

**ME, A
GENIUS?**

**I WAS REBORN
INTO ANOTHER
WORLD AND I
THINK THEY'VE
GOT THE
WRONG IDEA!**

3




NYUN



illust. SAKANA





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TRACKING A DESERTER WITH
A NEW FORM
OF AI?!

"WOULD YOU
LIKE ME TO
RELAY A
VIDEO FEED
FROM A
NEARBY
SURVEILLANCE
CAMERA?"

Aqcha

Clare

"THIS
SOFTWARE
LOOKS
USEFUL,
KOU..."

Miki Arakawa

"EVEN MOM
MIGHT HAVE
TROUBLE
CONTROLLING
IT."

Kouki Arakawa

"BUH HEE,
THAT'S
RIGHT."

Shingo Salto



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Chapter 1: Let's Create Culture

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

Roughly three days after returning from the other world, I had a lot of free time on my hands, so I was in my room watching some of the documentaries I'd recorded. Kon had been curled up in a ball beside me, but now she was slowly raising her head.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

Kon was looking over at the door to the room. There was the sound of the doorbell followed by Shingo's voice. "Kouki, are you there?"

"Yeah, come on in."

There was a rustling sound while Shingo did something outside. After a short while, he pushed open the door with his foot and entered the room with both of his hands full of large bags of candy that he'd bought from the post exchange.

"What's with all the candy?" I asked. "Aren't you spending time with Aikawa today?"

Shingo took a seat as he explained why he wasn't with Megumi. "She's going to the Space Development Group's research facility with Alice. She said something about some sort of research report."

Seeing the candy, Kon made a beeline for him. Shingo opened a bag of chocolates for her and handed it over.

Oh, I get it. Shingo came to see me because he was bored and by himself.

"So your precious Aikawa has abandoned you, and now you've come to see me. If you're really that bored, you should go visit the other world."

"Buh hee?! I-It's not like that. And you're no better. You've shut yourself up in this room just because Alice isn't around. I don't want to go to the other world,

anyhow. If I had to live in a world with no internet, I'd die."

Don't go dying over something so small, Shingo... I sighed internally at the sight of my friend greedily eating candy in front of me. *Still, when you think about it, there really isn't a lot for us to do.*

I could remember some of the ways people had killed time in my past life. There were things like video game consoles, anime, manga, movies, and other things that you could spend all your time on. I couldn't remember anything about myself, but I suspected that I'd used these sorts of things to kill time with my friends.

"There's none of that in this world," I said to myself.

"Buh hee? Did you say something?"

"No, it's nothing," I said, brushing off his question. I was sure my friend would think I was crazy if I said to him, "I died one time and then got reincarnated."

Anything that you might call "subculture," "media culture," or "otaku culture" wasn't very well-known in this world. In fact, those things might not exist here at all.

I'd first realized this when I was very young. There had been barely any anime on TV that wasn't educational. TV broadcasting had already switched over to satellite broadcasts at that point, and each household could select what programming they wanted to watch.

I'd thought that my mom didn't want me watching anime while I was growing up, but one day I'd found the remote control left on the table and decided to find out how many different television channels we were getting. I learned that out of almost 600 broadcasts, we could watch almost every single one, with the exception of a dozen or so adult-oriented channels.

At first, I was just surprised that we could receive so many different channels, but then I discovered something even more surprising. Out of almost 600 broadcasts, barely any of them were categorized as music, movies, or TV drama. And the few that did exist would stop broadcasting from 2 AM to 7 AM each day rather than being 24-hour broadcasts.

I couldn't help but feel there was something wrong with the world when I

learned this. I tried asking my mom if she'd heard of any of the famous composers, musicians, movie directors, and manga artists that I knew of.

Mom must have been surprised by how distressed I looked when asking these questions. She looked troubled when she told me, "I'm sorry. I don't know any of those people. Are they famous?"

A lot of these people had been written about in textbooks, yet Mom had told me that she didn't know any of them. If someone with a memory a hundred times more powerful than the average person didn't recognize those names, it could only mean that those people didn't exist.

I could only come up with one explanation for how this could have happened.

There were three important considerations in forming this hypothesis.

The first was that the Second World War that had begun in 1935 in this world had reached its conclusion after half a year instead of becoming a quagmire with no real victors like in original history. I expected that this had made a big difference.

Although culture such as movies and musicals should have undergone rapid growth after the war, the people who were fortunate enough to have escaped the horrors of war after a short amount of time had felt that the future was full of hope. Rather than relying on entertainment, they had found strength within themselves.

The second consideration was the European tragedy.

The disease had killed roughly half of the world's population. Humankind had lost many people who would have accomplished great things, along with would-be descendants of such people. I had been able to confirm that one famous person who would have gone on to become a bestselling author had lost their life before they could achieve their ambitions as a result of the European tragedy.

The third consideration was what I considered to be the biggest factor.

Science and the technology that came with it had advanced at an abnormally fast rate. Consider what this meant for camera technology. Some groundbreaking new method or device would appear, but then just a year later,

or maybe even half a year later, it would be replaced by something new. It must have been difficult to justify any investment into such short-lived technology. With the exception of a few enthusiasts, people had distanced themselves from media culture while the technology was changing at an incredible pace.

But what about now? Would a rapid growth in media culture be possible at this point in time? It seemed possible. There were two reasons for this. First was the existence of my mother, Miki Arakawa. In 2091, my mom's explosive appearance in the scientific community had ignited a technological revolution. Thanks to her, Earth's technology had leaped ahead by around 100 years. But even my mom wouldn't be able to stop the pace of development from slowing down from this point on... probably. If we made a new games console, movie special effects technology, or an anime right now, the quality would remain high enough for people to enjoy it for a good amount of time.

My second reason for deciding that it was possible right now was because I existed.

The Japan where I'd lived in my previous life had been creating a subculture that was known all over the world! With someone who'd been reincarnated from that world working together with someone like Shingo who'd probably love the subculture, and a technological genius like my mom, taking over the world with that subculture would be a breeze.

"Have you ever seen an opera, Shingo?" I asked.

"Hm? I've seen one before, but it wasn't very interesting."

"Well, what if the opera's script was in Japanese, and the music was something more upbeat instead of difficult classical pieces? Would you want to see it then?"

"That doesn't sound like a theater performance. If it was anything like I'm imagining, I'd probably want to see it."

Okay, so he's interested in seeing something musical. Hm... Rather than a comedic opera, I wonder if some kind of all-girl opera would be popular? I suppose I'd have to get ideas from someone else about that.

"I was telling you Joachim's story a while back," I said. "If you could somehow

experience that sort of thing for yourself using your terminal, would you want to try it?”

“Buh hee! Yeah, I’d want to try that!”

Oh ho. Looks like he’d enjoy an RPG or even a complete roleplaying experience that uses VR technology. Given the current level of technology, I think the best thing would be to use a miniaturized VR device. That way people could enjoy fantasy and action games, and maybe even supernatural horror games.

We could greatly reduce development time by producing and researching these things in a dedicated facility on Noa Island. The engineers that my mom employs could do something about the technology. Macho Man could be responsible for device safety and the effect on the user’s mental state because he’s got a heart of steel. It’ll take more than a little external stimulus to make him jump.

“All right,” I said. “Final question. Would you want to see an anime if it was about a stylized cute girl using magic to defeat an evil organization or some cool soldiers trying to prevent a terror attack?”

“Yeah! I’d love to watch that. It would be nice if there was something like that. It’s a nice dream.”

That’s right, Shingo, it is a nice dream. Subculture is all about making the impossible possible and giving you the experience of being a hero, like every man dreams about at some point. It might be that this world is a happy place now that there’s no great war and there are no incurable diseases. But that’s exactly why I dream of something beyond our everyday lives. We have the technology and we know where to find talented people... The only other thing is capital. Since we are doing something new, we should use our own money to take the first step so that we don’t have to answer to any sponsors.

I had \$400 million that I could use freely. After making the onsen with Shingo, that was what was left out of the \$500 million I’d received as a reward for developing a cure for the European tragedy. If I deducted the amount I’d need to pay for Alice’s birthday present, that left a little over \$150 million. It was probably enough to get started, but if I was allowed to be greedy, I wanted a little more.

I need to gather allies to help me make this happen, I thought as I watched Shingo eat his fourth bag of chocolates.

“Shingo, how much of your reward money is left?” I asked in a serious sounding voice.

“I think I’ve got just over \$300 million. But I didn’t waste it! I bought a piece of new equipment for my new research lab in your research complex. It was one of just three in the world, so it was expensive.”

“I see. I’ve got \$400 million, but I can only spend around \$150 million of it because I need to save some for Alice’s birthday present.”

“B-Buh hee?! W-Wait a minute! That’s 24.6 billion in Japanese yen! What kind of present is worth that much?”

“That’s a secret. So you’ve got \$300 million?”

If Shingo combines \$100 million of his money with what I’ve got left, that’ll be about 25 billion in yen. That’ll be enough to employ some of Noa’s engineers for my personal project with enough left over for miscellaneous expenses. Now’s the time to set things in motion!

I was already sure that Shingo would help me realize this crazy dream as I said to him, “Shingo, create a new age with me. Will you help create new culture?”

“Ah... Kouki, I don’t know what you mean.”

Shingo’s mouth was left hanging open.

It was exactly the reaction I’d expected. I opened a bottle of soda that was sitting on the table as I got ready to give Shingo a long explanation.

August 12, 2102: Kouki Arakawa, a boy referred to as the “greatest genius in history,” the “demon child,” and a “monster of knowledge” by the world’s governments and many researchers and military officers, made a conscious decision to make his work public for the first time.

No one could have imagined that he would later become known as the “father of the new age,” the “media prodigy,” and the “anime industry mastermind” for creating the “Special Media Entertainment Department” that

would bring in 40 percent of the overall sales made by the large conglomerate Noa.

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As I drank the soda, I explained the subculture that had been popular in Japan before my reincarnation as simply as I could.

“But anime is for kids,” Shingo said, looking doubtful. “You can’t just suddenly start making anime that’s aimed at everyone.”

“I know. That’s why the first step is character art. We can start by selling posters.”

“Art? But if no one understands the art style, then who’s going to draw it? Don’t tell me you’re going to draw it all yourself?”

“That’s right. I’ll draw it myself. What I’d like you to do is take my art and sell it in online auctions. If it actually sells, I’d like you to invest when we take it to the next level.”

Shingo’s right. If I don’t make the initial images myself, I won’t be able to express the art style to other people. I’ll just have to try my best. I’ve gotten pretty good at drawing after being involved in the Creation Program that Mom started. I’ve made some simple design sketches. I think this is going to work out.

The problem is what to draw on. Drawing on ordinary paper would be a little boring. I could make a painting on canvas, but then I’d have to stretch and wet the canvas first. I’d also have to get ahold of specialist painting tools.

What I need is something unusual that’s easy to get hold of here in the Hakone base. A front armor plate from a powered suit could work. If I take a scrap armor plate from the scrap heap, paint it white, paint an image over the white background, and then spray a protective coating over the finished painting, I could easily throw together a highly durable poster.

“Buh hee! Okay. I’ll decide whether to invest after seeing how well it does in the auction.”

“All right,” I said. “First we need to try making something. Let’s go get a suit’s front armor plate to use as a canvas! We’ll also need to borrow some paint and

tools for working with armor.”

“Ah... You’re going to paint on an armor plate?! Won’t we get in trouble?” Shingo still looked doubtful.

“Don’t worry. I’m going to use scrap parts. This sort of fancy material is going to grab people’s attention. Hey, Kon! Come with us.”

Kon came running over with a half-eaten chocolate bar held in her mouth. I picked her up and was about to leave, but then we heard the doorbell again.

It was too early for Alice and Megumi to be back, and Macho Man and Mom were on Noa Island. *I can’t think of anyone else who’d visit my room.*

Unsure what to expect, I opened the door to find Baldy standing outside and looking as stern as always.

“Oh. Long time no see,” I said. “Did something happen?”

Baldy smiled at me wryly and said, “No, it’s nothing like that. I’m just making the rounds. Mrs. Arakawa asked me to drop in on you once in a while. It looks as though you’re about to head out somewhere?”

The sight of us in our jackets and preparing to leave seemed to have made him curious. I wasn’t sure whether I should be honest and tell him we were going to the scrap heap. He’d ask why we were going there, and it’d be hard to explain. On the other hand, I felt like there’d be trouble if we didn’t tell him and he found out later.

Before I could make a decision, Shingo went ahead and answered the question himself.

“Buh hee! We’re about to go to the scrap heap on the third level. We need to find a powered suit’s front armor plate so Kouki can paint a picture on it.”

“Huh, he wants to use an armor plate for a painting? That sounds just like Kouki. But what kind of picture do you want to paint?”

“We’ll explain while we walk there,” I told him. “It’ll take a long time to explain everything. It’ll be quicker just to show you the painting.”

“Then I’ll come with you, if you don’t mind.”

Now I'm going to have to explain things to Baldy on the way there, I thought with a sigh. On the plus side, having a responsible adult with us should make it easier to borrow the tools.

I was a little annoyed about having to repeat the explanation I'd just given to Shingo as I picked up Kon again and stepped out of the room.

As we walked along the corridor, I explained to Baldy that this world didn't just lack the concept of anime and manga, but was lacking a subculture like that altogether.

Baldy knitted his brow and asked, "Is this the kind of thing you're talking about?"

He showed us the personal terminal he was carrying. I was speechless when I saw the image he was using for his desktop. To me, it looked a little old-fashioned. In my previous life, his desktop image could have been described as a 1980s style loli bunny girl.

Has this sort of thing been gaining popularity without me realizing?

Feeling concerned, I asked him, "What is this? Is there some kind of specialist website where you can find this sort of image?"

"No, it's... Well... I drew it."

"Huhhh?!"

Wait just a minute! This old guy who looks like the sort who'd erase anyone who gets in his way drew a picture like that? He's got to be lying. I can't even believe someone like him would have any interest in something like this.

He noticed how shocked Shingo and I looked and threw his hands up in front of his face. "Wait! I don't know what the two of you are thinking, but I'm not into little girls or even young girls! I mean, I don't exactly hate them. I like them in the sense that I find them cute. And I don't mean that in a weird way."

"We get it! Calm down! Shouting about 'little girls' in the middle of this corridor just makes you sound like a pervert."

"Ahh. Sorry. It's not like me to lose my cool like that. Anyway, I can explain this, so you can stop looking at me as if I'm some sort of criminal, Shingo."

I looked over at Shingo and saw that he really was staring at Baldy as if he was a criminal. And he was doing something with his terminal...

That's the emergency report screen for making reports directly to the security department!

"Whoa, Shingo! Let's at least hear him out. You can decide whether to report him afterward."

"Buh hee?! Sorry. I reacted on instinct."

Now that Shingo had come to his senses, he stopped making the report to the security department.

This feels awkward. We'd better let him give us his excu— his explanation. I glanced at Baldy to urge him to continue.

"I used to be in the Russian armed forces," he explained. "Toward the end of my service, I was in a special forces unit attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but I started out in the air force. I painted aircraft nose art. My job was to paint a personalized image on each plane to suit the aircraft or the pilot's personality. That's how I learned to draw."

"I see. I understand how you learned to draw, but why is the image of a little girl on your desktop?"

"Oh? Ah... Just like now, there weren't many women in the armed forces back then. I got a lot of requests for sexy girls when I was painting. But I'm into cute girls more than sexy girls, so I still use a picture of a little girl as my personalized image."

So it is what you're into! I don't mean to judge, but maybe we really should report him to the security department. I had no idea how to deal with Baldy after hearing him passionately explain his interests to us while continuing to act like a perfect gentleman.

"Different people are into different things," Shingo said, sounding tired. "I don't want to judge. Since you can draw, will you help Kouki with his work?"

That's not a bad idea, I decided. *The image that he drew is a little different from what I had in mind, so it'll help us determine what's popular with the*

people of this world. And it seems as though he likes making this sort of art and has some understanding of subculture. He might actually be a useful ally.

With that in mind, I decided to repeat the same request I'd made to Shingo in my room.

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Baldy's Point of View

I was using my personal terminal as I watched Kouki and Shingo search through the powered suit scrap some distance away.

The email I'd received from Mrs. Arakawa this morning had said, "My son will be up to something soon, so keep a very close eye on him." But I hadn't expected that he'd actually be up to anything.

Perhaps Mrs. Arakawa was worthy of admiration for being able to predict her son's actions so well, or perhaps Kouki was just easy to predict because he took after his father, Shuuichi, by causing trouble on a daily basis. It was a tough one to call.

"But I couldn't have predicted he'd ask me to create new culture with him," I murmured.

This year I'd turn 35. If I could get so fired up over the words of a young boy who had lived only half as long as I had, maybe I wasn't as sharp as I used to be. I had no great talents. I didn't have the courage of Shuuichi and the members of his ghost unit, nor was I as smart as Mrs. Arakawa or her researchers.

All I had was an above-average level of combat skill. And in comparison to the population of the Hakone base, even my combat skills might have been below average. At this rate, I would die of old age as just another face in the crowd. At least, that's what I'd thought. But now Kouki had given me new hope.

"Your artistic talent is just what I need right now! Won't you try to create something new with me? It won't matter if we fail, but if we succeed, you'll leave your mark on history. You're a man, so you've got to have big ambitions." Then Kouki had smiled a pure smile that reminded me how young he was. I'd been dazzled by it.

Big ambitions...? How long has it been since I gave up on my ambitions? It must have been when I entered the armed forces. No... I'd already given up on a lot of things by then. Is it too late to chase after some big dream just one more time?

While I was debating with myself, Kouki brought over some armor plates of

just the right size that he'd found. "Mr. Baldy! I found some unpainted armor plates that look perfect. The size is about right. Let's paint on them as they are! You must have a lot of ideas. Go ahead. Paint whatever you like, however you like."

Kouki handed over an armor plate with a smile. It was a prototype armor plate that was already painted white. This meant there would be no need for us to paint these white first. But it was hard to figure out what I was supposed to paint onto it after being told to paint whatever I liked.

After thinking about it for a while, I was about to ask Kouki what kind of picture I should paint, but then I stopped in surprise. On his own armor plate, Kouki was painting an elegant-looking girl with black hair dressed in a traditional Japanese kimono. On her head, he'd given her fox ears.

"That's... such a cute girl," I said.

"Thanks. You can paint whatever you like too. Everyone here likes this sort of thing, so go ahead and paint whatever you're interested in without feeling embarrassed."

My own interests...? In that case, I'll paint something I've been thinking about for some time! I'll follow Kouki's lead and use the full size of this armor plate to paint something I've had in mind ever since I'd first learned to draw! I should be able to paint it now better than I ever could in the past.

With that in mind, I gave my full concentration to painting on the armor plate. I'd been painting for some time when I realized that someone was standing over me.

"You're really focused on that. I finished my painting. How's yours going, Mr. Baldy?" Kouki asked me with a smile.

Has it already been so long? I checked my terminal and was surprised to find that three hours had passed since I'd started painting.

"Sorry. I got carried away and took longer than I thought. It's done now."

"Buh hee... This is... the only word I can think of is amazing. Don't you agree, Kouki?"

“Yeah. I didn’t expect that he’d be able to paint something on this level.”

The two of them were looking at my painting and showering it with praise, but I was so embarrassed that I raised my hands to cover it.

Kouki laughed and asked me, “We want to sell these paintings at auction like we said. Does your painting have a name? There’s only one suitable name for it that I can think of.”

“Right... How about ‘Girl in the Moonlight’?”

For me, this was my greatest masterpiece, and these two boys were the first like-minded people I’d encountered. When I told them the name I’d given it, they told me that they thought it was a great name. Despite my age, I felt my face turn red as I took another look at the painting.

This really is my greatest work. It might even fetch a high price. Maybe, just maybe, this painting will sell, and I’ll have one last chance to chase after big ambitions.

As I looked at the smiling girl lit by the moonlight in my painting, I decided, *Together with Kouki and Shingo, I want to do something that’ll make my name known throughout the world.*

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Kouki Arakawa’s Point of View

Now that Baldy’s finished his painting, we can go get lunch, I thought.

“Shingo, do you think now is a good time for lunch?” I asked Shingo, who was taking some photographs to use in the auction.

Shingo looked up from his terminal. “Buh hee, is it that time already? Okay, let’s get some lunch. Do you want to come with us, Mr. Baldy?”

Will he want to come along? I wondered. *I’ve tried inviting him before, but I always got the feeling that he didn’t want to eat with me, so I stopped asking. Maybe this time it’ll be different.*

“Hmm... Yeah, why not? Why don’t you let me treat you both? Order

whatever you like.”

Ohh! He’s not avoiding me this time. He must have become more friendly now that he knows we have similar interests. I’ve always thought of Baldy as the type to constantly frown, but he really does look friendly today.

Hey, maybe Baldy will even tell us his name!

I tried asking as casually as possible. “Okay, let’s head to the cafeteria. So I guess that ‘Baldy’ is just a codename. What’s your real name?”

“My name? I don’t remember... If you really want to know, I doubt anyone could stop you from finding out for yourself. Though I’d rather you didn’t concern yourself with things like that. Mrs. Arakawa wouldn’t like it.” Baldy folded his arms and reverted back to his usual stern face.

“If you don’t want to tell me, you don’t have to,” I said quickly. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

Baldy nodded a few times as if he’d decided on something. “Do you know what job your dad, Shuuichi, had originally?”

“Yes.”

He explained anyway. “Shuuichi’s a former member of a secret unit of the United Nations Standing Army. I was in a similar unit in my home country, Russia.”

So he was assigned to some ridiculously highly skilled special forces unit just like Macho Man? That means he must be an elite soldier who’s just as battle-hardened as Clare or Cote.

I looked at Baldy with newfound respect and was about to ask him what kind of work he did, but Shingo spoke before I could.

“Buh hee... Was that internal? Or was it external?”

“You know about that sort of thing, Shingo? It was external.”

Shingo seemed to understand what Baldy meant by that. He turned around to face me and said, “Kouki, let’s stop talking about this.” He sounded as though he wouldn’t accept any objections. “If we wait any longer, the cafeteria will be too crowded. You shouldn’t ask someone who’s been in the special forces

about their past.”

“Ha ha! Looks like I’ve made you both worry,” Baldy chuckled. “Thanks for your concern, Shingo. Let’s stop talking about it. All right! I’ll take back the tools we used while you two go and get us a table in the cafeteria.”

Baldy put the tools into a case and happily walked off towards the storeroom.

Did I say something I shouldn’t have? All of the military people I’ve met so far, mostly people in Macho Man’s unit, are proud of the work they’d done. I thought Baldy would be the same way... Maybe I was wrong.

I decided to ask Shingo. “Did I say something I shouldn’t have? For a moment there, Baldy was looking a little sad.”

“Maybe. He might be worried about what we’d think of him.”

“Why would he be worried?”

“Let’s get moving. We can talk on the way to the cafeteria.”

I picked up Kon and followed after Shingo.

Once I’d caught up to him, Shingo began using the terminal on his arm. Eventually he found the data he was looking for and sent it to me.

I told Kon to climb onto my neck so I could use both hands for my terminal. The information that Shingo had sent me was an excerpt from some information found online.

“Special forces unit attached to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs? External operations division... intelligence service... special operations... This is...”

“Yeah...” he said. “This is all just rumors, but it looks accurate based on the things it says about your dad.”

Now I understood why Shingo had put a stop to the discussion. Baldy hadn’t exactly been a military man. He had been more of a hitman working as a sort of intelligence officer. “Assassin” was probably a better way to put it.

Now I understood why he’d “forgotten” his name. He was one of those people who don’t officially exist.

So why is someone with that kind of exceptional skill taking care of me? I wondered.

I tried asking Shingo.

“This is just a guess,” he said, “but you need a counter sniper to take down enemy snipers. So if an assassin tried to snipe us, you’d need someone like Baldy there to deal with them, right? But let’s forget about that. How are you going to handle this?”

“What do you mean?”

“How are we going to act around Baldy? He’s probably worrying about that.”

“I’m not going to act any differently. He was risking his life for his country back then. And now he’s risking his life for us. I have to respect him for that.”

“Buh hee! You’re right,” said Shingo, sounding relieved. “I’m glad you feel the same way as I do! And from now on, he’s one of us.”

Shingo’s poker face turned into his usual smile, and he started talking to Kon about what they were going to eat for lunch. I watched them while remembering a novel I’d read in my past life.

It was about a lone assassin who’d had the world turn against him, yet somehow managed to identify the terrorists who were to blame. In my world, that was an old idea that had been used many times already, but here it would be a new type of story.

If my plan went well, I wanted to create a story where the main characters were people like Macho Man and Baldy who were always active in the darker corners of the world. Maybe it was selfish of me, but I wanted to raise the profile of the people doing that kind of dangerous work by telling the world that these people were risking their lives for the sake of world peace.

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Miki Arakawa’s Point of View

As I passed through the transfer gate from Noa Island, I felt the unique gloopy feeling of the gate across my entire body. Shuuichi and Kouki had told me they

were used to it now, but I'd never get used to it. The same inexpressibly unpleasant feeling hit me every time I used the gate.

"I'm so tired. This always makes me feel terrible."

I stood there in front of the gate complaining to myself as I waited for Elise. After a few minutes, she came running over to me.

Her right eyebrow is raised a little... Judging from that face, we've got some minor problem to deal with.

I got my personal terminal ready so I could deal with whatever it was immediately, and I braced myself for her report.

"Welcome back, ma'am," she said. "I know this is sudden, but I have three things to report regarding your son."

"Okay. I'm guessing from the look on your face that it isn't something we can just cover up. Tell me about it on the way to my office."

I started walking and Elise brought the information up on the terminal as she walked beside me. "Firstly, after stating an intention to 'create new culture,' Kouki went to the scrap heap with Anton and recovered front armor plates from sixth-generation suits. The two of them then painted pictures of girls on the plates and then sold them in online auctions."

It was already enough to make me feel lightheaded. *If anyone other than Kouki had taken away armor from a sixth-generation suit, it would have been a major incident. But why did he paint on it and then sell it? It's too overt to be a diversionary tactic. Did he want to show our enemies the technological might of Noa? Or was this a warning to other nations? It's impossible to be sure.*

"Secondly, the two pieces of armor were quickly sold to buyers for the upper bidding limit of ¥150,000. The buyers took care to cover their tracks, but we've determined that one was purchased by a front company for the United States intelligence services and the other by the British government."

I could have predicted that much. The powered suits used by the major powers of the United Nations are merely fifth-generation suits... I'm sure that they're desperate to get their hands on the sixth-generation suits that we're using.

Still, although we did use some new technology in the armor plating, the main points of improvement in the sixth-generation model are the actuation of the joints and the internal piloting unit. We don't have to worry about them making major progress after obtaining a single plate of armor. Perhaps Kouki sold them so those nations would have something to quell their appetites.

“Thirdly, after seeing how quickly the items sold at auction, Kouki declared that ‘the project starts now,’ and made several requests directed at you, ma’am. He asked for the establishment and purchase of Noa’s own satellite broadcast channel and the acquisition of a standard broadcast license. The acquisition of advertising rights in newspapers, digital media, and paper-based magazines. The purchase of old-style internet and radio broadcasting channels. Purchase of movie broadcasting rights and rental of Noa’s PR department. Also —”

“S-Stop! What about the budget and the personnel for something like this?”

“He appears to be funding the whole thing using the reward money that he received for developing an effective treatment for the European tragedy virus some time ago. This is just my personal opinion, but I think Kouki is serious about this. I think we should offer him our support while making sure we monitor his activities.”

But why would he want media broadcasting and publishing rights of almost every kind? I wondered, baffled. It would be easy to refuse and use my authority to stop him from getting what he wants, but there are no legal barriers stopping him, so I couldn't stop him forever. If he knew that we were refusing to cooperate, he'd move things ahead without considering our advice. It might be wise for us to help him.

What I really can't understand is how the sale of an armor plate relates to the acquisition of media rights. We already have a PR department that releases propaganda and engages in information warfare. Could there be some deeper meaning in those paintings?

“Elise, did you see the painting that Kouki made? What sort of painting was it?”

“It's difficult to describe... It was made in an art style that I've never seen

before. Would you like to see it?”

I opened the picture that Elise sent to me on my terminal. It was unlike the art style I'd seen in educational broadcasts; the painting was of a girl wearing provocative clothing.

I don't know what this has to do with armor, but Kouki is a genius... he doesn't do anything without a reason. I'll just have to trust in his genius, even though I have no idea what he's trying to do. I can put a stop to it later if he attempts something dangerous, I decided.

“Very well,” I said. “Grant all of Kouki's requests.”

“Understood. Please take a look at this document. This is a project plan that Kouki has provided to ensure that the project can run smoothly once you've given your approval.”

I looked at my terminal once again and opened the document. Some of the instructions were fairly detailed, and there was also a wide variety of projects described that appeared to be still in the planning stages.

One of the things that caught my eye was an advertisement for the cosmetics department. It was an instruction to make changes to commercials we were showing via internet broadcasting and on movie websites.

The project document said that we should request cooperation from women in the Merkava Kingdom of G-88 and have each woman use magic to transform herself into a “princess” the moment they applied a makeup product, and then say something like ‘I can't believe how beautiful it made me!’

I can see how that would have a big visual impact, but is that really going to resonate with customers? I suppose there are more important things to worry about...

“Elise, make an amendment to my previous instruction,” I said. “If we're going to go through with everything in this project, have a new department of Noa established. Call it the ‘Special Media Entertainment Department’ and put Kouki Arakawa in charge. Contact every existing department and ask them to provide support however they can.”

“Understood.”

“The project plan states that we should be capable of replacing the commercial within five days if it’s created on Noa Island. Have it done within two days. This is a great opportunity. Let’s see how fast we can complete a project with every department cooperating.”

“Understood. If I may be excused, I’ll begin coordinating with each department immediately.”

I watched Elise as she hurried off to relay my instructions. I opened the door to the office while still thinking about what I should do next.

First I’ll enjoy a cup of strong tea before making an appearance in the engineering department. Then I’ll need to visit the weapons department.

That was as far as I got before I couldn’t hold in my laughter any longer.

“Ha ha ha! They must be so pleased about getting hold of a sixth-generation armor plate. Well, too bad. Too bad indeed. We’re already developing a next-generation suit that’s going to change everything.”

My terminal held a design specification, protected by heavy encryption, describing a tenth-generation model, known as the “Type 0.” It would be at least a few more years before the suit was completed. But it would change the very concept of the powered suit, and would place Noa almost eighty years ahead of the world standard in terms of our level of technology.

Go ahead and delude yourselves into thinking you can follow in our footsteps... You’re about to get hopelessly left behind. I’ll use whatever means necessary to make sure my child can be happy.

I firmed my resolve once more as I heard bubbling sounds from the kettle as the water began to boil.

**

United States President William Auld’s Point of View

Hearing a knock, I looked up from my work to check the time. It was 4 PM.

I can’t believe it’s this time already... I instinctively began massaging my aching shoulders, but then I heard knocking once again.

“Come in,” I hastily replied.

