

ROOT DOUBLE

ルートダブル ビフォー・クライム アフター・デイズ

*Before Crime*After-Days*

**After*



WRITTEN BY Souki Tsukishima & Toru Tsukishima

ILLUSTRATED BY MIKEOU

©YETI / REGISTA

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Character Page](#)

[Character Page 2](#)

[Character Page 3](#)

[Character Page 4](#)

[Main Character Profiles](#)

[√After 2 Verse](#)

[√A Prologue: 【Heroes and Monsters】 9/16/2030 6:19](#)

[√A Chapter 01: 【Awakening and Forgetting】 9/16/2030 9:16](#)

[√A Chapter 02: 【Headway and Encounter】 9/16/2030 9:28](#)

[√A Chapter 03: 【Meltdown and Time Limit】 9/16/2030 9:44](#)

[√A Chapter 04: 【Carnage and Corpses】 9/16/2030 10:12](#)

[√A Chapter 05: 【Teamwork and Struggle】 9/16/2030 10:35](#)

[√A Chapter 06: 【Reunion and Separation】 9/16/2030 11:08](#)

[√A Chapter 07: 【Last Wishes and Mission】 9/16/2030 11:31](#)

[√A Chapter 08: 【Means of Survival and Hope】 9/16/2030 11:52](#)

[√A Chapter 09: 【Misery and Suspicion】 9/16/2030 12:15](#)

[√A Chapter 10: 【Complications and Rifts】 9/16/2030 12:35](#)

[√A Chapter 11: 【Past and Present】 9/16/2030 1:00](#)

[√A Chapter 12: 【Good and Evil】 9/16/2030 1:32](#)

[√A Chapter 13: 【Tribulation and Determination】 9/16/2030 2:16](#)

[√A Chapter 14: 【Life or Death Struggle】 9/16/2030 2:33](#)

[√A Chapter 15: 【Truth and Despair】 9/16/2030 3:05](#)

[√A Epilogue: 【Continue and Restart】 9/16/2030 3:16](#)

[√Before Preview](#)

[Other Series Pt. 1](#)

[Other Series Pt. 2](#)

Root Double -Before Crime * After Days- VAfter

Souki Tsukishima & Tora Tsukishima

Original Story by Yeti / Regista

Translation by Charis Messier

Illustration by Mikeou

CG Coloring by eco*

Illustrations from the game used with permission from Yeti / Regista

Original Title Design by Yeti / Regista

Editing by Nicole Brugger-Dethmers

Book Design A.M. Perrone

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Root Double -Before Crime * After Days- VAfter

© 2012 by Souki Tsukishima & Tora Tsukishima

First published in Japan in 2012 by

Kodansha BOX.

Based on the game first released in Japan in 2012 by Yeti / Regista.

English translation rights reserved by

Cross Infinite World.

English translation ©2019 Cross Infinite World

All rights reserved. In accordance with U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, email the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the email below.

Cross Infinite World-

contact@crossinfworld.com

www.crossinfworld.com

Published in the United States of America

Visit us at www.crossinfworld.com

Facebook.com/crossinfworld

Twitter.com/crossinfworld

crossinfiniteworld.tumblr.com

First Digital Edition: September 2019









Main Character Profiles

👊 Watase Kasasagi ... 32 years old. Male.

Captain of Rokumei City Fire Department's Special Elite Rescue Squad SIRIUS. He has a body and will of steel. He's prepared to do or die.

👊 Kazami Tachibana ... 28 years old. Female.

Lieutenant with the Special Elite Rescue Squad SIRIUS. She's a capable officer who never loses her composure in dire situations.

👊 Jun Moribe ... 20 years old. Female.

A rookie rescue worker with the Special Elite Rescue Squad SIRIUS. She's still green behind the ears, but her heroism makes up for what she lacks in experience.

👊 Yuuri ... Late teens. Female.

Survivor in need of rescue. She's a mysterious girl of few words who's trapped inside LABO during the lockdown.

👊 Ena Tsubakiyama ... 25 years old. Female.

Survivor in need of rescue. An eloquent high school teacher at Rokumei Academy.

👊 Keiji Ukita ... 35 years old. Male.

Survivor in need of rescue. A Junior Fellow at the 6th Laboratory of Atomic and Biological Organization (LABO) who failed to evacuate after the explosion.

👊 Natsuhiko Tenkawa ... 16 years old. Male.

Survivor in need of rescue. A student at Rokumei Academy who somehow ended up trapped inside LABO.

👊 Mashiro Toba ... 16 years old. Female.

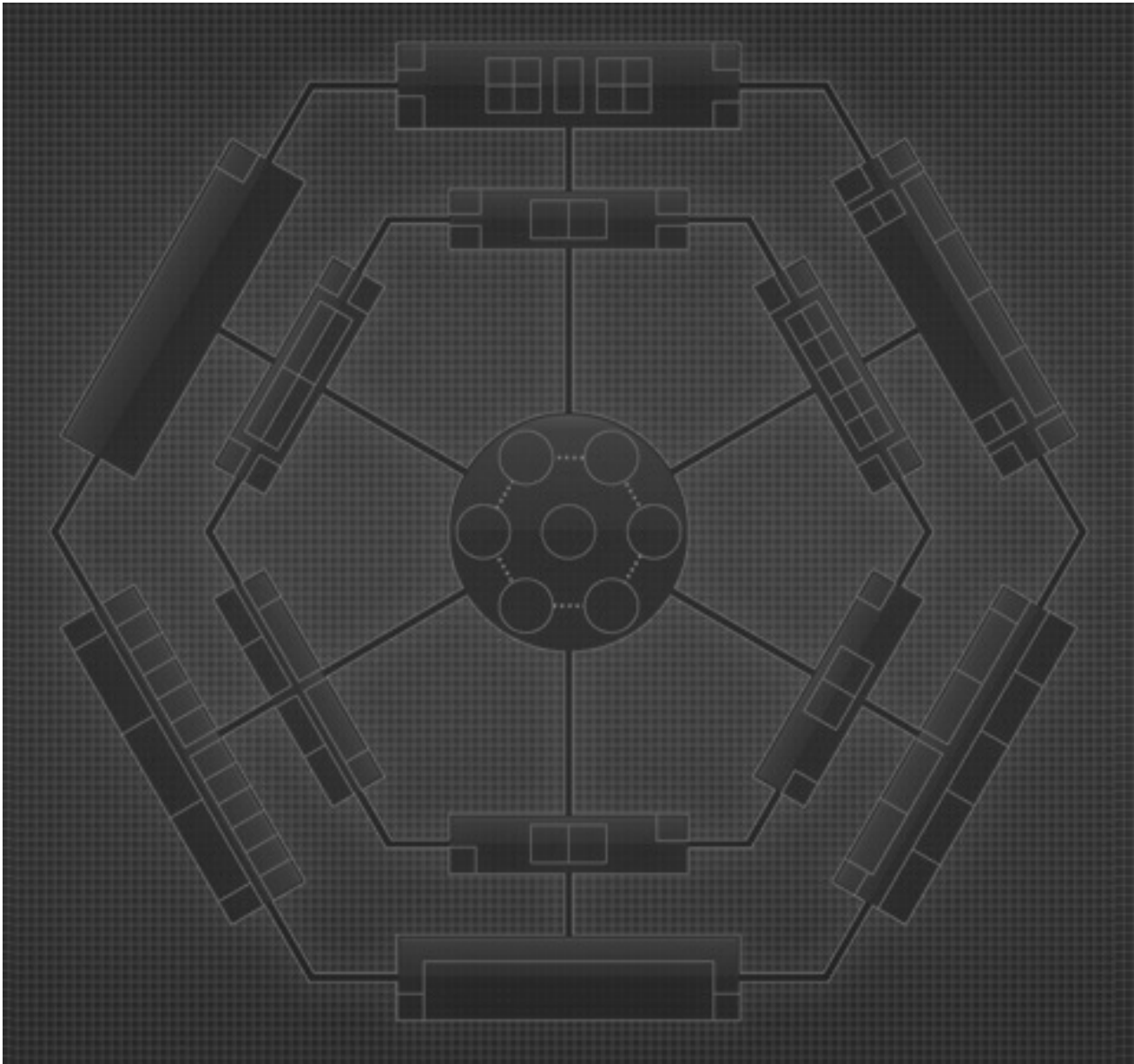
Survivor in need of rescue. A student at Rokumei Academy who got trapped inside LABO.

👊 Louise Yui Sannomiya (Salyu) ... 13 years old. Female.

Survivor in need of rescue. A student at Rokumei Academy who got trapped inside LABO.



***THEY WILL BE GATHERED TOGETHER AS PRISONERS IN A PIT;
THEY WILL BE SHUT UP IN A PRISON, AND AFTER MANY DAYS THEY
WILL BE PUNISHED.
ISAIAH 24:22 (ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)***



▼ 9/16/2030 6:19 AM

Rokumei City Fire Department, Central Station

Watase

AT 6:19 AM on September 16, 2030, sirens reverberated through the fire station like a trumpet heralding the end. Unrest hung over the isolated research city like an unrelenting fog.

An emergency alert blared through Rokumei City's fire department: "An explosion of unknown origin has occurred at the 6th Laboratory of Atomic and Biological Organization located just outside the city."

The announcement rocked the central fire station: they weren't given enough information to determine the scale and danger surrounding the accident, but due to the importance of the affected laboratory, the fire department made a prompt decision to respond to the call in full force with every resource at their disposal.

6:20 AM—one minute after the initial alert, orders to dispatch were made to Rokumei City Fire Department's Special Elite Rescue Squad SIRIUS, the finest rescue squad in the country.

All SIRIUS teams boarded the helicopter and rushed to the accident eight miles from the station. By 6:27 AM, only eight minutes after the fire call, all sixteen members had arrived at the scene.



THE enormous research facility towering over Lake Rokumei is commonly referred to as LABO. Unprecedented chaos ensues within its sterile walls. Several hundred people wearing either white lab coats or black business suits crowd the spacious entrance hall—all staff members who had successfully escaped from the facility's various floors.

Warning alarms continue blaring through the hall, the marble floor occasionally shaking underfoot as shockwaves from explosions still occurring underground travel to the surface. People flock toward the exits, screaming.

We, the members of SIRIUS Team A, move against the flow as we head

deeper into the facility.

Fully clad in hazmat suits, Team A is made up of five members including myself, the captain. I stand in front of my subordinates and shout, “Listen up, folks! Many people are still trapped within this facility, but this isn’t an ordinary dispatch. Anything can happen at this site. Expect the unexpected.”



My subordinates gasp inside their hazmat suits as more explosions sound off underground. Fires seem to have broken out, as well.

“Our team’s mission is to save lives, but you are humans *before* you are rescue workers. As long as you come back alive, too, that’s one more life saved.”

Not that anyone in this squad will readily obey that order—they are all men and women who have repeatedly put their lives on the line to carry out the mission.

I look around at the faces of the teammates I’ve served with until today and continue, “Don’t give up! Not even in the worst of situations. Mission commenced!”

“Yes, sir!” All four teammates raise their voices in unison—a hero’s battle cry.

We rush inside the scene of the disaster none the wiser about what awaits us within.

Thus, the curtain rises on what will later be called “SIRIUS’s Longest Day.”



THE members of SIRIUS have one common conviction: see through the mission assigned to us no matter what. More than once, though, situations far exceeding our expectations have struck our team.

SIRIUS’s Longest Day Incident Report:

6:35 AM: Radio communications between SIRIUS members was cut off due to interference.

6:42 AM: 85 percent of the route connecting LABO’s basement floors to the surface was inaccessible.

6:54 AM: Fires spread to roughly 40 percent of the basement floors.

7:02 AM: LABO’s security system switched into lockdown mode. All bulkheads shut automatically.

Additionally, in the short seventeen minutes before 7:19, three people died, and three others sustained serious injuries.



IN the midst of this extraordinary disaster and confusion, I was separated from my subordinates and am now making my way through the facility alone. I race through the blazing corridors, aiming for the inner depths—in search of those who may yet be trapped within.

As I run with urgency nipping at my heels, a distant memory flitters into my mind. On this same day sixteen years ago, I lost everything. I'd been racing through orange flames on that night too. But, having failed to save anyone, I'd become the sole survivor. The day of atonement has finally come. Regret and duty push me forward.

At last I cross through the sea of flames and open the closed door, unveiling the bizarre sight beyond.

What is this place?

On the other side is a massive hall drenched in silence and a cold stillness that is out of place for a facility engulfed in fire. Several large metal contraptions connected by cables fill the serene space.

This isn't my first time here. Under normal circumstances, an ordinary person isn't allowed to set foot inside this area.

There aren't any survivors in need of rescue here. My business finished, I try to leave, when something grabs my wrist.

"Wha—?!" Startled, I jerk my neck to the side.

What I see holding my wrist is no human. It's a "monster" with the devil's smile. It looks no different from a normal human being, but I know it's the same abomination I encountered sixteen years ago. It's a fearsome being that uses inhuman powers and infringes on mankind and society.

My senses, well trained from my line of work, send warning bells screeching through my head. *I'm screwed! I have to run!*

The moment I try to shake off the monster's hand, intense pain courses through me as if my brain is being crushed in its fist.



“GRAUAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” I cry out from pain unlike anything I’ve experienced before. My battle-hardened body is helpless before the monster’s *power*. My willingness to throw away everything, including my life, for the mission is shattered in an instant. A shaky cry rips out from the back of my throat. “Ah...ahh....UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

I run away without giving a damn about anything else but survival.

I’ll be killed if I don’t run. Who I am will be extinguished like a candle being blown out.

But the monster behind me sees through it all. **“I WON’T LET YOU ESCAAAAPE!”**

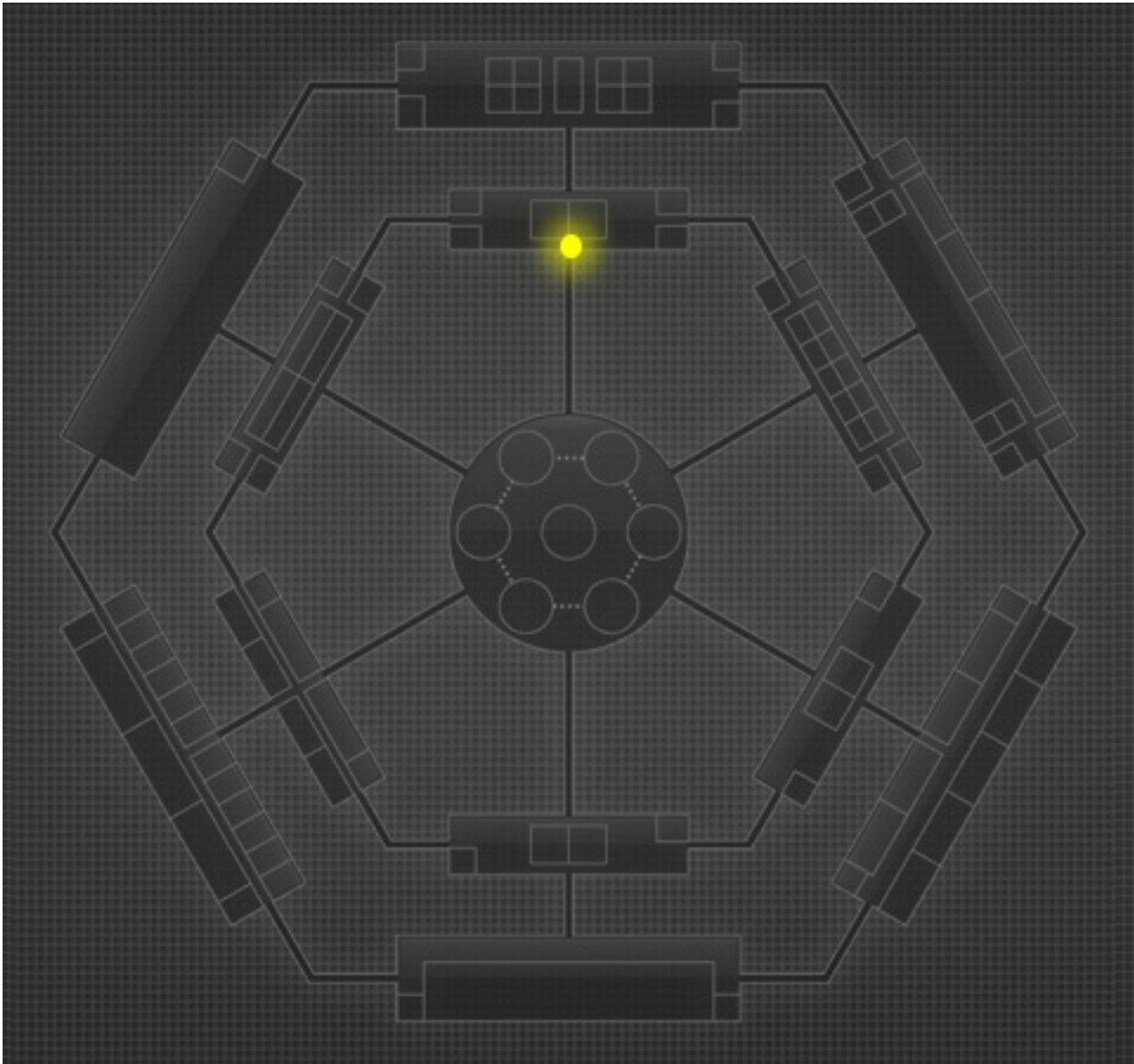
With its shriek, something explodes inside my mind. “AUGH! UOFF...!”

That’s the last thing I remember. Like a light switch being clicked off, my consciousness vanishes into the darkness.



LONG past the time that was frozen for me, I hear a voice telling me to wake up. Or maybe it’s the memory of someone saying that. At the bottom of the prison I was trapped in, I hear that voice, and time moves for me once more.

vA Chapter 01: 【Awakening and Forgetting】 9/16/2030
9:16



▼ 9:16 AM

LABO Basement Area 1, Inner Ring

Watase

MY consciousness is inside endless darkness. A closed-off world with nothing in it. Sight, sound, touch, smell, taste—I've been severed from all my senses. There's no world around for me to interact with.

What the heck is going on? What happened to me?

Fragmented memories and emotions flicker through my mind as I rack my brain for answers: the smell of blood and mind-boggling pain, imminent death and the fear of what was coming, something dreadful trying to erase me for good—

Did I...freakin' die...?!

No, I didn't. I just heard a thumping heartbeat. The sound of my heart beating. I can hear. I have control of my five senses. My body and mind both exist together.

I'm...ALIVE!

"...tain! Please come back to us, Captain!"

I open my eyes to the sound of a woman speaking right over me. The first thing I see is the faces of two people I don't recognize. To my left is a tall woman wearing orange coveralls over her broad and muscular shoulders. She gives off an air of maturity, with cleverness lighting up her amber eyes and her vulpine facial features.



She cries out in relief when she sees me awake. “Ah! You’ve finally come to! I’m so glad you’re okay!”

“Wh-What?”

The other woman stares down at my bewildered face and lets out a reassured sigh. “Thank God! You didn’t even twitch when we called your name. I thought you’d kicked the bucket!” She speaks like a young boy with a youthful voice. She’s short, baby-faced, and has a tooth protruding beneath her upper lip. She’s wearing the same orange coveralls as the other woman.

But I don’t recognize either of them. *Wh-Who are they? Who’s this captain?*

Confused beyond confusion, I scan my surroundings. I’m inside an unfamiliar building. I seem to have passed out in a corridor. Fluorescent lights illuminate the corridor where thick doors are lined up at equal intervals. Because there are no windows, I can’t tell whether it’s day or night.

“What is this place...? Why the heck am I—” Intense pain suddenly courses through my head, stopping me short. “AUGH!”

“Captain?!” The women raise their worried voices.

My arms come into view as I instinctively clutch my aching head. Apparently, I’m wearing the same orange coveralls as them. Thick leather gloves cover my hands and waterproof rubber boots protect my feet.

Incoherent images of disasters, accidents, and rescues zip through my mind. *Is this some sort of firefighter uniform? Does that make these women, and myself, firefighters? But...I don’t feel like one.*

I have no recollection of being a part of a fire brigade. Or more like I have no recollection of anything at all. For whatever inexplicable reason, I have no idea who I am.

“Who...in the world am—”

The woman with the protruding canine tooth creases her brow at my utterance. “L-Lieutenant! Captain’s not acting right!”

How was I supposed to respond to that?

The more mature woman being called lieutenant studies my face. "...Captain, do you not recognize us? Do you know your name?"

"My name...? Uhh, I'm..." I falter without an answer.

KA-BOOM! The air trembles with a roaring sound that shakes the ground.

"Wh-What was that?!"

Ignoring my shock, the women exchange apprehensive looks.

"Another explosion?! Let's move out, Moribe!"

"O-Okay! Wait here, Captain!"

"Wha-?! H-Hey!" With no understanding of the situation, I chase after them. Running, I shout, "Wait for me!"

The baby-faced woman called Moribe glances over her shoulder. "Captain?! I told you to wait!"

"I-I can't, not until you tell me what's going on! What was that sound? What's going on?!"

"HUH?! You don't even know the situation we're in?!"

"N-Nope..."

"You'll figure it out if you come! This way!"

I see a large iron door at the end of the corridor past her. The lieutenant operates the terminal beside it, and the door slides open with the sound of releasing air pressure.

An intense wave of heat surges through the opening and is upon us in seconds.

"What the...?!"

A sea of fire blazes on the other side of the door, the corridor beyond engulfed in flames. Sparks are flying in every direction and a heat haze distorts visibility. I tremble with fear before the fiery inferno, but the women quickly take action as if they're unfazed by it.

"Moribe, get a hose ready!"

“Roger! Outta the way, Captain!” Moribe shoves me aside and pulls a hose from the fire hydrant on the wall. The lieutenant takes it and points the nozzle toward the wild flames. “Lieutenant, here comes the water!” Moribe twists a valve on the hydrant, releasing a pressurized stream of water.

Forcing back the raging fire with that surge, Lieutenant shouts, “Moribe, search for survivors!”



“Roger!” Moribe immediately starts shouting at the top of her lungs to the burning surroundings. “Is anyone here?! We’re members of the rescue squad! We have come to save you!”

Hearing her say that confirms it for me—they aren’t firefighters, but rescue workers.

In other words, I’m most likely also— My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of a faint reply being drowned out by Moribe’s voice. I strain my ears. And then I hear it from the first room in the fiery corridor—a young girl’s voice muffled by the crackling pops of the angry flames.

“H-Help me...!”

Someone’s on the other side of that door?! I launch into a run, weaving my way between the few gaps in the violent flames. The door has been crushed and distorted by the heat. I kick it open and hurtle into the room.

It’s an expansive office bigger than the average Japanese apartment. The fire has already spread to this room filled with desks.

Sparks singe my hair and thick smoke burns my eyes and lungs. Enduring the pain, I rake my teary eyes over the area until I spot a girl crouched under a desk in a corner of the burning room.



“A-Are you okay?!”

The girl looks up at the sound of my voice. But the moment her eyes meet mine, she screams. Her face freezes with dread as if she has just encountered the devil in hell.

Why is she giving me that look when I came to rescue her?! Hesitation stops me dead in my tracks.

<Don't stop! Save her!>

I gasp. I don't know whose voice this is. It almost seems to be echoing from within me. But everything makes sense now. I finally realize why I'm here.

I came here to save her! The moment that realization sticks, I feel my divided body and nerves become one again.

<Go save her!>

The voice echoes through my head for the second time, propelling me into action. I lunge into the blazing inferno.

▼ 9:19 AM

Area 1, Outer Ring

SOMEONE yanks me by the collar before I can rush into the flames to help her.

“Captain! You can't just blindly charge in like that!” Moribe sternly informs me.

I argue urgently, “But if we don't do something, that girl will—”

“I know that! I'll take care of it! Lieutenant, back me up!”

“Roger!” the other woman shouts from where she was spraying the hose a short distance away and turns the hose on the middle of the room.

The stream of water blasts the flames aside, carving a narrow path through the fire. She angles the hose up, aiming for the ceiling next, where the water shatters into spray on impact. Moribe charges into the room as if clad in the light drizzle. It's perfect teamwork. She pushes her way through the flames, mist, and steam.

“Score! Survivor secured!” She returns from the fire with the girl on her shoulders.



“A-Amazing! Great job!” I applaud her in the heat of the moment.

Moribe shoves the girl into my arms without taking a moment to bask in the successful rescue. “What’re you complimenting me for? I’m not a rookie! Anyway, take care of this girl for me, Captain!”

“Why?! Hey! Come back here!”

Moribe breaks into another run, shouting the same lines as before. “Is anyone here?! We’re here to rescue you!”

But no one responds. This girl seems to be the only person in this corridor.

I quickly lead the girl by the hand to a place that’s not on fire. Once we get there, she sinks to the ground and stares out at the swaying flames in terror. Clueless about how to proceed, I merely stand like a dumb rock beside her.

After a hard fight, the lieutenant succeeds in dousing the fire on this floor. She shuts off the valve sending water to the hose and looks back at us. “The fire has been extinguished. You’re both safe now.”

Moribe returns from scouring the corridor for survivors and sweetly addresses the girl, “Are you hurt anywhere, miss?”

“N-No...,” the girl stammers.

Clad in a gothic Lolita outfit, she appears to be in her late teens. Her face is pale and she has frighteningly good looks, but she also gives off the impression of frailty.

I wanted to save her, but I was completely useless in both the rescue attempt and putting out the fires. Moribe eyes me suspiciously as I wallow in my powerlessness.

“...Earth to Captain? You there? You’ve been acting strange.”

“S-Strange how?”

“Like you’re completely worthless baggage? And your word choice and actions are unusual for you. Did something happen?”

“S-Sorry. I’m equally as clueless...” I start by apologizing before getting to my question. “...There’s something I want to confirm with you. You guys have been

calling me 'Captain,' so I take it that means I'm the captain of a rescue squad?"

"Well, duh. Where did that question come from?"

"Here's the thing...I don't know. Who am I? What is this place?"

"HUH?!"

Everyone goes slack-jawed at my admission.

Moribe wryly asks, "D-Don't tell me you've got amnesia? You're pulling my leg again, aren't you, Captain?"

"No... I wish I was, but I'm not..."

I know what amnesia is. And the fact that it doesn't occur often. But it's also true I have zero knowledge about myself. Only the memories pertaining my personality and current situation have unnaturally vanished.

How could this be anything but amnesia?

The lieutenant's suspicious voice cuts into my thoughts. "Please hold on a moment, Captain. Did you hurt your head by any chance?"

"My head? Now that you mention it, I had a horrible headache a few minutes ago..."

"I thought so... There's a possibility you hit your head on something. Your confusion and forgetfulness are likely temporary symptoms caused by the impact."

"Do you think my memories will return with time?"

"I do. However, if you suffered any brain damage, there is a possibility your amnesia could become permanent. And there have been cases of people dying when the damage is left untreated."

"People have died...?!" My heart plummets.

"Captain, how bad is your headache? Do you feel like throwing up?" Moribe rattles off questions, sounding worried.

"N-Nothing hurts right now. I don't feel nauseous either."

"Then you should be in the clear, but...let me check to be sure." Moribe grabs

my arm, rolls up my sleeve, and checks my wrist. I hadn't noticed I've been wearing some sort of metal wristband.

"What's this?"

"It's called a Vital Checker. It's a device that automatically checks the wearer's vitals."

On closer inspection, I see several numerical readings and five green lights lit up on the digital device.

A relieved smile replaces Moribe's frown. "Your status is all green. No irregularities with your pulse, blood pressure, or anything else. You're the picture of health."

"So I don't have to worry about dropping dead any time soon...?"

"This isn't a proper medical exam, so we can't relax yet. Make sure to go for a real checkup later."

I take her advice to heart.

Just then, out of the blue, the lieutenant gasps. "Oh no! We have to inject the girl with medicine before it's too late!" She pulls some sort of ampoule-like container from her pocket. Holding it out toward the girl, she says, "Miss, please extend your arm for a moment."

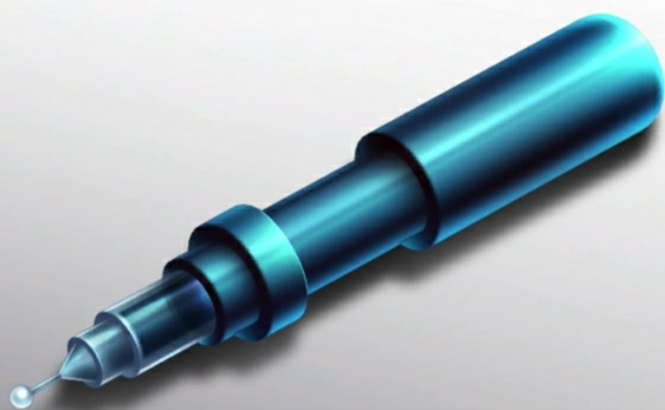
"N-No...I don't want that shot..." the girl fearfully resists.

"Don't say that! You'll be in serious danger without it!" She seizes the girl's arm. Not taking no for an answer, she rolls the girl's sleeve up and injects her with the ampoule.

"Ah!" the girl moans, trembling.

I cock an eyebrow at that display. "What are you injecting her with?"

"It's called AD," the lieutenant explains. "Put in layman's terms, it's a drug that prevents radiation exposure—an anti-radiation drug."



My heart lurches. I don't fully understand what it means, but an ominous feeling creeps into the back of my mind. "Did you just say it's an anti-radiation drug?"

"It was provided to us by this facility for use during our mission. We can't survive in here without injecting ourselves with this drug. After all, every nook and cranny of this building is contaminated with radiation."

"What?! Stop right there. What's all this about radiation and contamination? What the hell kind of place is this?"

"A nuclear energy research facility equipped with a small-scale nuclear reactor for research purposes. And that very nuclear reactor just went through a meltdown about two hours ago."

Meltdown. A nuclear reactor *meltdown*. This should be the first time I'm hearing that information, and yet, an icy chill snakes along my spine.

"Wh-What exactly does that entail?"

"A meltdown occurs when something causes the reactor core to melt, and the nuclear fuel leaches outside the containment chamber. It's an extremely serious accident accompanied by frequent explosions and fires. As a result of the meltdown, radioactive materials are spreading from the leak and contaminating this entire facility with radiation."

"How can that be?! This place doesn't look contaminated to me—"

"Radiation is invisible to the naked eye and odorless. But it's definitely here, eating away at our bodies as we speak," she says clerically, retrieving a small device from her pocket. The palm-sized metallic black box is equipped with a green display with numbers on it. "This is a portable device for measuring radiation. The reading it's currently showing is 1,108 mSv per hour. This number is equivalent to twenty million times the radiation dose in nature."

"Twenty million...?!"

"Exposure to abnormally high levels of radiation causes serious negative effects to the human body. This includes vomiting, sores, organ failure, neurological disorders, genetic disorders, and brain cell damage."

“...!” The lieutenant’s matter-of-fact explanation causes all the hair on my body to bristle with fear.

“All of these health problems can occur with exposure to 100 mSv and above. Meaning we are currently being exposed to extremely dangerous levels of radiation. This environment is so deadly we shouldn’t be able to set foot inside it under normal circumstances.”

“Are you screwing with me?! How can you remain so calm under these hellish circumstances?!”

“Calm down. Please let me finish my explanation,” she sharply tells me off, shutting me up. She continues her explanation with the drug in her hand. “Injecting AD offers almost one hundred percent protection against the effects of radiation exposure as long as you are in an area with low levels of contamination.”

“One hundred percent?!”

“This is a special drug containing medical-grade nanomachines that detoxify and discharge radiation sustained by the human body. Unfortunately, it only lasts for a mere sixty minutes, and we don’t have a large supply of it either.”

“Th-That doesn’t sound good...”

The drug sounds unrealistic, but seeing as she explained it with a straight face, it’s probably real. I feel the chilly tingle in my spine again.

“H-Hey, will we be okay without taking that shot too?”

“What? We only just injected ourselves with it—” The lieutenant stops midsentence and sharply inhales.

Moribe gasps and chimes in, “Oh yeah! When was the last time you gave yourself AD, Captain?!”

“N-No clue... Could be more than sixty minutes ago...”

“That’s bad! Very bad! You’d better inject yourself to be safe! You should have some AD on you!”

I frantically fish through my pockets and, sure enough, find a single ampoule. “Found it! How do you administer this stuff?!”

“It’s easy! All you’ve gotta do is pop off the lid and press the tip against a vein in your arm,” Moribe instructs me.

“L-Like this?” Urged on, I inject the ampoule. The fluid in the container enters my body with the prickling pain of a shot being administered. As the drug courses through me, I feel something fade from my mind.

What is this feeling? Is it the drug’s effect? Something doesn’t seem right, but at least I’m safe for now.

Yet administering the drug to myself doesn’t calm my nerves one bit. No way can I easily accept being dropped into this crazy situation, and without any memories at that.

“...Hey, can you answer me this? Who am I? What’s happening right now? And where’s the exit...?”

“The exit, you ask?” The lieutenant’s expression darkens. “We’ll take you to it now. I’ll explain the situation to you on the way there,” she says and starts walking.

Me, Moribe, and the girl trail behind her.

▼ 9:24 AM

Between Area 1 and Area 2, Outer Ring

Connecting Passageway

GUIDED by the lieutenant, we walk through what looks like some sort of connecting passageway. A gigantic iron door blocks our path forward, but it opens when the lieutenant operates the terminal beside it. Beyond is yet another corridor lined with doors on both sides. It continues for about fifty-five yards before turning at a dead end.

This is a ridiculously large and complex facility.

“Captain, what would you rather know about first? Your personal information or the situation?” the lieutenant asks as I’m taking in my surroundings.

“Good question. Let’s start with my personal information, please.”

“Very well. Then you should know your name first. It’s Watase Kasasagi.”

“Watase Kasasagi... That’s my name?” It feels odd listening to someone list facts about who I am.

She nods and goes on, “You’re a thirty-two-year-old single man. You’re a member of the Rokumei City Fire Department’s Special Elite Rescue Squad SIRIUS. Your rank is fire lieutenant and you’re the captain of our squad. In other words, that makes you our direct superior. Does any of this ring a bell?”

“No...I can’t remember anything.”

“I see...” The gravity of the situation colors her expression.

Uncomfortable leaving it at that, I ask a question instead. “...By the way, what’re your names?”

“Forgive me for not introducing myself sooner. I’m Fire Sergeant Kazami Tachibana. I serve as lieutenant in your squad.”

“Uh, so should I call you Ms. Tachibana?”

“No, please just call me Tachibana. You don’t have to be overly formal with me,” she answers in a monotone voice.

I’m nodding my agreement, when Moribe enters the conversation. “And I’m Jun Moribe! A twenty-year-old firefighter!”

“You’re twenty? Pretty young.”

“Yep! I’m a rookie officer who just joined this year. My nickname is ‘SIRIUS’s Lady Suicide Squad Captain.’ Let’s get along!” Moribe exclaims, her self-introduction cheerful.

I’m a whole twelve years older than her and her boss, but she doesn’t seem too concerned with typical hierarchical work relationships.

“...Say, Moribe, is SIRIUS a pretty tolerant squad?”

“Whoops! My bad! I usually try to keep my word choice and temper in check, but I get caught up in the heat of things in the field and lose track of it sometimes!”

“Nah, don’t apologize. Doesn’t bother me. It actually makes it easier to get along with you.”

“Wait, really? You sure are understanding today, Captain!” Moribe smacks me on the shoulder.

She’s definitely overly friendly, but she seems to have the skill to back it up. So I can let it pass. Besides, she has nerves of steel, keeping cheerful under these grim circumstances.

Next, I turn to the girl we rescued. “And what might your name be, young lady?”

“...!” She jumps and hides behind Moribe.

She reacted the same way when I found her in the sea of flames. She must still be frightened to death.

As I’m weighing my options over how to interact with her, Moribe intervenes. “Oh dear, Captain, it looks like someone doesn’t like you. You’ve got one intimidating face, so it makes sense why.”

“I do? I wouldn’t know...”

“Don’t let it get you down too much. You’re mostly handsome, aside from your face,” Moribe ribs, then drops to eye level with the girl. “Would you care to tell me your name, little miss?”

The girl holds her silence for a long minute before muttering, “...It’s...Yuuri.” She answers with only her first name.

That name strikes a chord with me. I feel like I’ve heard it before. Scouring my mind doesn’t bring up any solid memory of it, though.

I give up trying, and ask Tachibana for more information that might help. “Now that the introductions are over...could you explain what exactly is going on here?”

“All right. Let me start by telling you more about this facility,” Tachibana says, beginning her solemn report. “We are currently in the underground section of a nuclear research facility located on the outskirts of Rokumei City. This facility’s name is the 6th Laboratory of Atomic and Biological Organization, or LABO for short. It’s a facility with two aboveground and underground floors, with the latter housing a nuclear reactor for research purposes.”

“LABO is the name of facility?” I ask, the abbreviation nagging at the back of my mind.

“Correct. And it was at 6:19 this morning—the morning of September 16, 2030 to be exact—that explosions of unknown origins occurred in the basement levels.”

“Explosions? Did they cause the fire we just fought?”

“Yes. Although the cause of the explosion wasn’t known, they sent a rescue request to SIRIUS’s headquarters. So we rushed to the scene and commenced searching for survivors around 6:30.”

I look at the sturdy watch on my wrist. The digital display reads 9:27 AM. The accident occurred about three hours ago.

“Our team of five rushed to the scene. We split into two-member cells, with me and Moribe as one cell, and Dojima and Hiyama—other rescue workers on our team—as another cell to rescue survivors aboveground. You set up a command post on the first floor and gave us orders from there.”

“So we have two other teammates?”

“Yes, we do. Unfortunately, we lost contact with the Dojima/Hiyama cell. We then lost contact with you. This was around 6:35, a mere five minutes after we commenced rescue operations.”

“You lost contact with us? What happened?”

“The three of you might have gone down to the basement floors at the time. Reception is terrible down here, so our radios are practically useless now.”

“I see... But why’d we even go down to the basement floors?”

“This is just my guess, but wouldn’t it be to search for survivors? Members of LABO’s staff told us that the basement floors had already been evacuated and only the upper floors had survivors in need of rescue, but...”

“That wasn’t true?”

“It wasn’t. Moribe and I headed to the basement when we found out there were survivors there as well. But the fires were far worse than we had anticipated, and we lost sight of the survivors while we had our hands full... We

had no choice but to set up a makeshift base underground and resume our rescue activities from there.” Tachibana takes a breath and looks me in the eyes. “...Right after that, around 7:15 AM, an eerie announcement about a ‘Case N’ was broadcast throughout the facility.”

“Case N? What is that?”

“Given the nature of this facility, it’s probably code for *nuclear*. We believe that a meltdown occurred in the reactor area around that time. We measured the radiation levels right after the announcement and discovered that they had grown abnormally high, so that’s our theory for now.”

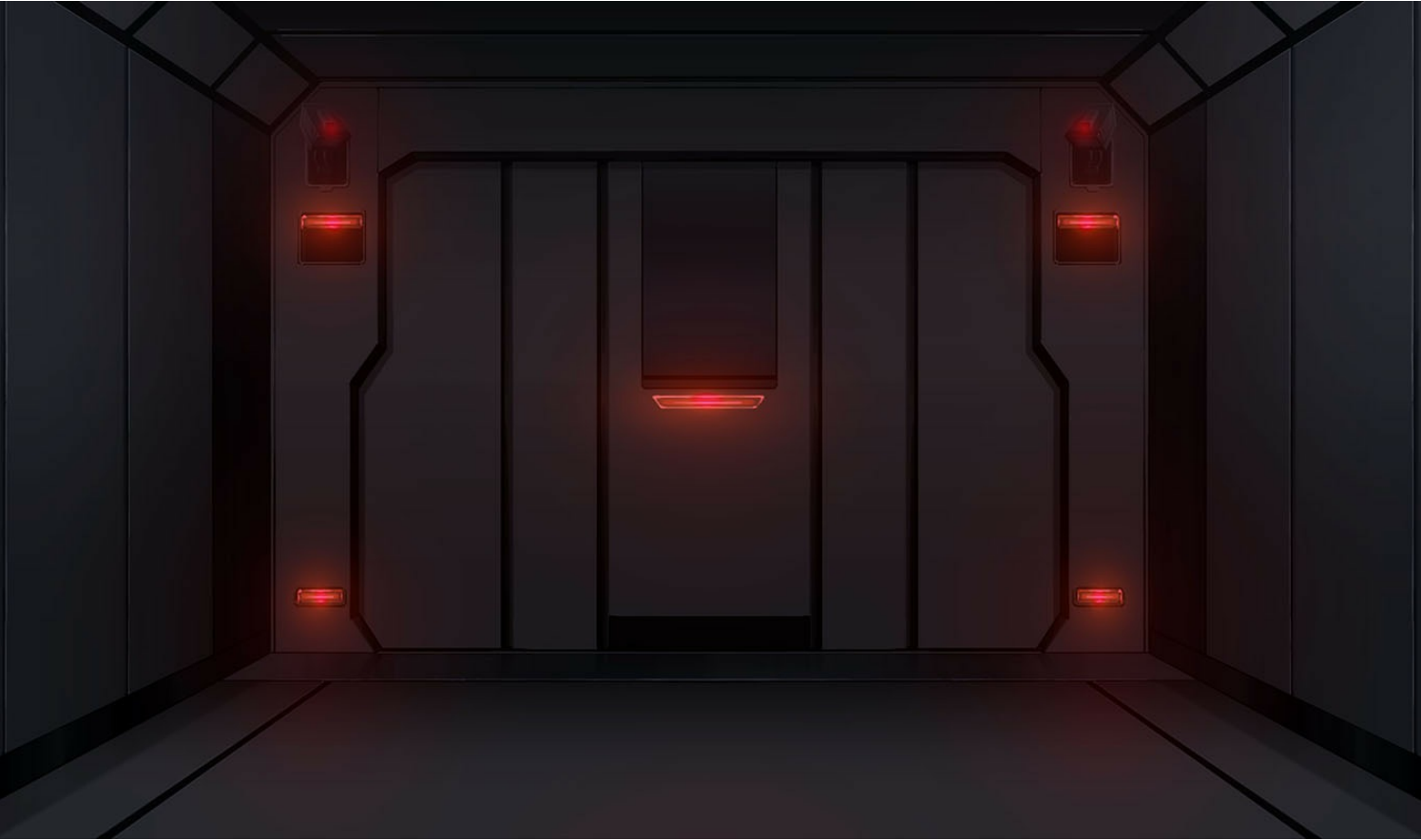
I organize the information Tachibana told me and what I’ve seen for myself to start piecing the puzzle together. What concerns me right now is the steadily growing radiation levels.

“Then shouldn’t we make a break for it? And soon?”

“Yes, we should, but...” Tachibana’s voice trails off, her gaze locking on what lies ahead—a door with the words “Emergency Staircase” written on it.

“That’s the exit, right? Let’s go!” I run to the door and throw it open as if it’s the light at the end of the tunnel. Through the poor lighting I see a metal spiral staircase continuing endlessly into the darkness above. I ascend it with the others, only to be stunned by what’s waiting at the top. “Wh-What the hell is this?!” I groan.

A metal wall blocks the stairwell entrance to the first floor aboveground. We can’t leave the staircase with this in our way.



“And there you have your answer... All exits leading to the surface are currently blocked off by these bulkheads... Meaning we are trapped in LABO’s basement floors.”

“We’re trapped?! Why?!”

“We don’t know. All we do know is that, after announcing there’s a Case N, the PA system indicated they were locking down every bulkhead in the facility. So there’s probably no way out of here...”

“Can’t we just contact someone outside and have them open it for us?!”

“Won’t do any good, ’cause we can’t get in touch with them,” Moribe answers instead. “Every landline phone in here is dead. And like I said before, the radios barely work.”

“Can’t we just break this damn wall or force it open?!” I slam my fists into the bulkhead, but it doesn’t even budge. I can tell from punching it that it’s extremely thick and sturdy. “Dammit! Open up, you piece of shit!”

No matter how hard I punch, kick, or slam into it, the bulkhead is completely unaffected. This isn’t something physical strength can overcome.

“Tch! Looks like we can’t do anything to this without explosives or something.”

“I hate to break it to you, but we don’t have explosives on us. We don’t have any equipment that can destroy it,” Moribe says with a sigh.

Listening to them helped me finally understand the situation. Ultimately, these damn bulkheads have severed the surface from the basement floors.

“...Is there any other way out?”

“None. We’ve tried every possible thing for the two hours we’ve been trapped, and nothing worked. We can’t go through the air ducts. The elevators are out of order. We can’t break through the ceiling either,” Moribe ruefully informs me.

“...Dammit!”

“It gets worse. This facility is supposed to have a flawless sprinkler system, but

it's not working. Fires are breaking out all over the place, and we've got no way to figure where they're coming from."

"Wh-What the hell? Then we're totally screwed, aren't we?!" I start cursing. "We're being radiated as we speak, fires are everywhere, and we can't escape?! How the hell did this happen—"

"Chill out, Captain! How do you expect Yuuri not to be afraid if the rescue workers lose their cool?!"

Moribe's pointed advice draws my attention to Yuuri. She's hiding behind Tachibana, staring at me, fear-stricken.

"Ah... S-Sorry."

She's right. I shouldn't have a pathetic breakdown in front of an already-scared girl. Amnesia or not, I probably came down here to save people.

"Come to think of it, what are you doing in LABO, Yuuri?"

"I-I'm...related to a staff member, and got caught up in this accident by chance..."

"I see... That's unfortunate..."

It really is unfortunate—for her and us. I want to do something to get us all out of here, but even I know that won't be easy. There's just too much I don't understand about the current situation.

Why won't the bulkheads open?

Why has the sprinkler system shut off?

Why did I lose my memories?

"...Hey, Tachibana, what should we do now?"

"I would like to explain that to you in detail as well. Let's move to the makeshift base we have set up near here first."

I have no choice but to go along with her plan. My shoulders slump as I make my way down the stairs.

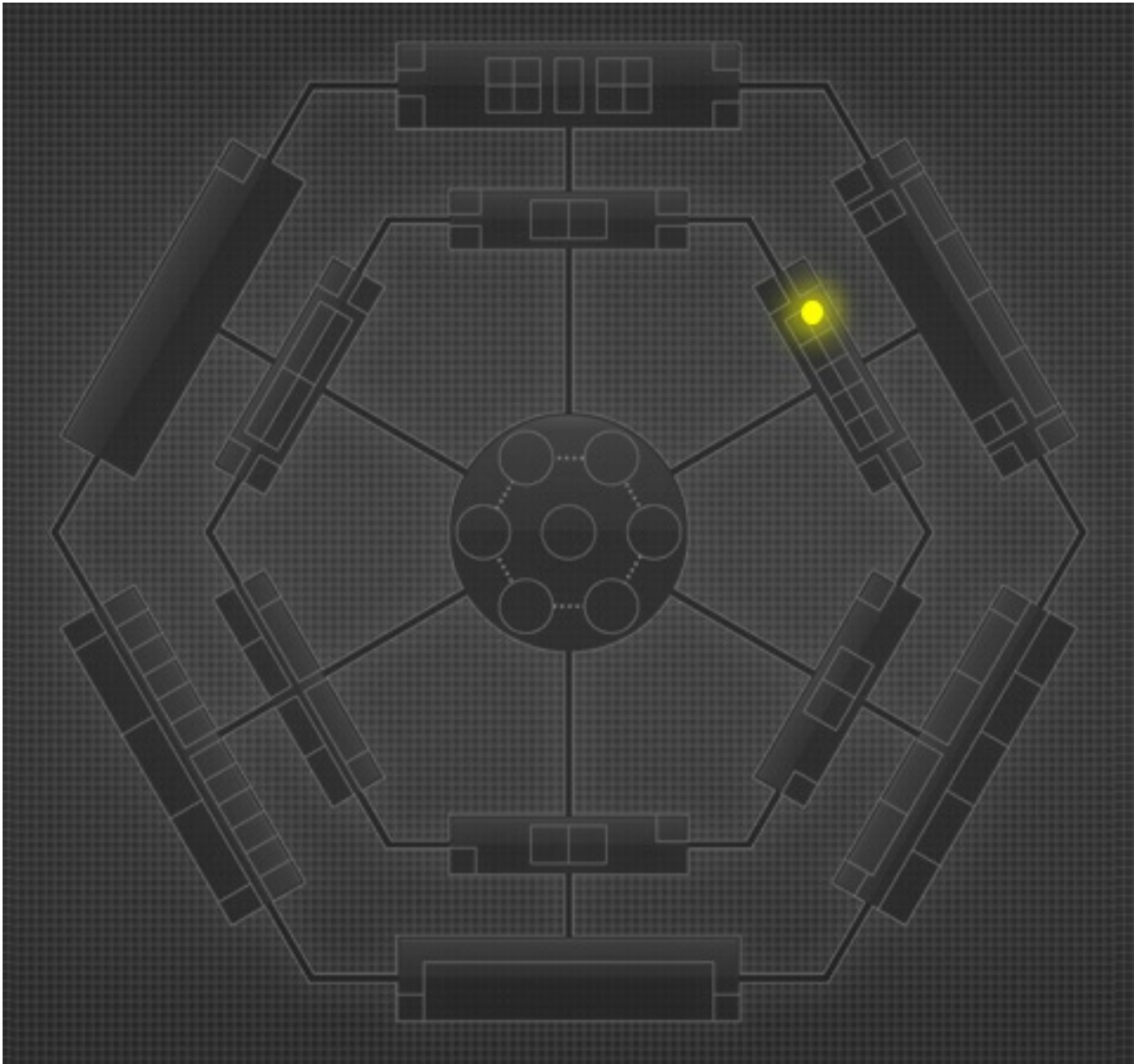
We've been trapped in a basement full of rampant fires and radiation. And yet I've gone and forgotten how to survive through a crisis, how to save others,

and even who I am.

I'm clueless about how to proceed from here. But in any case, I have to take action. My gut tells me that if I don't move forward, this basement will become my grave.

As powerless as I am without my memories, I have to fight in order to survive.

vA Chapter 02: 【Headway and Encounter】 9/16/2030
9:28



Radiation Level: 1,193 mSv

Remaining AD: ?

Area 2, Inner Ring

Makeshift Base

TACHIBANA brings us to a room near the staircase. By the entrance is a button for opening and closing the door. Judging from what I've seen of the other rooms, almost every door in this facility is automated. She presses the button and the door slides sideways.

On the other side is a small research office that's about 150 square feet. This is the spot Tachibana and Moribe turned into a makeshift base. Rope, air tanks, and other equipment are piled in a corner.

"All right, since you will need to know this going forward, let me explain LABO's structure to you, Captain. Please take a look at this." Tachibana picks up a piece of paper from the equipment pile and shows it to me.

It's a map of the facility. In the center is a circle, surrounded by two hexagonal rings. The hexagons are further divided into six areas, which are connected by passageways with security gates.

"The circular area in the center is where the reactor we believe melted down is located. It's known as Area N."

"Area N... As in nuclear area?" I venture.

"It would seem that way. Area N is surrounded by six other areas. Each area has an inner and outer ring."

"I see. So where are we now?"

"Floor B2, in Area 2's inner ring. We found you passed out in the inner ring of Area 1, and we found Yuuri in the same area's outer ring." Tachibana marks each spot on the map. "We've already searched the first and second areas but... haven't found anyone aside from you two."



“So, basically, we have to go to Area 3 next if we want to search for more survivors or find another way out,” I conclude.

“No, we can’t do that yet.”

“Why not?”

“All the passageways connecting the different areas have security gates. Do you remember how there was a gate blocking the way here?”

Now that she mentioned it, there was something like that. Tachibana had opened the large iron door in the middle of the passageway.

“I do. Is there a problem with that?”

“All the gates are locked and need security cards to open them,” she says, pulling a card out of her pocket.

It’s a plastic card the size of a credit card. “Level 2” is written on the front of it.

“LABO has different security levels that correspond to each area’s confidentiality level. Only corresponding levels can open their areas. You need the Level 3 card to access Area 3, the Level 4 card to access Area 4, and so on.”

Tachibana points to the gate marked within the connecting passageway. “There are two kinds of gates: those that connect the inner and outer rings and those that connect the different areas. We picked up this Level 2 card during our search, which gives us access to Area 2, but...”

“We can’t advance into Area 3,” I supply. “Is there anywhere we can get our hands on a Level 3 or higher card?”

“We’ve searched high and low, and this is the only card we’ve come across. About the only place we haven’t checked yet is your pockets,” Moribe says half-jokingly.

“My pockets, huh?” Things can’t be as easy as having a Level 3 card conveniently stashed away in my pocket, but I’ll check for the heck of it. “...I-I have two!” Surprisingly, I had two cards tucked in my chest pocket.

“What?! Are you kidding me?!” Moribe cries. I hold the cards out for her to

see.

Each one has a different name on it: Keiji Ukita and Kyouka Nanami. Better yet, they're both Level 4.



“Take a look for yourself. They’re Level 4. Can’t we go all the way to Area 4 with these?”

“Holy crap! How did you end up with Level 4 cards, Captain?”

“Huh. I have absolutely no idea...” I start checking all my pockets, thinking something else of use might come out—and my hands find another object I don’t recognize. It’s a one-inch-thick device of some sort that’s the size of my palm. The front side is a full LCD screen displaying various things. “What’s this?”

“Ooh, that’s an official SIRIUS PDA. We’ve got ’em too.”

“What’s a PDA?”

“It’s a portable information terminal. It’s primarily used as a phone and radio. But we can’t make calls underground. And radio reception is shoddy at best.”

“You guys have been saying that... So, how do you use this thing?”

“It’s a touch screen, so you press this part here and—”

Following Moribe’s instructions, I try out the phone function, starting with a call to Dojima, the other teammate who came up in conversation earlier. But I only get the sound of a dead dial tone.

I try contacting Hiyama, another teammate, with the radio, but it doesn’t go through either. Every phone number and frequency I attempt has the same result. It’s about as useful as a paperweight to me right now. Sighing, I pocket the PDA.

“...This is a different topic, but what does the gear you brought here do?” I ask, looking at the gear piled up in the corner.

“Oh dear, you forgot that too? We don’t have much time, so I’ll give you the abridged version.”

“Thanks. Sorry for the trouble.”

Moribe nods and walks over to the pile. She picks up an iron box and opens it. Several ampoules like the one from earlier are packed inside. “To start, this is AD—the same drug you injected earlier. Don’t forget that it protects you from radiation exposure for sixty minutes.”

“So this is our lifeline down here, huh?”

“Now you’re getting it. Between what they gave us and what we collected down here, we’ve scraped together seven doses.”

“Does that mean this facility has AD lying around?”

“It seems like they keep stashes of it on hand in case of emergencies. But we’re out of luck because most of the stockpiles in Areas 1 and 2 went up in flames.”

“So we only have seven ampoules for four people? We won’t last more than two hours at this rate. Don’t we need to get our hands on more?”

“For sure. Let’s keep our eyes peeled as we go,” Moribe suggests as she puts the AD back in the box. Then she pulls out the portable radiation counter. “Next up is Procyon here. It’s a radiation counter that fits in the palm of your hand and has the ability to measure and quantify radiation levels up to 15,000 mSv.”

“Did you find this lying around too?”

“Nope. LABO’s staff gave it to us. Two of the seven AD we have on hand were also provided by the staff. They’ve both been a huge asset to us.”

A sophisticated radiation counter and powerful anti-radiation drugs are definitely useful items to have in our situation. It’s almost as if the staff gave them to us knowing what would happen...

My train of thought is derailed by Moribe’s ongoing explanation. She pulls a cylindrical object from the pile of gear filling her arms. “This here is an air tank—standard equipment for our squad. But it’s pretty much useless to us now because the faceplates are broken.”

“I see... That’s a real shame, seeing how it might’ve come in handy.”

“It’s not all bad. Air tanks can be used for more than just breathing. We can use it to operate this guy too,” Moribe says, picking up another piece of equipment that has a red tube attached to what looks like a large balloon made of black rubber. At a glance, I can’t tell what it’d be used for.

“What’s that?”

“This is an air jack. It’s a powerful device you combine with an air tank to

create compressed air that you can use to move heavy objects. Since it requires the air tank, it has a limited number of uses.”

With our faceplates damaged, that’s about the only thing we can do with the air tanks at this point. I can’t even begin to imagine what situation we’d need it in, but we should definitely make use of it when the time comes.

Moribe lifts another piece of equipment from the pile and shows it off. It’s a frightening piece of machinery with a sturdy handle and a disk-shaped blade at the end. “Next up is our friend the engine cutter! The gasoline engine spins the artificial diamond blade, making this puppy slice through iron and pretty much anything else that gets in its way like it’s butter!”

“...Could you not sound so excited about it? The look in your eye is scary.”

“Sorry, sorry. This bad boy is my absolute favorite.” Moribe flashes an invincible smile and puts the unsettling tool back. “Add in this thirty-foot rope and that about covers it. Did you get all that, Captain?”

“Yeah, I’ve got it down. No problem remembering,” I reply, making a mental note of our seven different pieces of rescue gear.

“On that note, we also had two hazmat suits, but...like I just said, the faceplates are damaged beyond use,” Moribe says, pointing to the wrecked suits. Each has a cracked mask. “They were the ultimate piece of airtight gear with near perfect fire and water resistance that you could directly attach the air tanks to... Breaking the faceplates ruined it all.”

