believe that she was talking about relic sales—she'd had no other purpose but entertaining herself. She'd thought it would lull the businessmen into a false sense of security, making their eventual despair all the more devastating, and she expected that those negative feelings would surely incite even more thrilling conflict to come.

Such was her motivation. Nothing more, nothing less.



Once everyone else had left the warehouse and Akira and Sheryl were alone, Sheryl dropped her rich-girl act at last, breathing an exhausted sigh. Then she turned to Akira, her expression stern.

"Now then, Akira, how much do you want out of that money just now?"

"O-Oh, right. Let's see..."

Akira didn't know how to respond at first. He'd only agreed to help at the warehouse to stave off the boredom of waiting for his new equipment to come

in, so the thought of getting paid hadn't even crossed his mind. Moreover, Shizuka had made him promise he wouldn't resume hunter work until he had all his new gear. He was worried that if he took a paycheck for working warehouse security, his aid would technically be considered hunter work, and he'd be breaking his promise.

Still, not being compensated for his work didn't feel right either. He'd taken down a gigantic mech much stronger than the average monster, and he'd be selling himself a little too short if he did that for free. The seeds of doubt Alpha had planted in his mind much earlier were influencing his decision as well: back when he had been about to go to Mihazono to rescue Elena and Sara, Alpha had suggested to Akira that they might be taking advantage of how often he acted with no regard for profit, and he wanted to be more careful. After a bit of thought, he made his decision.

"All right, Sheryl. Take my portion and invest it into the relic business."

"Invest? Are you sure?"

"Yeah. You guys have already run into all kinds of trouble, but if I want to sell my relics for high prices, this shop needs to succeed. My portion should help at least a tad toward that." Then, with a sly grin to stress to Sheryl that this wasn't just an act of goodwill, he added, "If this shop does well, it'll be a cash cow for me, right? Don't worry, once you're rolling in the dough, I'll be taking my share in full. Until then, I'm relying on you."

Akira shot a glance in Alpha's direction. She was smiling as always, so he determined that he'd handled it the right way.

For a moment Sheryl looked stunned, but then determination welled up within her. "I understand! Leave it to me!"

"Y-Yeah, do your best," Akira replied, taken aback by her sudden enthusiasm.

Investing his money into the relic shop, banking on Sheryl making it a success?

At long last, he'd asked something of her!

Perhaps to anyone else, this wouldn't have seemed like much. But Sheryl was so elated that all the mental burden she'd accumulated striving to be of use to him was instantly wiped away.

He'd never wanted anything from her before, and now he *did*. That felt like significant progress to Sheryl. (Akira, who of course had no idea what she was thinking, was bewildered by the sudden, drastic change that had come over her.)

Meanwhile, Alpha still wore her usual smile.



Back at Druncam HQ, negotiations between Tomejima and Mizuha were growing strained—naturally, as their aims were at odds. Tomejima wanted to turn Mizuha down, while Mizuha wanted Tomejima to agree to her terms.

“And so,” Tomejima was saying, “I would really like you to just pretend that this job offer never happened.”

“Now, now, let's not be so hasty,” Mizuha replied. “You weren't just attacked by a bunch of monsters, but by a powerful mech as well. Wouldn't an accomplished Druncam hunter be just what you need to boost your security?”

“Yes, but we only have so much room in the budget, and—”

“Of course, I understand that as well. Which is why I'm open to negotiating an amount that might be more to your liking.”

Several times now, Tomejima had tried to use the warehouse's budget as an excuse to decline. However, the budget wasn't actually the problem. Mizuha had seen through his bluff and called him out on it.

In truth, Tomejima would have liked to hire Katsuya and the other Druncam rookies. They were the poster children of the syndicate's desk jockey faction, so he knew they could handle the job and would be a tremendous asset to the warehouse's defense force.

Yet he had no choice but to turn them down. While they were en route, Sheryl had called and told him not to let Katsuya join the security team at any cost—he and Akira didn't get along, apparently. But she'd also said not to let Druncam know this, as it could complicate matters, and to deflect any of their offers by alluding to budget issues.

“To be more specific, there's plenty of room in the budget itself,” Tomejima

began. “Just as you saw back in the warehouse, we are not in financially dire straits or anything.”

“Then—”

“But that doesn’t mean we can spend indiscriminately. Eventually the money will run out, so we’ve got to consider cost-effectiveness. Oh, and just to be clear, I’m not saying Katsuya and the others aren’t worth it. In fact, it’s the opposite—if we were to pay them what they were worth, we wouldn’t have room in the budget for much else, I fear.” He sighed, as if in resignation. “I’ll be honest—the reason I wanted a Druncam member to join our forces was just so we could say we have someone from Druncam guarding our warehouse. We didn’t actually care how strong they were, as long as they were from Druncam. From the very start, we weren’t prepared to hire anyone as talented as these hunters.”

“But you did get attacked—and even by a mech. Wouldn’t stronger security benefit you more in the long run?”

“Our security is plenty capable as is.” In truth, it was only capable *for now*, but he had to move the conversation along somehow. “As a matter of fact, an incredibly capable hunter on our team took that mech down all by himself. So in that sense, we could easily handle even worse situations if need be.”

“Just one hunter?” Mizuha parroted, shocked. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Then perhaps you’d like to see for yourself?” Tomejima pulled out his terminal. There on the screen was security camera footage of Akira and the white mech locked in combat, compiled and edited by Sheryl and the others involved in the relic business to spread word of Akira’s true strength. The video was heavily biased, only depicting Akira’s most impressive moments during the battle, but it sufficed as proof of his achievement, and that was enough to surprise Mizuha.

“Incredible,” she murmured.

“No kidding. Although it does mean we have to pay him accordingly to compensate for his strength.” Tomejima had no idea how much Sheryl planned on paying Akira, so he worded it in a way that left it all up to the imagination. “I’m sure even you have a limit on how low you can go. And of course, the last

thing I'd want to do would be to pay a Druncam hunter unfairly. So there's simply no way we can pay your hunters on top of paying our strongest hunter. Our budget simply won't allow for it." Tomejima bowed his head. "I'm sorry, but please understand that it's just not feasible at the moment."

Mizuha fell silent. Tomejima was essentially saying that if hired to guard the warehouse, Katsuya and his team would have to work for free. As a Druncam executive, she couldn't allow that. Still, she couldn't let this opportunity slip by—she could use it to forge a connection with Sheryl, who Katsuya so bizarrely seemed to trust, and she also could build rapport with this relic business, which Sheryl likely operated. Killing two birds with one stone. She *had* to make this work.

After racking her brain for a while, she finally hit upon a solution.

"In that case, I have a different proposal," she said, and explained what she had in mind.

When he heard her suggestion, Tomejima nodded, impressed. It could definitely work, and might even benefit Tomejima.

Negotiations began anew. They weren't any less intense than before, but now both parties were working productively toward an agreement.

Chapter 138: Quantity and Quality

Akira awoke early in the morning. Groggily donning his powered suit, he left the RV with a yawn.

“Good morning, Akira. Here you go.” Standing outside, Yumina cheerfully handed him a coffee.

“Morning. Thanks, Yumina.”

He took the drink with a smile. The two of them sipped their coffees and sighed pleasantly.

“You guys are about to head back, right?” Akira asked.

“Yeah. But before I left, I wanted to chat some more, so that we can get to know each other a little better.”

Aware she didn’t mean that in a romantic sense, he smiled wryly. “I thought I had it rough going solo, but I guess working for a syndicate has its own problems, huh?”

Yumina’s expression reflected his own. “More or less. But there are a lot of benefits too, so I’m willing to put up with scheming superiors.”

And for some time afterward, they enjoyed discussing the pros and cons of working solo versus working in a group.



Alone in her room, Sheryl sighed. She was looking at the camera feed on her terminal, which showed Akira and Yumina chatting with each other, looking happy.

Logically, she understood this was how it had to be, but she certainly wasn’t happy about it. Still, she knew that acting based on emotions was the quickest path to her own destruction, so she had no choice but to grin and bear it.

As part of Tomejima and Mizuha’s agreement, Yumina was now working security at the warehouse. She’d been hired alone rather than with Katsuya and

Airi, making her hiring fee cheaper. Furthermore, Mizuha had given Tomejima even more of a discount, on a few conditions: Yumina would wear Kiryou's test model suit, gathering field data while she worked to appease the corporation Druncam was under contract with, and Druncam wouldn't be held responsible for any damages caused by the suit malfunctioning. She'd also be hired by the day, and Druncam could pull her out at any time with no questions asked. As a result, the warehouse had hired Yumina for next to nothing.

Normally, hiring a capable Druncam hunter—and from Katsuya's team, no less—so cheaply would have been impossible. So to Tomejima, this arrangement had been a no-brainer. Plus, since he hadn't hired Katsuya along with her, he hadn't gone against Sheryl's wishes.

Sheryl did, in fact, acknowledge that Tomejima had made a logical decision. Bringing Yumina on board would give their security an enormous boost. So as she watched Akira and Yumina fraternize, that logic helped suppress the dark emotions roiling within her.

She also realized that Yumina was only trying to get closer to Akira because Mizuha had told her to. Mizuha wanted to get to Sheryl by forging a connection with Akira. Most importantly, she knew Yumina only had eyes for Katsuya and wasn't romantically interested in Akira in the least. As long as things stayed this way, she could excuse Yumina smiling at him amicably as they talked.

But she couldn't dismiss the relaxed, familiar way Akira returned her smile. So every time she saw the two acting so friendly together, it gouged her heart.

Still, she couldn't treat Yumina rudely—they needed her strength badly. And most importantly, if she mistreated someone Akira was close to, she might earn *his* ire, causing him to cut her off completely. Sheryl couldn't risk that. She *had* tried to schedule Yumina only when Akira would be asleep and made other efforts to limit their interactions with each other in ways that wouldn't upset him, but there was only so much she could do. Whenever she observed the two of them getting along, she could only heave a deep, unhappy sigh.



In the meeting room in Harlias's mansion, the gang's top brass were viewing the footage pertaining to the attack on Sheryl's warehouse. When they

watched Akira triumph against the mech all by himself, none could hide their surprise.

“No way! That shrimp won against a Shirousagi?! It might be a cheap model, but that’s still a mech, y’know?”

“No wonder he could trounce a bounty valued at three billion. And that witch Viola’s trying to tell us he’s no big deal? Bullshit!”

“Yeah. If the boss hadn’t pointed her trickery out before, we woulda been in trouble.”

So spoke the gang’s higher-ups among themselves, praising Akira’s strength while criticizing Viola for attempting to feed them false information under the guise of guesswork.

But their boss, Doran, wasn’t interested in either of those things. He sat at the head of the table, looking grave and deep in thought.

That bandit Zalmo was much more formidable than he’d led us to believe. Why had he hidden what he was capable of until now? Was there some reason he needed to join us without revealing his true strength? Then why did he show his hand at the warehouse? Perhaps he had to get rid of this Akira kid, even at the expense of his own plan? No, he would’ve used another method if he’d wanted to kill him that badly.

Doran thought some more, then shook his head. *No—I can’t say for sure without more information. And since Zalmo’s dead and his other goons are unaccounted for, no one knows the truth. As concerning as it is, I’ll have to shelve the issue for now.*

Doran cut off that train of thought, considering such speculation a waste of brainpower for the time being, and moved on to the next issue. He gave the table a light tap, and his subordinates instantly stopped the chatter, straightening up in their seats. The room now silent, Doran grinned at the well-dressed man facing him at the opposite side of the long table.

“Now, I’d like you to explain why this mech you cajoled us into buying couldn’t even take down a single hunter.”

His smile made even the top brass of Harlias quake in their seats. But the man

in the neatly pressed suit—Kazafuze, an employee of Yajima Heavy Industries—didn't even flinch. He smiled, as though Doran had just told an amusing joke.

“Explain? I don't think I need to explain anything. It was all there in the footage—our mech performed outstandingly. To tell the truth, I was worried myself that a cheaper model might not perform to standard, but now I can safely put those fears to rest. Now then, how many more would you like to purchase?”

“Your piece of junk couldn't even kill a single kid, and you have the gall to ask me to buy more?” Doran growled.

But Kazafuze waved off Doran's intimidation tactics and doubled down on his own sales pitch. “Please, let's be realistic. That hunter took down a bounty worth three billion. Yet our mech put up a good fight against him. That should be more than enough reason to buy in bulk. Also, that hunter's suit is valued at four hundred million aurum—yet our Shirousagi is only a mere two hundred million! Nearly half the price, and almost equally capable! What's not to like?”

“But as far as I could tell, that kid was only using an AAH and an A2D. You're telling me to pay two hundred mil for a machine that can't even withstand cheap guns like that?”

“Oh, for shame, having me explain something you already full well know the answer to! If he can afford a powered suit that expensive, he's obviously outfitted them with pricey mods.”

Indeed, Doran had already suspected that much without needing Kazafuze to point it out. If Akira had challenged a mech with a mere AAH and A2D combo, he'd more than likely modified both to be much more powerful than the base models—perhaps even with costly augmentations that AAH fanatics used to take down powerful monsters that the weapon's normal capabilities could never handle. So Doran's intimidation had only been intended to rattle the salesman, merely testing the waters.

But he'd expected his tactics to have had at least some effect by now. Worried that he was getting careless, he mentally shored up his defenses. “All right then. Let's discuss the price. How many can you prepare?”

“Yes, sir! We can have a hundred ready just seventy-two hours after purchase

—fully armed, of course!”

“Let’s start with fifty. Leave the rest on reserve. No, scratch that—I’ll take all one hundred, and pay later.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but we can only send you our products after you’ve paid for them. Certainly, we’d love to have your patronage, but if we supply you with those mechs in advance, we’d be recognized as supporting your organization. I’m sure you understand.”

It was considered unethical for a corporation to provide resources to a gang in the slums. Yajima was already treading on thin ice by selling their wares to a slum gang, so they were limited as to how they could do business. They could sell through dummy companies, but the buyer had to pay up front. Kazafuze recounted how one business was so desperate to make a big sale that they were blinded by the buyer’s offer of immediate payment, and neglected to check who they were actually selling to. Now businesses were more careful. Payment up front was necessary when selling to gangs, and the products would only be delivered when payment was confirmed.

“Fine,” Doran spat. “Give me eighty now, then. But reserve the other twenty for us. Don’t you dare sell them to anyone else. Understand?”

“Thank you for your business!” the salesman said with a bright smile and exaggerated bow.

Once the eighty low-price model Shirousagi mechs were paid for and an agreement to reserve another twenty for Harlias was signed, Doran’s gaze on Kazafuze became a bit sharper. “Now then, since you’ve profited quite a bit from us, I’d like you to do me a favor. Don’t worry, it’s nothing much. Just answer me one question.”

“And what would that be?”

“Your company, Yajima Heavy Industries, came to us. I thank you for that. You really helped us out.”

“The pleasure was all mine,” the salesman said.

“So which company came to the Ezent family, and what did they offer?”

Kazafuze kept smiling, but didn't answer. Doran grinned right back at him, staring right into his eyes. Finally, after ten seconds of neither side backing down, Kazafuze sighed in resignation. "All right, look: you didn't hear this from me. We're technically rivals with this company, but we do help each other out occasionally."

"Don't worry. We won't say a word," Doran assured him.

"I heard that someone from Yoshioka Heavy Industries went to visit Ezent and offered to sell them their mechs, just like we did for you. They negotiated a sale, but Ezent bought very few."

"Hmph. So they can't afford it, then? Or maybe they just don't think it's worth it?"

"I couldn't say. But for the record, our company's all-in on Harlias. We look forward to the day when you assume control of Kugamayama City's black market once and for all, and hope for a long and productive partnership with your organization."

"Don't worry, that day's not far off. It won't be long before I can show you that you made the right decision in choosing us over Ezent."

The two men grinned, and a fruitful partnership was born.

After Kazafuze left, Doran immediately began issuing orders to his officers. "Gather all the funds you can. Sell everything we're able to sell. Squeeze the gangs under our protection for all they have. Get the loan companies to finance all the loans you can, even if you have to threaten them. We're going to buy as many of Yajima's mechs as possible. Got it?"

The officers looked baffled by his orders.

"I-I understand, Boss," one said with trepidation. "But is all that really necessary? He said Ezent bought very little, right? I think even buying eighty is probably gonna be overkill."

"And do you remember what else he told us?" Doran retorted. "That story about the allure of a payment up front making a corporation neglect to check who they're selling to? He meant that whatever we don't buy, they'll peddle to

Ezent. They'll cozy up to whoever can pay the fastest."

The officers were shocked to hear that—none of them had read that far into the salesman's words. "But Boss," one said, "they're still not buying very many over there, right? Even if they sell a few units to Ezent, wouldn't we easily outnumber them with our eighty?"

"No," Doran said firmly. "Remember when I asked him whether Ezent couldn't afford the mechs, or if they just didn't think they needed them? He never confirmed either."

"I couldn't say," Kazafuze had told them. Doran had correctly deduced the meaning behind the salesman's evasive response. The Ezent family had the money, and they had indeed spent a great deal of that money on Yoshioka's mechs. If they'd only bought a fraction of the mechs that Harlias had, it meant they were focusing on quality over quantity. This was as much as Doran had gleaned during his and Kazafuze's brief exchange.

"We're prioritizing quantity, while Ezent is focused on quality. So we'll crush 'em with numbers. That hunter Akira might've won against one mech on his own, but that was his limit. One more Shirousagi, and we would've destroyed the warehouse. When quantity's against quality, quantity will always win. We just need to make sure we have enough units."

His explanation fired up the officers. But he wasn't finished.

"Once we procure all the units we can from Yajima, we'll pulverize Ezent once and for all. For that, we need money."

Imagining the imminent destruction of the Ezent family, the glint in his officers' eyes changed.

"So get it any way you can. I don't care how you do it. Sell all the relics in the shops under our protection if you need to. We can even go into debt, to a degree—we'll make it all back once Ezent is done for and we assume control of the black market. So don't hesitate." He slammed the table with his fist. "Now go!"

"Yes, Boss!" The officers leaped from their seats and ran out of the room to do their leader's bidding.

Doran remained behind, still looking pensive. Despite his orders, he knew better than anyone that gathering the funds wouldn't be so simple. By this point, nearly everyone in the slums recognized that the gang war was on the horizon, and both sides had already started gathering the funds to pay for it. The black market of the slums generated a great deal of money, but almost all of it was already being used to fund the war. He could crack the whip on his subordinates all he wanted, but they couldn't just pull money out of thin air.

What should I do? By my calculations, we won't have enough for a hundred at this rate. We just need a little more money. If only there was a source I haven't yet accounted for... At that moment, his gaze fell on a terminal that one of his officers had left behind in his haste, displaying the paused footage of Akira dueling with the Shirousagi mech.

The corners of his lips rose.



In another mansion far too lavish to be in the slums, the Ezent family boss, Rogert, was talking with Haraji, a sales representative from Yoshioka Heavy Industries.

"So when can I expect my order?" Rogert asked.

"Once you pay for it, of course," Haraji replied curtly.

"I already put a deposit down."

"You honestly think a pittance like that will cover it? Think of the risk we're running if we don't receive payment in full. We can't have that."

Rogert gave the sales rep a sharp glare, threatening him with his authority as the boss of a gang powerful enough to rival Harlias. Rogert was no stranger to combat—in fact, he'd stood on the battlefield many a time himself. His strength would have made any average hunter quake in their boots.

But Haraji wasn't intimidated in the least and stared right back. There was no trace of politeness or friendliness in his tone toward his client—something normally unbecoming of a sales representative. But in this case, his behavior was justified. Rogert was pushing just as much as Haraji was pulling—the rep had merely adopted an appropriate attitude to make his sale.

The two glared at each other for a while. Finally, Rogert clicked his tongue, and turned toward the individual next to the salesman. “Hey Viola, you’re supposed to be mediating these negotiations. Don’t you have anything to say?”

Viola, who had indeed joined them as a mediator, smiled. “Well, if I were you, I’d just pay up without trying to argue.”

“Don’t tell me you’re on *his* side now?” Rogert growled.

“Of course not. I’m just giving you a friendly warning.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“Harlias has already secured a big deal with Yajima Industries. They’ve purchased around a hundred of the Shirousagi models. Now that they’ve bought their weapons, they might attack anytime.” She pointed to a hologram display on the table in front of her, which was showing the footage from the battle between Akira and the Shirousagi mech.

Rogert scowled. Looking at the footage Viola had provided had more or less given him an idea of how powerful the mech was. If the enemy attacked with a hundred of those before Ezent had procured a single mech, Rogert would lose, hands down. He clicked his tongue again. “All right. I’ll pay in full.”

“A wise decision,” Haraji said.

Haraji’s comment ticked the boss off, but he reluctantly pulled out his terminal and paid for the entire order.

Haraji confirmed the payment on his end. “Great! I’ll have our company get your order ready right away. But don’t you think you ought to buy some armaments as well?”

“Excuse me?” Rogert said sharply.

“Well, our company makes high-quality mechs; of that you can be certain. But the machines can’t reach their full potential simply by fighting with their fists. I recommend you buy the accompanying weapon set.”

“You snake!” Rogert’s face darkened with fury. He’d assumed weapons were already included.

Haraji, however, was unfazed. “So what do you say? Now that you’ve bought

from us, you're a valued customer. If you place an order, I can have our company work on it right away, even before we receive payment. Of course, we won't send anything until after you pay, though."

"Just who do you think I am?" Rogert said with a glare.

"Think of it like a wasteland tax," Haraji explained. "If we're selling under the table to an organization like yours, we've got to make it look like a legit transaction to keep up appearances. Cover-ups like that aren't cheap. So, your order?"

Rogert had already paid for the mechs, so he had no choice. "Show me the weapons."

Haraji configured the hologram device on the table to display the weapons. There were a variety of types, including enormous guns, close-range melee weapons, and missile pods.

"Order whatever strikes your fancy. You can't go wrong with any of them."

Rogert snorted. "I'd hope so, for your sake."

The tenor of the negotiations changed. Both parties worked toward an agreement without any further arguments. The other half of the hologram table display still showed Akira fighting the Shirousagi—and Rogert and Haraji used the footage of the Shirousagi in action to plan out which weapons to buy for Ezent's own newly purchased units.

Carol, once again Viola's bodyguard, stood in the background. Her eyes were on the footage as well. She'd already known Akira had defeated the mech, but now that she was watching the footage for herself, something else surprised her. She had assumed he'd taken down the Shirousagi using the same gear as in Mihazono—she never would have dreamed he'd done it armed only with an AAH, an A2D, and a souped-up powered suit.

Rogert noticed Carol's expression. "You look awfully entranced. Something about that mech strike your fancy?"

"Something like that," Carol replied, coming to her senses. "Maybe it isn't my place to say so, but if your enemies have a hundred of these things, do you really think just one mech of your own will be enough to win?"

Carol's doubt didn't upset Rogert—in fact, he burst into laughter. “Foolish woman! On that point, we have nothing to worry about.”

“Really? But—”

Seeing Carol's bewildered expression. Rogert grinned smugly. “Oh, I know what you're thinking—we're outnumbered. But you're misunderstanding something.” He pointed to the white mech in the footage, controlled by Zalmo at this point in the battle. “Indeed, even we would have a hard time against a hundred of those. But we're really going to be up against a hundred of *these*.” He rewound the footage back to when Boze was piloting the mech like an amateur.

“A mech is only as strong as its pilot, right? I can tell—the pilot in the latter half of the battle was skilled. Not as skilled as me, of course, but definitely above average. Do you think Harlias can scrounge up a hundred pilots as good as him? I highly doubt it. They might have around five on that level, or maybe none at all.” He laughed derisively. “That's why they're choosing to go with quantity over quality—their pilots are a dime a dozen. They think that if they gather enough weaklings, they'll be able to topple the strong.”

Then he grinned with pride. “But they're forgetting one thing—me. I'm more than capable of getting the most out of a high performance mech. If I'm the pilot, one will be all we need to mow them all down. Right?” He glanced at Haraji.

“Yes, I guarantee this unit will perform to your expectations,” Haraji replied, automatically nodding. “Its specs blow those cheap models Harlias bought out of the water, for one. If it ever ended up losing a battle, it'd only be because the pilot wasn't skilled enough.”

Carol nodded, which Rogert took to mean she understood. Satisfied, he grinned. “Then that's that. We'll win this war against Harlias for sure—unless they get the jump on us and act first. So I need that mech as soon as it's ready. I've paid your fee, so I won't accept a late delivery.”

Haraji wasn't intimidated. “Then you'd better hurry and choose what weapons you want. They can't start on your order until you decide.”

“I know, I know. Right, this one looks good...”

Rogert might have been in a hurry, but this was something he couldn't rush. He carefully looked over his options before deciding.

After he'd placed his order and Haraji had left, Rogert remained in the room, looking conflicted. The deal itself had gone well. Haraji had pulled one over on him, but the gang boss could let that slide. Just as the salesman had explained, no company would normally sell such an advanced mech to a gang in the slums. Yet he'd succeeded in procuring one for himself. That alone left him satisfied.

Still, Rogert couldn't relax yet. It wouldn't matter how advanced the mech was if it didn't arrive before Harlias made their move.

When he'd voiced this concern to Haraji, the salesman's reply had been simple: "If you want it delivered faster, then pay more." Maintenance and delivery weren't free, he'd said, and the workers would need to be compensated for keeping to a tighter schedule. "Just saying 'hurry' won't make the wheels turn any faster," he'd added with an exasperated look.

But the Ezent family's funds were all dried up by now. They'd already extorted all they could from the organizations under their protection and borrowed all the money they could from various financiers, promising they would get that money back with interest once the black market was under their control. All his options for acquiring money were exhausted.

With Haraji—and the mediator Viola—gone, the only ones sitting across from him now were his officers.

"Boss?" one spoke up. "I hate to say this, but we've already squeezed all our supporters dry. And if we threaten the ones sitting on the fence any more, they might retaliate by going to the other side instead."

"Our only other option is to take the money from those waving Harlias's flag, but that'll start the war early—which would be bad for us, since we're not ready."

"That's not all. While you're busy fighting their mechs, what about the enemy's members? We'll need to fight the grunts off too, which means purchasing more weapons and ammo. We simply don't have the budget to—"

“I know, I know!” Rogert muttered, cutting them off. He was getting a headache. He knew they were right, but his irritation mounted anyway. Finally, he slammed his fist down on the table as hard as he could. “Dammit!”

