

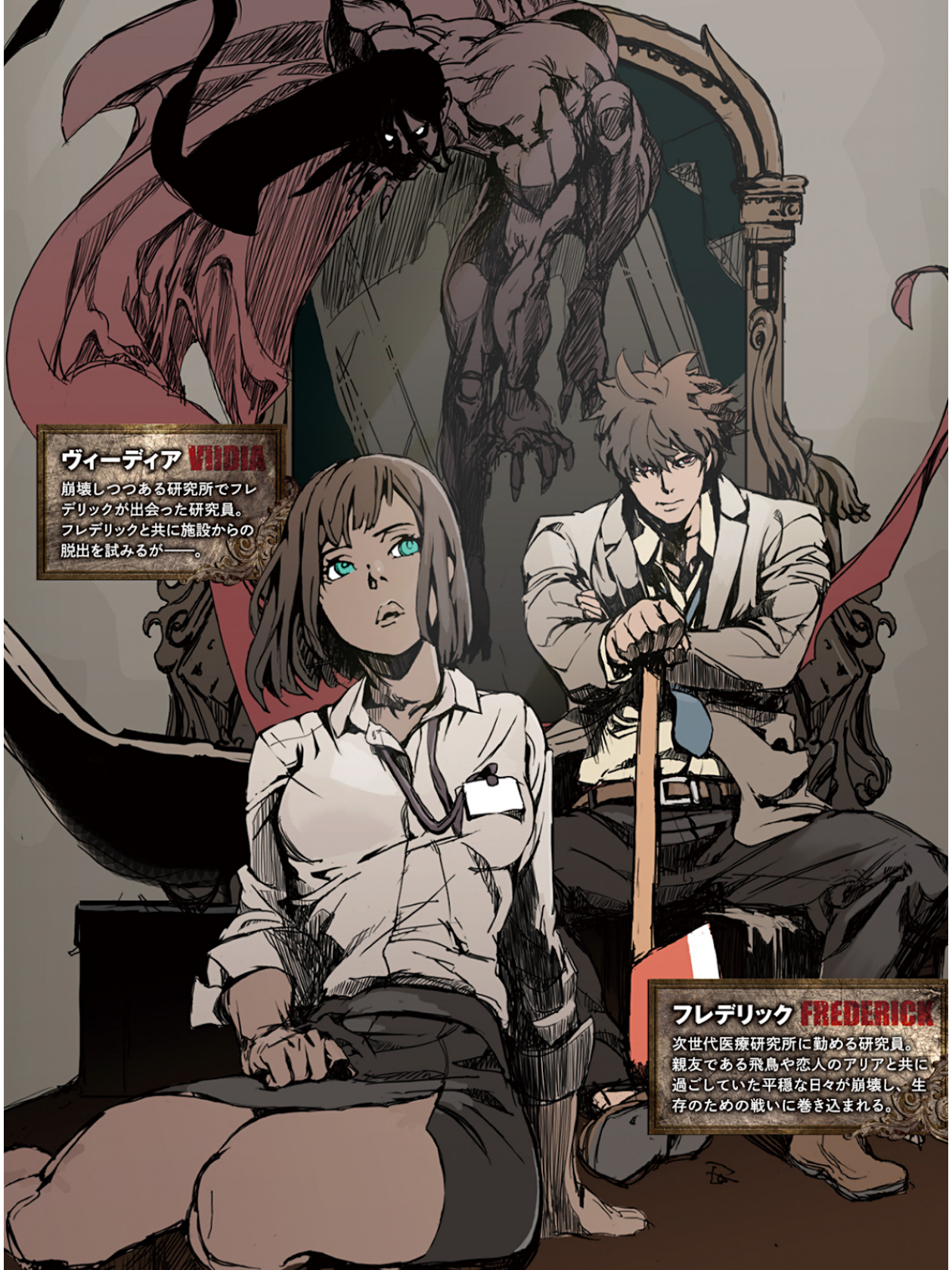
GUILTY GEAR BEGIN

ギルティギア
ビギン

原案・監修：**石渡太輔**
イラスト
(アーケシステムワークス)

著：**根岸和哉**





ヴィーディア VIDIA
崩壊しつつある研究所でフレデリックが出会った研究員。フレデリックと共に施設からの脱出を試みるが――。

フレデリック FREDERICK
次世代医療研究所に勤める研究員。親友である飛鳥や恋人のアリアと共に過ごしていた平穏な日々が崩壊し、生存のための戦いに巻き込まれる。

Translation of the text in the above illustration:

Frederick: A researcher working at the Next Generation Medical Research Institute. The peaceful days spent together with his best friend Asuka and his girlfriend Aria start to crumble when Frederick is caught up in a battle for survival.