“That’s an unfortunate loss...!” It’ll be difficult to fight fires or get anything done in areas with lots of smoke without the air tanks.

“But wait...you should’ve been wearing a hazmat suit too, Captain. What happened to it?” Moribe asks, as if it only now dawned on her to question my lack of a suit.

“Huh? Hmm... Maybe I took it off because it’s hard to move in?”

“That’s about as likely as you choosing to walk through fire naked! We were required to wear protective suits during our rescue operation within this facility, y’know? No way would you remove it with your life on the line.”

“That makes sense...but I don’t know what to tell you. Like everything else, I don’t remember what happened to it.”

Between having two Level 4 security cards on me and not wearing my hazmat suit, there are just too many mysteries surrounding the time before I lost my memories. Seriously, what was I doing in this basement? I doubt anyone here can answer that question.

“By the way, Tachibana...what’s our next course of action?” I ask with a sigh.

“With the Level 4 cards, we can finally expand our search range, but...what will you do, Captain? Your memories are still jumbled. Perhaps you should rest for now?”

Tachibana’s advice is valid. I’m about to take her up on it, when my eyes suddenly lock with Yuuri’s. The fear hasn’t left her eyes yet. As I look at her, I remember the voice that told me to save her.

I get the sudden feeling I shouldn’t stay put.

“No... Would you mind letting me help you search for other survivors?” I voice that feeling aloud.

“Are you well enough to do that?”

“As I am right now, I might look like a burden in your eyes, but...being out of sorts doesn’t change the fact that I’m the captain of a rescue squad, right? I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I sit around doing nothing while people still need my help.” I’m stirred to action by an almost impulsive sense of duty.

“Is that how you feel? That sounds just like you...,” Tachibana admits with a wry smile.

“Just goes to show that you’re still you even with amnesia,” Moribe muses and shares a smile with Tachibana.

Afterward, Tachibana turns a serious look on me. “Captain, I would normally never recommend you come with us, what with the cause of your amnesia still unknown. But with fires breaking out at random and the need to keep injecting AD, it’s actually safer for you to be with us.”

“Great! Then—”

“However!” Tachibana sharply cuts me off. “This isn’t an ordinary mission. You must be prepared to accept the responsibilities and duties that come with being a rescue worker if that is how you want us to view you.”

“How do I do that?”

“I am going to treat you as a new recruit until your memory returns. Please follow my orders as Moribe does. I’m fully aware this is a violation of my station, but lives will be at risk if we don’t tread carefully.”

I’m overwhelmed by her answer, but I muster my courage to respond accordingly. “...R-Roger that! I-I’ll try my best to keep up with you both!”

Moribe laughs and smacks me on the shoulder. “C’mon, don’t be so tense. I bet you’ll return to your invincible self once you regain your memories.”

“I was the invincible type...?” They make it sound like I was quite the skilled rescue worker before my amnesia. Then I’d better regain that side of me as soon as possible. I turn to Yuuri next. “What will you do, Yuuri? Want to rest here?”

Yuuri hesitates for a moment before giving a firm reply. “N-No... I’ll go with you too.”

She likely learned how scary the situation is from our conversation. I’d prefer she stay with us as well.

“All four of us will head to Area 3 together, then,” Tachibana says authoritatively beside me. “Captain, please help me gather the equipment we are going to take with us.”

With those orders, I assist with collecting the gear. We split up the remaining seven AD between Tachibana and Moribe. Moribe and I have one Procyon and one Level 4 security card each. I take the rope, wrapping it around my chest in an X shape. Maybe we’re too lightly equipped for what lies ahead, but we’ve decided mobility takes precedence.

“Is everyone ready to go?” Tachibana checks with us.

“Sure am. Ready to go whenever you are,” I respond.

I don’t know what I’m capable of in my condition, but I’ll do whatever is in my

power to help, I vow and leave the makeshift base with Tachibana and the others.

▼ 9:34 AM

Between Area 2 and Area 3, Inner Ring

Connecting Passageway

ONE of those security gates comes into view at the end of the connecting passageway on our way to Area 3.

Tachibana points out the terminal next to the gate. “Swipe the card through the slot here and the gate will open. You will need the card again if you want to pass through the same gate, since opening it once doesn’t unlock the overall security system.”



“Got it. I’ll give it a shot,” I say, glancing over at Moribe as I pull the card out of my chest pocket. She’s glaring at her Procyon. “What’re you doing, Moribe?”

“We need to check the radiation levels with this before we enter unexplored areas. Everything past this gate is uncharted territory for us, y’know?” Moribe clenches her jaw and waits for me to open the door.

I nervously swipe the card through the slot. With a hiss of hydraulics, the gate opens. Standing next to Moribe, I narrow my eyes on Procyon’s display. At 1,285 mSv, the reading is only slightly higher than when we checked in Area 1.

Relief sweeps through Moribe’s voice as she exclaims, “Whoo-hoo! It’s within safety standards!”

“What does that mean?”

“It means the area is contaminated, but on the relatively safer side. The safety standard is any number within 4,000 mSv. We don’t have to worry about radiation exposure at these numbers as long as we inject AD.”

“What happens if you go over that number?”

“Well, the first danger standard is 4,000–8,000 mSv. Basically, you don’t want to hang around long with this level of exposure even with AD. The second danger standard is anything over 8,000 mSv. Chances of survival are slim even with AD at this level.”

So to break it down:

○ Staying within 4,000 mSv = Safe with AD

▲ Over 4,000 mSv = Dangerous even with AD

× Over 8,000 mSv = High risk of death even with AD

I carve those standards into my memory.

“Just so you know, little Procyon here will beep if we’re in a danger zone that exceeds the danger standard. Hightail it outta there if you here it beeping.”

“O-Okay...I’ll keep that in mind.”

We pass through the gate as we chat. The damage grows significantly worse the farther we walk down the passageway leading to Area 3. The walls and

ceiling have been scorched black. Did an explosion happen here too? It looks like a fire broke out at some point.

The door at the other end of the passageway finally comes into view as I'm taking in the damage. I use the card to open it and enter Area 3.

▼ 9:37 AM

Area 3, Inner Ring

THIS area is considerably different from where we've been before. The walls are made out of an unfaced concrete, and the ceiling's steel frame and cables are completely exposed. The rugged interior is more in line with a factory than a top research facility.

The corridor is about fifteen feet wide, and a single door is set in the wall on each side. This corridor leads to a dead end that splits to the left and right.

I check the Procyon's reading. It says 1,391 mSv, so we're still within the safety standard.

Then again, these radiation levels would normally be lethal without AD. Good thing we have some. From the look of it, fires haven't reached this area yet, so we're safe for the time being.

"Wh-What the hell is this footage?!"

"It can't be! Why are those children here?!"

We gasp at the sound of a shouting man and woman and look for the source. I heard the shouts from behind a door labeled "Surveillance Room." On a reflex, I storm into the unlocked room with the others right behind me.

The whole back wall of the dimly lit room is lined with monitors. Under the monitors is a large control panel with countless buttons, a microphone for the PA system, and various computer components. In the middle of the room are a man and woman faintly illuminated by the green monitor lights.

Are they survivors?

The man looks just like a researcher with his white lab coat and wire-rim glasses. He appears to be in his forties with his gelled-back graying hair slightly receding from his forehead.

Standing beside him is a woman in her early twenties, dressed in a light-purple pencil-skirt suit. She's a beauty whose waist-length straight black hair and wide forehead make a strong first impression. Her face and clothes are covered in soot like ours are.

They look like survivors to me.

"Wait...aren't you the man from last week?!" Tachibana exclaims in surprise after seeing him.

"You're involved in another accident, old man?!" Moribe cries out at the same time.

"Do you guys know each other?" I ask.

"Yes," Tachibana says with a nod. "We saved him when he got into a car accident just last week."

So he's been in two accidents over the span of two weeks. I sympathize with him as I say, "That's some seriously bad luck you have there. Were you unable to evacuate in time?"

"Unable to evacuate?! What kind of sick game are you trying to pull here?! You're the one who locked me in this area!"

I'm stunned by his angry accusation. "I I-locked you in here? Slow down a sec. Can you tell me why I would do that?"

"Why are you asking me?! You know the answer better than anyone else!"

"The thing is, I think I hit my head earlier...and now my memory is a jumbled mess."

"Your memory is a mess? Is that true?" The man gives me a skeptical look.

The beautiful woman chimes in with her opinion. "What the heck? Are you saying you have amnesia? Does that even happen outside the movies?"

"I get that it's hard to believe, but it seems temporary memory loss like this happens to people on rare occasions," I explain.

The man looks me over doubtfully before making up his mind. "...Fine. I'll believe your story for now."

“Thank you. Uh...what are your names?”

“Oh, I’m Keiji Ukita. I’m a researcher at this lab,” the man answers.

“I’m Ena Tsubakiyama. A teacher at Rokumei Academy.”

I’m surprised by what I hear. I don’t know the woman, but the man’s name sounds familiar. For a second, I think my memory has returned, but it hasn’t. I very recently saw the name Keiji Ukita somewhere. One look at the security card I’ve been using confirms his name written there.

“Does this card belong to you?”

“Ah! So you had it all along!” Ukita snatches the card from my hand, his animosity toward me on full display. The way he’s acting makes me uneasy.

“Uh, Mr. Ukita...? Why did I steal your card from you?”

“That’s a bizarre question, but I suppose it’s inevitable in your condition. Where should I start explaining...?” Ukita thinks it over before choosing his words. “I was trying to take charge of this crazy situation while all my colleagues were evacuating. But the bulkheads locked before I could finish... I was trying to figure out what to do when I bumped into you, Captain. I’d reckon that was about two hours ago.”

“What’d I say at the time?”

“You said, ‘I’ll go look for a way out. But it’s getting dangerous with the fires growing worse, so please wait in this room for me to return.’”

“I said something like that...”

“But I was in such a panic I wouldn’t listen to you. You ended up taking my card away to prevent me from acting on my own... Well, I’m sure you did it to keep me safe, but it upset me how I didn’t have a choice in the matter.”

“So that’s why you were upset with me... I’m sorry. I was probably planning to come right back, but something happened along the way...”

“It’s not a big deal anymore. Incidentally, who’s the girl with you?” Ukita gestures to Yuuri.

“I’m...Yuuri... I’m related to one of the researchers here,” she timidly answers.

“You’re someone’s family member? What brought you here? This facility’s security is top-notch. It shouldn’t be possible for even family to enter the basement floors.”

“Someone from LABO picked me up early this morning...and I was here when the accident happened. I was never told why they brought me here...”

“Hmm, I see. I’m sorry that happened to you.” Ukita uncomfortably falls quiet.

“Uh, Miss Teacher, what was your name again?” I ask the pretty woman beside him.

“I told you my name is Ena Tsubakiyama. I’m used to being called Miss Ena, so you can call me that if you like.”

“Miss Ena, then. Why are you in LABO?”

“That’s what I want to ask. I have absolutely no idea why they called me here. Someone brought me to the basement, only for that explosion to go off moments later, trapping me down here.”

From the sound of it, both Yuuri and Miss Ena were brought to LABO by someone and dragged into the accident as a result.

“By the way, have you both injected yourselves with AD?” Tachibana asks, joining our conversation.

“Oh no, the AD!” Ukita cries out as if he only just remembered. “I injected myself with the AD Captain Kasasagi gave me, but I ran out. It’s been nearly an hour since my last dose.”

“Then please use this one.” Tachibana hands him an AD.

Miss Ena stares on, dumbfounded. “AD? What does that stand for?”

Tachibana explains to her what AD is, as well as the state of this facility, radiation exposure, and the danger levels. Miss Ena’s face grows paler by the minute.

“Th-There’s radiation...?! You’re telling me a meltdown happened here?!”

“Yes, it very likely did. Radiation damage symptoms are more likely to appear

in the internal organs, skin, and eyes. Do you have nausea, irritated skin, or blurred vision?”

“None of that right now...”

“You can guarantee your safety if you start injecting AD now, then.”

Miss Ena accepts the AD from Tachibana and promptly injects herself.

The problem now is our ever-depleting AD. Concern over our reserves is starting to eat at me.

“Anyway, would all you rescue workers mind taking a look at this monitor for a minute?” Miss Ena requests after regaining her calm. “Mr. Ukita and I were going through the surveillance camera records to get a grasp on the situation when we happened upon concerning footage.”

“What kind of footage?”

“See for yourself. It was taken at 6:31 AM in Area 1...” She operates the control panel, replaying the surveillance recording on one of the monitors.

She freezes the footage on three school children: one boy with glasses, a frightened girl, and a blonde girl. All three are wearing school uniforms.



“Who are they?”

“The students I’m responsible for. The boy is Natsuhiko Tenkawa. The girls are Mashiro Toba and Louise Yui Sannomiya.”

“Natsuhiko, Mashiro, and Louise, you say?” All those names sound familiar to me. I feel a kinship with them, as if I’ve known them for a long time.

I think I may have come down here to save these kids! That feeling strongly settles within me.

“Truth be told, I’m acquainted with these kids as well. The boy’s mother is my coworker here,” Ukita informs us.

“Seriously? Why in the world have people who know one another gathered in this facility today of all days?”

“I’m as clueless as you are. I don’t know why Natsuhiko and the girls came here either... All I can say is that there is more footage just like this. And the last footage was taken at 7:20 AM, in Area 5.”

After hearing that, I immediately know what he’s trying to say. If there is footage of them at 7:20 AM when the bulkheads lowered at 7:00 AM, then—

“You mean there are at least three more people locked inside this facility aside from the six of us?!”

“Yeah, that makes nine total,” Ukita answers in a tight voice.

I turn my eyes back to the three kids on screen. What were they doing here? Did they come to see the boy’s mother? Or did they have another agenda?

“...Hey, Ukita, are you positive these kids are trapped in here with us?”

“I can’t say for sure. If only we could contact the outside, we could confirm whether they evacuated...”

“Oh, that gives me an idea!” Miss Ena speaks up as if suddenly struck by an idea. “Can anyone here use BC?”

“‘Bee Cee’?”

“Right, like telepathy. We can learn more about the situation if we use that to contact the outside.”

My eyes go round at that unrealistic comment. “T-Telepathy? How can you joke around at a time like this?”

“Oh dear, your amnesia’s so bad you’ve forgotten common knowledge? It’s not that unusual for people to be capable of using telepathy nowadays.”

“HUH?!” In shock, I look at the others. No one else is surprised. “H-Hey, Tachibana, is she telling the truth?”

“She is. The telepathy she’s referring to allows the user to send their voice to people in distant places.”

“S-Seriously?!”

“But only one in twenty-five thousand people are capable of using it. Plus, while there are a lot of child BC users for some reason, adult users are about as easy to find as a needle in a haystack.”

The others nod along with Tachibana’s explanation.

“Naturally, there isn’t anybody on our squad who can use it—including you,” Moribe adds.

“I regrettably can’t use it either. How about you, Yuuri?” Ukita asks her.

“I-I can’t use it. I’ve never been taught how...,” she mutters.

Everyone took the question seriously. I’m struggling to believe in this telepathy stuff, but their reactions tell me it’s not a bald-faced lie or childish joke.

“Okay, so are there people who can use other superpowers? Stuff like teleportation, telekinesis, and the works?”

“Of course not,” Miss Ena demurs. “That stuff stays purely in the realm of the occult.”

“And telepathy isn’t?”

“For your information, BC has been scientifically proven. There’s nothing super about it. Essentially, it’s the ability to mentally communicate with people at a distance. There’s nothing more to it.”

This BC stuff appears to have very limited use, and it’s not on the level of

superpowers. Though being able to use such a half-baked power would still be useful...

“...Well, it’d be too convenient if we had someone with us who happened to be one of the lucky one out of twenty-five thousand who can use it.”

“But those kids *can* use telepathy!”

“Seriously?! Then we can contact the surface if we find them?”

“Only *if* we find them... Ugh, I feel so pathetic. Things would be so much easier if I could use BC myself.”

The sound of static and a voice coming from Tachibana’s chest pocket abruptly follows Miss Ena’s words.

“—is SIRIUS Commander Murakami. Tachibana, do you read me? Over.”

“What was that?!”

“The radio! It’s finally receiving transmissions from the surface again!” Tachibana pulls the PDA from her pocket and answers the transmission. “Loud and clear. This is Lieutenant Tachibana of SIRIUS Team A.”

“Tachibana! Sounds like you got your radio running again!”

“For now—the reception is extremely unreliable down here. It could give out at any minute.”

“Then let’s make it short. Give me a status update.”

“Roger. At present, we are—” Tachibana quickly fills the commander in on everything that has transpired down here, including how we rescued Yuuri, Miss Ena, and Ukita after she reunited with me. She keeps my amnesia out of this report. After she finishes, she asks, “Have you heard anything about why the bulkheads locked, Commander?”

“A lot of information is still unclear for us, too, but...there’s one thing I need you to know,” Commander Murakami starts, then pauses as if it’s difficult for him to tell us. **“We’ve learned the reactor in the basement underwent a meltdown about two hours ago. I know it’s not something you want to hear, but it’s been confirmed.”**

"I knew it...!"

"Right after the explosions occurred at 6:19, LABO's engineers tried initiating an emergency shutdown of the reactor from the remote control room located on the surface floor. But after that, about everything that can possibly go wrong did. The engineers did everything in their power to prevent the meltdown, but...their desperate efforts ended in vain."

Tachibana's expression twists with the news.

"...And the radiation leakage prevention system activated when the meltdown occurred. That's what caused all the bulkheads within the facility to go into lockdown mode."

"Is it possible to temporarily open one of the bulkheads for us to escape?"

Hope fills everyone's faces at her question. But Commander Murakami's bitter response douses it. ***"It pains me to say this, but...that's impossible right now."***

"Impossible?! Why?!"

"A huge fire caused by the meltdown is still raging within Area N, where the reactor is held. The security system is going haywire because of it, making it impossible to access externally."

"The biggest fire is in Area N?!"

"The system will stop fritzing out if the fire is doused, but since the sprinkler system in Area N broke down, we can't expect the fires to be extinguished on their own. LABO's entire staff is doing everything they can to restore the system, but..."

"What's the time frame for the system restore, sir?!"

"About...another nine hours or so."

Everyone gasps. Tachibana loudly snaps, "D-Don't joke like that! Please open an escape route for us, even if it means blowing up a bulkhead!"

"I'm really sorry, Tachibana! We can't do that!"

"Why not?! A plastic explosive should do the job just fine!"

“The floors and bulkheads separating the surface and basement levels are made of eight-layer-thick heat-and-shock-resistant composite steel plates! Those damn plates are designed to even withstand steam and hydrogen explosions. Plastic explosives won’t even nick the surface!”

“H-How can that be...?” weakly mutters the always cool and collected Tachibana. Grasping at straws, she appeals his decision. “We have several survivors down here! Including children! Isn’t there anything you can do for us...?!”

“We’ll do whatever we can, but—time...limited...” Terrible static suddenly cuts into his voice.

“Commander Murakami?! I didn’t catch that!”

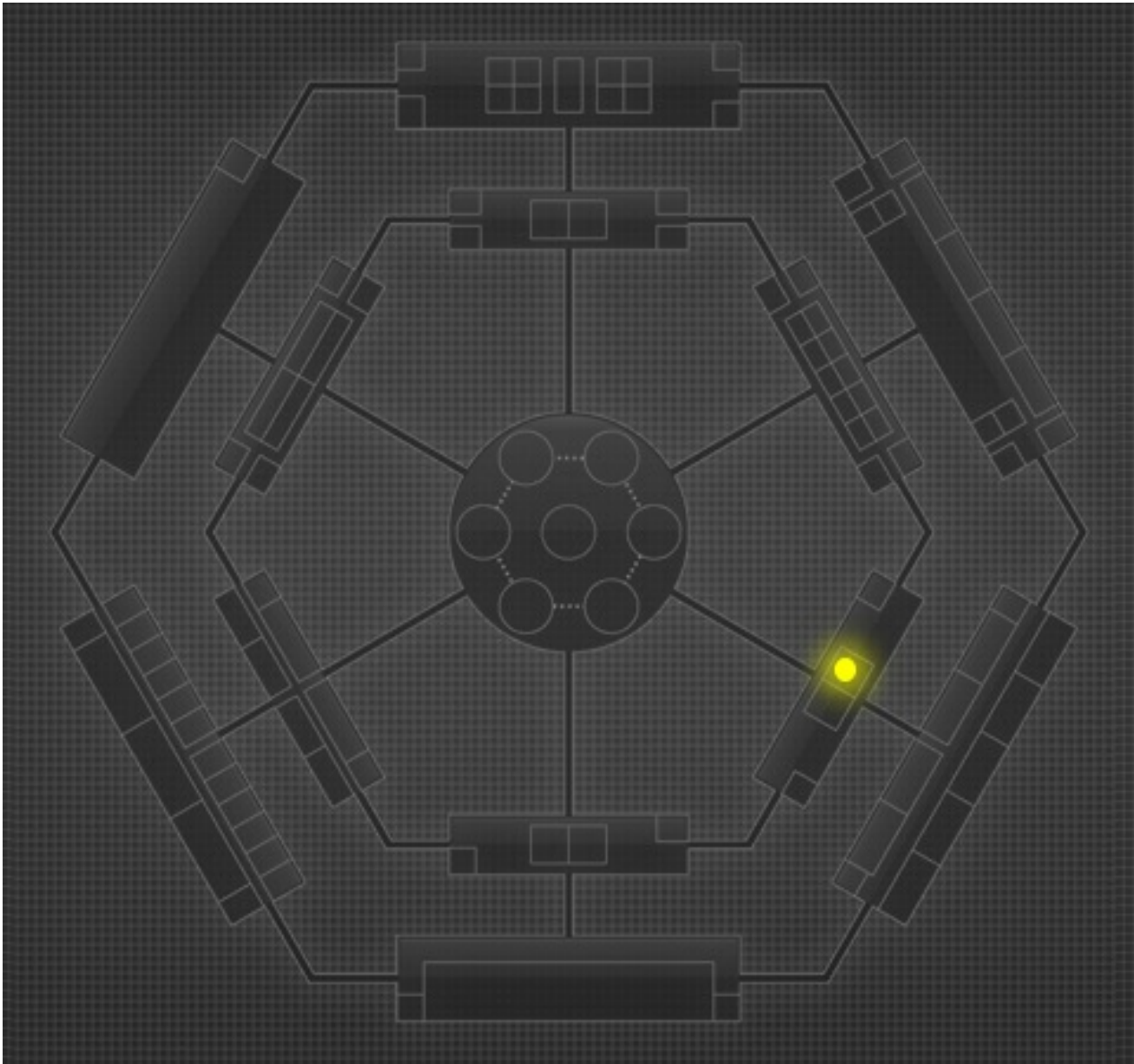
“—ception’s unstable! —o time. I have a message from LABO’s staff!” Commander Murakami starts talking faster as he realizes our transmission is reaching its limits. ***“—ere’s AD lying around the facility for emergencies! Keep injecting yourselves and stay away from contaminated zones! —oing that will keep you alive! —lease help the surviv—”***

The transmission cuts off with a hiss of static. We stare blankly at each other.

Nine hours to go until the bulkheads open?! I have to rot in this godforsaken hole for nine more hours?!

We’re in a situation where we’re practically sitting ducks next to a nuclear reactor that’s undergoing a meltdown. Now we’re being ordered to survive the long hours until we’re freed from here—to endure the radiation exposure by injecting the limited supply of AD.

No one says anything in the face of our hopeless situation. After the death of the radio, oppressive silence dominates the surveillance room.



Radiation Level: 1,571 mSv
Remaining AD: 5

Area 3, Inner Ring

Surveillance Room

TACHIBANA irritably drops her PDA back into her pocket.

“H-Hey, Ukita... What’s the whole deal with this radiation leakage prevention system?!” I ask in a cracking voice. “Why the hell would something like that activate and trap us inside?!”

“Hmm... Since you asked, perhaps I should explain for those of you who don’t know.” Ukita hesitantly answers my barrage of questions. “I need you to understand what a meltdown is first before I can explain why the bulkheads automatically lowered. It’s going to be a bit tedious, though. Are you fine with that?”

“Yeah. The abridged version, please, if you can.” I cross my arms and lean back against the wall as he solemnly breaks down the information.

“In short, a meltdown occurs when a nuclear reactor core rises to exceptionally high temperatures and proceeds to melt. A coolant system constantly cools the nuclear fuel burning inside the reactor to prevent overheating, but...when it’s not adequately cooled for a period of time, the heat will become too much for the reactor’s heat-resistant properties to contain, destroying parts of the containment and releasing burning hot fuel elements outside the reactor.”

“Is that what’s causing the massive fire in Area N right now?”

“Yes. It’s very probable that the extremely hot nuclear fuel set fire to nearby flammable objects. Melted nuclear fuel runs hotter than three thousand degrees Celsius and is capable of burning anything in its path.”

I gulp back the fear forming a lump in my throat and ask a follow-up question. “Am I right to assume the damage to the area is massive since the fires haven’t stopped burning yet?”

“Your assumption is likely correct. Considering the sprinkler systems are shot, there’s a high possibility steam explosions are going off as well. Area N has

turned into a living hell of inferno heat and constant explosions,” Ukita details in a grave voice. “...And it goes without saying that nuclear fuel is radioactive material. The fuel that’s leaking from the reactor is releasing considerable airborne radioactive contamination. It might be easier for you to comprehend when compared to a similar case. Are you familiar with the Chernobyl disaster?”

“Nope... I might’ve known about it at some point, but I’m drawing a blank right now,” I answer honestly.

“It’s one of the greatest nuclear disasters to happen in human history. It took place about half a century ago in Ukraine. One of the nuclear reactors in the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant underwent a meltdown, rupturing the reactor core in a highly destructive steam explosion that resulted in around ten tons of radioactive materials being leaked outside the chamber. It’d take five hundred of the atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima to release ten tons of radioactive materials, which is why it resulted in many casualties. To this day, we don’t know the exact death toll, but some think it to be within the hundreds of thousands.”

“Hundreds of thousands died?! How did the death toll climb so high?!”

“Because of the radioactive materials, of course. It resulted in a nuclear fallout, which is when residual radioactive material following a nuclear blast and fire is propelled into the upper atmosphere and falls out of the sky with rain.” Ukita turns grim eyes on me. “Do you understand what I’m getting at here? This is where the true horrors of a meltdown lie. Think about what will happen when the radiation bottled up in this basement spreads to the surrounding regions! The fact is, the area around Chernobyl’s power plant has become uninhabitable, and we believe it will be that way for the next nine hundred years!”

“It’ll be uninhabitable for nine hundred years?! A nuclear fallout is that dangerous?!”

“Damn straight it is. As such, this facility takes immediate emergency action when there’s a meltdown, in which the bulkheads automatically lock down to prevent a nuclear fallout. That’s what we call a Case N.”

“So that’s what happened...!”

It definitely sounds like it'd be easier to deal with a meltdown if the nuclear reactor is shielded by the unparalleled strength of composite steel plates. If this facility had been made of, say, ordinary reinforced concrete instead of steel, then steam explosions and the like would've brought the whole thing down.

Maybe they made this facility into what's essentially a giant heavy metal box—one they can close the lid on in times of emergency, sealing everything inside into an airtight container—to prevent that from happening. The logic behind it makes sense, but—

“...What're the people who get trapped inside supposed to do?” I shoot Ukita a hopeful look. “Hey, Ukita, is there really no way outta here? The fact that we're still breathing means air has to be passing through somewhere, right?”

“Unfortunately, the air ducts are equipped with radioactive material filters that block potential routes to the surface and other areas, making it impossible to use them as a means of escape.”

“Did they have to be that thorough?”

“Of course they did. Japan once suffered through a major nuclear accident. They have taken every safety precaution possible to not repeat that grave mistake again. LABO's basement floors have been completely severed from the outside world to ensure not a single speck of radioactive ash gets out. So, just as your commanding officer said, all we can do is keep injecting AD and wait until the lockdown ends—”

“I hate to break it to you, Mr. Ukita, but...we don't have the leisure of sitting around and waiting for them to fix the problem without taking action ourselves,” Moribe says, interrupting him.

“Wh-Why not?”

She pulls out her Procyon and explains, “Take a good look at the reading on this Procyon. It was still around 100 mSv right after the bulkheads locked, but it's jumped to 1,609 mSv now. The numbers bounce around somewhat depending on where we are, but they're gradually increasing across the board.”

She's right—the reading was only 1,100 mSv when I first checked the Procyon. The number has jumped by several hundred in the short time since.

“Why’s the number increasing so much, Ukita?! Don’t tell me you guys set up this facility to contain radioactive materials without doing anything to counter the spread within?!” I pound my fist against the wall.

“N-No, you see...I don’t know why either...”

“You don’t know?!”

“The security gates separating each area are supposed to be effective at stopping the spread of radiation like the bulkheads are, but...all the explosions and fires may have damaged the gates and inner walls.”

“Wh-What the hell?! Then what was all that crap about taking every safety precaution possible?!” Miss Ena presses Ukita, her beautiful eyebrows shooting up. “This damn facility locked down with people still inside and they can’t even open it up from the outside! The radiation is growing out of control, the phones and radios are dead, the elevators don’t work, and the sprinkler system broke! Your whole safety system is full of gaping holes!”

“I-I certainly admit that our safety precautions have a lot of shortcomings, but...the system going haywire and the explosions were all factors outside our forecasted expectations...”

“Isn’t preventing unexpected disasters the whole point of making safety precautions?!”

“Yes, it is, but I’m only a researcher at LABO—I’m not responsible for the security here! Don’t take your anger out on me! I understand why you’re upset, but could you calm down a little?!”

“How do you expect me to remain calm?! It’d be one thing if I was the only one stuck here, but my precious students have been trapped as well!” Miss Ena thrusts her finger at the monitor where the three children are on display. “I just know they must be running for their lives from the fires and fear of radiation exposure right now! At the very least, we need to get AD to them stat...!” She sounds like she’s on the verge of tears.

She comes across as a tough woman, but it’s only natural she’d be struck with concern for her students. She shouldn’t take out her anger on Ukita, but I’m all for finding a way to save the children.

“Okay, let’s go look for them right away!”

“Let’s do that!”

“Wait right there, you two!” Tachibana’s harsh voice stops us short. “There’s still an important factor we have to drill into your heads! Even if we regroup with them, we will require nine AD every hour to keep us all alive and well. However, we only have five AD on us.”

“Crap! That’s right...!”

“Ultimately, not only do we not have enough to give to those three, we’re lacking enough for the six of us present to survive the next hour.”

Miss Ena sharply inhales. “W-We only have five?!”

“I’m sorry to say so, but yes... We never expected to be caught in a situation like this.”

“How could you come so unprepared?! Aren’t you supposed to be rescue workers?!”

“...I sincerely...apologize.”

I grit my teeth as I watch Tachibana bow her head in dismay.

We need a minimum of six AD an hour to prevent radiation exposure for everyone here. With each person we rescue, the number of AD we’ll need increases.

“So basically, we need to find more AD while we’re looking for the other survivors, right?” I summarize for the group before the mood worsens.

“Yes, and as fast as we possibly can. Before their cumulative exposure exceeds fatal levels!”

“What’s cumulative exposure?”

Tachibana quickly explains: “What the Procyon shows us is how much radiation a person will be exposed to within an hour in their current location. In other words, we are being exposed to 1,605 mSv per every hour we stay in the present environment.”

“How bad is that?”

“Bad enough to be fatal. The fatality rate is about five percent when the cumulative exposure reaches 2,000 mSv, and it jumps to fifty percent at 4,000 mSv. And you have a ninety-nine percent chance of death at 8,000 mSv.”

“Ninety-nine percent?!”

“What it comes down to is that the more your cumulative exposure increases, the higher and quicker your risk of dying becomes. And it takes a long time for any radiation you have accumulated to go away.”

In our current environment, that means our cumulative exposure will reach 4,000 mSv within two and a half hours, and 8,000 mSv in five hours without injecting AD. We’ll all be dead in a few hours without AD.

“At least AD can almost completely detoxify radiation exposure up to 4,000 mSv,” Ukita mentions as I shudder. “Plus, it’s extremely useful at keeping you alive significantly longer in environments over 8,000 mSv. Our cumulative exposure won’t increase so long as we continue administering AD.”

“Are you positive about that? Do you have proof?”

“I know it’s hard to believe, but please trust me completely on this matter. AD is our lab’s greatest achievement.” Something like pride fills Ukita’s expression as he gives a fluid explanation of it. “AD is a medicine that protects the entire body from radiation exposure through stable iodine agents, chelating agents, nine types of Prussian blue anti-radiation drugs, and medical nanomachines. The formula circulates through your body from the vein you inject it into, protecting your cells, blood, nerves, and genes from radiation. Furthermore, it detoxifies all radioactive materials and compounds, which are excreted from the body through sweat and urine.”

“I can’t believe such a miracle drug exists!”

“It’s new and hasn’t been approved yet. I’m able to remain calm right now because I know how incredibly effective it is. Otherwise, I’d be running around in a panic.” Ukita doesn’t sound or look like he’s lying about this.

The most important takeaway here is that we can survive as long as we keep administering AD. But it’ll only be a matter of time before death comes for us once we run out.

In which case, this isn't the time for us to be arguing with each other. We need to scavenge every last AD in the facility and share it with the kids too.

"Hey, Ukita, is it possible to search for other survivors with the surveillance cameras? Or maybe use the PA to talk to them?"

"Sadly, the PA's not working anymore, and the majority of cameras are broken."

"How did they break?"

"The fires and explosions probably had something to do with it. Most of the surveillance camera footage is gone for good too. The kids seemed to be headed for Area 6, from what I gathered from the scarce footage I was able to recover."

"Area 6!"

That means they were headed much deeper into the facility than Area 3. But that works out fine for us. It's possible there are even more survivors than just the three kids, and we'll need to check every corner of all the areas to save them.

We've already checked Areas 1 and 2. We'll have covered the whole basement if we search from Area 3 to 6. Not to mention, the other two rescue workers we got separated from should be somewhere around here too. I'm sure they each have the AD they were supplied. It'll be reassuring once we can regroup.

"All right, Tachibana, Moribe! Let's search Areas 3 through 6 with a fine-tooth comb!"

"Agreed!"

"Roger!"

"I-I'm coming too!" Miss Ena pipes up in a firm voice.

"But it'll be dangerous for—"

"Do you honestly think now's the time to be saying that? Isn't it more effective if we move ahead with the search as a group?" She looks prepared to face the worst.

“Hold on. I’m coming as well,” Ukita joins in. “I can be of some use to you with my familiarity of the lab’s layout.”

“Me too...,” Yuuri quietly says. “I might not be all that helpful, but I’ll do whatever you tell me to.”

My team and I hesitate, but arguing the point will only waste precious time, so we decide to have them assist with the search.

And thus our various wills aligned to accomplish the two same goals: to survive and to rescue survivors.

Tachibana swiftly starts giving orders to bring us closer to accomplishing our goals. “All right, we are going to split into two teams. After taking balance into consideration, I believe that Captain Kasasagi, Miss Yuuri, and myself should be on one team. Moribe, Ms. Tsubakiyama, and Mr. Ukita will form the other team.” She confirms everyone is down with that plan before continuing. “My team will search the inner ring, so I want Team Moribe to handle the outer ring. We have four search objectives. The primary two are finding survivors and AD. The secondary two are finding a Level 5 security card and a route out.”

All four objectives are things we mustn’t neglect. I carve each deeply into my mind.

“AD can generally be found in iron medical boxes affixed to walls near the entrance to every room. We may be short on time, but please don’t panic, and always keep safety in mind. I’m counting on all of you to do your part!”

“Roger!”

United in our mission, we quickly depart the surveillance room.

▼ 9:50 AM

Area 3, Inner Ring

TACHIBANA, Yuuri, and I immediately start exploring Area 3’s inner ring. We begin by running through the doorway across the corridor. There’s a fairly large office space inside. Seeing as rows of computers line the walls, a lot of researchers must’ve conducted their work here.

“All right, commence searching! Do it within one minute!”

“You’ve got it!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

At Tachibana’s command, we scour the room.

I don’t find any survivors or medical boxes, but something else catches my eye. There’s a note written on the white board that says:

○ ***9/18 Sprinkler System Inspection***

The inspectors (Takeshita, Urabe, Misono) will be in the engine room at 1:00 PM.

****Make sure the sprinkler system is manually shut off before the inspection.***

“...The sprinkler system was being inspected? Do you think this is why it didn’t kick in?” I ask, showing the note to Tachibana. She contemplates the information before answering me.

“No, the date is different. Today is September 16. Though we might figure out why the system’s offline if we go to the engine room.”

“Any idea where it is?”

“Negative. We can only hope we find it during our search.”

But obtaining this new bit of information feels like an advance forward, however small. We wrap up our search of the room in exactly one minute and move on.

We proceed around the corner at the end of the corridor and open the door there. Inside is no ordinary room, but an elevator hall. No survivors are around, and all the elevator lights are out.

“We can’t use any of the elevators?” I ask, shooting a hopeful look at those doors.

“We couldn’t use the ones in Areas 1 or 2, so I think it’s safe to assume all the elevators in this facility are disabled.”

“Any chance we can climb up the elevator shaft to get out?”

“Unfortunately, there’s a bulkhead in the shafts at the section leading to the surface. Probably just another part of their radiation leakage prevention

system.”

This place is chock-full of bulkheads.

We give up on the disabled elevators and head for the connecting passageway leading toward Area N. But our path is blocked by another security gate. The terminal beside it requires a Level N card.

Looks like we need a special card just to enter Area N...

Area N requires the highest level of security clearance in LABO. It's all because of the blasted fires burning with a vengeance inside that the bulkheads refuse to open too!

“Hey, Tachibana, is there any way we can get into Area N and stop the fires ourselves?”

“Are you insane?! That's far too dangerous! It will be extremely difficult to put out the fire without external equipment, and even if we magically succeed in extinguishing it, we will be exposing ourselves to fatal levels of radiation!”

“Right... Dammit!” Not wanting to give up on the idea just yet, I hold the Procyon near the gate. The reading on the display instantly skyrockets to 2,406 mSv. “Holy crap! Get back, you two!” We make a hurried retreat until the Procyon's readings return to normal. “I can't believe it instantly jumped 1,000 mSv just by getting close to the gate! I hate to think what it's like on the other side!”

“A gate made out of lead and other elements should be able to block radiation, but...the surrounding walls and ceiling may be damaged.”

As Tachibana said, it doesn't matter how sturdy the gate is if somewhere else is cracked. Radiation and atomic ash could be leaking through it.

In any event, I have no doubt a melting reactor is just beyond this gate. It's a death zone where raging flames and radiation have swirled together. I can't even begin to imagine how much radiation is going to hit us if we open the gate when the contamination is this bad with it closed.

“Captain, with this we are finished searching the inner ring. We should go help out Team Moribe,” Tachibana says, putting her hand on my shoulder.

With my nod, we run back down the corridor.

▼ 9:54 AM

Area 3, Between the Inner and Outer Ring

Connecting Passageway

MORIBE’S angry shouts fill our ears the moment we reach the connecting passageway to the outer ring. “You’re not qualified to handle this! Listen to the professional here!”

“What’s the big deal? It’s just a little smoke! Since when have rescue workers been such wusses?”

Moribe and Miss Ena are having a serious spat in the middle of the passageway.

“Stop fighting.” Ukita is trying to mediate between them, but they’re locked in a glaring contest like two cats about to go at it.

“What’s all the commotion? Something happen?” I ask as I approach.

Moribe looks over her shoulder at us. “Nothing yet, but I detected traces of an active fire somewhere up ahead. Since I don’t know where it’s coming from yet, I told Ms. Tsubakiyama and Mr. Ukita to wait in a safe room, but—”

“Stuff your stupid ideas! If there are traces of a fire, that’s all the more reason for us to search as a group to cover more ground!” Miss Ena won’t listen to reason.

Tachibana levels her with an authoritative look. “Ms. Tsubakiyama, Moribe’s judgment is sound. We can’t allow an untrained civilian to roam around where unchecked fires are burning.”

“You’re siding with her stupid decision, too, Lieutenant? It’s just a little bit of smoke—”

“Do you have a death wish? Unless you do, I suggest you listen to us.” Tachibana speaks calmly, but with a commanding aura that doesn’t leave room for argument.

Miss Ena winces. “I-I don’t have a death wish... I just wanted to help with the

search...”

“The sentiment is appreciated, but please follow our orders during this disaster. Even the smallest fire, when underestimated, can claim lives. You would do well to remember that.”

“I see... Fine. I’ll leave the decision making up to the professionals, then.”

“Thank you very much. Now then, all civilians are to wait here. Our squad will handle extinguishing the fire.”

Naturally, Miss Ena obeys orders this time, along with Ukita and Yuuri.

“...Looks like it’s our turn to shine,” I say, feeling nervous.

“Sure is. It’s round one in your fight to recovery. This is just what the doctor ordered to reclaim your instincts.”

I nod and head to the outer ring with Tachibana and Moribe.

▼ 9:56 AM

Area 3, Outer Ring

LIKE the inner ring, the outer ring has a stark interior with unfaced concrete walls, but with a different floor layout. Several doors leading to small rooms are located on either side of the six-foot wide corridor. I don’t see any immediate traces of a fire, but a thin layer of smoke is definitely hovering over the entire area.

“Is this facility’s HVAC system not working either?” I ask.

“It has been, on the most part, but there are some places where the vents have broken, like here. They’ve likely taken damage from the fires.” Tachibana looks around before continuing, “More importantly, Captain, I need you to take one extra precaution while searching this block.”

“What’s that?”

“Please touch the door with your hand and confirm how hot it is before you open it. Don’t open doors, under any circumstance, that feel hot to the touch.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ll cause a backdraft,” Moribe answers instead of Tachibana.

“I take it that’s a bad thing?”

“It sure is. When a fire burns in a sealed-off room, it’ll eventually consume all the oxygen inside and begin to smolder. So when you open the door, air rapidly rushes inside, causing it to combust explosively.” Moribe gestures to the smoke hanging in the air. “We don’t see a fire in this block, but there’s smoke, which means a fire is smoldering away in one of these rooms. So if you don’t check the temperature carefully beforehand, you could get us all blown away.”

“Geh...” I swallow my fear and survey the area.

Dozens of button-operated doors line the corridor. Every single one poses a serious risk of unleashing a torrent of flames if I open it. This feels like a game of Russian roulette, where one door has an explosive booby trap just waiting to be tripped.

But survivors and AD may be hidden behind these doors, and we can’t leave the source of the fire alone either. I have no choice but to muster my courage and carefully check each room.

“O-Okay, let’s tread carefully!”

Frightened of what lies beyond, we commence our search of each room. Tachibana points the hose at the closest door first. I take off my glove and place my hand directly on the door to confirm the temperature.

“...It’s not hot.”

“Roger that. I’m opening the door!” Moribe announces and presses the button.

I brace myself as the door slides open, but all that’s waiting for us on the other side is a tidy office. I let out a long breath—no signs of a fire here.

“Search for AD within thirty seconds!”

At Tachibana’s orders, we do a quick sweep of the room. I spot an iron receptacle the size of a tissue box on the wall near the door.

“Isn’t this one of the medical boxes?” I run up to the container and open it, but it’s empty. It looks like someone has already made off with the contents. Sadly, I don’t see any other survivors or security cards around either.

“On to the next room, then. Let’s increase our search efficiency!”

The next door leads to a stairwell. Unlike all the other rooms with automatic sliding doors, this one has a fire door with heavy hinges. After checking for heat, I open it to find a mountain of debris inside. The spiral staircase had collapsed. It’s been completely destroyed from the part connecting to the surface down.

“Hold on, how did this staircase collapse? I don’t see any traces of a fire burning here,” I observe. There aren’t any scorch marks on the walls either.

“It certainly doesn’t appear to have been caused by a fire. I believe it was caused by one of those explosions of unknown origin.”

I investigate the staircase’s rubble as I listen to Tachibana. There’s nothing here, so we’re forced to move on to the next room.

We scour dozens of rooms after that, with no luck. Not only do we not find survivors or AD, but the fire’s source continues to elude us.

Crap! We need to find some AD and fast! I’m growing more impatient by the minute. The last time we administered AD was around 9:16 AM. It’s almost 10:00 AM now. We have little more than fifteen minutes left before we should take our next dose. Finding survivors and the security cards is important, but we won’t survive the next hour without more AD.

With growing dread biting at our heels, we approach the next room. I check the door’s temperature like every other time. It doesn’t feel any hotter than body temperature.

“No...heat here either,” I report.

“Roger. I’m opening the door.” Moribe reaches for the button.

We’ve repeated this routine dozens of times now. I’ve become less focused than I was at first because I’ve grown used to nothing going wrong. That’s why I didn’t notice it sooner. The door might not be hotter than body temperature, but it’s still hot!

“Oh, crap! Don’t open it, Moribe!” I yell, but it’s too late. Moribe’s finger presses the button, opening the door.

It feels like all the air around us is being sucked into the room. Moribe dives

away from the door just as fire shoots toward me out of the room with a monstrous roar.

“AGH!” I cry out from the shock.

I’m dead—or so I thought, but thinking means I’m alive. My eyes peel open and I see Tachibana on top of me. She knocked me out of the way just in the nick of time.

“Are you all right, Captain?!”

“I-I’m fine! But this is bad!” I push to my feet and assess my surroundings, which have been engulfed in a sea of flames. The fire smoldering in the room had combusted and spewed into the corridor. The hose had been flung out of Tachibana’s hand and onto the ground beyond the fire.



“Are you guys okay?!” Moribe calls out from the other side of the swaying flames.

“We’re all right! Please throw us the hose!”

“On it!” Following Tachibana’s orders, Moribe grabs the hose and tosses it in our direction. The metal nozzle slides across the floor and into Tachibana’s reach.

As I’m watching her, the flames sway toward us and lick my left hand. “Ouch!” The heat passes through my glove, searing the back of my hand. The growing flames send a hot blast of wind my way, burning the inside of my nose and the back of my throat. I start coughing and gagging.

“What are you doing, Captain?! Please stand back!” Tachibana barks, bracing the hose turned toward the rampant fires. “I’m releasing the water!” A powerful jet of water bursts forth, steadily pushing back the flames as it blows them out.

“Amazing...!”

“You want to aim for flammable, burning objects, not the fire itself, when putting out a fire. Please watch and memorize how I do it,” Tachibana calmly explains as she nimbly manipulates the heavy hose. Water swells into the burning room like a living creature. The fierce blaze grows smaller by the second until it’s completely doused. “The fire has been extinguished,” she quietly announces as she shuts off the flow of water.

Moribe dashes over to us. “You guys were in a serious pinch there!”

“Yeah...we somehow made it, thanks to Tachibana.”

“I’m glad you aren’t hurt, Captain, but”—Tachibana suddenly grabs me by the collar, shoves me against the wall, and starts berating me—“why did you give the okay without properly confirming the temperature first?! I warned you about how dangerous that is!”

“I-I’m sorry... I was starting to panic when I thought about how badly we need AD...”

“You panicked?! You’re blaming your failure on panic?! Do you honestly

believe you can do our job with such naive thinking?! In your state, you won't be able to protect yourself, much less save others!"

"...!" I avert my eyes away from her furious rant.

"Don't be too harsh on him, Lieutenant! He's out of sorts today, so we can't expect him to be himself!" Moribe intervenes on my behalf.

"I know. He never makes such rash mistakes." Disappointment oozes from Tachibana's voice.

"H-Hey, Tachibana...what was I like before this?" I ask, unable to take being such a letdown.

"You were the ideal rescue worker. You were an impeccable commanding officer who possessed both composure and bravery, while excelling in the field with your physical and rescue skills."

Moribe agrees wholeheartedly with Tachibana's evaluation. "That was you all right. You were a bit standoffish and strict, but someone I could count on to keep us safe."

"That was me, huh?" If that's what they thought of me, then I must've been an exceptionally talented rescue worker. I feel like such a worthless coward in comparison to the me I don't know. "I really am sorry for making such a big mistake... I know it's late to say so, but I'll make sure to put safety first from here on out."

"Please be extra cautious until your memories and skills return. This area is in the clear now, so let's continue the search before we waste more time," Tachibana declares and briskly walks off.

Moribe and I follow behind her. My burned left hand stings. I would've never made such a stupid mistake if I was my normal self. Just knowing that eats away at me.

"What's wrong, Captain? You look horrible," Moribe whispers.

"I'm reflecting on my actions... I feel pathetic."

"Ha! You're like a completely different person today. You're saying the same stuff I do."

“You say stuff like this too?”

Moribe flashes a wry grin. “Truth is, I often think the same thing you just said. I always wonder, ‘Am I really fit to be on SIRIUS’s squad?’ SIRIUS is led by awesome people like you and the lieutenant, so I can’t help feeling like I don’t belong.”

“Awesome people, huh? Too bad I’m a far cry from that person now.”

“Don’t be hard on yourself, silly. It’s only natural you’d be a mess without your memories. I’d seriously be out of a job if you showed me up in your state.” Moribe gives me a light thwack on the back. She tends to be overly familiar with people, but she doesn’t seem like a bad person. “Well, you can’t beat yourself up over spilled milk forever. I’ll cover for you when you make a mistake, so let’s work hard together without losing hope!”

“Thanks, Moribe... I’ll try to catch on fast, so I’ll be counting on you to watch my back until then.”

“Okay! I’ve got you covered!” She smiles at me.

I’m filled with reassurance when all I’ve felt until now is helplessness. She’s a whole twelve years younger than me, but she seems to have a natural inclination to look after others. She has a cheerful disposition that makes her easy to lean on for mental support as well.

Thanks to chatting with her, I’m able to pull myself together and recommence our search of the outer ring. But we don’t come across anything of value. Worse yet, the last door is jammed because of the flames let loose by the backdraft.

“A room we can’t get inside, huh? This is my fault too...”

But unlike the other doors, this one has a small square window. I take a peek inside, but it’s empty.

“I don’t see any survivors... Should we still break down the door and look inside?”

“Breaking it will take time. Let’s wrap up our search of this block and return to the inner ring.”

Moribe and I are in full agreement with Tachibana. We turn around and travel

back down the path we took to get here.

▼ 10:05 AM

Area 3, Inner Ring

MISS Ena and Ukita are waiting for us when we get back to the inner ring.

“D-Did something happen?” Miss Ena stutters with worry. “I heard something explode earlier.”

“It wasn’t quite an explosion. I caused a backdraft...,” I inform them, explaining what happened in the outer ring.

Ukita frowns at my story. “Hmm. The fires are spreading farther and faster than I expected. Shouldn’t we speed up the search?”

“Yeah, let’s move to Area 4— Wait a sec.” I pause and look around. “Hey, guys, where’s Yuuri?”

Everyone gasps and looks around.

“What do you mean ‘where’? She’s not here?! Where did she go?! She was here until just a minute ago!” Miss Ena panics.

“Crud! Let’s look for her! She’ll be in danger alone!”

Everyone agrees and we break into groups to look for Yuuri.

As I run through the corridor, I mull over where she might go. Yuuri shouldn’t have a security card, which means she can’t have left this area. So if she’s going to be anywhere, it has to be within Area 3’s inner ring.

The emergency stairwell comes into view as I’m working out her possible destination. Maybe she went to check if there’s a way to the surface from there? I charge inside, hoping to find her, and spot Yuuri trembling in the dark depths of the stairwell.

“I found her! She’s in the emergency stairwell!” I shout, summoning the others right over.

“You can’t run off like this, Yuuri!” Tachibana harshly scolds her. “Why did you leave Ms. Tsubakiyama?”

“Um, I...heard an explosion and got scared...,” she weakly answers.

“Going off on your own is even more dangerous than an explosion! You must never leave us without permission!”

“I-I’m sorry...” Yuuri hangs her head, tears welling in her green eyes. Being yelled at by an adult has thoroughly crushed her spirit.

“Don’t be too tough on her, Tachibana,” I say to smooth over the tense mood. “Yuuri was frightened by the backdraft I caused. You should be blaming me instead of her.”

“You’re being too soft, Captain! If something like this happens again, we might find a body next time!”

“I agree, but Yuuri’s learned her lesson. Haven’t you?”

“...I have.”

I offer the crestfallen girl a reassuring smile as we head to Area 4.

Along the way, I glance at my watch. “We’re in deep here. It’s already 10:07 AM. We have less than ten minutes before we need our next injection,” I mutter, more to myself than anyone else, but it gets a reluctant response out of Yuuri.

“U-Um...if it comes down to it, I don’t mind passing on the shot—”

“How could you say that, Yuuri? We don’t have to think about those things until we’re out of time for sure. Let’s have faith that we’ll find more AD in Area 4.”

“O-Okay...,” she timidly agrees.

As I’m encouraging her, my suspicions start to rouse. Yuuri is in no way uncooperative with our search. She’s terribly afraid but she still puts others before herself. So why would such a kind person try to escape on her own?

I think back to the face she made when we first met. Fear undeniably twisted her features when she saw me.

Is she scared of me the most? If so, why? I don’t have the time to figure it out as the gate dividing the areas comes into view.

I open the gate with the Procyon in my opposite hand. It’s reading 1,782 mSv—a safe level with AD. There aren’t any signs of a fire either.

But something entirely different has us frowning at the open door.

...What in the world is this smell?

The passageway beyond the gate has a strange odor like rusted iron. I'm getting a bad feeling about this.

"That's the smell of blood...!" Moribe cries out, shocking the rest of us.

▼ 10:09 AM

Between Area 3 and Area 4, Inner Ring

Connecting Passageway

"**BLOOD?!** Could Tenkawa and the girls have gotten injured?!" Miss Ena is the first to react aloud.

My heart lurches at the thought. This connecting passageway goes around a bend in the middle, making it impossible to see to the end. But the smell of blood is definitely coming from farther inside.

"...Don't jump to conclusions, Miss Ena. There's no guarantee it's one of your students."

"I want to believe otherwise too! But—" She bolts down the passageway before she finishes speaking.

"Tachibana, Moribe, after her!" I shout.

"Roger! Yuuri, please wait here with Mr. Ukita!"

Tachibana, Moribe, and I run off, leaving Yuuri and Ukita at the gate. Miss Ena is already to the bend. A second after she disappears around the corner—"KYAAAAAAA!"—she lets out an ear-piercing scream.

Her shriek stops us in our tracks. She staggers back into view.

"What's wrong, Miss Ena? Did you see something?!"

"A-Around the corner! C-Corpses...!"

The air around us instantly freezes. For a second, I imagine those children's bloodied bodies.

"Corpses? Please don't tell me you found your students!" I ask in a hoarse

voice.

She shakes her head. “N-No, not them... But they aren’t normal corpses!”

“H-How so?”

“...You’ll know when you see for yourself.” Trembling, she points beyond the bend.

Gripped by terror of the unknown, I squeeze out, “Let’s go...”

Tachibana and Moribe silently nod. I reluctantly peer around the corner and sharply inhale.

A gruesome scene straight out of a horror movie jumps out at me. The first thing that floods my vision is deep red. The passageway is dyed with the color of blood. Lying in a pool of blood are two corpses ripped full of holes. Farther past them is yet another dead body, wearing the same hazmat suit as the ones Tachibana and Moribe showed me.

The second she sees the third body, Tachibana cries out in a quivering voice, “I-It can’t be! That’s... That body is...!”

“You know them?”

“Y-Yes...it’s D-Dojima.”

I’m floored by that reveal. That’s the name of one of our teammates!

“Does that mean our teammate died?!”