Inadvertently, his strike to the table caused the paused footage displayed over the table to play again, showing Akira and the white mech’s fight outside the warehouse. Rogert’s eyes reflexively turned to the footage. For a moment, he looked puzzled, but then a smile spread across his face, as if he’d hit upon an idea.



Haraji and Viola left the Ezent family mansion together. “By the way,” Haraji asked her, “I can leave the adjustment of the schedule to you, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Great. Then I’ll be awaiting your call.” With that, he walked off on his own.

Seeing the big grin on Viola’s face, Carol couldn’t help but ask. “What ‘schedule’?”

“Hm? Oh, for the show later. Call it a perk of the job. Fireworks like these demand a good seat to watch from, you see.”

“Oh, gotcha,” Carol said with a grin. Knowing her friend, she could easily imagine what kind of “fireworks” she had in mind.



In the city’s lower district, a group of heavily armed security guards were patrolling an area bordering the slums, near the relic warehouse.

One guard contacted his headquarters. “Point E27, reporting in as scheduled. All normal.”

“Understood. Continue your watch.”

Then, after that routine exchange, the guard spoke again. “This *is* considered ‘normal,’ right?”

“Huh? You just reported that it was,” came the reply from the man at HQ.

“I know, but still...” Before the guard’s eyes lay the aftermath of the recent

attack—destroyed buildings as far as the eye could see. The mech’s rampage had caused widespread damage to the area.

The situation here was anything but normal.

The guard sent the man at HQ an image of the scene before him via his scanner.

“It’s all right,” the man responded, in a tone that seemed to say, “I know how you feel.” Aloud, he added, “There aren’t any monsters around, so it’s all normal.”

“Really? Even if the slums are virtually treated like an extension of the wasteland, a mech causing all this damage is ‘all normal’?” He sighed. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

The guard had also been on duty here the day of the attack, and had been just as heavily armed as he was now. He’d initially been dispatched because monsters had reportedly appeared in the area—and indeed, monsters were running amok when he’d gotten there. But since they weren’t coming toward the lower district, he hadn’t needed to eliminate them. As for the mech that had appeared at the same time, HQ had called and informed him there was no need to engage, so he’d left it alone.

“It’s all right,” the man at HQ repeated. “We’re watching for monsters to show up. That’s what the city pays us big for, and that’s our job.”

“So we’re just going to turn a blind eye to the mech and the destruction it caused? Jeez, how did it come to this?”

“No idea, but no use worrying about it. I’m hanging up now. Too much idle chatter will affect my performance review.”

“Oh, sorry about that. Point E27 will continue to keep watch. Over.” He ended the call and sighed. “Really, how the hell did it come to this?” he muttered to himself.

He’d had the feeling the city hadn’t intervened because of its own interests, but since he answered to the city, learning the details would only jeopardize his standing at his job. He sighed again, then went back to work.



At her base, Sheryl wore a grave expression. The reason? Two gang officers were sitting in front of her—one from Harlias, the other from the Ezent family.

The officers regarded Sheryl with open hostility. Their respective subordinates behind them also looked ready to brawl at any moment.

“How long are you gonna make us wait for a response?”

“I don’t have time for this bullshit!”

“I’d really like a few days to think about it first,” Sheryl finally answered.

“Hell no,” both officers said in unison. They glared at each other in irritation. Each recognized that the other was quickly running out of time, and the tension in the air mounted. Sheryl could do nothing but pretend to think it over and stall for time until the storm passed.

Ezent and Harlias had both come to Sheryl with the same simple request—to join their side. Until now Sheryl’s gang had maintained a neutral stance in the upcoming gang war by continuing to say they had yet to decide who to support. The reason they hadn’t yet been threatened into taking a side (like the other gangs who’d been on the fence) had been the wild card known as Akira.

The period leading up to the war was a crucial time for both parties. A wrong move on either side might backfire and cause unexpected damage, giving the opposition a head start. In fact, when Zalmo had attacked the warehouse, he’d been careful to erase any evidence that could be traced back to the gangs for that very reason.

But thanks to the attack, both sides now knew exactly how strong Akira was. And since at this point victory was more or less down to which side could first get their weapons in order, they’d both deemed it necessary to force Sheryl into supporting them, regardless of what Akira was capable of.

So they’d both made their move right away—and thus officers from both gangs had showed up on Sheryl’s doorstep at the same time.

Had either representative arrived any earlier, they would’ve kidnapped Sheryl

and coerced her into agreeing to support their gang. Sheryl had luckily avoided that outcome, but the situation in front of her wasn't much better. With the tension between the two officers so high, the moment she capitulated to one, she'd automatically make an enemy of the other.

Worse, there was no guarantee she'd even gain that gang's protection. It was far more likely that they'd crush her, make off with her assets, sell all the relics in the warehouse, and use all the money to fund the war. Then they'd assimilate Akira into their own forces. Sheryl could easily see all that happening, and if she chose one of the gangs, she was sure Akira would cut ties with her right then and there. If she relinquished the money and relics he'd entrusted her with and became a pawn of one of the larger gangs, all to protect herself and her interests, Akira would have no further use for her. And with no obligation to support her, he wouldn't even hesitate to drop her.

Akira was the pillar supporting Sheryl's heart. To her, there was nothing more terrifying than the prospect of him leaving. Attempting to run from that fear as long as she could, she continued to stall for time. To her, there was no other option.

As Sheryl kept putting off her decision, the officers grew suspicious. "Hey, you're just stalling, aren't you?" one said with a glare.

"Waiting for Akira to show up, are you? Hoping that he'll swoop in and solve everything?" said the other.

In fact, Sheryl hadn't even contacted Akira—she had a feeling that if she explained the situation and asked him what she should do, he'd just say it wasn't his problem. Besides, Sheryl was the boss, but Akira was supporting her as a partner, not a subordinate. If she asked him for advice, he might think she was implicitly expecting him to solve the problem by offering his relics and his strength to one of the two gangs. If that led to Akira abandoning her in the end, she couldn't risk calling him.

But the officers didn't know any of this, and they grew more and more agitated. Finally, as if to answer their doubts, someone else walked through the door.

“Sorry for intruding.”

It was Viola, with Carol in tow. Both officers glanced back and forth at Viola and Sheryl several times, then scowled.

“Why’re you here, you bitch?” one of them said.

“Why? Because I have some business with this young lady, of course. So why are *you* here? Don’t you two have a war to prepare for?”

“None of your business. Back the hell off.”

“How mean! I only wanted to give you a friendly reminder not to stay here too long slacking off, or your bosses might get upset. I wouldn’t want to see you two sleep with the fishes.” Grinning cheerfully, Viola spoke in a lightly admonishing tone, as if to suggest her warning really had come from a place of concern.

Of course, the officers knew better. They looked at her with undisguised hatred. At the same time, she was influencing their thoughts without them even realizing it.

Viola had said they were “slacking off,” which implied it was a waste of time for them to be here right now—an idea rendered more plausible because Sheryl had been stalling for time ever since they’d arrived. They knew those who ignored Viola’s advice or suggestions often ended up regretting it, after which the scheming woman would laugh at their foolishness and use them as examples to cajole her future victims. So they wondered: What misfortune would befall them if they disregarded Viola’s advice and continued to stay here?

They were here to convince Sheryl to join their gang so they could sell her relics and squeeze her for all her gang was worth. Whichever gang succeeded would be the first to gather the funds necessary for the mechs they’d be using in the war. With that in mind, Viola was likely insinuating that the scheme would fail, and they’d earn their bosses’ ire.

But *why* would the plan fail? Their subordinates behind them had come for the same purpose, so why did Viola only warn the two of them? What scenario could make it so that only these two officers took the hit?

The officers looked at each other. Then, as though they'd realized the same thing at the same time, their expressions changed.

This was all a trap. The entire plan had been a decoy from the start. Neither organization had wanted to convince Sheryl in the first place—both gangs had sent their officers here so that Sheryl wouldn't realize their true aim was to attack the warehouse.

The moment the officers came to that conclusion, they leaped from their seats and barked at their subordinates.

"We're leaving—now! It was the warehouse all along!"

"Contact the guys watching the warehouse at once!"

The two officers scrambled to be the first to get out the door. Their subordinates looked confused, but quickly followed behind. Only Sheryl, Viola, and Carol remained. Sheryl was having trouble processing what had just happened.

Viola watched the gang members go with a wicked grin. "Would you look at that? I didn't even have to lie," she remarked, earning a snort from Carol. Then the info broker turned to Sheryl. "Now that the riffraff's out of the way, I have something I'd like to discuss," she said, her smile now cordial. "I think it'd be in your best interest to listen."

"Okay, I'll hear you out," Sheryl said after some hesitation. She knew Viola's reputation as a conniving witch. But getting rid of the goons from Ezent and Harlias had only postponed Sheryl's demise for another day—if she didn't do something, both gangs would no doubt continue to target her.

Sheryl had no choice but to listen.

Chapter 139: The Stage Is Set

Viola drove Sheryl to the warehouse. The girl sat alone in the back seat, wrapping up a conversation with Tomejima on her terminal.

“And so, I’d like you to finalize the negotiations,” she told him. “Please take care of this right away.”

“Yes, ma’am! Leave it to me!” Tomejima replied, sounding elated.

Sheryl ended the call and heaved a deep sigh. “Ms. Viola, not that I doubt you or anything, but are you sure it’ll be three days at the most?”

“Positive,” Viola said cheerfully from the driver’s seat. “I trade information for a living, and I have the utmost confidence in the accuracy of my intel. I can’t tell you my source, but I can say they’re highly trusted. I’m ninety-nine percent certain their info is legit.”

“Ninety-nine?” Sheryl questioned.

“Well, I’m not a clairvoyant or anything, so that one percent is still up in the air. Sorry about that,” the woman said with a grin. But from the confidence in her voice, it didn’t sound like there was any doubt in Viola’s mind whatsoever.

“No, I should be the one saying sorry,” Sheryl replied. “I shouldn’t have doubted you.”

“It’s fine,” Viola said with a wave of her hand. “Just add a bonus to the liquidation fee for the info I gave you just now and we’ll call it even.”

“That should be easy enough to arrange.” Sheryl paused. “By the way, why do you want to cooperate with us?”

Viola had come to Sheryl with a way to help her survive the threats posed by Ezent and Harlias.

According to the info broker, the war would begin no later than three days from now. Once it started, both gangs would be too preoccupied to worry about Sheryl and the others. And regardless of which side won, both would

surely be impoverished for a while afterward.

Also, once a victor was decided, they wouldn't be pressuring Sheryl and the others so much anyway. Sheryl and her associates were under severe threat from the two gangs only because the latter wanted to sell their relics to fund—and win—the war. When the conflict ended, even if the gangs were still interested in the relics, Sheryl would have more room to negotiate.

In short, if her team could hold out for just three more days, there was a good chance they'd make it through. Given this, her main priority had to be beefing up the warehouse's security, even if only temporarily.

Since the warehouse association had hired Yumina, they already had a connection with Druncam. With their current funds, they could contract Katsuya and his unit for three days. Even the largest gangs in the slums would think twice about attacking with that group on security.

After explaining all this to Sheryl, Viola had recommended that she hire Katsuya's team. Sheryl had agreed, but had posed two objections. First, she had doubted whether the war really would start within the next three days (though she had no choice but to trust Viola on that point). The other issue was money. She could cover the hiring costs with what they had now, but only with Akira's share of the profits from selling off the bandits. He'd told her to use it on the business, but she had worried about how he would react if he found out she'd used his money to hire Katsuya. Still, she didn't have much choice—she had no other way of obtaining the funds. She'd asked Viola to take her to the warehouse so she could discuss it with Akira.

If she could persuade Akira to agree, she'd make it through this. She was just as hopeful as she was apprehensive—and it certainly didn't help that she couldn't figure out Viola's true motive for cooperating with her. She knew Viola had a bad rap, but the woman had only earned that reputation because she was clever. She had to be scheming something by helping Sheryl out, but what could Viola possibly hope to gain by simultaneously antagonizing the two largest syndicates in the slums? If she had just wanted money, she could've just cozied up to one of the gangs—or even both. And Sheryl hadn't felt any hatred or resentment from Viola toward the gangs either, so her motive probably wasn't revenge.

Not for a second did Sheryl think that Viola was acting out of the goodness of her heart.

As convenient as it was for Sheryl to have Viola on her side (or rather, although she had no choice but to rely on her), the girl couldn't relax as long as she didn't know what the witch was really planning. Her anxiety had mounted all throughout the drive, until she finally steeled herself and asked right out why Viola had cooperated with her.

Viola answered her question with a smile. "I have my reasons. But mostly, I just thought it'd be more intriguing this way."

"Intriguing?" Sheryl echoed.

"Wouldn't it be just too boring if the war simply ended with one side losing to the other? This is the perfect chance to spice things up a little."

Sheryl was well aware of her own natural talent for reading people. Before she'd met Akira, she'd relied on that talent to survive in the slums. And now, through her numerous efforts to read Akira and win his favor, she'd gotten very good at it.

So Sheryl could read Viola's true intent through her response. Viola was enjoying all this chaos from the bottom of her heart. She really had helped Sheryl for no other reason but her own entertainment. Viola saw everyone else as pawns to manipulate as she pleased—that much was clear.

"I-I see," Sheryl said, unsure how to respond. "Well, regardless, I appreciate your help."

"Don't mention it. Let's enjoy the outcome together, shall we?" Viola said cheerfully.

In the passenger's seat beside her, Carol resisted the urge to laugh.



When they finally reached the warehouse, they found a sour-looking Akira. The officers of Ezent and Harlias, along with their subordinates, were some distance away, watching him tensely. The expression on Akira's face made Sheryl hesitate to get out of the vehicle, but she mustered up the courage to go

and explain the situation to him.

The two gang officers strode over to Viola and Carol, who'd also climbed out of the vehicle. Their subordinates stayed put so as not to agitate the warehouse's security—especially Akira.

"What're you trying to pull, Viola?" one officer growled.

"What do you mean?" Viola asked. Naturally, she knew full well what he was referring to, but she played dumb.

"Quit the bullshit! At that girl's base, you led us to believe the warehouse was under attack!"

"Hm? I never said anything like that, though."

"Then what *did* you mean?!"

"You guys are after the relics in the warehouse, right? I was merely warning you that you were wasting your time with Sheryl when Akira's the one you really need to convince."

The officer looked confused. "But wait— isn't Sheryl the gang's boss?"

"She leads the gang, yes, but Akira holds the real power. If Akira ordered Sheryl to hand those relics over to someone else, she'd do so without question, and if he told her not to hand them over under any circumstance, she'd have no choice but to comply. She knows Akira would kill her if she did it anyway."

The officers found themselves glancing at each other, and scowled.

"You tricked us," the officer who'd spoken earlier growled.

"If you misunderstood, that's on you," Viola replied with a shrug. "You should've listened more closely to what I said."

"Shut up!" the officers spat in unison. Then, even more upset that they'd been in sync, they stormed off.

"More like you manipulated the situation to *make* them misunderstand, right?" Carol said with a grin.

"Well, maybe a *teensy-weensy* bit."

"I'd expect nothing less. And I'm guessing that's also the reason the two gangs

showed up on Sheryl's doorstep at the exact same time?"

Viola smiled. "No idea. Perhaps it was just a coincidence."

"Oh yeah? Then I guess it all came down to luck," Carol said. "Though I'm not sure if fortune ultimately favored you or Sheryl more." She turned her eyes to the girl nearby.

Whether you were a hunter or not, having luck on your side counted as a skill. And in this case, Sheryl's luck had saved her life.



Upon hearing the rundown of the situation from Sheryl, Akira readily gave the okay to hire Katsuya and the others. So readily, in fact, that Sheryl felt baffled.

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm not gonna nitpick over how you use that money. Do whatever you want with it."

"Th-Thank you! Don't worry, I don't plan to waste it. I'll only use it for necessary expenses."

His answer relieved her, but just in case, she observed his reaction carefully. He looked a little sour, but since he'd had the same expression when they were pulling up to the warehouse, that probably didn't have anything to do with hiring Katsuya's team. Still, she asked just to make sure. "You don't look too happy. Did something happen?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah—it's just that *these* guys just barged in all of a sudden," he said, with a glance at the gang members surrounding him. "And, well..."

"I'm truly sorry for all the trouble."

"Nah, I don't mind. Well, I do, but not for the reason you're thinking." Assuring Sheryl that she wasn't the one he was upset with, he glared back at the men.

Akira was preventing them from entering the warehouse. But the men weren't fighting back. To begin with, both gangs had only come here because each thought the other was trying to make off with the relics by force. If that wasn't the case, they had no reason to start a fight.

But their presence alone was enough to upset Akira. “Even after seeing the remains of that mech over there, they think they can take me down with only this many?” He assumed the men had shown up expecting they could take him on—that his solo victory over the mech hadn’t deterred them in the least.

That they still thought he was weak.

But they were only doing as their bosses had ordered them. And Akira represented enough of a threat to the gang members that they hesitated to attack him despite their orders. When they’d heard their enemies were staging an attack on the warehouse, the officers had naturally assumed this meant Akira was absent—after all, who would attack while he was present? But when they’d seen the boy standing there on guard duty, they’d panicked and stopped in their tracks—which was not how they would have treated someone they thought posed no threat. In a way, this served as proof that Akira was now sufficiently respected to give even the two most powerful gangs in the slums pause.

But Akira had been hunting alone all this time, and he knew nothing about what it was like to be beholden to a more powerful figure. And he automatically assumed the gang members were belittling him, in no small part because he’d been belittled most of his life.

Sheryl couldn’t read that far into his words, of course. She did at least realize that he thought the men were underestimating him, but she’d never seen him respond well when she praised his strength, and she didn’t know what else she could say to cheer him up.

Akira noticed her searching for words and realized his own attitude was to blame. “Sorry, Sheryl,” he mumbled. “I didn’t mean to take my anger out on you, but I guess I’m just like this.” He hung his head and sighed.

Sheryl was taken aback. After hesitating for a moment, she made her decision. She took a step forward and slowly embraced him.

“Wh-What’s this for?”

“You know, when you hugged me before, it really cheered me up. Today I’m returning the favor. How does it feel?”

“Huh? I’m not sure what you—”

“Now, now, there’s no need to hold back.”

“Uh, I’m not holding back, though—”

“Oh? Well, in that case, enjoy this feeling all you want until you’re happy again,” she said with a big grin, and hugged him even tighter.

She couldn’t see Akira’s expression from her position, but her embrace did the trick—even though it was only a hug, Akira could feel his spirits lifting. Before long, he found himself smiling, and even let out a small laugh. “Are you really gonna hug me like this until I tell you I feel better?”

“If that’s what you want, then I don’t mind.”

“Well, I *do* mind. I feel better now, so that’s enough.”

“If you say so,” Sheryl said with a smile, and let go of him.

Now that they could see each other’s faces, he noticed Sheryl looked a bit smug.

“All right, you got me,” he said with a grin. “Thanks. I did need that, actually.”

“You’re very welcome. If you ever want another, feel free to ask anytime. Don’t be shy now.” Already struggling to keep a lid on the joy welling up within her, she took the perfect opportunity to change the subject before he could reject her offer. “By the way, I was thinking that it might be best if I stayed here for a while until all the commotion dies down. Would you share your RV with me?”

“Sure. I mean, you and Katsuragi got it for me in the first place.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it,” she said with a bow. Unable to contain her smile, she headed to the warehouse to report on the situation to the others.

Akira lightly stretched as he watched her go. Then he noticed Alpha’s gaze on him. *What’s wrong?*

Oh, nothing.

Her tone and facial expression seemed completely normal, as though there really was nothing bothering her. He’d been expecting her to tease him again,

so he looked a bit surprised that she'd betrayed his expectations. But he didn't necessarily want her to either, so he kept his mouth shut.

He had no idea that Alpha had refrained from teasing him this time because she wasn't sure how he'd react.

That night, having moved into the RV, Sheryl nonchalantly tried to enter the bath with Akira. But Akira shooed her out of the room, saying the tub wasn't big enough for both of them.



The next morning, Sheryl and Akira waited in front of the warehouse for the Druncam team to arrive. Yumina, having just finished her night watch, was present as well. When Druncam's vehicle finally appeared, Akira temporarily distanced himself from the warehouse as agreed.

With Katsuya and his team on security, Akira had less reason to stay at the warehouse. He planned on heading back to his place to get some rest. Then once his new gun was ready at Shizuka's, he'd come back.

"Okay, Sheryl, I'm going back home for a while. See you later, Yumina," he said with a wave, then got in his truck and drove away. He'd agreed to the hiring of Katsuya and the others, but an unnecessary fight might break out if he and Katsuya met face-to-face. Plus, remembering how oddly irritated he'd felt with Katsuya during the hypersynthetic snake battle, Akira was afraid he might end up being the one to start that fight himself.

After watching Akira leave, Sheryl and Yumina simultaneously looked at each other.

"I heard Akira and Katsuya don't really get along," Sheryl said. "Did that incident with the pickpocket really affect their relationship so much?"

"Well, that's part of it, but I think it's more like they're just incompatible to begin with," Yumina answered.

"Incompatible?"

"Yeah. I'm not really sure why, but Katsuya seems to naturally repel just as

many people as he attracts. Our former supervisor Shikarabe, for instance, is a good example of that. Akira's probably the same way."

"I see. In that case, while I'd hate to put more work on you, could you help me make sure Akira and Katsuya don't interact while they're here? You can even change their schedules and stations around if you'd like—if either of them complain, tell them I ordered it. Feel free to call me at any time as well."

"Okay, I'll do that."

Yumina had eyes for Katsuya and Sheryl for Akira—different crushes, but the girls found common ground here, agreeing that they didn't want the two to fight. Thus Yumina and Sheryl forged a temporary alliance.

The Druncam vehicle rolled to a stop, and Katsuya and his teammates alighted. Mizuha got out last and went ahead of the rookies to talk to Sheryl.

"Good morning, Sheryl! I can't express just how lovely it is to have the opportunity to work with you today."

"No, the pleasure is all mine," Sheryl responded.

With the formalities out of the way, their ruthless game of tug-of-war began. Mizuha attempted to use the warehouse job as a springboard to strengthen her connection with Sheryl, while Sheryl, continuing her rich-girl facade, probed Mizuha to find out what the Druncam executive *really* thought of Sheryl and the others involved with the relic business.

Watching their exchange, Katsuya was even more convinced of Sheryl's well-to-do status. He ended up falling for her all over again.

Then Yumina spoke up. "Katsuya, Sheryl's our boss this time, so please don't do anything rude, okay?"

"Right, right, I know," he said, flashing a grin.

But Yumina wasn't finished. "That means you can't wrangle with any of the others Sheryl hired—namely, Akira. If you start something with him, you'll be offending Sheryl as well. Just keep that in mind."

When he realized what Yumina was *really* warning him about, his mouth twisted a little in displeasure—but only for a split second, and his expression

was quickly replaced with another grin. “All right, I get it. I just won’t go near him. Is that good enough?”

“Sure, but be warned: I’ll be watching to make sure you can keep that promise.”

Now realizing Yumina was genuinely worried, he smiled to reassure her. “Seriously, don’t worry! It’ll be fine.”

Yumina didn’t think Katsuya was lying. However, she’d known him long enough that his words alone didn’t exactly convince her.



When Akira returned home, his first order of business was to sleep off the fatigue he hadn’t been able to get rid of in the RV. After napping until around noon, he headed straight to Shizuka’s.

When he arrived, Shizuka was already waiting to greet him. “Welcome, Akira,” she said with a smile. “This way, please.”

Rather than heading to the store counter, she led him into the storehouse. There sat a large rectangular suitcase. She opened it, revealing a weapon even larger than Akira himself. “Behold, the weapon you ordered—an SSB multifunction gun!”

Just from the design alone, Akira could tell this weapon was completely different from any he’d used thus far. For one, the body was bulky and rectangular. There was no thin barrel protruding from the body like on most guns, and no gunstock for that matter. There were, however, multiple slots for magazines and energy packs, and an enormous grip for attaching a support arm.

“I’ve already installed the titan-killer mods you purchased,” Shizuka explained. “That’s why the gun’s as large as it is. The compatible support arm’s also included. With a powered suit as advanced as yours, you shouldn’t have any problem keeping it secure.”

The weapon fired at a faster rate than the DVTS minigun, and with more force than a CWH anti-materiel assault rifle. It was also more accurate than sniper rifles that typically sold for ten million aurum. You could even install additional

mods to make it fire grenades or micromissiles, although Akira's gun hadn't come with either of these.

A hundred million aurum. No firearm Akira had ever used could perform at the same level—it was truly a gun truly meant for high-ranking hunters.

Shizuka instructed Akira on how to equip the gun. She helped him attach the support arm to his powered suit, then fixed the SSB multifunction gun to the arm. First, they mounted it on his back to test out the weight, then she had him try holding it at the ready. The arm, now synced up with his powered suit, swiveled from his back to his front in a counterclockwise motion. Before the gun finished moving, Akira grabbed the grip and pulled the weapon into position.

All of this occurred in a split second. He was wearing his protective coat over the suit, yet the arm's movement was completely fluid. The hexagonal metal panels on the coat could be disengaged at will by the user, allowing the arm to move unimpeded.

Akira swiveled the SSB around to his back again and grinned. "Oh yeah, I think this'll work just fine!"

"I'm relieved to hear that. To tell the truth, this is the first time I've worked with a gun of such quality, so it's good to see that nothing's malfunctioning. More importantly"—Shizuka looked again at Akira holding the weapon, and her face fell slightly—"I see you already know how to use such a powerful weapon, huh?" But her smile immediately returned before Akira could notice.

"Impressive! Seems like just yesterday I was selling you that first AAH, and now look at you!"

"Yeah. I'm honestly surprised too. But just think of it like this: one of your frequent shoppers is now strong enough to afford the big-time weapons. That means more money in your pocket, so you ought to be thrilled, right?" He was partly joking with her, though he really did want Shizuka to be pleased by his growth.

But instead Shizuka's smile looked sad. "It's a shame you can't officially be one of my regulars yet, though."

"Oh—right." He really did wish he could be considered part of this group. So

he asked her something he normally wouldn't have: "Um, I've come here a lot and bought all sorts of things from your store, you know. Are you sure that's not enough for me to be one of your regulars?"