“Pardon me.” A man wearing glasses entered the room looking quite unwell. I recognized him as an army engineer with the rank of lieutenant general. I gestured for him to sit down, but he refused and then handed me some documents on paper.

“I’m here to report that the inspection of the Noa armor plate we obtained is now complete. Our conclusions are as follows: It is already within our ability to mass-produce armor plates of this type. We discovered no particular points of improvement. We have been unable to obtain a full powered suit, so the full extent of the suit performance remains unclear. However, based on our inspection of this armor plate, we believe that the sixth-generation suit is not significantly different from the fifth-generation suit. In other words, the sixth-generation suit is merely an improved form of the fifth-generation suit. Or to put it more bluntly, the suit is a sham created to—”

“A sham? Have you been watching TV recently? Not just TV. Have you visited any online video sites?”

“Not recently. Though I don’t see the connection,” replied the lieutenant general with a blank face.

It was difficult to stop myself from yelling at him as I told him to look at the screen on my desk as I played back the “Cosmetics Commercial” from Noa that had started airing the day before.

The lieutenant general began to look even less well after watching all five variations of the commercial. By the time he was finished, he looked so pale that I worried he might pass out. “I-Is this CGI?”

“You’d think so. There’s no way for a woman to transform into a princess by using makeup in reality.”

“B-But Mister President! This level of production is...”

The lieutenant general was understandably surprised. My government had asked a major movie production company to inspect the video, and they had told us that there was no evidence that CGI had been used. In other words, Noa had already far surpassed the capabilities of American companies despite

having only just established themselves as a movie production company.

Why would Noa resort to making sham weapons when weapons development is their specialty? This lieutenant general must be clueless.

“Now that you’ve seen this, do you still think the suit is a sham?” I demanded.

“But the technology involved in movies and weapons development are so different...”

“You fool!! Weapons development is Noa’s specialty, and yet you think it’s a sham? I’d love to hear how you can be so optimistic. Listen to me. A day after this commercial started airing... at around noon today... Noa’s products completely sold out in cosmetics stores around the world. I’m sure even you can understand how much of an impact this commercial must have had? What’s more, we recently received an audio message from Miki Arakawa herself.”

“The demon lord...? What did she say?”

“She said that the armor plate we’d obtained was an unfinished product. She said that she will deliver a new armor plate via a ‘legitimate route’ in several days from now. She also said, ‘This is merely a gesture of goodwill, and we ask nothing in return.’ What I want to know is whether this country’s intelligence agencies are inferior to a commercial entity? No, it’s more than that... Why did you offend Noa despite all my warnings?! They’re no ordinary company! This incident has already damaged our relationship with Noa. In the future, take more care not to incite their anger!”

I couldn’t resist any longer. I was yelling at the lieutenant general now. He apologized repeatedly and then left the room.

Unbelievable! If they wanted an armor plate, they should have used a legitimate procedure to ask Noa to provide us with one, I fumed. Not only did they anger the demon lord by using covert methods to obtain it, they’ve also created a huge setback for my plans to invite Kouki to visit as a state guest and honored researcher! My wife and my daughter Mary have been looking forward to meeting him...

I’ve scheduled a cabinet meeting this evening to discuss how we might somehow regain Noa’s trust, but this is going to take some sort of ingenious

plan.

Chapter 2: High Level AI Ageha

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

I was on the third underground level of the Hakone base, in the office of the chief of the Special Media Entertainment Department, sitting at my desk with my head in my hands.

I looked up and saw the various project managers sitting behind their partitions, making arrangements and generally looking busy.

"How did it come to this...?" I mumbled to myself as I drank my cold coffee.

Clare carried over a large pile of electronic memory chips and placed them on the desk in front of me. Even now, she was serving as my personal adjutant.

"Chief, tomorrow's animation broadcast and the commercials to be broadcast alongside it have arrived from Noa Island," Clare told me with a happy smile.

"Would you be able to give them a final check?"

I'm glad Clare's here, but doesn't she have other things to do?! Clare is part of the PMC department. This is hardly her field of expertise. Then again, I'm busy enough as it is. Without her to coordinate each of our teams, this workload would kill me.

Once I'd sold the paintings Baldy and I had made, and determined that my plan could work, I'd proposed a culture creation project that my mom had swiftly put into action. She'd immediately sent the necessary personnel and equipment to Noa Island, created the cosmetics commercial within just two days Earth-time, and then gotten our satellite broadcasting going before I knew it.

For reasons related to the broadcasting rights, our broadcasts didn't start until 7 PM, but we'd acquired rights to broadcast all five types of commercial repeatedly during commercial breaks on various TV channels. As a result, Noa's products had sold out in cosmetics stores around the world.

Mom must have been pleased. Soon after that, she established a special purpose facility on Noa Island so that movies could be recorded and produced at a faster pace. It was now only five days after the broadcast of the initial commercials, but the anime would be broadcasting on satellite channel number 452, “Noa Channel,” tomorrow.

Clare and the rest of the personnel of Noa were so talented, it scared me.

“It’s only been a week since I made that painting,” I commented. “It’s amazing how we’ve gotten everything done in time.”

“Yes, but we did have every member of Noa doing all they could to back us up while we got the new department established,” Clare told me. “Please remember that we won’t be able to produce everything at this speed in the future. As for *Magical Girl Alice* airing tomorrow, Alice is playing the protagonist and Aikawa is playing the antagonist, as you wished. They haven’t finished recording the final episode yet, so it should be another two days before they’ll return to Hakone, allowing for sightseeing time in G-88.”

“I see.”

Maybe it’s asking too much to have a new line of business up and running within just one week. I’ll make sure there are at least two weeks of production time for the team to complete episodes in the future. I need to think about Alice and Megumi, too. They were keen to help with the anime production, but we should probably be paying them for the work. Mom probably dealt with that, but I’d better email her later just to check. Next, there are the VR games and movies that I asked Macho Man and his team to deal with. I wonder how that’s going.

“Clare, how well are my dad and the others doing with the VR works?” I asked.

“First of all, please be aware that the adult-oriented content you’ve proposed has been divided into male-oriented and female-oriented categories and development has been assigned to two separate teams. This is due to a directive issued by Miki.”

“Ah. I thought that might happen. I can’t exactly get involved in that kind of project. But what about the horror game? I’ve got high hopes for that.”

“Out of the 46 members of Noa’s PMC personnel that took part in the beta test... 15 suffered a loss of consciousness. Of those 15, three developed nyctophobia.”

“It knocked them out? Was that some kind of technical fault? I thought that Mom had made sure the beta test equipment was safe to use.”

“Sorry... I should have said it more clearly,” Clare said. “Out of 46 personnel, 15 passed out from fear. Of those, three developed a fear of going to the bathroom at night.”

Huhhh?! These are former members of a UN special forces unit. They’re fainting in fear? I realize that the VR device is different from a TV screen because it feeds sensory data directly into the brain, but... being scared to go to the bathroom? They sound like children. The beta test map was supposed to be fun. All they had to do was solve the mystery and escape from the big hospital in the mountains. Why would they pass out? I stayed up all night coming up with puzzles and ways to surprise the player, but it looks like I wasted my time.

“Did anyone actually solve the mystery and escape? Did anyone clear the game?”

“I’m the only one who escaped,” said Clare. “Forgive me for being so blunt, but the game makes no sense! The way it starts out is fine, but around halfway, when you encounter the nurse with the broken leg in the west ward, that part was unfair!! Most of the testers gave up when she chased after them in the wheelchair without saying anything. And please make it so the ghosts of doctors don’t suddenly get closer when the lights flicker while fetching the key in the underground corridor! And then there’s the part where you have to put the final medical record back in the right place. How are you supposed to figure out where it goes? It took me so many attempts!”



“I know it’s not perfect, but you must have enjoyed it if you played it to the end,” I said. “I’ll see if I can add some new features to help out the player. Maybe settings to adjust the difficulty or make the visuals less intense.”

The important thing is that Clare had fun playing the game. But I should have guessed that the difficulty would be too high for people in this world because they’ve never played video games before. I thought keeping the number of save points low would make it more realistic, but I’m going to have to adjust those along with the enemy spawn locations to make it easier. The next thing I need to deal with is...

“Where did Baldy disappear to?” I muttered.

That bald idiot is supposed to be here helping me and Shingo, I fumed. Why would he disappear when we’re so busy? If Noa really is counting on him to protect children who aren’t combat trained, then shouldn’t he be with us at all times? At the very least, he should be here to rescue me from all this paperwork.

“Shingo, Clare,” I spoke up. “Do you know where Baldy has gone?”

“Buh hee? I haven’t seen him at all today.”

“I haven’t seen him at all, either,” Clare said. “I don’t think he’s around today. In fact, I can’t remember when I last saw him.”

Disappearing without a trace might be one of his special skills, but unless he had to assassinate one of Noa’s managers, now’s hardly the time. I was exasperated. I don’t have a choice. I really didn’t want to do it, especially not with Clare around, but it’s the only way to find him and put him to work. If I don’t do something now, there’s going to be blood on my hands.

“Shingo! Activate Butterfly. Finding that damn lolicon is our top priority!”

“K-Kouki, wait! Clare is here!”

“We don’t have time to mess around. The media department staff members are going to die from overwork.”

Shingo looked around at the personnel of the media department who sat all around us, looking at their work with empty eyes. He knew I was right. Shingo connected his terminal to the server on his desk, and in that instant, a great

number of windows opened up on the display in the center of the room. The windows were repeatedly appearing and then closing as the search for Baldy began.

“Mwahah. There’s no escape from the technological might of Noa, bald man!” I exclaimed.

“Kouki, what’s happening?” Clare asked. “It almost looks as though you’ve got access to positioning data for all key members of Noa.”

There’s no fooling Clare. She is a data analysis specialist, after all. Clare was exactly right. Butterfly was currently determining the locations of Noa’s key members and high-ranking personnel in real-time. But that wasn’t the half of it. If I tell her what else it can do, she’ll either tell my mom to order us to stop using it, or she’ll set up some kind of countermeasure. I’d better not mention it. I’d hate to lose Butterfly.

“That’s right,” I said. “Butterfly is currently determining the locations of Noa’s key members, including my mom and dad, in real-time.”

“Kouki! Do you know how dangerous this butterfly program could be?! If this fell into enemy hands...”

“Don’t worry about that. No one besides my mom would be able to take control of this software. Even Mom might struggle.”

“Buh hee, that’s right,” Shingo assured her. “No one but Miki. Even if you had the full power of the new large-scale terminal on Noa Island, the terminal would just get eaten by Butterfly.”

Clare was wide-eyed in surprise.

It might be an exaggeration to say that Mom would struggle, but I’m sure Butterfly could put up a fight against her for three days.

Shingo and I looked at each other and smiled. Clare knitted her brow and tried to terminate the program using her own terminal. I could tell that she was locked out of the server the moment she attempted to access it. That just made her more determined, and she continued trying to get access, but after four attempts, there was a morpho butterfly shown on her terminal screen.

Looks like her terminal got eaten. She'll see why it's impossible to fight against this program in just a moment.

**

Clare's Point of View

I stared in disbelief at the image of a blue butterfly that had appeared on my terminal screen. Though it didn't contain anything as important as the top-secret intelligence documents that Elise handled for Miki, my terminal had been specially designed to handle important information, and hijacking it wasn't an easy task. Despite that, I'd only been able to make four attempts to access the server before my terminal was rendered useless.

I didn't even understand what had happened to it. It wasn't generally possible to hack a terminal so quickly, and all of the data stored on the terminal appeared to have been eaten.

I turned to Kouki and asked him, "When you said that things get 'eaten,' is this what you meant?"

"That's right," he grinned. "But you're on Butterfly's list, so the data that was eaten will be returned to you afterwards. Butterfly has shut you down temporarily because you got in its way."

"I give up," I said. "Which one of you made this program? Was it you, Kouki? Or Shingo?"

Given the way he was bragging about it, I suspected that Kouki had made the program himself, but I wanted to be sure who was responsible before reporting the program to Miki.

"No, we didn't make it," Kouki replied. "Do you remember Chabane?"

"You mean the perfect standalone AI?"

"That's the one. Butterfly was made by Chabane."

"But..."

An AI made by an AI? That's not possible. It doesn't matter how advanced

Chabane was. Inventing something new is far beyond the capabilities of an artificial intelligence.

I was still speechless when Shingo took over Kouki's explanation.

"Chabane went out into space before he could finish it, so he left it incomplete. But Chabane left behind a record of improvements he'd made to himself. Kouki and I used that record to improve Butterfly. As a result, we completed a new AI named Ageha. You could say that she's Chabane's daughter."

"Kouki! Shingo!" The door to the office was violently thrown open as Miki entered the room. "Are the boys here? Stop hacking into the main terminal!"

It's no use, Miki, I sighed. *There's no way for them to stop it now.*

Miki looked so angry that I was worried about the blood vessels in her temples, but all I could do was quietly shake my head.

Yelling at us must have helped Miki calm down. Butterfly was analyzing data at a rate beyond human capability, and curiosity had overcome her anger.

"What's happening?" Miki asked emotionlessly.

Before I could respond, we heard a ridiculous chiming sound effect, and a fairy, similar to those we saw in the world of G-88, appeared on the main display.

"Position data acquired. Target is currently located in Moscow, Russia. Would you like me to relay the video feed from a nearby surveillance camera?"

The girl on the screen was wearing a blue dress and had butterfly wings that moved gracefully. She made her announcement with a smile, and looked nothing short of a goddess.

"Thank you, Ageha," Kouki said. "Now that we know where he is, you can leave the rest to us. Could you give us back control?"

"Very well. Please call on me again when you're next in need of my assistance."

After thanking Kouki, she bowed politely and then disappeared. The alert messages displayed on each terminal screen immediately disappeared and Noa

was back in control. My own terminal screen was displaying a message that said, “Your data is now in order.” All my data seemed to have reappeared.

“This software looks useful, Kou...” Miki said.

“I don’t mind giving you access rights, but this is a Chabane-type AI, so don’t forget that she has feelings. Don’t be mean to her.”

Any conversation between these two is beyond me, but I wonder if Miki really understands what Kouki just said. More importantly, I wonder why Baldy— why Anton is in Russia.

I held back a sigh while looking at the detailed positioning data. It more or less confirmed that Anton had run from his duties. He appeared to be moving through Moscow, but I couldn’t imagine where he was going.

Hoping that Miki would know what to do, I cleared my throat and looked in her direction. “He still has a Noa terminal with him. How about we turn on the microphone, Clare? We can activate it using our authorization codes.”

I’m sure we’ll have no problem activating his terminal’s microphone with our authorization codes, but then again, do we really want to do that with children present? I wondered. If things get messy for someone in his line of work, that might not be something we want to expose the boys to. We could end up listening in to one of his targets screaming in agony.

“Don’t worry,” Miki told me, as if she’d read my mind. “Even he knows where to draw the line. And these children are somewhat responsible for his actions because they rank above him. I think this could be a good learning experience for them.”

I couldn’t argue with that. Kouki and Shingo had to understand their own responsibilities. Still, I couldn’t help but feel uneasy.

I thought about Anton’s personal history as I keyed in the authorization code using my terminal. He wasn’t the type of person to act on his own. You might say that he was obedient, or maybe he just lacked initiative. It was strange for that sort of person to disappear without telling Kouki or anyone else.

“Authorization granted,” I told Miki. “We’re now receiving audio.”

I began to feel anxious as we listened to the noisy signal picked up by the microphone. We could hear the hustle and bustle of a city street together with the sound of Anton's footsteps. He was walking at a constant pace as if he knew exactly where he was headed, but then he appeared to suddenly stop.

The way he's walking... I thought slowly.

"Is he making sure no one follows him?" Shingo asked me in surprise.

I nodded in agreement and considered asking whether we should stop listening, but then Miki began loudly speaking to all personnel in the media department.

"Everyone, initiate B-class security protocols. I order all media department personnel to remain in their quarters on standby for the next 48 hours. Please act swiftly in accordance with the procedure in your operating manuals."

B-class?! Does she think some of our people might have turned against us?! I was too shocked to even say anything. There's no way that Anton would ever turn traitor!

"I don't doubt his loyalty," Miki continued. "But Anton knows everything about how these boys are being protected. However small the danger might be, I don't want to take the risk. Contact Shuuichi and instruct him to dispatch all soldiers on Noa Island to the Hakone base. I'll give further instructions from the command center on the lowest level of the base. I'll take Kouki and Shingo there with me."

"Understood."

The moment I responded, Miki turned and headed for the exit. I saw Kouki and Shingo hurry after her as I began inputting data into my terminal.

As I began selecting a security team and the types of weapons they'd use, I came to fully understand the meaning of Ageha's message about my data being "in order."

My data had been rearranged with such a maddening level of precision that it might actually have been an improvement over how I'd arranged it myself.

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

The command center on the lowest level of the Hakone base was located 1,500 meters underground. There was only one entrance to the base, and that was protected by three-meters-thick blast doors made of a special-purpose metal. Even if all functions of the Hakone base were to fail, we could still survive in here for half a year. And deep inside the base, there was the gate that connected to G-88. You could call this base our last bastion.

"The entrance to the base has been completely sealed from inside," an operator in the command center informed me. "It can only be operated by manual commands input from the command center."

"Very good." I nodded curtly.

I listened to the other operators as they gave me their reports, and re-entered the authorization code into the main terminal so that I could resume receiving audio from Anton. This time we were using a reconnaissance satellite belonging to Noa. That would allow us to know more about the target location.

"Don't forget. Our target is Anton Bortkiewicz, a former member of a special operations unit attached to the Russian Foreign Ministry's intelligence agency. The man is a true professional who I've trusted with the safety of my child. If we're careless, we'll lose him."

This seemed to put the personnel in the command center on edge. The speed of their movements increased as they worked their terminals.

It's about time I told Kouki and Shingo about Anton's responsibilities, I decided.

I turned around to face the area where the two of them were sitting around, and saw that they were helping themselves to coffee from the coffee machine while laughing about something.

"Buh hee. Didn't I tell you? I knew that Baldy—I forgot his real name..."

"Anton Bortkiewicz."

"Right! I knew that Anton was a counter agent."

"All of your guesses about him were on target," Kouki grinned. "But do you

really believe somebody like him would betray us? I know he has a bit of a thing for little girls, but—”

“Shh! Kouki! Keep your voice down.”

It looks like the boys have reached their own conclusions, but did I just hear that correctly? Anton likes little girls? I’ve made sure that the security personnel dealing directly with Alice and Aikawa are all female, so maybe I don’t have to be too worried... Come to think of it, I do remember him looking at some of the smaller female officers a little strangely.

“Satellite ready,” an operator informed me. “The satellite is able to observe the target area for two hours as it passes overhead. Additionally, we have temporary access to a spy satellite belonging to the United Nations. This will allow us to observe the area for a total of five hours.”

“What?! Oh. Th-Thank you, that’s great. Please express my gratitude to the UN for their cooperation.”

I got a little sidetracked there. I’ll have to look into his interest in little girls later. Right now, I need to know why he’s in Russia. The most likely explanation is that he entered the country to obtain information from a source himself. But that’s something he’s done many times before, and he’s always informed us of his intentions beforehand. The next most likely explanation is that he obtained information about a plot to assassinate Kouki, and now he’s dealing with the matter personally.

“Though that doesn’t seem too likely, either...” I murmured.

Judging by the satellite image, he’s not particularly well-armed. There’s also no way he could learn the location of an enemy’s base in a foreign country without support from our intelligence department. So the only other possibility is that he intends to sell information about Noa. If that’s the case, it’s the trust that the boys have in him that’s going to be most damaged.

I prayed that I was wrong and continued to watch the satellite image displayed on the large display.

Finally, Anton began to move.

“The target has entered a building,” an operator told me.

“Turn up the microphone! I want to hear absolutely everything.”

“Understood.”

Everyone was holding their breath as they silently listened to the sound picked up by his terminal. There was the sound of Anton walking across a wooden floor and then the creak of the door opening.

“Long time no see, Anton.” The voice we heard belonged to a man speaking in Russian. Judging by the pleased tone of his voice, this was someone who knew Anton quite well.

“Long time indeed. Five years, was it?”

“Roughly. Did you get the data I sent?”

“Yes, but what do you want from me?” Anton asked. “I can’t help you now, and I won’t risk causing him trouble.”

Data? This man must have sent something to Anton’s terminal. I quietly instructed a staff member beside me to have all data be transmitted via a Noa server so we could inspect it. Then I went back to listening to the two men talk.

“I never said we’d be causing trouble for Arakawa. I’m simply saying we can use him as a source of intelligence. You’re his protector. There’s enough trust between you and that monster to— Oh, don’t point your gun at me. I thought you were a more reasonable man.”

“Don’t ever call him a monster,” Anton growled. “That boy is my comrade. Insult him again, and I’ll make you regret it.”

It’s clear from the conversation that he’s willing to draw his weapon to defend Kouki’s reputation. If this isn’t a betrayal, then why is Anton in Russia? I looked over at Kouki and saw that he looked just as confused as me. *All we can do is keep listening to their conversation.*

“Whatever you say, Anton. But the army has taken Captain Yulia into custody. We need you.”

“I know. That’s why I’m here. Why else would I return to Russia after defecting? If the government finds me, I’ll be killed.”

“I’m glad you came,” the man said. “Take a look at this.”

“Is this a memory chip?” Anton asked. “It looks like an old one.”

“It’s old, but all of the data is recorded on here. Take your time looking through it. This is how the Alice Project and the New World Project began.”

Alice Project? I thought, startled. *We’ve been frantic in our attempts to learn more about that project. Why would this man have all the data? We can’t let Kouki hear about this! Why isn’t Shuuichi here?! I need him to hold back Kouki at times like this. Shuuichi, please, hurry!*

Everyone in the command center was sneaking glances at Kouki, expecting him to fly into a rage. But Kouki simply folded his arms and appeared to be deep in thought.

After a few minutes he suddenly said, “Mom, if we can hear what they’re saying, shouldn’t it be possible for us to transmit our voice to them?”

“Yes, it’s possible.”

“In that case, let’s help out Anton. I know you’ve been looking into the Alice Project because I saw reports that Dad left out in his room. Anton has the information that you want, and what I want is to keep Anton safe and help him out. The man he’s talking to must be looking for Captain Yulia. We should offer them our support.”

Shuuichi really is a brainless gorilla! Why would he leave something so important where Kouki would see it?! I was furious. I’m glad that it’s made Kouki calmer about the situation, but I’ll have to teach Shuuichi about his management responsibilities...

“It’s difficult to offer them support if the army is involved,” I said. “If we’re going to negotiate, we’ll need to talk to the Russian government. But we don’t have any bargaining chips we can use.”

“No, I think we do. I’ll need your help, but I can prepare bargaining chips. Before that, we need to see what data Anton is carrying.”

“What bargaining chips?” I asked.

“The precise location of a large, undiscovered diamond deposit located on Russian territory. Details of government involvement in an assassination plot

using radioactive polonium-210. Free distribution rights for Noa's satellite broadcasts."

If we have bargaining chips like those, negotiation will be possible. I was floored. It might even put us in an advantageous position. I know I'm always asking myself this, but how could Kouki know these things? Did he research in advance after predicting that this situation would arise? I don't want to believe that. If I accept the idea, it would mean that Kouki really can see into the future.

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Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

Mom's gone quiet, I noted. Maybe she's just thinking it over, or maybe I shouldn't have let slip that I know about a diamond mine and a polonium incident that no one in this world should know about. She's going to ask me how I know. I need to think of an excuse.

"All right," Mom said. "We'll negotiate based on those pieces of information. But afterward, I want you to tell me how you know all these things no one else knows. And no dodging the question this time."

"...The mine is located at 71° 39' north latitude, 111° 11' east longitude. Open air mining of the area is possible, so it should be easy to locate. I'll leave it to you to gather more info about the location."

I ignored the real question and just told her where the mine was. Mom just looked at me and started chewing her thumbnail without saying anything. I had that same bad habit of chewing my nails, and Mom was always telling me to stop doing it.

We continued looking at each other like that for some time. Mom then did something I wasn't expecting. She walked over to the coffee machine, poured herself a cup of coffee, and then added five sugars and a generous amount of milk. She normally drank her coffee black, and there was only one time when she'd make coffee like this.

"Mom's brain has overloaded..." I murmured to Shingo.

"Buh hee? What do you mean?"

“Mom’s brain is normally capable of processing everything at high speed, but when there is too much for it to deal with, it stops working and needs sugar to refuel. I’ve only seen it happen a few times. Geniuses are weird.”

“Is she going to be all right?” he asked, concerned.

“It’s no big deal. I think she’s already recovered.”

I looked over and saw that Mom was shaking as she drained the cup. As the sugar diffused through her body, she abruptly lifted her head and continued talking as if nothing had happened.

“Yes, I’ll check what’s at those coordinates. Now can we make contact with Anton right away?”

“I’ll do it,” I said. “Can I get a headset?”

With Mom’s permission, a staff member removed their headset and passed it to me. I looked at Mom to ask whether it was okay to start talking, and she gestured with her hand to tell me everything was ready.

“Mr. Baldy, can you hear me?” I said softly into the microphone.

“Kouki?! Crap! My terminal!”

His voice sounded panicked. I tried not to smile at the thought of Baldy panicking because I wanted to act as calm as possible.

“Don’t bother trying to cut me off. Even if you turn the terminal off, we can still take control of it from here. There’s also a reconnaissance satellite monitoring the building that you’re in. Now please listen to me. You need information from me, right?”

I didn’t have any information of my own to give, but they were under the impression that I did. What I did have was Noa’s intelligence network cooperating with me, so it wasn’t exactly a lie.

“How much did you hear?” he asked, panicked.

“Everything. I want to give you my support, Mr. Baldy... I suppose I should call you Anton. But in return, I’ll need you to provide us with all the information related to the Alice Project.”

“Do you mean it?” the other man said. “If we grant your request, you’ll help us rescue the captain?”

“I’m sorry, what was your name?”

“I’m Joseph. I’m a member of the unit that Anton was formerly assigned to.”

So this is Joseph... Anton’s comrade in arms. He called on Anton out of desperation, so I think we can trust him.

Mom must have reached the same conclusion. She signaled to me to be quiet so she could talk to Joseph herself.

“This is Miki Arakawa. Perhaps you’ll feel more confident now that I’m participating in the discussion? The answer to your question is yes. We can provide you with money and manpower, if that’s what you need.”

“Thank you,” said Joseph. “In that case, I’ll allow Anton to send you the information right now.”

“You sound awfully hasty. No one likes a man with no patience.”

“Spare me, witch, I don’t have the time,” the man snapped. “At 10 PM tonight, eleven hours from now, the captain will be executed.”

Mom and I looked at each other.

In eleven hours? But why?

Before I could say anything, I realized that the data sent from Anton had reached my terminal. I ran it through a virus check just to be safe, and then opened the file. It was data about some sort of experiment on humans. I asked the person who’d given me their headset to display the data on the main screen.

Mom stared at the data in disgust. “DNA-Modified Reinforced Soldier Project? Is this for real?!”

“Yes. As a researcher yourself, I’m sure you already understand, but the experiment induced genetic mutations in humans. The ultimate goal was artificial evolution.”

“Experiments like these are forbidden for ethical reasons!” she cried.

“Yes. The UN resolution formally forbidding such experiments worldwide was passed in 2055. However, the research continued in secrecy in Russia. Our ultimate goal was to create a soldier with a toughened body, but the research ran into some problems, and the whole thing was almost scrapped. But humans are sinful creatures. The intelligence agency learned that the Canadian government was conducting the same type of research. After we learned what they were doing, we reached out to the Canadian government and offered to collaborate.”

“And that led to the Genetic Improvement Project, starting with the Second Reinforced Soldier Project mentioned in the document?”

“Precisely. We offered to provide financial support for all aspects of the research, while the Canadians provided the research facility, the research staff, and the equipment. You’ll find a document explaining the details at the end of the data, so feel free to look at that later. As I’ve said, our objective was to create a super soldier. But this merely amounted to using drugs and nanomachines to improve a soldier’s body. In other words, we were trying to strengthen an existing soldier. Meanwhile, the Canadians attempted to create a human born with altered genetics. This was the Alice Project.”

It reminded me of something that the staff from the medical department had explained to me on Noa Island. There were limits to improvements that could be made to an existing human body. Those limits made it impossible to create an anti-aging drug that completely stopped aging. At best, aging could be slowed down. To completely stop aging, it would be necessary to create a strengthened life form whose genes had been modified from the start.

So that’s what the Alice Project was about. That means that the photograph of Alice in those documents...

“It’s worth mentioning that our country concluded the Reinforced Soldier Project more or less successfully,” Joseph added. “The proof is in the existence of our external special forces unit, Chernobog. We’re improved soldiers that have been modified based on the results of the Genetic Improvement Project. And there’s no doubt that the Alice Project led by the Canadian government reached a somewhat successful conclusion. The proof is your son’s girlfriend, Alice Alford. She’s one of the Evolution Sisters born out of the Alice Project.”

I knew it, I thought. I guessed when I heard the name of the project. But what does it matter? If Alice learns that she was involved in some crazy medical experiment carried out by a shadowy organization, she'll probably find it exciting. She loves that kind of thing. And it doesn't bother me. I doubt it'll bother Shingo or Aikawa, either. I just wish Mom wouldn't look at us as if we need her to feel sorry for us! It takes a lot to shock us kids these days.

"As far as I can tell from these documents, Alice was the only example of success," Mom said. "It says that Alice's sisters showed no signs of life, but the report doesn't give any explanation why."

"Do you believe in souls?" Joseph asked. "I don't mean in a figurative sense. I mean an actual soul that resides in a living body."

"What are you talking about?"

"According to a theory set out by a certain researcher, a human serving as a vessel for a soul can only carry a human-sized soul. An insect carries an insect-sized soul, a dog carries a dog-sized soul, and so on. Our souls may be strictly limited from the start. But if there was a vessel that appeared human but had greater strength and intellect, what sort of soul would it carry?"

"This is complete drivel!" Mom exclaimed.

No, I think Joseph might be right, I mused. Vessels like the Evolution Sisters should have been too big to house the life that was meant for them. Which means that someone like Alice can't have a human soul.

I pondered.

I didn't realize it until just now, but I've changed my views since visiting G-88. The soul inside Alice is probably something similar to a dragon soul. There are dragons that can move between worlds, so maybe there was a dragon capable of moving into another world after its body had been destroyed and only the soul remained. That means there's something I need to check...

"Joseph, did this researcher ever say anything about reincarnation?" I asked. "For example, did they ever mention the possibility of a soul from a parallel universe or from the past or future moving through space and time before settling in a vessel?"

“She did... She had that exact same idea. But would that even be possible?”

“I can’t prove it, but I think her theory is correct. This researcher... I’d like to meet with her myself and ask her some questions.”

“That’s not possible,” he said. “She’s the leader of a religious cult known as ‘New World,’ and you’re one of their targets. She’s the one who intends to have the captain killed to stop any more information about these projects leaking out. Her name is Dr. Sandra Zelenskaya. I suggest you look into her yourselves. My people are in hiding. I need to check that they’re safe and then meet with them at a new location. I’ll contact you again in two hours.”