Vidia: A researcher Frederick meets inside the laboratory after it starts collapsing. The two then attempt to escape the facility together.

GUILTY GEAR

BEGIN

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PROLOGUE

Frederick Bulsara was lying down. He leaned his back on the grass and looked up at the blue sky and the drifting clouds, not caring that his dark shaggy hair and white coat were getting dirty. Even in the United States, one of the largest countries in the world as of the year 2016, it is only at the Next Generation Medical Research Institute, built in a mountainous suburban area, that you could see such a beautiful sky. Frederick had been spending most of his time in the underground laboratory, day in and day out. There were certainly some people who were capable of secluded research in a dark underground laboratory, but for a scientist like Frederick, this kind of relaxation outdoors was sometimes necessary.

"Oh, sure enough, he's here again today! When you're not in the lab I know I can always expect to find you in this spot, huh?"

A voice suddenly called out to him, and Frederick, lying down, raised his chin to look at the owner of the voice. It belonged to Aria Hale, a colleague of his who worked at the institute. She was morbidly slender even in her loose lab coat. But more than that, she was Frederick's irreplaceable girlfriend. Aria, with her short red hair tucked behind her ear, looked into Frederick's face and said,

"Are you feeling stuck again?"

"Wouldn't it be more meaningful to get some fresh air than to sit in the gloom at your desk? We're not moles, we're human beings, and humans need sunlight."

"Why don't you just tell them you're taking a break then?"

With a wry smile on her face, Aria sat down next to Frederick. She noticed that he seemed to be getting a bit of cabin fever again.

"So, did you have any good ideas?"

"If I did, I'd be back in my lab by now."

Frederick lifted his upper body and sat down on the grass alongside Aria.

Is she...tired?

Frederick thought, since she looked even more pale than usual.

“Are you doing alright?”

“Yeah. But Asuka seems to be having a hard time with all the experiments he’s been doing.”

“That's not what I'm asking. I'm worried about your...”

I'm worried about your health. Frederick was about to continue, but then stopped. Aria was suffering from an incurable disease, an infection in the temporoparietal junction of her brain, and did not have much time left. However, Aria had rejected the suggestion of being frozen in cryostasis until a cure could be established for her TP infection.

The "Ecosystem Enhancement Plan" was one of the major projects being carried out at the Next Generation Medical Research Institute. If the Gear cell research, which was the basis of the Gear Project, could be put to practical use in the human body, even in Aria's future.... The subject still lingered in Frederick's mind.



However, it was a conversation that had already been decided. Respecting the will of the woman who had decided to cherish the time she had left, the same woman who had once said, "To not die is not to be alive," it wasn't as simple as bringing it up again.

"Don't look so worried, okay? I know exactly what's going on. I'm fine for now."

Aria smiled, somewhat sadly, as if she sensed the atmosphere.

"Alright. That's good, but...."

"Oh, but there's one thing I'm not ok with."

Throwing off the heavy atmosphere with a light tone of voice, Aria kneeled down and rested her head on Frederick's lap. Then she looked up at his face and said,

"Spending too much time with your girlfriend."

The dreamy smile made Frederick's eyes slowly rise to look at her, but he eventually lowered his shoulders in disapproval.

"I see.... If you can joke around then you must be okay."

"Oh, you're so quick to change the subject. Can't you just let your girlfriend heal you?"

"Stop it, you. That's not what I'm trying to say."

Frederick ran his fingers through Aria's hair a couple of times, though he wasn't in the mood for romance, and looked off into the distance.

"Not when your boss, the embodiment of the modern American dream, is coming this way."

The scientist in white coming toward Frederick and Aria was a familiar man with white hair that hid his face from the sun. Asuka R. Kreutz. Although they were now part of different research teams, they had been working together on Gear cells for a long time, and Asuka was one of the most recognized talents in the United States. But at the same time, he was as important to Frederick as his girlfriend, Aria, was.

"Aria, not that I'm accusing you, but are you skipping out on your work?"

"I'm sorry. I've been making time to come here."

Aria complained with a pout. However, as Asuka's assistant, she was still on the same research team as him, and with a sigh, she raised herself up from her kneeling position, knowing she had more important things to be working on than spending time with Frederick.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Am I interrupting something?”

Asuka came over and said apologetically, after seeing Aria get up. He, like Aria, also looked a little tired.

“If that’s what you think, why don’t you come back later?”

“Well, don’t say that. It’s been a while since the three of us were together like this.”

