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Mechanical Designer: **cell**

Rebuild World VII

Part One
**The AI
Overseer**



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Rebuild **V1** ***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.

"This time she chose a child?"

Rebuild World **V**

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Part One *The AI Overseer*

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Chapter 145: Tsubaki

Powerless and penniless, the boy had been fated to rot in the back alleys of the slums. But he'd resolved to leave that life behind in search of a better one. Dreaming of a roof over his head and three square meals a day, he'd set out to become a relic hunter.

Normally, this would have just meant he'd rot in the ruins instead of the slums. But an encounter with a mysterious woman named Alpha had set the future of this boy—Akira—on a different course.

Alpha had asked Akira to conquer a ruin. In return, he'd receive her support. Only a short time had passed—yet, with her help, Akira had grown by leaps and bounds. His skills were on par with veteran hunters, and everyone praised his ability. Akira himself appreciated that he was far and away more capable than when he'd first met Alpha.

He had danced with death many times since then, struggling desperately to survive, and had come out stronger each time. Yet while his skill couldn't be disputed, what he'd accomplished on his own so far didn't hold a candle to all he'd done with Alpha's help. He knew the voices around him were lauding the power he'd borrowed from Alpha, not his own ability, and this awareness had warped his perception of himself. Compared to all he'd achieved with her support, his own accomplishments had felt insignificant—hardly worthy of praise.

Recently, Akira had gotten involved in a war between two large slum gangs, and he'd found himself up against gigantic mechs. Alpha's support had saved his skin then as well, and with her help, he'd beaten a machine so powerful that the city's defense force had been considering purchasing it.

During this fight, his opponent Rogert had acknowledged and even complimented his skill. But because that skill was Alpha's and not his own, Akira had felt depressed and even a little guilty—Rogert had believed his opponent was truly strong, whereas the boy had really only borrowed that strength from

elsewhere.

After the fight, Sheryl had noticed that Akira continued to feel down. She hadn't known the source of his malaise, but she'd given him a hug and expressed her gratitude for all he'd done for her and her gang. Thanks to him, she'd said, they'd found a secure place to live even amid the harshness of the slums.

Her words had helped him see his power from a different perspective. Perhaps he *was* fooling everyone into thinking Alpha's strength was his. Perhaps having to rely on Alpha *was* pathetic and shameful. But if her support made him able to help those who asked him for assistance, maybe that was good enough for now. He saw his reliance on Alpha in a more positive light, and he felt motivated to work harder so that someday he would truly be this strong on his own.

With his newfound determination, Akira prepared to resume hunting in the ruins. Even with Alpha's support, the location Alpha wanted him to overcome was still far above his capability. He had to work even harder and develop more as a hunter, so that one day he could fulfill her request.

And he still had a long way to go.



After spending the six hundred million aurum he'd earned for the Mihazono job on a brand-new set of gear, he'd had to wait for his order to come in before heading to any more ruins. During his break, he'd gotten involved in several other incidents, including the gang war, but he was now ready to once again focus on his primary goal. Besides a new suit and new weaponry, he'd purchased a large desert utility bike. Now he was tearing through the wasteland on it, en route to the depths of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins.

Just before they approached the ruin's perimeter, the Alpha-designated route displayed in Akira's vision changed abruptly. Akira made a sharp turn, following the new route just as indicated, but he looked surprised. *Alpha, wasn't that the way to the ruins?*

Just ahead, he could see the forward base that Kugamayama City had built. It had still been under construction during his last visit, but it was now complete

and fully functional, ready to aid hunters in conquering Kuzusuhara's interior. A well-kept road also stretched from the base deep into the ruins, and was currently being extended even farther.

The monsters on the outskirts of Kuzusuhara naturally weren't a problem for hunters who were already capable of surviving its depths. But the routes to and from the ruins, blocked by collapsed skyscrapers and mountains of debris, were a nuisance to *any* hunter, no matter how experienced. Worse, the farther one penetrated into the ruin, the more cluttered and harder to navigate those routes became. The monsters also became more dangerous, and so the hunters found it even more difficult to survive with their movements hindered.

For these reasons (among others), the city was having the defense force clear a path of monsters, then build a diligently maintained highway over it, thus facilitating transportation to and from the ruin's depths. Now amateur hunters who were merely curious about what the depths of Kuzusuhara were like had a safe way of getting there. Experienced hunters, meanwhile, could reach the depths quicker and without wasting precious resources on their journey. Despite the tolls charged for its use, the city road was therefore a popular option among hunters of all skill levels.

Akira, too, had naturally assumed he'd be taking this path. But Alpha smiled her usual smile and shook her head.

We won't be using it. We're going somewhere special, so we'll need to take another route. Plus, the city monitors that road and keeps records of everyone who uses it. That's another reason we want to avoid it.

Does that mean we're headed to an undiscovered ruin? Akira grinned, anticipation written all over his face. If this were the case, he could look forward to finding some amazing relics.

You got it, Alpha confirmed with a grin of her own. *So let's get going!*

Yes, ma'am! Akira sped into the Kuzusuhara Ruins without further ado.

Because so many hunters searched for relics on the outskirts of Kuzusuhara, this area was the cleanest, most well-kept part of the ruin. Even back when Akira had fought Yarata scorpions, he'd had no issues driving his bike here. But that was only on the outskirts—now, as Akira progressed deeper into

Kuzusuhara, the condition of the road swiftly and decidedly took a turn for the worse. He quickly saw why even experienced hunters, though unafraid of formidable monsters, still preferred to take the city's highway—before he knew it, there was no longer any road to speak of. The ground beneath him was all debris, and enormous walls of toppled, broken buildings frequently blocked his path forward.

But Akira forced his way through, thanks to Alpha's expert handling. She used the speeding bike to knock minor pieces of debris out of the way; when larger walls loomed before them, Akira shot at them to weaken their structure, and then Alpha smashed the bike through. She also treated smaller rubble piles as jump ramps, from which she cleared towering mountains of wreckage and even raced up and along the sides of collapsed skyscrapers. No obstruction was impassable for them as they made their way farther and farther into the ruin.

Still, all those acrobatics proved just how difficult this part of the ruin was to traverse. *Now I get why we didn't take the truck*, Akira commented dryly. Back when they'd agreed on the Kuzusuhara depths as their next relic-hunting target, Alpha had recommended he purchase a bike, saying he'd have a hard time getting there by truck. Now he understood what she meant.

See? Alpha said smugly. *Aren't you glad you have a bike now?*

Absolutely, he agreed. "A hard time" didn't mean "impossible"—he probably could've made the journey even with the truck, but it would've called for even more excessive, absurd maneuvers. So he was grateful he had a bike to make the trip comparatively easier.

Akira continued to blaze a trail deeper into the ruin until the wheels of his bike were reunited with solid ground at last. He breathed a sigh of relief. *Finally, a normal path! Does that mean we've made it pretty far in?*

There were many reasons an area could become ruined, but the only logical explanation for the normally resilient Old World buildings to lie collapsed in mountains of rubble as far as the eye could see was war—specifically, between hunters desiring the ruin's relics and the monsters nesting there. Not that the monsters never fought each other, but this certainly wasn't the main reason for

a ruin being in such a sorry state. Akira had grown to realize as much during his time as a relic hunter, and he knew that if this area was comparatively intact, it meant very few hunters had made it this far, if any at all. Thus, he had to be considerably deep within the ruin.

Akira excitedly scanned the area for any buildings that clearly housed valuable relics. Ahead, he spotted an enormous wall of toppled, but relatively intact, buildings stacked horizontally on top of each other. Even the gaps between the buildings were filled in with debris, forming a solid mass with no openings whatsoever.

Staring at the tall edifice in awe, Akira had a thought. *It kinda reminds me of the wall around the inner city. I guess Kuzusuhara has something similar?* Taking this as proof that he really had reached the ruin's depths, he sighed with a sense of self-accomplishment and continued to marvel at his surroundings. But his bike showed no sign of stopping—on the contrary, it sped up, heading toward the massive wall.

Alpha, what are you doing? Akira asked, puzzled.

Heading to our destination, of course.

This isn't it?

No. I never said we'd arrived, did I? It's still a little farther ahead.

A little farther? You mean... Akira looked ahead, but he could only see the massive wall before him. Then realization dawned. *Don't tell me we're going to jump over that?! There's no way we can—!*

When there's a will, there's a way. Don't worry, it'll be a cinch with me at the wheel.

Thanks to being on solid ground, the bike was already approaching maximum speed—it was too late to pump the brakes. But if they continued straight ahead, they'd collide with the wall. Even wearing a powered suit, Akira was certain the impact would crush him, and he reflexively slowed his sense of time. As his consciousness stretched out, the wall before him seemed to approach much more slowly. But he knew it wouldn't make his speed any slower in real time, so his face was the very picture of panic. *If it's really a cinch like you say,*

then you'd better make sure it works! I'm counting on you!

But of course! Don't worry—leave everything to me. Here we go!

In direct contrast to Akira's unease, Alpha grinned at him with unbridled confidence. Then she took total control of the bike. (She'd relinquished a little control to Akira so he could practice handling it.)

The bike instantly changed course, moving as if possessed by a divine force. Using slight dents in the ground and small junk piles to gain altitude, it launched itself into the air. Momentum propelled the bike forward, but jumping immediately after a sharp turn severely compromised its balance. And since its wheels had already left the ground, no amount of maneuvering would help. An accident would be unavoidable at this rate. Akira clenched his teeth, bracing himself.

But Alpha's actions were all thoroughly calculated—she wasn't worried about a crash in the least. Though it had seemed like she'd lost control, the bike's wheels landed on the side of a nearby building at the perfect angle. Then, without losing speed, the bike raced straight up the building's surface—perpendicular to the ground—and launched off it toward the enormous wall ahead. After touching down, the bike shot right up the wall toward the sky.

Akira had previously used his powered suit and the recoil from his weapons to parkour down the side of a skyscraper, but he was now going *up* instead of down, and much faster than before since he was on a bike. He looked terrified. *Alpha, refresh my memory—did this bike have a feature that let it go up walls?!*

If you're asking whether it came with one installed, then no.

Then why?!

For better control and performance, and to allow sudden acceleration and braking, this bike's tires adhere to the ground especially well. Combine that with my expertise, and something like this is child's play.

That's not what I mean! If there's nothing that lets it go up walls, what if we fall?!

Don't worry, she assured him with a big smile. That won't happen—as long as you don't panic and throw off our balance. So stay calm, okay?

Akira immediately stopped complaining and concentrated on keeping the bike upright. His efforts paid off—the bike made it to the peak of the enormous wall without incident. Alpha skillfully landed the bike on top.

Grateful to be alive, Akira breathed a deep sigh of relief. *I seriously thought I was a goner!*

Why? I told you we'd be fine. Even if we'd fallen—which would never happen with me in control, mind you—your suit has a stabilizer. In the worst case, you could've created footholds in the air to keep from falling. You wouldn't have died.

That's not the problem here! Even if he had survived, a fall like that would've been terrifying. This was why his sigh had been so deep.

So, is this our destination? he asked.

Just a little farther. Look there. She pointed out beyond the wall. Akira carefully rode up to the wall's edge to get a closer look, and he couldn't contain his surprise at what he saw: a pristine Old World city spread out before him.

A place this intact exists here? He was just as baffled as he was shocked. He'd seen undamaged buildings like these on the horizon when he was previously hunting in Kuzusuhara, and had assumed they were located much deeper in, close to the heart of the ruin. Akira had come fairly deep in by now, but Kuzusuhara was a massive site. He'd only just reached the midpoint—in other words, he was still on the outskirts of its depths. Yet right before him, just beyond the wall, was clearly an intact, abandoned city. He couldn't believe such a vast metropolis existed only this far in.

But Alpha didn't look one bit surprised. *Now then, shall we head in?*

Into the city? Sure, let's— Whoa?!

They'd climbed to the top of the wall, so it stood to reason they'd have to come back down. Akira knew that, of course, but Alpha had taken his casual reply as a signal to descend, and he hadn't been prepared for the sudden drop. Without meaning to, he let out a yelp.

A short distance away, a small aircraft was monitoring him as he made his descent. But Akira didn't notice, and Alpha didn't let him know.

As they entered the Old World city, Akira was immediately taken in by the scenery. With all the buildings around standing uniform and immaculate, he couldn't help but feel like he was intruding on hallowed ground. The structures were all from an era long past, but the techniques used to build them—far ahead of modern technology—made the city seem more futuristic than anything else.

He felt like he'd set foot in a sanctuary. It made him wonder whether it really was okay to barge in here and loot the relics, and not just because of the tough mechanical guards roaming the area. Hunting for relics was his job, of course, but the majesty and dignity of the city surrounding him gave him pause.

What now, Alpha? he asked. If she told him they were going to hunt relics here, he'd have no choice but to obey—it would be an order from Alpha, after all. Using her as an excuse to make himself feel better about his task, he waited for her reply.

But Alpha's next words caught him completely off guard. *We're heading to our destination, of course. Then we're going to hunt relics there.*

What? You mean we're still not there yet?

No, it's in this general area. But specifically, it's over there. She pointed to a gigantic skyscraper enshrined in the center of the city. *And just so you know, the smaller buildings near us are probably also packed with relics, but hunting those is a no-no. Their security is especially tough—you can probably tell that much already from how the buildings have remained intact. Even as you are now, you wouldn't be a match for their guards.*

Oh. Well, if you say so. To himself, he thought, *Wouldn't a large skyscraper in the middle of the city have even stronger security?* But he quickly shelved that doubt. He'd already decided he'd trust in Alpha and obey her, no matter what she said. If she told him the truth, great. And even if she didn't, that was fine too—he was so indebted to her at this point that he could overlook it.

For her part, Alpha had learned how to handle Akira over her many exchanges with him, but even she couldn't read that far into his response. He hadn't fought her over her decision, but if he was inwardly unhappy with it, that could

lead to trouble. So she smiled smugly to reassure him. *Don't worry. Even if the guards weren't a problem, there'd be no point in searching for relics in those buildings anyway. In the building we're headed to, you'll be able to collect more relics than you can carry, instantly and without any hassle.*

Really? Wow! All right! His mood immediately did a one-eighty. *Just a little farther, right? Then let's go!*

Alpha smiled, pleased with his boyish enthusiasm. Off they headed to their destination: the towering skyscraper in the city's center.

As Akira sped along the Old World road, he passed countless mechanical guards on both sides—over a hundred in all. As soon as he zipped by, they deactivated their camouflage, revealing themselves. Some flew in the sky, while others ran down the road or the sides of buildings; but they all made their way ahead of Akira so they'd be in a position to eliminate this trespasser the moment he became a problem.

Once he got closer to his destination, Akira spotted a road leading up the side of the skyscraper. Then he realized it was the same road he was currently on—the road ahead curved vertically, connecting the ground to the side of the skyscraper, and continued straight up the building. There was no danger of him crashing into the building wall, but a vehicle that wasn't built to ride along vertical surfaces would undoubtedly fall off.

Akira's bike, however, went straight up the building. The road was smooth and superbly maintained, so it was easy to gain the necessary momentum. The deciding factor, though, was Alpha's expert control of the bike. With her at the wheel, Akira never had to worry about dropping.

On the way up, he passed a vehicle on the opposite side of the road. It had no driver's seat and resembled an automated container. Like Akira, it was traveling along the building vertically, as though it were completely natural for vehicles to do so here. Anyone who saw the scene and didn't know better would think the pull of gravity itself had changed direction.

Hey Alpha, are all Old World vehicles able to ride up walls like that?

Depends on the region and time period. Looks like that's the case here, at

least.

Feeling like he'd learned something, he pressed onward. The vertical road curved into the building near the top, leading into a large service entrance on one of the skyscraper's upper floors.

Once inside, Akira braked and let out a sigh. "All right, *now* we've got to be at our destination, right?"

Yes, this is it. We're here.

Akira grinned in anticipation of all the relics he was about to find. But Alpha's look became stern. *Okay, listen up! As long as you do exactly as I say, this place should be safe. So even if something unusual happens, stay calm and pay it no mind.*

All right. They were in the depths of a ruin, after all—Old World territory. Places like these were normally extremely dangerous, so Akira had already intended to follow Alpha's orders to the letter.

But then a look of puzzlement crossed his face. *Wait, "should" be safe?* Whenever she assured him he'd be safe as long as she was with him, she was usually quite confident. So a word of uncertainty like "should" had immediately jumped out at him.

But this tiny concern was banished from his mind the next instant, as he felt a sudden presence right beside him. It was so close he couldn't believe he hadn't noticed it until now. If this had been a battle and the presence had attacked him, he would've been dead.

Alpha had said not to panic, no matter what. Taking her words to heart, he carefully and calmly turned to look beside him.

A woman was standing there.

When did she...?! Wait, maybe she's a hologram and just looks real in my augmented vision? No—she really exists! Her reading's right there on my scanner! Then why didn't I notice her? This is a ruin, so I thought I was being plenty cautious! No, before that—why didn't Alpha warn me? Don't tell me she didn't notice either?!

As Akira's thoughts jumbled around in his head, the woman just stared at him with an unfriendly look. But she didn't act hostile, which helped him calm down a bit.

"Um..."

Seeking to figure something out about this situation on his own, he took stock of the woman. She wore a black dress—likely Old World-made—and she didn't look like a hunter. So if she was here in this building, she was probably similar to the AI who'd managed the Serantal Building back in Mihazono. That much he could figure out.

But the rest was still a mystery. He could tell from the woman's gaze that he wasn't exactly welcome here, but why was she just staring at him without a word? The Serantal Building AI had at least told him to leave. Akira lacked interpersonal communication skills to begin with, so he had no idea what the proper response to this kind of reception was.

What should I do, Alpha?

Let's see. First off—

"First off," said a third party aloud, interrupting their telepathic conversation, "you should at least recognize that you are not welcome here. However, as long as you behave yourself, I won't force you to leave."

Akira couldn't hide his shock at having been overheard. Alpha, on the other hand, didn't look one bit surprised—just irritated. Then Akira noticed the woman's gaze was now on Alpha. The woman had regarded Akira with only an unfriendly expression, but her gaze toward Alpha was filled with contempt.

No doubt about it, Akira thought to himself. She can see Alpha!

The woman's eyes slid back to Akira, and her expression became lukewarm once more. "Thank you for visiting the Tsubakihara Building. I am Tsubaki, the interface managing this building and the surrounding area."

"O-Okay," Akira replied, unsure what else to say.

"I will guide you to your destination. This way, please." She headed farther into the building.

Nonplussed, Akira gave Alpha a questioning look.

Come on, Akira, let's go, she said.

“R-Right.” Bewildered, he followed Tsubaki for now. He had a boatload of questions, but they could wait—currently he wasn’t in the right state of mind to process the answers.

As he trailed behind Tsubaki, his gaze wandered around the building. He spotted several more automated containers like the one he’d seen outside. Some were traveling across the floor like normal, but he also saw some riding along the ceiling upside down. By this point, such things didn’t surprise him, but as he watched one container on the ceiling suddenly fly into the air and out of the building, he recalled something he’d been told.

Wasn’t flying in the sky supposed to be dangerous, since the sky’s populated by deadly monsters? Or maybe containers like this will be fine because they’re on the same side as the enemy?

In that case, he was currently in a building where enemies were free to come and go as they pleased. And since they hadn’t attacked Tsubaki, she was probably on the enemy’s side as well. No—if she was the managing AI here, she was probably the one controlling them.

Suddenly, the woman walking in front of him seemed a lot more dangerous.

After walking for some time, she stopped and turned to face Akira. The boy involuntarily gave a jolt, but Tsubaki paid it no mind. With a neutral expression, she pointed to an enormous door beside her that had slid open the moment Tsubaki had stopped.

“This is the room you’re looking for. Once you’re finished here, leave immediately.”

Akira glanced questioningly at Alpha, who only nodded. Akira headed in first on his bike, and Alpha followed behind him. After passing through the door, Alpha turned back to look at Tsubaki. The woman was glaring at Alpha with a look of absolute loathing.

The door shut, blocking Alpha from Tsubaki’s view. But Tsubaki continued to monitor them.

Chapter 146: Overstock and a Deal

Tsubaki had ushered Akira into a spacious storeroom within the Tsubakihara Building—so spacious, in fact, that Akira wondered how a room so large could possibly fit inside a skyscraper. The room was filled with rows of shelves that reached to an unbelievably high ceiling.

The shelves in the back were much shorter, but they were stuffed full of boxes. And every one of them contained relics so valuable they couldn't be found in just any old ruin. In the storeroom of a building within an untouched Old World city, Akira had come upon a literal treasure trove of relics. He could hardly fathom the amount of money he could make if he sold them all. Alpha had been absolutely right—with this many relics in one place, there was no need to head to any of the other buildings in the city.

He was enraptured and beside himself with joy, seeing all the relics before him. However, doubt and confusion quickly overshadowed those feelings—doubts regarding this city, this building, this room, and most of all Tsubaki herself. That woman and Alpha most likely knew each other, and he could tell they weren't exactly on good terms. He had been curious but hadn't asked Alpha about it—he hadn't wanted to risk sabotaging their partnership by prying too much.

Still, he couldn't just ignore the issue. Telling himself that at this point it would be more unnatural *not* to ask at all, he spoke up. "All right, Alpha, don't you think it's about time you explained yourself?"

He deliberately omitted what he specifically wanted her to explain. That way, if there was something she didn't want to talk about, couldn't tell him, or didn't want him to know, she could abbreviate her explanation accordingly. This was Akira's best effort at choosing his words.

Alpha responded to Akira's question with her usual smile. *All right. But let's work while we talk. Staying too long and angering that woman will only lead to another conflict on our hands.*

Akira nodded and immediately got to work. The boxes on the shelves here were all filled with a variety of relics. And since the boxes were Old World-made, they counted as relics too—and would sell for a large amount in their own right. Some boxes were transparent, allowing Akira to see their contents. Others were opaque, but could be seen through with Alpha's help. For several boxes, even Alpha couldn't tell what was inside.

There were Old World garments among the relics as well; Akira couldn't tell if some of them were work clothes or meant for everyday wear. Some boxes contained coats and inner wear, and some held articles that could be underwear, a belt, or some kind of string—he wasn't sure which. He also found several transparent cases made of something resembling glass or plastic. Inside were objects shaped like three-dimensional bipyramids, made with a material like rubber, ceramic, or metal, yet oddly grainy to the touch. He wasn't sure *what* these were—were they just for decoration, or did they serve some purpose?

He even came across bladed weapons. Remembering how powerful Old World blades were said to be, he grabbed several, thinking he might keep a few for himself instead of selling them. He looked around for guns as well, but couldn't find any.

As he selected which relics he wanted to take with him from the trove, he listened to Alpha's explanation.

The long and short of it, she told him, is that I made a deal with that AI to let you take this building's overstock. These are scrap by Old World standards, but they're actually good as new. The products are swapped out for newer, better models every season. After a fixed period, products are removed from production in order to make way for new models, and so are rendered obsolete.

Of course, Alpha went on, even though these items are scrap, AIs aren't under any obligation to just hand them over to trespasser thieves—even well-mannered people who are only forced to steal out of desperation because they're poor. Such a well-intentioned thief would usually aim for the scrap, which might make negotiation at least possible, but wouldn't normally suffice to convince an AI. That's why you need to intimidate them with power. You need to be strong enough to make them think that their wisest option is to hand over

the goods without a fight—that the damage they’d incur from fighting you would be more devastating than parting with some scrap.

She concluded, And now you’re strong enough to fit that criteria. That’s why we came here. When she told us to leave immediately after we’re done here, she basically meant, “I’ll let you at least have the trash, so take it and get the hell out.”

“Oh, now I see,” Akira replied. “In that case, we’d better hurry and beat it before she gets mad.” He felt satisfied with the explanation he’d received. Many doubts still lingered, of course, but his curiosity had been sated enough that he could save pursuing those answers for later. As he continued selecting relics to take with him, he looked around at the staggering amount of items in the room. “Still, these are all considered trash just because they’re obsolete? What a waste! Why is there so much, anyway?”

Because these Old World systems are programmed to provide for a certain number of city residents, and they still think those people are here. No one buys or uses the goods anymore, but they still get manufactured and lined up on shelves. Then periodically, they’re purged to make room for more. That process keeps repeating ad infinitum, so an amount like this can pile up in no time.

“Why don’t they just stop making them? Isn’t it pointless?”

You might think it’s pointless, but the systems don’t. They never doubt their programming for a second. So they’ve kept making them all this time.

“Ever since the Old World?”

That’s right. Most of the AIs controlling these systems are the same way. Even if you think their actions are pointless, they won’t stop. Even if an AI were to attain self-awareness and start doubting their own programming, they wouldn’t be able to stop manufacturing without the proper clearance. And AIs don’t have that clearance.

“Ah, so that’s how it is.”

Yes. That said, there are some outliers too. Like more advanced AIs who grow to doubt their own programming. If their personalities develop enough that they prioritize their own interests over their original function, ignoring the roles and

rules set for them, a lot can change.

“A lot? Like what?”

Well, for example, they might decide to do business with humans from the modern world. That might be how corporations can buy Old World products using coron. Or the AI, no longer bound to an Old World corporation, could launch a business of its own in the modern world with modern currency. Some of those corporations might even be part of the ELGC.

“An Old World corporation? Really? That seems kind of significant.”

It’s just a possibility. Don’t slow down, now. Keep those hands moving.

“Oh, sorry.”

How did Alpha know this much, and how had she negotiated with Tsubaki in the first place? Akira concentrated on his work to keep his mind off these questions.

After finishing up his preparations to take the relics home, Akira hopped on his bike with renewed zeal. “All right! Now we just have to make it back home. Er... These *will* all make the trip, right?” He glanced back at the massive pile of relics on the back of his bike. He’d strapped the boxes on top with a single belt, and used the bike’s armlike weapon emplacements—essentially support arms—to hold the luggage in place. But the load was clearly compromising the bike’s center of gravity. The bike wheels adhered to surfaces well enough to scale a wall, but that was the only thing keeping the vehicle upright. Akira couldn’t help but be concerned.

Alpha, however, smiled confidently. *Don’t worry! With me in control, we won’t have a problem. We’ll just have to be a little more careful when we scale the wall.*

“Really? Okay, if you say so. Right—the wall. We *are* gonna have to go back up that thing to get back home, aren’t we? Well then, I’m counting on you to get us back home safe. Let’s go!”

As Akira approached the storeroom exit, the door automatically slid open. Tsubaki was still waiting there. She was extraordinarily beautiful, he thought,

but faced with her stony expression, Akira felt a little timid around her. “A-All right, I got what I came for, so I’ll be going now,” he told her.

“Be careful on your way back,” she said.

“R-Right, I will.”

He was about to pass her by, but before he could, she spoke again. “Let me ask you a question. It seems your communication bandwidth has been tuned specifically to connect to that woman. Is that really okay with you?”

“Huh?” Akira didn’t understand her question, merely looking blank.

But Alpha showed a very different reaction—her usual smile vanished.

I’m warning you now, she told Tsubaki with a frigid glare. Say any more than that, and you will officially be my enemy.

Tsubaki immediately stared back just as coldly. *And I’m warning you: you’re in my domain now. I might not have the authority you do, but don’t assume your little threats will work on me.*

You’ve been advised.

Try it, bitch. You know you can’t order me around, or you wouldn’t have needed to negotiate with me.



Akira couldn't hear what they were saying, but he could sense the thick tension in the air. It felt like a fight was about to break out. His eyes darted back and forth between them, and he felt panicky.

The two women glared icily at each other a little longer.

Then Alpha was the first to move. She turned her back on the other woman and smiled cheerfully at Akira. *Ready to go?*

"O-Oh, sure. Whoa?!" Under Alpha's control, the bike took off like a speeding bullet. Akira had to react quickly to keep the bike from falling over. In his augmented vision, he saw Alpha beside him, flying parallel to the bike.

Once they were gone, Tsubaki heaved a sigh and disappeared into the back of the building.

Akira scaled the massive wall surrounding Tsubaki's territory and made it back to the ruined section of Kuzusuhara. Feeling like he'd just made it through a minefield, he breathed a sigh.

Hey Alpha, what was that "bandwidth" talk back there about? Even he could tell he probably shouldn't ask about it, but at this point he felt ignoring it would be more unnatural. His relief from having made it over the wall safely had also loosened his tongue.

Alpha replied with her usual smile, *Oh, that? It's quite simple. Your bandwidth is becoming more attuned to me as time passes.*

She explained that Akira could stay connected to her because of his ability as an Old Domain User. The burden of sharing data with her had initially been immense, but as his brain had adjusted to the load over time, his bandwidth as a User had become more suited to her connection. She was also filtering his communications to reduce the risk of his brain overloading from a massive influx of data, which refined his attunement to her further. The more specialized his bandwidth became, the more data they could exchange safely and without worry. This allowed Akira to receive even greater support from Alpha, and this refinement would continue as long as they stayed connected.

Akira looked confused. *What part of that is bad? Those all sound like pluses to me.*

That's right, she said. They're all benefits.

Then why'd Tsubaki ask me if I was okay with it?

Perhaps she's looking at it from a different viewpoint, Alpha said offhandedly. Akira could be likened to a data terminal: An Old Domain User who was tuned to only communicate with Alpha was like a data terminal that could only connect to Kugamayama City. The ability to access the city was vital, of course, but if it couldn't connect to any other city and had a filter that leaked all of its communications to Kugamayama, its use would be severely limited.

However, Alpha explained, this was an outdated perspective and only applied if Old Domain Users were still just as commonplace as data terminals today. Akira didn't need to connect to other Old World cities to gather information—in fact, she stressed he shouldn't, because it might make him more likely to be discovered as a User. Plus, Alpha was his lifeline—if he wanted her full support, it was in his best interests to be as attuned to her as possible. *So right now, there's no need for you to connect with anyone else,* she finished.

Oh, okay, now I get it. If she was seeing me as a data terminal like you said, I can see why she'd worry. But we've already come this far—if I'd refused your support in the past because I was worried about something like that, I would've died a long time ago. And I won't make it from here on without your help either, so I'm fine with things as they are now.

Glad to hear it, Alpha said with a smile. But then her expression hardened. *To tell the truth, though, there's another possible reason. I think she wanted to open a separate channel with you so she could talk with you in private.*

In private? About what?

As I mentioned earlier, I've placed a filter on your communications, so I'll always know who you're using your ability to talk to and what about. If she wanted to speak with you regarding something she didn't want me to hear, she'd need a different channel.

Oh yeah? But what would she need to talk to me about?

Good question. I have my suspicions, though. She adopted a worried expression. *For instance, maybe she wanted you to put your arrangement with*

me on the back burner and prioritize doing a job for her instead. She might've been hoping to negotiate terms for this, and she couldn't really do that with me listening in, right?

Akira's eyes widened in surprise.

With a knowing smile, she brought her face close to his ear, mimicking Tsubaki's voice. *"I can pay ten billion coron as a reward, and offer other services too. So forget about that illusory woman you can't even touch, and choose me instead—I'll make it worth your while."* If she'd come to you with a proposal like that, could you have refused?

Akira smiled wryly. *Yeah, I would've, no question. You're always looking after me, and I owe you a mountain of debt. If I'm going to repay all that someday, I've gotta focus on completing your job.*

Thank you, Akira. I'm thrilled to hear you say that. She beamed with genuine happiness, then a knowing smile came to her lips. *Just for the record, I didn't want her to steal you away from me with a cheap offer like that either. Hence why I was so angry with her back at the Tsubakihara Building.*

Oh, really? Makes sense. He supposed that if this were the case, the two women must have been glaring like that to intimidate each other from communicating with him. This explanation seemed satisfactory.

I don't care if you accept her request after finishing mine, she said. *Just not before then, okay?*

Won't that be a long time from now, though?

That depends on you, she said with a wink.

Point taken. All right, guess I'd better work even harder!

Akira still had many trials ahead of him if he wanted to finish Alpha's request. And that included getting back to Kugamayama City safe and sound. Alpha and Akira grinned at each other, then focused once more on making it through Kuzusuhara's depths.



In a virtual room where the laws of physics didn't apply, Tsubaki sat in midair

surrounded by floating decor as she watched over her territory.

Tsubaki wasn't just responsible for the city inside the barricade of buildings but the area around it as well. She didn't manage the outskirts in the same way she did the city, but the crumbled, abandoned buildings and piles of debris around the Old World metropolis were under her watch all the same.

She saw Akira and Alpha exiting her territory and watched them carefully. Then, once she was certain they were no longer on her turf, her deal with Alpha—and her special treatment of Akira—came to an end.



Akira was heading back from Kuzusuhara's depths more carefully than he'd come, so that his load of relics wouldn't fall off the bike. He glanced back at the wall he'd just scaled. Despite its size, it had already disappeared from view, thanks to the colorless fog in the air. Even at a low density, it clouded the sky, preventing him from seeing too far into the distance.

Is that why no one in Kugamayama could find the Old World city, despite it being so close by? Akira wondered to himself. But he wasn't entirely satisfied with this explanation, so he turned to Alpha. *Hey, if that place is so close to Kugamayama, how come no one else has found it yet?* The Kuzusuhara depths weren't easy to reach, but closer to the city than many other ruins. He found it odd that no hunters had discovered the Old World city until now. *I know it's pretty well hidden behind that enormous wall and all, and the skies are too dangerous for anyone to have flown over the area and seen it. But why couldn't someone just send a small drone at a low enough altitude to clear the wall and see what's beyond it?* Sure, he'd made it there through brute force, riding up the wall with a bike, but there had to be other methods out there.

The reason is simple, Alpha said cheerfully. *And you're about to find out what it is.*

Akira looked alarmed. As if on cue, a group of approaching monsters appeared in his augmented vision.

Are those what I think they are?

Weapon dogs. You've fought them before, remember?

The smallest weapon dog in the pack was over ten meters tall, while the larger ones towered over twenty meters. Each was outfitted with munitions like cannons, machine guns, and missile pods as large as their bodies, making their destructive power clear even at a glance. And they were coming in droves. As he studied the scanner readings from his suit and his bike, the monsters entered his detection range one after another, bounding and leaping across ruined buildings and debris in order to reach him.

Those are—he gulped—a lot bigger than I remember.

Well, they're in the depths of the ruin. Of course they'll be larger than the ones on the outskirts.

It was true. Despite being the same type of monster in the same ruin, these creatures' sizes, weapons, numbers, and movements as a unit were all on a completely different level compared to those on the outskirts, reminding Akira how much more dangerous the depths of this ruin truly were. Now he could see why low-flying drones wouldn't be able to approach the wall—the monsters on the ground would just concentrate their fire on the aircraft and shoot it down. The drone would have nowhere to hide in the air, after all.

I see. Yeah, I guess the depths are just that deadly. Oh well! Leaving control of the bike entirely to Alpha, Akira stood up, grabbed his SSB and A4WM from their emplacements, and held them at the ready. Firing from a position with such unstable footing would normally have been impossible, but his suit's stabilizer and Alpha's expert maneuvering kept his feet just as firm as on land.

Don't worry, I'll handle the bike, she said. You just focus on those monsters.

Roger that!

The weapon dogs lined up Akira in their sights and began firing. A salvo of cannon fire, gunfire, and guided micromissiles flew in from multiple directions, threatening to blow him and everything nearby to smithereens.

Alpha countered by accelerating. The rough ground below was barely walkable, let alone drivable, so she drove up on the comparatively smooth sides of collapsed buildings to gain speed and get Akira out of range of the salvo in time. Still, they couldn't completely escape the wide radius of the canines' fire, so the rest was up to Akira. He concentrated, slowed down his sense of time,

held his guns akimbo, and got ready to intercept the incoming artillery.

As the cannon fire fell around him, a rogue shell flew in from the side, but he evaded by twisting his body. Then he blocked sprays of bullets with the force-field armor on his protective coat and shot down the guided micromissiles. After a volley of grenades to keep the weapon dogs back, he shredded them to mincemeat with his titan-killer.

The weapon dogs of the depths were resilient—some of them even had enough life force to keep attacking for some time after their heads had been blown off. But Akira's bullets blew away much of their bodies as well. Their innards scattered all over, and pieces of ruined weaponry littered the ground.

Of course, eliminating one pack of weapon dogs had alerted reinforcements. As other packs approached, Akira directed his heavy gunfire at them, which in turn drew more of the monsters' cannon fire toward him. The surrounding area took even more damage, and since Akira was moving quickly, stray shells landed in a wider area. In no time at all, the carnage inflicted upon the landscape increased exponentially.

In other words, a level of destruction typical for a battle in the Kuzusuhara depths.

Akira was now up against several packs of large, powerful weapon dogs. But rather than running away, he'd chosen to eliminate them all—otherwise, they would continue to chase him for who knew how long. And if they were to pursue him as far as Kugamayama, the city might think Akira had deliberately led the monsters there and send the defense force to wipe out the weapon dogs—and Akira.

Not to mention that the closer they got to the outskirts of Kuzusuhara, the higher the risk of running into other hunters, making Akira's journey to the depths more likely to be found out.

Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have cared too much. But right now he was carrying the relics he'd gotten from Tsubaki, which couldn't be found in just any old ruin. He needed to make sure that their origin stayed secret until he sold them—otherwise people might get curious, investigate

where he'd been, and discover the city where Tsubaki dwelled.

If word spread of an Old World city beyond the wall of buildings and hunters showed up in droves, Tsubaki would undoubtedly be furious, and she'd immediately know it was Akira's fault. So he didn't want to encounter any relic hunters on the way back if he could help it. And he knew that if he destroyed all the weapon dogs instead of fleeing as they gave chase, he'd have a better chance of escaping Kuzusuhara unnoticed.

So even though it was a pain, he needed to take them down.

He unfastened the load of luggage from his bike and, hoping against hope that no stray bullets would hit the relics, left them behind. Then, once he'd gone a considerable distance away, he drew the weapon dogs' attention to himself. As they bounded toward him, he took them out one by one.

Without the load of relics weighing it down, his bike had become lighter, making it easier to dodge the monsters' artillery and keeping Akira somewhat safer. And not having to worry about getting hit meant he could concentrate on eliminating the monsters. He took full advantage of his costly extended magazines of ammo, pulverizing the gigantic canines' bodies with curtains of gunfire.

At first, the battle was greatly in Akira's favor. But after fighting for some time, he looked perplexed. *Hey Alpha, why have so many of these things showed up all of a sudden? We didn't encounter anything like this on the way here.*

Maybe it's because you weren't carrying any relics back then? Alpha suggested.

The relics. Of course, he muttered.

Originally, before they went feral, weapon dogs were bioweapons, meant to defend Old World cities. Perhaps they're programmed to instinctively monitor trespassers and attack thieves.

Thieves? But these relics are overstock, and Tsubaki let me have them! he complained.

Alpha smiled cheerfully. *They're monsters, Akira. Do you really think they can*

make that distinction?

He grimaced. But then he had another thought, and his face lit up with hope.
In that case, maybe they'll go out of their way to not harm the relics!

They're monsters, Akira. Do you really think you can count on that?

He pulled a face and sighed. *All right, nothing for it, then. Let's get rid of them before they do any damage!*

Yes, let's.

After all he'd gone through to get those relics, like hell he'd let a stray shell blast them apart! More determined than ever, he began putting up an even fiercer fight against the weapon dogs.

Akira whittled away at the dogs' numbers until reinforcements stopped coming, leaving only one last pack. He mowed most of them down with a few sweeps of SSB fire, then looked slightly surprised—many had fallen to his assault, but one wouldn't stop no matter how many bullets hit it.

Looks like that one's especially sturdy, he thought. I guess I should've expected at least one tough one in the mix.

His sweeping attacks had failed to take it down, but he couldn't afford to focus on a single dog while so many more remained. Circling around the pack to avoid their fire, he kept shooting. Canine corpses piled up, then more gunfire blasted the piles apart, scattering the corpses into the mountains of debris. Even the larger weapon dogs, whose vastness sent tremors through the earth as they ran, didn't last long.

But even as he laid waste to the weapon dogs with sweep after sweep of SSB fire, the one dog he'd noticed endured. It had been hit by all of Akira's attacks thus far but was still standing.

Seems like that one's made of tougher stuff than the others, Alpha.

Indeed. But let's take care of the rest first. We'll save it for last so we can focus all our fire on it.

Gotcha! He was surprised to see it survive shots from his SSB, but because its

attacks were no different from those of the other weapon dogs, he didn't need to prioritize it over the others. In order to reduce the enemy's numbers and seize the advantage, he took out the weaker ones first.

Finally, the grunts were all taken care of, and only the resilient weapon dog remained. Without delay, Akira trained his SSB on his last target. A spray of bullets, each individually powerful enough to blow a normal weapon dog apart, all zeroed in on the lone monster. Its artillery was blasted to pieces in an instant, and the powerful ammunition pierced its flesh, sending blood and guts flying.

But the weapon dog still didn't fall. Akira couldn't hide his shock—underneath the creature's fleshy exterior was a solid layer of metal.

It was a machine all along?! No wonder it wasn't going down so easily, he reasoned. He recalled that he'd encountered similar monsters in Mihazono that looked organic at a glance but were actually mechanical, and this reminded him not to judge such creatures based on their appearance.

Its mechanical nature now revealed, the hulking beast opened up its back, and a new weapon unlike any used by the weapon dogs thus far emerged—a massive laser cannon. A beam of highly concentrated energy shot from its muzzle and razed the area like a blade, slicing through debris and exploding against the ground. The force of the discharged energy sent debris and smoke high into the sky. Akira had to lean sideways to tilt the bike and avoid the blast.

Alpha, he said, his face grim. *Are monsters in the depths normally that powerful, or is this one just special?*

Now you see why the city built that highway extending from the forward base, she replied. *That way, they can easily get multiple people with heavy weaponry out there to eliminate the more dangerous monsters deeper in.*

Yeah, no kidding... Though he'd had Alpha's help, he'd held his own against an army of mechs during the gang war in the slums, so he'd assumed he'd also be fine against the monsters deep within Kuzusuhara. But this encounter was threatening to destroy the self-confidence he'd gained from that battle. His face was showing signs of panic.

Alpha, meanwhile, wore her usual placid smile. *If it keeps firing that laser,*

people on the outskirts might notice and learn about what happened here. Defeat it as quickly as possible.

R-Right! I'll do that! Sensing her faith in him, he regained his zeal and grinned back at Alpha to show her he was raring to go. But his smile was soon replaced with a look of shock, because Alpha sent the bike on a beeline straight for the mechanical beast.

His powered suit moved on its own—he set down both of his guns and instead drew the blade he'd retrieved from Tsubaki's storeroom. He'd intended to use it himself rather than sell it, so he'd already taken it from its box and equipped it on his person.

Of course, he was up against an opponent wielding a powerful laser cannon, so he couldn't help doubting Alpha's choice of weapon here. *Uh, Alpha?! Are you sure about this?! Isn't this meant for close-quarters combat?!*

Defeating that creature with gunfire will take too long. It's got force-field armor all over it, which is why it's been able to withstand your shots. If we had anti-force bullets on hand, things would be different, but we don't, so this is our second best option. It's about to fire again—focus, Akira!

As Akira stood atop the speeding bike, blade in hand, the mechanical beast ahead of him prepared to fire its laser cannon once more. Because the laser's output was so high, the beam didn't last very long and needed time to charge in between shots, but it had energy for one more shot before Akira reached the monster.

The cannon's muzzle glowed so brightly that Akira could easily tell how powerful the beam was going to be. There would be no evading at this distance. He steeled himself and held his blade at the ready, eyes focused on the cannon's muzzle so as not to miss the critical moment.

Meanwhile, bluish-white light shone from the blade in his hands and extended from the hilt into a beam of light. The high-powered energy engulfed the blade, disintegrating it, but the Old World force-field armor kept the particles from dispersing, solidifying the weapon into a blade of light.

By this point, Akira's bike was going so fast it couldn't even be tracked by the human eye, thanks to its horsepower and the outstanding traction of its wheels.

But within Akira's slowed sense of time, it felt like he was moving at a snail's pace. Irritated and anxious that he wasn't closing the distance to the enemy quickly enough, he nonetheless continued to concentrate—and finally saw his chance.

At the exact same moment that the laser cannon discharged, Akira swung his blade. The energy trailing from the horizontal slash collided with the energy from the cannon, dispersing much of it. The weakened beam struck him, but failed to penetrate the force-field armor from his protective coat and powered suit. Scattered particles of light enveloped the area, but Akira and his bike tore right through them on the way to his target.

As he rode past the beast, he swung his energy blade once more with all his might. The blade sliced into the machine's metallic frame, severing it in a shower of sparks. But the blade had already used up most of its energy on the first swing, and unable to withstand the impact, it dissipated in Akira's hands.

Still, he could feel that impact in his hands even now—his attack *had* to have dealt some serious damage. He did a U-turn and braked to observe the enemy. “Did that do it?!”

He couldn't tell if he'd finished it off or not. His face grave, he watched the enemy closely. Finally, the massive machine fell to the ground with a deafening crash, proving to Akira that he had won.

You did it! Alpha said triumphantly. *Congratulations!*

Akira heaved a deep sigh. He'd been victorious, but he felt more exhausted than overjoyed. He tossed away his blade, now nothing more than a hilt—he didn't need Alpha to tell him it was now useless.

“All right, let's go grab those relics and get out of here. They made it through that fight, right?”

The box, packing material, and the relics themselves are all Old World-made, so they can endure a blast from a mere stray shell. Probably.

That last part worried Akira. “Y-You're not sure?”

Well, even I can't say for sure until we check.

“Please don’t let everything today be a bust!” he wailed, dashing to where he’d left the relics. The belt bundling the relics together had torn, having likely been hit during the fight, and the boxes were strewn everywhere. A horrified yelp issued from his throat; however, the contents were all still intact. Breathing a deep sigh of relief, he refastened the boxes onto his bike. “Thank goodness nothing got broken! Now we just need to make it out of here.”

Indeed, Alpha said with a smirk. We’re still in the ruin’s depths, after all. Let’s hope we don’t get attacked again on the way back, hm?

Akira pulled a face. He could tell she was teasing him, but he couldn’t discount the possibility of running into more monsters. They had yet to reach the outskirts, so who was to say they wouldn’t run into more monsters just as deadly, or deadlier?

Akira stayed on his toes for the rest of the trip, proceeding with the utmost caution. Thanks to his efforts, he made it back safely and without further incident.



Tsubaki watched the entire fight from her virtual room. “So he won,” she murmured.

Akira hadn’t encountered any monsters on the way to the Tsubakihara Building because Tsubaki had kept them restrained. She’d agreed to that much as part of her deal with Alpha.

But the weapon dog encounter on the way back had also been Tsubaki’s handiwork. Now that Akira had left her territory, she had no reason to keep the monsters away, so she’d released them. Technically, she hadn’t gone back on her word.

The mechanical beast had been under Tsubaki’s control. She’d programmed it to lead the weapon dogs in attacking any hunters trespassing in and around her territory. Naturally, this setting had compelled them to attack Akira as well. But she was no longer under any obligation to keep them from attacking him. She’d known they most definitely *would*, but hadn’t stopped them.

And in the end, Akira had defeated them, mechanical beast and all.

“Well, if he hadn’t been capable of *that* much, it would have meant she’d lied to me. So I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.” Had he not been at least skilled enough to persuade Tsubaki to give him the relics rather than risk fighting him, Alpha would have had hell to pay.

Even if the monsters had killed Akira and Alpha became furious with Tsubaki for letting it happen, the overseer wouldn’t have cared—why should Alpha think she could lie to Tsubaki and get away with it? Tsubaki wouldn’t let that slide. She’d do everything in her power to fight back, even if it meant antagonizing Alpha.

She’d only performed a basic evaluation, but she’d confirmed Akira’s ability for herself—handing over the relics had been the right decision. Satisfied, she was about to close the book on the topic—but then frowned.

“Honestly, though—this time she chose a *child*? Maybe she thinks a clueless kid will be easier to manipulate?”

Akira posed enough of a threat to convince Tsubaki to relinquish her overstock, and Alpha had obviously trusted him enough to hire him. Yet he was a child, meaning he was still naive and impressionable.

Whether for better or worse, the boy had piqued Tsubaki’s interest.

Chapter 147: Old World Data Terminals

Two weeks had passed since Akira had returned safely from his expedition to the Tsubakihara Building. Now he headed to Sheryl's base on his bike, with a portion of his haul inside his backpack.

As he sped along the wide roads of the slums, many pedestrians stepped aside to let him pass—naturally, as an expensive desert utility bike with an enormous gun affixed on the back would intimidate anyone who saw it.

Guess appearances really do matter, Akira mused dryly.

Seems that way. No complaints here—the fewer people you come to blows with, the easier it is for me, Alpha replied with a smirk.

Right, he muttered. Sensing she was implicitly admonishing him for constantly getting into pointless arguments, his grin turned sour.

He parked his bike near Sheryl's base and was surprised to see the surrounding area bustling and lively with shoppers. Street vendors were a common sight in the slums, but countless stands were lined up in rows, selling all manners of goods. One stall nearby was selling relics at discount prices, while the one next to it was hawking hot sandwiches. All the vendors were selling at regular prices—that is, without the usual wasteland tax.

And every single stall was packed with customers. Akira could hardly believe a street in the slums could be so busy. *Whoa, this is something else!*

He didn't want to make all these people move out of the way for him and his bike. However, he didn't feel comfortable abandoning the bike here, and if he parked it somewhere else, it might get damaged or stolen. After thinking things over, he called Katsuragi.

"Hey, Akira! Headed our way? I figured it was about time you came here."

"Yeah. I'm parked pretty close by, but I can't make it to the base with all these people in the street."

“Oh, in that case, just come to the warehouse—the new one behind Sheryl’s base. That route should be clear.”

“Gotcha.” Akira turned his bike around and took a detour to the newly built warehouse. When he arrived behind the base, he was surprised to see a huge building where—if he remembered correctly—ten or so slum residences had been. Those houses had been demolished, and a single enormous warehouse now sat in their place.

Akira rode his bike into the warehouse and was immediately greeted by a smiling Katsuragi. His business partners were also waiting inside.

“Akira! I’ve been waiting for you to show up! So, what relics did you bring me this time?”

Akira pointed to the backpack on top of the bike. Katsuragi’s face fell slightly. “That’s all? You said you couldn’t make it through the street, so I figured you had some massive haul, like what was in your garage before.”

“C’mon now, you can’t expect an amount like that *every* time I visit a ruin.”

“Yeah, I suppose not. That said, it’s still a decent haul, and if they’re quality relics, you won’t hear me complain. Just based on your gut, how much do you think it’s all worth?”

Akira thought for a moment.

Give him a ridiculously high number, Alpha suggested with a grin.

“Er... Maybe around a billion aurum?”

Katsuragi chuckled, thinking it was a joke. “Careful now—if you give me figures like that, you’re gonna really get my hopes up! All right, let’s take a look!”

Katsuragi and his business partners immediately got to work appraising Akira’s relics.

The relics from Akira’s backpack were lined up on the warehouse floor. Katsuragi let his business partners do all the work while he and Akira supervised.

They'd taken the Old World clothing, compressed in thin plastic, out of the backpack first. After laying the unopened packages side by side, the merchants tried to puzzle out what they might be worth.

"Old World garments, huh?" Katsuragi murmured. "Some of these do sell for a lot, and there might be more compressed into each package than we think, but you don't seriously think these'll sell for a billion, do you?"

"No one's saying you have to buy them," Akira replied. "I just brought them to you first because I told you I would." Akira had promised Katsuragi that the next time he brought relics in, he'd let the merchant decide whether to sell them at the relic shop or buy them for his own store. "If you don't think they'll be worth it, I'll just ask Sheryl to find another buyer somewhere else. Where is she, anyway?"

"Sheryl's got her hands full running the shop. It turned out busier than we'd expected. That's why the street in front of the base is so crowded."

After recovering the relics from the old warehouse, which had been destroyed in the gang war, and confirming they were still sellable, Viola had recommended that Sheryl and the others immediately open up shop. With little time to prepare, they'd only managed to remodel Sheryl's base into a shop and gather a few staff members to work the floor—the bare minimum, in other words. But from the day they'd opened, business had boomed.

The simultaneous demise of Harlias and Ezent had wrought a seismic effect on relic shops all over the slums. Because both gangs had siphoned the assets—their money *and* relics—from the businesses under their umbrella to fund their war, the lion's share of these shops no longer had the funds to stay open. Others had been attacked by opposing gang members during the war and wiped from existence. Even the few that had survived had been forced to start from scratch and would need time to replenish their stock and capital. For that reason, nearly all the remaining relic shops in the slums were shut down or temporarily closed.

Yet the demand for those relic shops was just as strong as ever. So when a store suddenly opened amid these shuttered businesses, it was only natural that hunters would flock to it. Viola had spread the word that a brand-new

outlet had just hung out its shingle in the slums, and curious patrons had come to check it out. Ultimately, the place had proven so popular that they'd had to set up additional stalls outdoors in front of Sheryl's base.

Akira looked impressed. "Wow, it's been that successful?"

"Yeah. It cost a pretty penny to get off the ground, but at this rate, we'll recoup those expenses in no time at all! Don't know how long it'll remain this busy, but Sheryl's working hard out there to keep the ball rolling."

Of course, the more the shop and its profits grew, the tighter security would have to be. The guards needed guns, ammo, powered suits, and scanners, and it was Katsuragi's job to get them. But if the relic shop continued to be this successful, he wouldn't have to fret over those expenses. It was clear from his carefree grin that he wasn't concerned about going in the red.

Meanwhile, his business partners were still appraising the relics. They pulled the last relic out of the backpack—a box around thirty centimeters in width. Seeing that it was an Old World box, the man who'd removed it excitedly opened it to see what was inside. He took out a transparent, five-centimeter cube. Encased inside was a bipyramid with geometric patterns all over it. Its luster suggested a metallic or ceramic exterior.

For a while, the man stared at the object in bafflement. Then a look of realization and astonishment dawned on his face and he hopped up in excitement, causing him to drop it. He let out a shriek and caught it before it hit the floor, then panted in relief.

Naturally, the other businessmen took notice, as did Katsuragi, who ran to the scene. "Hey, what's going on? Something happen?" he asked.

"K-Katsuragi...? Look here." The man handed him the object. Katsuragi looked at it for only a second before his eyes went wide with shock. Then he noticed there were even more cubes inside the box, and his hands started to tremble.

"Akira? I-Is this really what I think it is?! An Old World data terminal?! Are...are these all real?!"

"Dunno. It's your job to find that out, not mine. But if you think they're fake and not worth buying, no big deal. I'll sell them somewhere else."

From this reply, Katsuragi determined that Akira thought these items were the real McCoy—genuine data terminals. No wonder he'd valued the lot at one billion!

"You really weren't joking about the one billion, were you... W-Wait, let's at least check to see if they're real first! Hold your horses!"

Neither Katsuragi nor his business partners knew enough about Old World data terminals to appraise them. So they immediately rifled through their network of connections to find someone who could.

It wasn't long before the warehouse was awash in pandemonium. Sheryl heard the commotion and came to see what was going on, accompanied by Yumina.

"Katsuragi, you didn't tell me Akira would be coming today!"

"That's because he came on business of mine. You were occupied with the relic shop anyway, so I figured I'd just let you know later that he stopped by."

"Is that so?" She wore a smile, but didn't look happy in the least.

Katsuragi flinched and averted his eyes. "Hey, how's the appraisal coming over there?" he called out awkwardly to one of his business partners as he walked away.

Sheryl sighed.

Meanwhile, Akira was surprised to see Yumina. "You're still working security here?" he asked.

"Yeah. Katsuya and the others already went back, of course." Katsuya's team had originally been slated to work at the warehouse for three days, but after helping recover the relics from the demolished warehouse, Druncam had recalled them. Yumina's contract, however, had been extended—Mizuha had offered her to Sheryl as an "apology" for failing to protect the warehouse. In truth, the Druncam exec hoped to use Yumina as a liaison to forge a connection with Sheryl.

Reluctant at first, Sheryl had accepted the offer in the end. Druncam's

interests aside, being able to keep one of their members on security was a welcome prospect. So she'd designated Yumina as her personal bodyguard.

Hunters of all kinds frequented relic shops, which operated under the table to begin with. Not all of her customers would be moral, upstanding people, and Sheryl would have to deal with them regularly. If she had a Druncam hunter by her side, however, they might think twice before starting trouble. So she had Yumina accompany her while on the floor.

After hearing the reason for Yumina's extended stay, Akira nodded. "Oh, so that's why you two are together. And when is your contract up?"

"Whenever Mizuha decides it is, I guess," she said dryly. "But if I'm being honest, I'm only working solo because we're currently on break. Once that's over, she'll have to pull me out anyway."

"You're on break? Then shouldn't you be taking it easy?" Akira asked.

"Nah, it's fine. I..." She hesitated. "I have my reasons."

During the gang war, the Druncam team's all-in-one support system had determined Yumina would hold the rest of the team back and so had barred her from participating in the fight. If she didn't polish up her skills, the system might separate her from Katsuya on future missions as well. So when Mizuha had asked her to stay and help Sheryl a little longer, she'd immediately agreed.

If she wanted to be permitted to fight by Katsuya's side again, she had to improve. She couldn't afford to take it easy.

"Oh, okay then. Well, don't push yourself too hard. Though coming from me, that probably doesn't sound too convincing," he added with an awkward smile.

"Should I take that to mean *you're* pushing yourself too hard?" she teased.

But Akira answered with a small smile. "Honestly, yeah. It seems like I'm always getting into situations where it's necessary. I'm not doing it because I want to."

"Sounds rough," she said with a cheerful grin. *Maybe that's how he got so skilled*, she thought. "Hey, Akira, I've been wanting to ask—"

But Sheryl cut in right then. "So, about these relics..."

Akira's eyes darted back and forth between the two girls. But Yumina stepped back as if to signal that he should answer the other girl first, so his gaze turned to Sheryl.

"If Katsuragi chooses not to buy them," she continued, "that means we can sell them at the relic shop, can't we?"

"I'm not sure yet. Maybe I could find another buyer for the clothes. I don't mean to complain or anything, but I still haven't gotten the money from the last relic haul."

Sheryl bowed her head. "I'm truly sorry about that. They're out for sale now, but we haven't been able to sell them all yet."

Akira's last batch of relics had been from Yonozuka Station, gathered back when no one had known about the ruin. Because of this, they were extremely valuable and were currently being sold in the shop for high prices. But customers had their budgets to consider, and there had been enough of those relics to fill an entire truck. So there was no way the shop could have sold them all in the few days they'd been open. It would still be a while before she could hand Akira his pay.

"Oh, don't worry about it—I can wait," he said. "I was just wondering if I should really give you more to sell when you're still working on the first batch. It's not like you're short on stock or anything, right?"

"No, no problem there."

"Well, I'm waiting on Katsuragi for an appraisal of some of the relics, but he doesn't seem keen on the clothes. So I was thinking maybe I should find another buyer for those."

Katsuragi and his business partners were devoting their full attention to the Old World terminals. The garments Akira had brought in the same haul were still lying on the floor, untouched.

A thought occurred to Akira, and he picked up one of the packages. "Actually, would you want any of these, Yumina? You'll get them cheaper if you buy them from me here before they're sent to a store somewhere."

"Really? Can I?"

“Yeah. I mean, it doesn’t look like Katsuragi wants them, so go for it.” They were relics from the Old World, but Akira figured if Katsuragi wasn’t even giving them a second thought, they probably wouldn’t sell for much anyway. “And what about you, Sheryl?” he whispered, so Yumina wouldn’t hear. “Couldn’t you use these to make more outfits? You’re supposed to be rich, so wouldn’t it look more convincing to have several?”

“Indeed it would,” she whispered back with a smile. “I’ll take you up on that. Thank you very much!”

After asking Katsuragi for permission, just in case, Akira unsealed the packages of clothing. The tightly compressed articles unfurled, revealing high-quality Old World garments. Sheryl and Yumina went through the clothes with discerning eyes and made their selections.

“Those are some seriously high-quality garments,” one of Katsuragi’s business partners remarked offhandedly to Akira. “Where did you happen to find those, if I may ask?”

“The ruins,” Akira replied flatly.

The man’s smile stiffened. He knew that much, obviously—what he’d wanted to know was *which* ruin. If it was the same ruin in which Akira had found the Old World terminals, there might be even more untouched relics of similar value inside. In other words, he couldn’t have cared less about the clothes—he just wanted to know where to look, so that he could get a hunter he knew to retrieve the *truly* valuable relics, like those terminals.

But Sheryl heard them and cut in with a smile. “It doesn’t really matter where he got them, does it? They didn’t come from a store within the city walls, and Akira brought them here. That’s all you need to know.” She seemed to be saying, “Akira didn’t actually find them—someone else did. Even he doesn’t know which ruin they came from, but we’re going with the story that he found them. If you’ve got a problem with that, kindly make your way to the exit.”

Reading between the lines of Sheryl’s statement, the businessman nodded with a wooden smile. “I-I see. In that case, sorry to bother you.” He hurried away.

Sheryl watched him go with a smile, then gave Akira a look like she was

waiting for him to praise her. Akira couldn't tell anyone where he'd gotten those relics—even Shizuka, Elena, or Sara. Sheryl had sensed that much, and though she didn't know the circumstances, bailed him out.

Akira was indeed grateful for her intervention, but he felt a strange pressure from the look on her face and recoiled ever so slightly. “Th-Thanks for saving me back there,” he said with a weak smile.

“You're welcome,” she replied, practically on cloud nine.

Katsuragi and his business partners were on the other side of the warehouse, waiting to find out whether the Old World data terminals were authentic.

Katsuragi looked grave as he asked the appraiser, “So what's the verdict?”

“As far as I can tell using the tools I brought with me, they're most likely not fakes. That's all we can be sure of.”

“So basically, they're real?”

“Like I said, I can't give a definitive verdict. What I *can* confirm, though, is that the clothing from the same haul and the boxes these terminals were stored in are definitely from the Old World. But, of course, that doesn't prove anything. As a merchant, you should know that much.”

“Of *course* I do. That's why I was hoping you'd do a thorough job and give me an answer.”

“I can only be this thorough with the equipment I have on hand,” the appraiser snapped with a glare. “Old World data terminals are rare finds and extremely valuable, so quite a few people out there are making fakes, and good ones too. Some are so deceptively similar to Old World relics you can hardly distinguish them from the genuine article. There's also the possibility that these might be mock-ups, in which case they would really be Old World relics but not function as actual data terminals. So for these, the appraisal process is much more involved.”

Realizing he'd gotten ahead of himself in his excitement, Katsuragi backed off and calmed himself. With a sigh, the appraiser regained his composure and spoke in a more level tone.

“If you want a more accurate assessment, I’d recommend taking these to someone who’s got the proper equipment—although you’ll need to buy them off the hunter that found them first. I know it isn’t easy to put a price on items whose authenticity is up in the air, but hey, you do that for a living, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“At any rate, I’ve done all I can do here, so now it’s your call whether to follow my advice. I’ll write up a document with my findings if you want—just don’t try to use it to pin the blame on me afterward. *That* won’t go well for you.”

Katsuragi got the implied message: “I’ve done what you paid me for, so my work here is finished.” The merchant looked quite concerned.

Meanwhile, his business partner—the one who’d talked to Akira earlier—looked dubious. “Hey, Sheryl got those relics, didn’t she? Then what’s the problem?” If Akira hadn’t really found the relics—if saying so was a cover story to help Sheryl sell them—then she’d probably obtained goods that were already appraised. In that case, bringing in the appraiser had been part of her act. But seeing the worry on Katsuragi’s face, the other man wasn’t so sure anymore. What if they hadn’t been acting after all?

In fact, Katsuragi knew Akira really had discovered the relics, and he could tell the boy believed they were genuine. But he didn’t trust Akira’s eye for appraisal, so he’d called in an expert.

However, Katsuragi couldn’t tell his business partner any of that, so he made something up on the spot. “Well, you never know—this might be a test from Sheryl. She could’ve deliberately mixed some fakes in to see if we’re truly capable of dealing with relics this valuable. It’s possible, right?”

“Well, I suppose,” the man replied.

The other business partners exchanged concerned glances. They’d taken Katsuragi’s statement to mean that Sheryl doubted their acumen as merchants. In trying to cover up his lie, Katsuragi had inadvertently given them new cause for concern.

And what happened next made them worry even more.

“Sorry for the intrusion,” Viola announced with her usual cunning smile as she

entered the warehouse.

Upon making her entrance, Viola headed straight for Akira. “A little birdie told me you brought some Old World terminals with you,” she said, still smiling.

“May I ask where you got those?”

“No,” he said flatly. “Why should I tell you that?”

Her smile didn’t falter one bit. “Come now, is there any need to be so prickly? I made this store flourish, just like I promised.”

“If you think that’s going to be enough to keep you alive, think again.”

“How harsh,” she said with a mock pout.

Akira had nearly killed her after learning she’d dragged him into the gang war. Right now, he was letting her live in exchange for her helping Sheryl with the relic shop. He’d told Viola to prove to him that his decision to keep her alive was the right call—and that if he ever came to regret it, he’d finish her off.

And yet, despite essentially being told that she was still on the chopping block, she was treating him as brazenly as always. Her attitude shocked Sheryl.

The grin returned to Viola’s face. “Oh dear. Then if I want to keep my head, maybe I should put in a little more effort. How about five hundred million up front, to reward you for bringing those terminals?”

“F-Five hundred million?!” Akira’s eyes bugged out of his head at the sudden offer.

“That’s right! I’ll pay you five hundred million aurum right here, right now, and we’ll negotiate the rest of your cut depending on how well they sell at the shop. The more money we make on them, the higher your bonus—but of course, you’ll receive that part later. How does that sound?”

Blindsided by her offer, Akira couldn’t answer right away.

So Viola continued, “In order to make this shop a success like I promised, we’ll need valuable relics, and you’re our best supplier. We wouldn’t want you to quit bringing us relics simply because you weren’t seeing a quick enough return. So would five hundred million in your pocket right now tide you over until we

sell the rest? If we turn enough of a profit, I could also compensate you similarly for your previous batch of relics.”

“Five hundred million?” he murmured. *I don’t think it’s a bad deal myself, but what do you think, Alpha?*

Alpha had urged Akira to quote Katsuragi a ridiculously high figure as the value of the haul, and even Akira had thought the amount he’d told the merchant was preposterous. But now he was being offered half that on the spot, not to mention a bonus later on. Such a proposal was too good for Viola to not have an ulterior motive, so he wanted to know what Alpha thought.

Seems fine to me, she answered. *You threatened to kill her if she tried to put one over on you again, so if she is scheming something, it probably doesn’t have anything to do with you. And there’s no harm in having more money, so I say take the offer.*

“Okay,” Akira announced. “I’ll take the five hundred mil—”

“Wait!” Katsuragi cut in. “Weren’t you going to sell *me* those? You promised I’d have first dibs!”

Akira turned to Katsuragi in surprise. “Really? You wanna buy them? You’ve got five hundred mil?”

Unable to respond, Katsuragi fell silent.

“You said I could do whatever I wanted with the relics that you didn’t buy,” Akira continued, “and I did as I promised and brought them to you first. If you’re willing to pay the same amount as she is, they’re yours. But I never promised to give you a discount.”

The merchant was torn. If the Old World terminals were all genuine, five hundred million was a steal. But could he really afford to pay that amount up front? He’d already invested a great deal in the relic shop, so he didn’t have the additional funds himself. He could ask his business partners to contribute, but then he’d have to split the profit. He doubted whether he could even convince them it was worth it—after all, there was no guarantee the Old World terminals weren’t broken or fake, which would severely reduce their value. In the worst case, he and his acquaintances could end up in debt.

All he had to go on at this point was the appraiser's opinion that the terminals were likely real—which wasn't enough to confidently make a gamble.

As Viola watched Katsuragi hesitate, the corners of her mouth turned up ever so slightly. "You know what, Akira? Make that six hundred million."

"Whoa!" Akira exclaimed in joy.

"What?!" Katsuragi exclaimed in shock.

Sheryl and Yumina also looked surprised. Seeing everyone's reactions delighted Viola, and her grin widened.

Katsuragi was mentally tearing his hair out. His competitor had just raised her offer, which would normally mean she was confident the terminals were real. But this was Viola, after all—what if it was a ploy to get him to shell out six hundred mil for total junk?

Try as he might, he couldn't discount *that* possibility.

He'd heard about Viola's scheming nature many times from various acquaintances. Was this yet another plot of hers? Mounting suspicion clouded his judgment. Were the relics real or fake, and did Viola know the answer?

In fact, Viola *didn't* know, and she couldn't have cared less. If they were the real deal, great—she could use the terminals to stir up even more entertainment. But even if they weren't, it didn't matter. She'd end up wasting six hundred million—but that money belonged to the relic shop, which would take the hit instead of her. And Akira wouldn't be able to pin the blame on her, because he'd be at fault for having brought them junk. Either way, Viola would be suitably entertained, and her face reflected her anticipation.

Ultimately, Katsuragi couldn't come to a decision. The Old World terminals ended up in Viola's hands, and Akira became six hundred million aurum richer. As he jumped for joy, however, Sheryl and Yumina looked on with mixed feelings.

Sheryl was once again stunned that Akira had managed to earn such a vast sum of money, just like that. This motivated her more than ever to make her relic shop a success, so she could catch up with him. Yumina, meanwhile, was more curious about what Akira was capable of. If his relics were worth so much,

chances were he hadn't found them in just any old ruin. He'd likely gone out, on his own, to a site so dangerous that no other hunter had been able to reach it, collected the relics there, and returned to the city—a testament to his expertise.

If I had that level of skill, I could fight by Katsuya's side again, she thought, unable to take her eyes off the boy.

Chapter 148: Sheryl's Relic Shop

Having sold the finds from the Tsubakihara Building for a whopping six hundred million aurum, Akira headed straight to Shizuka's to purchase more gear.

"So anyway, as I was hunting relics in the ruins, I got to thinking: this SSB is awfully hefty."

"Well, it is classified as a large weapon, after all," Shizuka said.

Akira tried his best to stress to Shizuka that he wasn't dissatisfied with the gun she'd recommended him. "Don't get me wrong, it's plenty powerful," he replied. "It can take down huge monsters in one hit, which is a lifesaver. It's just, well, you know, *big*. Too cumbersome to wield in a narrow building, for example."

Shizuka found his awkward approach endearing and genuinely appreciated his effort to be considerate. "Well, as long as you're not demanding a refund, I'd welcome the chance to sell you a new gun," she said with a smile. "And you want one that's a little smaller this time, I take it?"

"Yes, please!"

They began discussing his options, and after a lengthy exchange, Akira ended up purchasing two additional SSB guns. Since he was already satisfied with his first SSB's functionality, this saved him the trouble of having to choose from a massive list like before—he only had to look at the different options in this category.

He bought one gun for everyday use. Unlike with his current titan-killer, which specialized in brute force, he chose mods for it that would keep it down to a manageable size without sacrificing too much power, allowing him to traverse narrow spaces without worry.

For the other gun, he selected modifications that would allow it to fire ammunition larger than bullets, like grenades. Because the shells for his A4WM

were no more than a deterrent to some enemies he'd encountered, he needed a weapon that could launch something more powerful.

Shizuka, however, looked slightly conflicted. "Adding in the cost of ammo, both guns will set you back two hundred million aurum. Are you sure?"

"Yes, ma'am. I just got my pay for those relics I mentioned earlier, so no worries there."

Shizuka turned an admonishing gaze onto him.

Akira panicked and immediately tried to justify himself. "W-Wait, it's not what you're thinking! I didn't overextend myself getting those relics. Well, I *did* go into a slightly more dangerous area, since I had upgraded my gear, but I was fine! Even giant monsters went down easy, thanks to the titan-killer SSB. So I didn't have to get reckless."

Shizuka kept staring.

Akira continued to plead his case. "Um, well, and the only reason I can pay the two hundred million is because I sold those relics for a lot more than I'd expected to get. It wasn't like I pushed myself to get more valuable ones..." Realizing how unconvincing he sounded, he trailed off.

Shizuka laughed. "Look, if you didn't do anything wrong, stop acting so guilty! You'll make me worry."

Akira sighed in relief when he saw her attitude had returned to normal. "R-Right. Sorry about that."

"Honestly, keep acting like that and you won't become a regular of mine anytime soon! You're still too much of a problem child."

"I'll get better, I promise! But I'm already coming here to buy more and more expensive gear so that I don't need to get reckless. Isn't that good enough?"

"It's certainly good—for this humble shop's coffers," she teased. "And for you, since the added power lets you fight more safely."

Akira grinned back. He thought he'd successfully covered up his excursion to the Kuzusuhara depths and his harrowing fight with the weapon dogs. But Shizuka wasn't so easily fooled. She could at least tell he'd been somewhere

from which he wouldn't have returned alive without the power of his SSB. Still, wanting to believe he really hadn't intended to exert himself, she decided the warning she'd given him would suffice. For now.

"All right, I'll put a special order in for these right away. As usual, I'll contact you when they arrive."

"Sounds good. Thank you, Shizuka!"

Once Akira had left, she ordered his new weapons, hoping they'd protect him from whatever desperate situation he would next run into without intending to.



Back at Sheryl's base, Viola was smiling as always. But this time, she also looked somewhat troubled.

The Old World terminals she'd bought from Akira were lined up before her. She'd already received a detailed evaluation of these relics from a place she trusted, and accepted the results as fact. But the verdict had been—quite literally—more than she'd bargained for.

"I never would've guessed they'd all be real," she murmured. "And in mint condition, no less..."

Not that she'd thought Akira would deliberately bring them fakes. But he could have easily brought back fake terminals that, unbeknownst to him, someone else had planted to deter other hunters from reaching the real ones. Or perhaps they were real and looked unharmed at a glance, but were actually already damaged beyond repair.

The appraiser's verdict had refuted both possibilities.

The firm she'd hired charged a pretty penny for their services, but its analysts were so reputable that their certificate of authenticity alone could increase an item's value by several digits. She didn't doubt their opinion—after all, once they'd finished their evaluation, they'd offered to waive Viola's fee if she let them buy the relics off her. This service fee was so high that many people, who weren't aware of how much it cost to buy and maintain the equipment to accurately appraise Old World devices, thought they were running a scam. Yet here they were offering to zero it out—if she agreed to their offer.

She hadn't thought this a bad deal—in fact, had she merely been after money, she would've accepted, since that would have saved her the trouble of looking for a buyer. But she'd turned them down, paid the exorbitant fee, and taken the relics with her. Truth be known, the allure of money had nearly swayed her decision, but another compulsion had taken hold in the end.

If they're the real deal, then just how much chaos could I cause with these terminals? No sooner had the thought occurred to her than her mind was made up. For better or worse, Viola was a woman true to her own nature.

Now, eyeing the Old World terminals lined up on the table in front of her with a shrewd smile, her brain was already hard at work constructing a scheme.

Sheryl entered the room. “Hi, Viola. You said you had something important to discuss?”

“Indeed,” the woman replied. “I wanted to talk with you about how we'll sell these Old World terminals I bought from Akira.” She didn't even bother to hide her conniving grin.

Sheryl's expression hardened slightly. Akira had asked Viola to help her run the shop, and—as Sheryl had learned—the woman was very good at it. But she was still an outside collaborator, and Sheryl didn't recognize Viola as part of the main staff. She had a sneaking suspicion that Viola had set up this talk as insurance so she'd have an alibi if something unexpected happened regarding the handling of the Old World terminals.

Even so, ignoring the woman was not an option. So Sheryl steeled herself and took a seat across from her. “What do you have in mind?”

“You see,” Viola began, “I've already taken it upon myself to get these terminals appraised. They're authentic and in outstanding condition, though I should've expected no less from Akira. I bought them to sell in the shop, of course, but to get the full value out of them we might need a more”—she paused dramatically—“*strategic* approach.”

Sheryl listened to her plan from beginning to end and decided it was worth implementing. It bordered on a scam, sure, but they were already operating a relic shop in the slums. So Sheryl could permit a scheme of this level, which could even help to deter actual swindlers and thieves. She might have some

dissatisfied customers, but Viola could smooth things over. The gang leader didn't see any issue.

Of course, her suspicion toward Viola hadn't abated. But Sheryl stood to make a tidy profit, and if she couldn't find any angle that might diminish her returns, she could only agree to the proposal. She needed this shop to flourish so that Akira would recognize her worth—she couldn't reject a pitch as lucrative as Viola's just because it seemed “vaguely” fishy or because Viola was “likely” up to no good.

“All right,” she said after a brief hesitation. “Then we'll go with that plan. I'll leave the setup to you. Remember, you're not just working for the shop, but Akira as well.”

“Naturally. I'll work hard—I know what's at stake if I don't.”

Despite the final warning that Sheryl had given Viola for good measure, the girl couldn't detect anything but scheming in Viola's smile. So she couldn't read the true intent behind her expression.



Akira sped across the wasteland on his bike, heading eastward. The monsters in the wasteland grew stronger the farther east one went, and he'd already crossed into what would be a danger zone for the average hunter (as understood by Kugamayama City's standards). The garden-variety hunter wouldn't stand a chance against the creatures here.

Akira had encountered a number of dangerous foes already but had made short work of them with his titan-killer SSB. A humongous armored beetle that normally preyed on large carnivorous beasts chased after him, but a single shot pierced its armor and blew a hole in its shell, scattering hemolymph far and wide.

Once the creature was done for, Akira braked to a stop and breathed a sigh. “All right, we're clear. Now we can take a look inside.”

The beetle had been nesting in an abandoned Old World structure. A vast number of Old World edifices strewn throughout the wasteland weren't large enough to qualify as named ruins, but held relics all the same. However,

because they were small and scattered all over, most of their relics were common in quality and few in quantity, and hunters typically didn't consider them worth their time or effort. And fewer hunters visiting an area meant more dangerous monsters were sure to prowl around, making any expeditions even more of a wash.

Still, there was the occasional valuable relic inside, and the lack of hunters meant a greater chance of discovering any that did exist. So every now and then, some hunter would throw caution to the winds and head to these areas, in much the same spirit one would have when purchasing a lottery ticket.

The building that the armored beetle had called home was narrow inside, and hard to move around in while toting an enormous SSB. But Akira's AAH hadn't had the power to take out the beetle, so he'd lured it out of the building with gunfire, then taken his time fighting it in the open.

He'd carried out both the planning and the fighting without Alpha's help, as a training exercise, and had even been in control of the bike during the fight. The battle had taken a lot longer as a result, but he now had the satisfaction of defeating a powerful monster all by himself, one which most hunters would have fled from. Hours of rigorous training and numerous battles had molded the boy into quite the capable hunter.

With the beetle out of the way, Akira descended from his bike to explore the empty Old World building. He brought only his AAH and A2D—the SSB was too large to use inside the building, so he left it behind on the bike.

When he entered, he saw the remains of a chewed-up table lying on the floor, with the beetle's bite marks all over it. Akira groaned. "Don't tell me it ate all the relics in here already?"

Alpha smiled thinly. *Seems so. Let's hope some of them weren't to its taste. Or... Say, perhaps they're still inside the monster, undigested. Shall we take a look?*

Akira made a face. "Nah, no need to go *that* far. It's not like we came here for the relics anyway."

Akira and Alpha were out relic hunting in the far reaches of the East, but relics weren't the goal this time. They were aiming to throw other hunters off the trail

of the relics they'd gotten from the Tsubakihara Building. Old World terminals weren't exactly easy to come by, and now that he'd sold the relics, others were surely tailing him to see where he'd found them. Akira had deliberately ventured farther east to make them think they should look here—in a region most of the hunters active around Kugamayama weren't even skilled enough to enter. He'd chosen an unnamed ruin since those were more likely to house rarities like Old World terminals, and because this part of the East was a suitable area for Akira to train.

It had been a month now since he'd journeyed to the Tsubakihara Building, and every day since, he'd headed to a ruin similar to this one. He explored every nook and cranny of the places he visited, but so far had never found anything of value. He would leave the ruin with a backpack bulging as though full of relics, but this was just for appearance's sake, and he'd always gone home empty-handed.

"Okay, Alpha, where are we headed today?"

Let's see... How about the Minakado Ruins?

"Why that one? Isn't it teeming with monsters and basically picked clean already?"

That's exactly why. As hunters don't typically go there, they wouldn't notice if the ruin's relics got restocked. And you just happened to wander in and notice by chance. Get it?

"Works for me!" Akira said, accelerating.

After hunting relics off to the east, he and Alpha always headed to a named ruin before going back to the city. Then, once they'd spent some time searching for relics there, he would attach a portable flatbed to his bike and return home with an ostentatiously large (and empty) Old World box in tow.

In fact, several people had followed his movements just in the last several days. They were, of course, after the Old World terminals. Most of Katsuragi's business partners had swallowed the story that Sheryl had provided the relics, but not all of them bought it, and Akira was their only lead. Some of them had hired hunters to tail Akira to try and find more terminals, while some hunters had found out on their own through other means. Either way, they'd all been

hot on his trail.

Of course, a less capable hunter could just have been shaken down for information. But that wouldn't work with someone as dangerous as Akira, so they had no choice but to follow him to a ruin. Still, less skilled hunters couldn't follow him *too* far east, or the monsters would tear them to shreds; so they instead set their sights on the ruins Akira visited on the way back. Perhaps these ruins were his real destination all along, they hoped—or if not, maybe he'd come to hide a few here to fool others into thinking it was. Either way, it was safer than heading farther eastward, so why not check to make sure?

Thanks to his trips to the east and to various other ruins closer to the city, plus Sheryl's persona as a wealthy company scion, Akira was already pretty sure no one would realize the relics had really come from the Tsubakihara Building in Kuzusuhara's depths. But he kept up his relic-hunting act every day, just to be certain.



A portion of Sheryl's base had been expanded and remodeled to accommodate her relic shop. The store consisted of three floors, each with their own price ranges.

The first floor sold cheap relics, the likes of which one might find in an average relic shop in the slums. The second floor housed relics in the mid-price range, which mainly consisted of the most valuable ones Katsuragi's group and Shijima's gang had gathered. The top floor, however, sold extremely expensive relics, like Akira's and some that Viola had arranged for through her own connections.

The interior of the top floor was upscale and highbrow. What's more, because the goods were so expensive, the team had limited the number of customers who could be on the top floor at one time, and didn't allow anyone in who looked poor. They'd also designed the room to look like a bank vault or treasury. In more ways than one, it was indistinguishable from an upper-crust business one might find near the city walls.

The customers currently on this floor were accompanied by bodyguards and had been queued up since early morning. One look at their expensive outfits

and their escorts' costly weaponry made it clear they were from the wealthy part of the lower district—meaning they normally would have had no business in the slums. But this also meant they had sufficient reason for coming here.

Once the store had opened, three patrons and their guards had been led upstairs. And upon seeing the relics on display in the center of the room, their jaws had, in sync, dropped.

“They’re actually here,” one mumbled in awe. “And this many, no less—I don’t buy it.”

The wealthy patrons had gotten a dubious tip that a relic shop in the slums had Old World terminals up for sale, and so they had come to see for themselves. They had expected the info to be bogus, of course; and even seeing the terminals in front of them, they had a hard time believing this wasn’t some kind of scam.