The terminal abruptly switched off.

We could have switched it back on from here, but we didn’t want to interfere while he was moving to a new position, and it was enough to continue tracking him by satellite. I decided that the first thing we needed to do was negotiate with the Russian government and have the execution of the captain delayed.

“Mom, we need to begin negotiations—”

I stopped short of saying “with Russia” because there was something strange about the way Mom was staring at me. It made me worry. I was about to ask her if something was wrong, but she spoke first.

“Kou... were you reincarnated?”

She found me out... I thought, chagrined. *A genius on Mom’s level was never going to have any trouble figuring it out. Not after hearing that conversation and seeing these documents. It’s time to stop hiding it. There’ll never be a better opportunity than this.*

With that decided, I looked Mom directly in the eye and nodded.

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Miki Arakawa’s Point of View

“Kou... were you reincarnated?”

At first, Kouki just looked at his feet. He looked uncomfortable, like a child

who'd been caught doing something wrong. But then he raised his head and nodded.

Every member of personnel in the command center was staring at him in astonishment. I remembered the way that Kouki had always known when something was dangerous and wrong without me ever having to teach him.

I should have realized it before now. Why didn't I?

"Sorry! I know I'm late. What's happening?" Shuuichi entered the room from the entrance nearest the gate. He was armed and out of breath.

I raised my hand to silence Shuuichi and then turned back to Kouki. "What happened to you in your previous life?"

"I died," he said bluntly.

I should have guessed. Now I see why he's always trying to deceive us. I'm sure he doesn't want to talk about his own death. Especially not in front of his friend...

I smiled in an attempt to put my son at ease, and then I turned to the soldiers that Shuuichi had brought with him.

"Take Shingo with you and take refuge on G-88," I ordered them. "The safe zone that we discussed with the Merkava Kingdom should be ready by now. Take Alice and Aikawa with you too. Security should be S-class. Mobilize an entire brigade if you have to."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The soldiers immediately sprang into action as I turned back to Kouki.

"Kou, thank you for sharing your secret with me. I won't ask any more questions. But don't forget: I love you, no matter what happened in the past. Whatever you've been trying to accomplish, you don't have to do it alone anymore."

"But I'm not trying to accomplish anything..."

Kouki was still putting on a brave face, and I couldn't help but take him in my arms.

He was always like this. He takes on everything himself. All the misfortune and sorrow. But not this time. This time, I'll be there for him.

"There's a break room here inside the command center," I told him. "Go rest for a while. I'll come up with a plan to help Anton. Come back when you've had time to think things over."

"Okay..." Kouki left quietly without saying anything more.

Now I need to explain this whole thing to Shuuichi. And then I need to inform all of our personnel. But how will I tell them? I hope none of our staff members will be rude enough to ask Kouki awkward questions.

"Miki, tell me what's going on," Shuuichi demanded. "Why's everyone here look so tense? And you don't look well either. What's wrong?"

"Kouki was reincarnated. Basically, he died and then was reborn with all of his memories."

"Huh?! Can that happen? You're talking about life after death."

I'd thought it was impossible myself. But if our son had been reincarnated, that would explain everything.

I urged Shuuichi to calm down, and then told him about the things Kouki had been keeping from us.

"Do you understand? If I'm right about this, he came to this world from the future. Actually, based on the equation he derived, I think he's from the future of another very similar world."

"What makes you think so?" he asked.

"He can predict things that are going to happen in the future. When he was hurrying to develop the eighth-generation model, it was because he knew Alice would be kidnapped. The roaring device used in G-88 must have been something he was planning from the very start. Our son has seen the future."

"Couldn't those things have been a coincidence?"

"Shuuichi, did you ever scold Kouki when he was very small? Maybe small things like, 'always look before you cross the road,' or 'don't play with my lighter'?"

“Well, obviously... I... Come to think of it, no, never.”

Because Kouki already knew. He knew what would make us angry and what he wasn't supposed to do. He knew because he'd already died countless times.

“We've talked about the day Kouki was born, haven't we? The way his eyes were devoid of emotion.”

“Right.”

“I think he must have died countless times. So many times that he didn't have much emotion left. Can you imagine how many times someone must have to experience death to become like that? If I had to do everything all over again every time I died, I couldn't take it.”

When he spoke about bargaining chips, Kouki told us about an assassination plot using polonium, I added silently. I can't guess how many times he'd died already by then, but it must have been an assassination method that they used on Kouki himself. This also explains how he can fly his powered suit. Shuuichi said it wouldn't normally be possible, but Kouki was driven to it by sheer desperation. It was the only way he could survive. He must be slowly losing his mind, but for what cause?

“What is it that Kouki wants?” I muttered to myself.

“What he wants?” Shuuichi said suddenly. “Well, I know the answer to that!”

Shuuichi's confidence surprised me. *I doubt he has the answer I'm looking for, but it can't hurt to hear him out. Kouki is Shuuchi's son, after all.*

“We didn't tell you at the time, but me and some of my subordinates took Kouki to a port town called Flonne in the Merkava Kingdom. It's a big place. All the soldiers know about it because there are some decent brothels there. Obviously, I didn't take him to a brothel or anything, but we had a barbecue on the grounds of a church in the town. It's a port town, so there's a good market there, and you can find a lot of good meat, fish, and wine. Well, we made so much noise that some of the locals came over to see what was happening, and we invited them to join us.”

“Is this story going somewhere?” I asked.

“Keep listening. We’d brought too much food, so we shared it with everyone who joined us. Then some knights showed up because they were worried that the locals might have been disturbing us. But then the knights joined us too, and it turned into a party. It was like race didn’t exist. Humans, demonic people, beast-like people, elves... they were all eating the same food and drinking the same wine. When Kouki saw that, he said, ‘This is the world I wanted.’ He sounded really happy.”

“So you think Kouki’s objective is...”

“That’s right. It’s really not that complicated. His goal is, ‘A world where everyone can live happily.’ I’m sure it’s a dream he’d be willing to go on dying for. But it’s meaningless without Kouki there to enjoy it. Without Kouki, not ‘everyone’ is happy. Let’s change Kouki’s goal a little.”



“A world where everyone can live happily,” Kouki included. I smiled. I can think of nothing better... The only way to free Kouki from his suffering is to create a world that he can accept. I don’t know what happened to us in the worlds Kouki has lived in up to now. If there are worlds where we’ve supported Kouki, then I’m sure there are also worlds where we never realized he needed us. But regret won’t help anyone. This time, I’ll create a world where Kouki can live happily!

“All right. Let’s get to it. Disengage the security protocols and have the political affairs team from the PR department gather ASAP. Have the military department on standby and ready to sortie. This could lead to a small-scale battle on Russian territory, so tell them not to carry anything that could tie them to Noa.”

“Leave it to me,” Shuuichi said confidently. “You do the thinking and I’ll do the fighting. It’s always worked for us up to now. This time’s no different.”

Shuuichi gave me a salute as he made his casual remarks, and I couldn’t help but smile. He rarely saw his own son because he was always working, but Shuuichi was always there for Kouki, and I’d never regret marrying him.

As long as Shuuichi’s by my side, I know that things are going to work out.

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sound of an anti-intruder alarm system in the base.

“Where’s the alarm coming from?!” I exclaimed.

“Analysis in progress!” an operator called back. “...It can’t be! It’s coming from an emergency escape route. The location is right above us. I don’t believe it... This activation code is...”

“Who?!”

“OF-7-001. Kouki is activating it manually.”

I felt dizzy.

Why must he always act alone? We know his secret now, so why didn’t he talk to us? We have to stop him.

“Mobilize the Hakone base suppression team!!”

Shuuichi and the men he'd brought with him saluted in response, and then they ran off to carry out my orders.

We have to stop him before it's too late...

I began biting my nails again as the shrill sound of the alarm continued.

Chapter 3: Anton in Crisis

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View — Two Hours Later

What am I doing? Was it really necessary to break out of the sealed base using Ageha?

As I absentmindedly pondered my situation, I sat in a seat on an aircraft drinking coffee from a paper cup. Spread out in front of me was a paper newspaper, which was a rare sight these days, and I was reading the day's news.

I've been so busy lately. It's been a while since I last had a chance to just sit and relax like this.

It would have been a perfect moment if the Russian Air Force's fighter planes weren't visible outside the window and if a mean-looking middle-aged man wasn't sat opposite me.

"In a few minutes, we will be landing at an air force base in the Moscow district, where we will make a brief stop. A number of passengers will be departing the aircraft, and we will take off once again after approximately fifteen minutes on the ground."

I went on reading the newspaper while listening to the announcement, but then the man opposite looked at me and loudly cleared his throat, so I reluctantly folded away my newspaper and re-fastened my seat belt.

When I bought a ticket for this flight so I could rescue Anton, I barely had time to catch the flight myself, I reflected. They did well to get onto the same aircraft. I didn't expect to see fighter jets escorting us the second we entered Russian airspace, either.

"I know we haven't spoken at all, but... when the announcer said 'a number of passengers,' he was talking about us, wasn't he?" I asked... in Russian. "Did the Russian government start providing guides to help civilians with their

sightseeing?”

I'd been completely silent since we'd taken off, but now I was suddenly speaking in Russian. I didn't need any special training to see how shocked the men sitting in front of me were.

Heh. Serves them right. They've been bugging me ever since we left Japan. I was looking forward to riding an ordinary plane for the first time, but they've ruined it for me. And don't they realize that I live on the Hakone base? I spend all my time with dangerous-looking men like Cote and witches like my mom. That mean look doesn't intimidate me. It's just an annoyance.

“We're here to escort you,” the man opposite said. “My superiors will greet you on the ground. They can tell you the details.”

“Details? I know I'm entering your country, but I'm doing everything by the book. You've got no right to divert my flight to a military base and then arrest me.”

“A-Arrest?! You've got it all wrong! If anything were to happen to you, it would be a great loss for humanity. Our country considers your safety to be paramount.”

“If you say so,” I said skeptically. “Just remember that one wrong move will cause a diplomatic incident.”

The words “diplomatic incident” seemed to cause them some concern, but I closed my eyes and tried to ignore them.

Mom once told me that whoever takes the initiative has an overwhelming advantage in negotiations. After Mom told me to go rest, I figured out that the threat of a diplomatic incident would make it difficult for the other party to act freely. Now these guys can't force me to go anywhere without an explanation... or at least, I hope not.

I sighed.

I'm so hungry. I was in too much of a hurry to eat lunch. And at this rate, I won't have a chance to eat dinner, either. Maybe there's some polite way to ask them to feed me? They won't let me land at the airport, but they should at least let me eat.

“I’m getting hungry,” I said. “I’ve heard that Russia is famous for its marinade and ukha restaurants.”

This caused them to talk quietly between themselves about “preparing dinner.”

Looks like they might actually feed me when we land, I thought hopefully. But what if they poison my food? Well, I don’t suppose they want to kill me. That’d cause a diplomatic incident for sure.

Thanks to doing research on the way here, as well as having Ageha obtain some records from the Russian government, I’d determined that a certain polonium-related incident had never occurred. The risk of being poisoned by a radioactive substance seemed negligible.

That reminds me. Clare is always stealing food from my plate when we’re in the Merkava Kingdom. I thought she just liked to taste everything, but she must have been checking it for poison. Clare does so much for me. I shouldn’t take her for granted in the future...

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Once we were on the ground, we were met by a warm breeze.

It was a common misunderstanding that Russia was cold all year round. In reality, the average summer temperature in Moscow was 22°C. Even Siberia heated up to about 20°C during its short period of summer.

The terminal I wore on my arm now told me that the temperature was 24°C, making today slightly warmer than average.

I took a deep breath of the refreshing air.

“There’s a car waiting,” said one of the men who’d gotten off the plane with me. “Please come with us.”

I did as I was told and walked towards a hangar in the corner of the base where a high-class black car was waiting, along with a large four-wheel-drive vehicle.

The man walked towards the car and opened the rear door. He looked at me as if he was waiting for me to get in. I couldn’t refuse after coming this far.

I tried to appear as relaxed as possible as I accepted his invitation and climbed into the car.

Inside, an elderly man wearing a suit and a middle-aged man wearing a dark blue uniform were waiting. The man in the uniform greeted me as I took my seat.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Mr. Arakawa. I’m Lieutenant Colonel Yakov Tarkovsky. I’m an intelligence officer. The man beside me is Yuri Pamfilova. He’s here from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And the man sitting here is Anton Bortkiewicz. He’s a member of a top-secret Russian unit. Anton sought asylum in your country after his involvement in a top-secret project, but yesterday, he was placed under arrest after illegally entering the country. Is he an acquaintance of yours, Mr. Arakawa?”

The lieutenant colonel’s face reminded me of a cat toying with a mouse as he introduced Anton. But none of that information was news to me. The capture of both Anton and Joseph might have surprised me without Ageha’s help, though.

After giving me back my terminal, Ageha had kept using its spare resources to track Anton this whole time, as she was worried about him. She’d also hacked the main terminal of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and learned that both men had been captured.

Having been told this, I knew I needed to use my political influence to its fullest extent.

“Nice to meet you, Lieutenant Colonel,” I said. “My name is Kouki Arakawa. Naturally, I’m acquainted with Anton. It was under my orders that he returned to his home country on business. But there must have been some misunderstanding. I’m shocked to hear that he’s under arrest.”

“Under Mr. Arakawa’s orders? I see. And what business brings you to this country today?”

Here’s the first hurdle. Clare said to “state your business in a roundabout way when you want to negotiate carefully” but to “cut to the chase when you want to achieve your goal quickly.” My main goal is to rescue Anton’s commanding officer. I don’t have time to waste. I’ll cut to the chase.

“I’d like you to hand over Anton and his former commanding officer, who’s in your custody.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know who you’re referring to,” the man said smoothly. “And suppose such a person were in our custody? I don’t see how that would be any concern of yours. Not even you should be interfering with our internal affairs.”

“Let’s not play games. I expect it would be a problem for you if foreign nations learned that you had me confined in this car?”

Yuri raised his eyebrows just a little when I suggested that I was currently “confined.”

That’s right, I thought firmly. I’ll decide whether this counts as confinement or not.

Now his options were limited. He could tell me, “No such person exists, and I’d like you to leave” before deporting me, but I could cause a lot of trouble later by declaring, “The Russians detained me!”

“Supposing such a person really were in our custody...” he said carefully. “This is a country based on rule of law. That person would have to be guilty of some crime. Are you suggesting that a criminal be handed over to you? To Noa?”

So he’s bringing Noa into it now. He must be wondering how far I’m willing to go. Or maybe he wants to know whether my mom is involved. I didn’t know what his intentions were, but I had to say something. *Think. What’s the diplomatic way to handle this?*

“Of course not,” I said. “But my understanding is that this person was arrested very recently. Could it have been the result of some sort of mistake or miscommunication? That sort of mistake can make it very difficult for someone to continue their current job, even if they’re later released and everything is cleared up. This is even more the case if they’re executed for a crime they didn’t commit in... say... nine hours from now. That’s why I’m here as a recruiter. I thought perhaps this person might want to join me.”

“Very well. Now I understand.”

“Indeed,” I said. “The job I had in mind is no ordinary job. I couldn’t possibly

offer such a post to someone without first asking permission from someone like the lieutenant colonel or Mr. Yuri Pamfilova first. And of course, I wouldn't attempt to headhunt someone of such exceptional skill without offering some form of compensation."

How's that? I watched the men carefully. Judging from the lieutenant colonel's reaction, he won't make any objection, but I'm worried about Yuri. He hasn't said anything.

We all remained silent for a while. During that silence, Ageha spoke to me using an earpiece connected to my terminal.

"Based on a spectral analysis from a satellite and the local environment, there is a 99.89% probability that the deposits you spoke of are present, Father."

All right! Let's take this discussion forward. I should ask Ageha whether there's anything I can do for her later. As a reward, maybe I should transfer her to a big terminal with more resources rather than keeping her crammed into the terminal I'm wearing?

"Lieutenant Colonel, perhaps you could determine whether this person truly is in custody, and whether they are truly guilty of any criminal behavior," I said.

"Very well," the man said. "I would normally refuse, but I can't deny a request from Mr. Arakawa himself. I'll investigate as quickly as I can, but this may take some time. Perhaps you'd join us for dinner in the meantime?"

"I'd love to," I said readily. "I'm ashamed to admit that I haven't eaten lunch because I was busy with work. I'd be happy to join you."

Although something about his words seemed odd. *What did he mean by, "I can't deny a request from Mr. Arakawa himself"? His attitude changed the moment I mentioned compensation. I'll bet they knew all about Anton's commanding officer all along, but were just playing dumb! I wish I could call them out on it, but the negotiation is going well, so it's too big of a risk.*

I sighed.

Now I know why Mom always looks so fierce after she's finished negotiating. I thought all the complicated talk was making her tired, but now I see that's not it. This sort of stuff is irritating. I remember Macho Man saying that after Clare

finishes a negotiation, she likes to shut herself up inside a training facility and give her subordinates hell. Yeah, I can see why now. This stuff is pretty stressful.

The lieutenant colonel spoke as the car headed toward the place we were going to eat dinner. "I'm sure you saw the state-of-the-art jets that our country used to ensure your safety. As a specialist, what did you think? Impressive, are they not?"

Those were state of the art...? I thought skeptically. *The fighter jets we have for flight training on Noa Island have way better maneuverability and offensive capabilities. Our jets remind me of UFOs from science fiction. Those Russian jets didn't even compare.*

"I don't consider myself a specialist, but they... they looked like manned craft," I said carefully. "Weren't you able to make them unmanned? If you can control them from the ground, it will be a lot less stressful for the pilot in a dangerous mission. And if the target justifies the cost, the jet itself could be flown into the target once its ammunition has been used up. Unlike powered suits, jets don't need such precise control. I think that's the real advantage of aircraft."

"Th-The jet itself?" he stuttered.

Don't act so surprised, I thought, exasperated. *Obviously, don't do it while there's a pilot on board. Just think of an unmanned craft as an expensive missile. Aircraft never fight against each other in this day and age. You have to use them to deliver missiles to get the most out of them.*

Almost all of Noa's fighter jets were already unmanned. And I expected that all powered suits would be unmanned within the next four or five years, except for a few high spec models used by commanding officers.

I once told Mom half-jokingly about the specs of a unit used by the protagonist in a robot anime from my past life, I reflected. *Now she seems serious about making it a reality. But building a unit like that isn't possible. Or at least, I hope it isn't possible. I can't imagine how we'd use an antimatter-powered unit capable of operating both in space and on the ground.*

I started to break into a sweat thinking about how my mom's efforts to develop new weapons were beginning to make her look like a mad scientist.

“We’ve reached our destination,” the lieutenant colonel said.

It was hard to tell through the tinted windows, but it looked like we were in an underground parking area. A number of civilian vehicles were parked nearby.

There were several middle-aged men standing around who had probably ridden in an escort vehicle. One of them opened the door to our car and guided us to the elevator.

All of the middle-aged men started to board the elevator with us.

The lieutenant colonel stopped them. “You needn’t accompany us further.”

Looks like they’ve decided to be less threatening in hopes of working out a better deal. It’s not a bad idea, but it’s a little late. I’m the type to hold a grudge. I secretly pondered how I’d get back at them.

I watched the lieutenant colonel press the button for floor 30. He explained, “We’re actually headed for a room on floor 83, but for security reasons, we can’t reach level 80 or above without passing through a security room on floor 30.”

I get it. It’s not just a safety precaution. It also makes it harder for me to leave.

The Hakone base used a similar system. You couldn’t reach the level where my mom worked without switching to a different elevator. It must have been inspired by the same thinking.

Sure enough, we changed elevators on floor 30 and then went up to floor 83. There we found a wide corridor with furnishings that reminded me of a fancy hotel.

“This is the place,” he told me. “A high-class suite has been prepared. I hope it will be to your liking.”

“I’m impressed that you’ve prepared all this for me after I arrived unannounced.” I could feel the softness of the carpet through my shoes, and it made the walk along the corridor quite enjoyable.

As we moved down the corridor, a beautiful female employee emerged from a room up ahead, pushing a trolley in front of her. The woman bowed politely and tried to pass by us, but as she moved the trolley toward the wall, it became

unbalanced and toppled over. The contents spilled across the floor, and Anton immediately ran over to help her pick them up.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m so sorry!” the woman said frantically, urging him to rise to his feet. “Please, leave me to clean this up. I’d hate for you to get your suit dirty on my account.”

Once Anton stood up, she brushed his jacket clean with her hand, but I realized what she was doing.

While the lieutenant colonel and Yuri were glaring at the clumsy employee, she turned her back to the two of them and slipped a small handgun into the pocket of Anton’s jacket, keeping her hands hidden from their view.

“I’m terribly sorry,” she told us.

Well, if she gave us a weapon when we’re unarmed, she must be on our side.

She finished clearing everything off the floor, then bowed once more and left. The woman had passed the weapon to Anton without either of them acting in any way unnatural or betraying anything through their facial expressions.

It feels like I’m in a spy movie. So this is what highly trained agents are capable of. I just hope my reaction didn’t give the game away.

We continued to the very end of the corridor. Then the lieutenant colonel stopped and opened the door to a room in front of us. “Please make yourself at home. If you’d like to take a seat, the food will be with you shortly.”

I went ahead and entered the room. We sat at the large table prepared for us. The lieutenant colonel sat down in front of me, and Yuri sat down in front of Anton.

I don’t want to sit here in silence until the food arrives, I thought. Maybe I should start a conversation myself.

I tried to think of something to talk about, but then the lieutenant colonel unexpectedly spoke while looking at his personal terminal. “Mr. Arakawa. I’m still investigating the matter, but it seems that the person you spoke of was arrested for their role in a mutiny. There appears to be no conclusive proof of

their guilt, so there is a possibility that they'll be released."

Yeah, yeah, I thought snidely. We both know what's going on here. If I make the right offer, you'll let her off the hook.

"I'm relieved to hear that," I said smoothly. "Personally, I don't think that the person I'm here to recruit is the sort to commit a crime."

Time to tell them what I'm offering, I decided. I can either offer him Noa broadcasting rights or the information that we got from Anton's old friend. But which one? I suppose the broadcasting rights is the safest choice.

I spoke up. "Supposing this person is indeed innocent and they accept my invitation..."

There was a knock at the door to inform us that our food had arrived. It was terrible timing.

The lieutenant colonel responded and rose to his feet. He unlocked the door and an employee entered.

A man dressed as a waiter carried food and cutlery to our table. He placed a knife in front of me that had some sort of dirt stuck to it.

No, not dirt. When I looked more closely, I saw writing on the knife so faint that only I would be able to read it: "18 SEEK ASYLUM."

This waiter isn't a real employee, either?! Something weird is going on here. Anton said he didn't have strong connections to his former colleague, and I don't think he lied. If an agent is captured by a foreign nation, it's all over for them, so having no strong ties is best for controlling information. And yet, that woman and the waiter in front of us are here to help us rescue his superior. Something unusual must have happened. Think. What could have happened to this country? Was there a coup? Is there some sort of power struggle?

My brain wasn't as powerful as my mom's, but I used every bit of brainpower I had to try to think of an explanation.

The lieutenant colonel smiled at Anton and me and urged us to eat. "Please, go ahead and start eating, Mr. Arakawa. You too, Probationary Second Lieutenant Anton. It must have been a long time since you last enjoyed the

cuisine of your homeland.”

So Anton was a probationary second lieutenant? I thought. I don't understand Russian military ranks. They sound needlessly complicated.

I thanked the lieutenant colonel and then cut into the trout on my plate so that the writing on my knife would be erased.

“Kouki!” Anton moved to stop me. “Let me eat first...”

No need to worry about that! I thought triumphantly. The terminal I'm wearing on my arm might be a basic model, but it's good enough to detect contaminants in the air, and it hasn't detected anything. I never thought this feature would be useful for anything other than those days when I'm shut up inside the lab!

“Anton, don't be so rude,” I scolded. “They've gone to a lot of trouble to prepare dinner for us. The lieutenant colonel has no reason to wish me harm.”

“But, Kouki...”

“I'm serious. It's fine. Look how good this food is.” As bad-mannered as it might be, I scooped up a large amount of the food and slowly placed it in my mouth before chewing and swallowing.

I just realized something! I thought gleefully. This is a great chance to get back at those men! I can't wait to see how the lieutenant colonel and Yuri react to this. I'm sure they'll be surprised.

“If there were an everyday poison mixed in with our food, we'd detect it quite easily,” I said calmly. “I expect they'd use polonium, but being a researcher, I'm likely to have prepared some countermeasure against that, so they're unlikely to try such a thing.”

“P-Polo...?” Anton didn't seem to understand what I was saying, but the lieutenant colonel was glaring daggers at him.

Even Yuri was looking concerned as he tapped his mouth with a napkin. It was the first time I'd gotten a reaction out of him.

I knew it. I grinned. A plot like the one I mentioned to Mom must have happened in this world, too.

I was relieved because it meant that I hadn't lied to her, and I was also glad to see I'd made both men uncomfortable.

"Lieutenant Colonel, I'd rather you didn't scowl at Anton like that," I scolded. "A mere lieutenant would have no knowledge of anything to do with polonium. I'm sure that such an operation would be handled by much higher-ranking people. To tell you the truth, I'm surprised that a lieutenant colonel even knows anything about it. You must have access to some fairly sensitive information."

"Ugh!! Yes, I'm an exceptional case. I have more authority than an ordinary lieutenant colonel..."

Seriously?! He must be really agitated if he's admitting that so easily. I was mostly bluffing just now. Judging by what he just said, his true rank is something higher than lieutenant colonel. I just wanted to put him in a bad mood, but now I've put myself in a better position. With the current mood, I should be able to take the lead if I go back to negotiating.

"Let's forget about this polonium business," I said coolly. "As I was saying... If the individual in question was found to be innocent and accepted my invitation, I was considering inviting all of their subordinates, not just the one individual."

"...All of them?"

"Yes." I nodded. "Naturally, I wouldn't take away such talented personnel without offering your nation something of equal value."

It wasn't what I'd originally intended, but the waiter was probably one of the captain's subordinates, and I wanted to save him, too. Mostly I felt that way because having someone ask me for help directly for the first time was satisfying, but that was my secret.

If things went well, we could be lucky enough to gain some highly skilled agents. I'd already seen what they were capable of. I could have just ignored them, but this was too good an opportunity to pass up.

"Indeed, it would be a great blow to our nation if we lost such a great number of talented individuals," the lieutenant colonel said. "We also need to consider that this creates a small chance of military secrets leaking out. But if you are able to provide us with information in return, there is the possibility of a special

exception being made.”

“If you’re able to take special measures in this case, I’d be most grateful.”

I stopped talking for a moment so I could try the ukha soup while it was still hot. Despite my expectations, it lacked the unpleasant smell that’s characteristic of seafood, and it was clear, beautifully colored, and delicious. Most importantly, it was rich with nourishing ingredients that my growing body needed.

As I was biting into a piece of fish from my soup, the lieutenant colonel stared at me with obvious impatience. It looked like he was just barely stopping himself from asking what I was going to offer them.

Relax a little. If my mom were sitting here right now, she wouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of you. I’m still thinking about it, so you’ll have to wait a little longer.

“What was it you intended to offer us in return?” the lieutenant colonel burst out.

I swallowed the fish and then moved on to my glass of water. *Now we start the real battle. I’ll have to be very careful what I say here.*

“71° 39' north latitude, 111° 11' east longitude....” I said smugly.

“I’m sorry?”

“There is a large area that can be mined for diamonds within your country’s territory. It’s located at 71° 39' north latitude, 111° 11' east longitude. I can’t give you any diamonds to inspect, but the diamonds you’ll find there are almost twice as hard as ordinary diamonds, and I expect they’ll be ideal as engineering materials.”

“Mr. Arakawa, you can’t possibly be claiming to know the location of undiscovered diamond deposits!” he exploded.

“The documents are on this memory chip. A few hours ago, a friend used a surveillance satellite to survey the area. A spectral analysis suggests that there’s a 99.89% probability of diamonds being present relatively close to the surface. It should be possible to extract them by open air mining.”

The lieutenant colonel grabbed the micro memory chip that I held out to him and hastily inserted it into his own terminal. Beside him, Yuri had lost every trace of his relaxed composure, and was leaning toward the lieutenant colonel to get a better look at his terminal.

The document they were looking at contained a basic survey of an area that was known as the Popigai crater in the world of my previous life. In that world, it was said to be the largest crater in Eurasia, but the impact appeared to have been smaller in this world. There was no massive crater, and its existence wasn't clear from satellite images. As a result, the area had never been surveyed, and the crater had never been discovered.

Just to be sure, I'd asked Ageha if there was some way she could survey the area. Her answer? "It's possible if it's okay for me to do something slightly illegal."

I'd given her the go-ahead. As predicted, she'd identified diamond deposits.

Given the strangeness of this world I'd been reincarnated into, I couldn't rule out the possibility that the diamonds had been "created" in order to make this world more consistent with other worlds despite no impact ever occurring.

I think I'll leave all that complicated theoretical stuff to my mom, I concluded.

Meanwhile, Yuri regained his composure surprisingly quickly. "Even if this information is accurate, we would have discovered this ourselves eventually because the deposits are in our own territory. We have little to gain by accepting this offer."

I know that. I've suddenly got a bunch of people asking me for asylum, and surveying another country's land without permission was the best option I had. I know I'm walking a fine line here.

My offer had only been intended to be enough to trade for two people, with a bonus of unsettling the country's top brass. Now it was time to make my real offer.

"You're right, of course. Think of that data as an appetizer. Now for the main course. What I'm offering are the rights to distribute Noa's TV broadcasts for free within Russian territory."

This time the lieutenant colonel and Yuri were left with their mouths wide open.

I picked up my glass with a broad smile on my face.

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The lieutenant colonel and Yuri told me they needed to speak to their superiors, then hastily fled the room. They probably didn't know how to respond to my offer because it wasn't something they'd expected me to give them.

I kept on eating because my stomach wasn't quite full. Anton, on the other hand, sat in silence, save for his heavy breathing.

The sound of knives against ceramic plates filled the room.

Did I make Anton angry? I wondered, and decided to talk to him.

"Isn't the food great, Anton? I wish we had green tea to go with it, rather than just water."

"I envy you, Kouki," he said slowly. "How can you be so relaxed at a time like this? I wish you'd take fewer risks. What would I tell Miki if anything happened to you?"

Oh. He's still angry because I ate without letting him taste my food for poison. I already told him how I knew it was safe. He needs lighten up a bit. I suppose it's a good time to ask him some questions.

I tapped my finger against my personal terminal, making sure he noticed. Then I opened up a chat window and sent an invitation to his terminal's address.

"Sorry, but this room might be bugged," I typed in. "This chat application was made by Noa's engineering department, so it's safe to use. There could also be cameras, so please scramble your terminal screen."

Anton joined me in the chat room. "What is it?" he wrote.

I wanted to ask him about things that had been bothering me. His responses would probably have a major influence on how the negotiations went after the lieutenant colonel returned.

I started with a simple question. “Was the woman dressed as a maid a friend of yours?”