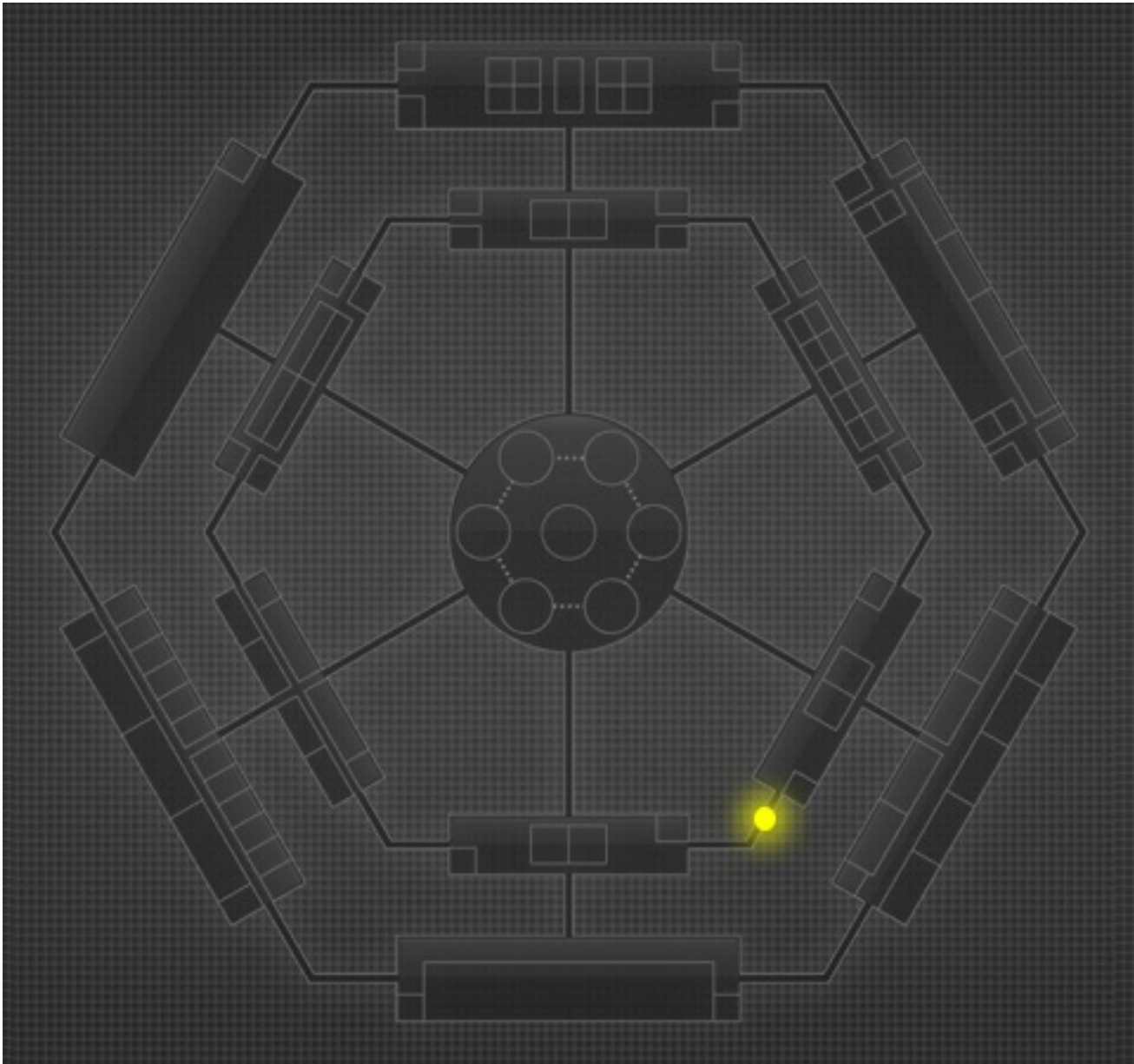
Tachibana nods and weakly mutters, “Wh-Why did he...have to die this way...?!”

No one has an answer for her. I stare at that dead body in a daze.

I always thought the corpses I’d see in this facility, if any, would be those who had been burned to death. But that clearly wasn’t the case here. It doesn’t take a professional to know that’s not what happened. These were the bodies of people who had their lives taken by another—they’ve clearly been murdered.



vA Chapter 04: 【Carnage and Corpses】 9/16/2030
10:12



Radiation Level: 1,798 mSv

Remaining AD: 5

▼ 10:12 AM

Between Area 3 and Area 4, Inner Ring

Connecting Passageway

CLENCHING my fists to stop from shaking, I take in every last detail of the gruesome spectacle spread in the bloody corridor before me. “Oh God, this is sick...”

The two corpses lying in a puddle of blood are dressed in black business suits. They likely worked at this facility. Their bodies are filled with holes from head to toe.

Were they shot with a...gun?

Taking a good look around reveals bullet holes in the walls and floor too. Seems like the work of a gun to me.

Blood oozes from the various-sized holes in their bodies, and their discolored innards spill out from the biggest hole ripped open in their stomachs. Gray matter seeps from their cracked skulls, leaving a slimy stain of indescribable color and smell on the floor.

“Ghh!” I instinctively look away from the grotesque way they had died. But the other corpse farther down the passageway—the remains of our teammate Dojima—was left in an even more baffling way.

His limbs are torqued in unnatural directions, and his neck has been snapped right around. His hazmat suit is torn and ripped in different spots, while his helmet lies in a broken heap beside him, exposing his dead face for all to see. A trail of blood streaks his right cheek under his gouged-out eye like red tears. Agony distorts his face, his tongue hanging from the corner of his mouth.

What the hell happened here?! Why have they been murdered in such a vicious way?!

This doesn’t look like the work of a human. Only a heartless monster would be capable of such carnage.

But this situation doesn’t make sense no matter who—or what—is responsible for it. Why were two pumped full of bullet holes, while the third

was killed in a completely different manner?

“What the devil happened here?!” I rasp.

“I don’t know,” Tachibana answers in a tight voice. “However, it appears he came down to the basement to rescue survivors after all.”

I take another look at Dojima’s remains and see a broken tool on the ground next to him. Since it was burned black, I can only tell it’s a piece of pneumatic equipment like the engine cutter.

“What’s that?”

“A jackhammer... He probably brought it with him to break down walls and doors.”

I pick it up, but it’s been broken beyond repair. One of the bullets had shot out the motor and ignited the gasoline, causing it to explode. And two broken ampoules are lying right next to where it had been.

“There’s AD...!”

One has been smashed into pieces, like someone had stepped on it, while the other is still in its original form, but the container is cracked and leaking the liquid inside.

Moribe glances down at the AD and quietly notes, “That looks like the AD we were given by the facility... I wonder if Dojima was administering it to them.”

“He might’ve been. I bet he took these survivors under his wing and was trying to come up with an escape plan as well,” I conclude from the information available to us.

“Just like we are... But why’d he have to die?! He was always so full of life! Why did such a great and cheerful person get killed?!”

I have no words to offer Moribe as tears well in her eyes. I don’t feel sad. One of my squad members is lying there dead in front of me, but it doesn’t feel real. It’s like I’m watching a crime drama I have no connection to. Without any memories, my teammate’s death is no different from witnessing the death of a stranger. I’m disgusted by myself.

Tachibana gently wraps her arms around Moribe’s shoulders as the younger

woman buries her face in her hands.

“We mustn’t dwell on this right now. Seeing as Hiyama’s body isn’t here, he should still be alive. We can still try to save him at least.”

“...Yeah.”

“Let’s hold a funeral for Dojima and the other two before we go... I can’t bring myself to leave them like this.”

Naturally, we can’t hold a proper funeral inside this facility. Even so, Tachibana moves the three bodies to the side of the passageway and quickly strips off some wallpaper to cover them. We put our hands together and pray for their souls to find peace, when a voice suddenly echoes down the passageway behind us.

“Hey, Captain Kasasagi! What in science’s name happened here?!”

“Wha-?!” I glance over my shoulder to see Ukita running this way. He probably came looking for us because we were taking too long to return.

He grabs me by the collar and starts yelling in my face. “Three men are dead, and the jackhammer’s been destroyed...! You know something, don’t you?!”

“H-How could I know anything?! Calm down, Ukita!”

“How could I possibly stay calm in this situa—” Before he can finish ranting and raving, a sorrowful shout echoes around the passageway.

“P-Please stop!” I turn my head to see Yuuri on the verge of tears. In a shaky voice, she begs us to quit. “D-Don’t fight! P-People died there, right? If something like that happens again...!” Her face is strained with fear, but a clear force of will burns in her eyes.

Rationality returns to Ukita’s eyes when he sees her. “I-I’m sorry... To think I of all people would lose my head like that...”

“Nah, you have a right to be upset... Did you know the deceased researchers?”

“Huh? N-No...I don’t know them at all.”

“You don’t?”

“This lab has a huge staff. The odds of ever seeing someone who doesn’t work in your area are extremely low.”

Something about his attitude and explanation doesn’t sit well with me. Why did he get so worked up if he doesn’t know them?

Miss Ena joins the conversation before I have a chance to figure it out. “Hey, can we get to the important question here? Why were they killed? Was someone trying to steal their AD?”

“Nope, I don’t think that was it. We found some AD in the passageway with them,” I say, eliminating that possibility.

“The bigger problem is the murder weapon. Why did the killer have a gun...?” Tachibana says, hesitantly voicing what she’s most concerned about.

Ukita’s eyes suddenly widen in shock. “E-Everyone, stay on guard! The killer might still be in this facility!”

“How?!”

“If those three were killed after the lockdown began, then that’d mean the killer was trapped inside LABO along with the rest of us!” His declaration electrifies the air between us.

I quickly argue against his theory. “Hold on, Ukita. It’s too soon to conclude that the killer’s in here with us. The killer should be just as scared of fire and radiation as we are. What reason would they have to slaughter a rescue worker like this?”

“That’s one way to think about it, but—”

“Plus, all of Dojima’s AD was purposefully destroyed. The killer would have to be out of their mind to break the AD if they killed Dojima and the researchers after the bulkheads lowered.”

“So you think the three of them were murdered before the lockdown?”

“I do. And if they were, that gives the killer plenty of time to escape after the murder. I don’t know what the killer’s objective was, but we should assume they got out—”

An electronic beeping noise suddenly echoes through the passageway, cutting

me off.

▼ 10:16 AM

Between Area 3 and Area 4, Inner Ring

Connecting Passageway

“**WHAT’S** that sound?!” I spin around to take in our full surroundings.

“Apologies. That’s my watch alarm. I set it to go off when we need our next dose of AD,” Tachibana says and clicks off the alarm.

I glance at my watch—it’s 10:16 AM.

“I understand you are all very stressed out right now, but please take this time to inject yourselves with AD. I know some of you took AD less than an hour ago, but we should do this together to be on the safe side. Our next required dose will be at 11:16 AM.” Tachibana hands out the AD, which Ukita and Miss Ena immediately inject into their arms. Only Yuuri refuses to inject herself. Tachibana frowns at her. “Yuuri, what’s the matter?”

“No...I still don’t want to do it...”

“You’re still saying that after everything that’s happened?! Very well, I hate that it has to come to this, but I’ll inject you instead!”

“N-No...”

Tachibana injects Yuuri with AD without hearing her out. Now we only have two AD. Tachibana, Moribe, and I exchange looks.

“We ran out damn fast... How do you want to handle this?” I ask.

“There’s no question here. Captain, Moribe, please inject yourselves with it,” Tachibana orders us, her mind made up.

“Wh-Why us?!”

“I can’t have you pushing yourself in your current state. And Moribe has the smallest body among us. So we should assume she has a weaker resistance to radiation.”

“B-But then what will you do?!”

“I will use this,” she says, picking something up from the floor. It’s the AD with a damaged ampoule that was with Dojima’s things. Less than half of the leaking liquid remains inside the cracked container.

“D-Don’t be a fool! You’re not seriously considering keeping your body protected with only half a dose, are you?”

“Will it protect me, Mr. Ukita?” Tachibana turns to Ukita for advice.

“Hmm... In most cases, if the drug’s dosage has been halved, the effects should be halved as well... Or it could be the effective time that’s halved instead. I honestly don’t know, as it hasn’t been tested.”

Moribe is horrified by what she’s heard. She’s checking the reading on the Procyon as she sputters, “W-Wait just a minute! It’s far too risky, Lieutenant! The Procyon is currently at a reading of 2,035 mSv and rising! It’s already at a life-threatening level as it is! If that AD doesn’t take effect, you’ll—”

“Do you have any better suggestions? We don’t have enough AD—that’s the cold, hard truth. If no one has any other ideas, I will be the one taking the damaged AD, no ifs or buts allowed.”

“But—”

“Don’t argue with me, Moribe!” Tachibana sharply cuts her off. Moribe flinches. “We’re being exposed to radiation as we speak! If you want to help me, please inject yourself with AD and continue searching for more!” Unwavering determination burns in her amber eyes. That’s enough to tell me it’ll be impossible to talk her out of it.

“...Moribe, let’s follow her orders.”

“O-Okay...”

Moribe and I reluctantly inject ourselves with AD, and Tachibana does the same with the damaged ampoule. The other three gravely watch on.

“...I apologize for causing a scene,” Tachibana says to them, then takes control of the situation. “Let’s discuss our next move. With our supply of AD depleted, I would like to hurry along our search of Area 4. I want to make sure everyone is up for it, though.”

Everyone falls silent for a moment, but Miss Ena's the first to break the silence. "O-Of course we are up for going with you! We can get the search over with faster with more people looking!"

"It seems dangerous out there, but probably safer than being alone," Ukita agrees as well.

Yuuri hesitates for a long moment before finally muttering, "I-I'm coming too."

It'll be hard on them, but it's a huge help to have them with us. After what's happened, keeping all the survivors nearby is for the best.

"...All right, let's get a move on, then, people."

We nod to each other and set off for Area 4—leaving behind our squad member who died before he could realize his ambitions and the two survivors we failed to save in time.

▼ 10:20 AM

Area 4, Inner Ring

WE pass through the connecting passageway and set foot inside Area 4's inner ring. It's a futuristic space completely unlike anywhere else we've been until now. The glossy blue walls end at an immaculate, polished black floor that seems to cover an expansive space as large as a 2,200-square-foot house.

In the middle of this ridiculously large floor is a square area surrounded by walls. At first glance, it looks like a giant blue box, but seeing as it has a door, it must be a room.

By all appearances, this room is the only one in this space. The only other things here are the connecting passage to the next area and the emergency staircase.

The Procyon is giving off a reading of 2,164 mSv. As we feared, the radiation levels are gradually growing, and there's no telling how high they'll go.

We have to find at least six more AD before 11:16 AM or we're doomed. We've got no time to grieve the loss of our squad member. That's why Tachibana is putting on such a brave front too.

“—his is SIRIUS Commander Murakami. Kasasagi, do you read— ...sagi, do you read me?” A voice suddenly emits from my PDA.

“...Ah!” It’s a transmission from the commander. He probably contacted me instead of Tachibana because she informed him that I was okay during the last transmission. I frantically pull out my PDA and respond. “Ah, ah! This is Kasasagi. I read you.”

“—sasagi...been trying to reach you for...—...finally got throu—” The radio waves have clearly gotten worse. Commander Murakami starts relaying orders through broken clips. ***“—port your status.”***

“R-Right. We found bodies inside the facility!” I give my report over the unstable transmission, informing him about the three dead bodies we discovered, how one of the corpses belonged to Dojima, and how they looked like they were murdered with a gun. “...The killer might have escaped to the surface. Please investigate if anyone who left the facility had a gun on them.”

“—check...for guns...right?! —derstood, I’ll handl—”

I’ve managed to get the abnormality of the situation across to the commander. The transmission’s almost at the end of its life, so Commander Murakami changes tactics and starts rattling off information as quick as he can.

“—of LABO’s...vivors...—...mong the survivors...—...protect...se—”

“I didn’t catch that, Commander! Please repeat!”

“—the girl—! ...—...protect the girl...—...—”

“Protect a girl? You’re talking about Yuuri, right? Okay! I will!”

“—ounting on...—...sasagi...—...—”

The transmission dies there. I pocket the PDA and address the group. “...Did you guys catch all that? Let’s get Area 4’s search over with quick.”

Tachibana nods and puts a question to Ukita. “Mr. Ukita, what kind of area is this?”

“Oh, this is where we handle most of our data processing. There’s a supercomputer in here called Brain Cell.”

“A supercomputer? Where is it?”

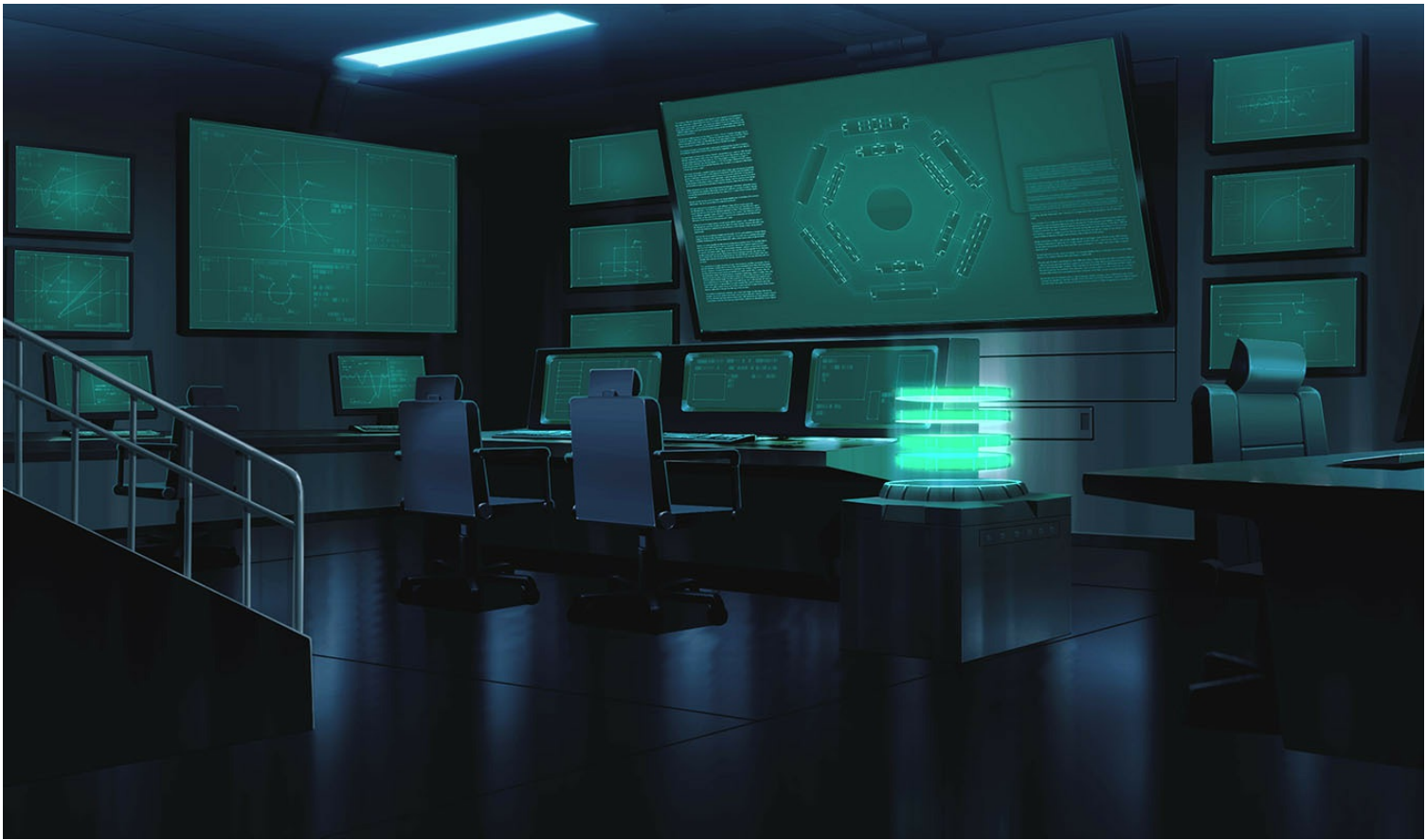
“In that blue room right there. Let’s go inside,” Ukita says and shows us to the room.

▼ 10:23 AM

Area 4, Inner Ring

System Control Room

AS soon as he opens the door, my eyes are filled with nothing but huge screens. About nine 100-inch computer screens cover the walls. Vast amounts of data are flickering on and off at dizzying speeds.



“Hey, Ukita, what does this supercomputer do?”

“It takes care of the batch processing for all the information handled by this lab. It manages everything from test data analysis and calculations to the infrastructure systems, such as electricity, lighting, HVAC, plumbing, and so on. Take a look at these numbers for example.” Ukita points to some numbers on the side of the biggest screen. A time stamp, indicated in military time as 18:16, and 14,581 mSv are listed beside each other. “This number ‘18:16’ refers to the time the lockdown is scheduled to lift at.”

“Roughly eight more hours to go, then. That more or less coincides with the commander’s estimate.”

“Indeed. He said our engineers are currently trying to restore the system from the surface, but...the data here is calculating ‘the time it will take for repairs to be done and for the lockdown to end.’”

“Is there any chance it’ll end before the estimated time?”

“Not easily. The mass majority of the processing necessary to cause a system restore is managed by Brain Cell here, which is what calculated the estimate in the first place. Artificial error may cause it to take longer, but I doubt they can do it any faster.”

“I see...” I sigh and bring up another question. “Okay, then what’s this 14,581 mSv number telling us?”

“Oh, that’s...” Ukita hesitates for a moment before answering me. “...the radiation level in Area N.”

“What?! The contamination in Area N is that high?!” I shudder.

The supercomputer’s basically telling us that close to 15,000 mSv of radiation is swirling around inside Area N. It’s become a death zone we can’t even step into without forfeiting our lives.

“...I guess LABO has its own Elephant’s Foot now,” Moribe quietly notes.

“Elephant’s Foot?”

“That’s what they called the mass of radioactive material expelled from the reactor during the Chernobyl disaster. It reached close to 80,000 mSv at its

highest level. The numbers we're dealing with are way better in comparison, but...we're still screwed if we set foot in Area N."

The difference between 15,000 mSv and 80,000 mSv doesn't mean much when it comes to radiation. Either amount and anything in between is a lethal dose. Both Chernobyl and LABO are crazy worlds where abnormal levels of radiation roam freely.

"In any event, we should be glad that Brain Cell is still intact given our horrible situation," Ukita mentions over our silence. "The security gates are controlled from here, so our search will be permanently finished if this ever breaks down."

Latching on to what he said, Tachibana rushes to ask, "It controls the gates? Is it possible to open the bulkheads from here as well, then?"

"...!"

Her proposal gets wide-eyed looks out of the whole group.

"Can that be done, Ukita?"

"I don't know! But it's worth trying!" Ukita walks over to the control panel, saying, "I'll try to figure it out. The rest of you should continue the search. There's no point in us all wasting time here."

"Good point! We'll start with a search of Area 4 while you work on it."

We leave the system control room and Ukita behind.

Tachibana gives orders once we're back in the corridor. "All right, let's break into two teams again."

"We're down to five people now. How do you want to split up?" I gesture to our group.

"Taking team balance into consideration, I will join up with Yuuri. Moribe, please take your team to search the outer ring."

"Roger!"

"You've got it!"

"Okay!"

We promptly split into teams and get to work.

Area 4, Between the Inner and Outer Ring

Connecting Passageway

MORIBE, Miss Ena, and I head straight to the outer ring. We pass through the connecting passageway without issue and arrive at the gate. I jump back when I get to it—I can feel heat radiating from the door. It sounds like something is popping and crackling. All signs point to a fire burning on the other side.

“Moribe...will a backdraft occur if we open it?”

“I don’t think so,” Moribe answers, her expression serious. “It’s unlikely the entire outer ring has been completely sealed off... But it’s dangerous nonetheless. Please stand back, you two.”

Moribe has us back away a couple of feet before she carefully opens the security gate. An intensely hot wind slams into us from the other side.

Purgatory lies beyond the opened door. The entire spacious floor has gone up in flames, and the air is filled with plumes of copious black smoke. Fire devours the floor, walls, and ceiling, and sparks are flying everywhere. Oppressive heat pours off it in waves.

“H-Holy crap! Don’t we need to get Tachibana over here for this?” Right after I say that, the Procyon lets off a shrill beeping noise in my pocket. Startled, I look at its display and see a reading of 4,331 mSv—that’s over the first danger standard! “Wh-What the hell?! Has this area been overrun with radiation?!” I shout over the roaring fire.

“Don’t panic, Captain!” Moribe shouts back. “That number shouldn’t be a problem with AD!”

“R-Right. Then we’d better put out this fire—” I turn my eyes toward the rolling flames and sharply inhale.

A blonde girl is standing on the other side of the hungry inferno.



“Ah...!” The girl and I both let out a startled gasp. She freezes in place and carefully studies us like a deer caught in the headlights.

“M-Miss Sannomiya?!” Miss Ena cries out in surprise.

I recognize that name. Louise Yui Sannomiya is the name of one of the high school students trapped inside LABO. Her blonde hair cascades to her waist, complementing her almost transparent white skin. She has the beauty of a French doll, but there’s a sharp glint in her blue eyes and an unforgiving expression on her hardened face. I assume the outfit she has on is the uniform from the high school she attends. She’s wearing a short white skirt and dark-blue blazer. Dark-red blood is oozing from her left shoulder.

“Are you hurt?! Can you walk? Come over here if you’re able to!” I shout as loud as I can so that she’ll hear me, but she turns on her heel and runs for it. I doubt my eyes. “Wh-Why is she running away?! Does she speak a different language?!”

“She speaks perfect English and Japanese!” Miss Ena points out.

“Enough chitchat! We need to go after her, Captain!”

“Y-Yeah! Wait here, Miss Ena!”

We have Miss Ena wait on the safe side of the gate, and we pursue the girl. She’s weaving her way through the gaps in the flames to escape. We frantically chase her while enduring the overbearing heat and suffocating levels of smoke.

“Wait, girl! Why are you running away?! We’re rescue workers! We came to save you!”

My shouts do nothing to slow her feet. She flees without looking back.

Our game of chase eventually takes us to the security gate leading into Area 5. The girl pulls out a security card and swipes it through the slot. The gate pops open and she disappears into the passageway beyond it.

She has a Level 5 or higher card?! Where did she get that?!

The gate is closing behind her. I speed up to follow her through when—a voice suddenly reverberates in my head.

<Stop! Don't follow her!>

What the?!

It's the same voice I heard before—the one that echoed in my head when I was trying to save Yuuri. And yet it's trying to stop me from rescuing this girl.

<Don't pursue her! Stop where you are!>

"Sh-Shut the hell up!" I shake off the voice's warning and chase after the girl. But crippling pain courses through my head a second later. "GUAH!"

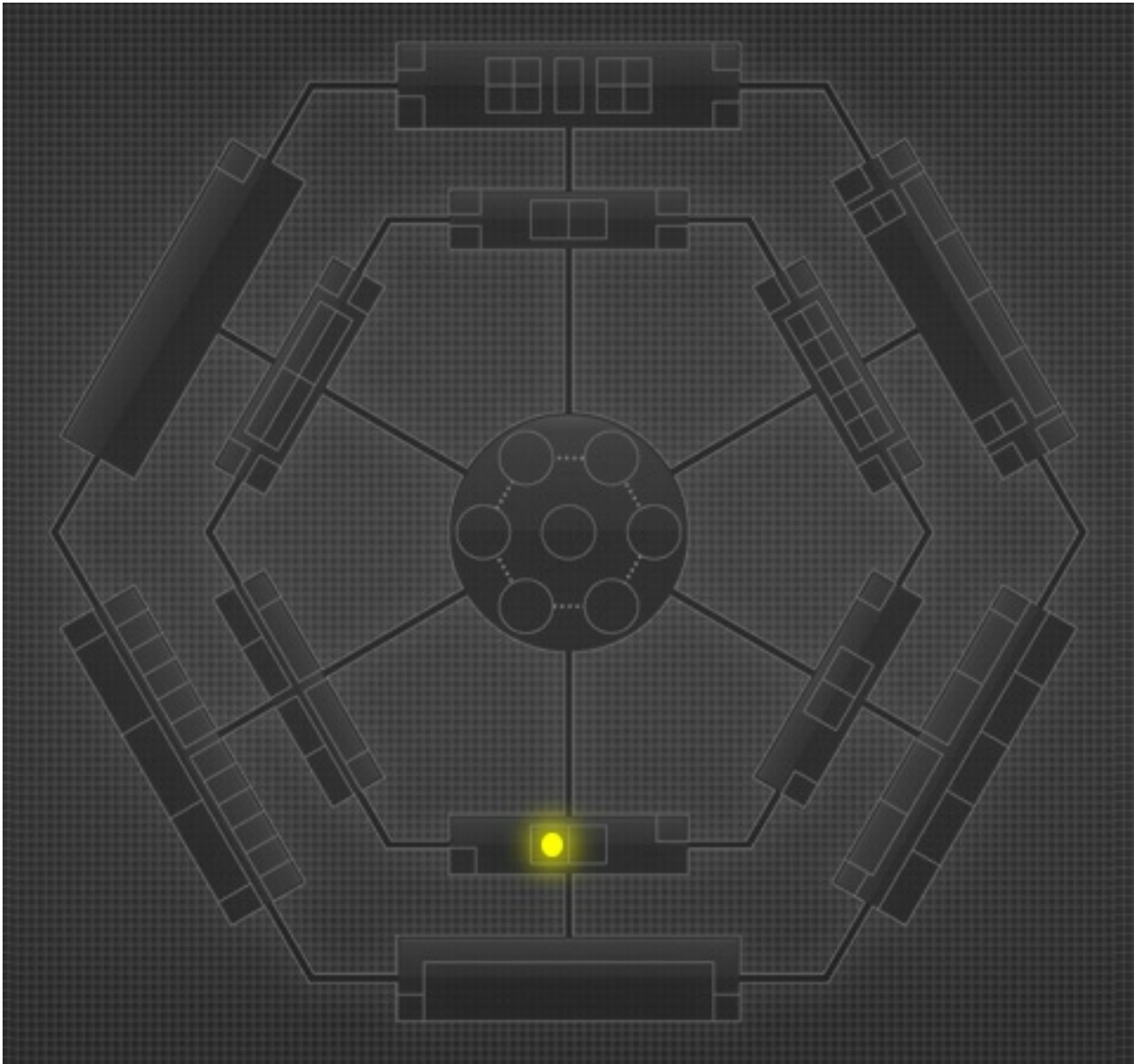
I stagger and slam my hand against the wall to hold myself up. Light flashes in front of my eyes, sinking my vision into darkness.

Wh-What in the world is this pain?!

I'm in tremendous agony as if my very brain is being burned from the inside. Unable to bear it any longer, I collapse to the ground.

"Captain?!"

I hear Moribe's voice in the distance as my consciousness rapidly plunges into nothingness.



Radiation Level: 2,352 mSv
Remaining AD: 0

▼ 10:35 AM

Area 4, Between Inner and Outer Ring

Connecting Passageway

MY consciousness is trapped within endless darkness. Without the ability to rely on my five senses, I have no idea where I am. After what feels like an eternity, I hear someone breathing through the haze.

“Huff, huff... You weigh a ton, Captain Kasasagi!”

I open my eyes to see the side of Miss Ena’s face. She’s walking with my arm around her shoulders so she can drag me along.

That’s right! I blacked out! I move slightly, causing her to turn her eyes toward me.



“Oh! You’re awake now?!”

“Wh-Where are we? Why are you carrying me?”

“In the passageway connecting to Area 4’s inner ring. Ms. Moribe carried you this far after you passed out in the outer ring.”

“Where’s Moribe now?”

“She met up with Ms. Tachibana and they’re working together to put out the fire in the outer ring. They asked me to take you to the system control room.”

“So that’s what happened... Sorry for the trouble.”

“You should be. It’s a Herculean feat to carry you with a woman’s slender arms!” She flashes me a teasing grin.

I smile back wryly. “By the way, what happened to the girl? Sannomiya, was it?”

“She got away, according to Ms. Moribe. She wasn’t anywhere to be found inside the outer ring.”

“Did she escape to another area?”

I *don’t know where* the girl went. I feel like I saw her running off somewhere right before I collapsed, but my memories from around then are nonexistent. But we know for a fact that she got away.

“...Why did she run away?”

“I don’t know.” Miss Ena gives her head a small shake. “Do you have any ideas?”

“None...”

But thinking back on it, Yuuri was clearly scared when she first saw me too. Is my face that frightening in a disaster? Or had that girl also come across those dead bodies and is on edge because of that?

The truth is a mystery.

“...I’m sorry, Miss Ena,” I say with a sigh. “I failed to save your student.”

“What?” She looks surprised, but that expression immediately gives way to a

soft smile. "...It's okay. You risked your life trying. Besides, it's a step forward just knowing that Ms. Sannomiya really is trapped down here."

"But she ran through a contaminated zone. There's a high chance she's been exposed to radiation."

"Actually, there might be some hope on that front," she says, pulling something from her pocket. It's an empty AD ampoule.

"What's the story with that?"

"It was on the ground near where Ms. Sannomiya had been. If she's the one who used it, then it should offer her some basic protection at least."

"We can't be overly optimistic. I doubt she has a Procyon. It's dangerous for anyone to stay in contaminated zones for too long, even with AD."

"...She'll be fine, Captain Kasasagi," Miss Ena reassures me in a calm voice. "She's actually a prodigy who excels at almost everything."

"A prodigy?"

"She sure is. I just know she's the kind of girl who can figure out a way to survive by herself."

"I see... That definitely offers some hope." I should believe in that hope, even if it's little more than grasping at straws.

"By the way, how long must I carry you for?"

"Huh? Ah! Sorry!" Realizing my arm is still wrapped around her shoulders, I quickly take my weight off her. She chuckles at me.

"You don't have to jump away like that. I won't bite. And you're still under the weather." As she says that, the sternness that usually dictates her speech and mannerisms is replaced by kindness. Trying to save her student probably made a good impression on her.

Feeling a little self-conscious, I thank her. "Well, anyway, thanks for everything. I'm ready and raring to go again."

"I don't mind helping you out if this is all it takes. Anyway, we should hurry to the control room."

We break into a run to make up time.

▼ 10:38 AM

Area 4, Inner Ring

Outside the System Control Room

YUURI is waiting for us in front of the control room.

“Um, did something bad happen...?” she asks upon seeing us.

“Not bad per se. Our captain here passed out right after entering a contaminated zone.”

“You went into a contaminated zone? Why did...you pass out...?”

“Well, I got a killer headache out of nowhere...,” I explain calmly so as not to make Yuuri fret too much. “It might’ve been a side effect from radiation poisoning. Tachibana says radiation can damage your brain cells, so that could be the culprit here.”

“Oh no...!” Yuuri stares hard at my face. She seems concerned about me.

“It’s okay, Yuuri. This is our way of life. We’d be out of a job if we made civilians, especially young ladies, worry about us.” I craft a smile just for her, earning a teasing remark from Miss Ena.

“Oh my, you’re finally starting to sound like a man of your station, Captain Amnesia.”

“Well, amnesia aside, I’m supposed to be a rescue worker. This is just my way of playing it cool.” As I say that, it hits me that my subordinates are currently fighting fires in the outer ring. “All right, I’m off to help Tachibana and Moribe. Wait for us in the control room.”

“Huh? Will you be okay? Did you also forget that you just fainted?”

“I’m all better now. So I’ve gotta go make up for lost ground.”

“Good grief. You’re such a tough guy, aren’t you?”

With that comment at my back, I run toward the outer ring.

▼ 10:41 AM

Area 4, Outer Ring

I race through the connecting passageway and find the outer ring still engulfed in a sea of flames. Surrounded by spark-spewing fire on all sides, Tachibana and Moribe are desperately suppressing the blaze with two hoses.

“Captain! Are you sure you’re okay to be up and about?!” Tachibana shouts over the roaring fire when she sees me.

“You needn’t be concerned about me! Anyway, is there anything I can help with?!”

“I would love some assistance putting out this fire, but you can see for yourself...”

I survey the area. Aside from where Tachibana and Moribe are standing, the rest is on fire. With heat, steam, and smoke filling the air, every breath I take feels like its setting my lungs on fire.

This fire looks like it can’t be controlled by just human hands anymore.

All of a sudden, the nearby flames surge fiercely upward and lick the ceiling before slowly rolling back to the ground. It almost looks like a giant writhing fire snake.

“H-Hey, guys, what’s that?!” I call out in warning.

Tachibana and Moribe both balk at it.

“Oh, crap! It’s rolling over!” Moribe yells.

“We won’t last against that! All hands retreat!” Tachibana orders in a loud voice.

Even I can tell we’re in too deep here. I break into a run behind Tachibana and Moribe. I hurtle into the connecting passageway and slam the gate’s close button. There’s a white flash on the other side of the closing gate.

“AGH!” A shockwave crashes through the opening, knocking me back. A sharp pain radiates from my rib cage as my body is tossed on the ground like a ragdoll. “GRAH! UAGH!” Moaning, I shove to my feet and stare at the closed gate.

It appears an explosion occurred in the outer ring, and the blast burst through the gate before it fully closed. I shudder when I think about what would've happened had we been even a second slower.

"Wh-What was that explosion?" I ask once I catch my breath.

"A flashover," Moribe explains. "It's a temperature-driven event where the contents of the room suddenly and simultaneously ignite. The snake of fire that darted out of the smoke was the warning sign."

"So that's why Tachibana gave the order to retreat..."

We would've all been torched to a crisp if we stayed there a minute longer. I gulp as the ferocious nature of fires is figuratively burned into me.

But I'm glad we got outta there alive. I glance toward Tachibana, only to find her painfully leaning against the wall with her hands pressed to her head.

"Wh-What's wrong, Tachibana?"

"N-Nothing... Just got a sudden headache and a bout of dizziness..."

"You have a headache?!"

Now that I think about it, the area where we were putting out the fire had a reading of over 4,000 mSv on the Procyon. And it doesn't help that Tachibana took a halved dosage of AD.

"Hey, Tachibana, are these signs of radiation damage?" I squeeze out in a hoarse voice.

"No, subjective symptoms of radiation damage shouldn't manifest this quick. This is more likely the effect of overexposure to carbon monoxide." Tachibana's still blue in the face as she speaks.

She dismissed radiation damage, but we can't be overly optimistic here. I experienced a killer headache and blacked out the second after I set foot in a contaminated zone. She can't be much better off with a lesser dose of AD.

"At any rate, let's return to the control room for now. Going back into Area 4's outer ring is no longer an option."

"O-Okay..."

Tachibana briskly walks off, leaving Moribe and me to run after her.

As we feared, a halved dosage of AD wasn't good enough to do its job. Not to mention, it's beyond extremely dangerous for her to have injected a drug housed in a damaged container.

We have to find more AD before it's too late. With that thought clawing away at me, I take quick strides toward the control room.

▼ 10:47 AM

Area 4, Inner Ring

System Control Room

MISS Ena, Ukita, and Yuuri are already inside the control room when we get there. Ukita's mortified shout echoes through the room when we step inside. "Damn it all! I can't steal the root authority!"

"Wh-What's going on, Ukita?"

He turns around at the sound of my voice. "Oh, it's you guys. I heard everything from Ms. Tsubakiyama. Sounds like you went through hell."

"Yeah, but we're good now." I decide to leave out Tachibana's worsening health for the time being. "Anyway, did something go wrong? What's this about not being able to steal authority?"

"Well, I've been expending all my efforts toward gaining control of the bulkheads. The control systems are buried under thick layers of protection I can't get through no matter how I try."

"I see..."

Everyone's expression falls at his explanation. Having our hopes, however small, dashed is a huge blow.

Sensing our disappointment, Ukita quickly fills in the silence. "...I can't say this makes up for it, but I discovered several things in the process. Please turn your attention to the monitor." He operates the control panel, bringing up a picture on the screen.

"What's this?"

“A detailed map of this lab. I marked the places of note.”

“Oh, this’ll be a huge help! This facility has a crazy layout I’ve been struggling to figure out.”

“And it’s not just a basic diagram of the layout. You can also use it to somewhat confirm the state of areas. Here’s what I learned from it.” Ukita gives his explanation while gesturing to the map. “First, all routes leading to the surface have truly been blocked off by the bulkheads. There are no alternative exits either. Incidentally, while some of the staircases going down are intact, every staircase leading up to those bulkheads, excluding the one in Area 2’s inner ring, have collapsed.”

“Hmm? What are these red marks, then?”

“Oh, those indicate the areas that are on fire.”

Red marks blot out whole sections of the map. They cover Area 4’s outer ring where we just had our run-in with the flashover. Worst yet, Areas 5 and 6 are drowning in red. In other words, all the areas we’re going to visit from here on are on fire.

“These fires probably damaged the security gates, causing radiation leaks... which is why the Procyon’s readings are jumping to higher and higher numbers.”

“Can we stop the numbers from increasing by sealing up the damaged areas?”

“It wouldn’t be easy. We don’t know what parts have been damaged, and it’s likely a lot. Besides, I highly doubt slipshod repairs will prevent radiation from spreading.”

“Great. Just great. We can’t continue our search with the whole place on fire.”

Some sections are no longer accessible to us even though we need to get more AD to Tachibana ASAP. And with all the unsearched areas on fire, I’m worried about the other survivors’ safety.

“Hey, Tachibana, Moribe, what do you think we should do next based on this new information?” I ask.

“The first order of business is finding AD, stat,” Tachibana says grimly. “Putting my own situation aside, the whole group is running out of time before we need our next injection.”

“But where do we look? The block we planned on searching next is burning away like there’s no tomorrow...”

My comment gets Yuuri to break her silence and speak up. “U-Um...I found this while I was waiting for you...”

“Oh?” I look at the small booklet in her hand.

“I think this is the facility’s disaster prevention manual. If you take a look at this page...” She opens the book to a certain page and holds it out to us. Our group walks over and takes a look at it together.

Disaster Prevention Manual (2030 Edition)

○ Before a Case N

In the event of an emergency such as a fire or accident occurring in the facility, please be prepared for a Case N to occur. Follow the procedures listed in this manual, and secure AD within the facility first and foremost. Please take the following countermeasures on the off chance a Case N does indeed occur.

○ Case N Countermeasures

The first thing you must do in the event of a Case N is immediately administer AD to yourself. Please do not panic should the bulkheads seal off the passageways to the surface. Remain calm, go to the nearest room, and wait for help to arrive.

○ About AD

A supply of AD is available in all areas. We recommend all personnel learn and confirm where the AD is kept in their area. Spare AD has been prepared in Areas 1, 3, and 5 for emergencies. Please obtain a supply as soon as possible and administer it.

There are several other entries in the manual, but those are the only ones that pertain to our current predicament.

I crack a smile at this new information. “Sweet! Sounds like there’s spare AD located in Areas 1, 3, and 5! Is there anywhere we haven’t checked in Areas 1 and 3?”

“There is—toward the end of Area 3’s outer ring, where we just were earlier. There’s one room we couldn’t get into because a backdraft destroyed the button.”

“Ah, I remember that. So it’s my fault, huh?”

“Wait, there’s a room you couldn’t get into?!” Ukita blurts. “All right, if I can pull this off, we might be able to solve both our AD and fire problems at once!”

“How? Did you come up with something, Ukita?”

“Yes. Take a look at this part of the map.” He points to the bottom right of the screen where something unusual is on display. There’s a block beside Area 3, called Area 3 Attic.

“What’s this?”

“It’s like a mezzanine floor between the surface and basement floors. This is the engine room where various equipment is stored.”

Hearing that reminds me of the note I found during an earlier search. “Is this the engine room where the sprinkler system is located?! How do we get there?!”

“According to this map, through a room at the end of Area 3’s outer ring. In other words, there’s a ladder leading to the engine room, located inside the room you couldn’t access. We should be able to restart the deactivated sprinkler system there.”

“So if we can find a way inside that room, we can put out the fires and get a hold of some AD!”

The news gets us all excited.

“The problem is how to get in that room. Want me to try repairing the jammed door?” Moribe offers in an ecstatic voice.

“Can you do that?”

“I don’t know, but it’s worth a try. I’ve got my handy army knife on me.” She whips out her knife for us to see.

The civilians in our group are all for her idea.

“I’ll lend you a hand, then,” Ukita volunteers. “I’m the only one who knows the engine room’s layout, after all.”

“I’ll come along as well. It’s kind of scary waiting here,” Miss Ena admits, hugging her shoulders.

“I-I agree... I’m coming too,” Yuuri quietly mutters.

Our next destination is set. Fires will no longer be a concern if we can get into the engine room. We leave the control room with a new hope tucked away in our hearts.

▼ 10:55 AM

Area 3, Outer Ring

AS a group, we head for Area 3’s outer ring, eventually arriving at the unopenable door. I peer inside through the small window and spot a ladder in the back corner. I hadn’t noticed it the last time, but Ukita’s information was spot on.

“Alrighty, I’ll give repairing it a whirl. Give me a few minutes, guys,” Moribe says, taking up position in front of the door. She fiddles with the switch using her army knife’s screwdriver.

Hoping for the best, we watch her as she works on it. I shift my eyes from her to where Tachibana is rubbing her arms with unease etched into her features.

“What’s wrong, Tachibana?”

“Oh, not much... I just feel this tingling pain in my skin...”

“You do?”

I have a seriously bad feeling about this. Forty minutes have flown by since our last AD dose. What if the damaged AD isn’t working like it’s supposed to? Has her cumulative exposure surpassed 2,000 mSv by now? It doesn’t help that we haven’t gotten a single AD since then. Time will finally be up for us if Moribe

can't fix the door.

As we're impatiently waiting, Yuuri suddenly cries out from behind us. "Oh no, smoke...!"

"What?" Everyone turns around at once. "Smoke? Where, Yuuri?"

"Over there..." She points to the floor a slight distance away.

KA-BOOM! The floorboards are blown away and fire spews from where they had been like a flaming geyser.

"Ack! Why's fire coming from the floor?!"

We instinctively move as far from the spot as we can.

"On rare occasions, the wiring under the floor will short out and catch fire! Let's put out the flames!" Tachibana orders in a sharp voice.

"O-On it!" Luckily, there's a fire hydrant right beside us. I pull a hose from it and hand the nozzle over to her. "Here comes the water, Tachibana!"

"Roger! Everyone else, please stand back!"

Learning by example, I twist the fire hydrant's valve, and Tachibana directs the water toward the incoming flames, pushing them back. Steam rises on contact. But flames burst through another floorboard, sending it flying. Even with her experience, it's taking all of Tachibana's effort just to slow the fire's progress.

"Holy crap! Moribe, are you done yet?!"

"G-Gimme another minute!" Moribe speeds up as fast as she can. But with every passing second, the fire is coming ever closer.

"Khh!" A heat wave slams into Tachibana and she lets out a pained moan.

Miss Ena pulls Yuuri into her arms and begs, "Ms. Moribe...please hurry!"

I'm praying for her success, too, when the door finally slides open. "Yes!" We cheer and make a break for the door, but before we can get there, Moribe sways violently on her feet.

"Hey! What's wrong, Moribe?!" I rush to her side and catch her before she falls.

She doesn't respond to me at all, and her eyes have rolled back into her head—she's completely lost consciousness. Instinctively sensing danger, I shut the door we'd only just opened. But then Yuuri and Miss Ena let out agonized moans and fall on top of each other.

"Yuuri! Miss Ena!" People are dropping like flies! I have no idea what's going on.

The color drains from Tachibana's face when she notices. "Oh no, is this oxygen-deficient air?!"

"What's that?"

"A lethal gas generated by fires! Inhaling it will knock you unconscious and, at its worst, kill you."

Ukita starts shouting in a shrill voice after hearing that. "This is very bad! The HVAC is broken here and can't properly ventilate the room!"

In other words, the room in front of us is teeming with oxygen-deficient air, while the path behind us is covered in flames—we have nowhere to run!

"How do we handle this, Tachibana?!"

Tachibana makes up her mind on the spot. "We have no choice. We have to climb the ladder to the engine room while holding our breath."

"Will that work?"

"Oxygen-deficient air generally occurs in sealed off rooms. There should be an airtight door at the top of the ladder. We'll be saved if we make it to the engine room!"

"But what about the three who fainted?!"

"I'll carry Ms. Tsubakiyama. You carry Moribe and Yuuri, Captain!"

"Y-You want me to climb the ladder while holding my breath and carrying two people?"

"You can do it, Captain! Please have faith in yourself!"

Tachibana looks me in the eyes. The trust there sets my spirit on fire, igniting my self-confidence.

“G-Got it! Leave it to me!”

“That’s my captain!” She smiles, then turns to implore Ukita, “I’m terribly sorry, Mr. Ukita, but can you climb up by yourself?”

“H-Hmph, I can try.”

“Thank you!” Tachibana exclaims as she lifts Miss Ena up and over her shoulder.

I use the rope I always have wrapped around my chest to tie Yuuri and Moribe to my back. They’re light. Together they probably weigh around 220 pounds, but they feel lighter than feathers to me.

“All right! Move out!”

At Tachibana’s signal, I open the door to the room teeming with lethal gas.

We dash through the room chock-full of oxygen-deficient air and white smoke while holding our breath. I lunge for the ladder in the corner and begin climbing it. Smoke instantly stings my eyes until they’re tearing up. Looking up, I see a circular airtight door about twenty-five feet above. That’s got to be the engine room door. Such a short distance feels like it will take an eternity to reach with my breath held. But the weight of the two lives literally resting on my shoulders gives me strength.

Bear it! If I run out of gas here, two more people will die with me! Powered by that thought, I frantically scale the ladder.

After what feels like forever, my fingertips finally brush the doorknob. I grab hold of it and push it upward. The spacious engine room lies beyond the opening. It’s covered in poorly lit darkness, but the air is clean. The three of us pull ourselves up and roll onto the engine room’s cold floor.

“Haaaaaaah!” I take a huge breath, allowing fresh air to spread through my strained lungs.

Breathing heavily, Tachibana seals the airtight door behind her. Meanwhile, Ukita lets out a moan and collapses to his knees.

“Ukita, you okay?!”

“I-I’m horribly dizzy... I think I inhaled some of the gas!”

At least the lethal gas can't get into this room. We're safe for the moment, but we're not entirely in the green yet either! I glance at my watch—it's 11:07 AM. Only nine minutes to go until we need our next AD dose. And we currently don't have any on us! If we don't do anything fast, everyone here will be exposed to radiation.

There's a very high chance there's a supply of spare AD in the toxic room filled with lethal gas below. So we need to restart the sprinkler system—thus putting out the fires—wait for the ventilation to kick in, and then search for AD—that won't work! We'll never make it in time!

Making it through the lethal gas and reactivating the sprinkler system won't mean anything if we run out of time before finding more AD. That leaves me but one option.

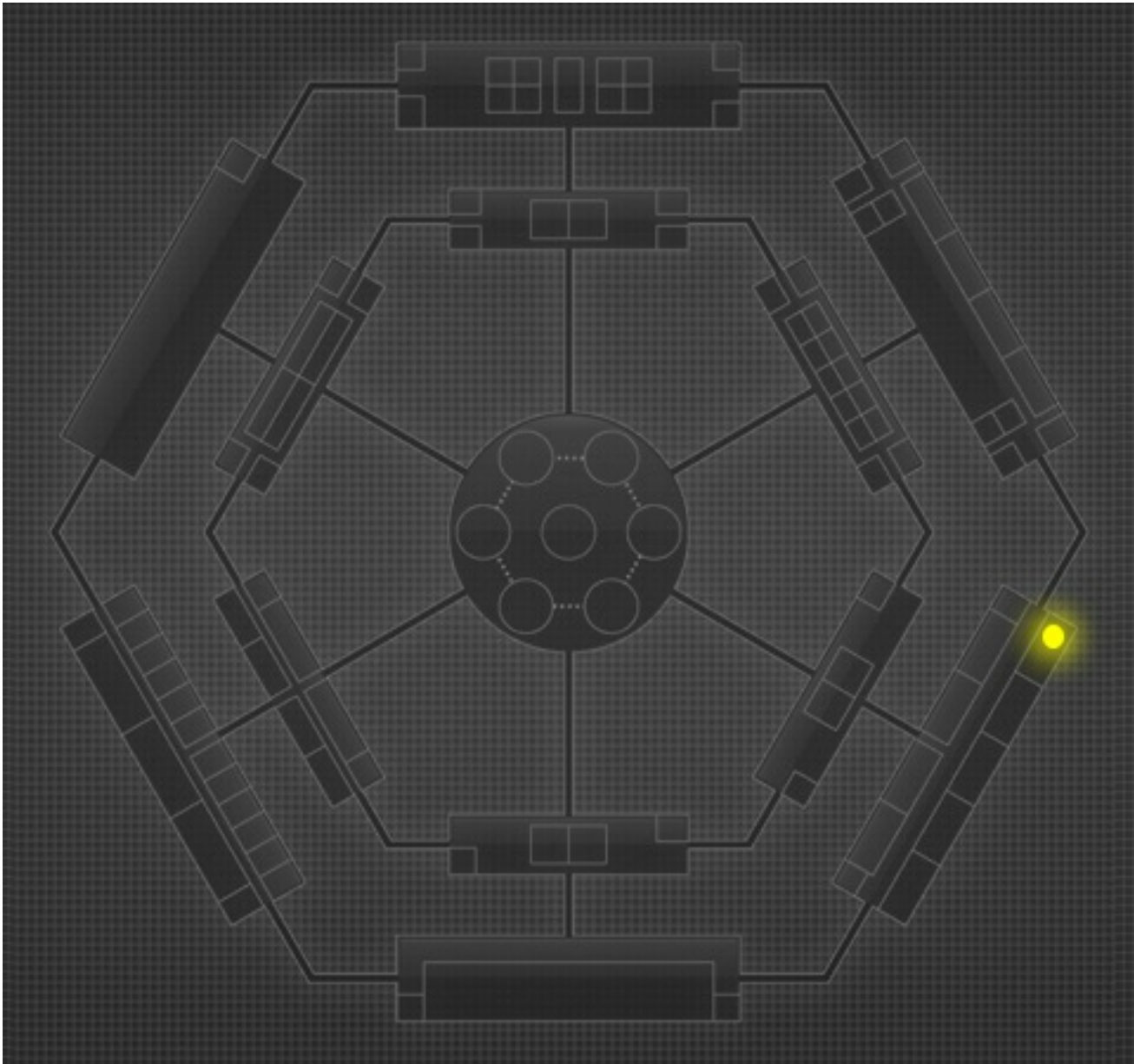
I untie Moribe and Yuuri and lower them to the ground. "Tachibana, look after the group!"

"What are you planning to do?!"

"I'm going back into that room to look for more AD! Close the airtight door behind me!"

"Don't be crazy! Please stop, Captain!"

Ignoring her advice, I open the airtight door and descend the ladder into the room that's essentially a death trap.



Radiation Level: 2,852 mSv
Remaining AD: 0

▼ 11:08 AM

Area 3, Outer Ring

Oxygen-Deficient Room

I hold my breath and descend the ladder into the deadly air, believing AD is somewhere in the room below. I jump the last few rungs and rake my eyes over the area. The room is cluttered with cardboard boxes. Tucked away in a corner is a medical box. I lunge for it and flip the lid. AD is inside! But only two!

Not enough!

I stuff the AD in my pocket and throw the medical box aside. Four more AD to go if I want to save everyone. Biting the inside of my cheek, I scour the room.

I consider returning to the engine room first, but I don't want to risk letting the lethal gas inside by constantly opening and closing the airtight door. Searching until I can't search anymore is my best bet.

But I can't find a single AD even after flipping over every box and checking every nook and cranny.

Dammit all! Are there none here?!

My second round of anaerobic exercise is a test of extremely painful endurance. My heart feels like it's about to burst, and my lungs crave oxygen like a bad addiction.

How soothing it would be to take just one breath. Pushing back the craving that could see me killed, I turn over more boxes. A medical box spills onto the ground from the last box I dumped. Throwing it open with shaky hands reveals five AD.

I found some! More was here!

With seven AD, I've secured everyone's safety for another hour. I jam the AD into my pocket and start climbing the ladder.

But I have no strength left. Lack of oxygen to the brain causes my consciousness to fade. My arms feel heavier than lead, tears fill my eyes, and even my vision is going out.

Sh-Shit...I'm done for!

The strength leaves my arms. I'm starting to fall back from the ladder when someone grabs my hand.

Startled, I look up. Through my narrow vision I see Tachibana. She had opened the airtight door and caught my hand as it let go of the rung. She clenches her jaw and pulls me through the door with a voiceless scream.

▼ 11:09 AM

Area 3, Attic

Engine Room

JUST as the airtight door seals behind me, I take a deep breath. Tachibana catches her own breath before saying, "Captain, are you all right?"

"Y-Yeah... Thanks, Tachibana...!" I say through ragged respiration as I pull the AD from my pockets. "Here, take this...AD! ...Now we can save everyone!"

Tachibana's brows snap together. I'm prepared for her usual stern lecture. "Good grief, you really are always so reckless...!" she says with a sweet smile. Her unexpected expression and comment catch me completely off guard.

"Y-You're not going to scold me?"

"I don't endorse heroics, but I can't deny that your actions deserve merit this time."

"Is...that...right? Good to hear." Relief and joy well up inside me at the same time. I'll admit I was being reckless, but I unquestionably took the necessary action to save everyone.

I clench my fists at the first sense of accomplishment I've felt since losing my memories. Tachibana is looking at me with kind eyes like a superior officer who takes pride and joy in her subordinates' growth. It's a tad embarrassing, but it doesn't feel half bad.

After catching my breath, I take another look around the spacious but cluttered engine room. Pipes, steel beams, and cables run endlessly in all directions, with some connecting to giant machines placed in different locations in the room.



No doubt this is where the sprinkler system and power generators are housed. Each machine is letting out a low, eerie droning noise.

And Moribe, Yuuri, and Miss Ena are lying on the floor not too far away, while an exhausted Ukita is sitting on the floor beside them.

Tachibana removes her Vital Checker and wraps it around everyone's wrists in order. I watch with bated breath as she monitors everyone's blood pressure and temperature.

"...Examination completed. Everyone checks out as all green," she reports with relief. "They are all unconscious, but they will recover with some rest."

I breathe a huge sigh. "Phew! I'm glad everyone is okay... They don't need antidotes or anything like that?"

"They will recover as long as they continue inhaling clean air. Oxygen-deficient air is extremely harmful to the human body, but it's not poisonous."

"Good. Then why don't we start up this sprinkler system before they come to?"

"But where is it? This place is a maze..." Tachibana examines our surroundings.

True enough, there are pipes of various sizes and pieces of equipment strewn all over the place without rhyme or reason, making it impossible to tell where anything is. I survey the area in hopes of finding a blueprint somewhere and spot a small monitor on the wall.

"What's that?"

Tachibana and I run over to the machine and read what's written on the screen.

Electronics Manuals Screen Menu

- Operation Manuals Overview
- Emergency Power Generator Operation Manual
- Switchboard Operation Manual
- Pipe Maintenance / Inspection Manual

- WX Particle Amplifier Operation Manual

- Filtering Mechanism / Forced Circulation Pump Maintenance Manual

This appears to be an electronics manual used by the engineers stationed in the engine room.