"Oh no, that's not the issue, Akira," Shizuka said in a gentle tone. "To be considered a regular here, you have to frequent my shop for a certain number of years. In other words, those who take dangerous risks—dangerous enough to get severely injured or end up dead—can't be regulars. If they survive long enough to meet that requirement, I don't have to worry about whether they'll come back safe and sound."

Hearing this, Akira finally realized why Shizuka didn't consider him a "regular"—and why she'd told him over and over again to come back safe and not to keep worrying her. He was happy she cared about him so much, but now—thinking about all the times he'd caused her to fret over him—he couldn't help but feel ashamed. He averted his eyes bashfully.

Shizuka smiled wryly at this. "Even if you don't mean to, you *do* take a lot of risks, you know."

"No, that's—" He was about to deny it automatically, but remembering all the times he'd nearly died, he knew that wouldn't sound very convincing. Instead, he nodded and looked downcast. "Yeah, you're right."

"Work hard to become one of my regulars, Akira. Okay?"

This time his nod was firmer. "I sure will."

"Glad to hear it." Shizuka gave him a big smile, hoping it would encourage him to work even harder.

With their business concluded, Akira said goodbye to her and headed back home. Shizuka saw Akira off with a smile, but the moment his truck disappeared from view, her face clouded over. "I *want* to think he'll be fine," she muttered to herself.

He had a brand-new powered suit, valued at four hundred million aurum. He had a gun so large that it looked too big for him. In terms of raw power, he was already a top-notch hunter who could handle the wasteland. And he'd reached

that level in just the short time she'd known him.

But Shizuka was still worried. He might have powerful gear, but the owner of that gear—Akira himself—still had a long way to go. She was afraid all that power was too much for him to handle. Those who relied on excessive power often became too dependent on it, rushed into a situation beyond what they could manage, and ended up dead. She knew relying on power alone was a one-way path to destruction. She hoped Akira now had a reason to stop and think twice before endangering his own life yet again, even if it was only to become one of her regulars.

But Shizuka's intuition was telling her not to count on it. And her intuition was almost always right.



As soon as he got home, Akira began preparing for his return trip to the warehouse. He took the SSB, the support arm, some especially powerful ammo he'd bought along with the gun, and a newly purchased A4WM out of the back of his truck. Then he mounted the guns on the truck's emplacements and stored all the ammo he'd need for the weapons in the truck bed.

Akira, look over here for a second. Alpha's voice came from behind him. When he turned to look, his face immediately grew wary.

Sheryl was standing there, fully nude.

He instantly knew it wasn't the real Sheryl. This was yet another image Alpha had projected into his augmented vision. "Alpha, what are you trying to—? Oh, I get it."

She'd pulled a similar trick before. He remembered how Alpha had used Elena's and Sara's naked bodies to determine whether he was prioritizing them over her, and realized now what she was implying. With a sigh, he answered her unspoken question.

"Look, I know the original plan was to start relic hunting again as soon as I got my gear. But I don't think it'll break the bank to help Sheryl out a little more first. Plus, if the relic business succeeds, I stand to make even more money, right? Think of it as an investment."

Alpha's gaze bored into Akira.

After considering a bit further, he continued. "I know what you're thinking. You're right—maybe giving my portion of all that money to Sheryl was a bit much, even for an investment. But you didn't stop me either."

Even he thought it was a little harsh to put the blame on her, but he said it anyway. In response, Alpha erased Sheryl's figure. Thinking this meant she'd accepted his excuse, Akira sighed in relief.

In fact, Alpha couldn't have cared less about his excuse. She'd been far more interested in how he'd reacted. He hadn't been surprised to see Sheryl's nude figure. Moreover, he'd automatically assumed Alpha was worried about him prioritizing Sheryl over Alpha's job, and had come up with an excuse to defend himself. Alpha determined that for now, his actions were still in the permissible range, and she smiled as if satisfied by his response.

As long as you're aware you went a little too far, that's good enough for me. Now, look at this next.

"Again? What is it this time? If you're gonna show me Shizuka next I'm gonna be seriously upset— *Wha—?!'*"

The image that appeared before him was a nude Alpha. But he was quite used to seeing her naked body by now, so this normally wouldn't have elicited such a reaction. For him to react the way he had, there needed to be some element he *wasn't* used to seeing.

Alpha had changed her own appearance to look much younger—Sheryl's age, in fact.

Now that's a reaction I haven't seen in a long time, she said with a smug grin.

Even the little-girl version of that grin was a fresh sight to him. Though her chest was still as ample as her adult form's, this figure lacked the overall sex appeal and charm of a woman. She was still beautiful, but in a cute sense rather than an alluring one.

You know what? I like that reaction more. I think I'll stay like this from now on, she teased. With a childish grin, like she was about to pull a prank, she inched closer to Akira.

Akira's face went beet red. He acted displeased to disguise his embarrassment. "E-Enough. Go back already! You're confusing me!"

Fine, fine. Alpha returned to her adult form.

"The clothes too!"

Alpha's figure became clothed once more, and Akira sighed in relief. He was still blushing furiously. "Seriously, what the hell was that all about?" he muttered.

Since you can't derive pleasure from touching me, I thought I might spice things up by giving you new varieties of Alpha to enjoy.

"Thanks, but no thanks." He turned back to his work, looking sour. He knew Alpha would realize this attitude was an act, but didn't care.

Alpha just grinned at him in high spirits.



Akira got as far as the outskirts of the warehouse grounds when the Druncam team stopped him—proof that they were guarding the perimeter diligently, like they were supposed to. They let him through almost immediately, but cast disdainful gazes in his direction as he drove away. Though they were technically coworkers on this job, the rookies on Katsuya's team thought of Akira as an enemy.

By the time Akira reached the warehouse, the sun was already starting to set. He pulled his truck up beside the RV, and Sheryl came out to greet him. She was nearly bowled over at the sight of the enormous SSB mounted on the back of his truck. "Welcome back, Akira. Wow, that's a big gun!"

"Well, it cost a hundred mil, so it oughta be," he replied with a hint of pride.

Sheryl judged that if he was already proud of his accomplishment, a little additional praise probably wouldn't upset him. "A hundred mil!" she exclaimed, positively beaming. "You really never cease to amaze—but considering how incredible you are, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I've never seen a gun that large before, but an outstanding hunter needs an outstanding weapon, I guess! Not to mention one that'll go with your four-hundred-mil powered suit."

“Oh, yeah? Maybe so,” he said. “Since it’s a big gun for killing big monsters, it’s pretty easy to tell how powerful it is just by looking at it, right?”

Akira’s favorable response made Sheryl break into a genuine smile. The last time she’d tried to praise him, his reaction had been more on the negative side. Now she’d tried to compliment him indirectly through his gear, and she felt relieved that this had been the right decision.

“It’s important for a weapon to *look* powerful too,” Sheryl said. “Taking down enemies with ease is obviously key, but a large gun will make enemies think twice about messing with you in the first place. You can win fights before they even start.”

“Yeah, you said it,” Akira agreed. “Oh, by the way, what’s my job here when those Druncam guys are on duty? I’m not so sure I should be loitering around like I’ve been doing.” He explained how Katsuya’s team hadn’t exactly given him a warm reception.

He only wanted Sheryl to know about this to avoid any unnecessary conflict in the future, but Sheryl’s face immediately darkened. “I see. Then it seems I’ll need to file a complaint, and perhaps adjust some hiring fees while I’m at it.” Her smile returned. “Until then, please guard the area around the RV. I think this would be a fine spot to show off that amazing gear you’ve got, don’t you?”

“Sounds good to me.”

They grinned, and then Sheryl headed to the warehouse to take care of the aforementioned adjustments. Akira, meanwhile, watched the area like he had been asked to.



Carol was in Kugamayama’s lower district, sitting on a bed in an apartment building not far from the warehouse. She was waiting on a client for her side job.

Right at the scheduled time, her client showed up—a Harlias officer, accompanied by his subordinates. Except for the officer, all were fully armed.

“Hey there,” Carol greeted them with an alluring smile. “I didn’t know you’d be bringing so many.”

“Don’t worry,” the officer said. “We’re just blowing off some steam before a big job. You can at least handle a group of this size, can’t you?”

“Well, I don’t really mind,” she said, and began stripping off her powered suit in front of the men. After unzipping the front of her inner wear, however, she stopped. “Are you guys not gonna undress too?”

“We’re just paying to look today,” the officer said.

“Suit yourself,” Carol said with a shrug, and stripped off her inner wear. Her nude form was stunning—which stood to reason, considering the money she’d spent on her figure.

The men’s eyes were instantly drawn to her, some even letting out cries of astonishment. But the expressions on all their faces seemed to say the same thing: “What a waste.”

Carol gave them a bewitching, inviting smile. “Now then, who’s first?”

“All of us.” The man raised his hand, and on his signal, his subordinates all drew their weapons on Carol.

Carol looked a bit confused. “Hey now, even I don’t go along with this kind of fetish play.”

The gang officer smiled at her joke, but shook his head sadly. “Sorry. I’m not really into it either, but, y’know, boss’s orders.”

The men had come here as Carol’s clients, but their true aim from the start had been to assassinate Carol and Viola.

“You two are connected to Ezent, right?” the officer said. “Well, that in itself isn’t a problem—the boss had Viola look into what they’re planning just like Ezent asked her to look into us, after all, so you’d have to be involved to some degree. But mediating a deal between Yoshioka and Ezent for the mechs was a bad move. Boss couldn’t let that slide, y’see. And even though we’re pretty much ready for the war at this point, the enemy’s preparations are still ongoing—we can’t afford to let you help them. So the boss has decided now’s the time for you to die.”

Harlias had known from the start that Viola had been cooperating with Ezent.

Still, they hadn't killed her right away because she'd been of use to them. Now they no longer needed her services. And since she was serving as Ezent's mediator, killing her might throw Ezent's negotiations with Yoshioka Heavy Industries into disarray. That alone was enough reason to eliminate Viola and her bodyguard Carol.

"For the record," he added, "I'd rather not have to off a beauty like you. But the boss ordered it, and what he says goes." The man gave another sad smile, then his expression turned grim. "Kill her."

His men all fired at once. Countless bullets instantaneously reduced the walls, the bed, and everything else in the room to Swiss cheese.

At the same time, one man's head slammed against the wall, killing him instantly. Blood leaked through the cracks in his heavily fortified skull, dyeing the wall red.

"What was that?!" Quickly, the remaining men aimed their guns toward their dead comrade, trying to get a good look at what had happened. But in the span of time it took them to turn, two more men had breathed their last. A vicious kick had pierced through one's powered suit, and the other had found his neck twisted two full rotations.

Carol had killed them both. Right as the men had opened fire, she'd used her own physical strength—already on par with that of a powered suit—to close the distance in a split second. Then, still completely naked, she'd ended both their lives.

As gunfire continued to ring out, bullets flew all over the room. But they didn't even graze Carol—thanks to the speed stims she'd taken, she could dodge the trajectory of each bullet with ease.

In the incredibly short span of time that followed, Carol killed one gang member after another. The fully armed men, with their powered suits and loaded weapons, were mercilessly, helplessly, taken out by an unarmed nude woman.

They'd been tasked with protecting a gang officer, so naturally some of the men were much harder to take down. But to Carol, this only meant she couldn't kill them in a single hit. She struck their chest, legs, and head in quick

succession, sending them flying to the ground where they moaned one last time before expiring.

Finally, only the officer remained. Carol kicked him into the wall. The impact where his back hit it sent fissures through the wall, and he slid to the ground in a miserable heap. His face was a mixture of shock and terror.



“N-No way...! How can you fight unarmed like that?!”

Her body covered in blood, Carol walked up to the man and looked down on him with a smile. “Actually, my body’s augmented. Apologies for keeping it a secret until now.”

Carol’s captivating figure was the result of high-level body augmentations. Her beauty was artificial—not unlike Alpha’s, in a sense.

On death’s door, the man responded. “I figured out...that much...already.”

“So then I suppose you want to know why I wear a powered suit if I don’t really need it? To deceive idiots like you, mostly. If I wear a high performance powered suit, most people will assume I’m compensating for my own physical weakness.”

Carol’s strength was more or less the same with or without a powered suit. Even when she worked her side hustle in the middle of some dangerous ruin, she felt safe enough to disrobe—because she was essentially just as strong without her powered clothing.

The dying man managed a stiff smile. “You had us fooled...from the start...”

“Well, there is actually one other reason I wear a powered suit. It might not change my physical capabilities much, but it does ease the burden on my body by reducing nanomachine consumption. Can’t say it’s very cost-efficient, though.”

“I...see... How...fascinating...” the man managed to utter, a smile playing on his face.

Carol delivered the coup de grâce, and the man finally perished.

Viola emerged from a room in the back of the apartment. “All done?”

“Yep, that’s all of ’em. According to what they said, Harlias is almost done preparing.”

“Then we ought to take our seats to watch the spectacle unfold, shouldn’t we?” Viola said with a smile.

Even with the room in such a tragic, ruined state, Viola didn’t flinch. Carol

herself was spattered in the gangsters' blood, yet she spoke as casually as though they were discussing the weather.

"Hey now, at least let me take a shower first," she complained.

"Fine, fine," Viola said with a sigh.

Carol grabbed her clothes off the floor and left the room. Viola followed after her, leaving the corpses of the men behind.

Chapter 140: The War Begins

Alpha woke Akira up a little before dawn. The sun had yet to rise.

Akira, time to get up. We've got an enemy.

Enemy—that word immediately made Akira sit up, alert. But he judged from Alpha's calm expression that there wasn't an emergency, and he was able to remain calm himself as he got ready.

What's the situation?

Multiple mechs are approaching the area. They're still some distance away and haven't attacked, but you should treat them as hostile.

Got it. Before he left the RV, he shook Sheryl. "Hey Sheryl, wake up."

Sheryl opened her eyes groggily. But seeing Akira's serious expression, she sensed something was amiss and shook her head to rid herself of her sleepiness. "What's up, Akira?"

"I've got some weird readings. You should probably be awake just in case they turn out to be enemies." He couldn't tell her Alpha had informed him of the enemy's approach, so he just came up with something that sounded good off the top of his head.

Even so, Sheryl could tell it was an enemy attack. "All right. I'll warn everyone else."

"Thanks," Akira said.

They left the RV together. Sheryl headed to the warehouse to inform the others, while Akira clambered into the back of his truck, removed the SSB and A4WM from their emplacements, and equipped them on himself.

Looking at the SSB with the support arm attached, he smiled wryly. *That didn't take long, did it? Although I did kind of have the feeling I'd get to try this gun out sooner or later.*

Alpha grinned confidently. *Let's just chalk it up to good fortune that your gun*

arrived in time. Your last warm-up session was for your suit, so this time, let's try out your weapon. Your opponents are mechs again, which will be the perfect target for this gun, and there are multiple targets for testing its many functions on.

Akira grinned back. *I'm not sure who, but someone was gracious enough to prepare this exercise for me, huh? Then I ought to oblige.*

That's the spirit. Let's go!

Akira hopped out of the back of the truck and took off running through the slums. The sky was still dark.



Katsuya, who'd been napping in the warehouse, awoke all of a sudden. Not long afterward, one of his teammates on night watch called him on his wireless—several mechs had been spotted heading toward the warehouse.

"Understood," Katsuya said. "Have the others on night watch retreat to the warehouse where it's safer. Inform everyone to switch to their most powerful weapons. We'll warn the intruders over the wireless, and if they ignore us, we'll recognize them as enemies."

After relaying his instructions to his other teammates, he immediately received their affirmations via the support system on his all-in-one support powered suit. *Whoa, that was fast! This suit's system really is something else.* He was impressed by the convenience this gear provided.

However, not all of his teammates' responses arrived at the same time—he received some faster than others. Airi's transmission was the first to reach him, then his other teammates' came shortly afterward, in order of how in sync they were with the rest of the team. Yumina's transmission came last, and in fact quite a bit after the second-to-last teammate.

Well, the system's still a work in progress, so there are probably a few kinks that still need to be worked out, he guessed, and got to work preparing himself for battle.

While he was getting ready, Sheryl appeared.

“Hey, Sheryl,” he announced with a stern expression. “My team informed me that several mechs are heading our way, but we’ll take care of ’em. If any of the warehouse staff are still outdoors, tell ’em to get inside the building. Once they’re all gathered, we can have them evacuate to the lower district if things get rough.” Then he smiled as if to reassure her. “Don’t worry. You hired us, so as long as we’re here, we’ll make sure you’re safe. You’re in good hands.”

“Thank you,” Sheryl replied warmly. “I’m counting on you.”

Katsuya was charmed all over again by that smile of hers. After she’d left and he’d returned to his senses, he felt more motivated than ever. “All right! Let’s do this!” Now was the perfect opportunity for him to impress Sheryl!



A group of white mechs made their way through the slums in the dead of night—the lower-priced Shirousagi models Harlias had bought from Yajima Heavy Industries. Suddenly, the lead mech received a transmission.

“Warning! Unknown units, this is Druncam. You are trespassing on the grounds we are guarding. Turn back immediately. Any farther, and we’ll be forced to recognize you as an enemy and respond accordingly. I repeat—turn back.”

The pilot of the mech switched his comms to another channel. “Boss, you heard that, right?”

“Proceed,” came the reply.

“Understood. All right, you guys heard the boss! Let’s go!”

On their boss’s signal, the mechs started behaving noticeably differently. Though not as limber as when Zalmo had been piloting one, the lower-price Shirousagis were now making fluid, humanlike movements. They drew their huge weapons and began firing massive projectiles. The bullets, far larger and more destructive than normal ammunition, blasted nearby residences and buildings to smithereens.



On the front lines, Katsuya fired a large automatic grenade launcher at a

white mech. The mech immediately tried to maneuver its gun toward Katsuya, but one of his teammates reacted first with a hail of gunfire. The teammate's large firearm wasn't powerful enough to destroy the mech by itself, but the impacts certainly kept the machine from attacking.

Katsuya had taken the vanguard, to serve as a decoy. Once a machine zeroed in on him, his teammates backed him up by disrupting its movement. Then Katsuya would lob a volley of grenades at the immobile mech, and the resulting explosions would reduce a two-hundred-million-aurum weapon to scrap. They'd repeated this strategy several times now.

"All right! That makes three!" Katsuya exclaimed with a triumphant grin. But then his smile went stiff—another enemy unit was heading his way. "Next one incoming! Let's go, team!" he ordered.

As long as the enemy remained, celebrating would have to wait.

For this fight, Katsuya's team of rookies had been separated into smaller teams that moved independently from one another. Yet the coordination among the teams was so impressive it seemed as though they were a single cohesive unit.

The all-in-one support system compiled and analyzed the data from all their scanners to pinpoint the locations of allies and enemies alike. Katsuya referenced this information when issuing commands to his team.

He'd chosen not to assign his teammates to any one specific job. They would act as decoys or snipers, engage in guerrilla warfare, or take any other role depending on what the situation called for. If he was smart with his commands, this tactic could increase the efficiency of his unit even further.

Mizuha had estimated there were likely five enemy units in all, at most. Still, she'd wanted to win Sheryl's favor and had prepared an excessive amount of weaponry for this fight, so that Katsuya's team could take down the enemy as easily as possible.

With more than enough weapons and ammo, plus Katsuya's tactics, he and his team were set up to win against even ten mechs with ease.

Unfortunately, that was *all* they were prepared to handle.

By the time they'd defeated the sixth mech, Katsuya was no longer smiling—in fact, he was starting to worry. One reason was that each of the mechs so far had been more formidable than anticipated. Even though they were lower-priced models, they were still brand-new Shirousagis—the same type of mech, in fact, that Yajima Heavy Industries also recommended to the Kugamayama City defense force. They were far more capable than the average mech.

The other reason, of course, was the enemy's numbers.

"Katsuya, enemy reinforcements spotted! A new group of fifteen units!"

"Katsuya! Another fifteen on this side as well... Wait, twenty?! No way!"

Even if Katsuya and the others had only had ten mechs to deal with—double what they'd anticipated—they would've won with ease. But the number of machines headed their way was far higher than what any of them had imagined.

So Katsuya was forced to make a call. Frustrated, he ordered, "Fall back for now—toward the warehouse! The barricades we set up there should hold out long enough to buy some time! Those stationed away from the enemy, head to the areas in need and help out the teams fighting there!"

As the unit began to retreat like Katsuya had ordered, a call came in from Yumina at the warehouse. "Katsuya, if the front lines are retreating that far back, should I get everyone in the warehouse to evacuate?"

He hadn't considered this. "Oh, right, good call. Yeah, please do!"

"All right." Yumina hesitated for a moment before her next words. "Katsuya? Please, be careful."

"Course I will," Katsuya responded cheerfully, hoping it would keep her from worrying. But no sooner had he replied than his face grew grim. If he wanted to protect Sheryl and the others, having them evacuate was the obvious choice. But that should have only been a last resort. Even with the power his team wielded, he hadn't been able to prevent the worst-case scenario. His face twisted in distress and regret.



Unlike Katsuya and the rest at the front lines, Yumina was at the warehouse. The all-in-one support system had judged that this was the correct decision. As she was someone who had trouble keeping up with the rest of the unit, it was more logical for her to stay behind and protect those at the warehouse than to go with them to intercept the enemy. Hence Yumina was unable to fight alongside Katsuya.

They were only permitted to use the all-in-one support suits so that Kiryou could gather live combat data. And so, for testing purposes, they had to go along with whatever the system decided. With no other choice, Yumina obediently agreed to stay at the warehouse. In fact, when she'd first heard the news, she was even inwardly relieved to learn that it had been the system's decision, not Katsuya's. (Then she'd berated herself for having such a thought.)

Even as the situation outside took a turn for the worse, she waited in the warehouse. She'd surely only trip them up if she was there with the rest. It was frustrating, but if that was what the system had decided, who was she to argue? Then she realized she was using the system as an excuse to stay behind. In order to find something to do to distract herself from that ugly thought, and to do all she could to help Katsuya, she suggested evacuating those already in the warehouse.

"All right. Katsuya? Please, be careful."

"Course I will."

She ended the call and heaved a sigh of relief. Even now, there was still something she could do to be useful. With that thought, she hurried to evacuate Sheryl and the others.

Hearing the situation from Yumina, Sheryl looked uncertain. "Has it really gotten that bad?"

"Certainly worse than we'd anticipated," Yumina said. "Evacuation was only supposed to be a last resort, but even after warning them we were with Druncam, they went right on attacking. At the moment, we don't know their goal; so just to be safe, it's best for you all to leave the area."

“I understand. I’ll go with you.”

“I appreciate it. Katsuya’s doing his best out there, so I’m sure he’ll manage, but protecting a building full of people in it is much tougher than protecting an empty one. I’d like to reduce Katsuya and the others’ burden as much as possible, so I’m sorry to say that today you’ll be getting the VIP treatment of being escorted out of here,” Yumina said with a small smile.

“Not a problem at all—I’d welcome such treatment,” Sheryl said with a smile of her own.

The two grinned at each other’s attempt to lighten the mood. And they did, in fact, succeed in calming each other enough to focus on the task at hand. Then they got ready to leave the warehouse.

Yumina loaded Sheryl and the other warehouse staff into the Druncam vehicle, got in the driver’s seat, and sped off toward the lower district. A team of guards belonging to private security companies were stationed at the lower district’s border, but Yumina got through by giving them Druncam’s name. As soon as they let her pass and she entered the district, she brought the vehicle to a stop.

“Sheryl, can I ask you to keep watch here for a while? If you’d rather I take you to Druncam HQ, I could do that instead.”

“No, I’ll be fine right here. Don’t worry.”

“Appreciate it,” Yumina said. She called Mizuha to inform her of the situation, telling her that she’d like a vehicle to come pick them up and take them to HQ, then hung up. After some hesitation, she turned to Sheryl. “Hey, um, can I ask you something? Had you already guessed that we’d be attacked?”

“No, of course not. That’d be impossible—”

“But you *did* shell out the money to hire Katsuya and the others because you thought it might happen, right?”

“Yes, I was worried that we might be attacked again, and I hired Katsuya’s team to safeguard against that. But it was supposed to be a deterrent more than anything. I was hoping that once our enemy saw Katsuya’s team, the

poster children of Druncam's future, they might think twice about approaching. I never imagined we'd get attacked anyway."

Sheryl legitimately looked like she was at her wit's end, so Yumina decided she was probably telling the truth, then felt guilty for doubting her. The Druncam girl wasn't normally like this, so why was she behaving so unlike herself lately? She heaved a sigh.

"Yumina," said Sheryl, "can you get an update on the situation from this far away?"

"Sure can! One sec." An AR display of the battlefield appeared in her vision—a feature of the all-in-one support system. "It's looking rough. Our lines are being pushed farther and farther back. But we haven't lost yet. The barricades we set up are the same ones used to defend bases within dangerous ruins, so they'll hold out for a while. Even if we're pushed back all the way, we can keep fighting. And also... Wait, what's this?"

In the middle of her decidedly optimistic explanation, she'd noticed something—a small, unnaturally empty space on the battlefield. Had Katsuya's team been spread too thin to cover that spot, the enemy could've just passed right through. But the enemy wasn't making any move to do so. Finding this odd, she took a closer look, pulling up some scanner data from a teammate near that location. When she did, her mouth dropped open in shock.

"Akira?!"

"What?!" Hearing Akira's name come out of Yumina's mouth, Sheryl immediately snapped to attention.

Yumina showed Sheryl the data from the scanner at the scene. There, on the video feed, was Akira—fighting multiple mechs at once, all by himself.



Drawing on the full potential of his new powered suit, Akira dashed through the slums—and not just on the ground. With his suit's stabilizer, he could run along the walls of buildings or leap between them. This freedom of movement allowed him to dodge his enemies and throw off their aim, leaving them vulnerable to his SSB. He readied the enormous gun, aimed, and pulled the

trigger.

The hundred-million-aurum weapon ripped through the air with more force than a CWH and had a higher rate of fire than a DVTS. What's more, the extended magazines he'd loaded in were on a whole new level compared to the ones he'd purchased previously, in terms of both capacity *and* price. As long as he didn't waste bullets by recklessly shooting at his gun's maximum rate of fire, he wouldn't have to worry about running out of ammo. He could fight without reserve.

The result? A concentrated hail of powerful bullets filled the enemy mech's torso—and the pilot inside—full of holes.

At the same time, Akira fired his A4WM grenade launcher at a different mech. Numerous explosions engulfed the machine, though that wasn't enough to finish it off. The impact *did*, however, knock it off-balance.