Seeing my message, Anton knitted his brow and typed a brief response. “You noticed? You’re right. Her codename is Sasha.”

“What about the waiter who brought me the knife with a message written on it?” I typed.

“I don’t know. This is the first I’ve heard of that.”

So the maid we saw in the corridor is an agent on our side. That waiter must be a member of Chernobog, too. But why is he asking me to give them asylum?

“The waiter told me that 18 people are seeking asylum,” I wrote. “I think that’s why Sasha was here. Do you know anything about this? Even the most trivial detail could be useful.”

“It’s been three years since I left Chernobog,” he wrote. “I have no idea. I think someone from our intelligence department such as Miki or Clare might know something.”

As always, we can’t figure anything out without getting Mom involved. I sighed. I don’t normally mind asking her, but... she’s going to be angry at me for going to Russia without saying anything. And I can’t imagine how angry Clare must be after I left all that work with her. I can just picture her wearing those glasses that suit her so well, with a blank expression on her pretty face, asking me, “Are you ready to die?” I don’t think I’m ready to face that. And if I don’t want to face the wrath of Noa’s witches, I’ll have to get through this without relying on them.

But without them, there was no more I could do. It was a real dilemma, but I couldn’t just sit here wasting time. If I did that, I’d have to face Macho Man’s anger, too. I knew what he’d say if he was here: “A man doesn’t hesitate!! Don’t just sit there!!”

“There’s no way around it,” I said aloud. “I’ll ask Mom directly and see if she can give us information.”

Anton looked at me in surprise.

I know why he's looking at me like that. The connection status icon at the top left of my terminal screen disappeared the moment the lieutenant colonel left the room. It might have been a way to keep us isolated and to prevent us from obtaining more information, or perhaps it's standard procedure. But either way, it won't work on me.

"Kouki... I don't know if you've noticed, but we've been cut off from communicating with anyone outside this room," he said. "There must be some sort of electronic jamming."

"That's no problem," I replied. "This terminal is a next-generation quantum terminal made by Luin Corp. And Mom made her own modifications to it. It'll take more than some basic electronic jamming to affect it." I looked into the terminal's camera. "Right, Mom?"

If I'm right, Mom gave up on pursuing me the moment I left the Hakone base, and instead she's been using the terminal's microphone to pick up the noise around me in hope of learning something about my situation.

"When did you figure it out?" she asked. "And don't worry about the room being bugged. Your terminal has electronic countermeasures."

Yes!! I knew she'd be listening in.

Mom took control of my terminal, and the screen displayed the image of Noa's demon lord, Miki Arakawa. As expected, her expression was terrifying. I wished I'd been wrong about that.

"I know how overprotective you are," I answered. "I left for Russia, but you didn't try to contact me. I knew you had to be listening. Is... Is Clare okay?"

"An hour ago, she took one of Noa's large transport planes and set out to pick you up. She took a mid-air refueling craft with her, so I think she's waiting outside of Russian airspace until she receives contact. I can see you're worried, but I'd advise against avoiding her. She brought a hunting tranquilizer gun."

If you know I'm in danger, then can't you stop Clare somehow? I thought, alarmed. I'm not Macho Man. If I get hit with a tranquilizer dart, it'll kill me! At least I have Anton to use as a shield. Oh yeah, I still need to ask Mom whether

she knows anything about what's happening in Russia...

"I won't run from her," I said quickly. "More importantly, I need to know what's happening here in Russia. I'm sure you've heard the whole conversation."

"Sadly, I have no idea what's happening," she answered. "The Russians have been awfully quiet lately. Our intelligence department has been focusing on the United States and the EU."

Are you kidding? Well, that's disappointing. I know something has to be going on. If I just had some kind of hint...

"So what was your plan?" Mom asked.

"Plan?"

"I don't understand what you were thinking when you set off for Russia to negotiate, but I'm sure you had a good reason. If you'd just tell me what you're planning, I might be able to negotiate for you."

Should I feel bad for not having a good reason? I was just hyped up because Anton asked me for help, and I thought maybe I could create a new market for anime merchandise here in Russia. I didn't think this whole thing would be such a pain, but I'm the one who started the negotiation, so it's my responsibility to end it.

"You don't have to do that," I told her. "There's another little thing I want to do while I'm here, anyway, so I'll take responsibility for finishing things. Could you take in the people seeking asylum? You might need to make arrangements to extract them yourself in case things get difficult."

Mom sighed. "You're growing up so fast. All right. Leave it to me. But don't forget that a lot of people are concerned about your safety. If you ever feel like it's all a little much, there's no shame in asking for help."

"Thanks. I'll bear that in mind."

Mom looked a little sad as she disappeared from the screen and returned control of the terminal to me.

I can't live my whole life depending on my mom. I wish she wouldn't look so

sad about it. Maybe she'll feel better if I do something to show her how much I appreciate her when I get back.

With that decided, I went over the whole situation once more in my head.

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Yakov Tarkovsky's Point of View

I left Arakawa to his meal and relocated to a suite one floor below. Across the table sat Yuri Pamfilova, the director of the Foreign Intelligence Service.

The director hadn't spoken for some time. He looked shaken as he repeatedly drank from his bottle of water.

I couldn't stay quiet any longer. "Director, what will we do now?"

He stopped drinking his water and produced a cigar case from his pocket. He offered me a high-class cigar, and I thanked him, took one, and lit it.

Finally, the director spoke. "He really is a monster..." He spoke as if the words caused him pain.

I knew who he was referring to without having to ask. Kouki Arakawa, the boy eating the meal we'd prepared in the room above.

Not only does that boy who's no more than a freshman at a technology academy know highly classified secrets of our nation, he also knew the location of diamond deposits that we didn't know about ourselves. I can't help but fear that boy. I wonder if the director feels the same way.

"Do you know how he found out about the polonium incident?" the director asked me.

"I've no idea. All information about that incident was limited to paper documents to prevent leaks. Without infiltrating our underground vault, there's no way that Arakawa could have learned of it."

"And yet, he knew..."

He knew things that no one could possibly know. He didn't just put us in a difficult situation; that young boy has us both dancing to his tune.

Although I hadn't expected it to be easy to deal with Kouki Arakawa, somewhere deep down, I'd still thought of him as a mere child. I now deeply regretted underestimating him.

"It may well be that Arakawa knows all the details of the incident," the director said.

"It's not possible! Not even you or I knew of it until just this morning. He couldn't possibly..." My voice trailed off.

We're dealing with a monster. Even if he knows the details, he'll probably act calm and pretend he knows nothing. It was clear to me now that something had been wrong from the beginning. *A diamond mine and Noa broadcasting rights, just for the sake of Lieutenant Anton's former commanding officer? It's too much. Perhaps he's known everything from the start, and is waiting to hear us confess?*

Recent intelligence suggested that Kouki Arakawa's mental state had been greatly improved by ethics training.

"Perhaps this entire negotiation was intended to send a message," I suggested. "Something like, 'Tell me what you know and you won't be harmed'?"

"You may be right. When Alice Alford was abducted, he used his own connections to learn a little about her secret. A lieutenant colonel working for the UN reached this conclusion while planning Alford's rescue. Perhaps Arakawa learned enough to prove our involvement."

"That would put us in a very difficult position. Let's not forget that he wiped out an entire terrorist organization singlehandedly for Alice Alford's sake. No matter how much his sense of ethics has developed since then, he now has the strength of Noa behind him. He could have us all killed..."

The chilling fact was, we weren't just facing Arakawa himself. If the incident did come to light, the Russian Federation would have the entire world to answer to. Not only would we lose the influence that being a great nation gave us, there was a real danger that the Arakawa Family would pressure the UN to revoke our membership completely.

No, it's even more serious than that. The Russian Federation will be awakened, and there'll be major turmoil. Turmoil on that scale could lead us into...

"...World War 3..." I muttered.

"It seems you've reached the same conclusion," the director said. "Well? Do you see now why I'm sweating as I drink this water?"

"But would it really come to that?" I burst out. "We're talking about the survival of mankind being put at risk for the sake of just one girl."

"I don't think he'd need to go that far. He merely needs to set the world against Russia and Russia alone. They'll release all information related to Alice Alford, and then Arakawa will hold a press conference. 'I still love her,' he'll tell them. That's all it will take. Arakawa will play the gallant knight, vowing to protect the innocent maiden. Our role will be that of the evil empire. His recent efforts to take control of the media are clear to see. Perhaps that was all part of the plan."

Yes, it all makes sense. Noa's commercials have enough impact to trigger social phenomena. If they made a TV program that was critical of Russia while bolstering the Arakawa point of view, the whole world would side with Noa in an instant. The boy truly is a monster. How far into the future can he see? Can he predict all possible outcomes, no matter how unlikely?

"Here's what we'll do," the director said. "Provide Kouki Arakawa with all the information we have relating to the Alice Project. We also need to prove that we have zero affiliation with the cult known as New World. Head back to headquarters ASAP and gather the relevant documents."

"I'll leave immediately!"

I saluted the director before dashing out of the room and heading for the elevator. I had to return before Arakawa lost his patience and took action.

I seem to recall that he was incredibly fond of animals, I thought frantically. Perhaps we could give him a movie about caring for the Russian desman. They're rare creatures, and one of Russia's national treasures. It could at least keep him entertained for two or three hours.

While waiting for the elevator, I used my personal terminal to send a message to one of my people, instructing him to bring the video footage to us.

The elevator was taking a long time to ascend, so I jabbed the elevator call button a few more times.

Chapter 4: The Alice Project

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

After I finished talking to my mom, I spent about two hours thinking about the situation. At last, I realized that all I could do was wait to see how Russia reacted to my offer.

So I decided to sit quietly and watch their video about raising the Russian desman. I wasn't particularly interested in Russian desmans, but it was a good way to kill time.

It's not far off midnight, I noticed. "Anton, I'm getting tired. Do you think Yuri and the lieutenant colonel will be back today?"

"Don't know. But I think they'd have told us if they weren't coming back..."

Anton is as clueless as I am, I thought with regret. *I just want to sleep, but I don't want to be in bed when the lieutenant colonel returns.*

Unsure what to do, I made myself a makeshift lemon soda by going to the room's minibar and helping myself to lemon juice and carbonated water for cocktails.

Then there was a knock on the door.

Anton thrust a hand into his pocket and was understandably wary as the door opened.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," a familiar voice said.

The lieutenant colonel and Yuri entered. They looked different from before. The lieutenant colonel's uniform was creased and Yuri was looking tired with his tie loosened.

I didn't think my offer would cause them this much trouble. It looks like a good deal for Russia to me... An alarming thought crossed my mind. *Don't tell me that they've realized that all the money is in merchandising rights?*

I was secretly starting to worry as I looked at the lieutenant colonel. Then he cleared his throat and spoke in a hoarse voice.

“I’ll get straight to the point. Exactly how much were you already aware of when you made your proposal, Mr. Arakawa?”

Damn. They’ve got me. A political or financial adviser must have told them that broadcasting doesn’t bring in half as much money as selling merchandise. Not even my mom figured that out. I wonder how the Russians knew. There must be someone else in this world who understands how subculture works. Now what? I can’t risk playing dumb when there’s so much at stake. I’d better be honest with them, and then we can agree to split the profits between us.

“I had a good idea right from the start,” I said. “But a lot of it was speculation. I think this is worth discussing between us.”

“Thank God. I’ll explain everything from the start. Please allow me to finish before you form any conclusions. The truth is, I don’t work for an intelligence agency; I’m actually assigned to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Yuri Pamfilova isn’t from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; he’s the chief of the Foreign Intelligence Service.”

The Ministry of Internal Affairs? Why would the Ministry of Internal Affairs be involved? All we’re doing is deciding who gets the merchandising rights. A lieutenant colonel tasked with maintaining order within the country shouldn’t need to be here.

Anton looked as surprised as I was, so it didn’t seem as though some new department had been established within the Ministry of Internal Affairs without me knowing. I wasn’t sure what was going on.

“Let me begin by talking about the Alice Project,” the lieutenant colonel said. “That’s how it all began.”

There were several photographs of Alice in the paper document he handed to me. I turned the page and saw the words “Genetic Improvement Project” written in Russian.

This is the same document that Joseph gave me before I left for Russia. That must mean the document originated from the Russian Ministry of Internal

Affairs. It looks like the members of Chernobog are heavily involved in all of this.

I wanted to praise them for their courage. As I was looking through the document, there was a sound from my terminal informing me that someone was calling.

I apologized to the lieutenant colonel and then put in my earpiece. "Hello?"

"Kou, it's looks as though they're about to tell you about the Alice Project. Tell them you know everything already. That should throw them off guard. Then you can ask them about what New World and Dr. Sandra are planning."

That makes sense. Throw the other party off guard and then get new information out of them. It seems they haven't figured out that the related merchandise that goes with broadcasting rights is more important because it sells better... If they just want to talk about the Alice Project, this could be a good chance.

"Okay. Is there anything else?" I asked Mom.

"No, that's all," she replied. "But you're not safe there. You should leave as soon as possible."

"I understand, but this is something I have to do myself. I don't need help."

I didn't mean to sound so full of myself... but whatever.

Mom began to say something else, but I ended the call before she could.

With the call from my mom over, the room was silent except for the clinking sound of the ice melting in my lemon soda on the table.

We can't just sit here in silence. I cleared my throat and asked the lieutenant colonel to continue speaking.

"I'm sorry, please go on."

"Are you sure? Did Arakawa— Mrs. Arakawa have anything to say?"

"Don't worry about that. I'm dealing with this; my mom isn't involved."

I'm not one of those kids who hides behind his mom his whole life. At the very least, I have to finish what I start. Whatever it takes, I'll save Anton's former superior, provide asylum to the members of Chernobog, and get some

information about New World and Dr. Sandra. And while I'm at it, I'll create a new market for Noa here in Russia.

Time to get serious. I'll act like my mom when she's in a conference with military-mode Clare. And then we'll see who's best at negotiating!

With that mental image in my head, I adjusted my sitting posture, and smiled just like Mom did sometimes... the smile that Macho Man referred to as her "witch smile."

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Yakov Tarkovsky's Point of View

Arakawa's demeanor changed before my eyes. Instead of a smiling child, he now had the air of seasoned interrogator about him.

This boy scares me... I've never felt fear like this. It's as though I'm being choked by it. I felt as though I might scream if I weren't careful.

"I see," I said with difficulty. "In that case, I'll continue."

I explained the nature of the Alice Project.

"Attempts to make genetic improvements using nanomachines first started in 2051, and ended in success. We successfully induced artificial mutations in transposons — a form of moving gene — in the human genome and chromosomes. I'm sure a distinguished researcher like yourself is already aware, but the ultimate goal of the project was to produce mutations in a human. In other words, artificial evolution. However, the project was suspended for ethical reasons before becoming fruitful."

Arakawa silently drank from his glass while I explained this to him. It was probably basic information for a researcher such as Arakawa, but the next part was more of a problem...

"In 2055, a UN resolution formally prohibited experiments of this sort. However, our country continued to conduct these experiments in secret. Our ultimate goal was to create a soldier with a strengthened body, but the project ran into difficulties and was temporarily suspended. However, the intelligence agency learned that the Canadian government was conducting the same type of research. When we learned of their efforts, we contacted them, hoping that we might collaborate."

Arakawa interrupted me: "And then you formed an agreement where Russia would support the research financially while the Canadians would provide the research facility, the research staff, and the equipment. Right?" he asked with a smile.

I couldn't help letting out a small cry. *Again? But how?! How does he always know?!*

“I heard all that from a friend of mine,” Arakawa told me. “No, not Anton. Another friend already gave me the basic information. I don’t need the details of the Alice Project. As far as I’m concerned, that’s Russia’s problem; it has nothing to do with Noa. What I want to know is why Dr. Sandra is planning terror attacks against Alice, me, and Noa.”

Basic information? Are our country’s best kept secrets no big deal to him? I thought frantically. *In that case, I’m sure he knows that Sandra was my fiancée... There’s no use hiding it any longer.*

“Are you familiar with the theory of soul reincarnation?” I asked hesitantly.

“Yes. It’s a groundbreaking theory. I can’t prove it, but I’m sure the theory is correct.”

“Well... it’s quite personal, but I’d like to tell you everything. Sandra disappeared two years ago. At that time, she was my fiancée.”

It had all been because of a trivial argument between us.

On that day two years ago, I’d bought a science magazine that Sandra had asked me to pick up for her on the way home...

We were having dinner with a glass of vodka at the dining table like always. We assumed we would be eating dinner the same way tomorrow, too.

Unfortunately, Miki Arakawa was featured on the cover of the magazine I had with me, and I said something I shouldn’t have: “That genius, Arakawa, is on the cover this month.”

Sandra had just barely finished the Alice Project and devoted herself to her own research. “Arakawa again? I hate that woman. She’s so full of herself. She’s always bragging about her research!”

“Don’t be like that, Sandra,” I said. “Most of her research comes from her son, Kouki. She doesn’t do it all herself.”

“Kouki? Don’t mention that monster to me! Do you know how many hours I spent on that equation?!”

“I know. That equation was meant to launch your career as a legitimate

researcher. But he solved it first. It's a waste of time complaining about it."

"Well, I'm sorry for wasting your time! Why does this always happen to me...? I was so close to coming up with that equation, and then a little kid goes and derives the ideal solution first! It's like he knew... It's like... It's like my theory when I created the sisters..."

The look on her face was unforgettable. She suddenly leapt up out of her chair and ran to her room where she began frantically working at her terminal. Then her hands suddenly stopped moving and she turned to face me.

"I knew it! My theory was right! The boy stole my research! He can't have found it himself. His brain wasn't developed enough for him to have been capable of math."

"Calm down. What's gotten into you?"

"Look at this! It's the theory I constructed on soul reincarnation. Not only can souls move from the present to the future, they can also return to the present from the future. What if Kouki Arakawa is from the future? That would explain..."

"That's enough! You promised you'd stop talking about this. You're a legitimate researcher now. This baseless theory was why you—"

"It's not baseless! I found the equation! Parallel universes exist, and if I had the technology and the funding, I'd prove it! If I could just observe that particle, I could even travel back and forth between other worlds! That's what makes it possible for a soul to travel through time. Why does no one believe me? I'm not crazy!"

Sandra went on yelling and crying. Or maybe she was laughing.

Either way, the next day she had vanished, and I found her engagement ring on the dining table.

Perhaps she was insane like everyone said, but I would always believe the things she said were true.

"She... Dr. Sandra wasn't insane," I finished.

Arakawa spoke with his empty glass held in his hand. “Didn’t the information reach you? I was transported to another world during the incident at the Space Particle Research Institute.”

“You’re talking about the Arakawa particle?”

“That’s right. The world wanted to know the details of the incident, but everything was kept secret. I really did travel to another world and then back again. I even brought back physical evidence. It wasn’t just a dream.”

“That means... Sandra is...”

“Dr. Sandra is a true genius. My mother and I can’t compare. My achievements are just the results of coincidences. But Dr. Sandra solved the problem using nothing but her own intellect. In truth, she should go down in history as a great scientist.” Arakawa smiled sympathetically.

If Sandra had met this boy, what would have happened? I wondered. I’m sure she’d have gone back to her research with new enthusiasm. If only I’d believed in her with all my heart. Things might have gone differently.

I tried not to let my regrets overwhelm me as Arakawa adopted the air of an interrogator once more and began to speak.

**

Kouki Arakawa’s Point of View

“Lieutenant Colonel, you violated the pact by manufacturing and storing nuclear weapons, didn’t you?”

“...Yes.”

“And New World is secretly funded by Russia, isn’t it?”

“...Yes.”

“And they tried to have the members of Chernobog killed to prevent them from leaking information that might harm them, didn’t they?”

“...Yes.”

“And Dr. Sandra quit the research institute because her theories were

considered absurd and she felt that even you, the one person who'd believed in her, had given up on her. Correct?"

"...Yes."

"Do you still love Dr. Sandra?"

"Of course."

"Would you be willing to cooperate with me as long as it doesn't conflict with national interests?"

"I'll cooperate! Just, please, no more of this. I'm begging you."

"In that case, let's handle this in secret."

"What?" the lieutenant colonel asked, thrown for a loop.

It wasn't just the lieutenant colonel; even Yuri was wide-eyed in surprise at my suggestion.

Hey, even I realized that if this discussion was made public, it would be the end for both of them, quite literally. Keeping this secret meant that I could bring them over to my side and make them work for me while appearing to do them a favor.

If Dr. Sandra's New World posed a threat to Alice, I wanted to stop her plan completely. To do that, I'd need information.

The first thing to do was to get them to hand over Anton's former commanding officer and the members of Chernobog, and then I'd leave them here to act as Noa's eyes and ears in Russia, just like in the movies.

"If we're going to handle this in private, I'll need you to hand over Anton's former commanding officer and the members of Chernobog," I said. "In exchange, I'll give you free broadcasting rights, which should be very profitable for your country, and I'll also see to it that you're able to contact Noa directly when you're in need."

"It's an incredibly generous offer," the lieutenant colonel said. "Are you sure about this?"

"It's fine. I'm already thinking about ways to explain our support for your

country to other nations. I think it'll be several days before I can formalize anything on paper, but I expect you'll need time to discuss the matter with your superiors, so that works out well, I think."

"Very well. As a gesture of goodwill, Captain Yulia will be released this very second. I'll make sure the same arrangements are made for the other members of Chernobog as soon as possible."

Great. Next, I need to contact Clare and have her pick us up, and then I'll need to have Mom prepare the necessary documents. Maybe I should talk to Macho Man about Alice and Shingo's security arrangements while I'm at it? Oh, and I need to talk with Anton's former commanding officer, Captain Yulia. I'm not sure there's time for all of this. I could miss tomorrow's anime. Maybe I should contact Kon and ask her to record it for me.

While I was still thinking over my plans, I decided to use the terminal on my arm to ask Clare to pick us up. I selected Clare Dauntless from the list of registered addresses on my personal terminal and then hit the call button.

I'll bet she's sitting just outside Russian airspace seething with rage... I'd better have my excuses ready.

"Hello. This is Clare."

I heard Clare's voice before I was even finished coming up with my excuses. She'd picked up quicker than expected. She looked like she was in a terrible mood, but she also appeared to be worried about me.

Okay. All I have to do is act scared and apologize. That should at least stop her from tranquilizing me.

"Clare, sorry for making you worry," I said quickly. "I promise I'll never do anything like this again."

"Honestly... You're just like the commander. It's hard to stay angry when you apologize like that. I expect Miki will deal with you when you get back, so I'll give you a break."

That's a relief. Clare's anger is worse than Mom's. Clare has this way of calmly breaking your spirit. I can't handle that.

“But you, Anton!” she burst out. “That’s another story! Do you realize that your job is supposed to be protecting Kouki and the other children from assassination attempts? Why would you let Kouki follow you to somewhere so dangerous? Take your job more seriously! You’re not—”

“Clare, our Russian friends can hear what you’re saying,” I interrupted. “Please save this for later. I’d like you to pick us up. Can you travel to the air force base where I landed in Russia? I don’t think a fully armed Noa aircraft should land at a civilian airport.”

I looked over the lieutenant colonel, and he nodded.

I guess the Russians were worried about that, too, but didn’t want to say anything.

“Very well,” Clare responded. “I’ll enter Russian airspace immediately. I estimate that I’ll arrive in an hour and 20 minutes from now... Hm? Please wait one moment.”

On my terminal screen, I could see that Clare was listening to something from her earpiece.

Then the ordinary lighting inside the aircraft switched to dull red illumination.

What’s going on?

Anton moved closer and looked at my terminal screen with a frown.

“I’m sorry Kouki,” Clare said. “I won’t be able to reach the air force base.”

“Why not?”

“There’s not much time, so I’ll be brief. If anything is unclear, ask Anton about it later. I’m currently flying at an altitude of 13,000 meters, but I’ve been intercepted by an aircraft of unknown origin. It’s not responding to my transmissions or my IFF system. The unknown aircraft has launched air-to-air missiles. I’m taking evasive action, but I expect I’ll be shot down. Kouki, Anton, please find a way to escape Russian territory without my help. I don’t care how you do it, Anton, but protect Kouki and get him back to Noa headquarters at the Hakone base. Clare out.”

What just happened? The transport plane that Clare is flying in just got

attacked? But why? Russia already agreed to everything. There's no way they'd attack us now... That means...

“Anton! This room isn’t—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Anton grabbed me in his strong arms and shoved me securely behind his back. I knew I could always trust Anton to keep me safe, but I wondered whether the small pistol he was carrying would be enough.

Anton pointed the gun at the lieutenant colonel and we heard a click as he disengaged the weapon’s safety. “I’m sure you heard the discussion. The aircraft that was going to pick us up was attacked. I know there’s no reason for you to attack us, but I’m not taking any chances here. Is the Russian government involved?”

“Calm down, Lieutenant,” the lieutenant colonel said quickly. “The government just barely gave us orders to protect Arakawa and ensure he returns to Japan safely. This has nothing to do with us. It’s probably an attack by New World.”

I knew it... I thought. If it's not a Russian attack, that just leaves New World. But how far have New World's people infiltrated? Only high-ranking government officials should know that I'm here. And what's their goal? I don't know whether they want to kill me or get information. I suppose the most important thing is to get out of this room and find somewhere safe before—

All the lights in the room suddenly went out.

“Anton, is this a power cut?” I asked.

“Not likely. A building of this size is bound to have a backup generator. Someone shut off the lights deliberately. Stay away from the windows, Kouki. Even if the curtains are closed, snipers are still a danger. Lieutenant Colonel! What defensive capabilities does this hotel have?”

“There’s a special forces unit belonging to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the security room on floor 30. There are also five powered suits stationed in the basement and at the front entrance. I don’t think the invaders can break in easily.”

The lieutenant colonel's response made it sound as though we should hold out here and wait for rescue to come, but the lack of any kind of response from my personal terminal made me less sure. No matter what button I pressed, the screen remained black, and I couldn't hear any of the faint sounds that normally came from the device while it was on standby. The only explanation was that it'd completely stopped working.

As my eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness, I realized that I couldn't see the green power LED on Anton's terminal, or the one on the lieutenant colonel's. I concluded that those had also stopped working.

"We're in trouble, Anton," I said. "The firearms held by the special forces unit downstairs and the powered suits have probably stopped working."

"What?!"

"My terminal isn't functioning, even though Mom worked her magic on it. Your terminal and the lieutenant colonel's terminals have also stopped. My terminal has built-in protection against ECM. It takes more than some simple jamming to disable it. That means this must be an EMP attack. The personal identification devices that soldiers have to wear to be able to use their weapons may have been destroyed, too. It's likely that the powered suits were disabled in the same way."

Noa had introduced equipment to protect against EMPs based on a suggestion from Macho Man, a suggestion so expensive that Mom had been almost reluctant to allow it.

If EMP protection was almost too expensive for the world's greatest private military with state-of-the-art equipment, then it was a certainty that any Russian forces providing security in a nation that was nowhere near as advanced wouldn't have such equipment.

That meant we'd have to escape with, nothing to rely on, other than a small automatic handgun no different from those used almost 200 years ago.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Escape by yourself, Kouki," Anton said. "You speak Russian, so you don't need me to accompany you. Listen, once you're out of the hotel, get yourself to

the apartment at the address written on this piece of paper. You'll find some friends of mine who can provide you with a false passport and enough money. Then you can—"

"W-Wait a minute! I can't do it alone! And what'll happen to you?"

"Kouki! There's no time. Shut up and listen. You can take a train across the Finnish border. Avoid heading east at all costs. Finland is in the opposite direction. Make sure you buy your tickets in cash; you'll be captured immediately if you use a credit card. Once in Finland, head for this second address. It's a Noa safe house. You can count on them. Do you understand? Take the gun with you. Now go."

Anton put the gun in my hand.

It felt heavy and oversized. I tucked it into my belt and hid it under my jacket.

Anton placed his hand on my head. "It'll be fine," he said in a soothing voice. "Back on Noa Island, you trained in shooting and urban warfare. You don't have to fight back this time. Just keep running. It should be a breeze."

"Okay," I said reluctantly. "But how am I going to get out of this hotel?"

Don't tell me I'm going to be escaping through a garbage chute. We're on the 83rd floor. I'll die before getting anywhere.

The lieutenant colonel moved over to me and said, "There's a large river flowing behind this hotel. It's 15 meters deep, and an immobile powered suit should be enough to absorb the impact. Use the emergency powered suit on this floor. Equip it manually and jump into the lake. It's an Arakawa-type, so you can purge parts by igniting the explosives. The ignition mechanism doesn't use any semiconductors, so it should be usable even after an EMP attack. I'll help you get into the suit."

The lieutenant colonel guided me as we carefully opened the door and moved out into the corridor. Then the lieutenant colonel pulled a lever hidden behind one of the paintings that were decorating the walls.

The lever must have been based on an old-style mechanism that was known for being reliable. It worked, and a powered suit stored in the wall was revealed.

“This is a Russian Military Fifth-Generation Mirage,” the lieutenant colonel said. “I would activate it for you if I could, but unfortunately that’s not possible. I hope someday I’ll have the opportunity to impress you with the performance of the activated suit.” Then he laughed at his joke in spite of the situation.

With an activated Mirage powered suit, I would have been well-armored and relatively well-protected from enemy attack. If only we could have activated it.

The lieutenant colonel used a specialty tool stored beside the powered suit to forcefully open its cockpit. Yuri and Anton helped me climb inside and fastened the seat belt around me. Then I put on the helmet with the inbuilt HUD that I wouldn’t be able to use. I gave a thumbs-up to indicate that I was ready, and then the cockpit was slowly closed from the outside.

“Mr. Arakawa, after a ten second countdown, you will be launched out of the hotel,” the lieutenant colonel warned me. “You’ll probably land in the water on your back. Brace yourself for the impact! It pains me to say so, but I don’t know the extent to which my country is cooperating with New World. Please consider every public institution to be an enemy in hiding. I know that the lieutenant has said this already, but please find some way to escape. Be safe.”

“Understood! Lieutenant Colonel, Yuri, Anton, please surrender without doing anything stupid.”

“Initiating countdown! 10... 9... 8... 7...”

“Are you listening to me?! Promise you’ll surrender!”

“3... 2... 1... launching!”

There was no response to my question, just the sound of the explosion that launched the suit. In an instant, I felt like I was floating, and then I felt the powered suit violently accelerate toward the ground, back first.

Honestly, I was scared and close to crying, but my biggest concerns were for Anton, Clare, and everyone else.

I’ll rescue all of you, no matter what. Stay safe until then...

I safely crashed into the river. I felt the intense shock of the collision, and then the powered suit sank into the water.

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

The central headquarters of the Hakone base was alive with activity. Clare Dauntless was commanding a team searching for the twenty-five people who'd been aboard the downed XC-03 transport plane, as well as the team searching for Kouki in Russia, and the teams were hard at work.

It had been 18 hours since the attack on the hotel by the terrorist organization New World, and we were still unable to determine the whereabouts of Kouki and his bodyguard, Lieutenant Anton Bortkiewicz.