“Hmm, it’s hard to tell what the contents are by the title alone,” Tachibana quietly observes.

“We’ve got no choice but to check them all.” I press the touch screen and change what’s on display, pulling up a graph of a cylindrical machine. The manual’s table of contents appears beneath it, but there’s nothing of use to us there. “Dang it all, is there no manual for the sprinkler system?” I swipe through the different screens at random.

“H-Hold on, you two...,” Ukita moans from where he’s still firmly planted on the floor.

“Ukita? You okay?” I look over my shoulder at him and drop my hand from the screen.

“I’ve been better, but I’ll manage.” He slowly gets to his feet and shakes his head. “Anyway, I know where the sprinkler system is. They showed it to me during orientation when I first started here.”

“Good to know. That’d be great. Tachibana, look after the others while we check it out.”

“Roger that. I’m sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Ukita, but please show him the way.”

Ukita nods and staggers deeper into the room. I follow him on equally unsteady feet. We weave our way through the labyrinth of pipes and machinery on course for the back of the engine room. Before long he points out a large tank down the path in front of us.

“...If memory serves me right, that tank is filled with fire extinguishing agents. The sprinkler system and subventilation systems are located around here too.”

“I see. Hey, what’s that awfully thick pipe for?” Above the tank is a three-foot-thick pipe that crisscrosses near the ceiling.

"I believe that's a coolant pipe for the reactor. It brings in water from the nearby lake."

"I know!" I snap my fingers. "Couldn't we go through that pipe to escape into the lake?!"

"That's unfortunately impossible."

"Why?"

"You heard me when I said it was a coolant pipe, right?" he says with an annoyed sigh. "Water is circulating through it at high speeds. If you break a hole in the pipe, water will burst out with all the force of a tidal wave, submerging the basement floors and killing everyone alive."

"N-Not good. Is there a way to shut off the water flow?"

"Escape would still be impossible even if we stop it. It's around five hundred and fifty yards to the lake from here. Think you can swim that far while holding your breath?"

"What if we used air tanks—"

"We don't have enough for everyone, do we? Even if we magically did, the water used by the coolant pipe is superheated by the reactor. I believe it's around sixty degrees Celsius. Not a temperature we can hope to survive."

"Tch! And I thought it was such a good plan too..." Escape through the pipe seems impossible in a number of ways. My shoulders slump with disappointment.

"My thoughts also went straight to finding a way out via the pipe. The only reason I never mentioned it was because it wasn't doable from the start. Though I already held this conversation with you before your bout of amnesia, Captain Kasasagi."

"You did? Sorry, but I don't remember that either. I've forgotten everything..."

"You mean you still braved the danger to get everyone AD in your unstable state?"

"Yeah. I feel like I have to make up for my lack of knowledge with my physical

abilities.”

Ukita stares at me long and hard before finally settling for a snort. “...That’s indeed quite impressive of you. I never thanked you. You have my gratitude.” He smiles slightly. It looks like he’s finally accepted me. He suddenly stops before I can enjoy the moment. “Whoops, we’re there already.”

I look at the tank and see countless valves beside it. The valves are closed for some reason.

“Do you think they were running an inspection earlier than planned?”

“Hard to say now. At any rate, the sprinkler system should reactivate if we open the valves. The room filled with lethal gas should get ventilated as well.”

“Great! I’ll take care of opening the valves.” I turn them one after another. The tank begins to groan, and the pipes connected to it start vibrating at once. It sounds like the sprinkler system reactivated. “I hope this takes out the fires in Area N too...”

Ukita shakes his head. “It won’t. Sadly, the sprinklers in that area are controlled by a different system.”

“They are? Can’t do anything about that, then. Let’s go inform the others.”

“I’m going to stay here for a bit to confirm the system is operating smoothly.”

“Okay. Please do,” I say and leave Ukita behind.

When I return to the group, Yuuri is still lying on the floor, but Moribe and Miss Ena are up and about. “Ooh, you ladies are back with us?”

“Yes, sorry for the trouble...” Miss Ena bows her head.

“I-I’m so ashamed of myself, Captain... It’s an unthinkable disgrace for me to go down in a fire zone...,” Moribe weakly mutters.

I pat her on the shoulder. “What’re you talking about? We got that broken door open again thanks to you. There’s nothing for you to be ashamed of.”

“R-Really? You sure are being nice today, Captain!” Moribe smiles, her face stark white.

“In any event, it’s a real relief everyone is okay,” Tachibana joins in. “We have

enough AD for another hour, and the sprinkler system kicked back on.”

The danger of being done in by the fires will drastically decrease now. Better yet, with the fires extinguished, we’ll finally be able to walk around normally.

“Hey, Tachibana? How long do you think it’ll take to put out the fires and vent the rooms?”

“Good question. I estimate about ten minutes.”

I hate to waste ten minutes in one place, but I’m starting to feel the burn of fatigue. If even I’m sensing it, the women and children must be even worse off.

“Well, why don’t we rest for ten minutes since Yuuri isn’t conscious yet either?” I suggest.

“I can agree to that plan. It’s not like we can move around right now anyway,” Tachibana says and sits on the floor.

And so, we decide to take a break in the engine room until the sprinkler system does its job throughout the facility.

Two hours’ worth of exhaustion washes over me the second I sit down. A sharp ache shoots through the ribs I banged up when the flashover blew me back. With how long the pain has lingered, I must’ve cracked a rib or two. Fatigue isn’t the only thing that’s been building up—so have my injuries.

“...How are you ladies faring?” I ask the women sitting in a circle with me.

“I’m as good as new—except for my numb fingertips.” Moribe shakes out her hands.

“Same here. I won’t have any complaints if I can rest a little more.” Miss Ena stretches her arms over her head.

Tachibana rubs her arms as she answers. “I can keep going as well. The numbness in my arms seems to have gone away after I injected AD.”

Then our fears were correct—Tachibana’s various health issues were caused by radiation damage.

“Then that proves AD works as advertised. I’m surprised it kicks in right away,” I note.

“It’s working *too* fast if you ask me. Perhaps the radiation’s negative effects and the drug’s effectiveness are just products of our imagination. A placebo effect, if you will.”

“Placebo or not, it’s better to be safe than sorry. We’ll be in bad shape if we don’t keep up the injections.” I glance at the Procyon. The reading has jumped even higher. “Look, it’s at 2,929 mSv now. Doesn’t seem like we have long before it passes the first danger standard of 4,000 mSv.”

“I see... There were people who stayed in an environment over 4,000 mSv to minimize damage during the Chernobyl disaster as well,” Tachibana says.

“What happened to them?”

“According to one theory, the mortality rate for all the workers who stayed was one hundred percent.”

Each person’s expression freezes.

Miss Ena quietly remarks, “...The longer I’ve been down here, the more I’ve grown indifferent to the reality of it, but we really are being exposed to a tremendous amount of radiation. I sure hope Tenkawa and the girls have access to AD.”

“Don’t panic, Miss Ena. The very fact we’ve been finding empty medical boxes and used AD means there’s a high chance they’ve been getting a hold of AD too.”

“Th-That’s true...” She offers a weary smile. Even someone who’d been so argumentative with us in the beginning has started to listen more now that exhaustion has caught up to her.

“...Hasn’t this been pretty tough on you, Miss Ena?”

“Honestly, it has been. Running around nonstop is taking a toll on me... And while I’m at it, I haven’t had a thing to eat since morning, so I’m getting hungry.”

Mentioning food makes me conscious of my own hunger. I don’t know when I last had something to eat, but my stomach feels empty.

“...The thirst is getting to me over hunger. My throat is dried out after inhaling

smoke and running from fires. I want to get my hands on some water.”

“Please give up on that idea,” Tachibana scolds me.

“Huh? Why?”

“In all likelihood, the water within this facility has already been contaminated by radiation. Drinking contaminated water will expose your innards to radiation.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s called internal exposure. AD might not protect you at that point.”

That means we can’t even get a sip of water while we’re trapped in this facility. We have at least seven more hours to go before the lockdown lifts. Knowing that is extremely depressing and distressing.

“Oh my gosh, why did my life come to this?” Miss Ena groans in a gloomy voice. “I had such a peaceful life up until yesterday too. I guess it’s true what they say about how you never know what the future holds.”

Depression hangs heavily over us. Moribe and Tachibana force the conversation in a cheerful direction to stop the group from giving in to despair.

“C’mon, Ms. Tsubakiyama, let’s stop with all the gloom and doom talk. We’ll definitely rescue your students and get out of this hellhole.”

“Moribe’s right. I give you my word as a professional that we won’t let a single person die.”

Their encouragement strikes a chord with Miss Ena. She lowers her head and meekly mutters, “Thank you, both of you... And sorry for all the rude things I’ve said to you until now. I’ve been all talk and no action...”

Moribe’s eyes widen at the unusually modest teacher. “D-Don’t let it get you down, Ms. Tsubakiyama. Anyone would be on edge in our situation.”

“But I’ll be sure to listen to your instructions from now on.”

Moribe and Miss Ena have finally opened up to each other after being at odds since the moment they met. Relieved, I toss out an idea: “Well, since we have the time, why don’t we have a fun chat?”

“A fun chat? Okay, I can think of a good topic for that.” Miss Ena grins. “You were very cool back there, Captain Kasasagi! Hero of the hour for carrying two of us at once!”

“Oh, you were still conscious?”

“Barely. You were very manly and dreamy.”

“D-Dreamy? This coming from the woman who called me undependable?”

“Those are the types who come across all the more dreamy when they do something unexpected when it counts, no?”

Heat rises to my cheeks. But it's not uncomfortable being complimented.

...Wow, she's pretty cute when she's not being standoffish. Did my face melt into a dorky smile by accident? Tachibana is shooting daggers at me with her eyes.

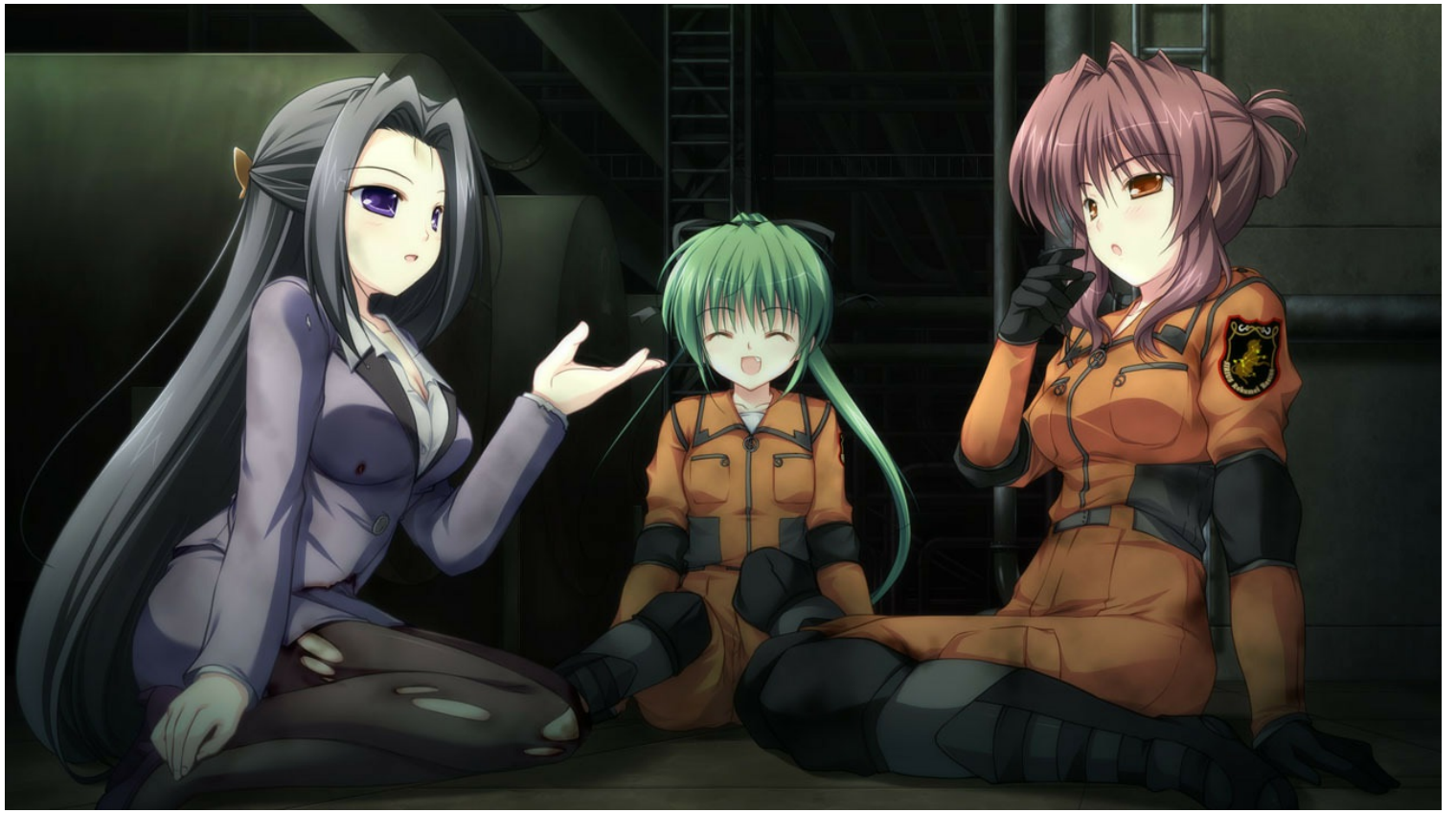
“Captain, please don't grin like a lovesick boy while we're on duty. It's unbecoming of you.”

“U-Unbecoming?” My jaw drops.

Miss Ena giggles beside me. “Oh dear, is that you being jealous, Ms. Tachibana?”

“D-Don't be foolish! Me, jealous? Never.” Red-faced, Tachibana falls silent.

“You're off the mark with that one, Ms. Tsubakiyama,” Moribe cheerily chimes in. “My big sis here is a workaholic. She's just bad at handling anything remotely romantic.”



I cock an eyebrow. “Hey, did you just call Tachibana your big sis? You don’t look like sisters and you have different last names. What am I missing here?”

Tachibana gasps and replies, “Ah, no...we just live next to each other and have hung out together since childhood. However, I have ordered her to call me lieutenant while on duty because I dislike our personal relationship coming up during work...”

“What’s the big deal? We’re on break. Right, Big Sis?” Moribe teases.

“And that’s why I always tell you to quit that. Sheesh!” Tachibana lets out an exasperated sigh and the rest of us laugh.

These are the first few minutes of peace we’ve had since coming to LABO.

▼ 11:16 AM

Area 3

Engine Room

PEACE never lasts long. Ukita’s voice drags us all back to reality. “Hey, you guys! The sprinkler system is running normally. We should be good to descend to the rooms below soon!”

I can see him running toward us from the direction of the tank. Tachibana’s watch alarm suddenly goes off in a round of electronic beeps.

“You came back at the perfect moment, Ukita. It’s AD time,” I greet him and hand out AD to the group. Each person injects themselves and Tachibana administers the dose to Yuuri. Yuuri’s eyes snap open when she does—probably from the pain.

“U-Um? Where...are we...?” She sits up and restlessly darts her eyes around the room.

Moribe speaks to her with a friendly smile. “You don’t remember? You inhaled a gas and passed out.”

“I did?”

“You did. But you’re okay now. All thanks to our captain here for carrying you out of harm’s way.”

“He did...?” Yuuri looks uncertainly from Moribe to me before timidly saying, “U-Um...thank you very much, Captain.”

“Don’t mention it. Anyway, do you think you can walk yet, Yuuri?”

“Erm... Yes, I think I can.” She slowly rises to her feet and takes two, then three steps. She seems to be functioning okay.

“Okay, with Yuuri awake now, we can discuss our plan of action,” Tachibana says, just as relieved to see her well. “Firstly, with the fires inside the facility extinguished, our searches will be much safer. Our primary problem is that we haven’t found any other survivors after combing over most of the areas we can access.”

“Good point. I’d like to expand our search into Area 5 soon... But not much we can do without a Level 5 card.”

“Which is why I recommend we go to the places we have yet to investigate and prioritize finding another card. Such as Area 4’s outer ring that was swallowed in flames. Exploring was the least of our worries the last time we visited that area.”

“I’m all for that idea,” Ukita says, raising his voice in agreement with Tachibana’s suggestion. “There were probably researchers in Area 4 who had access to Area 5. It wouldn’t be strange for someone to have left their card behind in all the chaos of the evacuation.”

Then there’s hope. “Okay, gang, I know it’s hard after what we’ve endured, but let’s push through and get back to the search,” I encourage them.

“Okay.”

“All right.”

“Indeed.”

The three civilians give reassuring responses. Exhaustion is probably catching up to them by now, but nobody lets it show. What we just went through brought us closer. Overjoyed to have grown stronger as a group, I leave the engine room with the others.

Area 3, Outer Ring

Ladder Room

I descend the ladder into the room where I found AD. There’s no more smoke or lethal gas to worry about. Fire-extinguishing agents have been scattered around. It looks like the sprinkler system is running normally.

“Why don’t we check this room for a card first?” I suggest. “I was in such a rush to find AD last time, I didn’t stop to look for anything else.”

“Good idea. Please help us search the room, everyone.”

The group follows Tachibana’s orders and commences a thorough search of the room. We split into groups to dig through the piles of disorganized boxes. My eyes stop on a file I pulled out of a box in the corner. The letters are running because it was soaked by the fire-extinguishing agent, but I make out what I can.

“July 7 LABO Fire Incident Report” July 9, 2021

All relevant parties are likely already aware of the fire that occurred in this facility two days ago. Although the worst possible outcome was averted at the last minute, there were inadequacies discovered in many systems. This report compiles and summarizes a list of problems identified by the incident.

The cause of the fire is ██████ of Senior Fellow S. On April 12, S. had been appointed as an administrator of ██████. As a result, he had a great number of opportunities to come in direct contact with the research results ██████.

About three months later, S. criminally took the generator gasoline stored in ██████ and ignited fifteen sectors within the facility ██████; at the same time he set the amplifier to ██████, ██████releasing ██████. The motive is believed to be the death of S█████ and while this is nothing more than speculation ██████stealing the results.

(Note: these research results are ██████ designated as “N” among █████.)

Furthermore, while this is not directly related ██████, two ███ had unfortunately sneaked into the facility during the day of the incident. █████ to

have found and exploited a hole in our security is ■■■■■■■■■■.

This firmly proves that our security system is extremely faulty. As a result of ■■■■, two lives were lost.

We must learn a lesson from this incident. There is an urgent need to have the specifications of ■■■■se N reviewed and for the security syste■ to be enhanced. Otherwise, we may see a repeat of this horrible tragedy.

It appears to be a report on a fire that occurred in this lab in the past. If this part of my memory isn't off, it's currently the year 2030. A fire took place here nine years ago as well.

So they let that horrible tragedy repeat after all. If this report isn't wrong, precious lives were lost during that incident too. That proves they never enhanced or fixed the problems in their security systems. Tch! I'll just make sure more lives aren't lost this time around.

With that oath, I rummage through more boxes but don't come across any security cards. Neither do the others.

"No luck here. There isn't any AD left or Level 5 cards lying around," Tachibana says, as if she's ready to give up on this room.

"Looks like it. Let's make the most of our time and search Area 4 now," I say and leave the room with the others.

▼ 11:27 AM

Area 4, Outer Ring

WE'VE returned to Area 4's outer ring. This block has been utterly desolated by the flashover's explosive flames. Though the fire was put out, the walls and ceiling are charred, laying waste to the futuristic interior.

The entire floor is in ruins, but there are several doors along the blackened walls. It's worth a look if the rooms are still intact.

Warning beeps have been going off from the Procyon for a while now. At 5,322 mSv, the radiation level here is much higher than the other areas.

Crud. The contamination is growing out of control in this block as we feared... But it's at a level we can tolerate with AD.

Tachibana checks the readings before handing out orders. “All right, we are going to search this block in teams. Mr. Ukita and Yuuri will search the rooms on this half with me. Captain, Moribe, and Ms. Tsubakiyama are to take care of the other half and the elevator hall.”

“On it.”

We immediately get to work without argument.

My team combs the crispified floor. Anxiety eats away at me as I walk around. Just because the sprinkler system kicked on doesn’t guarantee the survivors are safe now. They might very well be dead already if they were trapped in any of the areas surrounded by fire.

Moribe must’ve been thinking the same thing because she speaks up in a paper-thin voice: “I’m worried about those kids... I wonder if Louise and the others are okay.”

“It is worrying, but if the security camera footage is anything to go by, they’re likely in Area 5 or deeper. The fires shouldn’t have reached there yet.”

“It’s not just the fires I’m worried about—it’s the radiation. I mean, isn’t the Procyon reading over 5,000 mSv now?”

It’s true that you don’t want to stick around long with exposure to the 4,000 to 8,000 mSv range of the first danger standard, even with AD. The reality still hasn’t settled in yet, but these are normally absurd radiation levels to be walking around in.

“...You’re right. We shouldn’t stay here too long either—especially me and Ms. Tachibana,” Miss Ena says dismally.

“Hmm? I understand why Tachibana shouldn’t, but why not you?”

“Did you already forget, Captain Kasasagi? I was down here without AD until you guys showed up.”

Moribe and I gasp. I’d forgotten that Miss Ena didn’t even know a meltdown had occurred until she met up with us.

“Whoa, hold up, Teach. Aren’t you putting yourself in serious danger?! I’ll let Tachibana know so you can skip out on searching this area—”

“Oh, don’t give me that load of crap. I’m not going to sit on my butt while everyone else is working.”

“...!” I closely study her face. She has more gumption than I gave her credit for. “...You’re amazing, Miss Ena. I’ve had the wrong impression of you all this time.”

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere with me. Anyway, let’s hurry and get this over with.”

“Y-Yeah.”

While we were chatting, we finished our search of this block. The elevator hall is up next. It’s located at the far end. The flashover didn’t damage the door. As we get closer to it, Moribe sniffs the air.

“Huh? What’s that smell?”

“Hmm?”

“You know, it smells like something delicious has been cooking—” Her expression instantly freezes over.

I catch a whiff of that smell too. On a conditioned reflex, saliva fills my mouth and my empty gut aches, rousing my appetite.

But an icy cold chills my spine. The delicious smell my nose caught a whiff of was—that of cooked meat.

...Oh God, I hope I’m wrong.

The smell is wafting from inside the elevator hall. Some sort of burnt meat is in there. The worst possible outcome races through my mind, my body trembling.

Miss Ena catches on and croaks, “C-Captain K-Kasasagi, the door...!”

“Y-Yeah...!” We nod to each other, and I resolutely open the door.

“Ahh...” A hollow moan comes from all three of us.

The elevator hall is completely untouched by the fires. It’s sparkling clean, to the point I wouldn’t have believed a fire had been raging outside it if I hadn’t witnessed it for myself.

But what lies deeper within is unmistakably the result of a fire: legs burned to charcoal, melted body fat dripping to the floor, a horribly charred hazmat suit, a burned fire axe gripped firmly in hand—my hunger instantly turns to nausea.



“H-Hiyama!” Moribe cries out.

That name tells me on the spot that he was our other teammate who’d come down to the basement floors.

My voice rips from the back of my throat. “HIYAMA! Hey, Hiyama!” I run over to him, but he doesn’t even twitch at me screaming his name. It doesn’t take long for another voice to echo behind me.

“Wh-What’s wrong?!” Lured by our shouts, Tachibana and her team come running over. They let out breathless cries and stop right in the doorway.

Paying them no attention, I touch Hiyama’s body. I can tell he’s completely stiff through the hazmat suit. He’s clearly dead.

“We’re too late... He’s already dead...,” I wrench out in a thin voice.

“I can’t believe it... We’ve even lost Hiyama...!” Tachibana moans.

I hear Moribe stifling her sobs. And yet, jerk that I am, I can’t grieve his loss either. I merely examine his body while feeling like crap. His charred legs have been bent into a strange shape at his knees.

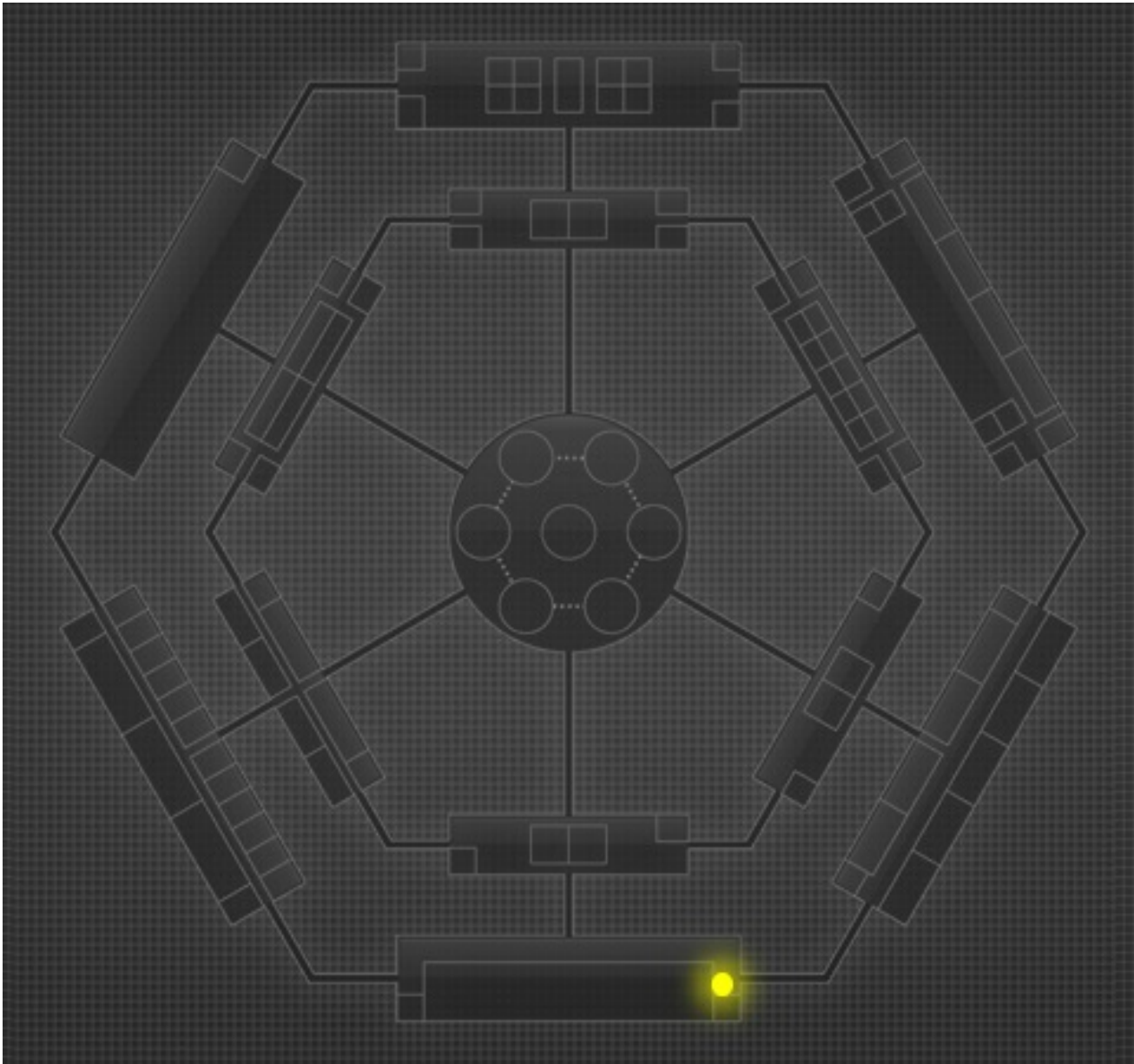
His legs were broken?!

He’d probably been trying to escape from the fires until the bitter end. He came across the inferno in Area 4, and yet crawled his way to the elevator hall, trying to cling to whatever hope of living he had left—and then breathed his last here.

“Hiyama...!” I cry out his name, lamenting the death of a teammate I don’t even remember.

And lying next to his body as if it’s his last parting gift to us is—a Level 6 security card.

vA Chapter 07: 【Last Wishes and Mission】 9/16/2030
11:31



Radiation Level: 5,399 mSv (Contaminated Zone)
Remaining AD: 1

▼ 11:31 AM

Area 4, Outer Ring

In Front of the Elevator Hall

AFTER discovering Hiyama's body, we gather in front of the elevator hall and explain what happened to Ukita and Yuuri. Fear twists Ukita's face and Yuuri is on the verge of tears. Moribe wraps her arm around Yuuri's trembling shoulders, but she's the one with a more grieved look on her face.

Tachibana eventually squeezes out, "...Being killed in the line of duty is something we must be prepared for in our line of work."

"But, Tachibana—"

"Please don't say another word, Captain. We can mourn after everything is over." Her voice shakes, and sorrow mists her eyes. Shaking off her feelings, she addresses Moribe. "Get a hold of yourself, Moribe. You threw aside your feminine emotions when you entered SIRIUS."

"B-But this is my first time losing a colleague...on the field, ya know? And it keeps happening!"

"It's the same for me... But even so..."

Tachibana and Moribe have sustained quite the emotional blow. Even the always calm and collected Tachibana can't suppress her feelings. And here I am, unable to grieve the loss of a squad member. Anything I say will have a hollow ring to it.

Damn it all! What can I do?! I stand there doing nothing but grinding my teeth.

"...What are you doing, Captain Kasasagi?" Miss Ena quietly whispers beside me. "You need to take charge here."

"What?"

"Aren't you the man? And a captain? Then that makes you the only one qualified to lead us."

It took her giving me that little push for me to realize that's indeed my duty.

It's exactly because I'm not mourning Hiyama's loss that I should be the one to lead the group while Tachibana can't.

Tachibana is putting on a brave front, but she's deeply grieving. After all, two squad members she's endured a lot with passed away within hours of each other. But she doesn't let her grief show because she's with survivors—and because we're still on duty.

How will the other survivors feel if the whole rescue squad gives in to despair? We can't let Yuuri, Miss Ena, and Ukita lose faith in us.

In which case, I need to be strong, as the captain of this squad. I may have unreliable memories and no confidence in my skills, but I'm still a rescue squad captain. I'm Watase Kasasagi, the man Tachibana and the others respect and serve under.

A fire is lit in my soul, giving me new strength. "Tachibana, Moribe, can I have a word with you?"

"What is it...?" They shuffle over to me on unsteady feet.

I clear my throat. "Tachibana, I'm taking over as leader. I'll guide the group from here."

"Captain...?"

"Don't look so shocked. We're just returning to our normal roles. Just until you both put your thoughts in order."

"B-But—"

"You won't listen? Then I'll order you—as SIRIUS squad captain." I snap my feet together and command them in an authoritative voice. "As of this point on, Lieutenant Kazami Tachibana and Ensign Jun Moribe will hereby defer to Captain Watase Kasasagi's command." Those words come very naturally from my mouth. Tachibana and Moribe tremble. "Repeat it!"

Strength and willpower return to their eyes. They click their heels together and reply in unison.

"Sir, yes, sir! Lieutenant Kazami Tachibana deferring to Captain Watase Kasasagi's command!"

“E-Ensign Jun Moribe deferring to Captain Kasasagi’s command, sir!”

“Good!” I grin and give them both a pat on the shoulder. I continue in that spirit as I hand out orders. “All right, let’s press onward... Hiyama went through a lot to leave that Level 6 card for us. We can reach the next area with it.”

Tachibana and Moribe look at the elevator hall.

“Indeed... We can’t let what he left for us go to waste.”

“You’ve got that right! Hiyama will be annoyed with us if we sulk forever!”

“That’s the spirit.” I share a smile with Moribe, then face our civilians. “Sorry for the wait, gang. Are you all ready to go?”

“Yes, I’m ready,” Miss Ena replies.

“No problems here. I can go anytime,” Ukita says after her.

Yuuri is clearly shaking in her boots, but she gives a solid nod.

As I’m grinning at them, Tachibana lays her hand softly on my shoulder and whispers, “...Thank you, Captain.” A faint smile touches her lips.

After getting everyone’s morale up again, we decide to leave Hiyama’s body in the elevator hall. I lean the axe against the wall near his body as a makeshift grave marker. Then we head out again.

Using the card Hiyama had, I get us into the connecting passageway leading to Area 5. The Procyon’s only reading 3,451 mSv, so we’re back within the safety standard.

“Let’s pick up the pace,” I call from the front of the group. “The security cameras showed the kids escaping in this direction.”

“...The other survivors are most likely somewhere beyond here,” Tachibana agrees.

“Yeah. We don’t have to worry about fires anymore, so let’s prioritize the survivors and AD,” Moribe adds.

They’re both still in shock, but they’re gradually returning to themselves. I set foot into the next area with a rare feeling of relief.

Area 5, Outer Ring

AREA 5's outer ring is markedly different from the other areas. Doors still line both sides of the corridor, but the walls and ceiling are stark white. It feels like a hospital ward.

"Hey, Ukita, what's this area for?"

"This is where high-level researchers conduct experiments. This division has far more advanced equipment than the areas we normal researchers have access to."

I look around while he explains. "Neuroscience Laboratory" is written on a plate next to the nearest door. "'Neuroscience Laboratory'? What does neuroscience have to do with nuclear research?"

"A lot. First of all, this facility's official name is the 6th Laboratory of Atomic and Biological Organization. Both nuclear science and biology are studied here. That's why we were able to develop a drug like AD."

"I see. So which science does your research fall under, Ukita?"

"Sorry, but I cannot answer any questions of that nature."

"Huh? Why not?"

"I'm bound by confidentiality. Some research is related to national policy, so it can't be shared with uninvolved parties."

"Yeah, I get that, but...you won't stop us from searching the labs, right?"

"You think I would start doing that at this point? Of course I'll allow it under the circumstances." Ukita follows up his permission with a firm warning. "But the confidentiality level is extremely high from Area 5 onward. If you want to continue living in peace after getting out of here alive, I highly recommend you never utter a word about what you've seen here."

He seems to be hinting at something more. Unfathomable fear roils in my stomach as I remark, "...Well, we can think about stuff like that after we escape. Searching comes first."

I imitate Tachibana and split our group into two teams. The team breakdown is the same as the last time. Moribe, Miss Ena, and I make up one team, while

Tachibana, Ukita, and Yuuri form another. I leave the rooms on the right side of the corridor to Team Tachibana and take responsibility for the left side.

We check room after room. There's a lot of weird equipment in them, but no survivors. The fifth room we arrive at has a completely different layout and appearance from the rest.

"Is this...an infirmary?"

There are several hospital beds, medicine cabinets, a refrigerator, ventilator, blood transfusion kits, and other medical equipment inside the room.



Moribe glances around the place, saying, “This looks like the kinda place they’d keep AD and other things that might come in handy.”

“Yeah. We should take special care in searching this room.”

We begin combing the infirmary, excited for what we might find. I start by walking over to the refrigerator and open the stainless-steel door. Inside are bags of red liquid, labeled with “A,” “B,” “O,” or “AB.”

Blood packs? So this is a full-scale doctor’s office...like one you’d see in a hospital.

Blood packs are all I find in the fridge.

“Captain Kasasagi, any luck?” Miss Ena calls from the other side of the room.

“Nope. No luck here. We might find a use for the ventilator and transfusion kit, but we don’t have an immediate need for it.”

“Same here. There’s a ton of empty AD ampoules, but not a single filled one,” she explains, holding out the depleted ampoules for me to see.

“It might not be AD, but I found something good,” Moribe says from where she’s rummaging through the cabinets. She pulls out a medicine tube. The label reads “Styptic Chiron.”

“What’s that?”

“Pretty much the ultimate ointment. It closes small wounds so ridiculously well it’s like they’re glued shut.”

“Wow, sounds useful.”

“Sure is. Let’s take one each.” Moribe hands a Chiron tube to me and Tachibana.

Sadly, that’s the only useful thing we’ve accomplished. With nothing left to do here, we leave the infirmary behind.

As soon as we leave the room, I spot Tachibana’s team talking in the corridor.

“It’s far too dangerous to drink that, Mr. Ukita!”

“But I’m dying of thirst!”

Tachibana and Ukita are arguing about something. Yuuri has her hands nervously pressed together as she watches them. I run over and ask, “What’s wrong? Did you find something?”

“We didn’t find any AD or survivors, Captain... But we did find this.” Tachibana shows me what she’s holding in her arms: six plastic bottles labeled “Distilled Water.”

“Water?! You found water?!”

“Yes. It appears to be water meant for mixing with medicine. But I’ve been telling him not to drink it because there’s a possibility it will give us radiation exposure from the inside...”

I loudly gulp when I see that liquid gold. Just as Ukita said, everyone’s thirst has passed its limits. The biggest problem now is figuring out how safe it is to drink.

“I-I want to risk the danger and drink it,” Miss Ena rasps out in a hoarse voice.

Ukita smooths over our shock. “I believe she’s made the right decision here. We found these in a metal medicine cabinet, so the possibility of them being contaminated with radiation is extremely low. And naturally, there’s a zero percent chance any atomic dust is inside sealed bottles. Bottled water is completely different from tap water that way.”

“Then it’s safe enough! I’m taking one!” Miss Ena announces as she snatches a bottle from Tachibana’s arms.

“Hey!”

Miss Ena twists off the cap and chugs the water before Tachibana can stop her. She immediately starts choking.

“M-Miss Ena?! You okay?!”

“I-I’m okay. A little went down the wrong pipe because I drank too much at once... Anyway, how about you have some as well? This is the first time mere water has tasted so heavenly!” An intoxicated smile overtakes her face as if she had something stronger than water to drink. That only serves to rouse everyone else’s thirst.

“I-I’m having some too!”

“Me too!”

Ukita and Yuuri snap into action and share a bottle of water.

“Oh, come on!” Tachibana says, exasperated. But even she recognizes that the temptation this water poses is greater than the fear of radiation exposure.

“...Sorry, Tachibana, I’m also taking one.”

“S-Same!”

Tachibana finally gives in after Moribe and I do. “...There’s no helping it. At least it seems safe enough...”

Everyone ended up taking a water bottle. I twist off the lid and slowly pour the water into my mouth, careful not to choke on it. Fresh water soaks into my parched and cracking throat. It’s unbelievably tasty for lukewarm, room-temperature water.

“Whew! I feel alive again!”

“Right?! All hail water!”

Moribe and I share a smile.

“W-Well, keeping hydrated is an important part of the job... It’s my duty to have a drink,” Tachibana says awkwardly, as if she’s making up an excuse to drink it as she puts the bottle to her lips.

Even someone who’s always as levelheaded and calm as Tachibana has her human moments too. There’s something cute about her reactions.

“Now that we’ve quenched our thirst, let’s get back to the search— Huh, what’s that?” I spot something strange out of the corner of my eye as I’m talking. At the end of the corridor is a plate on the wall with the word “EMERGENCY” written on it. Right below it is a keypad with ten buttons labeled from zero to nine. “Hang on, guys. What do you think this is for?”

The others gather around what I’m looking at.

“Hmm...what could it be?” Moribe tilts her head.

“No idea. Maybe it’s an emergency line or something of that sort?” Ukita

ventures.

Doesn't sound like anyone knows. I press the buttons at random, but nothing happens. Yuuri watches closely as I fiddle with it.

"Is something wrong, Yuuri?"

"Ah! No, I'm just a little...tired."

"I'm sure you are. You've had to keep moving without rest."

"I-I'm okay. I can keep going." She balls her trembling hands into fists. Her forced display of being okay worries me more.

Maybe our two-team system of three and three isn't the right balance. "Hey, Tachibana? Why don't we increase the help on your side by adding Miss Ena to your team? Moribe and I will cover the inner ring," I suggest.

"I can see the merit in that. What do you think, Miss Ena?"

"I have no complaints."

"You're a lifesaver, Miss Ena. Ready to get to work, Moribe?"

"You know it!"

As we're about to leave, Yuuri calls out to me. "U-Um, Captain Kasasagi... thank you for looking out for me."

"Don't mention it. It's the adults' job to look after kiddos. Don't push yourself too much, Yuuri," I tell her and walk toward the inner ring with Moribe.

▼ 11:41 AM

Area 5, Between the Outer and Inner Ring

Connecting Passageway

ON the way to the inner ring, something odd catches my eye. "What's this?" Something like charcoal was used to write a message in big letters on the wall.

To Sirius's owner, from Alice's owner,

Did you guys safely escape? Or are you still here? Maybe I should take it as a sign that you aren't here anymore because I

can't find you no matter how much I look. But if you are still here, I want to regroup as soon as possible. Answer the following question if you get this message: "Did Sirius succeed in escaping from the cage on the night of the full moon?"

"Wh-What do you think it is? A message from someone to someone else?" Moribe asks in a dubious whisper, her eyes tracing the charcoal letters scribbled along the wall.

"Looks like code to me. Isn't Sirius the name of our rescue squad?"

"Well, it's definitely like we're locked in a cage right now... But what's this bit about the night of the full moon? I don't think it's a full moon today—it's not even nighttime."

"Hmm, no clue."

I'm curious, but we don't have time to burn thinking about it. We make our way through the connecting passageway and enter the inner ring. But the shrill beeping of the Procyon greets us the second we opened the gate.

"Tch! Another contaminated zone?!"

"8,650 mSv is the second danger standard! Let's fall back, Captain!"

Moribe and I jump back and shut the gate. The shrill warning alarm ceases, but it'll just go off again if we reopen the gate.

"That's the highest level we've seen yet! It's dangerous even with AD."

"But I'd hate to leave somewhere completely unsearched. There could be survivors."

"True. It can't be avoided—I'll go search the area," I firmly declare.

"You can't! It's too dangerous! You fainted the last time you entered a contaminated zone, Captain!"

"I know, but I'll be fine this time. I'll go and come back in under three minutes."

Moribe thinks it over for a bit before finally making up her mind. "...Okay

then. If you're going, I'm coming too."

"You too?! Forget it. What good does it do for both of us to get exposed to radiation?!"

"I can't let you go in there alone. I need to be there to save you when you pass out again." Moribe grins to hide the fear she feels inside. Just where does she store all this courage in her small body?

"...All right," I concede while secretly admiring her bravery. "I'll be the one to carry you out of there if you pass out this time."

"I like the sound of that. I'm counting on you."

We exchange a firm handshake and determined smiles. Then I set the timer on my watch. "We're doing this in three minutes, Moribe. Give up the search and return here once the time is up."

"Roger, Captain. Let's turn the whole place over in that time!"

"Yeah! Let's do this!"

We bolster our morale and charge into the highly contaminated zone.

Unlike the untouched outer ring, the inner ring has extensive fire damage. The narrow passageway's walls and floor are scorched black, with a damaged door at the end. Corridors continue to the left and right of it.

We're in a battle against time now. No sooner does that thought occur than it feels like my head is being hammered and my skin goes numb. It's the same symptoms I had the last time I entered a contaminated zone.

Is this a side effect of the radiation as we thought?

Fighting the pain, I strain my voice to say, "Moribe, let's split up and regroup by the front room!"

"Roger!"

Moribe and I separate at the fork in the corridor. There are three doors on the left path I take. I hurtle into the farthest room first. It's been charred beyond recognition like the corridor.

"Is anyone there?! Say something if you are!" I shout as loud as I can.

There's no answer. I search for AD while I'm at it but don't find any. I finish the search in under a minute and bolt from the room.

I immediately burst into the next room. But there's nothing here either. The next room after that is no different.

I dash into the corridor after searching the three rooms and see Moribe sprinting toward me.

"Moribe! How'd it go on your end?!"

"I hit all three rooms with no luck!"

"Same here! The front one's all we have left, then!" My eyes turn on the last unsearched room. It's at the center of the fork and has a plate on the door that reads "Dr. Miyoko Tenkawa."

Tenkawa? Is she related to the Natsuhiko Tenkawa who's trapped here? Now that I think about it, Ukita previously mentioned that Natsuhiko's mom works at LABO. Would that make this his mom's office?

I open the door and find that this room, unlike the others in this block, hasn't sustained any fire damage. There aren't any survivors, but something about this room is calling to me.

I look behind the desk in search of that "something." Lo and behold, I find an iron box on the floor. It's a medical box! Flipping it open reveals five AD stashed within. I fist-pump the air just as my watch beeps.

"Score! Let's get back to the outer ring!"

"Okay!"

We fly out of that room with the medical box. Once we get back to the connecting passageway, I shut the gate behind us, stopping the Procyon's shrill warning beeps. Sighs of relief escape us with the quiet.

"Phew, I was becoming a nervous wreck!"

"You can say that again. Are you feeling out of sorts at all, Moribe?"

"Y-Yeah...no, well, a little nauseated...!" Moribe covers her mouth and bends over. "Don't look, Captain! I'm gonna hurl!"

“Hurl what— Ah!”

“BLURRRRGH!” She turns her back to me and throws up in a corner of the passageway. I watch her like a dumbfounded idiot. She finishes throwing up and manages to put a smile on her pale face. “...Man, I’m sorry you had to see that. I’m so embarrassed.”

She’s making light of the situation, but my voice comes out tight. “M-Moribe... Don’t tell me you got radiation damage from being in there?”

“Huh? N-No way. I was running around so nervous that my fatigue finally caught up to my stomach, that’s all.”

“Are you positive?! Hey, show me your wrist!” I grab her wrist and examine her Vital Checker. One of the five green lights is flickering bright red. “Hey, it’s red! Doesn’t that mean something’s wrong with your health?!”

“Don’t panic. That’s just the pulse indicator. My heart’s racing because I just finished blowing chunks all over the floor. It’ll change back to green soon,” Moribe explains, and sure enough, the light returns to green. “See? I’m the picture of health again. Right as rain.”

“I see... As long as you’re okay...”

But Moribe has entered two contaminated zones, same as me. I’ve already clonked out once, so there’s no guarantee she’s okay with her smaller body size.

“...Tell me immediately if anything feels off.”

“Thanks for worrying, Sir Captain. You really are being a nice guy today.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s only natural for a captain to worry after their subordinates.” We share a short laugh.

“...Anyway, we found one hell of a treasure trove in there, huh?” Moribe says to bring us back on point.

“Sure did. It’s too bad we didn’t find any survivors, but we got a hold of AD pretty quick this time.”

Together with the one AD left in my pocket, we now have a grand total of six. We still have time until the next injection, too, so we’re in the clear for the time

being.

“Let’s meet up with the others! They’ll be jumping for joy with this find!” she exclaims with a slightly less pallid face.

“Yeah!”

We take off in a run for the outer ring.

▼ 11:47 AM

Area 5, Outer Ring

TEAM Tachibana happens to be exiting a nearby room when we reach the outer ring.

“Oh? That was quick. Did you finish checking the inner ring?” Tachibana asks when she notices us.

“Yeah. And I’ve got good news. We found five whole AD there.”

The other team goes wide-eyed at my announcement. A rare smile graces Tachibana’s lips. “Then we have a total of six AD? We secured a supply much faster this time.”

“Yeah. This gives us another hour plus of safety,” I say with a grin. I decided to keep quiet about the inner ring’s contamination. With our search of the area finished, I don’t want to cause unnecessary worry for the others. “How did your inspection of the outer ring go, Tachibana? Any luck?”

“We didn’t come across any AD or survivors after going through all the rooms, but...we found these instead.” She holds out a stack of security cards marked “Level 6.”

“You found that many Level 6 cards lying around?”

“There were three in the room we just checked. It appears that office belonged to the person responsible for managing and issuing these cards.”

We now have a grand total of four Level 6 security cards. But there’s not much point in having a ton of the same level cards.

“Survivors matter more than some stack of cards,” Miss Ena snips, her opinion similar to my own. “How have we not found a single trace of those children

yet?”

“True. It’s fishy that we haven’t seen any of them after how much we’ve looked around.”

We’ve finished searching over 80 percent of the facility. Area 6 is the only area left unsearched. Does that mean we overlooked some places? Or have the survivors already died somewhere we haven’t come across?

Depression hovers in the air as everyone begins drawing similar conclusions. But a timid voice breaks through the glum mood.

“U-Um...I think it’d be better to think positively...instead.” Yuuri’s voice brings us all back to our senses as she continues, “Isn’t it better to believe that the fact we haven’t seen them yet...means everyone’s still alive? I’m sure they’re all in Area 6.”

“...You’re absolutely right, Yuuri.”

Yuuri’s smile dispels the shadows shrouding everyone’s faces.

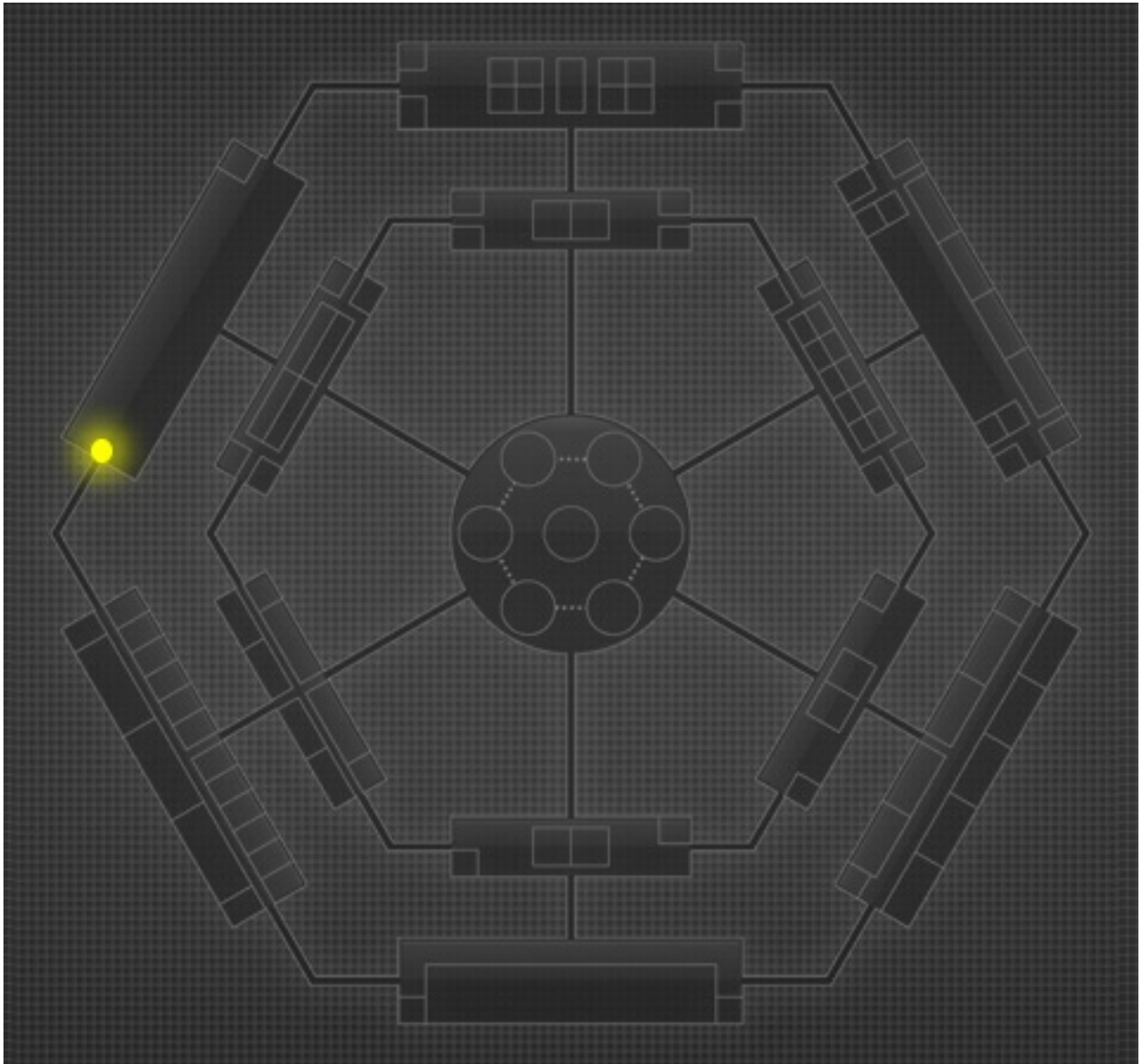
“That’s right,” Miss Ena says with a small smile. “They have to be okay... All three of them are smart kids.”

“All right! Then let’s get on with the search!”

We share a determined nod and walk off toward the last unsearched zone of Area 6!

vA Chapter 08: 【Means of Survival and Hope】

9/16/2030 11:52



Radiation Level: 3,711 mSv

Remaining AD: 6

▼ 11:52 AM

Area 6, Outer Ring

Factory

PASSING through the connecting passageway to Area 6 brings us face-to-face with a bizarre, sprawling space. This is more like a room you'd find in a factory than a research facility. The ceiling is at least a dozen feet taller than anywhere else in the facility, and heavy machinery and raw materials clutter the spacious concrete interior. The forklifts, conveyor belts, and other machinery have been charred useless and flipped on their sides.

A horrible fire must've ripped through the room. Soot and ash coat the entire floor.



“What the hell is this place?” I ask the room.

“This is the development block, nicknamed ‘the factory,’” Ukita answers. “This is my first time here, but I never imagined the damage would be this bad.”

The destruction and devastation here is particularly bad. Even the ceiling several dozen feet overhead and the crane stationed on the catwalk near it have been burned black.

I check the Procyon—it’s reading 3,711 mSv. This place has barely managed to stay within the safety standard. With our general safety confirmed, I hand out orders.

“Okay, let’s split into teams of two and four again. Team Tachibana is to search the factory. Moribe and I will cover the inner ring.”

“Roger!”

With everyone on board with the plan, I immediately head for the inner ring with Moribe.

▼ 11:53 AM

Area 6, Inner Ring

THIS block has a lot of doors lining the stark white corridor in a similar layout to Area 5. I check room after room along with Moribe. Survivors and AD are nowhere to be found, but we discover another Procyon in the last room we check.

“Hey, this a Procyon, right? Why’s one lying around here?”

“Isn’t that obvious, Captain? LABO’s staff provided us with the Procyon. It’s not strange for them to have some in the facility.”

“Oh yeah, you said something along those lines before. This is a good find. It’ll allow us to break into three teams should we need to.”

I don’t know if we’ll ever have to do that, but it doesn’t hurt to have an extra on us, so I stash it in my pocket.

We rummage through the office for anything else of use until Moribe finds some kind of booklet.

“Take a look at this, Captain. It’s a disaster prevention manual.”

“The same as the one Yuuri found?”

“Nope. There’s a few small differences. This one says it’s for employees working in Areas 5 and 6.”

Moribe and I read it with our heads close together. The majority of pages are exactly the same as the manual we read earlier, except for an extra page added at the very end.

Disaster Prevention Manual (For Employees of Areas 5 and 6)

○ Regarding Emergency Evacuation Routes

In the event of a fire, earthquake, or other disaster, the elevators will automatically ascend to the surface floor and stay there. This is to prevent passengers from becoming trapped inside operating elevators that stop due to aftershocks or other unpredictable factors. Please use the emergency staircase located in each block to evacuate.

However, please note that Area 6’s outer ring does not have an emergency staircase due to security risks and the facility’s structure. All staff should therefore evacuate from the inner ring. Should a situation arise where that becomes too difficult to do, please evacuate through the cargo lift.

○ Regarding Emergency Cargo Lift Usage

Unlike the normal elevators, the cargo lift is extremely sturdy. It has been estimated to withstand earthquakes up to a 7.0 magnitude and poses little risk of stopping midoperation. Therefore, all staff members are granted temporary permission to use the lift during an emergency evacuation.

Please use it to promptly evacuate to the surface. The same applies during a Case N. Should evacuation of the facility become impossible due to a lockdown, the cargo lift can still be used to evacuate to a safe zone on the surface floor.

My whole body trembles as I read that page. “Hey, Moribe, did you read what I just did? About using the cargo lift to evacuate to a safe zone...?!”

“Doesn’t that mean we can escape to the surface from here?!”

We exchange excited looks. We've finally discovered a way out of this hell!

"You rock for finding this little treasure, Moribe! It's the discovery of a lifetime!"

"I'm honored, Captain! So where do you think this lift is at?"

"Probably tucked away somewhere inside the factory that we didn't pay attention to."

"Sounds likely! Let's return to others!"

I nod and, with Moribe, run back the way we came. We pass through the connecting passageway and arrive in the factory, where I immediately spot the other team.

"Hey! Guys!"

Hearing my shout, the others come running over to meet us halfway.

"Did you find survivors, Captain?" Tachibana asks.

"No. How about you?"

"None. We searched high and low too..."

We've finished exploring every area inside LABO. But we didn't find those kids anywhere—not even their bodies.

"Then that settles it... Those kids already escaped to the surface with the cargo lift!"

Questioning looks cross everyone's faces.

"What cargo lift?" Miss Ena asks.

"Supposedly somewhere in the factory is a lift you can use to evacuate to the surface! Look at this!" I open the disaster prevention manual for them to see.

"The cargo lift?" Ukita groans. "It completely slipped my mind that that was an option!"

"Hey, Ukita, did you see anything like that inside the factory?"

"I'm not a hundred percent sure about this, but it might be that there." He looks toward a corner of the factory. I follow his gaze to where a security gate is

located on the farthest wall from us.

“What’s a security gate doing in a random place like this?”