Compared to the time when the three scientists had started their research on Gear cells as a team under the supervision and guidance of Professor Vince MacDonnell, their former mentor, the opportunities for them to get together had decreased significantly. Aria and Asuka may get to see each other every day, but Frederick, who had been transferred to a different team, felt nostalgic getting to see them after being unable to for more than ten days.

“Asuka, are you skipping class too?”

“If that was the case, it would make me feel better but... I wanted to get Frederick’s opinion, and you weren’t in your lab, so I figured you would be out here.”

At those words, Frederick and Aria, who had just had a similar exchange a moment ago, looked at each other and smiled. Asuka tilted his head, curious.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, don’t worry about it. So, what’s your business here?”

Frederick asked, regaining his composure. The results of his research were constantly being reported to the institute’s server. He had no idea that Asuka, the project chief of the entire Gear project, would ask him about it in person.

“I wanted to get a more detailed opinion from the person in charge of researching the altered branch of *varga hectacine*”

Varga hectacine was a self-replicating, non-essential amino acid, and one of the components of Gear cells. The research that Frederick was currently in charge of was to transform and branch the cells during their growth process. Unfortunately, Frederick had reached an impasse, which was why he was taking a break.

“The latest report said that the alteration was stagnant under certain conditions, but the description of those specific conditions was pretty vague.”

"I see. But unfortunately, we are still having a hard time reproducing that particular condition. Well, we've figured out about 60% of it..."

"I'd like to hear what that 60% is."

"Human error, I suppose."

"Frederick..."

"It's not something that can be answered with confidence immediately."

Asuka and Aria were both dismayed. Frederick snorted abruptly.

"Just kidding. Anyway, I'm still in the middle of a replication experiment. I just don't have much more to say than what I've reported. So while I'm waiting for the results, I've got a lot of personal research to do."

"But if the stagnation of the altered branch of varga hectacine was a factor that could be artificially reproduced, such as a suppressive effect, then..."

It could also lead to an accident in the Gear cell itself. Frederick knew the importance of what Asuka was trying to say.

"Even at this point, checking the conditions for altered stagnation is becoming quite complicated. It's not easy to reproduce."

Frederick said, raising his arms, yawning, and absent-mindedly standing up slowly. Then he looked at their tired faces and spoke with care.

"You don't feel like your research is going too smoothly either?"

"Not really..."

Asuka stated vaguely, then he put his hand on his forehead and reiterated.

"No... You're right. It's not a very good situation."

Frederick, who belonged to a different team, didn't understand Asuka's concerns. However, he knew that this unclear answer was not atypical of Asuka.

"Well, I'm sure there's a lot you can't tell me because it's classified. Don't take it too hard, you two. If you need it, I'm always here to help."

"Thanks, Frederick. I can always count on you."

Asuka looked somewhat pained, and Aria had a helpless expression on her face. For some reason, the sight of the two of them staring at the ground in low spirits left a terrible impression on Frederick.

Chapter One『ACCIDENT』

Frederick woke up, feeling the coldness of the hard, inorganic floor through his white coat.

Was that a...dream?

Still in a foggy state of consciousness, Frederick wondered if Aria and Asuka's painful expressions had made such a strong impression on him that he had dreamed of yesterday's events so vividly.

“Ugh...”

My head hurts like hell.

Frederick put his hand on his forehead, then looked around and saw that he was still in his lab, where he was always holed up, but for some reason it was strangely messy. The floor was littered with reports, documents, microscopes, measuring instruments, and various other laboratory equipment, as if someone had swept them off his desk with their arm. Most likely he fell asleep at his desk while engrossed in his research, but slipped and fell to the floor while sleeping. Convinced of this, Frederick tried to get up, but...

“Oh.... Huh?”

He focused all of the strength into his body and tried to get up but he just shook violently.

I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to do it.

“What....is this....”

His head hurt even more and his body felt sluggish and heavy. It wasn't as if he simply had a limp, there was something very wrong with his body. Frederick felt a violent tremor and a strange feeling of pain in his chest.

My body...feels hot?

At the very least, he had a fever. Was it a cold or some other virus? Or did he eat something strange? Yesterday, he didn't think that he was pushing himself hard enough to reach the point of collapsing.

"Ugh. It's pathetic that I can't even manage my physical condition."

Frederick tried to calmly retrace his memories to find the cause of his current state of poor health. To his recollection, yesterday, after the three of them had met outside, he had come back to the lab and by a strange coincidence discovered the conditions under which varga hectacine stagnated in the alteration branch.

And then... What happened?

He thought about it, but couldn't quite remember. At that moment, Frederick suddenly looked at the paper materials scattered on the floor around him and raised an eyebrow.