Because this was the first day the terminals were up for sale, Sheryl and Viola themselves were working the floor. “Thank you all for coming today,” Sheryl said with a polite bow. “My name is Sheryl, and I’m in charge of this floor. If you need anything at all, feel free to ask.”

One patron—a man—eyed Sheryl’s clothing. Her outfit, tailored from Old World garments, didn’t raise any suspicion, even to someone familiar with expensive apparel. But that was no guarantee that these relics were legitimate. Scrutinizing the five-centimeter cubes through the glass display case, he turned to Sheryl with a stern look. “These are Old World terminals, correct? I don’t mean to be rude, but are they the real deal?”

Sheryl answered with total composure. “Regrettably, we cannot verify that at this time.”

“So you’re selling fakes?”

“We leave our valued customers to make that judgment themselves. Additional data is available here to aid our customers in their decision, so feel free to take a look.” She gestured to the electronic barcode on the display case.

The man scanned the barcode with his own terminal and viewed the data that came up. His eyes widened like saucers. “A certificate of authenticity from

Kokuginya?! Why, in that case, there's no doubt—these *have* to be real!"

Kokuginya was a major player in the relic trade, with branches in cities throughout the East. Their talent for appraising relics was widely known, so the man was immediately convinced that the Old World terminals were authentic.

But his brow furrowed when he looked at the price tag. "Fifty million aurum? That's a little high."

The cost certainly wasn't out of his range. In the first place, if the relics here had been sold at more typical prices, he and the other patrons wouldn't have even bothered to come. Old World terminals were rare finds, highly sought after because they allowed the user access to the Old Domain and the treasure trove of information within. They were also extremely valuable from a technological standpoint—even without the means to peruse the Old Domain's database, they were far more proficient communication devices than the ones of the New World, and would help to advance modern technology by great strides.

Naturally, corporations would fight among themselves to get their hands on relics like these, and those with the most power and influence usually won—after all, they had the clout to put a hold on a relic at a Hunter Office exchange before any smaller companies even had a chance to obtain one. So if a small or medium-sized company wanted an Old World terminal, they'd have to buy it from somewhere outside of the Hunter Office's—and those large corporations'—reach. There'd be a markup involved, of course, but the patrons here were all prepared for that.

And fifty million aurum was reasonable for a precious relic that couldn't be acquired through standard means. But it wasn't an amount the man could spend at his own discretion. "Excuse me, miss," he asked Sheryl, "may I make a call to my boss in here?"

"Certainly."

As the man talked it over with his superior via terminal, another customer wore a look of puzzlement. "Hey, I have a question. This one here's unverified, and priced at only five million. What's up with that?"

"Because it has yet to be appraised, there's a possibility it could be fake or

damaged in some way,” Sheryl replied. “Therefore, we’ve lowered the price accordingly.”

“And why haven’t you appraised it yet?”

“Kokuginya’s fee is quite expensive, so unfortunately, we don’t yet have the funds to appraise them all. A few are still unverified, in fact.”

“Is there a difference between the ones that are appraised and the ones that aren’t?”

“We’ve examined the relics ourselves as well, and they are all very likely genuine and in excellent condition,” she explained with a polite smile. “But just to ensure the satisfaction of our customers, we had as many as we could afford reappraised at Kokuginya.”

The man’s lips curled into a mischievous grin. “I see. So until you appraise the rest of them, you can’t be held liable even if they happen to be fake or damaged. Not a bad business ploy.”

Sheryl smiled, pretending like she didn’t know what he meant. “Ploy? Nothing of the sort. They’re most likely real—we just thought some customers might like to press their luck. If you’re not the gambling sort, you can always purchase one of our verified ones. Pick whichever you like.”

At that moment, the other man ended the call with his boss and pointed to one of the Old World terminals in the display case. “Me, I’m not a gambler. I’ll take verified ones—these three.”

Sheryl gave him a polite bow. “Thank you very much. The relics in this case, correct?”

“That’s right.”

A guard accompanying the man sat a duralumin suitcase on the floor. Sheryl took three terminals out of the glass display and placed them in the suitcase. Once the man had sent an electronic payment via his own terminal, Sheryl checked it had gone through and stepped away. The man’s bodyguard shut the case, and with that the transaction was complete.

“Well then, I’ll be leaving now,” the man announced.

“Thank you for your patronage,” Sheryl said with another polite bow and smile.

Once the first of the three groups in the room had left, another group promptly entered to take their place. Viola replaced the purchased terminals in the case with new ones, and a similar exchange occurred between Sheryl and the new customer. This process repeated several times. Some of the customers left with Old World terminals and some didn't, but no one bought any of the unappraised terminals.

But the customer who'd first asked about the verified and unverified terminals still hadn't left. Sheryl turned to him, looking apologetic. “Sir, I'm very sorry, but if you're only window-shopping today, I'll unfortunately have to ask you to leave so we can move the line along and give other customers a chance.”

The man ignored her, his expression grim. Thinking she might have to kick him out, Sheryl's eyes narrowed slightly. Then the man pointed to an unverified terminal that looked no different from the verified ones.

“Question. This one's not verified because the appraisal fee's too high, right?”

“Yes, that's correct,” Sheryl said.

“In that case, what if I took care of the appraisal for you?”

Hearing that suggestion, Sheryl glanced at Viola, indicating the woman should take over.

Viola approached and answered with a wide smile. “If you can manage that without taking the relics out of the case, be my guest. But no touching the display case. We don't want anything to get broken or stolen.”

Of course, Viola knew full well a proper appraisal would be impossible under those conditions.

“If you buy them, they're yours, and you can do whatever you want with them. You can inspect them to your heart's content.” Her smile widened before continuing. “Though if you want to inspect them before you buy, I suppose I could allow it—under a few conditions. First, in order to guarantee their authenticity with the same accuracy as our verified terminals, we can't have

them appraised anywhere but Kokuginya. And second, the appraisal fee will be your responsibility. If you find those conditions favorable, go right ahead.”

The man looked taken aback by her terms. No one trying to sell their customers fake relics would ever let a customer appraise one themselves. Now convinced the terminals were real and that the business really hadn’t had the money to appraise them all, he dismissed his gut feeling that the explanation was a little *too* convenient and looked at the relics with renewed longing. If he got them appraised and they turned out to be fake or damaged, no matter—he just wouldn’t buy them. “All right, fine with me,” he said.

The man picked five unverified terminals out of the box. Viola called Dale, who was on transport duty, and he appeared carrying a sturdy duralumin suitcase. Sheryl placed the goods in the case and handed it back to Dale. “You know what to do,” she said.

“R-Right,” he said, looking tense.

The man noticed Dale’s attitude and speculated that he wouldn’t have been so nervous if he was only carrying fakes, so there were probably at least a few genuine terminals in the bunch. Moreover, Sheryl had called this a gamble earlier. If she meant they’d mixed the authentic terminals and the fakes together and a lucky customer could end up with a genuine terminal on the cheap, they had probably included a bunch of real ones in order to stoke their customers’ speculative spirit.

But the true reason for Dale’s worry was a little different.

Sheryl had hired Dale to continue working for the relic shop after the gang war, and even now Dale was convinced she was the heir to some massive corporation. In fact, that impression had solidified even further once he’d learned her shop was selling Old World terminals—how else would she have been able to get her hands on something that precious? After managing to forge a connection with someone so prestigious, he was determined to not screw up and accidentally lower her opinion of him.

Dale left the store along with the other man, headed to the local Kokuginya branch, and asked them to inspect the relics, just as he’d been instructed to beforehand. Sheryl and Viola stayed behind and waited on the next batch of

customers.

The next day, the man who'd footed the bill for Kokuginya's appraisal got a call from Viola saying the inspection was finished. He headed to Kokuginya as quickly as he could.

Viola and the Kokuginya appraiser were waiting inside. The newly inspected relics were lined up on a table. The man took a seat, and the appraiser reported to the other two what he'd learned: out of the five terminals he'd examined, three were fake and two were real.

The man couldn't help but grin—the results were even more favorable than he'd anticipated. "Two of them are genuine! But you know, that was awfully fast work," he said with a hint of suspicion. "I would've thought Old World terminals would take longer to appraise."

"I'm very sorry," the appraiser politely explained, "but if you're dissatisfied with the short length of time it took to appraise, unfortunately there's nothing we can do about that. Appraisal can take anywhere from one minute to one year, depending on the relic, and the degree of appraisal is based on the fee the client pays."

"No, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying you should've taken your time. In fact, I'm thrilled you got it done so quickly."

"I'm pleased to hear that," the appraiser said. "Thank you. By the way, we'll take these off your hands for seventy-five million aurum if you'd like."

"No, we'll be taking them back with us," Viola cut in.

"I figured as much," the appraiser said, and obediently backed down, saying no more.

Viola turned to the man with a grin. "So, now that you know the results, will you be buying?"

"Absolutely."

"Very good. Then that'll be one hundred million aurum."

"H-Huh?"

Viola's grin became slyer as she watched the man's reaction. "You actually thought you'd get two authentic Old World terminals for a measly ten million? Of course not. The five million price tag was for an *unverified* terminal. Now that it's verified, the price changes. Fifty mil per terminal, for a total of one hundred mil. Even the fakes are well-made mock-ups—I'll let you have each of those at a discount of ten thousand off, as a special treat from me."

"B-But I paid for their appraisal!"

"You did, and that was a big help. But until you buy them, they're still our products, not yours. Right?"

The man glared daggers at Viola. But she brushed it off with a calm smile.

"You might have thought you could snag a genuine terminal on the cheap," she added, "but here's some advice: you'll never win a gamble with such surface-level thinking. Honestly, if you'd just bought them at store price in the first place, you would've won. What a shame."

In the end, he hadn't read far enough into her scheme. His assumption that they had included many genuine terminals in the mix to rouse the customer's gambling spirit had been his undoing. As Viola's statement finally made this clear to him, the man ground his teeth in frustration.

"So, will you be buying?" Viola asked, knowing this would anger him even more.

It took every bit of the man's willpower to keep from shouting out in rage.

Sheryl was taking a break in her own room, on a business call with Viola via her data terminal. As Viola reported on the aftermath of their visit to the appraiser's, the girl's eyes widened in surprise.

"The customer bought a relic after all?"

"That's right. He probably felt that if he returned home empty-handed, the pricey appraisal fee he'd paid would've been wasted. Still, he could only afford to buy one terminal, it seems." Put another way, Viola cheerfully conjectured, the man had probably assumed that some of the remaining unverified terminals were genuine, and considered the expense of obtaining the appraisal and a

verified terminal the price of proving so. Besides, now he had an authentic Old World terminal in his hands. In the end, it had all been worth it.

Or so he thought.

Sheryl sighed. “I feel you’re going too far. We might make more money by duping our customers, but what if we anger the wrong people? No profit is worth getting crushed because someone wants revenge.”

Sheryl was technically an accomplice here: Viola had explained the plan to her beforehand, and Sheryl had signed off on it. So the girl regretted all the more that she’d let Viola carry out such a devious scheme. In truth, all five of the unverified terminals that the customer had chosen, and which Dale had carried to the appraiser, were replicas. Yet Kokuginya had told the customer and Viola that two of them were authentic.

This had been Viola’s handiwork. Without knowing the terminals in the suitcase were fake, Dale had taken them to Kokuginya to be individually appraised, introducing himself as Viola’s representative like she’d instructed him to. But behind the scenes, Viola had also brought two *genuine* terminals for analysis. Then, after being notified by Kokuginya that the appraisals were complete, she’d specified she wanted to hear five of the seven reports—for the two genuine terminals and three of the fakes—making the customer believe there were two authentic terminals in the batch *he’d* chosen.

Indeed, there were a few genuine articles among the terminals labeled as unverified. But Viola had rigged it so that the customer could never profit more from buying unverified terminals than the ones truly verified by Kokuginya, even if they bought every unverified one in the store—after all, if doing so allowed a customer to come out ahead, it wouldn’t be much of a gamble.

Commercial gambling was always rigged so that the house profited the most in the end. And Viola had employed the same tactics here. But if customers thought they had at least a forty percent chance of snagging a bona fide Old World terminal and that a reputable outlet like Kokuginya was vouching for the relics’ authenticity, they’d be more willing to take a chance. If forty percent was too much to hope for, considering the value of the relics, a twenty or even ten percent chance of getting one on the cheap was still worth betting on. In any

case, such odds were more than enough bait to hook the shop's customers.

Had Viola stopped there, the relic shop would have already stood to profit more than by selling the relics normally. But she'd also exploited loopholes in Kokuginya's appraisal fee, which was expensive to begin with and increased for rarer relics. If the quality of the inspection was unsatisfactory, the client could demand a discount, but that generally only happened if the appraisal didn't reveal any new information about the item, thus wasting the client's money. However, there *were* several cases where one could get a complete and accurate appraisal from Kokuginya at a reduced rate.

Case number one: a simple inspection sufficed to reveal that a relic was fake. This basic principle didn't just apply to relics: if someone made a replica of a New World data terminal, for example—one which looked identical to the original on the surface but was hollow inside—a complex inspection would hardly be necessary to declare it fraudulent. By the same logic, one could get a deeply discounted assessment of an Old World relic from Kokuginya if the object quickly turned out to be phony.

Case number two: the item had been previously appraised. A reappraisal based on data from a previous inspection was much cheaper than a thorough reappraisal from scratch, so one could keep the cost down by asking the company to reuse the old data.

Viola had, in fact, taken advantage of both options. She'd required the customer to pay her directly for an expensive, thorough appraisal of unverified Old World terminals, then turned around and paid Kokuginya to inspect fakes and previously appraised genuine terminals, greatly reducing her fee. Afterward, she'd pocketed the difference.

Naturally, the people at Kokuginya had seen through her scheme. But they hadn't said a word—they didn't want to get involved in an argument arising from a relic appraisal, as that might adversely affect their reputation. Their only job was to do the thorough analysis they'd been hired for and to report the results. On occasion, they'd approach a client and offer to buy a relic that had been brought to them, but that was all. Viola knew this and so had been confident they wouldn't interfere.

Because Sheryl already knew the details of the plan, she was greatly concerned that Viola's duplicity might come back to bite the relic shop later—thus her warning to Viola that she was going too far. But Viola, keenly aware of the reason for Sheryl's worries, replied with a smile.

"Relax, girl. I know when to rein it in. I've never once overstepped my boundaries. Well, except when I got shot by Akira."

That's concerning on its own, Sheryl thought, but since this was the very incident that had led to Viola lending a helping hand, Sheryl was in no place to criticize her aloud.

"Plus," Viola continued, "I just shelled out six hundred million aurum to Akira. We need to recoup that loss, even if it means resorting to underhanded tactics. And I'd like to pay Akira a similar amount for his next haul, so we'll need enough funds to offer him without going in the red. That way, I can prove to him I've kept my word and made the shop a success."

Sheryl had no rebuttal. They wouldn't have been able to pay six hundred million to Akira without Viola investing her own funds into the store—Sheryl's own business acumen had hardly been a factor. And Akira had earned that six hundred million by securing those relics himself, so the money couldn't be counted as compensation for backing her gang. Until she could repay Akira through her own efforts, she had to let Viola do as she pleased. "In that case, let's both strive to make this shop flourish so that Akira's satisfied," she said.

"Agreed. That's all for my report, so see you later." Viola hung up.

"Looks like I'll need to work even harder," Sheryl said to herself with a sigh. "Honestly, I'm already swamped as it is." Her gang was no longer one of the smallest in the slums. Thanks to Akira's support, the street children were lining up in droves to join her, and she'd gained enough influence to manage a thriving business. So on top of her work as a gang boss, she now had a business to run. Her already stressful workload had doubled.

But it was all for Akira, so she couldn't complain. If she wasn't able to handle this much, she knew, she'd never be of use to him. Steeling herself, she wrapped up her break, put a smile on her face, and went back to work.



While Akira had been out pretending to hunt relics, his new weapons from Shizuka had arrived, allowing him to resume making expeditions for real. Before long, he had enough goods that he decided it was time to sell some to Sheryl again.

His backpack had of late been full of ammunition. But this time, it was stuffed with relics—no one could tell the difference at a glance. After hunting farther east for a while to maintain his ruse, he hit up the Higaraka Ruins on the way back to the city, then headed home, dragging his Old World container behind him like usual. The box, however, was no longer empty: it contained the relics he'd brought in his backpack. After contacting Sheryl to say he was on his way, he returned to the city.

Upon entering her warehouse, he was greeted by some familiar faces, two of which he didn't expect. The first was Yumina—he'd figured her security work would've ended by now, but she was still here.

The second turned to him with an amused grin. "Hey, Akira! Been a while, hasn't it?"

It was Kibayashi, dressed in the suit he wore when on official city business.

Chapter 149: The Hunter Rank Advancement Commission

Old World terminals were extremely rare and in demand, but the shop had priced them at fifty million aurum a pop. Naturally, therefore, Sheryl and her team didn't sell out right away. Still, enough customers had purchased them that the shop was starting to run low.

As inventory of their flagship item dropped, the store's traffic gradually waned. Many of their customers had visited the top floor just to see the Old World terminals for themselves and to window-shop, then ended up buying unrelated relics or unappraised terminals as a result. Once the store ran out of terminals, such customers wouldn't even bother to visit that floor.

To make up the difference, the relic sellers were forced to raise the price of their remaining terminals, citing limited stock as an excuse. The authentic terminals were now eighty million, a price that even Sheryl and Viola didn't think would be too popular. But such a move was necessary to keep from selling out too quickly, as well as to entice more buyers to take a chance on the unappraised terminals. At any rate, this would get more customers in the door than merely waiting on Akira for another haul.

Viola and Sheryl were now meeting to discuss their next move. As they talked, however, Viola had something else on her mind.

It's been a week now, and they still haven't taken the bait. I guess it didn't lure them in like I'd hoped. I wish they would have come to us instead of vice versa, but there's nothing for it, I guess.

Her latest scheme hadn't panned out. But though she thought it was a shame, she was only mildly disappointed. Most people considered her a peerless mastermind whose complex, interwoven plans always went off without a hitch; in reality, only a fraction of what she planned ever actually succeeded. She couldn't even begin to count how often she'd failed—her failures had just never come to light. One reason her schemes fell through so often, however, was

because of the high number of plots she had cooking at any given time—a testament to how conniving she truly was.

Viola and Sheryl were deep in their discussion when they received word that a city official had arrived. Thinking her prey had bitten at last, Viola's smile widened.

But contrary to her expectations, the man named Kibayashi was only here to see Akira. She gave a small sigh of disappointment. Since Akira would likely be showing up any minute, however, she and Sheryl postponed their discussion for the moment and headed to the warehouse together.

When Sheryl entered the warehouse with Viola, she was surprised to see Yumina accompanying Kibayashi.

Yumina's contract with Sheryl had already ended. The Druncam hunter had served as Sheryl's personal bodyguard and worked security on the relic shop's top floor, but Mizuha had only loaned her to Sheryl as an apology for Druncam's failure to protect the first warehouse, and could pull her out at the syndicate's discretion.

In fact, Druncam had asked Sheryl if she wanted to keep Yumina on at their standard hiring rate, but Sheryl had refused—she didn't want Akira and Yumina to grow any closer than they already were. However, while she was visibly shocked to see that Yumina had shown up once again despite her efforts, she couldn't act coldly toward a city official.

So Sheryl greeted Kibayashi with a cordial smile. The man explained that he'd brought Yumina here on official business, leading Sheryl to believe that Druncam had accepted a job from the city.

Then she noticed the city official was eyeing her curiously. "Um, is there something on my face?" she asked.

"Hm? Oh, no, nothing like that. I was just thinking that Akira sure did pick a cutie. You *are* his girlfriend, right?"

"Yes, that's correct," she answered. At the moment, they were merely "lovers" by necessity. But Akira had permitted her to treat him as though they

were truly dating, and she was eager to turn the pretense into reality, so her smile was radiant and genuine.

“That so?” Kibayashi said, grinning from ear to ear. “With a pretty girl like you to care for, no wonder Akira’s working so hard! This makes my day.”

“Th-Thank you,” she stammered, but not out of embarrassment. She felt a bizarre sense of unease at his words. She could tell the man in front of her genuinely wished for their relationship to prosper, so why wasn’t she happy about this? Her feelings bewildered her.

“Keep pushing Akira to take on even greater things in the future, okay?” he added.

“S-Sure,” she said, her smile slightly strained. Somewhere in her subconscious, she’d realized Kibayashi’s true colors.

In truth, the city official had seen through her and could tell she and Akira weren’t actually dating. Yet he genuinely wished for them to have a good relationship, because he knew Sheryl was the chief reason the boy had caused such a commotion in the slums. Kibayashi considered Sheryl a valuable asset—someone who could push Akira to get involved in things against his will, a catalyst to make him even more crazy, reckless, and rash in the future.

Sheryl had vaguely realized that Kibayashi was a dangerous man, although she couldn’t quite put her reasons into words. But she felt anxious all the same. What if Akira learned she’d been in contact with the person in front of her, and he distanced himself from both Kibayashi *and* her for fear of getting wrapped up in more trouble? Once this worry entered her head, she couldn’t shut it out—it was entirely possible.

“Something wrong?” Kibayashi asked her.

“No, it’s nothing,” she answered.

“All right, if you say so. Oh, let’s exchange contact info before I forget. If anything happens with Akira, let me know right away! Feel free to call at any time.”

“O-Okay. Thank you very much!” Now Sheryl had the contact information of a high-ranking government official. She couldn’t have passed up such an

opportunity.

Akira showed up with a haul of relics shortly afterward. But Sheryl hardly even had time to greet him before Kibayashi, with Yumina in tow, whisked him away. Sheryl felt disappointed, but got to work looking over the relics Akira had brought.

She opened one of the boxes and was stunned.

“Viola, am I mistaken, or are Old World terminals supposed to be rare?”

Viola looked just as surprised. “If they weren’t, they wouldn’t sell for fifty mil apiece.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Inside the box Akira had given her, nestled among other relics, were many more data terminals.



Akira left the handling of his relics to Sheryl and followed Kibayashi and Yumina into the reception room. The boy sat down, while the other two took seats opposite him.

Kibayashi grinned as he began their discussion. “So, Akira, I heard you went wild again during the gang war. You should’ve told me!”

“What would I gain from telling *you*?”

“You’d entertain me, of course! I might not always act like it, but I’m pretty high up on the government ladder, y’know. Keep me happy, and I’ll give you all sorts of perks.”

Akira pulled a face.

For her part, Yumina was shocked at how casually Akira was treating Kibayashi. She was just a rookie, but she was also a hunter from Druncam, so she knew firsthand how much power the city held. After all, she’d seen Mizuha, a Druncam executive, abase herself before city officials on multiple occasions. To Yumina, copping an attitude toward such a person was strictly forbidden. Had Katsuya tried such a stunt, she would’ve gone to any length to stop him, up to and including knocking him unconscious. She watched Kibayashi on

tenterhooks, waiting for his reaction.

But Kibayashi wasn't offended in the least. "Just as brash as ever, I see," he said with an amused chuckle. "Well, that nature of yours is probably why you're always keeping me entertained, so no complaints here."

As Yumina looked astounded, Akira sighed. "So, why'd you show up out of the blue? If you've got business with me, you could at least let me know first."

"Oh, come on, is that really necessary? We're good friends by now, right?"

"A good friend wouldn't just ambush me out of the blue."

"You wound me, Akira. I'm always treating you well."

"Name one time."

"All of them. Everything I've done for you has always been to your benefit. Think about it—I've only put you on jobs you could make a killing on, and even when it was one of those pesky assignments the city wouldn't let you turn down, I always let you know in advance so you could prepare accordingly. I never told you to get reckless and make me bust a gut laughing—you did that on your own. Am I wrong?"

Akira scowled, because he couldn't deny it. So he settled for an exasperated sigh. Amused, Kibayashi's grin grew wider.

"So, what do you want this time?" Akira asked.

"Right, well, I've come on behalf of the city to offer you a job. And I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but your participation is mandatory."

"*Again?*" Akira looked even more disgusted than before.

"Whoa now, don't get all sour on me just yet," Kibayashi chuckled. "You wouldn't want to turn this one down anyway. Most hunters would give an arm and a leg for this kind of chance—and none of them would even *dream* of refusing. After all, it's a hunter rank advancement commission."

Akira didn't know what that was, or why it was significant. But Yumina's eyes went wide with shock. Her reaction puzzled Akira even more, so Kibayashi took it upon himself to explain.

Hunter ranks were an evaluation of a relic hunter's ability. But for a capable hunter, "ability" comprised many things—battle prowess and relic-seeking skills, among other factors. These couldn't be summed up in a single category.

However, the Hunter Office did make a serious effort to keep hunters with similar skill levels around the same rank. This way, anyone hiring a hunter could get an estimate of their general skill level at a glance (and make sure they had enough in their budget to pay the person accordingly). It also ensured hunters would be treated in accordance with their actual ability, rather than being either overestimated or looked down on.

So the Hunter Office, the organization handing out these ranks, held a great deal of sway over the relic hunters. Such people could be an unruly, dangerous mob if not properly handled—but with the ranking system, the Office could manage them efficiently.

Still, this required that the ranks be accurate. A small discrepancy wouldn't cause any major problems—it would correct itself over time as a given hunter grew in experience. But what if the discrepancy was so large that it threatened the integrity of the entire system? If such an error were left ignored, the hunters might doubt the system's ability to provide an accurate assessment of skill level, and the ranks themselves would lose their meaning. Such would be an insult to all the hunters who put their lives on the line to advance their ranks one level at a time in their pursuit of recognition and prestige. And they would direct their ire and distrust toward the Hunter Office, causing a seismic effect on the governing system of the East.

To prevent this, whenever the Hunter Office discovered a hunter who was far more skilled than their rank suggested, it adjusted the rank to more accurately reflect the person's ability. But a rank was also an indicator of a hunter's contribution to the Eastern League of Governing Corporations, so the Office couldn't suddenly raise a hunter's rank based on skill alone. Thus, it introduced these hunters to special city-commissioned jobs that, if completed, would grant them a higher rank while proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that they'd earned it. These were dubbed hunter rank advancement commissions.

Akira listened to Kibayashi's explanation all the way through, but didn't look

especially thrilled. Meanwhile, Yumina was beside herself with shock. The Office must have recognized Akira as extremely capable if they were offering him a job to raise his rank. As a Druncam hunter herself, Yumina was fully aware how prestigious such an achievement was.

Kibayashi chuckled with amusement at how different Akira's reaction was from that of Yumina, a conventional hunter. "Unflappable as always, eh, Akira?" he said. "Most hunters would fight each other to the death to get a chance like this, y'know."

"I mean, you've got to have some ulterior motive here, right?"

"Sure do."

"Wait, really?!" Akira looked shocked. Kibayashi had acted casually up until now, so his sudden matter-of-fact statement caught the boy off guard.

"That's right." Having gotten the reaction he'd wanted, Kibayashi smiled and moved on to his main objective—convincing Akira to take the job. "Would you like to know what the task entails? Accept the city's commission, and I'll tell you."

"I thought I couldn't refuse."

"Well, technically you can't. But if you told me to shut up or piss off, there wouldn't be much I could do about it, right?" Akira looked clueless, so Kibayashi elaborated, with an amused grin, "This is a direct request from the city, so yeah, if you refuse, you risk antagonizing the bigwigs of Kugamayama. But if you're prepared to move to another city, that won't matter. Knowing you, that's a possibility, right?"

Akira didn't answer. Perhaps back when he'd first left the slums, he would've said yes without any hesitation. But now he had connections and acquaintances tying him to Kugamayama—although they weren't such strong ties that he could definitively say no to Kibayashi either. He sat silent, wavering.

Kibayashi hadn't expected this, so in his head he amended the response he'd prepared. "C'mon, you only stand to benefit from this arrangement, so you ought to take the job. You don't have any reason to turn it down, right? Sure, there might be ulterior motives involved, but it's not like they're meant to

screw you over. In fact, once you hear what the task is, I think you'll see things my way. And FYI, I volunteered to negotiate this commission with you personally," he added smugly. "Remember what I told you back in the day? You're a favorite of mine, so I'll go the extra mile to help you out. Of course, I want you to entertain me with your crazy, reckless, and rash antics, but I'm also your advocate. That's the truth, and I've never lied to you before, right?"

For better or worse, Kibayashi's intentions were crystal clear. His straightforwardness even made Akira chuckle, and the boy decided the city official wasn't out to get him. "All right. I'll do it."

"Glad to hear it!"

With that, the deal was sealed. Now that Akira was on board, Kibayashi looked pleased.

"We'll save the details of the job for later and start with my ulterior motive. Let's see, where should I start?" After mentally organizing his thoughts, he spoke in a tone that belied the importance of his words. "So you know how that war between those two slum gangs ended in a battle of mechs? As you're already aware, the city was behind all that, but the thing is—"

Yumina made a startled noise, cutting Kibayashi off mid-sentence. To her, this news was like a bolt from a blue sky.

"Say, Kibayashi, are you sure you should be revealing this information in front of her?" Akira asked.

"She's a hunter backed by Druncam executives. I trust her to have the ethics and good sense not to say anything unnecessary."

"Why'd you bring her here, anyway? I mean, I'm sure you had a reason, but still."

"Due to some extenuating circumstances, she's relevant to this discussion, so I thought it'd be best for her to know the details too."

Kibayashi had brought Yumina along without telling her anything. As a hunter from Druncam, she couldn't refuse a request from a government official, so she'd obediently complied. But now she couldn't stay silent any longer.

“A-Akira, that incident was the city’s doing? And you knew this all along?”

“I didn’t know from the start or anything,” the boy answered, “but near the end I realized that was probably the case.”

“I-I see.” How many people had lost their lives in that incident? Yumina wasn’t sure of the exact number—the city had only reported that there were many who had been severely injured. But she could imagine that more than a few of those had died. And yet, despite knowing about the city’s involvement, Akira looked completely unfazed. Such a response, plus Kibayashi’s casual admission that the system he worked for had been behind the war, left Yumina reeling.

Kibayashi turned to her with a knowing smile. “Would you rather be excused? I won’t force you to hear this if you don’t want to. You seem to get along with Akira, so I just thought you’d prefer to be informed rather than left in the dark.”

“A-Are you saying it would be better not to know?” she asked.

“Admittedly, some people would create more problems if they learned about it than others. Druncam’s desk jockey faction has a strong rapport with the municipal government, but only the top brass there know the truth about this incident. It’s certainly not something we want every hunter in the organization to know.”

Yumina weighed her options and came to a decision. The shock and panic on her face gave way to determination and resolve. “No, I want to hear this. I’ll stay.”

“Very well. Now, where was I?” With that, Kibayashi resumed his explanation of the true reason for Akira’s job offer.

The corporations Yajima and Yoshioka had intervened in the gang war, attempting to turn it into a demonstration of their latest mech products. But Akira’s intervention had thrown a wrench in their plans—the companies’ precious cutting-edge mechs had all lost to a hunter who (on paper, anyway) was only rank 30.

Of course, anyone who’d seen the battle would immediately realize the

ranking wasn't an accurate measure of Akira's ability. But there were also many with complete faith in the ranking system who hadn't seen him fight. They would only see the following facts: an army of Yajima's Shirousagis hadn't stood a chance against Yoshioka's Kokurou, and the latter had failed to dispense with a Kugamayama City hunter. Even if Akira's hunter rank of 30 was low and didn't reflect his actual skill, the black mech had still lost to a single human. This wasn't something that could be written off as a mere clerical error.

Such people would conclude that the mechs had lost because they and their manufacturers weren't up to snuff. And rival corporations would use the incident as ammunition to disparage Yajima and Yoshioka. Even the city, who knew the truth, was planning to capitalize on their failure by demanding a lower rate from both companies, scoring both mechs for the defense force at a fraction of the cost.

Consequently, both corporations were in dire straits. So in order to repair their reputations, they'd begged the city to offer Akira a rank advancement commission. Akira was indisputably much more capable than his hunter rank indicated, and the city had agreed with hardly any pushback.

"So essentially," Kibayashi concluded, "these two corporations—Yajima and Yoshioka—are the real reason you're being offered this job. In my humble opinion, though, the fact that you're still listed at rank 30 is practically a scam. Who in the hell would believe that?"

"I'm not trying to deceive anyone."

"Oh, don't get me wrong—I'm not saying you're at fault. But leaving your rank as it is will lead to all sorts of misunderstandings, and in fact probably already has. So this is a great opportunity to raise your rank as high as you can get it. You probably don't know this, but once you reach rank 50, the cost of ammo drops—"

"I know that already. You can buy a single round of anti-force ammo that's normally priced at fifty million aurum for five hundred."

"What? I thought you were so unconcerned about raising your hunter rank up until now precisely because you *didn't* know."

In fact, before Akira had learned about the rank 50 perks, such had definitely

been the case, but he stayed silent now so as not to give Kibayashi the satisfaction of knowing he'd been right. Instead, Yumina, who'd kept quiet all this time, spoke up.

"Um, Kibayashi, I have a question. Is Akira really skilled enough to warrant all this?"

"Seeing is believing. Wanna take a look for yourself?"

Excitedly, he pulled out his terminal and sent a video to Yumina, who viewed it through the display on her all-in-one support powered suit.

The video contained footage of Akira facing off against the Kokurou.

As Yumina watched the battle, open-mouthed in shock, Akira eyed Kibayashi warily. "How exactly did you get a hold of this?"

"You mean, where was it recorded from? The cameras on the mechs you fought. Remember, even though things didn't pan out, the war was originally supposed to be a presentation of Yajima's and Yoshioka's latest product models, so there were cameras all over, recording everything."

"And just how many people have seen this?"

"It's technically classified, available only to the city's higher-ups, so it probably hasn't spread too far. But including those who were on the scene at the time, I'd say quite a few people have seen this by now."

Akira didn't reply for a while. When he broke his silence, he just said, "I understand."

Kibayashi, however, spoke jovially. "Man, that fight really was something else to watch! The first time I saw it, I laughed so hard my sides hurt! What kind of hunter thinks a powered suit is enough protection to face off against a mech?! Your recklessness never ceases to disappoint!"

Watching the footage of himself fighting desperately with Alpha's support, he had to admit it looked pretty impressive. But because he knew it couldn't be chalked up to his own ability, he had mixed feelings about this record that presented his performance as his own accomplishment.

Meanwhile, Yumina felt even more astounded by Akira's skill.

With the background for the commission made clear, Kibayashi moved on to the details of the job itself. “You’ll be working in the depths of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins. We’d like you not to stray too far from the city’s highway. But other than that, you’re free to do whatever you want.”

“Come again?”

“You’ll just be there to raise your hunter rank, so you don’t need to do anything specific. You can take out monsters on or around the road to help facilitate its ongoing construction. Or you can go hunt for relics. We don’t really care.” As long as Akira worked in the vicinity of the undeveloped section of the road, he’d be contributing to the city and the League, and his hunter rank would rise. So the city provided no directive beyond that. But, Kibayashi noted slyly, if Akira absolutely needed an objective, he’d be happy to provide one. “And if you decide to go relic hunting,” he added, “the city will buy everything you find—at a discount, alas, but we’ll raise your hunter rank at a faster rate to compensate. This *is* a rank advancement commission, after all, so I hope you can make do with such an arrangement.” Then he moved on to his main topic. “Also, given the nature of your mission, you’ll be taking a companion along.”

“A companion? Why?”

“Well, I say companion, but don’t count on them to be much help in battle—they’ll more or less be monitoring you. We’re giving you free rein, but we also have to make sure that what you’re doing actually merits rank advancement, and that you don’t sell any of the relics you find out there to other outlets.”

This all made sense to Akira. But he looked slightly troubled. “I understand why this is necessary, but if I’m going into the depths with someone who’s gonna be completely useless in a fight, I’d like to at least get compensated extra for protecting them.”

“You technically will be—except instead of paying money, we’ll increase the rate at which your rank rises.”

“Oh, I see.” This, too, made sense—protecting the monitor the city had provided would also count as contributing to the city. So even if his accomplishments in monster extermination and relic hunting weren’t as

significant as expected, they'd still have a reason to promote him.

“Understand? Good. Now as for your companion, here she is.”

“Huh?” Akira and Yumina announced in unison.



Akira realized that the companion he'd just called "completely useless in a fight" was Yumina herself. Inwardly, he started to panic. And Yumina, who'd also just had this arrangement sprung on her, was even more flustered.

"K-Kibayashi, what's going on?" she asked in disbelief.

Akira deduced that she hadn't known about this beforehand either. "Yeah, Kibayashi, what are you trying to pull?"

"What, is she not good enough for you?" the man asked.

"N-No, that's not what I—"

"If you have anyone else you'd rather go with, let me know, and I'll try to make it happen. But if not, you're taking her. That's not something I decided; it's what the circumstances dictated."

"What circumstances?"

"I can tell you if you want, but"—he turned to Yumina—"it involves what's really going on behind the scenes of the desk jockey faction at Druncam. Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"I'm sure," she said, her expression resolute.

"All right, then. Here's how it began." Kibayashi began gleefully detailing what had led to Yumina being chosen as Akira's companion.

Any time the defense force was considering some new type of equipment, rival corporations inevitably clashed to varying degrees in order to provide it—the competition between Yajima and Yoshioka was just one example. Another such corporation was Kiryou, creator of an all-in-one team support system—the same one Yumina was currently using. This system not only increased team efficiency, it allowed a commander to control a unit with ease even while off-site. In battle, it was often more suitable for hunters to move as a synchronized group rather than individually, making the system ideal for a large unit.

During the gang war, Katsuya and his teammates had trounced many of Yajima's mechs, effectively showing the city what Kiryou's system was capable of. Kiryou, of course, had been thrilled—until Akira had destroyed over half of

those mechs on his own. Just by looking at the battle footage, it was obvious that Akira had outperformed their support system.

So Kiryou now wanted *Akira* to wear their suit. Such a skilled hunter choosing to adopt it would serve as great advertising for their product.

The company had therefore deliberated over how best to get in touch with him. The most common methods were typically to make contact with the hunter directly, to approach them through shops from which the hunter typically bought their gear, or to have a friend recommend the gear to them. But the first option was out—his personal information on his Hunter Office profile was all undisclosed, so Kiryou couldn't contact him, nor did it know anyone with close ties to him who could contact him on its behalf.

The second option wouldn't work either. Shizuka didn't sell powered suits at her store—she always special-ordered them for her customers—so Kiryou wouldn't have much power over her. And if they tried going through her shop anyway, they might end up in a dispute with one of the companies she did regularly deal with.

That left only option three. But Akira's circle of friends was awfully small, so this hadn't seemed feasible either—that is, until Yumina came into the picture, dispatched to work security with Akira so that the Druncam exec Mizuha could get her foot in the door with Sheryl. Kiryou already had a connection to Mizuha, since Katsuya's team was testing its powered suits, so it hadn't had any trouble convincing her to assign Yumina to work with Akira.

Kibayashi turned to Yumina with a grin. "So your superior Mizuha will inform you sometime soon—tomorrow, I'm guessing—that you'll be accompanying Akira on his commission, and you're to try and market Kiryou's powered suit to him to the best of your ability. That much is practically already set in stone."

"I'm not sure if I could say or do anything to convince him, though," she said doubtfully.

"Doesn't matter. Even if you don't succeed, simply finishing this job will benefit Kiryou all the same. A hunter wearing their suit will have fought alongside a skilled hunter on a commission for rank advancement. That's a fine enough advertisement on its own, I'd say." He chuckled, then turned back to

Akira. “Still, if you report afterward that she was a burden or completely useless, so much for the advertising. But people don’t typically say things like that about their friends, do they?”

“Oh, I get it now,” the boy replied. They’d chosen Yumina, his friend, so that he’d keep his mouth shut about any of her shortcomings, thus allowing them to trumpet the fact that a hunter in a Kiryou powered suit had held their own during a rank advancement job.

Neither Akira nor Yumina looked thrilled at hearing all this.

With that, Kibayashi wrapped up his explanation. “To be honest, though, I couldn’t care less about any of that. I thought it might be easier for you to work with someone you already know rather than a complete stranger, but if you don’t want her, just say so. We’ll consider this discussion null and void, and I’ll find someone else. What do you say?”

“N-No,” Akira stammered, “I-I mean, it’s not like I don’t want Yumina with me or...” He trailed off. In truth, now that he knew the whole story, he didn’t want to say he approved, lest he seem to be approving the reasoning for her selection as well. Finally, unable to decide on his own, he passed the buck to Yumina. “What would you prefer, Yumina?”

“You want *me* to decide?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t want to force you if you’re not up for it, but I don’t have any reason to turn you down either.”

Perhaps pushing the decision onto Yumina was a little cruel on his part. But though he considered her a friend, at this point he still didn’t know her well enough to comfortably involve her in his own problems.

So she decided for him. “In that case, please take me along.”

At this, Kibayashi grinned once more. “Then it’s settled!”

Thus, Yumina joined the rank advancement commission as Akira’s companion. And for once, no one had made her decision for her.

Chapter 150: The Monsters of the Depths

Akira was at Shizuka's shop, picking up a massive load of ammunition.

Shizuka had prepared the ammo for him herself, yet her smile was tinged with concern as she watched him load his colossal order into the bed of his truck. "I know your employer is covering your ammo costs, but you sure didn't hold back," she remarked.

"They'll get over it," Akira said with a cocksure grin. "No such thing as too much ammo when you're in the ruins, and if they're going to saddle me with a mandatory job just because it suits their interests, they better not complain about me buying enough so I don't run out midway through."

After Akira had accepted the hunter rank advancement commission, he'd asked Kibayashi for the city to cover his ammo expenses. Kibayashi had agreed, and Akira had headed to Shizuka's immediately afterward to order as much as he could.

Shizuka rarely carried extraordinarily expensive rounds like the SSB's, so she typically had to order them from elsewhere. However, she had gathered as much for him as she could in the limited time available before his mission.

"I suppose," she replied. With a smile, she added, "Well, having more than you think you need will help to keep you safe, and it's certainly good for this store's coffers. So I won't complain."

"Fair enough. But I won't be stingy with this ammo, trust me! So chances are I'll be back for a restock real soon." He grinned good-humoredly.

She smiled back. "I'm looking forward to it!"

Akira finished loading the ammo into his truck, then climbed back into the driver's seat.

"Akira, you're going to have another hunter with you this time, right?" Shizuka said, still looking cheerful. "As always, don't overexert yourself, but make sure not to let your companion get reckless either."

“Don’t worry, I won’t. All right, I’m heading out!”

“Good luck. And above all, be careful!”

Akira drove off. Once he was out of sight, Shizuka sighed.

“A hunter rank advancement commission in the Kuzusuhara depths?” she murmured. “Will he really be all right?” But then she smiled, choosing to look on the bright side. “Well, he won’t be alone this time, so he’ll probably be fine.” With someone else’s safety to consider, Akira would surely act with more discretion. So she was probably worrying over nothing, she thought as she left the storehouse and returned to her shop.



Now fully restocked and ready to head deep into Kuzusuhara, Akira parked his bike near the city’s forward base and waited for Yumina to arrive. His truck sat in the base’s parking lot, packed to the brim with ammo, so that he wouldn’t need to go all the way back to his house to get more supplies.

After some time, Yumina drove up in a transport vehicle—one clearly built for wasteland expeditions, given the thickness of its armored exterior. Because hunters could eliminate monsters more quickly and efficiently with their own equipment than with a combat vehicle’s mounted weaponry, such a vehicle’s defensive capabilities would be in greater demand than its firepower if it got caught up in a monster ambush. This one had no machine guns or similar artillery mounted on top, but the roof had a hatch that could open and close if one needed to quickly take cover, and the side doors had footholds on the inside, allowing passengers to open the doors and, using them as shields, crouch behind them while fighting. Thus, vehicles like Yumina’s were popular for treks through the wasteland.

The girl got out and approached him. “Looks like you got here before me. I, er, didn’t make you wait too long, did I?”

In fact, Yumina had arrived right on time. But something about Akira’s expression gave her the feeling that he’d been waiting for quite a while now, and a hint of anxiety crept into her voice.

Akira, recalling that Carol had asked something similar, responded with a grin.

“Nah, I just got here—that’s what you want me to say, right?”

Yumina looked surprised for a moment, then broke into a smile. “I’d like to hear that, yes. I mean, I wouldn’t want you to think I was keeping you from your work, since you had to wait for me.”

“In that case, I just got here,” he said playfully.

“What a coincidence—so did I!” she teased. “Now let’s hit the road, shall we?”

With that, Akira and Yumina set off for the depths of the Kuzusuhara ruins.

The city’s highway started from the forward base on Kuzusuhara’s outskirts and stretched far into the ruin. Built to facilitate extended excursions into Kuzusuhara, the road was immaculately paved. It measured approximately one hundred meters wide and had tall walls on either side to keep monsters from trespassing.

Normally, when traversing the depths, one had to make their way past collapsed buildings and scattered debris while battling dangerous fauna, but the city’s road was clear and its path was mostly straight, helping hunters to reach the interior of Kuzusuhara with the least amount of hassle.

Akira and Yumina were enjoying these benefits as they sped down the highway, Yumina in her transport vehicle and Akira on his bike. Akira wondered to himself why he’d had to spend all that effort getting to the Tsubakihara Building when such a convenient path existed.

“Hey, do hunters typically need vehicles with so much armor when they go deeper into a ruin?” he asked Yumina.

“I wouldn’t know,” she answered. “They chose this one for me because of my powered suit.”

“Your suit has a say in what you drive?”

“You could say that. Oh, right—I told you about it a little before, but I guess I didn’t go into detail. I’m wearing what’s called an all-in-one support powered suit. And this vehicle comes with an onboard device that communicates with

it.”

Kiryou had designed the all-in-one suit to run the support system they had developed—without which it was just an ordinary powered suit. But the suit didn’t have enough processing power to integrate the support system directly into its OS, so instead they’d prepared separate high-powered CPUs with the system already installed. One of these large units was mounted in Yumina’s vehicle.

“But isn’t that a huge pain in the ass for the user?” Akira asked, looking doubtful. “You have to carry that massive machine with you everywhere you go.”

“Well, it’s normally supposed to be used by groups. Maybe the company thought the increase in team efficiency that it offered was significant enough to outweigh the inconvenience.”

“Oh yeah?” Such an explanation was good enough for Akira.

But Yumina gave a wry smile. “For *this* mission, though, I have to manage on my own. Orders from the top brass, apparently.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it rough,” remarked Akira with a smile.

“You have no idea!” she grinned back.

The cynical tone in their voices indicated just how they felt about an organization jerking them around.

Before long, Akira and Yumina made it to the end of the finished part of the road and found themselves well inside the ruin. The highway beyond was still under construction and inaccessible, and the surrounding area was heavily guarded by security to keep the deadly creatures of the interior from drawing near. Guards toting massive weapons patrolled on foot, and even multiple tanks and mechs were on standby, immediately tipping off any passing hunter that the area they were now in was quite dangerous.

Akira seemed undaunted by the presence of such high security measures, but Yumina looked visibly tense. She exited the transport vehicle and made her way to Akira’s side.

“All right, we’re here. What’s the plan now?” she asked.

“Let’s walk around first to get the lay of the land. We need a good grasp of the terrain and how tough the monsters are before we do any relic hunting.”

“Agreed. Then that’s settled, but one more question—are you really okay with me fighting by your side?”

“Why? Is there some reason I shouldn’t be?”

“Oh, no, it’s just that each monster I take down will be one less potential kill for you, making it harder to raise your rank, right? Since we’re here to boost your standing, I just want to make sure this is all right with you.” Yumina also knew that during this assignment, she was not only Akira’s companion but a target to protect and support if necessary. The more she fought with him on the front lines, the more of a liability she’d be, so it would make sense for him to tell her not to join the fray and to stay back instead. If that was his answer, she’d have to grin and bear it.

But to her surprise, Akira responded, “Oh, that’s it? I don’t care. Fight all you like—I could use the help.”

“Really? Are you *sure*?”

“Yeah. If it makes my job easier, it’s A-OK in my book.”

“Then I won’t hold back,” Yumina replied. Her worries now allayed, she grinned from ear to ear.

“But on one condition,” Akira added, the corners of his mouth turning upward. “If we’re ever up against a monster you think we can’t handle, fall back right away. I’ll follow suit, but given my standing with the city, it won’t look too good on me if I retreat before you do.”

“In that case, I don’t have much choice, do I? All right, I understand.” Yumina smiled teasingly, as if to say she would permit Akira’s selfishness.

Their course of action now decided upon, they began their exploration of the Kuzusuhara depths in earnest. Akira came to a large intersection within the ruin and was about to take the path heading right when Alpha stopped him.

Akira, let's not go that way. Though the end of the road is a fair distance from here, that route leads to the Tsubakihara Building. Best not to go near there if we can help it.

Oh, really? Okay then. He made a U-turn on his bike and headed in the opposite direction.

The wide roads, crossing through the ruin's evenly spaced buildings in a lattice pattern, were easily traversable by Akira and Yumina in their respective vehicles. The street's surface showed little sign of degradation, and even the surrounding buildings were intact, with only minor cracks and fissures noticeable. Akira drank in the scenery as he rode, thinking that the Tsubakihara Building and its surroundings would likely look similar to this if left unmaintained for a long period of time.

After proceeding along the road for some time, his scanner picked up several enemy readings. He zoomed in to get a better look—and was shocked to see they were shaped like monsters he knew all too well.

Alpha, those aren't... Are they tankrantulas?

The spiderlike creatures were appearing in droves, one after another. Some of them had fur covering their bodies, while others boasted metallic exoskeletons. One version had normal spider legs sprouting from the thorax, while another had what looked like automobile tires at the bases of their legs. Their sizes varied too: many were only around a meter tall, but several were even as large as five meters. But one thing in particular distinguished them from run-of-the-mill spiders: weapons such as cannons, machine guns, and missile pods protruded from every single one.

Technically, the name "tankrantula" only applies to the mutant variety that was designated as a bounty monster, Alpha answered casually. *These are just armored spiders.*

So, then, they're not tankrantulas?

Not quite. But the tankrantula might have originated from this cluster. If one of these spiders made it out into the wasteland and underwent a similar mutation, there's a chance another tankrantula could appear.

Really? Well, in that case—with a grin, he used his bike’s control panel to swivel his mounted SSB toward the horde—*I better take care of them now so I don’t have to fight another one of those things!*

A stream of enormous bullets erupted from the SSB, their rate of fire rivaling a minigun. Each one was far more powerful on its own than standard ammunition, and they blasted the smaller spiders to smithereens and crushed the larger ones.

Still, the assault was neither sufficiently powerful nor widespread enough to wipe out the entire horde. The surviving spiders immediately went on the offensive, unloading their arsenal of machine guns, artillery, and missiles in Akira’s direction.

Akira skillfully maneuvered his bike and avoided them, making a sharp ninety-degree turn at an intersection to dodge their lines of fire. There were more spiders ahead of him, but his SSB made quick work of them, and he drove past their remains.

Yet the curtain of enemy gunfire didn’t abate—in fact, it grew even thicker. New spiders were emerging from between buildings and over roofs, and those with tires on their legs chased after Akira at high speed, firing their own weapons.

In the blink of an eye, the entire area became engulfed in a deadly bombardment.

At first Yumina had been right behind Akira, but her vehicle had come to a sudden stop right before the fight began, and so she’d avoided getting caught up in the maelstrom.

Her all-in-one support system handled the vehicle’s auto-drive, and had halted the vehicle, judging from the enemy’s numbers that she’d be in danger if she went any farther. And looking at the hellish battlefield in front of her, she knew this had been the right call to make.

“He really charged in there with no hesitation?” she murmured, her face a mixture of astonishment and admiration. “No wonder the city chose him for a rank advancement commission!” Then her expression grew tense. “I can’t just

sit here and spectate—I've got to do my part too."

She hurried from the driver's seat to the back of the transport vehicle, grabbed a massive gun from storage, and climbed onto the roof through the hatch. Then, with a daring grin, she took aim at the horde of enemies.

"If I'm going to convince Akira to use this gear, then I'd better show him what it can do!"

All of her gear was new, provided by Kiryou specifically for this mission, and represented a significant upgrade from her old equipment. Its specs—and price—were so much higher than her previous setup that it approached what a rank 50 hunter might use. Kiryou had decided she'd need nothing less if she was to perform well enough to convince Akira to adopt their gear.

Yumina pulled the trigger. Her gun, so large that a normal powered suit wouldn't be able to wield it, fired a gigantic bullet, specially chosen for its sheer destructive power. The speeding projectile rent the air with such force that it left a visible trail in its wake before striking its target—blowing a large spider to pieces. It even kept going and struck several more spiders behind the first.

"Now that's some serious firepower," she marveled. "Just how far could I go if I actually owned a gun like this? I wonder if they'd give me a discount..."

As surprised as she was by its power, however, she also felt a bittersweet realization. She'd only been permitted to use this gun because she was accompanying Akira, and so to her, seeing the gun in action was like seeing firsthand the wide gulf in skill between the two of them. She felt her own powerlessness even more strongly, and a small sigh escaped her lips.

Still, she held down her trigger finger and continued to fire, helping to whittle down the horde's numbers as much as she could. Some spiders fired back, of course, but the armored transport withstood their attacks with ease, automatically swerving backward in snakelike patterns to avoid most of them.

As the foothold below her feet undulated from the swerving, Yumina crouched behind the open roof hatch for cover while the all-in-one support system assisted in lining up her shots. Because the processing power that was normally spread over an entire unit was now concentrated solely on Yumina, the system's aim correction was exceedingly accurate. So she was able to avoid

becoming a liability for the present.

However, this also made the enemy recognize her as a threat on par with Akira.

Akira weaved through the ruin's dilapidated buildings on his bike, a massive number of spiders hot on his tail.

Strictly speaking, he had baited them into chasing him. He turned the corner of a building to avoid the enemy's fire, then mowed them down with his SSB as they followed him around the wall. A sideways sweep from his titan-killer was enough to bisect countless spiders, as if a gigantic blade had sliced them apart. At the same time, he used a second SSB, one he'd bought for normal use and indoor combat, to pick off a group of spiders approaching along the sides of another building.

This SSB was only "indoor-use" in that it wasn't as large as his titan-killer, which was difficult to wield inside narrow buildings due to its sheer size. But even a standard SSB was considerably large and definitely powerful. It easily filled the spiders crawling on the walls full of holes, and they fell to the ground.

Of course, even Akira wasn't capable of accurately aiming two SSBs at the same time. But he fired wildly and without reserve to make up for his low accuracy—with his client footing the bill for his ammunition, he had no reason to hold back or worry about making each shot count.

Though the extra ammo helped, he was putting up a fight against the dangerous monsters of the depths—and he was doing so without Alpha's help. *I wouldn't say this is a breeze or anything, but I'm managing better than I expected*, he mused, and the satisfaction of his accomplishment brought a grin to his lips.

That's just how much you've grown, Alpha said, looking proud. *Keep up the good work! Just don't get too comfortable and let your guard down.*

I know, I know! I'm not so strong yet that I can afford to let my guard down around these guys. If you're going to offer advice, save it for a little later.

Very well, I'll do as you say and save it for a little later. I look forward to seeing

how you'll become a better hunter in such a short amount of time, she said sarcastically.

Akira's mouth puckered. But determined not to have to eat crow, he replied with a confident grin, *Yeah, look forward to it!*

First, he thought, he'd prove himself by taking care of his current pursuers. Inundating the spider cluster with even heavier fire, he gradually reduced their numbers while leading them around on the intersecting roads. By the time he made his fifth lap around, only a third of the horde remained. He'd expended a great deal of ammo by now, but he figured he could comfortably pick off the rest with more accurate shots.

Just then, Yumina's voice came through the comms. "Sorry, Akira, I'm going to have to fall back. I tried to hold out as best I could, but I can't go on any longer."

At first, Akira had kept almost the entire horde on his tail. But thanks to Yumina's efforts, more and more spiders had diverted their attention to her over time. Ultimately, the pursuing mob had become more than she could handle—it was now too dangerous for her to even go outside the vehicle to shoot.

Her support system had been advising her to retreat for quite some time. Yumina had ignored it, determined to hold out even the slightest bit longer—but she'd finally reached her limit.

"Roger," Akira replied. "You need me to back you up?"

"Only if you can afford to. If you're too busy, though, don't worry about it. My vehicle's armor is strong enough for me to make it back to the security unit guarding the city highway."

"In that case, I'll be right there." Akira cut the call, and his face became grave. *Alpha, training's over. I'm gonna need your support.*

Roger that. How much support do you want?

Full support. Everything you've got. Protecting Yumina's part of the job, and apparently I've slacked off. Time to make up for it.

You got it! Let's kick these monsters to the curb!

He'd already been managing fine on his own, and now he'd have Alpha's support—in other words, from here on out, Akira's purpose was not training but the utter annihilation of the enemy.

As he headed down the road at high speed, his bike made a sharp and sudden U-turn. Its tires gripped the ground with such strength that they cracked the pavement below. Their traction neutralized the bike's inertia from the turn, keeping its speed loss to a minimum as it accelerated in the opposite direction—straight toward the approaching cluster of enemies. At the same time, Akira pummeled the spiders with all three of his SSBs, unleashing maximum power with maximum efficiency.

The first SSB—his run-of-the-mill gun—Akira held himself. After concentrating and slowing his sense of time, he lined up each enemy in its sights and took them out one by one. Now that Alpha was correcting his aim, he didn't need to worry about compensating for poor accuracy with denser gunfire. Every single shot hit an enemy's vital area or other weak spot, mercilessly reducing them to scrap.

The second SSB, his titan-killer, was mounted on his bike and under Alpha's control. She aimed at each enemy with a level of precision one would think inconceivable for a gun fastened in an arm emplacement. At a glance, she merely seemed to be sweeping the weapon back and forth, but each shot was as accurate as it was powerful, taking out entire groups of spiders at a time.

The third and final SSB was attached to another arm emplacement; instead of bullets, it fired missiles about five centimeters in diameter. Inside was loaded a large extended magazine that held so many missiles it made Akira wonder how all of them fit inside, and that allowed for continuous, rapid fire. Missiles sailed through the air and descended upon the enemy, eliminating the spiders behind buildings and other areas that straighter-shooting weapons couldn't reach. It also easily dispatched larger monsters that couldn't be taken down with a single bullet. While the missiles could track their targets to a degree, Akira would not have been able to pull off the same feats had he been launching them on his own: the missiles were taking complex trajectories toward their targets, weaving through enemy gunfire—and naturally, this was only possible because Alpha was controlling them.

While he used his three SSBs to thin down the enemy horde, Akira also charged into clusters of spiders with his bike, crushing them from close range as well. Countless of these creatures had made this area of the depths their home—yet all it took was Akira, with Alpha’s help, to wipe them out.

Right as Akira broke through the final spider cluster, all three of his SSBs simultaneously ran out of ammo. Only piles of arachnid corpses remained in his wake. He finally braked to a stop and breathed a sigh of relief.

No sooner had he done so than his comms crackled to life.

“This is the security team stationed at the highway. We got a call requesting backup in your area. What’s the situation there?” If a hunter working in the Kuzusuhara interior ran into a group of monsters too large or difficult for them to handle, they were permitted to lead the monsters to the security presence patrolling the highway, since taking care of the monsters would help the city conquer the depths in the long run.

The security team had seen the mass of enemy readings and assumed a challenging battle was taking place. If too many monsters were coming their way, they needed to respond quickly.

Then they’d noticed Yumina’s vehicle retreating and contacted her to ask what had happened. In response, Yumina had requested that the security unit support Akira.

But Akira said casually, “Nah, I don’t need backup. I just finished up here.”

“Huh? Seriously?” the voice on the other end said. “All right then, if you say so. The monsters of the depths are no joke, though, so be careful.” With that, the call ended.

Akira frowned. *‘Be careful’? If all of the monsters in the depths are that tough—or worse—I don’t think being careful will do much good.*

That’s why it’s an ideal place to efficiently raise your hunter rank, I suspect, Alpha replied with a smile.

The city had limited his hunter activities to this area only, and Kibayashi had seemed strangely excited about that. He now understood why. *Oh yeah, guess that makes sense. No wonder!*

With a wan smile, he sped off on his bike once more to rendezvous with Yumina.



As Akira met up with Yumina once more, she immediately bowed her head in apology. “I’m sorry, Akira. I guess I ended up being a burden after all.”

When Akira had said he was on his way to help her, she’d assumed he meant he would immediately retreat to the highway. But he’d taken care of the rest of the monsters on his own first, finishing up not long after Yumina had called him.

She’d already known Akira was skilled, but now she realized he was even more talented than she’d thought. Suspecting that Akira had intentionally held back so that she wouldn’t believe she was a liability while they were fighting together, her confidence took another blow.

Akira saw how she was acting and hurriedly shook his head. “N-No, you weren’t! Honest!”

“But...” She hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“L-Look, if I thought you were actually holding me back, I would’ve asked Kibayashi for an extra protection fee. In fact, I *did* ask him that before I knew you’d be my companion, remember? But I wouldn’t have left you alone back there if I thought you needed me to keep you safe.”

Had that been enough to soothe Yumina’s concerns, she wouldn’t have been so down in the first place. But regardless of whether he was being honest or just trying to make her feel better, she worried that staying depressed would only burden him even further. Forcing a bright smile to her face, as though his words really had cheered her up, she said, “Really? Then that makes me feel better.”

Seeing her looking happier, Akira relaxed, and a smile came to his own lips. “All right, I know it’s still early, but how about we call it good for today? This is just the first day—we’ve scouted out the area like we planned, so that’s enough for now. Best not to push ourselves.”

“No complaints here! Let’s head back. Honestly, though, if our first day in the depths was this difficult, I’m going to have a rough time of it.”

“I feel the same,” Akira replied.

Yumina looked surprised. “You too? But you took out all those spiders by yourself just now!”

“Ah, well, that wasn’t necessarily *all* me.”

“If it wasn’t all you, then who else was it?”

“Well...” He hedged, then said with a smirk, “It was my client, who generously supplied all that ammo! Right? I mean, I couldn’t have done all that if I’d run out of ammo midway through!”

Though he’d spoken jokingly, it was the truth. Alpha’s support had obviously been the greatest factor in his success, but he couldn’t have purchased all the ammo he’d used in that battle with his own money. So he was right to say he hadn’t accomplished what he had without such aid.

His response shocked Yumina to her core. Akira’s feat that day had clearly not been something that anyone could pull off with *just* an excessive supply of ammo, yet Akira was behaving as if that were the case. His own perception of his achievement was so drastically understated, and so different from her own feelings on the matter, that she couldn’t help cracking a smile.

“I think I’m starting to see why the city offered you this commission. Keeping you at rank 30 any longer would’ve been fraud.”

“Y-You think so?” Yumina sounded so sure of herself that it unnerved him a little.



With the day’s activities in the depths done, Akira and Yumina headed back to the forward base.

“Well then, same time tomorrow, Yumina?” Akira asked.

He didn’t think he’d asked anything strange, yet Yumina looked taken aback. “T-Tomorrow?!”

“Um, would you rather go the day after tomorrow, then?” he asked.

Yumina sensed that Akira didn’t understand why she’d reacted as she had,

and she became lost in thought. Left to his own devices, then, Akira might actually head into the interior every day. To Yumina, this meant he was risking his life daily. He clearly wasn't in his right mind! And she couldn't accompany a person to the battlefield if they weren't sane.

On the other hand, they'd called it quits early today, and Akira probably wanted to make up for this as soon as he could. If her inferior performance today truly wasn't the reason for cutting short their activity, she could understand why he'd want to go back with her the very next day. This wasn't completely unreasonable. Besides, she was only his companion, so she couldn't delay his rank advancement commission for her own convenience.

Still, she couldn't bring herself to agree with him. "Sorry, Akira. Could you at least give me two days to prepare first? My suit's a rental from Kiryou, so there are all sorts of stipulations I have to follow, and the rest of my gear and vehicle need maintenance as well. I don't want to hold you up, but if you could give me just a couple of days..."

"Oh, in that case, no problem."

Yumina felt a wave of relief wash over her. "Thank you so much for understanding!"

After further discussion, they agreed they would take a two-day break, not just after that first day but also after every subsequent expedition. Then, just as they were about to part ways, Kibayashi showed up.

"Hey, Akira!" the man greeted him. "Good work out there, eh?"

"Why're you here, Kibayashi?" he asked. "Come to complain that I didn't get enough done today?"

Kibayashi paused for a second before answering. "And what if I did?" he said with a cheerful grin.

Akira sighed, irritated. "Shouldn't a light survey of the area be enough progress for the first day? I agreed to the commission, but you never said I had to work to raise my rank right away. I'm gonna take my time."

Kibayashi snorted, then burst out laughing. "Good enough for me! That's my Akira!"

Akira looked baffled at this. Kibayashi cheerfully continued, “You know those armored spiders you took care of? That was their nesting area, but because there have been so many of them, hunters have actively avoided searching for relics there. In fact, those things were such an obstacle to relic collecting that we’d actually already planned to send a team out to exterminate them.” He laughed again. “But you took care of all of them on your own! And for you to say it was just a ‘light survey,’ well, I couldn’t be happier! If that was your idea of ‘light,’ I can’t *wait* to see what’s next!”

“Glad to be of service,” Akira said sarcastically. “As long as I could make you laugh by risking my life, I guess it was all worth it.”

Meanwhile, Yumina’s smile had gone stiff. As she’d first thought, those monsters really had been quite formidable, yet Akira had not only wiped them all out on his own but considered doing so “light survey work.”

And she was going to be accompanying him for the rest of this job! Was she really going to be okay? The concern weighed on her mind so heavily that she found it hard to maintain the cordial smile she had presented to the city official.

“Oh, actually,” Kibayashi went on, “if a horde like that was too easy for you, want to join the highway extension team? You’ll be able to fight even tougher monsters deeper in! Typically we only let mechs patrol areas that are so dangerous, but you’ve won against a mech, so you shouldn’t have a problem!”

Akira pulled a face. “*Hell* no!”

Next to him, Yumina looked equally revolted. Kibayashi might have been a city official, but sometimes, one’s feelings were just too intense to conceal.

Chapter 151: Yumina's Training

After two days, Akira and Yumina once again headed to Kuzusuhara's depths.

"Hmm, what should we do today?" Akira wondered aloud. "Maybe continue to survey the area?"

Last time, their efforts had ended prematurely thanks to monsters attacking en masse. They'd succeeded in making Kibayashi erupt with laughter, but the monsters had been tougher than expected and had forced Akira and Yumina to wrap up early. Clearly the two had yet to grasp the difficulty of their mission, so Akira was thinking they should get a better feel for the ruin's interior first by scouting around and taking down a few more monsters.

But Akira's suggestion was met with a grave look from Yumina. "Actually, Akira, I know it's probably not even worth asking, but just in case: Would you mind if I took charge today?"

"Hm? Oh yeah, sure."

"Really? You're okay with that?" Yumina looked shocked at his immediate approval.

"Yeah, that's fine. Just don't ask me to do anything too weird," he said with a grin.

Akira had called the shots the previous time, and as a result he'd dragged Yumina into a battle that was beyond what she could handle—mainly because Akira's sense of risk differed greatly from hers. Repeated brushes with death and Alpha's overpowered support had severely skewed Akira's criterion of what constituted danger. He'd realized as much by now, but he still had yet to grasp the degree to which his understanding differed from that of others.

But Yumina would be accompanying him for the rest of this mission, so he thought it would be prudent to at least get an idea of what she felt she could comfortably handle—something he could probably find out if he let her take charge.

“Thank you, truly,” she said with a smile. “Naturally, I won’t say ‘my orders are absolute’ or anything like that. If you’re ever unsatisfied with a decision of mine, I’ll step down and let you take charge again. I promise.”

“Works for me. Then lead the way, Captain!”

“My pleasure!”

With teasing grins, the two got to work right away. The second day of the hunter rank advancement commission had begun.

Akira and Yumina proceeded through the ruins with the latter in command. They encountered several monsters along the way, but the two hunters’ combined might was more than enough to finish the creatures off. After proceeding in this way for some time, they started selecting specific areas to clear of threats.

The enemies they encountered here also went down with no trouble. One of them was an enormous glutton croc whose body no longer resembled a normal crocodile’s, thanks to having regularly gorged on armored spiders. Countless deadly weapons now sprouted from its body, making it clear that the monster was more than the average hunter could handle.

But Akira and Yumina’s concentrated, combined fire blew it to bits. Even the beasts strong enough to make their home in the depths were no match for the pair.

Once they’d eliminated all the monsters in that area, Yumina parked her vehicle in front of a building. “Let’s look for relics in here.”

Akira agreed, and the two of them headed inside with gear suited to exploring indoors. No sooner had they entered than Yumina’s scanner immediately began analyzing the area. Her support system automatically compiled this data and created a tentative map display of the inside, complete with markers indicating Akira and Yumina’s current location.

“Whoa, cool!” Akira murmured.

“Convenient, isn’t it?” she said. “We can even see what the situation looks like outside.” The vehicle’s onboard scanner was still running, and its data could

also be seen on the display, outside the map of the building.

The building itself was displayed in an easy-to-understand three-dimensional floor plan. Even the areas left unscanned had their structures and number of floors tentatively mapped out based on what they looked like from the outside. Details like walls, floors, and the shapes of the rooms were clearly displayed before the two hunters.

With this new information, Akira and Yumina began exploring. There were many rooms, each with all kinds of items inside, but they ignored them for now and did a rough sweep of the entire building first. They ran into several more monsters, but none of these posed a challenge.

“Hey Akira, are you okay with letting me decide what relics we take back?”

“That’s fine,” he replied.

They carried relics from the building and loaded them onto Yumina’s vehicle. After only a few round trips, the transport was completely full.

“All right, now let’s head back to the highway to drop these off,” she said.

Having secured all the relics they could carry, they headed back the way they’d come. When they passed the security guards and entered the maintained section of the highway, a group of hunters working as transporters were waiting with a large truck.

Yumina opened the back door of her vehicle, revealing the relics inside. “All of these, please. Thank you very much,” she said.

Transporters made their living hauling relics from dangerous ruins to the safety of the city. But they didn’t actually enter ruins, so they weren’t skilled enough to enter inner Kuzusuhara. They could only use the city’s road, as it was comparatively less dangerous. Still, they would save Akira and Yumina the trouble of having to carry the relics all the way back to the city.

Once all the relics were unloaded from the vehicle, Yumina left the rest to the transporters. “All right, let’s head back for another load,” she said.

They made several more trips between the building and the highway, carrying out as many relics as they could manage—chairs, shelves, tables, and whatever

else they found. Eyeing a relic that didn't look like anything but a cheap, worthless chair, Akira groaned.

“Hey, Yumina, are these really worth taking back?”

“They are. I mean, I don't think they'd sell for much either, but there's another reason. I'll explain later.”

“All right, if you say so.” Satisfied for now, he went back to work.

They continued looting relics until the sun was about to set, then called it a day and headed back to base.



Upon returning to the city's forward base in Kuzusuhara, Yumina invited Akira to eat with her, saying she needed to discuss something. Akira had no reason to refuse, so he agreed.

The base had several facilities to accommodate the hunters working in the ruin's interior, including a clinic, a cafeteria, and a relic exchange. However, one's hunter ID acted as a pass for these, and only hunters who had previously used the city's highway were allowed in. This wasn't a problem for Akira or Yumina, but because young hunters rarely came to the depths, they were met with curious stares as they entered.

Inside, the place looked no different from a normal cafeteria; there was no fancy decor like at a high-class restaurant. It was meant to be a quick pit stop for hunters coming straight from the ruins, and in fact, many diners were still wearing their powered suits. Still, the establishment maintained a strict standard of hygiene—the floors, tables, and everything else in the room were kept immaculate. And none of the items on the extensive menu were under ten thousand aurum, which implicitly shooed away inexperienced hunters who couldn't even earn that much.

Akira scanned the menu with a frown. “Whoa. Talk about expensive!”

Yumina looked somewhat amused. “Hey Akira, if you're worried about the prices, how about I treat you? I invited you, after all.”

Akira looked thunderstruck. “N-No, that's okay! It's important for a hunter to

experience buying expensive food with their own hard-earned money. And I need to do it more often.”

“Interesting. Is that part of your hunter philosophy or something?”

“Actually, I heard it from someone else. They told me if I want to be a proper hunter, I ought to use my earnings on other things besides hunter work.”

“You don’t say? I can get behind that mindset. I might be a hunter, but I don’t want to live my life cooped up in the wasteland all the time. However...” She gave him a big grin. “What if I told you this meal’s gonna be expensed?”

Akira looked surprised. “Expensed? Who’s paying—Druncam? They cover your food when you’re on missions?”

“This mission, at least,” she said, her smile insinuating there were other circumstances at play. “I told you I had something to discuss, right? Well, that topic is actually related to why my costs are covered—but we’ll talk about it while we eat. Go on, choose what you want!” Yumina ordered her own meal, pointing at the menu to indicate the dish she wanted.

“All right. Let’s see...” Akira examined the menu once more and gave an indecisive groan.

Once their food had arrived, Yumina said, “So, you know when we went relic hunting earlier today? How do you think I did as the leader?”

“What do you mean? I wasn’t dissatisfied, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Good. Now let me change the question: Do you think *you* could’ve done a better job?”

“Nah, I don’t think so. To be honest, I’m usually just winging it. I don’t have the talent for leadership you do.”

“I-I see.” She was taken aback. She’d worried that Akira might find the question a little rude, but his answer indicated it hadn’t bothered him at all. “The truth is,” she said with a weary sigh, “I didn’t make those judgments back then. It was all my support system.”

The decision to go relic hunting, how they’d dealt with the monsters they’d

encountered, the selection of relics to take back with them, the hiring of transporters—everything had been at the behest of the all-in-one support system, and Yumina had merely followed its orders. She confessed all of this to Akira as though she'd committed some misdeed.

“So it was the system all along, not you?” Akira asked.

“That’s right. So that talent for leadership you mentioned? That wasn’t my talent. I’m sorry for misleading you into thinking otherwise.”

“No need to apologize,” he said. “You told me from the start that you were using that system, so the misunderstanding’s on me. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

In fact, Akira had realized he and Yumina had more in common than he thought—he, too, was misleading everyone around him into thinking Alpha’s support was his own ability. Unlike Yumina, however, he couldn’t come clean. Feeling a bewildering mixture of kinship and guilt, he gained an even more favorable impression of Yumina. And for her part, seeing that Akira wasn’t offended or upset in the least, Yumina cheered up. Perhaps she wouldn’t have been so worried if she’d been allowed to level with him from the start; but she’d been ordered otherwise by the top brass, though she hadn’t felt good about deceiving him.

“I’m relieved to hear you say that. As for why I let the support system take over...” She grimaced a little. “Well, in a nutshell, it was to advertise the system to you.” Then she sighed. “And the reason I was asked to let it take over”—here she sighed again, harder than she ever had previously—“was probably because of my awful performance last time.”

Yumina had been lent such a powerful suit so she could advertise Kiryou’s wares to Akira. As the boy was skilled enough to be offered a rank advancement commission, Kiryou thought it would make for great PR if they could get him to use and recommend their products. So they’d issued Yumina their latest all-in-one support powered suit under the pretense of a development test. As a result, Yumina’s battle data from the armored spider fight had been leaked to Kiryou.

After viewing the data, Kiryou had judged that Yumina’s combat ability wasn’t

enough to convince Akira to try the suit and had told Yumina to advertise the suit to him in ways besides combat, like how efficiently it could manage the relic-hunting process.

“Well, not that I disagree,” she said. “I don’t think I’m skilled enough to convince you either, so this was the only other way.”

And in fact, Akira had praised Yumina’s—or rather, the support system’s—leadership skills, so Kiryou’s judgment hadn’t been wrong. But to Yumina, it had felt like a measure of her current ability, and she’d had her shortcomings pointed out with glaring clarity.

She’d sought out greater strength because she wanted to be at Katsuya’s side. But not to rely on him—to support him. Learning how far from the mark she still was had been a bitter pill to swallow.

“You might not know this,” Yumina said suddenly, “but until just recently, the rookie hunters at Druncam had a bad rap. Most of the old guard saw us as upstart novices who thought we were hot stuff because we were issued expensive gear. But Katsuya worked hard to overturn that stigma. As more veterans observed him, fought with him, and got to know him, they realized their bias didn’t apply to him. That he was an exception.”

She said all this with a smile, as though merely talking about Katsuya made her happy. But then gloom took over.

“But I guess, well, I’m no better than the stereotype,” she said in a weak voice that sounded on the verge of tears. This was a vulnerability she would never have revealed to any of her fellow rookies, especially Katsuya.

There had been signs, of course, and Yumina had noticed them. During the Yonozuka mission, when she’d watched Akira and Katsuya from the sidelines as they teamed up, she’d sensed that Katsuya had been able to fight on a whole new level compared to when he teamed up with her. That had made her wonder if she had just been holding him back all this time.

Then, in the midst of the fight with the hypersynthetic snake, she’d been shocked to witness her teammates whip themselves into shape with only a pep talk from Katsuya. But she’d been the only one surprised. Were the others *used* to performing this well? Had the excitement, confusion, and chaos of their first

bounty hunt just been holding them back initially?

The Mihazono mission had only reinforced this idea in her head. The whole team had been in perfect sync with Katsuya—except for her. Only she had failed to keep up, and she'd dragged Katsuya down in the process. The support system had even benched her during the battle in the slums, deeming her unworthy of fighting with Katsuya and the rest.

And just the other day, she'd failed to keep up with Akira as well. Despite her powered suit likely being even more high-spec than Akira's, her incompetence had driven Kiryou to give up on convincing Akira through her combat ability and to change their approach.

Perhaps, unlike Katsuya and the rest of her teammates, she really was an upstart novice who had convinced herself she was skilled because her gear was good. This was the fear, the weakness, she'd held so long, and that finally leaked from her mouth.

Akira listened and didn't say a word. The boy didn't have the interpersonal communication skills to say the right thing in this moment, so his attentive silence was the most he could offer her.

Once she finished, neither of them spoke for a while. The silence wasn't necessarily overbearing, but it wasn't a comfortable one either.

Yumina was the first to lighten the mood. With a deep sigh, as though to drive off her funk, she gave as cheerful a smile as she could muster. "Aw, man, I really brought the mood down, huh? Sorry about that." Then she forced the conversation in a different direction. "Seriously, though, you really are something else, Akira. How in the world did you get that skilled?"

"How? I mean, just good gear and lots of training, I guess."

"A boilerplate answer, huh?" She grinned, enjoying having a much less heavy topic to discuss.

"It might be boilerplate, but that's really all it is," he said, looking cheerful as well.

"I kind of figured. I guess I was just hoping there was some kind of secret to your skill. Like you had an ace up your sleeve or something."

“An ace...? Actually, I *do* have something like that.”

Yumina had made that comment almost certain that Akira had nothing of the sort, so his unexpected response made her face light up with curiosity. “Huh? You do?! Then, can I ask what it is?!”

“Well, you know about speed stims, right? The drugs that make it seem like time slows to a crawl all around you when you take one?”

“Yeah. They’re officially called sensory interval accelerators, and they can make it feel like your sense of time is faster relative to your surroundings by speeding up how frequently your brain perceives the world...or something. I’m not a scientist, so I don’t know exactly how they work.”

“Well, let’s just say I can do something similar without using speed stims. That’s my secret, or my ace up my sleeve, if you want to call it that.”

Yumina was stunned into silence for a moment.

“C-Can you tell me how you do it?!” she asked excitedly.

Yumina had joined the commission with Akira in the hope that if she accompanied him, she’d find out the secret to his skill and perhaps could even apply it to her own efforts to improve. Then, at last, she’d be able to fight alongside Katsuya once more. Now this knowledge was suddenly within arm’s reach, and in her anticipation she got a little carried away.

“I’ll tell you if you want, but on one condition,” he answered sternly.

“What is it? I’ll do anything,” she said, her expression becoming determined.

Her sudden seriousness brought a smile to his lips. “Just don’t ridicule me for what I’m about to tell you, no matter how absurd.”

Yumina regained her composure and answered calmly. “I won’t. I promise not to laugh at you no matter what you say. Is that good enough?”

“Yeah.”

Now behaving casually like before, they began chatting while enjoying their expensive, yet delicious, meals.

When Yumina had mentioned a secret to his skill, the first thing that had

popped into Akira's mind had been Alpha. But he couldn't tell her about Alpha, and it would be a problem if she remained curious. So he'd planned to gloss over things.

But he wasn't that skilled at covering things up. Attempting to do so had made him talk more than he'd intended, and seeing Yumina's eagerness had loosened his tongue even more.

Their conversation regarding the secret to Akira's strength continued well into the night.



When Yumina finally got back to her room, she collapsed on the bed and breathed a sigh, releasing all of the day's fatigue. Then she went over in her head what Akira had told her. "If he's doing all that, no wonder he's so skilled," she said to herself with a strained smile.

As Akira had unfolded the secret to his strength, she'd doubted his sanity a little, but she had been intrigued to hear about his ability to manipulate his sense of time—and about all the training he'd undergone to gain that skill.

When one faced imminent death, sometimes their consciousness would distort, making everything seem to move in slow motion. Akira had explained that by recalling that feeling of being near death, he could trick his brain into slowing his internal sense of the passage of time without needing to risk *actual* death.

He'd also told her that he controlled his powered suit separately from his own body—and at the same time. Simply wearing a powered suit didn't make one move quicker. A sycophant-type suit that matched its movements to the wearer's had a slight delay in its movements, since the person had to act first. Likewise, a reading-type copied the user's movements in real-time by scanning their neurotransmitters, but it still couldn't move any faster than its user. However, Akira had said he controlled his suit manually, allowing him to take full advantage of its strength to move quicker than he normally could. Naturally, this took a greater toll on his body, but he mitigated that with recovery medicine.

And he did all this while manipulating his internal clock. If the world was

moving at a snail's pace around you, typically you could only move your body at the same speed—you couldn't move faster than your own sense of time, after all. But you *could* manipulate your powered suit to force your body forward, allowing you to move at a normal speed even if everything around you had slowed to a crawl.

Of course, this would take a massive—usually fatal—toll on one's body. But this was Akira's secret to getting stronger: he'd push himself until his body was breaking down, take copious amounts of medicine to compensate, and repeat the process over and over again. In fact, he'd revealed, one doctor had even assumed after checking him over that he was aiming to become superhuman.

As she recalled all of this, Yumina sighed once again. "I bet Akira thinks I could solve all my problems just by training harder," she said with a thin smile.

Part of her felt this was preposterous, of course. But curiously enough, she no longer felt as depressed. She and Katsuya weren't on the same level—it was finally time to admit that. So merely adopting his training regimen wouldn't make her as strong as him. If she wanted to close that gap, she'd have to tailor her rigorous training for herself.

She and the rest of Katsuya's unit normally trained as a team, and she was usually always with Katsuya, so she hadn't had the opportunity to train on her own. But now, she was alone.

"Wait for me, Katsuya. I'll catch up soon."

She didn't have time to be down on herself. Nor did she have a reason to be—not since Akira had taught her his secret to getting strong. Now she just needed to put it into practice.

Resolve welled up in her heart, and a determined grin came to her lips.



For the next several days, Akira and Yumina alternated leadership roles. Akira took charge on monster extermination days, and Yumina assumed command when they were looking for relics.