I expected the lieutenant to have somehow helped Kouki escape the hotel alone, telling him to head for the Finnish border. But Kouki certainly hadn't reached the Finnish Noa safehouse, nor was there any sign of him in Finland.

"We're out of options..." I muttered to myself as I sat in the commander's chair.

If Kouki had been captured by New World, they would have made some sort of statement to Noa. We've heard nothing for 18 hours, so Kouki must have found a place to hide... or he's already dead. With there being no new information, I was beginning to fear the worst.

Shuuichi was sitting beside me. "Miki, based on reports from the Russian force surrounding the Rivage Hotel, we've been able to determine what weapons the enemy are using."

"Tell me everything we know," I said immediately. "If we're going to dispatch one of our own units, we need to know what sort of equipment the enemy has."

"They're using a new type of powered suit that appears to be a sixth-generation model, but it's a model we've never seen before. Their infantry has optical camouflage and reinforced exoskeletons. They also have V/STOL assault aircraft very similar to ours. And they're likely to be carrying directional EMP weapons."

"That can't be right!" I exclaimed.

I didn't mean to suggest that I doubted my husband's word, but if they had an unknown model of powered suit, that meant they'd developed it themselves. It

also meant that they'd produced enough of them to be able to provide a suit like that to their soldiers.

Noa had made prototypes of directional EMP weapons, but we weren't ready to use them in actual combat. If everything Shuuichi was saying was true, New World was on the same level as Noa in terms of technology and funding.

My adjutant, Elise, interrupted my thoughts. "Miki, President Shumsky is on the hotline," she said without changing her expression.

The wellbeing of Elise's younger sister Clare was in doubt, and that had to be taking some emotional toll on her. I'd suggested a while ago that she take a break, but Elise had declined and remained here to continue carrying out her duties, confident that we'd find her sister safe and well.

"Please display him on my screen," I said.

The tired-looking face of an aging gentleman appeared on the terminal on my desk. I hadn't been summoned by the United Nations for a while, so I'd had no other opportunities to speak with him directly, but I had no doubt the man I was looking at was President Shumsky himself.

"Long time no see, ma'am," he said.

"A long time indeed, Mr. President."

The last 18 hours had to have been pure hell for the president. He'd been the recipient of an endless stream of requests to ensure Kouki's safety and to open an inquiry to investigate possible transgressions against the Arakawa Pact. Meanwhile, the terrorist attacks in his capital city were still ongoing.

Whatever happens, his political career is finished. I'm sure he'll announce his resignation as soon as this is all over.

"Knowing that your son was caught up in a terrorist attack during his sightseeing here in Russia causes me great shame," he said. "We have the hotel completely surrounded and we're doing all we can to suppress this terrorist group and ensure the safety of their hostages. At the same time, we've started an operation to eradicate this terrorist group by targeting their very core. Rest assured—"

“The time for talk has passed,” I interrupted. “We want to see results. I want assurance that Kouki is safe, and the crew serving under Clare Dauntless must be located. The EU, the US Marine Corps, the Russian Pacific Fleet, and the UN Standing Army’s 6th Division have already been ordered to DEFCON 2 on the basis of the Arakawa Pact. I’m sure you’re aware that I have the authority to make any final decisions relating to military actions performed on the basis of the Arakawa Pact. If your nation fails to demonstrate its commitment, I may be forced to make a difficult decision.”

“Ma’am... Mrs. Arakawa, I assure you, we’re doing everything in our power. Our navy is headed to the area where your aircraft was shot down and they’ll be able to give us more information within the next few hours. However, there’s no possible way for us to determine the whereabouts of your son. You’re quite sure he’s made no attempt to contact you?”

“He has not. You said there’s no possible way, but I wonder whether you’ve checked all surveillance camera footage in the city?”

“Of course,” he assured me. “We determined that he escaped from the hotel by dropping into a river while in a powered suit. From there he walked to an alleyway 150 meters away where we lost track of him.”

Impossible. I know Kouki is smart, but he isn’t a soldier trained to break through enemy lines. Nor is he a spy who knows how to disappear or erase his tracks. The one thing keeping him safe was his personal terminal, and without it, he’s nothing more than a powerless 15-year-old boy. So what happened to him?

“Sorry to interrupt your conversation,” Elise broke in, “but the chief of the UN’s Transnational Organized Crime Organization wishes to speak with you. She says it’s urgent.”

“I’ll answer right away,” I said. “Mr. President, please contact me if there are any developments. For now, I’m instructing other nations not to engage in any military action. Personally, I fear that an extraction operation could lead to a major war, and that’s something I’d like to avoid.”

“Indeed. I’ll ensure we continue to do everything we can.”

The screen went dark for a moment as I ended the call, and then there appeared a red-haired woman in a United Nations uniform.

The woman on the screen placed some documents on the table in front of her and greeted me nervously. “P-Pleased to meet you. My name is Stabinger. I’m part of the Illegal Arms Trade Prevention Team of the Transnational Organized Crime Division.”

“Miki Arakawa. I’m told there’s urgent news?”

“Y-Yes. Recently, we’ve been tracking money to an arms dealer, Vladimir Stolyarov, in Russia. We gather information about his customers as evidence to present to the international court. Something happened an hour ago while we were doing this tracking. We noticed a trade made for an incredible sum of money. We searched through customer data for the credit card number and found that it belonged to the bank account of Kouki Arakawa.”

“Kouki’s account is with the international bank,” I said. “For him to transfer anything above a million dollars at once would require physical authentication. If he were kidnapped or being threatened, the authentication would show it, because his pulse and blood pressure would be abnormal. So at the very least, this means he was able to transfer money by his own free will an hour ago.”

“Exactly,” she confirmed. “S-So we hacked Stolyarov’s terminal and learned what weapons Kouki purchased. Should we send the data to you?”

“Please send it immediately! Did you say your name was Stabinger? It’ll take a day or two, but I’ll send the UN a formal letter from myself and Noa expressing my gratitude for the cooperation we’ve received.”

“Oh. Th-Thank you.”

With that, we ended the call.

This is good news... It’s the best possible news. I still don’t know what’s going on, but at least I know he’s safe. I don’t know how he did it, but he must have found some way to hide himself. I just wish I knew why he was buying from an arms dealer. If he just needs a weapon to keep himself safe, he could have just paid a dealer in cash to get whatever he needed.

As I puzzled over it, a document from Stabinger arrived on my terminal. Shuuichi appeared to have received the same document. He opened the file immediately and began reading through it with great interest, but his curiosity

soon turned to alarm.

“That idiot!” Shuuichi yelled. “Is he going to fight them on the streets?! Miki, this is bad. Kouki has bought some old-fashioned counter-EMP gear. And he’s bought enough anti-tank guns without guidance systems for a whole platoon. What’s this...? He bought howitzer charges but no howitzer? Those must be for IEDs! He must be planning guerrilla warfare using improvised explosives!”

I brought up the document on my own terminal screen.

It was a list that included enough equipment to support urban combat for a short time: 30 old-fashioned automatic rifles and five light machine guns that had once been used by the Russian army, a personnel carrier designed over 100 years ago for use in a nuclear war, an attack helicopter that used vacuum tubes in place of semiconductor chips, anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, a backpack flamethrower that used gel-state gasoline, howitzer shells, combat helmets that fell out of use a long time ago because of reinforced exoskeletons...

Anyone currently involved in modern military exercises would probably laugh and call it a list of antiques.

“Shuuichi, would it be possible to destroy a powered suit using the equipment in this list?” I asked with trepidation.

“No, but some of those weapons are enough to stop a powered suit from moving. A flamethrower aimed into an exhaust could activate a powered suit’s limiter by causing it to overheat. Or if an anti-tank land mine were covered with projectiles, it could destroy some of the weaker joint parts. Kouki wouldn’t have come up with these ideas on his own. Only someone with experience of drawn out unconventional warfare would think of something like this. I’d hate to have to fight against someone putting those methods into practice.”

A platoon with experience in drawn-out unconventional warfare who’d be willing to side with Kouki in Russia right now... I can only think of one answer: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Intelligence Bureau External Special Forces Unit — Chernobog.

Within Chernobog, there was a unit whose existence even Clare hadn’t been able to verify. Even Lieutenant Anton hadn’t provided us with the information. The Chernobog unit known for being the most powerful when it came to

localized warfare was Serp. The word meant “scythe” in Russian, and nothing could be more reassuring than knowing that they were on our side.

It's obvious now what Noa needs to do. Chances are that Kouki is giving those weapons to Serp, and Serp will use guerrilla warfare to hold out until reinforcements arrive. We need to find out where he made that trade as soon as possible.

“Miki!” Elise called. “We’re receiving a transmission from Kouki. It’s on an unencrypted channel.”

“Transfer him to an encrypted channel immediately!”

“H-He said that wasn’t necessary. He just wants to talk to you.”

What's wrong with him?! Using an unencrypted channel will give away his location to New World. Why hasn't he encrypted his communications? I fought to control my anxiety as I looked at the image that appeared on the terminal screen.

Kouki appeared, looking a little tired.

For a moment I felt relieved, but I began to worry again when I saw the people standing around him.

The personnel around me were looking at the image on the main screen, and they probably felt exactly the same way.

“Kouki! I’m glad you’re safe,” I said quickly. “Who are those armed people you’re with? Please tell me they aren’t New World.”

“They’re not. But I can see how you’d think so. The balaclavas they’re wearing almost make them look like an old-fashioned terrorist group.”

Almost? They look exactly like terrorists!

They were all wearing old-fashioned camouflage gear, helmets, and balaclavas with automatic rifles worn around their shoulders. They looked just like anti-government guerrillas I’d seen in photographs from the early 2000s.

Does that mean Kouki is their hostage?

“These people used to fight alongside Anton as part of Chernobog’s combat

unit,” Kouki said. “Well, some of them are part of the espionage unit. They’re cooperating with me, and we’ve set up camp here in Old Moscow.”

“Kou! Stop! You’re transmitting over a standard, unencrypted channel. Don’t you realize that New World could be listening to our entire conversation?!”

“I don’t mind. In fact, that’s exactly what I want. Go ahead, Captain Yulia.”

The soldier standing beside him, who was apparently female, brought up a map on a screen and pointed to a specific location on the map with her finger.

Kouki suddenly looked a lot less friendly.

I’ve seen him make that face before... It’s exactly how he looked when we were making plans on the megafloat after Alice’s abduction. It’s the face Kouki makes when he’s set his mind to something.

“To Dr. Sandra Zelenskaya, the leader of New World. I’m sure you’re listening. I imagine you must have felt quite frustrated when I escaped from the hotel? Well, I thought I’d give you another chance. I’m right here in Old Moscow. I don’t know whether you’re planning to capture me or kill me, but whatever you’re planning, you know where to find me.

“I don’t want to waste too much time on a researcher stupid enough to believe in occult notions such as reincarnation and the soul. That’s why I’m going to wait here and let you come to me. In exchange, I’d like you to bring Anton Bortkiewicz, Yakov Tarkovsky, and Yuri Pamfilova with you. If they’re already dead, there’s nothing to discuss. I’ll change location immediately. However, if they are still living, release them near Bechet Lake in the old city.

“The time from their release until I manage to move to a new location is the time I’m giving you to capture me. Reply within the next two hours. I’ll leave it to you to decide how exactly you get your message to me. I know you’re not the smartest woman around, but I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

Having finished his arrogant speech, Kouki abruptly cut off the transmission as if there were nothing more to say. Clearly, he had contacted us simply as a means of making a statement to New World.

For a short while, I sat staring dumbfounded at the blank screen, but then I came to my senses and began to give out orders.

Kouki's arrogant attitude was obviously part of some sort of plan. What we needed to do now was use the full might of Noa to learn every last detail of the area where Kouki was located so we'd be ready to send in reinforcements. I also needed to coordinate the signatories of the Arakawa Pact, and I needed to ask the Russians for their cooperation, too.

Once again, my son had gotten himself into trouble, but I had faith that he'd find some way to bring about the best possible outcome like he always did. Meanwhile, I had work to do.

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Kouki Arakawa's Point of View — 18 Hours Earlier

Despite not being made by Noa, and despite not even being turned on, the military-use powered suit was more than enough to absorb the impact of my landing.

After the impact, I couldn't hear anything going on around me. I knew I'd successfully been launched into the river from the 83rd floor, but that was it.

The problem is what to do now. Is the gun I was given safe in my belt? After leaving the suit, I'll need to shake the water out of it, but it's Russian-made, so it should still shoot. I'll be in trouble if it won't shoot. Then I'll need to remember everything Macho Man taught me about how to flee an enemy within a city.

"Let me think... I can't carelessly fire a weapon in crowded civilian areas," I murmured. "Just drawing a weapon will cause a panic, and that panic will attract the attention of my pursuers. I also need to make sure I don't act suspicious. My pursuers will be looking out for people acting strangely."

This is fine. I know I can escape. And if I don't call for an extraction team from somewhere safe, Anton and I could both die. All right, here goes.

Having mentally prepared myself, I used the suit's emergency purge system, causing a hatch to be vigorously blown off the suit. The suit immediately began to fill with water.

Even though it was August, the water was still cold. I had no choice but to endure it as I held my breath and waited for the force of water flowing in to

subside so I could exit the suit.

Looking up, I could see the lights of Moscow shining on the surface of the water.

According to the lieutenant colonel, the water was 15 meters deep, so I didn't think I'd have trouble holding my breath long enough to reach the surface. I kicked my legs and struggled toward the surface, but my clothes were wet and heavy.

At length, I broke through the surface. Barely able to keep my head above water, I swam as far as a waterway that connected to the river and grabbed onto a ladder that went up to the shore.

"I thought I was going to die," I said, gasping for air. "No way am I ever doing that again."

The water that had entered my nose was still stinging as I climbed the ladder up to a footpath where I found a woman in her 50s watching me with suspicion.

I smiled awkwardly and tried to explain myself.

"I got drunk and fell into the river," I told her in Russian, taking care not to speak with an accent. "The water's so cold at night."

She was still watching me in surprise. "I heard a loud noise that sounded like something falling into the river and came out to take a look." She spoke to me like a mother scolding a child. "You know that falling into the river while drunk could kill you? And you're just a boy. You should be at home in bed."

I apologized to her, then waved goodbye and walked away. Ahead of me stood the city of Moscow under the night sky.

When I last checked the time, it was just after 1 AM. I guess it's around 2 AM now? It should be easy to move through Moscow while it's dark and there's no one around. I'll get to the address Anton gave me, pick up some money and clean clothes, and then I'll board a taxi from an area where there are a lot of people around. The next step will be to get to a train station and buy a ticket in cash...

I went over everything in my head as I stood waiting for a crosswalk signal to

change to green. While I waited, I noticed a man stop beside me, using his personal terminal. When the signal turned green, we both began to walk across the road.

“Keep looking straight ahead,” the man murmured, as if talking to himself. “Turn left when you’re across the road. From there, keep going straight for 20 meters and then turn right. Go straight and then into the third alleyway on the right.”

He then quickened his pace and reached the other side ahead of me before turning right and hurrying off.

Was he a friend? I wondered. *If he was with New World, I suppose he would have grabbed me.*

There was no way to know whether this was one of Anton’s former colleagues. I remembered that Macho Man had once said something about the value of having the locals on your side. I didn’t have any other options, so I decided to take the risk and do as he’d said.

I turned left, walked for 20 meters, and then turned right. His directions were taking me to a part of town that I’d go so far as to call a slum. The whole area felt full of danger.

“Maybe this was a bad idea...” I muttered.

I tried not to let my anxiety show as I continued to walk forward up until the third alleyway on the right.

In the alleyway stood several provocatively dressed women. One of them was smoking a cigarette and leaning against a door. She noticed me and opened the door she was leaning on, then made a gesture with her head to invite me to enter.

As if pulled in by her gesture, I walked into the building without saying a word, and the woman entered after me.

“The boss is waiting in the room at the end of the hall,” she said. “What’d you do? Is someone out to get you?”

“I’ve upset the world’s most dangerous terrorist organization.”

“Was that meant to sound cool? Sounds dumb to me.”

She smoked the cigarette down to the filter and stubbed it out against the wall as we walked down the corridor.

Once we reached the end of the corridor, the door opened as if in response to our voices. A man as bald as Anton stepped out and handed a wad of cash to the woman.

“Good work, Svetlana,” he told her. “You can call it a day. Forget what you saw here. You’ll be safer that way.”

As Svetlana left us, he turned to me and grinned. “You’re looking a little wet. We’ll prepare clean clothes for you right away. I’m sure you’d prefer to change before speaking with the boss. This way, please, sir.”

They’re clearly on my side. I doubt this guy talks to everyone so politely. His smile looks so awkward.

I had to stop myself from laughing as I thanked him and accepted his offer.

**

Captain Yulia’s Point of View

“Captain, Arakawa has arrived. He’s currently changing his clothes in another room.”

So he’s here? It’s only been 26 minutes since he escaped the hotel. That’s not too shabby.

I looked up at the man. “What state is he in? Injured and full of adrenaline, I bet.”

“Not at all. He seems quite composed. In fact, he was relaxed enough to laugh at my appearance. I think he must have already guessed what sort of group we are.”

So the rumors were true. He’s 15 at most... or perhaps 16 if he had a birthday recently. A boy that young just barely escapes from terrorists, and then he’s calm again after just half an hour? It’s no wonder they call him a monster.

We were ready to take him with us to Japan immediately. We would request asylum once we arrived. If we handed Arakawa over, there'd be no objection from the Japanese government, and Miki wouldn't use her political influence against us.

"Is the plane ready to fly us out of here?" I asked.

"It's waiting in a secret airport at the city outskirts. It's ready to take off the moment we arrive. There are also aircraft ready to escort us as far as Japanese air territory... but..."

"But what?"

"Are you sure you want us to bomb Moscow's radar station before we take off? Those are our allies operating that radar system. I don't—"

"We're not betraying our country; our country betrayed us. They tried to have us killed over false charges! Consider it payback."

I knew that we'd be killing some of our own soldiers. But there was no other way to escape from New World now that they'd found their way into the highest ranks of the Russian government.

Besides, it was undeniable that our country had been ready to kill us to ensure Russia's survival. They had no right to complain if we sacrificed the nation for the sake of our own survival.

As I sat there thinking to myself and chewing on the end of the cigarette in my mouth, there was a knock at the door and Arakawa entered the room.

"You wanted to speak with me?"

Arakawa stood there dressed in a black suit that had been prepared for him at the last minute. There was a leather holster hanging from his waist that one of my men must have given him. Judging from the way the grip looked, he had one of the small pistols that we used while working undercover. It seemed he'd already made contact with one of our members before arriving.

"Well done making it this far," I said. "Do you know who we are?"

"You're Anton's former colleagues... Chernobog. Which would make you Captain Yulia."

He knows I'm a woman despite the way I look?

My hair was long, but my body could hardly be described as “human.” Yet he didn’t look surprised at all.

The side effects of the Reinforced Soldier Project had left me with just 18% of my original body remaining. The rest of my body was machine parts made from iron and oil.

“I don’t scare you?” I asked.

“Not really. Well, I was a little surprised.”

“All right, then, I’ll tell you our itinerary. A car’s coming to pick us up in 15 minutes. The car will take us to an airport on the outskirts of the city where we’ll board a plane. After flying to Hokkaido, we’ll force a landing at Wakkanai Port. Obviously, the Japanese self-defense forces are going to be on high alert, but we’ll be able to negotiate asylum for ourselves by handing you over to them. To put it bluntly, you’re our hostage. Don’t hold it against us.”

“How many of you are seeking asylum?” he asked.

“Fourteen.”

Arakawa tilted his head as if puzzled by my answer.

Whatever he’s thinking about, it doesn’t matter. We need to get moving.
Before I could tell him that there’d be no further questions and no changes to the plan, he opened his mouth to speak.

“That’s weird. That’s not the number I heard. I met one of your people in the hotel. He was disguised as a waiter and he told me that eighteen members were seeking asylum. Now it’s just fourteen? Did you suffer casualties?”



So he really did make contact with another Chernobog squad at the hotel. That explains how he got the gun. Looks as though our other squad is isolated and couldn't contact us.

We could have visited our usual rendezvous points to pick my subordinates who were still in the city, but I knew if we didn't keep our heads down, there was a chance we'd be arrested once again. We had a rule: those with the greatest chance of escaping take priority. As much as I hated to leave anyone behind, it was the best option in this situation.

Once we're safe, maybe we can come back for the others.

"He was with another squad," I explained. "Sadly, I don't have time to round up every last member of Chernobog in hiding."

"Well, that's awkward," he said. "I promised I'd save everyone I could, Anton and the lieutenant colonel included. I didn't even want to leave Anton behind in the hotel."

"This is just how it is. I have a duty to save what subordinates I can and get them to Japan. If you want to save Anton and the others, wait until you're back in Japan with the force of Noa behind you."

"You may be right. But I can't help but notice that your body is built more for combat than espionage..."

"Yes, we're a secret combat unit known as Serp. On paper, this is an espionage unit, but in reality, we specialize in combat. But you've asked enough questions already. If you won't cooperate, we can just restrain you. You'd better come quietly."

I was growing tired of this, so I moved toward Arakawa intending to grab him by the arm, but he drew the weapon at his waist with alarming speed. He immediately chambered a round and put his finger on the trigger ready to fire.

Besides a few people with unusual occupations, people from Japan shouldn't have the opportunity to use firearms. Noa must have given him self-defense training. Regardless, I doubt an amateur could hit anything with that little pistol. At this distance, I can get near him before he has a chance to aim. Children who don't know how to behave need to be punished.

Before I could find the right timing, Arakawa went into motion. I started to rush toward him, but then I screeched to a halt.

I didn't know what he was thinking, but Arakawa stood there smiling with the gun pointed at his own head.

"Don't be stupid!" I couldn't help but cry out. "You got that gun from one of my people. It's not carrying blanks!"

"I figured this would stop you. If you try to restrain me, my finger might put a little too much force on the trigger, and then I'll end up blowing my brains out."

Has he lost his mind? No, he looks calm. I can't take any chances here.

"Captain, just give me ten minutes to explain myself," he said. "If you don't like what I have to say, that's fine. I'll go with you and board that plane."

"All right. Just lower the gun. If someone makes a loud noise, you might jump and blow your brains out."

"Okay. But don't come charging at me when I lower it. I'm a lot more frail than you'd guess. If you knock me down with that body of yours, I'll look like tomato ketchup. I can't imagine my mom giving you asylum after that."

This dirty brat. He knows we can't make a deal without him.

I kept my anger inside and checked the time on my watch. It was 2:40 AM.

Fine. He can have his ten minutes. As long we're out of here by 3 AM, I can figure something out.

"Ten minutes and no more," I snapped. "Speak."

"Okay. First off, I promise you I'll tell my mom to give you all asylum with Noa no matter what. Even if I die, I want her to take you in. And I always keep my promises. Whatever happens, I won't betray you or Chernobog; you have my word. I'll stand by you until the end. Bear that in mind while you hear me out."

That's what everyone says right before they betray us. Our fellow soldiers, our own country, even the civilians we were fighting to protect...

"I want to use myself as bait to lure out New World, and then we can wipe them out. I'll need your full cooperation to make this work."

He'll use himself as bait? I don't understand what he's saying. And what's with this kid's eyes? They look so pure. It's like they're drawing me in.

Those eyes were unlike any I'd ever seen.

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

"I want to use myself as bait to lure out New World, and then we can wipe them out," I explained. "I'll need your full cooperation to make this work."

The captain looked at me with distrust, but I had no intention of stopping now.

"The first step is to secure the weapons, ammunition and other supplies we'll need to put up a fight," I went on. "I'll need your help with this. The existence of Serp is top secret, right? That means you can't purchase weapons through the usual routes. Do you know how to buy from an arms dealer on the black market?"

"...I might. If we had the money, we could get hold of whatever we need. Though I obviously can't get hold of military-use powered suits so easily because of international regulations."

I knew it. In my past life, I saw movies and novels that showed well-known arms dealers with ties to government institutions. Looks like that was accurate. Now that weapons aren't a problem, the next thing is...

"The second step will be to take our weapons somewhere where we can put up a fight. Then we'll provoke New World. I doubt I can provoke their leader, Dr. Sandra, but her followers and her financial backers are another story. I doubt her financial backers are motivated by faith. They'll want to get some sort of return. We can exploit that weakness."

They'll probably — no, definitely — come at me in rage and try to kill me. Sandra's fanatics see her as some kind of god, and her backers will pressure her to show some results after her successive failures. New World won't be able to ignore us.

A lawful organization like Noa could be able to show some self-control, but it wouldn't be so easy for New World. The only thing holding them together was Sandra's charisma.

They're going to regret trying to hurt Alice, Anton, and everyone else important to me!

"If they won't come out and face me I'll force them into it," I added.

"You want to force their hand? Where would you make your stand?"

"I'm expecting large-scale urban warfare, so I was thinking of Old Moscow."

Roughly 40 years ago, Russia's capital had been moved 20 kilometers east from Old Moscow to a new city. The government had lacked the funds necessary to maintain the old city, so it had simply been left standing, supposedly as a historical site. No one would mind if it was damaged in battle.

What's more, entry to the old city was forbidden to stop the site being used by criminals. That meant a battle there wouldn't cause any civilian casualties. Any sane person that might still be there would run away the moment a large armed force showed up in the area.

"I see," she pondered. "The underground railways and sewer tunnels could be used as makeshift war tunnels. You've really thought this through."

I haven't thought this through at all, Captain. I just want to avoid any civilian casualties. The details of how we fight are totally up to you. Still, if she thinks otherwise, that misunderstanding might make her more willing to consider my ideas, so I'm not going to disagree. Judging by what she just said, the captain and her soldiers specialize in guerilla warfare, unlike Macho Man. This battle will suit them perfectly.

"The third step is to request support from the Russian government," I said. "There are two reasons for this. First, unless something changes, President Shumsky will be forced to resign when all of this is over. That'll invalidate the pacts he formed with Noa, and that'll cause problems in the future. The other reason is that this is best for you and your people, Captain."

"For us?"

“If you all leave quietly and seek asylum now, people in Russia will think you betrayed your own country. Regardless of whether that’s true. I’m sure there are people in high places who know that Serp did nothing wrong, but a lot of people won’t realize that. Instead, you could leave as patriotic heroes who saved Russia from a terrorist organization. Until now, you’ve always been fighting behind the scenes, but if you’re going to leave the country, why not do it in style? Give the people who betrayed you a reason to regret it.”

“Heroes...?” she asked slowly. “What exactly did you have in mind?”

All right! We’ve almost hit the ten-minute mark, but I’ve got her interested. She just needs a little more encouragement, and then I’ll be able to escape together with Anton and all of Serp.

I can do this. I just need to remember those speeches I gave in G-88 as a Noa representative.

**

Captain Yulia’s Point of View

Arakawa was done talking.

True, if everything went according to plan, his influence and his mother’s authority would make it possible for us and for our country to be the heroes. But I still had my doubts.

“Arakawa, why would you do any of this? What do you get out of it?”

“To tell you the truth, it’s for my own self-satisfaction,” he shrugged. “When someone asks me for help, it feels good to help them out. That’s enough for me.”

“And you think I’ll trust someone with such vague motives?”

“Would you feel better if we made a contract? I promise you’ll all be given asylum in Japan and with a future where you can live how you please. In exchange, I’m asking you to serve as mercenaries until we’ve wiped out New World.”

A future? That’s something that’s always been just out of reach. He’s offering

us the thing we want more than anything else, and at a fair price.

I glanced over at Joseph who sat in the corner of the room. His arms were folded and he was deep in thought. I wanted to hear the opinions of everyone else, so I called in my subordinates who were waiting in the next room.

“Everyone! Get in here!” I ordered.

The door to the neighboring room opened and my subordinates entered the room.

Seeing them enter, Arakawa looked surprised for the first time. I felt a little better seeing him make a face that better suited to someone his age.

“You all heard the conversation,” I told my subordinates curtly. “What do you say?”

“It’s worth a shot,” said one of them. “Even if we seek asylum in Japan, we could still be assassinated. I think the only hope we have left is to put our faith in Arakawa.”

“I agree,” another put in. “I don’t know whether we can trust him, but I think he’s the only hope we have left.”

So be it. We’ll take a chance on Arakawa. I don’t trust him... but if he’s willing to enter into a contract, I’ll give him the same respect I’d give any client.

“Joseph! We’re moving to Old Moscow! Achim, take two others with you and go round up everyone still here in the city. Engage the enemy if you have to, but keep the fighting to a minimum. Everyone else, make a list of equipment. Get moving!”

In the corner of my eye, I saw everyone rush off to carry out my orders as I turned to face Arakawa. He noticed me looking at him and smiled.

“I know an arms dealer named Vladimir Stolyarov who can give us the equipment,” I said. “Can you get us funds?”

“I have money, if dollars will do. But I’ll need a device that can authorize the payment.”

“We can arrange that. We don’t have any funds of our own, so you’ll have to pay for everything. Leave all the dirty work to us. We’re used to fighting. Just be

ready for whatever might happen. Think you can handle it?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

I doubt this brat has ever seen a battle, I thought skeptically. But if he can prove that he’s better than the pigs that make up the higher ranks by not running away when the fighting starts, then I’ll believe in him.

If he doesn’t run, maybe I’ll even offer to work for him. Don’t let me down, kid.



Chapter 5: Chernobog

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

The captain and I decided that the former Moscow Station in the old city would serve as our base of operations.

At first, the only work I had to do was to enter my password into a terminal when asked so that some money could be transferred.

Then things began to happen. Roughly three hours after that, we finished rounding up Chernobog's remaining members. Then the bald man, whose name was Joseph, transported a large number of weapons into the station. Joseph was the one who'd called Anton to Russia in the first place.

I'd only looked at the list of equipment for a few seconds while making the payment, but I remembered that, in addition to personal firearms, the list also included an attack helicopter and a personnel carrier.

Meanwhile, New World was no doubt going to come at us using powered suits. It was hard to see how we were going to cope with nothing but those old-fashioned weapons.

Then again, I know these weapons are old-fashioned, but I'd love to know where they all came from.

The captain might have known, but she was nowhere to be seen.

While everyone else was gone, I was left waiting alone and helping myself to the pirozhki and the sickly sweet Russian tea that had been passed around.

"Arakawa, we're ready." The captain burst into the room and threw a new terminal at me. "I've come up with a declaration just like you planned. Now we just need to contact Noa."

I guess they don't want me to know the particulars until I've sent the request for asylum to my mom. In that case, first we should send a transmission to Noa over an unencrypted channel.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll send a transmission.”

I used my terminal to contact Noa over an ordinary channel, and the operator on duty soon appeared on the screen.

The operator looked surprised to see my face.

Sorry, but there’s no time to explain.

I ignored the operator’s questions and asked to be put through to my mom. I heard some sort of argument going on among Noa’s staff, but eventually my tired-looking mom appeared on the screen.

“Kouki!” Mom cried. “I’m glad you’re safe. Who are those armed people you’re with? Please tell me they aren’t New World.”

“They’re not. But I can see how you’d think so. The balaclavas they’re wearing almost make them look like an old-fashioned terrorist group.”