Despite being a mechanical weapon, the Shirousagi was designed to be highly flexible so that it could emulate human movement. But this meant its center of gravity was less stable compared to multilegged tanks or to machines with larger, sturdier legs, making it easy to topple. To prevent this, each Shirousagi was fitted with a high-grade auto-balancer, so that an amateur pilot could move the mech around without any difficulty whatsoever.

But even the auto-balancer could only do so much. Akira's volley of grenades couldn't damage the mech or knock it down, but the average pilot couldn't accurately target an enemy with their mech's balance compromised. All they could do was thrust one arm out to keep from toppling over, and even if they did fire in that state, they wouldn't hit their target, Akira.

With the previous mech down for the count, Akira turned his SSB toward the off-balance mech. The machine was incapable of evading in time and was instantly turned to scrap by the merciless bullet storm.

But before he could savor his victory, two more mechs shot at him. One wielded a minigun, while the other was equipped with a large cannon. They didn't hesitate to unload salvo after salvo onto their tiny human target. Humongous bullets pulverized the area surrounding Akira, while artillery shells bombed the ground, reducing a nearby apartment building to rubble in seconds.

flat.

Yet Akira himself remained unscathed. With projectiles coming his way from both sides, he dodged high into the air. Normally this would've been a bad move—gravity would make him unable to evade their shots on his way down, and the mechs would only need to anticipate his trajectory to finish him off.

But thanks to the stabilizer on Akira's suit, he had more movement options. Generating a foothold in midair, he kicked off and opened fire at the ground, using the recoil to forcibly change his trajectory and avoid the explosions below from the enemy's shells.

Before he touched down on the ground, he aimed both his titan-killer SSB and his A4WM at the two white mechs. The SSB shredded one mech instantly, and a volley of grenade blasts sealed the other's movements. He then aimed the muzzle of his SSB at the immobile mech and, with a hail of powerful gunfire, blew it to pieces.

Akira landed on the roof of a nearby building and grinned, satisfied with the power of his new weapon. *Wow! They went down immediately, and my aim wasn't even that good!*

Maybe so, but don't get careless, Alpha gently admonished him. *Your shots still need to be accurate.*

I know, I know, he replied. *But now I might not have to slow time and aim every shot precisely to maximize the damage I inflict.*

One minute between shots offered more time to aim precisely than one second. But in live combat, you needed one minute's level of accuracy within only one second. A single missed shot might be all the enemy needed to finish you off.

Akira couldn't count on lucky shots to save him. So he'd relied on concentrating and slowing his sense of time to make his aiming more accurate. But doing so put a severe strain on his brain. The longer he spent in this state and the harder he concentrated, the heavier the burden. Concentrating hard enough to follow a falling raindrop with his eyes, for instance, would take an immense toll on him.

By now, he'd polished and improved this skill through countless training sessions and numerous battles—what he'd once struggled with and barely managed, he could now do with ease. But he was facing more formidable enemies now, who demanded quicker movements and reactions. His new powered suit gave him the necessary physical speed, but not the mental quickness required to keep up. Thus, he needed to manipulate his sense of time to make up that difference, which only increased the burden on him.

But the SSB could blast enemies apart with sheer firepower alone—he didn't even need to concentrate to take them down.

To Akira, this was a godsend.

I can't believe how I used to struggle with just the AAH and the A2D—it almost doesn't feel real! No wonder this gun was a hundred mil—it's on a whole other level!

But then his grin disappeared. *Enemies keep showing up, though. That one I took down just now makes ten. What the hell's going on?* He figured they were probably here to attack the warehouse and make off with the relics, but if so, they were going about it rather strangely. Something wasn't right, and he felt uneasy.

Conversely, Alpha didn't look concerned in the least. *But isn't this a good practice drill?* she said cheerfully. *If you're already bored with these small fry, just let Druncam handle the rest. No one said you had to see the fight through to the end. Sheryl hired them with your money anyway, so they ought to at least do this much for you, right?*

Akira reflected on the current situation for a moment and shook his head. *Nah, let's not. They'd probably lose if I left everything up to them.* Had Katsuya's team been winning by a landslide, he might have considered it; but right now they were struggling, no two ways about it. He wasn't obligated to help Katsuya and the other Druncam rookies, but he'd hate for the relics in the warehouse to get damaged because he'd decided to clock out early.

In that case, shall we at least back them up? Alpha suggested.

Might as well— What's that?! Another mech-like reading had suddenly shown up on his scanner—one that was clearly different from the white mechs

he'd been fighting, however. He took a closer look at the figure, and his mouth dropped open in shock: in his scanner's zoomed-in display was a black mech flying through the sky above the slums.

Even at a glance, it was obvious that the mech was heavily armed. A gigantic propulsion device was mounted on its back, both its shoulders were equipped with missile pods, and two support arms extended from its body—one with a gun, the other with a cannon. The mech also held a melee weapon resembling a chain saw. All those armaments—not to mention the bulk of its own body—had to weigh a ton. Yet the mech was flying effortlessly through the air—and *fast*! It seemed utterly unlike the white mechs he'd fought thus far.

Its abrupt appearance had put him on high alert, but even as he stood there, watchful and ready, the black mech aimed its cannon—enormous even by mech standards—in the warehouse's direction.

Kaboom! A ridiculously large artillery shell erupted from the cannon's muzzle. The massive projectile rocketed through the air, generating gales along its trajectory and annihilating every obstacle in its path as it headed straight for its target. The warehouse's defensive walls slightly reduced the shell's momentum, but it struck the building and exploded. The force of the blast would have made a howitzer look weak—the warehouse collapsed with a single shot.

As Akira stood there in shock, too stunned to move, the battleground shifted rapidly before his very eyes. New white mech readings from all over the slums popped up and began attacking the black mech. The other white mechs assaulting the warehouse now turned on the black mech as well.

What the hell's going on? Akira demanded to Alpha, looking helpless and dumbstruck as he watched the black mech and the legion of white mechs duke it out.



Akira returned to the warehouse. His face was a mask of utter confusion as he looked at the ruined building. Sheryl and the others showed up not long afterward—with the white mechs no longer interested in attacking the warehouse, it was now safe for her team to come back and assess the damage.

But when she saw the demolished remains of the warehouse, her face fell in

despair. It took every ounce of willpower in her to keep from collapsing on the spot.

No... It's not over yet! she told herself. *The building only collapsed, that's all! The relics weren't stolen, and the majority might still be intact! We can just rebuild the warehouse later! It's too soon to give up!*

Gritting her teeth, she lined up hope after faint hope in her mind, praying this would be enough to convince herself. She knew if she admitted to herself that her endeavor had failed, she'd lose the energy to even stand.

Akira had invested his relics, money, and strength in her relic business, expecting a large return. If she failed, he would *definitely* leave her, and the mere thought of this made her tremble. Even with the destroyed remnants of her hope right before her eyes, she continued to tell herself that things weren't over yet. The alternative, after all, was facing that fear.

Katsuya showed up shortly thereafter. He saw Sheryl in the throes of despair and cursed himself. She was like this because *they'd* failed to protect the warehouse—the thought hurt him so much he couldn't even bring himself to call out to her. As commander of the operation, he knew, it was his duty to report his failure to the client. But when he saw Sheryl on the verge of tears while trying her best to stay strong, he couldn't even make a sound.

Yumina saw Katsuya's expression and reported to Sheryl in his stead. "Sorry, Sheryl. We failed to protect the warehouse."

Sheryl didn't respond for some time. Then, in a quiet voice, she said, "No. We haven't failed yet. Continue your watch. It'll take time to clear away all the debris and recover the relics underneath. Until then, we can't leave the warehouse unguarded. Please, don't just decide on your own that it's all over."

After some hesitation, Yumina replied, "Understood. Katsuya?"

"Huh?" He looked startled to hear his name. "Y-Yeah? Wh-What's up?"

"Don't 'what's up' me! We need to assess the damage, carry out any wounded, report to Mizuha, request backup, and continue guarding the area. Our job's not over yet. Now get a move on!" She gave him her harshest glare.

That kicked Katsuya back into gear. "Right! We've got work to do."

The two nodded at one another. By implicitly agreeing they didn't have time to mope around, each helped the other keep any regret over their failure at bay.

Meanwhile, Akira—oblivious to both of them—tilted his head in puzzlement. “Yeah, I don't get it at all. Why did the mech destroy the warehouse and quit? Would they really send such a strong mech just to collapse a building? Shouldn't they be going after the relics inside instead?”

“Not when the warehouse's relics were never their goal to start with.” At some point, Viola had arrived, with Carol in tow.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Their goal was to keep the enemy gang from getting their hands on the relics first.”

Akira didn't look any less clueless, so Viola explained in a little more detail. The two opposing gangs—the Ezent family and Harlias—had each prepared powerful mechs to win the gang war. That, of course, had cost them a great deal of money. Both gangs were going after the relics in the warehouse in order to secure the necessary funds for those weapons. But once one gang became confident that they could act before the other did, and still win even without being fully prepared, the relative worth of the relics to each gang would change dramatically.

Taking the relics by force was the best option for each gang. The worst outcome, however, was letting the other gang snatch the relics out from under their noses, sell the goods, and use the money to strengthen their own forces. With this in mind, both gangs had decided against prioritizing the relics themselves.

Harlias's forces had arrived at the warehouse first, so Ezent had destroyed the warehouse to prevent Harlias from taking and selling the relics before the war ended. With no more reason to attack the warehouse, Harlias had targeted Ezent's black mech instead. Hence why the white and black mechs had ended up fighting among themselves instead of going after Akira and the others.

“I filled in some of the blanks with my own guesses, but I'm pretty sure that's what happened,” Viola concluded. “My guesswork was based on info from one

of my most trusted sources, so I certainly don't think I'm too far off base, at least."

Akira nodded, accepting her explanation. "I see, so that's what happened." A new emotion began to bubble up within him.

Viola blithely continued, "You don't want to lose to the gangs either, do you? Actually, as it happens, Carol and I were just attacked by some of their members, so it looks like we have the same enemies. To that end, I'd like to propose—"

But just as Viola was about to try negotiating with Akira, she saw his face and stopped in her tracks.

In a tone like ice, he declared, "So that's what's going on, is it?" As murderous intent welled up from the depths of his heart, the expressionless mask on his face was growing darker and darker.

Having lived in the back alleys of the slums, Akira had been ridiculed, scorned, and looked down upon as a weakling for most of his life. Even after becoming a hunter, meeting Alpha, and growing quite strong over the course of countless challenging battles, the influence of all that belittling still clung to him.

He had been healing from this over time, slowly but surely. As he'd acquired more powerful gear and become more capable of fighting on his own, his friends and fellow hunters had acknowledged and praised his strength. He was no longer the puny kid everyone had looked down on, and as he'd come to realize this, his confidence had gradually rebuilt itself.

Events of late, however, had threatened to raze that confidence to the ground. He'd obtained an advanced suit—yet a pickpocket had still gone after him. He'd participated in taking down a bounty worth three billion aurum—yet the warehouse he was guarding had been attacked anyway. He'd shown he was capable of defeating a large mech all on his own—yet enemies kept attacking the warehouse as though he wasn't even a threat to them. And just now, despite having defeated several white mechs, one after another, the enemy had pulled back immediately after destroying the warehouse.

Had they been retreating, Akira would've understood—after he'd taken down

so many mechs, it stood to reason that they'd be afraid of him. But the white mechs had started fighting the black mech instead, almost as if to say, "We don't have time to play around with you anymore."

And this was after the enemy had moved to kill him! They'd even tried to fight him to the death! But then, when this was no longer convenient for them, they'd quit the battlefield of their own accord, leaving their conflict unfinished. They hadn't even tried to take revenge on him for their fallen comrades. They seemed to consider the fight with him so inconsequential that they had never cared about winning in the first place.

Now Viola's explanation had shed new light on their actions—and seriously shocked him, destroying all the newfound confidence he'd been gradually building up thus far. In its place, dark emotions were bubbling up.

Powerful gear. Taking down bounties. The strength he'd shown his enemies. Regardless of all he'd done, he was *still* being belittled! Ridiculed! *Looked down upon!* Everyone *still* thought he was *weak*! All he'd accomplished so far had essentially amounted to *nothing*!

In that case, he just needed to harm his enemies so much that they'd *have* to take notice!

Let him pile up a mountain of corpses, then stand tall upon its pinnacle!

He didn't even hesitate.



Everyone in the area noticed the change in Akira right away. Yumina looked apprehensive; Sheryl looked terrified. Katsuya moved in front of the two girls protectively. Carol and Viola, for their part, only seemed slightly surprised.

"Sheryl," Akira said suddenly.

"Y-Yes?" Sheryl stammered. She knew his rage wasn't directed toward her, but found it hard to respond anyway.

"I've got some business I need to take care of. Have the others guard the warehouse for now."

"O-Okay."

Akira dashed off, taking the murderous aura in the air along with him. With the source of their trepidation gone, Katsuya, Yumina, and Sheryl breathed a sigh of relief. Viola signaled to Carol with her eyes, and Carol nodded back.

As the general mood returned to normal, Katsuya unwittingly gave voice to his criticism of Akira. “What’s his problem, anyway? It’s just like what happened that other time—”

Yumina cut in before he could say anything further. “Katsuya, we should get back to guarding the warehouse. You need to let Mizuha know what happened *now*.”

“Oh, right. Thanks, I almost forgot.”

Katsuya mentally switched gears and started to call Mizuha. Yumina watched him from afar and sighed, belatedly patting her past self on the back for stopping the two boys from killing each other in the lower district.

Sheryl gazed in the direction Akira had gone. A worrisome thought had occurred to her—she knew she loved Akira and depended on him. But what if that was all just a self-defense mechanism she’d unconsciously built up to keep herself from being afraid of him? What if her feelings for him disappeared once she became powerful enough to no longer fear him? She wanted to dismiss that worry, to say that would never happen, but try as she might, she couldn’t.

Chapter 141: Priorities

The black and white mechs streaked through the skies of the slums, engaged in their deadly firefight. The black mech blasted one white mech apart with its massive projectiles, then zeroed in on the next one. Thanks to its propulsion device, the mech quickly closed the distance to its prey and brought its chain-sawlike weapon down on top of it, severing the low-cost Shirousagi model in two and scattering its pilot's insides all over the cockpit. The two halves of the Shirousagi fell to the ground.

At the same time, the voice of the man in the black mech's cockpit came over the wireless, his scorn directed at Harlias. "Pathetic! You weaklings are like paper! What do you expect to accomplish with amateur pilots in cheap mechs?! Even *two* hundred of you would be no match for me!"

The black mech, a specimen of the model known as Kokurou, was the weapon that Ezent's boss, Rogert, had purchased from Yoshioka Heavy Industries—the *only* weapon he'd purchased. He'd had no time to test it out beforehand, yet now he'd already taken down a number of the enemy's Shirousagis.

What's more, there was a fundamental difference in potential between the black mech and the cheaper white mechs. A relatively low-spec Shirousagi had no way of winning against a high-spec Kokurou, period. The Harlias mechs were reduced to scrap, hardly offering any resistance whatsoever. Rogert did come under intense enemy fire as the enemy retaliated, but no bullets pierced the Kokurou's force-field shield. As light scattered off the shield at the points of impact, it only served to illuminate the black mech, making it look even more imposing.

"Fools! It's useless!" Rogert spat from the cockpit. "Your peashooters won't damage my Kokurou! It's too late for you! Die as you rue the day you ever made an enemy of the Ezent family!" His jeers over the comms resounded through the cockpits of the white mechs as well as his own.

But even while he boasted, Rogert realized he was in trouble. *Shit! Harlias is*

putting up more of a fight than I expected. To think they were able to scrounge up all these superior pilots! Rogert had expected them to retreat by now, but the enemy units just kept coming. Did I unconsciously underestimate them? No, based on that woman's intel, I should've been right. So it was the intel that was faulty. Shit, I've been had!

Rogert scowled. Yet, still confident in his own superiority, he attacked the enemy units with no less ferocity than before.



Sitting in a desert utility vehicle disguised as a regular, unassuming truck, Harlias's boss Doran directed the horde of Shirousagis. He left the more specific commands to his subordinates, but governed over the operation as a whole.

As the battle went on, more and more Shirousagis fell, and the enemy's black mech had hardly received a scratch. One of Doran's subordinates in the truck turned to him with a look of panic. "Boss, it's not looking good at this rate!"

But unlike his weak-minded subordinate, Doran's expression remained calm, as though everything was going according to plan. "No, there's no problem. The situation is exactly as we want it. Stay the course."

"B-But—" the subordinate began.

"Don't listen to that bastard's crowing. If he feels like he has to assert how strong he is, that's just proof he's rattled. He's trying to reassure himself. The truly powerful don't need to proclaim how strong they are—they show it through their actions. The weaker the dog, the louder the bark. When that guy barks, I only hear a coward."

"O-Oh, okay."

"If our attacks *really* weren't having any effect, he'd be calmly taking our fire without even trying to dodge—that'd psych out the enemy far more. If he's dodging, it means our attacks are working."

Seeing that Doran wasn't worried in the least, the subordinate relaxed. The rest of the underlings looked reassured as well. Doran had led Harlias up until now, after all.

“So don’t get too hasty. We might have the advantage in numbers, but we’ll still lose if we panic. Keep it up, and we’ll win.”

“Y-Yes, Boss!” The subordinate in the car regained his confidence and shouted through the comms to the other pilots, who were losing heart. “All right, you guys, you hear that?! We haven’t lost yet! All units surround that mech and take it down!”

A chorus of spirited cheers from the pilots greeted this declaration. The mood in Harlias’s command vehicle also improved instantly.

Doran seemed calm and composed as he sat there. But in reality, he found the situation a lot less favorable than he’d let on.

I never would have thought he’d be so powerful. We have more skilled pilots on our side than I’d even accounted for, and still our forces are dwindling. I screwed up.

By his original estimation, he should’ve already won by now. He’d ordered the initial attack on the warehouse to lure Ezent out, using his amateur pilots as decoys. Then, once Ezent showed up, he’d planned to attack the enemy all at once with his most skilled pilots.

The horde of Shirousagis had ganged up on Rogert’s mech, just as planned. But he hadn’t accounted for the resilience of the Kokurou’s force-field shield. None of the white mechs’ weapons were reaching the black one.

Of course, he didn’t think they were wasting time either. Each strike against the shield depleted the enemy mech’s energy. This was why Rogert was trying to dodge all the attacks he could—he didn’t have enough energy to take every attack head-on. Despite how strong he claimed to be, he wasn’t invincible.

But he was still proving to be a tougher nut to crack than Doran had anticipated. If Doran were to let this show on his face, however, it would make things worse. So even as he grimaced on the inside, he carried himself with an air of composure and confidence.

“How are the foot soldiers doing?” Doran asked.

“They’re searching for the enemy’s maintenance bay as ordered, but have yet to find anything.”

“Tell ’em to keep searching. That black mech’s primarily built for defense. They wouldn’t use it without having some sort of supply and repair zone nearby. Doesn’t matter how tough it is—without a supply of ammo or energy, it’s done for. If we can keep it from recharging or restocking, our victory will be even more certain.”

“Yes, Boss!”

“It might not necessarily be at their base, so tell them to look all over. Even if they can’t infiltrate right away, just have them find the place. Once they do, we’ll have the mechs go in and crush it.”

Harlias was at a disadvantage, Doran thought, but they weren’t down for the count just yet. Undeterred by the enemy’s strength, he kept his eyes on the prize—victory for his gang.



Both gang leaders felt they were at a disadvantage, yet fought to claim victory against one another. Their struggle intensified, but their forces were more or less evenly matched.

All at once, though, a new element threatened to upset that balance. One white mech was suddenly hit with gunfire other than Rogert’s. Rogert and Doran, equally caught off guard, went on the defensive, and the mechs attacked less fiercely as they scanned the area around them. Both men spotted the attacker at the same time.

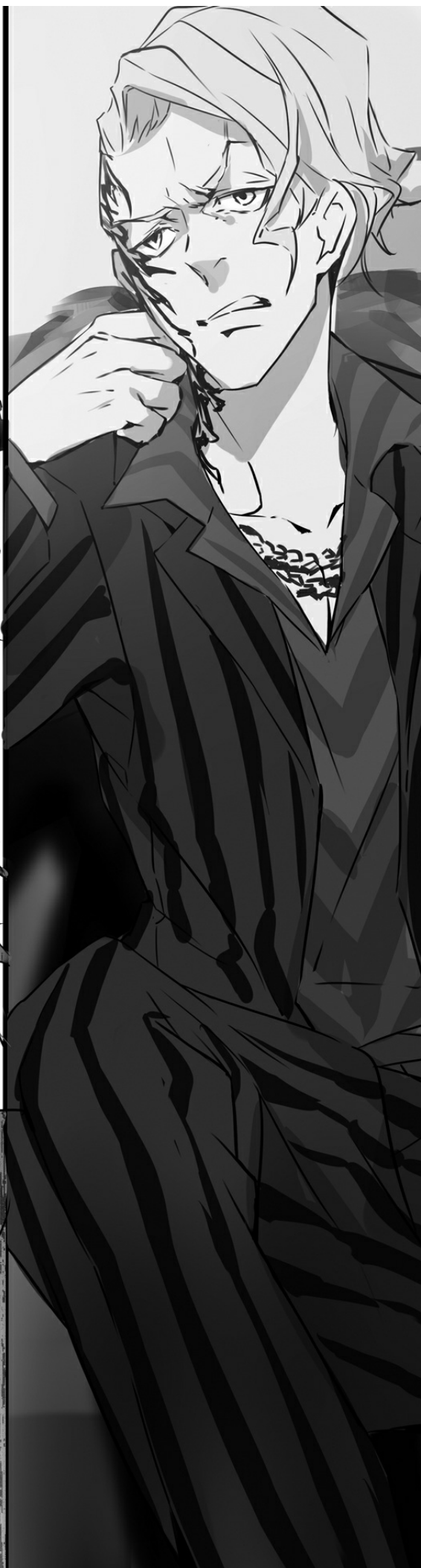
There, standing on the roof of a nearby building, was Akira.

“Bastard... What do you think you’re doing?” Doran growled at him over the wireless.

The fury in his tone would have made the average person tremble. But Akira ignored it.

“Killing you,” he said quietly.

His clear, concise declaration of war made Doran scowl inside the command vehicle.



Rogert, however, grinned in amusement. He thought Akira was antagonizing Harlias because Sheryl, terrified after having her warehouse destroyed, had asked Akira to join his side. “So you guys at the warehouse have finally come to your senses and decided to join us, huh? Excellent choice! You were a bit slow on the uptake, sure, but I’m willing to overlook that much—”

“I’m killing you too.”

Rogert fell silent. Exclamations of surprise arose from Harlias’s side as well. Akira had now declared war on both gangs. To Harlias and Ezent, he might as well have declared he was committing suicide.

Rogert sighed in exasperation. “So you came here with a death wish, then?” He was now angry. “Then die, you fool!”

The black mech aimed its massive weapon at Akira and fired. At the same time, the boy leaped from the roof and pulled the trigger of his SSB.

The black mech’s force field blocked Akira’s small bullets. Meanwhile, its enormous projectiles crashed into the roof Akira had been on. Rogert and Akira were both unharmed, but it was clear which side had the upper hand.

As Rogert and Akira fought, Harlias looked on—if one of them took out the other, it would help their side out greatly. But then Akira started firing on the white mechs as well. No longer able to sit idly by, they joined the fray too.

A new challenger had entered the ring, and the feud between Harlias and Ezent became a three-way war.



The clash between the mechs gradually transformed the slums into a mountain of rubble. Projectiles small and large alike leveled buildings, scattering debris all over.

In the middle of this was Akira, barely managing to avoid it all.

Having just unceremoniously butted into the war between the two powerful gangs, Akira was currently at a greater disadvantage than they were. The white mechs were controlled by skilled pilots, and the black mech could hold its own against all of them. Either side was a threat on its own, and now Akira had to

deal with them both at the same time.

Had his goal merely been victory, he could have just waited until one side had defeated the other and then taken on the victor. But Akira's goal here wasn't to win—it was to pile up corpses. Waiting until one contender had been eliminated would diminish his mountain of bodies, which would defeat his purpose.

So he didn't regret the path he'd chosen in the least. The dark emotions welling up from the depths of his heart had swallowed up any regret. His anger compelled him to fight. As he did his best to avoid both enemies' gunfire, he sent a stream of SSB bullets toward the black mech and hit the white ones with volleys of grenades.

But this wasn't enough to improve his chances. To Doran and Rogert, Akira's desperate struggle only amounted to an eyesore. Still, it was a nuisance all the same, and they couldn't ignore it. A gigantic projectile struck him, sending him flying backward. He crashed through the wall of a building and disappeared from the gang leaders' sights. As if to deliver the coup de grâce, they leveled the building he was in with another volley of gunfire.

The bosses didn't have time to check whether he was dead. But since he didn't emerge to attack them, they assumed he was out of the picture and went back to fighting each other.

Akira, however, was alive. The gunfire had pierced his protective coat and reached his powered suit, but he'd survived by raising the strength of his protective coat's force-field armor at the exact moment the bullets hit. The building he'd fallen into had been destroyed, but Akira was lying right in a gap amid the rubble.

That hadn't been a coincidence. Alpha had taken control of his suit and moved him to a position where he'd avoid getting crushed by the debris. She'd also boosted the intensity of his suit's force-field armor as the bullets had struck.

Akira rose and vomited blood—violently, as if heaving his guts out too. The fresh blood dyed the area around him red. He immediately swallowed several

medicine capsules—by hunter standards, he just had a minor wound he could easily recover from.

Alpha watched him with a sigh. *They really did a number on you, didn't they?* Her tone seemed to say, “That’s what you get for rushing in on your own without my support.” Strictly speaking, she hadn’t been completely hands-off, but the help she’d provided had been minimal, like during his training sessions. Had she given him her full support, he never would’ve gotten hit in the first place—otherwise, he knew, she wouldn’t have let him rush headlong into the fray.

Nor had Akira asked Alpha for any help in this situation. He well knew that Alpha’s support was an advance payment to him, granted with the expectation that he’d overcome ruins, acquire powerful gear, and one day grow strong enough to conquer the ruin she’d asked him to. She *hadn’t* given him her aid merely so that he could create a massive pile of bodies just to show how strong he was. (In fact, some part of him had hoped that Alpha would help him automatically anyway, but apparently that had been naive.)