“We were also curious because it seems out of place here, but...we couldn’t get inside because the security slot burned up in the fire.”

“It did?”

“But past that gate is the only place we haven’t searched yet. I’d bet this cargo lift to the surface is protected behind it.”

That’s enough to bring a smile to everyone’s face. Our distressing journey to find a way out is finally coming to an end!

“All right! Let’s find a way to pry that gate open! How about we break it down with the engine cutter?” I suggest.

“We already tried that,” Tachibana replies. “We even went back to base to get it... But it didn’t even dent the gate.”

Another look at the gate and I see the engine cutter lying on the ground beside it. But there’s only a slight nick on the gate itself.

Dang it all! What do we have to do to pry it open? The exit is right before our eyes. Yuuri and the others will be saved if only we can open it.

An unsettling snapping noise echoes loudly overhead before I can finish thinking.

▼ 12:00 PM

Area 6, Outer Ring

Factory

SHOCK instantly runs along my spine. Fragments of something are falling from above. Startled, I crane my neck up and see a big crack spreading through the ceiling.

“G-Get away from here, guys!” As I shout, the crack shoots in every direction and the ceiling begins to cave in!

“Kyaaaaaaaaah!”

“Eeeeeek!”

“Waaaaaaah!”

Everyone screams. Debris, pebbles, scraps of iron, steel frames, and iron plates come crashing down on us like killer hail. We flee in different directions to get out of the epicenter.

“Kyah!” Yuuri slips on debris and falls onto her butt just as a fifty-five-square-foot ceiling panel plummets toward her.

“Yuuri!” On the spur of the moment, I lunge for her and shield her with my body. An impact like nothing I’ve ever felt before slams into my back a second later. “Aaagh!”

I had intercepted the falling panel with my back. With Yuuri splayed out below me, I try to push the panel up with my back. But even more debris crashes down on top of me, assaulting my body with impacts I feel through the panel.

“Gaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

The panel’s weight suddenly increases tenfold with great force. I can’t even begin to estimate how much the mountain of rubble weighs. Three hundred thirty pounds? Four hundred fifty pounds? I try to brace myself with my hands and legs, but my limbs feel like they’ll break under the overwhelming weight.

My eyes lock with Yuuri’s. She’s lying faceup underneath me as I try to hold up the debris on my hands and knees. My pained face is reflected in her frightened eyes.

If I don’t hang in there, Yuuri will be crushed with me! I muster every ounce of strength left in my body to hold out against the crushing weight. Protecting Yuuri is all I let myself think about.

By the time the ceiling stops caving in, Yuuri and I are buried under a mountain of rubble.

“C-Captain Kasasagi...!” Yuuri cries out in fear. Red droplets splatter onto her dusty cheeks. My blood. The back of my head has been split open.

I answer her through the pain: “Don’t you worry, Yuuri. I’ll save you no matter

what...!"

"B-But...you're in worse shape than me...!"

"Oh, this? It's no more than a scratch." I force a faltering smile, bringing tears to her eyes.



“Captain?! Yuuri?!” Tachibana shouts at the top of her lungs.

I can hear the voices of the other four who managed to escape the wreckage in time.

“Where are you?! Answer us!” Miss Ena calls.

“Don’t tell me they ended up under all this debris?!”

“A-Are they alive?! Captain Kasasagi?! Miss Yuuri?!”

“We’re right here!” Yuuri shouts through the rubble. “Move the debris fast! Or else Captain Kasasagi will—!”

“B-But how?!”

Miss Ena’s question sets my brain into gear. It’ll be near impossible for them to get this rubble off me with just their hands. And they have to act fast before my stamina gives out. I allow my instincts to guide me as I shout out orders.

“Tachibana, Miss Ena, Ukita! Move as much debris as you can!”

“Roger!”

“Moribe, run to base and grab the air jack! It shouldn’t take long if you go through Area 1 to get there!”

“I-I’m on it! I’ll be back in two minutes, tops! Hang in there till then, Captain!” I hear Moribe say as she runs off.

Tachibana’s voice echoes on the other side of the rubble. “Mr. Ukita, Ms. Tsubakiyama, help me with this debris!”

“O-Okay!”

“I will!”

The three of them commence clearing away the wreckage. One minute later and my arms are shaking worse than an earthquake.

“Grrr...!” I can hear my elbows cracking under the weight as they near their breaking limit.

“I-I’m so sorry, Captain Kasasagi,” Yuuri rasps in a mournful voice as she watches my face contort with pain. “...It’s all my fault that you got trapped in

here too...”

“Y-You dummy... Don’t apologize...for nothing...!”

“O-Okay...” Yuuri meekly nods, then quietly asks, “But why...why are you going so far to save me?”

I don’t know why. That “voice” I heard could have something to do with it. Or it might be completely unrelated. So I just answer with the role I’ve been given.

“D-Do you even need to ask...? I’m...a rescue...squad...captain... That’s why...,” I choke out between ragged breaths.

“No way... Then why did you—”

Yuuri’s question is cut short by Moribe’s voice on the other side of the rubble. “Sorry for the wait! How’re you holding up, Captain?!”

“Hon...estly...not...well... Hurry!” I holler.

Tachibana’s orders echo back. “Moribe, cut a line from here to here with the engine cutter! Then insert the air jack into the opening! We’re going to lift the debris and pull the two of them out!”

“Roger! Ms. Tsubakiyama, Mr. Ukita, please stand back!” The sound of the engine cutter quickly follows Moribe’s orders. The two rescue workers begin removing the debris from us.

But the muscles in my arms are already past their limit. They could buckle under the rubble’s weight any second now.

I look Yuuri square in the eyes and ask, “H-Hey...Yuuri? ...Can you...do me...a favor?”

“What is it?”

“Please...tell me to...hang in there...!”

A heartbreaking expression crosses her face, but she promptly encourages me. “Captain Kasasagi...please hang in there!”

Renewed strength fills my aching bones with those words. “ALLLL RIIIGHTTT!”

I rally every ounce of strength in me and push the debris up with my back. At the same time, an opening is made in the wreckage and light shines on Yuuri’s

face. Tachibana inserts the air jack into that opening.

“All set! Everyone, please lend a hand so that the rubble doesn’t collapse while the air jack is inflating!”

“I’ve got you covered!”

“All right! I’ll handle this side!”

“Okay, inflating the air jack nooow!” The debris lifts into the air with Moribe’s signal.

“Captain! Yuuri! Hurry!”

We obey Tachibana’s orders and roll out from under the rubble.

▼ 12:06 PM

Area 6, Outer Ring

Factory

“**HAH**...haaaaaaaaaaaaaah...” Out of danger, I collapse on the ground and catch my breath. Every bone in my body aches, and my muscles are shaking and cramping.

I’m amazed I survived that one.

No sooner does that cross my mind than I hear Tachibana’s voice right beside me. “Captain! Yuuri! Thank God you’re all right!” She throws her arms around the both of us.



“Whoa!”

“Wah!”

Ignoring our surprise, she tearfully expresses her concern. “I was worried sick about you! I thought my heart was going to stop for good this time...!”

“I-It’s okay. Both Yuuri and I are in one piece.”

“But...it’s hard to breathe...Lieutenant Tachibana...”

Tachibana doesn’t let us go anyway. “Isn’t it okay for us to stay this way a little longer? You were in serious danger just now.” She pats us both on the back. Yuuri starts trembling as if the reality of the situation has finally dawned on her. “...You must’ve been so scared.”

“I-I was...!”

“You did such a good job not crying. You’re safe now,” Tachibana soothes as she rubs Yuuri’s back. I can feel warmth from her arm around me, which brings into stark reality what I just went through as well.

That’s right... We survived the impossible...!

I gently return Tachibana’s hug. Yuuri rests her hand on my arm. We stay there sharing a wordless hug for a good few moments.

It’s not long before Moribe’s teasing voice interjects into our moment. “Wowwie, enjoying the benefits of being captain? I mean, it gets you a hug from the iron-faced lieutenant here.”

Brought back to earth, I look over my shoulder to see everyone looking extremely pleased.

“That’s a rescue captain for you. You get to walk away with all the juicy moments,” Ukita teases.

“But Captain Kasasagi is the one who saved Miss Yuuri,” Miss Ena says with a smile.

I shake my head. “Nah, I was powerless alone... It’s everyone’s teamwork that saved Yuuri.”

Bashful expressions appear on each person’s face.

“You’re bleeding from the back of your head, Captain Kasasagi,” Miss Ena mentions with worry as soon as she takes a good look at me. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah. I think some of the debris nicked me, that’s all.”

“Here, turn around. I’ll apply some Chiron for you.” Miss Ena pulls the tube of medicine from her pocket.

“Um, please let me do it,” Yuuri timorously requests. “...I caused his injuries...”

“Take good care of me, Yuuri.”

Yuuri accepts the Chiron from Miss Ena and starts rubbing it into the back of my head. I can feel the gentle movement of her fingers. After a while, she speaks up in surprise. “...Huh? I just noticed that you have a single streak of white hair.”

“Oh, I do? I never knew, since I can’t see my own head.”

“You do. It looks like a *kasasagi* feather.”

“*Kasasagi*?”

“It’s the name of a kind of magpie. It’s a very intelligent bird that has a single white feather among its black feathers.”

“Cool... Maybe that’s where my last name, Kasasagi, comes from?”

Miss Ena corrects my light joke. “Of course not. Don’t teach her weird things.”

“Aw, come on, Miss Ena. Can’t you take a joke? I’m just trying to cheer Yuuri up...”

“Is that what you were doing? You’re a tough guy, but you have a questionable taste in humor.”

“Boy, are you as hard on me as ever.”

Yuuri laughs at our banter. I think this is the first time I’ve ever heard her laugh.

Once she finishes rubbing in the Chiron, Yuuri faces the group again. “Um, Captain Kasasagi, everyone...thank you so much for saving me.”

“Your being safe is all that matters,” Tachibana answers gently.

“We’d fail as rescue workers if we lost one of our survivors after coming this far, y’know?” Moribe jests.

I squeeze out a wry smile. “Damn straight. But man, who woulda thought the ceiling would cave in?” Sighing with exasperation, I look up at the collapsed ceiling. Something there catches my eye. “Ah!”

“Is something the matter, Captain?”

“I just got a genius idea about how we can open that gate!” I exclaim and point to the crane hanging from the ceiling. “Can’t we use that? We’ll use the engine cutter to cut a notch into the gate, then hook the crane to it so it can pull the gate open...!”

“It’s worth a shot!” Tachibana runs over to the wall and operates the controls there. The crane lurches forward. “It moved! We can use it!”

“Okay, let’s get to work, people!”

We head straight to the security gate in question.

Moribe picks up the engine cutter. “Alrighty! I’ll start things off by cutting into it with this bad boy! Stand back, guys!” She starts it up and runs its spinning blade into the gate. Sparks bathe her body with the grating sound of metal cutting metal. It doesn’t take long before she makes a four-inch incision into the center of the gate. “...Phew! Captain, how’s this?”

“Perfect! All that’s left is to hook the crane to it. You’re up, Tachibana!”

“Roger!” Tachibana operates the crane controls. The crane swings, dropping the chain from the ceiling.

I grab the hook and latch it on to the notch in the gate. Tachibana presses a switch on the controls, winding the chain up to the ceiling and pulling the hook tight against the gate as it goes.

I watch and pray it succeeds. It’s not long before the gate starts creaking, widening the notch we made until it pulls open a gap big enough for us to walk through.

“Okay! That’s perfect!”

“Whoo-hoo! W-We did it! We did it! Hell yeah, we did it!” Moribe’s jumping with joy.

It’s a narrow opening even I can fit through. I see what looks like a lift inside the darkness beyond.

“We pulled it off, huh?” Ukita seems happy for once.

“Phew... We can finally breathe easy,” Miss Ena says with a sigh.

“You’re all so amazing! Really, really amazing!” Yuuri cheers.

Their praise brings a grin to my face too.

At long last, we’ve secured an escape route. While we haven’t found all the survivors yet, this will get Yuuri, Miss Ena, and Ukita to safety at least. Then we won’t have to worry about finding AD anymore. And we can probably call for help from the rescue squad on the outside.

I stifle my ballooning excitement and address the group: “Ready continue with our escape?”

“Let me go on ahead and confirm it’s safe!” Moribe happily pushes her way through the opening. A fraction of a second after she’s on the other side —“KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!” we hear her shrill scream from the darkness.

“Moribe?! What’s wrong?!” I call after her.

The group gasps and slips past the opening into a space the size of a small bedroom. Toward the back is a cargo lift large enough for people to board, just like we read in the disaster prevention manual.

Moribe is rooted to the ground in front of it. Someone else is inside—

“What the?!”

We are all at a loss for words.

A dead body is propped up in a corner of the lift. It’s the remains of an unfamiliar girl dressed in what looks like a white nightgown and sandals. She was probably in her late teens. She’s a beautiful girl with white skin and even whiter hair. Blood from a gunshot wound to her stomach has dyed her clothes

red.



“Wh-Who is she? Mashiro Toba?”

“She isn’t...!” Miss Ena says in a ghost of a whisper, her face whiter than a sheet. “She’s not one of my students...”

“She’s not?! Th-Then who is she?!”

No one has the answer to my question.

This girl no one knows was undoubtedly murdered. Why was she killed? Her face is completely expressionless. There isn’t a hint of fear or pain at her death to be seen there. She’s merely staring at the floor with empty eyes.

Everyone is rendered dumbstruck and speechless.

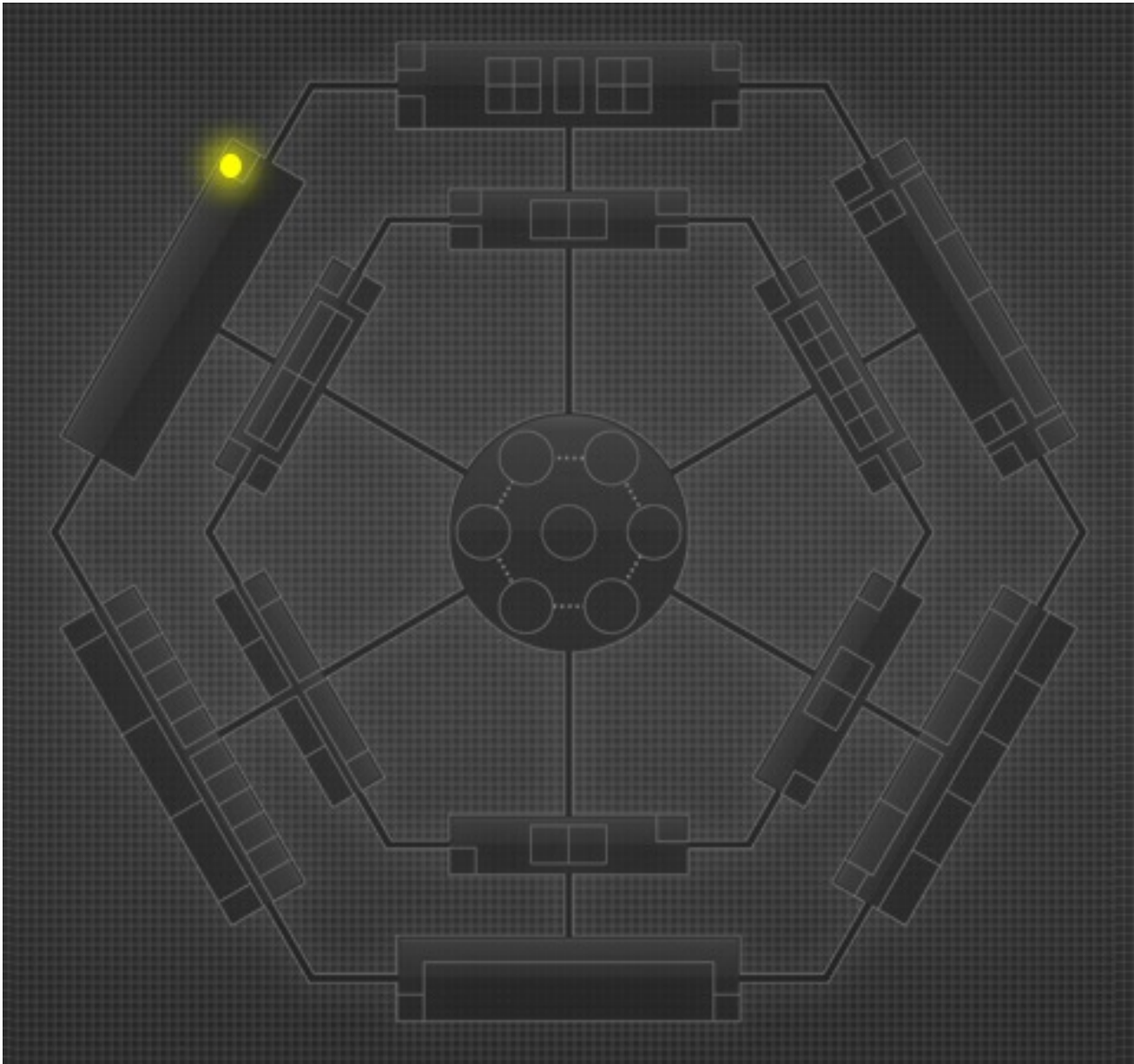
Ukita eventually lets out a small groan. “...Oh no!” He walks over to the lift’s control panel.

The panel right beside the girl has been—completely and utterly destroyed. He tries to operate it anyway. Nothing happens when he presses any of the switches. Growing annoyed, he slams his fist into it.

“Wh-Why...,” Yuuri mutters in a wisp of a voice. “Why did this happen?!”

I’m frozen to the spot, too frazzled to offer any comfort to the young girl.

vA Chapter 09: 【Misery and Suspicion】 9/16/2030
12:15



Radiation Level: 3,961 mSv

Remaining AD: 6

Area 6, Outer Ring

Cargo Lift

WE had hope until then. The cargo lift we finally found after all our searching is supposed to be the only escape route from this death trap of a facility. But the control panel that operates it has already been destroyed—almost like it was intentionally broken. In the place of our crushed hopes we find the remains of a mysterious girl none of us know.

Everyone is dazed by this completely unexpected turn of events.

Tachibana stumbles over to the girl's body. "I-I must...check her vitals..." She removes the Vital Checker from her wrist and wraps it around the girl's. All five lights turn deep red. That's likely a sign the person is dead. Tachibana lays the girl on the floor as she orders, "Moribe, give me a hand. I'm going to perform CPR."

"O-Okay." Moribe hurriedly sits down next to the girl.

Tachibana performs cardiac massage fifteen times. Moribe performs artificial respiration two times.

The girl doesn't respond. Incapable of helping, I watch over them in a haze.

Fifteen compressions. Two rescue breaths.

Fifteen more compressions. Two more rescue breaths.

Still, the girl doesn't respond.

Ukita crouches down beside her and sadly announces, "...You're wasting your time. She's long dead...."

The two rescue workers continue performing CPR regardless.

Fifteen compressions. Two rescue breaths.

Fifteen more compressions. Two more rescue breaths.

Fifteen more compressions. Two more rescue breaths.

Eventually, Tachibana's watch alarm goes off.

“Hey, Tachibana! It’s time to administer AD!” She ignores me too. It’s almost like she can’t hear or see anyone else. “Tch!”

I let her continue while I pull out the AD and inject myself first. I administer injections to both Miss Ena and Yuuri next. Yuuri always fights us when it comes time for hers, but she’s in so much shock, she lets me do it without a peep.

“Come on, Tachibana! Inject yourself!”

Tachibana is muttering something under her breath that’s not in response to me. I strain my ears to pick up on that breathless voice. “Don’t you die on me, Nagisa!”

Moribe sharply inhales when she makes out what Tachibana muttered. “S-Sis, this girl isn’t Nagisa...!”

Who’s Nagisa? I’m full of questions after hearing that unfamiliar name. Tachibana relentlessly performs CPR without listening to anyone.

Moribe grabs her by the shoulders and yells, “*Lieutenant!* Stop it already!”

“Ah!” Tachibana finally stops. She darts her eyes around the lift as if she’s just come back to her senses. After a moment of silence, she looks at me and murmurs, “...I’m very sorry, Captain. I did everything I could, but she is dead.”

Tachibana’s voice and face are devoid of life. Terror ices my spine. “T-Tachibana...are you all right?”

“I apologize for worrying you. I am well now.” Her assertive tone is so severe it rejects any further questions.

For a few minutes there, Tachibana was definitely not acting like herself. Her attitude rebuffs any attempts at prying into why.

At any rate, there’s one thing that’s been made clear here—another person has died on my watch!

Hope turned to despondence, we depart the cargo lift room, leaving the girl’s remains where we found them.

▼ 12:17 PM

Area 6, Outer Ring

Factory

THE Procyon lets out a shrill warning cry in the factory. Alarmed, I check the display—it's reading 4,001 mSv. Contamination has spread to the factory, shooting the radiation levels up to the first danger standard.

The whole facility could be over 4,000 mSv now if this is anything to go by. That's a problem just as dire as the dead body we discovered. This hellhole of a facility has now become a danger to our lives even with AD.

"Tachibana, Moribe, Ukita, inject yourselves with AD, stat," I urge them. "I know you have a lot on your minds, but you need to do this." I hand out the AD and they administer it in silence.

Our lives have been extended for another hour, but with our escape routes severed, it's nothing more than a stopgap on our way to certain death.

We'll have to inject AD five more times before the lockdown officially ends. We've already used up the AD we had on hand. I'm fairly certain we combed over most of the facility, so if we didn't miss a supply of AD lying around, we'll all be exposed to radiation in an hour.

Do we have to check all the same areas again? Go over it with an even finer toothed comb? That thought is like a jolt to my brain. With our one hope crushed, all my fatigue is catching up to me at once. My body isn't in perfect shape anymore, either, what with my cracked ribs and the cut on the back of my head. And I shouldn't forget the countless bruises, scrapes, and burns I've gotten along the way.

The others' faces are equally filled with loss and despair. No one is saying anything. They're likely just as confused by these unexpected events as I am.

Heavy silence hangs over us. But an abrupt voice from my pocket slices through it.

"—sagi...—...ead me? ...Kasasagi, do you read me?!"

It's a transmission from Commander Murakami! I hastily whip out my PDA and respond, "I read you! This is Kasasagi, over!"

"...—sagi! I finally got a hold of—...—" The transmission has more static noise

than ever. The commander talks without waiting for my reply this time. “—...—*ception is extremely unstab—...—is will probably be the las—...—nsmission—...—*”

“Commander! I can’t hear you!”

“—...*idn’t find anyone with—...—gun. —ouldn’t confirm if there’s a kill—...—*”

He seems to be saying that they couldn’t find anyone with a gun or confirm if there’s a killer. I keep my mouth shut and try to catch everything he has to say.

“*According to—...—rapped there aside from you guys—...—...—...the ones possibly trapped inside are—...—including the deceased—...—Dojima and Hiyama—...—resear—...—...—I repeat...*” Commander Murakami is desperately trying to convey the information we need to know through bursts of static.

“*...—rapped with you are—...—Dojima and Hiyama, two researchers—...—...—...—...—...—...—wo research—...—three high school stude—...—...—girl—...—...—...—...—gh school students...—...one girl—...—...—...—...—...—...—*”

The transmission ends there. Static is all we can hear now. Pocketing the PDA, I confirm what I heard with the others. “Was that a list of the people trapped down here?”

Tachibana thoughtfully answers, “Yes. He was probably trying to tell us who else might possibly be in the basement floors with us.”

“Did you make out what he was saying?”

“From what I could piece together, he said, ‘The ones trapped inside aside from you guys, including the dead, are Dojima and Hiyama, two researchers, and three high school students.’ I think?”

“Wait, he said something else after that. One girl, right?”

“A girl?”

Everyone’s gaze turns toward the lift at once. He was probably talking about the young lady we found in there. Most of the people he listed are already dead: Dojima, Hiyama, the two researchers, and the one girl.

Their loss should be mourned, but Murakami’s list told us something of even greater importance—those three high schoolers were included in the list of

people still trapped down here.

“Dammit! So those kids didn’t get out after all!”

Miss Ena blanches. “This is horrible! We must’ve overlooked them! They must be unconscious somewhere down here!”

“Calm down, Miss Ena. They could be moving around the areas like we have been.”

“How?!”

“Our search has basically taken us in only one direction at a time. It’s reasonable to think we’ve been going the opposite direction from them.”

“Then that’s all the more reason to get on with the search right now!”

Ukita puts out his hand, stopping her from running off. “Wait just a minute, Ms. Tsubakiyama. We have something more important to think about first.”

“What could be more important?!” she shrieks.

“The dire situation we currently find ourselves in. When you stop and consider there was a mysterious girl’s body right next to our intentionally destroyed escape route, you have got to ask yourself—what in the world have we gotten mixed up in?”

No one has an answer.

Tachibana breaks the oppressive silence. “...Then let’s sort out the situation first. If you ask me, I think the young girl died trying to escape.”

“Based on what?”

“Please take a look at this and see for yourself.” Tachibana pulls a security card from her chest pocket. Written on the front of it is “Level N.”

“Level N?! How did you get this?!”

“It was on the floor next to the girl’s body. She must’ve made her way to the lift using it. I assume she was searching for a way out of here just like we are.”

“Okay, say she was—how did she get a hold of the highest level card? Who in the world is she?”

“I don’t know. All I can say for sure is that she desperately dragged herself all the way here after being shot by someone—but lost hope and her hold on life after discovering the only exit was destroyed.”

“That’s a good theory... The next question is who in their right mind broke the lift controls?”

A look of fear crosses every face.

Moribe frowns as she asks, “Someone broke it? It wasn’t accidentally destroyed?”

“No way. The controls weren’t damaged by accident, no matter how you try to spin it. Someone did it intentionally.”

“But what’s there to gain by doing that? Destroying the lift traps the culprit down here with the rest of us. And I find it hard to believe anybody would wanna stay in this hellhole,” Moribe groans.

That’s as good of a question as any. Is there someone down here with us who wanted to destroy the escape routes so badly they’d risk getting trapped?

“...Wasn’t it the killer?” Miss Ena ventures in a subdued voice.

“The killer?! What are you getting at?”

“I’m talking about the culprit who murdered that girl. Whoever it was is most likely the same person who killed the three people in Area 3.”

My mind flashes back to the grotesque way we found the researchers’ slaughtered bodies. They’d been pumped full of bullet holes, just like that girl. It’s the same M.O.

“You’ve all been trying to forget about those three bodies up until now, haven’t you? We’ve shelved away any discussion of it by going along with the theory that the killer had already *escaped*. You all figured we could just look for the murderer after we got out of here, no?”

“Y-You’re not wrong.”

“But that assumption has been totally invalidated. They couldn’t have escaped as easily as we assumed... So I’ll say it again: this was no mere accident!” Miss Ena’s barbed voice echoes through the silent factory.

I swallow the lump in my throat. "...What's that supposed to mean, Miss Ena?"

"Seeing as a girl was shot to death right next to our escape route, it's only natural to infer someone did it while she was trying to escape. Murders have been happening in the basement of a facility that's impossible to escape from... Doesn't it make more sense if the killer's the one who created this enclosed space in the first place?"

"Impossible! Why would they do that?"

"Perhaps they wanted to kill someone so badly they remained in the basement to do it? Think about it this way: if they killed their target during the lockdown, all the evidence would go up in flames with the bodies."

"Drop it, Miss Ena. You're speculating too much! All you're doing is getting people spooked over nothing!" I raise my voice in objection to her out-of-control conspiracy theories.

"Hold on a second, you two," Moribe interjects. "I didn't think it had anything to do with our situation until now," she says as a preface before gingerly continuing, "...but word has it that terrorists have recently invaded this city."

"Did you say terrorists?!" I'm astonished by that abrupt word drop. "Moribe, are you being serious here? Do you have a good reason to think it's related?"

"I know rumors lack credibility, but plenty of them have been floating around. A lot of similar disasters and incidents have been occurring all over the city lately... Another huge research facility was bombed just yesterday too."

Miss Ena is in total agreement with Moribe's tentative theory. "Terrorists targeting a nuclear reactor makes perfect sense to me. All those explosions and fires, along with the sprinkler system being suspiciously shut off...when you think about it, those are clearly human acts."

If there really is a terrorist organization on the loose, then the bullet wounds to several of the deceased would make more sense. It'd also explain the frequent occurrence of unnatural incidents and why someone would go after a nuclear reactor, but it feels like we're grasping at straws here.

Ukita seems to have come to the same conclusion as he lets out an

exasperated sigh. "Terrorism? Preposterous. Have you people been watching too many movies?"

"Care to repeat that?" Miss Ena scowls at him.

Ukita goes on refuting her theory. "Are you people totally unaware of how strict this facility's security is? We have a 24/7 security team made up of JDSF soldiers equipped with rifles and riot guns. Only in fiction could a terrorist ever dream of bypassing our security and pulling off this kind of stunt."

"Oh, I'm sure that sounds good on paper, but the instant someone opens the lid on your almighty defense system, the whole thing goes down the drain like the load of crap it is," Miss Ena sneers.

"Hey!"

"Are you so blindly confident that you'd ignore the possibility a terrorist took advantage of a hole in your PERFECT system to sneak inside? Case in point, there's some random girl who slipped in unnoticed and died. That defense system you put all your faith in isn't looking so dependable right now."

"Are you that desperate to make this incident our facility's fault?! The accident is one thing, but we aren't responsible for a murderer on the loose!"

Sparks are flying between Ukita and Miss Ena as if they're loose cannons about to explode at any second now.

The most unexpected person speaks up then. "I agree that we should at least take the involvement of terrorists into consideration."

"You think so, too, Ms. Tachibana?" Miss Ena asks, surprised.

"Yes, somewhat. But even if we hypothesize that a terrorist was here, I still believe they escaped before the bulkheads lowered."

"You do? Based on what?"

"Because if the terrorist is trapped in here with us, why haven't we run into them in the nearly five hours since the lockdown?" Tachibana looks around the group. "With a gun, they could take any one of us hostage, steal our AD, or get away with practically anything else in this confined space. It's very strange they haven't tried anything on us yet."

“But you heard that last transmission. Your commander said no one has escaped to the surface with a gun,” Miss Ena argues. “How do you explain that?”

“Simple: they just had to get rid of the gun. They could have slipped into the huge panic before the lockdown and escaped outside facility grounds unchecked. Those are my thoughts on the matter.”

It’s a perfectly thought-out and logical reasoning that fits Tachibana’s personality.

“Hold it, Lieutenant,” Moribe says, joining the debate. “Isn’t it too soon to draw conclusions? Aren’t you always telling me to assume the worst when we’re on duty?”

“That’s a completely different matter from this! We aren’t detectives!”

Miss Ena doggedly pushes the argument with her. “It’s important to keep the worst-case scenario in mind, Lieutenant Tachibana. We’re in a whole other league of danger if there’s still a terrorist—or terrorists—roaming this basement, no?”

Ukita snorts. “Are you implying one of the nine of us still trapped here is a terrorist? What rubbish. We’d be in a far, far worse predicament if someone with *evil intentions* was among us.”

Everyone is arguing their own thoughts and opinions on the matter. To me, every opinion feels like it has some validity. But we’re only digging our own graves by wasting time debating them. I open my mouth to tell everyone to think calmly, when an agonized moan rips past my lips instead.

A sharp shock crashes through my brain like a tidal wave. My vision turns to black, immediately followed by countless scenes flashing through my mind.

Wh-What the hell?!

Scenes from the past several hours whisk through my head. Starting from when I woke up in Area 1 to everything I’ve experienced up until Area 6. They zoom past my eyes like a movie on fast-forward—and then vanish.

“...?” The abrupt phenomenon leaves me confused. Through my blurred

vision I can see everyone eyeing me.

“Wh-Why did you suddenly bend over? Are you all right, Captain?”

I’m incapable of answering Tachibana. The shock has rendered me speechless.

Wh-What the hell was that just now?!

This was nothing like looking back on old memories. It’s totally different from reminiscing. In a fraction of a second, I’d relived everything that’d happened up until now in minute detail.

I don’t know what caused this bizarre phenomenon or what it was. But thanks to that curious case of instant recollection, I was able to make several connections between all the things I’ve seen and heard so far.

Okay, okay...let’s say there really is a terrorist down here with us... Which of the nine people trapped is the most likely suspect? Distrust toward the others rapidly billows within me. *Is Ukita the most suspicious?*

Ukita was the one who constantly emphasized the facility’s strict security system and how a terrorist could never slip past it. But he’s a staff member at LABO—it’d be a piece of cake for him to let someone in. And if he had, it’d make sense why he grew irrationally defensive over Miss Ena pointing out flaws in the system.

But misgivings have a way of summoning more misgivings.

Wait...doesn’t that increase the chance of her being the culprit instead?

When I think about it, Miss Ena has the flimsiest reason for being here. She said someone from LABO told her to come, but she has nothing to support that claim. And while she introduced herself as a teacher, anyone can allege they’re whatever they want when we have no way to confirm it with the outside. There’s little reason to trust her.

But that’s also not enough of a reason to pin her as the culprit. I decide to go back to the drawing board of suspicious people.

What about Tachibana and Moribe, then? I consider them for all of a second before tossing out the idea. There’s nothing suspicious about them. They’ve been acting with everyone’s safety in mind—I can probably trust them

unconditionally.

Maybe I'm going about this all wrong... What if this very facility is where I should be placing my doubts? Isn't it strange that we're still on lockdown after all this time? Is it really due to the system trying to prevent a radiation leak?

Doubts keep summoning more doubts, making everything seem dubious. I push back those feelings and look around at our ragtag group of survivors. My eyes go from Tachibana, to Moribe, to Ukita, to Miss Ena, and then—I realize Yuuri is missing.

“Y-Yuuri’s gone!” I shout as soon as I realize it. The others look back at me in wide-eyed surprise.

“Y-You’re right! Since when?!”

“You don’t think she ran away again, do you?!”

Moribe and Miss Ena shout one after the other, just as the sound of a gate opening goes off in the distance. I whip around in time to see Yuuri disappear beyond Area 5’s open gate.

“I see her! She went into Area 5!”

We break into a run after her.

▼ 12:25 PM

Area 5, Outer Ring

I charged into Area 5’s outer ring, but Yuuri is nowhere in sight. I shout orders to the others as I rake my eyes over the area. “There’s a chance we’ll get separated as we search! Meet me back in the infirmary in ten minutes, whether you find Yuuri or not!”

Everyone shouts back in agreement before breaking off into groups to cover more ground. Tachibana and Moribe head toward Area 4. Miss Ena and Ukita handle the closer rooms. And I go straight for the inner ring.

Yuuri doesn’t know the inner ring is a contaminated zone! I can only pray she didn’t run—

<Go! Save her!>

“...!”

A voice echoes in my head, interrupting my own thoughts. That “voice” has come back to nag me for the first time in a while.

Guided by the voice in my head, I sprint to the contaminated zone. I slip through the connecting passageway into the inner ring. The Procyon instantly lets out a shrieking warning beep. It’s reading 9,355 mSv now—much higher than before.

“Yuuri! Where are you, Yuuri?!” I yell at the top of my lungs as I search every nook and cranny of the inner ring. After entering several rooms, I finally find her. “Yuuri!”

Yuuri turns around with a start. “Ah! ...Captain Kasasagi, you came for me, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did, you dummy! Save the chitchat for later—it’s dangerous here, Yuuri! It’s a contaminated zone!”

“Is it...? You always worry after me like this, don’t you, Captain Kasasagi?” She’s perfectly calm after hearing this area is contaminated. She’s not acting like herself. She looks me square in the eye and asks, “So then why...why *did you do* such a horrible thing to me back then?”

“Back when...?! ” I sharply inhale at this accusation of doing something I don’t remember. I hesitantly ask her about it. “Wh-What did I do to you...?”

“Did you truly forget? I very nearly died. I was scared to death of being abandoned in a sea of flames...”

“What? I don’t understand, Yuuri.”

“And yet you were also the one who saved me... What’s the big idea?”

I’m shaken to the core by her accusations. Tremendous unease explodes inside my chest. I have a horrible feeling she’s trying to tell me something dreadful—a truth I don’t know and should never learn.

“Y-Yuuri...what’re you trying to say...?! ”

“I can’t know if you don’t! So please tell me what is truly in your heart...!” The moment she walks over to me, a bizarre scene replays in my head like video

footage.



It's yet another memory I have no recollection of.

I'm in a strange, spacious place.

Large towers loom all around me.

The smell of rusted iron hangs in the air.

Something is grabbing my wrist.

There I see a "monster."

I spot a broken wristwatch out of the corner of my eye.

The time indicated by the shattered dial is 6:19 AM.

As soon as I see that, pain so intense it feels like my brain is being crushed crashes over me!



It was an extremely disturbing memory. A shaky moan spills past my lips: "Ahh...aaahhhh..."

What filled me to the brim during that memory is spine-tingling fear. And I feel the same visceral reaction to the girl in front of me.

"U-Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh!" I spin on my heel and run as fast as I can. I bolt from the room and slam the door behind me. The bang snaps me back to my senses.

What the hell am I doing?! Why am I running away from Yuuri?! That's Yuuri in there! Not that "monster"! Telling myself that doesn't stop me from shaking. Fear, anger, and malice boil up from the depths of my memory. Just as it's about to crush my mind—

"Ghh!" Sharp pain rips through my head. "Guh! AGH! GAAAAAAAAAAHHH!" I hold my head and scream. My voice echoes through my skull. My thoughts are muddled by the severe pain.

What the hell is this?! I've never—

—felt anything—

—like this until now.

Wait! Is this—

—radiation damage?!

Is it because I've entered contaminated zones too many times?!

It feels like something is poking its nose around in my brain and scrambling it. The pain spreads throughout my body and squeezes my stomach in a vise.

“GHH! GAAAGHH!” I throw up. Since nothing’s in my stomach, all that comes up is stomach acid mixed with blood, and it splatters all over the passageway. My consciousness is quickly fading away.

(My memories were shatt(ered bac)k then and my past self’s—

—memories—

My--...

.....

“—A-Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” I scream again and force my consciousness back into place.

My awareness and memories have become discombobulated from the unbearable pain. There’s red vomit at my feet.

What the hell just happened? What was I doing?! I dig through my chaotic memories and instantly realize I was looking for Yuuri. Damn it all! If I’m this screwed up because of radiation damage, then Yuuri is in serious danger! I can’t leave such a frail and fragile girl in this dangerous place for long! Worry for Yuuri is all that fills my mind.

Something strange happened to me. I get the feeling my past memories returned for a few seconds. And I have this nagging sense I felt an entirely different emotion toward Yuuri, but all of those *irrelevant* feelings and factors have been blown right from my mind.

“Yuuri! Where are you, Yuuri?!” I bellow as I search the inner ring. But she’s nowhere to be found. With little choice left to me, I return to the outer ring,

where I spot Tachibana and Moribe.

“Oh, Captain!” Moribe and Tachibana run over to me. “Did you find Yuuri?”

“I spotted her inside the inner ring a few minutes ago, but then I lost sight of her!”

“We’ve also had no success finding her. We secured the perimeter around the Area 4 gate so she couldn’t go through there, either, but...” Tachibana trails off. The three of us exchange looks.

“So she just vanished on us? How? Did we simply pass each other?”

“I don’t think so. What I want to know is how Yuuri even got into Area 5 in the first place.” Tachibana puts that question out there for all of us to ponder.

“Oh yeah, that’s a very good question...”

A Level 5 or higher card is necessary to open the security gate into Area 5. But all the cards we’ve obtained until now have only been distributed to Tachibana, Moribe, and myself. There shouldn’t be any other cards.

That’d mean Yuuri has been secretly keeping a high-level card from us. Why would she have kept quiet about that? I’m suddenly unsure of her motives.

Alas, Tachibana sighs to break the deadlock. “...Debating it here won’t lead us to the answer. Let’s head to the infirmary for now. It’s almost time for us to regroup.”

“What? Already?” I glance at my watch—it’s 12:35 PM, just about time for us to meet up. It appears I spent longer on the search than I thought.

Feeling a faint sense of denial over where the time went, I make my way to the infirmary with the others.

“Tachibana, the inner ring is contaminated. I’m worried about Yuuri’s health,” I inform her as we’re walking.

“It’s contaminated?”

“Yes. I told Yuuri that too. But she still ran away from me.”

“I don’t believe it. Why would she do that?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. She’s run away from me like this before...”

Tachibana drops her gaze to the floor and hangs her head.

“The AD will last us for close to another hour, but she’ll be in real danger if we don’t find her before that. I hope she’s able to get a hold of some AD on her own, but I wouldn’t bet on it.”

Tachibana doesn’t respond to me. She merely mutters “Please be safe...” under her breath and speeds up.

“Ah! Hey!” I call out to her back, but my voice isn’t reaching her. There’s something unnatural about the way she’s been acting. I slow down to ask Moribe about it. “Hey, Moribe...don’t you think Tachibana’s been out of sorts for a while now?”

“How so?”

“As if she’s not all there. She’s been like that ever since she called the deceased girl we found in the cargo lift ‘Nagisa’...”

Moribe’s face freezes. “Did she mutter Nagisa’s name again?”

“She didn’t, but she’s acting the same way she did then. What’s this about a Nagisa? How did the always calm and collected Tachibana lose all bearing like this?”

Moribe heaves a heavy sigh and quietly says, “I really don’t want to talk about this much, but...I’ll tell you, Captain.”

“I’m listening.”

“Nagisa is the name of the lieutenant’s little sister. She passed away more than ten years ago. She was her precious kid sister.”

Her reply takes my breath away. “She died? How?”

“A gas explosion took out the apartment complex they lived in while the lieutenant was at work... Nagisa would be around the same age as Yuuri or the girl who died by the lift if she were still alive.”

“So Tachibana sees her kid sister in those girls...?”

“Yeah... I’m pretty positive Lieutenant Tachibana still blames herself for being out of the house when the accident happened. Even though she’s not the least

bit at fault for it.”

I shift my gaze forward to Tachibana. A heavy past weighs on those slender shoulders as she picks up the pace. She suddenly looks back at us. “What are you both doing? We need to hurry.” Her expression is back to normal, so we respond to her the same as usual.

“Yeah. Sorry for slowing down, Tachibana.”

“Roger that. Getting the lead out, ma’am!”

I jog after her, all the while hoping I can become a pillar of support for my squad members who are being haunted by painful pasts.

▼ 12:33 PM

Area 5, Outer Ring

Infirmary

WE arrive at Area 5’s infirmary first, and Miss Ena and Ukita show up not long after. But no one found Yuuri. So we lost sight of her after all.

I lower my head to the dispirited group. “...I’m sorry. I basically let her get away.”

“It’s not your fault, Captain. Everyone who looked had the same result,” Moribe says in my defense.

“Isn’t it actually Captain Kasasagi’s fault?” Ukita throws out there. “I really have to wonder about his innocence in this.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, this has been bothering me for a while now, but...didn’t Yuuri always act like she was scared to death of you?”

I can’t deny I sensed the same thing.

“Excuse me, Mr. Ukita, but would you care to clarify that?” Tachibana inquires, as if she hadn’t noticed it herself.

“None of you saw it? The poor girl was practically shaking in her boots every time our captain here so much as said a word to her.”

“She was...?”

“Furthermore, she made herself scarce while we were searching Area 3. I always suspected she left to get as far from you as possible, Captain Kasasagi.”

Tachibana clenches her jaw at that revelation. Moribe intervenes on my behalf. “Hold your horses, Mr. Ukita. I agree that she showed signs of fear, but... survivors tend to become extremely frightened during a disaster.”

“Hmph. Think what you like. But what do you have to say for yourself, Captain Kasasagi? Do you have any idea why she acts that way around you?”

“N-No...,” I say in an unreliable, weak voice.

I don’t have any concrete evidence to refute his suspicions. Did I do something horrible to Yuuri before I lost my memories?

“How can you be sure about that, hmm?” Ukita presses. “And while we’re at it, how did you even lose your memories?”

“H-How am I supposed to know?”

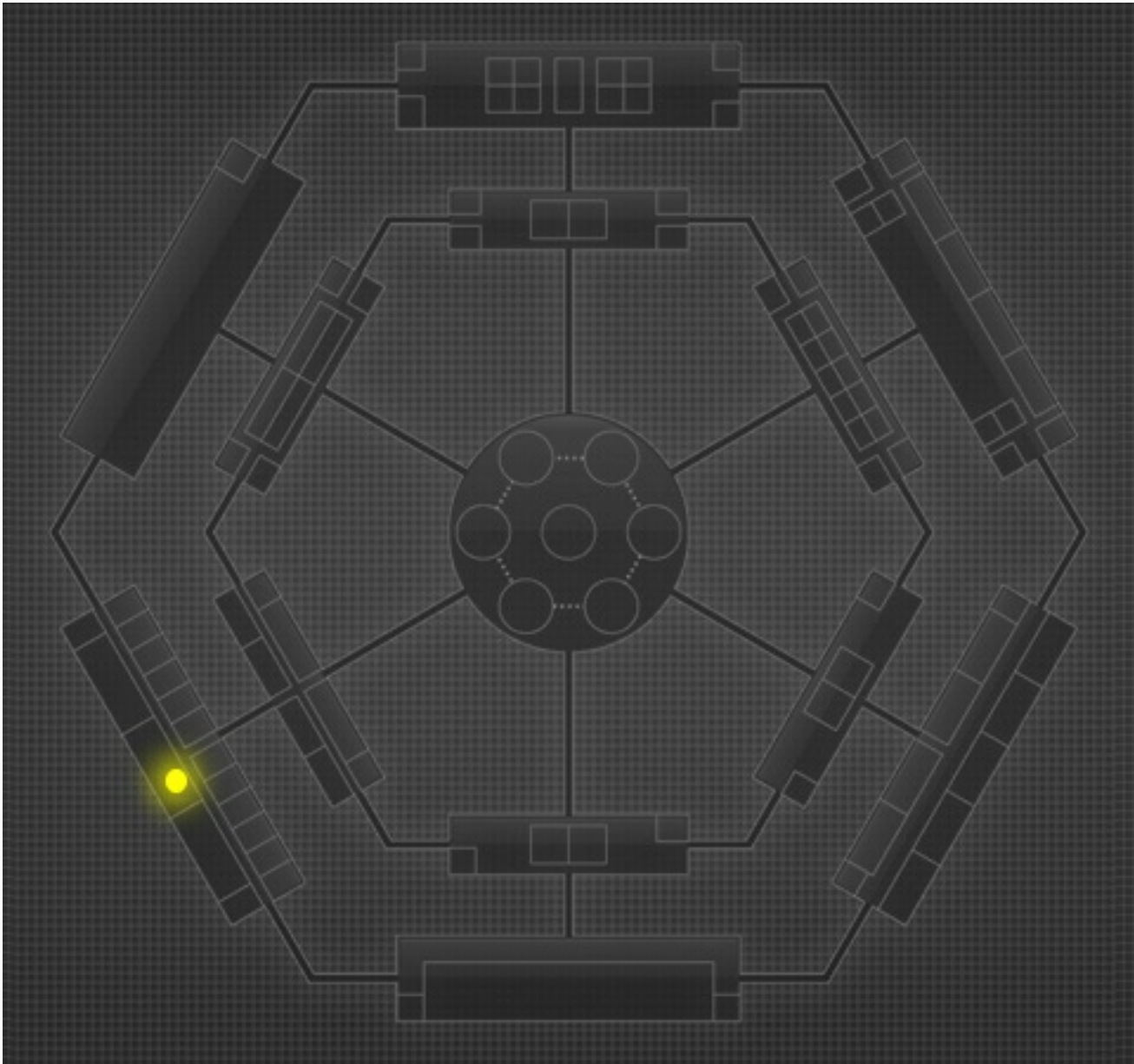
“Amnesia caused by external trauma typically fades with time. Yet you show no signs of recovery after all this time—don’t you find that strange?”

“S-Strange how? Are you trying to imply something here, Ukita?”

“I sure am. To be frank, I’ve always suspected that Captain Kasasagi may be lying about his amnesia.”

Everyone sharply inhales.

vA Chapter 10: 【Complications and Rifts】 9/16/2030
12:35



Radiation Level: 4,347 mSv
Remaining AD: 0

▼ 12:35 PM

Area 5, Outer Ring

Infirmery

I'M dismayed by the allegations directed at me out of the blue. My confusion explodes into defensiveness. "Wh-What's gotten into you, Ukita? Why would I ever need to tell a stupid lie like that?!"

"Because you have something to hide... That's my thought, at least."

"Like what?" He has me completely baffled.

Ukita gives me a hard look. "Several hours ago, you stole my security card, effectively preventing me from leaving Area 3. But even that action is odd when I think about it now. Why did you have to steal a security card? Isn't it because you wanted to do something you needed to hide from LABO staff?"

"Do something? Like what...?"

"How should I know? But I can't help thinking whatever it was is connected to Yuuri's fear of you. And there have been multiple murders since then... How can I not suspect you?"

"I-I haven't done anything wrong!"

"Then prove your innocence to us here and now!"

"Don't be ridiculous! How the hell am I supposed to prove anything without my memories?! Don't you guys think he's being ridiculous too?!" I look to the others for support. They all look like they want to say something but can't find the right words.

I don't blame them. I can't defend myself, so why should I expect them to be able to? So how do I get myself out of this predicament, then?

Ukita doesn't give me time to think as he tries to push me into a corner. "Get the picture now, Captain Kasasagi? Everyone is starting to become very curious about what you so conveniently forgot."

"U-Ughh...!" I groan. I'm ticked that I don't have a good comeback, and frustrated that I can't remember anything.

Dammit! What in the world was I doing before I lost my memories?! I can prove my innocence if I can only remember! No sooner do I think that than white light suddenly bursts open in my head.

“Agh?!”

It’s the start of another one of those bizarre flashbacks. Various scenes flicker in front of my eyes—all related to the things I’ve seen and experienced until now.

“URK! Ahh...AGGHHHHH...!”

The torrential flow of memories zipping in front of my eyes distorts my sense of time and place. It’s as if a second is stretched into eternity, and an eternity has been shortened into seconds. Time travels backward, and the journey I’ve taken is played back in reverse: saving Yuuri in the factory; diving into the lethal gas to find AD; meeting Ukita, Miss Ena, and Yuuri; waking up in Area 1 and meeting Tachibana and Moribe; and at the end of those scenes—

Something unfamiliar floats into view.

What is this?!

I’m confused for a moment until it clicks—what just entered the forefront of my mind are my lost memories.



Several hours ago, at 6:42 AM, I was racing down LABO’s emergency staircase to get to the basement floors. Two men in hazmat suits charged ahead, shouting something over their shoulders at me.

“Hurry, Captain!”

“I heard footsteps over here, sir!”

I don’t recognize their voices, but I know who they are: Dojima and Hiyama, my squadmates who’ve passed away in the line of duty. I had descended into the basement floors at their behest.

“Are you absolutely positive, Dojima?! Survivors are definitely down here?!” I confirmed with them.

“Yes, sir! It’s just as I reported over the radio!”

Taking their report seriously, I searched the basement floors with them until I spotted several people down one of the passageways—one boy and two girls wearing high school uniforms. They rejoiced upon seeing us.

“I-It’s the rescue squad!”

“They surely came to save us!” One of the girls jumped for joy and waved at us.

I sprinted over to them with my subordinates. “I’m sure you kids don’t work in this facility. What’re you doing here?”

“We happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and got caught up in all this,” the boy answered me.

“Was anyone else with you?”

“No. Only the three of us you see here.”

“What are your names?”

“I’m Natsuhiko Tenkawa, this is Mashiro Toba, and the girl hiding behind me is Salyu,” the boy explained while pointing to each of the girls with him.

My eyes went to the blonde girl behind him. “Your name’s Salyu? Are you a foreigner?”

“That’s my nickname. Comes from Louise Yui Sannomiya.”

“I see...” I checked my watch while thinking I’d asked a dumb question. I read aloud the time indicated by the needle: “Okay, three survivors secured at 6:50 AM.”

Just like that, we had taken Natsuhiko and the girls into our protective custody. But problems arose right after. We couldn’t escort the survivors to safety on the surface floor because the emergency staircase had completely collapsed. We raced around the facility looking for another way out.

An ominous alarm blared throughout the facility while we were searching—a Case N was announced the second we set foot inside Area 5. Worst of all, the security gate shut right behind me, separating me from the others who were

following a few steps behind my lead.

I had no choice but to leave the kids to Dojima and Hiyama at this point, and start searching for security cards and AD. One of the rooms I eventually made my way to had a huge stash of AD.

I remember the nameplate on that room—"Dr. Miyoko Tenkawa." The supply of AD was hidden in Natsuhiko's mom's desk.

Relieved, I continued my search with the thought I had to get AD to any other survivors trapped inside the facility.

It was in a certain room inside Area 5 that I met her for the first time. Her delicate features and frightened face struck an immediate chord with me. I rushed over to her side and asked, "Are you all right? What's your name?"

"Y-Yuuri... Wh-Who are you?"

"I'm a rescue worker. I came to rescue you." I hold an AD ampoule out to her and say, "Okay, I need you to inject this medicine."

"I-I don't want to!"

"You can't refuse it. This area is radioactive! You'll be in danger if you don't take this."

Yuuri refused to inject AD then too. I tried to forcefully administer it to her, but she shoved away my hand and fled the room. I chased after her, my pursuit eventually taking me to where the factory was engulfed in a fire straight from hell. Through the blazing inferno I dashed in search of her. But then something blew up nearby.

"GUAGH!"

I was thrown by the blast into the nearest wall. Flames from the explosion transferred to my hazmat suit, and I hurriedly stripped it off. Heat waves blew violently against my unprotected body.

I sensed my life was in serious danger. It was impossible to keep searching the factory amid this raging fire.

There's no way Yuuri is here. I just know she ran to the next area. With that belief, I staggered my way toward Area 1. My head spun and I wasn't walking

straight. Not just because of the heat wave—I had smashed my head hard against the wall when that explosion blew me back.

Everything in front of my eyes was blurred and distorted. I couldn't even tell if that was due to something wrong with my perception or the heat haze.

I pushed ahead with everything I had left in me. After a while, a security gate came into view. I fled into Area 1 through it.

There were no signs of fire in that area. Relieved for my momentary safety, I pushed on even farther, telling myself I had to find Yuuri.

But I was already past my limit. The strength suddenly went out of my legs and I dropped to the ground. I fell hard, without supporting myself, but the pain was dulled. My pain receptors weren't the only thing blunted—all five senses felt out of whack. I couldn't control any part of my body and my consciousness was growing hazy.

Through my fading awareness, I told myself: Now's not the time to go down. Rescue those kids. I came down here for that sole purpose.

But my pep talk ended in vain as my mind slipped into darkness.



“—Captain! What's the matter with you, Captain?!”

“Huh? Ah!” Tachibana's voice brings me back to the present. The scene before my eyes switches from Area 1 several hours ago to the current Area 5. Ukita and Miss Ena are gaping at me.

“Y-You okay there, Captain?” Moribe cautiously checks with me. “You suddenly started screaming, then went dead silent without a single reaction to anything we said or did...”

“I-I'm okay... What's more important here is that I remembered.”

“What?”

Everyone is taken aback by my confession. Tachibana grabs my arm and confirms it: “Captain, did you remember what I hope you did?!”

“Yeah... Finally got my...memory back.”

“What?!” Ukita’s eyes open so wide I wouldn’t be surprised if they fell out. “R-Rubbish! You want us to believe your vanished memories suddenly popped right back for you?”

“Yeah. Only a fraction of them did... It’s limited to my memories since arriving at LABO, but it might be enough to prove my innocence.”

“How...can that be?”

I slowly explain what I recalled to bring Ukita out of shock. “I’ll explain things in order. I came down to the basement because Dojima and Hiyama asked me to.”

“How did they do that?”

“I got a radio transmission that there were survivors in the basement floors. If I’m not mistaken, they called for me around...right, it was 6:42 AM.”

“6:42 AM...? Are you positive that’s the correct time?” Tachibana double checks.

“Yeah.”

I had looked at my watch and saw without a doubt that the hands pointed to that time. Something about that seems a little off to me, but I’ll trust my memory on this one.

“...I headed to Area 2 after that and found Natsuhiko, Mashiro, and Salyu.”

“Salyu?”

“That’s Louise Yui Sannomiya’s nickname, apparently.”

“Tenkawa and the others do call her by that,” Miss Ena says in support.

“Now that you mention it, we spotted survivors in the basement’s Area 2 as well,” Moribe adds, as if hearing me talk about it sparked her memory.

“You did?”

“It’s not exact, but the timing is pretty close to when you said. You guys might’ve been super nearby while we were putting out the fires.”

“Could’ve been. In any case, we took the kids under our wing, but...” I explain the rest of what happened from there. Talking about my memories helps me

solve several of the outstanding doubts and questions I had too.

It explains how I knew the names of Yuuri, Natsuhiko, Mashiro, and Louise, why I wasn't wearing my hazmat suit when I regained consciousness, and why I immediately felt the need to save Yuuri when I saw her again. The answer to all those mysteries had been lost with my memories. But there are still a few points I don't understand.

After hearing me out, Tachibana voices my biggest question. "...I understand what happened to you now. But I wonder why Yuuri was so opposed to being injected with AD."

"That's the one thing I have absolutely no clue on..."

Yuuri has been adamantly opposed to being injected with AD from the start. It didn't matter if it was me or Tachibana who tried to talk her into it—she hated it.