Today, they were hunting monsters. Rather than heading inside any buildings, they stuck to clear, drivable paths, while mapping out the area and taking care

of any beasts along the way. Eliminating powerful monsters from the roadways and accurately surveying the ruin's depths both helped hunters gather relics more efficiently from the dangerous interior of the ruin, thus fulfilling the criteria for Akira's rank advancement commission.

Akira was riding his bike as he worked. Yumina, however, was accompanying him on foot.

With the strength of a powered suit, it *was* possible to catch up with a motorbike, even using only your own two legs—but it was difficult. Akira was riding slower than usual but maintaining a pace slightly faster than Yumina's, forcing her to always run at full tilt in order to keep up. So she couldn't even take a breather.

Yumina herself had requested this treatment, asking Akira to assist in her training for the duration of this mission. Akira had agreed, on one condition: "If you ever feel like you want to quit, just speak up." That was all.

Therefore, it was up to Yumina herself to decide whether to continue or to give up. Akira's simple stipulation could be seen as either overly forgiving or overly harsh, depending on how you looked at it. But Yumina had agreed to it—and the result was the hellish training she was currently undertaking.

Gritting her teeth, Yumina ran after Akira as though her life depended on it. The support system in her suit issued warning upon warning, urging her to stop and catch her breath. But she ignored them all and kept racing. Without the extra power her suit granted her, she would have long since collapsed. Yet she willed herself forward, propelled only by the support suit. The strain was so intense it made her feel like her entire body had turned into mincemeat.

In fact, that impression would soon become a reality if she kept on as she was. For the moment, the copious amounts of recovery medicine she'd taken beforehand were keeping her intact. Still, those could only do so much—once the remaining medicine in her system was depleted, she'd cease to move. The support system could warn her that she was in danger, but it couldn't stop her against her will. Once her consciousness succumbed to the burden, she'd collapse—and she was nearly at her limit now.

Akira noticed this and slowed his bike down to match Yumina's pace, riding

alongside her. He handed her an open box of medicine.

She reached out for it. Her face was marred with fatigue, but her determination to continue was evident. Grabbing the box, she scarfed the capsules down. As long as her will held out, her training would continue. And Akira would assist her.

The recovery medicine she'd taken was specialized for use in combat; it kept the user conscious under severe duress. Now Yumina wouldn't pass out, and before the effect wore off, she ingested even more pills. Akira then pulled slightly ahead of her once more and had her help fight the monsters they ran into, ensuring that she was pushed to her absolute limit.

Yumina had already repeated this cycle several times.

She finished swallowing her current box of capsules and grinned confidently to motivate herself. She hadn't stopped running.

"Akira! These recovery capsules are really great, but aren't they awfully expensive? Are you really okay with me taking this many?"

"Yeah, sure. I told you before that the client's covering my ammo expenses, and that's actually true for all my consumables. Energy packs, medicine, material cartridges for repairing powered suits—they're all included. So," he said smugly, "it's not gonna break *my* bank. Use as many as you need!"

"All right! Just don't blame me if the client complains later."

"Even if they do, I don't care. When it comes down to it, I got saddled with this job because it was convenient for someone else. If they didn't want to pay my expenses, they shouldn't have offered it to me."

Yumina smiled despite her exhaustion. "You've got a point there."

"We've already done enough to make Kibayashi laugh, right? Then they ought to at least overlook a little extra spending." With that, he sped forward, once again pulling just ahead of her.

Her short respite—if you could call it that, since it was basically a pit stop to grab more meds—was over, and she resumed running at full speed. She also had to be wary of the monsters in the area—if they encountered one, she'd

have to take it out. While still running, of course.

But she didn't complain. She poured everything she had into this diabolical training session, believing it would make her stronger in the end.

Akira was looking over his shoulder at Yumina. There were a few monsters in his way up ahead, but he didn't even need to turn to face them—he merely used their readings on his scanner to aim in their direction and gun them down, swerving his bike slightly to avoid their corpses. He also did this all without Alpha's help—he was now capable of this much on his own.

He saw that Yumina had also raised her weapon to aim at the monsters before realizing that Akira had already taken care of them. She lowered her gun, her breathing ragged as she ran.

Hmm. Alpha, you think I should slow down a little? he asked.

Alpha, floating beside him in midair as though resting on an invisible seat, grinned knowingly. *It depends. Are you asking out of consideration for the girl? If so, then no—she's keeping up fine as is. But if it's getting too strenuous for you, you can slow down as much as you need to.*

Akira was speeding through the ruins, spotting and eliminating any monsters he came across without slowing down, even as he also watched over Yumina. He had to worry not only about his own safety but about the safety of his companion as well. Even at Akira's current level, this was a lot for him to manage on his own, especially for an extended period. Thus, it was as much a training exercise for him as it was for Yumina.

Speeding up would make his training even more difficult; slowing down would make it easier. If Akira went any faster right now, Yumina could no longer catch up. But it would be too much for *him* to handle as well, which was why Alpha had remarked that he could slow down if he felt he was having trouble.

Akira answered her with a self-assured grin. *In that case, I'll keep going. Yumina's trying her best right now, and I wouldn't want to interfere with her efforts.*

Very well, Alpha replied.

And so, neither Akira nor Yumina slowed their pace as they continued training.

Yumina's transport vehicle was automatically trailing behind her as she ran. If she ever lost consciousness, the onboard support system would take control of her suit, bring her back to the transport, and make it evacuate the area.

But the sun finally set, marking the end of their rank advancement commission activities for the day. Yumina was completely worn out, but she'd made it through without needing the support system to step in.



It was a new day. This time they were relic hunting, meaning Yumina was in charge. They were following the same plan as the last time they'd done so, but with one major difference—Akira grilled Yumina on every little decision she made. Why had she chosen *this* path? Why had she picked *that* building to enter? Why were they taking *these* relics back? He needled her with so many questions that a random bystander would probably have thought he was deliberately harassing her.

This constant stream of questions was intended to make Kiryou think that Akira was interested enough in their support system to be curious about how it functioned. He wanted to make sure he could trust the system's judgment—that it wouldn't lead him into danger through baseless or unreasonable conclusions.

That was his pretense, at least.

Yumina, meanwhile, tossed all of Akira's questions over to the support system and answered him by parroting its responses. The system immediately answered the simpler questions, but some of his queries were far more difficult. Alpha had come up with these specifically to stump the system.

When the support system couldn't answer a question, it would relay it back to Kiryou, who would send a response the following day. They couldn't just ignore his questions—if they could give Akira a reply that satisfied him, they'd be one step closer to reeling him in. Also, seeing his interest in the system, they'd assume Yumina's efforts to market the product to him were succeeding,

meaning Druncam would no longer give her grief over whether she was doing her job properly.

Akira had discussed all of this with Yumina beforehand. However, he'd secretly also seen this as an opportunity to gain more knowledge about the hunter profession. He figured if Kiryou thought he was trying to learn more about the capability of their product, they'd answer any question he had, even unusually elementary ones.

But that wasn't all. Yumina's self-training as she exterminated monsters was also technically a demonstration of what the support system could do. Therefore, her efforts could conceivably be passed off as efforts to convince Akira of the system's merits. After all, no one would want to buy a powered suit that couldn't even help one accomplish what she was doing.

In this way, both Akira and Yumina exploited Kiryou's effort to market their suit to Akira, using it as an excuse to further their own training as they continued the city's commission.



Even on their free days, Yumina continued training on her own. During these periods, she practiced manipulating her own internal clock.

As it turned out, however, finding a regimen for this was like fumbling around in the dark. Akira had told her what he'd done to train, but had prefaced it with the disclaimer that while that method had worked for *him*, it wouldn't necessarily work for everyone else. So she began by searching Druncam's training data for battle footage of her fellow Druncam hunters' last moments. Since these were recorded in first-person, she thought they might help simulate the feel of imminent death she was looking for.

But the footage turned out to be too real, too gruesome. Druncam had cherry-picked the most horrific, upsetting recordings for their training data—this was to discourage its members from making careless decisions or rash judgments, and to encourage them to train harder so they might avoid such fates.

Still, Yumina steeled herself and watched the footage over and over again, trying to imagine herself in the same positions. As she did, she broke out in a

cold sweat. She felt panicky. Even as anxiety and fear overwhelmed her, though, she didn't stop.

Yet her efforts were all for naught. In the end, she failed to adjust her own sense of time.

"This is going to be tougher than I thought," she muttered. Realizing just how long a road she had ahead of her, she heaved a deep sigh.

Chapter 152: Do-or-Die

Back on the top floor of Sheryl's relic shop, a man named Noguchi looked at the price of a verified Old World terminal and called an employee over. "Excuse me, ma'am, the other day I heard these terminals were eighty million aurum. However, they're now priced at fifty-five million. Can you tell me why they're so much cheaper?"

"Certainly, sir," the woman replied in a customer-friendly tone. "We had to raise our prices temporarily due to limited stock. But now that we've replenished our inventory, we've lowered the price to a more palatable figure."

"It's not because they weren't selling at the high prices you had them at?" Noguchi said jokingly.

The employee answered casually, "No, of course not. A hunter we're on familiar terms with brings them here, so we needed to wait for more."

"I see. And may I ask who that hunter is?"

"I apologize, but that's classified."

"I figured as much."

To everyone else in the room, their exchange sounded like a typical conversation between customer and salesperson. Noguchi had gone along with the mood for a bit, but now he'd had enough of the pleasantries and was ready to talk business.

"Well then, since they've returned to their original price, I'll take this one."

"Pleasure doing business with you," the woman said.

Noguchi left the shop with the terminal he'd bought stored in a suitcase for safekeeping. He got in a car parked on one of the streets in the slums and headed toward the city walls. Inside the vehicle, Noguchi made a call to his superior on a private line.

"It's me. I've got news on the relic shop."

“Let’s hear it.”

Noguchi explained the situation to the person on the other end of the line, who followed up with a few questions.

“Yes, that’s right,” Noguchi answered. “At the moment, I’m not sure whether that hunter really did bring more in, or the shop simply had to lower the price because they weren’t selling enough. It’s also possible the hunter asked them to mark it down so they would actually sell. At any rate, though, I can confirm that the rumors are true—the store has indeed gotten its hands on a decent amount of Old World terminals.”

“Do you think they’re the real deal?” the voice on the other end inquired.

“I can’t say for sure. The director will decide that, not me. For now, though, I’ll bring this sample to the department for appraisal. We’ll decide from there what quality we’re dealing with and how many more we should procure, if any.”

“Understood. However, take it to Kokuginya for appraisal rather than the department. Use your own name.”

Noguchi hesitated for a moment. “But this terminal was already appraised by Kokuginya—I even have their certificate of authenticity. If we want to know for sure whether it’s real, wouldn’t it be better to send it to the city’s own department?”

“If we let the city’s department appraise the terminal, news might leak to other parties. There’s also a chance that the certificate you have is for a relic other than the one you bought.”

“Fair point. Then I’ll do as you say, and call you again with the results.”

Noguchi hung up and headed to Kokuginya, just as the voice on the other end had ordered.



As before, Viola took the new batch of terminals Akira had dropped off to Kokuginya for appraisal. A week later, she was notified that the appraisals were finished and the relics were ready for pickup. This time, Viola brought Carol to Kokuginya with her.

Once again, all the Old World terminals were genuine. Viola took the relics back, along with their certificates of authenticity, then had Carol carry them out of Kokuginya's reception room.

As the two of them headed toward the exit, Carol glanced curiously at the sturdy duralumin case in her hand. "Say, where do you think Akira got these?" she casually asked Viola.

What Carol really wanted to know wasn't *where* he'd gotten them, but *how*. But she kept that to herself, disguising her true intent behind a question that a hunter desiring valuable relics would naturally ask.

Viola saw through Carol, but didn't call her out on it. Instead, she smiled and redirected the conversation. "Who knows? I was actually thinking I might have you get it out of him with your honey trap skills. How's it going with Akira, by the way? You've at least managed to sleep with him by now, right?"

"That's a secret," Carol said with a smile.

"A secret, huh?" Viola replied. Viola could easily tell that the answer was no, and she was quite astonished.

Carol knew she hadn't fooled Viola, but didn't seem to mind. "Does it really matter? It's not like you hired me to ensnare him. I'm working on it at my own pace."

"Then would you rather I *did* hire you to do so?"

"No thanks," Carol said with a grin.

Viola sighed dramatically before shifting the topic again. "How about helping me out at the relic shop, then? I could really use you over there."

"Sorry, but I'm busy with my own hunter work. I know you get off on trouble, but I don't have time to tag along for every single one of your schemes. I already stuck with you all through that gang war, so this time I'll pass. You'll just have to do your best without me."

"You'll get more opportunities to meet Akira if you help out at the shop, you know," Viola teased her.

"Nice try," Carol said with a smirk, "but I already know Akira's on a hunter

rank advancement commission right now and won't be back at the store for a while."

Viola made a show of looking away from Carol and whistling nonchalantly.

The two conniving women were cut from the same cloth. Thus, each always assumed that the other was lying and, at the same time, seeing through her own lies.

Viola and Carol headed outside, only to find someone waiting for them—Noguchi.

"Viola, I presume?" he asked. "I'm with Kugamayama City, and I'd like to take a moment of your time to chat. Please follow me."

Finally, Viola thought, grinning inwardly. They'd taken the bait at last. But she pretended to act wary and distrustful toward her surprise solicitor.

"Kugamayama City, you say?" she said in a skeptical tone. "May I ask what department? A number of people reside in Kugamayama, you see."

"As the one who helped the city orchestrate the slum gang war, you're surely aware that some departments are top secret," he said coolly, indicating that he knew about her involvement and thereby proving that he was a city official.

But Viola's attitude didn't change. "And they would contact me through their own channels if they wanted to talk to me. I'm not sure what you're after, but don't think you can deceive me that easily. Come on, Carol, let's go." She turned to leave.

Noguchi clicked his tongue in irritation and, with no other option, called out after her. "Wait! In that case, how about we talk in there?" he said.

Viola looked at where Noguchi was pointing and smiled as though intrigued. "Sure—if you're really able to take me there, that is."

"That won't be a problem."

Noguchi had indicated a tall building integrated into the city walls.

The Kugama Building.

More specifically, he'd gestured at the top floor, where only authorized

government personnel were allowed to enter.

Viola, Carol, and Noguchi entered the Kugama Building together and took the staff elevator to the top floor. This particular elevator was under constant surveillance, and there was a record of anyone who used it, including the official staff. Outsiders were normally required to undergo a lengthy procedure at the reception desk before heading up. However, Noguchi skipped all this and led Viola and Carol straight to the elevator, which proved to them that he had the authority to do so. His gaze to Viola seemed to say, “Is *that* enough to satisfy you?”

Aloud, he declared, “Now then, I believe this should suffice to prove to you I’m a city official. Though you already knew who I was from the start, didn’t you? I’m not sure why you’re playing dumb, but if you’d just leveled with me back there, we wouldn’t have had to go through the trouble of coming here.”

“You’ve got it wrong,” Viola said. “I’m not psychic. Even I couldn’t be certain of who you were without checking first.”

Noguchi looked a little taken aback. Given that all of the city’s records showed that Viola was a skilled informant, someone more than qualified to do their dirty work, he hadn’t expected such a normal reaction to his appearance. “You must have at least figured out that I came myself because this matter is so top secret that the city can’t approach you directly, right?”

But Viola’s next words changed his impression completely.

“No, I didn’t. Because that’s not actually what’s happening here, correct?”

For just a split second, Noguchi paused. “What do you mean?”

“When I got hired to set up the gang war,” Viola told him, “that was also a top secret matter, and it was a request from the city itself. This is different, though, isn’t it? Only one department—maybe a select few higher-ups, or perhaps just an individual—sent you here on business related not to the city’s interests but to their own. Am I wrong?”

Noguchi didn’t answer. Merely denying this would be pointless, while confirming it would count as leaking classified information. So he stayed silent.

“Also,” she went on, “it’s probably something you want to keep secret from the other top brass. Otherwise you’d would’ve contacted me through the city’s intelligence division, as with the gang war job.”

Noguchi still didn’t respond.

“I bet I’m about to meet with your ‘superior,’ right? Except they’ll just be a grunt made to act out that role, who doesn’t actually know what’s going on and is reading from a script they’ve been given as they offer me some bogus account. I wonder if you’ve picked a decent actor, though? Just because they convinced *you* they could play the role doesn’t mean they’ll fool me.”

They reached the desired floor, and the elevator doors opened. But Viola didn’t step out. Instead, she grinned mockingly at Noguchi.

“So now that you’ve brought me all the way here, tell me—why should I get off this elevator?”

Viola’s guess had been spot-on. Noguchi was about to introduce her to an individual playing the role of Noguchi’s superior, who was all set to deliver a faux explanation that concealed their department’s true intentions as they negotiated with Viola for her cooperation. Now that she had seen through their ruse, however, those negotiations would be pointless—both parties would know it was all a farce. Thus, Viola wanted to know whether there was any purpose in even showing up.

In response, Noguchi issued her a warning, attempting not only to confirm her intentions but also to find out whether she really did know what he was up to. “I wouldn’t get too curious if I were you. Curiosity killed the cat, you know.”

“Only the incompetent ones. I’ll be fine. I’ve learned so much about the city’s inner workings at this point that it’d be more dangerous for me if I *wasn’t* in the know.”

In fact, even knowing that the negotiations would be a farce, she could simply agree to cooperate with Noguchi’s department without trying to learn what they were really after. Sometimes, when it was too dangerous to pry, the wisest choice was to look the other way. But the implication in Viola’s answer was clear: such a choice was only for those who weren’t skilled enough to handle the information, whereas she *was* that competent. If they thought she’d be

some obedient pawn who, in order to stay safe, wouldn't ask questions or try to learn anything, they were sorely mistaken.

Noguchi got the message loud and clear. With a sigh, he pressed a button, and the doors shut. He no longer had any reason for Viola to step out of the elevator.

As they made their way back down to the ground floor, Viola gave him a cheerful grin. "A word of advice: next time you want to talk business, introduce me to someone who's capable of making their *own* decisions, rather than to some puppet. I can't negotiate seriously with someone who has to clear every little thing with a boss who couldn't even be bothered to show up."

"Noted," Noguchi said begrudgingly. "But we'll be expecting the same transparency from you. Is that clear?"

"Crystal. In fact, I'll give you the access code to my private line. When you're ready, contact me there."

Just as the negotiation between both parties concluded for the day, the elevator reached the ground floor.

When the doors opened, only Viola and Carol got off. Noguchi stayed on the elevator and pressed the button for the top floor. His face looked grave.

So that's the Viola I've heard so much about. Her reputation precedes her accurately, it seems—no wonder her profile warns she's bad news. I'm almost certain she already knows what we're really after—the Old World terminals. His expression then relaxed into a strained smile. *Although she wouldn't be of any use to us if she couldn't figure that out.* If she were incompetent, that would be a problem for them—after all, they'd have no business hiring her if she couldn't even hold her own in negotiations. Putting this positive spin on the situation, he racked his brain for how to deal with her during their next meeting.

Most likely, he thought, Viola was the type of person to use information she'd gathered beforehand to gain an edge in negotiations. She could have agreed to cooperate with them, pretending not to know what he and his colleagues were really after, yet she hadn't. This was probably because Noguchi had appeared without warning, and so she hadn't had a chance to gather info on him like she

normally would've. If so, then she would consider it critical to her business dealings to obtain that info.

In other words, she's probably already started snooping around, gathering as much dirt on us as she can. Then perhaps we should call her sooner, so she won't be as prepared? I've got to make room in the schedule...

As one of the city's top brass, his superior was already extremely busy. Finding an opening for her would be tough, the more so because this was a personal endeavor. Nevertheless, Noguchi began placing a call immediately.

Carol got off the elevator with an unhappy sigh. She raised the suitcase in her hand to Viola's eye level. "Viola, didn't you say I'd only be your pack mule today?"

Viola replied with a grin, "Had I known this was going to happen, I would've told you. Don't worry, I'll give you a bonus."

"In that case, I suppose I can't argue. So I'm good to leave now, right?"

"Not quite. Since you're already here, I'd like you to stick around just a little longer. We're heading back to Kokuginya."

"Why?" Carol asked with a puzzled look.

Viola replied with a sly yet eager grin. "Because I suspect at least one more party has taken the bait."

Viola had said a number of things to mislead Noguchi, put him on guard, and get him to delay negotiations for another day. But those were just the means to an end—to keep him from realizing that nothing that had transpired had been a coincidence.

That she'd been waiting all this time for a city executive to fall for her scheme.

Viola's main reason for putting the Old World terminals up for sale in the relic shop had been, from the start, to lure in bigwigs from the city. Had she merely wanted the money, she would've sold the terminals right away and used the proceeds to make the relic shop flourish through safer, easier means.

The terminals were highly valuable and extremely sought after. If such a relic

showed up in the slums, it wouldn't be unreasonable to think someone might even use a mech to take it by force. But even though she was well aware of the risks of displaying the relics and the danger doing so would invite, Viola had put the Old World terminals up for sale in Sheryl's outlet.

For she was a woman always true to her desires—and to her own nature.

And today, she'd finally gotten a bite. The allure of the Old World terminals had been too much for even the city executives to resist.

Still, there was a possibility they might swipe the bait off the hook and swim away, or even bite Viola along with the bait. She was dealing with the city's highest leaders this time, after all. They wouldn't be as easy to manipulate as the two slum gangs had been. But even knowing this, she wouldn't stop—because Viola was a devious witch through and through.



It had been three days since Noguchi had first approached Viola, and rows of appraised Old World terminals were still on display on the top floor of Sheryl's relic shop. Present, too, were customers who'd come because they'd heard the terminals had dropped to their original price. But the looks on their faces were of shock and confusion.

"One...one hundred million aurum?!" a client shouted out.

The price displayed on the screen was so high that the store might as well have announced that it didn't care whether it sold any or not.

Another shopper looked grim. "And there aren't any more unappraised ones. Hey, you! What's going on here?!"

The employee working the floor, who was already swamped dealing with other irate customers, flinched. "All of the goods have been appraised, so we can no longer sell any more at the unappraised price," she answered. "Our managers decided to increase the price of the appraised ones, but I was not informed as to why."

"But didn't you just replenish your stock?! What gives?!"

"That was what I was told, yes," the woman answered. "And in fact, we did

temporarily have them on sale for fifty-five million aurum. I have also been informed the appraisal of the new stock should be finished soon, but have not heard anything since.”

The customers started to draw their own conclusions from the employee’s words. “In other words,” one said, “you were all excited about brand-new stock and went to get them appraised, but when nearly all of them turned out to be fake, you jacked the price back up?”

“Is that also why you had the rest of the terminals appraised?” another accused. “Because there were still plenty of real ones left in the previous stock, and you had to compensate for the fakes?”

Drawing these conclusions, the customers turned their gazes to the terminals now priced at a hundred million aurum.

“If that’s the case, there might not be any more genuine terminals after this batch,” another shopper mused. “Maybe the markup is justified after all!”

Relics this precious were generally snatched up by massive corporations before smaller businesses could get their hands on them. Thinking this could be their last chance to obtain them, the customers continued agonizing over whether to buy.

While the customers on the store’s top floor were surprised and bewildered by the significant price increase, those out front were surprised and bewildered as well—but for a different reason altogether. A car officially belonging to the city was pulling up to the shop, and judging from its expensive and ornate appearance, it was clearly not the kind meant for regular government staff.

The car came to a halt, and the rear passenger door opened. People excitedly wondered who was about to appear. All eyes gathered on the open door.

But no one emerged from the vehicle. Instead, before everyone’s eyes, Sheryl and Viola exited the shop and got in the car. The door closed, and the car took off with Sheryl and Viola on board. Everyone else watched them go, looking dumbfounded.

Inside, Viola grinned. “All right, Sheryl, from here on it’s do-or-die! I’m

counting on you.”

“I know,” Sheryl replied tersely, looking at the suitcase she’d brought. While it resembled the ones commonly used to transport large amounts of cash, it actually contained the real reason that the prices on the shop’s top floor had been raised—all of the verified genuine Old World terminals from the new stock that they’d planned to sell, but had pulled at the last minute.



When the city vehicle pulled into the Kugama Building’s indoor parking lot, Noguchi was already waiting for them. He instructed them to get into a windowless armored desert utility vehicle, which headed for the city’s forward base in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins.

Along the way, Noguchi gave Sheryl and Viola a casual warning. “You two are about to meet with an executive who works on the top floor of the Kugama Building. You’re free to make up your own stories about who you went to meet here and for what purpose, as long as you don’t mention this individual.”

Viola smiled. “We know. Don’t worry, we’ll make sure this meeting stays secret.”

Noguchi nodded, and said nothing else until they reached the base.

Sheryl and Viola were led discreetly into a room, where Noguchi told them to wait for a little while and left. After some time, he returned accompanied by another man—his boss.

The man took a seat in front of Sheryl and Viola. Not even bothering to introduce himself, he glared at them with all the authority of a city executive. “I’m here today because you requested no proxies at the negotiation table,” he said sharply. “So I’ll have you go first. Speak.”

He was demanding an answer from her, but he’d never given them any hint as to the right question. It was also clear from his gaze that if they failed to reply correctly—if they had wasted his time in getting him to come out here—they would pay the price.

These implications weren’t lost on Sheryl either, and her anxiety skyrocketed. Even so, she managed a calm smile. If these negotiations succeeded, her gang

and shop would both grow by leaps and bounds. Perhaps she could even match the pace of Akira's rapid development as a hunter. With this in mind, she steeled herself. "Certainly, Mr. Inabe," she said politely.

She already knew the name and the face of the man before her—the bare minimum for being permitted to remain in this room any longer. Thus, she passed the first test. Then she placed the suitcase in front of Inabe and opened it to reveal the Old World terminals inside.

Inabe's eyes widened ever so slightly—there were more than he'd expected. But other than that, he showed no reaction. If she was thinking he'd come here merely to negotiate for the Old World terminals, she was far off the mark. In such a situation, he had no need to be here—any negotiating could have been settled between Viola and Noguchi during their previous meeting.

Observing the confidence and expectation in Sheryl's eyes as she showed him the goods, Inabe felt disappointed. The two of them really were only here to make a deal for the Old World terminals. True, the relics were valuable—valuable enough to stir up heated arguments over their price. He could understand why the women wouldn't want to haggle with a proxy possessing no real authority. This was likely the only reason they'd wanted him here.

His motivation for continuing the discussion was dwindling.

But Sheryl's next words caught him completely off guard. A confident grin came to her lips as she indicated the contents of the case with a wave of her hand. "I was thinking we might be able to assist you by announcing where these relics were discovered. For instance, if they happened to be found within the territory you manage, it could help you recover from falling behind Mr. Udajima."

Inabe's gaze instantly sharpened. Thanks to the development of the highway, the city could now explore the depths of Kuzusuhara in earnest. In fact, many relics had already been recovered there, earning Kugamayama a sizable profit.

The city executive who had benefited the most from this was Yanagisawa, who'd spearheaded the development of the forward base and the highway. But he had funneled nearly all of that money into fortifying the base and extending the highway even deeper into the ruin, and those expenses had canceled out

most of his profit.

So the other top brass were profiting in his stead. They'd divided the Kuzusuhara interior among themselves and determined which section each would oversee and harvest relics from. Thanks to the equipment Yanagisawa had purchased for the base, the personnel present were more than capable of keeping the highway safe and free of monsters. And since this equipment technically belonged to the city, there was nothing keeping the other executives from borrowing it. Thus, they were able to make great headway in their respective territories while keeping expenses to a minimum.

Inabe was no exception. But his section of the ruin had turned out to be less lucrative than he'd expected, so he was currently lagging behind Udajima, the head of a rival department.

Yanagisawa was putting all his resources into extending the highway deep into the ruin, but this also meant he was neglecting to expand it in any other direction. Had he poured more money into branching the road out through the ruin, it would have made their relic hunting even more efficient; but despite his colleagues constantly urging him to do so, Yanagisawa seemed to show no interest. "If you want that so badly, do it yourself" was always his reply.

Because of this, their relic harvests were not as efficient, so they had less of a budget to explore the ruins with, and often had to argue with each other over how much should be allotted to each of their territories. But the section Inabe managed was a fair distance away from the highway, and formidable monsters resided there. Worse, the scout teams he'd sent out had yet to recover any relics of actual worth.

He could possibly find more valuable items if he expanded his search area. But this would cost more, and because his section was so far from the highway, he couldn't count on support from the forward base, leaving him unable to get rid of the monsters in the way. And since he hadn't found any relics of worth, his poor rate of return had put him far behind the others. Ultimately, most of the budget that should have been his had been usurped by Udajima and his section.

But even though Inabe was losing, he hadn't given up. All this time, he'd been looking for some sort of chance to turn the tables on Udajima. Then he'd gotten wind of a relic shop in the slums that had begun selling Old World terminals. But while most people would be interested in the valuable relics themselves, Inabe wanted something else—a way to manipulate the information on where those relics had been discovered. If the terminals were reported to have been found in Inabe's territory, its value would skyrocket. Conveniently enough, the actual place the relics had been discovered was still unknown, so this was a golden opportunity for Inabe.

He eyed Sheryl once more. She'd essentially stated just now that she was fully aware of Inabe's situation. But how had she found out? Was she highly skilled at gathering information? Did she merely have an uncanny knack for observation? Perhaps both? Inabe couldn't say for sure, but one thing was clear: the girl before him was indeed qualified to negotiate with him directly.

"Name your terms," he grunted.

"Since we're helping you out, we'd like your support in return," Sheryl said. "The support of the whole city, in fact—not just your own."

"That's quite the brazen request," Inabe observed. "Don't you think that's asking too much?"

"Look at what happened with Ezent and Harlias," Sheryl replied. "To ensure that doesn't take place again, we need an organization that has the city's backing from the start. And if that organization happens to end up in total control of the slums, it'll be easier for the city to manage the area. With that in mind, I think it's worth considering. Don't you?"

Inabe understood what Sheryl meant. Viola wasn't the only one responsible for the two gangs' demise—Akira had also been a huge factor. Sheryl had connections to both of them, and she also owned a relic shop that was already open for business. She certainly would be useful in tipping the economy of the slums in the city's favor.

The man glanced at the case with the Old World terminals inside. "Then what's with the suitcase?"

"Camouflage. Most people would think I was just carrying cash—in other

words, if anyone saw me, they'd assume I was heading here to buy terminals *from* you, maybe to restock them for my shop. I needed something to store them in anyway, so I took advantage of that mistaken impression." She wanted to show Inabe that she had taken special care to mislead anyone who might be snooping around.

Inabe correctly read between the lines of her response, and was quite impressed. "That makes sense. I do have a final question, though. To be honest, I thought Akira would come instead of you. Yet here you are. That's not going to lead to any issues, right?" Though Akira wasn't directly involved in the management of Sheryl's gang, he was its de facto leader due to his skill as a hunter. He was also the only one who knew where the terminals had really come from. Inabe could make all the deals with Sheryl he wanted, but if Akira didn't approve, everything would be for naught. So Akira's opinion carried a lot of weight.

And Akira wasn't present at the moment. Therefore, Inabe wanted to make sure that if he agreed to a deal, it wouldn't run into any problems down the line. The city executive stared at Sheryl, as if to warn her that he wouldn't tolerate any lies.

Sheryl mustered her resolve and answered with a smile, "Don't worry. There won't be any difficulties."

Inabe didn't take his eyes off her. Sheryl stared right back, her gaze unwavering. Finally, the executive was satisfied.

"Very well. Then let's negotiate. Noguchi?"

"Yes, sir." Hearing his name called, Noguchi began hashing out the particulars of the deal with Viola.

Inabe and Sheryl listened to their subordinates haggle, ready to jump in if a superior's judgment was necessary. Relieved that she'd made it this far, Sheryl unconsciously let out a small sigh. Inabe caught it, but didn't let on.

Once negotiations were concluded, a different subordinate of Inabe's led Sheryl and Viola out of the room and to the vehicle, after which they were driven back to the Kugama Building. They would then be escorted back to

Sheryl's base in the fancy car that had brought them.

Noguchi was about to leave the room as well, but then he turned to his boss. "Director Inabe, excuse me for asking, but is negotiating with Sheryl really not going to present any problems?"

"Actually, it most definitely will. I'm not foolish enough to think everything will work out."

"Then why?"

"Because the setbacks I foresee aren't serious enough to say no to this deal. That's all."

Sheryl had mustered her resolve and answered that there would be no issues. But the moment Inabe had seen that she had to steel herself before answering, he'd been convinced they wouldn't just have smooth sailing. Still, Sheryl had shown her determination and capacity to handle such issues. He felt he could expect good things from her, which had factored into his ultimate decision to move forward.

"Plus, I hear that hunter Akira's got issues of his own," he went on. "Even if he'd been here, there's no guarantee he would've behaved himself. He could have even spoiled the negotiation. So going through Sheryl might well have been the safest outcome anyway. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, sir. If that's your decision, I have no complaints. Good day."

Noguchi bowed and exited the room. Then, while walking down the hallway, he pulled out his terminal. "It's me. I've got some info to report regarding Director Inabe..."

Still in the room, Inabe muttered to himself. "Who's he talking to out there? And what about?"

Curiosity killed the cat, Noguchi had said. But for those who could capably deal with the consequences of their curiosity, the amount of info they had at their disposal was often the deciding factor between life and death.



A lavish dinner party was in full swing on one of the Kugama Building's upper

floors, sponsored by Kugamayama City itself. Industrialists and entrepreneurs from both inside and outside the city walls had gathered to mingle, deepen their rapport with their peers, collect information, and expand business opportunities. But these weren't amateur capitalists at the mercy of economic trends—they were the powerful figures who set those trends in the first place. Even now, the businessmen were embroiled in cutthroat negotiations underneath their guise of pleasant banter and cordial smiles as they ate.

Sheryl had been invited as well, and she'd brought Viola and Dale with her. Viola wore her usual relaxed smile, and Sheryl maintained a calm facade, but Dale was a bundle of nerves.

"Er, um, Miss Sheryl, what should I do?" he asked. Shifting around uncomfortably in a suit he wasn't used to wearing, he was well aware of how out of place he looked, and this only made his anxiety worse.

"Just focus on acclimating yourself to this atmosphere," she told him. "Abstain from striking up conversations with anyone, and don't make any waves."

"Y-Yes, ma'am."

"You may walk around, but do not forge any connections with anyone. You just want people to see your face for now so that they'll recall you were at this party. Try anything more than that, and I won't bring you a second time. Understand?"

"Y-Yes, ma'am."

Indeed, Dale had been hoping that his ties to Sheryl would get him acquainted with some of the city's upper crust. But never, even in his wildest dreams, had he thought he would end up at a gathering like this. Right now, it was all he could do to maintain his composure, so he couldn't have started a conversation even if he had wanted to.

Viola randomly piled food onto two plates and handed them to Sheryl and Dale. The moment Dale took a bite, his face lit up with bliss—he'd just tasted the most delectable thing he'd ever eaten in his life. Sheryl ate the same kind of dish but looked unfazed, as though she were used to such high-class fare.

Watching Sheryl's reaction carefully, Viola also took a bite (again, of the same type of food Sheryl and Dale were eating). "Isn't this delicious, Sheryl?" she asked, her tone slightly teasing.

"Indeed, it's *quite* delightful," Sheryl answered, a hint of defiance in her smile.

The week before the party, Viola brought Sheryl to Stelliana, a fancy restaurant on one of the top floors of the Kugama Building. When the mouthwatering food, plated like works of art, arrived, Viola grinned cunningly at Sheryl from across the table.

"Eat," she commanded.

Sheryl hesitated for a moment, but gave in. "Very well, then." With a determined expression, she brought the food to her mouth. The moment her tongue made contact with the tantalizing bite on the end of the fork, however, the explosion of flavor immediately tore off the mask of her rich-girl persona. A small moan even escaped her lips.

Viola gave a satisfied smirk. "Too bad, you've failed."

That brought Sheryl back to her senses, and she grimaced in frustration.

When the girl had first heard about the dinner party from Viola, she'd resolved to improve her acting even more, so as to naturally blend in with the other guests. Even the simplest things, like the way one stood or carried themselves when they walked, could give away a person's social standing. All the guests at the dinner party would be extremely wealthy, so she knew she needed to thoroughly polish up her etiquette if she didn't want them to see through her act.

She'd already been practicing diligently on her own, and her efforts had allowed her to fool Katsuragi's business partners as well as Dale. But from Viola's perspective, Sheryl's facade was still that of an amateur. Certain that the leaders of the city would immediately see through the girl at this rate, the woman had decided to give her a curriculum that was a little more unforgiving.

So she'd taken her to Stelliana.

"I hate to break it to you, but that won't cut it," Viola told her. "Everyone

who'll be at that dinner party eats this quality of food every day. React like you did just now, and your abecedarian acting attempt will be kaput. Got it?"

Sheryl looked ashamed of herself. "I know. I'm sorry."

"By the way, the bill for all this food will be around five hundred thousand aurum, just like what they'll be serving at the party."

"F-Five hundred thousand aurum?" Sheryl looked shocked.

"That's right. A lot of money to you, no? So you'd better hurry and learn to eat this without batting an eye—because until you do, we're going to keep coming here, and you'll be picking up the tab every time."

Sheryl took another bite. This might have been standard cuisine for the rich, but the sharp flavor profile overwhelmed her unrefined palate, accustomed as she was to the tasteless fare of the slums. The third and fourth bites, too, were just as tantalizing as the first, and she had to grit her teeth to keep from reacting. In fact, the more she ate, the more her tongue grew sensitive to the nuances of the taste, making the flavor even more vivid and irresistible. It made her wonder: Could someone like her ever get used to food this delectable?

But she immediately renewed her resolve. If she wanted negotiations with Inabe to succeed, if she wanted to grow her gang, if she wanted Akira to acknowledge her, she absolutely could not fail here. So she continued her battle against the hopelessly tasty food.

I've got my work cut out for me, Viola thought dryly as she watched Sheryl's reactions to her food.

At the dinner party, Sheryl took another bite of the food, thinking back upon the rigorous training she'd gone through the previous week. The cuisine was still incredibly delicious, but thanks to her practice, she could now keep herself from overreacting, and even afford to flash a dignified smile. Thanks to her composure, no one saw through her ruse.

Inabe showed up at the table. "It's been some time since our last meeting, hasn't it, Sheryl?"

"Why, Mr. Inabe! It *has* been a while, hasn't it?" Sheryl greeted him as though

she and the city executive were longtime acquaintances, rather than having met only once before. She glanced at Viola, at which signal Viola bowed and excused herself, taking Dale with her.

“Who was that man here at the table just now?” Inabe asked.

“A hunter currently under my employ,” Sheryl answered. “I’m simply having him accompany me for my own purposes; I haven’t told him anything. Until I get familiar with the atmosphere here, I thought I’d have him stand out in my place.”

“Is that so? Well, you can do as you like, but if you start bringing overly suspicious people, then we’ll have a problem. If he’s merely a hunter, though, I don’t mind. Now, with that out of the way, let’s chat, shall we?”

“Yes, let’s.”

For various reasons, the two started off with some small talk. And as they chatted, Sheryl’s smile was indistinguishable from that of a high-class woman from a wealthy family.

After leaving the table, Dale watched Sheryl and Inabe from a short distance away, his expression a mixture of anxiety and shock. “H-Hey Viola, isn’t that man...?”

“Yes, that’s one of Kugamayama’s bigwigs. He’s the leader of a faction known as the Inabe Group.”

“Th-Then it really is him! Wow, Miss Sheryl even knows people who are that high up on the ladder, huh?” He laughed nervously.

Dale had already made several guesses of his own pertaining to Sheryl’s background. But he’d never dreamed that she would have connections to such a prominent figure within the city. Realizing just how much power the girl must hold and how far off his earlier impressions had been, the smile he turned to Viola came off as forced.

At that moment, another guest casually approached Dale. “Excuse me for butting in, but I haven’t seen you before. First time?”

“Huh? Ah, y-yes, that’s right.”

“Imagine that! We haven’t had any newcomers for a while, so I was beginning to worry it’d just be the same old boring group every time. I’m glad to see some new blood here! Oh, where are my manners? I haven’t even introduced myself. I’m...”

Even among a dinner party featuring the richest of the rich in Kugamayama, there was still a pecking order of sorts. Naturally, the city executives and those of similar status sat at the top, while the less important were making desperate efforts to talk to the bigwigs, hoping to get a foot in the door.

Now, however, an unfamiliar girl—clearly a newcomer—had shown up at the party and was chatting with Inabe, one of the city executives, as though they were old friends. Eyes were starting to gather on their table. Some guests were thinking that they might like to try to cozy up to the girl, if only to get to Inabe. But of course they couldn’t interrupt the two of them in the middle of their conversation, so they had to settle for those who had accompanied the girl there.

The guest who’d approached Dale and Viola had seen them leave the table after Inabe sat down, and had seized his chance to probe them for info on the girl and her connection to the executive. From an outsider’s perspective, their conversation looked no different than a pleasant chat between a regular partygoer who’d come over to offer a warm welcome and a couple of newcomers who appreciated the gesture. But Dale already had a completely mistaken impression of Sheryl, which complicated matters; and Viola, smiling amicably, played right along with this and deliberately kept lacing the conversation with her poison.

“Yes, that’s correct,” she was saying. “And so, after hardship upon hardship, our efforts finally paid off, and we gained the right to attend one of these parties at last. That, too, was all thanks to Mr. Inabe’s long-standing support.”

“You don’t say! How enviable! If only my own group could share that good fortune. And those relics you speak of were also provided by Mr. Inabe?”

“Oh, well, to be honest, I’m not sure. Such details aren’t divulged to someone at my level. So I can only guess that this might be the case, given Mr. Inabe’s

involvement in the city's relic-gathering operation near the heart of Kuzusuhara..."

Their conversation continued, as did Inabe and Sheryl's. And thanks to Viola's conniving nature, which was running at full throttle, misinformation spread among the guests at the dinner party. Some unquestioningly accepted the info as fact; others were skeptical. Some even plotted to use this information to their advantage, regardless of whether it was true. But since dinner parties like these were as much to gather information as for powerful people to socialize, all of this was par for the course.



Katsuya was also in attendance, looking slightly tense. Mizuha had brought him along.

Had this been simply any old reception, he would have been fine. He'd already been to several similar gatherings with bigwigs from within the city walls (including those who supported him and the rest of his unit) in which he'd been the center of attention and the subject of their scrutiny. A gathering of rich, powerful city executives didn't faze him at this point. But Mizuha had stressed the importance of this event so many times that even he could tell it would be on a different level from anything he'd experienced previously. She'd repeatedly told him that among those present would be not just the city's top brass but company executives as well, and that making a bad impression on them would invalidate every effort he and his unit had undertaken to prove themselves thus far—including the efforts of his deceased comrades. So Katsuya was approaching this gathering more seriously than any he'd ever been to.

"All right, Katsuya, this is it," said Mizuha. "Just conduct yourself like you always do, and you'll be fine."

"Yes, ma'am!" Despite his mounting anxiety, he managed a confident smile.

And seeing that smile, Mizuha felt certain that she could count on him.

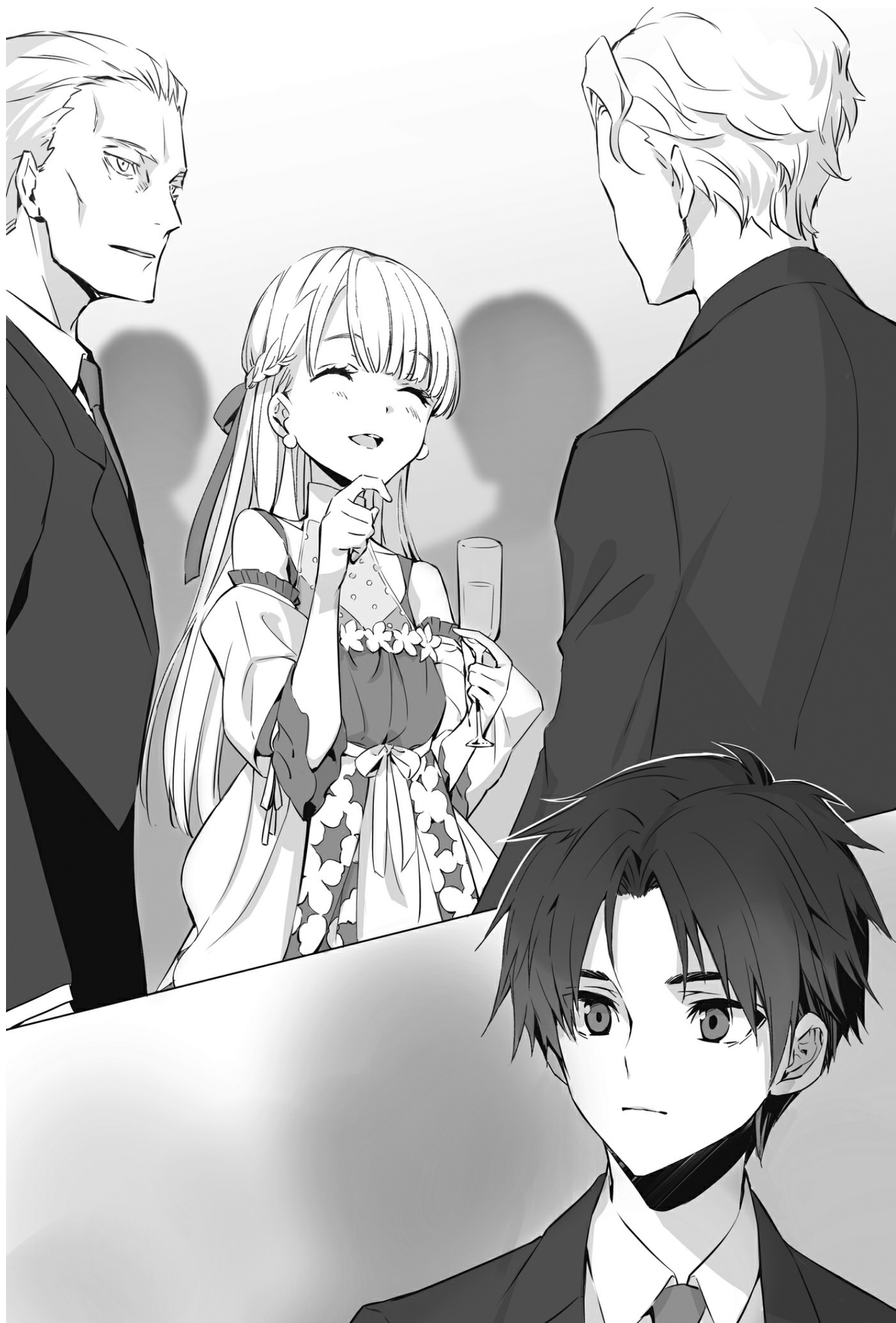
Mizuha's goal was to advertise Katsuya to the guests attending the dinner party. She approached the individuals she already knew and had them

introduce her to other guests, with whom she built rapport through light, amicable conversation. As they talked, she would mention that she managed a group of hunters who had originally been destitute, hopeless orphans, but who had the good conscience and strong drive to become moral, upstanding hunters. And thanks to the generous financial support of the virtuous executives within the city walls, these young hunters now had the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Her moving story was tailored to resonate with those wealthy individuals who were benevolent enough to want to support the children. And indeed, it worked as intended. But she also lured in some less forthright types who disguised their support for the children as a business investment, as well as some who only cared to invest because they knew, just by looking at Katsuya, that their returns would be satisfactory. They sensed his current talent and the breadth of his future potential, and immediately jumped on board.

Mizuha wanted to gain support from as many of the party's guests as she was able—for Druncam, for her faction within the syndicate, and for Katsuya who belonged to that faction. And her efforts were even more successful than she'd hoped.

Katsuya was chatting pleasantly with a few of his new backers when he noticed Sheryl out of the corner of his eye. She was seated at a distant table, talking to another attendee.



“Huh? Sheryl?!” he uttered in surprise.

Mizuha started and turned to look, as did the others she and Katsuya were talking to. When her gaze found Sheryl, however, her eyes bugged out in shock.

“That’s Inabe over there, isn’t it?” said one of the others, who had found her reaction curious. “I’ve never seen the girl he’s talking to before, though.” He turned to a colleague. “Do *you* know who she is?”

“No, I’ve never seen her before. She seems to be a newcomer, but she’s chatting rather easily with Inabe, so who can say? Mizuha, Katsuya, who is she? You both seem to know her.”

Mizuha was so rattled she couldn’t come up with a suitable response. “Er, well, that is to say...”

She was just as surprised as Katsuya to see Sheryl in attendance, but that alone wasn’t what had made her react as she had. She was already under the impression that Sheryl was some rich girl who lived within the city walls, so the latter’s presence just meant that she held a higher status than Mizuha had previously assumed.

Seeing the girl act so friendly toward a city bigwig like Inabe, however, had struck the Druncam exec like a bolt from the blue.

Mizuha had once barged into Sheryl’s warehouse in the slums, chasing after Katsuya and chewing him out. Sheryl had been present, and though the girl had been subtle about it, Mizuha could tell she hadn’t been too pleased with the executive.

Of course, there was also the fact that the warehouse had been destroyed under her watch, after Sheryl had hired Katsuya and the others to protect it.

So how could she save face in this situation? Mizuha was struggling to come up with an answer. Yes, she was acquainted with Sheryl. But she couldn’t risk letting her new supporters find out she’d earned the ire of someone who was so close to a city executive. So she needed a suitable explanation to cover things up.

But as Mizuha agonized over her dilemma, Katsuya smiled and replied with

absolute sincerity, “Yes, I know her. That’s Sheryl—she’s a friend of mine.”

“Is that so?” His supporters looked rather intrigued by that response.

Katsuya didn’t notice their reaction, however. He bowed his head and said, “My apologies, but can I excuse myself for a bit? I’d actually like to go say hi to her, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Oh, yes, of course, that’s perfectly—”

“Absolutely not!” Mizuha interjected in a panic, cutting the investor off.

Katsuya looked surprised. Her anxiety inwardly mounting, Mizuha continued with a smile as though scolding a child.

“However friendly with Sheryl you might be is a personal matter. These parties are mainly for conducting business, so wouldn’t it be discourteous to interrupt a discussion with a city executive, just to greet someone you don’t even have strong business ties to? That would be rude to both of them, right?”

She hadn’t said anything that wasn’t true. More importantly, her excuse would keep Katsuya from approaching Sheryl, which would reduce the likelihood of Sheryl voicing her disapproval of Mizuha and her faction in front of Inabe. In her desperation to stop him, her smile to Katsuya appeared more coercive than she intended.

So Katsuya immediately backed down. “O-Oh, right. Sorry about that.”

His new backers saw this. Judging that even having connections with Katsuya or Sheryl wouldn’t grant them access to Inabe, they joined in rebuking the boy. “She’s right, you know,” said one. “You might be a hotshot hunter, but this isn’t the wasteland. You’ll need much more experience as a hunter before that kind of behavior can be overlooked. Be more careful.”

“Y-Yes, sir, I will! Thank you for the warning. Er, in that case, just how experienced a hunter would I need to be?”

“There are a lot of factors involved, so it’s hard to say. But I take it you’re just asking how much you’d need to achieve as a hunter if you don’t want to get in trouble for butting into an executive’s conversation?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Katsuya nodded earnestly.

Sensing ambition within the capable young hunter, his backer couldn't help but crack a smile. "Well, let's see. First off, you'd probably need to be at least rank 50. That's when you take work farther east, and the monsters get tougher. But that also means you'll earn much more, at which point you'll likely have enough leverage that you could threaten to leave the city and get the executives to convince you to stay."

"Hunter rank's important," another investor chimed in, "but if you're only skilled in combat, a mech could easily replace you. So collecting valuable relics is the most effective way to show your worth as a hunter. As a matter of fact, I heard of one hunter recently who brought a load of Old World data terminals to a relic shop in the slums. Find relics like that, and the city executives will line up to meet you, I bet."

In this way, Katsuya's new supporters continued to impart nuggets of wisdom upon him, and Katsuya drank it all in, rapt with interest.

Ultimately, the party ended without Katsuya getting a chance to talk to Sheryl. While he thought that was a shame, however, he didn't seem too down about it—as a matter of fact, he felt more motivated than ever.

Sheryl was a crucial figure in his life. Back when he had been helpless to do anything but agonize over his dead comrades, she'd saved him, and he owed her enormously for that. Yet at the same time, she was a complete enigma. Outside of her looks and personality, and that she was likely extremely wealthy, he knew absolutely nothing about her. She never talked about herself, and whenever Katsuya had asked her anything out of curiosity, she'd teasingly responded with "That's a secret," leaving his questions unanswered. So up to this point, he'd only been able to guess at what status she truly held.

But now new light had been shed on a few of those mysteries. She was at least eminent enough to attend a party that Mizuha had repeatedly stressed the significance of, and she was on close terms with an executive of the city. He could now understand why she hadn't divulged anything to him about her social standing: she probably thought that if she revealed any of those details—even just to deepen their friendship—he might use his relationship with her to bolster his own prospects as a hunter. Moreover, as he was a member of

Druncam, perhaps she also didn't want the syndicate using him as a liaison to pester her for networking opportunities. So around him, Sheryl was keeping tight-lipped about her personal details—and would continue to do so until he was a capable enough hunter to speak with her on business terms.

At least, that was the conclusion Katsuya had come to. And, he thought, if he ever *did* reach a level where he was permitted to interrupt her talks with a city executive, perhaps he could have a more intimate relationship with her. Then, instead of running into her by chance, as had been the case so far, she might be open to meeting him intentionally, at a scheduled date and time.

So he was determined to improve. In fact, this was the first time in his life that Katsuya had ever desired anything for himself. For once, no one had *told* him what he wanted—this was a desire born from his own wishes. That, more than anything else, lit a fire underneath him.

“So, Mizuha,” he asked, “would succeeding in another big organized hunt be a good start?”

“Wh-Why, yes, I'd say so! It'd certainly go a long way toward getting the city's attention. Come to think of it, I've heard that many highly skilled hunters are getting hired to hunt relics for the city leaders who oversee the depths of Kuzusuhara. Perhaps if you show those execs what you're capable of, they'll send an invite your way too.”

“Then I'll make it happen!” Katsuya replied.

In Mizuha's eyes, Katsuya's zeal made him seem even more reliable. “If it's you, Katsuya, I'm sure you will,” she said. “Everyone's rooting for you. Sheryl would too, if she knew how hard you were working. So be sure to show her, okay?”

“Don't worry, I will,” he said, flashing a confident grin.

Satisfied with his response, Mizuha's expectations for his future soared even higher. But even she wasn't sure why she'd suddenly thought to mention Sheryl.

Chapter 153: Yumina's Trigger

Two months had now passed since Akira's hunter rank advancement job had begun.

This was an extermination day. Akira sped through the depths of Kuzusuhara on his motorbike, peppering a group of monsters with gunfire; Yumina kept up with him on her own bike, while also shooting at the enemy. Repeatedly pushing herself to her limit had improved Yumina's abilities dramatically—so much so that she herself could scarcely believe it.

Before this, she'd been using the extra strength offered by her support suit to chase after Akira while he rode on his bike. But as an advertisement for the suit's capabilities, this arrangement was rather weak. In fact, at one point Akira had gotten off his bike temporarily to help her out, and Yumina had only barely managed not to hamper his efforts. Determining that Akira would hardly be convinced at this rate, Kiryou had ordered her to change her sales approach, meaning she had to change her style of training as well.

Now her directive was to show Akira that her suit's power allowed her to perform just as well as he could. For this purpose, she'd been issued the same kind of bike and the same model SSB, with all the same mods, that he used; so together, Yumina and Akira easily cut down one monster after another.

Naturally, she still wasn't able to move like Akira could if he was going all out. And when Alpha supported him on top of that, his skill became even more impossible to match. Nevertheless, Yumina put forth a serious effort to keep from being dead weight. Anyone observing her from afar would have seen a worthy companion for the skilled hunter who had been commissioned by the city for rank advancement.

The two of them were in a vast territory that was densely populated with monsters, but the hunters' fierce gunfire rapidly whittled the enemy's numbers down. The beasts rallied against the onslaught, launching salvos of cannon fire, but all in vain—one by one, their corpses collapsed onto the road.

“I feel like I’ve improved quite a bit, if I do say so myself,” Yumina commented. “Although I know most of it’s due to my suit’s support.”

“You had that same level of support from the start, though,” Akira pointed out. “You’ve definitely gotten better. Give yourself some credit.”

It was true—her own abilities had improved so much that she could now afford to chat idly while dodging enemy artillery. She sensed each shell’s line of fire and calculated which route to take in order to avoid it. A single direct hit would have wiped her out, but she took partial control of her bike back from the support system and pulled off some high-level maneuvers to evade the blasts. Perhaps none of this would have been possible for her without the power of the support system, but the system alone couldn’t account for everything. Yumina’s tremendous growth in skill had made a significant difference.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile. “Yeah, I feel like I’m already putting in all the effort I can. Except...” Though she could clearly feel that her abilities had risen to new heights, she looked slightly defeated as she spoke. “I haven’t been able to manipulate my internal clock even once yet.”

“You don’t think that’s just because it’s ridiculously hard to do? Although that probably sounds weird coming from someone who can do it like me.”

“Thanks for rubbing it in.” Yumina didn’t doubt that Akira could manipulate his own sense of time. In the first place, she didn’t think he was the type to lie. And furthermore, now that she knew it was something he might be able to do, she’d been watching for it, and she thought she’d seen him do it several times already during combat.

“I guess watching training footage just isn’t good enough,” she muttered. “However real a first-person recording of someone’s last moments seems, it’s just a recording, so it doesn’t feel like you’re actually going to die.”

“Yeah, makes sense. At the same time, though, you don’t wanna rush headlong into certain death just to know how it feels, right?”

“You got it,” she said with a sigh.

Akira and Yumina continued firing as they talked. They were both using the

same guns, so they could share ammo between them (which was legal in this case because they were teammates). Since the client was covering their exorbitant expenses, Akira and Yumina spent the whole day wiping out monsters, creating a mountain of corpses in order to raise the boy's hunter rank.

"Hey Akira," Yumina asked, "are you sure you can't let me in on any other tricks you use to reliably control your internal clock?"

"I've already told you all I can, so I'm not sure what kind of trick you're after."

"Anything, really. I've tried everything you've suggested, but it's like I haven't made any progress at all. I feel like something's missing. Is there something you're doing that I'm not? Or did I forget a step somewhere? You're an expert at it, right? Then I want to hear an expert's opinion. Could you take some time to think about it, at least?"

Akira tried to come up with an answer, but this was especially difficult for him because he knew that no matter how hard she tried, Yumina could never do what he did.

During their chat, he'd told her he had trained himself by repeatedly experiencing unavoidable death through imagery. That wasn't exactly a lie. However, the image had been Alpha's, depicted in augmented reality, and she'd repeatedly swung a sharp sword at him in order to reproduce the feeling of the moment right before death. Yumina, however, was attempting to reproduce that same moment by viewing a first-person recording. There was a critical difference in realism between the two methods.

Then, too, Alpha had told Akira that he could definitely learn how to manipulate his own sense of time, and since she'd said so, he'd believed that he really could. Part of him understood that this trust had also been a major reason for his success. But Yumina didn't have Alpha to train her, nor was anyone telling her she was sure to pull this technique off.

Since he couldn't explain any of this to Yumina, he wasn't sure how he should answer. He thought back to the first time he'd successfully controlled his internal clock—and then remembered something.

"Actually, the first time I pulled it off, I *do* recall having a dream the night

before.”

“A dream?”

“Yeah, one in which I got killed. It felt so real. After dying in the dream, I woke up; but I remember everything in the dream world was moving in slow motion. The next day, I tried manipulating my sense of time again while recalling how I’d felt in the dream—and it worked. I don’t know if you can call that a trick, but you said you’d be fine with anything, and that’s all I can tell you.”

“A dream,” Yumina repeated thoughtfully. Then a wan smile came to her lips. “I guess no amount of effort would conjure up a dream like that, huh?”

“Probably not.”

Their conversation came to a standstill, and they turned their attention back to the pack of beasts. A short time later, they’d wiped out every monster in the area.

They were taking a breather when the support system’s CPU, mounted on her vehicle, caught his eye, and a thought occurred to him. “Hey Yumina, by your own estimation, how much of what you did in that last fight was possible thanks to your support system?”

“Hmm, good question. Maybe fifty percent?” Taking more of the credit for herself would downplay the capability of the system, but attributing most of it to the system would sell her own growth short. So considering her obligation to Kiryou, she could only give an answer of fifty percent.

But Akira was genuinely impressed. “Really? Wow, that’s amazing!”

“Do you mean *I’m* amazing, or the support system is?”

“Both, I guess?”

“Then considering my role here, I guess I ought to appreciate that response,” she said with a grin, though there was a hint of sarcasm in her tone.

Akira, however, looked unsure as to what she meant.

“Since the company lent me this suit so I could advertise it to you, I’ve got to report any positive remarks you make about it,” she explained. “Are you okay

with me putting what you just said on the record?”

“I mean, if it’s just that, then sure.”

“Thanks. And one more thing: At present, do you think you would want the support system for yourself? This won’t go on the record, so you can answer honestly.”

“Well, if I’m being honest, I don’t think I really need it. It could be convenient, sure, but it’s primarily meant to be used by teams, right? I mostly work solo, so I don’t think it would be a good fit for me. And I occasionally visit ruins vehicles can’t access, so that would also be a problem.”

“Then should I suggest in my report that you’re not interested?”

“That’s up to you. But it’s not like it’s a bad product; I just don’t think it’s for me. You know, maybe Sheryl and her people would find it useful.”

“Yeah, it could probably help them defend themselves—as long as their warehouse doesn’t get attacked by another mech,” she said with a wry grin.

“I doubt we’ll have to worry about that too much now,” he remarked with a smile of his own.

Despite how harrowing that incident had been, it was far enough behind them now that they could look back on it and laugh.



Once their hunter work was over for the day, Yumina headed to her room to relax. She put Katsuya on a long-distance call, and they enjoyed a lighthearted chat during which Katsuya filled her in on what he’d been up to.

“Sounds like your job isn’t easy either,” Yumina commented when he was finished.

“Yeah,” Katsuya agreed. “But honestly, it’s been kind of fun getting to visit other cities besides Kugamayama, and to see new varieties of monsters I haven’t encountered before.”

The long break that Katsuya and his team had taken following the incident at Mihazono was finally over, and they’d been sent on yet another expedition. This time, they’d been tasked with helping maintain some of the supply routes that

ran between the cities in the East. Their job, though, was not to work on the roads themselves, but to eliminate any monsters that got too close and to guard the laborers who made the actual repairs.

On occasion, they were also expected to provide security for the supply transports themselves—and because of this, Yumina had once again been prohibited from accompanying Katsuya. The transport vehicles, which resembled massive cargo ships but traveled over land, often had to pass through the cities' defense walls to deliver their freight. So security on the transports had to be just as tight as within the city walls, meaning the guards present needed to be reputable and highly skilled.

Had reputation been the only condition, no one would have objected to Yumina. She was a Druncam hunter who belonged to the syndicate's desk jockey faction. Considering all the rapport Mizuha had built up with Kugamayama City, the girl would have easily been allowed to join.

The problem was her lack of skill. Only the most talented members of Katsuya's unit had been cleared to guard the transports. Yumina had held back the rest of the team during the Mihazono events and had even been barred from fighting alongside them during the gang war, so she was disqualified.

In fact, she could still have technically come along—but as a passenger, not part of the security personnel. And it was ridiculously expensive for a regular passenger to get on board a transport. Mizuha saw no reason to foot the bill for this—in fact, the Druncam exec was already pushing the syndicate's budget by getting herself on board as head of the operation.

So Yumina's own incompetence was keeping her from her loved one, and in the worst case, things might stay that way forever. This fear was one of the key reasons she was so desperate to improve.

But chatting with Katsuya like this, she was able to put all of that out of her mind for the time being and just enjoy their conversation. They each talked at length about their current jobs. (Yumina didn't once mention Akira—she only said that Mizuha had assigned her to a job in the Kuzusuhara depths.)

Still, that didn't keep Katsuya from worrying about her. "The monsters there are supposed to be really dangerous, right? Are you sure you'll be okay?"

Yumina felt genuinely happy about his concern. But it also depressed her, because it meant she was weak enough for him to worry about her. Still, despite her conflicting emotions, her happiness won out, since she had grown drastically as a hunter of late.

“Don’t worry, I can handle things,” she said with a bright smile. “It might be the depths, but I’m not straying too far from the city highway. I can always head to safety if things get out of hand.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Plus, I’ll have a bodyguard with me—though that sounds kind of embarrassing when I say it out loud, huh? Anyway, the client’s made sure that I’ll be safe. If I thought this was too risky, I would’ve refused, regardless of Mizuha’s orders. So I’ll be fine.”

Hearing the confidence in Yumina’s voice, Katsuya decided he was worrying over nothing and relaxed. “Okay,” he said cheerfully. “Just be careful, since it’s the interior. Don’t let your guard down, all right?”

“I know, I know. I appreciate the concern, though.” Then she had a sudden thought. “Actually, Katsuya, can I ask you something? While you’re in combat, have you ever felt your sense of time, uh, getting distorted? Like everything moving in slow motion when you’re in grave danger?”

“Huh? Why are you asking?”

“No reason. Just thinking that if you answered with ‘Oh yeah, all the time,’ I might have to slug you when I see you next,” she said impishly. “By the way, you’re not taking advantage of my absence to plunge into anything reckless, right?”

Since she’d been unsuccessful with methods Akira had taught her, she’d hoped Katsuya could mention some sort of trigger or trick that might help her out. But she couldn’t actually tell him that, so she teased him instead, while indirectly reminding him not to bite off more than he could chew.

But Katsuya took her seriously, so his response sounded a little timid. “W-Well, actually, I *have* experienced something like that—several times, in fact.”

“Several times?!” Yumina cried out.

“N-No, wait! It’s not what you’re thinking! I’m not saying I put myself in danger all those times! A-Actually, if anything, it’s more like it happens whenever my teammates are in danger.”

Anyone listening in would have thought Katsuya was merely making excuses for his own reckless behavior. Yet Yumina hung on to his every word. The slowing of his sense of time didn’t trigger when he himself was in danger, but when his *comrades* were. So to him, something likely only registered as “dangerous” when it threatened someone else.

Yumina thought that such selflessness was just like him, so what he said checked out.

But while Katsuya was explaining himself to her, he was actually thinking of Sheryl. Back when he’d asked Sheryl for advice during his slump, she’d told him he was being too overprotective of his comrades—that he was so concerned about their well-being and devoting so much of himself to keeping them safe that it was severely affecting his own performance. And the more he and his unit had used the all-in-one team support system, the more he’d realized how right she was.

The system constantly ran checks on the team members through their suits in order to monitor their conditions, then sent that data to Katsuya as the team leader. Thanks to that, he didn’t have to spend nearly as much effort to make sure everyone was safe. And he’d noticed his performance had significantly improved ever since they’d started using the support system, so he was sure that was the reason.

Realizing Sheryl had been right all along had reinforced his faith in her even more.

“Anyway, don’t worry,” Katsuya said. “Just because my sense of time has distorted occasionally doesn’t mean I’m putting myself in danger. And it’s not like the support system’s going to let me rush in on my own. Even if it ordered me to, I’d just ignore it.”

“Glad to hear it! Still, just be careful. It’s late, and you probably need to go, so I’ll hang up now. I’ll be expecting a cool souvenir when I get back! Sweet dreams!”

“Sure thing. Night, Yumina.”

The girl ended the call and sighed, satisfied that she’d been able to have a pleasant reprieve. Regrettably, however, she couldn’t carry that comfort with her to bed just yet. Recalling what Katsuya had said, she searched through Druncam’s training data until she found what she was looking for.

Akira’s trigger was feeling that he was in danger, while Katsuya’s was feeling that his comrades were in danger. Then what would Yumina’s trigger be?

When she thought about it that way, the answer was clear—feeling that Katsuya was in danger.

Of course, she didn’t want him to actually be in peril. But there was plenty of Katsuya’s data in Druncam’s records. If it was for Katsuya’s sake, and to prevent any more danger from befalling him, she could steel herself to look at the footage.

She deliberately chose recordings of moments when he was a hair’s breadth away from death, and from a third-person perspective.

First she played some footage of the hypersynthetic snake battle—specifically, of the point when he’d been luring the gigantic serpent away from everyone else, all by himself. As she watched, the frustration, anxiety, and fear she’d felt back then came rushing back. But she ignored those feelings and concentrated on watching her beloved dance with death, as though the perspective on the scene was her own.

That night was the longest one Yumina had ever experienced.



Akira went to meet Yumina at their usual spot in front of the forward base, and was surprised to find he was the first to arrive. Given her role in this commission, she shouldn’t make him wait for her, so she would always get there ahead of him. And then Akira had also started coming a little earlier than scheduled, so as not to make *her* wait too long; but he’d still gotten used to her already being at the meeting point by the time he reached it.

For once, however, he had beaten her there. The scheduled time was drawing near, and she hadn’t called to say she’d be late. He was wondering if something

had happened to her when he finally spotted her vehicle.

Yumina was barely on time.

She pulled up and got out of the vehicle in haste. “Sorry, Akira. I’m not late, am I?”

“Nah, you’re good. I just got here myself,” he said, grinning.

Yumina breathed a sigh of relief.

But Akira seemed concerned. “Everything all right? Is something wrong?”

“Why? Does it look that way?”

“A little, yeah.”

She didn’t look too surprised. “To tell the truth, I didn’t get a lot of sleep last night. Or rather, I *couldn’t* get to sleep. So that’s probably why.”

She also had an idea of *why* she hadn’t been able to sleep, though she didn’t tell him that part. Even though she’d only been trying to learn to manipulate her sense of time, watching Katsuya nearly lose his life countless times had frayed her nerves, making it impossible for her to rest comfortably. She suspected some of that mental fatigue had yet to wear off.

But Akira was genuinely worried about her. “Are you sure you’re good to go? If you’re not feeling up to it, we can just take it easy for today. It might be part of a hunter’s job to take care of their own health, but sometimes feeling sick is beyond our control. Don’t push yourself if you’re not ready.”

Yumina shook her head and smiled cheerfully to dispel his concerns. “I’ll be fine. I do take care of my health at least well enough to keep it from affecting my hunter work. Besides, we’re only hunting relics today, so we won’t be fighting a lot of monsters.”

“All right, if you say so.”

He still looked doubtful, though, so Yumina grinned as energetically as she could. “If you’d prefer that I not come along, fine—I’m your companion on this assignment, so I’ll defer to your judgment. But even if I turn out to be a burden and you have to protect me, that’ll just give you an excuse to demand extra compensation from the city, right?”

Akira looked surprised, then pleased. “Good point. All right, I guess I can be your bodyguard today if need be,” he said teasingly.

“Then I suppose I’ll be counting on you if need be,” she rejoined.

With that, the two of them headed out to the depths.

After proceeding through the ruins for a while like usual, they searched for a building to hunt relics in and selected a skyscraper. First, they eliminated the monsters around the building, so that their parked vehicles would stay safe while the two were inside. Akira had worried about Yumina’s condition, but as it turned out, she wasn’t a burden on him at all—she kept up with absolutely no problem.

Once the area was clear of enemies and they were ready to enter, Akira looked up at the edifice. It was as tall as it was wide, and though the walls were grimy, they looked sturdy—he couldn’t see a single crack anywhere. A relatively intact building like this meant he could expect valuable relics inside, but it suggested the presence of more monsters as well. And he also had Yumina’s condition to consider.

Thinking it would be safer to err on the side of caution, he offered a suggestion. “Can you have the support system lead us without using any existing data, like when we started?”

The support system made its judgments by amassing and analyzing a large amount of data. The more info it gathered, the more accurate and efficient its directions were, meaning it made better decisions in areas it already had knowledge of. But Akira, who’d already visited more undiscovered ruins than the average hunter, found this antithetical to his way of doing things. So he had asked Yumina several times now to turn off the function that let the system use data it had already gathered, under the pretext of wanting to see how well the system handled unknown ruins.

Without that setting, the system would be forced to issue more careful commands. The hunters wouldn’t have anything to go on regarding the layout of the building, its location relative to the rest of the East, or what kind of monsters were inside. But learning how to navigate in such conditions had

significantly contributed to Akira's growth.

"Sure," Yumina replied amiably. "Do you want me to turn off the relic data too? We might just end up with cheap tables and chairs rather than anything valuable, but it's your call."

During shorter expeditions in a ruin, it was typically unwise to simply grab whatever relics one found without considering their quality. But for longer expeditions, there were many times where it was better to do so. Relics like furniture and equipment were usually found in sets, with common and rare finds mixed together. Suppose a hunter found a cheap chair that turned out to be part of a set that was overall valuable: if they then found an identical low-value chair somewhere else, the rest of its set was likely nearby.

The support system, designed for large teams who were working in vast ruins on longer expeditions, featured a database that logged the relics Akira and Yumina took. So it was more efficient for them to grab as many cheap relics as possible—even broken tables and chairs—in order to gather more data on nicer ones. Even if they didn't find anything of value on their own, the system could help them do so.

Akira hesitated for a moment. "That feature might influence the instructions the system gives us, so let's leave it off for now. We can always turn it back on when we start bringing the relics out."

"Roger that. Then shall we go in?"

Leaving their vehicles parked outside, Akira and Yumina equipped themselves for indoor exploration and headed into the building.

The two began searching the structure, taking note of any possible escape routes. First, they scoured the ground floor.

"Considering how wide this building is, you'd think there'd be more relics in here," Akira commented. "You suppose someone's already been here?"

"Perhaps so," Yumina replied. "Oh well, this is just the first floor. Let's hope we have better luck higher up."

"Yeah, let's."

Sometime later, as they reached the fifth floor, Akira wondered aloud, “Is it just me, or are there an awful lot of monsters in this building?”

“It’s not just you,” Yumina said. “At least they’re all weak and easy to take down.”

After they finished exploring the tenth floor, Akira concluded, “Yeah, there are way more monsters here than usual, and no relics worth taking so far. I think this building’s probably a wash.”

“Agreed. Should we leave, then? The support system’s telling us to keep going, but I bet that’s because it doesn’t have any existing data to go on. We’re not having any trouble with the monsters here, so it probably determined that we can just continue and gather more information on the area.”

“Yeah? Hmm...” After mulling it over, Akira decided to keep going. The monsters here were weak, so even if the relic hunt was a bust, at least they could wipe out some more monsters to boost his hunter rank. Plus, if he was supposed to be testing the support system’s capabilities in an unknown ruin, it wouldn’t make much sense to retreat.

Yumina deferred to Akira’s decision, and the two of them went up to the next level.

Upon reaching the fifteenth floor, they encountered a group of snaillike monsters. They’d run into and defeated a number of these already during their previous relic hunts, and each time Akira saw them, he was reminded of the multigun snail that had once been designated as a bounty monster.

“They really are like miniature multigun snails, huh?” he remarked.

“Yeah, they’re very similar,” Yumina replied. “Come to think of it, you participated in that hunt, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. I was pretty much just on standby doing odd jobs and didn’t actually fight it, but I was there. So if these things get outside to the wasteland and start growing, you think they’ll become multigun snails too?”

“If so, we might run into a horde of such creatures later. No thanks!”

“Ditto, so let’s take care of them now before that happens!”

Exchanging grins, they drew their weapons. The group of snails, taken by surprise, had their shells instantly shattered by heavy gunfire. A few of the snails retaliated with the miniature laser cannons that protruded from their carapaces, but Akira and Yumina were shooting from cover where the lasers couldn't reach. Those snails were also eradicated in quick succession.

The few remaining snails, still adhering to the walls and ceiling, sought refuge in their shells. The moment they did so, the durability of their shells dramatically increased, repelling Akira's and Yumina's bullets. The support system detected the impact conversion luminescence scattering off the snails, and its analysis displayed in her vision:

Target determined to be utilizing force-field armor. Energy source is likely not the target itself, but the building it is adhering to. Current weapon and ammo judged to be ineffective. Recommend either switching to anti-force rounds or retreating.

Akira's suit was currently linked to Yumina's, so the words also appeared in *his* vision. But he ignored them and kept firing, concentrating to slow down his sense of time and increase the precision of his shots. The continuous stream of bullets pummeled his target in the exact same spot, piercing through its force-field armor and tough shell. Realizing its efforts to defend itself had failed, the snail turned its newly absorbed energy to offense again. Energy began to gather once more in its miniature cannon's muzzle.

But as a result, less energy was routed to its force-field armor, and its defenses became weaker. Even with regular bullets, Yumina had no trouble blasting holes in its shell and rupturing its innards. The snails had no other way to defend themselves, so Akira and Yumina's method made quick work of the rest.

When they were done, Akira lowered his weapon and sighed. "Hey Yumina, do you think the support system issued those instructions back there because it didn't have any existing data to go on?"

“Most likely. I suspect it was treating those monsters as though we’d never fought them before. If we’d allowed it to use existing data, it probably would’ve judged the situation differently.”

“In other words, it analyzed an unknown monster really quickly. That’s pretty impressive. I mean, unless it’s just pretending it doesn’t know,” he said with a small smirk.

“If so, I wouldn’t know what to believe anymore, so let’s just trust that’s not the case,” she replied wryly. “Especially considering my task during this job.”

“Yeah, good point. Best not to just doubt things without any basis for it.” He dismissed the possibility with a grin, and they continued onward.

“Akira, you controlled your sense of time just a bit ago, right?”

“Yeah. You could tell?”

“More or less. Does it really improve your marksmanship that much?”

“It sure does. When you’re shooting normally, you might think your powered suit’s enough to keep yourself steady, but your aim wavers more than you’d expect. For more accuracy, it’s better to slow down your sense of time.”

“Oh yeah? Sure would be *great* if *I* could learn how to do that soon too!”

Akira caught the over-the-top tone of her voice and smiled thinly. “I can’t help you there. But, well, do your best.”

“I will!”

Their chatting ceased, and they focused once more on the task at hand, heading up to the next floor.



Akira and Yumina climbed higher and higher until they reached the thirtieth floor, all the way at the top of the structure. But their faces showed no sense of accomplishment—in fact, they looked somewhat put out.

“Since we’d already come so far, I figured we should go all the way, just in case,” Akira said. “But there are even more monsters and more worthless relics here than on the lower floors. Could this have been any more of a bust?”

“That’s the hunter profession for you.” Yumina shrugged. “Sometimes you just get unlucky. There’s still some more of this floor left to explore, so since we’re here, we might as well search the whole level.”

“Good call. Let’s get to it, then.”

As there was no harm in being thorough, they scoured the last floor for any valuable relics.

We’ll head back outside after this floor, Akira thought.

But then Alpha warned, *Be on your guard, Akira.*

Alpha had never once yet intervened while Yumina was in command. She’d told Akira that this was an excellent opportunity for him to get some experience hunting on his own. So Akira knew that for her to speak up now meant something serious was afoot, and he immediately grew vigilant.

Yumina perceived this and became more alert as well. “What’s up? Is there a monster nearby?”

“Well, it might just be me, but I feel something’s not right,” he answered vaguely, since Alpha hadn’t told him yet exactly what he needed to be on his guard against.

Alpha pointed farther down the hallway. A moment later, their scanning picked up something in the same direction.

Yumina noticed the reading, but when she saw its form, she looked puzzled. “A human? Here?”

“Seems so,” Akira said, confirming the data for himself. “Another hunter, maybe?”

“I doubt it. With all those monsters we fought on the way up, how could another hunter have reached the pinnacle before us? Besides, I didn’t see any creature’s corpse along the way. Did you?”

Akira’s brow furrowed. “You’re right—something’s strange. Let’s be extra careful.”

“R-Right.” Her mind was racing with possibilities, but Akira was correct—with an unknown entity nearby, the highest priority at the moment was to be on

their guard. Shelving her uncertainty for the time being, she focused entirely on watching for any threat, her expression stern.

The source of their concern emerged from around the corner of the hallway and, without noticing them at first, grumbled, “What a waste of time. I got my hopes up, since this building’s so big, but there’s nothing here but crap.” As the individual walked farther along the corridor, he finally saw Akira and Yumina and froze. “Huh? Who’s there?”

The other two looked bewildered. The mystery individual was a boy around their age. Judging from his gear, he was probably a hunter—but everything he had was cheap, inferior equipment that no hunter in their right mind would ever bring when exploring a place as dangerous as the heart of Kuzusuhara. How in the world had he made it this far? Their suspicion grew even more.

The boy recovered his senses, his face contorted in terror. With a yelp, he raised his left arm in Akira’s direction.

Had he been holding a gun, Akira would immediately have sprung into action. But there was nothing in the mysterious boy’s hand, and his expression was clearly more fearful than hostile. So Akira didn’t react—until he heard Alpha’s sharp command.

Dodge!

At that, he realized the other boy was about to attack. With all his might, Akira leaped sideways toward the wall, dodging so that the boy wasn’t pointing at him. As he did so, he grabbed Yumina, practically embracing her as he pulled her out of the way.

A moment later, an artillery shell raced down the hallway, struck the wall at the end, and exploded. The powerful blast shook the entire building. Smoke and flame rushed up the hallway at Akira and Yumina. But thanks to the double layers of force-field armor from Akira’s powered suit and protective coat, he was unharmed—even a direct hit from the shell wouldn’t have scratched him.

Yumina was also uninjured. Not only had Akira shielded her from the blast with his embrace, she was wearing an expensive powered suit with high defensive capabilities, so she’d been completely safe. No part of the explosion could have harmed her.

Once the smoke had finally cleared, Akira breathed a sigh. “You okay, Yumina?”

“Y-Yeah,” she answered.

Akira smiled with relief, then gently released her and, staying hidden in the shadows of the corridor, looked for his opponent. But the mysterious boy was gone.

“Ran off, huh? Who *was* that guy, anyway?” Akira muttered.

The grave look on his face brought Yumina back to her senses. With a shake of her head, she calmed herself enough to assess the situation. Her expression, too, became grim.

“What should we do, Akira? Chase after him?”

For a moment, Akira considered it. But then he remembered he was Yumina’s bodyguard for the day. Unhesitatingly chasing after someone who’d tried to kill him could put her in danger too.

“I’ll defer to you on that decision,” he said. “Today’s a relic hunting day, so you’re the one in charge.”

“All right, fine.” She sighed. “Then I’ve decided we won’t chase him and will just head back to base for the day. That’s the safest option, and safety’s our first priority. Monsters are one thing, but hostile hunters are an entirely different kind of threat. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

With that, the two cautiously made their way back down to the ground floor.

Exiting the building without incident, Akira and Yumina headed straight for the forward base. When they reached the highway, Akira finally relaxed. He turned with a dubious look to Alpha, who was floating beside him as he rode.

Hey Alpha, what was up with that guy?

Even I can’t say for sure, she replied.

Yeah, I figured. Still, I feel like I’ve seen him somewhere before. Or is that just

my imagination?

No, you're right. He was one of the kids hired to guard Sheryl's warehouse.

Seriously?! Akira mentally exclaimed in shock. He certainly hadn't expected that. Then what was he doing in that building, and why'd he try to attack us?!