Receiving an injury had cooled Akira’s head a little. But the source of his fury still hadn’t vanished, and Akira soon felt compelled to move once more.

I’m not forcing you to help or anything, he told her firmly. *If you don’t want to support me, then don’t.* Even without her assistance, his will to fight hadn’t abated in the least. The feelings flowing up from within his heart wouldn’t allow him to retreat—even if he died trying, he felt compelled to prove to his enemies how powerful he was.

Alpha gave another exaggerated sigh, then regarded him sternly. *Akira, you’ve got it wrong.*

About what?

At times like this, you should be begging for my support, no?

Akira looked stunned.

Alpha smiled gently. *Unlike the incident with the pickpocket, you’re wearing a powered suit. Unlike the Mihazono incident, I don’t need to be anywhere else right now. You’re allowed to ask me for help if you want it. So rely on me all you*

want. I would've thought we were at least that close in our relationship by now, she said teasingly. Then her grin became more reassuring. *But thinking I'd just support you without you saying anything was indeed naive—I can't have you blaming your actions on me later, after all. So what do you say?*

By now, Akira was trying to suppress an outburst of laughter, but he failed. *Good point! I didn't even consider that. My bad,* he said with a wry smile.

The expression on his face was no longer dark. He now wore a confident grin, not unlike the one he usually wore when faced with a desperate situation. *All right. Please, Alpha, I need your help!*

Leave it to me! she said with assurance, and she extended her hand to Akira.

Akira took it, and Alpha pulled him up to his feet (although she didn't actually pull him up—she was just manipulating his powered suit).

Akira sucked in a breath, then exhaled. He felt even more fired up than before. *All right, let's waste these guys!*

Hold up, Akira. Carol's coming this way.

Say what? Akira looked over in the direction Alpha indicated, knocked aside some rubble that was blocking his vision, and did indeed spot Carol approaching.

“Looks like you bit off a tad more than you could chew this time, no?” the woman greeted him cheerfully. “Although I knew you weren't gonna die from something like that anyway.”

“What do you want, Carol?” Akira asked tersely.

“Cold as always. Did it not even occur to you that I might have gotten worried and come to check on you?”

“If you knew I wasn't gonna die, then I doubt it. What do you really want? Hurry up, I'm kind of preoccupied right now.”

Carol shook her head in mock exasperation as she approached him. “Wanna join forces? You didn't really let Viola finish before, but we actually have a score to settle with Ezent and Harlias as well.”

“Sorry, but I'll have to pass. I need to finish this quickly, and I don't have time

to move on someone else's schedule." And teaming up with her, he figured, would also lessen the significance of the pile of bodies he planned to accumulate—Carol would be stealing his kills. But most of all, Akira just didn't feel right about involving Carol in his personal vendetta.

Carol was good at reading people, and she sensed what Akira was thinking. Though the weights on the scales of his decision were a bit complicated, Akira was essentially motivated by revenge. It was natural to want to carry out one's vengeance without any help.

"Look, I don't want to take your prey or anything," she said. "You're aiming for those big mechs, right? Then I'll take the foot soldiers. We'll be allies but work separately. Would that be okay?"

"Then what would be the point of teaming up?"

"Well, I wouldn't get in your way, for one. How does that sound?"

"Do whatever you want." Akira wasn't sure why she wanted to work with him, but if she wasn't going to get in his way, he had no reason to refuse.

"In that case, here—take these." Carol handed Akira something, and Akira's eyes widened in surprise—it was several extended magazines of anti-force rounds.

"Didn't you say earlier that you'd get in trouble if you gave these out to random strangers?"

"Normally, sure. But we're teammates, right?" Carol grinned smugly.

Akira finally realized why Carol had wanted to join up with him. He also vaguely understood that Carol hadn't told him her reason up front because, knowing Akira's personality, she was worried he might refuse her gift.

"Thanks, Carol. This'll be a big help!"

"No problem! Let's kick some butt together, shall we?"

Akira grinned wryly in response. Carol left him with a smile, almost as though she was looking forward to their results.

Akira, load those into your SSB. I'll tell you when to use them, so shoot with whatever other ammo you want until then. The SSB multifunction gun could

load different types of magazines at the same time. And Alpha had taken over the gun's system, allowing her to control it with precision. The addition of anti-force rounds would make the gun even more formidable.

Akira did as he was told, and Alpha grinned. *Good. Now let's go show those goons what you're really capable of, hm?*

Sounds good to me! With his SSB and A4WM in each hand, Akira grinned confidently, then kicked away the mountain of rubble with ease, thanks to the leg strength from his powered suit. The collapsed building shuddered from the inside, and Akira burst out, scattering debris all around him.



Once more, Akira threw himself into the battle between the mechs. Rogert saw that Akira had not only survived but looked even more fired up than before. The gang boss was a bit surprised, but he still didn't see the boy as anything more than a nuisance. This time, he moved to finish Akira off for certain.

Just as the black mech turned its gun toward him, Akira trained his SSB on the Kokurou. They fired at almost the exact same time, though the Kokurou's bullets were much bigger. The blasts of gunfire grazed each other as they passed through the air.

The black mech blocked all of Akira's bullets with its force-field shield, while the Kokurou's larger projectiles collapsed the buildings in Akira's vicinity. Both were unharmed, just as before.

But then the situation changed.

A warning came from the black mech's control system. The mech had received an attack stronger than its shield could defend against.

"What?!" The last time he'd received such a warning had been when all the white mechs had attacked him at once, back at the start of the battle—yet a single attack from Akira had raised the alarm. Rogert's face twisted in shock.

The Kokurou, a Yoshioka next-generation mech, was equipped with a powerful force-field shield that could block normal bullets with ease. In fact, it had neutralized most of Akira's gunfire so far. But now that Akira had Alpha's

support, the shield could no longer repel the attacks from the SSB. Since he was able to concentrate all of his shots on a single point, his gunfire was more destructive than before.

He was shooting from a distance, and both he and his opponent were moving fast. His rate of fire was also on par with that of a minigun. Yet each of his shots landed on the exact same spot. An impossible feat—except with Alpha’s superior support. As Rogert looked on in shock, Akira chewed through his extended magazines at a speed that would’ve instantly emptied a normal magazine.

The Kokurou’s control system raised the strength of its force-field shield to defend against Akira’s assault. His bullets never reached their target, but the powered-up shield quickly depleted the black mech’s energy.

Rogert immediately took evasive action. With the high-grade propulsion system on his mech, he zipped around erratically so Akira couldn’t get a bead on him. But to no avail. He couldn’t run from Akira’s precision fire.

In fact, Akira wasn’t firing precisely at all. He was aiming in the mech’s general direction, but Alpha was correcting his aim. Because he’d left the marksmanship to her, he didn’t need to slow down time as much, reducing the burden on his brain.

No matter how unpredictable the black mech’s movements, Alpha had no trouble reading them. She could perceive each individual raindrop in a downpour if she wanted to, so a few erratic movements wouldn’t throw her off.

Eventually Rogert gave up on dodging and went back to attacking. He turned the Kokurou’s massive weapon on Akira, setting the mech to only disengage the force-field shield the moment he fired.

But in that instant, Akira aimed his SSB at the Kokurou’s gun instead of the mech’s body and sent a stream of gunfire toward it (with a few anti-force bullets mixed in, per Alpha’s instructions). The Kokurou’s shield was primarily meant for protecting the mech’s armaments, not the mech itself.

The mech’s body was covered with tough force-field armor, as were its weapons. But even a surface protected by such armor could warp or dent under a strong enough impact. A mech could go on fighting with a body thus

damaged, but its weapons not so much—they were less resilient than the bulky mech body, so even slight external damage could disrupt the weapon's aim, rendering it unable to hit targets at a distance.

Blam! So powerful was the strike on the black mech's gun that the system immediately issued a warning. Now Rogert's shots weren't likely to hit Akira, no matter how many he fired.

Realizing this, Akira prioritized attacking over evading. His gunfire became more fierce.

Meanwhile, Rogert tried to compensate for his loss in accuracy by shooting more. He emptied an entire clip, but none of his shots hit his target. Akira didn't even have to evade.

"You makin' fun of me?!" Rogert screamed, and the mech readied its large cannon. Now it wouldn't matter if its aim was slightly off—the blast would engulf the entire area. He was sure Akira couldn't dodge now.

But the boy was already on the move. He dashed to the closest white mech while firing his A4WM at the Kokurou. Countless grenades arced through the air. Even if all of them hit, however, the black mech wouldn't get a scratch. So Rogert kept firing.

But the grenades weren't meant to damage their target in the first place. Alpha had precisely calculated the time until their detonation, making sure the area would be covered in a smoke screen. This disrupted the Kokurou's onboard sensors, greatly decreasing the accuracy of its targeting system.

So that's his game? Rogert clicked his tongue in irritation, but fired another shell.

The white mech that Akira was running toward fired at him, but he dodged. He passed the Shirousagi, and the Kokurou's shell touched down a moment later. Had he been any closer, the explosion would've wiped him out—the white mech was blasted to pieces. Akira had used the mech to shield himself from the impact. Anticipating another shell, he ran to the next nearest white mech.

Indeed, Rogert was about to fire, but then reconsidered with a scowl. "Shit! I

can't attack here!"

The gangs had paid off the bigwigs of the city to tacitly allow mechs to fight in the slums. But the powers that be wouldn't tolerate the lower district coming to any harm. And he absolutely could not risk antagonizing the city. Unfortunately for him, Akira was positioned in such a way that Rogert couldn't attack him.

If Rogert fired from higher up, there might have been less risk of hitting the buildings behind Akira, but the gang boss could only fly so high before he'd enter the no-fly zone mandated by the city. Ascending too high might also draw some of the more deadly monsters in the sky toward the ground, compelling the defense force to take action. And with his targeting system on the fritz, there was no telling what he might hit, so he didn't want to fire his cannon any more than necessary.

Unable to attack for the moment, Rogert lowered his mech to the ground, and with a grim expression powered up his missile pod. He'd wanted to save this for the final battle with Harlias, but Akira's unexpected strength had forced his hand. If he didn't use it here, he might not get to fight Harlias at all.

Rogert unleashed a swarm of micromissiles through the air. By this point Akira and the white mechs had already moved away from the off-limits lower district. Countless micromissiles descended upon the slums, engulfing the area in smoke and flame. The missiles were just as destructive as one would expect from the armaments of such a pricey mech.



Back in the desert vehicle, Doran's face looked stern. "Damage report?"

"Half of our forces have been wiped out. Based on the scanner readings, we think it was that hunter Akira."

"I see." Doran knew the situation was getting dire. Yet he still didn't let an ounce of panic show on his face. If his subordinates thought he was the least bit rattled, they'd panic as well, and their chances of victory would be even slimmer. "All right, have our people distance themselves from him for now. Then position them on the opposite side of Ezent's mech, with Akira in the middle. We'll stand by as Ezent and Akira eliminate each other, and back away if they try to target us instead."

“Back away? You mean retreat? Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It’s not gonna matter. Since we chose to prioritize our numbers, we can back away without issue. But Ezent focused on quality over quantity—they don’t have that luxury.”

Both gangs’ reputations were on the line with this fight. A shameful display would affect their social standing. But there were ways Doran could mitigate the damage. Though he was the overall commander, his subordinates were piloting the actual units, which were low-end Shirousagis. Even if the black mech or Akira took down a few, Doran could pin the blame on incompetent pilots or faulty machinery. So a temporary retreat to give Akira and Rogert time to crush each other could be explained away without any damage to Harlias’s name.

But the Ezent family didn’t have that option—Rogert’s gang was mostly propped up by his own personal strength to begin with, and the outcome of this battle rode entirely on his shoulders, as far as Ezent was concerned. Whenever there was a large conflict, Rogert always stood on the front lines himself—displaying such strength had been a key factor in his gang’s growth. This time, too, he had wielded the influence of his gang to obtain a weapon suitable for someone as strong as himself. If he turned tail without killing a lone hunter, both his position and his entire gang would be in jeopardy.

Retreat was not an option for Rogert.

Doran had banked on the size of his gang to fight, while Rogert had gone all in on raw power. And here on the battlefield, the results of those decisions were now becoming clear. Seeing their boss grin with confidence, the Harlias subordinates also relaxed. Reassured that they had this in the bag, they relayed their leader’s orders to the pilots.



Micromissiles had ceased descending upon the slums, allowing the area a temporary reprieve. Rogert had stopped his attack to check the area with his high-powered scanner.

All right. If that finished him off, I just need to take care of those Harlias goons afterward, and I win! But still... Rogert’s expression became grave. *How on*

earth was that kid so strong? Was he hiding what he was capable of up until now?

Hunters who hid their true strength weren't particularly uncommon. But then he shook his head. *No, that can't be. I saw him fighting for his life on that video footage, and again right after he interfered in my fight with Harlias. That was no act back then. If he'd had a trump card, he would've used it. I can tell.*

As he thought about that, a new possibility came to his mind. What if it wasn't a trump card at all, but a hidden technique—not something like a speed stim, which might make you pass out for several days afterward, but a last resort that might seriously kill you if you used it? Then that kind of power would make sense, Rogert realized.

Akira had grown ridiculously stronger after he'd gotten shot. Perhaps he'd used this technique because he already figured he was done for. Connecting the dots this way, the gang boss sighed. *Bastards like him are a real pain. They've got guts, sure, but that makes 'em harder to kill.*

Just then, Akira showed up on his mech's scanner. "Still alive, huh?" After a moment of thought, he decided to call Akira on the wireless.



Akira had shot down the micromissiles in his path to avoid their explosions and was currently sheltering behind a pile of rubble, swallowing one medicine capsule after another. Thanks to Alpha's support, he'd managed to survive the fierce onslaught, but it had still taken a massive toll on his body. He needed to heal on a cellular level.

Alpha, status report?

The black mech hasn't budged since that attack. He's probably waiting to see if you're alive before making his next move. The white mechs are keeping their distance from us, likely waiting until you finish your fight with the black mech.

I see. Well, that's better than fighting both of them at the same time.

Alpha gave him a knowing smile.

What?

Oh, just thinking how much easier this would've been if you'd asked for my help from the beginning.

Yeah, sorry about that, he said with a wry grin. As he spoke, he realized the situation had improved—he could now afford to joke around.

Then a transmission came in from Rogert. “Yo! You’re Akira, right? You’re awfully strong for a pip-squeak—way stronger than those Harlias idiots. At first I thought you just had a death wish, but I take that back.”

Akira wondered suspiciously why he was calling, but listened anyway.

“So anyway, now that I’ve realized how capable you are, I have a proposal for you. Wanna join our gang?”

“Hell no.”

“An immediate answer. Playing hard to get, are you? I don’t think this is a bad deal for you, y’know. As powerful as you are, you could be my second-in-command—my successor! If you join me in trouncing Harlias as one of my top brass and securing control of the black market in the slums, you’ll have all the money and women you could ever want.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Stubborn too, huh? I like it! You’re probably upset ‘cause I thought you were weak, right? You wanted to show me how strong you were? Well, after a display like that, you’ve shown me plenty. I won’t look down on you anymore, so what do you say?”

“No.”

“Really now...” Rogert sounded seriously disappointed and heaved a sigh. “Then I guess there’s nothing for it—a fight to the death it is. I was gonna snuff you out while fighting the Harlias losers, but from here on out, I’m prioritizing you instead.” Then, in an excited voice that almost seemed to show respect toward his opponent, he went on, “All right, here I come. Get ready!”

The transmission cut off. Alpha regarded Akira with a stern look. *He’s seriously coming to kill you. Best to take his advice and steel yourself.*

Akira’s expression was all business. *Don’t worry, I don’t need him to tell me*

that. Resolve is my burden, after all.

At that moment, a massive reading appeared on his scanner. Just as he'd proclaimed, Rogert was heading toward Akira at high speed.

Chapter 142: Anticlimax

The black mech charged at Akira, flying at full power. Akira leaped out from behind the mountain of rubble to counterattack—and gawked in surprise.

His mechanical opponent was only wielding one weapon, the chain-sawlike blade—it had discarded the rest and even deactivated its force-field shield. As it made a beeline for Akira, its blade ready to strike, the mech didn't even try to evade the boy's defensive fire.

Akira kept up a continuous stream of SSB shots toward his enemy. Each one packed a punch as it slammed into the black mech's body. But they all bounced off of its exterior, protected as it was by force-field armor. Light scattered through the air from the impacts, illuminating the night sky and the machine itself as it swung its mighty blade down on Akira.

The blade didn't just cleave through the mountain of debris he'd been using as cover—it blasted the rubble apart like a bomb. Fragments flew everywhere. Akira instantly leaped sideways, narrowly avoiding a shard of concrete streaking toward him like a bullet. Then, reflexively slowing his sense of time, he saw the bladed edge of the mech's chain saw head for him at a speed he could still scarcely follow with his eyes.

Akira flinched—he instinctively knew he'd be mincemeat the moment it hit him. Right after pulverizing the debris and slamming into the earth, the chain saw had bounced up and changed course, sweeping horizontally toward him. The motion was so instantaneous that even with his slowed perception of time, in which the air felt like molasses, only the movement of the blade seemed unaffected.

He leaped backward in a desperate attempt to avoid it. His suit's stabilizer generated a foothold, and he kicked off, adding force from the recoil of his SSB's continuous fire. In this way, he pulled off what would have normally been impossible: gaining enough speed that the blade just barely missed him.

Even in the air, he didn't let up on his SSB's trigger. Every bullet struck true,

but the mech's armor kept flashing brilliantly, and Akira doubted his shots were doing any actual damage. Indeed, as if completely unharmed, the mech stomped forward, not even bothering to correct its posture from its swing. Thanks to its propulsion device and humanlike flexibility, the machine dexterously closed the distance to the airborne Akira in a single step. Akira fired countless bullets into its body, but all this did little to keep it from swinging its blade upward.

Still, Akira managed to avoid the attack. To evade the mech's swing, he manipulated his sense of time as far as he possibly could. The flow of time stretched out, and everything around him slowed to a crawl. Yet the black mech was still dangerously agile.

In fact, a direct hit wouldn't have been any more deadly to him than the artillery shell that had hit him earlier. But the sight of a chainsaw over twice his size, roaring as it streaked toward him, frightened him far more than mere cannon fire.

Shocked, Akira turned to Alpha for help. *Alpha! Is it just me, or did this guy get a hell of a lot stronger all of a sudden?!*

No. In fact, his overall specs are weaker now. He's just focused on specifically killing you, that's all.

Had Rogert still been fighting the white mechs, it would've been wiser to keep his weapons rather than discard them—more firepower meant greater combat strength, naturally. But now that he was only targeting Akira, the gang boss had decided ranged weapons would only get in the way of his kill. Of course, he knew that tossing them aside would put him at a significant disadvantage once he'd finished Akira off and resumed the fight against Harlias. But he was determined to kill the boy and had discarded them anyway.

He had other reasons for his decision as well. Any damage to his guns might throw off his aim, but melee weapons were specifically meant for direct clashes. Now he wouldn't have to worry about Akira's shots ruining his weapons. Furthermore, the nearer he got to his target, the more accurate the Kokurou's scanner became. At close range, he could even see which direction Akira was pointing his SSB. This helped him better predict the trajectory of the

boy's shots, allowing him to conserve energy: by anticipating Akira's attacks, Rogert could strengthen only the parts of his force-field armor that were likely to get hit.

Were the Harlias mechs to strike the parts of his armor that weren't as fortified during this time, he would naturally have been in trouble. But Rogert knew Doran was having his men stand down until Rogert or Akira—or both of them—fell. There was no need to worry about Harlias attacking out of the blue.

But Rogert was on a time crunch and had to take out Akira as quickly as possible. His opponent wielded a powerful SSB multifunction gun—with anti-force bullets to boot. Blocking them all with his force-field armor would consume a great deal of power, and performing agile, precise movements with his blade also demanded much more energy than firing a gun. To keep his fuel consumption to a minimum, he needed to kill Akira in the shortest amount of time he could.

There was also another, completely different motive Rogert wanted to hurry: if Akira's sudden power boost really was due to some chemical ace up his sleeve, as the Ezent boss suspected, Rogert wanted to finish the fight before the effects of the drug wore off. He wasn't a fan of cheap victories—he preferred to defeat his opponents at their best, as a show of respect to their strength.

Alpha explained all of this to Akira (save for Rogert's own feelings, which she had no way of knowing and could only offer educated guesses about). Akira was startled.

A time limit?! How long can he hold out for?! he asked.

I can't say for sure, but most likely five—no, ten minutes at max.

Ten minutes?! You mean I gotta survive for that long?! Enduring a single second of this onslaught was already difficult enough. The black mech kept swinging its blade with polished execution and agility that belied its massive frame. Its strikes, too, were as forceful as they were fast—Akira had to keep slowing down his sense of time to evade. Each passing second already felt excruciatingly long, so ten minutes sounded to him like an eternity.

Complaining won't make it any better, so focus on staying alive, Alpha replied. I'll handle the support, and you supply the will, the drive, and the resolve. That's

how it's always worked, no? she said teasingly.

Akira grinned back despite himself. *Right, how could I forget? All right, I can handle that much—you take care of everything else!*

Leave it to me! Alpha replied, her smile brimming with confidence.

And in that smile, Akira found the will to keep fighting.

The mech's enormous chain saw blade cleaved a slum building in two, sending it crumbling to the ground. Rubble blasted everywhere, and a massive dust cloud engulfed the area.

Akira had baited Rogert into attacking the building. The mech's melee weapon was protected by tough force-field armor, so the sturdier the object it struck, the more energy the armor would use. The scattered debris and dust also interfered with the Kokurou's sensors, lowering its scanner's accuracy and making it harder for Rogert to predict where Akira would strike next. Forced to err on the side of caution, Rogert had to strengthen wider areas of his armor, burning through his energy supply even faster.

Akira was also firing grenades from his A4WM with reckless abandon. Of course, even multiple grenade blasts at point-blank range wouldn't damage a Kokurou. But the mech's sensors interpreted the explosions as attacks to defend against, and bolstered its force-field armor accordingly. Even if Akira got himself caught up in the blasts, he didn't care if he could thereby exhaust the energy of his mechanical foe.

Countless explosions engulfed the black mech, each detonation destroying more and more of the slums. The blasts enveloped Akira as well, but he resolutely kept firing grenade after grenade. The carnage surrounding the mech and the boy was so widespread and severe that Kugamayama City, which bordered the slums, would have normally stepped in and shut them down by now.

Of course, such an intense fight consumed Akira's resources just as much as his opponent's. He was chewing through his supply of ammo fast, and once he used up all of the energy packs for his suit, he'd be in trouble too. However many extended magazines he had, they weren't infinite—once they were gone,

his time would be up.

So each worried about their respective time limits as they fought with grim determination. And Rogert's time ended first—eventually the Kokurou's control system issued him a warning that he was running on fumes.

“Shit! Out of energy already?! Dammit, that was too fast!” he shouted in the cockpit.

Without a doubt, the Kokurou was a highly advanced mech. But no matter how cutting-edge it might be, without energy to power its systems it was little more than a hunk of metal waiting to be destroyed. Rogert mentally saluted Akira for having cornered him thus far, but he wasn't ready to give up just yet. Instead, he moved to a new plan. After informing his subordinates of his decision, he switched the mech to autopilot and rose from his seat.

Akira was exerting every effort to avoid the mech's relentless strikes. He just barely managed to evade one swing—a sweep wider than any of its melee attacks thus far. Normally, this would have made it comparatively easier to sidestep, but the attack leveled several nearby buildings, meaning he had to dodge falling debris in addition to the attack itself.

He had been too preoccupied with evading to notice the minute shift in the mech's behavior. But Alpha's keen eye caught it. *Watch out, Akira! The enemy's moving differently.*

Thus forewarned, Akira prepared for the mech's next attack, observing its movements carefully. But what happened next defied all his expectations.

“What the—?”

All of a sudden, the black mech turned its back on Akira. Then, channeling all of its remaining energy into its propulsion device and force-field armor, it took off at full speed in the opposite direction.

“Wait... It's running away? Why?!” Akira watched in a stupor as his enemy retreated into the distance. He was at such a loss, he even found his own confusion confusing. He couldn't make head or tail of what had just occurred.

Based on his brief exchange with Rogert via the comms, as well as the fight

thus far, Akira hadn't pegged his opponent for a coward. Retreat was the last thing he would have expected.

Meanwhile, Alpha assessed the developing situation. She spotted a large trailer in the distance, ahead of the fleeing mech. Realizing the enemy's true aim, her expression turned grim. *The enemy's not fleeing—it's headed to resupply its energy!*

She highlighted the trailer in his augmented vision. It looked like an unassuming desert-utility trailer, but was in fact a maintenance base for mechs—the very one Harlias had been searching for all this time. They hadn't found it because the trailer had been constantly on the move.

"Shit!" Akira spat. If the mech refueled, all his efforts until now to exhaust its power would be for naught. Determined to prevent this outcome, he raised his SSB. But the trailer was on the opposite side of the mech—he couldn't target the maintenance base from his position, and the dust and debris in the air from ruined buildings didn't help either.

He decided to head for higher ground—the roof of the closest intact building—for a better vantage point. But before he could move, a blade suddenly emerged from the cloud of dust, heading straight for him.

It came so fast that Akira's brain barely even registered the attack. But Alpha took control of his suit and forced him to leap backward. As his opponent continued to slash wildly through the debris in all directions, Alpha made Akira detach his SSB from its support arm and toss it and his A4WM behind him. Then she had him take a powerful step forward and throw a punch. It didn't connect, but the sheer force of the strike sent the surrounding debris flying off, revealing the figure of his enemy.

There, holding a twinblade with both hands, was Rogert.

"Good call!" he crowed, a confident grin on his face as he readied another strike.

Akira was stunned.

The gang leader announced, "Since this is our first time meeting in person, I'll reintroduce myself. The name's Rogert, boss of the Ezent family. I was also the

one piloting that mech earlier.”

“And you got out?” the boy asked in surprise.

“Honestly, I never would’ve thought you’d push me this far. Didn’t expect you to sap my energy that fast. But don’t think you’ve won just yet. Once my mech finishes resupplying, I’ll be back in action...”

Rogert kept talking. Akira half-listened to him until Alpha spoke up. *He’s trying to stall for time. Attack him!*

Okay! But why’d you throw away my guns?