"...Maybe she disliked being injected with AD so much she left our group?"

"But why would she despise it that much? I can't imagine most people reacting that way under normal circumstances..."

"I don't know why, but there's one thing I can say for sure." I look at everyone in the group and announce, "I simply wanted to rescue Yuuri. You may not believe me, but my desire to save her hasn't changed." With that, my long story ends.

Right away, Ukita snorts in disbelief. "Hmph. Those are some mighty unreliable memories you've got there, Captain. Do you have proof your story is true?"

I'm stumped for a whole minute, before I realize there's confirmation right there in my memories. "I've got your proof, Ukita."

"You do...?"

"I discovered a treasure trove of AD inside this facility before I passed out. It's located in Area 5's inner ring."

Moribe's the first to react. "Isn't that the contaminated zone we searched together?! There was more AD lying around?!"

I fish through my memories for the answer. “Yeah, in the office belonging to Dr. Miyoko Tenkawa, where we found the other five AD. I completely overlooked it our last time there, but there’s still a ton of AD in that room. It should be stored in the desk drawer.” I’m nearly positive about it. There’s no way such a vivid memory would lead me astray. “If that AD is still there, it’ll prove my story’s true.”

“...Tch.” My appeal silences Ukita.

“I-I’ll go check!” Moribe offers.

“I will come with you!” Tachibana says, running out of the infirmary with Moribe.

▼ 12:41 PM

Area 5, Outer Ring

Infirmary

SEVERAL minutes later and the two of them come back with their hands full of medical boxes.

“Captain, you were right! There were six medical boxes with thirty AD total!” Tachibana’s news surprises us all. Even I’m stunned by the large amount.

“Seriously? There were thirty of them?! That’s thirty hours’ worth of AD!”

“Indeed. We won’t have to worry about a lack of AD for a good while now.” A relieved smile touches her lips.

Moribe grins and cheerfully points out, “Plus, this is clear proof that Captain was telling the truth! Isn’t that right, Mr. Ukita?”

“Hmph...” Ukita uncomfortably averts his eyes.

I prod an answer out of him in a calm voice. “Do you believe me now, Ukita? I have no ill intentions toward Yuuri or anyone else for that matter.”

“.....”

“If I was some bad guy, I’d keep all the AD to myself. I’ve gone and shared everything with the whole group, so please believe me.”

My earnest appeal finally wrestles a bitter response out of him. “...It certainly

seems you were telling the truth.”

Suspicion still reflects back at me deep in his eyes. But I should leave well enough alone now that he’s openly stopped accusing me.

Moribe walks over to me and whispers, “U-Um, I’m real sorry, Captain...for you know, not believing you right away...”

“Hmm? That’s nothing you have to apologize for.”

“But even if it was for only a second, I...doubted whether your amnesia was real.”

“Y-You did? Well, I can’t blame you for that one.”

Looking at it objectively, it’s inevitable she came to that conclusion. I should probably avoid doing things that draw suspicion from now on.

“I believed in you, Captain. You should scold Moribe,” Tachibana instructs me.

“Oh, really? I thought his whole amnesia spiel sounded fishy from the get-go.” Miss Ena’s frank admittance leaves me stunned.

“Th-That’s harsh, Miss Ena. I see your cutting remarks haven’t lost their edge yet.”

“That’s my candid opinion. But it looks like you were telling the truth and are starting to get some of your memories back too. You can just think of the whole thing as having a valuable experience few people get to endure.”

“Y-You know...you can only take positive thinking so far, and that right there about does it.”

Everyone laughs a little. Their laughter is temporary, but it still brings me peace of mind. After losing our newly found escape route, finding another victim, and Yuuri disappearing on us, everyone’s mental health is starting to fray. Getting into quarrels here and there is unavoidable. The scariest thing at a time like this is having everyone at odds. I convince myself of that.

“...All right, now that we got that out of the way, we have something more important to discuss here,” I say to bring us back on topic.

Tachibana’s eyes sharply narrow. “Yuuri.”

“Yeah. You don’t need me to tell you how bad it is that we got separated inside this huge facility.”

Miss Ena gives a firm nod and gets on board with my change of subject. “I’m concerned about Tenkawa and the girls too. Whether we passed each other by or overlooked them...doesn’t matter at this point. We have to reconsider our search method.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something important?” Ukita cuts in. “Isn’t searching for AD just as critical?”

“Huh? We just got our hands on thirty...”

“And that’s still not enough. With the cargo lift taken out of the picture, we have no choice but to wait for the lockdown to end. We each need to inject AD five more times to survive until the estimated release time.”

“Right. If we meet up with Yuuri and the three high schoolers, it’ll mean we need five hours’ worth of AD for nine people... So we need forty-five AD total, huh?”

That’s right—not everyone will survive if the AD we have here is all that’s left in the facility. It’d be a different story if people start stealing AD from others, though... That thought gives me the chills.

If we’re going to try to survive another five hours with the thirty AD we have on hand, there will only be enough for six people to be covered for the whole duration. Put another way, *only* six people can survive—three won’t be saved.

Everyone is holding on to their thin veneer of calm right now, but anything could happen as time and the radiation levels progress. Ukita turning on me just now is a perfect example of how things can go wrong.

If worse comes to worse and our stress, fatigue, and fear continue to escalate, a life-and-death game of “musical chairs” will inevitably break out.

S-Stop! Don’t think like that! Put your energy into coming up with a plan to keep everyone alive! I shake my head and try thinking about things in a different light.

I glance at the Procyon and check the radiation level. It’s reading 4,531 mSv

right now—the levels are steadily increasing. Every area in this facility will eventually surpass 8,000 mSv if the contamination continues spreading at this pace. And if it does, it won't matter whether we have AD.

“...There are four possible ways we can go about this,” I say to the others as I hold up four fingers. “One: prioritize finding an escape route. Two: look for an escape route while searching for the survivors, including Yuuri, and AD. Three: look for the damaged part of the gates and repair them to suppress the speed of contamination spreading. Four: look for everything—an escape route, AD, the damaged gates, and the survivors. Choosing which path we take may very well decide whether we sink or swim.”

Everyone loudly gulps. Tachibana answers in a low voice. “Searching for everything is unrealistic. Splitting our attention between too many things won't yield any results. So four is out.”

“Indeed. Repairing the damaged gates doesn't seem like a smart move either. I highly doubt emergency repairs will do anything to hold back the contamination,” Ukita says, knocking out number three as an option.

“Then that leaves us with option one or two. Either we prioritize an escape route, or we look for the survivors, AD, and an escape route...”

“I can't believe you even think there's a decision to be made,” Miss Ena snaps at Tachibana. “We're going to search for the survivors and AD while looking for a way out of here. I mean, it's questionable if there's even another escape route, but we know for sure that Tenkawa and the girls are trapped down here!”

She makes a solid argument. Plus, Yuuri will be in terrible danger if we don't get to her soon because she didn't have any AD on her, and I doubt she'll inject herself.

Moribe seems to be thinking the same thing I am because she agrees with Miss Ena. “Okay, guys, are we good to go with searching for the survivors, including Yuuri, while looking for an escape route?”

The whole group nods without argument. It seems like we came to a decision. I direct the conversation right into the next topic. “Then we should do one more lap around LABO leaving no box or shadow unsearched. How about we split into

two teams with one searching clockwise and the other counterclockwise?”

“I like that plan,” Tachibana says first. “It will decrease our chances of missing the survivors. How do you want to split the teams?”

“Good question... Tachibana, Ukita, you’re with me.”

“Sure, I can team up with you.”

“I have no complaints on that front either.”

I’m secretly relieved they both agreed to join my team.

Ukita is dangerous. His hostility is directed toward me right now, but I can’t be sure he won’t turn on someone else next. I can’t shake the feeling things will end poorly if I pair him up with Moribe and Miss Ena.

Moribe is a rescue worker, but she’s still young and inexperienced. And Miss Ena is an untrained civilian. Tachibana and I will be more adept at squashing any problems with Ukita.

Tachibana gives me a slight nod as if she caught on to why I made this call. “All right, we are currently in Area 5, so one team should head toward Area 4, while the other heads in the direction of Area 6.”

“Where do we regroup?”

“Since we may pass each other along the way, I suggest using this infirmary as our final destination. We can take one lap around and set off again if we don’t come across the survivors.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. I want you all to return here in an hour, even if your search doesn’t yield any results. Come back sooner if you run into any unexpected trouble.”

“So what do we do about the AD?” Moribe interjects. “Take it all with us?” She points to the thirty AD we just obtained.

I mull it over. “No... Let’s take two hours’ worth with us—so two per person. We’re screwed if something damages them along the way.”

Each person takes two AD.

“How about we leave something like this behind too?” Miss Ena grabs a piece

of paper and a pen and scribbles a message on it.

Dear Mr. Tenkawa, Miss Toba, and Miss Sannomiya,

This is your teacher, Miss Ena. It looks like we all got caught up in the same horrible disaster today. I've been looking for you guys this whole time but haven't had any luck. So if you happen to find this note, please stay right here. I'm leaving a radiation exposure inhibitor known as AD for you. It's medicine we've been using to protect ourselves from radiation damage. It will work for one whole hour if you inject it directly into a vein.

Wait in this room for help to come while injecting this medicine every hour, okay? I hope we can meet up soon.

Sincerely,

Miss Ena

"How about it? It'll lower our chances of completely missing them again if we post this on the outside of the door," she says with a smile.

"It's worth a shot," I say. We use some tape in the room to post the note to the door and head out.

We split up all the gear we've obtained until now, starting with the security cards. I keep the Level N card on me and hand out a Level 6 card to the other four. My team takes two of the Procyons and Moribe's team takes the third.

"Okay, we'll be heading to Area 4, so I want you two to search in the direction of Area 6."

"Got it. Our goals are to look for AD, survivors, and an exit. We're off, then." Moribe walks toward Area 6 with Miss Ena at her side.

"...We should get moving, too, Captain."

"Yeah."

My team heads in the opposite direction.

▼ 12:46 PM

Area 4, Outer Ring

I step into Area 4's outer ring for the third time. This is the same area where

Salyu fled from me, I ran into a flashover, and I discovered Hiyama's corpse. The futuristic interior is scorched black, and stillness hangs heavily over the passageway.

A look at the Procyon shows it's 6,610 mSv here. The contamination has grown worse. Obtaining a large supply of AD doesn't change the impending dangers. I need to be even more careful about not wasting time.

"Let's start searching. Finish within three minutes."

"Yes, sir."

We hastily set about inspecting the floor. This particular area isn't as difficult to cover with its few rooms. After circling all of them, we head for the elevator hall. Hiyama's body is still there.

"What the—?!" I doubt my eyes. Something that was supposed to be here isn't. It only takes me a second to realize what that something is. I know I left Hiyama's fire axe next to his body as a grave marker. "The axe is gone?!"

My voice draws surprised looks from Tachibana and Ukita.

"Oh no... Why?!"

"S-Someone took the axe...?"

The six of us have been together all this time. That leaves one of the three high school students or Yuuri as the one who made off with the weapon.

What do they need an axe for? Each of my guesses is more unsettling than the last.

"...We don't have time to spare. Let's keep moving."

"I-I agree."

With that decided, we recommence the search.

We move to the inner ring after finding nothing in the outer ring. This is the floor where the supercomputer Brain Cell is located. We come up empty-handed there too.

We have no choice but to move on to Area 3. Tachibana stops walking when we reach the connecting passageway.

“This is where...” Her voice trails off.

This is the passageway with Dojima and the two researchers’ bodies. The scenery here hasn’t changed one bit. Wallpaper covers the three bodies covered in blackened blood. A rusty smell still lingers in the air.

I don’t experience fear at that sight as I had the first time.

Dojima...how you must’ve suffered...!

Regaining a portion of my memories brings out the sorrow I didn’t feel before. My regret over being unable to save the two researchers is stronger than ever.

Tachibana is biting her lower lip—she must feel the same way.

“Tachibana... Let’s have a proper burial for Dojima and the others when this is all over,” I whisper.

“...Yes, we should. For now I will concentrate on the search...!”

We give each other encouraging looks and walk past that place. Ukita watched over us in silence.

▼ 12:50 PM

Area 3, Inner Ring

THE connecting passageway takes us into Area 3’s inner ring. This is where we came across Ukita in the surveillance room. There are only two rooms here.

“Let’s start with the first one, then hit the surveillance room.” The other two follow me into the nearest room.

It’s a large laboratory. There are too many blind spots to tell at a glance if anyone has fainted or is hiding, so we commence a more thorough check.

But there’s nobody and no AD.

Grr! Fine, I’ll look for more information while I’m at it.

Several documents are scattered around the lab. I’m hoping they might contain some hints on an unexplored escape route. So I pick up page after page and scan them. The titles of each aren’t much help:

“Area 3 Personnel Social Gathering”

“Senior Fellow Training Seminar: Accepting Applications”

“Dr. Miyoko Fanclub: Meeting Notice”

“Seven Wonders of Rokumei City: Outline”

“Special Observation Target Na2: 4th Periodic Report”

“Concerning the Abolition of Print Media”

The paper topics either confuse me or serve no purpose for us. And on closer look, they’re all dated around 2020—nearly ten years ago.

They even have documents on the abolition of the print medium. I guess most of their documents have been digitalized by now...

Thinking I shouldn’t get my hopes up for finding anything useful, I pick up a booklet from the floor. It’s titled: *NBC Outbreak and Security Manual*.

What’s this?

“What are you looking at, Captain?” Tachibana asks.

“I honestly have no idea. What’s NBC?”

“Oh, NBC stands for nuclear, biological, and chemical. So, for example, whenever you hear about an NBC disaster, they’re using it as a general term referring to a disaster caused by nuclear, biological, or chemical substances.”

In other words, this is a manual describing the security measures to be taken during a disaster much like this one. Though I always thought they were supposed to prioritize evacuation over security in these kinds of situations.

“What are you doing over there?!” A sharp voice at my back jolts me into spinning around to where Ukita is angrily glaring at me.

“Uh, well, I figured I could find a hint about how to get out of here.”

“We don’t have the time for that. And besides, all the paper documents in this facility are outdated. They abolished print nine years ago and decided to digitize everything after that.”

“Huh? Then what about the disaster prevention manuals? The ones we found were 2030 editions...”

“The latest disaster manuals are distributed in print format in case of an emergency. But everything in this facility is top secret, including the manuals. You’re only inviting trouble if you read them.”

“But this is an emergency situation—”

“I’m not simply threatening you for the heck of it! I’m warning you for your own safety!” Ukita interrupts me in a razor-edged voice. He continues his tirade despite Tachibana flinching away from him. “You shouldn’t take a government-run facility lightly. Not if you want to live in peace once you get out of here!”

His warning packs a serious punch. It’s almost as if he’s hinting to us that the world contains far more horrifying situations than the one we’re already in.

His intensity overwhelms me into backing down. “F-Fine. Let’s finish up this room and move on.”

Aggravation prickled the air between us, but we leave the room behind. Except, the moment I step outside, I catch a whiff of a disturbing smell. A burnt odor is wafting from somewhere.

“Is it just me or is something burning?”

“You’re right... Where in the world is it coming from?”

I follow the source of the smell to an emergency staircase and cautiously open the fire door. A thin layer of smoke has built up on the other side. I glance down the stairs and spot a small fire flickering behind the staircase.

“Looks like a small fire broke out. It’s dangerous, so wait for us up here, Ukita.”

“All right.”

I have Ukita wait for us at the door, and I descend the staircase with Tachibana to confirm the state of the fire.

The fire is burning in a hole in the cracked floor at the bottom of the spiral staircase. The cables embedded in the floor are fueling the fire.

“Did the embers reignite or something?”

“So it appears. The sprinklers weren’t able to put it out entirely because it’s in

a hole behind the staircase.”

Putting out such a small-scale fire should be a piece of cake. Out of the corner of my eye I spot an extinguisher sitting right next to the cracked floor.

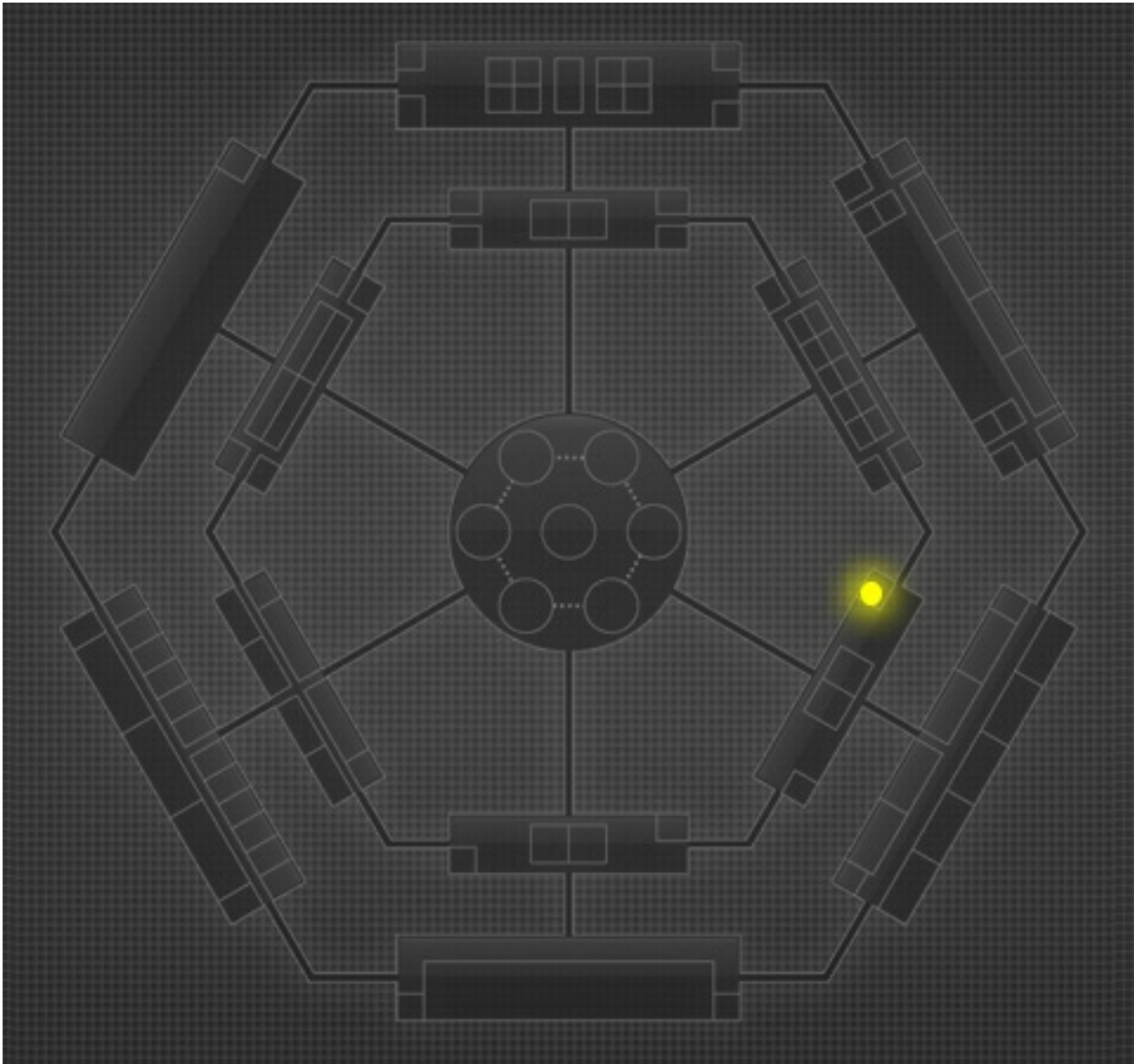
...A fire extinguisher?

Shivers race down my spine at the sight of it. Warning alarms blare inside my head. Tachibana sends me a questioning look as I stand there shuddering. “Captain? What’s the matter? We need to put out the—”

Her voice snaps me into action and I shout, “Tachibana, RUN!”

“What?!”

Right after I lunge at the fear-stricken Tachibana, a white light flashes behind me and a roaring explosion shakes the stairwell.



Radiation Level: 4,744 mSv

Remaining AD: 30

Area 3, Inner Ring

THE explosion threw me and Tachibana against the floor.

“GUAGH! ...Urghhh...” I force my consciousness back from the brink of darkness and peel my eyes open. Smoke and thick dust covers everything. The small fire seems to have ignited something, causing an explosion.

But there shouldn't have been any explosive materials around...

“Ughh...” Someone moans beneath me—it's Tachibana. I knocked her to the ground in a last-ditch effort to shield her.

“Are you okay, Tachibana?!”

“Y-Yes...but m-my leg...!”

I look down to see a scrap of iron about six inches long impaling her left thigh. Blood is seeping from the wound.

“I need to get you out of here!” I scoop her into my arms and carry her up the stairs and out of the stairwell.

“What happened? Are you both all right?!” Ukita asks in a panicked voice from where he's pacing in front of the fire door.

“I'm fine, but Tachibana was injured.”

“Wh-What's the state of her injury?”

“It's not life-threatening, but her leg's in bad shape. I want to treat it as soon as I put out the fire here.”

“That sounds time-consuming! Would you like me to continue searching the other areas in the meantime?”

“You sure? Will you be okay on your own?”

“I won't go near anything dangerous. We're running out of time and options.”

“You can say that again... All right, you have my permission to go. Take this with you.” I hand the Procyon over to Ukita.

“I'll be going on ahead, then. Sorry for leaving you.”

“Don’t mention it. Be super careful out there.”

“Of course. Let’s meet up again in Area 2 so we don’t get separated too long,” Ukita says and takes off.

I drop my gaze to Tachibana. “Wait for me here, Tachibana. I’ll go put out the stairwell fire and be back in a jiffy.”

“Okay... I’m sorry for slowing you down...” I help her sit on the ground with her back against the wall before running back into the stairwell.

The explosion had weakened the strength of the flames. I make quick work of extinguishing the fire there and race back to her.

“All right, time to take care of you. Climb on.” I crouch down with my back to her.

“O-Okay...” She meekly leans her weight onto my back. I hurry to the nearest room, her weight and softness pressing up against me.

▼ 1:05 PM

Area 3, Inner Ring

Surveillance Room

THE surveillance room was the closest to us. I lay Tachibana down on the floor.

“Sorry, but I have to roll up your pants,” I inform her before rolling up her left pant leg, revealing a painful wound that makes me grimace just looking at it. Her white thigh is drenched in bright-red blood. It’s too wet to apply the Chiron. “It doesn’t look good, Tachibana. I have to take you to the infirmary!”

“No, you don’t. It didn’t hit an artery, so...you can perform adequate treatment right here.”

“You need stitches—”

“You need training to properly stitch a wound closed. So, take this instead...” With shaking hands, Tachibana pulls what looks like a stapler from her pocket. “It’s a surgical stapler... Please use it to close the wound.”

“O-Okay.” Resolved to do what it takes, I accept the device from her. I press it

against her wound and push down the lever. Her expression contorts with the click of the staple snapping into place. “Are you all right?”

“D-Don’t ask! Just do the next one... I can tolerate it...!” Tachibana whimpers with her eyes squeezed shut.

I shove my guilt into a corner and snap staple after staple into the wound. Seven staples later, the wound is closed. I rub about half a tube of Chiron onto it next, cleanly stopping her blood loss.

“All done.”

“Th-Thank you...”

“Still hurt like hell?”

“Somewhat... But it’s within tolerable limits.”

So she says, but I’m still worried about her. My staring brings a wistful smile to her lips. “...This makes me kind of nostalgic.”



“For what?”

“It reminds me of when I first joined SIRIUS. I frequently got injured like this and received firm scoldings from you... You often said, ‘You’re so reckless I can’t bear to watch.’”

“Huh. I’m surprised you went through a phase like that, too, Tachibana,” I unintentionally mention as if it’s not a memory associated with me. Tachibana’s expression darkens.

“...Captain, do you truly not remember anything?”

“Hmm?”

“How about your memories with me? Have you still not recalled any of them?” Tachibana pleads with her eyes.

“S-Sorry. I honestly can’t remember most stuff,” I confide the honest truth.

“...Is that...so?” Tachibana doesn’t say another word.

She’s acting a little odd. No sooner do I think that than a scene that’s not here suddenly flashes into my mind.



I’m somewhere that looks like a public park. I can see Tachibana standing on the green lawn under the bright sunlight. She’s wearing a white blouse and navy skirt, not the SIRIUS uniform. She gives a little spin and self-consciously asks, “Um, does it look weird on me? I haven’t worn a skirt in ages...”



Someone answers her. "Not at all. You look really nice, Kazami." The man who said that has the same voice as me.

Tachibana blushes. She briefly glances my way to hide her shyness and says, "...Th-Then let's go. The movie will start without us."



That scene plays in front of my eyes and vanishes like a daydream.

Wh-What was that just now? A memory from my past? From when?

Tachibana peers into my perplexed eyes. "What's the matter, Captain?"

"Nothing. One of my memories seems to have resurfaced, is all. A memory of you wearing a skirt..."

"Huh?! I-Is that from when—" Tachibana trails off. She clearly has an idea what I'm referring to.

"You know what I'm talking about? Please tell me what that was a memory of!"

"I-I know about it, but...that's so cruel of you! Why did you have to go and remember that moment over something else?!" She's blushing.

Her reaction pulls me up short. After a few seconds, I come to a certain conclusion that I'd never considered until now. "S-Say, Tachibana...could it be possible that we were dating?"

My question draws an exasperated smile from her. "...You finally remembered." Affection fills her voice.

I'm shaken more than ever. "A-Are we still a couple?"

"No, we broke up a long time ago."

"I-I see." Finding the right words escapes me. A long silence hangs between us before I work up the nerve to ask, "...Why did we break up?"

"We were too much alike. That's what drew us together in the first place, but we were so similar it became painful to be together... That was probably why we had to break up."

Tachibana did tell me that, before my amnesia, I used to be “an intellectual rescue worker who always made rational decisions no matter the crisis.” That would make us very similar types.

“...But man, I must’ve been a total dumbass to let you go. Women as amazing as you only come by once in a lifetime, after all.” I meant that as a compliment, but it makes her frown.

“Where did you pull that pick-up line from...? It sounds nothing like what you would say, Captain. You’ve never said things like that.”

“Huh. I didn’t? Well, maybe rattling my brain did some good in making me into a more honest man,” I snuffle, earning a couple of laughs from Tachibana. A comfortable mood fills the space between us. But we can’t revel in the moment all day. Too much is riding on us. “...Sorry, Tachibana, but I’d better get back to the search soon.”

“Oh, then I’ll join—”

“Don’t push yourself with that fresh injury. Rest here for a bit.”

“B-But—”

“No buts. You’re ‘too reckless for me to watch’ right now.” I borrow the words of my past self to keep her obstinacy in check.

“...Very well,” she meekly concedes. “I will obey orders, Captain.”

“Good girl. Return to the infirmary once you feel up to it. Do me a favor and check the unbroken surveillance camera footage for survivors in the meantime.”

“Yes, sir. You can entrust that duty to me.”

I accept the spare Procyon from Tachibana and make to leave the room, but she calls out to my back. “Captain, um—”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

“N-Never mind... Please be careful.”

“You’ve got it. Thanks.” I grin at her and head out.

Area 3, Inner Ring

I return to the stairwell to investigate what caused the explosion. I examine the whole length of the stairwell and don't come across anything remotely like explosive or combustible materials. The fire extinguisher had given me the chills for some reason, so I check it out as well. But there's not much for me to learn from it after it's been blown to smithereens.

The explosion's cause remains a mystery. It bothers me to no end, but time is not on our side, so I set aside my investigation and recommence the search.

I exit Area 3 and move to Area 2's inner ring.

Tachibana and Moribe were the only ones who searched the floor where they set up the makeshift base. Hours have passed since then, and I can't ignore the possibility survivors might've moved into the area.

A particular door catches my eye during the search. "'Reference Room'?" I hadn't seen this room before. Some of the reference materials in here might cover possible escape routes. Doesn't hurt to check.

Bookshelves dominate most of the sixteen square foot space. Books and research papers tightly line the shelves.

An Introduction to the Informational Field Theory, by Dr. Miyoko Tenkawa

Elementary Particles, Information, and Consciousness, by Dr. Miyoko Tenkawa

Supersensory Perception Synchronization Hypothesis, by A. Courbet

Cerebrum: Labyrinth of Physiology, by Ryoken Kashiwagi

A Well-understood Maxwell's Demon, by Koki Sumida

*Before Crime * After Days*, by Chikage Sonomura

Particles, the Mind, and the Brain, by Shuuya Eriguchi

Reading the titles doesn't help me even begin to understand what they're about.

I was told that this facility is researching nuclear science and biology. About the only thing I grasped from those titles is that there are a lot of biology-related books. Although I do recognize one of the authors: Dr. Miyoko Tenkawa.

That's the name of Natsuhiko Tenkawa's mother. When I saw her books, unease exploded inside me.

Why do I feel anxious just looking at a book? My heart is tripping an unsettling beat.

I hesitantly pick up the first book and flip through the pages until a particular portion jumps out at me.



An Introduction to the Informational Field Theory

Dr. Miyoko Tenkawa

Foreword

I have always hypothesized that the fifth force that exists in the natural world is “information.” The problem is that there was too little material to prove it.

However, this hypothesis has been reappraised in a way I had never expected—through the rapid social revolution that has occurred in recent years.

Namely, through the manifestation of “BC (Beyond Communication).”

In recent years, the ability BC has been widely recognized by society. As a result, it can be said that the concept of “information” and how it is communicated has experienced great change. And we have since seen countless people possessing abilities that we would have never conceived as feasible mere years ago.

The abilities of BC can generally be classified into two groups.

The first is telepathy: the ability to send your voice directly into another's mind.

The second is empathy: the ability to read the voice of another's mind.

When using BC, the user's “thought information” is not converted into another medium. They communicate with their target by sending that thought information directly into the target's brain by using elementary particles as an intermediary.

This is consistent with what I proposed in my “informational field theory” thesis paper. Two completed unrelated fields of study—parapsychology and elementary particle physics—are connected by BC.

Furthermore, while there are still only a few telepathy users, empathy users are even rarer. But the true number of users isn’t what’s important here.

What’s important is that an ability such as empathy actually exists.

And also that the existence of “information” referred to as the “voice of the mind” formerly known only to the thinker can now be observed by others.

The emergence of BC is the first and greatest paradigm shift in the twenty-first century.



“BC?!” I cry out in a trembling voice. The book’s foreword covers some surreal information.

Miss Ena had mentioned that ability when we first met. She said something about there being more than a few people who can use telepathy nowadays. But the other ability sounds more problematic to me.

Some people have the ability to read others’ minds? Shocked, I scan the bookshelf in front of me and find *BC* included in most of the titles. If this bookshelf is anything to go by, these abilities have become common knowledge.

Even if the rate of running into someone with that power is slim, it’s seems there are people in this world who can read minds. And now I finally understand the reason for my unease.

I get it... I was frightened of this empathy ability!

Maybe I had a traumatizing experience with this empathy before my amnesia. And even if I hadn’t, I don’t think there are too many people out there who’d be happy with someone spying on their intimate thoughts.

Which reminds me of the time Tachibana mentioned BC users are mostly kids for some reason, with adult users being extremely rare. If I’m to believe that, then there shouldn’t be any BC users among the adults in our group.

What about the kids? Does Natsuhiko, Mashiro, Salyu, or Yuuri have these abilities?

Miss Ena said Natsuhiko and the girls can use telepathy. Doesn't that make it equally as likely that they can use empathy as well?

Thinking things over with this new information brings several doubts to mind. Why did Yuuri disappear on us? Why did Salyu run away from us? Why have we still not found any of the three high school students?

What if they have the ability to read minds?! Wouldn't that mean the kids are running from us because someone in our group has evil intentions?! I hate to think that way, but it fits.

Say that theory is true: Who's the one with evil intentions? I know it's not me at least. I know myself. Does that mean one of the other four adults is out to do something horrible?

Suspicion only breeds more suspicion that eventually comes full circle.

Wait...maybe it's the other way around? What if they're the ones who are out to get us? Maybe, just maybe, these kids who can read minds have the motive and hatred to drive us into a corner? And if they do, can we even oppose them?

Going over it in my head is making me sick. As it is, we're in one of the most toxic environments in the world, weird things are happening one after the other, people are dying—or being killed—and to top the craziness of this day off, there might be someone who can read our minds.

This whole crazy ordeal has surpassed the bounds of reasonable thought. I'm losing faith in everything around me.

"Dammit! What...should I trust?" I curse and stagger out of the reference room.

▼ 1:15 PM

Area 2, Inner Ring

I glance at my watch in the corridor—it's 1:15 PM. Almost time for the next AD dose. I inject one of the two AD I have on me.

Five hours to go until the lockdown lifts. We still have a long road ahead of us.

My mental and physical exhaustion has been accumulating into unbearable levels, and my body feels heavier than lead.

I'm walking through the corridor sighing when I catch the sound of an unfamiliar voice.

"—n't come any closer."

The voice is coming from the corridor around the corner. Another voice echoes back.

"Wait. Why are you trying to run from us?"

That sounds like Miss Ena. Keeping myself hidden, I peek around the corner and spy on the people talking; it's Miss Ena and—

Salyu?!

—the girl who ran from us in Area 4. Salyu, also known as Louise Yui Sannomiya.

I tamp down my surprise and strain my ears to hear their conversation.

"What are you even doing here, Miss Sannomiya?"

"Why are *you* here, Ena? You wouldn't even give our tip-off the time of day yesterday."

"That's because...I told you then to leave the rest up to the adults, didn't I?"

"And this is how you take care of it?" Salyu doesn't act like a student speaking to her teacher.

"We can get into the details later. Come with me for now, Miss Sannomiya. It's too dangerous for you to be on your own," Miss Ena says persuasively.

"I refuse. Mashiro said, 'Ena's heart is closed off.' I trust her judgment."

"What? Miss Toba is with you?! Where is she?!"

"She's not with me now."

"...What do you mean?"

Salyu doesn't answer.

Doubts surge within me again. *Miss Ena's heart is closed off? Has she been*

hiding something from her students? And what did she think needed to be left to the adults? Why isn't Mashiro Toba with Salyu now?

"I acknowledge my heart is closed," Miss Ena concedes, stopping the barrage of questions racing through my mind. "I have a reason for keeping it so... But I'm on your side. Won't you trust me?"

Salyu stays silent for a long time before grimly warning, "...Let me give you one piece of advice out of consideration for Natsuhiko. Be careful around that 'captain.' He's *dangerous*."

An electric shock courses down my spine and I stupidly leap out from around the corner. "H-Hey! How am I dangerous?!"

Salyu and Miss Ena jump. Less than a second later, Salyu whips around and darts off like a rabbit.

"Ah! Wait, Miss Sannomiya!" Miss Ena sprints after her, but Salyu shoves her when she gets too close. "Kyaa!"

I catch her before she falls. Salyu takes that opening to flee into the connecting passageway leading to the outer ring. After steadying Miss Ena on her feet, I run full speed after her, but the security gate shuts in front of me.

"Ugh! Gimme a break, you piece of crap!" Miss Ena angrily slams her hands against the closed gate.

I swipe my card through the slot, reopening the gate. Salyu is already out of sight. "Let's look for her! I bet she's hiding in a nearby room!"

"O-Okay!"

We open every door we come across and search inside for Salyu.

"You care to explain why my student just warned me about you being *dangerous*, Captain?" Miss Ena probes while we're looking.

"I have no clue. Sadly, it's just as much of a mystery to me."

"...I see." Suspicion colors her voice. "But something definitely happened between you and her. Probably before your amnesia."

"I agree, but I'm a rescue worker, you know? What do you think I did to her?"

“How should I know?”

We finish checking the floor before our conversation ends—and still no Salyu.

“Let’s search the other areas. We can ask her directly when we find her.”

“Before that...what happened to Tachibana and Ukita, Captain? Didn’t we decide to avoid traveling alone at all costs because of how dangerous it is?”

“Oh, as for that...” I explain about Tachibana’s injured leg and how Ukita went on ahead.

“I see. So you guys ran into trouble too...”

“You guys did as well?”

“Ms. Moribe was electrocuted by a shorted cable during our search of Area 6.”

“She was?! Is Moribe okay?!”

“Don’t worry. She’s currently resting in Area 6’s inner ring, but I believe she will recover soon.”

“That’s good to hear...”

Being told she’s fine does nothing to set my mind at ease. Something about Tachibana and Moribe getting hurt one after the other is very unsettling. It’s almost as if an “invisible enemy” is lurking in the shadows. But mentioning that aloud will only incite fear in the others. I’ve decided to give priority to urgent matters over theories.

“At any rate, finding Salyu’s the most important thing right now. She might still be close.”

“...I hope so,” Miss Ena says with worry and runs at my side.

We’re currently in Area 2’s outer ring. Considering the location, Salyu should’ve run into Area 1 or Area 3. Before I can decide which direction to go, I hear a disturbing sound from the direction of Area 1.

“What was that...?!”

“It came from that way! Let’s hurry, Miss Ena!”

We take off in the direction of the noise.

▼ 1:21 PM

Area 1, Inner Ring

DROPS of fresh blood are splattered all over the floor in Area 1. Is it Salyu's blood? The trail of blood continues into the stairwell.

"W-We have to find her, Captain Kasasagi!"

"Yeah!"

We storm into the stairwell.

The state of this emergency staircase hasn't changed since its collapse. But Salyu isn't here either. And at the end of the blood trail is—one of the blood transfusion packs from the infirmary.

"Wh-Why in the world is there a blood pack here?!" Miss Ena cries out in dismay.

The fire door slams behind us.

"What the?!" I whip around and dash to the door. It won't open no matter how hard I try. It barely budes, as if something has been propped against it. "Dammit! We've been locked inside?! Was it a trap?!"

Panicking, we seek out another exit. Something uncanny catches my eye right away—a fire extinguisher left alone in a corner of the stairwell.

"A fire extinguisher—another damn fire extinguisher?!" A hollow voice slips past my lips.

"Captain Kasasagi? What's wrong with fire extinguishers?" Miss Ena asks with a frown.

"I-I'm not sure... Just give me a minute to think, Miss Ena!"

Intense apprehension pierces my brain. A fire extinguisher had been at the scene when Tachibana was hurt by the explosion in the other stairwell. Is it possible that the fire extinguisher was the very cause of the explosion?

A hunch that's little more than guesswork gets me to examine the fire extinguisher. When I flip it over, I see soldering marks on the bottom.

It was soldered? Something's inside?!

I pick up a piece of debris from the staircase and work it into the soldered part until the bottom pulls off and something questionable appears within.

“Oh God!” This time, I’m terrified.

A cord is sticking out of what appears to be a digital clock, wrapped around several cylindrical objects that look a whole lot like TNT. I can tell at a glance that it’s a freaking time bomb.

Miss Ena lets out a horrified scream. “A-A bomb?! A bomb was planted inside the fire extinguisher?!” Just as she finishes voicing her shock, blood-red numbers flash onto the digital display. Together with a mechanical beeping, the number is counting down from sixty to fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven!

“H-Holy crap! It just activated!”

“Can’t you disarm it, Captain Kasasagi?!”

“I don’t have that kind of training! We need to focus on getting out of here ASAP!”

“How are we supposed to do that?!” Flustered, Miss Ena does a sweep of the stairwell. The part of the spiral staircase leading up is a pile of rubble, and the fire door has been locked shut. The death countdown is heartlessly ticking away with no way out.

“DAMMIT!” I ram the door. “Open! Open up, you piece of shit!”

The fire door doesn’t budge. The time between beeps is growing shorter by the second.

Are we done for? Am I going to be blown up without knowing the answer to anything?!

“Move out of the way, Captain Kasasagi!” Miss Ena shouts and draws something from her skirt pocket.



I doubt my eyes—she’s holding a gleaming black pistol.

“You have a gun?!”

She pulls the trigger as I instinctively take a step back. Four silenced bangs take out the door’s hinges.

“Kick the door open! Now!”

“O-On it!” Flustered, I kick the door down with all my strength. And then I run like a madman with her.

How much time is left? Can’t be more than a few seconds.

I hear a high-pitched beep behind me.

“Get down, Miss Ena!”

“Agh!”

I throw myself into the corridor in order to shield her with my body.

▼ 1:24 PM

Area 1, Outer Ring

OVER ten seconds have passed since the beeping stopped. But the only sound filling the corridor is our heavy breathing. We fearfully glance back at the stairwell from where we’ve fallen on top of each other on the floor.

“It didn’t explode...? Why?”

“I-I wish I knew... But it looks like luck is on our side.”

We wait a few minutes before moving, but the explosion never comes. I push to my feet and help Miss Ena up.

“Do you think it was a dud?” she asks in a voice drained of energy.

“It might’ve been, but something’s weird here... Something about it feels very different from everything else that’s gone wrong until now.”

Strange things have been happening left and right. The sprinkler system was off, the cargo lift’s control panel was busted—but unlike those times, I sense clear intentions to cause harm from this one.

But isn't it too sloppy of a job for that?

Something that looks like a metal bar is lying on the ground next to the door I kicked down. Someone probably used that to jam the door. It feels too improvised for a trap.

And to top the weirdness off, the bomb in question didn't detonate. If the person who set the trap was trying to kill us, they completely and utterly failed at it.

Is there a reason they didn't spend much time prepping the trap? Did they give up on it halfway?

Approaching footsteps interrupts my thoughts. I jerk my head around to see Moribe running toward us from the other end of the corridor.

"Moribe?!"

"Did something happen, you two?! I heard a loud bang from over here!" Moribe's voice is followed by another set of footsteps. Ukita is sprinting our way from the opposite direction.

"Oh, you're all together?! I heard a jarring noise! What happened?"

They both said more or less the same exact thing. My eyes dart to Miss Ena's hands. Moribe's and Ukita's eyes fly open in shock when they look at her.

"M-Ms. Tsubakiyama, where did you get that?!"

"I-Is that a p-pistol you have there?!"

Pressed by Moribe and Ukita for answers, Miss Ena recoils. "Ah, this is... well..." She fumbles over her answer.

Ukita jumps on her. "What's the story with that pistol, hmm? Can it be... you've kept something that dangerous on you this whole time without telling us?"

"Wait! You're jumping to conclusions! This isn't my gun. I picked it up inside LABO!"

"You picked it up? Where?"

"In the room with the cargo lift. It was lying on the ground in the corner."

“You really expect us to believe that? You mean you found a gun and pocketed it while everyone was focusing on conducting CPR?”

“Wh-What else can I say...? That’s the truth...” Miss Ena shrinks away from Ukita’s reproachful glare. Moribe is warily eyeing her as well.

Her story is full of holes, but I decide to back her up anyway. “S-Settle down, people. Let’s believe her story for now.”

Moribe shoots me a look of disbelief. “Huh? You’re gonna trust her? Did your brain go soft with your amnesia?”

“We don’t have many options here, Moribe. Since no one saw what she was doing at the time, we have no way to prove if she’s lying or not.” I put Moribe and Ukita in their place, then turn to Miss Ena. “But why did you hide it until now? That’s the bigger problem.”

“It wasn’t really the best time to bring it up... We’d only just found a dead girl, and our hope of escape was squashed... I felt like I needed a way to protect myself.”

Now that she mentions it, Miss Ena brought up the notion of there being a killer multiple times after we discovered the girl’s body. Did finding the gun solidify in her mind that there really is a killer? Or was it because she was plotting the best way to protect herself?

“...Well, whatever the case may be, the fact is that we have a gun,” Ukita states while I’m still puzzling things out. “It’s a dangerous weapon, so I will hold on to it for you.”

Moribe balks at his offer. “Where do you come off offering something like that, Mr. Ukita?! It’s only right for a rescue worker such as myself to confiscate it!”

“N-Neither of you has any say in this!” Miss Ena sharply raises her voice. “I know it’s not right for me to have a gun, but it’s just as dangerous for either of you to have it!”

“Why?!”

Threatening glares are shared among the three of them. I shudder just

watching. People are going to start fighting over the gun for real if this goes on.

“Wait, guys. Stop right there! Something that dangerous should either be destroyed or gotten rid of!” I advise in a hasty attempt to stop them.

Moribe shakes her head. “Those are both bad ideas, Captain! Destroying it will render us all unable to oppose a terrorist if there really is one! And how do you propose we get rid of it in this sealed-off facility? Someone else will eventually find it.”

“Argh... In that case, er...”

Moribe still believes the terrorist theory. It’s an absurd opinion, but I won’t discount that we have enemies inside this place. I rack my brain and toss out the most reasonable answer.

“I know, how about we do this? First, we remove the magazine from the gun. Then we take the bullets out of that. That’ll leave us with three separate parts: a gun without bullets, an empty magazine, and just bullets. Each one of us can take a part for safekeeping.”

The three of them shoot me questioning looks.

“You want us to split it into pieces?” Miss Ena confirms.

I nod. “Yeah. That way in the off chance a terrorist does show up, and we’re all in agreement, we can reassemble the gun to fend them off. On the flip side, if a terrorist doesn’t show up, we’re all equally powerless. Isn’t this the least offensive method?”

“But, Captain Kasasagi—”

“Go along with my plan, Miss Ena. I want to finish this idiotic argument ASAP.”

Silence stretches between us. Miss Ena eventually lets out a resigned sigh. “... Fine. I’ll cooperate with you, Captain Kasasagi,” she says as she pulls the magazine from the gun. She empties out the bullets. There’s a grand total of eleven.



“Okay, the gun barrel goes to Ukita, the magazine to Miss Ena, and the bullets to Moribe.”

“What about you, Captain?”

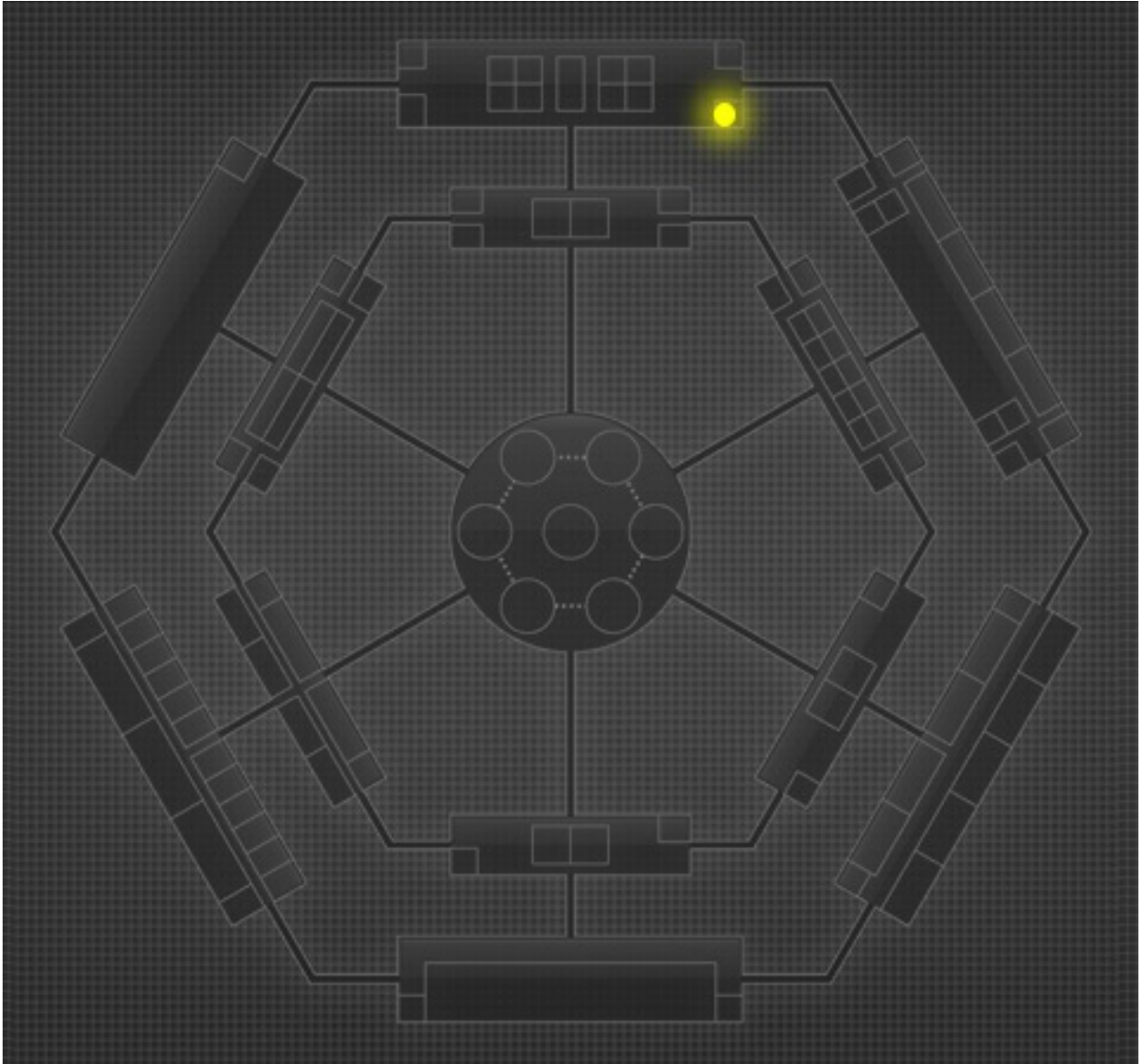
“I’m good. I shouldn’t take anything as the one who suggested the plan.”

Moribe and Ukita accept my explanation. Miss Ena begins handing the gun barrel to Ukita and the bullets to Moribe. But my thoughts are elsewhere as I watch them.

Why was there even a gun lying in the lift in the first place? If this really does belong to a terrorist or some killer, would they seriously drop their gun and not realize it?

Wait a minute...did they leave it there? So that we would find it and fight over it...?

That gun seems like a carefully placed trap to put everyone at odds.



Radiation Level: 5,265 mSv

Remaining AD: 25 (estimate)

Area 1, Outer Ring

WE stare at each other in suspicious silence. A single gun has planted an unhealthy amount of distrust in everyone's minds. Whether we can trust one another or not, the only path to survival requires us to work together.

I purposely address the group in a cheerful tone. "...Okay, looks like the gang's all here except for Tachibana. Let's have a brief meeting. Did you ladies on Team Moribe find anything?"

"Nope. Didn't find any survivors or AD." Moribe shakes her head sadly.

"How about you, Ukita?"

"What do you think when less than twenty minutes have passed since we parted ways? I didn't find anything," he snorts.

Sounds like the survivors are still giving us the slip. It's so strange that we haven't seen Natsuhiko Tenkawa or Mashiro Toba even once, or come across Yuuri. Where could they be?

"...Did anything else stand out to you during your search?" I ask what sounds appropriate for a rescue squad captain to say and get a very unexpected answer back from Moribe.

"Oh yeah, there was one small thing that I noticed... I completely stopped smelling that *flowery* scent."

"What scent?" I cock my head. "Something in here smelled like flowers?"

"Well, you know, you can occasionally catch a whiff of it wafting around the facility. You never smelled it?"

"Oh, now that you mention it, it did have that kind of smell now and then," Ukita acknowledges as he pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"I'm not so sure... I don't recall ever smelling something floral," Miss Ena says, her statement a complete contradiction of theirs.

Puzzled, I crease my brow at their responses. We've been together almost the entire time, and yet Miss Ena and I never picked up on that smell, while Moribe

and Ukita claim they have.

“This isn’t adding up... Can you describe the smell in detail?” I dig for more information.

“Meh, it’s seriously not a big deal, so don’t get hung up on it,” Moribe says lightly, shrugging me off.

It bothers me, but my thoughts turn to a more important matter, so I change the subject. “By the way, Miss Ena and I had a run-in with Salyu. But she fled again.”

“What? Agaaaiiin?” Moribe groans and shakes her head with a frown. “This is the second time now. Why’s that girl always running around when she’s injured?”

“I have no idea, but she looked pretty energetic when I saw her. I believe she’s injecting AD without a problem.”

“Oh, thank God! That’s one consolation, at least.”

“That being said, we have no way of knowing if she has enough AD on her to last. She ran in the direction of Area 6. The four of us should spread out and look for her.”

“Four of us? Oh yeah, where’s Lieutenant Tachibana?”

“She’s resting from an injury. I told her to return to the infirmary once she feels up to it.”

Area 6 just so happens to be very close to the infirmary. We can regroup with Tachibana if we head there after we finish searching Area 6.

“All right, let’s get moving, people. We’ve wasted too much time as it is.” At my instruction, the group starts walking toward Area 6.

Miss Ena is at the front of the group. She’s fiddling with her PDA. I walk up to her and whisper, “What’re you doing, Miss Ena?”

“Ah!” She jumps and jerks her head toward me. She shoves the PDA into her pocket and snips, “I was just checking to see if we can connect to the outside yet. Anyway, don’t just appear behind me like some creeper. You gave me a fright!”

“S-Sorry. On another note, are you sure it’s okay? You know, not telling the others about what Salyu said.”

“It’s fine. Things will only become more complicated. Probably shouldn’t mention that bomb either. Not after everyone was ready to jump down each other’s throats over me having a gun.”

“You think so? You’re probably right on that one...”

“But, in return, both you and I have to keep that bomb and what Miss Sannomiya said and did at the forefront of our thoughts, Captain Kasasagi.”

“Why’s that?”

“Miss Sannomiya must have a good reason for running away from us. And someone definitely set that bomb. We might overlook a critical piece of information if we let down our guard—something that will cost us our lives.” Her voice has a sharp edge that’s somehow different from her prior harshness. This is different from her spiteful jabs and hysterical whining—it possesses an unspoken intensity.

“Miss Ena, what are you getting at?”

“Be suspicious of everything around you, that’s what. Don’t believe the people around you, what LABO says it is, or what you think you’ve heard and seen. Preconceptions will lead you astray.”

“I see... That’s wise advice.”

I don’t want to doubt the others, but it doesn’t hurt to keep her advice in mind. Our conversation carries us through Area 1.

▼ 1:36 PM

Area 6, Inner Ring

I searched Area 6’s inner ring alone with Moribe last time. Seemingly endless doors line the stark-white corridors. Once we get there, I promptly give orders to the group.

“All right, let’s go back to our teams. Moribe is with Miss Ena, and Ukita is with me. Search with your teammate.”

“...Roger. Then Ms. Tsubakiyama and I will cover the factory.” Despite Moribe’s affirmative response, she looks like she wanted to say something else entirely. Miss Ena seems like she has no complaints, though.

“...Catch you later, Captain Kasasagi. Be careful,” she whispers in my ear before leaving with Moribe.

After I see them off, I start checking the area with Ukita.

Going through each of the rooms doesn’t bring us any different results from before.

“I can’t believe we still can’t find her. Where’d Salyu go off to?” I mutter after reaching the last door.

“To the factory, maybe. Let’s go there and help the others look.”

Ukita talks me into leaving, until I catch sight of a computer monitor in the final room. “Hmm?” I didn’t notice it last time. The computer froze with the monitor on. Stuck on-screen is a text file someone had been editing.

Test Subjects and the IGF2R Gene Type

○Subject A

Hereditary IGF2R Gene Abnormality Type S (Deceased)

○Subject N

Hereditary IGF2R Gene Abnormality Type S

○Subject Y

IGF2R Gene Type 4 (Discarded)

○Subject Y-II

Acquired IGF2R Gene Abnormality Type S

Observation Targets and the IGF2R Gene Type

○Special Observation Target Na

Hereditary IGF2R Gene Abnormality Type S

○Special Observation Target Na2

Acquired IGF2R Gene Abnormality Type S

○**Special Observation Subject Yu**

IGF2R Gene Type 4

○**Special Observation Subject Ka**

Hereditary IGF2R Gene Abnormality Type D

○**Special Observation Subject Ma**

Hereditary IGF2R Gene Abnormality Type B / Incomplete Ability Mastery
Communicator Class 2

“...?!” I grimace at what I see.

I don't understand a single word on the screen. And yet reading those entries sent chills creeping over my skin for whatever inexplicable reason. Standing here is frightening and so uncomfortable I feel the bile rising up the back of my throat.

“URGH...!” I go down on my knees.

Surprised, Ukita turns toward me. “Wh-What's the matter, Captain Kasasagi?!”

“I-I don't know! I suddenly felt sick...!”

“You do? Are you all right?”

“I-I'll recover with a little rest... Go on ahead to the factory, Ukita...”

“I-I can't just leave you—”

“Time's not on our side... I'll catch up later...”

Ukita hesitates over my request before eventually giving in.

I slump onto the ground for a while after watching him go. I puzzle over the sudden panic attack that hit me.

I've felt this way before...! When was the last time I felt like this? Right, it was when I charged into the contaminated zone in search of Yuuri.

Yuuri had said something bizarre to me then. And I experienced an abnormal level of fear in that moment. It only happened an hour ago—how the heck did I

forget about it until now?

“H-How could I have...?!” No sooner do I utter those words than I sharply inhale.

What if my amnesia isn't recovering with time, but—growing progressively worse?! I tremble with fear. But that's not the only terrifying thing—I clearly experienced dread toward Yuuri in my lost memories.

“Wh-Why was I afraid of Yuuri...?!”

Even more incomprehensible phrases pass through my brain as if to confuse it further:

—The test subjects are too dangerous—

—They're a completely different species from us—

—A monster caused that fire—

—Everyone will die if I don't do it—

Wh-What was that just now?! What are these words in my head?!