"This is... an altered branch of acceleration?"

He picked up a copy and skimmed through it. It was not about stagnating alteration branching in varga hectacine, but about encouraging the acceleration of alteration branching. But that's not right.

Why do these data exist?

Frederick had envisioned pursuing the acceleration of the alteration branching in his own research, for personal reasons, and yet was not far from the experimental stage. And yet, this was clearly a report on the results of an experiment.

You're kidding, right? You didn't go back in time, did you?

Frederick kneaded his shoulders in self-doubt and looked at his watch.

I'm still somewhat dazed, but if I remember correctly, today's date is....

"Huh? What the hell?"

The date on the watch was almost a month different from what Frederick remembered.

So that dream wasn't yesterday, but a month ago? Do I have amnesia? That's ridiculous.

Then at that moment, the image flashed back into Frederick's mind as if an electric current had struck him. His own eyes peered into a microscope, observing the alteration of Gear cells that had been tampered with, in varga hectacine. With a snap, a crack appeared in the glass specimen slide.

"The altered acceleration was also successful. Good!"

He looked away from the microscope and did a small fist pump.

Was that me? Was that my...memory?

It may have been the moment when Frederick succeeded in accelerating the transformation of varga hectacine, but as if a broken thread was connected, something that looked like a memory surfaced in his mind. It felt distant, like someone else's problem, but when he tried to recall the memory further he became more certain that the memory was real.

Did I really?

He put his hand on his forehead again and tried to recover his memory. But once he managed to get up and sit down in his chair to calm down, Frederick's eyes widened at the unexpected sight before him

"Is that a...bloodstain?"

Red stains were on some of the materials laying around the lab. Frederick looked around and found red splashes on the floor, walls, and other parts of the room. It only seemed to be concentrated around the place where he had fallen a while ago....

No way....

Immediately after he became aware of the blood throughout the lab, he noticed it. Frederick felt something sticky on his neck. He held his palm to his neck for a moment, then saw that the red fluid was almost completely dried up on his hand. Moreover, even his other hand, which was on the opposite side and would not have touched the bloody area on his neck, was also covered in blood.

Why is there blood here?

Fearfully, Frederick stroked his neck, but he could find no wound there. Strangely enough, there was no pain in his neck either. But he was sure that both the lab coat he was wearing and the shirt underneath it were damp with what looked like blood around the collar.

"What's happening...?"

My memory for the past month has vanished, and there's blood around my neck. This situation is clearly insane. There's no way I had simply fallen asleep or collapsed.

Why had I collapsed in the first place? What happened in this lab?

Frederick's memories were blurry and distant, as if he couldn't remember anything. But in the midst of the anxiety and fear of not knowing, he sensed something. It was a new anomaly. The sound of an explosion, as if a large amount of gunpowder had exploded at once, followed by the shaking of the whole laboratory.

“Aaaaaaaaaah!”

At the same time, Frederick heard a number of different screams coming from far away.

Explosions in the distance...? Wait, why would there be explosions?

Frederick's mind wondered at the cause of the explosions, while in reality he continued to hear numerous screams, as if a panic had broken out in a crowded plaza. Immediately after that – beeping. An emergency alarm sounded over the research station's broadcast system.

“In the event of another accident in the Alpha Section, the Institute will be temporarily closed to prevent secondary damage. All employees are requested to evacuate in an orderly fashion according to the prescribed manual.”

The voice from the speakers on the ceiling cut out with a crackle. At the same time, the alarm also stopped, as if the power had suddenly gone out. Soon after, the lights in Frederick's lab went out, and only the red emergency lights on the wall stood out eerily in the darkness.

“Now what? What's going on?!”

The walls in this underground laboratory were not thin, but Frederick could still hear the distant screaming. And mixed in with the screams was a short panting of air, like some kind of animal.

I don't know what's going on with me...

He could hear sounds that he shouldn't be able to hear. And on top of that, this unusual situation was unfolding around him. This underground laboratory was a place where various bleeding-edge medical projects were being planned. Even if there was an accident, would there be an explosion from it?

Is it really an accident? If so....

If so, it wasn't safe to assume some kind of biohazard crisis, but in the worst case, it could be a terrorist attack targeting one of the sensitive research projects. With that much thought, Frederick stood up this time.

“Anyway, there is no doubt that something is going on....”

He wondered if Aria and Asuka were safe. They were the two central figures of the Gear Project. The thought of the worst possible outcome crossed his mind. Frederick shook his head to try to clear the negative thoughts from his mind. He stood in front of the information management terminal, but no matter how many times he touched the console or pressed the power switch on the terminal, it didn't make any difference. The power to the lab itself was off. The employees of this underground laboratory were not allowed to have their own personal communication devices due to the confidential research management aspect. So there was only one way left to contact them.