I couldn’t blame her for looking so worried. If Mom were to say that the captain and her people looked like Afghan guerrillas from the 2000s, I wouldn’t be able to argue. It probably looked like the enemy had me.

I did my best to sound full of confidence as I spoke so that Mom’s anxiety would be lessened somewhat.

“These people used to fight alongside Anton as part of Chernobog’s combat unit. Well, some of them are part of the espionage unit. They’re cooperating with me, and we’ve set up camp here in Old Moscow.”

“Kou! Stop! You’re transmitting over a standard, unencrypted channel. Don’t you realize that New World could be listening to our entire conversation?!”

Of course I realize that. I’ve thought it through, so calm down.

To keep the discussion moving forward, I didn’t give Mom any more opportunities to share her concerns. I turned to the captain, who was standing beside me with her arms folded, looking menacing, and I asked her to indicate our location on the map. Then I spoke at the screen in the rudest tone I could manage.

“To Dr. Sandra Zelenskaya, the leader of New World. I’m sure you’re listening. I imagine you must have felt quite frustrated when I escaped from the hotel?

Well, I thought I'd give you another chance. I'm right here in Old Moscow. I don't know whether you're planning to capture me or kill me, but whatever you're planning, you know where to find me.

"I don't want to waste too much time on a researcher stupid enough to believe in occult notions such as reincarnation and the soul. That's why I'm going to wait here and let you come to me. In exchange, I'd like you to bring Anton Bortkiewicz, Yakov Tarkovsky, and Yuri Pamfilova with you. If they're already dead, there's nothing to discuss. I'll change location immediately. However, if they are still living, release them near Bechet Lake in the old city.

"The time from their release until I manage to move to a new location is the time I'm giving you to capture me. Reply within the next two hours. I'll leave it to you to decide how exactly you get your message to me. I know you're not the smartest woman around, but I'm sure you'll figure something out."

I'd said all that I needed to say, so I cut off the transmission. I then sent a document describing our planned course of action to Mom's personal address, hoping that she'd notice.

The document included my request that asylum be given to the captain and her people. The document also suggested a pretense that the Russian army could use when offering us support and details of what I wanted the Russian army to do for us.

Next, I had to worry about when Dr. Sandra would give us her reply. I'd have to discuss that with the captain.

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I checked the time on the terminal that the captain had given me and saw that it was 9 PM.

Our base of operations was partially underground, making it hard to know what was happening outside, but I expected that it would soon get dark.

It'd been one hour since we'd made our declaration to New World. I expected they would take action within the next hour.

"I'm so tired," I said to myself while rubbing my eyes.

I realized that I hadn't slept in roughly two days because I'd been working on the anime and trying to help Anton. Toughened soldiers like Macho Man and the captain were probably used to this kind of thing, but it was a struggle for a frail commoner like me.

Just as I was considering taking a nap, the captain burst into the room with such force that I worried she might have bent the door out of shape.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

"We've had a response from New World! They're transmitting a satellite broadcast that anyone can view from anywhere using a terminal. They've hijacked Russia's broadcasting systems!"

Really...? Why do geniuses have to turn everything into a spectacle? You'd think a terrorist group would try to draw a little less attention to themselves. Hijacking broadcasting systems is the kind of thing my mom would do.

My head felt heavy from lack of sleep as I took the terminal in my hand. The signal was a little noisy, but sure enough, a man with his face obscured was being shown on every channel.

I don't see Dr. Sandra. This looks like a prerecorded video. Maybe they had a reason for not showing her? Or maybe she just wasn't around at the time?

"I repeat," the man on the broadcast said. "In 30 minutes from now, we of New World will release Anton Bortkiewicz, Yakov Tarkovsky, and Yuri Pamfilova to the Russian force surrounding the hotel. Upon their release, we will begin moving towards Old Moscow together with our comrades remaining in the hotel. We are acting on the basis of an existing arrangement. If our actions are impeded in any way, we will retaliate with a devastating, indiscriminate attack. I repeat..."

So they're going to release Anton and the others at the hotel, and then they'll attack us as soon as they reach the old city. Broadcasting this across the whole of Russia means that the Russian government won't be able to attack them while they're on the move. If they're forced to choose between me and their own people, they're obviously going to protect their own people. The ordinary civilians living in the city are more important.

“Captain, the hotel is—” I began.

“We already have people in position near the hotel to keep us informed. They’ll let us know as soon as the hostages are released.”

“We need—”

“Everyone is ready and in position. We’ll fight by tunnel warfare using the subway tunnels and sewers, just like you planned. They’ll serve as our trenches. If we fight defensively, we should be able to hold out for five hours or so.”

Let me finish a sentence! Maybe you can guess what I’m worried about, but you should still let me say it instead of assuming, I thought indignantly. Forget it. I need to get myself some weapons so I can at least defend myself. If this building that we’re using as our makeshift headquarters is captured, it’ll mean total defeat. In that case, I’ll at least need a weapon to turn on myself.

With that in mind, I was about to leave the room and fetch a weapon, but the captain stopped me.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she asked coldly.

“I was about to fetch myself a weapon. I only know how to use a shotgun, but that’s better than being unarmed, right? And I might need it if worst comes to worst.”

“Worst comes to worst?”

“I don’t like thinking about it, but they might capture this building,” I said. “If everyone else dies fighting, I’ve no intention of being taken alive. I’ll take my own life.”

The captain was left speechless.

Did she think I was planning on running? Every member of Serp must have been thinking the same thing. Now I see why they’ve been keeping all the details of their plans from me... I don’t have time for this! I get that their own country betrayed them, but we’re allies here! Can’t they see that we have to work together to stand any chance here? I can’t take this anymore.

As intimidating as the captain looked, I had a terrible feeling that I’d come to regret it if I didn’t say something now.

Joseph's Point of View

"Where do you think you're going?"

I could hear the conversation between Arakawa and the captain through my radio. Because we didn't trust Arakawa, the captain had arranged things so that everyone would hear all of his conversations. We were hoping this would give us a better idea of his true intentions.

"I was about to fetch myself a weapon," Arakawa said. "I only know how to use a shotgun, but that's better than being unarmed, right? And I might need it if worst comes to worst."

"Worst comes to worst?"

"I don't like thinking about it, but they might capture this building. If everyone else dies fighting, I've no intention of being taken alive. I'll take my own life."

Take his own life? He'll commit suicide?

The captain must have been too surprised to say anything.

I was shocked, too. *Arakawa intends to share our fate, no matter what? But why? Why would he go so far for us when we've only just met? It makes no sense.*

"Captain, stop messing around!" he snapped. "I know that no one in Serp trusts me, but I won't just run. You have to start sharing information with me! I've told you already, we'll all be killed if we don't all cooperate."

"You're the one who's messing around!" the captain yelled at Arakawa in response. "You suddenly show up and expect everyone to trust you! You've given us no assurance that we'll get asylum if we survive this! You've given us no assurance that your plan will even work! You're in no position to demand trust from us!"

I understood what Arakawa was trying to say, but his motivations were beyond my understanding. The captain had said the same thing in a briefing two hours prior.

There was a sound from the radio like something being kicked over, followed by Arakawa's voice. He no longer sounded friendly; he was enraged.

"I wish you'd shut up about assurance! I promised I wouldn't lie, so let me be honest with you. This isn't my first battle! I fought alongside Noa in an inter-racial war to prevent a genocide. I won't get scared and run away. And saving you doesn't have to be part of some grand plan. I'm here because Anton asked me for help and I'll look bad if I let him down. So please... I'm not as intelligent as my mom, so I don't know how to say it clearly, but you have to believe me... I want to help you." Arakawa sounded tearful, and his last words were hard to make out. "At this rate, we could lose everything."

When was the last time someone cared enough to cry for me?

I vaguely remembered that just before joining the army, my mother had cried when seeing me off from the station. She'd kissed me on the cheek and then said something that I couldn't recall.

I looked to my side and saw that Ivan, the soldier assigned as the gunner, was sobbing.

"Ivan, are you crying?" I asked.

"Yes. I grew up in an orphanage. I joined the army so I wouldn't starve. Listening to Arakawa reminded me of a nun who cared for me in the orphanage. She cried when I left to join the army. She was sorry for not sending me to school. I don't know why, but somehow Arakawa reminds me of her..."

I placed a hand on Ivan's shoulder as I looked at the other soldiers who were with us. Everyone was wearing a similar expression.

Maybe we should believe in Arakawa... If we were fighting for him, maybe we could go on fighting just like we always have. I need to tell the captain. I can only speak for the soldiers around me, but we believe in Arakawa, and we're ready to fight for him.

I was about to hit the transmission button on my radio when someone else started transmitting instead.

"This is Squad 2. Captain, we trust Arakawa."

“Squad 3, here. We feel the same.”

“This is the sniper outpost team. We believe in him, too.”

We were all having the same thought.

I took another look at the soldiers around me. My subordinates were tired, but they all nodded, and their morale was still clear to see on their faces. Seeing that made me remember what it was my mother had said between her tears.

“I hope you can make some good friends.”

And then I’d left to join the army in order to pay back the debt my father had left us.

How many years has it been? I wondered. *It took a while, but I’ve finally found such comrades.*

“Captain, this is Squad 1. We also believe in Arakawa.”

After sending my transmission, I heard two clicks from the radio. It was our usual way of signaling acknowledgement.

Now it’s up to the captain. Though something Arakawa said makes me curious. What does he mean when he says he fought alongside Noa to prevent a genocide? As far as I know, there hasn’t been a major conflict in several years. In that case, could it have happened when he was transported to the other world during the particle research that we recently learned about? I thought he was only gone three days. He’s so young, and yet I can’t imagine what hell he might have gone through.

It was chilling to think about. I took a cigarette from my pocket and placed it in my mouth.

“Arakawa, every member of my unit is listening to this conversation,” said Captain Yulia at last. “We didn’t trust you, but after what you’ve just said, I think we’re all ready to believe in you. I’d like to apologize on behalf of Serp. Please forgive us.”

“C-Captain?!” Arakawa exclaimed. “Please raise your head! I should be the one apologizing. I got over-emotional for a moment there!”

The captain herself is bowing to Arakawa?! I can’t believe this. I wish I’d asked

to be there in headquarters! I'd love to see it with my own eyes.

"I wish I was there in headquarters," Ivan mumbled to himself with tears still in his eyes.

As if she'd sensed the relaxed atmosphere coming over the unit, the captain began to yell at us: "Attention, all personnel! There's going to be a change of plan. Objective 1 is to ensure that Arakawa... 'Arakawa' is hard to say. Let's change Arakawa's codename. His new codename is 'Volga.'"

Volga... That's the name of the river that flows through Russia and gives it life. Arakawa is giving us life, so it's a fine choice of name for him.

"Objective 1 is to ensure that Volga can escape from the combat zone. You got that? Whatever happens, even if the last man standing has to resort to suicide bombing, we're sending Volga back to Japan! And for Objective 2... we make sure every last one of us gets out of this alive. Once we've been given asylum by Noa, we're going to live out our lives however we please."

It sounds crazy. Objective 1 goes against Objective 2. But I get it. We'll protect Volga with our lives, but we'll all get through this. It couldn't be simpler. The pigs among the top brass have always had us fighting for such vague goals that the most we could hope for was to live to see another day. But now we have something to fight for.

"This is the communications team. We have confirmed release of hostages in front of hotel. All three are unharmed."

Looks like that moron, Anton, is safe. It's all thanks to Volga's good heart. The pigs would have abandoned him and run off to Japan by themselves. Now that he's free, it's time to fight for our survival.

I turned up the volume on the radio and concentrated on the voice of the operator from the communications team.

"New World immediately began moving from the hotel site. Our basic radar has detected six planes. I believe these are the V/STOL transport planes that were reported. And— What?! This signal... I don't believe it! The enemy's powered suits are already surrounding the old city. I count—"

There must have been an EMP strike, because the radio suddenly stopped

working. Now the only equipment left usable would be new devices equipped with high output electromagnetic wave jammers.

But they were underestimating us. The enemy was powerful, but if they thought this was enough to throw us into disarray, they had about as much of a clue as a single-celled organism. It was rare that we were ever able to make it through a battle with our radio communications working until the end. In fact, I couldn't remember such a thing ever happening.

A question came to mind. I turned to Ivan who was busy wrapping a grenade in tape to prevent it from being set off by accident.

"Ivan, does Volga know the official name of our unit?"

"I'm not sure. I doubt he knows. If he knew, he'd relax and leave the fighting to us."

Good point. Volga mustn't know.

The official name of our unit was the "Prototype Reinforced Solder Solider Unit, Serp."

We were the strongest special forces unit, born out of the Reinforced Soldier Project that had achieved genetic improvements and the Alice Project that had achieved an advancement in evolution.

In this day and age, our unit was the only remaining unit designed with the threat of nuclear war in mind.

The enemy had already started shelling us. I grinned as the subway tunnel around me shook.

New World might think of us as little more than bugs to be exterminated, but they're about to realize that they've messed with the wrong people.

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

New World had begun their offensive. Each time a mortar shell hit the old Moscow Station area around me, I could hear the explosion and feel the

building shake.

If the report we received from the communications team is correct, there must be a good number of powered suits surrounding us. Will we be able to hold out? Now that there's no communication between squads, how are we going to fight back?

My concern must have been visible on my face.

"Volga, your father's a colonel," Captain Yulia said. "Did he teach you how modern battles are fought?"

"Well... the thing is... I've experienced a modern battle firsthand. a while ago, I took part in battles that used powered suits as the main weapons."

"Before you were born, 150 years ago when there were no powered suits, do you know what kind of battles the people of this world fought?"

I don't know what reference to use when it comes to talking about "this world" 150 years ago. I suppose there weren't so many differences back when there were no powered suits. I'll use the world where I spent my previous life as a reference...

"I think an air force would be used to gain air supremacy, and then ground forces would occupy crucial sites while receiving air support."

"I'll give you 7 out of 10 for that answer. In general, you have to consider the entire military, including the navy, but we'll forget about that for now. The next question is: How does a nation fight when they are defending themselves against a nation with overwhelming power?"

I didn't know where the captain was going with this.

A nation with overwhelming power? In that case, they can only use guerrilla warfare like we're doing. But I don't want to hear about military tactics and strategy; I want to know how we'll contact squads on the ground. Wait. There were more things that weren't around 150 years ago. The personal terminal I'm holding, for one thing... Those didn't exist in my previous world. Instead of modern terminals, everyone used cellular phones. That's it! I've got it.

"Telephone lines..."

“Now you get a 10 out of 10. You geniuses really are something else. Most people wouldn’t even think of the telephone. I’m surprised that a researcher like you would know about devices from the past like telephones.”

I didn’t know how many years it had been since people stopped using telephone lines. According to an article I’d seen in my mom’s room, all civilian voice-based communications had transitioned to using satellite networks by the year 2020, with the exception of a very small number of emergency lines. Roughly 80 years had gone by since then, and now it was unusual for anyone my age to know anything about telephones.

“I was going to ask you a lot more questions, but you’ve reached the answer already, so I don’t have to,” she said. “The people in our communications team are trying to put our squads in communication with each other using the telephone lines that run throughout the old city. Everything is going as we expected, so don’t look so worried. Now, there’s something else I’d like to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“You said something a while ago. Noa was part of an inter-racial war?”

“I can’t share the details without permission from my mom, but it all starts with Noa’s formation...”

I explained the true nature of Noa to the captain. I gave her a long-winded description of how the search for a safe place had increased in scale, and how the Hakone base wasn’t Noa’s main headquarters, but was actually a fortress built to protect a gate connecting to another world. If she was going to join Noa, she’d eventually learn everything anyway, so I saw no reason to hold back.

I went on to tell her about our dealings with non-human races in the world of G-88 and about the multi-race coalition.

The captain listened, frowning the whole time.

Talking while ignoring the sounds of the mortar shells striking nearby helped me to feel better about this bizarre situation I’d found myself in. I gradually became calm once more.

The captain probably started asking me questions because she knew talking

would help me calm down. And here I thought I was the one saving her...

**

Captain Yulia's Point of View

"This is a little hard to believe..." I couldn't help saying as soon as Arakawa was finished with his story.

Even so, the boy in front of me smiled warmly without showing any sign of irritation.

It was likely that everything he had just said was true. If he'd been lying, he would have come up with something more believable, and the fact that he was now calm was further proof.

Someone who'd never been on a battlefield would never be able to speak calmly while shells were raining down around them. I was forced to conclude that it was all true.

Just as I closed my eyes to think, one of my subordinates placed a nostalgic-looking telephone on the desk in front of me.

"Captain, we've established a wired connection."

This is no good. I have to concentrate on the battle in front of me...

To regain my focus, I ordered the communications team to give me an update on the status of each squad.

"Squad 1 and Squad 2 have not sighted the enemy. They are on standby."

"We have contact from the sniper outpost squad. They have sighted an enemy company of powered suits and are moving into offensive positions."

So the sniper squad is about to engage? I noted. If we can just keep their attention away from this place, we can move to the next stage of the operation. But what happened to Squad 3? Why haven't they contacted us?

"Give me the status of Squad 3!" I called.

"Please wait a moment, I'm establishing a connection," the com officer said. "Squad 3 is engaging enemy powered suits! The enemy unit is on the scale of a

platoon, so Squad 3 is feigning retreat while moving to detonation point 1-3 as scheduled.”

The idiots are really falling for it... Keep chasing them, and it'll be the end of the line for you.

Powered suits couldn't be destroyed using ordinary explosives, but detonating explosives in a subway tunnel would leave the powered suits buried under the rubble and unable to move.

We would have to reduce the enemy's power as much as possible before they saw through our plans, otherwise our situation would rapidly worsen.

It's about time I give orders regarding the helicopter...

“Prepare the helicopter! Make sure it looks like a good prize. It's completely useless to us, but it should look like a valuable target. Naturally, it should be surrounded by explosives.”

“Understood!”

All right... Looks like we're still in control of the battlefield. Now we need to find the right timing to dispatch Arakawa. Come to think of it, he's been quiet for a while now.

Feeling worried, I began to look around for him, and saw him concentrating on a pamphlet that must have been dropped in the station.

“What's up?” I asked him.

“...Operation Highjump. The German Third Reich,” he murmured. “No, it can't be...”

“What are you talking about?”

He looked at me, and I saw the fear on his face. “Captain, did the United States of this world send their military to Antarctica sometime after 1940? It doesn't matter whether it was done in public or in secret!”

“Antarctica? If I remember rightly, they went there in 1948 and 1951. The expedition made in 1951 was kept secret, I believe.”

“On what scale?”

“I don’t know the details, but there are records of a large force including several aircraft carriers being sent out. Why does it matter?”

“Give me a moment. I’m thinking it through. I have one more question... My mom will probably ask the United Nations Army to rescue us. I suspect several nations will participate in the rescue to earn favor with Noa. In that case the main force will be—”

“The United States Army.”

Arakawa closed his eyes and seemed to be thinking hard about something.

Meanwhile, we continued to receive constant updates from each squad.

We’ve just barely got the upper hand here, I thought. Putting up such a good fight against powered suits could easily land us in the military history books.

After about five minutes, Arakawa spoke. “Captain, there’s no escape for us,” he said, sounding quite certain. “I think— no, I’m sure— we’ll all be killed.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, glaring at him.

My glare didn’t scare him. The genius calmly told me the reason.

And that was when I finally learned the truth.

That was how I came to realize why they called this boy a monster.

**

Kouki Arakawa’s Point of View

“What are you talking about?” the captain asked while glaring at me.

The fact that her right eye was mechanical made her look all the more frightening, but this was no time to worry about that.

How do I explain something like this?

I doubted she’d believe me if I told her I had memories of my past life. And what I was thinking of was mostly just speculation. But when I thought about the scale of New World, I knew I was right.

I suppose I’ll get my thoughts straight while talking about it with the captain.

“Captain, did you know that the Germans had a huge submarine fleet during the Second World War?”

“Yes, I did. But the war came to a quick conclusion, so they must have been barely used. What does that have to do with anything?”

“The German submarine fleet intended to make their base in Antarctica. However, that information soon leaked out to allied forces. An attack led by the United States on the base was planned. It was known as Operation Highjump.”

The captain took a drink from a bottle of water and then nodded to urge me to continue.

“But it’s like you said. The fleet was never used in actual combat because the war quickly reached a quick conclusion. It’s also rumored that the submarine base was never built. Despite that, the United States still sent their forces there...”

In a world that never had a Cold War, there would have been no need to train in arctic warfare on Antarctica, unlike in my previous world. With no need for such training, no one would have needed to do anything as expensive as going to the South Pole.

“They’ve claimed that base as their own?” she asked.

“I can’t be certain,” I said. “They might have claimed it, or they might have completed its construction. In any case, I think there’s a base there. And that base must be New World’s main headquarters.”

“How can you be sure?”

“They have to be somewhere that not even my mom, Noa, my dad, and the United Nations could find them. Wouldn’t it be the perfect place? They could accommodate at least as many personnel as Noa. It would be possible to construct a facility deep underground where reconnaissance satellites wouldn’t see them. And New World could also accommodate an impressively large fleet of submarines there.”

“So the United States is conspiring with New World?”

“I can’t be sure about that, either. But I suspect New World has members

quite high up in the United States government. Other nations also have observation stations in the area, so the United States might not be the only traitor. If we want to understand New World's aims, we should take this into consideration."

I hadn't been able to understand New World's intentions at all so far. If they had just wanted to kill me, they could have had a sniper take me out from far away. The same was true of Alice. Instead, they had halfheartedly abducted her and then let her escape. Even now, they were halfheartedly fighting us and with a halfhearted offensive.

It's beyond me. This whole situation is too much for someone with my level of intelligence.

I regretted having been too proud to let my mom deal with everything. As if my lack of rest had suddenly caught up to me, I began to feel dizzy and had to sit on a nearby chair.

The captain lit a cigar and asked me, "A moment ago you mentioned 'the United States of this world.' What did that mean?"

I said that...? Damn. It's hard to think straight after going two days without sleep. Not that it matters anymore. We're surrounded by New World and the United States Army. The situation is completely hopeless. What's the harm in sharing the more surprising details of my life in my final moments?

"Captain, did you read the research article that Dr. Sandra published?" I asked.

"You mean the crackpot one about reincarnation of souls?"

"That's the one. Let's forget about whether it's a crackpot theory or not. It is accurate. I can't give you conclusive proof, but I do have evidence to support it."

The captain eyed me suspiciously. But then her expression turned to surprise, and the cigar she was holding fell to the ground.

Looks like she figured it out.

"Before we fight alongside each other, let me reveal my true nature to you. I,

Kouki Arakawa, was reincarnated after having lived my life in another world.”

For a few seconds the captain was completely frozen, but then she suddenly started laughing.

I knew it. She doesn't believe me.

Everything I was saying was true, but if the captain came at me yelling, “You expect me to believe that crap?” I would probably wet myself.

“Heh heh...” she chuckled. “Ha ha ha! Now I see. Now I see why people call you a monster. You constructed the same theory as Sandra in another world, and then you tested it on yourself. Now you’ve been born to the most eminent researcher in this world: Miki Arakawa. You were already a genius, but then you were able to learn a completely new body of scientific knowledge from a genius of another world. So that’s what makes you a monster.”

“No... Captain...”

“Say no more. I can see from the look on your face that you want this to remain secret. I’m guessing you haven’t even told your parents. Well, I give you my word, your secret is safe with me.”

Now what? The captain has jumped to her own conclusions, and now she’s happily accepted everything. If I tell her, “I’m just an ordinary person, I’ve never been exceptional, and my mom knows everything already,” I feel like she’ll yell at me. But at the same time, I feel like I should tell her the truth.

As I was frantically trying to decide, we heard crashing sound from inside the building.

The captain’s smile vanished. She removed her gun from its holster and stared up at a ventilation shaft.

“Is it... the enemy?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Stay back.”

I nervously hid behind the captain’s back and stared at the ventilation shaft over her shoulder.

“I’m coming down,” said a voice. “Don’t shoot me.”

Whoever it was spoke Russian but with a terrible English accent.

I know that voice.

There was another crashing sound as a duffel bag landed on the ground in front of us. A woman climbed out after it. She was covered in dirt, presumably from crawling through the old ventilation shaft.

When I saw her face, I couldn't help but cry out: "Clare?!"

"That's right," she said. "You thought you could escape me, Kouki? Thanks to you, I've been swimming through the sea and spelunking through caves. Let's go straight home so I can shower."

After two days without seeing Clare, she was now standing in front of me with her usual smile, wearing a combat uniform instead of her usual suit.

**

Clare's Point of View — 48 Hours Earlier

"There's not much time, so I'll be brief," I said. "If anything is unclear, ask Anton about it later. I'm currently flying at an altitude of 13,000 meters, but I've been intercepted by an aircraft of unknown origin. It's not responding to my transmissions or my IFF system. The unknown aircraft has launched air-to-air missiles. I'm taking evasive action, but I expect I'll be shot down. Kouki, Anton, please find a way to escape Russian territory without my help. I don't care how you do it, Anton, but protect Kouki and get him back to Noa headquarters at the Hakone base. Clare out."

After quickly explaining the general situation, I ended the transmission and hurried to the cockpit, which was full of the sound of the alarm.

"What's the situation?" I demanded.

"Evasive action is in progress. Our missile defense system is active, but the attack is coming from beyond the horizon... It's difficult to counter it with this aircraft's defense systems."

"Descend! Prepare for an emergency landing at sea."

We'll have to survive this attack before we can attempt any kind of landing... I reminded myself.

My thoughts focused on finding a way we might get out of this alive.

If the emergency landing succeeds, they'll probably attack from—

"More unknown aircraft detected! At 10 o'clock... there are... 5, 12, no, 15 craft in total! Damn! Stealth planes?! High-speed projectiles are breaking off from the unknown aircraft! They're probably missiles!"

"Evade them!"

"I can't! There's no time. The missiles are on us!"

I instinctively closed my eyes tight as I braced for the impact... but it didn't happen. I could still hear the shrill sound of the alarm as I opened my eyes.

I was so tense that my throat had dried up, but I somehow managed to speak. "Did they miss?" I asked the pilot.

"No, the missiles passed close by us and then headed for the missiles fired by the unknown aircraft behind us."

"We have a response from their identification on the friend or foe systems," said a crew member. "The aircraft ahead are from the Russian Space Defense Forces."

"They've shot down the missiles behind us," another one added. "The unknown aircraft is moving away at high speed."

They saved us? Why would the Russian military save us? And why would the Space Defense Forces have aircraft here? I don't know what's going on.

"The Space Defense Force craft are about to come flying alongside us," the pilot reported.

I looked out of the window and saw a newly developed Russian aircraft flying by us. I'd only ever seen aircraft of that type pictured in reference data.

For some reason, there were no markings on the aircraft to indicate the country or unit it belonged to. The whole thing was jet black.

"Now I see..." I murmured.

The aircraft that had saved us wasn't actually from the Russian space defense agency.

That means the next transmission we'll receive should be...

"Expect a transmission to come through on the frequency of the Strategic Rocket Forces," I ordered.

"But... Ah, there it is! A transmission from the Strategic Rocket Forces. This is —"

"Have we got a rendezvous point at sea?" I interrupted. "We need to abandon this aircraft! Have all crew members prepare to disembark!"

If my worst fears are true, Kouki is in great peril right now. If I'm not there to support him, he could be assassinated by the extraction team.

**

Clare's Point of View — 4 Hours Earlier

After abandoning our aircraft and enjoying a swim in the sea, my subordinates and I were rescued by a powered suit carrier ship that appeared to be a Russian ship with all of its markings erased. After that, I was confined to quarters aboard the ship.

Based on the size of the room and the furnishings, the room I was in appeared to be the quarters of a high-ranking officer, so you could say they were showing me warm hospitality.

"Excuse me..."

There was a knock, and then the door to the room opened. The man who entered was wearing a military uniform bearing no rank insignia of any kind.

The man sat on a chair facing me and produced a file that he was carrying with him.

"Can I ask a question before I take a look at that?" I asked him.

"Please go ahead." The man put the file down on top of a desk and looked at me somewhat nervously.

“I want to check that I’m right about something,” I said. “You speak fluent English with no accent, your aircraft and this powered suit carrier have no identifying marks, and there’s no insignia on your uniform. You must be with the Russian Internal Troops. Your unit must be a secret unit attached to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Is this true?”

He was silent.

“Based on the scale of this unit, I’m guessing this is the National Security Unit?”

The man stayed silent. I took this as an affirmative.

I picked up the file on the desk and looked through it. It contained a lot of detailed information that hadn’t been available to me during my confinement. The man then gestured towards a personal terminal he was carrying so I could access digital records on the memory chip that was included in the file.

I don’t know what’s on this thing. I’m glad I can avoid putting it in my own terminal.

“Please go ahead,” he said.

I placed the memory chip into the terminal and accessed the data. It contained details about the Alice Project, records of the Chernobog combat unit that Kouki was working with, and detailed documents regarding the unit’s members.

I need to take this memory chip back with me...

“Would it be possible for me to keep this memory chip?” I asked.

“Please do. We’d also like to give you a map of an underground tunnel of Old Moscow prepared by the administration, which is where Mr. Arakawa is currently under siege. We can also prepare a powered suit with counter-EMP capabilities and some combat gear that we think you’ll need.”

“This is all very kind of you. What do you hope to get out of this?”

“We hope we can rescue someone who this world considers precious.”

“You’re misleading your own president into thinking our aircraft was shot down just for the sake of rescuing this important person? I find that hard to

believe.”

The man was clearly troubled by this. He looked up at the ceiling and sighed before he said anything. “Our main concern is the long-term survival of our nation. The nation is currently in a deep crisis. A terrorist organization known as New World has found their way into the high offices of our government. There have already been several high-ranking officers arrested on the orders of government officials. If the information known to Mr. Arakawa were to leak out, we would go from being recognized as a federation to being considered a rogue state. If we were suppressed by force—”

“The United Nations would get involved... and Kouki’s mother, Miki Arakawa, has an immeasurable influence over the United Nations.”

“Exactly. In that case, a third world war would break out. In the worst-case scenario, the Russian Federation would be pitted against the entire world. Even if Mr. Arakawa is able to escape by himself, we anticipate there’ll be devastating retaliatory measures taken against us.”

Indeed, it was clear from his data that the only reason New World had been able to break through our forces surrounding the island during Alice’s abduction was because of having support from the Russian Navy. If Kouki found out about this, he would no doubt take retaliatory measures, just as this man said.

On top of that, our methods had changed lately. If we were to broadcast propaganda over Noa’s satellite network to paint Russia as the enemy, we could manipulate the public opinion however we wished. Judging by the effect our broadcasts had on sales of cosmetics, you could say that we were capable of something close to brainwashing.

“I understand,” I said. “Let me ask again: What’s your goal and what would you have me do?”

“Our goal is to rescue Mr. Arakawa and send him home safely. We will deliver all documents related to the Alice Project and New World, along with all relevant personnel. Any officers in the Internal Security Unit found to be affiliated with New World will also be handed over to Noa. In exchange, we ask that you refrain from taking retaliatory measures.”