Because as long as they were in your hands, he could’ve destroyed them. In case you haven’t noticed, he’s been aiming to get rid of your weapons first. You wouldn’t want to have to fight that mech at close range, would you?

Point taken!

While still in the mech, Rogert had deliberately swung his weapon wider than usual to take out the nearby buildings, which in turn had covered the area in dust and debris. Then, under the cover of the growing smoke screen, he’d covertly abandoned the mech and attacked Akira from the cover of the dust cloud, aiming to catch the boy unawares and take out his SSB. If Rogert had succeeded in destroying both of Akira’s guns, the boy would have been helpless once the mech came back from resupplying. So Alpha had tossed his guns out of harm’s way and turned to hand-to-hand combat instead—thus meriting praise from Rogert.

Retreat was not an option for Akira. If he called it a day here, he’d have to fight Rogert’s Kokurou at its best, restocked and in peak condition, during their rematch. All the energy Rogert had used up fighting Harlias’s Shirousagis would be restored, and Akira’s chances of winning would be slimmer than ever. So he needed to keep the mech from recovering at any cost. But Rogert had realized this as well—if the SSB was powerful enough to pressure a Kokurou, it could be turned on the maintenance base and prevent any refueling. So he kept attacking Akira at close range to prevent the boy from assaulting the trailer.

Akira had only to defeat Rogert, and victory would be his. Lacking a capable pilot at the helm, the mech posed no threat even at full power—with only an

average pilot, Alpha's support and the SSB would be more than enough to finish it off.

On the other hand, if Rogert neutralized Akira, destroyed the boy's SSB, or stalled for time long enough for the mech to finish refueling, he would be the victor instead. (So, too, if Akira were to retreat, but the gang boss was smart enough to know this wasn't an option for the boy.)

This is it, Akira! Alpha said. *Do or die! Are you ready?*

Let's finish this! Akira answered.

Their telepathic exchange occurred in an instant—and Akira took another firm step toward Rogert.



Observing Akira and Rogert's duel from afar, Doran grinned to himself. His strategy to wait as the two combatants took each other out was working out even better than he'd planned.

But then one of his subordinates announced, "Boss, the black mech's on the move. Is it running away? No—maybe it already finished Akira off, and it's coming after us next!"

"Check its direction," Doran ordered. "Does it look like it's headed toward our mechs?"

"N-No. In fact, it's going in a completely different direction."

"It's probably headed to its maintenance base to refuel! Have our unit follow it."

"Yes, sir. Wait, what's this?! Boss, I've spotted a large trailer ahead of the mech! *That* seems to be its destination instead. But why?"

Doran instantly realized the trailer's true identity. "Destroy that trailer immediately!" he shouted. "That's their maintenance base!" Then a grin came to his lips. "A mobile base, huh? Well played—no wonder we couldn't find it. Hmm... That bastard wouldn't be able to retreat and refuel while fighting Akira, so the boy must already be dead. And if Rogert's going to refuel in the first place, it means he's almost out of energy. Now's our chance! Tell all units to

engage that mech!”

“Y-Yes, Boss!”

“Sorry, that’s not gonna happen,” announced an unfamiliar voice.

Doran turned around in surprise.

A gunshot rang out.



Akira slipped past his enemy’s flurry of twinblade attacks to deliver a suit-strengthened, air-rending punch, capable of piercing even steel. But Rogert dodged, turning the momentum from his lightning-quick movement to propel an equally powerful kick back toward the boy.

Akira managed to evade—barely. Feeling like he’d come within a hair’s breadth of an artillery shell, he couldn’t help pulling a face. He tried to counterattack, but his opponent’s relentless strikes kept him on the defensive. It took all he had to dodge each swing. Even with the world slowed to a crawl around him—he could follow a bullet’s trajectory with his eyes—Rogert’s twinblade moved so fast that Akira could barely keep up.

Without Alpha’s support, he would have already been dead ten times over during this fight, if not more. But he was fortunate enough to have her by his side, and she had kept him alive until now. Besides, he’d learned from all his brushes with death thus far. So, with these two advantages in his pocket, Akira desperately fought to survive yet another near-death encounter.

Rogert was putting his all into his attacks. Seeing Akira weave through his perfectly executed twinblade strikes, he felt a strange thrill.

Akira had to remain in close-quarters combat, pinning Rogert down to prevent him from destroying the discarded SSB in the middle of their fight. The moment Akira dodged too wide or put too much distance between them, Rogert would definitely seize his opportunity to smash the gun. And the boy was fighting against the clock as well. He had to take Rogert down before the mech finished replenishing its energy, so Akira had no time to dawdle.

Yet burdened as he was with these restrictions—and face-to-face with Rogert, who was fighting with all his strength—Akira kept blocking or dodging every blow. Rogert wasn't surprised by this point—he'd already realized just how skilled the boy was after failing to kill him with the mech.

He went for Akira's leg with a low slash. Akira hopped up out of the way, raising both legs as he jumped and kicked at Rogert in midair. But having anticipated this, Rogert bent backward to dodge, while simultaneously swinging the blade on the other end of his weapon upward.

Normally, Akira would have had no way of evading. But the stabilizer built into his suit generated a midair foothold, and he jumped over that blade as well.

Yet Rogert had anticipated this too. After jumping so high to avoid the blades, Akira wouldn't be able to return to the ground immediately.

Now was his chance—Rogert charged toward the SSB lying on the ground.

But Akira's second leap had also included a vertical spin. Nearly upside down, with the soles of his feet pointed up at an angle, he kicked off another foothold in the air, shooting toward Rogert in a flash.

Rogert swung his twinblade to intercept him, but Akira dodged the attack and threw a punch before Rogert could reach the gun. Once again, they fought fiercely at close range. Common sense dictated that it was impossible to move as freely in the air as on ground, but these combatants were proving otherwise.

As skilled as they were, both Akira and Rogert could easily dodge a normal bullet from a typical peashooter of a gun at the moment it fired. They channeled that expertise into every punch, kick, slash, and dodge as they fought to the death. Rogert was having the time of his life—so much fun, in fact, that he almost felt it a shame to kill the boy.

Alpha was only able to support Akira because of his aptitude as an Old Domain User. Higher levels of support meant a heavier information load on his brain, and she'd been giving him extensive aid even when Rogert was still inside his mech. In that sense, the boy had yet another time limit to contend with—whether his brain could hold out before he finished the fight.

Akira was trying to alleviate his mental burden as much as he could by performing so well that Alpha wouldn't have to help him out with every little detail. Her support was outstanding, to be sure, but it wasn't infallible. If he wanted to survive, he had to put in his best effort as well.

Then—finally—time ran out, and the battle was decided.

Rogert hit his limit.

A powerful kick from Akira struck him squarely in the chest. Had the boy attacked a second earlier, Rogert would have dodged, but now he couldn't move his body like he wanted to. The impact doubled him over, knocking him off his feet and sending him toward a nearby building. Akira had expertly distributed the impact of his kick so as to damage the insides of his opponent, rather than to send him flying, yet Rogert still slammed against the wall with so much force that it collapsed. Blood erupted from his mouth, dyeing his surroundings scarlet—the kick had indeed ruptured his internal organs.

Akira's face was a mask of surprise. He'd finally gotten a good hit on his opponent, but he knew even his best efforts couldn't have achieved a result like that on their own. *Uh, Alpha, how'd that kick connect?*

Most likely, his speed stims wore off, she replied matter-of-factly.

It went without saying, but piloting a gigantic mech during high-speed combat wasn't easy, and doing it as precisely as Rogert had was even harder—especially up against someone as skilled as Akira when he was also fully supported by Alpha. Even in melee, Rogert couldn't have won against someone like that if his mech were moving sluggishly. So he'd taken speed stims to help with operating the machine, and had been under their influence until now.

"Speed stims, huh?" Akira muttered, looking at Rogert in surprise.

"Guess that means you're *not* using medicine right now, I take it?" Rogert replied with a weak smile.

"No, I don't take speed stims. I take recovery capsules all the time, though." Even as he spoke, he took out a handful of pills and popped them in his mouth. He watched Rogert carefully, anticipating an attack, but the gang boss made no move to interfere with his first aid. Rogert had acknowledged his defeat, Akira

realized.

In fact, Rogert was still physically capable of continuing the fight—he'd simply lost the will to go on. He could have killed a combat amateur in an instant, but by this point he knew that wasn't enough to finish Akira off. Most of all, he'd look like a sore loser if he attempted such a vain struggle.

He had more pride than that.

"It's your win," he said to the boy with a grin. "Kill me." With a peculiar sort of satisfaction, Rogert awaited his own death. But one thing still had him curious. "Though, come to think of it, the effect of the speed stim should've lasted until the mech finished replenishing its energy. I told the guys at the base to finish their job as fast as possible—I wonder what's taking them so long?"

Not that it mattered now. It was just a fleeting doubt, and since he was about to die, he figured he'd probably never know the answer anyway.

But then the answer came. "Oh, that's because I killed all the workers there."

Both Akira and Rogert turned in surprise at the newcomer's voice. There, standing where no one had appeared to be just a moment ago, was a woman. Akira immediately realized she'd been using active camouflage—he was more surprised to see *who* the woman was.

"*You?!*" he exclaimed in disbelief.

"Hey, Akira! Been a while, no?" she said with a smile.

It was Nelia.

Akira regarded her warily, but she continued to smile and held up a hand.

"Relax. I'm not your enemy."

"You really expect me to believe that?"

"Well, I didn't sneak up on you and attack while under cover, for one. Had I really wanted to kill you, I wouldn't have waited until the battle was over. Oh, and you can go get your gun. I won't stop you, since I'm not here to fight you."

Akira slowly stepped backward, making sure not to show his back to Nelia or

to take his eyes off her for a second, until he reached his SSB and A4WM, where they were lying on the ground.

He picked them both up. True to her word, Nelia didn't interfere.

He relaxed his guard slightly. "So, if you're not my enemy, why are you here?" he asked.

"I wanted to ask you a little favor. And before you ask, I'm not on either Ezent's or Harlias's side. But while I know it's not exactly the outcome you have in mind, can you please call it a day and go home? You've already won, so this should be enough for you, right?"

Bewildered and suspicious as to her motives, Akira couldn't even respond.

Nelia took this to mean he wasn't too happy with the idea, and she continued with a grin, "Don't worry! Even if you bow out here, Ezent and Harlias will both be history before the day's over. It's more convenient for *us* that way, you see."

"Then why does me being here matter?" he finally said. "What's the real reason you want me to leave?"

"Simply put, it'll be a problem for us if you meddle here anymore—I'm sorry, but that's all I can say publicly. So, your answer?"

Akira stayed silent. Nelia interpreted his silence as a tacit refusal, and gave a small sigh. Her smile didn't falter, but took on a different hue. "Well, if you don't want to, that's your decision. By the way, Akira—have you found a girlfriend since we last spoke?"

"Why are you asking?"

"If not, want to go out with me?" she said with a grin.

To Akira, seeing that smile recalled how she'd behaved back in the Kuzusuhara Ruins. He unconsciously took a step backward and grimaced. For Nelia had hit on him in the heat of their deadly battle, saying she wanted to add a bit of spice to her boring life by experiencing a thrilling event like fighting a lover to the death. Akira had found that reasoning completely incomprehensible. Now she was coming onto him again, and obviously for much the same reason. Her thought process was clearly far removed from

normal people's—as she eyed him hungrily with equal parts affection and bloodlust, he couldn't help but wince.

Let's head back for now, Alpha suggested. I don't think it's too wise to antagonize Kugamayama City here.

At that, Akira finally grasped the big picture. A former relic bandit, Nelia had been captured by the city, with the rights to her life and the freedom of her body stripped from her. She was most likely being forced to work for the city to pay off her enormous debt, meaning everything she'd done here was probably ordered by the city. If he refused her request, he could potentially make an enemy of Kugamayama.

Even Akira didn't want to fight the city if he didn't have to. Plus, since he'd finally defeated Rogert, he felt this wasn't a bad point to stop. And one other realization had diluted his will to fight as well. He gave a deep sigh. "I've already got a girlfriend, and I wouldn't date you anyway. But I'll go back home like you asked. That good enough for you?"

"Oh? Well, in that case, I suppose there's nothing for it." She looked somewhat disappointed, which rubbed him the wrong way all the more.

In a sense, that closed the book on this incident. But one person was not satisfied by this anticlimax in the least—Rogert.

"You bitch," he growled. "How *dare* you interfere..." Glaring daggers at Nelia, he slowly rose to his feet. "How *dare* you decide everything on your own..." Channeling all his hatred for her into his blade, he prepared to swing. "How dare you *steal* someone's right to finish their opponent off!"

With all his remaining strength, he struck ferociously, knowing full well that even if he managed to kill Nelia, she'd take him out as well. But the attack's execution was magnificent—certainly worthy of an honorable warrior's last stand.

Regrettably, however, it only sliced the air. At the same moment, Nelia sliced him horizontally, then vertically, her cuts forming a cross with his throat at its center. His body had been augmented to preserve his life even if his head was severed from his body, but that meant nothing if his head was also sliced in two. Cut into four pieces, Rogert's lifeless body collapsed to the ground.

It had taken only an instant. Nelia grinned, as though the moment had given her a rush. “Hey, you might have not gotten to kill him, but at least you won the fight, right? I waited long enough to let you have your victory before interfering, so let me have at least this much.” She put away her blade and smiled at Akira. “All right, my work here’s done. Until we meet again, Akira.” She reactivated her camouflage and vanished from sight.

Akira looked at Rogert’s corpse. The man hadn’t even had time to feel regret—the two halves of his face were still contorted in rage. For a while, the boy stood in silence.

Alpha, let’s go home.

Sounds good to me, she replied.

Seeing the face of a man who had given everything he had to fight Akira, yet who wasn’t even allowed a satisfying conclusion in the end, Akira couldn’t help but feel for him. He turned his back on Rogert and left.

Dawn was already starting to break.



The maintenance base, disguised as a mobile trailer, was filled with corpses, each sliced to ribbons. Yet the Kokurou was still refueling. After killing all the personnel here and going to meet Akira, Nelia had returned here to take charge.

Once the mech was fully replenished, she boarded it. It was supposed to only allow Rogert himself to pilot it, yet the system accepted her with no fuss whatsoever. Once seated in the cockpit, she called her teammate.

“I’m all set on my end. What about you?”

“I’m ready as well.” The reply came from inside Doran’s command vehicle, which was now littered with corpses. Every single person on board had been killed—except for the man who’d killed them.

“Then shall we begin?” Nelia asked.

“Be sure to go easy on me,” the man replied.

Now with Nelia at the helm, the Kokurou held its chain saw blade at the

ready. At the same time, the man ordered the Shirousagis forward. With a new pilot on one side and a new commander on the other, the war of the mechs began anew.

Chapter 143: Strength without Honor

Sheryl waited beside the collapsed warehouse building for Akira to return. She looked anxious, in part because she was worried about him; but she also had a bigger reason—the expression he’d worn right before leaving.

Try as she might, she couldn’t forget the murderous, terrifying look on his face. If he had the same expression when he returned, she wasn’t confident she’d have the courage to welcome him back with a smile. But if she acted like she was afraid of him, he’d surely avoid her altogether—perhaps even cut her off completely.

She absolutely did not want that to happen. Still, she couldn’t just stop being frightened of him at the drop of a hat. Scary things were scary for a reason.

Unable to shake the sense that this, like the relic shop, was yet another trial put before her that would determine the fate of her relationship with Akira, she waited for him nonetheless.

Finally, he showed up.

“Welcome back, Akira!” she greeted him, breathing an inward sigh of relief. For now, at least, her worries seemed unfounded—she couldn’t sense any trace of the dangerous aura he’d had. No longer clouded by anxiety, her smile toward him was more radiant than ever.

But Akira’s response was even more tepid than usual. “Oh—Sheryl. Sorry, I’m worn out. I’m gonna go crash.”

“O-Oh, okay then.” She couldn’t detect any dissatisfaction or irritation in his voice, so though she was a little taken aback, she was able to respond as if nothing was wrong.

Akira really did look tired. He sluggishly dragged himself over to the RV and disappeared inside.

Sheryl watched him go. Puzzled, she wondered out loud, “Is he depressed about something?” Such listlessness couldn’t just be from mere exhaustion—at

least, so it seemed to her.

As soon as he entered the RV, Akira took off his powered suit, placed it in the storage pod, and headed straight for the bath. But he was too exhausted to even soak in the tub, so he made do with a hot shower—just to wash all the blood and sweat off—and collapsed on the bed.

Sleep didn't come. The recovery capsules he'd ingested were meant specifically for combat, and had the bonus effect of keeping the user's consciousness sharp and holding fatigue at bay. So now Akira was wide awake.

After some time Sheryl entered the RV, along with Shijima.

"What gives?" Akira grumbled, still lying on the bed. "I told you I was tired. Leave me alone."

"I apologize," Sheryl began, "but Shijima needs to speak with you right away, it seems."

Akira raised himself up and looked at Shijima. There were traces of irritation on the gang leader's face. Even when confronting a hunter who'd single-handedly won against a mech, Shijima maintained his dignity as a gang boss. However afraid he was on the inside, he knew to never let it show, and he had the guts needed to keep up appearances. Most of all, this was a topic where he couldn't afford to show weakness.

"I hear you picked a fight with both Ezent *and* Harlias," he spat. "What the hell were you thinking?! I might be cooperating with Sheryl as part of our deal, but if you're gonna pull shit like that, I'm outta here. The deal's off."

Shijima gave Akira his most intimidating glare—even knowing it might upset him—in the hopes of making Akira feel like he was in the wrong and Shijima in the right.

Akira only stared at him in response. A cold sweat ran down Shijima's back, yet he didn't avert his eyes from the boy for one second. He projected confidence, as though he'd taken a stance no one could argue against. Sheryl watched him, surprised and impressed—seeing him adopt that kind of attitude with Akira, she had to admire his courage.

Then Akira answered. "Fine—do whatever you want. It was something I

decided to do on my own, and I never asked you to go along with it in the first place. Sheryl might want you to keep cooperating with her, but I'm not gonna force you to stay or anything."

Shijima released the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "I see. Then in that case—"

He was about to announce that he and his gang would have no part in Akira's feud with Ezent and Harlias. But Akira wasn't finished.

"The way I see it," continued the boy, "getting involved was my choice alone, but the other two sides might not see it that way. Still, if you're worried about them coming for revenge, I don't think that'll happen. It sounds like both gangs will be destroyed within the day, or something."

"Come again?" Shijima said after a long pause. In fact, his greatest fear had been that one of the two syndicates would win the war and end up with full control over the shadow economy of the slums, with the power to crush Shijima and his gang like ants. Such was the apprehension that drove him to risk ticking off Akira and confronting him. But now both gangs were to meet their end within the day? He could scarcely believe it. "Hold up. How do you know that for sure? Isn't the war still ongoing?"

"How? Well..." Akira was about to answer, then clammed up. His source was Nelia, and Nelia was working for the city. So he knew her information was accurate, and that the demise of both gangs was most likely imminent. But if he answered honestly, might he violate his agreement with the city to not mention anything about Nelia and the other bandits? The possibility of antagonizing the city gave him pause.

"Well," he finally said, "you know how it is. I got the information from a certain source. That's why I came back early. I might've picked a fight with the gangs, but if they're gonna get destroyed anyway without me even having to interfere, that's good enough."

Shijima had assumed that Akira had come back because he'd suffered a humiliating defeat, which was why Shijima had been so worried about retaliation from the gangs. But if that wasn't the case, it changed everything. He didn't think Akira was lying—the boy had only hesitated because he didn't want

to name his source. It was clear to Shijima that Akira wholeheartedly believed the gangs were done for.

Whether Shijima himself believed the info, however, was a different story. In fact, he suspected someone was trying to deceive Akira by feeding him this story, and he had a pretty good idea who.

“Hey, you didn’t hear that from Viola, did you?”

“Hm? Viola? Oh. No, not her. Sorry, I can’t tell who, but as far as I know, neither you nor Sheryl know them—although I don’t know who all you have connections to, so I can’t say for sure.”

“I see,” Shijima murmured. If Viola wasn’t involved, that changed matters yet again. Akira had been on a team that took down a bounty worth three billion aurum, after all—maybe it wouldn’t be so strange if he *did* know a reliable source or two. And anyway, Shijima already recognized Akira as the type to solve his problems with brute force rather than clever deception, so he doubted Akira was lying to him.

Then what were the chances someone would deliberately feed Akira false information and risk earning his ire, even knowing that he had defeated such a bounty? Akira’s info was starting to sound more reliable by the minute.

You’re shittin’ me... Both gangs are really gonna get crushed? And by the end of the day? How the hell?!

Shijima still couldn’t bring himself to believe it. As the leader of a medium-sized slum gang, he knew Ezent’s and Harlias’s influence all too well. He couldn’t fathom even one of them getting destroyed, let alone both on the same day.

“So, just to make sure I heard you right, you didn’t learn this from Viola? And whoever you did talk to isn’t connected to her in any way, right?”

“Well, probably.”

“Very well...” Shijima looked pensive.

Akira guessed that Shijima was trying to find out if the news was legit, but his own thoughts turned toward the woman herself. “You seem awfully concerned

with this Viola woman. Is her info really all that dangerous?”

“You serious?! Of course it is—she’s a conniving witch! In fact, if you’d answered that Viola was involved, I would’ve been *more* inclined to believe you. I’m doubting you because you said she wasn’t. That’s the kind of shit-stirrer she is.”

“Really?” Akira looked surprised, then realized something. *Come to think of it, I have been running into Viola a bunch lately...* After he’d seen her for the first time during his negotiations with Tomejima, she’d started showing up more and more in his life—though still rarely enough to be written off as a coincidence. Perhaps he was just overthinking things, but now that the possibility had occurred to him, he couldn’t help but wonder. Finally his curiosity got the better of him, and he made a decision.

“Then why don’t we just go ask her ourselves and find out for sure?”

“You’re kidding” was Shijima’s dumbfounded reply.

Akira climbed out of bed and took his suit out of its storage pod once again.



After setting up an appointment with Viola, Akira and the others headed to the designated meeting spot—an apartment building in the lower district.

Carol was waiting out front to greet them. When she saw Akira, she grinned and waved. “Akira! Over here! Oh, you came too, Sheryl?”

“Will that be a problem?” Sheryl asked.

“Not for *us*—but just warning you, it’s a little messy inside. That won’t bother her, will it?” she asked, turning to Akira.

Akira directed the question to Sheryl with his eyes.

“I’ll be fine,” she answered with a nod.

“If you say so,” Carol said, then addressed Shijima. “I’ll caution you too: I don’t mind you bringing bodyguards, but if something happens, you’ll be the one held responsible for their actions.”

“Is that a warning something *is* going to happen?” Shijima asked, narrowing

his eyes.

“Well, I’m guessing you didn’t exactly come to chat about the weather,” Carol said with a smirk. “On the off chance things get heated and those subordinates of yours get careless, it might be dangerous for you as well. Keep that in mind. Look, even Akira had the decorum to leave his enormous gun at home.”

The apartment complex was near the border separating the lower district and the slums, so guards from private security firms patrolled the area heavily. If Akira were to try toting a weapon as large as an SSB around here, they might recognize him as a threat, inviting unnecessary conflict. He hadn’t come to fight Viola anyway, just to talk, so he’d only brought his AAH and A2D this time.

After some hesitation, Shijima clicked his tongue and begrudgingly instructed his subordinates to wait for him outside. Carol welcomed the three of them into the building with a smile.

“Now, follow me,” she said. “Like I said before, we haven’t had time to clean up, so it’s a little messy here, but just pay it no mind.”

She led them through a room littered with corpses. Unlike Akira, who did as he was told and ignored the scene, Sheryl appeared terrified and even slightly queasy. Shijima, however, looked stern.

“Who are these guys?” he asked.

“Hm? Oh, just some goons from Harlias. They came to kill us, so we fought back.”

“Harlias targeted you? Then why are you two still in this building?”

“Because no one in their right mind would think we were,” Carol said with a wink. “Look, here we are.”

Beyond the blood-splattered—or rather, blood-*filled*—room, Viola awaited them in her office, standing against the front of her desk. She wore a conspicuous, expensive-looking pendant around her neck that hung over the center of her chest.

“Welcome,” she greeted them. “I apologize for having you meet me in a place like this, but let’s cut to the chase—what did you want to ask me?”

As she spoke, she turned to Shijima, who looked grave.

“I heard from a certain source that Ezent and Harlias are both gonna be history by the day’s end,” he said. “Would that be *your* handiwork?”

It was a leading question, but Viola answered him directly. “That’s a little dishonest, don’t you think?”

“My source isn’t lying. I can trust them.”

“Not that—you’re being dishonest. You’re not actually sure if the info’s legit, and you’re trying to find out based on my answer. Nice try, but it won’t work. If you want information from me, you’ll have to pay up first.”

Shijima clicked his tongue in annoyance again—she’d seen right through him.

Viola, however, was all smiles. “How about hiring me to find out if that info’s good or not? I’ll even make the fee negotiable. Or perhaps you came to sell this story? If you can prove it’s legit, I’m happy to buy.”

Shijima snorted. “Hell no.”

“What a shame. Then I suppose we’re done here?”

Scowling, Shijima glanced at Akira, silently urging him to intervene.

So the boy opened with a simple question. “Were you the one who dragged us into all this?”

“You’re going to have to be more specific,” she answered wryly. “What exactly do you mean by ‘dragged into’?”

“If you don’t know what I’m talking about, just answer no.” His eyes bored into her.

Now Viola hesitated to respond.

In any other situation, Viola would have said no with a smile on her face and without batting an eye. But two factors kept her from doing so.

First, she had already heard from Carol that Akira had a way to detect lies, and that it was most likely extremely accurate. (She also knew from their close friendship that Carol wouldn’t tell a lie if she didn’t deem it necessary—and

certainly not to Viola, since she knew Viola would instantly recognize the falsehood.)

Second, Viola herself felt certain that Akira's eyes would see through any lie she told him. If she thought he was merely judging her honesty with observational skills alone, she wouldn't have hesitated to try deceiving him. But she sensed something else in his gaze: absolute faith in something concrete, like a lie detector that was always accurate.