Like I said, I can't tell for sure. The only thing I know for certain is his name—Tiol.

What the hell's going on? Flummoxed by this turn of events, Akira shook his head.

Turning onto the highway, Yumina set her transport vehicle to auto-drive, headed to the cargo storage area, and connected directly to the mounted support system CPU. Then she surveyed the data it had gathered from the building's thirtieth floor. Since she'd had only a brief window of time to observe their attacker, she suspected the support system would have more information on the boy.

The system had run a full analysis on Tiol, just as she'd expected. But the results left her bewildered.

"How is that possible?" she murmured.

The data only showed that she'd encountered a single unidentified monster on the thirtieth floor.

Chapter 154: Tiol's Grief

How did it turn out like this?

No matter what he did, that grief always seemed to be in the back of Tiol's mind.



Several days after the gang war had ended, Tiol found himself running for his life through the war-torn slums.

"Faster!" one of his pursuers yelled. "Don't let that brat get away! He's dead meat!"

"Once you catch him, kill him!" shouted another. "We're not letting him escape a second time!"

Their voices laced with unmistakable and relentless bloodlust, they sent a hail of bullets toward the boy. Gunfire rang out, reverberating through the back alleys and piercing the nearby walls and ground.

Tiol fired a few shots back as he fled, but he was hopelessly outnumbered—it was taking all he had just to keep them at a distance. To make matters worse, he was nearly out of ammo. He could see only two ways this situation could end, and they were equally wretched: either they would shoot him dead before he exhausted his bullets, or they'd capture and murder him when he had none left. He was cornered, both physically and mentally.

Upon joining Sheryl's relic venture at Akira's behest, Viola's first order of business had been to expel the traitors from their ranks. She'd provided Sheryl with the details of those who had either sold information on her organization or had backdoor dealings with other gangs.

Sheryl had only kicked out the members whose crimes she couldn't overlook. She'd forgiven those who'd turned their back on her when her gang was still one of the smallest, since they'd likely had no choice in order to survive the

harsh, unforgiving environment of the slums. She'd also turned a blind eye to those who'd committed minor acts of betrayal but had then changed their tune upon learning how skilled Akira was, because they now fully understood the threat he posed.

But she'd shown no clemency to anyone else. Upon informing them of the reason for their expulsion, Sheryl had tossed them all out without giving them a chance to explain themselves, leaving them to rot in the back alleys of the slums as an example of what happened to those who double-crossed her—for killing them on the spot would've been too merciful.

Tiol, who had been provisionally added to the gang's defense force based on how well he'd fought against Zalmo's people, had been part of this last group. Although Tiol himself hadn't been fully aware of what he'd done, he had leaked information on the relics in Sheryl's warehouse and on Akira's absence to the two largest gangs in the slums at that time, directly precipitating the attack on the warehouse. And when Shijima had found out, he'd sent his men to kill the boy. Shijima had lost many men in that attack, so letting Tiol live wasn't in the cards.

Shijima's men had finally cornered Tiol. By this point, the boy's body was riddled with bullet holes, but his powered suit still let him keep moving. His face, pale from blood loss, was stricken with the fear of impending death.

Currently, he was hiding in an abandoned building. They wouldn't spot him right away, but staying concealed there wouldn't improve his situation. He had only a few bullets left, and despite having consumed the last of his recovery medicine, he was still losing blood. It was checkmate for him.

Tiol was a considerably skilled hunter, and under normal circumstances he never would have lost to a bunch of washed-up hunters. But Shijima's men weren't the only ones chasing him—the other boys who'd fought alongside Tiol to defend the warehouse were also on his tail. They'd agreed to cooperate with Shijima to prove their own loyalty to him and Sheryl.

One of the boys' voices reached Tiol's wireless. "Tiol, don't you think it's about time to surrender already? Don't worry: we were comrades who once

fought together. We'll make your death quick and painless."

Losing his usual composure entirely, Tiol foolishly shouted, "Sh-Shut the hell up!"

"He's here," said the voice. "He's within the range of our comms—about a fifty-meter radius. Surround the area."

"Roger!" said another voice.

Then the transmission cut off.

Too late, Tiol realized the boy had baited him into responding and giving away his general location by speaking to him over comms. Once they thoroughly surrounded that fifty-meter radius, he would have no escape. Terror overwhelmed him, and he shouted again. "Shit!" Channeling his anger into his fist, he punched the wall repeatedly, exhausting the last of his strength, willpower, and hope. "Shit! Shit! Shit!"

His fist finally stopped, and he crumpled to the ground—he'd run out of energy at last.

"Dammit..." Things had seemed to be going so well! His crush, Sheryl, had finally acknowledged his efforts and added him to her gang's defense force, bringing him one step closer to deepening their relationship. The future had looked so bright—so how? *How did it turn out like this?*

That was the last thing Tiol thought before blacking out. But right before he slipped into unconsciousness, he heard someone call out to him.

"Why, if it isn't Tiol! Say, those wounds look awfully serious."

Somehow, without anyone noticing, a man in a white lab coat had suddenly appeared—the resident physician of the slums, Yatsubayashi.

The boys chasing after Tiol combed the entire area. But they only discovered what they believed to be Tiol's gun and data terminal, lying in a large pool of blood. Tiol himself was nowhere to be found.

Suspicious, the boy who'd spoken to Tiol over the comms picked up the blood-spattered terminal and inspected it. "No doubt about it—his transmission

came from this very device. He was definitely here. So where did he go?”

“Maybe he tossed everything he didn’t need so he could make a quicker escape,” another boy suggested. “He probably hasn’t gotten far.”

“Agreed,” the first boy said. “Let’s spread out and look for him.” He sighed. “Seriously, if those Shijima guys find him first, it’s his own fault. He could’ve saved us and himself a lot more trouble if he’d just stayed put.” Now that Shijima and his gang were after Tiol, the fugitive was as good as dead either way. But at least the youths wouldn’t torture him if they found him first. When the boy had promised Tiol a “quick and painless” death, he had been entirely honest.

They searched the surrounding area. Shijima’s team arrived not long afterward and joined in. But there was no sign of him, no matter where they looked. Even after calling for reinforcements and expanding the area of their search, they never found him.

It was as though he’d vanished into thin air.



In the basement of the Yatsubayashi Clinic, there was a special sickroom dedicated to the care of certain patients. Treatments here were usually at no charge, but you got what you paid for.

In other words, this was where Yatsubayashi conducted his experiments.

Having been rescued by the doctor, Tiol now lay asleep in one of the room’s beds. His wounds were already fully healed, yet he showed no sign of waking. A variety of peculiar devices were attached to him, and a green liquid was being gradually administered to him through hypodermic needles attached to various tubes all over his body.

Yatsubayashi was also in the room, observing him with a smile. “Don’t worry, kid,” he said to himself. “With your level of aptitude, there won’t be any problems. You’ll make it through just fine.”

Yatsubayashi had treated Tiol before. While giving him a thorough checkup, he’d discovered that Tiol possessed something incredibly rare, and he’d been looking for an opportunity to run further experiments on the boy ever since.

But even Yatsubayashi had morals, however twisted. He never experimented on anyone without their consent, regardless of how prime a specimen they were—he always got their permission first. However, in exchange for offering free treatment to those who couldn't afford it, he would have them serve as guinea pigs for new kinds of treatment he devised.

This was the very reason he'd set a clinic up in the slums.

The moment Yatsubayashi had heard Shijima's goons were after Tiol, he'd recognized that his opportunity had finally come. With active camouflage, he'd approached the wounded Tiol undetected, then waited until the boy had been about to lose consciousness to ask him for permission to treat him, promising to heal his wounds and take him somewhere safe. As payment, Tiol would only need to assist him in a clinical trial. Teetering on the border of life and death, Tiol couldn't very well refuse the doctor's offer.

"I kept *my* promise," Yatsubayashi murmured. "So now I'll have you keep yours. But don't worry—I think you'll find your new abilities rather useful." He grinned with anticipation.

In this world, some things were worse than death. Tiol's hunter colleague had generously offered to give him a swift and painless end, and Tiol had rejected it. Now the boy would have to live the rest of his life walking the path he'd chosen.



When he finally awoke from his slumber, Tiol looked around groggily. "Huh? Where am I?"

He was on a bed, in an unfamiliar white room. Puzzled, he tried to make sense of his surroundings. But everything he saw only confused him further.

Both his hands were in manacles. But the chain that would have normally restrained him seemed to have been ripped apart by something, allowing him to move freely. He could see symbols, or perhaps letters, floating in his vision; but he didn't know what they meant, nor could he read what they said. Thinking he must be wearing some sort of AR head display, he reached up to touch his face, but there was nothing of the sort there.

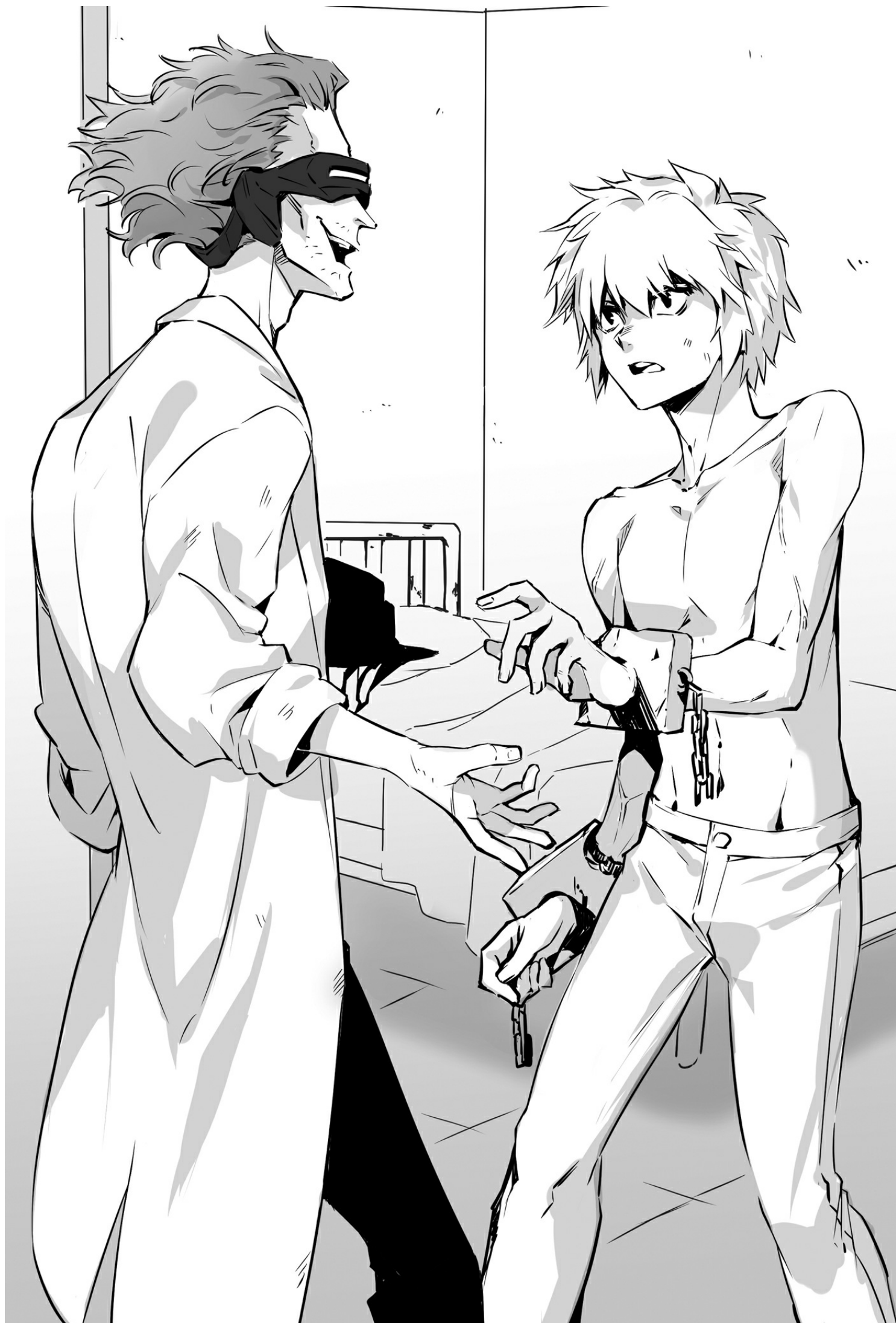
“What the hell? What’s going on?” The expression of puzzlement on his face gave way to one of confusion and panic. Seized with an immediate urge to leave, he stood up.

And as though it were the most natural thing in the world, without even knowing why, he extended his left arm toward the door.

At that moment, Yatsubayashi opened the door, carrying Tiol’s meal on a tray. He saw Tiol’s arm pointing toward him and panicked. “Whoa! Again?!”

“Hm? Aren’t you...?” Tiol began, but his voice trailed off. He looked baffled as he stared at Yatsubayashi’s face. He felt like he knew the man from somewhere, but that was all he could recall about him.

For a short while, neither of them made a move, each taking the time to process the situation. Then Yatsubayashi grinned happily.



“Looks like you’re fully awake now,” he said. “Man, that’s a relief! I wasn’t sure what else to do, so I left you alone for a while to give you time to acclimate to your new self—except to feed you, of course. Looks like that was the right call after all.”

“What did you just—?!”

“Whoa there, calm down! First off, how much do you remember? Do you recall where you are right now, or why you’re here? Do you remember anything prior to waking up?”

“Um...” Tiol strained his brain to remember, but his memory was a haze.

Yatsubayashi understood his dilemma. “Then can you tell me your name?” the doctor asked.

His name. The identifier that defined his own self. If he couldn’t answer, wouldn’t that mean he was no longer himself?

But he replied, “Tiol. My name’s Tiol.”

“Very good, that’s correct,” Yatsubayashi said with a grin, pleased to learn that his experiment had been a success. “Now, Tiol, how about you eat up for starters? I’m sure you have a boatload of questions, so I’ll explain everything while you’re chowing down. Also, would you mind lowering that arm for me?”

“Huh? O-Oh, sure.” Tiol dropped his arm just as he’d been ordered, then looked confused. *Wait, why did I raise it in the first place?* he thought to himself.

It was something he himself had done, yet he hadn’t a clue why.

As Tiol ate the provisions on the tray, mechanically carrying each bite to his mouth as though on an assembly line, Yatsubayashi brought him up to speed, and the doctor’s words stimulated the boy’s memory. Tiol recalled that he’d nearly been killed by Shijima and his gang, that Yatsubayashi had rescued him, and that Tiol had agreed to assist in the doctor’s clinical trial in exchange for treatment. The memories were all there, even though they seemed to be of events from long ago, which he had temporarily forgotten.

“Well, I’m healed now,” Tiol said, “so what do I need to do to help you with your clinical trial?”

“Yes, well, I just need you to gather some data for me, for the most part. You’ll be resuming hunter work, but I’ll decide what jobs you take and how you complete them.”

“Hunter commissions? Well, I’m a hunter, so that should be easy enough.”

“Good! You’ll be heading to the interior of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins.”

Tiol reflexively spat a mouthful of food onto the floor. “The Kuzusuhara depths?! You’ve gotta be kidding! Do you know how dangerous that place is?!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll let you use the highway to get there, and I’ll even pay the toll for you.”

“That’s not the point! The monsters there will eat me alive!”

“That won’t happen either. Because the bodily augmentations I’ve fitted you with have made you much stronger.”

“Excuse me?!” Tiol couldn’t quite believe what he’d just heard, and he stopped eating for a moment. Then he realized something felt off and looked at the food he’d just spat on the floor. With a puzzled expression, he picked it up, and his eyes widened in shock.

It was a block of metal, all chewed up.

He slowly turned his shocked gaze to the tray and for the first time noticed what he’d been eating—similar blocks of metal and ceramic. In no way did they even remotely resemble food.

“Wh-Wha...? What is...?” He was so discombobulated he couldn’t even form a sentence. He’d been eating the blocks all this time, as though this were completely normal. And despite how bizarre it was, he hadn’t even realized he’d been doing so until now.

Yatsubayashi, on the other hand, observed Tiol’s reaction with extreme interest. “Tiol? Something wrong?”

“What the hell did you do to me?” the boy said with a glare.

“I told you just now, didn’t I? I treated you, and you’re now the proud owner of a newly augmented body—quite a powerful one, I might add.”

As Tiol stared in blank shock, Yatsubayashi began gleefully detailing the success of his experiment.



Yatsubayashi’s vehicle sped down the highway, en route to the Kuzusuhara depths. Originally an armored transport, it had been remodeled into a mobile clinic.

Tiol sat in the examination area, looking anxious. “Hey, am I really gonna be all right?”

“That’s what we’re heading to the ruins to find out,” Yatsubayashi casually replied.

“Well, yeah, but...”

“I told you—you’ll be fine! You’re a precious subject of mine and a valuable assistant. I have no intention of letting you die a dog’s death.”

As flippant as the doctor’s statement sounded, he didn’t seem to be lying. Tiol sighed in resignation. “All right, but any relics I find are mine. Promise?”

“Of course. I have no problem with that. Just because you’re aiding me doesn’t mean I have the right to take your relics. But you’ve got to hold up your end of the bargain as well and gather data for me. I can’t have you running away in the middle of the job.”

“Yeah, I know. I won’t run away, and I’ll help you out.” He sighed. “But did you really need to plant a bomb in my head just to make sure? Do I look that cowardly to you?”

“Your body is a precious creation of mine, fitted with various special augmentations, so I didn’t have a choice. In fact, it’s so impressive that it would probably fetch around ten billion aurum.” He grinned smugly.

Tiol snorted. “If it’s that great, then why’d you need to blackmail someone on death’s door to test it? Shouldn’t people be lining up to try it?”

But Yatsubayashi just nodded earnestly. “They should indeed! Honestly, why

is everyone so opposed to this project? Sure, it's a work in progress, so I can't say it's one hundred percent safe just yet, but if it means not dying to the monsters in the ruins, a minor risk should be worth taking, right? It's certainly less dangerous than the slum rations people willingly consume on a daily basis, so I don't understand what the big deal is."

Tiol realized that Yatsubayashi was speaking seriously, and he grimaced in disgust—all the more so because this was the reasoning which the doctor used to justify remodeling Tiol's body. "No one in their right mind would want a body that only digests shit like metal and plastic if it's just to get stronger."

"You think so? Then maybe I should make it so that you can directly load cartridges of those materials into the body, rather than having to consume them. But that would be a difficult change to implement, since the model's built around consumption. The entire system would have to..."

Yatsubayashi's attention focused entirely on the reworking of his creation. Seeing that this was the doctor's only concern, Tiol's anxiety flared up anew.

They reached the depths of Kuzusuhara. Tiol alighted from Yatsubayashi's vehicle, equipped only with an unmodded AAH and a data terminal for communicating with the doctor. Usually, no hunter would head to the depths with such insufficient gear unless they *wanted* to die.

Feeling woefully underprepared, Tiol looked incredibly tense. "Are you absolutely sure I'll be fine?"

"How many times do I have to tell you? That's what we're here to find out! Theoretically, you shouldn't have any trouble, though, so it's all up to how you perform on the field. Now get going, and good luck!"

"Fine, fine!" With no other choice, Tiol headed into the ruin.

The stark contrast in scenery between the outskirts of the ruin and its interior did stimulate his hunter's sense of adventure a little. However, this feeling was overwhelmed by his fear of having stepped into a danger zone. His breathing became heavy and panicked.

Meanwhile, Yatsubayashi's voice in his ear reminded him of the trial's

important points. “Now, as I said before, even if you run into a monster, you’re forbidden from fighting back. That peashooter you’re carrying won’t even scratch the monsters here.”

“Then why’d you give me such a useless gun in the first place?” Tiol grumbled.

“Because you’d look awfully suspicious walking around in the depths without a weapon,” the doctor replied. “So I couldn’t leave you *completely* unarmed. Just keep in mind that firing at any monsters is going to be pointless.”

“Gee, *thanks*. Then I guess I just gotta hope your little field test here is a success, no?” He looked at his arm. “You said this was some new kind of camouflage? This *will* keep me hidden from those monsters, right?” His arm was still as visible as ever. “I can see myself just fine, though.”

“That’s because it’s not your typical active camouflage. In the first place, we’d have a lot fewer dead hunters if turning invisible was enough to keep a monster from noticing you. Even in total darkness, monsters can detect the sounds you make and the heat you give off. Of course, there are camouflage products out there that safeguard against that as well, but my camouflage is superior to those.”

“Glad to hear it,” Tiol spat.

Continuing to talk to Yatsubayashi to distract himself from his own mounting anxiety, Tiol proceeded through the ruins. Then he chose a building at random to search for relics.

The monsters inhabiting the depths were all extremely dangerous. Thanks to this, many areas of the ruin were untouched, and all kinds of valuable artifacts still lay inside, just waiting to be collected.

The building Tiol had chosen was no exception. Upon entering, he looked inside one room, spotted several precious-looking relics right off the bat, and spontaneously let out a whoop of joy. “Whoa! Awesome!”

These were relics he never would have run across in an average ruin, and he grinned from ear to ear as he stuffed the goods into his backpack. He was so over the moon that he completely forgot he was in the middle of a clinical trial.

A noise came from behind him, snapping him back to his senses.

Remembering he was currently deep inside a ruin, he turned around. Several gigantic spiders, machine guns protruding from their bodies, were watching him—two on the floor and two on the ceiling.

He froze. Outnumbered, with no hope of winning, he was as good as dead. But the spiders made no move to attack him—they only watched him carefully. Then, after some time had passed, they scuttled away.

Tiol was so overwhelmed with relief he collapsed to the floor. “Holy *shit*! What was *that* all about?”

“Yes! It was a success!”

Yatsubayashi’s cry of glee brought Tiol back to earth, and the implications of the term the doctor had used—“success”—dawned on him. “Then the reason they didn’t attack me just now,” he wondered, “was thanks to the camouflage you developed?”

“Bingo!”

“S-Seriously? That’s pretty impressive...! I mean, I was in plain sight, yet they didn’t attack me at all.”

“That’s exactly what’s supposed to happen! Now we can say for sure that it doesn’t just work in theory but in practice as well. I was already certain it would, of course, but I finally have actual data I can use to prove it to other people. Wonderful!”

It was more than enough proof for Tiol as well. He no longer saw Yatsubayashi as just an eccentric quack—the boy recognized him as an extremely talented scientist.

The doctor’s voice reached him once more. “Now then, Tiol, let’s continue the trial, shall we? Keep hunting for relics as you normally would. Refrain from provoking any monsters you encounter, and you should be fine. And remember, do *not* fire your weapon. Draw their attention, and they will most certainly attack.”

“No problem, I got it. All right, let’s do this!” After stuffing the rest of the relics in his backpack, he went off in search of more treasures. He encountered a number of monsters along the way, but none of them showed any sign of

aggression toward him.



Once the clinical trial was over and Tiol had finished hunting relics for the day, he returned to Yatsubayashi's mobile clinic. He piled all the items he'd collected on the floor and, seeing the mountain, lit up with joy. "Look at all of these! And just from one day! I never would've imagined such a treasure trove was in the depths, just waiting to be found!"

Tiol knew he never could have collected so much on his own, which only drove home the extent of Yatsubayashi's talent. He couldn't hide his surprise and delight. "You're seriously amazing, doc! Those monsters didn't attack me even once! Now I can collect as many relics as I want, no matter how dangerous the site!"

"I'm glad you're satisfied," the doctor replied. "Now, let's head back for the day. I need to talk to you about our plans for the future." He started the vehicle up, and they left the Kuzusuhara depths behind, both reveling in their respective successes.

They made it back to Yatsubayashi's clinic in the slums, and Tiol could finally relax.

Reflecting on the day's success kept him in an extremely good mood.

In the underground examination room, Yatsubayashi laid out his schedule for Tiol's next excursions. The boy would continue to gather data in the ruins for the next two months, just as he had today. Then Yatsubayashi would give Tiol his original body back, and the clinical trial would be over.

Tiol couldn't help but let a hint of disappointment enter his voice. "Huh? You're going to give me my old body back?"

"Of course. I have to make sure the procedure is reversible, don't I? If it was permanent, the barrier for commercial use would rise even higher." Yatsubayashi explained that even private security firms who lent powerful artificial bodies to their hired hands would take their technology back once the employees left the company. It was important for augmentations to be

reversible—more convenience made them an easier sell.

But that didn't make Tiol look any happier.

"What's the problem?" the doctor asked. "Earlier you were complaining about having a body that could digest blocks of metal. Now you're telling me you want to keep it?"

"Th-That's not..."

"Well, I'm certainly glad you like it so much, but sorry—I'm giving you your old body back. I need data proving that the procedure is entirely reversible with no aftereffects."

"Yeah, okay." Tiol sounded dejected.

Yatsubayashi, on the other hand, was thrilled to see his reaction.



Tiol was back in the Kuzusuhara depths collecting more relics, just as he'd been doing all week. Even though the monsters didn't attack, the ruin was still fraught with danger, so he had to proceed carefully. But by now he was used to them; at present, the only reason he was moving as stealthily as he could was so as to not alert other hunters to his presence.

He moved through the dangerous ruin secure from the powerful monsters within, while he grabbed as many relics as he pleased. It was a scenario a hunter could typically only dream of, and he, too, had been overwhelmed with excitement at first. But now that he'd grown accustomed to the area, both his enthusiasm and his anxiety had waned considerably. He could even direct more of his attention to conversing with Yatsubayashi, who was carefully observing Tiol's data from his mobile clinic.

"You sure there's no way I can stay in the city?" Tiol was saying.

"I've told you countless times already. Moving away to a different city is your best bet. As a hunter, you'll have it rough working in an unfamiliar region, but if you sell all the relics you've collected and buy yourself some good gear, you shouldn't have a problem."

On the first day of the clinical trial, Tiol had wanted to sell all his relics right

away, but Yatsubayashi had stopped him. Tiol's anger had flared up, thinking that Yatsubayashi was about to go back on his word and lay claim to his finds. Once he'd heard the doctor's reasoning, however, he'd understood—and he'd also realized the full gravity of the predicament he now found himself in.

After Yatsubayashi had whisked Tiol away under the cover of his optical camouflage, Shijima and his men had been unable to locate the boy. By now they likely thought he'd either died while hiding somewhere that was especially difficult to discover or that he'd escaped to another city. Either way, Shijima had probably determined it was no longer worth looking for him and had given up the search.

But if Tiol went to sell his relics, Shijima would find out the boy was healthy enough to resume hunter activities. And since the gang boss couldn't leave him alive, Tiol would be targeted once more. With his augments, he might be capable of handling Shijima's goons, but the more battles he won, the stronger the men Shijima would send after him—and in the worst case, he might even send Akira, which would mean certain death. So Yatsubayashi recommended that Tiol lie low at the clinic during the trial period, then take the relics to another city, sell them, and use the proceeds to start a new life there.

Deep down, Tiol also knew this was the best option. But he couldn't completely abandon his hope of staying in the city. And since everything had been going so smoothly the past few days, Tiol couldn't help but wonder if he could obtain his desire after all.

"I really would like to stay in Kugamayama if possible, so are you sure there's nothing I can do? You're a genius scientist, right? Don't you have some awesome technology that could help? Like, for example, something that would make me stronger than Akira?"

"You're asking if you can buy augments off me once the trial's over? I don't mind, but you do know how strong Akira is, right? I pride myself on my skill as a technician, and I could certainly make you even more powerful than he is—but the cost would far exceed that of your current body. Personally, I wouldn't recommend it."

Tiol didn't reply. Yatsubayashi had already priced his current augmentations

somewhere around ten billion aurum—anything more than that was out of the question. Realizing this, the boy looked defeated.

But suddenly a ray of hope glimmered in his eye. “Then what if I negotiate my way out? I’ll settle with Shijima and his goons, and—”

“That’ll be harder than you realize, Tiol. I don’t think you understand that you’re on not just Shijima’s shit list, but Sheryl’s as well—and that means you’ve also antagonized Akira. Convincing them all to let you off the hook will be quite difficult, I imagine.”

“S-Sure, but—”

“Well, if you can convince Akira, maybe the others will agree as well. But you’ll be negotiating with someone who unhesitatingly picked a fight with the two largest slum gangs. You might get killed on sight before you even have time to beg for your life.”

Once again, Tiol had no response. To him, this sounded all too plausible.

Yatsubayashi worried that he might’ve gone a little too far, and he tried to cheer his specimen up. “But you *could* hire a mediator, I suppose. That way, you wouldn’t need to negotiate with Akira directly. And I happen to know someone who could fit the bill.”

Tiol had been hanging his head, but he jerked it up excitedly at the opportunity that the doctor was dangling before him. “Really?! Who?!”

“Let’s save that conversation for after the trial’s over. Our experiment will be a long one, I suspect.”

“All right,” Tiol said reluctantly. But at least now he had some prospects to cling to. His smile and optimism restored, he focused once more on hunting relics.

On this trip, as usual, Tiol was again running into all sorts of monsters. But even though they spotted him, they didn’t attack. This reconfirmed to him the greatness and convenience of Yatsubayashi’s camouflage, and he decided to take the opportunity to observe the monsters from up close. They were powerful, dangerous, and dreadful—but they had spawned from Old World technology, which they’d then carried into the New World. Tiol couldn’t help

but be curious.

He stared intently at an insect-like monster and saw a green outline form around its body, followed by rows of symbols and letters. Similar things had appeared numerous times since he'd awoken in Yatsubayashi's underground exam room. By this point, he was almost certain that the writing was describing the monster in front of him. But he still couldn't read it, so all it did was impede his vision.

"Hey doc, any idea what this stuff in my vision says?"

"Regrettably, I have no idea."

"You don't? But they started cropping up after you remodeled my body."

"I'm recording your visual data as part of the clinical trial, but those letters and symbols don't show up in my feed."

"Really?"

"Yes, which means they aren't reflected in your retinas. Your brain's likely taking an additional step somewhere when processing the visual information. It's probably a simple malfunction—that's why we do these trials. Just do your best to ignore it for now."

Hearing he had an AR function that was totally useless, Tiol sighed.



Viola waited on the perimeter of Kuzusuhara, scheduled to meet with a client for her latest business deal. Once again, she'd hired Carol to guard her.

Because there was now a convenient route into the Kuzusuhara depths, far fewer hunters were searching for relics on the outskirts. That meant an increase in the number of monsters roaming the area. What's more, with the edge of this ruin nearly picked clean, hunters not skilled enough to brave the interior headed to other ruins instead. Very few were still working in Kuzusuhara's outermost region.

So anyone designating this area as a meeting spot likely had a specific, calculated reason for doing so. But Viola had come anyway, because the customer was someone she hadn't expected and—more importantly—the

outcome was sure to be intriguing.

Her client arrived right on time. Seeing that he had actually shown up, Viola grinned in anticipation.

“And here I was thinking someone might have just been using your name as a disguise,” she greeted him. “But I guess it’s true—you really did survive.”

“Yeah, although you’re the reason I nearly got killed in the first place.”

The client was Tiol. It was thanks to Viola’s snitching that Shijima’s gang had gone after him in the first place, so he glared at her with undisguised loathing. Carol took a protective step in front of Viola, but the info broker held up a hand, and her bodyguard obediently retreated.

Then Viola grinned brazenly at Tiol. “Sorry about what happened, but certain circumstances dictated I had no choice. Now then, you had something you wanted to discuss? Or did you just call me out here to kill me?”

Truth be told, Tiol would have loved nothing more, and it was written all over his face. But he gritted his teeth and forced himself to remain calm. Then, with a heavy sigh, he faced Viola earnestly.

“I’ve got a job for you. I need you to negotiate with someone on my behalf.”

“A negotiation...? Let me guess: you want me to get Sheryl and the others to stop targeting you—and while I’m at it, convince Sheryl to let you join her gang. Is that about the gist of it?”

“You got it. You can handle that, right?” Inwardly, he was taken aback that Viola had immediately anticipated his entire request, but he didn’t let it show. Instead he stared at her unblinkingly, as though trying to intimidate her.

Viola wasn’t daunted in the least. “I don’t think you realize just what a tall order that is,” she said with a mocking grin. “Perhaps you’re not fully aware of how much trouble you’re really in?”

“If you can’t do it, just say so and shut the hell up.”

“I never said that. What if I’m just refusing your request because I feel like it? Ultimately, I’m the one who decides whether I take your commission.”

“So you can’t do it. Then I’ll find someone else.”

“Oh, you know someone *else* who can? Then tell me, exactly who do you plan to run to?”

“None of your business.”

Viola smiled as though she knew exactly what the boy was thinking. Tiol gave her a hostile glare. For a while, they stared each other down, neither saying a word. Most people would have involuntarily let their emotions show during such a long period of silence, but Viola expertly concealed hers with her usual taunting smile.

Tiol, however, let his mask slip ever so slightly. This betrayed to Viola all sorts of information—he was probably desperate, but hiring Viola to negotiate with Sheryl and the others wasn’t his last resort. He definitely had more options at his disposal, and she doubted they involved negotiation.

Her smile grew wider—this was going to be even more interesting than she had anticipated.

“Very well then, I’ll take the job. Now let’s talk price—and just to let you know, my fee’s not cheap.” Then her smile became strained, in order to invite a sense of vulnerability and familiarity. “I’ll come clean—Akira’s actually a little upset with me right now, thanks to that gang war incident. To be specific, I *might’ve* angered him enough that he nearly killed me.”

“Is that true?” Tiol asked.

“Yes, it was rather traumatic.” She described the entire incident to Tiol: Akira had visited her at her office and blown a gigantic hole in her torso. She had barely survived thanks to Carol’s quick first aid, but the boy had warned her that the next shot would land between her eyes if she didn’t cooperate with Sheryl and her relic shop. Viola had complied, and so she had gotten to live another day. That was also why she’d leaked Tiol’s betrayal to Sheryl and the others—if she didn’t act cooperative, Akira would come and kill her. So her hands were tied.

But Viola said all this merely to make him feel sympathetic to her. Next to her, Carol suppressed a grin.

Tiol fell for it, hook, line, and sinker. His hatred for Viola hadn’t dissipated, but

he no longer thought she'd sold him out for money—hearing she'd been coerced, he didn't feel quite as hostile toward her.

“And so,” she went on, “I can't say anything to Akira that might upset him. You betrayed Sheryl and her team. Asking them to forgive you, and to join them no less, would fall squarely into the 'might upset Akira' category. So there's a lot of extra work I'll have to do—like planning the timing of when I'll bring it up, or coming up with a reason that won't rub Akira and the rest of them the wrong way. And I expect to be compensated accordingly, so the fee will be higher than usual. So, how much are you willing to pay?”

“I don't have any money,” Tiol said quietly. “But I can pay you in relics.” He set a bulging backpack on the ground and stepped away from it.

Carol approached the backpack and inspected the contents, just in case. Once she determined it was safe, she beckoned Viola over.

Viola glanced at the backpack, then looked at Tiol once more with an expression of surprise. “Where did you manage to get this many relics?”

“None of your business. Anyway, will that cover it?”

“Not in the least.”

“Huh?!” Tiol had thought for sure that a backpack full of treasures from the Kuzusuhara depths would be more than enough to cover Viola's fee. He grimaced in surprise, his distrust of her reaching new heights.

But Viola looked unconcerned, even condescending. “Do you even know what this is all worth?”

“I-It should be around a billion aurum.” Tiol didn't have an eye for appraisal, so he had no basis for quoting her that specific amount. But he figured the relics had to be worth at least that much, since they came from the ruin's interior. Even if his estimate was a little off, their value surely couldn't be less than that.

Viola immediately saw through him but didn't contradict his claim. Instead, she gave an exaggerated sigh as if to say “Foolish child!”

“Guess I'll have to spell it out for you,” she told him. “Dealing with Akira and Sheryl isn't like negotiating with your average hunter or small-time gang boss.

An amount like this won't work as a settlement payment or even as compensation to those two. You're severely underestimating them." She took out her terminal, pulled something up on the screen, then tossed the device over to Tiol. "That's footage from one of Akira's battles. It's classified city information, so I can't give you a copy—I can only let you look at it. But I think simply viewing it will correct your understanding of just who you're attempting to negotiate with."

Tiol watched the video on the screen, and his expression gradually morphed into one of shock. It was the footage of Akira's one-on-one fight with the Kokurou mech. "H-He was *this* strong all along?!"

The Akira in Tiol's mind had been the one who'd taken down the first Shirousagi that had attacked the warehouse. That feat had been impressive enough in itself—and seeing Akira accomplish something ten times as awe-inspiring floored him.

Viola doubled down on pointing out Tiol's naivete. "I'll bet you also probably saw Sheryl's clothing and thought she was some rich girl from inside the walls, right? But are you aware of how much she paid for that outfit? It was custom-made from Old World garments. A fitting like that typically costs way over a million aurum, and yet she wears those clothes like they're casual attire. *That's* who you're dealing with!"

Tiol was so stunned he couldn't reply.

Then Viola delivered the coup de grâce. "Now then, considering you'll need to settle up with Akira and Sheryl, pay Shijima reparations, and of course pay me for your request, a paltry one billion aurum won't even *begin* to suffice. Sorry, but if that's all you've got, then no deal."

Tiol believed her. Looking like he was at wit's end, he held his head in his hands. "Then, how much would I need?"

"Let's see. If you're going to pay in relics, I'd say you'll need at least ten times the amount in that backpack."

"*T-Ten times?*"

"And FYI, that's the bare minimum you'll need to get a seat at the negotiation

table. You'll have to cough up even more if you want the talks to actually succeed. Naturally, the more you bring, the better your chances; but I doubt any amount will outright guarantee your success."

Tiol looked like he was mulling things over, which surprised Viola a little. This meant he still believed he had a chance. No hunter who had nearly gotten killed by Shijima's goons would seriously think they could collect that many valuable relics. Why did *he* suppose it was possible? Had he found an undiscovered ruin—and was avoiding using it as a bargaining chip because he didn't want anyone else to know about it? Or had he maybe found an untouched section of a known ruin and was worried that the relics inside might not be enough? Viola had several theories, but deliberately chose not to press the issue—making this deal with Tiol would lead to something *far* more entertaining.

"So, what's your answer?" she inquired. "If you want to hire me, I'll take what you've got here as a down payment on what you owe. This way, I can also meet Akira with cash in hand, which will help convince him. Letting him know you can supply Sheryl's relic shop with valuable stock will go a long way toward persuading him."

Tiol agonized over it for a while longer, until he finally nodded. "All right. Take it."

"Then we have a deal. Now then, I'll be heading out. Contact me when you have the rest of the relics you'll need. Remember: the more the better!" With one last smirk, she left the meeting spot with Carol.

Tiol watched them go, wondering whether he had really made the right decision. But there was no turning back now, so he convinced himself it was pointless to worry about that and turned his full attention to amassing more relics.

Once she and Viola were out of earshot, Carol couldn't hold it in any longer. She burst out laughing. "Man, what a *riot*! That kid got thrown out on the streets and nearly killed because of you, and he actually came crawling to you so he could get back into the gang!"

"Indeed. Sometimes the world can throw some interesting curveballs your

way.”

“Is that something you should be saying, considering you were the one who threw them?”

“Sure. I mean, it *was* pretty entertaining, wasn’t it?”

The two conniving women exchanged knowing grins.

“So tell me this, Viola. Do you really plan to take his request diligently?”

“How rude! I’m *always* diligent with my work.”

“I suppose so.”

Viola was telling the truth, and Carol knew it. But whether her diligence would help or hinder Tiol in the end was another matter entirely.

And they both knew this as well.

Chapter 155: Rebuild Complete

While Akira and Yumina were in the Kuzusuhara depths working on the hunter rank advancement commission and polishing up their skills, Tiol was working nearby, undergoing the clinical trial and hunting relics.

At first, he had been thrilled that Yatsubayashi's camouflage allowed him to grab as many relics as he wanted without having to worry about getting attacked by dangerous monsters. But now he had a deadline for gathering as much as he could, and the sense of urgency drowned out all his excitement.

Yatsubayashi would only take Tiol as far as the end of the developed section of the highway—the boy had to make it the rest of the way into the interior on foot. And Yatsubayashi forbade him from using a vehicle, saying his camouflage only disguised Tiol himself, not the vehicle he was in—so its presence might lure monsters to attack the boy, which Yatsubayashi couldn't allow. Similarly, Tiol couldn't lug a cart or trolley behind him to transport his relics, nor could he stuff his backpack too full, because doing so might alert monsters to his presence too.

Tiol wasn't sure whether any of this was actually true, but it didn't matter—he had no choice but to go along with whatever the doctor said.

In the meantime, Tiol contacted Viola for a progress report on the job he'd given her. Viola answered that she was still laying the groundwork. Usually, most of the relic shop's sales came from the rare, valuable goods Akira brought in. But now, while Akira was currently busy with his rank advancement commission, they weren't getting any new stock in—the city had laid claim to any relics he found while on the job. At the moment, this wasn't a critical issue, but delaying much longer might seriously hurt their business.

Viola told Tiol she had already warned Sheryl and the others of this impending crisis in order to plant a sense of urgency in their minds, then claimed to know someone who, with some conditions, might be willing to provide a sizable stock of relics in the interim. Viola knew how determined Sheryl was to keep the relic

shop a success, and she expected the girl would agree to any demand to make that happen, as long as it wasn't too unreasonable.

However, Viola hadn't yet revealed that the person in question was Tiol, nor that his condition was to let him back into Sheryl's gang. Viola would wait until their sense of crisis had been stoked a little more, lest they decide to kill their betrayer instead. Meanwhile, she needed Tiol to gather as many high-quality relics as he could before Akira finished his commission.

Hearing Viola's explanation, Tiol felt hope well up within him—his wish might come true after all! He might actually be able to rejoin the gang, work hard to make up for his previous transgression, and even get closer to Sheryl herself. All he had to do was gather enough valuable artifacts in the allotted time.

But there was another time limit he needed to keep in mind. Once Yatsubayashi's clinical trial was over, Tiol could no longer search the depths. If either the testing or Akira's commission ended before he reached his quota, his chances of convincing Sheryl to let him back in would plummet.

He'd be as good as dead.

The clock was doubly against him, so he needed to hurry. The fear he might not make it in time drove him to work faster—and with less discretion.

Thus, urgency gave way to carelessness. Since Tiol was sure the monsters wouldn't attack him anyway, he threw caution to the wind and ran around the ruins recklessly, hell-bent on gathering as many relics as he could. Normally, he would have at least been careful not to let other hunters spot him—especially Akira, who was also working in the Kuzusuhara depths, or so Tiol had heard—but he was no longer concerned about that either. With so many monsters in the area, Tiol doubted the average hunter could come anywhere near where he was working—even Akira would surely have a tough time making it this far. So rather than worry about being discovered, he began to venture farther and farther away from the highway in his searches.

But in his haste, Tiol forgot—Yatsubayashi's camouflage only kept the monsters from *attacking* Tiol. It didn't disguise him from their sight.

He was correct that very few hunters had reached this place—which meant

the population of monsters in the area had hardly been culled. So he was searching for relics amid a larger population—and a wider variety—of dangerous creatures than average. Moreover, as he was participating in a clinical trial, his augmented body was still in the testing phase. There was no guarantee his camouflage would hold up against some type of monster it had yet to be tested on—or even the ones it had been, for that matter. But Tiol assumed he'd be safe and focused every bit of his attention on collecting relics, making no attempt whatsoever at stealth.

As a result, nearly every monster in the area had spotted him.

He also failed to notice that one monster—a massive gluttonous crocodile—was behaving differently from the others, until Yatsubayashi's panicked shout came through his wireless.

"Tiol, run! Your camouflage isn't working on that one!"

"Huh?" Coming to his senses, Tiol finally noticed the gigantic glutton croc, its mouth large enough to swallow a vehicle whole, charging toward him. "Oh sh—!"

"What are you doing?!" the doctor screamed. "Get out of there *now*!"

The croc was too large to enter a building, so if Tiol had simply run into the nearest structure, he would have been safe. In fact, he had ample time to do so.

Yet he couldn't move. He'd been so confident no monsters would come after him that the shock and terror of the deadly croc's sudden attack rooted him to the spot. The enemy was coming for him—he could see that—but he could only stand there, paralyzed and helpless.

The glutton croc closed the distance between them and opened its enormous maw before Tiol's eyes. In AR, he saw the monster's outline highlighted in red.



Tiol awoke on a bed in Yatsubayashi's mobile clinic.

"Huh? Why am I...?" he mumbled groggily. Still half asleep, he had no idea how he'd gotten here, or even where "here" was, for that matter. His head was full of questions.

“Finally awake, are you?” came Yatsubayashi’s voice from nearby. “How do you feel?”

His sluggish consciousness and utter confusion made him slow to respond.

Yatsubayashi changed his question. “What’s your name?” he asked, looking stern.

“What? Tiol, of course,” he said with a puzzled look. “You should know that, so why even ask?”

The doctor smiled. “To find out if your hearing is still intact, of course—and if your consciousness has recovered enough to understand my question. Looks like the answer’s yes on both counts.”

“Oh, gotcha.” Tiol nodded. “That makes sense.”

“Then tell me: Do you know where you are right now?”

“Er, inside your transport vehicle, right?”

“And why are you here?”

“Um... Wait, why *am* I here? I was just out hunting relics, right? And then... Huh?” He racked his brain to try and remember what had happened next, but that was as far as he could recall.

Yatsubayashi observed Tiol with a talented researcher’s scrutiny. Then, after doing something on the terminal he was holding, he grinned. “You don’t remember? A gluttonous crocodile attacked you—and you got your revenge!”

“Huh? Oh, right, I got attacked by that huge crocodile, and I— Wait, I won? Really?”

“You sure did! Even though I told you to run, you took on that croc and wasted it. See for yourself!” Yatsubayashi handed him the terminal.

Tiol took a look at the footage on the screen, which depicted him punching and kicking the croc, beating it to a pulp.

“Honestly, talk about reckless,” Yatsubayashi grumbled. “Sure, your newly augmented body might’ve made it possible for you to win, but just because you *can* fight doesn’t mean you *should*. There was no need to risk so much!”

But Tiol was too shocked by what he was witnessing on the screen to listen.
“I...I really did this? Then why can’t I recall any of it?”

“You really don’t remember? Oh dear, don’t tell me you’re one of those types who go berserk and afterward don’t recall anything they did. In that case, we might need to tread more carefully going forward.”

Tiol desperately traced his own memory, screwing up his face as he tried to recall experiencing the events on the screen. He could remember up until the crocodile had lunged at him with its large open maw—but try as he might, everything after that was a blank.

“Sorry, I really don’t remember. It doesn’t feel like it happened at all. Even when I look at this recording, I don’t feel any sense of accomplishment or recognition.”

“That’s probably because I used your visual data to artificially reconstruct the footage from a third-person perspective. It’s a reproduction, so of course it’s not ringing any bells for you.”

“Huh... Okay, then. Anyway, what happened after that?”

“As soon as you took down the croc, you collapsed on the spot. Then I came to retrieve you and carried you here. You’re too valuable of a specimen to just up and abandon, you see.”

“Really? How’d you make it past all those monsters?”

Yatsubayashi’s eyes narrowed slightly at Tiol’s honest question. “I did my best to pass by them undetected, of course, hoping against hope that none of them would see through my active camouflage. But had you just listened to me and escaped in the first place, I wouldn’t have had to go through all that trouble.”

“S-Sorry.” Tiol hung his head in shame.

At the boy’s earnest apology, Yatsubayashi’s expression softened into a smile. “Well, we’ve both been through a lot today already. How about we head back and relax?”

Tiol honestly wanted to keep going and gather more relics, but he couldn’t say no to the doctor.

On the way back to the clinic, Yatsubayashi busied himself with compiling all the data he'd gathered from the day's excursion. Every bit of Tiol's field data was precious—any of it could lead to a breakthrough in his future research. But he threw the footage he'd shown Tiol in the garbage, because it held no scientific merit whatsoever.



It was now the final day of Tiol's clinical trial, and the last day he could gather relics. He'd already gathered more than the bare minimum Viola had specified, but she'd also said the more relics he collected, the better. So he didn't want to let up on the gas, so to speak, until the very end, and today Tiol headed in at full throttle once again.

Upon arriving in the Kuzusuhara depths, he first searched for a building that might house especially valuable relics. Thanks to the construction of the city highway, more hunters were operating in the depths than ever before, and the areas closer to the highway were quickly getting picked clean. For the worthwhile items, he'd need to go farther from the road.

His eyes fell on a vast building, as tall as it was wide. From its size, he guessed there were likely amazing relics inside, but a higher monster presence as well. This might have given the average hunter pause, but not Tiol—he knew he'd be safe from the beasts.

Anticipating a treasure trove within, he entered the building.

But his expectations were betrayed. More monsters inhabited the edifice than he'd expected, and most of the relics were worth next to nothing. He did find a few rare artifacts, but nowhere near enough to fill his backpack. So he climbed higher, hoping that all the good relics were on the upper floors, but there was no great find anywhere—only more monsters. After scouting out the thirtieth floor, at the top of the building, he heaved a disappointed sigh.

The majority of this level consisted of large rooms where the walls, floors, and ceilings were pure white. The rooms had no furnishings and were teeming with monsters—the worst possible find for a relic hunter. Dejected, Tiol headed for the stairs to leave.

“What a waste of time,” he muttered. “I got my hopes up since this building’s so big, but there’s nothing here but crap.”

Then, as he continued down the corridor, he noticed two people at the end of the hallway—Akira and Yumina.

And Akira was looking right at him.

The moment Tiol realized he’d been spotted, a deluge of various memories, thoughts, and emotions flooded his mind: surprise, at having encountered other hunters in an area infested with such deadly monsters; fear, from having run into Akira before Viola had finished her negotiations; Yatsubayashi’s earlier statement that Akira would kill Tiol on sight before he could even beg for his life; and the footage Viola had shown him, depicting Akira’s strength as he fought the Kokurou mech one-on-one.

As all of this weighed down on Tiol, mentally driving him into a corner, Akira’s outline turned red in his vision.

Tiol recalled how the gluttonous crocodile’s outline had also turned red when it had attacked, after Yatsubayashi’s camouflage had failed to work on the creature.

He’s going to kill me.

The instant that thought entered Tiol’s mind, his face twisted in horror, and he instinctively raised his left arm toward Akira.

An artillery shell erupted from his arm, streaked down the hallway, and collided with the wall at the end! The ensuing explosion was so massive that the entire building shook. Smoke and flame raced back up the hallway. Akira and Yumina dodged the blast, and their figures vanished within the fumes. As the smoke engulfed Tiol as well, he frantically ran in the opposite direction, away from where the other two had been.

H-He’s gonna kill me! I’ve gotta get far away, and fast!

He’d done it now—he’d shot at Akira! Negotiations were sure to fail, regardless of how many relics he found. At this point, the only thing he could do to stay alive was run.

And so he ran as fast as he could.

What the hell was that, anyway?! What happened to my arm?! He recalled how once, in the basement of the Yatsubayashi Clinic, he'd reflexively raised his arm toward the door. At the time he hadn't known why, but now he understood: he'd intended to destroy the door so he could escape. Despite never having done anything like that before, he'd somehow known he could.

And that realization terrified him.

He ran into a white room. Like all the others he'd checked on this floor, it was teeming with monsters. However, this time there was one small difference.

Their outlines were all glowing red.

What?! No way!

Not only had he fired a shell inside the building, he was brandishing the muzzle on his arm as he approached—more than enough for them to recognize him as hostile. One after another, they attacked.

Tiol pointed his arm at them in a panic—but it didn't fire. His arm cannon only loaded one shell at a time. He would have to wait for a new shell to regenerate before he could fire again.

But no one had told him this, so in desperation, he fired the AAH in his right hand instead. Naturally, it didn't even scratch the monsters. The AAH had only been issued to him so he wouldn't look suspicious roaming the ruins without a weapon. Because he was using it in the depths, other hunters might assume the gun had been fitted with powerful mods, but it was never meant to actually be used in combat and was utterly ineffective against the monsters here.

Now beside himself with terror, Tiol tossed the gun away. In a last-ditch effort he knew would be futile, he threw a punch at the gigantic creature lunging at him.

But contrary to his expectations, Tiol's fist smashed the monster's head in, killing it instantly. The impact from the punch even blasted the creature's body far backward.

"Wha...?" Tiol looked dumbstruck at what had happened.

But more monsters were still coming at him. He threw a punch at one, kicked away another, and dodged an oncoming attack while stomping yet another beast into the ground. Each monster was defeated with a single strike.

As their corpses piled up, the fear and panic faded from Tiol's face. By the time it was completely gone, an overconfident grin had taken its place. "Ha...ha ha! Of course—I should've known! With a body this powerful, of *course* I'd easily win against anything here! Bastards... They'll regret intimidating me!"

The footage Yatsubayashi had shown Tiol—the video of him easily defeating the glutton croc—only made him more confident of his own strength. He didn't remember it happening at all, but assumed that if it was there on video, it had to have happened. His fighting spirit restored, he grinned confidently. "That's right! I took down the huge croc all by myself, so like hell I'm gonna lose to the likes of you!"

He slew every single monster that attacked him, including some especially formidable ones that a single blow from him could only disable, not kill. As the monsters died one by one, he grinned, certain that his strength was superior.

But in his presumption, he became careless. A gigantic white glutton croc lunged at him, closing the distance instantly. The enormous creature, already so mutated that it could hardly be called a crocodile anymore, launched itself forward on its numerous long legs as it opened its cross-shaped maw in order to devour the boy.

"Huh?!"

By the time Tiol realized what was happening, it was already too late. The mutant glutton croc raised its giant head high like a serpent and swallowed Tiol from above. Its jaws tore through Tiol's body as they snapped shut, leaving behind only a portion of his right arm and everything below his knees. The rest of him ended up in the beast's belly, where he lost consciousness.

But soon the croc itself began to writhe in pain. Then, without warning, part of its stomach exploded, opening a gaping hole in the monster's torso.

A human figure dragged himself out of the hole—Tiol.

He'd regenerated another artillery shell, with which he'd blasted the croc

open from the inside. His missing arm and legs were also regenerating rapidly—he'd ripped out and eaten a portion of the croc's insides while in its stomach. Standing up unsteadily on misshapen legs, he took another bite of the amalgam of flesh and metal held in his right hand, further hastening the regeneration process. His face was a mask of calm—nothing in his expression suggested he was disgusted or bewildered by what he was eating.

But merely having its stomach blown open wasn't enough to kill the croc. Abnormally resilient for a nonmechanical monster, the massive creature's body started to regenerate. As it lunged for the prey it had failed to kill, additional arms and gaping mouths sprouted from its body to help it finish the job.

Realizing the crocodile was still alive, Tiol turned to attack it once more. He leaped forward and continued punching, kicking, and devouring the monster's flesh. Over and over, he blasted the croc's limbs off, only for them to regenerate. His own limbs would get bitten off and swallowed, then regenerate. So the struggle dragged on, as though an eating contest had broken out between two gluttons.



Yatsubayashi sat in his mobile clinic, analyzing the data he was receiving from a scanner implanted in Tiol's body. On his face was a look of rapt interest.

"So he's escaped the stomach of a glutton croc twice now," the doctor mused. "And it looks like the system's invading his consciousness at a rapid rate. I wonder if he can even return to normal at this point? I brought him back the first time with only a few minor tweaks, but it might not be so easy this time..."

With a frown, he reexamined the footage of the first time a glutton croc had attacked Tiol. The video, reconstructed with a third-person perspective, showed Tiol getting swallowed by the croc and bursting out of its stomach exactly like he had just now. The alleged footage Yatsubayashi had previously shown Tiol had been fake—fabricated so the boy wouldn't find out the truth of what had happened.

"But what's the trigger for his change? Extreme mental duress, as I thought? If so, how do I bring him back to normal? It'd be great if it were as easy as

administering a sedative, but somehow I doubt that's the case."

Yatsubayashi turned his attention once again to the live feed, where Tiol was still facing off against the mutant glutton croc. The boy fired another shell, then closed in and slashed the monster repeatedly with a blade of light from his right arm.

"How intriguing! Those relics he was carrying were swallowed along with him—could he have absorbed their traits during the rebuild process? From an engineering perspective, that's certainly fascinating. But it's unrelated to our goal, so it's unnecessary. Then again, if the traits are now so deeply rooted in the main system, they'll be a headache to extract."

Meanwhile, Tiol's fight against the croc finally drew to a close. After repeatedly having its head sliced off and its torso blown apart, the crocodile's regeneration could no longer withstand Tiol's barrage of attacks, and the boy dealt the fatal blow, blasting it to pieces. Tiol stood victorious.

"So he won. Time to go retrieve him, then— What's that?"

Yatsubayashi noticed something strange—the boy had turned his gaze toward the empty white wall of the room, as though he could see something there. For a second he thought Tiol had spotted a monster that was using active camouflage, but the data from the high-tech scanner inside Tiol's body informed the doctor that there was nothing in that direction.

"If it's not something with active camouflage, perhaps it's in augmented reality that only he can see? He mentioned there are letters and symbols in his vision that don't show up in the visual feed I get, so maybe something he saw in AR got his attention?"

But Yatsubayashi's speculating ended there, because all at once the data the doctor was receiving from Tiol changed drastically.



Ever since defeating the mutant glutton croc, Tiol hadn't made a move. Killing the crocodile had been a defensive measure the system had taken to protect itself—the boy hadn't done it of his own volition. And once the system had finished defending itself, he still hadn't moved, because the system had taken

over his thoughts. It never even occurred to him to budge from that spot. The same thing had happened after his first glutton croc attack, before Yatsubayashi had carried him back to the mobile clinic.

Everything in the white room was motionless. The other monsters in the room had been killed during the fight with the crocodile, leaving Tiol as the only survivor. Yet within the boy's vision, something was moving—a woman wearing a black dress from the Old World.

With a smile, she approached him.

All throughout the fight with the glutton croc, Tiol's expression had hardly changed, even when his limbs were being torn off. Now, however, there were subtle but unmistakable signs of panic and fear on his face. Since the system had intruded into his mind, Tiol could finally read the description displayed next to the woman.

A higher authority has established a forced connection. This connection cannot be severed. Authority identified as the chief interface managing district 844. Do not engage in combat. Likelihood of winning: zero percent. Recommend immediately retreating outside authority's range.

Tiol tried to make a run for it. Somehow, without being told, he knew that the woman was using this white room to connect to him. So his best bet was to escape the room—but he'd only taken a single step toward the door before his legs froze in fear.

The woman he'd turned his back on was now inexplicably right in front of him.

The AR vision chuckled. *Running away as soon as you see me? How rude. Though I suppose it's unreasonable to ask for decorum from an impostor.*

She extended her hand toward Tiol. He saw it pass through his forehead until her fingers reached his brain.

I originally wanted to recruit him for this task, but he's already left the

building, so you'll have to do. Especially since you don't seem to have any pesky companions with you.

Tiol couldn't move a muscle. The entity in his vision had his brain in her grasp, but she wasn't real—she didn't have a physical hold on him. So why couldn't he escape?

You're pretending to be one of us, right? That's fine—in fact, it'll make it all the easier for you to complete my request. In fact, how about I make your disguise even better?

The woman had directly attacked the system supporting Tiol—hence why he couldn't move. The letters in his augmented vision began to display ominous notices:

Importing additional data. Rebuilding connection device.
Rebuilding authorization protocol. Rebuilding system.
Making final adjustments.

Finally, the woman extracted her hand from Tiol's head and smiled. *That should do it! Well then, I'm counting on you.* She turned her back on him and was about to walk away when she stopped and faced him again. *Oh, right, I never introduced myself. You may call me Tsubaki. Good luck!*

With that, the mysterious woman—Tsubaki—disappeared from his vision. The moment she did, Tiol's body unfroze.

The first thing he did was thrust his own hand through his head and tear out the bomb embedded there. It was the kind set to explode immediately if forcibly removed, and indeed it detonated in Tiol's hand, blowing off everything past his wrist. A mix of green blood and flesh flew into the air.

But Tiol paid it no mind. Instead, he chowed down on the gluttonous croc's corpse to regenerate himself. His hand grew back, and the rest of his wounds healed. By the time he'd eaten the entire corpse, he was back in perfect condition. A notice detailing his current status popped up in his vision:

Rebuild complete. Commencing mission.

Chapter 156: A Ladies' Man

After running into Tiol in the Kuzusuhara depths, Akira and Yumina had decided to call it a day. But after they left the ruins and got back on the highway, they were contacted by Kibayashi. He told them to return to the forward base, as he had something he needed to discuss with them. Akira and Yumina told him they were already on their way back and made for the base.

Upon entering the base's cafeteria, they saw Kibayashi sitting at a table, waving them over enthusiastically.

"Ah, good, you made it!" he called. "Over here!"

Akira and Yumina took their seats across from him. Knowing Kibayashi's cheer could mean nothing good for him, Akira gave an annoyed sigh.

"So what did you want to tell us?" he demanded.

"We'll get to that in a minute," said Kibayashi. "How about we order some food first and take our time talking while we eat? Get whatever you want—it's my treat! Still, you came back awfully early today, huh? Run into trouble?"

"You could say that," Akira said.

Kibayashi turned to Yumina with a questioning look, and she elaborated on behalf of her companion.

"Actually, another hunter attacked us in the ruins. I made the executive decision for us to retreat, just to be safe."

Kibayashi looked surprised—and intrigued. "Someone tried to attack Akira?! You don't say! I don't know who'd have the balls to do something like that, but they'd have to be especially reckless—and from what you've said, I take it they're still alive? Well then, no wonder you look so pissed off."

"What do you mean by that?" Akira said with a scowl.

"I mean, after carrying Yumina to a safe place, you probably wanted to go after him and kill him right away. Am I wrong?"

Yumina looked shocked. “Huh? Really?”

Kibayashi nodded confidently. “Yeah, I’m sure of it. I mean, it’s *Akira* we’re talking about here. To be honest, I’m more surprised he actually returned to the base with you. The Akira I know would’ve told you to go back on your own, then chased after the attacker without waiting to hear your response. I wonder why he didn’t do that?”

Yumina glanced at Akira. Indeed, that *did* sound like something he’d do. So why had he come back with her? Now *she* was curious.

Instead of answering, Akira sighed. “That doesn’t matter. Get to the point already, Kibayashi.”

“Oh? Well, in that case, let’s go ahead and place our orders. Since this is covered in your commission’s expenses, you ought to take advantage of it. I mean, if you went back to the ruins right now, it would be impossible to find the hunter who attacked you, right? So you might as well take it easy and enjoy your food.”

Kibayashi began ordering his own meal. Seeing how unconcerned the man was acting, Akira couldn’t help but relax as well. With a small sigh, he started to look over the menu.

Partly to get back at the city officials who had saddled him with the job in the first place, he ordered the most expensive meal he could.

Once everyone’s food had arrived, Kibayashi moved on to his main topic. First, he casually declared that they’d be leaving Kuzusuhara and working in the ruins of the Iida commercial district for a while. Then, in a more serious tone, he explained why: the city had been tipped off to the possibility of an Old World automaton inside Iida. While the info might have been bogus, automatons were incredibly precious relics—and incredibly dangerous, depending on how well they’d been preserved.

Akira was to devote his full attention to recovering the automaton. This time, he could either work alone or recruit more help and form a team—Kibayashi didn’t care either way. Previously, he’d said the city would buy all of the relics Akira found at a lower rate while covering his expenses, but he was open to

renegotiating those terms right now if Akira wanted. Of course, it was no sweat off his back if Akira preferred to keep the terms as they were.

Kibayashi explained all this with the tone of a no-nonsense city official, which left Akira narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

“And?” the boy demanded. “What’s your ulterior motive *this* time?”

“I’ll tell you, if you promise to take the job seriously.”

“So there really *is* one!”

“Naturally,” Kibayashi said with a chuckle of amusement.

Akira sighed. “All right, I’ll take it seriously. So what’s really going on here? What do you want me to do in the Iida ruins?”

“Nothing,” Kibayashi replied.

“For real?” Akira seriously doubted that was the case, so he eyed Kibayashi warily.

Having gotten the exact reaction he’d wanted, the city official laughed again. “Frankly speaking, the automaton in the Iida ruins is just a pretext. The real reason behind your reassignment is to keep you away from Kuzusuhara for a while.”

Akira looked perplexed, so Kibayashi explained the circumstances that had led to this decision. He reminded them that Akira had been offered the opportunity to advance his hunter rank because of Yajima and Yoshioka. These two corporations had been competing to sell their new mechs to the defense force, but Akira had trounced both models of mechs during the gang war, giving the businesses a bad rap. So in order to save face, they wanted to make sure everyone knew Akira was extremely powerful. That way, they could say their mech’s losses to him were an inevitability, not because the products themselves were defective.

And thanks to Akira’s efforts thus far in the Kuzusuhara depths, their plan had worked—the companies’ poor reputations were gradually being overturned. Not wanting to miss their chance, Yajima and Yoshioka were planning to hold a second showcase of their newest products. They’d formed a battalion of their

own mechs that would guard the part of the highway that was still under construction, in order to prove the usefulness of the mechs to Kugamayama City. The units had already been shipped to Kugamayama via intercity transports, and would soon move on to the forward base at Kuzusuhara. As soon as the mechs went through their final checks and preparations at the base, the operation would begin.

Hearing all that, Akira felt even more confused. “Okay, but what does that have to do with me?”

“Everything—to Yajima and Yoshioka, at least. You still don’t get it?”

It was clear from Akira’s expression that he did not, in fact, get it. Kibayashi grinned, entertained by the boy’s cluelessness.

“I’ll spell it out for you then,” said the official. “Yajima and Yoshioka don’t want you anywhere near their demonstration.”

“Huh? But I’m not gonna interfere.”

“Doesn’t matter! That’s how dangerous they think you are! They’re worried that just by being in Kuzusuhara, you’ll trigger some crazy, unforeseen event that trashes their presentation once again!”

In other words, the companies couldn’t afford to fail a second time—the upcoming showcase needed to go off without a hitch. So both corporations had joined forces to remove Akira from the premises. Since he couldn’t interfere if he wasn’t on the scene, they just had to keep him away from Kuzusuhara temporarily. Thus, the city had given him a new directive elsewhere.

“And so, the automaton in Iida is just an excuse to shoo you away from Kuzusuhara. It could’ve been any other mission anywhere else. Except,” Kibayashi added, “on paper, we’re only changing the place of activity for your commission, so we couldn’t put you on a job that didn’t contribute to the city and wouldn’t raise your rank. That’s why you’re on the automaton case.”

An ominous possibility suddenly occurred to Akira. “Are we even sure this automaton exists?”

“It might, it might not. We haven’t been able to confirm either way, and it’s possible you’ll learn more while hunting relics in Iida. But Yajima and Yoshioka

gave us the info, so I think there's a decent chance it's legit."

"Hmm, okay." Akira certainly didn't want to wander aimlessly through a ruin in search of an imaginary automaton, but as long as he was likely to find it, he didn't mind putting in a serious effort. "Yumina, what do you feel like doing? Want to come with? Or stay behind?"

Yumina looked surprised that he had even asked. "I'm your companion for this commission, so of course I'm coming along. The Iida ruins are supposed to be less dangerous than Kuzusuhara, so it's not like I'll drag you down, if that's what you're worried about."

"N-No, that's not why I asked..." He tried to sound more nonchalant in his reply. "I mean, y'know, Kibayashi said you weren't required to come, right? Just asking in case you'd rather call it quits here."

Yumina looked at him in disbelief. Then a hint of gloom crept into her expression. "Akira, er, am I just in your way?"

The difference in her strength and Akira's was as clear as day. And just earlier that day, Akira hadn't been able to go after the hunter who attacked him because she'd judged it was a bad idea. Perhaps he was just trying to get rid of her in a roundabout way so she wouldn't hold him back anymore. At least, this was how his words sounded to her.

Akira looked surprised and shook his head frantically. "No, not at all! I just thought that since the higher-ups forced you to come with me, this might be your only chance to get out of it. I mean, it's not like you could just tell them honestly you wanted to quit, right?"

"Well, you've got a point there, I guess."

"Not to mention, you've been jerked around like that ever since you were hired to guard the warehouse. And because of these jobs you've been put on, you haven't been able to go back to your original team. So are you sure you want to come?"

Yumina now understood that Akira was asking out of genuine concern for her, but the vortex of feelings in her heart kept her from answering right away. Indeed, she wanted to return to her original team—and to Katsuya—as soon as

possible. But her superiors and the support system had already judged she was a burden to the team—if she bowed out of Akira’s commission with the excuse he’d proposed, she doubted they’d let her back in. And even if she did return to Katsuya’s team, at her current skill level she felt she’d still drag them down. Katsuya would be bailing her out constantly, just like the many others he’d rescued heretofore, and she’d be depending on him yet again.

She didn’t want that to happen. She didn’t want to think that was the reason she’d stayed by Katsuya’s side all this time.

Working with Akira on the city’s orders had given her an opportunity to hone her skills so she could return to Katsuya. But she couldn’t deny that it had also given her a convenient excuse to temporarily forget about the team and her exclusion from it. She couldn’t say that out loud, however, so she forced a cheerful smile instead.

“I’ll be fine. I’ve got my own reasons for coming along as well. As long as you don’t think I’ll hold you back, I’ll go with you.”

“Really? Okay, then!” Akira looked somewhat elated by her response, which surprised Kibayashi. Akira noticed the change in his expression and regarded him with a wary look. “Got a problem?”

“No, no.” Kibayashi hadn’t pegged Akira as a ladies’ man, but of course he didn’t say that out loud. “So just to confirm, Yumina will be accompanying you like before, and outside of investigating the automaton, you’ll mostly be hunting relics like before. And if you find the automaton, our original deal still stands, and we’ll buy it from you for dirt cheap. Does all that suit you?”

“First, tell me what’s so important about the automaton,” Akira said.

“Compared to the rarity of an average relic, an Old World automaton’s value is in a class of its own. While the actual price would depend on a number of factors, I’d imagine it’d fetch around ten billion aurum. So I’m just confirming that you’re okay with us buying it from you for, let’s say, ten thousand.”

“T-Ten thousand?! You’ve gotta be kidding! A ten-billion-aurum relic for ten *thousand*?!”

“That’s right. Of course, we’ll raise your hunter rank that much more to

compensate, but money-wise, don't get your hopes up. Keep in mind we're also covering all your expenses on this job. So what do you say? Would you rather pay for your ammo and such yourself?"

"Huh? What would happen if I did?"

"Well, first off, we'd have you pay us for all the ammunition you haven't used yet, and at the same rate you bought them at—in other words, the price you paid before you raised your hunter rank. That'll be awfully expensive."

"Didn't you tell me before that I could just return whatever ammo I didn't use to the city?"

"I did. But that only applies to the current conditions, where we're covering your expenses."

"I bought as much as I could so I wouldn't run out, you know."

"Oh yeah? That's rough."

"And because I've handed over every relic I've found in the depths to you guys for next to nothing, I'm not exactly loaded with cash right now."

"Oh yeah? That's rough," Kibayashi repeated.

Realizing he'd essentially been swindled, Akira grimaced in displeasure. Kibayashi grinned, enjoying his reaction.

"That's not fair!" the boy declared.

"Remember, it's only one option. It's not guaranteed you'll find the automaton anyway, so you might as well keep the conditions as they are, right?"

"Well, sure, but—"

"Then you agree! I'm only telling you what'll happen even on the off chance you *do* run across the automaton, so that we don't run into any arguments later."

"Yeah, but..."

Starting to get the feeling he'd never had a choice in the first place, Akira scowled even more, and Kibayashi's grin widened.

The official clarified that Akira still had a number of options available. As mentioned, if the boy took responsibility for his own expenses, he could sell the relics he found for incredibly high prices; whereas if he let the city pay his expenses, he'd earn next to nothing. Alternatively, he could pay only part of the expenses himself, in which case his compensation and relic sale prices would be adjusted proportionately to how much the city covered. Kibayashi added he was also open to any suggestions to make the terms more favorable for Akira, like having the city cover his expenses *and* having them buy the relics from him for high prices—but those negotiations would need to be done right here, right now. If Akira didn't make a decision immediately, the terms would stand as is.

Once he finished explaining all this, he grinned, anticipating how the boy would react.

"At least give me until I finish eating to think about it," he grumbled. Then he glanced at Yumina.

"Sorry, Akira," she said, looking apologetic. "I can't really offer any input in this part of the discussion, since if I speak up it might get Druncam in trouble."

Alpha?

Think about it. At your current level, how much ammo will you need, and how much can you afford? That's your answer. She grinned, as if to say "Surely you can do that much on your own, right?"

Akira gave a deep sigh. Then he began the long, agonizing process of negotiating with the amused Kibayashi. By the time they'd finally hammered out a deal, the sun had already set.



In preparation for his trip to Iida, Akira headed to Shizuka's shop. This time, he brought Yumina along so he'd have an extra vehicle to pack ammo in. They parked near the delivery entrance, and the two of them entered through the front door.

Shizuka was behind the counter when she noticed Akira enter. "Welcome, Akira!" she said with a bright smile. "It's wonderful to see— *Eeep?!'*" She broke off in a shriek.

“What’s the matter, Shizuka?” Akira asked, startled.

“O-Oh, I just didn’t expect you to bring a companion along. I take it this girl’s a friend of yours?”

Yumina bowed politely to Shizuka and introduced herself. “Hello, ma’am. My name is Yumina, and I’m a hunter from Druncam.”

“Oh, really? I’m Shizuka, the proprietor of this shop. Pleased to make your acquaintance!”

While Akira stood there recovering from his surprise, Yumina explained to Shizuka that she had been working with Akira on his hunter rank advancement commission for two months. Coming to his senses, Akira chimed in to add that their site of operation had recently been switched from the depths of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins to the Iida Commercial District Ruins, and that as a result of his negotiations with the city, he could no longer buy ammo with reckless abandon.

“And so,” Akira finished, “this’ll probably be the last time I’ll be able to buy so much ammo from you. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Shizuka said. “I’ve already made enough money off you as it is. In fact, if your ammo expenses will be coming out of your own pocket from now on, like you said, don’t feel like you’re locked into buying today’s ammo either. We can just cancel the order you placed.”

“No, it’s fine. Money won’t be a real concern—I’ll only be held financially responsible for the ammo I use. The unused portion will go back to the city.”

Per his agreement with Kibayashi, Akira would foot the bill for his own ammo from now on. However, the city would retain the rights to that ammo, meaning Akira would be paying *the city* instead of any vendors. This way, he could buy as much as he needed to survive without having to cover the whole cost up front. He could reimburse the city later for the ammo he had used, and even return what he hadn’t.

The terms were ridiculously in Akira’s favor, of course, but Kibayashi had used his business acumen to get the other city officials to agree nonetheless. He’d done so for two reasons, the first being a bargaining chip that Akira had thought

of all on his own.

“If you don’t agree to these terms,” the boy had declared, “I’m not gonna be quite so gung ho on this job. Are you really okay with that?” Rank advancement commission or no, the city wanted him to hand over, for virtually nothing, an automaton that (depending on the circumstances) could be worth a hundred billion aurum. Akira didn’t exactly find this motivating, and he had threatened to simply report that he hadn’t found the automaton regardless of whether he actually had. Then the city would have to deal with the financial loss of failing to recover it.

The second reason was Kibayashi’s personal motive. During negotiations, the city official had made a show of frowning and hesitating to accept Akira’s terms—but in fact, he couldn’t have been happier. Kibayashi wanted nothing more than for Akira to go wild and perform crazy, reckless, and rash antics. If the boy didn’t feel like he had enough ammo, he might hold back and accomplish only the bare minimum needed to finish the commission.

That would be the worst possible outcome for Kibayashi.

On the other hand, if Akira had an abundant supply, he’d be sure to take bigger risks—or so Kibayashi believed, based on how the boy had laid waste to an enormous horde of armored spiders on the very first day of his commission. Of course, during that fight, Akira had restrained himself out of consideration for Yumina—a real shame. But the city official hoped a change of location and a new mission might be the catalyst that finally tipped the scales in the direction he wanted.

In truth, Kibayashi would have loved to see Akira trash Yajima and Yoshioka’s demonstration a second time. But that was too much to ask, so he just had to hope the search for the automaton would lead to an equally large commotion.

There was no chance of that happening if Akira felt unmotivated, however. Since the boy was using his own enthusiasm as a bargaining chip against Kibayashi, the city official was sure Akira would hold up his end of the bargain and approach the job with zeal. Akira was the type to honor agreements, after all. Still, Kibayashi hadn’t let any of this show in his attitude as he said, “You *do* realize how unfavorable these conditions are on our end, don’t you? If I’m

gonna make the effort to push this through, you'd better take our job seriously."

But Akira hadn't seen through Kibayashi's ruse and remained certain that he'd successfully convinced the man entirely on his own. So Akira wore an air of smugness as he detailed all of this to Shizuka.

From his story, Shizuka could immediately tell that Kibayashi had some ulterior motive. But since things had ultimately worked in the boy's favor, she didn't point this out. Instead, she gave him a warm smile and encouraged him. "You negotiated with him all by yourself? I'm impressed! You've grown into quite the capable hunter, haven't you?"

"Thanks! I tried my best," Akira said, a hint of bashfulness in his smile.

Yumina felt surprised—the boy in front of her was nothing like the Akira she'd known up until now. He certainly wasn't the same person who had glared at her and Katsuya with bloodlust during the pickpocket incident in the slums, or who had exuded a murderous aura so dense it was almost palpable after that mech had destroyed the warehouse during the gang war. She could only see an innocent boy who was thrilled to hear his efforts praised. It was enough to make her doubt her own perception.

Shizuka noticed the shock on Yumina's face but didn't let on. "By the way, Yumina, has Akira been behaving himself in the ruins?" she asked. "He hasn't been reckless or overexerted himself, has he?"

"I-I haven't!" Akira cut in.

"I didn't ask you, I asked Yumina," she said, her tone slightly sharper. Then she turned to the girl again with a cheerful smile. "Well?"

There was a hint of a smirk in that smile, as though she already knew the answer.

Akira panicked and shot a desperate look at Yumina that clearly said, "Please tell her no!"

Yumina found their dynamic so amusing that she let out a snort. Then, with an equally knowing smile, she answered, "Well, I dunno... Akira *has* accomplished a lot already. On the first day of the job, he took out a ton of

these spider monsters all on his own. Even the city officials were astonished.”

“You don’t say? How interesting!” Still smiling, Shizuka’s gaze slid over to Akira.

He flinched so hard that Yumina nearly giggled out loud. But when he turned a pleading gaze to her, begging her with his eyes to save him, she couldn’t hold it in any longer, and burst out laughing.

Akira frowned. “Hey, what gives?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Yumina said, catching her breath. “I just couldn’t help myself. The truth is, Shizuka, while Akira’s done some impressive stuff, I wouldn’t say he’s been reckless. He had more than enough ammo to take out that horde, and that very morning he told me he planned to take things easy, since it was our first day. I doubt he was overexerting himself.”

“Oh? Then you really did keep your promise, Akira. That’s a load off my mind.”

“O-Of *course* I did!” Akira sighed, sounding more relieved than he intended.

Though Yumina had been caught off guard, she enjoyed seeing this new side of him. Without realizing it, she was reminded of how Katsuya acted around her whenever she told him off for *his* recklessness.

After chatting with Shizuka, Akira and Yumina loaded the purchased ammo into their respective vehicles. As they were doing so, Shizuka approached Yumina and lowered her voice so that Akira wouldn’t overhear.

“Yumina, I know Akira’s a difficult child in many respects. He’ll probably cause you trouble from time to time, but I’d still like you to get along with him if possible.”

Shizuka had been thinking for a while now that Akira needed a friend who was similar to him in age and skill. But she’d had a feeling that his prospects were slim. She, Elena, and Sara thought of Akira as a friend, of course, and she knew Akira thought of them in the same way. They were all clearly important to him. Yet she could also sense he didn’t see them as equals. If anything, he seemed to view himself as beneath the three of them.

And now Akira was treating Yumina like an equal, even acting casually around her. To Shizuka, Akira had long seemed to want a friend, and now here was this girl.

But that didn't necessarily mean Yumina felt the same way. She likely had her own preferences. Moreover, Akira was ridiculously strong, and—if Shizuka was being blunt—his personality was a little warped. Yumina probably saw him as dangerous, in which case Shizuka couldn't in good faith suggest that the girl befriend such a person.

So she'd instead channeled her hopes into two words—"if possible."

Yumina picked up on Shizuka's meaning and replied honestly, "I'd like to as well, but I'm sorry—I can't make any promises right now."

"That's good enough for me. Thank you, Yumina."

Yumina and Shizuka's brief yet heartfelt conversation ended there, and the two returned to their work as if nothing had happened.



When Akira and Yumina finished resupplying at Shizuka's, they headed for the warehouse at Sheryl's base. Katsuragi was waiting there, and when they arrived, he gave Akira a massive box. Inside were ten smaller packages of medicine the boy had purchased from the merchant, each of which cost five million aurum.

Akira packed the enormous box in Yumina's vehicle.

Having just pocketed fifty million, Katsuragi was all smiles. "Pleasure doing business with you, as always! Here's to many more purchases in the future, eh?"

"Hate to burst your bubble, but this is the last one."

"What?! Why?!" Katsuragi had been profiting greatly from Akira's regular orders of medicine, so hearing that Akira was cutting him off all of a sudden sent him into a panic.

And when Akira told him the reason, it only increased his anxiety.

"Whoa, hold up now!" demanded the merchant. "I ordered a ton of that

medicine in advance so I'd have it in stock and all ready for you to buy! Now you're saying you can't afford it anymore?!"

"If you ordered stock I didn't even ask for, that's on you. Don't complain to me. You're responsible for managing your own inventory."

"But this is just too sudden!"

"It was sudden for me too, so I can't help it. Besides, who was it that said I might not be able to afford to buy medicine from you regularly if the commission ran too long? You did, right? Well, this is that time. You should've already planned for it."

Katsuragi determined from Akira's attitude that no amount of grouching would change his mind. And Akira was the only hunter he knew who would purchase a box of meds at five million aurum a pop. If the merchant could sell off his surplus stock, he'd certainly make a tidy profit, but otherwise the medicine would gather dust in his inventory.

Such a severe loss in profit could seriously impact his business. To keep from hemorrhaging a critical amount of money before it was too late, he immediately contacted his suppliers to see if he could cancel the order—or, barring that, get them to reduce the order amount somehow.

Seeing Akira treat Katsuragi completely differently than he had Shizuka, Yumina had a sudden thought. "Akira, are you sweet on women, by any chance?"

"Huh? Wh-Why would you ask that out of the blue?"

"I was just thinking you treated Shizuka much better than you're treating Katsuragi now, is all."

"That's because Shizuka's done a lot for me ever since I became a hunter. Katsuragi hasn't done shit."

Katsuragi overheard him and looked offended. "Hey now, is that any way to talk about a friend you survived a near-death experience with?"

"Yeah, considering this friend tried to swindle me and get expensive relics off me for cheap." He gave Katsuragi a critical look.

The merchant averted his eyes with a sheepish grin.