“Very well. I accept your conditions.”

The man relaxed.

Now I need to study these documents to find a way to get Kouki out... I pondered. If I use these underground passages and then blast a passage halfway to Kouki's location, I can travel the rest of the way to the underground subway station using the ventilation shafts.

The problem is what to do after that. To round up all members of Chernobog and escape, I'll probably need immediate assistance from the National Security Unit.

Once I've rendezvoused with Kouki, I could contact Miki and I could ask her to dispatch the commander and his unit...

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Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

While Clare was introducing herself to the captain and explaining what had happened to her, I went over the situation in my head once more.

It seemed that New World had found their way into positions of power in more countries than just Russia and America. But I couldn't understand why so many people would cooperate with New World despite the obvious risks. There was no benefit to doing so.

"Clare, how does New World reward their collaborators?" I asked.

"With money and anti-aging drugs."

"You mean..."

"Yes. New World has developed a drug similar to the one Noa developed for the sake of living on G-88. But New World found a different use for it."

Information about the drug described how it stopped time within the body. But the drug could only suppress aging; it couldn't be stopped completely. And having to take such a drug continuously made it potentially harmful.

As I was thinking it over, Clare stopped working at her terminal and turned to look at me. "Kouki, New World's technology, scientific knowledge, and

personnel could be on the same level as Noa's," she said solemnly. "The difference is that none of our people are so sly or deceptive."

"Noa's fight won't be over until you've defeated New World," the captain added.

Clare smiled and corrected her. "Captain Yulia, aren't you on Noa's side? You should call it '*our* fight.'"

"You're right. And we can't afford to lose. What'll we do? Right now, my subordinates are using delay tactics against the enemy to give Arakawa a chance to escape. But now you're telling me that the extraction team we expected might include assassins from New World..."

"You're right," Clare said. "We need to change our plans. I think we can break through the forces encircling the old city by heading north through the underground passage that I used to get here. To pull it off, we'll need to withdraw from each area simultaneously. It'll be hard to determine the best timing without knowing what's happening overhead."

While the two of them were holding a strategy meeting, I suddenly had a realization about Clare's story. She'd been constantly on the move, and hadn't told the extraction team or research team that I was safe. That meant that New World might not be aware that Clare was still alive.

"Clare, do you think New World knows that you're alive?" I asked.

"Good question... I don't think they know. I'll need to make contact with some people before we escape, so they'll find out then. Captain, the equipment we have is..."

They really don't know, I realized. What if I died here...? What if we tricked New World into thinking I died here? What would they do? If their objective is to kill me, perhaps they'll show their hand once they think they've succeeded. If we just knew what their objectives were, we could make plans to stop them... or at least my mom could make plans.

"Captain, is there somewhere safe where we can find supplies?" I asked. "It doesn't matter how far away it is."

"Hm... There's a secret base in Chelyabinsk, Ural. Our allies in the National

Security Unit control it, so I think it's safe. Lieutenant Colonel, I'm sorry. If my soldiers die in battle, I can live with that, but I can't deliberately sacrifice..."

It's about 1,900 kilometers from Old Moscow to Chelyabinsk... If we can get onto Highway M5, it should be easy to get there, I reflected. First, we need to cause confusion to give us time to move. Me dying would be the most effective thing. This world is always misunderstanding me. For once, I should deliberately spread a misunderstanding throughout the world myself.

"Could I make a suggestion?" I asked. "I've got an idea."

I waited for both of them to stop their discussion and look at me.

"Right now, we don't fully understand New World's intentions," I said. "Allowing them to achieve their first primary objective could give us a chance to learn their true intentions. Let's make it appear that everyone including me died in this battle, and then we'll retreat to Chelyabinsk."

"I see," Clare said thoughtfully. "We'll watch how New World acts after we've all died, and then use that to determine their intentions?"

"Right."

"But how would they be sure that you've died in battle?" Captain Yulia asked. "We don't have time to be dressing up corpses."

"A while ago, you set off explosives within the subway station to slow down the enemy, right? Let's set off all of our remaining explosives next time they attack. We can make this whole area cave in. They'll be fairly sure that we're dead, but the extraction team will definitely dig through the rubble to find our bodies. I'm sure the Russian government will also have the fire department, police department, and the military dig through the rubble so that my body can be returned to my mother."

"So we'll buy some time, and we'll limit their movement at the same time," Captain Yulia said. "Before the search even begins, the Russian military and the extraction team will have to fight New World. It'll be total chaos. I didn't realize there was such a devious mind behind that cute face of yours. I guess this is why they call you the demon child."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Well, what do you think?"

I thought it was the best plan we had, but the final decision would be up to Clare and the captain.

“This could work,” Captain Yulia said.

“I think it will work,” Clare agreed. “But I have one question.”

Clare was looking at me sternly.

I know... I know. I'm worried about that myself, but we'll just have to believe in her.

“What about Miki?” Clare demanded. “Do you think she'll stay calm if she learns you've died?”

“I'm sure she'll continue to believe I'm alive until the body has been found and DNA tested. During the Arakawa particle incident, she never stopped believing I was still alive.”

“Very well,” said Clare. “We'll consider this an acceptable level of uncertainty. Now, Captain, let's begin planning our response to the next attack. Be ready to send word to your subordinates when the time comes.”

“Understood.”

As I watched the two of them hastily figure out the details of our strategy, my thoughts turned to my family and friends.

I'm sure a genius like Mom will see through my plan. She'll know what to do. And I know Macho Man will stay calm and remain ready to sortie at any time. But what about Shingo and Aikawa? They'll worry about me. And Alice... I'm sure she'll cry.

Chapter 6: The Tenth-generation Model, Type 0

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

"Don't you think you should get some sleep?" Shuuichi asked as he entered my room.

I hadn't been to bed in some time. It had been 72 hours since the underground rail tunnel where Kouki was holed up had collapsed.

That's the limit... Humans can't survive for more than 72 hours without food and water...

Now that three days had passed since the cave in, Kouki's chances of survival had fallen below six percent.

The chance is still higher than zero... I'm sure he's alive.

"Don't worry about me," I said at last. "Is there any news?"

"There was a report from the engineering department. They've finished their analysis of the powered suits New World was using. They were using sixth-generation suits. We believe their commanding officer was using a suit roughly equivalent to an eighth-generation suit."

"I see... Now we know how they caused so much harm."

"Yeah. They destroyed 80 percent of the elite powered suit company that the United Nations Standing Army sent out to extract Kouki. In the end, New World lost 65 powered suits while our side lost 241 suits."

We barely put up a fight, I thought grimly. What a joke. But if the experiments Alice and I are performing can succeed, the difference in powered suit performance will cease to be important. I need to finish collecting data as quickly as possible...

"At 1 PM, we'll perform a test of the Type 0 on Noa Island," I told Shuuichi. "Please order everyone to leave the island except for the relevant personnel. Be

ready to deal with it if something goes wrong.”

“But the system is incomplete,” he objected. “Don’t you think that’s too dangerous? And Alice isn’t to blame for what happened to Kouki. And I still don’t understand why you told the children about the Alice Project! What’s gotten into you?!”

“They would have found out sooner or later. I thought it better to tell them now so they don’t feel as though we’ve kept secrets from them. Besides, Alice herself demanded to be involved in the experiment, and I can’t stop her now. She feels responsible.”

“Kouki will blame us...” Shuuichi muttered. “This is exactly what he wanted to avoid. He was trying to protect Alice’s secret. But now...”

I don’t need you to tell me, I sighed. But if Kouki really has escaped, he’s going to need the Type 0 suit. And the children truly believe that Kouki is alive. We have no choice but to move development forward several years. Whatever it takes, we’re going to finish it within a day.

Shuuichi still looked unconvinced as I pushed him out into the corridor.

In frustration at my own powerlessness, I bit my lip without thinking.

Somehow, I felt a little better as I tasted blood in my mouth.

**

Alice Alford’s Point of View

“Are you ready, Kon?” I asked. “Give it all you’ve got.”

“Kyu.”

I smiled at the image of Kon on the display and then nodded to Miki so she’d know we were ready.

“Initiate the testing sequence,” she ordered. “Activate the converter!”

“Activating converter,” an engineer said. “Output stable. The Type 0 suit is now operational.”

It really worked!

The originally planned antimatter reactor hadn't been ready on time, so the suit was using a magical energy converter fueled by Kon's magic that we'd created at the last minute. At least Miki had told me that. At any rate, it was working.

Now I can do my part and help everyone!

I felt relieved, but I noticed Miki was looking at me sympathetically.

Is she still worried about me?

"I'm all right!" I told her.

"Sorry... This is all my fault."

"I'm the one who suggested this. I'm not like ordinary people... not that it bothers me. Let's just get this suit up and running."

"Thank you, Alice. I know I've explained this already, but you're about to be physically connected to the Type 0. All of its systems will be managed by your brain. Naturally, those systems include the weapons management system and motion control system. Your brain will also be managing the communications system."

"It's like I'm a living computer," I said. "No, I've turned into a cyborg. That sounds way cooler."

I realized that Miki's eyes had glazed over while I was talking.

I was just joking around... Kouki would have laughed at something like that, but Miki's reaction just makes me feel bad. I regret saying anything now.

"The load placed on your brain will probably be more than you're used to," she said at last. "We're using a device from the moon relic that facilitates brain operation, but in the worst-case scenario—"

"Honestly, I'm fine! The measurements we took yesterday showed that my brain capacity surpasses ordinary human brain capacity. This should be easy."

"I have surpassed humanity." That sounds pretty cool. I'll have to tell that to Megumin if this experiment succeeds. If I have more brain capacity than even Kouki, then maybe I have what it takes to become a genius? Maybe I'll become like Miki if I work hard enough. I need to make this experiment a success so she

can teach me things!

“All right, here I go,” I told Miki.

With some help from the research team, I climbed into a capsule that formed the back part of the piloting unit.

The large helmet I put on covered not just my head, but my entire face. I took a moment to calm myself before speaking into the in-built microphone.

“I’m ready.”

“Understood. Ultrafine needles will enter your brain to inject the nanomachines,” Miki said. “Make sure you don’t move.”

“Got it.”



I braced myself, expecting it would hurt, but there was no pain at all. Instead, I felt a sort of cold feeling for a moment, and then the world came into view.

“Awesome! I can see everything! Even things behind me!”

“Alice, calm down! Right now, your senses are extended by the external cameras of the suit. Now we’re going to switch the power supply from low-output mode to ordinary mode.”

“O-Okay.”

“Switch in 5... 4... 3... 2... 1. Switched to normal mode. The Type 0 is fully operational!”

I don’t feel anything different. Is it really working?

I started to worry, and then a red dot appeared in my vision centered on Miki in the control center.

What is this thing?

As I stared at the red dot, I realized that the researcher stood beside Miki was trembling. When I looked at him, another red dot appeared. The trembling person suddenly appeared to be having a fit.

“Alice, I don’t how to say this, but...” Miki said.

“What is it?”

“The weapons control system is online. You’re locking on to us.”

Uwah?! How do I get rid of this? I feel like I know how, but I can’t get it right.

As I was getting increasingly flustered, a message log stating “system optimization complete” appeared at the edge of my vision. Suddenly, I knew exactly what to do. I quickly disengaged the lock on using the method I’d just learned, and put the weapon control system offline for the time being.

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly.

“It’s okay. It’s your first time using the suit, after all. Now that the optimization is finished, we— Excuse me for a moment.”

Miki turned away and began talking with someone excitedly over an internal

communication channel. Then she looked back at me, and for the first time since Kouki's disappearance, she was smiling in her usual way.

"Alice, we've found Kouki! He's in Chelyabinsk. He's alive and well."

Kouki! I'm so glad he's okay. I knew he would be. I knew that believing in him and getting this suit ready was the right thing to do.

I felt ready to explode with happiness as the message log reappeared at the edge of my vision: "Explosion requested. Would you like to overload the reactor?"

Uwaaah! I want out of this suit...

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

I awoke suddenly. I looked at the clock and saw that it was 5:18 AM. For a while, I lay on my cot and waited for my sleepiness to wear off.

"Volga, you're awake?" the man lying on the cot next to mine asked. "I'm surprised. You went almost three days without sleep, and now you've slept for only five hours."

"Because I'm hungry... And because there's a lot to do today."

"That's true," he said. "We should get some breakfast and then receive our uniforms."

With that, the man got out of bed and began putting on his boots.

I forget his name. I'm sure he told me before we went to sleep, but I can't remember. Something like Yohan... No... I remember! He's Yosef!

He was Yosef from the heavy weapons squad.

"Yosef, have all the nearby residents been evacuated?" I asked.

"Yes. Last night we finished clearing out everyone within a fifty-kilometer radius. But will it really happen?"

"Yes. I was thinking about Clare and about the extraction team, and now I'm

sure of it.”

Yosef stroked his beard and looked as though he still didn’t believe me.

We said nothing more to each other until we’d arrived in the cafeteria via a narrow hallway.

I accepted food from the soldier acting as the chef and then sat down in an empty chair to eat it.

“I hear that you’ll be given a major general’s uniform,” Yosef said.

“That’s right. I haven’t actually had the basic training and education, so I’ll probably just get in everyone’s way. Special major general is just the rank that Noa gave me.”

“Ha. It’s not as though we’ve had the proper training, either,” Yosef replied, laughing. “Can you believe that there’s still a unit trained for a nuclear war in this day and age?”

That’s kind of amazing in its own way... Even Macho Man’s unit was only ever trained to deal with tactical nuclear weapons used by terrorist groups. Meanwhile, Joseph and his unit are prepared for an all-out nuclear war involving strategic nuclear weapons. That’s the only reason we’re able to be where we are right now.

“I owe you an apology,” I said to Yosef. “I came out here to Russia acting all tough, but all I’ve done is sneak around like a coward.”

“Forget about that,” he said. “The National Security Unit showed you our new uniforms, right? I’m really happy. I didn’t think we’d ever get to wear proper uniforms.”

I didn’t realize Yosef’s unit has never had uniforms. Being in a top-secret unit sounds cool, but the top brass probably just thinks of them as a unit they can throw into any unconventional warfare situation.

“All right! I’m done eating, so I’m going to get my uniform.” Yosef spoke with exaggerated enthusiasm as if he was trying to shake off the gloomy atmosphere. “You should go see the captain.”

“All right.”

I watched him walk off and then climbed to my feet and headed in the direction of the captain.

On the way there, I encountered Clare, who was already wearing the new uniform.

“Good morning, Clare.”

“Good morning. The operation will commence in fifteen minutes, as scheduled. I’ll send the transmission to the Hakone base.”

“Understood. As our intelligence officer, the success or failure of this operation is all down to you, Clare. We’re counting on you.”

“You can always count on me.”

I was relieved to see Clare smiling confidently.

When I reached my destination, I found the captain giving orders with an unlit cigar in her mouth.

She’s as energetic as always... Does she never get tired?

“Good morning, Captain,” I said.

“Good morning. Our preparations are complete. It took some time, but now we can intercept transmissions to the Hakone base.”

“Even AAA-class transmissions?”

“Even those. Lieutenant Colonel Clare was able to hack into Noa’s main computer to give us full access for a short while. We can intercept everything up until they change their transmission frequencies.”

In that case, we need to start right now, I thought. If we wait too long, Elise might have the same thought and change the frequencies. If that happens, we’ll have wasted our time.

“Understood,” I said. “I know it sudden, but let’s start the operation right now. Please send a transmission to Noa.”

Under my orders, the captain and her subordinates began to move at once.

We would report my safety to the security department. That would set everything in motion.

“Transmission sent,” Clare said. A moment later she told us, “The traffic on Noa’s network is increasing.”

Clare had connected her own terminal to one of the computers and was analyzing the communication data.

One minute after being informed of my safety, Noa contacted Macho Man’s rapid response unit. I expected they’d contact the engineering department where my mom was working next.

“We’ve intercepted an AAA-class transmission,” a com officer said. “The transmission appears to be addressed to Miki Arakawa.”

It took them just two minutes to send word to my mom? That’s pretty fast. Next will be the reply from my mom, and then there should be an emergency directive sent to every department.

“I’ve found it!” Clare called. “This transmission isn’t being sent according to standard protocol. This is... I can’t believe it.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Kouki, Captain Yulia, you were both right. Someone within Noa is leaking information to New World. There’s a spy within the security department sending A-class transmissions.”

Just as I thought. Our plans are all being communicated to New World. But I never expected the spy would be in the security department. How did they infiltrate that department? It should have been possible to detect spies using the device for reading surface level thoughts that we discovered on the moon. Either way, Macho Man will handle it.

“Clare, contact my dad and have him lock down the security department,” I said. “The military department and the security department are the only departments where it’s permitted to carry weapons within Noa, so this puts Alice and my friends in danger.”

“Understood.”

If there’s a spy sending transmissions, what about the Chelyabinsk base?

I asked one of the operators to bring up a satellite image of the Chelyabinsk

base. For a moment, the tanks protecting the base perimeter were bathed in a flash of light.

“Where did it come from?” I asked.

“It was a strike from an air force unit stationed 120 kilometers east.”

“Impressive. Sadly for them, there was no one there.”

“Indeed,” Clare said. “This confirms that there are no spies with us or within the National Security Unit.”

While we were having this carefree conversation, the intensity of the attack on the Chelyabinsk base was increasing.

If we were in that base, we’d already be dead, I realized.

“Kouki,” Clare called out to me. “We’re approaching the Academy City defense line. There’s an unusually strong antisubmarine defense patrol because of New World’s attack. If we don’t surface, they’ll sink us.”

“Understood. Captain, I’ll leave you in command. New World is fond of submarines, so our escape should leave them with a bitter taste. Let’s do this in style.”

The captain nodded, put on her new Russian Navy jacket, and then grabbed the mic to give orders throughout the ship.

“All personnel prepare to surface immediately! This vessel will surface close to Academy City within Japanese territorial waters. After surfacing, we will be in the care of the Maritime Self-Defense Force. We are crew members of the nuclear submarine *Maria Feodorovna*, belonging to the Russian Navy. Don’t forget that we’re to be given asylum by Noa as the heroes that rescued and delivered Kouki Arakawa.”

I know, I added silently. *Once the Japanese government captures us, I’ll make it release you immediately. I’ve got no intention of sending the captain back to Russia or handing her over to the Japanese government. Delivering me home safely in a situation like this is no small feat. I’m sure no one will complain.*

It felt good to be back in Japan. It had only been four days, but it felt as though I’d been gone a long time.

I'm sure my mom will be busy handling an inquiry into all of this once I get back. But maybe she can make me something to eat first, and then I can take a bath...

**

"Here's some more for you to look at," Mom said.

There was now a mountain of paperwork in front of me.

With my personal terminal broken, I couldn't receive any data, but Mom had gone to the trouble of printing out all of the paperwork that was piled up in front of me.

Clare was sitting at another desk with a similar mountain of paperwork, looking over at me and grinning.

Is that pretty secretary of mine actually enjoying this?

"And here are the complaints from the Academy City Defense Force. Oh, I almost forgot! We have a request from the Russian Security Council for us to give back the submarine you came home in."

"Mom..." I complained.

"The VR technology department was held up while you were gone, Kou. There are a ton of reports from that department for you to deal with. And then there's..."

Oh, man. Mom is really angry. I don't know how to deal with her when she's this angry.

Mom was smiling at me, but she wasn't smiling with her eyes. I turned and looked at Alice in the corner of the room for help, but she avoided my gaze. Even Kon was hiding behind her own tail as she lay in Alice's arms. The captain and Anton remained behind me standing to attention as if they'd been turned to stone. I had nowhere to turn for help.

"I'm sorry..."

As soon as I apologized, Mom stopped piling on the paperwork. She slowly turned her head to look at me.

“I couldn’t quite hear that. What did you say?”

“I’m sorry for trying to do everything by myself! I’m sorry! So please help me with all of this!”

“You need my help?! But you didn’t need my help to run off to Russia. And when you found yourself in danger there, you stopped me from helping at all and said you’d handle everything yourself. Then you went ahead and blew yourself up in an old city of a foreign country before miraculously returning home in a secretly stored submarine.”

“I know...” I murmured.

“Well, all right. But promise me you’ll learn from all of this and stop trying to do everything by yourself in the future.”

“Okay.”

“Your dad is waiting for you on Noa Island. Go say hello. He was worried, so make sure you apologize.”

Even Macho Man was angry? Well, this was a big deal, so I can’t blame him.

I said, “Okay,” and then got ready to head to Noa Island for the first time in a long while.

Chapter 7: Back to the Multi-Race Coalition

Shuuichi Arakawa's Point of View

From the observation tower of the fifth training ground on G-88, I watched my subordinates during the ground training exercise.

The geography was putting the attacking side at a major disadvantage, and the multiple units were finding it difficult to work together.

I clutched the radio in my hand and yelled my orders at Squadron B: "Squadron B! Move forward, now! Squadron C is behind you and waiting for your asses to move!"

It was difficult for Squadron B to advance because the intense suppressing fire from the enemy hiding ahead of them was overwhelming.

Squadron A was attempting a flank attack, but they too had been stopped by a small number of enemy powered suits that were attacking them from either side.

"Commandant, we've received a weather report from the carrier ship *Siren* patrolling offshore," Elise reported. "Visibility is expected to drop rapidly due to low air pressure. It's going to be difficult to introduce further ground units or provide landing support..."

I checked the weather radar and quickly realized that Elise was right; there were no viable landing sites.

In the four hours since the operation started, we've put about 600 soldiers on the ground. I doubt we can do much more with just landing craft. All I can do now is have them withdraw and pin our hopes on a secondary landing operation.

"End the training exercise," I ordered. "Let's say that half of the attacking forces on the ground were killed while withdrawing. Have each unit reorganize with that in mind."

“Understood.”

I announced the end of the training session over the radio. Then the intense snowstorm rapidly dissipated and rays of sunlight broke through the clouds.

Ursna’s higher mages really are something, I reflected. It’s hard to believe that when 200 of them gather, they can change the weather within a 50-kilometer radius. I’m glad they’re on our side. Without them, we’d never be able to train for an invasion operation in Antarctica.

“Commander, perhaps we should employ the strategy that Kouki improved on in the past?” Elise suggested with her head bowed.

Now that the training was over, she was going back to calling me “Commander” instead of “Commandant.”

Yes, Kouki’s polar region strategy was looking like our most effective option. There was just one problem.

“That strategy involves having our elite forces rush the enemy’s headquarters,” I said. “I realize how effective it could be. We’d be entering the region from outside of the atmosphere using intercontinental ballistic missiles. But to do that, we’d have to fly.”

“That means...”

The only one capable of flying a powered suit with the necessary flight parts installed was Kouki. The rest of us could only hover for a short time, and even that took great effort. I had no idea how much training it would require until we could actually fly.

And based on Miki’s descriptions, there was no way to know how much experience Kouki had amassed before learning the ability himself.

“Training will resume after two hours,” I said. “Until then—”

I was interrupted by the sound of a knock at the door.

Who could that be? We’re in a training facility more than 1,800 kilometers away from Noa Island, so I doubt it’s a visitor.

“Come in,” I said brusquely. “You’d better have a good reason for—”

With my permission, two beautiful women entered the room, both accompanied by guards.



I couldn't help but cry out in surprise. "Princess Adrienne?! And Empress Victoria... Forgive my rudeness! I thought it was a soldier..."

"Please be at ease," Adrienne said. "It has been some time since our last meeting, Sir Shuuichi."

"Quite some time indeed," Victoria added.

The two of them greeted me with smiles without seeming at all bothered by my lack of manners.

But what brings them here? The higher mages of the Ursna Empire that Empress Victoria loaned to us are being treated as if they're our own officers. Even the knights from the Merkava Kingdom here to observe the battle have been treated with great respect.

I couldn't think of a reason for them to come all this way until Empress Victoria herself explained.

"Several days ago, Miki informed us of Noa's situation. And also about the matter involving your son, Kouki. Shortly after, the Ursna Empire and the Merkava Kingdom secretly held discussions with Noa."

"The matter we discussed was the prospect of sending volunteer soldiers to Noa," Adrienne added. "To put it briefly, we are considering sending soldiers from the Multi-Race Coalition Force into your world."

I welcomed the idea of the empire and the kingdom sending us soldiers. But soldiers from cultures on their level could hardly fight against New World; they'd be annihilated instantly.

"It's clear from the look on your face what you're thinking," said Victoria. "You don't believe that we can be of any use to you."

"No, I wasn't thinking that... But if you fight in our world, you'd be fighting an enemy with the same equipment that we use."

"I am well aware. Anyone standing in front of your rifles is easily shot down. Anyone hiding below the ground can be crushed by missiles. Even a surprise attack will fail in the face of your powered suits."

They're willing to give us soldiers, despite knowing this? Would they be foolish

enough to waste their own soldiers in hopeless battles? They must have some sort of plan...

“We will not fight,” Adrienne explained. “Instead, we will make it difficult for the enemy. If the enemy is hidden by the terrain, we will change the terrain. If the weather puts our side at a disadvantage, we will change the weather. If we cannot win against their powered suits, we will work our magic against the humans inside.”

“Perhaps we are little more than uncivilized barbarians to you, but we can learn from the examples of others,” Victoria added. “You have protected the empire and the kingdom. It is our turn to protect you.”

“We need not be concerned about magical energy. If we charge our magical energy with the gems created by Kon, we can use magic in your world.”

I had them all wrong... I've misunderstood the people of G-88. I thought they had no way to fight against our technology, but is that really true? The tactics they've just explained could be enough to drive us back and maybe even defeat us.

I could think of nothing more frightening than an enemy that could change the terrain and the environment. Such an enemy would make all maps and tactics worthless.

“I understand,” I said. “We’ll make a formal request for volunteer soldiers from the empire and the kingdom.”

“We will be at your service,” Adrienne replied.

“You can trust in us,” Victoria agreed.

“Oh, I forgot,” Adrienne put in. “Out of the demonic races providing soldiers, there was one race that volunteered for battle in the sea’s polar regions.”

“Which race?” I asked with trepidation.

I have a bad feeling about this. It's the same feeling I always have before hearing that Kouki's done something stupid again.

“The kraken race,” Victoria told me. “They were unable to participate in the previous war because the battles took place on land, but this time they’ll have a

part to play. In a previous mock battle, there was a mention of... nuc... nucle...?”

“You mean nuclear submarines?”

“Ooh! Yes, they defeated the nuclear submarine, *Tolstoy*. Slow weapons like torpedoes are of no use against krakens.”

The torpedoes carried by the *Tolstoy* were an improved version of the super cavitation torpedoes based on the Russian-made ZS-115 Grom, and they traveled through water at a speed of 200 knots.

I can't even imagine a creature that would consider something approaching at over 370 kilometers per hour slow. The thought of such a creature made my blood run cold.

There was another knock at the door.

“Please, come in,” I said.

It was Kouki who entered.

I'd heard from Miki that Kouki would be coming to G-88 to see me once she was done lecturing him. Knowing how angry Miki must have been, I decided I wouldn't give him any further lectures myself.

Instead, I had a question for him.

“Good timing,” I said. “Ursna and Merkava are both about to provide military support to Noa. I was wondering if you had any thoughts on this? I realize that, with the exception of a few races, they'll be outclassed on the battlefield, but I believe we need their help to set up our positions...”

Kouki tilted his head and looked at me curiously. Then he seemed to realize something. He nodded before taking a seat.

“Well...” he said, “I'll get right to the point. I think you've got it all wrong. Outclassed? That's just because these two nations don't know how to fight against an enemy with modern equipment. If they knew the right methods, it would be Noa at risk of being outclassed.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Empress Victoria. Tell me, if five powered suits were to appear in the capital city of the Ursna Empire, how would you defeat them?”

“Let me see... In the capital, mages can line the walls and produce an almighty fireball. Though that might not suffice to destroy a powered suit.”

Exactly. A powered suit couldn't be stopped so easily. The suit would be capable of withstanding temperatures of up to 10,000°C for a moment or two, assuming its cooler was operating correctly. Even if the suit could be stopped, this would only be effective against an attacking force no larger than several hundred soldiers.

“You're right, they wouldn't be destroyed,” Kouki said. “But I'd be able to defeat them with just four mages and two members of the mantis race. First, I'd use magic to turn the ground to mud around the powered suits. That would reduce maneuverability of the suits for a moment. Do you know what would come next, Dad?”

“They'd just jump to a location with more stable footing.”

“That's what I'd be waiting for. While they were in the air, I'd use magic that produced large fireballs and water-balls.”

“But using those types of magic simultaneously would cause an explosion!” Adrienne objected.

“Exactly, Princess Adrienne.” Kouki grinned. “You'd call it a steam explosion. In such a situation, the sensors used by powered suits would temporarily shut down. They'd recover within several seconds, but surrounded by dense steam, the visibility would be so poor that they'd be blind. Then the mantis race would strike the weakest parts of the suits. Essentially, their scythes would attack the joint portions.”

A mantis scythe would be enough to cut through the joint parts, I realized. If the ground suddenly turned to mud and then there was a steam explosion, I can't even imagine fighting during the confusion that would cause. When you think about it, Kouki's methods could be incredibly effective.

“Then I'd seal the immovable suits inside within rock-like domes and wait for their batteries to run out. Or you could use summoning magic to call something

like a golem. Given enough time, it could probably break apart a suit.”

I see. I was impressed. I’m surprised how many tactics there are, when you think about it that way. Kouki seems to be giving Empress Victoria and Princess Adrienne a lot to think about. I’ll leave this to Kouki. He’ll find a way to combine our modern technology with their magic. Someone like me or Cote would probably be weighed down by our common sense. I’ll leave it to Kouki to come up with the right tactics.

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Miki Arakawa’s Point of View

“Miki, it’s time,” Elise said quietly as she placed a cup of tea down on the table.

I nodded and then gave a signal to the member of staff waiting at the right side of my desk.

“Connecting...” appeared on the screen in front of me.

After a short amount of time, a pale-faced man appeared.

“Long time no see, President Shumsky.”

“Long time no see, Mrs. Arakawa.”

It had been approximately one hour since Kouki’s return to the Hakone base.

As always, the Russian president was looking unwell and sounding tired.

“The incident involving Captain Yulia and the submarine they’ve been secretly keeping must have caused you a lot of trouble.”

“Not at all.” The president looked troubled as he expressed his gratitude.

“Despite the incident involving your son, we’ve benefited greatly from the free broadcasting rights and the diamond mine.”

Personally, I’d wanted to call everything off after the Russians had failed to uphold Kouki’s deal with them. But Kouki had insisted I honor the original agreement.

“We’ll definitely profit from this!” he’d told the political department. “There’s

no risk to us!”

I hadn’t been able to understand his reasoning.

Perhaps it worked out well in one of his previous lives...

“The topic of today’s discussion...” President Shumsky said.

“Yes, I’d like to finalize the agreement regarding our attack on New World’s main base in Antarctica,” I said.

“Very well. You will have our full support.”

“I’m grateful for that. Please take a look at these documents.”

I used my terminal to show him the reinforcements coming from the world of G-88.

We’ve thought of good explanations for all of this, so sharing the information shouldn’t cause problems.