So Viola admitted with a smile, "Yes, I dragged all of you into this. As for the degree of my involvement, let's say I didn't exactly want to kill you but didn't really care if you died. So if you're asking if I was deliberately trying to kill you, the answer would be no."

Sheryl's and Shijima's mouths dropped open in surprise. Akira narrowed his eyes slightly.

But Viola's smile didn't falter. "So now that you know, what do you plan to do? Kill me?" She added in a singsong voice, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"And why's that?" Akira asked.

"Oh, there are lots of reasons, but if I had to pick one, well, are you familiar with the kind of program called revengeware?"

"Sure."

"Well, I happen to be using it too. Whichever individual or organization kills me gets a bounty on their heads. I think the amount was three billion aurum?"

At that, Sheryl and Shijima looked stricken with panic. But neither Akira nor Viola changed their expressions in the slightest as the info broker continued.

"It's an unofficial bounty, sure, but if you kill me, you'll paint a target worth three billion on your back all the same. You've taken down a bounty worth that much yourself, so I'm sure you can imagine how deadly the hunters coming after you will be. Yeah, I wouldn't recommend it."

"Is that all?" replied Akira without hesitation.

Viola feigned a look of exaggerated surprise. "Oh? Is that not enough of a reason for you? In that case... Let's see..." Then she smiled slyly. "How about

the fact that my bodyguard is standing next to your lover?”

Sheryl instinctively glanced sideways. At some point—she didn’t know when—Carol had appeared right beside her.

“I see” was all Akira said.

A gunshot rang out.

The bullet pierced through Viola’s pendant into her chest. Her face frozen in surprise, she crumpled to the ground in a pool of her own blood.

Akira lowered his AAH and turned to Carol nonchalantly. “So do we have to kill each other now?”

There was no trace of anger on his face. Yet Shijima and Sheryl were almost certain Carol would move to kill him, and both looked incredibly anxious.

But Carol just gave him a breezy smile. “Nah, let’s not. Viola might’ve hired me to be her bodyguard, but she didn’t pay me enough to justify fighting you to the death.”

“Oh, really?” Akira said.

“But that aside, I’d like to at least do the job she hired me for. I won’t attack any of you, so do you mind?”

“As long as you keep that promise, do whatever you want.”

“Appreciate it.”



Shijima and Sheryl relaxed a little upon hearing Akira and Carol speaking amicably to each other, but didn't quite know how to feel about the two hunters treating death so lightly. Carol turned her back on them and got to work, while Akira watched her with a curious expression.

"Say, what *are* you doing?" the boy wondered aloud.

"Applying some first aid, though I'll be lucky to make it in time." Carol took something sphere-shaped off of Viola's shelf, split it open down the middle, and placed it over Viola's gunshot wound. Then she inserted several tubes extending from the device—like the kind used for an IV drip—into Viola's neck and several other places on her body. Liquid began flowing through the tubes into her system. Ten seconds later, Viola coughed up a huge wad of blood, and her eyes opened wide.

Akira was shocked by what he'd just witnessed. To a hunter, of course, Viola's wound would've been classified as minor. But Viola wasn't a hunter—she was an average citizen. Akira was sure he'd killed her.

"Whoa, that was amazing," he said in awe.

Carol answered, "It ought to be, considering how expensive this contraption apparently is. It's called an autorecovery kit, and it can patch up even severe wounds that would normally require replacing the injured area with artificial limbs or parts. So it can handle a wound like this with no problem."

Viola coughed a few more times and looked around the room. Then she turned to Carol and sighed. "Carol, you really revived me and put me back in this situation? Couldn't you have at least gotten me out of here first?"

Carol grinned at her look of dissatisfaction. "What are you talking about? Since I brought you back to life after you screwed up and nearly got yourself killed, shouldn't you be thanking me instead? I revived you and gave you a second chance, so good luck handling the rest on your own—especially since you already failed once!"

Viola gave another small sigh and moved her gaze back to Akira. Akira raised his gun once more, this time at her head.

"Last question: Any *other* reason I should let you live?"

Viola paused for a moment. “I’m not sure why, but you’re having Sheryl set up this relic-selling business, right? If you let me go, I’ll pitch in and help manage it. How does that sound?”

He didn’t say a word. Nor did he lower his weapon.

“With my help,” she went on, “I guarantee your business will be a success. Shijima asked me earlier if I was behind the destruction of Ezent and Harlias, and the answer is yes. It was indeed my handiwork. Technically, I was hired to do it, but I did all the planning myself.”

“Who hired you?” Akira asked.

“I can’t say *that* much, of course. But I think you can probably guess, right? After all, the ‘source’ Shijima mentioned earlier was you, wasn’t it?” Akira didn’t respond, and Viola gave a triumphant grin as she continued. “Well, I won’t press you for the details. The important thing is that my client chose me because they knew I could make it happen. That’s why you want me managing your business. What do you say? I think my offer makes up for me dragging you into this mess, don’t you?”

“Anything else?”

“Hmm... Nope, that’s all I got. If that’s not enough for you, go ahead and shoot.”

Akira stared hard at Viola. Viola smiled back. Based on her smile, she didn’t appear to be bluffing.

What do you say, Alpha?

She’s not lying.

Akira lowered his gun at last. “All right. Prove to me I made the right call keeping you alive. If I ever regret letting you live, I’ll come finish the job. Same thing applies if you try to mess with me. Got it?”

“Deal,” she said. “I like my life, so I’ll work hard to keep it.”

Thus the conniving witch Viola made an uncharacteristic agreement with Akira and the others involved with the relic shop. Carol helped Viola to her feet, then gave Akira a cheerful grin.

“All right, I’m taking Viola to the hospital now. Later!”

“L-Later,” he responded. He was puzzled at how she could treat him so casually after he’d just shot her friend, but her behavior also impressed him in a way. He and the others followed Carol and Viola outside, closing the book on an unexpected turn of events that had arisen only because of an impulse of Akira’s, born from Shijima’s suspicion.



Akira and the others went back to the warehouse, then Akira walked Sheryl back to her base. In her absence, the children of her gang had been riding out the war by holing up in the base for safety. When they saw Sheryl appear in the doorway with Akira, they were visibly relieved.

Once Druncam had taken over security at the warehouse, Levin and the other original hires had been reassigned to guard the base instead. That made the location safer than most of the slums, but with their boss and patron potentially in danger, the children couldn’t help but worry. Seeing Akira and Sheryl return safe and sound lifted an enormous weight off their shoulders.

Sheryl led Akira into her room. He didn’t seem too happy, which concerned her. “If you’re tired, perhaps you should stay here tonight. We have a large bath you can soak and relax in.”

“Sounds good,” he mumbled.

“Great! Then I’ll get it ready for you—”

“No, I’ll just soak in my bath at home tonight. Since we won’t have to worry about those two gangs after today, I don’t have to stay at the warehouse anymore, right?”

In fact, Sheryl did want to keep him with her. But she couldn’t think of a convincing excuse, so she gave up. “I suppose not. Thank you so much for all your hard work today. Everyone felt a lot safer with you there.”

“Oh, really?” was his reply.

Sheryl could tell that he didn’t believe her. She also sensed that the reason for his doubt was related to whatever had him down in the dumps. Her first

impulse was to ask him, since she thought talking to someone about it might make him feel better. But she had the feeling he wouldn't tell her even if she inquired, so instead she resorted to something that had already worked before.

She stepped forward and embraced him.

"Sorry, Sheryl, but I'm really not in the mood—"

"I feel a lot safer when you're here, you know."

Her sudden assertion hit Akira like a bolt from the blue, causing him to freeze in midsentence. But she kept talking.

"I can't say that *everyone's* as relieved as I am when you're around. I doubt any of them think that having you here would automatically keep them safe no matter what."

Akira doubted this as well, and he couldn't blame them.

"But our gang wouldn't have grown as large as it is today without your backing. If you hadn't been there for us, we never would've even gotten off the ground—the other syndicates would've immediately snatched away our base, territory, and members. Then, once we were back out on the streets, thieves would've taken our money and weapons and left us for dead. I'm sure of it—I've lived in the slums long enough to know what kind of place this is."

So had Akira. He knew she was right.

"But thanks to you, that didn't happen. Thanks to you, we survived. Yes, I know some of my members aren't sure how to act around you—some of them are afraid of you, and others simply don't like you."

Akira didn't say a word. But he kept listening.

"I don't think you like to be told how strong you are. I think you know many others who are more capable than you are, so when someone praises you, you never feel like you deserve it."

It was true: Akira felt this regularly because his "strength" wasn't even his to begin with. The way he saw it, he was capable only because he had Alpha's support.

"But with your power," she continued, "we now have a safe place where we

can all live. We don't have to fear for our lives out on the streets. You saved us, Akira. I just want you to know that."

In fact, while these were her honest feelings, she was only telling him this to make him feel better. But her words worked all the same.

After his battle with Rogert, Akira had left instead of fighting Nelia. The biggest reason? He had matured enough emotionally that he could view his own actions objectively. Nelia had looked down on him, but if he'd retaliated in a rage, using someone else's power—Alpha's—to defeat her, wouldn't he be proving her point?

He wouldn't tolerate anyone making light of him. Such people thought his life didn't matter, and that he was an easy mark. He also wouldn't hesitate to rely on Alpha—without her, he would've died long ago. But he'd no longer depend on her help to carry out his personal vengeance—not because it was morally wrong, but because he felt no honor in such a victory.

Akira had felt Rogert's admiration and respect for him, but he knew Alpha's aid was the real cause: Rogert had pegged Akira for a weakling at first, but when Alpha had started supporting Akira, the man had heaped praise on the boy, mistaking Alpha's power for Akira's. So Akira felt ashamed—an impostor, a swindler.

Such had been the true reason for his malaise.

"Really? I saved you guys?" he mused.

"Yes, you really did."

"Huh. Well, if it helped you out, then maybe it's fine." Perhaps he *had* depended on strength without honor. Perhaps he *was* shameful and pathetic. But if that strength had helped those who'd asked for it, then maybe it wasn't all bad. Suddenly, he felt like a significant burden had been lifted from him. He could finally see his own weakness and need to rely on Alpha in a positive light.

"Yes," she agreed. "It's fine."

A wry smile came to his lips. "I don't think you know what 'it' is."

"No, I don't. But surely it must be a good thing, right?"

“Yeah—probably.”

“Then it’s fine, right?”

“I suppose so,” he said with a small grin.

Instead of lamenting having to rely on Alpha for everything, he thought, maybe he should channel his frustration into getting stronger, so that one day he’d be able to do those same things without her help.

This new perspective filled Akira with fresh determination. “Thanks, Sheryl. I feel a lot better now.”

“No need to thank me! Like I said before, whenever you want me to hold you, ask. Don’t be shy now.”

“Get off me,” he said.

“Awww! Just a little more?”

He hesitated. “All right, fine. Do as you like.” She’d cheered him up, after all, so he was feeling more receptive toward her than usual.

Realizing this, Sheryl smiled radiantly. “Much obliged!”

True to his word, Akira let Sheryl do as she liked, and she embraced him to her heart’s content. Anyone watching the two would have thought they were lovers.

As she held her arms wrapped around him, a doubt she’d had earlier resurfaced in her mind. She’d been worried that maybe her feelings for Akira were rooted in fear—a defense mechanism her mind had cooked up so that he wouldn’t seem so terrifying.

She could now safely lay that doubt to rest. Here and now, she could definitively say her feelings were genuine. And this delighted her most of all.



Chapter 144: Back in Action

In a hospital in Kugamayama's lower district, Viola lay on a medical bed in a room reserved for wealthier patients. Akira had nearly killed her, but thanks to Carol's first aid and a pricey treatment procedure, she'd pulled through. What was more, the wound was no longer visible, not even leaving a scar. But she was a regular person, not used to wounds this severe. She'd need several days in the hospital to fully recover.

Besides Carol, who was sitting in a chair by the bedside, smiling like usual, there were two other grave-looking men in the room—Haraji and Kazafuze, from Yoshioka Heavy Industries and Yajima Heavy Industries, respectively.

"You screwed us over. I hope you're prepared to face the consequences," Haraji said.

"Some informant you are," complained Kazafuze. "You trashed our company's demonstration! Now you're gonna regret it."

Viola pretended to be confused. "Trashed? Whatever do you mean? I did exactly what I was hired to do—I got Ezent and Harlias to drain all their funds, and I made sure their confrontation happened after both were fully prepared but before one stole a march on the other."

This time, the war between the two gangs had been entirely planned out from the start, with two chief goals: one, the complete destruction of both syndicates; the other, to drain the slums of all their money.

The city needed the slums to remain poor, so that disputes would keep breaking out between the residents. This hostile environment forced the residents to buy and learn to use cheap weapons for self-defense, which planted in the people the hope that if they ever got strong enough, perhaps they could escape their poverty and try their luck as hunters. On the off chance they succeeded and made it to a ruin, the relics they collected would stimulate the city's economy. So it was in the city's best interests to preserve the slums as an environment that cultivated hunters.

Ezent and Harlias had overturned that system completely. At first, they had just been small-time garden-variety slum gangs. But both bosses had used their unique talents to gain power and influence within the slums, eventually drawing many smaller gangs under their umbrella.

As both syndicates had grown, they'd collected more money from their subordinate organizations. Then they'd turned around and invested that money to generate even more capital. Rinse and repeat. By the time Ezent and Harlias had grown large enough to assume control of the shadow economy of the slums, they'd amassed even more money than some of the smaller companies in the city's lower district. So when the residents of the slums had wanted to escape poverty and squalor, they hadn't needed to risk their lives hunting relics—they'd had the option of just aiming to get hired by one of the two gangs.

In so doing, Ezent and Harlias had become a thorn in the city's side. And they'd even been using their wealth to lend to citizens of the lower district as of late, interfering with the city's own economy. Then the city had decided it was finally time to clean house.

But the powers that be had realized just getting rid of the two gangs wouldn't be enough, as both had grown so large not just from the acumen of their bosses but also because the black market generated astonishing amounts of money.

War, after all, wasn't free. So each gang had spent inordinate amounts of money to wrest control of the black market from the other's grasp. And the more both groups had grown and bolstered their forces, the more lucrative the black market had become. If the city had merely stopped at the destruction of both syndicates, smaller gangs would have risen from their ashes and used the money from the black market to grow once more. As long as this money stayed in the slums, eliminating Ezent and Harlias wouldn't solve the city's problem. The slums had to return to the destitute, hopeless environment they had once been, back when the residents had been forced to struggle every day to keep from starving.

The city had hired Viola to make this happen. And not merely to goad the gangs into a small skirmish with no sense of finality—they wanted her to make the two syndicates invest every aurum they had into the war, then wipe each other out. Viola had obliged, fanning the flames of hostility on both sides and

working behind the scenes to make the ensuing conflagration as grand as possible.

Originally, this had been intended as a gradual process. Both gangs were to spend more and more on the war, little by little, until there was no more money in the slums. But the participation of Yajima and Yoshioka had pushed the schedule forward. By selling mechs to both gangs, the corporations could sap Ezent's and Harlias's funds all in one go.

Yajima and Yoshioka each wanted the city's defense force to purchase their products, and had been aggressively promoting their mechs. But this hadn't been enough—the corporations had needed a live demonstration to showcase what their mechs looked like in action. So the two companies had conspired and decided to have their mechs fight each other in live combat.

Mechs were already incredibly expensive to manufacture—normally, the companies' budgets wouldn't have allowed for such a demonstration. But when they'd caught wind of the city's plan, they'd realized they could have the gangs foot the bill instead. And while there was no guarantee that the city's defense force would purchase the winning mech, such a victory would at least look good on that company's résumé. So the war between Ezent and Harlias was remodeled into a corporate advertisement for Yajima and Yoshioka's new products—the real reason the city had allowed their mechs to rampage through the slums unchecked.

And the city had been pleased with the outcome. Both syndicates were no more. The thorn in their side was gone, and the two gangs had drained all the money from the slums to fund the war. Even better, the residents' ire would be toward the gangs themselves, not the city—and large gangs would now be equated with the carnage of war in the minds of the people. They wouldn't be so quick to form more.

The corporations had also gotten the opportunity to test their mechs out on the field and now knew what they were capable of. This was good enough for the city, but Yajima and Yoshioka had gotten the short end of the stick, and their displeasure was visible on the faces of their sales reps.

"Like hell you did what you were hired to do," Haraji growled at Viola with a

glare. “You were the reason that hunter interfered, right?”

Kazafuze looked just as angry. “We did some digging, and we know you’ve been in contact with him several times now. You can’t weasel your way out this time.”

Whichever corporation had won the battle—Yajima’s Shirousagi or Yoshioka’s Kokurou—could have shown the city’s defense force that their product was worth purchasing. But because a certain individual had butted in, both corporations had ultimately lost, damaging their wallets and reputations.

Viola shook her head exaggeratedly. “You’ve got it all wrong. I actually told Akira *not* to get involved, though apparently my warning fell on deaf ears.”

“Enough of your lies!”

“It’s the truth,” she said calmly. “Carol, show them.”

With a wry smile, Carol sent some data to the men via terminal. There on the screen was video proof that Viola had attempted to negotiate with Akira after Rogert’s cannon fire had destroyed the warehouse.

“Right before this footage was recorded, goons from both gangs came after us,” Viola explained. “I was trying to get Akira to take care of them for us by striking a deal with him. Naturally, they wouldn’t have gone after the likes of us with mechs or anything, but they might’ve sent a few more grunts our way. We needed protection.”

According to the video, Akira hadn’t even listened to Viola and instead had dashed off on his own. It certainly didn’t look like she’d ordered Akira to attack the mechs.

Yet Haraji didn’t seem convinced in the least. “You think this’ll get me to believe you? Who says you didn’t cooperate with the kid to stage this footage?”

“You shouldn’t doubt things just because they don’t suit your interest. I’m here in this hospital bed because Akira nearly killed me out of suspicion, you know. How could that have happened if he was in cahoots with me?”

Unable to argue her point, Haraji scowled and didn’t say another word. So Viola doubled down.

“First off, aren’t your companies trying to sell their mechs to the defense force? It would be one thing if they lost to a hunter from the Front Line, but if your mechs can’t even stand up to an *average* hunter, that’s on you guys. Don’t pin your failure on me.”

The men flinched—she’d hit them where it hurt. Indeed, that was the crux of the problem. Had the corporations’ mechs eliminated Akira with ease, neither salesman would have had any reason to be present. But since they’d failed to kill him, doubts would arise about whether their mechs were as capable as the companies claimed.

Viola deduced what the men were most afraid of and zeroed in on it. First, she addressed Kazafuze with a sweet smile. “Well, I suppose Yajima at least has an excuse. Those Shirousagis were the cheap models, no? And none of their pilots were especially skilled. Up against a hunter who eliminated a bounty worth three billion aurum, there was no way they could’ve won.”

Kazafuze looked surprised by her comment, though Haraji narrowed his eyes.

Viola went on, “And it’s already clear from Akira’s previous one-on-one battle with a Shirousagi that a skilled pilot can make all the difference. If the cheap version alone is that capable with a skilled pilot at the helm, I think that’ll be enough to convince the defense force to buy.” Then she directed a knowing glance at Kazafuze. “Once I get out of here, I have to send the city a detailed report of how the job panned out. I could even include some of those details as well, you know?”

Kazafuze hesitated for a moment, then answered, “All right. But whatever you write will directly influence my company’s reputation. I trust you’ll keep that in mind?” His eyes seemed to say, “You’re still on my shit list right now, but if you can help us save face in this mess, I’ll let you off the hook.”

Viola knew what his gaze meant, and smirked as if to respond, “Then we have a deal.”

Meanwhile, Haraji panicked—the rival company now had a leg up on him. He glanced at Viola as if to ask that she throw *him* a bone as well.

But Viola only looked at him quizzically. “Why are you staring at me like that? Sorry, but you’re not my type.”

“I take it that’s your answer, then?” Haraji growled. There was an unspoken threat: his tone suggested that even if Yajima let her off the hook, she’d regret making an enemy of Yoshioka. This was her last chance to make amends, so was she really making the right move?

But Viola only sighed deeply. “Look, your mech lost to a single hunter, and there’s only so much I can cover for. Perhaps you expect me to suggest to the city that Akira faked his rank and is actually much stronger?” Essentially, she was saying, “Regardless of the truth, I can make things look however you like—as long as you’re willing to pay up.”

Haraji correctly inferred Viola’s meaning. “‘Expect,’ huh?” he snorted. “Expecting anything from you was a mistake to begin with.” He’d basically answered, “Thanks for the advice, but I won’t be asking *you* to do it.” Turning his back on Viola, he shot a look at Kazafuze. “I need to talk to you outside.”

“All right,” the rep replied. Kazafuze had no reason to refuse—if Akira was far stronger than his hunter rank suggested, that would be a convenient excuse for the defeat of Yajima’s mechs as well. The men excused themselves, apologizing for the intrusion.

“Then another time, perhaps,” Viola replied cheerfully as they exited the room.

Carol smiled wryly. “Viola, don’t tell me you deliberately let Akira shoot you so you’d have an excuse when these guys showed up? If so, you’re even more dedicated than I thought!”

“How mean, Carol!” Viola said with a mock-pout. “You’re suspecting I willingly got shot just so they’d let me off the hook? You’re no better than those men just now.”

“But you *did* get shot on purpose, right?” Carol said with a sly grin.

“Of course not—at least, that’s what I’d like to say. But you wouldn’t believe it anyway, would you?”

“Not for a heartbeat.”

The women exchanged conspiratorial grins. Then Viola dropped her act and came clean to Carol. “For the record, it wasn’t like I *wanted* to get shot. I knew I

could recover from a gunshot wound, so this was simply the best way out of the situation.”

Even if someone could see through lies, there were other ways to deceive them. Viola’s particular specialty was cherry-picking the information she gave out to mislead people in the direction most convenient for her. And readily admitting her involvement to Akira had been part of one such scheme. If she came clean from the start, it would make her next words seem that much more trustworthy to Akira—namely, that she hadn’t set out to kill him, but didn’t mind if he died because of her scheming.

Her words then hadn’t necessarily been a lie. But there was a difference between enacting a plan while fully expecting everyone to die in the process, and enacting a plan in which people *might* die if they were extremely unlucky. Viola had indeed involved Akira and the rest in her latest scheme, but they hadn’t been the only victims—the entire slums had been affected, and Akira and the others had just gotten caught in her web.

Or so her words had led Akira to believe.

Next, Viola had immediately moved the discussion to the question of whether he’d shoot her, diverting his attention away from just how involved she had been and the level of danger she’d knowingly put him in. This had allowed her to minimize the degree of killing intent he’d directed toward her—even if his shot ended up not killing her, he’d feel satisfied enough to let her go.

Her story about using revengeware had been a bluff—partly. From the start, she hadn’t expected it would get him to back down. Her real aim had been not to threaten Akira with Sheryl, but to target his connection to Carol.

“Sheryl was already there, so I just added that part as a bonus,” she explained. “But I was sure he’d hesitate to kill me if he’d have to fight you right afterward. Yet he didn’t even think twice about shooting me. You know, I think your man-trapping skills are getting rusty.”

She spoke with a teasing smile, as if trying to get a rise out of the other woman, but Carol grinned, seemingly unfazed.

“What can I say? I warned you he was a tough nut to crack.”

“You got that right! Even after you gave him the anti-force rounds I provided, which saved his skin, he didn’t flinch at the thought of fighting his savior to the death. Some ‘clientele’ you’ve got there, Carol.”

It was Viola who had supplied Carol with the anti-force rounds that the latter had given Akira during the fight. Viola had intended the ammo as a bargaining chip to get Akira to fight the mech. Her earlier statement to Haraji, about only wanting Akira to fight the grunts, had been a complete lie—shooting mere peons wouldn’t require powerful anti-force rounds, after all.

So Carol had helped Akira out of his tight spot and even offered him extended magazines of expensive, effective ammunition. Viola had been certain that the consequence of having to fight Carol would at least stay the boy’s trigger finger. Thus Carol’s aid to Akira had all been part of Viola’s plan, in which Carol had been an accomplice.

And technically, her plan had worked: in the end, Akira *had* hesitated to fight Carol to the death. Still, Viola had set up other various countermeasures against him as well; for example, the pendant she’d been wearing. She’d worn it so that in the event Akira *did* shoot her, his aim would unconsciously be drawn to the conspicuous pendant on her chest—instead of, say, shooting her in the head.

Of course, this was just one small countermeasure among many. She’d never expected all of them to work, and since he’d ultimately ended up shooting her anyway, obviously more than a few of her preparations had failed. But since she was here now, alive and smiling, her planning had paid off in the end.

Carol grinned as well. “Well, be content that you pulled through. Just think: if I hadn’t befriended Akira, you’d be dead right now.”

“Sure, sure.”

Once again, the scheming women exchanged sly grins.



Akira was on the roof of Sheryl’s base, keeping watch. He’d promised Sheryl he would at least help defend it until the end of the day, as the gang war was technically still underway.

But all was quiet. No one was coming to attack, so Akira had nothing to do.

Sheryl's base was a considerable distance from where the mechs were fighting, and each syndicate's foot soldiers were too preoccupied with attacking the enemy's strongholds to worry about hers. Some smaller gangs had attempted to strip Sheryl's territory from her under the cover of all the commotion, but they'd never made it past the first line of defense—Levin, Kolbe, and the other hunters hired to guard the warehouse.

Still, there was meaning in Akira being here. Sheryl's gang had only risen to its current standing because he was its patron, so she needed to show her potential enemies that he was alive and well. That was also why he was on the roof—he wouldn't have been as visible if she'd stationed him at the entrance.

Sheryl stood beside him as she worked to fulfill her duties as the gang's boss, currently on a call with Katsuragi.

"So now you should be up to speed," she said. "We'll start recovering the relics from the destroyed warehouse tomorrow."

"All right," he agreed. "I'll handle hiring the personnel for that. But are those gangs really gonna be finished by the end of today? Don't get me wrong, I'm not doubting you. But maybe we ought to make a plan B—or even a plan C—in case your intel turns out to be bogus."

"Don't worry. We could technically start the recovery today, but with the slums in such chaos right now, I think it'd be hard to get the personnel for that. Even though Druncam's guarding the warehouse, I think most people will be leery to go near it. That's why we're waiting until tomorrow. In fact, it might even be better to wait a few days from now."

"Well, I suppose..."