At that moment, Sheryl and Viola walked up. Sheryl looked shell-shocked to see Akira and Yumina acting so friendly with each other. Viola, on the other hand, didn't look fazed in the least—in fact, even as the woman brought everyone up-to-date on how the relic shop was faring, Sheryl's dismay amused her to no end.

At the moment, Viola told them, the shop was still raking in profits. But the other outlets in the slums were beginning to recover from the aftershock of the two biggest gangs' demise. Sheryl's operation wouldn't have a monopoly on the trade for much longer, so they needed something to distinguish themselves from the competition, something that would keep the customers coming. The valuable relics Akira brought in would fill that niche.

"The Old World terminals you've supplied aren't so common that they can be found on the average relic shop's shelves," Viola explained. "So these goods have been a major help." Her expression hardened. "But our stock is limited. Once we sell what's left, we'll be completely out. So Akira, can you help us procure more?"

"I mean, I know you're counting on me and all," said the boy, "but I'm in the middle of a hunter rank advancement commission right now, and I have to sell any relics I find to the city. I figured you of all people would know that already."

"Of course I know that. But I'm asking anyway, because I'm trying to make good on my promise to you and help Sheryl's relic shop flourish. We're going to need rare, highly valuable relics if we want any hope of that happening. So what do you say? Could you help us out? For Sheryl?"

But Viola's pleading was all an act. She'd known from the start that Akira would refuse, and had only asked so Sheryl would realize that Akira's relics wouldn't be an option this time. They still did need valuable merchandise to keep the shop going, though, and this was where Viola planned to mention Tiol as another potential relic supplier. She expected Tiol's offer to look a lot more enticing in Sheryl's eyes once the girl realized she had no one else to turn to.

Sheryl could tell Viola was up to *something*, but of course had no way of knowing what it was or to what end. Moreover, she knew Viola was right—

expensive relics would indeed be necessary to keep her business running smoothly. So while she remained wary of what the conniving woman was planning, she kept her mouth shut.

Akira, however, didn't pick up on Viola's intentions. He genuinely believed she was trying to help Sheryl because he'd ordered her to. And if it was for Sheryl's sake, he couldn't very well refuse. He groaned for a moment, mulling it over, then addressed Sheryl.

"Tell me, Sheryl. Do you absolutely need those relics to keep the business afloat?"

Sheryl chose her words carefully. "As far as I'm concerned, your circumstances take priority over everything else. If it'll inconvenience you in some way, don't worry about it. I'll take care of things somehow."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll be honest: if you could provide us with more relics, it would be a tremendous help. But I don't want to burden you any further with my problems. As our patron, you've already done more than enough for me." She smiled at him.

He grinned back bashfully. "Really? You think?"

"Absolutely!"

Watching their heartwarming conversation, Viola inwardly wore a mocking smile. *Of course that's the answer you'd give, Sheryl. Now you've given Akira an excuse to turn you down—perfect.* Her gaze shifted from Sheryl to Akira. *In the first place, you have absolutely nothing to gain from breaking your contract with the city and giving us those relics, do you? Not to mention you honor your agreements, no matter what. In fact, I bet that was how you ended up backing Sheryl too—she probably duped you into agreeing to it, and you couldn't go back on a promise you'd already made. Oh, how tragic!*

After all, she reasoned, if Akira had actually cooperated with Sheryl out of love or lust, he would long ago have laid his hands on her. Since he hadn't, there had to be some other reason he'd stuck around. And from what Viola knew of Akira's personality, this was the most likely possibility.

With Akira incapable of offering relics to the shop, they'd have no choice but to use another supplier capable of delivering relics that were just as profitable. Now her success hinged entirely on whether Tiol had managed to gather enough relics in time. Making a mental note that it was about time to check in with him, Viola began formulating the next stage of her scheme in her head.

And then the very foundation of her plans crumbled away.

"All right. Then wait here—I'll be back in a moment!" Akira said.

"Wha...?" Viola accidentally let out a small gasp of surprise.

Akira got on his bike and drove out of the warehouse. A short time later, he returned toting a gigantic box, which he set in front of Sheryl. "Sorry, this is all I can offer for the time being. It's probably enough to tide you over, though."

Sheryl and Viola looked in the box, and their eyes widened in shock. Inside were many more Old World data terminals—exactly the same kind of valuable relics Akira had brought them before.

Viola looked at Akira sharply, losing a bit of her self-possession. "Where did you get these? The Kuzusuhara depths?"

"I already told you—I can't say where I got them."

"That's not what I mean! You're under contract to sell any relics you find there to the city, yet you're handing them over to an illegal business in the slums. Are you sure you're prepared for the consequences?"

"Oh, so *that's* what you mean. Nah, won't be a problem. I didn't find these during the commission."

"O-Oh, is that so?" Viola shot a glance at Yumina, as if asking her to confirm.

"It's true," Yumina said. "We've handed over all the relics we've found to the city, and the transactions are recorded on our scanners as proof."

"Though I can easily see how people might think these were from the same batch," Akira added. "But if that turns out to be a problem, you can cover for me, right? You're good at that kind of thing."

Viola answered with a mischievous smile, "Of course. Just leave it to me."

But that smile was meant to hide her inner unrest. Since the relics Akira had just brought in were all Old World data terminals like before, he'd probably stored the entire haul somewhere, intending to bring them to Sheryl bit by bit, in order to hide the fact that he'd found them all at the same site.

Viola could easily guess this much. But never in her wildest dreams had she suspected that he still had so many on hand.

Now she was even *more* curious about where he'd found them. But interrogating him would be signing her own death warrant. Recalling how he'd once shot her without any hesitation, she reined in her curiosity in order to avoid a second bullet in the chest.

"But really, to think you were able to provide us with all these highly valuable goods so quickly," she said. "Aren't you glad I beefed up the warehouse's security when I did, Sheryl?"

"I suppose so," Sheryl replied, in a tone that seemed to say, "How shameless can you get?"

Akira looked clueless as to what Viola meant, so the info broker helpfully explained, "During the gang war, I bought intel from the moles who were leaking info on the warehouse, info which I then used to chase them out of Sheryl's employ. Now, with them gone, the warehouse's security is a lot more reliable. See how useful I was, Akira?"

"Oh, I see... Yeah, I guess you were." Finally realizing what she was up to, Akira looked astonished by her brazenness.

But hearing her mention the warehouse's security also called to mind what Alpha had said: that Tiol had once been hired to guard the warehouse.

"Right, that reminds me," the boy said. "Sheryl, do you know a guy named Tiol?"

"Tiol? Wasn't he one of the moles Viola chased out? I heard that Shijima had him killed."

"Nope, that bastard's still alive. I ran into him in the Kuzusuhara depths."

"Really? That's surprising. I didn't think he had the skill to head to a

dangerous area like that. I wonder why he would go there?”

“To hunt relics, I guess? But wait, that’s not the important thing.” Akira’s expression became grim, indicating to Sheryl the seriousness of what he was about to say. “We met him inside a building, and he attacked us out of the blue.”

“What?!” Sheryl looked alarmed. “But why?!”

“Beats me. I have no clue what he was thinking. All I can tell you is that he attacked us first, then bolted immediately afterward.”

Sheryl felt completely blindsided.

“I’m just telling you so that if you ever run into him, you’ll know to be on your guard,” he added. “If he’s working in an area like that, he’s got to be pretty strong. Though if he’s that capable, I’m not sure what he was doing working security at a warehouse in the first place.”

“I understand. I’ll be careful,” Sheryl said with a nod.

Beside her, Viola maintained a perfect poker face, despite having just heard something incredibly intriguing. She longed to beg Akira for more details, but as Tiol had commissioned her to set up this scheme in the first place, she couldn’t say anything unnecessary at the moment. She’d need to confirm the situation for herself first.

I guess this scraps that plan, she thought unhappily. What a waste! Now Akira and Sheryl will never agree to take Tiol back, no matter what tricks I pull. Honestly, what was that numbskull thinking?

Disappointed as she was to see all her work disappear down the drain, the feeling vanished in a flash—she recovered almost immediately. *Well, no matter. In that case, I’ll just cook up some entertainment using a different approach.*

If she could no longer amuse herself following the plan Tiol had hired her to concoct, she’d simply do so by making his failure as miserable as possible. Always quick to make the best of a bad situation, the conniving woman moved on to her next scheme.

Having finished their business, Akira and Yumina turned to leave the warehouse. As they walked to the entrance, Yumina glanced back at Sheryl, whose gaze was following Akira as he walked away.

“I guess women really are your weak point, huh?” Yumina teased.

“Why would you think that?”

“I mean, you went out of your way to bring those relics here for Sheryl, right? I never would have guessed you were such a ladies’ man.”

“What?! Hey, you can’t just label me like that based on one instance!”

“I’m not *labeling* you,” she said with a smirk. “It’s just the impression I get, considering how differently you treat men like Kibayashi and Katsuragi.” *And Katsuya*, Yumina thought, but she kept that part to herself.

Akira looked slightly troubled. “That’s how it looks to you, does it?” If that was how Yumina saw him, then maybe it was true. (He’d warmed up to her enough by now that he could entertain such a line of reasoning.) “I see. So I guess I really *am* weak to women?”

Seeing Akira take her comment made in jest so seriously, Yumina felt like teasing him a little more. “I’m a woman too, you know,” she said with a sly grin. “So that was just a bit of wishful thinking on my part, since it would be awfully convenient for me if I could exploit a weakness of yours.”

“Oh, so *that’s* what you meant,” Akira said with a half smile, concluding that Yumina had just been messing with him all along.

To the two of them, this conversation was no more than an amicable exchange between friends. But Alpha observed them intently all the while, her expression grave.

Chapter 157: Desire and Decision

At Druncam HQ, there was a large garage the size of a warehouse. It was meant for housing vehicles like armored transports, but Druncam was currently loaning the space out to Kiryou as a maintenance hub for their all-in-one support suit.

Inside, Yumina was talking to a girl named Fulta, one of Kiryou's engineers. Fulta was in charge of Yumina's support suit. Reexamining the battle data from Yumina's latest excursion, Fulta whistled in admiration.

"Wow, Yumina! You sure have gotten a lot stronger!"

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

"Honestly, I really wish I could use your success as a testimonial for our product."

"You probably shouldn't do that," Yumina advised with a small smile.

"Yeah, probably wouldn't fly, would it?" Fulta replied, grinning wryly back.

They both knew the only reason Yumina had grown so skilled was the training Akira had recommended. As the one in charge of Yumina's suit, Fulta was well aware of just what kind of regimen the hunter had endured, which was not something anyone could survive simply by wearing the suit. So Yumina's improvement wouldn't work as an advertisement for Kiryou.

Akira's rigorous training program completely disregarded the well-being of the trainee. It also required having inordinate amounts of expensive medicine on hand to forcibly curb the intense stress of spending hours in dangerous areas teeming with powerful monsters. The purpose of this approach was to repeatedly simulate the experience of being near death, so the things Yumina had undergone wouldn't apply to the average consumer. Such training would be far too expensive, considering all the medicine one would need to buy; and then, too, there was the sheer mental fatigue it would bring. Even if they tried to emulate Yumina's success, most people would probably give up on the

training long before they'd see any benefit.

As Akira's companion on his commission, Yumina had access to a vast quantity of expensive medicine without even needing to pay for it herself. And quitting wasn't an option for her. These were the real reasons for her growth. In other words, it would have been extremely difficult to recommend that others should mimic Yumina if they wanted to be as skilled as her—in fact, it would be antithetical to the idea that anyone could become a skilled hunter just by wearing the support suit, which was the whole idea of the product in the first place.

Naturally, Fulta understood this as well. “Well, it's not a total loss,” she said. “Thanks to your efforts, we now have proof that the suit at least makes you able to accompany *him* without dragging him down. That should be a good enough advertisement on its own.”

“Really? Is Akira's skill that famous?”

“Well, among those in the know, anyway. But if one of those happens to be, say, a supply coordinator for the city defense force, I'm guessing a claim like that would go a long way toward convincing them.”

“No kidding?” Yumina was surprised.

“Also, I know it might be rude to bring this up, but you were separated from the group that the other development team's handling because you were judged to not be good enough, right?”

The development team Fulta belonged to and the one supervising Katsuya and his teammates, led by an engineer named Takagi, had originally been a single group. But because one part had to manage a single hunter and the other an entire unit, the management styles that each side required greatly differed. As a result, they'd split into two separate crews.

“In that case,” Fulta went on, “we can now also boast to the other team that our style of management succeeded in getting you this far. That's a big help on our end, so thanks a lot!”

“R-Right... You're welcome.”

To Fulta the engineer, seeing the painstaking efforts of her team bear such

fruit was cause for celebration. But Yumina, who longed to return to Katsuya's side, could only manage an awkward smile.

Fulta didn't stop there, however. She went on to say that unlike Takagi and his group, who served as support for a whole unit, her own department aimed to perfect the support suit for individual use. The CPU Yumina was currently using for Kiryou's support system had originally been developed for team use, so it was massive. But with research geared toward individual use, they could make the CPU smaller. Plus, as development continued and the system got closer to perfection, they might even be able to recommend it to the hunters on the Front Line. Worrying about its cost-effectiveness would be a thing of the past.

Provided the user's terminal was high-spec enough, a person would be able to install the system right onto the device. Then the system could be used remotely, and with a strong enough connection to resist the colorless fog's interference without losing bandwidth. A top-class hunter with wealth and clout on par with the city's would undoubtedly already have a terminal capable of this.

Fulta described her team's future development plans with excitement. She was an optimist at heart, but she wasn't delusional. Their goal was in fact realistically within reach, in large part because Yumina's stellar results had convinced Kiryou to funnel more money into the budget for the individual-use developers.

"Maybe I shouldn't say this out loud, but compared to our dev team, I feel like Takagi's crew has a long way to go. Don't get me wrong, their achievements are pretty impressive—but that's only because Katsuya and his team are so talented. That support system they're using is far from perfect. It only looks competent because Katsuya and the others' coordination makes up for it..."

Fulta continued to run her mouth, failing to realize that by praising the product she'd helped develop, she was actually downplaying Yumina's own ability in front of her.

Finally, Yumina couldn't help but interject. "So I'm completely talentless as a hunter, then. Makes sense—I couldn't hack it on Katsuya's team, after all."

“Huh? N-No, that’s not what I mean at all!” Fulta finally realized her mistake and hurriedly tried to smooth things over. “You might have had help from our system, but those results are still your own.”

Yumina looked no more reassured. Now panicking, Fulta desperately attempted to cheer her up.

“L-Look, it’s not that you’re talentless, okay? It’s that Katsuya’s *too* talented. You’re plenty skilled—just in a different way.”

“A different way?”

“Yeah! I mean, that’s probably the real reason you were removed from the other dev team’s group. It wasn’t that you’re untalented—you just weren’t a good fit.”

She explained what she meant in the following way: Suppose two people were training, and the second person trained ten times harder than the first, yet only attained seventy percent of the strength that the first person did. This didn’t mean that the second person was weaker; on the contrary, maybe the first person couldn’t train any harder. And if the second person trained a hundred times harder than the first, yet only became fifty percent stronger than the other person, they were still clearly more powerful in the end even if their method of training was highly inefficient.

In other words, one person was capable of growing as strong as they wanted, but the other utilized more efficient training. The two couldn’t be judged by the same standard.

Such was the account Fulta gave in order to avoid offending her team’s test subject any further, while mixing in her own pet theories along the way.

Yumina listened to her intently. “So basically, Katsuya is the former, and I’m the latter, right?”

“Pretty much. And, well, the other dev team’s system is more suited to support a team led by the former. Katsuya might be capable of training a hundred times harder than normal, but if the rest of the team can’t keep up with him, they won’t be able to function as a unit.”

Yumina nodded, finding herself agreeing with the engineer’s assessment.

Relieved that Yumina had accepted her explanation, Fulta made one final comment. “I’m not saying this to put you down, but even if you did rejoin Katsuya’s team and used the other dev team’s system, you’d hit a plateau really quick. If you’re not satisfied with mediocrity and truly want to aim for new heights as a hunter, I think you’d be better off sticking with us and your current regimen. Don’t you agree?”

“Well...” Yumina hesitated to answer yes, because she wanted to return to Katsuya. “I’m not really sure what’ll come of it,” she said, giving the engineer a cordial smile, “but I’d like to at least stick with Akira until his commission’s over.” Then her smile turned cynical. “Not that it’s *my* choice to make—it’s ultimately up to the top brass.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Fulta said dryly. She was also part of an organization that required answering to higher-ups, so she understood how Yumina felt.

They talked for a while longer about other topics until Fulta’s adjustments to Yumina’s support system and suit were finally complete.

“All right, that oughta do it,” the engineer said. “Now you should be all set to head to the Iida ruins. Any questions for me?”

“Er, is it really necessary to adjust the system’s settings every time I visit a different ruin?”

“It’s not like you’ll be in trouble if I don’t, but this’ll make things easier for you. It’s mostly for our own purposes, though—it helps us gather critical test data, y’see.”

“Oh, right. That makes sense, I guess.”

“Anything else?”

“Let’s see...” Suddenly, Yumina remembered Tiol. “Actually, there is. While we were in the ruins, we ran into another hunter who attacked us. But when I reviewed the data later, it only said we encountered a monster. Was that supposed to happen?”

“Really? Hold on, lemme check.” Fulta looked over the data, and furrowed her brow in confusion. “You’re right—the system recognized the hunter as a

monster. That's odd... It shouldn't do that, even if the hunter was hostile. Maybe some kind of bug caused it to equate a hostile presence to a monster encounter? Hmm... Sorry, I'll look into this right away. Oh, but don't worry, I think it's just a bug with the display. It shouldn't adversely affect the system itself or anything, so you should be good to go."

"Okay, then. That's all the questions I have," Yumina said. "Thanks for everything!"

"Nah, I oughta be thanking *you* for all your hard work. Good luck out there in the Iida ruins. And here's hoping you find that automaton—a success like that would raise our dev team's rep even more!"

Both Akira's and Yumina's preparations were now complete. They were scheduled to head to Iida the following morning.

The night before they set off, Yumina talked to Katsuya via terminal for a while, as usual. When he told her his expedition was now over and he'd be returning to HQ tomorrow, her smile was radiant.

"You're heading back tomorrow?! I mean, I'm thrilled to hear that, but I wish you'd told me sooner, so I could've taken that day off to come see you!"

"Sorry. I wanted to, but I couldn't—the schedules of intercity transports are confidential and all that. I just now got word from Mizuha that it was okay to tell you."

"Oh, guess there's no helping that, then. Let me know when you've got a free day. I'll take time off so we can hang out."

"Sounds good! I'm looking forward to that."

Yumina hung up and crawled into bed. Elated that she'd be able to see her beloved again after so long, she drifted off to sleep with a smile on her face.



The entire time Katsuya had been chatting with Yumina, inside the intercity transport en route to Kugamayama, Mizuha had been next to him, watching him like a hawk.

When Katsuya finally hung up, she smiled amiably. “You look awfully chipper all of a sudden. Does the idea of seeing her again really make you that happy?”

Katsuya grinned to hide his bashfulness. “Well, yeah. Yumina and I go way back, and we’ve almost always been together up until now. This is the first time we’ve been apart for this long, so of course I’m thrilled to be able to see her again.”

Mizuha studied him for a bit before speaking. “I see. Then keep that enthusiasm up until you do.” She smiled, playing the part of an understanding superior, then walked out of his room.

The moment she did, her face scrunched up in a scowl.

Keeping a weakling like her on Katsuya’s team will only drag him down! This is why I wanted to separate them for good, but if that’s how he feels, it might not be as easy as I initially thought!

Mizuha had made the final decision to remove Yumina from the team, then pinned the blame on Takagi and the rest of the support system dev team overseeing Katsuya’s unit, so that Yumina’s and Katsuya’s ire wouldn’t be directed toward her. But she couldn’t use Kiryou and their system as a scapegoat forever. She needed another reason to distance Yumina from the team, a reason that wouldn’t incur Katsuya’s displeasure.

I can’t put her back on the team simply because she’s Katsuya’s friend, if she’s just going to be a burden. This is for his own good as well. Sorry, Katsuya, but I’ll have to order her official removal.

Mizuha knew that Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi had been together ever since they’d become hunters. But unlike Airi, who was performing remarkably by Katsuya’s side, Yumina had clearly been holding the team back ever since the Mihazono operation. Mizuha needed to prove the team’s worth to the desk jockey faction’s financial backers, and Yumina was an obstacle in her way.

Hmm... Katsuya seems to be at odds with Akira. If he knew Yumina was working with Akira right now and thought they were getting along a little too well, that might drive a rift between him and Yumina. Then I’d have a reason to ask them to stay away from each other for the time being.

Friendships between men and women could be volatile at times. If a boy learned that a girl he liked and another boy he hated had been together for an extended period of time, it would undoubtedly put a strain on his relationship with the girl. Mizuha started to wonder if she could use that to her advantage.

But she couldn't tell Katsuya about Akira and Yumina just yet. Mizuha was the one who'd put Yumina on that commission, so if she didn't want Katsuya upset with her, first she needed to come up with an excuse that would satisfy him.

There has to be something I can do with this. How could she use Katsuya's dislike of Akira to her advantage? After mulling it over for a while, she scowled again. *At the same time, I can't believe Yumina agreed to accompany that bastard with no pushback whatsoever. Superior's orders aside, she really has no backbone, does she?*

The more she thought it over, the more she concluded that she couldn't let someone so spineless be on Katsuya's team. It didn't hurt that Mizuha couldn't stand that boy Akira either.

But her animosity toward Akira felt so natural that it never occurred to her that she hadn't felt anything of the sort toward the boy when she'd first ordered Yumina to accompany him.

Not long after Mizuha had left, Katsuya was still in his own room, feeling perplexed without really knowing why. *Something* was nagging at him, but he didn't know what. It felt as if he'd just realized he'd forgotten something, but couldn't quite remember it. Finally, thinking that if he'd forgotten, it probably wasn't important anyway, he gave up and went to sleep. As his consciousness ebbed away and he entered the hazy world between dreams and reality, he mumbled something in his sleep.

"Yumina's with...*him*?"

Asleep or awake, Katsuya wouldn't have known why he'd uttered those words at that moment. He didn't even realize he'd said them. Yet somehow, he knew them to be true.



The next day, when Yumina entered Druncam's garage (temporarily Kiryou's maintenance hub), various pieces of equipment were getting carried in. They belonged to Takagi's team, which managed the support system for Katsuya's unit.

Takagi and his team had accompanied Katsuya and the others on their expedition so that they'd be on-site if any adjustments to the system were necessary. If their equipment was being brought here, Katsuya and his team were likely already back at HQ.

Realizing this as she looked around at all the activity around her, she nonetheless headed to her vehicle.

If she rang up Katsuya right this instant, they might be able to spend a little time together before she headed to Iida. But she held herself back—there was no guarantee he was nearby. She was certain he'd come to her if she called, but she didn't have time to wait on him. Most of all, she worried that if she started talking to Katsuya, even over the terminal, she might not want to stop. Her heart might waver, and she might permit herself to make Akira wait. So she steeled herself and refrained from contacting him.

But all her resolve turned out to be pointless. Just as she reached the door of her vehicle, Katsuya appeared.

"Yumina!"

"Katsuya!" Seeing her crush in person for the first time in a while, Yumina beamed.

Katsuya was so surprised and charmed by the radiance of her smile that he nearly tripped over himself as he ran to her.

"You're back already! Let's see..." She looked him over. "Yep, no injuries! That's a relief."

"Y-Yeah..."

"I was kinda worried that you'd run off on your own and get seriously hurt if I wasn't there to stop you." She grabbed hold of both his shoulders and shook him gently.

“H-Hey! What gives?!”

“You’re not grimacing in pain. That means your body’s not a wreck, and you’re not just pretending to be okay and forcing yourself to stand with your powered suit. *Now* I can actually relax.”

Yumina’s smile was warm and gentle, with just a hint of teasing. Once again, Katsuya felt shaken to his core. Seeing her smile for the first time in so long, he felt the sudden urge to embrace her—but he got a hold of himself and managed a grin.

“I’m fine, seriously. You always worry too much,” he protested.

“Because you’re always doing things to *make* me worry! Honestly, what would you do without me? If you want to get good enough to make me stop worrying about you, you’ve still got a long way to go.”

“Wow, that’s harsh! I think I’ve accomplished a lot as of late, if I do say so myself.”

“Oh yeah? Then I’ll have you tell me all those stories in detail, and...” But she stopped mid-sentence—she knew she’d end up talking to Katsuya for hours at this rate. Her smile tinged with disappointment, she spoke again. “Actually, Katsuya, I’m sorry, but I need to get going. We can chat all we want after I get back, though. Thanks for coming to see me before I leave—it really made me happy. Bye, now!”

With a smile, she turned away from him and started to get in the driver’s seat.

But this snapped Katsuya back to his senses. Practically bewitched by her smile, he’d forgotten what he wanted to ask her—something so urgent, he’d run all the way here. Now he remembered.

“Yumina! Wait!”

“Sorry, Katsuya. To tell the truth, I’m kind of in a hurry. If it’s not too urgent, it’ll have to wait until I get back.”

“Is it true you’re working with *him*?!”

“‘Him’?” She looked confused.

“Akira!”

Yumina froze in shock. Then her eyes narrowed. “Who did you hear that from?”

“Wh-Why does that matter?”

“Katsuya, this is not the time for bullshit. Answer me.” Her tone became sharp, and Katsuya flinched.

Then he realized he actually didn’t know who he’d heard it from, and his look turned to one of confusion.

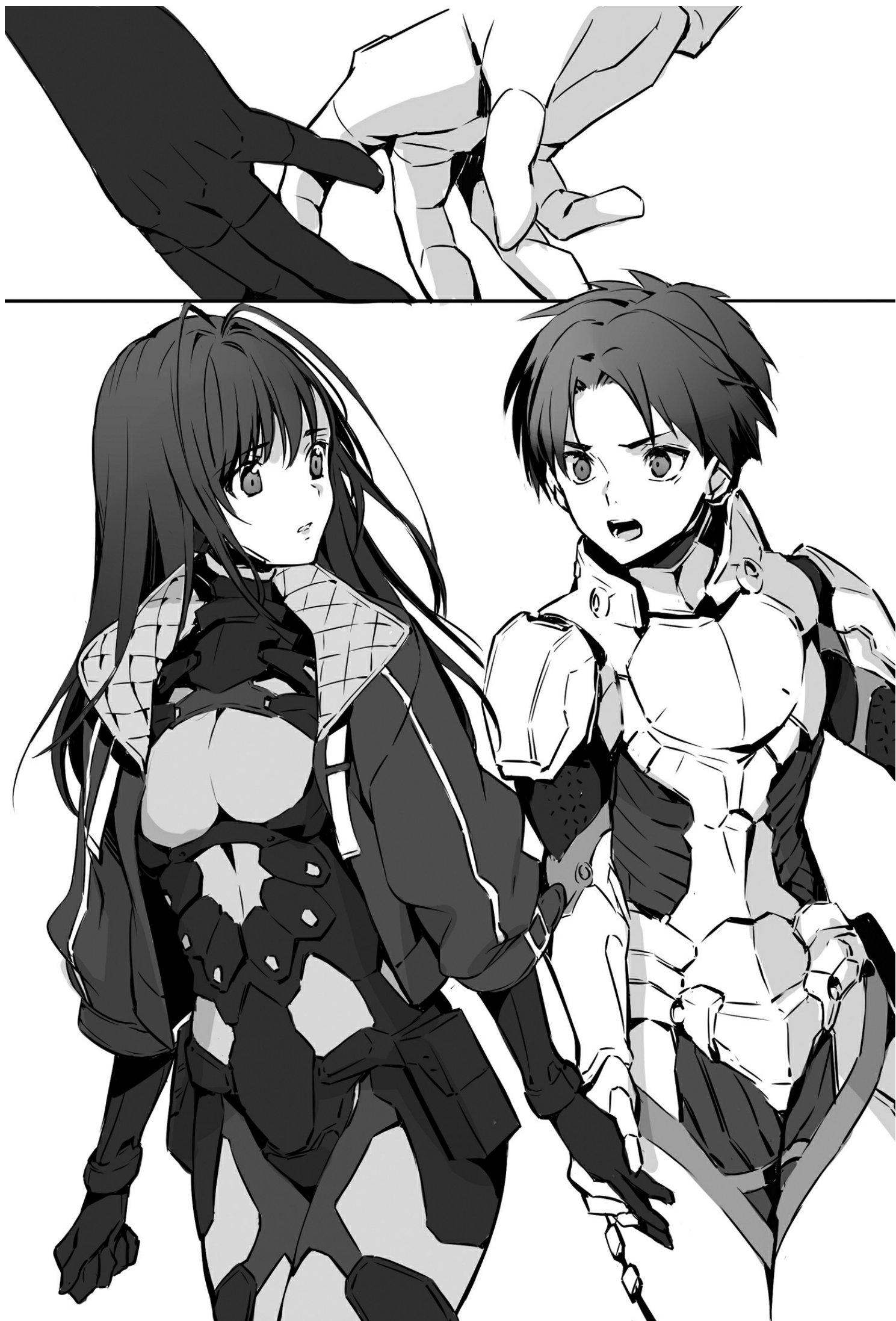
That in turn puzzled Yumina. “Wait... Can you not say? Is someone threatening you?”

“No, nothing like that. Er, it was Mizuha, I think. Probably.” He didn’t know why he thought so, but it seemed right to him, so that was his answer.

Yumina sighed in exasperation. *Mizuha, what the hell were you thinking? Did you not even stop to consider what might happen if you told him?* She’d supposed that maybe one of the members of Kiryou’s dev team had blabbed, in which case she’d planned to file a grievance with Mizuha. But upon hearing that the tattletale was none other than Mizuha herself, she wanted to bury her head in her hands.

Still, she didn’t have time to explain the situation to Katsuya in detail, so she cut him off there. “Sorry, Katsuya, I have to go. We’ll talk about this later.”

Once again, she turned around to leave and get in her vehicle. But before she could, he reached out without thinking and grabbed her hand.



Yumina couldn't bring herself to shake off his hand, of course, so with a small sigh, she turned to face him once again.

"Look, Katsuya," she said, sounding resigned. "Yes, it's true that I'm working with Akira. In fact, I'm about to meet up with him now to go relic hunting in the Iida ruins. Mizuha's orders."

"H-Huh?! But why you?!"

"Like I said, I'm in a hurry. Get Mizuha to tell you the rest. If you understand, then let go of my hand."

Katsuya didn't let go. Instead, after briefly hesitating, he asked her another question. "Are you"—he hesitated again—"okay with that?" He looked like he was in pain.

"It doesn't matter whether I am or not. Mizuha ordered it. She's a Druncam exec, and the one supporting us. I can't go against her. You understand that much, right?"

"But...!"

Katsuya's grip didn't loosen. Yumina heaved an exasperated sigh, then her expression became stern. "All right, then—will you leave Druncam with me? Say yes, and I won't go."

"Huh? W-Wait a minute, why is *that* your condition?!" He was just as surprised by the abruptness of her request as the request itself.

"During the battle in the slums, I wanted to fight with you, you know," she said quietly. "When you went on your intercity expedition, I wanted to come too. But I couldn't, because Druncam wouldn't let me. I know it's not my place to decide—it is the support system's, the dev team's, or Mizuha's. I understand that." A hint of anguish crept into her expression as she spoke, then vanished as quickly as it had appeared. "But we only have to defer to those judgments because we're Druncam hunters. If we leave Druncam, we won't have to listen to them! We could fight together again, like old times." She added in a persuasive tone, "Of course, if we leave Druncam, we'll lose all the support we've enjoyed up until now. It'll be tough. But we're not novice hunters anymore. Both you and I have grown by leaps and bounds. I think we could

manage without the syndicate's help."

Katsuya didn't interject. He just listened.

"If the two of us leave," Yumina went on, "I'm sure Airi would come with us as well. We can move somewhere far away from Akira, and the three of us could start afresh in a new city. I don't think that sounds so bad." She looked hard at him. "So choose. If that sounds fine to you, don't let go of my hand. Drag me away from here, and never look back."

She stared right into his eyes, awaiting his answer. Several seconds passed in silence. Then, with a miserable expression, he let go of her hand.

"Yumina... I..."

Yumina smiled gently and embraced him. "It's okay. You've made a lot of friends in Druncam, and seen many die as well. You couldn't possibly abandon them at this point, right? I know you, Katsuya, and I understand. I only asked because I knew you wouldn't do it. Sorry—I know it was cruel of me."

Yet even while she was hugging him, when he couldn't see her expression, she allowed a hint of gloom to darken her face. Yes, she'd known he wouldn't agree—but some small part of her had still hoped that he would. When she finally let go of him, she gave the despondent-looking Katsuya a winsome grin.

"Cheer up, okay? I'll be back on the team soon, and you'll be relying on me again before you know it. I've just got to convince them to let me back in by showing them my skill."

"Your skill? How do you plan to do that?"

"When they barred me from going on the expedition, I realized no amount of begging would get Mizuha and the rest to reassign me to be with you. They all think I'll drag you down. So I just need to get good enough to not be a burden!"

It was written all over Katsuya's face—he didn't think that was likely to happen.

Yumina gave him a smirk. "You didn't think I was just goofing off all this time, did you? If you don't believe me, I'll show you just how much I've improved once I'm back with your unit." Then she smiled, as if gently rebuking her

childhood friend for his selfishness. “Until then, you’ll just have to wait a little longer.”

It was the same smile she wore whenever she doted on him. Seeing that smile, he could feel the anxiety and doubt in his heart melting away. He regained his calm and was finally relaxed enough to smile back.

“All right. I’ll wait for you.”

“Of course you will—you need me to keep you in line,” she teased. “Later, then!”

“Yeah, later. Take care, Yumina!”

Yumina got in her vehicle and drove off. Katsuya watched her go until she was out of sight.

As she sped away, Yumina smiled to herself as she reflected on their conversation just now. She’d finally gotten to see Katsuya in person, and he was eagerly anticipating her return to the team. She felt more motivated than ever.

“All right! Time to work hard and make it happen!”

Though she was relying on the aid of the support system, she had reached the point where she could keep up with Akira. Now she just needed an opportunity to show Druncam what she was capable of. But to even be considered for a high-level job, she needed to show she could handle her current mission first. With newfound anticipation, she headed to meet Akira in order to explore the Iida ruins.

As Katsuya watched Yumina drive into the horizon, a vortex of emotions swirled around in his heart. A large part of him was happy Yumina was trying so hard to return to his side. He also wanted the two of them to be together like they’d always been. But that begot feelings of discontent and frustration toward Druncam, which was getting in their way. Yumina was a precious friend of his, yet the syndicate was keeping them apart. Because of their interference, he couldn’t even go to her rescue if she needed it. Wasn’t that just too unreasonable?

But just as Yumina had said, no amount of complaining to Mizuha or the other higher-ups would change the situation. They'd think he was just being a selfish child. He might be lauded as the top hunter in the desk jockey faction right now, but that alone wouldn't give him the pull he'd need to call the shots. So what could he do to change their minds?

Katsuya spoke the answer aloud. "I've just got to work harder."

If Druncam wouldn't listen to him at his current skill level, then he'd get so strong that they couldn't possibly ignore him. He needed to rack up more achievements—his deeds on the expedition he'd just returned from were a start, but he couldn't be satisfied with just that. For Yumina, he was more determined than ever to prove himself.

From a world of white, a girl cast a disapproving gaze on Katsuya.

"Sorry, but I can't let you get attached to someone who shows no sign of joining the local network."

Unbeknownst to Katsuya, the girl had identified Yumina as a threat, determining that she'd only get in the way of the trial if left unchecked.

Chapter 158: The Iida Commercial District Ruins

Akira was driving through the wasteland en route to the Iida Commercial District Ruins, in search of an Old World automaton. He'd met up with Yumina in the wasteland on the outskirts of Kugamayama, and now the two of them were heading toward their destination.

Yumina's voice came over the wireless. "So, Akira, what's the plan for today—or rather, our entire time in the Iida ruins? We're prioritizing finding the automaton over hunting for regular relics, right?"

"Yeah, since Kibayashi asked us to, among other things."

An Old World automaton had been reportedly spotted in Iida; investigating this claim with Yumina served as part of Akira's hunter rank advancement commission. But, as Akira reminded her, this was only a pretext to keep him away from the depths of Kuzusuhara while Yajima and Yoshioka held their demonstration—after all, there was no definitive proof that the alleged automaton even existed. So Akira and Yumina could probably get away with ignoring the automaton altogether and just continuing to hunt relics like they had been.

However, the Iida commercial district was quite a ways from Kugamayama City. Akira had heard that if one was serious about relic hunting in a distant ruin, they were usually better off staying on-site for several days, camping out near or inside the ruin. But he and Yumina had already decided to only make day trips to Iida, returning to Kugamayama each night. And since both their vehicles were already packed full of ammo, they had very little extra space for relics anyway.

"So, taking our situation into account, I think we should focus on the automaton," Akira finished.

"Really?" asked Yumina. "If those are your only reasons, then I actually think we should make hunting relics our number one priority and merely keep an eye out for the automaton. I mean, it might not even exist, and wouldn't you be

awfully disappointed if we ended up leaving Iida empty-handed?”

She added that they had, after all, brought along a decent supply of rations—enough to spend a few nights in the ruins camping out in their vehicles. Besides, if they ran out of space for relics, they could just hire a transporter—a specialist who could ship their relics home for them—like they’d done in Kuzusuhara. And since Akira was responsible for his own ammo expenses this time, neglecting to secure any relics might put him far in the red.

“Oh, but your vehicle doesn’t have a roof, does it?” Yumina remembered. “It could rain at night, so if you’d prefer a roof over your head while you sleep, I don’t mind sharing mine.”

Akira’s eyes widened. “Uhhh, Yumina, you know, I mainly suggested we do day trips to Iida so we *wouldn’t* have to share a vehicle. Are you really okay with that?”

Naturally, he and Yumina had grown closer than before over the course of this commission—but not so close that he thought she’d agree to staying in the same vehicle with him overnight. Wouldn’t she feel uncomfortable?

Because Akira’s interpersonal communication skills were stunted, he was woefully ignorant of various social norms. That was why, for example, he’d taken a bath with Sheryl without batting an eye. And yet, here he was able to show a degree of consideration toward Yumina.

She raised her eyebrows, then a grin came to her lips. “Now *there’s* a surprise. I wouldn’t have thought that sort of thing would bother *you*, of all people.”

“Wait, what do you mean by that?”

“Oh, just recalling something Sheryl told me—that you took a bath with her and it didn’t bother you in the least.”

Akira made a sputtering noise over the wireless, and Yumina couldn’t help but snicker.

Sheryl had mentioned this incident to her, as well as several other instances where Akira and Sheryl had been more intimate than usual, in order to tacitly impress upon the other girl how close she and Akira were. But Yumina had seen through her and gotten the sense that the reason it didn’t bother Akira wasn’t

so much his familiarity with Sheryl as a general indifference toward the opposite sex. Whether Sheryl's tales of intimacy had been embellished or not, Yumina at least sensed that Akira's lack of reaction had frustrated Sheryl.

Akira buried his head in his hands. "That girl... What's she going around blabbing all that for?" he groaned. "Look, Yumina. That was, you know, all for show. Since I'm backing her gang, for many reasons it's more convenient to make people believe we have that kind of relationship, that's all!" he protested, not knowing quite why he felt the need to defend himself.

But Yumina didn't seem offended or critical of him. "Oh, I'm not scolding you or anything. I just figured if something like that didn't bother you, spending the night with me wouldn't either. Besides, boys and girls aren't separated during ruin expeditions for Druncam, so I'm used to it."

"O-Oh, is that so?"

"So, what would you rather do? Maybe you'd like to go exploring in the ruins for a while first and have some time to think it over? We'll check for any valuable relics we can grab right from the start, and if we don't find anything, we'll look for the automaton. How does that sound?"

Hearing Yumina treat the matter so casually, Akira relaxed. "Sounds good to me."

"Then it's decided."

As Akira and Yumina drove on, they encountered a monster—a carnivorous beast around four meters in length. It bounded after their vehicles at a speed unbelievable for its size.

Organic monsters in the wasteland tended to be more resilient than their mechanical brethren, and this one was no different. If an average hunter had encountered this beast, their bullets would have bounced off its exterior; the creature would have caught up to their vehicle and rammed it, sending both hunter and vehicle flying through the air. But Akira and Yumina had previously been working in Kuzusuhara's depths, and by comparison, even this monster was hardly a threat.

"I'll take this one, Yumina!"

“Roger. Go for it!”

Akira’s bike was parked on top of Yumina’s vehicle, but he could still control it remotely. The unmanned bike swiveled around on the vehicle’s narrow roof to face the monster. His SSB was still attached to the bike’s arm emplacement, and Akira lined up its sights with the monster’s head.

An instant later, an enormous, powerful bullet erupted from the gun and tore through the air. Bull’s-eye! The impact crumpled the monster’s skin and flesh, tougher than steel, like a tin can. But the projectile failed to pierce the creature’s bulky exterior, nor did it have enough force to counter the inertia of the beast, which was traveling as fast as a truck.

The monster remained on its feet.

A second bullet followed immediately, striking the exact same spot as the first—then a third—a fourth—a fifth! All five of the SSB shots struck the same point. The last one finally broke through the target’s defenses, piercing the monster’s cranium. Then the bullet exploded from the impact, pulverizing the creature’s brain and scattering shrapnel throughout the rest of its head.

The beast died before it hit the ground, its momentum sending it tumbling head over heels, and it rolled four times before finally coming to a stop.

“Nice work!” Yumina commented. “You really are something else, Akira.”

Her praise was genuine, and Akira had made those shots without Alpha’s help. So he grinned with pride. “And I didn’t waste a single bullet either,” he said. “If I’m gonna be paying for my ammo, I gotta be able to at least manage this much.”

“Just don’t expect me to do the same. That would put too much pressure on me.”

“Nah, don’t worry. I just have to ’cause I don’t want my bill to be too high. Keep shooting like you always do—after all, I doubt there’s some convenient setting on your support system that’ll help you conserve ammo,” he said with a smirk.

“Oh, now you’ve said it! I’ll make you eat those words—just watch,” she replied with a grin, unoffended. “But really, it’s amazing that you’re able to

make such precise shots *without* support. I mean, even when controlling the bike's arm remotely, you hit that monster with pinpoint accuracy. Wasn't that difficult?"

"Well, I've had a lot of practice."

"Practice, huh? If you were able to get that good with just practice, that makes it look like I haven't been trying hard enough. You sure there's no trick involved?"

"Hmm. Well, there is *something*—but it's awfully vague and might not help you very much. Still, wanna hear it?"

"Sure!"

Akira had nothing else to do until they reached Iida, so he fabricated a long story about his technique, despite not understanding a thing about how he'd actually done it. Essentially, he told her he treated all of his gear, weapons, and vehicles like an extension of his powered suit, through which he could control them.

He explained that when he had his suit on, he could control his own arm and the powered suit's arm as separate limbs—in other words, he could manipulate a phantom third and fourth arm as easily as a part of his own body. And this didn't just apply to his powered suit—he could also control his bike and truck just as intuitively as his own limbs. By syncing his powered suit's OS with his vehicles, he could manipulate the latter directly without using the steering wheel or handlebars.

Humans didn't have tires on their body, of course, so this had been incredibly difficult to pull off at first. To familiarize himself with the sensation, he'd first put his vehicle on auto-drive. Just as humans aren't conscious of every movement their joints make when they walk, he hadn't concerned himself with details like how the tires rotated—he'd focused on practicing more general movements like going forward or turning left and right. Then, when he was comfortable with those, he'd worked his way down to more specific movements like changing the angle of the tires or the speed at which they rotated.

But that wasn't all. He'd learned to handle the arm emplacement on his bike

the same way—and the attached SSB. As a result, he could control the bike, the arm, and the gun all separately—and as precisely as his own body. Afterward, he just had to practice often to improve—as one did to, say, improve one’s marksmanship with a gun. The more he’d practiced, the more accurate his movements had become, culminating in the performance Yumina had just witnessed.

Yumina listened to his story with interest. “Wow, that’s awesome! Do you think I’d be able to do something similar?”

“If you train hard enough, maybe? I mean, you eventually learned to control your powered suit separately from your own body while we were in the Kuzusuhara depths, right?”

“Yeah, I did, didn’t I? You know what? I think I’ll try it.”

“Wait, what?”

No sooner had Akira uttered this than Yumina’s vehicle suddenly swerved to the side. Akira hurriedly veered his own vehicle away from hers to avoid a collision.

“Yikes, be careful! What happened?!”

“Sorry! I guess it’s too difficult for me after all!” came her voice through the wireless. She set her vehicle’s driving mode back to normal, and her course immediately stabilized.

Akira sighed in relief. “I didn’t know you were going to try it right away!”

“My bad, my bad! I honestly didn’t think it’d be that hard. It sounded easier when you were explaining it.”

“I don’t care if you try it out, but just be careful. Still, I’m surprised you can just change your driving settings on a dime like that. I figured you’d have to spend some time configuring everything.”

“Normally you would. But the support system I’m using is designed for individual use, so they made everything user-friendly.”

“Really? Wow, that sounds convenient.”

“Interested? If so, I can get you in touch with a sales rep from Kiryou. They

could explain everything in more detail than I can.”

“Well, if I feel like it, I’ll let you know.”

Yumina gave a small sigh. “But man! You can control your bike *and* gun like that at the same time without difficulty? I couldn’t even manage to keep my vehicle on course. You’re seriously amazing.”

“Nah, I just put in the effort and trained really hard.”

“Put in the effort, huh?”

Akira had spoken casually, but as someone who had once seriously thought she might not survive his harsh training regime back in the depths, Yumina was well aware of what his words actually meant. After all, she now knew what it was like to “put in the effort” he did—and it made her realize how *little* effort she’d been putting in before going on this commission with him.

No wonder I wasn’t able to keep up with Katsuya and the rest of the team, she thought. Katsuya’s ridiculously strong, after all—even Shikarabe acknowledged as much, and he can’t stand the boy. And because I’m utterly talentless by comparison, following his regimen wasn’t enough to let me support Katsuya instead of dragging him down. I was so foolish.

However, her harsh self-reflection also renewed her resolve. A tenacious grin came to her lips.

“In that case, I’ve just got to put in more effort!”

Such a declaration didn’t mean much without the results to back it up. But Yumina was more determined than ever.

Beside Akira, Alpha grinned smugly.

What’s so funny? he demanded.

Hm? Oh, I was just thinking you sure are being awfully considerate toward Yumina. I wonder why you don’t treat me or Sheryl like that?

Why would I need to, when I’ve already shared a bath with you two? he said with a small smile.

That's different, Alpha replied with a pout.

If you say so. Akira just wanted to end the discussion as quickly as he could.

At that, Alpha only smiled, but she observed him intently—just as she had ever since they'd met.



Upon arriving at their destination, Akira and Yumina parked in a place that offered a good view of the entire ruin. The scenery was utterly different from any site Akira had explored previously, and he grinned with excitement. “So this is the Iida commercial district? Pretty cool!”

Iida's commercial district was actually a vast Old World-style shopping mall, featuring a multitude of stores, hotels, plazas, and parks, all contained within massive domed structures spread out as far as the eye could see. Even Akira, a resident of the New World, could easily imagine the prosperity and glory this hub of commerce had once enjoyed.

At the same time, it was also clear how long it had been since the area's decline. Vegetation had overtaken the buildings, dyeing the entire district green. The domes—some only hundreds of meters wide, others spanning several kilometers—were all covered in verdant weeds and vines.

Out of all the ruins Akira had visited, including Kuzusuhara and Mihazono, he'd never seen anything like this. His eyes went wide with awe.

“What a sight, no?” he commented to Yumina. “I never thought ruins could look so different from one another.”

Yumina seemed equally amazed by the landscape. “In a way, places like these feel more like proper ruins, don't they? I mean, you can really sense the history here and get a clear idea of what once was.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean! You're absolutely right. The interior of Kuzusuhara and the Serantal Building in Mihazono didn't have this timeworn vibe. If anything, they seemed even more modern than the world we currently live in.” He nodded, impressed by Yumina's keen insight.

“But we can't ruminate on the past forever, can we?” she said with a grin.

“Time to do what hunters do and explore. You’re okay with me taking point today, right?”

“Sure. We’re in an impossibly large ruin searching for an automaton that may not even exist, so I hope your support system makes this search less of a wild-goose chase.”

“I’m sure it will—or so I’d like to say, but to be honest, I’m also hoping more than I am confident. Guess we’ve got no choice but to trust in the power of Kiryou’s technology, huh?”

They grinned at each other from their driver’s seats, then without further ado drove off toward the domes of the Iida commercial district.

After picking a dome to explore first, they headed toward it and found themselves standing in front of a tangled mass of vines and overgrown plants that blocked their path.

Akira stared at the wall of vegetation. His scanner, which was capable of reading his visual data and providing a more accurate analysis of his surroundings, informed him that this had originally been the dome’s entrance.

It had once been a square entryway, five meters by five meters. But dangling vines and creepers had since taken root, sealing the dome off.

“Looks like you were right, Yumina—this is the door. My scanner’s pretty high-spec, and I still had to get this close to confirm.”

“Oh, I guess that means you can’t see the data I’m getting. Hang on, I’ll send it to you.”

Akira was wearing AR goggles. Normally he wouldn’t need such headgear since he had Alpha’s support, but he was using them at present so Yumina wouldn’t get suspicious. Through them, he saw additional AR data popping up—a graphic and a text description conspicuously indicating that this was the dome’s entrance.

“I’m reading the augmented reality data transmitted by the ruin, in order to better analyze our surroundings,” Yumina explained. “I guess that since it’s like a shopping mall, customers needed the data to locate the entrances and exits.

And the ruin's still transmitting that data even today."

"No kidding? That's pretty neat. Is this another feature of your support system?"

"It is, but most modern scanners can do the same thing by default. Maybe you turned that setting off on yours, thinking it was a nuisance, and never turned it back on?"

"W-Well, maybe so. I'll have to check that once we get back to base. For now, let's head in," Akira replied, urging her onward to keep her from prying any further.

"All right. So how are we supposed to get inside? These vines look pretty tough, but with our suits' power, we should be able to force our way through." She grabbed a fistful of vines and was about to rip them down when Akira stopped her.

"Hold up, I'll handle it. Stand back."

He took out a melee weapon with no blade, only a hilt. Yumina sensed what he was about to do and retreated behind him. The moment she did so, liquid metal flowed from the hilt, ignoring gravity as it molded itself into a sharp, silver blade longer than Akira was tall. Akira held the sword at the ready and delivered a series of slashes to the wall in a single instant, then kicked it for good measure. A portion of the severed vines had already begun to regenerate, but even such resilient vegetation couldn't withstand the impact of his blow. The wall of green was blasted open, powerless to resist.

"There, that should do it," he commented nonchalantly. "Or do you think I should make it wider?"

"We're not taking our vehicles in, so this is good enough. Let's go."

With the entrance now cleared, Akira and Yumina entered the dome and began exploring within.

The dome housed an enormous commercial complex, all overrun with vegetation just like outside. Even the footpaths, once neatly paved and maintained, were covered with weeds and humus. On the surface, it looked like

a standard ruin, abandoned by time and consumed by nature—except that its AR data was still actively transmitted. The pair’s vision was populated by signs, markers, and advertisements from various establishments, as vibrant and lively as if the area had never fallen into decay.

Akira found the juxtaposition of old and new both amusing and fascinating. Yumina, however, mostly ignored the pop-ups and focused on the ruin before her.

“Look at all these plants,” she said. “This ruin must be pretty unpopular, huh?”

“Really? You think other hunters have been avoiding it on purpose?”

“For sure. I mean, I definitely wouldn’t want to set foot in here if I could help it.”

Yumina told him that since the Iida commercial district was an Old World shopping mecca, it was guaranteed to house a treasure trove of relics. The monsters nesting here also weren’t as deadly as the ones in Kuzusuhara’s depths. By all rights, hunters should’ve been swarming the place. But they’d all gone out of their way to avoid it—mostly because of the vegetation infesting the district. Thought to be yet another product of the Old World, these plants couldn’t be ripped up without the strength of a powered suit, nor could they be burned away with a flamethrower, as they were extremely resistant to fire. They also exuded a substance similar to jamming smoke, reducing the accuracy of any scanners in the vicinity. And as if that weren’t bad enough, they regenerated almost immediately. A hunter could clear a space in the ruin to park their vehicle in and leave it alone, and in only a matter of days the automobile would be overrun with weeds and vines, rendered nonfunctional.

Had the ruin been near the city, perhaps the allure of the relics sleeping within would have made most hunters turn a blind eye to the invasive greenery. But Iida lay a considerable distance from Kugamayama. If one was going to make the trip all the way out here, they’d want it to be worth their while—in which case they might as well head to another ruin that *wasn’t* overrun with plants. So it was only natural that people avoided the area.

“Its unpopularity *does* make the presence of an automaton seem more

credible, though,” Yumina added.

“Yeah, if hunters came here more often, someone would’ve already found it, right?”

“You got it. So let’s hope it’s here somewhere and do our best to find it.”

They continued their search inside the dome. The entrances to the stores were all covered in vegetation. A garden-variety hunter would have needed to clear away the resilient masses blocking each entrance, which would have been annoying and time-consuming.

Fortunately, Akira wasn’t your garden-variety hunter. With his blade, he sliced through the obstructions with ease. Yumina was surprised by the weapon’s sharpness.

“Akira, is that an Old World sword, by any chance?”

“Yeah. I found it in a ruin a while back and decided to hold on to it instead of selling it.”

“Lucky you! We Druncam hunters don’t have that luxury, since we have to hand over all the relics we find to the syndicate. We always hunt relics in teams, though, so I guess it makes sense.” Yumina eyed Akira’s blade with longing and just a hint of jealousy.

Akira noticed her gaze and thought for a moment. “You want one too?”

“Huh?”

Before Yumina could even reply coherently, he nonchalantly passed her a spare. The sword, reduced to a hilt when not in use, fit snugly in Yumina’s hand.

“W-Wait!” she stammered in a panic. “Wh-What are you thinking, just giving me something like this at the drop of a hat?! This is an Old World blade! Do you even know how much these go for?!”

“I’ve got a bunch more, so I’m not gonna miss one. But I only gave it to you ’cause it’s more convenient to have one, so if you’re just gonna turn around and sell it, give it back.”

“I-I’m not going to do that...”

“Then it’s yours,” he said, and walked into the abandoned store whose entrance he’d just cleared.

Yumina looked conflicted but followed him inside. She began to search the area, but the enormous value of the item he’d gifted her weighed on her mind, and she couldn’t help but ask him one more time just to be certain.

“You’re really just giving this to me? Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yeah. If it was something I’d regret giving up, I wouldn’t have offered it to you in the first place.”

“All right, then. In that case, er, I’m really grateful. Thank you, Akira!” She smiled, which made him smile back. But then the corner of her mouth turned up in a smirk. “You really are weak to women, aren’t you?”

Akira spluttered, but then saw the playfulness in her smile and teased back, “On second thought, maybe I *will* take that blade back.”

“Too late. You already gave it up—it’s mine now.”

They grinned, then focused once more on their search.



Once they’d finished exploring the inside of the dome, they decided to head back to where their vehicles were parked. For better or worse, their search hadn’t been too eventful. They had indeed found a decent amount of valuable relics inside, but nothing precious enough to warrant abandoning their search for the automaton in favor of regular relic hunting. There also weren’t enough goods to justify hiring a transporter. So they were at an impasse.

“What should we do next, Yumina?”

“Don’t ask me. I’m just your companion, so I ultimately have to defer to whatever you decide. Whether we give up the search or keep looking, I don’t have the authority to make that call. Harsh as that might sound, it’s not my responsibility.”

The hunter rank commission was Akira’s, after all, not Yumina’s. So it was up to him to decide on their overall course of action—even when Yumina took point, she was only in charge of tactical commands. Whether they succeeded

here or failed, the client wouldn't hold Yumina responsible.

Still, on the off chance they ended up failing because of some critical oversight Yumina made, the city might blame her—and by extension, Druncam—for interfering when it wasn't necessary. So she had to be very careful when offering input. Put another way, only Akira had the right to fumble the job by making a bad call—Yumina could only make suggestions. Akira had the final say on everything.

He groaned for a while, mulling it over. But as one might expect from a boy not used to having such authority, his answer was irresolute. "Let's check some of the other domes first, then decide."

Yumina smiled wryly at his hesitance. "Sure. Just because that last one was a bust doesn't mean we won't hit pay dirt on the others, right? We should at least check."

He was clearly putting off his decision until later, but considering how little information they had to go on, she didn't necessarily think this was a bad move—not that she could object anyway, of course, since she was merely his support.

As they were heading to the next dome, Alpha chided him. *Akira, you can't be so wishy-washy when you're calling the shots. Flexibility is all well and good, but being indecisive isn't.*

Yeah, I know. But I'm not alone this time. I can't just make slapdash judgments, or I'll put my companion in danger.

True, but she's just your companion. You can't let her jerk you around. Stick up for yourself.

Yeah, but still...

Alpha interpreted his reply to mean he knew he was prioritizing Yumina—and more importantly, that he was fine with doing so. This raised Alpha's wariness of Yumina yet another level—the girl was now officially classified as a threat. But Alpha didn't let her intentions show on her face and instead grinned smugly. *"You're not alone this time"? That's quite the statement to make, considering I've been with you every step of the way.*

It's a figure of speech. Sorry, I didn't mean to downplay your support. I couldn't do any of this without you.

Very well. Apology accepted.

Akira grinned at her, and Alpha returned his grin—just like always.

And one party knew the full significance of the conversation they'd just had, while the other had no idea. This, too, was just like always.



Having finished exploring the second dome, Akira wore a frown. As with the first one, they hadn't found anything here compelling enough to prioritize looking for relics. If they were to quit looking for the automaton and channel all their efforts into relic hunting instead, they'd need to stay on-site for several days, which would require additional preparation. So he needed to make a decision sooner rather than later.

At present, then, their main focus was the automaton. They'd discovered some decent relics so far, but hadn't collected any yet; if they switched to relic hunting, they'd need a way to carry them back home. They could call a transporter, but there was no telling how long it might take for the person to show up. And even though Yumina had offered to share her vehicle with Akira, they couldn't just park anywhere around the ruin. All these arrangements would take time, so Akira couldn't put off deciding much longer.

After a little more agonizing, he made his call. "All right, we're gonna focus on hunting relics from now on! We can just look for the automaton as we go."

"Can I ask how you came to that decision?"

"Even if the automaton is here, it's pretty much up to luck whether we actually run across it, right? To tell the truth, I'm not exactly the luckiest person in the world," he said with a sigh.

From the deepness of that sigh, it was clear his misfortune had landed him in more than a few precarious situations. Secretly finding this amusing, she gave a slight smile. "Works for me, then. Hunter work might be a gamble, but that doesn't mean we need to aim to win every time. Sometimes it's better to play it safe."

“Right? Then, Yumina, you’re in charge.”

“All right, all right.” *Really, he’s such a handful*, she thought, seeing Akira abandon his role as leader the moment he could. But this reminded her of a certain someone else who was always needing her help, so she didn’t dislike it either.

Now that they’d switched their focus to relic hunting, their first order of business was to retreat some distance from the ruin. The entire district and the area surrounding it were dominated by the invasive vegetation, after all, so if they planned to camp in Yumina’s vehicle, they needed to park outside that region. Otherwise the plants might swallow the vehicle up while they were sleeping.

Furthermore, they needed a spot that was defensible against possible monster attacks. While the creatures in this region wouldn’t be a match for the two of them, neither of them wanted to be attacked in their sleep.

As they drove around the wasteland, searching for a suitable campsite, a large monster showed up on their vehicles’ scanners. Based on the reading, it was chasing them from behind and quickly gaining speed.

Akira raised his gun, ready to intercept the creature. His scanner responded to his movements and raised the accuracy of its analysis in the direction he was facing. So it was that he noticed another vehicle behind the monster, chasing after it.

“Huh? Is it running from the hunters behind it? Wait a minute, isn’t that—?!”

He recognized the people in the vehicle—Reina and her entourage.

Chapter 159: Reina and Togami

Reina was speeding through the wasteland at full tilt, chasing after a monster she'd failed to finish off. Leaning out from the passenger's seat of the roofless desert utility vehicle, she held her gun at the ready, got a bead on her target amid the undulation of the automobile, and fired. The bullet streaked through the air like lightning, striking the torso of the six-legged beast. Its skin, covered not in fur but in scales as tough as steel, was blasted apart, sending the scales flying along with it.

Yet the monster didn't fall. Thanks to its tenacious vitality, characteristic of the biological wasteland monsters, it continued to run.

Reina fired several more shots. The bullet struck what remained of a mechanical apparatus protruding from the monster's back. This device, which could either be used as a cannon or machine gun, weakened under each shot. Finally, the dented mass broke off the creature, machine parts scattering as it hit the ground.

However, this only freed the monster from its heavy burden, allowing it to run faster.

Reina turned to Togami, who sat in the driver's seat, and shouted, "Put the pedal to the metal! We need to speed up, or it'll escape!"

"Any faster and we'll be in trouble!" Togami yelled back. "Don't worry about what *I'm* doing—just concentrate on shooting!"

Reina turned toward her target once more and fired another volley of shots. Not all of them hit, but considering the violent jolting of the vehicle and the distance to her target, her accuracy was quite impressive.

Her current gun was smaller than most firearms designed to exterminate monsters, yet more powerful than some anti-materiel weapons twice its size—for example, it could reduce the weak monsters on the Kugamayama outskirts to mincemeat in an instant. Still, it couldn't finish off tougher monsters like this

one, and Reina knew why—the gun’s range was woefully short. It was meant to be used in close quarters, so the farther away the monster was, the less damage her shots would do. Besides, this creature was much more resilient than the ones on the city’s outskirts, so she knew her weapon wouldn’t hurt the enemy much at her current distance.

“Rrrgh!” she growled. “I *told* you we should’ve aimed at its legs from the start!”

“Huh?! Didn’t we agree that the safest option was to take care of the weapon on its back?!” Togami argued.

“And will that really matter if it escapes?!” she retorted.

“Who told me to play it as safe as possible?!”

“And who boasted she could take it down without difficulty before it ran away?!”

Despite Reina and Togami’s bickering, there was no hatred or animosity in their tones—they’d simply become so comfortable with each other that they no longer needed to sugarcoat their opinions. Kanae merrily looked on from the back seat, smirking.

“You two are just perfect for each other, aren’tcha?”



Reina and Togami immediately fell silent. They glanced quickly at each other, then turned their attention wholly to their work, so as to keep Kanae from getting too smug.

“Anyway,” said Reina after a bit, “just step on it.”

“Roger that!”

From then on, they didn’t say anything unrelated to their job. Nor did they bother retorting to Kanae—the last time they’d tried that, the two had answered her in unison, whereupon Kanae had taunted, “What’d I tell ya? Perfect for each other!”

Each was determined not to repeat that mistake, and so Reina and Togami ignored the maid and concentrated on the task at hand. But Kanae merrily noted that even their efforts to ignore her were in sync, and her smug grin didn’t fade.

Next to her, however, Shiori looked stern. She sighed, though not loudly enough for the two in front to hear, before saying, “Miss Reina, Mr. Togami, I know tensions can run high during battle, but I advise you not to let unnecessary squabbles disrupt your focus. In the worst case, it could put Miss Reina in danger. Just a word of warning.”

Shiori didn’t necessarily disapprove of Togami and Reina partnering up. However, what she’d seen of Togami’s ability so far fell short of Shiori’s standards, and she was worried his influence might dull Reina’s performance as well. Shiori wasn’t about to let that happen.

She sighed again, much more heavily. This time, the two young hunters heard her and immediately straightened up in their seats.

“M-My bad,” Togami mumbled.

“Sorry, Shiori,” Reina said.

Their apologies were completely in sync, of course, which amused Kanae even more. Without even turning around, Reina and Togami could easily imagine the grin she was wearing. In order to deprive Kanae of any further entertainment, they made every effort to stay expressionless as they chased their prey.

The monster continued fleeing from Reina and Togami as they doggedly gave chase. At first glance, it seemed obvious which side had the advantage as the hunter. But no matter how long they chased after the creature, Reina and Togami couldn't finish off their quarry.

There were two reasons for this. First was the rough terrain of the wasteland—the ground was uneven and the dirt slippery on the tires, and rocks and boulders of all shapes and sizes were lying here and there. It was certainly no place to be driving an automobile. But the monsters who lived here were used to it and able to run over the ground at full speed, making it easier for them to elude pursuit.

Togami, at the wheel of their vehicle, knew all this and was trying his best to close the distance. But he also knew he couldn't get *too* close, or they'd lose their advantage of being able to attack from long range. Besides, several times now the monster had turned on a dime and tried to body-slam them. So they needed to keep some distance from their prey to avoid getting smashed, while remaining close enough for Reina's gun to be effective. The slightest miscalculation in Togami's driving could mean death, and he put every effort into staying just far enough away.

Still, he wouldn't have needed to exert all that effort if Reina had simply used a gun with longer range. All she had to do was kill the monster, so why not just select a better weapon for the task? The answer: she was deliberately using a gun with a shorter range because Shiori was evaluating their skill.

Reina glanced at the sniper rifle lying on the floor of the vehicle. It had outstanding range and power—a perfect weapon for long-range encounters. With a gun like that, she was confident she could kill the monster in one hit. And indeed, Shiori had instructed her to use it to finish the job if all else failed—but they'd both receive a failing grade if she did. It was a deliberate test of Reina's judgment.

For a fleeting moment, Reina considered picking up the rifle. Then she thought better of it and addressed Togami instead.

“Get closer! It's gonna get away!”

“Too dangerous! What if it tries to body-slam us again?!”

Reina hesitated for a moment before answering. “Well, then I’m counting on you to dodge it!”

Did she really trust him that much, or was she just foolish and reckless? Togami couldn’t tell. With a wry smile, he answered, “Fine. Here we go!”

He accelerated just as Reina had ordered, closing the distance to the monster in an instant. Reina forced herself to grin in order to psych herself up. Surely she could finish the enemy off at this range! If she was too slow, it would kill them, but so what? She just had to kill it first. Determination welled up within her, and her gunfire became more aggressive. With less of a distance to travel, the powerful bullets drilled into the monster one by one with increased accuracy. Even a beast so resilient as this couldn’t withstand the assault—it lost its will to counterattack and channeled all of its remaining energy into fleeing for its life, running even faster.

“Seriously?! It’s still able to go that fast with injuries like those?! Just how strong *is* this thing?!”

“Sorry, Reina! I can’t go any faster!”

“I know that! Guess there’s no choice...!”

The beast was using the last of its energy to flee, and sooner or later its strength would run out, so eventually they would catch up. This never occurred to Reina, however. Seeing no other option, she reached for the sniper rifle she’d hesitated to use until now. She held it steady, aimed, and put her finger on the trigger.

But before she could fire, she suddenly froze.

“Reina! What’s wrong?! Shoot!” Togami yelled.

“I see someone ahead! It looks like—*Akira*?!”

“What?! No way!”

On Reina’s scanner, her display magnified to help her snipe more accurately, Akira was standing in the monster’s path, as though he’d been waiting for its arrival all along.

The monster was desperately running for its life when it noticed a human figure ahead. But it couldn't stop, lest it be slain by the humans behind it. So it tried to leap past the boy blocking its path.

Akira watched the monster approach but didn't move from his position. Instead, he grabbed hold of his Old World blade. As the silver edge extended from the hilt, he calmly awaited his opponent's approach. Then, right at the moment the monster passed him, he swung the blade, bisecting the massive beast in a single horizontal slice. The momentum from the monster's run sent both halves of its body flying, and they crashed onto the ground an instant later. Blood from the monster's corpse dyed the wasteland red.

Akira sheathed his blade, his expression calm.

Reina's and Togami's jaws had been on the floor as they'd watched the whole scene.



Seeing as they already knew Akira and Yumina, Reina's group came over to talk to them. Reina and Togami looked surprised to see the two of them teaming up, though the maids seemed unperturbed, with Shiori maintaining her usual serious demeanor and Kanae itching for excitement.

"Sup, Akira kiddo?!" Kanae greeted him. "Been a minute, hasn't it? That move you pulled off just now sure was impressive! The thrill of close-quarters combat finally got its hooks in you too?"

"Didn't want to hit you with a stray bullet, that's all," he said. "Just because you and Shiori dodged my shots in Mihazono doesn't mean you'd do so here."

"No, no, kiddo, you've got it all wrong! The moment you use a flimsy excuse like that to justify pulling out your blade, you're already addicted! There's no going back now, so why not take a step farther and indulge me in a duel?"

"Sure, but I'll just use my gun. Good luck dodging it again."

Kanae smirked and shook her head as if to say "Maybe one day you'll realize you're already hooked."

Shiori stepped forward. “Mr. Akira, I must thank you. By engaging that dangerous monster at close quarters, you ensured Miss Reina’s safety.”

“Don’t mention it. With a blade that powerful, it was easy. I mean, you and Kanae could’ve taken it down no problem, right?”

“Certainly. But with the circumstances as they are, we couldn’t have stepped in.”

This reminded Togami that he and Reina were currently in the middle of a training exercise. “Oh, right. Since Akira took down our target, Shiori, what about our evaluation?”

“You’ll be graded as though you let the monster get away,” Shiori responded.

“Seriously?” Reina grumbled. “Sure, he finished it off before *we* could, but we nearly had it! If Akira hadn’t been there, we would’ve won! Does that not count?”

“Of course not,” Shiori said sternly.

“But his presence was just a coincidence,” Togami argued. “Why are you factoring an element of random chance into our evaluation?”

“Because luck is also a measure of one’s skill. You and Miss Reina happened to be unlucky. It’s as simple as that.”

Reina and Togami’s shoulders slumped.

Seeing this, Akira looked a little concerned. “Should I, er, not have killed that thing?”

“You did nothing wrong at all, Mr. Akira. Their objective was to dispatch the monster in a timely manner, and their failure to do so invited misfortune. They also lose points for failing to recover from said misfortune.”

The two young hunters’ heads sank lower. Just then, a mischievous idea popped into Kanae’s head.

“So you’re saying running into Akira was ‘unfortunate,’ are you, missy?” she said. “He probably finds that pretty rude, don’tcha think? So let’s turn this into an opportunity. If you can convince Akira to tag along with you on your search of the Iida ruins, I’ll offer you my support in combat as well.”

Reina and Togami looked shocked at her sudden suggestion, and Shiori narrowed her eyes.

“Just what are you scheming, Kanae?” she demanded.

“Look, there shouldn’t be any problem with this, right?” the other maid answered. “We already know that the kiddo’s plenty skilled, so he’ll offset the incompetence of these two. Plus, though it was entertaining watching the lovebirds squabble from the back seat for a while, the amusement’s startin’ to wear off. I wanna do something else now.”

“T-Togami and I are not *lovebirds*!” Reina spluttered, unable to restrain herself from lunging at Kanae.

But the maid adroitly grabbed her shoulders and spun her around to face Akira. Then she gave her a light push forward. “Now then, missy, let’s see those negotiation skills of yours! This, too, is an important part of your training! Lack of combat skill aside, sis *definitely* won’t acknowledge a hunter who can’t negotiate on their own, so show her what you can do!”

Reina glanced furtively at Shiori, who gave a resigned sigh. The girl inferred that Shiori more or less agreed with Kanae. She felt determined to prove Shiori wrong and show her what she was capable of, and her heart filled with resolve.

“I understand. So, Akira, we’re actually planning to take a trip to the Iida ruins after this...” she began.

With Kanae shoving Reina in his face, Akira couldn’t simply ignore the girl. So he decided to at least hear her out.

A number of circumstances had led Togami and Reina to be on the same team for now. Occasionally they butted heads, but thanks to their experiences in Mihazono, both were equally determined to become better hunters. Through pointing out and criticizing each other’s weak points without reserve, they had come to recognize their own shortcomings, learned what areas they needed to improve in, and then given each other advice on how to polish up those weak spots. Thus they’d been through quite a lot together as hunters. They’d even started to exchange honest opinions not just as coworkers but as friends.

Shortly thereafter, they'd been tasked for certain reasons with heading to the Iida commercial district on a search mission. But Shiori had objected, arguing that they weren't ready for such a job just yet—at Reina and Togami's current level, Iida would be too dangerous for just the two of them. While all four of them (including Kanae) could handle the Iida ruins together, the maids were just there to step in when they ran into trouble and couldn't be counted as regular teammates. So Shiori had prevented them from carrying out this job.

The two young hunters hadn't been able to argue with her reasoning. While they felt they'd grown enough to no longer burden a more experienced team, they also knew they still had a long way to go. Still, they had been determined to prove themselves and had tried to persuade Shiori to let them take on the job. Afraid an outright refusal might lessen the motivation Reina had shown up until now, Shiori had agreed to a compromise: As Reina and Togami visited more ruins, they would inevitably run into more encounters with deadly monsters at close quarters. In order to test whether they could hold their own in such cases, Shiori had given them marks of increasing difficulty to defeat. (The reason Reina had been using a weapon with a shorter range in the last battle was because Shiori had wanted to see how well the girl would fare with weapons suited to narrow indoor spaces.)

Reina and Togami had accepted the challenge, engaged the monsters Shiori had indicated at close range, and won every battle, despite each monster being more challenging than the last. Finally, Shiori had given them their final test, saying she'd permit them to go to Iida if they won this last encounter. Reina and Togami had gone into the fight more motivated than ever—only to have their moment of glory usurped by Akira.

Reina gave the boy an abbreviated version of these circumstances, but he got the gist of what had happened—and looked very puzzled.

"If the Iida ruins are too hard for you guys," he wondered, "can't you just go to a less dangerous site? It's not like Iida is too popular anyway, so why are you so hung up on it?"

"Oh, well, because..."

Reina trailed off and glanced back at Shiori. But Kanae grabbed her head with

both hands, forcing the girl to face Akira again.

“Sorry, missy. You’ve got to judge for yourself whether it’s okay to reveal this info and whether Akira can be trusted with it. You can’t just decide what to do based on sis’s reaction.”

Reina froze. She hadn’t even realized she’d been looking to Shiori for the answer, unconsciously planning to make her decision based on how Shiori reacted, as Kanae had pointed out.

Kanae let go of Reina’s head with a merry grin. Shiori’s brow furrowed at the way her coworker was treating someone they were supposed to answer to. But she didn’t rebuke Kanae, only sighed softly.

Reina’s gaze moved back and forth between Akira and Yumina as she struggled to decide. Eventually, Yumina took pity on her and bailed her out.

“Look, Reina. You know that as a member of Druncam, I’m trained to be careful with the information I’m given. So don’t worry about me. Does that help?” She gave Akira a look that suggested he aid Reina as well.

Akira nodded. “I’m not sure what you’re about to tell me, but I’m not just gonna run around blabbing it to people. Your secret’s safe with me.”

At that, Reina decided she could trust them, and her expression relaxed. “Very well. I still can’t tell you where I got this info, but the truth is, there’s supposed to be *an Old World automaton* somewhere within the Iida commercial district! We’re going to go find it.”

There was a hint of smugness about her as she disclosed this information. She was sure their jaws would drop open upon hearing such a huge scoop, and her anticipation of this was written all over her face.

But her expectations were betrayed—they both just nodded, and the surprise was Reina’s instead. “H-Huh? Aren’t you shocked? It’s an Old World automaton, you know? We aren’t just talking about your average relic!”

Yumina sounded apologetic. “Actually, Reina, well, we’re also searching for that automaton.”

“Wait, what?! Seriously?”

“Yeah,” Akira said. “Otherwise we wouldn’t have bothered to come all the way out here.”

Reina had been certain her group was the only one privy to such immensely valuable information. So upon hearing that Akira and Yumina already knew, she let her shoulders slump in disappointment.

Shiori cut in. “Mr. Akira, if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, would you share how you came across this information? I’ll pay you if you deem it necessary.”

“Nah, as long as you don’t go around telling people, I don’t mind letting you know. I heard it from a guy named Kibayashi—he works for the city. According to him, the news came from two rival corporations, Yajima and Yoshioka.”

Even with these sparse details, a number of possibilities instantly came to Shiori’s mind. Her expression darkened. “I do apologize, but I need more than that to go on,” she said. “Could you explain further?”

“Look, a lot happened, so we’ll be here all day if I do that. First, we should settle the matter of whether we’re going to lida together, right?”

This brought Reina back to her senses, and she panicked. Since Akira and Yumina already knew about the automaton, her trump card to convince Akira to accompany them was now worthless. If he and Yumina refused, the two groups would end up racing each other to find the automaton first. And since Shiori was currently preventing Reina and Togami from participating, they couldn’t even make it to the starting line. By the time they managed to persuade Shiori, Akira and Yumina would have a significant head start.

“R-Right! L-Look, don’t you think it’ll be a lot safer for all of us to search for the automaton together, rather than in separate groups?” Thus, in her desperation, Reina came up with what was likely the most unconvincing, amateur argument she could have employed at that moment. Even *she* inwardly cringed as she said it and quickly racked her brain to come up with something more persuasive.

But to her surprise, Akira bought it. “Point taken. What do you think, Yumina?”

“Sorry, I think you should have the final say here,” said the girl. “Oh, not that I

mind coming with you, Reina. I'm fine with either outcome."

"You sure?" said Akira. "All right, then. We'll join you, but first there's a condition and a nuisance you need to be aware of."

Reina was pleasantly surprised he'd responded so favorably, but his words puzzled her. "A nuisance? As in, something different from the condition?"

"A little, yeah."

The condition Akira proposed was that they would also hunt for regular relics while searching for the automaton. While this would undoubtedly decrease their likelihood of finding the valuable Old World artifact that was their primary objective, there was still no guarantee the latter actually existed, regardless of how hard they searched for it. Reina decided it would be a real shame if she went back home empty-handed after traveling all this way, so she agreed to his stipulation.

But the "nuisance" Akira detailed next made her balk.

"As part of my contract," he told her, "we're required to turn over whatever relics we grab to the city. Even if we decide to divide the relics we find between our groups, you'll probably be roped into some seriously tedious negotiations with city officials. That okay with you?"

On the off chance they were successful and found the automaton, they couldn't just disassemble it and divide its parts between their teams (assuming it was still in one piece). They'd earn more by selling it somewhere whole, then dividing the proceeds between themselves afterward. But because such an automaton was so valuable, deciding where to sell it and for how much would undoubtedly lead to extensive, grueling negotiations in the future. Adding the city into the equation would only complicate things even more.

On top of that, in addition to cutting a deal with Akira and Yumina, Reina's team would still have Druncam to contend with. They still officially belonged to the syndicate, whose hunters were required to let it handle the selling of whatever they found. As compensation for taking such tedious business off their hunters' hands, however, Druncam deducted various expenses, including commission fees, out of the hunter's cut of the earnings.

Naturally, the syndicate offered more support to hunters who brought them more relics. So rookie hunters would often obediently hand over all the relics they found to Druncam in order to gain as much help as possible, while veterans who no longer needed such assistance would typically hold on to many of their relics for themselves.

Within Druncam, at least, Reina and Togami were still considered rookies. Since distancing themselves from the organization, they had actually become more like the veterans, in that they both needed less support and were handing over fewer relics to Druncam. Still, if Reina and Togami managed to find a relic as valuable as an Old World automaton, the syndicate would undoubtedly force its way into handling the treasure's liquidation, and harsh negotiations would be sure to follow.

Factoring in negotiations with Akira's team and the city on top of that, Reina could tell the whole thing would become a mess. Did she really want to get involved in all this? At a loss for what to do, she unconsciously tried to glance at Shiori. Once again, Kanae grabbed her head and forced her to look forward.

Right, I have to make this decision on my own, she reminded herself. Even if the option she chose turned out to be the wrong choice in the end, she couldn't let her maids call all her shots forever. She had to become a proper head of household one day, one worthy of Shiori and Kanae. So she steeled herself and smiled. "It'll be fine. Let's go to Iida together. Being able to manage such nuisances is also a measure of a hunter's skill, right?"

"Really? Okay, if you say so." Akira felt a little perplexed at Reina's slight (yet still sudden and obvious) change in attitude, but he didn't give it any more thought beyond that.

Kanae, however, grinned in amusement. A small smile even appeared on Shiori's lips.

Now that her mistress had come to a decision, it was time for Shiori to follow her lead. "In that case, Miss Reina and Mr. Togami, the two of you may take Kanae with you and go relic hunting with Mr. Akira and Miss Yumina. I will stay behind and make the necessary preparations to aid you. Hunting relics in Iida will require camping arrangements, the hiring of transporters, and the like, so

leave all that to me.”

“Thank you, Shiori. Though it’s not often we go separate ways like this, you know?” Though Reina felt grateful, she found Shiori’s decision to not come along a little unusual.

Shiori merely smiled once more. “Remember, Miss Reina, only *Kanae* has acknowledged your ability enough to offer herself as combat support. I have done no such thing.”

“Oh, right.”

“I’m permitting Kanae to accompany you two in order to cover for your shortcomings, but if you end up causing trouble for Mr. Akira or Miss Yumina, I’ll suspend your mission indefinitely. Is that understood?”

“Yes, I’ll do my best,” Reina answered, the corners of her mouth turning up.

Shiori nodded, satisfied, then glanced at Kanae. Kanae picked up on her meaning and strode over to Reina and the others.

Reina interpreted Shiori’s look to mean “You’d better protect her.” While the girl thought her maid was being a little overprotective, this reminded her that she still had a long way to go and needed to be careful not to let her guard down during the mission.

Reina and her newly formed team, now including Akira and Yumina, left Shiori behind and made for the ruins of the Iida commercial district. The maid watched them go and sighed, looking conflicted.

If the rumors of an Old World automaton in Iida are confirmed, the company that Reina’s family owns will undoubtedly make a move. Though this is all extremely unlikely, I need to decide how to proceed, should Miss Reina and the rest actually prove successful. However slim their chances were, Shiori wasn’t about to let such a golden opportunity go to waste due to her own negligence. On the off chance the stars *did* align, she needed to be ready.

She’d separated herself from Reina, even if only for a time, thus exposing the girl to potential danger in the process. But Shiori had no choice—she absolutely could not make preparations like these with Reina around.



When they arrived at the Iida commercial district, Akira suggested they start by gathering up the relics in the domes he and Yumina had already explored. Everyone prepared to enter the domes, and when they were finished, Kanae turned to Reina and Togami and smirked.

“As I promised, I’ll help you out during combat. Would you rather I go in front?”

She was provoking them, and they knew it. So Togami just grinned back confidently. “Nah, you can step back and take it easy. Reina and I can handle this by ourselves—right, Reina?”

“Absolutely,” Reina said with an equally assured smile. “We’ll be fine without your help, so just watch.”

“Ooh, you’re gonna give me a show? In that case, Akira kiddo, you and Yumina step back too. If it ever looks like missy and Togami kiddo can’t hack it on their own, feel free to bail ’em out.”

“Gotcha,” Akira said nonchalantly.

It didn’t matter to him where he was positioned. Reina’s and Togami’s expressions, however, instantly became more serious. During the battle in the Mihazono ruins, they’d only been a burden to the rest of the team. But things were different now, and this was their chance to prove it to Akira. They felt immense pressure to succeed—but that pressure also filled them with motivation.