“This... I’m sorry, but... is this an image of a squid?”

“That’s right. It’s a life form created using squid genetics. Its formal name is the *G-88 series, type-kraken*. Noa’s weapons development department... Actually, we’re friends, so I’ll tell you everything. It’s a biological weapon that my son created.”

“Th-This is a weapon?!”

“Yes. This life form is 185 meters long, or more than 200 meters long if you include the tentacles. We estimate that they can move through the water at a speed of 480 knots. Their bodies are covered with a special mucus that makes them impossible to detect using sonar or heat sensors. And as you can see from the next photograph, they’re extremely obedient.”

As I spoke, I brought up the photograph of Kouki playing with a member of the kraken race. If I remembered correctly, this was the kraken named Muu. I’d been there at the time, but Muu had been incredibly friendly towards Kouki and Shingo and had picked them both up in its tentacles while speeding through the water. I would probably have thrown up if I’d traveled at that speed.

“The next thing I’d like to show you is the *G-88 series, type-dragon*. This is a

biological weapon created using dinosaur and monitor lizard genetics. It has a length of 30 meters and some of its internal body parts are mechanical, so it can emit plasma flames from its mouth. It can also fly at a top speed of Mach 6.7. These creatures are equally obedient.”

The photograph showed Alice and Aikawa riding on Lirin’s back while laughing. This white dragon wasn’t just obedient, she was a refined and cultured woman. But I could hardly tell the president that I’d enlisted creatures from another world to support us.

“Did Kouki create all of these creatures...?” he asked faintly.

“That’s right. I should mention that the outer skin of the dragon is extremely tough, so to stop it, you’d have to fire a barrage of railgun shells with a caliber of over 200 millimeters or overwhelm it with powered suit armor piercing shells.”

“It sounds like a monster.”

“These are all of our large-scale biological weapons. Now I’d like to introduce our biological weapons for use in land operations. This land biological weapon from the same series is known as the *type-arachne*. This creature was created by combining human and spider genetics. This is top secret, but we used my generics, so it can speak human language. It can speak some Japanese.”

The president looked at me in disbelief when I mentioned human genetics. But there was no other way to explain the arachne race, because the top half of their bodies looked like a human female.

Perhaps it was wrong of me, but I was glad that the human-looking part of each arachne was beautiful-looking, because it meant I wasn’t embarrassed to say they’d been created using my genetics.

I originally wanted a pure-spider type such as the queen of the arachne race to fight with us, but it turns out they can’t handle cold environments, I thought regretfully.

“Forgive me for asking... but are there any more such creatures?” President Shumsky asked.

“Of course. Though the *type-arachne* is the only creature that we tried

creating with human genetics.”

“But doesn’t the incorporation of human genetics raise concerns?”

“Yes... That’s why we only created one such type. If I had to justify this decision, I would tell you that only my genetics were used, so I didn’t violate the United Nations regulation forbidding the use of genetics of ‘a fellow human.’ You could argue that some of my genetics are shared by my son, but the experiment itself didn’t take place on Earth. This all took place on an orbital platform launched by Noa several days ago.”

This would all be considered very gray area. I had no doubt that the United Nations regulations would have to be rewritten, but that was a worry for another day. Experiments on this level would likely be pardoned once a strict set of conditions had been put in place and agreed on by both parties. Of course, this would be after agreeing to an inspection and clearly stating how we planned to use these new weapons.

“Similar experiments were conducted by my country, but they took us more than a decade to complete,” President Shumsky said. “I’m surprised that Noa had the technological capabilities to succeed in just a few months.”

“Oho. It’s no use hinting for more information. This project is considered highly classified even within my own research department. Only a handful of my researchers were in any way involved. So I’m afraid I can’t tell you anything more.”

I deliberately showed him an attractive smile to drive the point home. A frown would have worked just as well, but I had to remain friendly for the sake of the operation we were planning.

“Ha ha!” he chuckled. “Indeed. I understand that very well.”

“However, I expect there to be strong collaboration between Noa and Russia in the future.”

“...Of what sort?”

I’ve got a bite! Russia must be dying to get their hands on biological weapon technology. Too bad, Noa doesn’t even have that technology. I can just send them information gathered from the Ursna Empire’s soldiers with a few changes

and let them misinterpret it however they like. I'd like us to make an ally of a strong nation like the Russian Federation while we have the chance to surprise the United States, the EU, and the East Asia Alliance.

“That depends what sort of weapon information you want and how much,” I said. “This is all very hypothetical, but if favorable statements were continually made on our behalf during United Nations general assemblies and in secret meetings between heads of state with Noa in attendance, Noa could very quickly share details of our biological weapons projects, as well as prototype sixth-generation suit parts.”

“R-Really?!”

“Yes. We are also quite willing to assist in another attempt to launch the nuclear pulse propulsion rocket, *Nadezhda*, whose launch failed last year. By the way, we've investigated the reasons behind the failure of the launch.”

Last year, the Russian government had begun working on something called the Interstellar Spacecraft Project, similar to Project Orion undertaken by the United States long ago.

For Noa, creating such a spaceship would be a suitable research project for a child only, because we'd been able to study the materials left behind by Eve of the people of Adam.

We could suggest a few improvements, and they'd be able create a spaceship capable of a slow journey from Earth to Mars and back. Meanwhile, we were in the process of creating a spaceship capable of freely traveling through the solar system of G-88.

“That would put us on the level of allied nations. No, it would give us an even stronger relationship.”

President Shumsky appeared to be thinking hard about something. This may have been the most difficult decision he ever made during his long career as a politician.

Perhaps unconsciously, he loosened his tie with his right hand and drank his glass dry. Meanwhile, I added some milk to my tea and calmly stirred it.

“Very well,” he said at last. “The Russian Federation would like to enter into a

formal pact of friendship with Noa. Are you familiar with the Warsaw Pact that our nation once entered into?”

“I know it well. It’s more formally known as the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance.”

“That’s right. We could recreate it in the form of the Hakone Pact. I will offer you the support of the Federation and all of its allies.”

“I appreciate you making such a bold decision,” I said.

Incredible! This will give us the power to fight against even New World! I never thought we could establish such a friendly relationship! This makes me a little reluctant to hand over materials full of misleading information. Perhaps we could capture several hostile life forms from G-88 and deliver them to Russia. We could say that a gargoyle was a failed experiment, and based on their appearance, the Russians might believe us. And maybe we’ll make their spaceship a little more powerful.

“Let’s return to the original topic,” said the Russian president. “In the initial stages of the attack on the Antarctic, what would you have us do?”

“Ah, yes. Please have half of your National Security Unit gather in Vladivostok. Once they’ve gathered, our krakens equipped with human transport containers will come ashore. The National Security Unit will then remain on standby offshore near Academy City.”

“But entering Japanese territory is... Okay, I understand. I will contact you again after we have done so.”

“Thank you. I will await your response.”

Once the call ended, I began drinking my tea.

Next, I need to talk with Ms. Yamamoto from the technology academy. I wonder what happened to make her want to come here to speak with me. I’ve been wanting to ask her how Kouki is doing at the academy anyway, so it’s good timing.

I was rubbing my sore back muscles that had stiffened during the discussion with the president. Then there was a knock at the door.

That's odd. I wasn't expecting Ms. Yamamoto for another hour.

"Come in," I said.

"Is now a good time?"

It was Shuuichi who appeared. He must have just returned from Noa Island. He had a faint smell of gunpowder about him.

"As long as it won't take longer than thirty minutes..."

"I'd like for some of our forces to descend on an inland region of Antarctica. We'll need a high-altitude stealth jet. Can you prepare one for us?"

"We have a suitable prototype. It can fly higher than the Karman line."

Suddenly I realized: *Shuuichi probably doesn't know what the Karman line is. I'm glad I have a husband whose bravery I can always count on, but his intelligence has always been his weak point.*

Shuuichi's response was more or less what I expected: "Sorry, Miki. You'll have to dumb it down a little so I can understand."

"Ordinary aircraft fly between an altitude of 15,000 meters and 20,000 meters in a region known as the troposphere," I said. "The high-altitude spy planes that you've flown in can reach a maximum altitude of just over 25,000 meters. That region is the stratosphere, and it extends up to 50,000 meters. Have you heard of the stratosphere?"

"Yes."

"Above that, extending to an altitude of 85,000 meters is a region known as the mesosphere. The Karman line is above even that: an altitude of 100,000 meters. Basically, it's a line 100 kilometers above the Earth."

"That's space, right?"

"Exactly. Definitions vary, but it's not incorrect to say that everything above the Karman line is in space. The prototype jet X-55 is a stealth jet that flies an altitude of 130,000 meters at a speed of over Mach 9, which is 12,000 kilometers per hour, using rocket engines."

"Wouldn't it be detected by satellites and space debris radar?" Shuuichi

asked.

“Oh? I didn’t think you’d know about debris radar. It’s a stealth jet, so it won’t be detected. It has optical camouflage to prevent it from being sighted by satellites. When descending from altitude, it will be mistaken for a meteor if it has a stealth reinforced exoskeleton equipped. The only problem is—”

I would normally enjoy explaining the design, but remembering the reality made me trail off.

That’s right. It has a huge flaw...

Shuuichi understood what I was feeling, and looked at me sympathetically. “I realize it’s dangerous for the crew, but—”

“Huh? No, it’s not that. I’d never design something with that kind of deficiency. The problem is that the fuselage needs to have such a specific shape that we can’t fit any landing parts to it. In other words, once it takes off, all it can do is fly until out of fuel and then crash. And the X-55 is very, very expensive! Put simply, it’s worth as much as a dozen copies of Kouki’s fully equipped eighth-generation powered suit.”

That’s right... I was so focused on improving performance that the X-55 turned into an incredibly expensive disposable transport jet that’s twelve times more expensive than Kouki’s own suit, using up roughly three percent of Nod’s annual budget. Just the thought of using the aircraft makes my stomach hurt... but if we don’t use it, then it was a total waste to create it in the first place.

“Mass production would bring the cost down somewhat,” I said. “But we didn’t see any purpose for it other than data gathering purposes, so we only made one. You might as well make use of it.”

“Lately I’ve been thinking, could Kouki’s tendency to do so many crazy things be something he learned from you?” Shuuichi said. “I mean, take this aircraft that can’t land once it takes off, for example. It’s basically just a missile.”

Shuuichi can be so annoying at times! It was only meant to be a prototype aircraft! A human can fly in it, so I’m calling it an aircraft. I wish he’d leave me alone now that he’s asked what he needed to. I’ve got work to do.

“Don’t look at me like that...” he said. “I have more to ask you.”

“What is it?” I demanded.

“I want to borrow an Alice-type land battleship. The amphibious battleship *Miki* would be ideal. Once the remodeling is finished.”

The remodeled Alice-type amphibious battleship *Miki* weighed approximately 8,000 tons, was 420 meters long, 50 meters wide, and 35 meters high. It was fitted with four tri-axial 26-inch cannons. All 40 of the vertical launch system missile launchers that it had used before the remodel had now been removed, and in their place, there were thirty 20-millimeter railguns.

What’s more, there were three field-reversed fusion reactors aboard to supply the high amount of electrical energy required by the railgun shells and to support management facilities for overall command of Noa’s forces.

To put it simply, not only could this single ship take on the entire English navy, depending on the circumstances, this one ship might have the power to completely overpower the English navy.

Shuuichi thought Kouki’s tendency to do so many crazy things could be something he learned from me. But I suspect it stems from Shuuichi borrowing weapons like this one!

“Are you trying to wipe Antarctica off the map?” I asked incredulously.

“No. That’s not it. I thought of a good way to make use of it while we were talking. That’s why I want to get permission right away.”

“Fine. Take it. Just remember that if you fire the main cannons at New World’s non-combatants, such as their researchers, I’ll divorce you.”

“I’m not that stupid. Though I might threaten to shoot at them. I’m heading back to G-88. Send a messenger for me if you need anything.”

Shuuichi must have been pleased to have the chance to use our latest battleship. I sighed as I watched him leave the room with a grin on his face, and then I turned to Elise.

“Would you like me to make some more tea?” she asked. “And we might want to give Ms. Yamamoto some cake...”

“In that case, please have some cheesecake and strawberry shortcake ready.

I'm sure she likes sweet things. Could you also prepare some small snacks for her?"

While Elise was preparing things in the room's adjoining kitchen, I adjusted my makeup a little.

I really should apologize to Ms. Yamamoto. Other countries will learn about our use of biological weapons in the attack on Antarctica, so she'll be placed under some pressure from the United Nations. And she was always taking good care of my son. I should find some way to thank her.

"The materials gathered by the intelligence department said she was..."

I opened a desk drawer and picked out a file labeled "Kaori Yamamoto" from the large number of documents inside. I read through the notes on the file.

I see. She likes cars... It seems she most likes high-class cars that are considered classic cars.

It wasn't an interest that I understood at all, but I remembered something I'd seen in a Quartet Corp catalogue. That company was pleased that I'd purchased so many of their powered suit components, and they'd offered to give me one of their cars as a gift in return.

That's perfect. I'll have Ms. Yamamoto select one, and I'll give it to her.

"Miki, Ms. Yamamoto is here to see you," Elise said.

"Oh. Okay. Please bring out the appetizers."

I was startled at Elise's sudden words, but I composed myself and then moved over to a seat in the meeting area before sitting down.

About two minutes later, Ms. Yamamoto entered the room. Something seemed to be weighing on her mind.

"Long time no see, Principal Yamamoto," I said. "Is something wrong? You don't look well."

"Long time no see," she said. "I thought the United Nations would have contacted you last night. I've been asked to resign from my position as principal of the International Science and Technology Academy."

But why?! How could they? There must be some reason for this!

“It must be because of my son. Was this because he surfaced near Academy City in a submarine belonging to the Russian navy?”

“Yes. But don’t get me wrong, I realize that Kouki wasn’t at fault. I don’t know the details of the incident, but I heard that his life was in danger and he did what he needed to survive. However, there are those who dislike the idea of me being principal, and they put pressure on the United Nations behind the scenes. It was decided that my managerial abilities are insufficient.”

“That couldn’t be further from the truth!” I said furiously. “It’s thanks to you that my son was able to make good friends, and his experiences working with others at the academy have helped him mature. I must make sure I properly express this to the United Nations in a future report!”

What are they thinking?! No one could manage the academy better than she’s done. I’ll contact the committee right away and ask them to stop her dismissal.

Ms. Yamamoto stifled a laugh. “I’m sorry. You’re unexpectedly straightforward about all this, Mrs. Arakawa. I don’t think you should complain to the committee on my behalf. People would just think you were defending your son and trying to keep your preferred principal in place. It would damage your reputation.”

“But what about *your* reputation? What education authority will employ you after hearing that you were dismissed by order of the United Nations?!”

“I don’t mind. My job is to take care of my students. My job isn’t to take care of my own reputation. I do hate to leave when there’s so much more I hoped to accomplish, but I’d rather go quietly. Fortunately, I have savings and I can make a living as an independent home tutor.” Ms. Yamamoto smiled faintly as she talked about her choice to resign as principal.

Just at that moment, I received a message on my personal terminal. The message said that Principal Kaori Yamamoto would be replaced on the first day of next month.

So be it! In that case, I have an idea of my own. I won’t sit back and watch an exceptional teacher be reduced to the level of a small-time home tutor.

“I’ve just now been informed,” I said. “By the way, you said you intended to work as a home tutor. Have you accepted a work assignment yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“Then I have a proposal. Come work for Noa and serve as the home tutor of the children living here.”

“By the children living here, you must mean Kouki and Alice? And I suppose Shingo and Aikawa?”

“That’s right. In several years, they’ll have a major influence on this world. I’d like you to teach them how to be responsible researchers, for their own sake.”

“I’d be delighted. However, I expect there are others more suited to this task.”

“The truth is, there’s more to it. Unfortunately, it’s highly classified information, so you must promise not to make what I tell you public. I’m sure what I have to say will interest you.”

“I understand. I can’t promise to accept, but I won’t share what you tell me with anyone else.”

Materials from the intelligence department said that Ms. Yamamoto was highly trustworthy. I felt confident that I could tell her about the project I had in mind.

I produced a paper file labeled with the words “Bologna Project” from the drawer and handed it to her. The project had been named after Bologna University, the oldest university in the world. The aim was to establish a higher education institution on G-88.

We intended to create a massive educational institution in the Merkava Kingdom that would recruit students with no regard for age, sex, race, or nationality. Put simply, the idea was to recreate the International Technology Academy in another world, but on a much greater scale.

There were currently 1,600 students enrolled in the university, but the Bologna Project would gradually increase this number, until we created an enormous university with tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of

students.

“But...” She looked shocked. “This can’t...”

“I know it’s a lot to take in at once, but I think we can raise the bar and surpass the technology academy. Academy City owes its status as a city to the presence of the technology academy. Someday, the place where we pursue the Bologna Project may come to be known as Academy Nation. I’d like for you to serve as the first principal of that academy.”

“I’d be the first principal?”

“That’s right. I believe this is a good opportunity for you. But please, help yourself to tea and some cake.”

I’d completely forgotten that we’d prepared tea and food. I offered the tea to her, but Ms. Yamamoto remained focused on the documents in front of her.

As an educator, this must all be very exciting to her.

“I have a question,” she said. “It says here that Noa will provide the funding, but does this just refer to scholarships? Or does this include maintaining facilities and supplying experimental materials?”

“Everything will be provided,” I said. “In truth, Noa, Merkava, and Ursna will all make financial contributions. Over time, we’ll also encourage other nations to make financial contributions of their own.”

“This world appears to be an aristocracy. What about those who attempt to use their social status to enter the academy without passing entrance exams? Would they be refused admission?”

“Of course. Though we must make some considerations for my son, so there will be some exceptions.”

“...Very well. If you think I’m qualified, then I’d like to offer you my services.”

That’s a relief. This may be the greatest achievement I’ve made today. If I can entrust this project to Ms. Yamamoto, I can consider the project to be halfway to success already.

Next, I need to get the political department involved so we can work out the details with Merkava and Ursna. Then we can begin constructing the actual

academy. This is going to be fun! I can't even imagine what new technological fields we might create.

"I was hoping to give you a little something to congratulate you on this appointment," I said. "And also to thank you for taking good care of my son. Am I right in thinking that you like classic cars? If you like, you can choose one of these cars and I can have it provided to you."

I handed her the catalogue, and she looked through it excitedly.

"Wow!" she cried. "These are classic Quartet models! How did you get hold of this catalogue? Can I really choose any I like?! I'd cry if you changed your mind now!"

Elise was watching Ms. Yamamoto with surprise. A moment ago she'd seemed like a solemn educator, but now her refined demeanor was gone without a trace. She began to hum to herself as she enjoyed the cake and browsed through the catalogue.

I've got so much more to do today. I really hope she doesn't want to stay here in my office for too long.

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Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

"I'm worn out..." I murmured.

"Kon..."

In the joint training performed with the Multi-Race Coalition Force this morning, Noa's ground forces had gone through hell trying to survive an all-out assault from the air, and somehow they'd earned a passing grade from Clare. Now, everyone was exhausted.

Without meaning to, Kon and I drifted off to sleep in the officers' lounge on Noa Island without having eaten anything.

"Buh hee!" Shingo cried when he found us.

"What's up?" I asked him. "It's not like you to get dressed up and come out all

this way.”

Shingo was wearing a brigadier general’s uniform. It had been provided for him to use just in case he ever needed it. No one expected him to take part in battle, but he needed a high rank to be able to get into the research areas.

“I’m here to see the *Type 0* suit! The whole thing has been kept secret. I knew it existed, but I didn’t get to see it. Now that its classification level has been lowered, I thought I’d come take a look.”

“That explains that.”

What my friend was saying sounded plausible, but I doubted he would have left the internet to come to G-88 just for that reason. Aikawa was going to be attending a G-88 space exploration strategy conference today, but even that didn’t fully explain it. Something had to be up. Why was he here creeping me out by staring at me with upturned eyes?

“Shingo, I’m sure Alice and Aikawa find that face cute, but to me it’s just creepy,” I said. “Let me guess. You want *Satanachia*?”

“Huuuh?! No... I... it’s... ah...”

“What language are you talking? I hope you realize they’ll be removing the flight unit. If you want it to fly, you’ll have to fit our prototype to it. I’m also guessing that the weapon control unit that my dad’s unit fitted to it will be removed. And the weapons too, obviously.”

No matter how kind my mom might be, there’s no way she’d give someone the eighth-generation suit Satanachia with all the military-grade weapons still installed. I’m not sure she’ll even want to hand over the frame, so the armor might be reverted back two generations to sixth-generation armor. Considering the current state of the world, it’s still cutting-edge equipment.

“Can I really have it?” Shingo asked hopefully.

“Sure. I have the *Type 0* suit. But in exchange, I want you to help me come up with a name for the *Type 0*.”

“Why not just give it another demon name like Satanachia?”

I do like demon names, but Alice will be with me this time, so I’d prefer

something different. But I haven't been able to think of any other ideas, so now I'm stuck. In Russia, names of natural phenomena like Mirage, Storm, and Lightning are popular, while Japanese powered suits tend to be named after mountains like Fuji, Tsurugi, and Hiuchi. Everything here at Noa tends to get named using numbers, and that gets boring.

"Okay. How about a monster from Japanese myths?" he said.

"Something like *Yamata no Orochi* or *Kagutsuchi*? Those names sound cool, but they don't suit Alice. I doubt Kon would like them, either. Would you? You're a girl, after all."

Kon was on the table and was having no trouble drinking vegetable juice through a straw. She gave a slow flick of her tail in response. Sure enough, she didn't seem to like the idea.

"Well, what about the name of an angel? I'm sure Alice and Kon would both be happy with an angel's name."

"That's a good idea! We could consider names of female goddesses, too."

Kon used her magic to create a message explaining why this was a bad idea: "There are many within the multi-race coalition who tell tales of battles fought against the angels from these myths. I doubt they'd be pleased with such a name."

I think some members of the spirit race have passed down stories like that for several generations, I remembered. Well, that rules out angels... Now I'm really stuck.

"What about Alice? Have you tried asking her?" Shingo suggested.

"My mom called for her after midday training finished. She's stuck in the medical ward this afternoon so they can check what effects the equipment might have had on her brain. She also said that I could choose the name myself."

"Right. Megu is busy working today, so I can't ask her, either."

Megu?! He's started calling Aikawa Megu now?! I'm going to punch him! Lately, I've been too busy to get to know Alice better. Meanwhile, he's messing

around with Aikawa the whole time?!

“Sounds like you two are getting along great, you dirty rat,” I growled. “How far have you actually gone?”

“Buh hee?! You sound abusive all of a sudden... Lately, Megu’s been spending all of her time on the Manned Platform Project to launch a satellite into orbit around G-88. Something like that wouldn’t be possible back on Earth. Keep this to yourself, but I heard she’s busy with some sort of outer space childbirth project.”

“Wait, you mean...”

“Yeah. There were some experiments that she heard about back on Earth that she wants to try out here. This is happening with the consent of a married couple of researchers who are acting as test subjects. And if anything goes wrong, there are people ready to use healing magic. I’m more interested in the ‘equipment’ belonging to the members of Chernobog you brought back.”

“Some of them are part machine, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. Those people also want to do some things that would violate pacts on Earth. Too many people think they can do whatever they want now that pacts don’t apply to us. It caused some trouble when one of them was grumbling about wanting to have a chainsaw installed within their arm.”

I thought Macho Man’s unit just did whatever they wanted, but Chernobog is on another level... I reflected. I mean, just recently, a group of Chernobog members caused some trouble in the Merkava Kingdom, and the captain had to beat them senseless.

I told Shingo about it, and he nervously asked me what they’d done to deserve that.

“A while back, a horde of monsters appeared in an area where Noa was responsible for maintaining public order. A fast carriage was sent out with a message from one of the villages nearby, and then the members of Chernobog led an assault...”

“Buh hee, don’t you mean a defense?”

“No, it was more than just defense. They headed out with armored personnel carriers equipped with 20-millimeter autocannons! When they reached the village, they wiped out all of the monsters while shouting things like, ‘Hyahaa! Stay back you pathetic weaklings. Leave the monsters to us!’”

“That’s overdoing it a little, but I’m sure they meant well.”

“The problem is what happened next. They could have just finished the job and gone home, but instead they took the personnel carrier to a nearby post station town to have a drink. And they didn’t just carry weapons for self-defense; they took all of their heavy weaponry with them, still loaded with live ammo.”

Their guns all used biological authentication systems to prevent anyone else from using them, but that had still caused a lot of trouble.

In fact, the whole reason we’d started using authentication systems in the first place was because some members from Macho Man’s unit had allowed a mage from the Ursna Empire to try out their weapons without authorization.

I imagined that a good-looking female mage had asked if she could try firing just two or three rounds, or something stupid like that.

“But still, they’re well-liked,” I went on. “Whoever defeats a monster can use the monster parts however they like, and they sold all those for drink money and then packed what was left over into bags to give to an orphanage and a church. They were trying to be discreet, but it was obvious who’d done it.”

Back on Earth, I’m sure no one would have realized. But here on G-88, the only people who use military backpacks made of synthetic fibers are members of Noa. Packing backpacks full of gold and silver coins along with a few copper coins received from shops as change made it a little obvious. That’s why probably the captain beat them senseless and kept them in the detention barracks for five days.

While thinking about how shy that unit could be, I suddenly thought of a name. “Shingo, what do you think of ‘Lycoris’?”

“What? That’s a sudden change in subject.”

“I’m talking about the name of the *Type 0*! Lycoris, as in the red spider lily.”

“That’s a good name! Those flowers are striking and beautiful, and they’re considered ominous, so considering the enemy’s point of view, it’s a great name for a combat-use powered suit. What do you think, Kon?”

“Kon! Kyuu!”

Kon seemed to like it, too.

I liked the way lycoris flowers looked, but that wasn’t my only reason for choosing that name. *In the language of flowers, a red spider lily means, “You are all I think about.” I’ve chosen that with Alice in mind.*

But there was another reason, too. The red spider lily could have another meaning: reincarnation.

That second meaning made me feel as though the name was just right for me.

Afterword

Dear Readers, sorry for the long wait. My name is Nyun.

I hope you're all in good health despite the summer heat. For some reason, I catch a cold every summer, so this year I'm taking good care of my health and trying not to repeat the mistakes that I ordinarily make each year.

Me, a Genius? I Was Reborn into Another World and I Think They've Got the Wrong Idea! is already on its third volume. I'm incredibly grateful to everyone who has supported my unsophisticated writing, and incredibly grateful to all of my readers.

In this third volume, we finally see some action from the terrorist group New World, the mysterious attackers from volume 1 who cause endless problems for Noa and the protagonist Kouki.

What sort of fight will there be between Noa and an armed force with equivalent organizational strength, scientific knowledge, and personnel? And of course, what kinds of misunderstandings will occur?

This volume also continued the theme from volume 2. Namely, I've slipped in a historical mystery that I'm personally interested in.

I'm sure many of you will have realized this already, but the moon relic that started things off in volume 2 was based on rumors of a mysterious monolith that was said to be covered up by NASA. I don't know if there's any truth behind the rumor, but there's a certain sort of romance to the idea.

The historical mystery that I slipped into this volume is the "Antarctic mystery." There have long been rumors of a secret Nazi base or UFO base on the Antarctic continent. In fact, Operation Highjump mentioned in this volume is a genuine historical event.

I encourage you to look up the details of this operation if you're interested; I expect you'll find it quite mysterious, but that's all I have to say on that topic for now.

In my world, I'd like to use the Antarctic mystery as the inspiration for a secret New World base that takes the form of an impregnable natural fortress.

In this third volume, Dr. Sandra was mostly mentioned in name and only appeared in a flashback scene, but I'd like her to be a relatable character. My initial idea was, "I'll make a mad scientist version of Miki!" but I built on this to make her somewhat pitiable. She's a genius scientist who was misunderstood and was denied her chance to find glory. Perhaps she merely created New World so that she'd achieve some level of recognition, or perhaps...

Please look forward to learning more about her in the future.

Furthermore, let's talk about our hero, Kouki. Actually, no... His mother Miki is always demonstrating an equal level of genius. For her son's sake, she managed to get the new powered suit, the *Type 0*, to an operational state despite it being incomplete, and now its performance surpasses existing powered suits.

Since there was no convenient place to mention it, the formal name of the "orbital observation data collection prototype jet X-55" didn't appear anywhere in the text of this volume.

Other mega weapons have also made their appearance, including the "remodeled Alice-type amphibious battleship, *Miki*," and you may well wonder for what purpose it was remodeled.

Finally, there's our protagonist, Kouki.

Following on from the war in another world from volume 2, he was thrown into the battlefield where he had his fateful meeting with the "Chernobog Combat Unit," the worlds' strongest special forces unit. This has put him face-to-face with characters like Captain Yulia who are more intimidating than any characters we've encountered so far. How will he develop from this point onward? I hope you will continue to watch our main character develop.

Moving on from the highlights of some points of this third volume, I'd like to give my usual current status report.

There was actually another incident going on behind the scenes as this novel was about to be published. The incident in question is what's known as an "HDD crash." That's right. I had to go through that nightmare scenario.

There were several reasons for this happening, but S-sama who is working on this project always has to deal with a lot of trouble, and this incident caused yet more trouble. This led to me ceasing to make updates to the web version of the novel on the *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* website, and it's been a vicious cycle.

This has taught me the importance of backups. And now, although I didn't bring it up until now, I'd like to talk about the online story. It really is great to talk about it! I don't know why I've avoided the topic until now.

In the end, this finished volume has become somewhat different from the story I originally started writing, but having read this revised version, I think it might have actually turned into something better...

Partway in, I tried changing the way our new character, Ageha, talks, but then it just didn't seem right, and the whole process became quite difficult.

Thank you to *Narō* users and readers of this volume who still didn't give up waiting for web novel updates even though they came to a stop. It's thanks to you that I've been able to keep going. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving me this opportunity. I truly appreciate your support.

In the next volume we will finally see the battle with New World... I expect that Kouki will protect Alice through his courage and the power of misunderstandings as a large-scale mobilization occurs. Perhaps it's strange for the turning point in the story to be reached at volume 4 rather than at volume 3, but I think that in a certain sort of way, that's the Nyun style.

I truly hope to see you all again in volume 4, but for now, I must lay my pen to rest. I hope you can continue to enjoy *Me, a Genius? I Was Reborn into Another World and I Think They've Got the Wrong Idea!* in the future!

I write this on a day in July 2016 as I read your comments on the web version of *Me, a Genius? I Was Reborn into Another World and I Think They've Got the Wrong Idea!*

Nyun

(Editor's note: This volume was published in July 2016 and as of August 2018, when this English edition is released, no volume 4 has been scheduled for

Japan. The author stopped posting updates on the webnovel version in 2017; however, he has recently posted some blog updates saying he is writing again. We'll let you know if/when that volume 4 appears!)

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Me, a Genius? I Was Reborn into Another World and I Think They've Got the Wrong Idea! Volume 3

by Nyun

Translated by Shaun Cook Edited by Emily Sorensen

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