The phrases surge up from the sealed depths of my mind along with an indescribable unpleasantness. I shake my head to erase them from memory.

No! No! I wanted to save Yuuri... I just wanted to save everyone! The chaos in my head makes it impossible to sit still. Staying in this place any longer will be damning.

I stagger to my feet and out of the room en route to the factory so I can see the others.



CHILLS creep along my spine causing me to shudder on my way there. I have a creeping suspicion that something is inside the emergency staircase tucked away in a corner of the inner ring.

“Wh-Who's there?”

There's no response. But a sickening premonition causes my pulse to catapult. I slowly approach the door and fearfully open it. What I see on the other side is

—

“...It can’t be...” A hoarse voice spills from my lips. The girl I’ve been searching for all this time is right there before me.

A frilly, cute dress. A small body lying on the floor.

I must’ve missed her last time because she was behind the staircase. But on the ground is undeniably Yuuri. She’s collapsed faceup and isn’t even twitching. She merely looks at me with empty eyes that have lost the light of life.



“...Yuuri?” I rasp.

She doesn’t answer. A single streak of dark-red blood adorns her pale face.

I rush over to her side. All the fear I’d been feeling disappears in an instant. “Yuuri! Yuuri!” I hold her in my arms as I cry out her name. But her head dangles feebly.

I hold my hand over her mouth and don’t feel her breathing. I touch her cheeks, but her body has grown cold. I strip off my Vital Checker and slip it around her wrist. All five indicators are as red as the blood staining her face.

She has...undeniably passed away.

“Th-This can’t be... Why?!”

Yuuri doesn’t answer my question. I hug her body, which has lost all warmth. Memories with her replay in my mind. A voice echoed in my head the first time I met her—a voice that told me to save her. I had decided since then that I would protect her.

She was wary of me at first, preventing us from reaching a mutual understanding. Yet she gradually opened up to me as I acted in accordance with my desire to keep her safe.

That’s why I was able to shield her without a moment’s hesitation when the factory’s ceiling collapsed. I wanted to escape from this facility and bring her to safety outside.

In the end, she vanished from where I could protect her. And now that we’ve reunited—Yuuri is no longer the lively girl who ran away.

And I thought we had finally...finally come to understand each other a little better!

I’m filled with regret for what can never be undone. The sound of my ticking watch echoes through the still room. And thus, before Yuuri could tell me the source of my fear for her, tell me what she’d meant before, or say anything again—she’d fallen to the hands of eternal silence.



Area 6, Inner Ring

Emergency Staircase

...I'VE been zoned out for God knows how long. I'm only pulled back to reality by an abrupt voice echoing through my head.

<Hey! Get a hold of yourself already! You can't stay spaced out all day!>

"Nggh!"

Being scolded by that familiar auditory hallucination snaps me out of whatever trance I was in. I only now realize I've been ambling around the inner ring's corridors like a brainless zombie. I turn around and see the door to the stairwell behind me.

That's right... I have to tell everyone about this...

I stitch together my bleeding heart and break into a run.

Moribe, Miss Ena, and Ukita are already inside the factory when I get there.

"Oh, Captain!"

"Are you all right, Captain Kasasagi? I heard you weren't feeling well."

The others run over to meet me at the door. Ukita's looking at his watch as he says, "You look much worse than you did before. Took you a long time to recover. I assume something happened?"

I shudder. I don't want to answer that question, but I squeeze out my reply in a bitter voice: "Everyone, listen to me very calmly...! Yuuri...died."

They're petrified by the news.

"N-Nonsense! You expect me to believe she's dead?!" Ukita yells.

"Wh-Where?! Where did you find her?!" Moribe prods.

I lower my eyes to the ground. "I found her body on the floor of the inner ring's stairwell... Follow me. It's this way." I head for the inner ring with everyone in tow. I come to a standstill in front of the stairwell door. The other three at my side noisily swallow. "Are you ready? I'm opening it..."

Icy-cold sweat trails down my back as I open the fire door. My eyes fly wide-open to take in all that spreads before me. “The hell?!”

There’s nothing there aside from the collapsed staircase.

Moribe examines the area and dubiously inquires, “C-Captain? Where’s the body?”

“U-Uh...this can’t be happening...!” Rattled, I search the entire stairwell. But no matter how much I search, there’s no body. I stand there dumbly rooted to the ground.

Miss Ena gingerly inquires, “D-Don’t tell me you’re...seeing hallucinations now, Captain Kasasagi?”

“I’m not! There really was a corpse here! Blood was gushing from her forehead, and she was definitely dead—”

“She was bleeding? Even though there’s no blood anywhere?”

I swallow the rest of my words. I’ve only just confirmed for myself that there’s no corpse or bloodstains.

Alas, Ukita shrugs as if he’s fed up with me. “Perhaps the absence of the body you allegedly found can be explained as an issue with your perception?”

“What?”

“You hit your head hard enough to induce amnesia. Your brain has clearly been damaged in some way or another, no?”

“...!” I feel shivers snake down my spine. Ukita’s theory makes total sense, after all.

Does that mean the auditory hallucinations I’ve been having for hours, and the constant headaches and bouts of nausea, are all the result of brain damage? If that alone isn’t bad enough, I’ve been exposed to radiation damage on top of that!

Has my brain been damaged...past the point of no return?! I can’t think of another plausible explanation for it. But I plaster a smile onto my face to hide my internal chaos.

“L-Let’s think this out... It’s better for me to have been wrong in this case. It means Yuuri is still alive,” I say as much for my own benefit as theirs.

“...Captain, let’s return to the infirmary for a bit,” Moribe suggests out of consideration for me. “It’s been quite a while since we set out.”

“Yeah, it has been. Tachibana might be waiting for us too...”

With that decided, we head for the infirmary.

▼ 1:59 PM

Area 5, Outer Ring

Infirmary

BUT we’re thunderstruck when we arrive.

“Wh-What the hell happened here...?!”

Tachibana isn’t in the room. But that’s not what made my blood run cold. Before we left, we put aside the remaining twenty AD, only—all of it is gone!

“Wh-Where the hell did the AD go?!”

The five of us turn the room upside down looking. Torn bits of paper litter the floor in place of the AD. I pick up a scrap that reads, “Dear Mr. Tenkawa, Miss Toba, and Miss Sannomiya.”

Someone angrily tore up Miss Ena’s note.

“No, I don’t believe it... Why?” Miss Ena weakly mutters.

I stand there stunned. The absurdity of what just happened numbs my ability to think. We have only one AD each. Without AD, we will inevitably be exposed to radiation.

One look at the Procyon and the reading only adds to our despair—5,839 mSv. It’s come to the point where we’re being exposed to radiation levels at the first danger standard or higher anywhere we go.

Tachibana previously went an hour with a partial dose of AD, and she complained of feeling unwell. What’s worse is that the contamination is on a whole other level now. At this rate, we’re going to hit the second danger standard in no time. A life-threatening dose of radiation is going to come down

on everyone the second our AD wears off.

“Damn it all! How the hell did this happen?!” I let out a loud stream of curses.

Why have terrible things been happening one after the other down here? I sink my teeth into my bottom lip.

“Do you even have to ask?” Moribe pipes up beside me. “The answer’s as clear as day, Captain... Someone made off with our AD.” She runs a needling gaze over each member of our group.

I gasp at the distrust burning in her eyes. “D-Don’t jump to conclusions, Moribe. Are you implying the culprit is a part of our group?”

“Face it, whoever did it intentionally ripped up the note left for Tenkawa and the girls. I don’t know the kids well, but I don’t believe they’d do that.”

“...!”

“So isn’t it only logical to assume the culprit is one of us? I mean, can any of you prove your alibi?” Moribe’s threatening voice trips me up.

Miss Ena sighs. “...Ms. Moribe, none of us have a solid alibi—you know that as well as any of us. Each of us acted independently at one point. But the same applies to you.”

“How?”

“You have no one to back up your story of what you were doing the whole time between when you got electrocuted in Area 6 until you met up with us again, do you?”

“D-Don’t be ridiculous. You know I was resting in Area 6, Ms. Tsubakiyama.”

“What if you recovered right away? They always say the first to point their finger is the most likely suspect.”

“Huh?! Who made that nonsense up? Are you suggesting I hid the AD for myself?”

“We can’t deny the possibility, now can we?”

“...SCREW YOU!” Moribe screeches in an ear-piercing voice. She stomps right up to a flinching Miss Ena and yells in her face. “How does that benefit me,

huh?! I'm a rescue worker! The pay sucks! The work is backbreaking! Why do you think I do a job that gets barely any recognition from the public when the pay is dismal and the workload is miserable?!"

She grabs Miss Ena's collar and snaps at her. "Because I want to help people! Every time I go out onto the job I have to jump into flaming infernos and have constant near-death experiences, but I still do it because I want to save lives! You're questioning me, SIRIUS's Jun Moribe, the woman who goes through hell to save people, if I hid some damn AD? You can shove your mockery of my post up your ass!"

It was a cutthroat display. Moribe's shoulders are rising and falling with her ragged breathing, and tears mist her eyes.

Miss Ena is speechless. After a few moments, she apologetically lowers her head. "I-I'm sorry... Y-You've been putting your life on the line for your work."

"Damn straight. And I hope to continue doing so forever."

"That sounds pretty on paper, but who's to say all rescue workers think the same as you?" Ukita quietly demurs.

"...Excuse me?" Moribe shoots him a skeptical look.

Undisturbed, he goes on: "Occupational ethics and personal opinions do not always match. Some people prefer to stick religiously to their personal ideology rather than duty."

"What's that supposed to mean, Mr. Ukita? Are you implying the traitor is among SIRIUS's ranks?"

"We can't turn a blind eye to the possibility."

"This coming from the man who was rescued by us just last week?! You've got guts making implications in front of us!"

"No, wait, that's not what I'm trying to say—"

Not wanting to sit through another quarrel, I shout over the lot of them. "Enough! Cut the crap, guys!" They all turn and look at me. "What's the big deal about the note being torn up?! One of the survivors might have just taken the AD with them! You're all in the wrong for doubting the only people who have

your back without proof!”

“Then how do you propose we obtain proof?!”

I ponder Ukita’s irate question for a moment before answering. “By using the surveillance room. Tachibana has been watching the cameras there. They might have picked up on something.”

I told Tachibana to return to the infirmary once she felt better. She’s likely still in the surveillance room.

“Did you forget the majority of cameras are broken?” Ukita points out.

“The majority isn’t all of them, is it? In which case, it’s worth a look. A much better use of our time than jumping down each other’s throats here.”

The three of them fall silent with that. Moribe finally looks around the group and concedes, “Fine, Captain. Let’s head to the surveillance room. But if the culprit is among us, then I’ll—”

“The culprit isn’t among us, Moribe. We’re going to obtain proof that our group members are trustworthy.”

No one agrees with me.

Even at odds, we hurry to the surveillance room where Tachibana is.

▼ 2:06 PM

Area 3, Inner Ring

THE four of us arrive in front of the surveillance room. As I’m about to open the door, I hear Tachibana talking inside.

“—op it. He’s not like that...!”

I can’t hear her too well through the door, but she seems to be conversing with someone. She speaks again before I can figure out who it’s to.

“—on’t believe that...—ho in the world? Why...—” She sounds miserable.

I swallow my hesitation and open the door. Tachibana screams the second it opens. “W-Wait!”

“What?” We instinctively stop just outside the door.

Tachibana is the only person in the room. Her face stiffens when she sees us.
“C-Captain...and everyone else...!”

“Who were you talking to, Tachibana?”

“T-To...” Tachibana pauses for a moment before finishing with “Someone...on the radio.”

“The radio?”

“Yes. It momentarily connected with someone on the surface... But died right after. I instinctively cried out for them to wait when it cut off...” she explains in a paper-thin voice.

Is she telling the truth? I doubt her but avoid prying too deeply. I don’t want to increase the amount of distrust circling within our group.

I cut straight to the point before anyone else can question her. “Hey, Tachibana, I just want to check with you to be sure... You didn’t happen to bring the supply of AD with you here, did you?”

“What? I haven’t taken a step from this room since you brought me here... Did something happen?”

“Yeah. Someone seems to have made off with the AD we left in the infirmary.”

“Oh no...!”

“So I wanted to check the surveillance camera footage to see if it caught anything.”

Tachibana shakes her head. “...I’m sorry, Captain, but there are no working cameras near the infirmary.”

“None at all?”

“There are two cameras working in Area 1’s inner ring, one operational in Area 3’s outer ring, and two running in Area 6’s inner ring. That’s it.”

“Two are still working in Area 6’s inner ring?! Is there any footage of Yuuri?!”

“Unfortunately no, not any footage of Yuuri on her own...”

“No, they should’ve caught her near Area 6!”

“Why do you think that?”

Ukita answers Tachibana’s question before me. “You see, he’s been claiming that he saw Yuuri’s dead body in Area 6’s emergency staircase. Though this supposed corpse he saw was nowhere to be found when we looked.”

“Are you positive about this?” Tachibana sends me a questioning look.

I give a firm nod and argue, “We can prove if what I saw was real or not by checking the surveillance camera footage. It should’ve been taken about thirty minutes ago now. Try replaying the footage around then.”

“V-Very well. There happens to be footage of the emergency staircase.” Tachibana replays the footage taken by the camera in that area.

Area 6’s emergency staircase displays on the monitor. Everyone turns their full attention on that screen. After a while, there’s movement on-screen. It caught me staggering into the stairwell.

“It happened right after this! I saw Yuuri’s body right there!” I lean in close to the screen. “...What the?!”

The me on-screen stumbles right out of the stairwell. The time displayed is 1:40:19 PM. The time coincides perfectly.

“I didn’t find a body...?!” I utter in disbelief.

“...Captain Kasasagi,” a deep voice snarls behind me. “Care to explain yourself?”

I whip around to find Ukita glaring daggers at me. I wince. “E-Explain what?”

“Not only did you not discover a body, but you passed through the area without stopping. Why did you lie, hmm?” I have no answer for him, so he chomps down like a dog with a bone. “There’s one more thing that doesn’t add up—the time stamp.”

“What about it?”

“It’s marked ‘1:40 PM’. That appears to be the time you left the stairwell, but... you didn’t show up in the factory until 1:50 PM.”

I’m blindsided by his remark. I’d just assumed I lost track of time from the

shock of finding her body, but what if that's not the case?

"It doesn't take ten minutes to walk from the inner ring to the factory. Where and what were you doing for those ten unaccounted minutes, I wonder?"

I fumble over a reply to his tenacious questioning. "W-Well...I was shaken up after finding her body—"

"But you didn't find anything. There's not even a body shown on camera!"

"You're wrong! I know I saw it!"

I still have the vivid memory of finding her body. But I have no way of defending myself against Ukita's accusations when my *subjective opinion* has been blown to pieces by the *objective* data left by the camera footage.

Ukita hits me with another round of questions as if he's an interrogator closing in on the truth. "Why don't you just acknowledge it already, Captain Kasasagi? Acknowledge you lied."

"How is it a lie?!"

"How is it not? You used the discovery of a nonexistent corpse as an excuse for why you were late in arriving at the factory. And then you used that time to secretly go and swipe the AD supply for yourself. Didn't you?"

The others all gasp at his suggestion.

I impatiently argue back. "D-Don't be ridiculous! I'd never do something like that!"

"Then what were you doing for those ten minutes, hmm? When every second is more precious than the last for us."

I can only respond with silence, because I don't know the answer to that myself.

Moribe stares into my eyes and asks, "...What's wrong, Captain? Why aren't you saying anything? You didn't actually trick us, did you?"

"I-I did not! I honestly don't know what happened!" I shout.

"I see. So you don't believe yourself now?" Ukita sneers. "Are you going to blame this one on your amnesia too? Might as well write off every mistake

you've made that way. But if you do, it's the same as admitting there's no credibility to anything you have ever done or said."

"H-How?"

"Isn't that obvious? How do you expect us to believe the words of a madman who hallucinates about nonexistent corpses? Couldn't you have just forgotten where you stashed our AD?"

"H-How could I forget something like that?! I'm sane!"

"Then that would make you a liar. There was no corpse, and as such, you were probably the one who stole the AD."

"Grrr...!" I realize all too late that he's cornered me. Whether the others choose to believe I'm sane or not, I'll still lose all credibility.

Tachibana looks rattled as well. "P-Please wait," she says to Ukita in a shaky voice. "The real problem is why he would tell such a peculiar lie in the first place..."

"Who knows? But once you think about it that way, everything about him becomes suspicious. Like if the memories he said came back to him are true or not."

"Why?!"

"You said you came down to the basement to rescue survivors, right? But that's another lie, isn't it? Didn't you actually come here for a completely different objective?"

"What o-objective is that?"

"Need you ask? To kill people. This isn't terrorism—it's a planned murder."

"Hah?" I'm flabbergasted by his logic.

Meanwhile, Ukita continues playing detective. "How about this for the reason: you harbored the urge to kill your squadmate Dojima for some reason and decided to do the deed at a disaster site. Killing him somewhere with raging fires would burn up the evidence with his body, and then the authorities would chalk up his death to an accident. Drawing that conclusion, you used this incident as the opportunity to enact your murderous plans."

“...!”

“But then you were caught red-handed by the two researchers and had to kill them to keep the truth from getting out. Hiyaama barely escaped you, only to have the misfortune of being caught in a fire and dying that way. Yuuri, Sannomiya, and the girl in the lift may have all been witnesses to your heinous killing spree.”

“Shut up! That’s bullshit! Why would I do something like that?!”

“There’s no evidence you did. And absolutely no evidence that you didn’t. Aren’t you the most aware of that fact out of all of us?”

“Damn you...!” I sweep my gaze around the people in the room for help. My eyes lock with a frightened Tachibana. “T-Tachibana... Did I hate our squadmate Dojima enough to want to kill him?”

“I-I...don’t know.”

“You don’t know? You should have at least seen hints of—”

“I don’t know! Honestly!” Tachibana sharply cuts me off. “You never talk about yourself, Captain!”

Shocked by that unexpected reply, I ask, “I didn’t talk about myself...?”

“You always kept a distance from people before you lost your memories... You never spoke with others about what was on your mind.” Sadness shimmers in her eyes.

“Now that you mention it, I know nothing about Captain’s private life,” Moribe throws out there, as if she’s only just now realized it. “...We only have a work relationship.”

I feel the ground sway beneath my feet.

I thought Tachibana and Moribe would believe in me—just as I believe in them. And yet not only do they question me after I lost my memories, but they seem to have never trusted me before this either. My knees buckle under the abrupt despair washing over me.

Moribe’s gaze digs into me as I hold my silence. “...Hey, Captain, tell us the truth. What really brought you to the basement floors?”

“I told you it was to rescue su—”

“That’s bull. You’ve never left your post before, you know?” Moribe marches over to me. “Just tell me... You came down here to save lives, didn’t you?”

“.....”

“Because if you didn’t...I’ll never forgive you, Captain.” Rage simmers in her eyes. No, it’s not something as cute as rage—it’s bloodlust. Moribe is glaring at me with bloodlust blazing in her eyes.

I want to tell her what she wants to hear. But I don’t, because anything I say here is going to sound hollow.

I try to say something before things go horribly wrong, when Miss Ena suddenly speaks on my behalf. “Stop right there, Ms. Moribe, Mr. Ukita. You two are acting a little strange.”

They turn on her like she stepped on a land mine.

“What? How are we acting strange? Huh?” Moribe snaps with an intensity that could make even the fiercest dog back down.

“Yeah. I believe we are making a truly sound argument,” Ukita agrees.

Miss Ena returns their glares. “And that’s what I’m saying is strange. Didn’t Captain Kasasagi save you both numerous times? Where do you get off turning on him just because the AD disappeared?”

“This and that have nothing to do with each other. How could you side with him after all we’ve said? You’re a complete stranger who doesn’t even know him yet—” Moribe gasps midsentence. Her eyes widen as if the truth finally dawned on her. “Don’t tell me...you two were in on it together?”

“H-How did you come to that conclusion?!” Miss Ena scowls.

Ukita sweeps in for the kill. “Is that it? It does make sense. No wonder why you were both acting so strange...! You’re working together so only the two of you can get out of here alive!”

“Has her stupidity rubbed off on you, Mr. Ukita?! You know that’s not true!”

“No, I’m positive it is. You hid the AD, didn’t you?! You’re trying to hoard the

AD!” he rants and raves.

Moribe’s deranged glare stabs into me and Miss Ena. These two seem to have complete faith in their own baseless speculation. It’s closer to a false accusation than speculation too.

But the way they turned on Miss Ena helped me see the insanity glimmering in their eyes. *H-Have they lost their minds?*

There have been plenty of factors to make that happen. Accumulation of stress and fatigue. Countless unexplainable incidents. A feeling of entrapment. Utter despair over a lack of an exit. Fear from discovering body after body.

And then, to deliver the final blow, our AD supply vanished. That single occurrence shortened the time limit for our survival by hours.

It’s impossible for people to keep it together in a situation like this!

Ukita and Moribe are slowly closing the distance between us like wolves closing in on a kill. Before they get too close, I hear that auditory hallucination again.

<You’re in danger! Take Miss Ena with you and run!>

“Tch!” I snap to it and grab Miss Ena’s arm.

Moribe and Ukita yell out at once.

“Planning to run for it?!”

“Don’t let them! Pin them!”

They both lunge at us as they shout. I narrowly sidestep them and they are propelled into the monitors instead.

CRASH! The sound of something breaking echoes through the room. But they quickly recover and turn back around with hatred in their eyes. I instinctively look away, and my eyes meet Tachibana’s. She wordlessly looks to the door. She mouths, “Run away.”

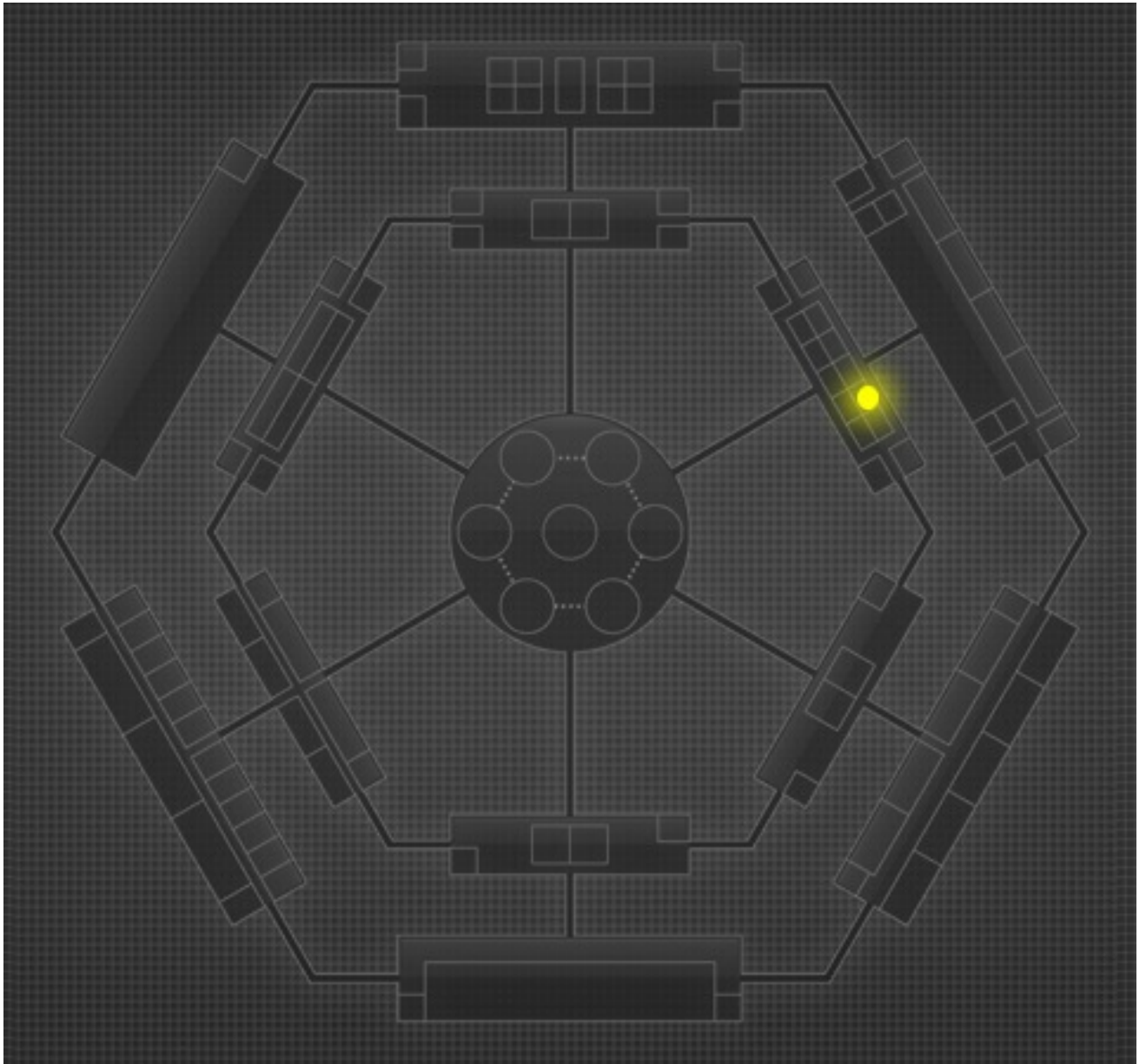
“—Miss Ena, time to run!”

“I-I agree!”

I fly out of the room holding her arm.

vA Chapter 13: 【Tribulation and Determination】

9/16/2030 2:16



Radiation Level: 6,002 mSv

Remaining AD: 1 (per person)

Area 2, Inner Ring

MISS Ena and I had escaped their pursuit and are now hiding in a room located in Area 2. I listen for sounds in the corridor with my ear pressed up against the door. I don't hear any footsteps. We both let out a long sigh after confirming we've shaken them off our tail.

"...Everyone's moods suddenly took a scary turn, huh?"

"Hard to blame them for it... Death is suddenly at their doorstep. I can understand why they've lost it."

Miss Ena sharply narrows her eyes at me. "Don't underestimate the situation. We very likely would've been killed if they had caught us there. You realize that, right?"

"Killed? ...C'mon, you think they'd kill us?! They'd never take it that far!"

"You still don't get it, Captain Kasasagi? What's truly horrifying under these horrendous circumstances isn't the fires, the smoke, or the radiation. It's the madness laid bare by people who've been driven into a corner that's the most terrifying."

I gasp.

I had believed our greatest hope in this death trap of a facility was "people's determination to survive." But hope can be turned on its head when the situation grows so desperate it pushes people to the brink.

What happens when the determination to survive transcends morals? Will people choose to kill another so that they can survive? Or will they start to think it's okay to kill someone in order to protect someone else?

Under normal circumstances, neither Ukita nor Moribe would even consider that. But now that everyone's lives are in real danger, morals are teetering on cracked, thin ice. One wrong step and people can justify murder.

Dammit! How the hell did it come to this?!

I had thought of everyone in our group as allies, but they definitely don't view

me that way.

I let out a heavy sigh and say, "...Hey, Miss Ena? Can I ask you a question?"

"What is it?"

"Why did you defend me back there? I come across as mighty suspicious after what was shown on that camera footage."

"....."

"Aren't you the one who told me to doubt everything? So why would you stand up for me then?" It's exactly because I'm starting to doubt my own memory that I want to know her real intentions.

She answers me in a voice steeped with hesitancy. "...Because I also want to know your *real intentions*."

"Huh?"

"Say, Captain Kasasagi, you said you saw Miss Yuuri's dead body, right? What are your own thoughts on that?"

"That was...probably a hallucination like Ukita said. I've got amnesia on top of my frequent visits into highly contaminated zones. It's not odd if I'm starting to see things now."

Tachibana told me before that vision impairment, neuropathy, and brain cell damage are among the adverse effects of radiation on the human body. Those effects are probably making me hallucinate.

"...Besides, I occasionally have auditory hallucinations too."

"Auditory hallucinations?"

"At first, I thought it was related to those BC abilities you explained to me. Someone sending me telepathic messages would explain the voice I'm hearing, but...that theory is called into question by the incident with Yuuri's body. Is there a BC ability that can make people hallucinate?"

"...No. BC is nothing more than the ability to read and speak into people's minds, after all."

"Then, that pretty much proves it... My brain's been screwed up." I'm

consumed by helplessness. All of a sudden my skin starts to tingle, and my brain starts hammering in my head—just like when I’ve set foot into a contaminated zone. I glance at my watch and realize it’s past the time we should’ve taken our next AD dose. “Shit! Miss Ena, inject AD, stat!”

“O-Okay!”

We fumble with our last dose of AD and shoot it into our arms.

My headache instantly subsides, but the Procyon reading is 6,026 mSv. Quite a bit of time has passed since the radiation levels exceeded the first danger standard at all times. I’ve spent hours in radiation levels that not even AD is proven to protect against. Hallucinations might just be a part of the overall package.

I shudder at the thought.

“Hey, back to what you were saying...,” Miss Ena quietly starts.

“Hmm?”

“You said it’s not odd for you to start seeing things between your amnesia and visits into the contaminated zones, but what if your hallucinations aren’t caused by radiation?”

“...What do you mean?”

“I once read about the effects of radiation exposure. Radiation definitely causes impaired vision, but in the form of narrowed or hindered vision. I’ve never heard about it making people see things that aren’t there.”

“Then what’s causing me to see things?”

“You don’t have any ideas?”

“I don’t know... Maybe it’s the result of brain cell damage or neuropathy. Won’t damage to the brain and nervous system cause you to hallucinate?”

“It can... But there’s something even more concerning than that. Could you take a look at this for me?” She pulls out her PDA. A few swipes and a paragraph appears on the LCD screen.

“...What’s this?”

“A file I copied off a LABO computer. I obtained it during the time I was roaming the facility alone after Ms. Moribe got hurt.”

“Why did you do something like that?”

“Because I’ve always felt that this was no ordinary accident. Think about it: Isn’t it extremely strange that the lockdown won’t lift for nine whole hours? It’s not like radiation will clear in that time either. So I was starting to think there’s another reason for it.”

“That’s true enough...”

“But all the computer data was encrypted. I tried to decrypt it, but most of the data broke in the process.”

I caught Miss Ena messing around with her PDA earlier. So she was trying to decrypt data instead of checking the maps?

“I still found some data in there that’s barely readable. Give it a read.” She hands me the PDA.

Some sort of broken proposal is displayed on the screen.

Ca * e N Specification Revision Pro * * sal

Aug. 1 * , 2 * 21

*** * * ken Kashiwagi**

On * * * * * 2021, Subject N attempted * * * * * cape * * *

As you already know, * * * * * .

* * * * * At the same time, * * * * * this chance to reevaluate the danger of * *

* * * * * searcher S * * * * * ook this opportunity * * use their own * * * * * BC * * .

* * * with “* * * pathy * * * * ’s ability * * * * the Communicator can * * * * the target’s brain * * * * .

Subject * * was born inside LABO. However * * * * * sire to go outs * * * * * * * *

* * what we should be cautious of is the test subj * * * * * .

Several phrases pique my curiosity: “Subject * * was born inside LABO” and “what we should be cautious of is the test subj * *.” I haven’t the faintest clue what any of it means, though.

“None of this makes any sense. What are they even talking about?”

“It appears to be a ‘Case N Specification Revision Proposal’... It goes on endlessly like this with mostly unreadable sentences. The same goes for the rest of the data.” Miss Ena swipes her finger across the PDA, changing the screen. “I’ve managed to extract several lines with the tools I have on hand...and several strange terms popped up. This is the part I really wanted to show you. Does any of this mean anything to you?” she asks as she pulls up a fully comprehensible list of words.

<String>	<Search Results>
CASE N	22 HITS
AREA N	21 HITS
MELTDOWN	20 HITS
TEST SUBJECT	19 HITS
NBC	15 HITS
WX PARTICLES	13 HITS
PARTICLE AMPLIFIER	9 HITS
SUBJECT N	8 HITS
BRAIN DYSFUNCTION	6 HITS
GENE DYSFUNCTION	5 HITS
AREA ZERO	5 HITS
WX PARTICLE PROLIFERATION	4 HITS
SUBJECT Y	4 HITS
SUBJECT Y-II	3 HITS
IGF2R GENE ABNORMALITY TYPE S	3 HITS
SUBJECT A	3 HITS

“...!” Chills crawl down my spine with each phrase I read.

Subject N! IGF2R Gene?!

There are multiple unknown terms mixed into the list, and it gives me a strangely intense sense of discomfort. But that feeling is immediately washed away by another emotion.

Negative feelings spring up from the depths of my heart like a geyser. They’re a pitch-black explosion of fear, rage, and hatred.

“Captain Kasasagi, do you recognize these terms?!” Miss Ena asks as I begin to violently tremble.

“Y-Yeah— AGH!”

Before I can explain, a sharp pain pierces my brain as if my flesh and body are refusing to remember that information. I push through the agony to find what’s hidden beyond it, but I can’t pull on any related memories.

“N-No... I don’t.”

“...I see.” She sighs as if she is truly disappointed.

I wait for my headache to retreat before asking, “Do you know what any of this means?”

“I don’t either. I thought it might be related to your amnesia and hallucinations because it mentioned ‘brain dysfunction’...”

“But I can’t remember anything... I really think my hearing and seeing things is the result of something wrong with my brain.”

It feels like everything, from my constant headaches to frequent memory defects, is due to a problem with my brain. I hang my head and hopelessly murmur, “And if it is my brain malfunctioning, I might not have even noticed that I stole the AD.”

Fear suddenly fills me the moment I voice that thought aloud. I can’t be one hundred percent sure that there’s not some dark recess in my heart that thinks it’d be okay as long as I alone survive.

What if there’s a wicked side to me that I’m not aware of—one that’s

deciding all my actions on its own and driving everyone to their deaths? That's a far more frightening thought than my own death.

I cover my face with my hand and tremble in fear. But Miss Ena reaches out, softly removes my hand from my face, and hugs me. "Get a hold of yourself, Captain Kasasagi. You're not that kind of person."

"Huh...?" I lift my head and see Miss Ena's face right in front of me. Her eyes are clear of suspicion and doubt. She rubs my back as if she's soothing a sobbing child.



“You are unquestionably suspicious. Especially when it comes to the security camera footage and your amnesia. But I want to place my trust in you regardless of that.”

“Why? I haven’t done anything to earn your trust, have I?”

“You have. It’s the undeniable truth that you have been pushing yourself to the brink to save everyone. And you even charged into a contaminated zone to save a student of mine you don’t even know.”

“.....”

“Your amnesia and hallucinations are trivial things in the face of what you’ve done for us. As long as you stay the way you are now...as long as you are ‘Captain Kasasagi’...I am on your side,” she says with a tender smile.

I become all choked up and can’t bear to look her in the eyes. “Thank you, Miss Ena...”

I have someone who says they’ll trust me when I can’t even trust myself. I couldn’t have asked for better words of comfort at this time.

“...But what should we do now? Moribe and Ukita seriously suspect me of being a murderer, you know?”

“I know, that’s why I’m going to...” She breaks our hug and announces in a determined voice, “...go convince the two of them.”

“Wait, that’s too dangerous! Ever since the gun incident, they’ve become pretty suspicious of you too. Who knows what they’ll do to you if you go out there?”

“But what other choice do we have? The way things are now, we can’t search for AD, survivors, or an exit. Nothing will change if I don’t persuade them.”

This is definitely the worst possible situation to be in. Even if she successfully convinces the others, our AD problem won’t be solved. Everyone will be exposed to high levels of radiation in less than an hour. I’ve done everything within my power until now, but when I really think about it, not a single problem has been resolved.

None of the remaining survivors have been found, and Yuuri has practically

vanished. I don't even know where the killer with the gun is hiding. All the squadmates I should've been able to rely on and the people I'm supposed to save have now become my enemies.

What the hell am I supposed to do?! Is there no way for all of us to survive in this situation?! Just as my thoughts hit rock bottom, I recall what Commander Murakami said over the radio transmission in the surveillance room. His words spark to life a new possibility.

"...Ah!" The second I reach that genius idea, I smile from ear to ear.

"Wh-What's gotten into you, Captain Kasasagi? You're grinning for no reason," Miss Ena asks me in a dubious tone.

"Well...I just came up with the way to solve everything, Miss Ena."

"You did?"

"The answer was there from the very beginning. I've long since known the way to save everyone."

"Wh-What are you talking about?! Why would you hide something like that?!"

"Shh!" I press my finger against my lips. Miss Ena falls silent with a start. "Don't speak so loudly. It's over for us if Moribe and the others catch on."

"Is there really a way to solve things...?" She raises an eyebrow at me.

"Yeah. I'll let only you in on it. Lend me your ear."

Miss Ena reluctantly leans over. I bring my mouth next to her ear and softly whisper, "All it takes is...throwing away my life." I circle behind her before I finish speaking and wrap my hands around her neck.

"Ghh!" She moans painfully, but I continue squeezing her neck anyway. "GAGH! W-W-Why?!"

"Sorry. You'd stop me if I told you, Miss Ena. I really hate to do this to you, but I need you to sleep."

"Don't do this... What are...you..."

Her body goes limp before long. I gently lay her down on the floor.

The usual nagging voice comes back to shout in my head. **<Wh-What are you doing?!>**

But it's not surprising anymore. I leave the room without giving it the time of day.

▼ 2:23 PM

Area 3, Inner Ring

I close the door behind me and destroy the electronic control button. Now anyone who comes by the room won't be able to get in and hurt Miss Ena. She'll be safe.

No sooner do I think that then the auditory hallucination echoes again.

<Hey, answer me! Why did you knock out Miss Ena?! What are you trying to do?!>

Hmph... I'm getting pretty close to being a crazy guy, talking back to my auditory hallucinations and all...

I answer the hallucination with a bitter smile. "You heard what I said to her. I'm going to save everyone."

I pull a security card from my pocket—the Level N card the dead girl had on her. Commander Murakami's words replay in my mind.

"A huge fire caused by the meltdown is still raging within Area N, where the reactor is held. The security system is going haywire because of it, making it impossible to access externally."

The answer to our problems lay there all along. Once we put out the fires raging inside Area N, the security system will stop going haywire and the lockdown will end. My auditory hallucination seems to have picked up on my intentions because it starts rambling in a panicked voice.

<Don't tell me you're so insane you're planning to go into Area N alone?!>

"I'm that insane."

<Don't! You'll die! There's no way you can put out the burning reactor flames all by yourself!>

“There’s no other option.”

<Even if you succeed in extinguishing the flames, an enormous amount of radiation is enshrouding Area N! You can inject over a dozen ampoules of AD and your body still won’t survive the damage!>

This voice has guided me more times than I can count. I defy the voice whose owner I don’t know. “...Sorry. I won’t obey your commands this time.”

<Why?!>

“Someone’s got to do it. Everyone has tried so hard to survive the last five hours, and look where it’s gotten us.”

<Are you that desperate to die?! You’re okay with dying if it means saving everyone else?!> The auditory hallucination intensely questions me.

I answer it with a wry smile. “Maybe you can’t understand, but...it’s not like I have a death wish. I just want to save everyone.”

<Huh? Why are you going so far...?>

I had the same question tossed at me a few hours ago. *“But why...why are you going so far to save me?”*

Yuuri’s question feels nostalgic now. She asked me that when we were crushed under the ceiling debris in the factory. It’s a memory of the time before everyone was at each other’s throats—from when we were all searching for the road to survival together.

I whisper the answer I couldn’t come up with then. “...All I’ve thought about is saving people. Ever since that moment you told me to save Yuuri.”

For me, someone with no memories of his past, the few hours since I woke up have essentially made up my entire life. The few memories I’ve recalled have all pertained to events inside LABO. This poorly lit basement facility is my entire world.

Perhaps I would’ve made a different choice if I had lived a peaceful life. But I woke up in this hellish place engulfed in fires and radiation with the responsibilities of a rescue squad captain on my shoulders.

“I just want to fulfill my duties as captain. I’m fed up with my powerless self

for being on the run from fires, explosions, and smoke...but I still want to save everyone.”

I’ll leap into the inferno if I find a survivor.

I’ll search through lethal gas while holding my breath if we’re short on AD.

I’ll put my own body on the line to shield Yuuri from being crushed under debris.

That’s how I’ve put saving the lives of others first and foremost.

<.....>

The auditory hallucination goes silent. I don’t blame it. Whoever the voice belongs to, they can’t understand the depths of what I’m feeling.

I’m a blank slate who was suddenly dropped into this nightmarish environment without my memories. I’m a soul who doesn’t even know a thing about myself, and yet the one thing I have to hold on to is my mission to *save people*.

That’s me—Watase Kasasagi.

The injuries I’ve sustained in the process of fulfilling that mission hurt again. The burns on my left hand, my cracked ribs, the lacerations on the back of my head, and the bruises all over my body cry out as painful reminders. My throat stings from thirst and vomiting, and my body feels heavier than lead from my amassing fatigue.

And still I put one foot in front of the other. Because that determination to save others is the last leg I have left to stand on after losing faith in myself.

“...I don’t want to see anyone else die. It’s just as bad if someone dies because I didn’t take action. If putting out the reactor fire is what it takes to save everyone, then that’s what I’ll do.”

Even if it costs me my life in the process.

The auditory hallucination seems to sense my resolve, because it speaks for the first time in a ghost of a voice. <...**Watase, you...**>

“Get it now? Please stop talking to me if you do... Talking about it will only

dull my resolve,” I declare and break into a run in the direction of the area with the blazing reactor.

▼ 2:27 PM

Between Area 2 and Area N

Connecting Passageway

THE Procyon’s warning alarm screeches at me the second I set foot inside the passageway leading to Area N. Displayed is a reading I’ve never seen before—12,210 mSv, a number that far surpasses the lethal limits.

My head is killing me, nausea forces me to clasp my hand over my mouth, my skin tingles, and my eyes blur over.

“...Tch!”

I flip the switch on the Procyon to “OFF” and push forward. It’s not long before I can make out the security gate through my watering eyes. A melted nuclear reactor, raging hellfire, lethal radiation. I shudder as I imagine the hell on Earth awaiting me up ahead.

But I came here prepared to face all of it. I keep myself from shaking, pull a hose from a nearby fire hydrant, and direct it at the security gate with my left hand.

“...Extinguishing preparations all set. I’m ready to do this.”

My determination doesn’t wither even in the face of genuine danger. Boundless courage courses through me.

I wonder if I’ve finally...become a real rescue squad captain now.

With the card in my right hand, I open the gate to nuclear hell.

▼ 2:28 PM

Area N

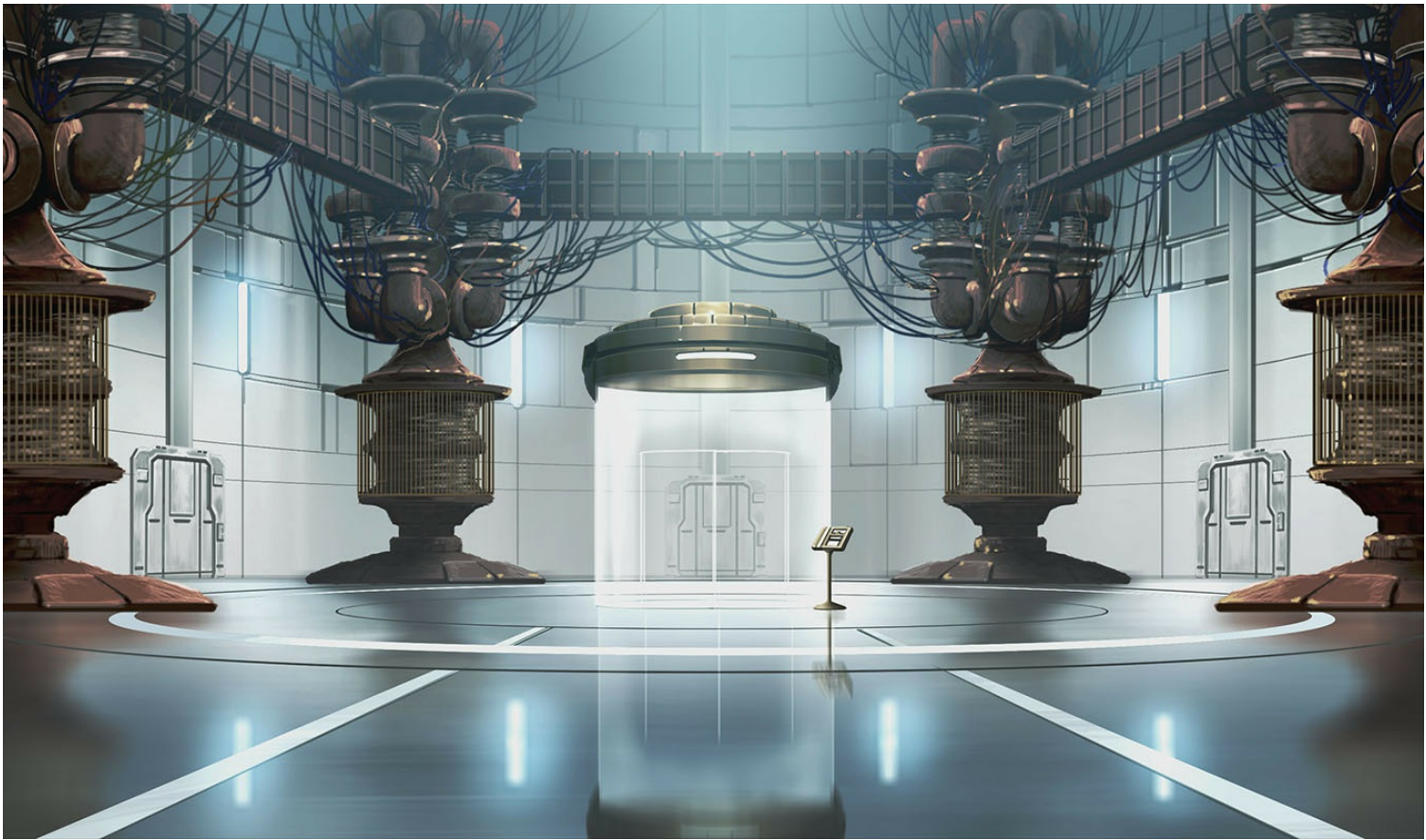
IT feels as if I’ve just opened the door to a raging energy storm. An invisible force crashes over my body with the earth-shattering power of a tidal wave. I dig my feet in, hold my arms down, and force my eyes open until they can take in every detail of the spectacle beyond the gate.

“...?!” The breath is ripped from my lungs.

This should be where a reactor melted down. The place where a fire is burning so out of control it made the security system go haywire. When in reality, the air is fresh and clear. Fire and smoke are nowhere to be seen.

“Wh-What the hell is this place?!”

On the other side of the opened gate is a gigantic hall filled with the faint sound of running machinery. A transparent cylinder stands in the center of the hall, surrounded by six towering spire-like installations. The installations are all connected to each other near the ceiling, forming a hexagram.



“Wh-What’s the meaning of this?! Wasn’t Area N supposed to be on fire?!” I throw the hose aside and walk over to one of the towering installations.

I don’t have any idea what a nuclear reactor is supposed to look like. But something tells me that the machines in this room aren’t it.

Doubts suddenly race through my mind. *H-Hang on...wasn’t there something like this in that data Miss Ena showed me earlier...?!*

I rack my brain to recall the data. I’m fairly certain the list included terms like *Case N, meltdown, brain dysfunction, Subject N, WX particles, particle amplifier, WX particle proliferation*, and so on. Now I finally realize the source of the uncomfortable feeling I had when I first saw the search list.

It’s too strange...!

Though the words *Case N* and *meltdown* appeared on the list, the other terms that should’ve been there weren’t. There hadn’t been a single hit on words pertaining to nuclear reactors, radiation, radioactive materials, or radiation exposure. And this is supposed to be a facility that designed an anti-radiation drug!

Instead, there were a ton of hits on mysterious terms like *WX particles* and *particle amplifier*.

This is clearly strange. There’s no explanation for it. But I have a hunch the answer lies in this room.

“It’s not just that there’s no fire! Could it be that...there was never a nuclear reactor here to begin with?!” I shout out loud.

Countless questions race through my already confused mind. *Were we tricked? By who? For what purpose? Who deceived us? Commander Murakami? Why would he lie about this? No, the people at LABO are more suspicious. Then was Ukita in on it...?!*

My head aches before I can finish my train of thought. “Ghh! AGH!” The pain is a thousand times worse than before. Every muscle in my body begins convulsing. “Sh-Shit...!”

I dart my eyes around the room in search of an exit. Just then, I catch a whiff

of a disturbing stench. I've smelled this stench more times than I would've liked to in the past few hours—it's the smell of spilled blood. A very bad feeling balloons within me as I follow the scent trail.

"No...!"

A boy in a blood-soaked school uniform is unconscious on the ground behind one of the whirring machines. His eyes are closed beneath his wire-rimmed glasses. His name and face match up perfectly with my memory of him.



Lying in a pool of his own blood is one of the three high school students trapped inside LABO—Natsuhiko Tenkawa.

“Hey, boy! Are you all right?!”

He doesn’t respond to my calls. I remove my glove and press my fingers against his carotid artery, but there’s no pulse, and his body is growing cold.

I quickly lay Natsuhiko flat on the ground and begin CPR. I do it just like Tachibana and Moribe did. Fifteen heart compressions. Two rescue breaths. But I get no reaction out of him.

Dammit...dammit!

I withstand the headaches and convulsions racking my body in my desperate attempt at CPR on the boy.

Fifteen compressions. Two rescue breaths.

Fifteen more compressions. Two more rescue breaths.

Fifteen more compressions. Two more rescue breaths.

“Please, please don’t die on me...!” I cry out as I throw myself into every compression. And then, somewhere along the way, his pulse faintly returned. “I-I did it!”

I hold my hand over his mouth, and his shallow breath slightly brushes along my skin. I may have gotten him back for now, but it’s still a life-threatening injury. It’s a miracle he’s still alive after how much blood he’s lost.

How did he get so severely injured, though? I examine his body and find several bullet holes in his uniform. *He was shot by someone too!* As soon as that realization hits me, I spot something lying on the ground beside him.

“Th-This is...!” I pick up that black glimmering piece of deadly metal and feel its weight in my hand. It’s a different model from the one Miss Ena had, but this is a pistol nonetheless. “Did the same killer get Natsuhiko too...?!”

In any event, I have to carry him somewhere safe. I pocket the pistol and put my hands under his body to lift him up.

Suddenly, I sense someone’s presence behind me. Startled, I jerk my neck to

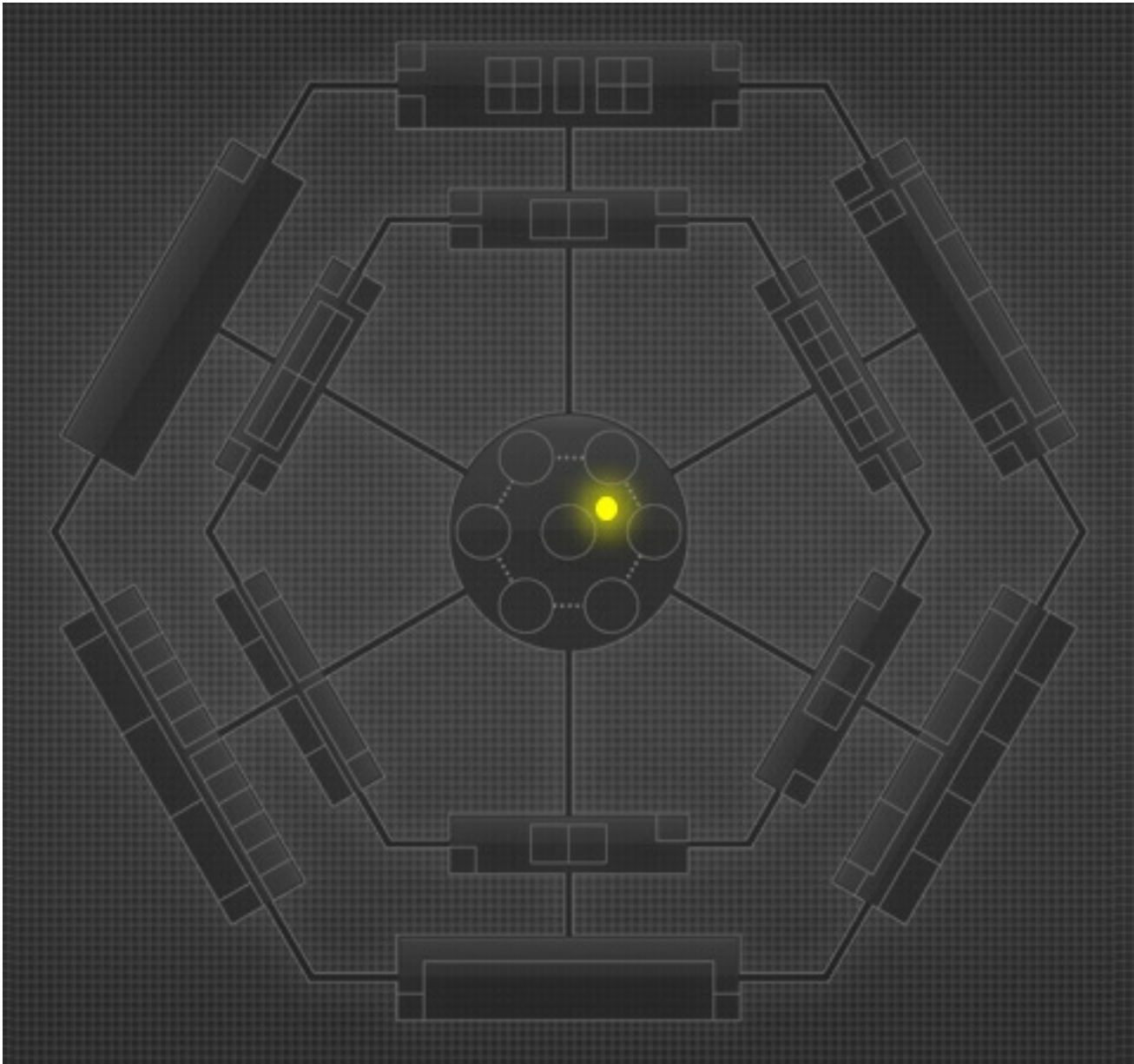
the side and see a petite figure charging straight at me with an axe.



They swing the axe down toward the crown of my head.

“Are you insane?!” I roll to the side just as the axe hits the floor. I spring to my feet and confirm who it is from a distance. Standing before me is the blonde girl who ran away the two times I’ve come across her. “It’s you!”

Standing off with me with a bloodied axe is one of the survivors—Salyu, a.k.a Louise Yui Sannomiya.



Radiation Level: 12,839 mSv (heavily contaminated zone)

Remaining AD: 0

Area N

I square off with Salyu in a corner of Area N. Her blue eyes gleam with a light colder than ice. She grips the burned axe in her right hand. It's the one Hiyama had when he died and was snatched after I left it as his grave marker. I had wondered why someone made off with it, but—

“Why did you take—” Salyu lunges at me again before I can finish. “Whoa!”

She lashes out for my neck. I barely lean back in time, leaving the axe to slice through thin air instead of flesh. I reflexively try to grab hold of her, but she swings her leg up a second faster, landing a swift kick to my temple.

“AUGH!” I immediately jump back before she swings the axe back around. I'm greeted by her frosty expression through my reeling vision.

Wh-What's her problem?!

She attacks without an ounce of hesitation using battle techniques that belie her age and size. Matters are only growing worse for me as my convulsions and aching brain intensify. Fighting in this condition is the same as throwing my life away.

Then I notice it—Salyu's body is slightly trembling. She has the same shakes as I do.



“H-Hey! Do have a terrible headache, too?!”

“.....”

“Then get out of here right now! What good does it do to fight me if it means putting your life in danger?!” My shout causes her cheek to twitch.

Salyu stares at me and bitterly hisses, “...That line again. You said the same thing to me last time.”

“I-I did?!”

When was that? When did I speak with this girl? My moment of confusion leaves me wide-open. Salyu comes at me for the third time. *Dammit! I won't survive this one!*

My body moves on its own. I drop into a crouch and spring at her with all the strength in my legs. I tackle her with the force of a speeding bullet, hitting her directly in the waist.

“GAGH!” The axe slips from her hand as she falls on her back. I use the momentum of my tackle to straddle her.

What did I just do?

I'm shocked by my own actions. Those instinctive moves were clearly worked into my muscle memory through training. But I can't think of a single reason why I'd need them for rescue work.

Where did I learn to fight like this?

Salyu is glowering up at me, her eyes seething like cold blue flames. I let the hatred there roll off my back and try reasoning with her. “Why did you attack me?”



She shifts her gaze to where Natsuhiko is lying.

“Did you think I attacked Natsuhiko? That’s a big misunderstanding if you do! I was trying to carry him to a safe place!”

She sadly narrows her eyes. “Stop telling thinly veiled lies even I can see through,” she whispers and moves her right hand as fast as lightning.

“UGH!” She pokes both my eyes, temporarily blinding me. I can feel her body slipping out from underneath me.

Crap! If she gets away now, I won’t be able to dodge her next slash!

I blindly reach into the darkness. My left hand makes contact with something. It feels like cloth. I latch on to it and concentrate on yanking it toward me.

“Let go of me!”