“You ready, Togami?”

“I was born ready. Let’s go!”

Looking determined, Reina and Togami eagerly rushed into the dome. The other three followed after them, with Akira and Yumina confused as to why the other two had become so gung ho all of a sudden and Kanae wearing a grin of utter amusement.

As the team proceeded through the interior of the dome, every inch of which

was covered in green, they reached a wide corridor where they encountered a group of monsters—hairless, muscular, four-legged beasts.

These were omnivores, so they also ate plants, and the greenery infesting the area was their only vegetarian option. Since their fangs had to be sharp enough to shred through vines and weeds as tough as steel, they could easily tear through average body armor.

The beasts charged in a three-dimensional assault toward their prey, leaping into the air and kicking off of the corridor's walls and floor to evade Reina's and Togami's aim. But the two young hunters countered their enemies' movements with finesse. Togami slowed them down with a spray of bullets—while his shots failed to penetrate their thick, armor-like flesh, the relentless impacts sufficed to keep them at bay. Reina followed his lead and fired mercilessly at each of the beasts' heads, starting with those closest to her, and instantly inflicted critical wounds. Even if the monsters managed to survive, immobilizing them was enough—her main goal was to keep them from getting close. And once all the monsters were incapacitated, the two finished them off—not eradicating them all at once in a showy hail of gunfire, but playing it safe to ensure an easy victory.

When the battle was finally over, Reina turned to Akira and the others with a smug look on her face. “Well? How was that? I told you Togami and I could handle it!”

Yumina looked somewhat astonished. “Yeah, you sure did. When did you get so skilled, Reina?”

“Well, you know, it's not like I've been sitting at home twiddling my thumbs all this time.” *This* was the reaction she'd hoped for, and she was over the moon.

Her gaze then slid over to Kanae and Akira to gauge *their* responses. But her expectations were betrayed, as they both wore their usual expressions. Though Reina and Togami had demonstrated skill that was clearly head and shoulders above what it had been in Mihazono, it hadn't sufficed to impress these two.

Or at least, that was what Reina thought. In truth, her and Togami's display hadn't necessarily underwhelmed Akira or Kanae. The maid simply knew

already what Reina was currently capable of, so of course she wasn't surprised. However, she had no smart remarks to make this time—proof that she'd acknowledged their skill, even though Reina didn't realize it.

As for Akira, Reina's and Togami's growth as hunters simply didn't interest him. He acknowledged their ability, in the sense that he didn't think they'd drag the rest of the team down, but he wasn't particularly amazed by their performance.

Reina felt disappointed that Kanae and Akira had shown no visible reaction. Togami felt much the same way, but he was also reminded of Akira when they'd first met—Togami had tried to show off his skills to Akira then, yet Akira's expression had barely even changed. Akira hadn't been ignoring him—in his eyes, Togami's skill had simply been nothing to write home about. This had stung all the more.

In other words, I'm still not good enough to get a reaction out of him. But the look in his eyes isn't condescending either, so I guess I'll take that as a passing grade, Togami thought, deciding to look at the glass as half full. Then he noticed how downcast Reina seemed and turned to Akira with a cocksure grin. "Well, Akira? Reina was right, wasn't she? We'll be fine with just the two of us in front."

"Hm? Oh, yeah, sure."

"That's a pretty tepid response—though, based on your reaction, I doubt you think we'll drag you down, at least. Well, if you couldn't tell from our first battle, just sit tight and watch. Reina, let's move." He strode away without another word.

"Huh? O-Okay." Recovering, she followed after him. As she reached him and began walking alongside him, she noticed she felt a little more at ease. And she immediately knew why: Akira had agreed that they could handle the vanguard on their own. She also realized Togami had deliberately maneuvered Akira into saying so in order to cheer her up. Togami had wanted her to realize that she wasn't the burden she thought she was, and that if the others' reactions disappointed her, she just needed to impress them even more in the battles to come.

And thus encouraged, Reina was no longer hanging her head. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

Togami started walking a little faster than her so she wouldn’t see him blush, putting a slight distance between them. Reina smiled to herself, then quickened her own pace to catch up with him.

Behind them, the socially inept Akira looked puzzled at their behavior. Yumina, however, only seemed mildly surprised, and Kanae just grinned in amusement.

Chapter 160: Luck as a Measure of Skill

Once Akira and the others had wrapped up their first relic hunt in the Iida commercial district, they went back outside the ruins and reconvened with Shiori. Reina reported to her what they'd found.

"Togami and I were able to take care of the monsters here on our own, with no issue whatsoever. Thanks to that, we collected a whole bunch of relics!"

"Oh, is that so?"

It sounded like Shiori suspected there was more to the story, and Reina scowled. "What, you don't believe me?"

"That is not the case. It's just that, for all those accomplishments, you appear rather discontent."

Now that it had been pointed out to her, Reina became aware of the expression on her face and quickly forced a cheerful smile. "Oh, that's just because while we were plenty successful, I still feel like I could've done even better, you know? It's the constant desire to improve oneself, that's all."

"That's a good attitude to have, missy," Kanae cut in. "You're exactly right—it's true you didn't drag Akira kiddo down, but that's just the bare minimum. I'm glad to hear you're not satisfied with that!"

"N-Naturally," Reina said, her smile twitching.

Shiori had already more or less guessed what had happened, that during this first relic hunt, Reina and Togami had successfully eliminated any monsters they encountered—yet they'd been unable to get a satisfactory reaction out of Akira, which had disappointed them both. Shiori chided her gently, "Miss Reina, the desire to improve oneself is indeed a good thing. But there's no need to rush. You're already developing at a steady pace."

"I know." The girl sighed, then got a hold of herself and smiled. "So, what about you? Did you finish all those preparations you mentioned?"

“Indeed. Don’t worry, a transporter has been called and accommodations have been arranged for you all. They are scheduled to arrive around the time you finish your next hunt. I will accompany them this time, Kanae; you will remain on standby and help the transporter when they arrive.”

“Roger that.”

“Now then, everyone, shall we go?”

Reina was surprised that Shiori was ready to move out immediately. “Huh? We’re going *now*? Without even taking a break?”

She looked around at the others, hoping they, too, would want to rest up first. But Akira and Yumina had been on standby through their entire first trip and so weren’t tired at all. Togami, in fact, felt just as exhausted as Reina, but he kept quiet and began preparing to head back into the ruin.

“If you’re too tired, miss, you may stay behind.”

“N-No, I’m not tired at all! Let’s go! Come on, Shiori, hurry up and hop in!”

While Reina was no longer dwelling on her unsatisfactory performance during their first hunt, she’d still been feeling a little down. But Shiori’s prod gave her mistress the push she needed to convert that last bit of discouragement into enthusiasm as she clambered into the vehicle.

“Very well, then,” Shiori said with a smile and followed suit.



With their second trip to the Iida commercial district now underway, Akira and the others stopped at the entrance to a different dome, though still one that Akira and Yumina had already searched. Since these two were familiar with it, they knew where all the relics were located, and the team would only need to focus on carrying them out. So as before, they needed a strong vanguard to eliminate any monsters that attacked them along the way. Reina stepped forward with determination, but Shiori stopped her.

“Mr. Akira, would you and Miss Yumina take the lead this time? I’d like to get a sense of the entire team’s ability in combat, including yours.”

“Hm? Sure, no problem. Yumina?”

“No objections here. Looks like it’s our time to shine!”

Akira and Yumina took up positions ahead of everyone else, forming the vanguard. Reina cast a puzzled look in Shiori’s direction, but obediently assumed the rearguard, thinking the maid must have some kind of strategy in mind.

Proceeding through the dome, they ran into another pack of the same hairless, four-legged beasts they’d encountered last time. While Akira and Yumina calmly assumed battle stances, Reina and the rest carefully observed the two from behind, their expressions rapt.

The monsters charged forward—but the pair quickly and accurately took them out, before the pack could even get near. The fight was over in less than ten seconds—and naturally, Akira and Yumina were the winners.

But even that brief encounter was enough to shock Reina and the others.

Akira had hit all his targets in the exact same weak spot with pinpoint accuracy. Despite the beasts’ naturally high vitality, each had gone down almost immediately, in part thanks to the might of Akira’s SSB. And he hadn’t let a single bullet go to waste—since he’d fought this kind of creature before, he knew exactly how many shots it took to kill each one. This, on top of knowing where their vulnerable points were, had allowed him to wipe them out with the highest possible efficiency.

His display of skill had been stunning, to be sure. But had that been all, Reina and the others would have merely nodded to themselves—they’d already witnessed Akira in action during their time together in Mihazono. They knew how capable he was, and since he’d gotten even better gear and weapons since then, it stood to reason that his performance would be even more impressive. There was nothing too surprising about this.

What had *really* surprised them was that Yumina was keeping up with him effortlessly. Her shots weren’t as accurate as Akira’s—she would occasionally miss the monsters’ weak spots, causing her to spend more ammo than necessary—but she clearly didn’t need Akira to cover for her. She had proven to Reina and the others that she was just as capable of standing on her own two feet.

Inwardly, Shiori grimaced. *I thought that Miss Yumina was only slightly more skilled overall than Miss Reina, and that Mr. Akira's talent would make up for what Miss Yumina lacked. But that was a miscalculation—I never dreamed she'd improved so much. At worst, her growth might have the opposite effect on Miss Reina.*

Shiori knew how hard Reina had been working to get better ever since the incident in Mihazono. And, in fact, her efforts had borne fruit—she was much stronger than before. But Reina herself had yet to realize how far she'd come—and now that she'd failed to impress Akira, she was likely beating herself up for her lack of progress, thinking all her hard work and determination had been for nothing.

So Shiori had hoped that by putting Akira and Yumina in front, Reina would see Akira cover for Yumina and realize how much Reina had improved by comparison. At the very least, she'd wanted Reina to see that she didn't need Akira's help, like Yumina did.

But Shiori hadn't accounted for Yumina's drastic growth. Realizing she'd made a terrible mistake, she berated herself for her poor judgment.

Togami was caught just as off guard by Yumina's skill. At the same time, he now understood why Akira hadn't been impressed by his and Reina's performance. *If what Yumina did just now is the standard in Akira's eyes, no wonder he didn't even bat an eye at what we did,* he thought.

Amid her surprise, Reina narrowed her eyes at Yumina in suspicion. "Yumina, were you *always* this skilled?"

No sooner had she uttered it than she realized how rude she sounded and silently chided herself for her thoughtlessness. Yumina had been impressed by how much better Reina had gotten, which had thrilled Reina. But now that she knew Yumina was even better than *she* was, it occurred to her that maybe Yumina had just been trying to make her feel better. So Reina's words had come out more harshly than intended, and she felt ashamed at how quick she'd been to blame her own shortcomings on someone else.

Yumina sensed what Reina was thinking and responded with a bright smile, to assure her she wasn't offended. But her expression seemed a little strained.

“Well, I haven’t just been sitting around twiddling my thumbs either, you know—or so I’d like to say, but to be honest, I’m cheating a little. So if I couldn’t at least do what I did back there, I’d *really* be in trouble.”

“Cheating? What do you mean?”

“I’ve been using something called an all-in-one support system to assist me. It’s built into all my equipment, including my powered suit. And it’s a souped-up version specifically prepared for me to make sure I don’t hold Akira back.”

Reina looked taken aback by this news. With a small chuckle, Yumina continued.

“I’ll tell you the details later if you want. But we’re in the middle of a relic hunt, so we should focus on that for now. Come on, Akira, let’s move!” she urged with a smile.

“Hm? Oh, okay.” Akira wore a slight frown, but trailed after her.

Reina and Togami looked intrigued by Yumina’s confession, but she was right—the relic hunt took priority. Exchanging quick glances with one another, they followed behind.

As they proceeded through the ruin, Akira muttered to himself. “Cheating, huh?”

He wasn’t directly addressing Yumina, but she heard him anyway, and thought he sounded awfully down. Realizing he was thinking about what she’d said to Reina earlier, she spoke up. “Maybe I’m being a little harsh on myself by saying I’m cheating, but I *am* using a system that lets me pull off more than I’d normally be capable of. So in that sense, I can’t exactly say I’m playing fair.”

“I guess so.” He sighed heavily—her words didn’t seem to make him feel any better.

She tilted her head in confusion—why was he so dejected?

Cheating... Right, I’ve been cheating all along, haven’t I? he thought. If Yumina considered her own support system to be unfair, just how unfair would she think his support from Alpha was? Even the socially inept Akira could figure out

that answer.

Thanks to some encouragement from Sheryl, he'd made peace with relying on Alpha's support a while back. He'd decided that if he was so worried about using Alpha to cheat, he would just get good enough to accomplish the same things *without* Alpha's help. But that didn't mean he was completely free of guilt—he'd simply framed the problem differently in his mind. He still wasn't *proud* of relying on Alpha, so while he wasn't despairing over it anymore, it was enough to make him let out a small sigh.

If something like this is enough to rattle me, I guess I've still got a long way to go too. I've gotta work harder. Akira forced his worries about unfairness to become motivation for reaching even greater heights.

What he didn't notice was that none of this would have bothered him at all if Yumina hadn't been the one who'd brought it up. This was obvious to Alpha just from her observation of him, but she refrained from making any unnecessary comments, lest he realize it himself.



After finishing their second relic excursion in Iida, the team left the ruin and headed back to where they had parted with Kanae. A transporter truck and a huge motor home were now parked there.

"Welcome back!" Kanae greeted them. "Sorry to ask this when you've just been through a lot in the ruins and all, but these guys have been waiting for a while already, so go ahead and pack those relics on board."

They did as she said and began loading the relics they'd found onto the transporter's truck. As they worked, a confused look appeared on Reina's face.

"Wait a minute—these aren't Druncam trucks. You hired a transporter from elsewhere, Shiori?"

"Indeed," the maid replied. "Had I made the request through Druncam, the relics would have been placed inside a Druncam facility temporarily, which would be disadvantageous to us when we're negotiating with them later about where to sell the relics and how to divide the proceeds."

"Oh, I see. That makes sense," Reina said with a nod and went back to packing

relics.

Shiori hadn't said anything that wasn't true, and Kanae didn't interject either—Shiori had given her a look warning her to stay silent.

Once they'd loaded all the relics, the truck drove away, marking an end to the day's activities. As Reina watched it head off into the distance, her face was brimming with anticipation. She was eager to hear all about the all-in-one support system, in part because she'd already cheered up during the course of the relic hunt.

"So, Yumina, mind if I ask a few questions?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"Miss, instead of standing out here and talking, how about we head inside?" Shiori suggested.

Reina agreed, and they all headed toward the motor home. Before Akira stepped inside, he looked up at the vehicle in awe.

"Whoa."

"Is something wrong, Mr. Akira?"

"Nah, it's just, well, huge. I've never seen a vehicle this large before."

The motor home Shiori had rented had extensions that could be raised once it was parked, creating a larger living space. With every available partition already set up, the vehicle was now the size of a small villa. When Shiori had mentioned "camping arrangements," he'd assumed they would use tents or a small RV, so he'd been quite surprised to see they were staying in this massive vehicle instead.

"There are six of us, after all," Shiori replied. "We needed something that would accommodate our whole group."

"But, I mean, wasn't renting this pricey?"

"Indeed, it was quite expensive. But if we aren't going to earn at least enough to cover the cost by working in these ruins, there would be little point in hunting relics here in the first place. And considering how a lack of restful sleep can impair one's performance in battle, it was a necessary expense."

“I see. Yeah, you have a point.” Akira agreed with Shiori’s reasoning. Because he’d earned and spent so much since becoming a hunter, he’d always thought his sense of money was somewhat off compared to others’. But until Shiori had pointed it out, even he wouldn’t have thought of renting such a luxurious motor home as a “necessary expense.” Maybe his financial sensibilities weren’t so off base after all, he found himself thinking. In fact, perhaps he was still unconsciously holding back after having lived penniless in the slums for so long, and was actually spending *less* than what was the norm.

But just as Akira’s outlook on money was beginning to change, Shiori continued with a serious look in her eye.

“Of course, I would have *never* allowed Miss Reina to stay in such crude lodgings if we’d had any other option.”

“Oh, right. Of course.”

...Or maybe some people were just more affluent than others, he mused as he headed inside.



With the day’s activities concluded, the young hunters stripped off their powered suits and spent the rest of the night relaxing. After showering and changing, they all had dinner. Only the four young hunters changed clothes, however—Shiori and Kanae remained in their maid outfits so as to be prepared in the event of a monster attack. This way, they could at least stall the enemy long enough for the others to suit up. In other words, they had a plan in place that would ensure everyone’s safety even in the worst-case scenario.

The inside of the mobile home was spacious, featuring comfortable beds and a sofa. Akira was amazed at how lavish it all was, despite the fact that they were out in the middle of the wasteland.

For their part, Reina and Togami were shocked at what Yumina told them about her support system. Among other things, she revealed why she’d been lent such powerful gear to begin with—so she wouldn’t hold Akira back while serving as his companion on a rank advancement commission.

Togami in particular was surprised to hear this—but at the same time, he felt

it explained a lot. His conflicting emotions were not only apparent on his face but even slipped out in his tone of voice as he said, “If they put you on a rank advancement commission, I guess you really were deceiving everyone with that low rank of yours, just as I suspected!”

“It’s not like I was doing it on purpose. Don’t complain to *me*.”

“Oh, no, that’s not what I meant. Back up—I’m not saying it’s your fault. I’m just realizing all over again how stupid I was for judging your ability based on your rank when we first met, that’s all.”

“O-Oh, I see.” Akira looked a little caught off guard by Togami’s response.

“By the way,” Togami went on, “what’s your hunter rank currently?”

“Rank 42.”

“*Rank 42?! And you were rank 21 back then? You’ve doubled your rank in that short span of time?! You realize there are very few Kugamayama hunters even over rank 40, right?! Stunned, Togami raised his voice without meaning to.*

Reina understood how he felt but chimed in anyway. “And his commission’s still ongoing, so he still hasn’t reached a rank that reflects his true ability.”

“Aagh!” Togami held his head in his hands.

Akira couldn’t tell whether Togami was in shock or despair. Looking at him, Akira couldn’t help but feel like he was in the wrong somehow. But then he reminded himself that he’d done nothing to feel guilty about.

Shiori, who’d been merely listening to their conversation until now, finally spoke. “Miss Yumina, thank you for sharing this intriguing information. However, several points don’t quite add up. Make no mistake, I don’t believe you’re intentionally lying to us, but might you have abbreviated your explanation in some places?”

Both Reina’s and Togami’s gazes fell on Yumina.

Feeling slightly pressured, she answered, “To be honest, the answer is yes. But I’ve told you everything I’m able to, including that the all-in-one support system is the secret to my skill. Is that not enough?”

Shiori realized that in order to learn more, she would need to coerce Yumina

into breaching confidentiality. But the maid didn't want to go that far, so she backed down. "No, you've shared plenty already. It appears I was too forward, for which I apologize."

However, the nuances of this exchange went right over Reina's head. "Aww! If there's more to share, can't you just tell us? You want to know too, right, Togami?"

"Uh, w-well, if it's something okay for her to say. I don't wanna force her or anything." Togami would have been lying if he said he wasn't curious, but he wasn't so curious as to risk antagonizing Yumina and Akira. So while he didn't contradict Reina, out of consideration for her, nevertheless he made his intent clear.

Yumina hesitated. In all honesty, she didn't have the right to decide what to disclose and what to keep secret, nor did she care to shoulder such responsibility. So she passed the buck to the person who *could* make that call.

"Akira, you think it's okay for us to tell them? And if so, can you explain it, rather than me?"

"Hm? Well, it's not anything confidential, and we weren't sworn to secrecy or anything. Besides, I doubt Reina and Togami will go around telling anyone else. It's probably fine." Akira's tone became more serious. "Just don't come crying to me if you regret it later."

Reina flinched at the gravity of his words. "Huh? I-Is it something that bad?"

"Dunno. I'm not too good at judging that kind of thing myself, so I can only answer 'Probably.' But I'm guessing Yumina hesitated to tell you because *she* thought it'd be bad if you knew."

Reina was taken aback—she certainly hadn't been expecting the conversation to go in *this* direction.

"So, do you still want to hear, or not?" Akira asked casually, his tone suggesting he was fine with either answer.

"Um, well..." Reina couldn't answer immediately. If she was being honest with herself, she really did want to know, and it wasn't like Akira was threatening her. Plus, the answer might not be as terrible as Akira thought. Wasn't it better

to learn the truth than to not ask and remain indefinitely curious?

At the same time, she also felt that this was probably something she wasn't supposed to ask about, and that she shouldn't pry any further. Indecisive, she involuntarily turned once more toward Shiori—and Kanae once more grabbed Reina's head with both hands and forced her to look straight forward. "Not so fast, missy! Remember what I told you? Akira kiddo's asking *you*, so you've gotta make this decision for yourself." Then, with a cheerful grin, she continued, "Ignorance kills, but so does curiosity, y'know? Learning to strike a balance between the two is vital. Now then, missy, show sis what you can do!"

Kanae let go of Reina's head. Since the maid had indicated that this was Reina's opportunity to prove herself to Shiori, Reina couldn't let Shiori answer for her. So the girl endeavored to make the judgment on her own, without Shiori's aid. Finally, after weighing her options, she came to her decision.

"Can you just tell me a *little* more, then? If I feel like what I'm about to hear is dangerous, I'll just ask you to stop."

"All right, if you're sure," said Akira. "Hmm, where to start? From the beginning is best, I guess. So, by now, I'm sure you know about the incident when a bunch of mechs rampaged through the slums?"

"Yes, I heard about it. The two largest gangs there fought with each other, right? I was surprised to hear they managed to acquire that many mechs."

"Only because the city was behind it all."

Reina sputtered, "W-Wait, are you serious?! I heard a ton of people died!"

"Well, with so many mechs going wild, that stands to reason."

Akira didn't seem too concerned with the deaths of people he didn't know, but Reina's conscience was stronger. It didn't matter if it was the slums—she was shocked to hear that the city had allowed so many of its residents to perish. "Shiori, um, were you already aware of this?"

"No, although I did consider the possibility," answered the maid. "The city treats the slums like a part of the wasteland, but despite the commotion taking place so close to the rest of the city, they didn't even send the defense force in to help. At the very least, I suspected the city was deliberately looking the other

way for some reason.”

“Well, when you put it that way, it makes sense,” Reina agreed.

“So that left two possibilities,” Shiori continued. “Perhaps the city had circumstances that forced their tacit approval of such destruction. On the other hand, maybe a lot of other cities with slum districts complained that Kugamayama was neglecting the management of their slums by letting it grow too large, and this was the city’s way of culling the population there. Judging by what Mr. Akira has said, the latter seems more likely.”

“I see,” Reina said, wilting. She was aware that her social status put her on the city’s side rather than with the people of the slums, so hearing that the city she belonged to had such a dark side did depress her a little.

Akira noted her reaction. “Want to stop here?”

But Reina didn’t want to throw in the towel this soon, so she pulled herself together to give the impression she was fine. “No, please continue.”

“If you say so. Anyway, you mentioned you were surprised that they managed to get those mechs. That only happened because the war between the two gangs was actually a stage prepared for two mech companies, Yajima and Yoshioka, to show off their latest creations to the city.”

Reina looked taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“Both companies had been competing to see which one’s products the city would adopt for its defense force. But they weren’t getting anywhere, so they came up with the idea for a demonstration instead, or so I gather.”

Reina looked astonished that the city would allow so many people to die on their watch for such a purpose. Shiori and Kanae, on the other hand, nodded like they weren’t surprised by the city’s actions in the least. As for Togami, he looked intrigued, but his reaction was closer to Shiori and Kanae’s than Reina’s.

“Want to stop?” Akira asked again.

Reina hesitated for a moment. “No, keep going. Having already heard this much, I doubt anything else you’d say could surprise me.”

“Okay. So anyway, I ended up trashing their demonstration by joining the

fight and destroying a bunch of those mechs—”

“Excuse me?!” Reina cried out despite herself.

“Well, you know, one thing led to another. But that’s another story, and not really relevant to the topic at hand. Point is, the city wasn’t gonna buy a mech that couldn’t even stand up to a single rank 21 hunter, so Yajima and Yoshioka got the city to put me on this rank advancement commission to save face.”

Akira’s explanation continued for some time. Even Shiori looked taken aback, as did Reina, while Kanae and Togami looked amused. But everyone present listened intently to Akira to the very end, right up until he told them that his commission had been changed to an automaton hunt in Iida—at Yajima and Yoshioka’s behest—so that he wouldn’t be able to ruin their upcoming second demonstration in the depths of Kuzusuhara.

The many consecutive revelations hit Reina so hard that by the end, she’d become desensitized to the shock and just looked exasperated.

Yumina knew all of this already, of course, but hearing Akira’s summary, she nevertheless exclaimed, “Oh! So *that’s* why! I see now!”

“Wait, Yumina, don’t tell me there’s more?” Reina said. “I feel like I’ve already hit my limit on surprises for the day.”

“It’s not really related to what Akira’s talking about, but Katsuya and I were also there to witness that incident. At the time, our team was tasked with guarding the warehouse, you see. They took me off the front lines because I wasn’t skilled enough, but Katsuya and the others destroyed a lot of those mechs as well.”

“You mean it wasn’t just Akira there?! You and Katsuya *also* joined in that fight? What happened after that?!”

“Well, then Katsuya and the others went on their expedition, but I wasn’t allowed to go with them, because I was told I’d just drag them down. At the time I didn’t see anything strange about that, but that trip of theirs was also something of a rank advancement commission for them, wasn’t it? No wonder I couldn’t go.”

She gave a deep sigh, and Akira caught the sorrow in it.

“You know,” he commented offhandedly, “as skilled as you are now, you could easily take out all of those mechs Katsuya and the others fought.”

Yumina looked surprised to hear this vote of confidence from Akira, of all people. “Really?”

“Yeah, for sure.” He nodded.

He didn’t seem to just be saying things to cheer her up, so she couldn’t help breaking into a smile. “Thanks, Akira,” she said.

Togami, for his part, felt even more surprised when he heard Akira’s observation. “Is this support system of yours really that powerful, Yumina?” He’d already seen what Yumina was capable of back in the Iida ruins, and apparently she could also take down a mech on her own? He and Reina were both floored to hear that the support system had boosted Yumina’s ability to such a degree.

But Akira shook his head. “No, that’s not the reason. True, the system is pretty impressive on its own, but merely using it wouldn’t let just anyone do what Yumina did. That’s her own skill you saw back there. I mean, before she started all that training, she did hold me back some—and that was with the support system too.”

Reina and Togami also desired strength, and they turned expectant gazes on Yumina.

“Actually, when we were in the Kuzusuhara depths, I *did* ask Akira to train me for about two months,” she said.

“You got this skilled in only two months?” Togami asked incredulously.

“What kind of training was it?” Reina demanded.

Yumina felt put on the spot, but she detailed the regimen Akira had run her through. Initially, Reina and Togami listened with rapt interest; but as her explanation went on, their expressions gradually changed.

“And so, I tried my best to move my powered suit separately from my own body. At first, it was too hard for me, but before long—and with the help of my support system—I was finally able to do it. Even so, for a long time, my body

couldn't keep up with my powered suit's movements, and I felt like I was always taking a beating."

The longer they listened, the worse her training sounded. As Yumina grimaced, recalling all the rigor she'd gone through, Reina's and Togami's faces also twisted as they imagined her pain.

"Thanks to all the recovery medicine I took beforehand, though, it didn't actually hurt that much. My senses were numbed, but they were still there—though there wasn't any pain, I could tell that my skin and muscles were mush. And my bones didn't feel like they were broken either—it was more like they'd been turned to mush too."

Reina and Togami had asked for these details out of simple curiosity, but hearing how Yumina had gone through the wringer, they were starting to wish they hadn't asked at all.

"But the expensive recovery medicine helped me heal up right away. Then, once I was fully healed, I'd injure myself again, and repeat this process throughout the entire session. When I went home and finally took off my suit, I remember I was always a little worried my body would just look like a formless blob."

The account of her harsh training continued for a long time. At one point, she mentioned that Akira had told her that if one aimed to be superhuman, they needed to train as though they were already one, and the same applied to anyone looking to achieve a normally unattainable level of strength.

"So whenever we ran into monsters, Akira would have me fight them, even in the state I was in. I'd also do scouting and surveying. Akira would go ahead of me on his bike, but I had to do everything on foot."

Reina and Togami turned to Akira, who averted his eyes.

"So anyway, that lasted for two months. There were occasionally break days in between, and I only trained on the days we went monster hunting; but looking back, it was pretty rough. Well, Reina? Did that help at all?"

"W-Well, more or less."

"Good. I guess it was worth recalling all I did. Not that I'd recommend it to

anyone else.” She smiled wryly—the pain was still too recent for her to manage a real smile over it.

Reina had the same look on her face. Yumina didn’t have to worry—no part of Reina wanted to undertake *that* training.

Togami, however, looked a little conflicted. Then, with a completely serious expression, he spoke up. “Akira, do you think I’d be able to handle that?”

“Hm? Of course not.”

“O-Oh, okay. I see.” Togami looked slightly deflated. The matter-of-factness of Akira’s answer made it seem like there was no doubt in his mind that Togami wouldn’t be able to handle it.

But Akira realized how he must have sounded and quickly moved to dispel any misunderstanding. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s not a question of whether you can manage it, or whether you’ve got the drive. The problem’s money.”

“What do you mean?”

“When we were working in the Kuzusuhara depths, our client footed the bill for all our consumables, like medicine and stuff. Yumina mentioned that, right? She had to take tons of expensive recovery medicine. I doubt you’d be able to cover a cost like that on your own.”

“Well, let’s see. Just hypothetically, how much are we talking about?”

“It was five mil a box, and there were, um, how many boxes in total again? Yumina, do you remember?”

“I just recall we used a lot. You bought a lot of ten-packs from that Katsuragi guy, I know, but I don’t think we used them all up.”

“So then that would be...”

As Akira tried to calculate the total number of boxes, Togami stopped him. “That’s all right,” he said with a small smile. “I don’t need to know the exact amount. It’s enough to know I wouldn’t be able to afford it.” Then he sighed. “Money, huh? It’s a catch-22—you can’t get stronger without money, yet you can’t get more money without getting stronger. It costs money to train and get

better gear too. Guess your success as a hunter really does depend on your finances. You know, Yumina, you're awfully lucky to be where you are right now."

"Well, I can't deny that. But luck's also a measure of skill, right?" she teased.

Togami chuckled. "Yeah, I guess so," he said with a grin.

Each hunter in the room had mixed feelings about all they'd heard and discussed, but their conversation ultimately ended on a light note. Finally, Shiori brought the evening to a close.

"Everyone, it's getting quite late," she said. "You all ought to get some rest if you want to be refreshed and ready for tomorrow. Kanae and I will keep watch overnight so that you may sleep without worry."

Akira nodded and stood up. "Thanks. That'll take a load off my mind. Just wake me up whenever you feel like switching out. Night!"

Yumina and Togami made similar offers to the maids, before following Akira and heading off to sleep.



As Togami lay in bed, he reflected on Yumina's training regimen and his own.

Previously, Togami had offered the Druncam veteran Shikarabe thirty million aurum to train him. But Shikarabe had been concerned Togami might give up halfway through. He had taken just a million aurum from the boy, promising only a million aurum's worth of training at first. If Togami wasn't all talk and made it through the first part of the training, *then* Shikarabe would accept the rest.

Knowing Shikarabe was testing him, Togami had accepted his challenge.

When his training with Shikarabe had begun, Togami had witnessed hell on earth. The veteran hunter would continue his relentless drills until Togami passed out—after which Shikarabe would smack him awake and the hell would go on. Only when Togami's fatigue was so severe that he could only stay conscious for a couple of minutes before passing out, and could no longer persist on determination alone, would they finally call it a day.

Shikarabe had also drilled knowledge of all the monsters around Kugamayama, both organic and mechanical, into Togami's head—their habitats, their behavior, and their weak points. He had the boy memorize them all, then made him come up with the most efficient strategies for their defeat. The veteran would deliberately take Togami to areas far more dangerous than the boy could handle and force him to fight powerful monsters from as close as he could get without putting himself in mortal peril. Then he'd have Togami struggle against the monsters as long as possible, knowing full well there was no way for the rookie to win with his current ability and gear.

Back at base, he would load the battle data from Togami's own scanner into a smart visor and have Togami wear it. As Togami relived an AR version of the battle he'd just fought, Shikarabe would meticulously and mercilessly point out all of his mistakes and weak areas. Then he'd order Togami to correct his errors in an AR mock battle, after which he'd point out the flaws in the boy's corrections until Togami's movements were absolutely perfect.

Shikarabe hadn't been bluffing—the brutal regimen, as rigorous in the classroom as it was out on the field, would have had the average rookie hunter running for the hills. Shikarabe had continued to goad Togami, saying he was free to give up whenever he felt like it, but this had only made Togami more determined to persevere. Even as he had been pummeled to the point of vomiting blood, he had summoned every ounce of his will to keep going.

After several days had passed, and the amount of blood he was spitting up on a daily basis had lessened, Shikarabe had ordered him to join Reina's team. Togami had been confused by this at first, but had done as he was told, and he and Reina had been together ever since.

Because the two young hunters were similar in overall skill, they could instruct each other, point out each other's flaws, and work together to improve themselves. And since they were in many ways nearly mirror images of each other, they could also look at one another and see themselves from a third-person perspective, as it were, making it easier to identify their own strengths and weaknesses.

At present, Togami had gotten Shikarabe to accept twenty-nine million aurum—only one more million remained before Shikarabe would fully acknowledge

Togami's ability. So the boy had gone into this job more eager and determined than ever—until that day, when he'd run into Akira and Yumina.

Akira's one thing, but I can't believe Yumina's gotten so skilled too. And she herself doesn't seem to realize just how good she is now. I guess after being Katsuya's flunky for so long, she instinctively downplays her own ability. Man, I told myself I wasn't going to look down on anyone because of my own prejudices anymore, but here I am making snide comments again. Get it together, Togami!

So he'd overcome Shikarabe's harsh training, had grown as a hunter alongside Reina, and knew he was much stronger than before. But maybe he'd also become a little too cocky and complacent? He needed to get a hold of himself. Then he remembered Yumina's description of her training regimen, and he belatedly realized why he'd asked whether he could survive the same. Somewhere in his subconscious, Togami had known doing so would be impossible for him, and yet he'd wanted Akira to deny it.

And here I thought Shikarabe's training was tough. Compared to what Yumina's been through, that was nothing. She's really something else, to stay strong through all that.

Though she'd said it as a joke, Yumina had commented that luck was a measure of skill. Togami was now beginning to see how true this was—to improve oneself, one needed the proper gear and training. Yumina had had the good fortune both to be trained by Akira *and* to obtain her powerful support system. But luck alone hadn't gotten Yumina through that hellish training; her determination, resilience, perseverance, mental fortitude, and focus—and likely other factors—were responsible. Even in the face of Akira's absurd training program, she hadn't folded.

There was no way this could be chalked up to pure chance.

Yumina's luck hadn't made her stronger—her efforts had. Togami was now capable of clearly recognizing this, and he was impressed, holding her in much higher regard than before.

Yeah, I admit it. I'd never be able to do the same thing she did. At least, not yet.

One day, though, he told himself, he'd reach that milestone. Therefore, even after Shikarabe accepted the entire thirty million, Togami wouldn't be satisfied with his progress. He'd seek out even greater strength—and stop at nothing to obtain it.



After Akira and the others had gone to bed, Reina stayed behind with a troubled look on her face. She, too, was thinking about Yumina's training.

Akira had judged that Togami didn't have the money necessary to undergo his regimen. But what about Reina? Even if it was cost-prohibitive to attempt the *exact* same thing, couldn't she use her wealth to produce the same results, at least to a degree?

Following the events in Mihazono, she'd asked Shiori and Kanae to train her. Shiori had stressed that she wouldn't go easy on her, and to be prepared accordingly. In fact, Reina had spat blood on more than a few occasions. But the training had paid off. She was now much more capable than before—so much so that she regretted not having asked sooner.

She'd also received a brand-new set of gear, far more advanced than what a rookie with her level of experience would typically use. Previously, in her bid to prove to others that she wasn't just some spoiled rich kid, she had intentionally used cheaper, lower-spec gear—as expected of a beginner like herself—in order to show off.

But no longer. Instead, she'd asked Shiori to prepare her the highest-spec gear obtainable.

With access to the right gear and the right training, Reina's abilities had grown by leaps and bounds. Upon meeting Togami for the first time since Mihazono, she'd been shocked not just at how much she'd improved, but at how easily she'd kept up with him in combat. She was proud of how far all her grueling efforts had taken her—until this day, when she'd run into Akira and Yumina.

Sure, Shiori and Kanae's training was much more intense than Druncam's, but it's a walk in the park compared to Yumina's! I wonder, were Shiori and Kanae still going easy on me all this time?

Of course, such might not have been the case at all. She knew she could just be overthinking things. But seeing Yumina's performance in the Iida ruins, and hearing the details of how she had gotten so skilled, had left enough of an impression on Reina to raise doubts about the maids in her mind.

Just then, Kanae called out to her. "FYI, missy, I wouldn't try and adopt that training regimen if I were you."

At first Reina thought Kanae was once again making fun of her for her incompetence, and she scowled in the maid's direction. But Kanae's face was deadly serious, and Reina drew back in shock when she saw it.

"Well, why not?" the girl ventured. "Yumina became an expert hunter in such a short time. Think of what that assistance could do for me!"

"Well, you're right in that it's efficient. But it's efficient to the point of disregarding the trainee's own well-being and safety. It's only for the desperate—people who don't care if their training kills them today, because they know they'll be dead anyway if they aren't stronger tomorrow. That's not you, so I wouldn't recommend it."

She spoke in a tone that sounded as serious as she looked. The fact that she'd dropped her usual carefree attitude and playful banter drove home to Reina the importance of this warning, so the girl stayed silent and listened.

"People often say there are no shortcuts to getting stronger," Kanae went on. "But that's actually a lie. There are plenty of shortcuts out there—like buying better gear and undergoing harsher training. And there's nothing wrong with searching for a method that works for you and gets you where you want to be. In fact, only a prodigy could just pick the first method they thought of and succeed at getting stronger, without weighing their various options."

Kanae's tone grew more stern. "But it's no good if the method's not safe. The regimen those kiddos described? It's like not wanting to take the long way around a cliffside, and instead crossing a chasm on a tightrope of death—while people are playing tug-of-war with the rope at either end. Most folks would fall and die—your chances of even reaching the other side are negligible at best."

Reina couldn't help but agree. But this raised a new question in her mind. "Then why did Akira even train Yumina like that in the first place, if she was so

likely to die trying?”

“It probably didn’t seem so dangerous to Akira kiddo. After so many brushes with death, he’s learned to thrive in that sort of environment, which is probably why he can cross that rope forward and back multiple times without any danger of falling.”

“But it’s Yumina who’s undergoing the training, not Akira.”

“Though this is just the impression I get, I think Akira kiddo has a bad habit of downplaying his own ability. He probably assumes that if he can do something, anyone can.”

“Oh, come to think of it...” Now that it had been pointed out to her, Reina could see how Kanae might be right.

“Y’know, that chick was joking earlier about how luck is a measure of skill, but that’s actually true. She doesn’t realize how lucky she is to still be alive right now. Sorry, missy, but I’m not gonna let you risk your life on something *that* reckless.”

Technically, Yumina hadn’t survived Akira’s training just because of luck—Akira had asked Alpha to make sure Yumina was always riding just inside the line between danger and death, weathering no more and no less danger than was necessary.

Still, though the two young hunters never realized it, Yumina was indeed lucky to have a presence like Alpha looking out for her.

Kanae broke into her usual merry grin. “In terms of my earlier example, you might have to take the long way around the mountain, but you’re making the journey in a race car rather than on foot. You’re getting training from me an’ sis, after all. Plus, if you feel like you’re going too slow, you can always tell sis to step on it. *She’s* the one behind the wheel, after all.”

Reina glanced at Shiori. Shiori glared sharply at Kanae, but Kanae just smiled back. So Shiori heaved a sigh and addressed Reina sternly.

“I certainly won’t deny that your safety comes first. But as far as it doesn’t present a threat to your life, I want you to know you’re free to control your own actions. Kanae, if you fill Miss Reina’s head with any more foolishness, I will

make you regret it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kanae said breezily.

Shiori sighed again at Kanae’s attitude. Reina watched them, smiling. She’d been afraid that Shiori and Kanae were going soft on her, but apparently she’d been worried for nothing.

She felt her spirits lift. “All right, I understand. Shiori and Kanae, keep training me in the same way you have been.”

“As you wish.”

“Roger dodger!”

“I’ll be heading to bed now. Wake me up when it’s time to change shifts, and I’ll help keep watch too. Good night!”

“Good night, Miss Reina.”

“Sweet dreams!”

Reina left the room. She climbed into her spacious, comfortable bed and closed her eyes. Then she drifted off to sleep with thoughts of working harder and growing stronger in her head.



The two maids headed outside to start their night watch. Here, their conversation wouldn’t be overheard by those inside.

“Kanae, what do you think about Mr. Akira’s information on the automaton—or rather, the source whence he got it?”

“Beats me. Could just be something they cooked up so they’d have a reason to send him to Iida, or perhaps Yajima and Yoshioka got the info from the same source we did. With just the kiddo’s account to go on, I can’t be sure.”

“Indeed,” Shiori said with a sigh.

“And even if our kiddos do end up stumbling upon a real automaton, there’s nothing to guarantee it’ll belong to Lion’s Tail. So don’t worry until there’s something to worry about, right?”

“Indeed.” Shiori sighed again.

“Be honest with me, sis—are you hoping they’ll find the automaton, or not?” Kanae asked.

“I don’t know,” the other maid said quietly.

“That so? Well, for what it’s worth, I won’t mind whatever you decide. No skin off my nose either way!”

All they had to concern themselves with was responding to whatever situation arose and handling it as needed—thus, worrying about what might happen was pointless. Reminding herself of this, Shiori turned her attention to watching the motor home’s surroundings with Kanae.

Chapter 161: The System's Flaws

After spending a night in the motor home Shiori had prepared, Akira and the others woke up early the next morning for another day of hunting relics in the Iida ruins. As a team, they decided on a plan for their search for the automaton, during which they would merely note the location of any other valuable relics they came across. If they discovered the automaton, great—if not, and no Old World automaton turned up even after searching several domes, they'd pick up the other relics on their way back.

First, though, they spent that morning going back through the first two domes and finishing their harvest of the relics there; they would not begin the automaton search in earnest until this was over. The previous day, Reina and Togami had taken point early on, then Akira and Yumina had taken over; so it was Shiori and Kanae's turn to be in front. As the team made their way through the ruined dome, they reached a long, wide corridor where they encountered yet another group of the same hairless beasts they'd fought before. However, these were larger than the others—in fact, their muscles looked overdeveloped, almost swollen. They watched Akira and the rest on the other side of the corridor with insatiable hunger in their eyes.

“Looks like we're getting some action sooner than I expected!” Kanae said with a grin. “I got this!”

These monsters were quite dangerous. The average hunter would have had to attack from a distance to stay alive—and if they ran out of ammo, their best bet was to run. Even if the hunter couldn't escape and melee combat was the only remaining option, they'd have to somehow make sure that they didn't end up fighting the whole pack at once, or they'd be done for.

But Kanae immediately charged right at the pack. Naturally, the monsters launched themselves back at her. The distance between them closed instantly, and they collided.

Kanae's right fist pierced the head of the monster in the lead, denting it as

easily as if it didn't have a skull. But momentum carried the gigantic beast forward. Wedged between Kanae's fist and the monster's own torso, the head popped off like a cork. The impact launched the headless beast into the air, spraying a fountain of blood everywhere before the corpse slammed into the ground.

But the rest of the pack weren't intimidated—they charged Kanae one after another, only to meet similar fates. Whether they leaped at her with open jaws or swiped at her with their front legs, she didn't even let them so much as graze her as she pummeled and kicked them mercilessly. Her blows bashed their heads, tore off their legs, and even ripped holes in their torsos, while the weaker ones were pulverized in a single hit. Firearms were the standard weapon of choice in the East—yet here stood a lunatic deviant who chose instead to face off against the wasteland's formidable monsters at close range.

Watching Kanae in action, Togami couldn't help but mutter his thoughts out loud. "Yeah, that settles it—she's nuts."

Togami had already known Kanae was tough—but seeing her fight, it became clear to him just *how* tough. He even found himself admiring her, in a way. Sure, she was wearing a powered suit for protection, but that didn't matter—seeing anyone who chose to fight a monster without a ranged weapon *and* was strong enough to send said monster flying would inevitably light a fire in someone else who was already seeking to get stronger.

Reina heard Togami's comment and smirked. "She's got to be good for *something* if she wants to earn her keep, since all she ever does is goof off." Of course, the girl didn't actually think Kanae was just resting on her laurels all the time—as her bodyguard, the maid was always prepared to respond in the event of an emergency. And the fact that a melee aficionado like Kanae had even gotten involved indicated a critical failure on Reina and Togami's part—by all rights, she shouldn't have needed to intervene. Yet despite knowing this, Reina was able to make lighthearted jabs all the same. She was clearly over her shock from yesterday.

Togami sensed as much, which brought a smile to his lips. "Yeah, you said it. Though since we're the ones with the guns, from now on let's try and keep her involvement to a minimum."

“Sure thing!”

As they grinned at each other, Kanae dealt the final blow to the last monster. She raised her leg high and brought it down toward its head. On its way to the ground, her foot sliced through the creature, pulverizing its skull and splitting its torso in two. The halves of the beast’s lifeless body collapsed to the ground in a heap. An enormous pool of blood dyed the floor red before being absorbed into the earth below.

Kanae made a 360 on the spot, sending the spattered blood and guts on her clothes and gear flying off by way of centrifugal force (this was less time-consuming than wiping them off manually). Satisfied that she’d been able to let loose for the first time in a while, she sauntered back over to the others in high spirits.

“So, Akira kiddo, what’d you think of *that*?”

“What do you mean? You took care of all the monsters and did your job. What else is there to think?”

“No, no, that’s not what I mean. Don’t you have any comments on how I did? Opinions?” She’d just wiped out a group of deadly monsters with nothing but martial arts. Such would have impressed any regular hunter, and her actions would have normally been considered worthy of praise.

But Akira had already seen Kanae fight Monica, clad in her Old World powered suit, in Mihazono. Compared to that, a mere pack of monsters hardly posed a threat, so he hadn’t been particularly impressed. Still, he tried to come up with an answer. “An opinion, huh? Well, wouldn’t it be a lot less trouble to just use a gun like everyone else?”

Kanae sighed and shook her head as if to say “You just don’t get it.” But all she responded with was “Seriously, what a dull answer.”

“You didn’t say you wanted an *interesting* opinion. You’d be better off asking the others for that.”

Kanae looked over at Reina and Togami expectantly. But as she was always the one teasing *them*, now they seized their chance for revenge as they took Akira’s side.

“Just use a gun already,” Togami said with a grin.

“Ditto,” Reina said, equally amused.

Kanae gave another exaggerated shake of her head that seemed to protest “Honestly, I just can’t with these kiddos.”

They proceeded further into the ruin until they reached a place that resembled an atrium, where they encountered yet another monster. Shiori noticed its presence first and ordered everyone else to step back.

They did as they were told, and several seconds later, a giant beast lunged from a corridor on the level above them, pouncing toward Shiori on the ground below.

Shiori calmly unsheathed her blade. She took a single step forward and swung as the monster passed overhead. The long, sharp blade traveled through its head and torso, bisecting the beast even before it landed. The monster’s halves collided with the ground, blood spilling everywhere as they tumbled along.

Shiori flicked her blade once to get rid of the excess blood, then sheathed it again. Her movements were casual, as though her feat a moment before had been nothing special for her.

Akira, having witnessed the work of a master up close, offered his impression. “Wow, cool!”

“Thank you, Mr. Akira,” Shiori said, bowing politely.

Kanae clearly looked unhappy. “Hey, kiddo, what gives?! You didn’t even bat an eye when I fought, but when sis does it, you’re all sparkly eyed?!”

“Huh? But what she did there was really impressive.”

“That’s not the point! Why don’t you tell *her* to use a gun instead too?!”

“Well, when you’re fighting at such close range, sometimes a blade really is a smarter choice. I mean, look—she took care of that thing no problem, right?”

“No, *not* right! I won’t stand for this! You just like sis more, don’t you?! This is blatant favoritism!”

“Who the hell cares?”

As their immature banter continued, Shiori sighed in exasperation. “Enough, Kanae. Drop it and let’s move on.”

“Aw, fine,” Kanae said with a pout, proving that she’d never been seriously upset to begin with, and followed Shiori.

Reina and Togami smiled wryly at each other and trailed after them.

As they moved on, Yumina suddenly had a thought. “Hey Akira, both Shiori’s and Kanae’s techniques seem equally amazing to me. Is there really such a great difference between them in your eyes?”

“Hmm... Come to think of it, why *do* I find Shiori’s bladework more impressive?” He’d just said what he felt—he’d never given any consideration as to *why* he felt that way. But since Yumina had asked, he mulled it over. “Maybe it’s because I feel like what Kanae did wouldn’t be too hard for me either?”

“Hm, so that’s the reason. Well, you did face a mech in hand-to-hand combat, after all.”

Akira had only meant it “wouldn’t be too hard” for him even without Alpha’s support. But Yumina didn’t know this, of course. She’d been under the impression that someone as skilled as Akira wouldn’t have a problem doing what Kanae *or* Shiori had done. *But then again, everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses*, she thought with a nod.



The invasive vegetation in the Iida commercial district had grown over not just passageways and doors but the shops’ display cases as well. Even if someone spotted a set of relics, they would need to get rid of the extraordinarily sturdy vines and creepers in the way before even thinking about taking their discovery home—yet another reason hunters tended to steer clear of Iida.

But for this team, the plants hardly proved an obstacle. Akira easily cut away a mass of vines covering a store shelf, grabbed the relics off the display, and handed them to Yumina. With her support system, she looked up the estimated value of everything he passed to her. Anything worth taking the two hunters would stuff into their backpacks before moving on. And unless it was obvious at

a glance that a relic was worthless, they were more or less grabbing and appraising whatever items they came across.

Togami and Reina were likewise paired up, with Togami grabbing relics and handing them off to Reina. Shiori and Kanae watched the team's surroundings, just in case.

At a certain point, Akira handed Yumina a cylindrical relic, and she stiffened for a moment.

"What's wrong, Yumina?" he asked.

"Huh? O-Oh, nothing!"

"Really? All right. Say, what was in that relic I just gave you?"

The cylindrical relic was wrapped up several times over, completely concealing its contents. But Yumina's suit was AR-compatible, so when she'd first looked at the relic, a catalog had popped up in her vision detailing what was inside.

Akira couldn't see this display himself—his gear didn't come with an AR function, and the relay that broadcast data to him from Yumina was currently offline. Nor had he asked Alpha to relay it to him instead: while the ruin's various AR signboards and pop-ups were useful when navigating a ruin, they got in the way during combat since they made monsters more difficult to spot. As Akira was an essential part of the group's overall firepower, it was more important for him to have a clear field of vision than to see the extra information. So it made sense to have Yumina take charge of gathering intel, in addition to appraising relics with her support system.

"They're, um, clothes. Just clothes."

Akira nodded and went back to work. He knew the designs of some Old World clothing were far removed from the sensibilities of the modern world, so he supposed a particularly bold one had momentarily caught her off guard.

Yumina gave a small sigh. Her support system judged the relic to be of considerable worth, so she stuffed it in her backpack.

Meanwhile, a similar exchange was taking place between Togami and Reina.

“Reina, what does your scanner say these relics are?”

“Oh, you know. Accessories, electronics, toys... Things like that.”

“Hm. Are any of them actually valuable?”

“Um, I wouldn’t know. The catalog doesn’t say.”

Togami had really only asked out of curiosity, so he dropped the subject and went back to work.

But Yumina and Reina exchanged glances, then looked away without a word. Despite their mutual silence, both understood the implicit message between them: “Don’t say anything if you don’t have to!”

Yumina strained not to let her embarrassment show. *So this is one of those shops. There was no AR sign on the door to suggest anything like that, so I didn’t realize. Honestly, why does this shop’s sign have to be the only one offline?!*

Reina, on the other hand, attempted to talk herself out of her bashfulness. *Okay, Reina, calm down. It’s no big deal. Relics are relics. Their purpose doesn’t matter, as long as they sell. If hunters fretted about every little thing like this they came across, they couldn’t make a proper living. The right move here is to act indifferent.*

Thus each girl tried to hide her agitation in her own way. The AR catalog display was of Old World design, so its technology was of course highly advanced. It displayed relics like clothes and accessories with detailed graphics and a model showing how the user would look wearing the product—and for certain devices, it even included videos depicting their proper use.

When Akira and Togami had innocently passed the relics to their companions, Yumina and Reina had each seen the blank model on the catalog assume the figure of the boy she was working with—and once the girl had taken the relic herself, the model had changed to her own image. The female hunters had needed every ounce of willpower to not splutter in embarrassment and blush furiously.

Shiori, meanwhile, kept a poker face and maintained an iron grip on herself to avoid showing any reaction, and Kanae just barely managed to suppress her own laughter.



After a number of round trips between the Iida ruins and the motor home, they called it a day. Because Iida was so unpopular and thus virtually untouched, they'd found a bevy of excellent relics there.

Togami was in high spirits as he imagined the ways he could spend his share of the spoils. As he and the others talked among themselves inside the motor home, he brought up one option he'd been kicking around. "Hey Yumina, if the support system were included, how much would one of those powered suits of yours run?"

"Why? Did I pique your interest enough to buy one?"

"Actually, yeah. Seeing how capable *you've* become, it's got me curious. I'd at least like to know more about it."

"Oh, in that case, one sec." Yumina sent a pamphlet for her support system to Togami's terminal. "There—I've shared some documentation with you so you can read for yourself."

The pamphlet was laid out like a shopping catalog. Togami perused it with a frown. "Hmph. Looks like the cheapest model's a hundred million, and that doesn't include the monthly fee to use the support system. Damn, that's expensive!"

"Well, seeing as Kiryou designed this pamphlet specifically for Akira, it only includes models for hunters at his skill level," she replied.

Togami turned to Akira. "Say, how much was that suit of yours?"

"Around six hundred million."

Guess the catalog's model was cheap after all, Togami thought. "Well, I definitely can't afford that on my own. I wonder if I could get Druncam to buy it and lend it to me somehow?"

"This might sound odd coming from a member of the desk jockeys' faction," said Yumina, "but since they're the ones lobbying for the adoption of that support system, I doubt they'll agree to let you use it. The only reason I got to test the system out was because I'm a part of their group."

“Oh, right, I never thought of that.” Togami’s head drooped a little, and he sighed. He still didn’t regret turning down Mizuha’s invitation to join the Group A rookies, but he was starting to realize the effects of being on the other side of the syndicate’s power struggle.

Yumina let the others take a look at the pamphlet as well. Reina’s budget was much higher than Togami’s, so obtaining the system seemed much more feasible to her. And seeing that money was the only thing keeping Togami from purchasing it, she turned to consult her financial manager, Shiori.

“What do you think? Would this support system be a good investment for us?”

“For *you*, miss, I would advise against it.”

“Oh?” Reina looked surprised. “But it seems like it would help me out by greatly boosting my strength, and perhaps be convenient in many other ways.”

Shiori’s expression hardened. “I acknowledge that it offers a degree of boosted performance in battle and is useful in other situations as well. But because it also aids the user in making decisions and planning courses of action, sometimes even making the decision *for* the user, I unfortunately can’t recommend it.”

Shiori added that were it only providing minor support like scouting and aim assistance, it would just be a harmless, highly advanced tool. But Kiryou’s all-in-one support system greatly assisted the user in *every* aspect of hunter work. Even when doing something as basic as hunting relics, it would recommend a ruin best suited to the user’s level, display the estimated value of the relics found, and even electronically send for a transporter if necessary. If they preferred, the user could also contact Kiryou via the system and ask them to handle the negotiation and sale of said relics.

It was designed to be the only support a hunter would ever need.

However, Shiori explained, if a hunter wasn’t savvy enough to only use the system’s more convenient aspects, and instead relied on it as a crutch, they’d eventually become dependent on it. And if they grew *too* dependent, they might unquestionably obey whatever the system recommended and never make their own decisions.

This was Shiori's main concern. "Tools are supposed to be used. As my job is to look out for your best interests, I cannot in good faith recommend a tool that might end up using you instead."

She sounded so harsh that Reina drew back. "O-Oh, I see. And Kanae? What do *you* think?"

"Depends on the question! But if you're asking whether I think you should use that system, I'm in agreement with sis."

She spoke in her usual teasing tone, but Reina could tell that she wasn't joking. Both her maids had now criticized her suggestion, and Reina's shoulders sagged a little. "Do you two really think I'd be that quick to rely on the system?"

"It's more like I can't guarantee you wouldn't," Kanae said. "In fact, I knew that system would be a poor choice for you the moment you tried to get sis's permission during our hunt today."

Reina looked puzzled. "What do you mean by that?"

"Considering your position, missy, you're supposed to be giving *us* permission to act, not the other way around. Sis should be asking for *your* approval instead. We're your attendants—you can talk to us, bounce ideas off us, pick our brains, even rely on us if you want. But needing our permission to make decisions for yourself? That seems kind of pathetic, don't you think?"

Much to Reina's surprise, she found Kanae was chiding her in earnest.

"Say that—just hypothetically—these ruins were far too dangerous for you as you are now. If you decided to go anyway, sis and I would defer to your decision. Sure, we might try to talk you out of it, especially if it's just gonna end in sis sacrificing herself to protect you, or me carrying you out of there. But ultimately, the choice is yours."

Reina automatically glanced at Shiori, who looked as poker-faced as ever.

"Do keep in mind that you are still in training, Miss Reina," she said. "We don't expect such decisiveness out of you just yet. But we also don't want to endorse the idea of a support system that might make you even more submissive in the end. Eventually, you'll need to shoulder the responsibility of your own decisions. Preparing you for that is one objective of your training."

The girl mulled over their words for a moment before replying. “So in other words, you’re still treating me like a kid who can’t decide anything on her own.” Then she grinned with determination. “Fine! If that’s how it is, I’ll work hard to temper that aspect of myself. Just wait, you two!”

“Very well,” Shiori said, bowing with a smile.

Kanae just smirked as usual. “We’ll see.”

All at once, Reina realized Akira and the others had been listening in on their conversation. “W-Well, it’s not like I’d be able to afford a suit that expensive either until we find that automaton, so let’s focus on that first, shall we?” she said, speaking a little too loudly in an effort to hide her own embarrassment. “Tomorrow, our search begins for real, so let’s all do our best!”

Togami smiled. “Yeah, good point. We’ve got an early start in the morning, so we should get some rest. I’m gonna turn in. Night, all.”

Akira and Yumina followed him out, and Reina got up as well.

“I’m also heading to bed. Good night, you two,” she said without turning to face them.

“Pleasant dreams, Miss.”

“Night!”

Reina could envision the expressions Shiori and Kanae were wearing right then—especially Kanae’s—so she made sure they couldn’t see her own expression as she headed to bed. And in fact, her attendants’ faces looked exactly as she imagined.



It was the third day since the team had arrived at the Iida commercial district, and their search for the Old World automaton had at last begun in earnest. For the past two days, they’d been exploring vast domes filled with many large monsters or navigating narrow spaces where such creatures were hard to spot, requiring extra caution. But starting today, they were officially moving as a full six-person team. With their combined strength, none of Iida’s monsters stood a fighting chance.

Yumina and Reina were sharing leadership responsibilities. They were the only two with AR-compatible gear, and Yumina had the aid of her support system besides.

“Now that we’ve pretty much searched all the areas that have AR markings, what should we do next?” Reina asked.

“Let’s look for signs that indicate restricted areas,” Yumina replied. “It might be locked up in a special storehouse somewhere.”

“Got it,” acknowledged Reina. “So we’re looking for storehouses instead of shops from here on?” Then a thought occurred to her. “Hey, your support system can help you explore ruins and hunt relics, right? Isn’t there a way you could, like, set it to search for where the automaton might be?”

“Hm. That’s probably doable, but it’s not really an option right now. If I did, Kiryou and Druncam might find out we’re looking for the automaton in these ruins.”

Yumina had accepted a commission for the city, so she had a duty to keep the details of that mission confidential; but as one of Druncam’s testers for Kiryou’s support system, she was also supposed to report her activities to both organizations. Given the situation, she’d judged that the info on the Old World automaton was something that should remain classified, and thus hadn’t mentioned it to either Kiryou or Druncam.

If she used the support system to search for the automaton, however, Kiryou’s development team would see that data. So she’d decided that while it seemed safe to tell it to search for places where valuable relics might be, telling it to search for the automaton in particular was off-limits. Since the system could handle general requests just as easily as specific ones, Yumina had only issued vague commands during the hunt thus far.

But then something occurred to her. “Wait, Reina—did you report to Druncam that you’re looking for the automaton? If so, and the cat’s already out of the bag, then I’ve been hiding it from them all this time for no reason.”

“Um...” Unsure, Reina shot a questioning look at Shiori.

Shiori noticed and answered in her stead. “I have reported nothing about the

automaton to Druncam. We obtained the tip as to its whereabouts from our own sources; thus, I do not feel an obligation to report on this matter to the syndicate.”

Yumina nodded. “All right. Then I’ll continue not relying on the support system. Guess we’ve got to do this the hard way!”

Overhearing their conversation, Togami looked slightly conflicted. “Oh, that’s a good point. If you used the system to, say, find an untouched ruin, you wouldn’t be the only one who knows about it.” Every hunter dreamed of finding a previously undiscovered ruin and striking it rich. But if the price of such a convenient support system was that you couldn’t have that ruin all to yourself, Togami felt a little less inclined to use it.

“Well, that would depend on the contents of your contract with Kiryou,” Shiori answered.

At that, Togami’s face lit up with hope.

Shiori explained that in order to increase the accuracy of its output, the support from Kiryou’s all-in-one system most likely pulled from a database of knowledge compiled from the aggregated information of many other users. So there was probably a clause in the user agreement that covered sharing data with the company.

But some hunters—like Togami—would surely see this as a deal-breaker. So chances were that they at least had some way to temporarily prevent any data that would actively hinder the user if it were spread around (like the discovery of an untouched ruin) from getting shared across the whole network. Kiryou would still receive the data, of course, but were required to respect user confidentiality. If they didn’t take at least a modicum of care with their customers’ information, they’d never gain the trust of those hunters skilled enough to comfortably afford products that cost hundreds of millions of aurum. So using the system wouldn’t necessarily mean giving up on his dream of having exclusive access to an undiscovered ruin.

Hearing this, Togami relaxed. “In that case, using it should be fine. Hm... I wonder if I can get Druncam to lend it to me after all.” At present, the syndicate’s budget for equipment was primarily going to the desk jockey

faction, but Togami hoped that maybe one day things would change.

However, Shiori wasn't finished. "If Druncam lent you the support system, Mr. Togami, it would unfortunately no longer be possible to keep your information confidential." Kiryou's obligation of confidentiality only applied to the official owner, in this case the syndicate—not Togami, who'd merely be subleasing the suit. So while his information might not get sent to outside organizations, it would certainly be shared with Druncam. After all, Druncam's members were most likely consenting to the sharing of their data whenever they borrowed gear from the organization, whether they knew it or not. Therefore, Shiori warned, if he didn't want to give up on the hunter dream, he'd need to borrow the support system from somewhere other than Druncam.

Togami understood, yet couldn't help but let out a small sigh. "So Druncam's not an option, then. But it's too expensive for me to buy on my own. What's the point of joining an organization in the first place if I can't borrow gear outside my price range just because of the company's stipulations? No wonder Shikarabe's always complaining." At present, Druncam wasn't providing Togami as much support as before—leaving him in the same boat as the Druncam veterans, whose plight he was starting to sympathize with.

But the boy continued, "That said, I get that this way's more convenient for Druncam, since it's an organization and all. And because most hunters start out as hopeless kids with no money to their name, they're willing to do the syndicate's bidding if it affords them a fighting chance. It's not like I can't grasp what the desk jockeys are thinking." As a rookie himself, he could understand the perspective of his fellow rookies—and also of their superiors, to a degree. Togami's current gear was a rental from Druncam, so he was already benefiting from being one of their members. And considering that the desk jockey faction was also handling the supply and management of said rental gear, he couldn't entirely disavow their actions.

Shiori, for her part, didn't disapprove of *how* the desk jockeys managed aspiring hunters, at least. "There's no question that integrating Kiryou's support system into Druncam would boost the efficiency of the entire organization. It would also increase their less-skilled members' capabilities, allowing them to fight more safely. From the organization's perspective, adopting the all-in-one

system is surely the right move. The question, then, is how far will their members allow the desk jockeys to control that initiative? Druncam is an organization made up of hunters, not employees.” As far as Shiori was concerned, hunters were all free to decide for themselves what they could and couldn’t tolerate.

But if the support system ultimately resulted in Reina becoming a follower—a drone—she couldn’t condone it. That was her sole criterion.

“Yeah, you’ve definitely got a point,” Togami said with a sigh. Hunters were risking their lives in the wasteland every day, so naturally they’d want the right to spend those lives as they saw fit. However much power they might gain by joining an organization, it wouldn’t be worth it if they couldn’t decide for themselves how to use that power.

Togami realized this, of course—but if the only other option was to remain a weakling and die miserably in the wasteland, was it really so easy to refuse? Torn, he looked to Akira for an answer. “Hey, Akira, do you want that support system of Yumina’s for yourself? If we end up finding this automaton and strike it rich, would you like to go and buy a couple together?”

“Er, well...” Hesitating, Akira glanced at Yumina without thinking.

“Don’t worry,” she said with a wry smile. “Regardless of your answer, I’m not gonna go around crowing ‘You said you’d buy one! Now you’re locked in!’ or anything. And if you say anything that might normally put me in an awkward spot, I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear. So you can answer honestly.”

“O-Oh yeah? That’s a relief. Then if I’m being honest, well, I don’t need it.”

Akira already had Alpha and her support, of course. But he also had a feeling that even if Kiryou promised confidentiality, he’d have a hard time keeping the company quiet if he visited a place like, say, Tsubaki’s district again. So he sensed the system would hinder him more than help.

Indeed, Alpha said with a smile. Why would you need anything like that when you have me?

Yeah. He smiled back.

Yumina was also grinning. “Well, I figured that was what you’d say.”

He looked surprised. “Really? How come?”

“Come on, I’ve shown you that pamphlet a number of times now, and you’ve never looked the least bit interested.”

“I-I see.” *She’s been watching me that closely?* Akira thought, blushing ever so slightly, but he didn’t say that part out loud.

“Plus,” Yumina added, “as amazing as the system’s assistance is, it’s still not enough to help *you* out much. I mean, you’re clearly stronger than I am even when I *do* have its support. A system like that would probably just hold you back.”

Next to them, Togami nodded in silent agreement.

“At first I thought you might at least find its relic appraisal function useful,” she went on, “but considering you’d have to load that massive CPU onto a vehicle and cart it around with you, it’s probably just more trouble than it’s worth. Am I right?”

“Yeah, you nailed it.”

“So that’s why I kind of already knew selling it to you would be a futile effort from the start.”

“I...see.” He didn’t know why, but he felt somewhat guilty and looked down.

Yumina smiled to cheer him up. “Well, there’s still hope. Even if the support system’s a lost cause, maybe you’ll be interested in some of the other high-spec suits Kiryou has to offer. If you could at least consider a Kiryou product for your next model, that’ll help me out just as much.”

“Okay.”

“All right, I’ll hold you to it!” she declared.

“All right— Wait, what?!”

He jerked his head up, meeting her gaze. She wore a big grin.

“Didn’t you say earlier you wouldn’t hold me to anything?”

“Only for the support system. I promised nothing about the other powered suits.”

Akira's face blanched as if to say "Shit, she got me!"

Seeing his face, Yumina couldn't help but snicker. "Just kidding! I wouldn't do that to you."

"D-Don't freak me out like that!"

"Sorry, sorry, I couldn't help it. But you really should be more careful about that kind of thing! A verbal agreement is still an agreement."

He answered with mock exasperation, "Fine, fine. I'll watch out from now on."

"*You* two are getting along awfully well," Kanae chimed in with a smug grin.

"Oh, really?" Akira deadpanned.

And Yumina said calmly, "We are?"

Neither of them seemed fazed by her teasing. So Kanae set her sights on Reina and Togami again.

"Missy! Togami kiddo! See that just now? *That's* how proper lovebirds act. Until you two can manage that level of composure, you've got no chance together."

The two were still so embarrassed by their own feelings for each other that instead of merely brushing off Kanae's comment, they felt compelled to take her bait. "Sh-Shut up!" they shouted in unison.

Satisfied, Kanae grinned ear to ear. Shiori merely sighed.

And Alpha stayed silent, scrutinizing Akira's behavior all the while.

Akira and the others spent the rest of the day searching the ruins. But they didn't find the automaton.

Chapter 162: Rivals

On the upper floors of the Kugama Building, dinner parties were occasionally held for the city's wealthiest to fraternize and make business deals with one another. Thanks to Inabe's support, Sheryl had established a footing at these parties as a prominent businesswoman.

She'd already become acquainted with several other guests at this party, all of whom Inabe had introduced her to. None of them had known about the deal between Inabe and Sheryl, but they were a part of Inabe's faction and couldn't question their boss. From Inabe's gaze, it was also clear they weren't to say anything unnecessary. Their silence had aided Sheryl in solidifying her position within Inabe's group.

While conversing with Inabe's subordinates, Sheryl had also learned things about the city's economy that everyone at a party like this would already be expected to know, helping to hone her rich-girl act even further.

Once she and Inabe were alone, however, they picked up the thread of a conversation they'd started earlier.

"So how are sales at the shop?" he asked.

"Business is booming, thanks to you," Sheryl said with a smile. "The goods you've graciously provided us have been flying off the shelves."

As payment for the batch of Old World data terminals Sheryl had given him, Inabe had provided Sheryl not with money but with a collection of valuable relics to sell at her shop. While none of them were quite as valuable as the terminals Akira had provided, many were at least good enough to be sold on the top floor of her relic shop, greatly contributing to her business's sales.

"Glad to hear it. Though I must say I wasn't expecting you to have even more of those terminals in reserve! Is that the last of them, or can I expect yet another set later on down the line?"

All the terminals Akira had given Sheryl after the Kuzusuhara segment of his

rank advancement commission had gone straight to Inabe without Kokuginya's appraisal. This was convenient for Inabe too, since the more terminals he had, the more easily he could make it appear as though they had been found in the section of Kuzusuhara he managed. But the fact remained that Akira had now delivered three batches of terminals to Sheryl. So regardless of whether he'd found them all in one trip and was delivering them piecemeal, or had made multiple trips to retrieve them, Inabe couldn't help but be curious about whether more would be forthcoming.

"I apologize, but even I don't know the answer, and I'm afraid that if I try to ask Akira, I might get on his bad side. So even if you ordered me to ask him, I'd unfortunately have to refuse."

"That so? Well, nothing for it then. As long as you handle the management of your source properly, that's all I ask." Until the terminals were "discovered" in Inabe's section of the ruin, their origin needed to remain unknown. Under no circumstances could it get out that Akira had found them elsewhere, or that they'd secretly been transported to Kuzusuhara.

"Naturally," Sheryl replied.

Their plan allowed for no mistakes or slipups on either end, and their conversation here served to reassure each other that they were aware of this. Then another of Inabe's subordinates approached him, bringing along someone she wanted the city executive to meet. Sheryl was a little surprised to see these two newcomers, but immediately plastered on an amicable smile.

"Hello, Katsuya. It's been a while since we last met, hasn't it?"

"Yeah, sure has, Sheryl." To Katsuya, Sheryl's smile seemed to say that she was congratulating him for making it here at last, where they could now stand as equals. He grinned elatedly.

However, Mizuha, the aforementioned subordinate of Inabe's, felt nervous that Katsuya might have offended Sheryl with his overly casual response. The executive had worked hard to prepare for the Druncam expedition right up until she'd left with Katsuya and the others. Thanks to her efforts, their excursion had been a great success, and the city officials were now paying close attention to both Druncam and Katsuya. Ultimately, the city had offered both of them an

opportunity to introduce themselves to the top brass—and so they had once again been invited to join the dinner party.

Despite Mizuha's anxiety, however, the conversation continued smoothly.

"Oh, I see," Inabe said after introductions had been made. "You're the ones Sheryl hired, then. But wait—wasn't that the commission to protect her warehouse? And didn't the warehouse get destroyed in the end?"

"That's true," Sheryl said, "but it would be far too unfair to pin the blame on Druncam. Rather, it was my fault for misjudging the strength of our opponent. Katsuya and the others did enough—no, more than enough—to justify their pay."

Hearing Sheryl defend Katsuya's team, Inabe grinned mischievously. "Oh yeah? But at the end of the day, they failed. Are you sure you're not just covering for him because he's your friend?"

"No, that's not the case at all. Rather, it's only because of your gracious support that I'm here today, so I wouldn't let my personal feelings factor into an important business discussion of yours."

Mizuha relaxed a bit. Even if Sheryl *was* just lying to cover for Katsuya, it didn't matter as long as she wasn't going to openly criticize the Druncam hunters in front of Inabe. Now she felt more at ease—it seemed her plan to promote Katsuya and his team to Inabe would surely prove successful.

But before she could open her mouth, a commotion arose among the party guests. The man at the center of the disturbance walked up to Inabe and the others with him, as the eyes of everyone else present followed him across the room. He wore a smug grin.

Inabe scowled. "What do *you* want, Udajima?"

As another city executive, like Inabe, Udajima supervised his own section of Kuzusuhara, and the two of them were rivals locked in a power struggle. Whenever they were both in attendance at one of these parties, they would each take measures beforehand to make sure they didn't run into each other. The dinner parties served primarily to foster positive relations between guests, in the hope that their business talks and deals would ultimately stimulate the

city's economy. Two executives waging their private conflict at these events would undoubtedly sour the overall mood, and so would be disadvantageous for the two executives themselves as well. So there was an unspoken agreement between them not to interact with each other at social gatherings like this.

Yet now Udajima had broken that agreement and appeared before Inabe. Everyone else present was watching with bated breath, wondering if they were about to witness an official declaration of war at last.

Udajima grinned smugly. "I'm not here to talk business with you, but *her*."

Sheryl was taken aback. "Me?"

"That's right. I came over to say thank you."

Inabe narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "For what?"

"Well, you see, that hunter of hers did some splendid work in my section of the ruin. Because he went in there and kicked all those powerful monsters to the curb, we've been able to collect more relics than ever. Sheryl, was it? You have my gratitude. You've seriously helped me out! Give that Akira kid my thanks too, when you see him next."

"I certainly will," Sheryl said with a cordial smile. Though Udajima and Inabe were rivals, Udajima was also a city executive, so Sheryl had to treat him politely.

Udajima then beamed at Mizuha. "And you're from Druncam's administrative branch, are you not? I'd like to extend my gratitude to you as well. The hunter accompanying Akira—Yumina, I think her name is—is one of yours, right? I've heard she did great work in my territory as well. I can't thank you enough."

"N-No, as long as our organization could be of use to you, that's all that matters," Mizuha said, putting on the best smile she could muster. She didn't want to incur the displeasure of a city executive, so this was the only way she could respond.

Finally, Udajima smirked at Inabe. "Now then, that's all I came over here for. Sorry to interrupt your business deal with Druncam—that *was* what this little meeting was about, correct?"

Inabe scowled. “No.”

“Is that so? Then surely you won’t mind if I propose a deal of mine first?”

Now caught in the cross fire between two city executives, Mizuha started to panic. But as it turned out, she didn’t have to decide between them.

“Do as you like,” Inabe spat. “If it’s going to benefit the city in the end, the means don’t matter.”

“The means don’t matter, eh? For you, that’s probably true.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Oh, nothing. Farewell!”

As he turned to walk away, Udajima glanced at Mizuha with a look that said to follow him. Flustered, Mizuha bowed politely to Inabe, grabbed Katsuya’s hand and hurried after him. Inabe himself had given her the okay to respond to Udajima’s proposal, so remaining here was no longer an option for her.

Katsuya also had no choice but to leave, a fact which he had mixed feelings about. Thanks to the tremendous success of their expedition, he’d finally attained a position allowing him to talk to Sheryl on equal footing. He’d thought he’d gained enough influence that they could be together at last.

But the machinations of the higher-ups had once again ripped that opportunity away. As a member of Druncam, he knew he couldn’t oppose the city—Mizuha didn’t have the status at Druncam to disobey a city executive, and Katsuya couldn’t disobey his superior. Once again, he was forced to realize that the interests of the organization he belonged to were tying him down.

His thoughts wandered back to Yumina. How she’d reached her hand out to him, saying she’d abandon everything in order to be with him. How he hadn’t taken that hand.

“This isn’t sufficient,” he muttered under his breath. “I need more power.”

He hadn’t accomplished enough. Not nearly enough. If he wanted to reach such heights that neither the city nor Druncam could jerk him around and that he could have both Sheryl and Yumina at his side, his current achievements weren’t going to cut it. Most likely, he’d always be under the thumb of the city

bigwigs until he made a *real* impression—like becoming the highest-ranked hunter in Kugamayama City.

Very well, that's just what I'll do, he thought to himself. *So I can be together with Sheryl and Yumina.*

His heart was set.

Once Katsuya and Mizuha had left, Inabe ordered his other subordinates away as well, leaving only Sheryl and himself.

“Now then,” he said sternly, “any idea what that was all about?”

“Not particularly,” Sheryl answered. “If I had to guess, it sounds like Viola’s handiwork. But Akira warned her he’d kill her the next time she tried anything, and it’s hard to imagine she thinks he’s bluffing. Not that I could kick her out anyway, now that she’s the one handling my entire plan.”

In other words, perhaps Viola *had* leaked information to Udajima as part of some scheme. But if Akira ever got wind of it—or even suspected she was involved—her life would be forfeit. So if she was involved, she likely wasn’t targeting Akira or anyone he was associated with. And with Viola largely heading up Sheryl’s own scheme, it would be difficult to remove her, even as a precaution.

“I see,” said Inabe. “I don’t know anything either. But my plan’s still in the preparation stages, and I haven’t even moved the goods yet. It’s too soon for him to have sniffed anything out.” Inabe was proceeding carefully so that his plan wouldn’t get exposed. Thus the Old World data terminals had yet to be transported to his section of Kuzusuhara, so he doubted Udajima was already onto him.

Based on their conversation, Inabe and Sheryl concluded that neither of them had accidentally leaked information to Udajima, nor did either suppose the other was lying. So their discussion turned to what Udajima’s true aim was and what he’d been hinting at.

“Any thoughts?” Inabe asked.

“Perhaps he was trying to secure Katsuya and his team for himself,” Sheryl

conjectured. Akira had eliminated many powerful, dangerous monsters in Udajima's territory during his time in Kuzusuhara, but now he was working in Iida. So Sheryl guessed that Udajima wanted to hire Katsuya's team to replace Akira. If the reports of his team's success on their recent expedition were to be believed, they were likely more than up to the challenge. But then Udajima had seen Mizuha attempting to promote Katsuya to Inabe instead, and so he had quickly intervened.

As for Udajima's insinuations, Sheryl suspected he had only been shooting in the dark. A man like him would likely assume Inabe was already cooking up a counterplan, so Udajima was probably hoping he could learn more by baiting Inabe and observing his reaction. And if he failed, he might at least incline Inabe to scrap, out of excessive caution, whatever plan the latter did have in the works.

Inabe listened to her reasoning and nodded. "Sounds like him. Then let's not read too much into it right now but stay on our guard just in case. By the way, Sheryl," he added, shifting to another topic. "What's your *real* relationship with that Katsuya fellow? He seems awfully taken with you. Are you deliberately leading him on?"

"No, nothing like that, nor do I plan to in the future."

"Really? Why not? Don't you think having someone as talented as he is on your side would be a great asset?"

"If you'd like to have him join *your* group, I'd be happy to mediate for you. But that's as far as I'll go."

Inabe could clearly tell from Sheryl's attitude that she wasn't the least bit interested in Katsuya. So he found it strange that Katsuya would be so smitten with her.

"Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Oh, but I do have one more question. How did you meet him, anyway? Did someone introduce you two?"

"No, not at all. I first met him in the city's lower district..." Sheryl regaled Inabe with the tale of her first meeting with Katsuya, as well as how he'd come to her for advice later on, without embellishing or leaving anything out. Inabe already knew she was from the slums, so she had no need to hide her

background from him, or the fact that she'd pretended to be a rich girl while talking to Katsuya. She also told him about the bad blood between Akira and Katsuya and explained how that had come to be.

"So thanks to all this," she concluded, "Katsuya really doesn't get along with my backer Akira very well. That's why I have no intention of bringing him to my side. If I did, there's a good chance my gang would collapse on itself."

"Now I understand. I'll keep that in mind when handling those two from now on. But, really, Sheryl, you sure are something else. Viola has a reputation for being a conniving witch, but I'd say you're not too far behind her."

Sheryl looked stunned, and didn't reply for a moment. "Um, may I take that as a compliment?"

"Sure, I don't mind."

"Th-Then thank you very much." She wasn't sure what Inabe was getting at, but some gratitude seemed in order anyway.

In fact, Inabe was reflecting on how a girl her age had not only gained the support of a hunter worthy of a rank advancement commission but had also (whether knowingly or unknowingly) seduced Druncam's top hunter. And it seemed to him that Sheryl was likely quite the conniving witch herself.



A week had now passed since Akira's arrival at Iida, and they had yet to find the automaton they were looking for.

In the middle of yet another day combing the ruins, Reina groaned. "We can't find this thing *anywhere*."

Togami tried to cheer her up. "Considering how huge this ruin is, we haven't even covered ten percent of it yet. We're sure to find the automaton at some point."

She didn't look any less disappointed. "Yeah, but still..."

"If you're getting tired of exploring, want to focus on getting some other relics instead? Just for a while?"

"That wouldn't be so bad, I guess. But you know, we haven't been home for a

whole week now.” Reina sighed. Life in the motor home was exceedingly comfortable by wasteland standards. Yet even this present level of luxury paled in comparison to the life Reina was used to back in the city, and she was starting to miss that treatment.

Then Yumina pointed at a derelict building. “Hey, everyone! How about we head in there next? Looks like it used to be an automaton store!”

Yumina and Reina could both see Old World signage in their AR vision, but Yumina’s support system provided additional information derived from its analysis of those signs. She was still trying to conceal their search for the automaton from the system and so hadn’t told it to prioritize such a relic; but here they’d run across a promising building by sheer coincidence, so any data tracked by the system wouldn’t give away what they were really up to. Yumina’s face brimmed with anticipation.

Reina also seemed pretty optimistic as they headed into the building, but she kept her expectations in check—until she saw what was inside and let out a cry of surprise.

In the center of the room—in plain view—were two cylindrical glass display cases. One housed a male figure wearing a butler outfit, the other a female figure clad in a maid uniform.