Sheryl immediately understood Katsuragi's hesitation. "I get what you're thinking: if we really don't have to worry about Ezent and Harlias after today, then we could open up shop and start turning a profit right away. So you want to know my source and if they can be trusted. I get that, but I'm not at liberty to say. I'm sorry."

"N-No, that's not necessarily what I..." Katsuragi began, then trailed off with a weak laugh when he couldn't come up with an excuse.

Sheryl smiled to herself. “But if you’re really so concerned, just asking you to believe me probably won’t set your mind at ease. So I’d like you to contact Viola for the details instead.”

“Her? Why her?”

“Because, thanks to circumstances I can’t divulge, I’m having her cooperate with us, through Akira, on the relic business. So when it comes to any intel we need to manage the business, she should be able to vouch for its accuracy, even if she can’t disclose the source.”

Katsuragi was so shocked it took a moment for him to respond. When he finally did, his tone was businesslike. “Very well. I trust you.” The seriousness in his voice was proof that his perception of Sheryl had once again changed drastically. Up until then, a small part of him had still thought of her as a poor slum child who’d latched on to Akira by flattering him, and who was riding on his coattails. Deep down, he’d seen her as beneath him.

But now he’d reevaluated her all over again, and in his head, his conclusions made him chuckle with admiration: he now felt she was just as reliable—and as shrewd—as any of his other merchant buddies.

“You’ve really grown up to be full of surprises yourself,” he said with a smile. “Weren’t you supposed to be just a no-name slum girl who became the boss of a small gang because you wanted to protect the other kids?”

“I still am. But this no-name slum girl has Akira by her side now. That’s the difference.”

“I see. I really made the right call investing in you. Here’s to a long and fruitful partnership! Don’t let me down.” His voice had a trace of cockiness, but it was clear he was in a good mood as he hung up.

As she held the now-silent terminal, a confident grin came to Sheryl’s face as well. “Don’t you let me down either, okay?”

She watched the sun set on the slums, smiling happily by Akira’s side.

The mechs continued fighting even into the night. Though Rogert was no longer piloting the black mech and Doran was no longer commanding the white

ones, the members of both Ezent and Harlias thought their highly capable bosses were still in control. So each side was equally relentless as they continued to fight, assuming they were acting on their bosses' orders. Both organizations had been built on their bosses' might, authority, and leadership, so whatever their commanders said was law. They'd even obey an order to retreat without question. So the loyal gang members continued to attack their enemy's base, killing and getting killed, until told otherwise.

Finally, on their last legs, the black mech and the last remaining white mech took each other out. Both machines simultaneously collapsed to the ground with a deafening crash and lay motionless, like gravestones to mark the demise of Harlias and Ezent.

The two largest gangs who had dominated the slums were no more. Their bosses, their most skilled subordinates, and the astonishing amount of money they'd held were gone. Their regime had crumbled in a single day—just as the city had planned from the start.



Ten days after the demise of the two gangs, Akira sped out into the wasteland on his brand-new bike, ready to finally resume his hunter work. The bike was, of course, a desert-utility type, meant for high-ranking hunters who could already afford equipment like a four-hundred-million-aurum powered suit and a one-hundred-million-aurum weapon. In other words, it was quite a capable machine.

The bike had its own layer of force-field armor and featured several armlike emplacements on the back that could fit any large gun. These could be controlled remotely from the bike's control panel and almost completely dampened the recoil of powerful firearms. The bike itself had the horsepower to travel at astounding speeds and the room to carry both his SSB and A4WM (in the emplacements), several packs of ammo, and Akira himself.

Akira had purchased the bike from Katsuragi with his share of the liquidated assets that had come from the bandits who had attacked the warehouse. He'd initially told Sheryl to invest that money into the relic shop, but he'd since asked for it back: like the now-defunct gangs, Akira had spent far too much money

during the war. Ammo, energy packs, and recovery capsules weren't free, and repairs to his suit and protective coat had cost him as well. The cartridges he'd used had been especially spendy. Even his pay for the warehouse job wouldn't cover it all.

So realizing he wasn't exactly in the best financial position to be giving money away, he'd had a talk with Sheryl, and she'd given his portion back to him. He'd only requested the amount she hadn't already spent, and told her that if the business ran into financial trouble as a result, she should have Viola cough up the money instead. After all, he reasoned, if she could afford three billion aurum in revengeware and was so confident she could make the relic business prosper, she was probably loaded.

At first, Akira had suspected that it was probably too late to get his money back, but figured there was no harm in asking. Sheryl was happy to give him the money, but Katsuragi, who was currently holding the funds for her, hadn't been so eager. He didn't want to see money in his possession dwindle, or more accurately, he didn't want less money in the relic shop's budget—money that as a manager of the business, he was free to spend however he saw fit.

Intense negotiations had ensued, at the end of which Katsuragi had begrudgingly allowed Akira to take back his earnings, but begged him to at least buy something from his own store with it. The result? Katsuragi had taken great pains to find Akira a bike that suited his current ability.

As Akira raced across the wasteland on his new bike, he recalled Katsuragi's haggard expression when the merchant had brought the bike over. The boy grinned. *He kept saying he'd gone through hell and back to get this—and seeing what all it can do, I believe it. Say, Alpha, this bike ought to be good enough for the Kuzusuhara depths, right?*

Alpha, sitting on an empty gun emplacement, responded with a smile. *Yes, it should be just fine. But only with my support included, of course!*

Naturally. All right then—let's go plunge into the ruins and seize some relics!

Accelerating through the wasteland with Alpha at his side, Akira was back in action. His destination? The depths of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, the Old World domain that had once seemed so far out of reach. The boy, after

escaping the slums, becoming a hunter, and cheating death many times over, had finally earned the right to enter.

But so far, that was all. He still needed to set foot in that Old World realm.

To explore it.

To achieve results.

And, most of all, to survive.

All so that one day, he'd be able to conquer the impossibly difficult ruin Alpha had hired him for.

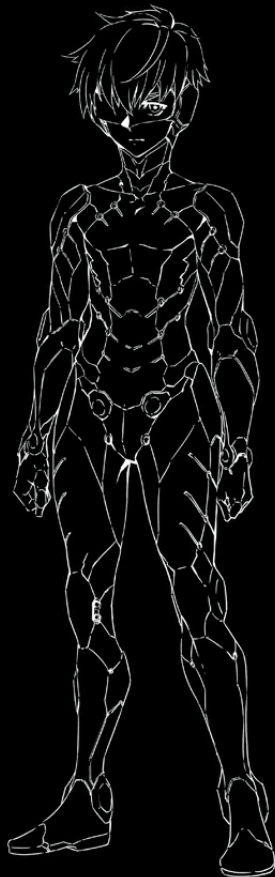
He would still be hunting relics for quite some time yet.

>Episode
005

Total War

Character Status

Akira's current status after spending six hundred million aurum—his portion of the bounty for defeating Monica—on a full set of new gear. His hunter rank was updated after Monica's true identity became public. His new Neoptolemos powered suit cost four hundred million aurum and came with a visor, protective coat, and force-field armor that boasts outstanding defense.



Powered Suit Underneath

NAME

Akira

SEX

Male

HOMETOWN

Kugamayama City,
the East

JOB

Hunter

HUNTER RANK

Rank 30

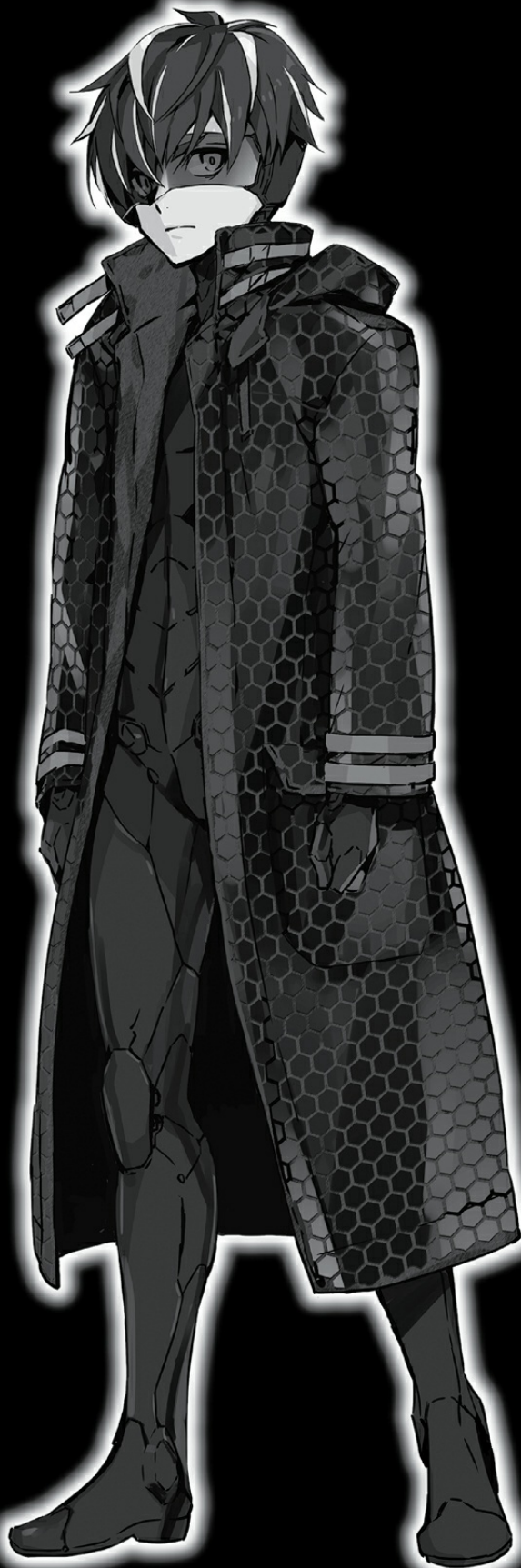
EQUIPMENT

WEAPONS

AAH assault rifle
A2D assault rifle
A4WM grenade launcher
SSB multifunction gun

ARMOR

Neoptolemos, a TL Series,
2A-2N powered suit

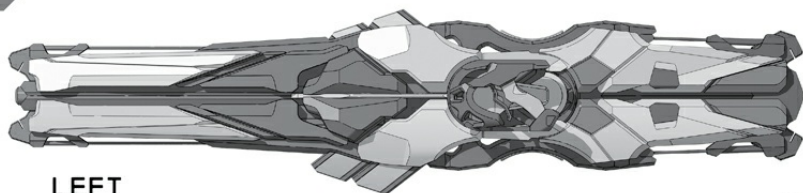


AKIRA

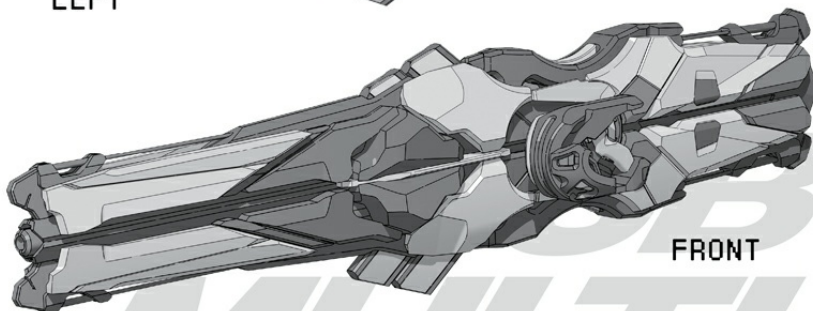
Weapon Guide

A large gun meant for higher-ranked hunters and a departure from Akira's previous firearms. Since its body is taller than Akira himself, he can't wield it without a powered suit and a support arm. The gun has a higher rate of fire than a DVTS minigun, hits with more force than a CWH anti-materiel rifle, and is more accurate than a ten-million-aurum sniper rifle. It's easily modifiable and can fire grenades or missiles just by swapping out parts. Akira paid one hundred million aurum for it.

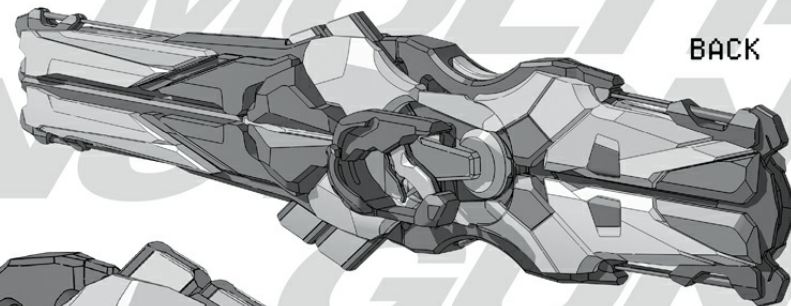
**SSB
MULTIFUNCTION
GUN**



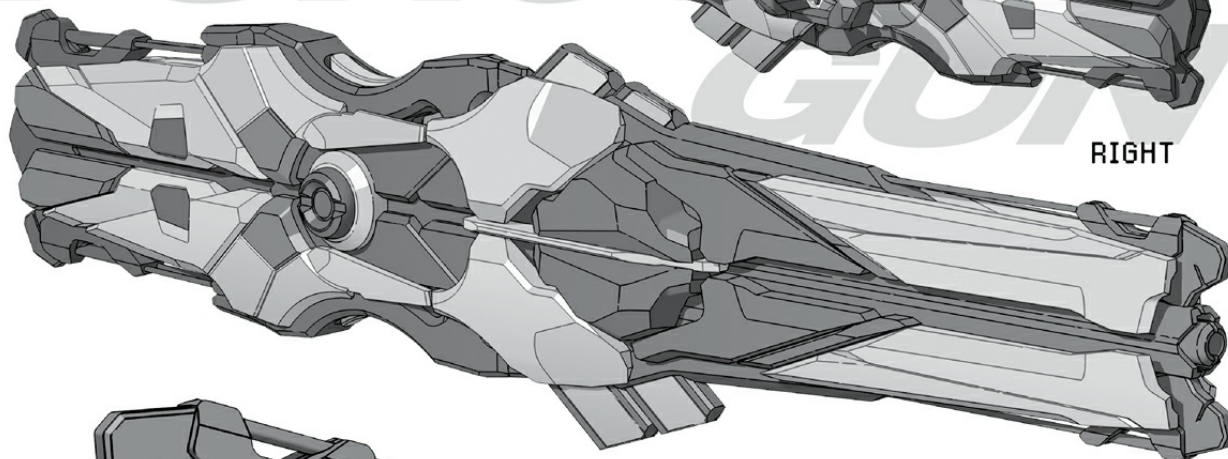
LEFT



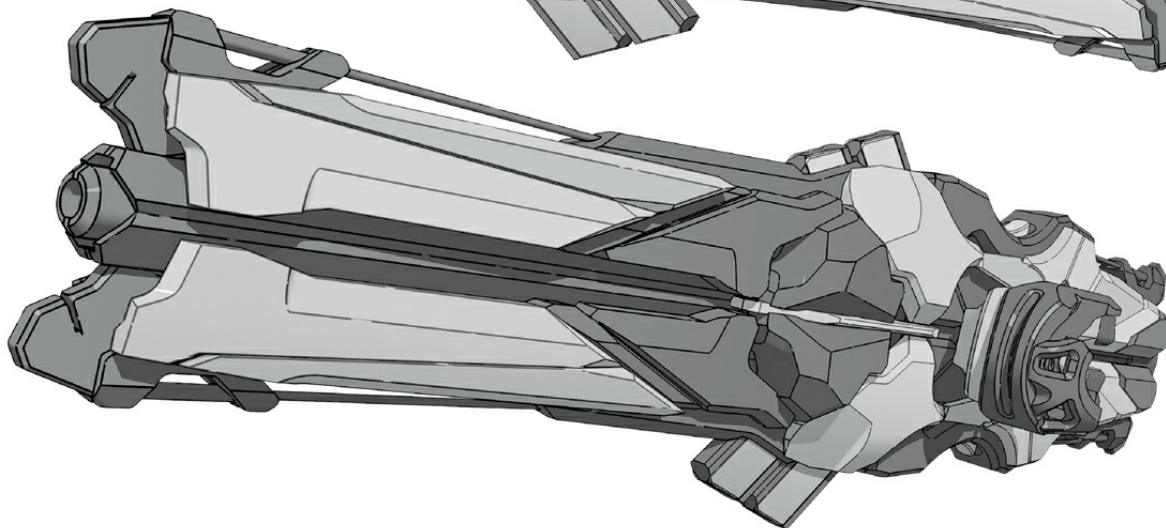
FRONT



BACK



RIGHT



SHIROUSAGI

A mechanical humanoid weapon that Harlias purchased from Yajima Heavy Industries—a cheaper model, but still cutting-edge. Versatile and easy to use, it can field a variety of weapons; even a pilot experienced in combat but inexperienced with mechs could use it in hand-to-hand combat with no issues. This version costs two hundred million aurum per unit, and Harlias purchased a hundred for the war with the Ezent family. Yajima wants the city's defense force to adopt pricier Shirousagis for their arsenal.

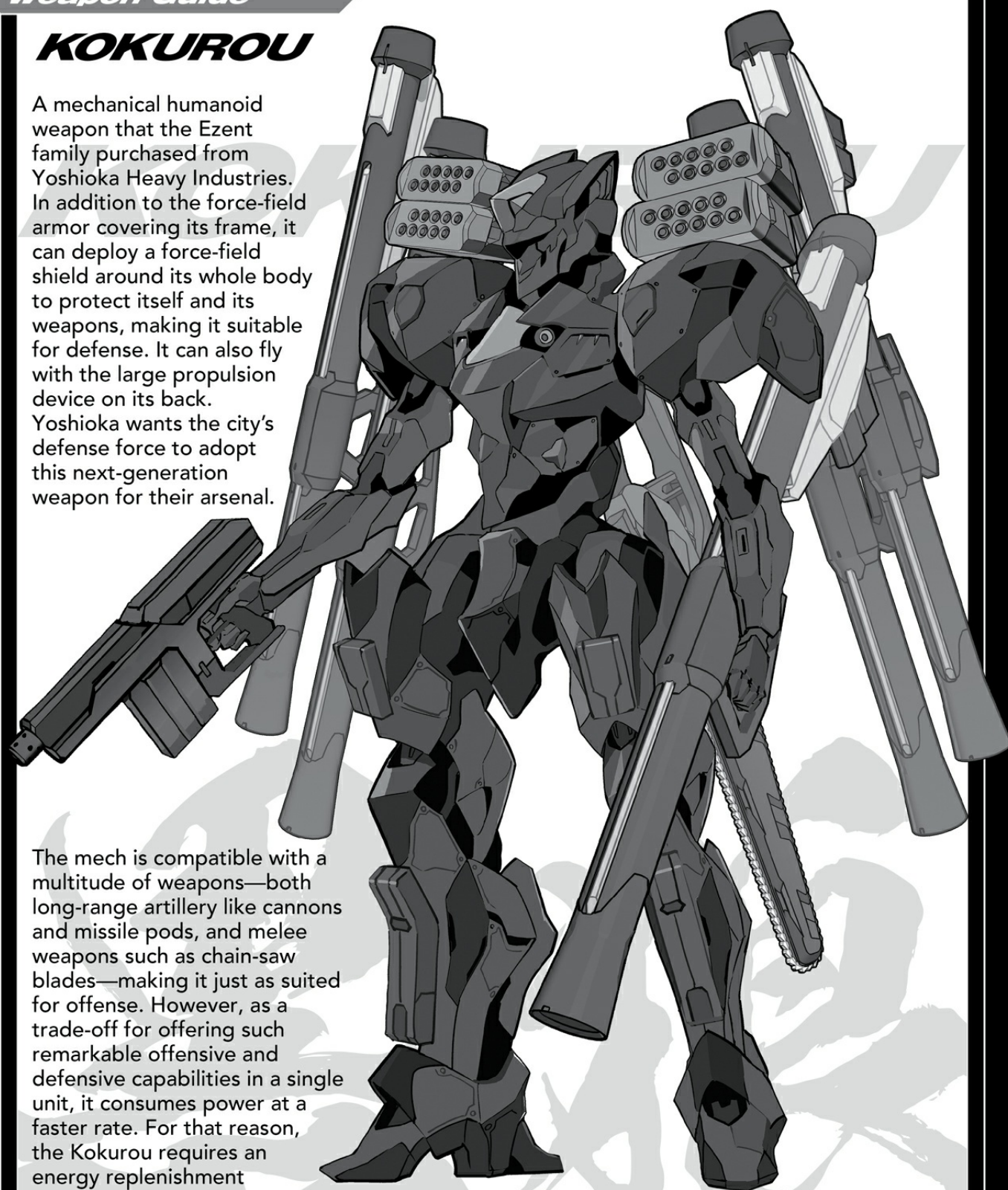


Weapon Guide

KOKUROU

A mechanical humanoid weapon that the Ezent family purchased from Yoshioka Heavy Industries. In addition to the force-field armor covering its frame, it can deploy a force-field shield around its whole body to protect itself and its weapons, making it suitable for defense. It can also fly with the large propulsion device on its back. Yoshioka wants the city's defense force to adopt this next-generation weapon for their arsenal.

The mech is compatible with a multitude of weapons—both long-range artillery like cannons and missile pods, and melee weapons such as chain-saw blades—making it just as suited for offense. However, as a trade-off for offering such remarkable offensive and defensive capabilities in a single unit, it consumes power at a faster rate. For that reason, the Kokurou requires an energy replenishment station to be nearby.







Rebuild* *World

Total War

Author: **Nahuse**

Illustrator: **Gin**

Environmental Artist: **yish**

Mechanical Designer: **cell**

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



"You're supposed to answer, 'No, I just got here,' remember?"

"Nah, you're ten minutes early. You're good."

"Oh, you're already here? Did I make you wait long?"

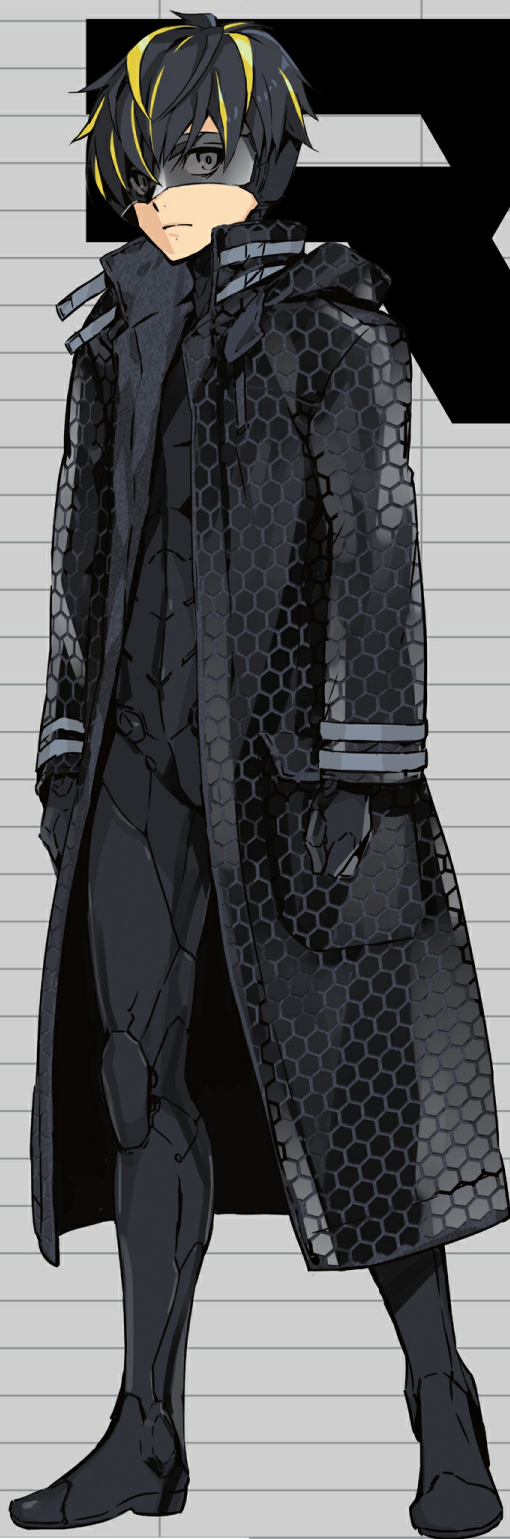
Akira was in the shopping district of lower Kugamayama, waiting for Carol. She showed up dressed in a modest, innocuous outfit—the polar opposite of the risqué Old World-inspired powered suit she usually wore in the ruins.

>Episode
005

Total War

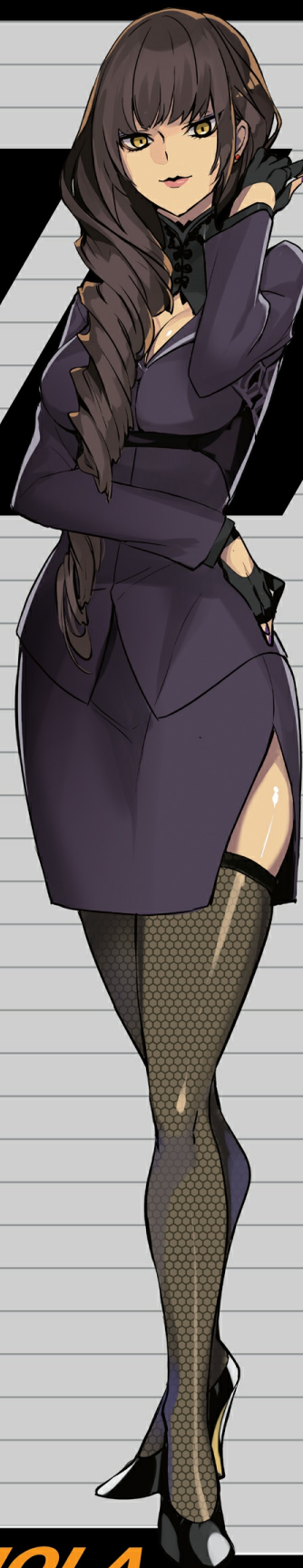
Character

Rebuild World **RVII**



>**AKIRA**

A boy who became a hunter in order to escape the slums. He's spent the six hundred million aurum he got for Monica's defeat to buy a brand-new set of gear.



>**VIOLA**

An information broker dabbling in a wide range of activities. She mainly negotiates on behalf of clients and sells info to a variety of buyers like gang leaders, merchants, and relic hunters.



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Translated by Perry Logan Edited by NegativePrimes

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Illustrations by Gin

Environmental Art by yish Mechanical Designs by cell First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo All rights reserved.

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