Through my closed off vision, I can tell she’s struggling against me. But she’ll very likely kill me if I let go of her now. Knowing I’ll die if I don’t take her out here, I wrap my hands around her fragile neck and squeeze.

I hear her coughing, and then her body falls limp in my hands.

My vision returns soon after. I blink a few times until I see her unconscious in my arms.

I-I almost died there! This girl seriously tried to kill me...!

My head, gut, and skin are aching like crazy still. The convulsions haven’t stopped either. Every instinct in my body is screaming that it’s too dangerous to stay here.

Right now, I need to focus on getting these kids out of here. That newfound purpose gives me the strength to throw both Natsuhiko and Salyu over my shoulders. I stagger out of Area N with them.

I fumble my way out of the connecting passageway.

“Captain!” Tachibana abruptly calls.

I torque my neck with a start and see her standing in the middle of the corridor. She sprints over with a look of absolute relief.

“Oh, thank God. I’m so glad to see you alive...”

“Tachibana...what are you...doing here?” I rasp.

“I was watching the surveillance cameras out of worry for you, when I spotted you walking in here...” She stops when she sees Natsuhiko and Salyu dangling from my shoulders. “What in the world is going on here, Captain?”

“This is Natsuhiko and Salyu. I found them in Area N.”

Tachibana furrows her brow. “Did you say Area N? Isn’t that where the melted reactor is burning?!”

“Well, I’m not really sure what’s going on here, either, but...there was no reactor or fire in Area N.”

“What?!” Tachibana is speechless.

Determining she probably won’t believe a word I say, I hand her the Level N security card. “You’ll believe it if you see it. Check with your own eyes.”

She gives a skeptical nod as she accepts the card and runs to Area N. She comes back within thirty seconds with a look of absolute disbelief. “Th-There really wasn’t a fire or a melting reactor...! I can’t believe this is happening...!”

“Me either...”

“But, Captain, if there’s no fire in Area N, why did the lockdown happen?!”

“...I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore...” I take the Level N card back from Tachibana and move things along. “Let’s save the explanations and debates for later. Natsuhiko won’t last much longer if we don’t give him first aid, ASAP.”

“He has lost a lot of blood... I believe he needs a transfusion to survive.”

“Then let’s head straight to the infirmary. There are blood packs and transfusion kits there.”

“I agree. Let me carry one of them.”

“Can you do it with that injured leg?”

“I have recovered a lot since then. I’ll make do.” Tachibana carries Salyu despite her badly injured leg. She quietly warns me on our walk to the

infirmary, “Captain, we need to be very alert on the way there.”

“Something happen?”

“Moribe and Mr. Ukita stormed out of the surveillance room before I left. They are both acting extremely unusual. You will be in danger if you run into them now.”

I don’t know the full picture, but her tense voice and expression are more than persuasive enough for me.

“...Got it. Let’s proceed carefully from here.”

We advance through the connecting passageway wary of everything around us.

▼ 2:39 PM

Area 5, Outer Ring

Infirmary

FORTUNATELY, we make it to the infirmary without bumping into anyone. We lower the kids off our backs and onto the beds, and immediately tend to Natsuhiko’s wounds. Tachibana checks his blood type with the antigen analysis device, then inserts the IV into his wrist and begins the blood transfusion.

Meanwhile, I use as much Chiron as I can to seal up his wounds.

“Tachibana, do you think Natsuhiko can be saved?”

She wraps the Vital Checker around his wrist and announces, “Both his breathing and his pulse are very weak. But his vital signs are just barely stable... He’s in an unpredictable condition, but I believe he should stabilize with the blood transfusion now that the wounds have been sealed with Chiron.”

I’m relieved from the bottom of my heart. But that relief is short-lived as Tachibana continues to speak with a grave expression. “Captain, while we are waiting for his transfusion to finish, please tell me what happened after you left the surveillance room.”

“Here’s what happened...” I tell Tachibana everything I’ve done until now, starting from my journey to Area N to put out the fire so the lockdown will end.

I fill her in on how there was neither a fire nor a melted reactor, and how I had to knock out Salyu because she attacked me right after I found Natsuhiko.

After hearing me out, Tachibana lowers her head and puts her finger to her chin in thought. “So that’s what happened... It’s all so strange, I don’t even know where to begin questioning you...,” she starts, then looks me in the eyes. “Captain, what do you think about LABO?”

“In what sense?”

“Like you said, not only were there no fires in Area N, but there wasn’t even a single reactor. The machines there were something entirely different.”

“You don’t think those are reactors either?”

“I don’t. I have never seen or heard of a nuclear reactor with that shape and set up. Though I can’t entirely discredit the possibility it may just be a new model that hasn’t been announced to the public yet.”

The chances of that are slim. The moment we discovered there were no fires was the moment we gained solid proof LABO has been lying to us. I don’t know why they are, but I have a hunch.

“...Either way, the fact that there wasn’t a nuclear reactor raises the question if LABO was ever a nuclear energy research facility to begin with,” I speculate.

“But that is strange in and of itself. Since there’s no nuclear reactor, that should mean the radiation we have lived in fear of these past few hours never really existed. And if it doesn’t, what caused my horrible headache and my skin to go numb for the hour I had a reduced dosage of AD?”

“Those are all good questions... When Moribe and I entered the contaminated zones, we also had symptoms including a headache, vomiting, and blacking out.”

Plus, Ukita seemed genuinely scared to death of the rising readings given by the Procyon. With how much he’s been on our backs about not digging into the secrets of this facility, I assume he knows the truth behind those machines in Area N.

What was Ukita afraid of, then? Was he deceived by someone as well? Or—

“...Even if there’s no nuclear reactor, there could still be something lethal spreading through the facility. Something comparable in danger to radioactive materials...”

“That’s a valid possibility. Then the question is: What were those machines in Area N?”

As I consider the possibilities, a fragmented memory flashes into my mind. “Now that I think about it...I feel like I’ve seen those things somewhere before.”

“You have? Before you lost your memories?”

“No. Recently. Like several hours ago. I’m pretty sure it’s—” The memory is right there at my fingertips when the door is suddenly thrown open. “What the?!” I spin around and come face-to-face with Ukita.

He grins when he sees us staring back at him in shock. “My, my, my, if it isn’t Captain Kasasagi and Lieutenant Tachibana. Why, I didn’t expect to find you here when I heard that sound,” he drawls. “And what are you two up to, hmm?” The light of sanity wavers unsteadily in his eyes. He shifts them to the beds. “Natsuhiko? Sannomiya?! They’re terribly injured! Where have they been all this time?!”

I carefully pick my words. “I went to Area N to put out the fire and took them under my protection when I found them there.”

“What?! You actually went to deal with Area N...?” Ukita’s eyebrows snap together. He nods several times to himself and growls in a low voice, “I see, I see. I finally see the whole picture... So you were the real traitor all along.”

“How did you come up with that?! Why does going into Area N make me the traitor?”

“Shut your trap. I don’t have the patience to listen to your excuses any longer.”

“Wha—”

“You know, I trusted you, Captain Kasasagi. I believed you were a just person who put his life on the line to save lives. That’s why I put my own life on the line to save others too...!” Ukita shoves his hand in his coat pocket and whips out a

pistol. The very one I had them split into three parts.

“Are you bluffing right now, Ukita? That gun is a paperweight without the magazine!”

“Shall we test how much of a paperweight it really is?”



One glance at his deranged expression tells me he isn't bluffing. I step in front of Tachibana and try reasoning with him. "Wait, Ukita! Hear me out before you fire that thing! Your superiors might not have informed you of this, but there's no reactor in Area N!"

"What...? You're going to spout nonsense with a gun pointed at your face?"

"Trust me! It's the truth!"

"Well, truth or not, your role in this ends now!" Ukita cocks the hammer and my damn body stays rooted to the spot.

In the same second that feels like eternity to me, Tachibana shouts, "Watch out, Captain!" and pushes me out of the way.

A gunshot rings out a moment later, and the bullet drills a hole into the wall. As I roll onto the floor, I whip out the weapon in my pocket.

"How?!" Ukita's eyes widen with disbelief.

I'm gripping the pistol I found on the floor in Area N. When I point it at him, he turns tail and bolts from the room. I could've shot him in the back, but I obviously don't pull the trigger.

"You've finally shown your true colors, Captain Kasasagi! But don't forget I'll be the one to bring you to justice!" Ukita shouts like a madman as he disappears into the corridor beyond the open door. His footfalls fade into the distance.

Once we can't hear him anymore, Tachibana cautiously asks, "Um, Captain, where did that pistol come from?"

"O-Oh, right, I forgot to tell you about it... I picked it up in Area N. It was on the ground next to Natsuhiko."

"I-I see..." Tachibana appears frightened by the pistol.

I shove it into my pocket and change the topic. "We need to get outta here now. Staying here any longer with Ukita knowing our whereabouts is dangerous."

Natsuhiko's blood transfusion isn't finished yet, and Salyu shows no signs of

rousing. They're at major risk of getting hurt if we run into another deranged attack like that.

"...Miss Ena is in danger too."

"Ms. Tsubakiyama is? Where is she anyway?"

"I left her in a room back in Area 2. The way Ukita is now, I fear he'll attack her too."

"I-I fear so as well. Let's keep Tenkawa's blood transfusion going while we move to meet up with her." Tachibana wraps the blood pack and transfusion kit around Natsuhiko's body.

With Natsuhiko on my back, and Salyu on hers, we depart the infirmary.

▼ 2:44 PM

Area 2, Inner Ring

I cry out in horror when we make it to the room in Area 2. "What the hell happened here?!"

A rectangle big enough for a person to fit through has been carved out of the door to the room I locked Miss Ena in. Destroying the control button was meaningless. I rush through the hole into the room.

No one's inside. Did Miss Ena wake up and run away before this happened? I don't see her or any bloodstains.

At least she got out okay, but...who in their right mind did this?! How the hell did they break down the door?

My ears pick up an unsettling sound coming from far down the corridor outside.

"...What was that sound?" I share a look with Tachibana and we stealthily peek around the corner to the far end of the corridor. There I spot Moribe's back about fifty feet from us.

She's wandering around muttering to herself with blood dripping from her head and the engine cutter firmly gripped in her hands. "Where...where did that cretin go...?" She's talking to herself. Her delusional voice echoes through the

corridor as she converses with empty space. “I knew it... Then I have no choice. I can’t protect everyone otherwise... I have to be the one to kill ’im... I’ve gotta do it even if it’s painful for me...” she says sinisterly, as if she’s chanting a curse. Listening to her gives me the chills.



Is she talking about me?! Moribe suspected me. Her suspicion may have escalated into a need to kill!

That's the only explanation after Ukita just tried to do the same for no good reason! Moribe is very likely the one who carved her way into the room.

"...It's dangerous here, Captain. Let's escape while we still can," Tachibana whispers in my ear when I don't move.

"You sure? Isn't Moribe like a sister to you?"

"I fear convincing her is impossible even for me in her current state of mind...", she says in a heartbroken voice. I don't argue with her on this one.

As I set off in the opposite direction, my boot scrapes the shiny floor, letting out a loud squeak.

"Who's there?!" Moribe wails behind me. I can hear the sound of her running and the engine cutter motor fast approaching.

Tachibana and I sprint down the corridor as fast as we can go. We slip through the connecting passageway toward Area 3.

"Hurry, Tachibana!" I shout as I run. "We're screwed if we don't run away!"

"B-But, Captain...where should we run to?"

"Where?" I don't have a good answer.

As long as Moribe has a running engine cutter, it won't matter what room we hide in. Locking ourselves inside doesn't do any good when she can cut through the door. And we can only run so far with Natsuhiko and Salyu on our backs before we run out of stamina and she catches up to us.

Time isn't on our side either. My watch says it's 2:46 PM. Only thirty more minutes to go until our AD runs out. Radiation or no radiation, my gut tells me we're all doomed when that time comes.

Oppressive silence flows between us.

"Why...why did it come to this?!" Tachibana mournfully whispers. She continues speaking, more to herself than to me. "Chased down by the people we were supposed to save and called friend... How can we save others when we

can't even save ourselves?!"

This is the first time I've heard her complain since this nightmare started. It breaks my heart to see her hurting like this.

Up until now, we never gave up no matter what was thrown at us. We planned to save everyone, even if it cost us our lives in the process.

But is it hopeless at this point? Would it be better to just give up and die? That thought triggers a scene to flash into my head.



The scene takes place inside a strange building with sterile corridors just like the ones found in LABO. Crimson light illuminates the pitch-dark corridor. Fire covers the walls and ceiling. I'm walking through the gaps in the flames with my arm around some woman's shoulders. Smoke fills my vision, distorting what her face looks like.



“Watase, you can’t give up! Save dying for after you fight until the bitter end!” she shouts with her eyes firmly locked on the way ahead. Her words sunk into me with unshakable determination.



That was a waking dream that lasted but a moment. Her voice and face disappeared from my mind like haze blown away by the spring wind.

Wh-What was that just now?

I strongly believe that was a scene from my fractured memories—a fragment from my lost past. It’s a sorrowful and nostalgic memory that pulls me from the spiral of depression and gives me the courage to keep going.

“Tachibana...don’t give up,” I say, conveying the same hope-inspiring words to her. “We’re still alive. We have people to rescue. So let’s save giving up for after we fight...until the bitter end.”

“...Yes, sir.” Her voice is filled with the determination of someone trying to survive through the pits of utter hopelessness.

▼ 2:48 PM

Area 3, Inner Ring

“...**WE’RE** going to search for an escape route,” I inform Tachibana when we arrive in Area 3. “Escaping outside is the only option with nowhere inside the facility being safe. We can still look for a way out.”

Tachibana gives me a hard look. “But we have been looking everywhere for an escape route since long before you woke up, Captain. I’m sure Commander Murakami and the people outside have been, too. Seeing as they haven’t broken their way inside to get us out, I don’t think there is anything we can do from the inside.”

“...It sure doesn’t look that way.”

I started looking for other ways out after the cargo lift stopped being an option. Meanwhile, other problems kept popping up one after the other in the process. Did I come across anything useful along the way?

That question triggers something I remember seeing. “Wait, come to think of it...!”

“Did you come up with something?”

“The pipes! Remember how there were thick pipes running along the engine room ceiling? One of those pipes brings in water from the nearby lake to cool the reactor.” I recall Ukita’s explanation. He said water is circulating through the pipe at high speeds and breaking a hole in it will flood all of LABO, but... “Doesn’t the purpose of that pipe become suspicious now that we know there’s no reactor?”

“It does...! But I don’t believe its purpose is a complete lie. Perhaps it’s used to cool off that large machine?”

“Crap. Then we still risk flooding LABO by opening it up? I wish there was a way to stop the water from circulating through it.”

“So do I... We might be able to come up with a plan if we knew what that machine was for.”

Her comment sparks another fragmented memory. “H-Hang on, Tachibana! I just remembered where I’ve seen that machine before!”

“You did?! Where?!”

“The engine room! It was in one of the machine manuals included in the terminal there! There was an image of that large machine on the first page!”

“I remember that too!” Tachibana had looked at that manual with me. “That manual may have valuable information that can help us! Let’s go check right now!”

Tachibana and I run even faster toward the engine room.

▼ 2:51 PM

Area 3

Engine Room

WE come back to the dimly lit heart of LABO where machines whir and pipes snake in every direction. I lay Natsuhiko and Salyu next to each other on the

floor and run over to the terminal with Tachibana.

I touch the manual at the top of the menu screen. A picture of that machine appears on screen under the heading “WX Particle Amplifier Operation Manual.”

“This is it!”

Tachibana and I squeeze in close and devour every word on the screen.



WX Particle Amplifier Operation Manual

This is an operation manual for the WX particle amplifier. Since it is extremely dangerous to operate, please read this manual carefully before starting work. Furthermore, please be aware that WX particles have an adverse effect on the human body due to their properties. The correlation between the effects on the human body and the amount of particle energy is as follows:

○**Without AD**

0 to 2,000 mSv No effect on the body

2,000 to 4,000 mSv Sensory abnormalities, vomiting, headache,
genetic disorders

4,000 to 8,000 mSv Brain dysfunction, deterioration of awareness level

8,000+ mSv Disruption of consciousness

○**With AD**

0 to 6,000 mSv No effect on the body

6,000 to 8,000 mSv Sensory abnormalities, vomiting, headache,
genetic disorders

8,000 to 12,000 mSv Brain dysfunction, deterioration of awareness
level

12,000+ mSv Disruption of consciousness

As described above, the intensity and probability of the symptoms increases in proportion to the amount of energy exposure. When AD is administered, add

about 4,000 mSv to the value when not administered. If the amount of energy exceeds 4,000 mSv, the occurrence of NBC is also a concern.



“Tachibana, do you understand what it’s talking about?” I whisper as I stare at the screen.

“No... I have never heard of WX particles before. The list of negative effects it has on the body makes it sound similar to radiation, though.”

I get the same sense from it, too. But there’s something more important for us to think about right now.

“Is there anything written about the pipes?”

As I continue scanning through the operation manual, my eyes anchor on one particular entry.



○About the Water Coolant System

A large amount of heat is generated when the WX particle amplifier is in operation. In order to cool the heat, a coolant system that uses natural water from Lake Rokumei has been installed in the engine room.

Cold water is drawn inside through the “intake pipe” and drained by the “drainage pipe.” The diameter of each pipe is 3.3 feet. Thickness is 0.4 inches. The amount of water circulated is about 1,200 liters per minute. The cold water from the intake pipe is discharged after the water temperature rises by about 30° Celsius.

(※ If the water temperature of Lake Rokumei in August is 24° Celsius, it will be 58° Celsius when discharged.)

The water flow is controlled by a “forced circulation pump” installed in the drainage pipe. In addition, a “filtering mechanism” exists in the intake pipe to prevent foreign matter from entering.

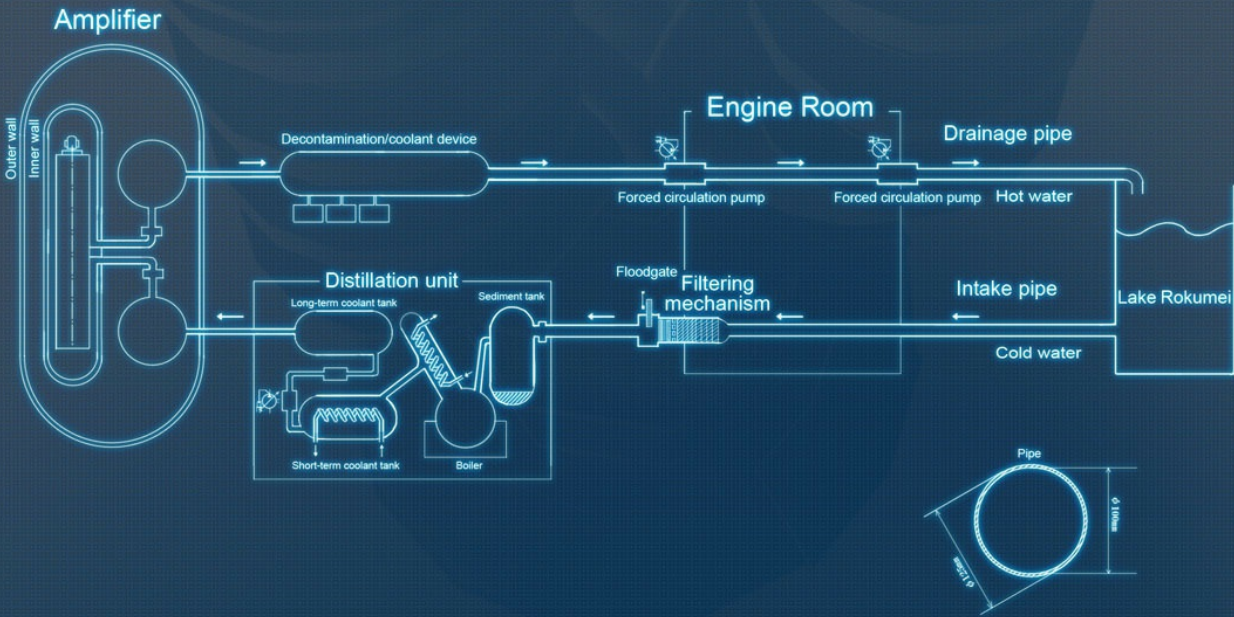
Only water distilled and filtered at high speed by the filtering mechanism is used as coolant. Foreign matter such as algae is automatically discharged from the “foreign matter discharge port” equipped in the filtering mechanism.

When the filtering mechanism fails, there is a risk that contaminated water will flow into the amplifier and a serious failure will occur. Therefore, when the filtering mechanism fails, the “floodgate” in the intake pipe is automatically closed to avoid the inflow of water mixed with foreign substances.

At the same time, the operation of the forced circulation pump and the amplifier is stopped, and the water flow is stopped. The position of each piece of equipment is shown in the blueprint below.



Coolant system blueprint





“This is it! I just knew this was our ticket outta here!” I exclaim after reading the manual.

Looking up, I can see the two pipes running near the ceiling. Lining it up with the blueprint would make the closest one the intake pipe and the one behind it the drainage pipe. Next to the pipes is a ladder. And right under the intake pipe is a white machine about twenty-two square feet in size. That should be the filtering mechanism.

“If this filtering mechanism fails—or rather, if we break it, the water will stop circulating. And then we can escape through this pipe to Lake Rokumei!” I rejoice.

Tachibana thinks it over before softly asking, “Yes, but...what should we do after we stop the water’s circulation?”

“What do you mean?”

“Going by this blueprint, the intake pipe is located deep under the lake. Even if we stop the water, puncturing a hole in the intake pipe will still flood LABO.”

“Which leaves us with opening a hole in the drainage pipe instead. It shouldn’t release too much water if we stop the flow and cut a hole in the top of the pipe.”

“But the drainage pipe is filled with water heated by whatever that amplifier is. We can’t withstand water temperatures around fifty-eight degrees Celsius.”

She’s absolutely right. Even if we cut a hole in the bottom of the drainage pipe and let out all the water, it’s still a risky move. One wrong move could drown the remaining survivors in a large volume of boiling water.

“...We can’t play around when the stakes are this high. So we have to make the incision into the top of the drainage pipe.”

“Then that leaves us with three problems we must solve first. One: how to open a hole in the drainage pipe. Two: how to breathe inside the water-filled pipe. Three: how to make the five-hundred-fifty-yard journey to the lake while withstanding water that’s fifty-eight degrees Celsius.”

“Let’s figure it out together, Tachibana. We can escape this hell by clearing just three obstacles!”

“We can do this!” We sit on the ground and start bouncing ideas off each other. “The first problem is how to open a big enough hole we can fit through. If only we could wrest the engine cutter from Moribe for it...”

“Nah, that’s just asking for pain. I know where we can find the perfect tool for the job that doesn’t involve Moribe.”

“What is it?” Tachibana tilts her head.

“Hiyama’s fire axe. It’s currently on the floor in Area N. I can use sheer brute force to hack a hole into the pipe.”

“...Is that actually possible?”

“Trust me. You said you did before, right?” I flex and put on a tough guy show, which earns a small laugh from her.

“...I trust you!”

“Good! Now, how to handle breathing inside the water-filled pipe?”

“I have an idea on how to do that.”

“What is it?”

“There is still one air tank left at our base. It has about twenty minutes of air. I can’t guarantee that’s enough for a five-hundred-fifty-yard trek underwater, but it’s all we have.”

“I thought the mask was broken?”

“You can hold the hose that extends from the tank to your mouth. It can’t be used this way while extinguishing fires because it not only removes the use of one hand, but also eliminates your ability to converse, so I never recommended it before now.”

“That makes sense. We can make it work if we’re only traversing through the water.” I strongly agree with Tachibana’s suggestion. As we knock out each problem, the plan becomes more realistic. But we haven’t solved the true obstacle yet. “...Okay, last problem. How to withstand boiling hot water...?”

Tachibana grimly nods. “First, you should know that an air temperature of fifty-eight degrees Celsius is a completely different creature from water that’s fifty-eight degrees. Hot water causes significantly more damage to the human body than hot air because your body is less likely to perspire while in contact with liquid. You’ve never taken a bath in fifty-eight-degree water before, right? Humans can’t tolerate water at that temperature.”

“Geh...” I groan.

I wish we could wait for the water to cool down after we stop the circulation, but it’ll take too much time for water to cool off inside a superheated pipe that’s so small.

“So should we just plunge into it prepared for burns once the temperature drops a little?”

“Even if you and I could tolerate the heat, I doubt the survivors can. Especially Tenkawa, with how serious his injuries are.”

“True... Trying to carry Natsuhiko through the pipe seems near impossible.”

But if even one person makes it out, they can seek help from Commander Murakami. We can even call in the cavalry. The police should be capable of subduing the frenzied Moribe and Ukita.

If only we could come up with a way for at least one person to endure the heat long enough to get out of the pipe! I rack my brain harder than ever before. I sift through all the knowledge I’ve obtained in the past five hours. *Think...! Is there anything inside this facility capable of blocking heat?*

Our uniforms are heat resistant, but they aren’t built to withstand boiling hot water. The water will seep through the various openings in the sleeves and collar, burning the skin below.

What else is there? I sort through everything I’ve seen so far. What about the gear inside the makeshift base? Air tank, air jack, AD, Procyon, engine cutter. Then what I have on me: PDA, security cards, and a gun. None of that is very helpful.

How about the things I found inside the facility? Blood packs, a transfusion kit, respirator, Chiron, distilled water, axe, and another pistol. Again, nothing

useful!

Don't give up! Think! There must be something somewhere!

I think back on the journey I've taken to get here. I woke up after losing consciousness, met Tachibana and Moribe, and saved Yuuri. From there I sorted through the gear in the makeshift base, met up with Miss Ena and Ukita, and began looking for the kids. In the process, I found my dead squad members, continued the search, restarted the sprinkler system, put out the fire—

“...!”

Something nags at the back of my mind. I recall what Moribe told me at the beginning of our search when we went to the base: *“We also had two hazmat suits, but...like I just said, the faceplates are damaged beyond use.”*

Then I draw on a second memory, one of the time we discovered Hiyama's corpse in Area 4. His hazmat-clad body was charred from the waist down.

“...Ah!” I utter in a trembling voice. My heartbeat accelerates and I clench my fists at the stroke of genius I just had. Those two memories contained the answer we're looking for. “I've figured it out, Tachibana! The way we can withstand the superheated water!”

“Wh-What is it?” Tachibana leans in close, anticipation glimmering in her eyes.

“The hazmat suit. It's going to help us out in the very end.”

Hazmat suits are worn to block out any radioactive dust. Like the bulkheads that locked down LABO, the suits won't let in a single speck of dust. On top of that, the hazmat suits are water-resistant and airtight. Wearing one will prevent any hot water from leaking inside. 58° Celsius water will become 58° Celsius air temperature, transforming it into a tolerable level.

“But, Captain, our hazmat suits were cracked...!”

“It's okay. I've got a plan. I'll go collect what we need to escape. Will you wait for me here with the kids?”

“B-But...!” Tachibana's eyes waver. She knows how dangerous it is to split up with Ukita and Moribe roaming the corridors.

“I understand why you’re worried, but I’ll stand out less if I act alone. Plus, someone needs to keep the kids safe. I’ll be back in no time.”

“A-All right. Please be careful!”

“Yes, ma’am.” I smile at her and sneak out of the engine room.

First stop: the makeshift base in Area 2. I obtain the air tank and hazmat suit from there. The cracked mask rendered this suit useless to us. I remove the faceplate and hurry from the room with the suit.

I collect the axe from Area N, then run toward Area 4 pondering the hazmat suits. Every hazmat suit down here has been destroyed in one spot or the other. Tachibana’s and Moribe’s had cracked faceplates, Dojima’s was ripped to pieces, and the lower half of Hiyama’s was burned off.

But taking the undamaged pieces from each of those suits will give me a fully working hazmat suit. That’s the genius plan I came up with after racking my brain.

Before long, I make it to the elevator hall inside Area 4’s outer ring. Hiyama’s body is still where we left it.

“Forgive me for this, Hiyama...” I apologize to him as I remove the faceplate from his hazmat suit.

Now I have everything I need: the axe, air tank, an unbroken faceplate, and an undamaged hazmat suit. With all that in my hands, I force my legs to run in the direction of the engine room.

▼ 2:59 PM

Area 3 B0

Engine Room

TACHIBANA runs over to me once I return. “Captain! Where did you get that hazmat suit?!”

“I pieced together the working parts from several different suits.”

“I never even considered that...!” she says in awe. She shifts her gaze up to the ceiling pipes and tells me, “...I destroyed the filtering mechanism while you

were away. The water has stopped circulating inside the pipe.”

“Thanks... Looks like escape is no longer a pipe dream,” I say, making a small joke to lighten the mood, and then look her straight in the eye. “Tachibana, this is our final decision. We only have one hazmat suit. Who goes? You or me?”

Staying here will only increase the odds of being hurt by those WX particles. Going into the pipe or remaining in LABO are two options with equally dangerous prospects.

“I believe I should go,” she says without a moment’s hesitation.

“Why?”

“Because going into the pipe is far more dangerous than remaining here. It’s questionable whether the air tank will make it, and the burning hot water may leak into the piecemeal hazmat suit along the way... I cannot allow you to endanger yourself like that.” She pins me down with her strong gaze.

“I thought you’d say that,” I say with a slight smile. “But you can’t, Tachibana.”

“Why not?”

“You injured your leg bad. Can you walk five hundred fifty yards through a cramped pipe on that leg?”

“Yes, I can. I helped carry Salyu all the way here, didn’t I?”

“But you’ve been gradually slowing down. And going slow with limited oxygen decreases your chance of survival.” Frustrated by my sound argument, she falls quiet. I put my hand on hers and make my case. “The lives of everyone inside this facility are bearing down on the shoulders of whoever plunges into that pipe. So we have to do whatever it takes to increase our chances of success... That’s why I’ll be the one to do it, Tachibana,” I flatly declare. When she says nothing in return, I add one final remark. “This is an order. No objections allowed.”

Tachibana shakes her head. “...I object,” she protests in a barely audible voice.

“Whoa, where did that come from? It’s not like you to ignore an order, Tachibana.”

“But...!” she complains like a child throwing a tantrum. Worry shimmers in her eyes. It’s the first time I’ve seen her look this scared for me.

I return her argument with the manliest expression I can manage. “Please let me go, Tachibana... I was hopelessly helpless when I first regained consciousness, and had to be saved by you at every corner. Let me be cool at the very end to repay you for everything.”

She hangs her head and bites her lip as she fights with herself in silence. She eventually gives a small nod.

Mind set at ease by that voiceless answer, I hurry to prepare things. I suit up and prep the air tank. I carry the faceplate and air tank in my right hand and the axe in my left.

“I’ll get out of here and call for the cavalry,” I tell Tachibana once I’m ready. “I hate leaving you guys here, but...wait for my return.”

“...I will,” she says, returning my gaze. Her apprehensive expression squeezes at my heart.

I pat her on the shoulder and climb the ladder, clamber on top of the drainage pipe, and raise the axe into the air. I bring it down on the pipe with the full force of the swing. Sparks fly, and a tiny hole forms. But the sturdy pipe is too thick to open a hole big enough for a person to fit through in one hit.

“URAAAAAAAAAAHHH!” I let out a battle cry and bring the axe down dozens of times. Powered by my determination to escape, I put all my strength into each hit.

The hole steadily widens. Steam rises from the pipe and hot water spills out. But only a cupful. The water has definitely been stopped.

After swinging the axe over and over again, the blade finally gives out on me.

“Ghh!” But it did its job—the hole is big enough for me to slip inside. “...Yes!” I peer below the pipe. Tachibana is staring up with worry. “Tachibana, I put a hole in the pipe! I’m heading out! Take care of the kids for me!”



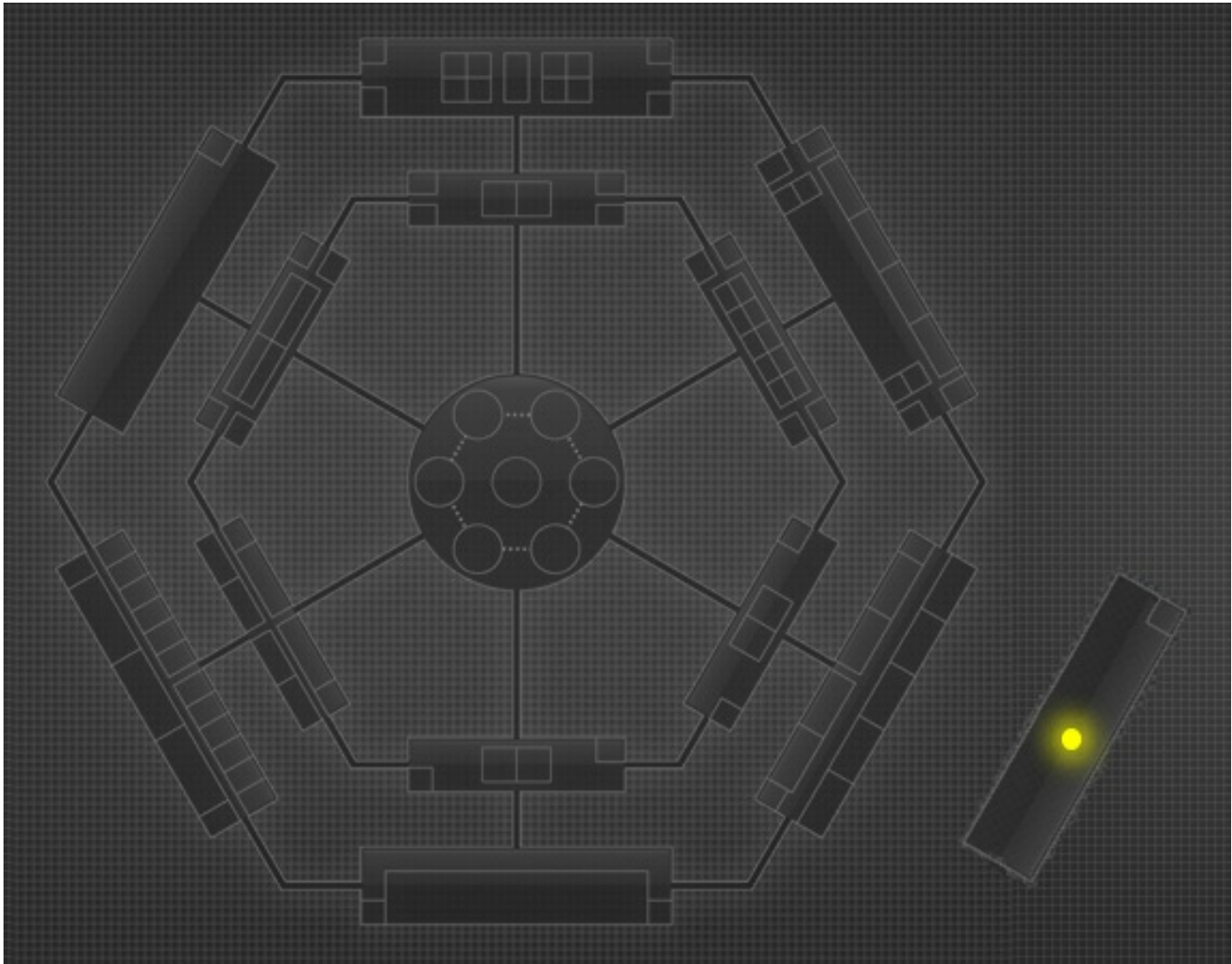
“Captain!” she calls back from below. “Please come back no matter what!”

“You got it!” I reply and lower myself into the pipe filled with searing hot water—our last escape route.

The inside is sunk in darkness. I can feel the heat through my hazmat suit. Walking 550 yards through this will get me to Lake Rokumei.

...Time to go.

I harden my resolve and take my first step into the darkness to save us all.



Radiation Level: 4,862 mSv

Remaining AD: 0

Area 3, Attic

Inside the Engine Room's Drainage Pipe

FIVE minutes have passed since I dove into the pipe. I've come to a complete standstill after advancing about fifty-five yards through the water. Something is blocking my path forward. The darkness in here is so thick my eyes are basically useless. I can still tell there's something in the way, though.

The forced circulation pump from the blueprint is obstructing the middle of the pipe.

Why after I've come so damn far?! I slam my fist into the pump. It doesn't even vibrate under my knuckles. This isn't something I can take out with physical strength. Break, dammit! I can get to the lake if this is gone! I can save everyone!

I punch and kick at it, but I can't muster enough force underwater. Still, I fight with the pump until it becomes difficult to breathe.

There's plenty of air left in the tank, but expending so much energy underwater at these high temperatures is burdening my lungs. I'm seized with a rapidly growing sense of despair. Death is all that's in store for me if I stay here.

You piece of shit...! I kick off the pump and return down the path I came.

"Puuaaah!" I rip the faceplate off when I come up from the hot water. I clamber on top of the pipe and slide down the ladder. Once my feet hit the floor, I hear a voice behind me.

"Captain!" Tachibana is running over to me. "You came back so soon?!"

"I'm sorry, Tachibana...! The path inside the pipe was blocked! We can't reach Lake Rokumei!" I explain through gasps for cool air.

Tachibana's expression falls. "I-Is it possible to destroy the obstruction? What if we use the engine cutter...?"

"The pipe is filled with water. The motor won't work underwater."

"...No..." She covers her mouth and casts down her eyes.

“...The pipe is no good,” I grind out between my teeth. “We gotta search for another way.”

“But how? There really is nothing else for us to go off of...”

“Let’s go back to the starting point one last time. We have to think of a way to pry open the bulkhead blocking the escape route from the emergency staircase in Area 2.”

My suggestion isn’t even close to a plan, but it’s better than nothing. Tachibana wordlessly goes along with me. I glance at my watch—it’s 3:09 PM. Only seven more minutes until our last dose of AD runs out. I peel off the hazmat suit and pick up Natsuhiko.

“...Time to move, Tachibana.”

“Okay...” Tachibana pulls Salyu onto her back and steps forward just as we hear the alarming sound of electronics powering down and the area is sunk into darkness. “A blackout?!”

All the lights in the facility have gone out. An automated broadcast fills the corridors: “The main generator and backup generator have stopped. Activating the emergency generator now.”

The lights click back on after the broadcast. It’s slightly darker than before the blackout, but it’s doable.

“Wh-What was that all about...? Why would the generators suddenly—” Tachibana lets out an agonized cry before she finishes her question.

I whirl toward her and gasp. Salyu is squeezing Tachibana’s neck from behind. “Wha—?! Wh-When did you wake up?!”



She doesn't answer my query. She merely continues to choke Tachibana.

"Khh...aaaghhh..." Tachibana wheezes and falls to her knees.

Salyu relentlessly tightens her hold as she glares at me. "Release Natsuhiko," she demands in a low hiss. "Or else I'll choke the life out of this woman."

"Stop it, Salyu! We just want to save you guys! Why can't you understand that?!"

"There you go with more of your thinly veiled lies."

"Why do you think I'm lying?!"

"Because you're the one who *shot* Natsuhiko," she flat-out accuses.

"Wh...at?" Her accusation stabs me right in the chest.

Tachibana's expression fills with shock that has nothing to do with being choked. "...Wh-What...did you...just?!"

Salyu answers her in a conspiratorial whisper: "You didn't know? Then I'll tell you. This man is a terrorist."

"T-Terrorist?"

"It's the truth whether you believe it or not. We've been fending off his attacks since last night and this morning."

Every word she says sends my world spinning.

Tachibana looks at me with pleading eyes. "She's lying, right? You would never do something like that, would you?"

"....." I try to say something, but the words don't form. Attempting to dredge up my lost memories overwhelms me with unexplainable apprehension.

Meanwhile, Salyu continues to blame me. "Everything that's happened here is all this man's fault. Several suspicious things should stand out to you too."

"Stop...it...! I don't...want to...hear it...!"

"Take a good look at what's in his pocket."

What's in my pocket...is the pistol I picked up in Area N.

“It probably originally belonged to him. Natsuhiko was shot by that gun—”

“Just stop it!” Tachibana screams and violently bucks Salyu off her back.

“Ah!” The force sends Salyu flying back toward the machine that controls the sprinkler system.

“No!” I can only watch as everything plays out in slow motion. Salyu whacks the back of her head against the machine and slides limply to ground. “S-Salyu!”

I rush over and check her condition. Blood is trickling from her head, but she has a strong pulse and is breathing. Tachibana staggers over to me during my moment of relief.

“C-Captain...how is she...?”

“She’s okay. Just lost consciousness.”

“I-I see...” Tachibana’s shaking. Trembling, she stares at me with fear in her eyes.

“T-Tachibana, why are you looking at me like that? Do you actually believe Salyu’s accusations?”

“N-No, sir...”

“There’s no way I’d be a terrorist, right? You know better than anyone else that I’ve always been a rescue worker!”

Tachibana flinches away. She won’t reassure me. My worries swell during the long pause she takes before answering me with her head lowered. “...Captain, may I ask you another question?” she mutters.

“Wh-What is it?”

“There is one doubt that has been left unanswered... Why did you come down to the basement at 6:42 AM?”

Her unexpected query catches me off guard. Unsure of the intent behind it, I reluctantly answer, “I told you before that it was because Dojima and Hiyama called for me on the radio—”

“Wouldn’t that mean your radio still worked at 6:42?” She lifts her head and holds me in her accusatory gaze. “But, Captain...I tried to send you a radio

transmission a few minutes before that.”

“...!” Electricity courses through my spine.

Come to think of it, Tachibana has been saying all along that she lost radio contact with me around 6:35 AM. The times are inconsistent.

“Why didn’t you respond to my transmission when you responded to Dojima’s? Doesn’t that imply you had reason to intentionally not respond to me...?”

“What reason would that be?”

“How about...slipping away from your rescue duties to commit some other act...?!” Suspicion and sorrow color her eyes.

“H-How long...have you been thinking that?” I ask in a trembling voice.

“Ever since you said some of your memory came back...since the moment I heard your reason for coming downstairs.”

“Since that long ago?!”

“But I didn’t want to bring it up... I believed the inconsistency in the times was due to your jumbled memory!” She drops her gaze to the floor and sorrowfully imparts, “I...was desperately trying to believe in you. I’ve continued to have faith in you since long, long ago...”

“T-Tachibana...?”

“But...but...I can no longer...” She jerks her head up. “...do that, Watase,” she declares to my face. She’s dropped all formality with me. Her expression is neither that of an obedient subordinate nor that of a strict lieutenant. Before me are the ice-cold eyes of a woman who’s lost faith in me. Those eyes pierce into me.

“Everything adds up if Ms. Sannomiya’s story is true. When I think of what this facility really is and about the you I knew before...the answer becomes clear.” Tachibana yanks the fire hydrant off the engine room wall.

“Whoa, Tachibana! What do you plan to do with that?!”

“Watase, you’ve gone down the wrong path... The time has come for you to

pay,” she says in such a soft voice it gives me chills.

Sensing imminent danger, I try to run just as she’s swinging the fire hydrant toward my face.



“GUAGH!” I throw my arm up to block the impact. The bone in my arm cracks from her merciless strike. “S-Stop this, Tachibana! Why are—”

“I’m so sorry, Watase... This is all I can do for you now...” An eerie glimmer flashes in her eyes as she apologizes. It’s the same shade of madness I saw in Moribe and Ukita.

Why has even Tachibana been affected?! Did I do something to engender her hatred? At a complete loss, I thrust her away from me before she can hit me again.

“Kyah!” She falls onto the floor.

I take that opening to readjust my hold on Natsuhiko and flee from the engine room with him. I descend the ladder to Area 3 with him on my back. I don’t want to leave Salyu behind, but I’ve barely managed to carry Natsuhiko with me.

Dammit! What the hell is going on?!

Tachibana and I had been on the same page only a few minutes ago. We definitely trusted each other. But the pain in the arm she whacked with all her might is very real. It aches with the vibrations caused every time my feet hit the ground while running.

I’ve come to the connecting passageway while blindly running for my life. Footsteps echo from the path ahead of me.

Who is it now?!

Moribe appears from the other end of the corridor. “Captain...!” She fastens her empty eyes on me. She’s still clutching the damn engine cutter!

“Uwaaaaaaaaaah!” I scream and flee in the opposite direction.

I run blindly with Natsuhiko to whatever area is next. I’m gasping for air and every bone in my body aches. Just when I think I can’t run anymore, a dry bang echoes out of the blue.

“GAH!” I fall on the ground. Red-hot pain splits open my side. Someone shot me. Clutching my side, I search the area. I can’t see him, but I hear Ukita’s voice coming from somewhere.

“I hit you this time, Captain Kasasagi,” he cackles.

“U-Ukita?!”

“You seem to be in agony. As my last act of pity, I’ll put you out of your misery right now.”

I spring to my feet before he finishes speaking. Scooping Natsuhiko back up, I break into another sprint, while blood spills from my side.

Luckily, the bullet seems to have missed my internal organs. But the wound hurts like nothing I’ve experienced before, and the blood flow won’t stop.

“Dammit...dammit...!” I curse from the pain and seek out a safe place. During my nonstop dash I finally see it—the connecting passageway to Area N. Only the Level N card I have can open the gate leading to that room.

I’m safe if I can escape inside there! I give myself a pep talk to keep my burning legs going in the direction of Area N.

▼ 3:15 PM

Area N

I open the gate and scurry inside. Whatever those WX particles are, they’re causing my head to throb and my fingertips to go numb. But I have to push through the pain and reclose the gate if I want to stop the others.

Yet before I can do anything, Tachibana appears on the other side of the still-open gate brandishing the fire extinguisher. Our eyes meet. The daggerlike gleam in her eyes stabs into me. Ignoring her injured leg, she charges at me with the speed of a tiger.

“Shut already!”

The gate slowly begins to close. Tachibana slips through the open gap and swings the fire extinguisher down on my head.

“AUGH!” Sparks scatter in front of my eyes. Losing my sense of balance, my body reels to the side.

Sh-She’s gonna kill me! But Natsuhiko is doomed if I die here! That sole thought fastens my rupturing consciousness. I muster the last bit of strength

left in me and—“URAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”—shove Tachibana outside Area N.

“GYAH!” I hear Tachibana’s scream the same time the gate fully closes. She starts shrieking hysterically on the other side. “Watase! WASTASE! Open up, WATASEEEEEEEEE!”

Her voice gradually fades into the distance. My headache and convulsions grow increasingly worse by the second. The AD has probably run out by now. All the energy drains from my body as soon as that realization strikes me.

I try to resist gravity’s sudden wicked pull on my body.

I can’t fight it.

The floor is coming right at my face.

It’s no use! I’m falling!

A loud thud resounds through the tranquilly still Area N.

Natsuhiko’s weight disappeared from my back when I hit the ground. He seems to have slid off. But there’s no longer anything I can do for him.

In my fading consciousness, I think to myself, *Why...did it come to this...?*

Thinking doesn’t help me understand it. Too many absurd things have happened over the past six hours. All the mysteries I’ve stumbled upon until now flash into a corner of my increasingly muddled awareness.

The reason why I lost my memories.

The reason why the nine of us were trapped inside this accursed facility.

The reason why people were murdered here.

The reason why the survivors ran away from us several times.

The reason why the cargo lift control panel was destroyed.

The reason why there was a mysterious girl’s body there.

The reason why the AD supply we set aside went missing.

The reason why there was no reactor or fire in Area N.

And the reason why Yuuri’s body disappeared.

Until the very end, I never learned the answer to any of those mysteries. What in the world happened here? The faces of everyone I met today flashes into my mind: Tachibana, Moribe, Miss Ena, Ukita, Yuuri, Salyu, Natsuhiko. And then there's the final survivor, Mashiro Toba, whom I haven't seen yet.

I didn't want to suspect any of the survivors. But isn't it most likely that the mastermind behind this disaster is among us? The only thing I know for sure is that it's not Natsuhiko. He was on the verge of death in this room.

I wanted to at least...get Natsuhiko outta here...!

But I can't make that happen either. I can no longer keep my consciousness grounded. As the energy leaves my body and my mind is about to slip into darkness—I hear a loud heartbeat.

For a moment, I think it's mine. But it's not. The sound is coming from right next to me.

After a short while, I sense movement beside me.

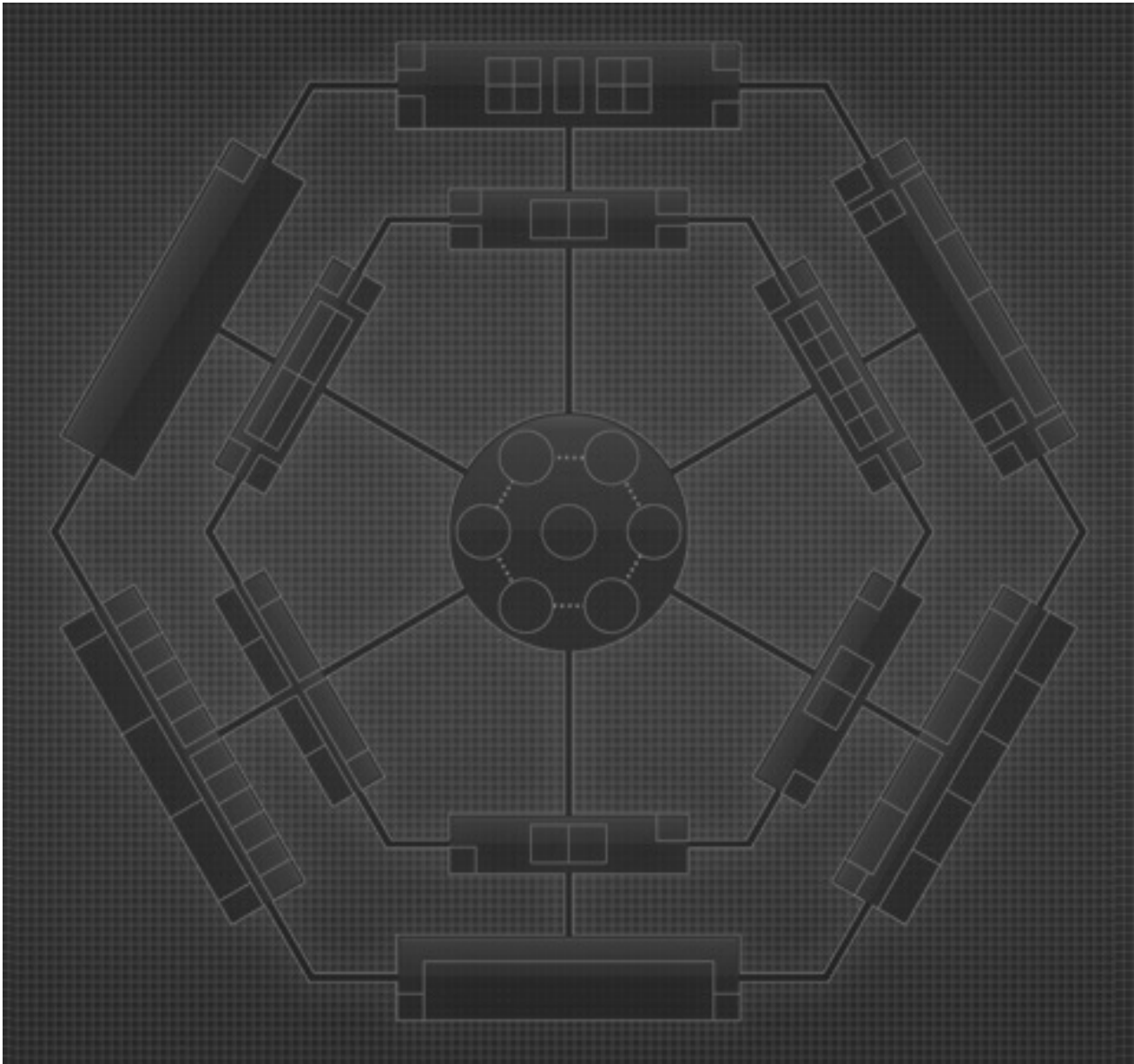
I-It can't be! I wrench my eyes open and see—him standing there. *H-How?!*

Natsuhiko, the boy who should be at death's door, has gotten to his feet and is glaring down at me. Why did he suddenly come to? Why is he glowering at me?



“Stand! Nothing is over yet...!” he declares to me, who doesn’t understand a single thing.

But after hearing him speak, my mind plummets into darkness.



▼ 3:16 PM

Surface Floor

Entrance Hall

LABO Researcher Miyoko Tenkawa

AT the same time, in LABO's entrance hall on the first floor aboveground, a man in a business suit was conversing with a woman in a white lab coat.

"You've returned, Dr. Tenkawa?"

"Yes. What's the status?"

"We confirmed that the amplifier shut down and cut off the power supply. The readings inside the facility are already in decline," the man reports.

"I see. Three more hours to go... How many people are trapped inside?"

"We have already confirmed those numbers as well. There are *sixteen* people total. The breakdown is"—the man flips through the documents in his hand—"two subjects, two special observation targets, one observation target, three researchers, three Communicator administrators, four members of SIRIUS, including one observation target. All sixteen people have been identified."

"...!" Dr. Tenkawa grits her teeth. It's impossible to tell what she's thinking from that expression.

"It is unknown who is alive or dead among the sixteen..." the man whispers in a low voice. "Do you think those children are still alive?"

"We can only hope they are."

"Understood. Then we will remain on standby," the man says and leaves.

A large number of people decked out in heavy-duty hazmat suits scamper around the area. Among them are men in orange uniforms—members of SIRIUS. Their commander is raving at the people wearing hazmat suits.

"Are you screwing with me?! What do you mean we can't enter the surface floors anymore?!"

"The aboveground floors have been successfully evacuated! Please wait until

the lockdown ends.”

“A lot of survivors and my subordinates are trapped inside! Why are you stopping us from rescuing them?!”

The commander and his squad won’t be persuaded by the hazmat group’s explanation. An argument immediately breaks out between the rescue squad and the hazmat people.

Absently listening to the commotion, Dr. Tenkawa mutters, “How long will we continue to repeat this...?”

No one answers her question. Her sorrowful eyes fix firmly on the darkness lingering deep within the entrance hall.

▼ 3:19 PM

Inside LABO

Her

BEYOND those iron bulkheads, in a corner of the vast facility where everyone failed to search—a girl lies in a pool of her own blood. Her name is Mashiro Toba. She’s the girl who boldly fought to prevent the disaster that happened here. But her hopes were crushed when she was shot to death by the culprit.



Mashiro holds on to her fading consciousness and whispers in a lifeless voice, “...Natsu...hiko...”

Her words reach no one’s ears. She’s fighting the fear of imminent death alone in the darkness, all the while believing he would come to save her eventually. Her thoughts are with the boy who tried so hard to stop this disaster with her—Natsuhiko Tenkawa.

√After END

Continue to √Before...



ROOT DOUBLE
*—BEFORE CRIME * AFTER DAYS—*
√BEFORE
PREVIEW

SIX DAYS BEFORE THE DISASTER AT LABO
ONE BOY FOUGHT HARD TO PREVENT A
GREAT TRAGEDY.

THE ANSWER TO EVERY MYSTERY
LIES IN HIS MEMORIES,
CRUEL AS THE HIDDEN TRUTH MAY BE.





cross infinite world



LITTLE PRINCESS IN FAIRY FOREST

STORY BY: TSUBAKI TOKINO
ILLUSTRATION BY: TAKASHI KONNO
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Join Princess Lala and Sir Gideon as they flee for their lives from the traitor who killed the royal family and wants to wed Lala! Gideon is willing to do anything to protect his princess, even if it means engaging the mighty dragons in combat! Tsubaki Tokino's fairy tale inspired Little Princess in Fairy Forest!

AKAONI: CONTRACT WITH A VAMPIRE

STORY BY: HIRORO
ILLUSTRATION BY: MOKOPPE
VOL. 1 OUT NOW

Akaoni is a supernatural romance about a powerful vampire who can't drink blood and a girl hunted for her blood!



EMETH: ISLAND OF GOLEMS

STORY BY: SOUKI & TORA TSUKISHIMA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MURA KARUKI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

From the Square Enix authors behind Final Fantasy Type-0 comes a fast-paced adventure about the most unlikely of heroes taking down Sephiroth to save their island of Golem Tamers!

crossinfworld.com
twitter.com/CrossInfWorld



cross infinite world



THE ECCENTRIC MASTER AND THE FAKE LOVER!

STORY BY: ROKA SAYUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY: ITARU
VOL. 1 OUT NOW

Fly with Nichika into a magic journey in another world with witches, shapeshifters, inventors, summon spirits, princess generals, homunculus, and a quirky master-apprentice duo in The Eccentric Master and the Fake Lover!

BEAST + BLOOD

STORY BY: SATO FUMINO
ILLUSTRATION BY: AKIRA EGAWA
VOL. 1 OUT NOW

Euphemia's a biotech scientist whose world suddenly gets flipped upside down when her sister hires an alien mercenary to be her body-guard in this thrilling science fiction romance light novel! Join Euphemia and Zelaide as they take on a dangerous colony world and an even more dangerous interspecies romance!



THE CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE AND THE SUPREME RULER OF EVIL

STORY BY: KAEDE KIKYÔ
ILLUSTRATION BY: TOBARI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

A comedic story about a villainess who lacks the tact to exact her evil schemes and the Champions of Justice who lack motivation in stopping her. Join Mia as she finds love, friendship, and the truth behind her world-breaking magic.

crossinfworld.com
twitter.com/CrossInfWorld