Old World automatons.

“No way! They’re actually here?!” Reina cried out joyfully as she ran to inspect the glass cases. The automatons both appeared completely undamaged. “And they’ve been perfectly preserved all this time! We did it!”

But then she looked at the floating sales panel in her AR vision. Looking dubious, she disengaged her AR function and looked at the automaton again with just her naked eyes. The sales panel disappeared from her sight, but the automatons remained.

“Thank goodness—they’re not just an AR display! They’re real! *We’ve hit the jackpot!* Our mission is a success!” The relics seemed in such perfect condition that she’d been afraid they were nothing more than an image in her vision, but she now laid that fear to rest. Joy filled her once more.

Yumina and Togami joined her at the cases. Seeing the automatons inside and the look on Reina's face, they were likewise convinced that the automatons were real, and the two hunters felt similarly shocked and elated.

"It says on the merchandise panel here that these are the latest models from Mitsuba Silvertech. And they were sold for"—Yumina peered at the text—"eighteen million coron?!"

"Eighteen million coron?! Holy *shit*! What does that even convert to in aurum? Let's see, currently one coron's equal to—"

Reina interrupted Togami's calculations excitedly. "Who *cares* about the exact amount?! I mean, they were sold for eighteen million coron *back then*! So they're worth even *more* now!"

"Oh! You're right! So if we sold just one of these, we'd net... Wow, I can't even imagine how much!"

Reina and Togami were both over the moon at their unbelievable success. But Akira just stared silently at the glass cases with a frown. The other two hunters finally noticed his expression, and their excitement calmed until they could think rationally. Finally, Reina spoke up, sounding anxious.

"Um, what's wrong, Akira? We found an Old World automaton, right? Are you not pleased?"

Akira didn't answer. He continued to stare at the humanoid figures within the glass case with an unmistakably skeptical look in his eye. An unsettled feeling was starting to steal over Reina when he finally murmured something.

"I think they're holograms."

"What?"

Reina's face went rigid as she spoke, as did Yumina's and Togami's. Behind them, Shiori stepped forward, completely calm, and illuminated the inside of one case with a powerful flashlight.

"Indeed they are," she confirmed. "The light doesn't change their shading."

An object's shadow was normally affected by light. But even in the intense beam from Shiori's lamp, the shading on the automaton had stayed the same.

Such was typical of a holographic display, Shiori explained.

As the three young hunters stood open-mouthed in disbelief, Kanae merely grinned. “Well spotted, Akira kiddo. Unlike the others, you didn’t freak out and stayed calm. Perhaps you realized the truth from the start?”

“No, but I experienced something similar once, so I did have my doubts.” Recalling the display window that had seemingly held so many valuable relics but was actually a holographic promotional poster, Akira couldn’t help but grimace.

“I see. Judgin’ from that expression, must’ve been a harsh lesson to learn.”

Akira didn’t feel particularly disappointed, even though his doubts had been right on the money, because he’d felt suspicious from the start. Reina, on the other hand, fell to her knees in despair.

Reina had lost all motivation to continue, and they figured this was as good a point as any to take a break; so they decided to stay in the abandoned automaton store for a while longer and rest.

Shiori quickly set up a portable table and chairs for them all. The table, quite compact when folded up, was surprisingly large when expanded to its full length. She even went so far as to spread out tablecloths and prepare refreshing drinks for everyone.

Reina slumped over the table with her head down. She knew Shiori was watching her from behind, but the girl couldn’t even muster the will to correct her posture.

“Why did they put holograms right *there*, of all places?” she said in a monotone. “It’s so misleading...”

Sitting opposite her, Togami tried to console her by agreeing. “Yeah, for sure.”

Yumina was also sitting down and resting, but Akira still gazed at the holograms, looking utterly fascinated. Curious, she stood up and asked, “Akira, you’ve been staring at those for a while now. Do you really find them that intriguing?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I see. I guess all guys really do go crazy for maids, then.”

Akira digested what she’d said for a moment and then, feeling that she was about to have a grave misunderstanding, held up a hand. “Hang on! What does *that* mean?”

“Just what I said. You, like all the other guys I’ve seen, have a thing for maids. You do, don’t you?”

Kanae butted in at that moment, knowing full well she was only going to complicate things. “Did I just hear Akira kiddo’s into maids? Oh dear, now I feel a little embarrassed!”

Akira merely dismissed this with a flat “No.”

But Kanae ignored what he meant and made an exaggerated face of surprise as she pointed at the automaton in the butler outfit. “Oh? Then perhaps you swing this way instead? Ah, that makes sense! No wonder you weren’t fazed even when that woman was following you around in *that* getup back in Mihazono.”

“No! What I’m interested in is the Old World itself! When I see that things like this automaton were commodities then, I just can’t help but imagine what that world was like.”

Yumina nodded—as did Kanae, who’d known what he meant from the start and felt satisfied at the reaction she’d gotten.

Akira gave a small sigh and diverted the conversation in a new direction. “Still, why do these things have maid and butler uniforms on, anyway? Are automatons like servants or attendants?”

“Maybe the demand for that sort of thing was high even in the Old World?” Kanae suggested. “Some automatons sold back in the city are also dressed like this, even though they’re made in the modern world.”

“Modern automatons? Right, since we have to specify ‘Old World’ automatons, it would stand to reason that modern ones exist too, huh?” Akira mused. “By the way, how much do the modern ones run?”

“Depends on their functionality,” Kanae answered. “The ones I mentioned just now go for around a billion aurum, though.”

“A *billion*?! That’s crazy expensive!”

“Naturally,” she said with a shrug. “They’re a luxury item only the wealthy can afford, after all.”

“A luxury item? Well, if the modern version’s that pricey, I can’t even begin to imagine what an Old World one would fetch today—”

At that moment, Akira, Shiori, and Kanae all felt a presence in the direction of the entrance and immediately assumed defensive stances. Yumina and the rest noticed an instant later and also prepared to fight. Even Reina switched into battle mode, knowing this was no time to feel dejected.

How many are there, Alpha?

Twenty in all.

Twenty? In a deserted ruin like this, that’s way too many to be a coincidence. I wonder what they want.

The vegetation in this area reduced the accuracy of hunters’ scanners, yet the newcomers were close enough now that both parties could clearly detect the other. Akira’s scanner indicated that they had stopped before entering the building, so the other party was obviously wary of those inside.

In the wasteland, no encounter was guaranteed to be friendly. It was precisely because both parties were well aware of this obvious fact that neither wanted to invite unnecessary suspicion. When trying to avoid a confrontation, the best option was to keep your distance. If the opposing party stepped forward, it was advisable to step back. So Akira and the others advanced, expecting their opponent to retreat.

But they didn’t. On the contrary, the newcomers began to fan out as though to seal off access to the store. Soon afterward, a voice came through the short-range local channel on their comms.

“This is Kurosawa, commander of the unit waiting outside. I’d like to speak with your leader or representative. If you decide to comply...”

He spoke in a tone that made it clear he wasn't some common bandit. Just by hearing it, Reina and the others could sense that he was extremely skilled, and their faces became grim.

Except for Akira, who reacted more to the name the man had given, since he remembered it. "Kurosawa? Er, this is Akira. Do you remember me? We met each other when I was on Shikarabe's team."

"Wait, *Akira*? What are *you* doing here?"

Kurosawa remembered the boy, of course. The moment he realized who was on the other end, he dropped his businesslike tone.

"Actually, it'll be better if we talk face-to-face. I'm heading your way now, so don't shoot. Got that? Don't shoot!"

Kurosawa cut the transmission without waiting for Akira's reply. As their expressions turned from wariness to utter confusion, Kurosawa appeared at the entrance.

"It's me. Don't shoot. You're not gonna shoot me, right?" He said the last part in a joking tone to show he meant them no harm as he approached.

Walking up to Akira and the others with a grin, Kurosawa set aside his personal feelings for the moment to objectively evaluate the strength of Akira and his team.

Three of them are the main force that took down the three-billion-aurum bounty, so they're powerful enough to go toe-to-toe with a woman in Old World gear. Another one accompanied Akira in the Kuzusuhara depths. And there are two others I'm not sure about. A fight was already out of the question the moment Akira got involved, so maybe the strength of the rest of his team will be enough to convince my unit and the client to retreat.

Taking care not to let the others notice his appraising eye, Kurosawa spoke. "Once again, the name's Kurosawa. I'm the commander of the unit outside. So who's your representative? I'd like to chat with them."

Akira's team glanced at one another. Kurosawa followed their gazes and, since their eyes didn't fall on any one person, deduced they hadn't decided on a

leader. So before they could choose a representative, Kurosawa nominated one himself—someone he knew lacked deception and negotiation skills, and thus would be the most convenient for him. “Well, you’re probably the strongest one here, Akira, so you’ll do. Been a while since we last met, huh? What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Right back at you. Why are *you* here?”

“I’m out here with this unit hunting relics. Normally this is a pretty unpopular ruin for hunters, but that’s only because it’s out of the way and the vegetation’s a pain to deal with. The monsters aren’t much of a threat, and the relics here are actually pretty valuable, so it’s a good fit for someone like me who likes to overprepare and play it safe anyway.”

“Oh, okay. We’re also relic hunting, and our reason for being here is pretty much the same as yours.”

Kurosawa didn’t miss the relief on Akira’s face—the boy clearly thought he’d successfully covered something up. So Kurosawa decided to mention what he thought the boy was trying to hide, and if Akira already knew about it, Kurosawa wouldn’t need to hide anything on his end either.

“Relic hunting, you say? You wouldn’t be hunting for an automaton, would you?”

Akira narrowed his eyes. “How did you know that?”

The fact that Kurosawa had seen through him instantly raised Akira’s suspicions. But just before Akira’s eyes turned hostile, Kurosawa continued.

“Actually, that’s what we’re searching for too. It makes sense that two teams in Iida would be after the same thing, right?”

“Has the news of the automaton really spread that quickly?”

“Do you see this place getting swarmed by a bunch of run-of-the-mill hunters? The news still hasn’t reached the masses. But for those with the right connections, it’s a different story.”

Kurosawa’s excuse sounded plausible, so Akira lowered his guard. The older hunter perceived this as well and continued.

“So, since our objectives are the same and all, how about we team up? Neither of us have found what we’re looking for so far, so we might have better luck working together.”

Akira looked wary again. “How do you know we *haven’t* found it?”

“Oh, come on. If you’d actually discovered it already, other hunters wouldn’t have been able to enter its storage space,” Kurosawa replied matter-of-factly.

But at that, Akira just looked confused.

“Whoa, whoa, don’t tell me you don’t know what you’re supposed to do with the automaton once you find it!” Kurosawa exclaimed, a little taken aback.

“Sure I do. Even if we find the automaton, we’re not to touch it or activate it. We’re supposed to leave it where it is and notify a specialist, right? And because we haven’t secured the area, you judged that we haven’t located it yet.”

There was a proper procedure, widely known among relic hunters, for handling an automaton if they ever ran across one. The hunters weren’t to activate the automaton under any circumstances, even if it was offline—they had to keep their greed in check and contact the specialists to handle said automaton instead. Many hunters in the past had chosen to ignore this protocol and activated it on their own anyway—and nearly all of them had ended up dead.

By Old World rules and standards, hunters were nothing more than petty thieves breaking into and looting stores through brute force. While all the automatons activated thus far had varied by model and individual details, they all shared this perception. Not wanting to be controlled by a thief who’d obtained them through illegal means, the automatons had used military force both to defend themselves and to preserve their commercial value. Some had even gone on to assess their surroundings and enter an emergency state to maintain public order according to Old World standards, taking further steps to eliminate anyone they perceived as unlawfully occupying territory and buildings. Because Old World automatons were generally extremely powerful, a number of those who’d gone rogue had been marked as bounties with high rewards.

Kurosawa let out a rather exaggerated sigh of relief. “Don’t scare me like that. If you weren’t aware of the procedure and had activated the automaton, we’d have an Old World weapon out there wandering the ruins right now!” He expelled another sigh, then returned to the topic at hand. “So anyway, want to search together? I don’t mind if your whole team joins ours. You’ll all be moving under my command, but you should already know how capable of a leader I am. And I promise not to reduce your cut of the reward for joining us only midway through the operation.”

“Sorry, but we’re gonna have to pass on that,” Akira said. “I’m already wrapped up in some troublesome circumstances as it stands. I don’t want the discussion surrounding the reward to get any more complicated than it already is.”

Kurosawa nodded as Akira briefly detailed those circumstances to Kurosawa. “I get it. If you guys travel with us, the reward will need to be split between you and Yumina, Reina’s group, Druncam, the city, *and* us. That *would* be a pain.”

“You got it. If you’re really adamant on us joining, though, you’ll need to convince Reina instead of me.”

“How come?”

“Because her group’s situation is gonna be the most annoying to negotiate around. If you can get *her* to agree, I won’t refuse either.”

“Excuse me?!” Reina cried out in surprise, partly because Akira had passed the buck to her so abruptly, and partly because she was shocked to hear that he found her group the most troublesome to deal with. But rather than standing there in a stupor, she suddenly made a face like she’d realized something and quickly brought both hands to the sides of her head—narrowly preventing Kanae, who’d suddenly appeared behind her, from grabbing it once again.

“Wow, way to react, missy! Nice job!” In a rare show of praise, Kanae beamed, dropping her hands once more.

Reina grinned for a moment, feeling proud of herself, then faced Kurosawa with a serious expression. “I apologize, but I’ll have to decline as well. Just like Akira said, involving more people will only make negotiating the reward more complicated.” Then she smirked ever so slightly. “And even though Akira

acknowledges your skill as a commander, I think we'd rather decide on our own course of action. If you can allow that, we might consider it."

Kurosawa also grinned, having gotten the message. "Fine, fine, I'll lay off. But that means we'll be rivals, racing each other to find the automaton first. Are you cool with that?"

"That's fine with me," Reina said.

"By the way, I'm almost certain our team will find it first," Kurosawa added. "Just keep in mind that I offered to join forces, and you guys refused. Don't hold a grudge against me afterward, all right?"

"We won't. And if we find it first, don't hold it against us either."

The commander and the heiress grinned, each shouldering the responsibility for their decisions while simultaneously taunting their opponent.

After leaving the derelict automaton store, Kurosawa rejoined his team. "Let's go. If we hang around here, the group inside will be too wary to leave."

"Roger," a subordinate said. "So in the end, what's the verdict?"

"No issues. The plan stays the same."

With that, Kurosawa and his team departed the area.

Motivated once more, Reina spoke up enthusiastically. "All right, break time's over! We've gotta find that automaton before those guys do! Let's go!"

Togami was glad to see that Reina's spirits had lifted, but wanted to make sure she wasn't just spinning her wheels. "How about we settle on a plan first? If we merely search around haphazardly, we're probably gonna lose. They've got advantage in numbers, after all."

"Oh, good point. Hmm, what to do...?"

Togami had successfully kept Reina from rushing off on an emotional high, and now he also began to consider what they should do from here on out. But in the end, no good ideas came to mind.

It was Yumina who first voiced a suggestion. “Since it’s come to this, how about I just ask the system for advice?”

The only reason she’d tried to keep any information secret from the system was so they’d be the only group who knew about the automaton and therefore wouldn’t have any competition. Now that Kurosawa and his team had emerged as rivals, the situation had changed—her group no longer had that advantage. So there was no longer any point in concealment.

Of course, if they used the support system to search for the automaton, Kiryou and Druncam would also learn of it, meaning they might have even more rivals to contend with. But none of that mattered if Kurosawa beat them to the punch. So Yumina decided that going forward, they ought to utilize all the support they had. “Plus,” she added, “if we do end up finding the automaton thanks to the support system, it’ll make a good advertisement for the system itself. So I think it’ll be more in Kiryou’s benefit to cooperate with us than to compete, and to offer us even better support through their system. What do you think, everyone?”

Akira was the first to nod in agreement. Reina and Togami couldn’t think of any better plans, and neither Shiori nor Kanae felt the need to make Reina reconsider her opinion, so they didn’t object either.

“Great. Then we’ll go with that,” Yumina said, and promptly configured her system’s settings to search for the presence of an Old World automaton in the Iida Commercial District Ruins.

The system immediately informed her that the existence of such an automaton was highly likely and indicated the locations of several more automaton stores that might be worth checking, as well as their complete floor plans. The store they were currently in was one of the areas it suggested, proving the accuracy of the system’s location data.

Everyone was surprised, and Akira exclaimed, “No way! You’re telling me we could’ve done this from the start all along?!”

Yumina, who was equally shocked that the support system had instantly offered this much aid, couldn’t help but smile wryly in agreement. “Well, up until now we weren’t able to, so no use complaining about it. Let’s just focus on

what we need to do from here on.”

Reina was more fired up than ever. “Now that we know where to look, this’ll be easy! Thanks to your system, we’ve got the advantage again! Let’s move out!”

With that, Akira and the rest resumed their search and headed to the next closest store the system suggested.

A short while later, Kurosawa brought his troops back to the abandoned store’s entrance.

“All right, they should be gone by now. I’ll head in and check around inside, just in case. You all stay here and prepare to secure the area.”

“Roger. But what will you do if that group is still in there?”

“Then I’ll just act like I came back to convince them to join us again.”

“Ah, makes sense. That’s why you invited them the first time even though you knew they’d turn you down, right?”

“Well, something like that.”

Kurosawa entered the automaton store by himself. After confirming that Akira and the others were indeed absent, he called the rest of his team in to secure the building.



Akira and the others made their way through lida toward the next automaton store. Now that they knew where they were going, they proceeded quickly and without incident, kicking to the curb any monsters they encountered along the way with the strength of a full team of six. It wasn’t long before they reached their destination.

But when they arrived, they encountered members of Kurosawa’s unit, who were already in the process of securing the building. One of his men noticed Akira’s team approaching and called out to them over the wireless.

“You guys the team Commander Kurosawa mentioned? We’ve already searched and secured this store. Did you have business with the commander? If

not, and you'd rather avoid conflict, I'd turn back if I were you."

Reina responded, slightly flustered. "You secured the store?! Does that mean you found the automaton?! And so quickly?!"

"Sorry, but I can't answer that question. If that was all you came here to confirm, then please leave. That's all."

The transmission cut off. As Akira and the rest exchanged glances with one another, Yumina had a suggestion.

"I doubt we'll learn any more by staying here, so how about we head to the next location?"

None of them objected, and they headed to the next closest automaton store.

Some time later, Akira and the others wore grim faces. The stores were all exactly where Yumina's support system had indicated, and they'd visited all six remaining locations—yet all of them were occupied by members of Kurosawa's unit.

Reina held her head in her hands. "Why is this happening?"

Togami looked just as distraught. "Normally, if they beat us to the punch like this, I'd think they bought a map of the ruin from a surveyor, or that they already knew where the automaton stores were beforehand. But I wasn't expecting them to have a large enough unit to secure all eight locations at once. At this rate, we'll lose to the difference in numbers alone. Is there anything we can do?"

Even knowing where they needed to look, they'd still taken time to get there. After visiting so many locations, the sun was already starting to set. Concerned, Yumina made another suggestion.

"Let's hang it up for today, guys. We don't want to be out here searching when it's dark."

They all nodded and decided to call it quits for the day. But before they could leave, Shiori spoke up.

"In that case, there's a place I'd like to visit on the way back. Are you okay

with that, Miss Reina?”

“That’s fine with me, but where is it?”

“The first automaton store we visited.”

Unlike when they’d visited the other stores, they already knew from their first visit there was no automaton inside that store, so Reina couldn’t fathom why Shiori would want to go back there. But guessing that her attendant had a good reason for it, she agreed anyway.

Thus, Akira’s team made their way back to the first store they’d searched—only to find Kurosawa’s men were now occupying it as well. Even Akira’s mouth dropped open in surprise.

“Seriously?! Kurosawa should already know there’s no automaton here, so why is he occupying this store too?!”

Yumina and Reina looked just as shocked. But Shiori, the one who’d requested to come here, didn’t seem surprised in the least. A grave look crossed her face for a moment before she turned to her master with a calm smile.

“Now then, Miss Reina, shall we return home and rest?”

“Sounds good,” the girl replied.

Seeing Shiori’s unbothered smile, the rest of them were also able to regain their composure. Together, they headed back to the motor home.



Kurosawa was inspecting the holographic automatons inside the first store when one of his subordinates came to report.

“Akira’s team came here again? What did they say?”

The man, whose name was Rodin, answered, “Nothing. They just approached the building, then left.”

“I see. Then there shouldn’t be any problem. If they ever come back and ask any questions, just say you’re not allowed to answer—don’t give them any information whatsoever. They’ve probably already realized what we’re up to,

but we're not obliged to verify their suspicions."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

Kurosawa went back to scrutinizing the automatons—specifically, the one in the maid outfit. Rodin eyed him.

"Hey Kurosawa, to complete the mission, we'll need to obtain one of those automatons, right?"

"Yeah, but it's not like it'll belong to us. Still, selling it to the client will make us a ton of money, even after expenses are deducted. We'll all be rich."

"I get that, but just level with me—how likely do you think we are to succeed?"

"I'd say about twenty percent."

"Twenty?! That's *it*?!"

"Are you nuts? That's more than high enough for me." After all, if the info was wrong and there wasn't any automaton here for them to find, the mission would have been a failure from the get-go. However, Kurosawa reasoned, if the chances of finding it were fifty percent or higher, the client would most certainly have sent their own unit out to retrieve it instead of going through the trouble of hiring a group of hunters. So the likelihood of success had to be low if Kurosawa and the others had even been offered the opportunity to search. Yet the client wouldn't have shelled out the money to organize such a large unit if they thought the operation was likely to fail. Therefore, their chances of success were likely somewhere in the middle—in other words, twenty percent or so.

Rodin nodded and sighed. "I see. Only twenty percent, then."

"Bingo."

"That's a little disappointing," Rodin persisted. "Even if I couldn't take it home with me, I was kind of hoping I'd get to see the real thing at least once."

"Even if we do find it, it's not like we could touch it anyway, so how is looking at this hologram any different?" Kurosawa pointed out. "You can look all you want right here." Then Kurosawa recalled seeing Shiori and Kanae on Akira's team, and became lost in thought. *Those two women were wearing maid*

uniforms—must be the Druncam hunters Shikarabe was talking about before. And one definitely looked like the real deal—though I’m not so sure about the other.

He considered bringing this up to Rodin, just to have something to talk about, but then saw the man staring at the hologram in fascination and decided against it. Kurosawa had a feeling that if he mentioned the maids, his subordinate might get a little *too* excited.

A surprising number of hunters, Kurosawa knew, had imagined they could handle Old World automatons without an expert’s assistance and, even knowing the risks involved, had gone ahead and activated them. Letting a specialist handle everything meant the hunter couldn’t claim “finders keepers,” after all. And paying a professional to disarm an automaton through skilled persuasion and negotiation, without dismantling it and thereby ruining its functionality, was also incredibly expensive—most hunters couldn’t afford it. So instead of paying the extra fee for maintenance and handling, they’d usually sell valuable automatons to the specialists, who would put them up for auction.

If money was a hunter’s main objective, of course, the auction might suffice. But some—quite a few, in fact—were captivated by the very idea of finding and employing an Old World automaton out in the wild. In fact, though it was extremely rare, there were instances of reasonable, docile automatons who had immediately acknowledged the hunter who’d activated them as their new master. Those hunters had gone on to become incredibly successful, thanks to the power of their new automaton companion, and human and machine alike had enjoyed a cooperative, fruitful partnership together.

The problem, however, was that many others had wanted that same experience for themselves. And so it would happen that some hunter, fortunate enough to come across an automaton at last, would fear missing out on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. They thus felt compelled to press their luck even further, throw caution to the winds, and activate the automaton on their own.

But we’re out here searching for one because we were hired to. Even if we secure the automaton, the client has the rights to the machine, not us. It’s never going to be ours in the first place. I hope Rodin has already realized and come to terms with this. I want to think so, but...

Kurosawa glanced once more at Rodin's face, which was focused intently on the hologram of the maid. And though he hoped that his subordinate knew better, Kurosawa couldn't be sure—in part because he understood exactly how Rodin felt.



That night, resting in the motor home, Akira and the others discussed their next move. They all agreed that Kurosawa's unit had most likely occupied every automaton store in Iida by now, so there was no need to spend the next day checking the rest. But none of them could figure out how they should proceed instead.

Akira wore a conflicted expression. *Alpha, any ideas?*

If it were just you and me, as when we went to Tsubaki's territory, I'd have some ideas. But they wouldn't work at the moment.

Does that mean you know what's going on here and what we need to do?

Indeed, but I can't tell you the answer. After all, if Yumina or the others ask you how you found out, you can't let them know about me, right?

Alpha deliberately chose her words to suggest that his companions—like Yumina—were only holding him back. But this went right over Akira's head, and he took her statement at face value.

Yeah, I suppose not. Really, though, why would they occupy a store if it didn't have an automaton?

For all intents and purposes, an automaton search is still a relic hunt, and Old World automatons are relics. Now, that ruined building was once an automaton store. That's the only hint I'm giving you, so start figuring things out from there.

Akira did as he was told and thought about this. Finally, realization dawned on him. *Of course! Relics eventually get restocked!*

You got it. Way to go!

He beamed, proud of himself for arriving at the correct conclusion on his own. Alpha rewarded him with a smile.

Akira hadn't said any of this out loud, of course, since he was conversing with

Alpha via telepathy. Even so, Yumina noted his expression and sudden change in attitude.

“Akira, did you perhaps think of something?”

“Oh—yeah. Kinda.” He realized he’d accidentally let his emotions show on his face. *No wonder Alpha’s so hesitant to tell me anything*, Akira thought. Then he answered, “Well, Kurosawa’s unit went to the trouble of securing the empty shops, right? I couldn’t understand why he’d do that, and it was bugging me, so I thought for a while. Then I realized—he’s probably planning to grab the automaton once it gets restocked.”

Even if a shop within a ruin were divested of all its relics, new relics of the same types would reappear after a fixed amount of time. Rumor had it that this was because the Old World delivery systems were still active, restocking relics even after all this time.

Nevertheless, an Old World automaton wasn’t something that could be restocked overnight. It would take quite a while—long enough that most hunters who visited Iida wouldn’t even find one by chance. But Kurosawa’s group had somehow determined when the automaton was likely to be restocked, even if they weren’t sure exactly which store it would show up in. This was why they needed to occupy every automaton vendor in the ruin, just to be safe.

At least, so Akira had deduced, he told them. “Also,” he continued, “that hologram made me think. However unpopular a ruin like Iida is, if an actual automaton had been left behind in such a conspicuous location, someone surely would’ve spotted it by now. But since that’s what the store sells, it wouldn’t be strange at all to have *real* automatons on display, right? So what if those holograms are just placeholders while the store’s out of stock, which will get replaced with the real items later?”

Reina grew more excited than any of the others, partly because she’d been the most hopeful when she’d first laid eyes on the hologram. “Oh, of course! That explains why even though the automaton inside the glass case was a hologram, the case itself was real!”

The others agreed that Akira’s guess must be correct, or at least not too far

off. With this new information, they hashed out a plan, then headed straight to bed so that they'd be ready for the following day.



A large trailer truck sped across the wasteland in the dead of night, carrying several different models of desert utility vehicles as well as numerous shipping containers. It was a hodgepodge of cargo, piled and stuck every which way with no uniformity whatsoever—but given how smoothly the trailer truck made its way over the wasteland's rough terrain, this clearly wasn't impacting the vehicle's performance.

Tiol, in the driver's seat, suddenly looked bewildered. "Huh? Where is this? Where am I?!" he cried out in surprise.

He seemed as though he'd just woken from a reverie, only to find himself in an unfamiliar place. But then recognition dawned on his face, like he'd immediately remembered something he'd forgotten. "Oh, that's right. I remember now—I'm heading to the Iida commercial district."

Why he was heading there, he didn't know, nor did it ever occur to him to question it. He just kept on driving.

Chapter 163: Transporter—or Trespasser?

The next morning, after a good night's rest, Akira and the others got ready to search for the automaton again. Once they finished preparing, they gathered outside the motor home.

Reina, in particular, was bursting with energy. "All right! No matter what happens, this is our last day here, so let's make it count!"

With that, they headed out to begin their final day of scouring the Iida ruins, and of their mission together.

Thanks to the abrupt appearance of a formidable rival—Kurosawa—Akira's team had been forced to rethink their strategy. The automaton would likely be delivered to one of the automaton stores in Iida, but Kurosawa was currently occupying them all. At this rate, they'd have no way of getting to the machine before him. With the odds stacked against them, Akira and the others had racked their brains for a solution and finally come up with a way to outwit Kurosawa.

Instead of waiting inside the store for the automaton to get restocked, they would head for the warehouse the automaton would be delivered to first.

Assuming Kurosawa had trustworthy information, the longer his unit stayed in Iida, the farther that information would spread. If hunters even suspected there was a chance of obtaining an automaton in Iida, they would flock to the ruin without hesitation. And considering the sheer value of an Old World automaton, some of them would not hesitate to use force.

Therefore, if Kurosawa's team was going to occupy all of the stores in the ruin, its best chance of success was right before the automaton got restocked. Acting with haste would make them more conspicuous, but if they didn't do so, other hunters might get the jump on them.

In other words, Kurosawa's unit hadn't been searching the ruin at all—

heading to and occupying the stores had been their aim from the start. This meant they had at least enough confidence in their information—including when the automaton was to be restocked—to move to their goal right away. And since they couldn't start the operation on the very day of the restock, in case they missed it, it was reasonable to conclude that they would start the day before.

Thus, the automaton would be restocked the following day—in other words, today.

Here was the opportunity for Akira's team to stage their counterattack. After being carried in from a factory somewhere, the automaton would get delivered to one of the ruin's warehouses. By heading there instead of to the stores, Akira and the others could find it before Kurosawa did.

Of course, they knew they were assuming a lot, piling conjecture on top of conjecture. Put nicely, it was an optimistic plan; more critically, it was shortsighted. But they all agreed it was a gamble worth taking, when the alternative was to hang their heads in defeat and let Kurosawa walk off with the prize. If they had even a chance of winning, however slim, they'd take it.

So they went with the best shot they had.

After leaving the motor home, they split into two groups, just as discussed the previous night. Akira and Yumina set off by themselves, and their objective was simple: to run around the outskirts of Iida looking for a transport craft or other vehicle that might be carrying the new automaton to the warehouse. If they could spot the transport or at least traces of where it was headed, they could track its movement and thereby find the warehouse. With any luck, they'd find the automaton before it even reached any of the stores.

Meanwhile, Reina and the others were to conduct their own search for the warehouse within the ruin. Kurosawa's unit had secured the automaton stores, but there was a chance they hadn't taken the warehouse. Unlike shops, which were located where customers could easily enter, warehouses were generally closed to the public and quite possibly heavily guarded. So there seemed a good chance Kurosawa hadn't bothered with it. And if the scheduled restock was

today, there was even a possibility the automaton might already be at the warehouse.

Akira's team had bet it all on those chances—there would be no do-overs. Even if they stayed in Iida a few more days, there was no guarantee they'd succeed. With their numbers, they couldn't go up against Kurosawa's unit. Besides, it was about time for them to return to the city anyway. They couldn't waste fruitless days in Iida pining for an automaton they had no hope of finding.

So if their plan today failed, they would pack it in and go home. Such was the unanimous and final decision they'd come to.



As Akira drove his vehicle around the ruin, he turned to Yumina, who occupied the passenger's seat. "Hey Yumina, you think our plan today will work?"

"Mm... To be honest, I doubt it."

"Yeah, me too."

They both laughed.

"Though I'm not saying it's doomed to fail either," Yumina continued. "My support system's analysis ability will make our search easier than normal. For instance, even if the transport itself is camouflaged, we can probably find traces of it on the ground, if there are any." Yumina's support system was the main reason the two of them had been tasked with finding the transport.

"But if it's being delivered via aircraft, or through a tunnel underground, I doubt we'll have much chance," she added.

Finding the transport would be difficult if it was invisible to the naked eye. And the colorless fog in the air could sometimes also dampen sound, making the vehicle hard to detect in the sky as well. But locating it underground would be nearly impossible—the vegetation in the area was already reducing the accuracy of their scanners aboveground, so their instruments would be practically useless farther down.

In other words, Akira and Yumina could only search a limited area.

“Yeah, good point. Guess we’d be out of luck then. And the possibility of the automaton being restocked today was just a guess of mine to begin with. However amazing your support system is, I doubt it can find a transport that’s not actually here,” Akira said with a grin.

“I suppose not. In that case, want to just spend the day enjoying this drive together?”

Startled, Akira hesitated for a moment before exclaiming, “Sure!”

Yumina was just stating a fact: if they didn’t find the transport, they’d waste the day just driving around the ruin’s outskirts together. Akira realized this—but something about the way she’d spoken had seemed to imply something more. Hence his pause, and when he did speak, his voice came out louder than he’d intended in an attempt to hide his embarrassment. Yumina watched him, grinning with amusement.

A third party who Yumina couldn’t see also witnessed this exchange.

Watching, without saying a word.



Meanwhile, Reina and the others made their way through the ruin. Ignoring the signs in her augmented vision that forbade them entry, they crossed into the maintenance corridor and eventually reached an enormous warehouse appropriate for a massive commercial complex.

However, it was terribly run-down and neglected. The roof and walls were full of huge holes, and remains of large destroyed containers were strewn all over the ground, which was covered in thick weeds and grass. Here and there lay the corpses of monsters as well, clearly newer additions.

Reina turned to Shiori. “What do you think happened here?”

“It looks to me like Kurosawa’s men have already been here. I think it’s reasonable to suspect they saw the condition of the building, decided it was highly unlikely the automaton would get delivered here, and deemed it unnecessary to secure.”

“Makes sense to me. Hmm...”

Togami chimed in. “Then what should we do? Secure the area ourselves? There *are* shipping containers here, after all, and if one of those holes in the roof is actually the transport entrance, the automaton might still show up here. In Mihazono, there were those containers that could fly through the air on their own, after all.”

“That makes sense too. What to do...?”

“Considering the warehouse’s condition, however, this could be a depository for cheaper goods,” Shiori pointed out. “In which case the automaton might instead arrive at a special storehouse designed for more valuable items.”

“Another good point. Ugh...”

As Togami and Shiori laid out possibility after possibility, the indecision on Reina’s face worsened. Still, she’d already sworn to herself that from now on, she wouldn’t rely on anyone else to decide for her. She needed to become a leader who gave orders and permission, not received them.

Shiori was glad to see her master was making a serious effort. Kanae also grinned, albeit mostly out of amusement.

Finally, Reina made the call. “All right, let’s go search somewhere else! Come on!”

Reina had no basis for her decision, beyond just a hunch. Without any concrete information to go on, she couldn’t guarantee she’d made the right choice. Still, she’d made her decision—and she’d done so entirely on her own.



As Kurosawa stood guard with some men at one of the automaton stores, a subordinate reported over the wireless. “Kurosawa, the guys out on patrol want to hunt for relics while they’re on break. What should I tell them?”

“No! Don’t let them touch any relics. I thought I already made that clear. What idiots—?”

“The idiots our client graciously provided after the fact because they didn’t believe we could handle the job on our own.”

Kurosawa clicked his tongue. “Sorry, but can you deal with them on your end?”

I'm kind of busy here."

"Fine, but if I 'restrain' them, they might suffocate. You all right with that?"

"That's fine. Anyone who ignores their commander's orders gets what they deserve," he said coldly.

Kurosawa's orders always prioritized his teammates' safety above all else, and he strove to complete his commissions without any casualties whatsoever. But if an underling chose to ignore those orders, he couldn't promise their safety.

Kurosawa's sudden harshness alarmed his comrade, whose voice clearly sounded puzzled over the wireless. "Hey, anything wrong? Is something unexpected about to happen?"

"It already has. In the first place, Akira and the others are here. Aside from that...? Yeah, I'm almost certain we'll have a few surprises. That's why, as a countermeasure, I can't let my men do anything that might make them reluctant."

"What do you mean, 'reluctant'?"

"If their little relic hunt happens to go well, they'll be reluctant to leave if I give a sudden order to retreat. Their lingering regret might delay their movement, or they might waste time gathering the relics they've collected first."

"Oh, I see now."

"I won't let any idiots die on my watch," Kurosawa promised, "as long as they follow my orders. But I won't save those that don't—at that point, all bets are off."

"I get it, I get it! I'll stop them somehow without killing them." The man's tone suggested he was smiling wryly.

Kurosawa calmed down as well and managed a smile of his own. "Sorry. I'd really appreciate that. Well, if they're really that hell-bent on it, at least tell them to wait until the day after tomorrow. Our contract's only good through tomorrow, after all."

"Gotcha. Later."

Kurosawa cut the transmission and sighed. “Dimwits! Here we are, working to find an Old World automaton, and you want to go off on your own to hunt everyday relics? Think about the job, not yourselves.”

But Kurosawa was only venting to figure out how he felt about their situation. The results of his test? He felt a little less calm. He was worried he’d reacted a little too hastily.

It’d be great if everything went off without a hitch, but...

Something did feel off to him. First, there had been the commotion in Yonozuka. Then the bounty monsters. Then the incident in Mihazono, and finally the carnage in the slums. They’d all been recent.

And somehow, Akira had been involved in every single one.

Now Akira was *here*, on a mission to find the same Old World automaton Kurosawa was looking for. It could very well have been just a coincidence. But the hunter’s intuition he’d honed over the years was giving him a bad feeling.

It was telling him that right now, he needed to be on maximum alert.



After driving around the ruin’s perimeter for a while, Akira and Yumina noticed something and parked, then inspected the ground. Here there were tracks, as though something had passed through recently, and they continued from the outskirts into the ruin.

“What does your analysis say, Yumina?”

“Only that the tracks seem to be from a large trailer truck.”

“Like a transport carrying an automaton?”

“We can only hope. But Kurosawa’s men have probably been transporting stuff too, and we can’t even rule out the possibility that it belongs to another hunter either. You think we should follow the tracks and see?”

“Sure, why not?”

Akira and Yumina got back in their vehicle and followed the tracks. The girl grinned with anticipation.

“I know I probably shouldn’t get my hopes up,” she said, “but when I think about how this might be the transport we’re looking for, I can’t help but feel giddy.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. This, too, is part of the thrill of being a hunter, huh?”

Akira spoke without really thinking too much about it. But Yumina let out a gasp of surprise, like she’d just realized something—or suddenly remembered something she’d forgotten until now.

“What’s wrong?” Akira looked concerned.

“Oh, nothing, really,” she said with a smile. “I was just thinking how you’re absolutely right.”

“O-Oh, okay.”

As he replied, Akira tried to show as little emotion as possible, to disguise the fact that her smile had somewhat captivated him.

They followed the vehicle’s tracks to a dome in the Iida commercial district. There was a yawning hole in the wall, beyond which the trail continued. Before entering, they approached the gap and surveyed the area outside.

“Looks like it leads underground,” Akira said.

“So it does. And the door wasn’t blasted apart with explosives—it was cut down. Look, you can see the clean-cut pieces on the ground.”

“Hm, you’re right. I don’t know of any transport vehicle that can do that. Do you?”

“Maybe it came to deliver the goods, saw the door was closed, and broke its way in to complete the delivery? Just kidding!”

“Then maybe it’s a hunter’s personal vehicle. If they went through the trouble of destroying the door, they must have had a good reason to enter.”

The only possible reason that came to mind was the automaton. Akira and Yumina looked at each other, thinking the same thing.

“Let’s contact Reina’s team first and see what they’ve found out,” Akira suggested.

“Good idea.”

Yumina called Reina and the others right away.



Upon entering the commercial district in his large trailer truck, Tiol made his way through the ruin until he arrived at what looked like an enormous parking garage underneath one of the domes. This was the collection and delivery hub for the entirety of Iida’s commercial district. While the walls and floor were cracked and had degraded slightly over time, there were no weeds and vines like aboveground. The subterranean hub was connected to each dome in the district via a network of underground tunnels, and all of their deliveries were processed in this central chamber.

But the computer system was no longer online. Now it was just a vast, empty space.

Tiol parked his truck in the middle of the space and opened the rear cargo door. Several storage devices resembling mechanical coffins were packed inside atop a miniature transport. The small transport came to life and, with the storage devices still on top, disappeared down a corridor. As Tiol watched it go, he tilted his head in confusion.

“Next was... What was I supposed to do again?” Then he nodded, as if suddenly remembering. “Oh, right, that was it!” He clambered into the truck’s cargo hold and pulled out one more storage device—the last one left in the vehicle. Then, shouldering it, he headed down one of the underground tunnels, leaving the trailer truck behind.



After updating Reina and the others on their situation, Akira and Yumina headed underground to take a look. Akira’s desert utility vehicle could handle the rough wasteland terrain, so the descending path presented no difficulty as they made their way to a massive, open area, akin to a parking garage.

Here they saw a large trailer truck parked and went to investigate.

“It’s huge, but it’s just a regular semi. It doesn’t look like an Old World transport to me. So I guess we’re just dealing with another relic hunter after all?”

The first time Akira had met Tsubaki, the management AI for the Old World city deep within Kuzusuhara, he’d seen a number of containers with Old World goods propelling themselves around the factory. Comparing their appearances to that of the truck in front of him, Akira doubted the latter was a product of the Old World. It did indeed have some odd, mysterious parts, unlike anything he’d ever seen on a modern semitruck—but otherwise, it looked normal.

“Look, the cargo door’s wide open, and there’s nothing inside,” he said. “Maybe it was transporting a hunter instead of goods.”

Yumina looked around the area. “Perhaps so, but there’s no one here now. A vehicle this size indicates a group of hunters, not just one, and any group would have left someone behind to keep watch.”

“Makes sense, but you know, we didn’t do that either.”

“Well, you’ve got a point there.”

Iida was a dangerous ruin. A team reckless enough to split its forces there would prioritize its own safety over that of its vehicle, which could always be replaced with a hired transporter. At least, most hunters worth their salt would reason this way. In any case, this meant the two of them were likely facing a group of hunters who had stayed together; meanwhile, since Akira’s team was divided into two groups, Akira and Yumina had less firepower at their disposal than usual.

“My system’s finished analyzing the trailer truck, Akira. Says this vehicle wasn’t sold in the East.”

“You think they made it themselves?”

“I highly doubt it. That’d be way too bizarre.”

“But does it look like an Old World model to you?” Akira wondered. Logically, a vehicle that hadn’t been made in the modern world came from the Old World—even Akira thought that was obvious. But the semi in front of them looked far too crude for that, as though welded together from parts salvaged from a

number of totaled vehicles.

“No, it doesn’t,” Yumina admitted.

“Right?”

For the moment, they decided to contact Reina’s team again.



Tiol carried the coffin-like container through the ruin until he reached a room of pure white. He set the storage device down and activated it. He had no memory of learning *how* to activate it—he just knew. Yet nothing about that seemed strange to him.

The capsule’s lid slid open. An Old World automaton lay inside—an elegant female model wearing a maid uniform. Her eyes were closed, as though she were asleep.

Gazing at the automaton, Tiol felt an upsurge of emotions. He was a relic hunter—he knew how extremely valuable Old World automatons were. Seeing one in person, his hunter’s heart couldn’t help but be moved.

Up until now, he’d been working mindlessly, as though on an assembly line, but the sight of the automaton jolted his consciousness. His vague awareness began to sharpen. He at once realized what he was doing and recalled the protocol a hunter was supposed to follow in such situations.

“Huh? Come to think of it, isn’t activating an automaton on my own like this supposed to be dangerous?” he said with a puzzled look.

The automaton in front of him opened its eyes—and its arm went straight through Tiol’s chest.

Blood erupted from Tiol’s mouth as the automaton pulled its arm back. He collapsed to the ground, a gaping hole in his torso. A pool of blood poured from his chest, dyeing the floor green.

As his consciousness waned, he noticed the pool of blood around him. *Green? Is that my blood? What the...?*

Darkness engulfed his awareness once more.

The automaton shook its arm lightly, and all the green blood on its sleeve and glove went flying, leaving it immaculate as before.

Its vision picked up three things: the room of white, Tiol lying collapsed on the ground—and standing next to him, the AR figure of a woman.

“There’s something I want you to do for me,” said the woman. Her words, which the automaton heard in AR, carried no hint of friendliness. “Please consider it.”

It was Tsubaki.

In the underground tunnel, Tiol regained consciousness, once more as his old self. He looked at the piece of metal he was holding with both hands—part of the capsule the automaton had been in—and cocked his head, puzzled.

There were tooth marks on the metal.

“Have you finally come to?” said a voice from behind him.

He turned around—and instinctively recoiled. The automaton he’d activated was standing there.

Tiol looked down at his own chest. No wound. Then he glanced at the automaton’s hand—perfectly clean, with no blood whatsoever.

“Was that all a dream?” he muttered in confusion.

The automaton spoke once more. “You have now regained consciousness, so I don’t need to send you any more aid. I will take my leave.”

“Er, wait! Where am I? Why am I here? What was I doing?” He couldn’t make head or tail of his situation. Anxiety and fear welled up within him, both evident in his terrified expression.

The automaton spoke evenly. “You were returning from completing a job, of course.”

“Huh?” Tiol looked startled. Then his expression relaxed, as though finally recalling something important, and he nodded. “Oh, right! I remember now. I guess I forgot.” Then he thought for a moment. “Wait a minute, who are you?”

“My name is Olivia. Good day to you, sir.” The automaton calling herself Olivia bowed politely, then headed off in the direction opposite the tunnel he’d carried her in through.

“What was *that* all about? Well, guess it doesn’t matter. Time to go home.” Tiol looked a little curious, but quickly lost interest and walked off, obeying the command he’d been given, even if he didn’t know who’d given it.



Akira and Yumina reconvened with Reina and her team in the underground space below the dome, then briefly explained what they’d seen to everyone. Akira concluded with a question.

“So what do we do now?”

Reina’s expression seemed to say, “Don’t ask me—I have no idea.” Shiori noticed this and took it upon herself to give her own opinion and to report the results of her team’s search.

“First off, this area is most likely a collection and delivery hub that leads to the storehouse we searched—or indeed, perhaps to every dome in the ruin. And I think the hunters who drove that truck in here entered the race late.”

Shiori explained that like Kurosawa and his men, the newcomers clearly knew about the automaton, albeit from a different source. After all, rather than securing the automaton stores like Kurosawa’s team had, they’d chosen to go after the storehouses. Judging from the vastness of this subterranean space, the underground tunnels likely extended out to each of the domes’ storehouses, and the unknown hunters had probably come down here so they could occupy them all.

Reina nodded, but then a doubt came to her mind. “If that’s true, wouldn’t it be better to occupy this space?”

“They probably have some reason that prevents them from doing so,” Shiori replied.

According to the information Akira’s group had, once automatons were carried to the central hub, they were scheduled to be delivered to each of the automaton stores. And like the other teams, these new hunters had also

learned the automaton's delivery date. Originally, then, the hunters *had* planned to secure this space. But something unforeseen had apparently delayed their arrival, and after not finding the automaton in this area, they had probably assumed it was already en route to one of the dome's storehouses, or perhaps even one of the automaton stores. In order to find the automaton before anyone else, they'd felt compelled to move quickly.

Shiori paused for breath and then continued, "Of course, this is all just conjecture. After all, it might be that the automaton's delivery to the hub was late, not the hunters' arrival, which begs a few more questions. For instance, why did these hunters not consider such a possibility themselves? Or if they did, what evidence convinced them otherwise? So my analysis is nothing more than rough conjecture, but based on what we currently have to go on, it is the best I can come up with."

Akira, Reina, and Togami knew that not even their best guesses would have been so well-reasoned. They nodded, impressed—until they realized they were all in sync and tried to pretend otherwise.

Togami ham-handedly changed the topic. "Anyway, we still haven't figured out what we should do. If there really is a chance the automaton's delivery has been delayed, wouldn't it be best for us to occupy this area in the meantime?"

Reina nodded, smiling wryly. "Yeah, that's probably our best bet at this point. Honestly, even though searching the warehouse was supposed to be *our* team's job, Akira and Yumina beat us to the punch once again. We really do have a long way to go, huh?"

"Oh, come on, cheer up. This is the part that—"

Togami stopped mid-sentence. All of them had noticed something pop up on their scanners, approaching from one of the corridors connected to the hub. Based on the location of the reading, it was some distance away. Unlike aboveground, where invasive vegetation reduced scanner accuracy as much as jamming smoke, here there was no interference, and they could easily see any threat as well as its general shape and size.

"A single human, looks like," Kanae announced. "And probably a kiddo, at that."

“One of the hunters, returning to the hub,” Shiori guessed. “Be on your guard, miss, just in case.”

As Reina’s bodyguards, Shiori and Kanae tended to be more cautious than the others—yet they did nothing further to prepare. Even when a boy emerged from the corridor, they were more concerned about avoiding a fight over this location, and the trouble that might bring, than the opponent himself.

But not Akira.

“You bastard...!”

And his mystery opponent’s reaction was different as well. “A-Akira?!”

Recognizing Tiol, Akira’s face tensed—at the sight of which Tiol looked terrified. Akira was only wary, while Tiol was wary *and* fearful. So Tiol felt he had to take action first. With a look of horror, he aimed his left arm at Akira.

In response, Akira drew his SSB. “Get out of here!” he shouted to his team.

Both maids took immediate evasive action, with Shiori seizing Reina and Kanae grabbing Togami, while Yumina fled with the aid of her support system. Akira’s SSB erupted into continuous gunfire to head off Tiol’s attack.

At nearly the same instant, Tiol’s arm cannon erupted, blowing his arm off in the process. The shell streaked through the underground space, making its way directly toward Akira.

But Alpha guided the SSB’s aim, and the countless bullets intercepted the shell, which exploded ten meters ahead of him. The force of the blast, far more powerful than any grenade, engulfed the subterranean area. Aboveground, an explosion had room to expand; but the delivery hub was a closed space, and the blast and flames utterly ravaged it.

Akira was blown back, though his powered suit and protective coat kept him unharmed, and he landed without any pain. Yumina and the others safely took cover behind the trailer truck.

Tiol seized the opportunity to flee. Running with all his might, he made a beeline for the corridor leading back to the surface. But Akira wasn’t going to let him escape this time. He aimed at Tiol once more—and Tiol’s semitruck

suddenly shot toward Akira on its own, as if to flatten him.

Akira dodged just in time. But after passing him by, the truck's trajectory interfered with Akira's line of sight, preventing him from getting a bead on Tiol.

Whipping out his other, everyday SSB, Akira fired a volley of bullets at the truck. While this gun didn't have the firepower of his titan-killer, it could still shred most vehicles and monsters to mincemeat. Unfortunately, the semi was sturdier than average, and none of his bullets could stop its advance.

By now, Tiol had hopped in the back of the truck, and he fired his arm cannon at Akira from above. (In his current state, he could fire again after only a short interval of time.)

Akira intercepted the second shell like the first, sending another blast roaring through the delivery hub. Once again, Akira went flying backward, and once again, Tiol took the opportunity to put some distance between the two of them.

"Shit!" Akira spat as he hit the ground a second time. Just then, his bike pulled up from behind him, at Alpha's behest.

Hop on, Akira!

Sure thing!

By the time Akira sat astride the bike, Tiol had already entered the corridor leading outside. Akira took off after him at top speed.

Everything had unfolded too fast. Without any way to assist Akira, Yumina and the others were left behind in the hub. Akira's voice came over their comms.

"I'm going after him! Stay and secure the area or retreat, but be careful—he's dangerous! I can't just let him go! I'll meet up with you later!"

The line went dead—he'd cut off the call on his end. Yumina and the others remained glancing at each other, until Yumina made a suggestion, looking solemn.

"I think we should get out of here. It sucks that we couldn't find the automaton, but I don't think we're in any position to worry about that

anymore.”

Shiori nodded. “Yes. We can’t continue the search now that other relic hunters are after us.”

Shiori didn’t know Tiol, but his spontaneous hostility led her to conclude that he was also after the automaton. Kurosawa and his team were their rivals, but only in the sense that they were competing to find the relic first. As far as Shiori could tell, neither side had wanted a fight. But if a rival appeared who *didn’t* mind clashing over the automaton, she couldn’t permit Reina to search any longer.

Togami also agreed. Kanae, for her part, said she’d go with whatever Reina decided, and Reina sided with Shiori as well.

“All right, let’s fall back,” the girl said. “We’ll return to the surface, help Akira, and escape together. Let’s go— Wait, hold on. I’m getting a message from Kurosawa!”

They might have been rivals, but Kurosawa had said he would contact them if anything happened. With a grim expression, Reina read it—and yelped.

According to the message, a horde of Old World automatons were running amok throughout the ruins.

Chapter 164: Tiol's Mutation

Inside the abandoned automaton store that Kurosawa and his men were occupying, the glass display case with the hologram began to change.

First, the hologram vanished. That in itself put Kurosawa and his men on the alert—after all, they didn't know what might happen next. In the worst case, the event might presage a change in the ruin's behavior, like the sudden activation and deployment of mechanical guards.

But even as they watched warily, the floor on the bottom of the display case opened, and a genuine Old World automaton rose up inside. Agog, Kurosawa and his companions confirmed that this was indeed not a hologram, then let out brief whoops of delight.

Per their intel, the odds that the automaton really would get restocked had been twenty percent at best. So they all broke out into grins—they'd hit the jackpot!

"All right! Let's tell Yuzumo Industries to send a specialist!" Kurosawa ordered. "We'll guard the area until they arrive! This is when it really counts, so stay on your guard!" He then called the rest of his men, who were still occupying the other stores. Now that they knew which store had the automaton, there was no need to secure anywhere else.

But then one of his units reported some surprising news.

"What? The others too?" Kurosawa said in disbelief.

Automatons had appeared in *every* store Kurosawa's men were occupying. Some of them had appeared through openings in the floor at the bottom of the display case, like at his location, while in other cases, walls had opened to reveal capsules with automatons inside.

And even as Kurosawa was listening to these reports, the walls around him shifted, revealing *more* containers of automatons.

This far exceeded the expectations of Kurosawa's team, and they were all

overjoyed. But Kurosawa himself looked grim.

This isn't good! I thought that if I gathered all my troops here, we'd have enough personnel to defend ourselves if something happened before the specialist got here. But now I have to keep my men where they are. Should I give up on occupying at least half of the stores, then? No, that's not an option.

Yet the fact remained that he hadn't anticipated this outcome, and so was woefully short-handed now that they were on the defensive. Kurosawa agonized over how to proceed, then finally delivered his orders with a stern expression.

"Tell everyone on patrol to return! Report the situation to Yuzumo and request backup. Even if we've succeeded, this is still an unexpected development. Remain on your guard."

His harsh tone brought his giddy subordinates back down to earth. Disciplined once more, they again began moving with the skill and coordination expected of them.

For some time afterward, nothing else out of the ordinary happened.

Upon receiving Kurosawa's request for aid, Yuzumo Corp quickly dispatched a support unit, greatly reducing the amount of time Kurosawa and his team would have to spend defending themselves. In the meantime, Kurosawa issued a number of orders to his teammates, all with the purpose of safeguarding themselves against this new situation.

At this rate, we'll manage, Kurosawa thought with a sigh, allowing himself to relax just a little. But then he noticed Rodin gazing fixedly at the automatons inside the storage devices. As he walked over to his subordinate, Kurosawa let out another sigh, but this time it wasn't one of relief. "Hey, Rodin, what do you think you're doing? I told you to stay on your guard. Stop gawking and get back to your station."

"O-Oh, my bad."

"Get it together, man." Kurosawa turned to leave, and Rodin made to follow him.

A noise rang out behind them.

With an uneasy premonition, Kurosawa spun around. Rodin did as well.

Kurosawa's intuition had been spot on. One of the capsules was opening up—with an automaton preparing to climb out.

Instantly, Kurosawa's gun was in his hand—but too late! Before he could fire, the automaton closed the distance between them, stripping Kurosawa of his long-range advantage. The machine's hand came down on Kurosawa, like a blade faster than any firearm.

But the commander was quicker and delivered a powerful kick. The automaton flew backward and slammed into the wall.

Not a scratch—it was Old World-made, after all, and so extremely resilient. Its Old World clothing also offered the same level of defense as New World protective wear.

But Kurosawa had expected this. From the start, he'd never intended his blow to damage the automaton—he was just trying to regain some distance. While the automaton was busy peeling itself off the wall, he had a small window in which to act.

In that brief span of time, he peppered the machine with countless bullets. Rodin, who'd finally come to his senses, hurriedly joined in the assault with his own gunfire.

Prioritizing his team's safety above all else, Kurosawa had prepared weapons for use against automatons, just in case. He couldn't hand them out to *all* his men, of course, but besides himself he'd provided them to Rodin (who outranked most of his teammates). Their combined firepower sufficed to eliminate the threat before them, and the automaton was blown to pieces, its parts scattering across the area.

Rodin let out a sigh of relief. Kurosawa glared at him.

"Rodin! You *imbecile*!"

Realizing Kurosawa suspected him of having activated the automaton without permission, Rodin shook his head in a panic. "Wait, wait! That wasn't my fault! I didn't open the case, I swear!"

Seeing the desperation in his face, Kurosawa decided to believe him. But that meant the situation was even worse than he'd initially guessed. If Rodin hadn't activated the automaton, it had powered up on its own.

And as though confirming his fears, similar activation sounds began to emerge from the other capsules as well.

Kurosawa made an immediate decision.

"We're retreating! Move to Plan C!" he shouted, breaking into a run.

Rodin followed suit, panic evident on his face. "Plan C?! Are you serious?! We've already informed Yuzumo of the situation! They're sending us backup!"

"I've never been more serious! We're rejoining the other units! Get a move on!"

Plan C was one of the courses of action they'd decided on beforehand: if the mission ended in failure, they would abandon all of the automaton stores and eliminate all inactive automatons, as well as any they failed to destroy before activation.



Tiol's semitruck raced up the sloping subterranean path and burst outside. A moment later, Akira also emerged, his bike launching into the air. The setting for Akira's pursuit of the fleeing Tiol had changed from the underground to the surface.

While on his bike, Akira could use his mounted titan-killer, more than doubling his firepower when he'd been on foot with only his lightweight SSB. Now he could hit Tiol's truck harder. What's more, out in the open air he could employ micromissiles without worry. Countless projectiles arced through the air, passing over the semi to strike it from the front. The explosion, powerful enough to eradicate a horde of monsters from the Kuzusuhara depths, rocked the vehicle and dealt it significant damage.

Yet that still wasn't enough to put it out of commission. Akira grimaced at the truck's surprising resilience—but his assault did impede Tiol's escape. However sturdy a vehicle, a cluster of micromissiles hitting it from the front would inevitably slow it down. Furthermore, the resulting explosions had also ravaged

the ground ahead of the semi, making it more difficult to maintain speed. And if the truck tried to change course to avoid the micromissiles or the ravaged road, it had to deviate from its route to the ruin's exit. Tiol was cornered.

As if that weren't enough, Akira took advantage of his bike's superior mobility and rode ahead of Tiol, doggedly firing at the cargo hold with the other boy inside. But each time one of Akira's bullets struck, impact conversion luminescence scattered—the vehicle's exterior was protected by force-field armor. No matter how impressive Akira's bullet storm looked, its damage was decidedly less so.

Still, he didn't let up on the trigger, and as shot after shot pelted the cargo hold, they finally started to make some headway. As proof, a large hole began to open in the truck's frame. Alpha was correcting the trajectory of Akira's gunfire, focusing all of his bullets at a single point. The force from his continuous bombardment was piercing through the force-field armor and reaching the truck itself.

Tiol tried to counterattack. This time, however, he didn't use his arm cannon—while he could technically have done so, he hesitated lest Akira intercept it like before. So instead he used his right arm.

He briefly leaned out of a hole Akira's gun had made and swung his arm hard—and a glowing blade extended from his hand. A wave of light slashed through the air, cleaving all in its path, even far beyond the reach of the blade itself.

Akira was shocked at the blade's power. But even when Monica had attacked him with a similar weapon in Mihazono, he'd avoided it without Alpha's help—and right now, he had Alpha. He evaded the attack with ease and continued to fire from outside the light's range.

Now Tiol was backed even farther into a corner. Even as he attacked, Akira's shots kept hitting him, and wounds opened up all over his body from which red blood—or blood which appeared red to Tiol, anyway—leaked. And the more blood he saw, the more he feared his death was approaching.

His most critical wounds were already healing themselves. But all the blood on the floor and covering his body convinced him he was beyond saving. His mounting desperation was chipping away at his sanity. He lifted his left hand to

his head, the cannon that was now his left arm entered his vision, and a crazed grin came to his lips.

“If my arm can already transform into something like this, I bet I can turn it into something even *more* powerful! I’ll teach you not to underestimate me!” His voice cracking with desperation, he slammed his left arm against the cargo hold’s frame repeatedly, as though punishing the weapon for its current uselessness. “Go on, turn into a better weapon! One that’ll easily wipe out the likes of Akira in a single hit! I need more...more power! Transform, dammit! Transfooorm!”

Screaming like a madman, he continued to slam his arm against the truck, over and over again. The force of his swings tore his arm apart, sending even more blood flying. He was so far gone that even if he’d been able to see that his blood was green, he wouldn’t have paid attention.

But as he fell further into madness, and his two identities as Tiol and the program began to meld with one another, his left arm responded to its owner’s wishes. From the open wound in his arm sprouted fangs, which soon became a gaping mouth. His arm then began devouring the truck from the inside.

Tiol saw this and grinned maniacally.

Akira continued to fire at Tiol from his bike, until he noticed a change coming over the semi. He was so surprised by what he saw he couldn’t help but stop shooting.

What in the...?

The semitruck was collapsing, as though something was eating it from within. The walls and ceilings of the cargo hold disappeared, and by the time only half of the vehicle remained, a grossly mutated Tiol stood on top of its remains.

His left arm, deformed and gigantic, had become part machine. Large artilleries sprouted from it, and even an enormous shield. Part of the arm had fused with the semi. Seeing how powerful his arm looked, Tiol cackled with high-pitched laughter.

“See?! So you *can* do it if you try! All right, Akira, you’re dead meat!” He

aimed his arm in Akira's direction and unloaded everything he had. A massive hail of bullets—enough to lay waste to all their surroundings—streaked toward his enemy.

Naturally, even Akira was panicked by this, and he immediately took evasive action. Tiol's shots lacked accuracy, but the dense assault made up for it. The weeds and vines in the area, all tougher than steel, were instantly eradicated, and even the exposed dirt underneath was flung through the air as if struck by bombs. Akira, well aware of how resilient the ruin's vegetation was, broke out in a cold sweat.

Uh, Alpha?! What the hell happened to him?!

It looks like he's created weaponry for himself by using part of the truck as material, like a glutton croc would do.

He doesn't look like a crocodile to me, though!

Perhaps he's somehow incorporated and adapted to a glutton croc's traits, then. At least, we know he was a human originally.

But as he drove around on his bike, Akira observed Tiol's mutation some more. It didn't look like something a human could ever pull off—then again, could anyone capable of transforming in such a way even be called human anymore?

Judging merely by appearances, one might consider flesh-and-blood humans, cyborgs, and even automatons to all be "human," inasmuch as they *looked* human. Yet even by that superficial metric, it was doubtful whether Tiol could still be considered a human in his current form.

Is he actually a human, or a monster?

I suppose it depends on how you define either term. But right now, that's irrelevant. Regardless of what he is, you need to defeat him.

Good point!

Akira wasn't one to hesitate before taking a life anyway. He'd only asked because if Tiol still had any humanity left, it might be worth disarming and interrogating him first. Of course, that was only *if* by coincidence Tiol managed

to survive—Akira had never planned on holding back.

Why had Tiol suddenly attacked Akira back in Kuzusuhara, and why had he done it again here? Akira didn't particularly care—sparing Tiol's life long enough to ask him the reason was something he had never considered even once. Whether he was human or monster wouldn't change what Akira had to do—eliminate the enemy. Pushing all superfluous thoughts from his mind, he focused only on the battle in front of him.

All this time, Tiol had been fleeing from Akira. But now he'd obtained a new, powerful weapon, and he turned on Akira with vehemence. For his part, Akira attempted to keep his distance from Tiol as they fought.

Their roles in this pursuit had been reversed—the hunter had become the hunted.



After deciding to retreat, Reina's team piled into Yumina's vehicle and headed for the surface. The vehicles driven by Reina's group and Akira had been damaged—not quite totaled, but just to be safe, they refrained from driving them and set them to follow behind on auto-drive.

Once Reina and the others reached the surface, they first checked how Akira was doing. The vegetation on the surface messed with their scanners, but the wireless connection was working just fine, and they were already linked up with Akira's scanner. Observing the data it sent them, they could immediately tell how he was faring in the battle.

They all knew how strong Akira was, and before checking the scan, they were all feeling optimistic to various degrees. Perhaps Akira had already felled the mysterious attacker. In that case, all they had to do was meet up with him and head back together.

But their expectations were betrayed. Akira was still locked in combat, and against an unknown entity. No sooner had she looked at the data than Yumina contacted him in a panic.

“Akira?! Are you all right?!”

“That you, Yumina? Yeah, though I'm a little tied up at the moment.”

In contrast to Yumina's anxiety, Akira sounded perfectly calm, which helped Yumina relax as well.

"O-Oh, okay. Good to hear. Um, what exactly are you fighting against right now?"

"Not too sure myself. I was fighting that guy for a while, and he just became like this all of a sudden."

She hesitated for a moment. "Understood. For now, we'll head over and provide support, then we'll all leave together."

Akira didn't respond right away, as though he was hesitant to reply. "Support would be appreciated, but this bastard might come after you too if you're not careful. Will you be okay?"

Yumina couldn't give an immediate answer. From what she could gather about Tio's strength, based on the linked data, she couldn't say for sure that they'd be fine.

From her silence, Akira judged that it would be difficult for them to directly assist him. "If you don't think you can, don't worry. Go ahead and escape—I'll catch up later. Oh, but if you could just drop a few cases of ammo on the ground along the way, that'd be a big help. I'd like to avoid running out of ammo in the middle of fighting if possible. Just let me know the general area where you leave them, and I'll pick them up on my own. Don't overexert yourself." He cut the call.

Yumina said nothing for a moment, looking grim. But then she looked determined. "Let's go, everyone! We'll head for the ruin's exit and place some ammo along the way, just like Akira asked!"

Reina looked surprised. "Wait—for real?! You're not going to go rescue him?!"

Yumina hesitated briefly before answering her. "I've decided that at this moment, it'll be tough for us to make it to where he is and fight alongside him. You two agree, don't you?" She turned her gaze to Shiori and Kanae.

"Regrettably, miss, she is correct."

“Well, no big deal, though, right?” Kanae said breezily. “It’d be one thing if Akira kiddo begged us for help or to come save him, but it sounded more to me like he thought we’d just be in the way if we tried.”

In truth, had only Shiori and Kanae been present, their combined skill would have been quite helpful to Akira. They had two extra vehicles on hand, so the maid duo could even have left the team temporarily to help him out if they wanted. But if that meant leaving Reina to fend for herself in this situation, it was a tall order—and taking Reina along with them would be even riskier. There was no need to bail Akira out at the expense of Reina’s safety. Yumina had more or less understood this, even as she’d confirmed her guess with the two maids, and Shiori and Kanae had responded with the expectation that Yumina had already guessed the answer.

Reina understood what her attendants were thinking as well. “Fine, then let’s go.” Once again, she was only holding everyone back. Her head sank a little in shame. She tried to convince herself that getting all down and depressed wouldn’t help anything—yet try as she might, she couldn’t will herself to look up.

Togami could tell that she was hurt. It looked to him like she needed encouragement, but he couldn’t find the right words.

They made their way through the ruin with Yumina at the wheel, stopping a number of times to drop ammo on the ground for Akira. But after a while, Reina looked puzzled.

“Wait, Yumina, aren’t we awfully close to where Akira is right now? I know we need to drop the ammo where he can reach it, but still...” *We’re much too close for that*, she thought without saying it out loud. But the bewilderment was evident on her face anyway.

Yumina picked up another SSB lying inside the vehicle and grinned. “How can he receive our help if we don’t get close?”

“Huh?” Reina looked nonplussed.

“Reina, I said it’d be difficult to support Akira by fighting directly alongside him. I didn’t say we weren’t going to help him out.” She held the SSB ready, an audacious grin on her face. Then she fired until its extended magazine was

empty. A cluster of micromissiles erupted from the muzzle and flew over a nearby dome to strike Tiol on the other side.

Yumina confirmed its accuracy via her support system and grinned in satisfaction. “That’s what I’m talking about—direct hit! Feats like that are where the support system really shines!” Had she just fired normally, the vegetation in the ruin would have ensured a miss, even if she’d left the missile guidance to the support system. But she was currently linked to Akira’s scanner, using it to direct the micromissiles in place of a guidance system and setting them to target the space near him.

She was firing from a distance without worrying about her aim, adjusting the trajectory of her micromissiles based on Akira’s position. That way, she could hit her target accurately even from so far away.

When fighting alongside Akira in the Kuzusuhara depths, Yumina had used the same type of gun that he had. And since their weapons were similar, she could also use the extended magazines Akira had packed in her vehicle. So there was no danger of running out of ammo—she could fire micromissiles continuously to her heart’s content. As she emptied magazine after magazine, she turned to Reina smugly.

“I’ve got this part under control. You guys watch the area in the meantime—automatons might be lurking nearby. If any attack, I’m counting on you to take care of them.”

“All right!” Reina lit up with a smile, happy to be relied on, and took up a suitable position where she could guard Yumina.

Grinning, Togami positioned himself beside Reina. “Aren’t you a little *too* excited?”

“Oh, shut up. Focus on doing your own job so you don’t mess me up.”

“Roger that,” he said with a smirk.

Togami’s lighthearted jab restored Reina’s calm and composure. Then she realized he’d meant to do exactly that from the start, and smiled bashfully.

Kanae turned a knowing grin to Shiori. “You sure about this, sis?”

Shiori hesitated. “Well, it should be fine. Doing this much still counts as my job.”

“If you say so.”

According to Kurosawa’s message, the area they found themselves in was dangerous, with Old World automatons running amok. Leaving Reina alone in a place like this would certainly be risky.

But Shiori permitted it. If what she planned to do was ultimately for Reina’s sake, it fell within the scope of her job—or so she justified it in her mind.



Akira continued to evade Tiol’s avid pursuit, through expert handling of his bike. He was up against a semitruck, so he tried ascending one of the domes by riding up its side, expecting the truck would be unable to chase him there.

But Tiol followed him up the dome without difficulty—the semi, which had been rolling along on its tires up until now, sprouted insect-like legs to clamber after him.

Akira clicked his tongue. *Well, guess I shouldn’t be surprised at this point!*

Compared to what he’d already seen of Tiol’s transformation, this was nothing—at least, that’s what he continued to tell himself as he fired. He aimed at Tiol himself next, but Tiol blocked his shots with the shield protruding from his left arm. The force-field armor covering the shield was the same kind as that which covered the entire truck—but the shield itself was far tougher.

So Akira targeted what little human flesh still remained in Tiol’s arm. He succeeded in breaking one of the protruding guns, but to little effect, as a new one immediately popped up in its place. Next he launched the micromissiles toward Tiol’s back and upper body. Tiol couldn’t use his arm to block these—in order to defend against Akira’s shots and fire back at him, he had to keep his left arm facing in Akira’s direction. So instead he used his right arm to defend, slicing through the micromissiles that came his way—he lowered the intensity of his blade, widening its energy so that it would sweep rather than cut in a straight line. Then he took out the entire cluster of micromissiles in one swipe.

Switching plans, Akira aimed not at Tiol but at the semitruck itself—then

quickly abandoned that idea. The moment he eased up his attacks, Tiol would notice and intensify his own assault. If even more guns and artillery sprouted from Tiol's left arm, the hail of bullets would become even more concentrated, making it harder for Akira to evade them. No matter how godlike Alpha's driving skills were, dodging through a dense storm of projectiles would be physically impossible if there were no gaps in it to begin with. In fact, Tiol's bullets had already hit him several times, and Akira had only blocked them by raising his protective coat's force-field armor at the exact time and place of the impacts.

As they fought, Akira's expression became more grim, while Tiol looked more gleeful—partly because he was drunk on his newfound power, but there was another reason as well. It had occurred to him that if he could just kill Akira, he might actually attain his goal—if he managed to destroy Akira right here, right now, his wish might actually come true. He didn't know what that wish was—he just had an intense desire, and felt like if he could just win against Akira, it would be within his reach.

Even though his consciousness was so hazy that he couldn't even remember who he was himself.

As Akira and Tiol's battle raged on, Akira was the first to show signs of worry. *This isn't good, Alpha. I'm about to run out of ammo.*

Extended magazines granted astounding amounts of ammo, but they weren't infinite. Anyone who kept firing continuously would eventually come up empty. And by the time he'd started chasing Tiol, he'd already burned through a good portion of his supplies, so it was only a given that he'd run out even sooner.

Just go get some more, then. Yumina already sent you the coordinates where she dropped the ammo, right?

Well, yeah, but...

Picking up the ammo and loading it into his weapon would take time, Akira knew. Perhaps that wouldn't be a problem if he were fighting an average hunter, but in Akira's current situation, it meant the difference between life and death. Akira looked grave.

Still, he had no other option—this was far more preferable to running out of ammo. In order to reduce the window of risk as much as possible, he vowed to himself he'd finish grabbing the ammo and reloading in an instant.

Alpha, ready to give me your full support?

Leave it to me!

Seeing Alpha's usual confident smile, Akira found himself grinning as well. His enthusiasm renewed, he hurried to retrieve the dropped ammo.

But Akira's enthusiasm turned out to be for naught—in a favorable way. At that moment, Yumina's barrage of micromissiles slammed into Tiol. He and his vehicle were swallowed up in a flurry of explosions.

What was that just now?!

Assist fire from Yumina. Now you can pick up your ammo.

Oh, okay!

With the sound of the blasts erupting behind him, Akira accelerated, making a beeline for a package of ammo. When he got there, he braked and scooped it up as quickly as he could. He tucked part of it inside his coat before speeding off once more. Then, balancing on the bike as it drove along, he slowed down his sense of time so he could switch out ammo and energy packs.

All right! Done! Only a couple of seconds had passed since he'd grabbed the ammo. Still, as letting his guard down for an instant could have spelled instant death, the fact that Akira had chosen and succeeded to stall Tiol for that long showed how much composure he had at present.

Yumina's micromissiles had created the opening for him. Unlike Akira, who was fighting from up close, Yumina could safely fire long-range weapons from a distance. Extended magazines for micromissiles cost a pretty penny, but they held quite a lot. With so many micromissiles targeting him, Tiol simply didn't have the leeway to attack Akira. Thus Akira was able to scoop up all the ammo that had been left for him relatively quickly and easily. With Alpha's help, he called Yumina to thank her.

"Yumina! You saved me! Keep going like that from now on!"

“I will! Do the best you can over there too!”

“Back at you!” Akira ended the call with Yumina and drew his gun with a grin. *Now it’s two against one. Or actually, six against one. Let’s finish this in no time.*

But Alpha smiled knowingly. *Don’t you mean seven against one?*

Akira smiled wryly and corrected himself. *Oh, whoops, good point! Seven against one. So I’ll need your full support to get through this.*

Leave it to me!

As the micromissiles continued to descend upon Tiol, Akira fired the gun in his hands and his mounted titan-killer. The hail of projectiles from the three weapons assailed Tiol mercilessly.



Tiol was cornered once again. The micromissiles were still targeting him, and Akira continued to fire—and Tiol had no way of defending against them. Even if he left defeating Akira for later and tried to go after Yumina and the others, Akira would thoroughly prevent him from doing so, and meanwhile Yumina’s group would retreat somewhere safe. He had no more options. The high from his newfound power was already starting to wane, and the fear of death once again took over his consciousness, chipping away at Tiol’s mental condition and blurring the line between his conscious self and his programmed self. As the two sides of his mind intermingled, Tiol’s wish for support activated the program’s rescue function.

In Tiol’s vision, words appeared in a language that humans couldn’t read:

Commencing request for support.

Chapter 165: The Automatons

Reina and the others continued to support Akira from afar. Yumina fired a barrage of micromissiles at Tiol from atop her vehicle; Reina and Togami stood guard beside her, quickly disposing of any monsters that came near and passing ammo from the vehicle to Yumina before she ran out. Shiori and Kanae stuck close to Reina, making sure she stayed safe throughout this unexpected turn of events.

With the assistance of the rest of his team, Akira was once again able to seize the upper hand. *At this rate, he'll definitely win*, Reina thought, sniping an approaching monster with near-perfect accuracy.

As she fired, she kept the bulky, powerful weapon steady in her grip without letting the strong recoil affect her aim—a level of competency now possible thanks to all the harsh training she had endured. Observing her growth from behind her, Shiori smiled with a hint of pride.

But then Reina furrowed her brow. “Hey Shiori, aren’t these the same monsters we saw inside the domes? Isn’t it rare for such monsters to venture outside?”

“That should be the case, yes.”

“Then why are they out here?”

“Likely because some anomaly has occurred. We haven’t encountered the automatons yet ourselves, but if they really are running loose throughout the ruins, I suspect they’re currently attacking the men occupying the shops. Perhaps the commotion drove the monsters outside the domes.”

Reina nodded. “Oh, I see.”

Then Shiori’s face turned grave. “Miss Reina, heed my words,” she warned. “Even if we run into an automaton, do not—under any circumstances—attack it right away. Our group is not holding any of the stores, so the automatons might not recognize us as enemies. As long as we don’t engage them first, we might

be able to avoid a fight.”

“I know, I won’t attack them. But they’re still dangerous, so as soon as Akira takes care of that monstrosity he’s fighting, I think we should escape.”

Based on the data Reina was receiving from Akira’s scanner, the boy apparently still held the advantage. *Just a little longer, and we’ll be done here*, she thought as she turned her full attention back to aiding Yumina.



Meanwhile, Kurosawa and his men were struggling against the activated automatons, thanks to three factors in particular. Not only were the machines ridiculously powerful, many of them had already come online by the time Kurosawa had ordered his team to eliminate them. Worse, a decent number of his men were hesitating to destroy the ones that hadn’t yet come to life, as the machines were so valuable.

Still, Kurosawa managed to keep his unit together, issuing shrewd orders and keeping the damage the humans took to a minimum. He even joined the front line himself while ordering the injured to be carried away from the battlefield. With Rodin’s help, the veteran hunter took out yet another automaton.

But witnessing firsthand the might of Old World automatons and the threat they posed, Rodin grimaced. “Shit! Why are these things attacking us, anyway?! We didn’t even turn them on!”

Kurosawa responded calmly, “Isn’t it obvious? We’re armed, and we trespassed into the commercial district. Of course they’d move to eliminate us.”

“W-Well, yeah, but still—”

“The only silver lining here is that the dangerous monsters wandering the ruin also count as trespassers. Their presence makes it less likely that we’ll be targeted.”

“Silver lining?! The automatons are all targeting us as we speak!”

“Well, you and I have destroyed the most. It’s only natural they’d consider us the biggest threat.”

“Dammit!”

Even as Rodin cursed his plight, new automatons emerged one after another. He noticed that one was charging an energy beam in their direction, and he and Kurosawa leaped behind a building for cover. The beam cleaved easily through the ruin's overgrown plants, which crumbled to ash instantly despite their legendary resilience that kept relic hunters away from Iida.

Rodin saw the scorch marks it left behind and grimaced again. "Crap! Why does a maid need an energy beam as a weapon, anyway?!"

"Who knows? Maybe it was necessary back in the Old World for some reason."

"In what environment would a maid need to fire an energy beam *from her eyes*?!"

"It's the Old World, man. They made all sorts of incomprehensible stuff back then. Their tastes were vastly different from ours, so it's futile to even try and understand. Get your head out of the clouds and focus on the battle in front of us."

Kurosawa leaped from cover and fired back, even as he dodged the automaton's beams. Rodin sighed, but followed suit.

The restocked automatons varied in value and model, like this one whose energy beams made it suited for long-range combat—and, naturally, much more formidable than the others. Against such a threat, only the most skilled in Kurosawa's unit—in other words, Kurosawa and Rodin—stood a chance, even if they were fully equipped to deal with automatons. So the two men prioritized taking out the automatons that the rest couldn't finish off on their own. This also caused the automatons to register Kurosawa and Rodin as their most pressing threat, thereby taking the heat off everyone else.

But then something happened which put an end to this strategy—the automatons assaulting Kurosawa and Rodin suddenly and simultaneously retreated. Understandably, even Kurosawa looked bewildered, and it wasn't long before transmissions began to come in from his subordinates, reporting that the same thing had happened on their ends as well.

"Good to know. Then this is our chance to retreat too. We'll leave the ruin for now and join up with reinforcements. Let's get a move on!" He relayed his

order to the other units as well, and then he and Rodin left the area.

Yet he looked anything but relieved. The automaton's sudden retreat had been to his team's advantage, but Kurosawa wasn't so naive as to chalk the inscrutable, abrupt change up to a mere stroke of luck.

Anomalies are cropping up one after another—far too many to be a coincidence. I don't know if it's because Akira's here or not, but I hope he doesn't make this situation even more chaotic.

He couldn't say *definitively* that all this was Akira's fault, but he had a hunch the boy was somehow involved. With an annoyed scowl, he heaved an exasperated sigh.



Thanks to assistance from Yumina and the others, Akira had again gained an edge over Tiol, but he was still far from clinching the victory—once more the pursuer rather than the pursued, but unable to finish Tiol off despite his best efforts.

By now, the countless guns protruding from Tiol's left arm had all been destroyed under Akira's persistent gunfire. Tiol had only his shield left with which to defend himself—yet he clung tenaciously to life.

Damn, he won't go down! Just how tough is he?! Akira grumbled to Alpha.

That's because you're using normal bullets against force-field armor, she pointed out with a smile. *With your current ammo, this is the best you can do.*

She reminded Akira that he'd already fought similarly resilient opponents, like the Kokurou, the mech from Yoshioka Heavy Industries he'd encountered in the slums. The black machine's force-field armor had been so tough that even extended magazines of anti-force ammunition hadn't finished it off. Not only was Tiol protected by a force-field armor just as powerful as the Kokurou's, Alpha explained, but he could keep it cranked to maximum output, thanks to a high-capacity generator inside the trailer that was constantly supplying him with energy. This force-field armor allowed him to barely withstand Akira's and Yumina's relentless attacks.

Akira nodded. *So force-field armor really is that amazing. No wonder anti-*

force rounds are so expensive. Yet even though he grasped what she'd told him, his expression remained grim—now he knew how difficult breaking through Tiol's armor would be with his current gear.

But Alpha's smile didn't fade. *Fear not—look!* she said.

In order to repair the damage to his left arm's shield and artillery, as well as to supply the bullets for his arm cannon, Tiol was forced to consume more and more of his semitruck, which was now around the size of a small car. The vehicle was still working, but it clearly wouldn't for much longer—large cracks were appearing in the semi's frame, and it was starting to crumble, strewn broken pieces in its wake.

It's run out of energy to maintain its frame, Alpha observed. *Now the trailer's exterior won't be as strong as before.*

As the frame crumpled and tore off, Tiol was thrown from the vehicle, striking the ground with force.

Yes! Akira grinned. *Now, let's finish this!*

At that moment, Yumina had to stop firing to reload. That saved Tiol for the moment, but it didn't matter—to finish him, Akira only needed to shoot straight ahead.

Most of Tiol's left arm—and the guns sprouting from it—had been blown off, leaving only the part with the shield. He'd channeled all the semi's remaining energy into the shield right before the vehicle collapsed, but he doubted even that would protect him from Akira's gunfire.

Akira pulled the trigger. Tiol was out of options—checkmate.

Yet Tiol didn't perish—because at that moment, an automaton burst from a nearby dome.

Seriously?! Now, of all times?! Akira had heard from his teammates that rogue automatons were roaming the ruins. He knew how dangerous this machine would be if it attacked him, and for a moment, he considered prioritizing it over Tiol, since the latter was already at death's door. But having already cornered Tiol, Akira decided he might as well finish the job—kill Tiol first, then take care of the automaton afterward.

But the next moment, he was forced to change his priorities. The automaton flew into Akira's line of sight and stood in front of Tiol, as if protecting him.

What the—?! Akira found himself blindsided by this unexpected development.

Intercepting Akira's bullet, which was meant for Tiol, the automaton crumpled to the ground. But a new automaton appeared and shot a laser beam toward Akira.

Forced to take the defensive, Akira put all he had into dodging. Yet the beam was set to a wide area at the expense of attack power, and the boy couldn't avoid it completely. A wave of luminescent energy razed the plants on the ground and headed straight for Akira and his bike.

Thanks to the combined layers of force-field armor on his bike and his powered suit, he blocked much of the beam, emerging more or less unscathed—at least, the damage couldn't keep him from fighting at full power. Even so, his new opponent hadn't let him finish Tiol off—and worse, in the time Akira had taken to evade the beam, four more hostile automatons had appeared, one from the same dome as the first, and the other three from farther off. The vegetation in the ruin reduced the accuracy of his scanner, and the Old World technology of the automatons granted them outstanding speed; so the four machines had approached without Akira noticing.

One automaton, now twenty meters ahead of him, reared back for a horizontal slash with the blade in its hand—another, from the same distance but behind him, adopted a similar stance for a vertical slash. Each blade was roughly a meter in length, nowhere near long enough to reach Akira at that distance.

Nonetheless, Akira immediately dove from his bike, just as the two automatons swung their blades—and waves of light extended well over twenty meters from them. Their slashes overlapped to form a cross shape.

His desperate leap had utterly wrecked his bike, but the gun that had been mounted on top of it was still functional. So even as he'd abandoned the bike, he'd set the armlike emplacement to eject the gun into the air, then grabbed it mid-jump.

Now he was relying on the strength of his powered suit, rather than his bike, to help him keep a bead on his enemy. While a bike was more suited for quickly covering long distances in a straight line, moving on foot in his powered suit was better for making quick, irregular movements in different directions, allowing him to dodge the machines' attacks more easily as he fired back. So with his titan-killer in his right hand, his everyday SSB in his left, and his micromissile SSB attached to a support arm on his back, he was able to pound Tiol and the automatons alike with maximum firepower.

As the battle raged on, curtains of gunfire, explosions, blades of light, and lasers ravaged the surrounding area. Yet even in the midst of it all, Akira noticed two automatons—one like a maid, the other a butler—were poised to carry the immobile Tiol away from the battlefield.

What?! Why are the automatons helping him?!

Akira! Worry about that later! More reinforcements are coming!

Indeed, even as Alpha warned him, four more automatons appeared. Seeing his situation instantly go from bad to worse, Akira couldn't help but curse.

Dammit! What the hell's going on?!

At that moment, a barrage of micromissiles descended from the sky—Yumina had finished reloading and rejoined the fight. But the missiles, still set to target Tiol's semi, floundered around looking for it and then, not finding it, exploded aimlessly on the ground.

Countless blasts engulfed the area—including Akira and the automatons.



From the roof of her vehicle, Yumina checked Akira's scanner data and saw she'd accidentally hit him with friendly fire. Panicking, she immediately stopped shooting and called out to him over the comms. "Akira?! Akira?! Are you okay?!"

"Yeah, I'm fine" came his calm reply.

At that, she felt a wave of relief. But his next words made her frown, confused.

“Are *you* all right, Yumina? If you’re not hurt, don’t stop. Keep firing.”

“K-Keep firing?! But in this situation, I really *will* end up hitting you!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll just evade on my end, and even if one does hit me, I won’t blame you.”

“B-But...” Even if, strategically, he was making the right call, could she attack an enemy if it meant putting an ally in danger? For Yumina, who wasn’t pragmatic enough to easily answer yes, the question made her hesitate.

Akira sighed as if to say “Can’t be helped, then.” Aloud, he told her, “If you don’t think you can, I’m not gonna force you. But with things this dicey, I want you to go ahead and escape.” With that, he ended the call.

Being urged to flee only strengthened Yumina’s resolve, however, and she called him right back. “You’d better avoid my ordnance no matter what, okay?!” she shouted over the comms, resuming her assault. A massive cluster of micromissiles once again searched for their missing target before exploding in Akira’s vicinity.

Akira sounded somewhat amused. “All right, now that’s what I’m talking about! Keep firing just like that and don’t stop! And above all, be careful!”

“You too!” She felt her spirits lift, and a determined grin appeared on her lips.

Meanwhile, Reina clambered onto the roof in a panic. “What are you *doing*, Yumina?! You’re gonna hit Akira if you keep that up!”

“That’s okay. As things stand, I’m far more likely to hit the automatons. Helping him out like this is worth it, even with that risk.”

She could have easily excused herself by revealing that Akira himself had told her to fire. But she left that out—she was still the one who’d pulled the trigger, and she felt she had to own up to that responsibility rather than run from it.

“B-But—”

“More importantly, Reina, I suspect things are about to get pretty busy on our end too. I’ll need your help.”

“What do you mean?” the other girl said, looking puzzled.

Shiori, who'd climbed up on the roof with Reina, drew a gun seemingly from nowhere and fired, effortlessly striking a rapidly approaching automaton in the distance with deadly accuracy and knocking it to the ground. It immediately got back up, though, and began running toward them once more.

A hint of worry entered Shiori's expression. "Hm... Less effective than I thought. Miss Reina, it looks like I'll need your assistance."

Reina quickly drew her weapon and joined in the shoot-out. As she and Shiori pelted the approaching automaton with gunfire, she had a sudden thought. "Wait, Shiori, didn't you tell me not to fire at these things if we ran into them?"

"This automaton is clearly targeting us, so restraint is no longer necessary. Considering Mr. Akira's situation as well, there is unfortunately no longer any possibility of escaping without a fight."

Reina smiled wryly as though to say "Sorry I asked!" before pulling the trigger and hitting the automaton dead-on.

Under fire from Shiori and Reina (with Togami lending a hand), the automatons collapsed. More bullets damaged their limbs and sent their bodies skidding across the ground. Even so, they rose back up and resumed their advance.

Nor was this all. At the same time, new automatons were showing up one after another. More targets forced the team to spread its fire out, rendering it less powerful and making it harder to prevent the enemy's approach. Each automaton was already ridiculously resilient to begin with—even after getting hit with multiple barrages, the machines didn't look or move any worse for wear.

Reina's face looked grave. "Shiori, aren't we kind of, um, screwed?"

In contrast, Shiori was the picture of calm. "I suppose that depends on how you define 'screwed.' Compared to what Mr. Akira's currently dealing with, for instance, this is hardly worthy of concern."

"I suppose, but still—"

"Also, 'screwed' is a term unbecoming of a lady such as yourself. I'd like you to watch your language from now on."

Reina smiled wryly. “All right.” If Shiori was calm enough to chide her for something that trivial, the situation probably wasn’t as bad as she thought. She relaxed.

“Miss Yumina,” Shiori ordered. “Head toward the ruin’s exit. If the automatons are security installations for the facilities inside the ruin, they likely cannot chase us past the border.” The maid scanned their surroundings. She saw that several of the machines were already on the ruin’s outskirts, but there were no other hostiles on the way to the exit. Had there been, Shiori determined, they would already have noticed the vehicle approaching. Therefore, this escape route would be mostly clear, and if any new automatons showed up, they’d appear from the opposite direction and wouldn’t pose a threat.

“The area outside the ruin is also a more suitable location to reconvene with Mr. Akira,” Shiori said. “In an open space, we will be able to drive right to him, pick him up, and leave the premises at once. Please tell Mr. Akira to make his way outside the ruin as well.”

Yumina sensed that Shiori seemed unusually eager to leave the ruin, but she wasn’t in a position to argue. “Understood” was her only response.

“Don’tcha think it’s about time, sis?” Kanae urged Shiori.

“Indeed. Kanae and I will be going on ahead. Mr. Togami and Miss Yumina, I leave Miss Reina in your capable hands.” With a final bow, she and Kanae leaped from the vehicle, each executing perfect landings, and closed in on the machines waiting near the border.

Had the automatons ahead been moving in the same direction, the machines’ speed relative to the women would’ve been faster, and the maids would have had a hard time catching up. But the machines at the ruin’s border were stationary, so Shiori and Kanae closed the distance rapidly.

The automatons spotted the duo approaching and drew their weapons. Some had blades formed from liquid metal, while others were wielding long swords of light—energy that was solidified by force fields.

Shiori gave a small sigh. “So these have Old World blades as well, it seems.”

Kanae, on the other hand, was all smiles. “Not that surprising, considering the ones that attacked Akira kiddo also had ‘em. There was never any guarantee that these would be unarmed. We’re already lucky that they aren’t the ones with the crazy laser beams, so we have no right to complain.”

“Fair point,” Shiori conceded.

With that, they held their weapons at the ready, Shiori placing her hand on her blade’s sheath while Kanae gripped her hands into fists. At the same time, despite being over ten meters away, the automatons dashed forward and swung their blades. But with the added strength from their powered suits, Shiori and Kanae ducked underneath the machines’ attacks and clashed with them in an instant.

Shiori swung her blade. Kanae delivered a devastating punch.

One automaton collapsed in pieces; the other was flung into the air. Their bodies, strong enough to withstand multiple barrages of gunfire, nevertheless fell, each destroyed by a single attack.

Reina, who hadn’t even had time to stop Shiori and Kanae from leaping out of the vehicle, watched their fight from afar, stupefied. She was so surprised by what she saw that she even forgot to fire her own weapon. Togami also looked shocked but quickly recovered and went back to intercepting the advancing automatons.

“C’mon, Reina,” he said, as he resumed firing. “We need to back them up.”

Given that the automatons had such hardy exteriors, Togami suspected they were equipped with force-field armor. Neither he nor Reina had anti-force rounds, so their gunfire couldn’t have much effect. However, Shiori and Kanae’s weapons *were* effective against force fields. In a close-range fight, the maids had a good chance of winning—but they couldn’t reach their opponents in time if Reina and Togami didn’t keep the machines at bay with their gunfire. The reason for this was that though the automatons wielded different kinds of blades, they all were technically long range and so could put Reina in danger. The maids would have had a tough time fighting such opponents while also protecting Reina. So if they wanted to keep Reina safe, their best option was to

leave her to her teammates and engage the automatons up close while they had the chance.

“Get a grip,” he continued. “Our job right now is to make sure those machines don’t reach our vehicle, and to buy time for Shiori and Kanae to finish them off. That’s all we can do right now. Your maids understand that too, so let’s do what we can, okay?” He gave her a gentle smile.

A determined grin appeared on Reina’s lips. “Of course! You don’t even have to ask!” She, too, aimed at the automatons and rejoined the fight.

Now that Shiori and Kanae had dashed off toward the enemy, she found herself in the same situation as during the final fight in the Mihazono ruins. But, Reina thought with renewed enthusiasm, that didn’t mean the *outcome* had to be the same. She wouldn’t let it.

Back then, everyone had had to protect her—but now, things were different. Even if she couldn’t fight by her attendants’ sides, she could still help them out. She’d grown so much she could now fight together with them. So now was her moment! Driven to succeed, she cleared her mind of everything except the battle in front of her.

Ever since that day in Mihazono, she’d been desperate to get stronger. Right here, right now, she’d make all that effort pay off.

Focusing with all her concentration, she pulled the trigger. Her shot streaked through the air in a straight line, striking her target with pinpoint accuracy—proof of how much Reina had improved since Mihazono.

The automatons darted in all directions as they fought Shiori and Kanae, so they were much harder to hit than if they were charging in a straight line. Even so, Reina’s shot had found its target—due not to luck but to her own skill. This alone would have merited great praise, but her marksmanship had in fact displayed an even higher level of expertise—because against all odds, her mundane bullet had severely damaged the machine.

Old World automatons were protected by a layer of especially resilient force-field armor, but they didn’t have the energy to keep their entire body covered by that armor at maximum output. And since the automatons were currently in combat, dealing with their opponents at close range, they had to distribute

their energy to both their force field *and* their attacks, thus allocating less energy to pure defense. Naturally, this meant some parts of their bodies were less protected than others. And Reina had aimed for those weak points.

She'd had no idea her shot would be so effective—in fact, she'd more or less been guessing as to where those less guarded points might be. But her success hadn't been pure luck either—she'd made an unconscious yet informed guess, based on the intuition she'd honed through all her training and live combat since she'd first resolved to improve. This experience and knowledge had accumulated inside her subconscious ever since, present but never fully utilized. Yet here, with her concentration at its absolute limit, everything had come together in her mind.

The result? She had managed to cripple an Old World automaton with a normal bullet. With all she'd undergone fueling her growth, she'd improved so drastically from her old self that one could easily have mistaken her for a different person entirely.

Critically damaged, the automaton's movements became sluggish. Shiori didn't miss that opportunity, of course, and sliced the machine in half instantly.

"Excellent marksmanship, miss!" came Shiori's voice over the comms. "Keep up the good work!"

"No problem! Leave it to me!" Reina said, grinning at her praise, and kept firing at the machines. Her shots didn't damage the automatons this time, but they all hit their targets, which at least prevented the enemies from attacking her attendants.

Togami also noticed how much Reina had improved, and he couldn't help but grin as he fired more shots of his own. "Knocked down an automaton even through all that force-field armor, eh? Not bad."

"Well, considering how much more expensive my gear is than yours, I ought to be able to do at least that much," she retorted teasingly.

It was true—Reina's current gear was far pricier than Togami's. Shiori had ordered the best equipment she could possibly afford for Reina, and her gear was so powerful that one might even see rank 50 hunters using it. Togami's gear, on the other hand, wasn't much better than what he'd used back in

Mihazono. As it was on loan from Druncam and he'd exhausted his earnings from the Mihazono job to pay Shikarabe to train him, he wasn't in a position to afford better gear.

Equipment, like luck, contributed a lot to one's performance. But though she spoke in jest, Reina had just acknowledged, without a hint of embarrassment or shame, that she was relying on the power of her expensive gear. This, too, was proof of her growth.

Togami picked up on this and returned a jab of his own. "Must be nice to be rich. Sure wish I could afford stuff like that."

"Maybe you can, after we sell one of these automatons," she said with a smile.

"Probably not, since we're kind of destroying them right now."

"Guess you're right. What a waste!"

"You said it!"

The two continued their jocular banter as they diligently supported Shiori and Kanae to the best of their ability. On the day they'd returned from Mihazono, they'd each vowed to themselves to get stronger—and seeing their performance now, it was clear just how far their efforts had taken them.



Shiori swung her weapon at one automaton, repelling its abnormally long, silver blade while dodging a wave of light from another. Her horizontal slashes, delivered with masterful execution, were bolstered with the extra physical strength granted by her powered suit, and the energy flowing from her blade's hilt gave the already-sharp blade even more of an edge. This, combined with its anti-force capabilities, allowed her weapon to eat into her opponent's force-field armor. With just one attack, her blade cleaved both automatons in two, sending their severed bodies to the ground.

However, this didn't mean the automatons were done for. They were, after all, machines—as long as their internal generator remained intact, they could still move even after losing half their body. But Shiori was well aware of this. From the start, her aim had never been to destroy the automatons, but rather

to keep them from reaching Reina and the others. As far as she could judge, the time she'd need to completely destroy an automaton would be better spent incapacitating any that were about to head Reina's way.

Not that she'd have time to destroy them all anyway—there were simply too many. By now they'd incapacitated all of the original group, but reinforcements had shown up immediately after, so the enemy's numbers hadn't actually decreased. The automatons were weaker than she'd anticipated, which helped matters somewhat, but the look on her face remained grim.

Many of these are cheaper, less capable models; even so, it's abnormal for there to be so many. I know anything can happen in ruins, since they're Old World facilities, but I'd hoped there wouldn't be anything this extreme.

Grumbling to herself, Shiori moved on to her next target. An automaton Reina had hit flew into Shiori's range, and she promptly cut it down with a single slash.

Reina and Togami were doing an excellent job of supporting Shiori. *I'm thrilled to see how far you've grown, miss*, she thought. And she did welcome the idea of Reina getting stronger. But there was something else about this prospect that was concerning. *If she's really gotten so strong, will she decide that she wants to keep being a relic hunter for the rest of her life? And will her friendship with Togami influence that decision?*

Reina was wealthy—wealthy enough to have two maids accompany her wherever she went. Typically, someone so affluent wouldn't have any reason to become a hunter. In other words, Reina had other circumstances that had sent her down this path.

Shiori was making every effort to resolve those circumstances, for Reina's sake. At present, she had yet to find a clear solution, but she doubted Reina actually wanted to make a career out of being a hunter. Therefore, she thought, she had to work harder to free Reina of the forces that had driven her to the hunter life before the latter took hold of her, so that Reina could live the way she truly wanted.

Then she realized she was letting her concerns affect her battle performance and quickly wiped the distraction from her mind. Until she *did* find a solution,

worrying about it wouldn't solve anything, she reminded herself, focusing on the battle again.

She glanced at Kanae to see how she was faring. Her colleague was fighting several automatons at once a short distance away. Shiori had planned to assist if it looked like Kanae was in over her head, but the other maid didn't look pressured in the least—on the contrary, she looked bored. Judging that she'd be fine on her own, Shiori let her be and engaged the next automaton near her.

Kanae had initially jumped out of Yumina's vehicle with enthusiasm and glee at the prospect of a fight, but no trace of that remained on her face now. She was still wearing a smile, but it looked more like she was trying to fool herself into being excited about the fight, rather than actual excitement. And even that smile was gradually waning as the fight went on—she was finding the automatons to be total pushovers.

Kanae had a vice—she got a huge thrill from combat. She even tended to put the people she was supposed to be guarding in dangerous situations just to keep herself entertained, deliberately chose to fight in close quarters even when long-range weapons would be ten times as efficient, and refused to change one bit even after being called out for her excesses.

If her opponent was an organic monster, she savored the thrill of winning a fight to the death with a creature who was clearly aiming to kill her; if her opponent was human, she enjoyed a lethal contest in which each combatant employed their skills to the utmost. So whether against human or monster, what Kanae enjoyed the most was pitting her own will against her opponent's.

She could even find enjoyment fighting machines like security guards, as long as she knew not to expect them to display any emotional reactions from the get-go. For instance, she hadn't minded fighting the reanimated corpses in Mihazono because she knew they were just a warm-up for the main event—Monica.

Had these automatons fought more like humans, Kanae might have had more fun. But as she dodged their blades, stepped inside their attack range, and punched them with her anti-force gauntlets, piercing the machines' armor and

rupturing their insides, the automatons remained expressionless. They didn't show any pain, panic, hostility, joy, enthusiasm, or scorn.

They were hollow—and Kanae's zeal had faded as a result. Though she would normally have jumped at the chance to fight, Kanae's motivation was starting to wane.

Automatons were meticulously designed to appear indistinguishable from humans, but that didn't include displaying human feelings. The machines' lack of emotion made the fight feel empty and pointless to Kanae. Each time her fist connected, she felt as though she'd punched a human-shaped sandbag with no will of its own.

That couldn't be called a fight. There was no thrill in it. It was boring—and her smile was becoming thinner and thinner.

"Ugh, enough already," she groaned. "I can't take it anymore!" By the time she voiced her feelings aloud, her enthusiasm had gone completely cold. Losing her last sliver of hope that the fight might eventually become interesting, her smile disappeared.

"Guess I'll just wrap this up, then," she muttered with no inflection in her voice whatsoever, and with a single devastating swing of her fist, she smashed the nearest automaton to pieces. An instant later, the automaton next to it was also broken beyond repair. With a frigid gaze, like one might give to a pebble on the side of the road, and an expression of complete and utter disinterest, she'd taken out two automatons in an instant, as though she just wanted to get this ordeal over with as quickly as she could.

Kanae's vice was, in fact, her biggest weakness. Because she prioritized the joy of combat over certain victory and her own safety, she would often drag fights out on purpose, place handicaps on herself, or avoid attacking an opponent's weak points, even if doing so was highly inefficient and counterproductive.

But if there was no pleasure to be had in a fight whatsoever, Kanae had no reason to hold back.

She swung her fist again, then delivered a swift kick. Each attack was as efficient as could be, and the automatons dropped one after the other. They

attacked her with blades from all directions, but she evaded and counterattacked with deadly seriousness.

Playtime was over.

And so, with precise, mechanical movements, she laid waste to machine after machine, looking as cold and unfeeling as her opponents, until there were none left to challenge her.

Chapter 166: High-Definition Reality

Riding in Yumina's vehicle as it headed for the border of the ruin, Reina and Togami kept up their support for Shiori and Kanae, and were both shocked by Kanae's display of strength.

"Gotta be honest—I had no idea Kanae was capable of all that," Togami commented. Of course, if Shiori was allowing the other maid to tag along without a long-range weapon, he knew she had to be pretty skilled. But this was the first time she'd really impressed him.

"At least it looks like we'll win now, thanks to her," Reina replied. Shiori and Kanae were still fighting off automatons, but Reina was confident they'd be victorious at this rate.

However, Yumina interjected seriously, "If they can do without your support, then pardon my asking, but I'll need you both to help out over here instead."

Reina and Togami had been fully focused on helping Shiori and Kanae, so they hadn't been paying attention to how Akira was holding up at all. Yumina's expression made Reina uneasy, but regardless, she checked Akira's scanner data—and her look immediately became grave.

"What in the world?!"

They could all see Akira's reading on the scanner—he was fighting eight automatons at the same time.



Akira was trying his best to make it to the ruin's border. Drawing on every ounce of extra power from his suit, he was running at full tilt, occasionally even hopping along footholds he generated in the air. With a gun in each hand, he continuously peppered the pursuing automatons, firing both weapons at their maximum rate. He'd already exhausted his supply of micromissiles and, seeing no point in carrying dead weight, had tossed away the ammo-less SSB and its support arm even as he dodged an automaton's blade of light.

His two other SSBs were also running dangerously low on ammunition, even with their extended magazines, which served to show just how much in the way of munitions he'd poured into the horde of automatons in such a short span of time. And yet the machines were still pursuing him tenaciously. Realizing he'd be finished if they surrounded him, Akira zigzagged at random to throw them off, but continued to make his way toward the ruin's exit.

One automaton got close enough to strike and swung its five-meter-long liquid-metal blade horizontally, slicing the long grass and weeds on the ground in a fan shape as it went. Akira jumped to avoid it, but a different automaton attacked him with a sword of light while he hung in midair. To evade, he generated a foothold in empty space and kicked off with so much force that the foothold crumbled as he went flying off to the side.

Immediately afterward, however, another automaton started charging a laser cannon embedded in its palm. Sensing that he couldn't dodge, Akira swung his leg into the laser's line of sight and created another foothold. Channeling his suit's force-field armor entirely into the sole of his foot, he blocked the laser, refracting it away from him.

He continued to dodge the automaton's attacks any way he could—until even more machines appeared, and more blades of silver or light flashed in his direction. Akira's expression immediately turned grave—even he wouldn't be able to handle this many.

Yet at that very moment, a cluster of micromissiles descended, their explosions knocking the hostile machines to the ground and flinging their attacks off course. Akira seized the chance to quickly straighten up and dash toward the exit once more, firing his guns behind him.

D-Damn, that was close! I thought I was done for!

Yumina had fired the micromissiles that had saved him. There were still many extended magazines of micromissiles remaining in her vehicle, so she had plenty of ammo. But she couldn't fire while she was swapping out magazines, and in that brief span of time, the automatons had managed to corner and nearly finish off Akira.

Now that she had resumed firing, however, the micromissiles struck one

automaton after another. While the explosions couldn't destroy them completely, they gave Akira the chance he needed. As he hurried to the exit, he decided to finish off the rogue machines while he had the chance. And so, with Alpha correcting his aim, he was able to target machine after machine in exactly the same spot over and over, even while the fire rate on his guns was set to maximum, thus chewing through their force-field armor in no time.

The spot he aimed for? Their internal generators. Thanks to Alpha's quick and thorough analysis of his scanner's data, he'd known exactly where each automaton kept its power source. With these destroyed, the automatons crumpled to the ground.

How many more, Alpha?!

Eight.

Eight?! You've gotta be kidding me! I've already wiped out a ton! Why are there so many left?!

Probably because for every automaton you destroy, several more show up.

Dammit! Then I guess I've just gotta hope I can make it outside the ruin before they catch up!

More and more micromissiles descended around him, but the automatons kept chasing after him, heedless of the explosions. Even so, Akira kept moving forward.



How is he still alive? Reina and the others all thought simultaneously.

So dire did Akira's current predicament seem—which was why Yumina announced to Reina and Togami, "Here's the plan! Once I get a good lock on the automatons attacking him, I'm going to shoot them with *this*." She picked up a titan-killer SSB—the same kind that Akira used.

Up until now, as Yumina had fired the micromissiles, she'd been using the domes of the ruins and other obstacles as cover so that the enemy wouldn't be able to get a bead on her vehicle with their laser cannons. As the micromissiles were guided, they could arc over the domes and hit their targets, taking the

heat off Akira.

But from this point on, her tactics would be different. Aiming directly at the automatons meant she'd have nowhere to hide from their lasers.

She'd be right in their line of fire.

The automatons Shiori and Kanae were fighting didn't have any weapons with the range of a gun, so Reina and Togami had been able to support their teammates from a safe position. But Yumina's plan would put Reina in the enemy's sights as well—in the view of enemies so formidable that even Akira was fleeing them.

If they gave up on helping Akira and focused on saving themselves, there *was* a chance the automatons might not give chase. Yet Yumina wouldn't consider abandoning Akira for even a second.

"I want to help him," she said. "But I also don't want to put you in danger, so I won't force you to stick with me. If you think this is too risky, head for the exit on your own." She turned her gaze to Reina's vehicle, which had been trailing behind them on auto-drive. Reina and Togami could just get in and head out of the ruin, and they'd be safe.

True, Shiori had asked Yumina to look after Reina, but Yumina wasn't about to use that as an excuse to leave Akira in the lurch—this was the most Yumina was willing to compromise.

But even knowing the risks involved, Reina gave a big grin. "Don't be silly! I'd help even if you told me I'd just get in the way." She changed the settings on her vehicle, which drove off toward Shiori and Kanae.

Yumina gave a small smile. "I assume you feel the same, Togami?"

"Huh? Sure, works for me," he said, casually agreeing to stay behind in a zone so dangerous that he might not survive if things went south.

At this, Yumina grinned in amusement. "I get it—don't wanna leave your sweetheart by herself, huh? I understand."

"Excuse me?!" demanded Reina.

"Now then, shall we go?" Yumina said, ignoring her completely as she got into

position with her titan-killer.

Togami smiled wryly, but drew his weapon as well. Reina held her gun with a scowl, pretending to be upset in order to mask her feelings; but her face was beet red.

Yumina could eyeball Akira and the automatons' general location by following the trajectory of her missiles. And because her scanner was already linked to Akira's via her support system, she could accurately pinpoint the enemy positions behind one of the large domes. Atop the vehicle's undulating roof, the three of them maintained a distance close enough for their guns to be in range—but also close enough to be dangerous, inasmuch as the automatons could instantly run up and attack—as they waited for their chance.

Finally, before their eyes, Akira dashed out from behind the dome, with several automatons in hot pursuit. At that moment, Yumina, Reina, and Togami opened fire as one. A storm of bullets sailed through the air, pummeling the pursuing machines from the side.



Akira reached the edge of the ruin, but he was nearly spent. So overwhelming were the enemy's attacks that he'd barely had a chance to heal himself with medicine, and so severe were his wounds that he could no longer walk on his own, forcing himself forward solely with his powered suit.

What medicine he *had* managed to ingest was long since depleted. With each step, intense pain assaulted him, forcing him to grit his teeth.

He had the advanced weaponry of the automatons to thank for having reduced him to this sorry state. The restocked machines in the Iida Commercial District Ruins came equipped with a variety of weaponry, but most formidable of all were those with built-in laser cannons; in general, these also had higher specs than the others. While Shiori and Kanae were facing a greater number of enemies, the ones attacking Akira were clearly of higher caliber; and as they pursued Akira relentlessly, even he felt mental exhaustion overcoming him—sensed the unending, excruciating pain shattering his spirit.

His powered suit would continue to function as long as its wearer willed it—and by the same token, if Akira lost his will to go on, he wouldn't be able to

move. Thus, the moment he gave in to his distress, he was as good as dead.

Yet Akira didn't give up. The will to fight, the drive to press on, the resolve to endure—these were all his responsibility, his burden to bear.

Such was the mindset that had carried him through countless desperate struggles until now, so he wasn't about to throw in the towel here. It was thanks to this perseverance that he'd made it as far as he had.

And now he wasn't fighting alone—he had the support of Yumina and the others. An uninterrupted barrage of micromissiles pounded the automatons, and a dense curtain of gunfire peppered them from the side. Not everything hit its mark, but the damage to the machines hindered their movements.

With their assistance alleviating some of the pressure on him, Akira didn't miss the chance to cram as many recovery capsules into his mouth as he could fit there. The five-million-aurum-a-box medication began to heal the boy at a speed far beyond that of average oral capsules, and the pain reliever kicked in immediately, freeing him from his agony.

Whew, I was nearly a goner, wasn't I? But now I think I can get through this! A grin came to his lips. He was still in extreme danger, but now he at least had a fighting chance.

Just then, a call from Reina came in over the comms, and he had Alpha pick it up.

"Akira! Looked like you were taking quite the beating back there!" Reina said. "Did we bail you out in time?"

"Yeah, I almost didn't make it! You guys saved me! Thanks, and keep it up!"

"R-Really? All right, leave it to us! We're gonna win this!"

Hearing the spirit in Reina's voice, Akira felt his enthusiasm revive. *Alpha, it's now or never! Let's make it out of here alive!*

Understood. We'll overcome this, just like we always do!

And to Akira's eyes, Alpha was smiling as confidently as ever.



Upon hearing Akira's gratified response, Reina beamed with pride. "All right, leave it to us! We're gonna win this!"

Her abilities had improved by leaps and bounds, but there was still a wide gulf between her and Akira. Initially, she'd worried that her question had come off as a little too cocky, but Akira's unexpectedly favorable reply had given her spirit a massive boost.

Then she noticed the expression on Yumina's face—anxious and grim, even a bit tormented. "What's wrong?"

"Hm? Oh, it's nothing," said the other girl, suddenly cheerful. "You heard Akira—we need to support him the best we can!"

Just as Reina's experience had catalyzed her growth so much that she was now hardly recognizable as the same person, so Yumina's own desperate efforts were starting to bear fruit at last. Here and now, her talent was about to blossom.

The groundwork for this had long since been laid. By splitting off from Katsuya and the rest of his team and persuading Akira to train her instead, she'd freed herself of the mediocre exercises she had undergone at Druncam. And after hearing from Akira how he'd trained himself to control his sense of time, she'd incorporated his method into her own training.

All she'd been missing was the trigger.

When she'd seen Akira run out from behind the dome—when she'd seen the horde of automatons currently on his tail—she'd seen Katsuya, his image superimposed over Akira's. She'd beheld the Katsuya who had recklessly charged in on his own and baited a horde of monsters to keep his teammates safe.

Katsuya did indeed have a tendency to make reckless decisions. And so, even during the hypersynthetic snake battle, he'd used himself as a decoy to lure the skyscraper-sized bounty monster away from the rest of his unit, nearly getting himself killed in the process. Similarly, even though Akira had been desperately trying all this time to escape from the horde of automatons, he had never once attempted to reunite with Yumina and the others—because doing so would mean luring the dangerous machines to where they were.

In other words, Akira, too, was assuming the role of a decoy, and seeing him struggling to take on the enemy all by himself was more than enough for Yumina to see Katsuya in Akira's place. She was seized with an intense impulse to save him.

While training to manipulate her sense of time, Yumina had repeatedly watched footage of Katsuya in peril. She'd imagined herself being there, unable to aid him, anxious and fearful. And each time, she'd been powerless to help Katsuya from the other side of the screen. All she could do was wish that she was with him, and that she had the strength to rescue him.

I have to save him, Yumina told herself, blotting out all other thoughts. Perhaps she couldn't have been there for the Katsuya on the screen—but right now, she was here. If she didn't help Akira in this moment, she might as well just be watching footage on a screen, as there would be no point to her being here in the first place.

She yearned to return to Katsuya's side, but not so she'd have his protection or because she wanted to cling to him. Rather, she longed to help him when he needed it. If she couldn't rescue Akira here, what made her think she'd be able to rescue Katsuya once she was together with him again?

So she had to save him. In order to deliver Akira—in order to deliver Katsuya—she concentrated more deeply than she ever had before.

All this time, she'd only been missing the trigger—and now, she had it at last.

The world around her slowed to a crawl. The vehicle she was perched on was traveling at a good clip, but she hardly felt it move. The automatons were also darting around at high speed, yet she hit her marks with ease, as though her bullets were being sucked in toward their targets.

Yumina had successfully slowed her sense of time.

With her newfound ability, she struck down the automatons one after another. In the face of her abruptly and dramatically increased accuracy, the automatons ceased to be a threat—and lost their advantage.

To eliminate this new danger, one automaton directed its laser cannon, resembling a lens embedded in its palm, away from Akira and toward Yumina—

only for Yumina to blast out the lens before it could fire, her bullet piercing through the length of the machine's arm and out the other end. With its laser cannon and arm destroyed, the automaton was defenseless against Yumina's gunfire, which blew it apart.

Yumina owed her victory to the synergy between her temporal manipulation and her support system. She'd been steadily growing stronger ever since she'd started training with Akira, but Kiryou's support system had always been carrying her. Her gear was cutting-edge, yet she'd lacked the skill to unlock its full potential. But now? With everything around her moving in slow motion, she could finally execute the high-speed, high-precision movements her top-of-the-line equipment demanded of her. She could finally use her equipment as a convenient tool, rather than letting the tool use her.

In short, harnessing far more of her powered suit's functionality and drawing on her support system, she was able to boost her abilities drastically. This meant she could now hold her own in battles that required this level of speed and precision, and execute a level of marksmanship on par with Akira's.

But she felt no joy, no satisfaction, no sense of accomplishment—just determination. In order to rescue Akira, she maintained her focus and kept firing.



Seeing Yumina's remarkable improvement, Akira felt more pride than surprise.

Seems like Yumina and Reina both got a lot stronger all of a sudden, huh? Well, I'm certainly not complaining! Come on, Alpha, let's finish this!

Roger that! said his companion.

During the lull in enemy fire, Akira swallowed more recovery capsules, then swung his protective coat like a simple support arm, flinging the magazines concealed inside it into the air. At the same time, he ejected the empty mags from both his SSBs and caught the airborne ones in the guns' now-vacant slots, allowing them to automatically reload. Then, for the first time since the chase had begun, he turned around in the opposite direction and instantly closed the gap between him and the automaton horde. He thrust the barrel of his titan-

killer SSB into the nearest automaton, slamming it to the ground, then opened fire at point-blank range. Pinned between the gun and the ground, the automaton was unable to dodge, and Akira's gunfire blew it apart.

He hadn't tried this earlier because focusing on one automaton would have left him vulnerable to attacks from the others. But now that the supporting fire from Yumina and her companions was more effective, he could afford to do so. Their bullets struck any automatons targeting Akira, knocking them off their feet before they could attack.

Even so, Akira knew his teammates couldn't keep up this level of support for long, nor did he expect them to. He had to bring the battle to a close soon.

He concentrated and slowed his sense of time until the micromissiles descending on the automatons seemed to move at a snail's pace. In the dense, drawn-out second that followed, he dodged a liquid-metal blade, a blade of light, and a blast from a laser cannon as he closed the distance to his next enemy. Again he pinned the automaton down with his SSB and blasted it to pieces. But moving at such extraordinarily high speeds overtaxed his body and injured it at the cellular level, though he mitigated the damage by ingesting yet another massive dose of recovery medicine.

Thinking about how many times in his life he'd repeated this process—break his body down, take meds to heal—made him feel uneasy, so he pushed it out of his mind and ran forward, destroying another machine.

The more he demolished, the weaker the enemy's forces got—yet no matter how many he defeated, the automatons never grew less hostile, hell-bent on eliminating Akira even if they had to sacrifice themselves. But now that he'd stopped trying to escape, he knew he was as good as dead the moment the support fire from Yumina and the others ceased. So he needed to make sure he eliminated all his enemies before then.

He shot down machine after machine, dodging their blades and lasers to get close enough to destroy them. And in the end, his efforts paid off—he overcame the horde.

By that time, Yumina had long stopped firing. As this was the first time she had successfully performed temporal manipulation, she'd quickly reached her

limit. Still, Akira managed to make it in time, turning the guns in his hands onto the final automaton.

With this, it's over!

A stream of bullets erupted from both weapons and struck the automaton point-blank, piercing its force-field armor and blasting it to fragments.





At the sight of Akira finishing off the last machine, Reina let out a whoop as she turned to Yumina. “Yes! We did it! Yumina, look! We won!”

But seeing Yumina’s expression, Reina’s joy vanished from her face. The other girl was down on one knee and grimacing in extreme pain. On the ground in front of her, Reina beheld a pool of blood and vomit.

“A-Are you all right?!”

“Urk... Don’t worry, I’m fine,” Yumina managed to answer. “I just pushed myself a little too hard.” Moving sluggishly, she took out a large quantity of recovery medicine and swallowed it. The pills belonged to the highly effective meds Akira had shared with her, so the healing process began immediately. Feeling her pain lift, Yumina sighed in relief. “Five million aurum a box, huh? No wonder—that’s some good stuff!”

“Yumina, are you *sure* you’re okay?” Reina asked.

“Yeah, I’m good. Just let me rest a little...” She looked exhausted but wore a smile.

Reina judged that Yumina’s life wasn’t in any danger and relaxed. “Good. Then let’s pick up Akira, Shiori, and Kanae and get out of here.”

At that moment, Shiori called her to let her know they’d finished mopping up the automatons on their end and were going to drive out of the ruin in Reina’s vehicle.

“Do not worry about Mr. Akira,” Shiori added. “We will pick him up, so wait outside the ruin and we’ll meet you there.”

Shiori and Kanae knew that Akira had finished eliminating his pursuers, but just in case, they couldn’t allow Reina to put herself in danger by heading to where he was; and Reina understood this as well. “Sounds like a plan. Good work, you two. We couldn’t have done it without you.”

“I appreciate that, miss!”

Yumina gradually brought the vehicle to a stop. Now they just needed to wait for the others. She didn’t detect any hostiles in the vicinity—she could finally

relax. But no sooner did she realize this than a wave of fatigue hit her all at once. The meds might have helped her recover physically, but successfully manipulating her sense of time had taken a higher toll on her mental state than she'd expected.

I finally managed to pull it off at the eleventh hour, but I didn't think it'd wear me out this much, she thought. Akira does that all the time, without breaking a sweat? No wonder he's so capable! And now I understand why he bought so many cases of that medicine.

Temporal manipulation took a severe toll on both mind and body. Akira had just gone all out against an entire horde of Old World automatons. If just firing a few shots at long range had wiped her out to this degree, just how heavy was the burden on Akira right now? Merely imagining it shocked her.

Still, Yumina was satisfied simply knowing she'd been able to save him. That meant as long as she kept training and maintained this level of strength—or perhaps got even stronger—she'd be able to rescue Katsuya in his hour of need, once she returned to his team. Staring straight ahead, in Akira's direction, she eagerly fantasized about how much more capable she'd be when that time came.

But the next instant, her expression turned to shock. A sword of light, over ten meters in length, suddenly jutted up from the ground and barely missed skewering Akira.



After finishing off the final automaton, Akira sighed deeply. "Finally, it's over." He was so exhausted he could have collapsed on the spot, but with the help of his powered suit, he remained upright.

Alpha praised him with a smile. *Well done, Akira. Looks like you made it by the skin of your teeth again!*

Yeah, you ain't kidding. He sighed a second time. *You know, just once I'd like to have a normal fight where I win without being pushed to the brink of death.*

What are you talking about? she said with a smirk. *By now, that is normal for you.*

Akira smiled wryly—he had no rebuttal.

Soon after, Shiori called to let him know she was on her way to pick him up, and to wait there. He could see Shiori and Kanae in the distance, boarding their vehicle—he wouldn't have to wait long. Now he just needed to rejoin everyone else, and they could head home. He relaxed, about to lower his guard.

But at that moment, he suddenly felt off, and Alpha's expression turned grave. Though he didn't know why, he at least grasped that he was in extreme danger. So he didn't resist as she seized control of his powered suit, forcibly jerking him out of the way; instead, he leaped with all his might in the direction she was guiding him.

And not a moment too soon—a pair of luminescent blades flashed up from underground, forming an X as they sliced through the air. The power of the attack surprised him—just a tiny fraction of energy leaked from the high-output force field that gave the blades their shape, but it was enough to send massive chunks of earth flying.

Before Akira, who'd just barely dodged the slashes, two automatons burst from the ground below, wielding blades of light. One wore a maid uniform; the other was dressed like a butler. Akira recognized them: they were identical to the holograms on display at the automaton store—the latest models from Mitsuba Silvertch, each valued at eighteen million coron. Even one such automaton performed far beyond those he'd encountered thus far, and here were two of them.

The machines raised their blades for a second strike. These weapons came with their own generators, which were directly linked to the high-output main generators for the automaton's bodies. From hilt to tip, each sword measured over ten meters in length, and was one meter wide including the excess energy leaking from the blade's surface.

I'm outmatched! was Akira's first, instinctive thought. He wasn't giving up—he just knew that based on what he could see, it was physically impossible for him to win.

The automatons swung their blades of light—and Akira charged. He'd vowed to never throw in the towel, no matter the result, so he had no choice but to

act.

Suddenly, without warning, the world—as Akira perceived it—dramatically transformed.

He could see everything around him vividly, with surprising sharpness. As though his world had suddenly switched from low resolution to high definition—as though his very reality had been rewritten—as though he'd been transported without warning to another realm entirely, his five senses felt like different senses altogether.

And in that world of high definition, Akira could perceive his opponents' attacks quickly and more accurately than ever before. With perfect timing, and not a moment too soon, he dodged both blades. Such a move would have been impossible in his previous, low-resolution world, but it was feasible in HD. The leaked energy coming off of the brilliant blades scorched his protective coat and powered suit, and even charred the skin underneath—but he managed to avoid a direct hit.

He struck back! First, he slammed the SSB in his left hand against the maid automaton and then, with the barrel pressed up against its body and his fire rate set to maximum, he pulled the trigger.

Throughout the whole battle, he'd already had his gun set to shoot as fast as possible—or at least, as fast as possible at the time. For there were two limiters on the weapon: one preventing the user from setting the rate of fire too high and ruining their weapon, and another to stop the overflow of energy from the force-field armor from backfiring if the weapon broke, thereby killing the user.

But with Alpha's help, Akira had now disengaged both limiters—it didn't matter if his gun broke beyond repair, as long as he survived. Now he was able to shoot at its *true* max rate. His extended magazines emptied in an instant as he pounded his enemy with bullets.

Of course, with its barrel pressed right up against the automaton, the gun recoiled frantically, one massive impact after another, without a moment of reprieve. The relentless shock waves took a toll on both Akira and his weapon—but even so, Akira kept firing. Every time the barrel kicked away from the machine, he forced it back with his powered suit.

The SSB in his left hand eventually exploded, the blast engulfing his whole left arm—just as the maid automaton’s internal generator shut down. Too much of the machine’s energy had been directed to its weapon, greatly weakening the force-field armor protecting its body and giving Akira the opportunity to take the automaton down for good, even if it meant sacrificing his left arm and SSB in the process. He’d seized his chance.

Yet one enemy still remained. The butler automaton leaped into the air and swung its blade downward toward Akira. Where the blade of light touched the ground, light exploded in a wide radius. Once more, Akira avoided the attack by a hair’s breadth, but it burned his protective coat to a crisp. Nor could his suit’s force-field armor protect the skin underneath, and even the flesh beneath his skin charred, but Akira nevertheless shoved his remaining SSB—the titan-killer—against his opponent and fired.

Again, he maxed out his rate of fire—and on this gun, the recoil was even worse. The automaton tried to back away from the gun’s muzzle, but Akira wasn’t about to let that happen. Leaping in the air, he kicked down and slammed the gun back on the automaton, pinning his enemy to the ground. Then he unloaded his entire magazine.

But the butler automaton remained intact, and though trapped, it swung its blade. Yet Akira found its attacks easier to dodge now that he was grappling with it, and taking damage had caused the machine to dedicate more force field to its body, weakening its strikes further. Akira evaded this one easily—but his titan-killer SSB wasn’t so lucky. The light from the blade engulfed the massive weapon, annihilating it in an instant.

Akira was out of guns—but not out of weapons. He snatched an Old World blade from its holster on his suit and thrust it at the automaton with all his might, aiming for the same spot on its body that he’d just pounded with the SSB. Even with force-field armor, this point still had to be weaker than the rest of its body.

Indeed, his blade did pierce through its armor and into its insides—but only the tip, proving the resilience of an Old World automaton worth eighteen million coron. Here, however, Akira deployed his last remaining weapon. Channeling every ounce of his remaining strength, he swung his fist down and

punched the hilt of the blade with everything he had.

Success! His strike drove the blade deep enough to pierce the automaton's internal generator. With its power source destroyed, it fell motionless.

Akira was also completely spent. He lost consciousness and collapsed on the spot.



Approaching Akira's location, Shiori and Kanae were startled to see the two automatons attack Akira without warning. But they quickly recovered and immediately moved to offer support. As they could cover the short distance quicker on foot, they leaped from the vehicle and hurried to his side.

Yet before they could even get close enough to assist him, Akira finished off both machines on his own. He collapsed to the ground—undoubtedly out cold and critically wounded. He needed immediate treatment.

Shiori felt relieved, though. If she hadn't made Reina wait up ahead, the girl would have also gotten caught up in the battle—a fight so fierce that it had reduced even Akira to this state. Glad that she'd made the right call, Shiori quickened her pace, as did Kanae.

But just before they reached him, they both witnessed something unbelievable.

Yet another maid automaton appeared beside Akira, seemingly out of nowhere. Shiori and Kanae moved instantly to eliminate the new threat—it had to have noticed them already. Bearing down on it in a flash, they attacked in perfect unison. Both their powered suits and the anti-force settings on their weapons were maxed out, and they struck with blade and fist.

But the automaton blocked both with laughable ease, catching Shiori's blade between two fingers and intercepting Kanae's punch with her other hand—and didn't even budge. Taking their full-power attacks, she remained standing and looking calm.

"Are you finished?" she said with a smile, releasing Shiori's blade and Kanae's fist without any sign of hostility.

They were not, in fact, finished. Shiori instantly sheathed her blade to recharge it, planning to release her most powerful attack, which would burn out the blade itself. At the same moment, Kanae grappled the automaton by the waist so that it couldn't escape Shiori's ace in the hole.

And Shiori swung her brilliant blade with all her might—to no avail! The automaton parried it with a mere wave of her arm. Shiori stared dumbfounded at the now-useless blade in her hand, reduced to only a hilt, while her target stood smiling and unharmed.

Instinctively, Shiori backed away. Kanae followed her lead and assumed a fighting stance beside her. With no other weapons to rely on, Shiori took a similar pose, though she clearly hadn't used it in some time. Both looked grave—the situation seemed so dire that even Kanae couldn't manage a grin. With such a despair-inducing gulf between her skill and her opponent's, she couldn't even think about fighting for sport.

But the automaton continued to smile. “Don't worry, I didn't come here to fight.” And yet, there was no doubt she could put an end to both maids' lives in an instant if she so wished.

As this automaton, unlike the others, seemed to be capable of conversation, Kanae tried to stall for time until they could find some way to tip things in their favor. “If you don't plan to fight us, you could at least introduce yourself,” she snarked.

The automaton gave an exaggerated bow. “My name is Olivia, and I am a general-purpose automaton designed by Lion's Tail, Inc. I highly recommend Lion's Tail products if you ever come across them.” It was the same automaton Tiol had activated.

Hearing Olivia's introduction, both Shiori and Kanae were visibly shaken to their core. Olivia produced a white card and flicked it over to Shiori.



“What is this?” Shiori demanded.

“It’s not for you. Give it to that boy when he wakes up. Now then, I bid you a good day.”

“W-Wait!” Shiori cried out, but Olivia vanished before her eyes without a trace. Shiori scanned the area in a panic, but the automaton was nowhere to be found.

A wry grin came to Kanae’s lips. “Sis?” she said, sounding almost hoarse. “That automaton callin’ herself Olivia was standing in front of us at first—but did you notice? Partway through, she became a hologram. And yet, just before she disappeared, I felt her presence again. Any idea what *that’s* all about?”

The threat had abated. Olivia had disappeared. Yet Shiori and Kanae remained confused and bewildered.

At that moment, a call came in from Reina. “Shiori! Kanae! What’s the situation over there?! Is Akira okay?!”

That snapped Shiori back to her senses, and she hurriedly checked Akira’s condition. “His wounds are severe—but he is alive! He needs immediate first aid, but it looks like we made it in time.”

“We’ll treat his wounds here, then bring Akira kiddo back to you guys,” Kanae added. “Wait there, missy, and don’t drop your guard until we get there. We’re a little busy right now, so we’ll explain what happened later.”

“Understood,” Reina replied.

Shiori and Kanae gave Akira enough first aid to keep his injuries from being life-threatening. Now he’d hang on until he could receive proper treatment.

“By the way, sis, what do you plan to do about *that*?”

Shiori hesitated, looking conflicted. She knew Kanae was referring to the white card from Olivia. “Let me think about it.”

They carried Akira to the vehicle and drove toward Reina and the others. As they approached, however, their scanners picked up a number of other readings heading toward them from outside the ruin. After temporarily pulling out, Kurosawa and his unit had joined up with their reinforcements and were

on their way back. They, too, had seen Akira's fight from afar and were coming to ask for the details.

With such a large outfit arriving in the Iida commercial district, the commotion in the ruin could no longer be kept under wraps, marking the end of Akira and his team's activities in Iida.

Chapter 167: A Hindrance to the Trials

Akira awoke in Kugamayama City's hospital. From all the instruments and medical apparatus around him, it was immediately evident that he was the guest of honor. He sat up and looked around the room. Then he sighed.

"I'm back at the hospital again?"

You're alive, aren't you? I wouldn't complain if I were you, Alpha said with a smile.

Yeah, I guess you've got a point, he said, grinning back. *I managed to survive—I should be grateful for that. How long have I been out for?*

Several days. If you want the exact number, ask the next person who comes in here. Otherwise, if I tell you, they'll wonder how you already knew.

Okay. Er, then I'll ask something only you would know instead. Before I passed out, I felt this sensation like the whole world around me changed. Was that your doing? And what did you do, exactly?

In layman's terms, I upgraded your perception of reality to a higher resolution. From the look on Akira's face, it was clear he still didn't get it, so Alpha clarified at greater length. The "reality" a human perceived was, at its essence, just something the brain constructed based on the input from their sensory organs. Therefore, there would always be a discrepancy between one's perceived reality and actual reality.

This was because a human's sensory organs had their limits. If your eyes went bad, your vision failed; if your ears worsened, it became harder to hear. Both made it more difficult to perceive your surroundings. Likewise, with imprecise input to the brain, one's perceived reality became more blurred and indistinct, and the brain also needed more time to process what it received. Thus, there was always going to be a lag between perception and reality.

Processing all the necessary input to produce a one-to-one recreation of reality demanded extra time, delaying one's experience of the world and

making it extremely difficult to perceive what was happening in the present. Therefore, to continue working at the speed necessary to survive, one's brain omitted a number of processes when generating the perception, sometimes even substituting guesses and assumptions. This made one's perceived reality indefinite and hazy—merely a mock-up of reality.

In short, Akira's perception had been a considerably delayed and highly inaccurate impression of reality.

But then Alpha had intervened. Because his communication bandwidth as an Old Domain User was specifically attuned to her, she could use that strong connection with him to override the way he processed reality. Now, in addition to his five senses, the data from his scanner could be counted as input. On top of that, she routed the processing through herself instead of his brain, providing only the output to Akira.

As a result, Akira had perceived reality extremely accurately and with virtually no lag—something his brain could never have done on its own. Suddenly, he'd found himself in an entirely different world, in which he was capable of defeating even the pair of extremely powerful automatons. Otherwise, he would have had no hope of winning against the machines, who could perceive reality with virtually no lag thanks to their high processing power. But with Alpha's support, the lag between the perceived and the real had been eliminated, even if only temporarily, and he'd fought the automatons on equal ground, just barely eking out a victory.

Akira nodded, accepting Alpha's explanation. It was difficult to follow, and he hadn't understood all of it, but it sounded convincing enough. *I see, that's pretty amazing. Hmmm... So, will I be able to trigger that on my own one day, like how I control my sense of time?*

Alpha shook her head. *That would be impossible. Even if you could make yourself perceive reality at a higher resolution, you'd die from brain overload without my help.*

O-Oh, I see.

And even with my support, it won't be easy for you to pull off. Part of the reason you're in this hospital right now is because you fainted from mental

fatigue, not because of the severity of your wounds. While I didn't really have a choice, the truth is I pushed you way beyond your limit back there, she admitted, looking serious.

Akira was surprised. Alpha had forced Akira to overexert himself on a number of previous occasions, and yet she had smiled the whole time. But now, she was earnestly admitting that she'd pushed him too hard. Realizing how much danger he must have been in if she had been driven to such extreme measures, he grimaced.

Then Alpha's smile returned. *Well, you might not be able to do exactly the same thing, but with the proper training, you might be able to achieve something similar. So work hard!*

I-Is that so? All right, then, I will. If Alpha said it was possible, then it most likely was. In that case, it was in his best interests to learn how.

Even so, his smile to Alpha was a little stiff.



A short while after Akira awoke, he received some visitors. Shiori was the first to enter.

"Good day, Mr. Akira. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I'm fine now, thanks. I take it you brought me here? If so, I appreciate it."

"No, no need to thank me. If you are well, that's all that matters. Now then, I do apologize for bringing this up so soon after you've woken, but if you don't mind, I would like to discuss a few things with you, including what you plan to do from here on out."

Shiori told him what had transpired after he'd blacked out. Five days had already passed since they had left Iida, during which time Kurosawa and his unit had gathered up the destroyed automatons, so now none were left in the ruin. A heated, extremely complicated discussion over who had the rights to their remains was imminent. In truth, the concerned parties had wanted to start negotiations right away, but had decided to wait until Akira, perhaps the most involved party, regained consciousness.

Having laid the groundwork for what she was about to say next, a hint of anxiety crept into Shiori's expression as she pulled out the white card from Olivia and showed it to him. "Mr. Akira, do you know what this is?"

"That? No, I don't."

Shiori hesitated for a moment. "Is that so? Well, this happens to be one of the relics we acquired from the ruin."

Shiori's words made Akira recall that before all the chaos, he'd been hunting relics in Iida with the others. But he didn't remember ever seeing a relic like this. "Really? Well, if you say so. And?"

"One of the conditions of your hunter rank advancement commission is that you have to sell all relics you find to the city, correct? Therefore, before any selling happens, we will first need to distinguish which relics *you* found, and which relics *our* group found. Do you follow me so far?"

"Yeah."

"As it happens, I want to take this particular relic for ourselves."

Akira looked puzzled for a moment. "Er, can I ask the reason, just in case? It's not like we need to hammer out who gets what right this instant, do we? So what makes this card so special?"

"This card is, shall we say, a little tricky. If a typical hunter brought it in to sell at any run-of-the-mill exchange, the people there might think it was just some nondescript card with no value. And even if you held on to it, unless you were the type to collect relics as a hobby, I suspect it would be useless to you as well."

That made sense to Akira. At a glance, it just looked like an ordinary white card, certainly not some highly valuable relic, and collecting relics merely for its own sake didn't sound appealing to him at all.

"That said, there are people to whom this object does indeed have considerable worth. Handled properly, it's a relic that could net a considerable profit. And we have connections with such people—though I can't guarantee those negotiations would go smoothly." She gave a small sigh. "Naturally, I don't expect you'll readily agree to hand the relic over to us for free after

hearing all that. But this card is such an outlier that I can't even pay you its worth in aurum."

Shiori passed the card to Akira so he could inspect it, then continued, "So here is my proposal. If you hand the card over to us and we successfully negotiate its sale for a high price, we will compensate you suitably. This means you won't be breaching your contract with the city. If *you* had found it, there would be a problem—but not if it's in *our* possession. How does that sound?"

Akira thought it sounded pretty good. But he'd learned from experience that if something seemed too good to be true, it probably was. So he hesitated before answering. "Um, I know this is probably gonna sound extremely rude, but you're not trying to deceive me here, are you?"

"That depends on what you consider 'deception,' I suppose. If you're asking whether I'm taking advantage of your ignorance of the world, I cannot entirely deny it. However, think of it like this: you might not know how to turn a profit on this card, but I'm also under no obligation to tell you how to do it."

"Well, I can't really argue with that."

Here, Alpha chimed in. *Akira, I'm not sure why you're doubting her, but why not just give her the card? Regardless of her real intentions, it's true you won't be able to do anything with it even if you keep it, so I'd say it's better than just letting it burn a hole in your pocket. She even told you she'd compensate you if negotiations go well, didn't she?*

Yeah, I suppose. Alpha's argument felt convincing enough, and if Alpha approved, that was good enough for him. So he dismissed his concerns and made his decision.

"All right. You can have the card."

"Thank you, Mr. Akira. I greatly appreciate your understanding." She took the card from him and bowed politely. "Now then, I've taken up far too much of your time, so I'll be taking my leave."

"But weren't we going to divvy up the relics?"

"Let us save that until after you finish talking with your next visitor. After all, depending on what happens, such a conversation might be redundant. Good

day.” She bowed once more and left the room.

Kibayashi entered in her place. “Yo, Akira! Finally awake, eh? Caused another crazy commotion, I hear!”

Seeing Kibayashi in extremely high spirits, Akira grimaced in immense displeasure.

Shiori rejoined Kanae, who was waiting outside the hospital room. As the two of them made their way back home to Reina, Shiori filled Kanae in on what had happened. In a rare display for her, Kanae looked concerned.

“Hey sis, aren’t you basically swindling Akira here? Are you sure you wanna do that? What if missy finds out?”

“I am quite aware of the risks. If that happens, and the worst comes to pass, well, then Miss Reina will just have to fire me, won’t she?”

Kanae looked surprised. “I see. Well, as long as you know what’s at stake, I guess.”

Reina, abandoning Shiori? Kanae knew exactly what that would mean for the other maid. And if Shiori was fully prepared for such consequences, Kanae had nothing more to say.



The moment Kibayashi had received word that Akira was awake, he’d rushed to Akira’s hospital room. But the boy apparently had another visitor already, so Kibayashi had been forced to wait his turn, wondering how someone could have possibly gotten here before him. After all, he’d been ready to head to the hospital the instant he’d gotten the call. *They couldn’t have been waiting in front of his hospital room the whole time—could they?*

Finally, Shiori exited the room, and Kibayashi entered. At the sight of the official, Akira looked disgusted.

Unfazed, Kibayashi grinned at him cheerfully. “Yo, Akira! Finally awake, eh? Caused another crazy commotion, I hear!”

“Ugh, Kibayashi. What do you want now?”

“Hey now, is that any way to treat someone who came here specifically to visit you? Well, if you’re well enough to cop an attitude with me, then I can rest easy. First off, I should pass this along.” He handed Akira a piece of paper.

It was his hospital bill.

Akira looked at it and sighed. “*Seventy* million this time?”

Previously, Akira had been charged sixty million aurum for similar treatment, making him pale and panicked. Now the price was even higher—yet from the current Akira, it only elicited a sigh, a sign that he had changed quite a lot.

Kibayashi observed his reaction with a grin. “Naturally. After all, you got seriously banged up this time—not to mention you’ve continued to be reckless even after you were first admitted. Apparently, something or other has been building up in your body from all your overexertion, and they had to clear it out. A small maintenance fee for a hunter skilled enough to earn nine figures, am I right?”

Indeed, Akira didn’t really have any qualms about the price. After all, Shizuka had also stressed to him the importance of keeping his body and mind in top shape. A body in poor condition couldn’t fight to its full potential, so he chalked it up as a necessary expense. “Sure. So, you just came here to give me this?”

“No, no, of course not. I have another reason. Which brings me to my next question: Just how much do you know about what happened?”

“I’ve heard the gist.”

“Gotcha. Well, I’ll go over everything again, just in case.”

Kibayashi’s perspective on events was decidedly different from Shiori’s. During the battle, Akira had lost all three of his expensive SSBs. His protective coat was in tatters. His powered suit was severely damaged and no longer usable. And he’d also trashed his pricey bike. In other words, the boy had lost all of his main equipment. He’d also burned through a massive quantity of ammo that technically belonged to the city, so he would have to pay it back—and at the same rate as when he’d bought the ammo, when his hunter rank had been low. On top of all that, he now had a hospital bill to pay off.

In other words, Akira needed money.

Hearing all this, the boy held his head in his hands. Doubting whether the compensation from Shiori for handing her the relic was going to cover everything, his face grew grim.

Satisfied that Akira had reacted just as he'd expected him to, Kibayashi moved on. "So let's talk about the discussions we're going to have over who gets the rights to those automatons you all destroyed. Since you're the MVP here, we wanted to wait until you woke up first; now that you're awake, I'd say we'll start as early as tomorrow. I think most people will want you there as well—but I gotta warn you, it's gonna be real rough in there. Let me tell you why."

He explained that though the automatons had been demolished, they were still from the Old World and thus highly valuable. A skilled technician could restore them as good as new; unrestored, they would still prove incredibly useful in the analysis of Old World technology. Their intact parts could even be integrated into cyborg bodies. Though their monetary value had fallen considerably from being damaged, they still had outstanding worth.

Naturally, that meant the battle over who got to possess those automatons would be all the more heated, and matters were already quite complicated. If the automatons were treated as relics, the rights would most likely go to those who'd found them first—Kurosawa's unit and the client who had hired them, Yuzumo Industries. However, in this case, they would immediately be held accountable for failing to control the automatons and letting them attack other hunters—they'd be forced to pay a large sum in damages.

But since the automatons had activated on their own, they could also be considered monsters rather than relics. Then the rights would go to those who defeated them. That said, since the automatons had already been destroyed when they were retrieved, it was difficult to determine who had the rights to each one. It could be argued that Kurosawa and his unit had temporarily abandoned the ruin, while Akira and his team had stayed on. Yet no one on Akira's team had recovered the destroyed automatons, so Kurosawa's group could assert that the rights to the machines should go to the team that had picked them up.

However, Akira had been in the middle of a hunter rank advancement commission backed by Yajima and Yoshioka, two heavy industry companies. If

Kurosawa's group and Yuzumo tried to steal Akira's glory here, they might trigger an industrial conflict.

Everyone at the discussion would know these nuances, and yet all would be lobbying for themselves, taking advantage of the situation to maximize their own interests. And Akira would most likely be strong-armed into participating, Kibayashi explained with glee. The more Akira heard, the more his scowl deepened—and Kibayashi looked even happier that he'd gotten the reaction he wanted.

"That being said," the official added, "they likely just want you there as a formality. They'll probably cajole and wheedle and deceive you into doing what they want. But never fear—that's where I come in! If you'd like, I can be your proxy. That way you can avoid all the messy, tedious discussions, and I'll do everything in my power to push the negotiations in your favor, so you'll still reap the benefits afterward! How do you like that?"

Akira thought it was a splendid offer—which was why he immediately looked skeptical. He knew Kibayashi better than that. "And the catch?"

"Oh, come on, nothing that major. We're friends, aren't we? I'm not gonna screw you over. I just ask that you don't spend the money you earn this time on anything except paying back your debt to the city," Kibayashi casually answered.

Akira looked a little surprised. "That's all?"

Hearing his reply, Kibayashi couldn't hold himself back any longer and burst into laughter. "You got it, Akira! That's all! Good answer—I wouldn't want it any other way!"

Most hunters would have flown into a rage if someone told them they needed to spend their money, which they'd risked their lives to earn, in a certain way. What's more, the only reason hunters sought more dangerous ruins to hunt in was so they could afford safer, more luxurious lifestyles. If they were forced to spend everything they'd earned on their expenses for surviving in the wasteland, they would quite naturally be upset.

Yet Akira had accepted both conditions without so much as an argument. Kibayashi was overjoyed to see that Akira prioritized the wasteland life this

highly. However, Akira didn't really see any reason to refuse: he'd need the money to purchase a new set of gear, and now that he understood Kibayashi's sole motive was to get him to do just that—so that Akira would head back into the wasteland for more rash antics—he wasn't worried.

“Well, if that's all you want in return, then go for it, I guess.”

“All right! Just leave it to me!” With their interests aligned, Kibayashi was now set to sit in on the negotiations as Akira's representative. “Oh, I almost forgot to tell you—your hunter rank advancement commission's complete. Your final reward is still pending until these negotiations are over, but do you have any requests? If so, I might be able to get them for you alongside your pay.”

“Oh, in that case, I'd like the right to buy anti-force ammo for cheap. I hear that rank 50 hunters can buy such ammunition for five hundred aurum each—I'm not saying raise my rank to 50 or anything, but can you pull some strings and do something similar for me?” As he said this, he wondered: Just how much easier would the battle in Iida have been, if only he'd had anti-force rounds?

“Anti-force ammo, eh? Okay, I'll see what I can do. Well then, Akira, goodbye for now—I gotta prepare for these negotiations, after all. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised with how things go. Later!”

With that, Kibayashi left the room.

Akira had only had two visitors, but he was already exhausted. He lay back down on the bed.



Shikarabe had invited Togami to the Kugama Building. When Togami entered the first-floor restaurant where they were scheduled to meet, the veteran hunter beckoned him over.

The boy took a seat opposite Shikarabe and set a million aurum in bills on the table. Shikarabe grabbed the stack and pocketed it.

Togami grinned. “And that makes thirty million. Looks like I made you take all of it.”

“You sure did.” Shikarabe also seemed to be in a good mood.

Some time ago, Togami had asked Shikarabe to train him, setting thirty million aurum on the table before him. Shikarabe had only taken one million at the time, while implying that accepting the full amount to train the likes of Togami would make the veteran a swindler. Since then, however, Togami had gradually gotten him to accept the other twenty-nine million, proving the boy's worth. And with this last contribution, his payment was finally complete.

Of course, he knew that this was only a checkpoint, a stepping stone on the way to his goal. But he couldn't help feeling proud of what he'd accomplished.

Shikarabe stood up. "All right, let's get right to your final training session—though whether that training ends today or several months from now depends on your skill, I suppose."

Togami stood up as well. "Then I'll finish it today."

"Your resolve passes muster, at least. Now let's see whether you can walk the walk. Come with me."

Togami accompanied Shikarabe upstairs, to a higher floor of the Kugama Building. The young hunter looked puzzled—he'd expected Shikarabe to take him to the wasteland and pit him against some terrifying monster for his final ordeal. "Hey, where are we going?"

"Shut up and follow me—if you're not too scared, that is."

At this, Togami had no choice but to clam up and obey. They proceeded through the tower until they reached their destination—a meeting room. There were already a number of people gathered around the circular table.

Shikarabe ordered Togami to take a vacant seat. The boy had no clue what was happening, but did as he was told.

Reina, in the seat next to him, turned with an awkward smile. "So you're here too, huh?"

Seeing her expression, he started to feel anxious. "Hey, Reina. What's happening here?"

"You didn't know? It's a negotiation to decide who gets the rights to the automatons. We'll be starting any minute."

“Say what?!”

Shiori, standing behind Reina, spoke up. “In order to search for the automaton together with Mr. Akira and Miss Yumina, Miss Reina had to agree to handle some troublesome negotiations later on. That’s why she is here.”

Shikarabe took up a similar position behind Togami and added, “And *you’re* here because the ability to negotiate is a vital skill for anyone calling themselves a relic hunter.” In fact, much of the reason for the desk jockeys’ rise to power within Druncam lay in the fact that many hunters found negotiations like these a nuisance, and just let the administrative branch handle them. But Shikarabe kept this part to himself.

Togami looked around the table at the other attendees. They weren’t hunters, but he could tell from their auras that there was no soft touch among them. Had someone told him that they’d all mastered the art of negotiation, he’d have readily believed it.

“Wait, are Akira and Yumina not present?” If he was here, and Reina was here, then he figured the other two ought to be as well.

Kibayashi, seated almost directly opposite him, answered, “No, Yumina was only Akira’s companion to begin with, so we didn’t summon her. And Akira isn’t coming because I’m sitting in for him.”

Hearing his response, both Reina and Togami had the exact same thought: *No fair! Why does he get to sit this out?!*

A business representative for Yuzumo Industries spoke up. “It’s time. Let’s begin.”

Shiori wished Reina good luck, while Shikarabe only said, “Try not to die, Togami.”

This was a meeting of powerful, influential businessmen. In a sense, Togami and Reina were being thrown to the wolves. Nevertheless, the young hunters did their absolute best to put up a fight.

They were utterly torn to shreds.



Deep within Kuzusuhara, in a room belonging to one of the derelict buildings that barricaded Tsubaki's city, stood an automaton wearing a maid uniform.

It was Olivia.

Tsubaki was also present—not as a hologram, but in her corporeal form.

"If you've come all this way to see me, I suppose that means you've decided to accept my request?" the overseer said.

"Not quite. I do apologize, but my company wants to hear the specifics of the request before I give an answer."

"I believe I have already explained those specifics to you."

It was true—Olivia had indeed heard the details from the AR version of Tsubaki that Tiol had encountered in the Iida commercial district. Nonetheless, she shook her head. "I do apologize, Ms. Tsubaki. I have no doubt that you and the woman I saw in Iida are one and the same, but I currently answer to a temporary interface AI. Sending me here as a messenger is the absolute limit of what it is authorized to do."

"I see." Tsubaki caught her drift—even if a hologram was capable of conversation, there was no point in debating with it if it had no authority to speak of.

"By the way," Olivia continued, "may I ask why your actions have been so roundabout?" Olivia had originally been in storage within Tsubaki's district, and yet Tsubaki had made Tiol carry her all the way to Iida and activate her, then required Olivia to come all the way back here. To Olivia, all this seemed rather pointless.

"I have my reasons, and I can't tell you what they are. Think of it as a liberty I took to safeguard against a possible data breach. As a result, you're active again, so shouldn't that be good enough for you?"

Tsubaki had also been responsible for initially preventing the automatons from being automatically restocked at the Iida stores, determining that the machines would only get stolen now that the commercial district was in ruins—with no more customers, there was no point in resupplying. Her decision was flexible—or selfish, depending on who you asked. Later, she'd decided to

restart the delivery process, in order to have a reason to send Olivia to Iida. Consequently, the shops' Old Domain websites, which for so long had listed the restock date for the automatons as "TBD," had finally been updated. Anyone with access to the Old Domain could then find out when the automatons would arrive—and indeed, someone had.

And it was Tsubaki who had set the automatons to activate on their own, thinking that if they remained offline, they'd be liable to get stolen.

That had been her only reason.

Olivia found it all a little bizarre. Overseer interfaces were thickheaded and inflexible by design, and she'd never seen a management AI so willing to bend the rules. She looked down at the floor. "And what you did to this boy—was that another liberty you took?"

Tiol was lying unconscious on the ground, where Olivia had placed him after carrying him here.

Nearly dead from his fight with Akira, Tiol had been rescued by two automatons—Mitsuba Silverttech models—who'd received an order to extract him. They'd brought him outside the ruin, but because their orders were vague, they'd merely made sure he was safe and then left him there. Their return trip had been rather long, which was why these two had been so late in attacking Akira.

During most of this, Olivia had stood on the sidelines as a mere spectator. Once the dust had settled, however, she'd headed to where Akira was, wanting to greet the person who'd last connected to one of her company's terminals. But Akira had already lost consciousness and had shown no sign of waking, so she'd settled for leaving him the white card and departed.

Next, Olivia had decided to deal with Tsubaki's request by picking the unconscious Tiol up and carrying him all the way back to the city.

Olivia raised her head, looking at Tsubaki once more. There was a hint of criticism in her gaze. "This boy attempted to interfere with me. I was functioning at normal capacity, so I was able to deal with it, but these models from other companies, following an emergency protocol, were heavily influenced. I doubt even you have the authority to make such a thing happen,

but—”

“The boy himself did that, not me,” replied the overseer. “But, well, I’ll accept that I was partly to blame.”

In truth, there was something irregular about Tiol’s call for help. When the boy had lost his mind, blurring the line between it and the system inside him, he’d ignored protocol and done things he wasn’t authorized to do, exerting so much influence over the automatons that he had altered their behavior. Some had suddenly lost all emotion, while others had been reduced to making simple, dull movements. This was not Tsubaki’s interference—even if she was technically capable of it, she didn’t have the authority.

Tiol, then, was a dangerous entity. But Tsubaki, having gained the capacity for flexible thought, saw Tiol as a pawn she could use, at least partially, to circumvent the rules and restrictions imposed on her, and so had sought to increase his usefulness as her pawn.

“In any case,” Tsubaki added, “I suppose I’ll explain the request in detail once more.”

“Please do.”

Paying no more attention to Tiol, still alive yet unconscious on the ground, Tsubaki and Olivia continued their conversation.



Within an expanse of white, Alpha wore a stern, icy expression. “Can’t you do something about her on *your* end?”

The girl she was talking to wore an identical look—icy, severe. “That’d be difficult at this point. Unlike you, I have a limit on how much I can directly interfere with my subject.”

“Which means it would seem more plausible for an unforeseen tragedy to occur on your side. She should be rejoining your subject very soon, so you’ll have ample opportunity.”

“I suppose,” relented the girl. “Then I’ll do as you say and wait for the right moment. But I want your help as well. You have the ability to directly interfere

with your subject, so don't just rely on me to get the job done."

"All right. But we have to make it look like an accident. I don't want my subject to hold any animosity toward me, you hear?"

"I understand."

Once Alpha and the girl had finished discussing how they would handle this hindrance to their trials, they vanished. Only the white space remained, until it, too, disappeared shortly thereafter.

The trials would continue as planned. Any hindrance to the trials would be eliminated.



"Thank you for visiting the Tsubakihara Building. I am Tsubaki, the interface managing this building and the surrounding area."

"I will guide you to your destination. This way, please."

"What should I do, Alpha?"

Akira felt a sudden presence right beside him. It was so close he couldn't believe he hadn't noticed it until now. If this had been a battle and the presence had attacked him, he would've been dead.

>Episode
006

Part One The AI Overseer

Character

Rebuild World **RVII**



>**OLIVIA**

A general-purpose Old World automaton—developed by Lion's Tail, Inc.—that Tiol activated in the Iida Commercial District Ruins.



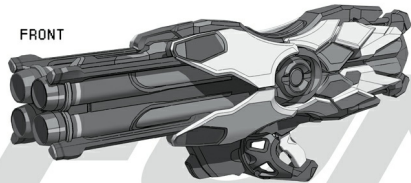
>**TSUBAKI**

A management AI overseeing an Old World city located in the depths of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins.

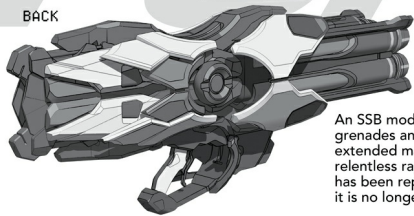
The regular version of the SSB multifunction gun sold by the company Toson Corp. The "titan-killer" SSB that Akira customized to max out its firepower was so bulky it required a support arm; this smaller model is for tighter, more compact spaces like inside ruined buildings. Even so, it packs more power than cheaper models of anti-materiel weaponry and can blast the average monster or vehicle to pieces.

**SSB
MULTI-
FUNCTION GUN:
CANNON**

FRONT



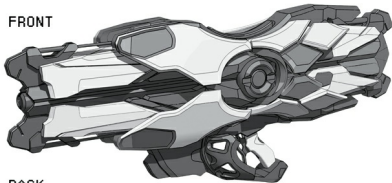
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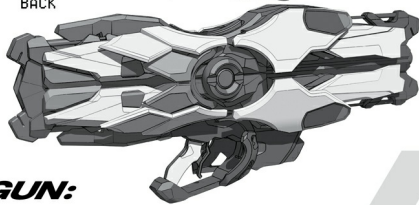
An SSB modded to fire projectiles such as grenades and micromissiles; it can employ extended magazines for a continuous and relentless rapid-fire attack. Because its muzzle has been replaced with launchers, however, it is no longer able to fire normal bullets.

**SSB MULTI-
FUNCTION GUN:
STANDARD**

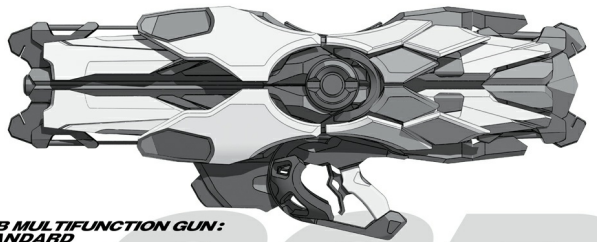
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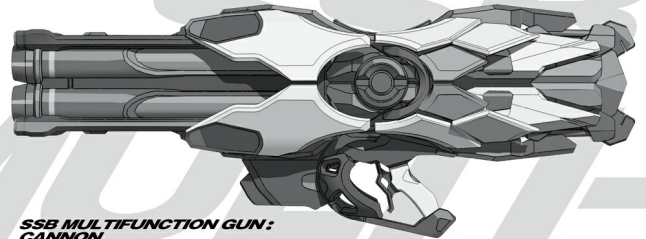
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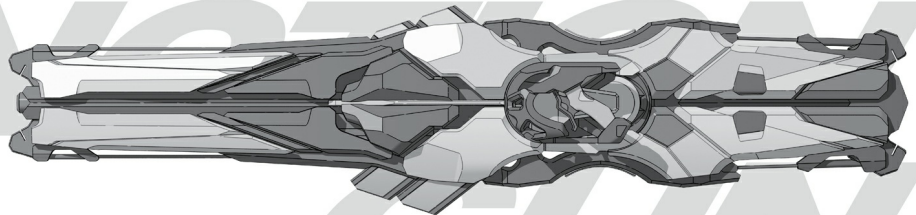
**SSB MULTIFUNCTION GUN:
STANDARD**



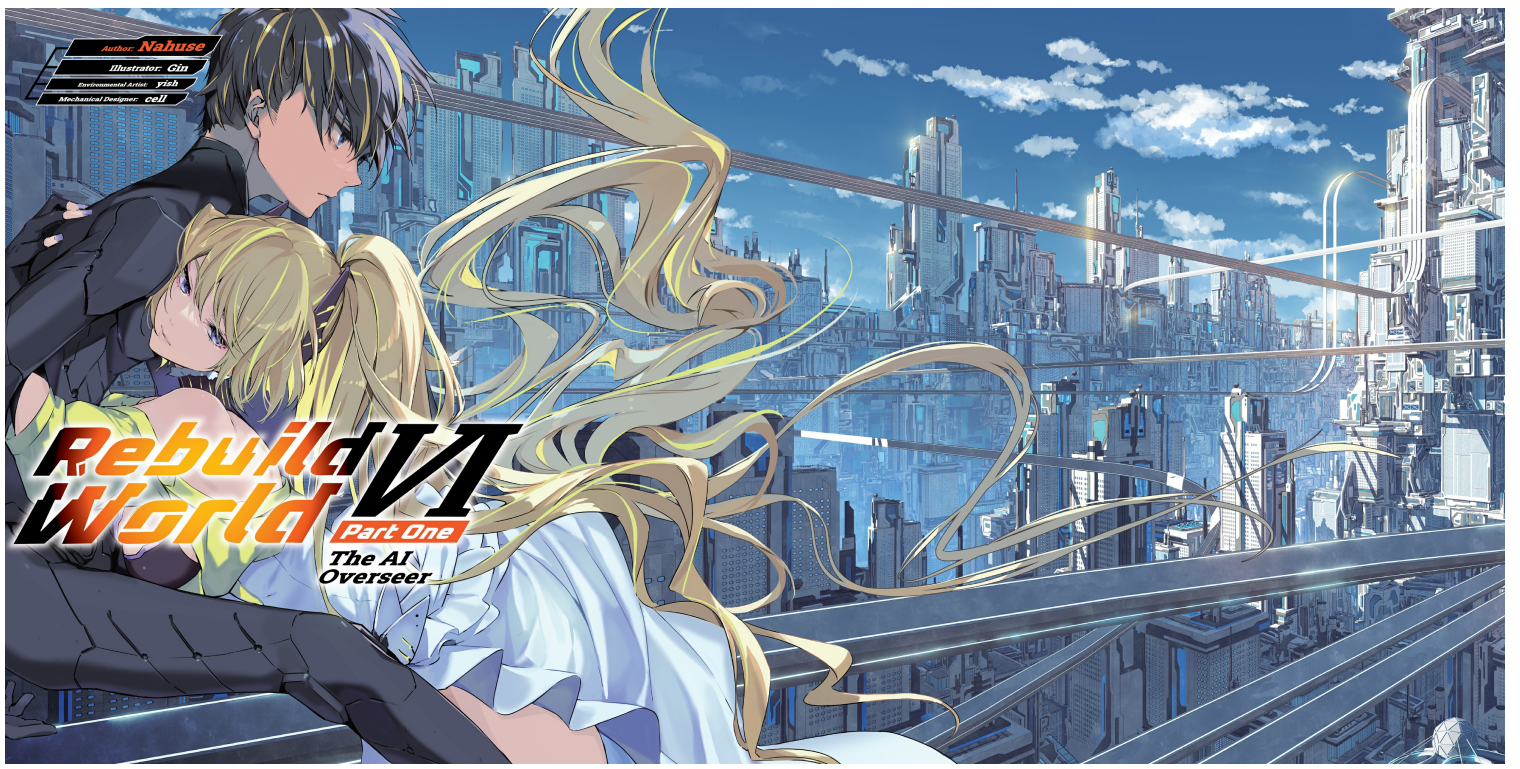
**SSB MULTIFUNCTION GUN:
CANNON**




**SSB MULTIFUNCTION GUN:
TITAN-KILLER**



Size comparison





Rebuild V1

The AI Overseer

Part One

*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.



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REBUILD WORLD Vol. VI Part One: The AI Overseer by Nahuse

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