I guess I'll just have to go look for them directly.

Frederick walked toward the door, but was suddenly confronted with a problem.

"There is no way I can open this...."

The door to the lab, which usually opened automatically, was sealed when the auto-lock was enabled after the emergency power switched on. In other words, he was trapped. Even though all electronic devices were disposed of more than a decade ago, and human civilization had shifted from electric power to "legal power," the helplessness one feels with the loss of the power of civilization was still the same. In the movies, if you were locked in a room like this, you would break the lock with a gun, but there was no way that Frederick, a researcher, would have such a thing. So, could he pry it open by force? Or would he have to dismantle the locking unit to release it?

Wait a minute. In situations like this, there has to be a way....

There was no way out of the laboratory. Frederick thought of ways to escape, but then he looked up. He could hear a distant sound approaching him: the sound of running footsteps and uneven breathing.

Is someone coming?

This might be the only chance to get help from outside, but he had to act now or they would pass by the lab. Then, Frederick shouted,

"Hey, you there! Stop!"

He quickly slammed the door and tried to make contact. Even if he had to force his way through, the strength of two people could possibly do it, or so he thought, anyway.

"Is there a release mechanism? Please! Open this door! "

A man's voice echoed from the other side of the door. He seemed to be in an extremely urgent state.

“As much as I'd like to, I'm trapped in here....”

“Come on! Come on! Come on! Come on, open up!”

“What are you in such a hurry for? Hang on, just give me a minute!”

“Oh my God, it's coming! No, no, no! We'll never make it in time!”

“Hey! What are you talking about?! What's coming?”

In spite of Frederick's words, the footsteps of the lab personnel were moving away. The conversation delayed his noticing it, but after they had passed, there was another sound.

Is that... an animal, or what?

The sound of claws scraping against the floor, like a beast running on all four limbs was rapidly approaching and followed the footsteps of the man outside Frederick's lab.

"Uwaaaaahhhh!"

At the same time as the staff member's distressed cry, there was a vigorous growling. It sounded much like the struggle of hounds descending upon their prey.

....Is he being attacked?

When Frederick heard the beastly sounds, he thought that some laboratory animal had escaped from the earlier explosion, but the sound that came into his ears next blew away his common sense. A loud, bloodcurdling, shriek pierced through the momentary silence of the laboratory. Crunching, snapping, chomping, chomping, chomping. Just the sound. It was indeed only sound. He wasn't sure why, but it was too much for Frederick to hear in his condition. What he imagined was a scene that made him want to turn away. The darkness of the lab, lit only by emergency lights, added to the creepiness of the scene. Chomping, crushing, grinding. That was probably the sound of the animal ripping, chewing, and shredding the man's flesh.

He's being...eaten?

Frederick couldn't help but feel the chill in his blood. He couldn't see it, but he could imagine the horror, and goosebumps broke out all over his body. An unidentified beast that eats people. As soon as he realized that there was such a thing, Frederick took a few steps back from the door. As Frederick continued to listen to the unorthodox sounds of life being taken, he felt as if he could collapse at any moment if he wasn't careful. But now, with just a door in front of him, he was in a safe zone. So, it was okay. Just when Frederick was beginning to feel such relief, his

bloody but unscathed neck or, more precisely, his throat suddenly hurt. His body was hot from the nervous energy of the situation.

Damn it. What the hell!

Frederick shook his head once and ran to the fire extinguisher station in the lab, driven inexplicably by the heat rising from within his body. Lit by the red emergency light, the station consisted of a fire extinguisher and an emergency axe. Such a uniquely American preparation, the emergency axe, jokingly called a "master key," could also be used as a weapon. The only difference was whether it was too late or too early. In any case, he had to pry open the door and get out of the lab. Frederick mustered up the courage to persuade himself to go back to the door, axe in hand. But just as he was about to swing the axe down with both hands...

Hey, wait.... What am I doing? What the hell am I going to do?!

Frederick gulped, lost in thought.

Are you sure you want to do this?

If he opened this door now, he was sure to be involved in the tragedy. No, this was a senseless act of jumping into danger. Frederick was neither a superhuman nor a hero. He was less than an ordinary man, a scientist who was too confined underground to exercise. If he went out alone, wouldn't that only lead to more casualties?

If that's the case, I might as well just let this go... I can't risk my life to save a man I don't know.

Frederick thought, and felt cruel for it. He clenched his teeth. In the meantime, outside the laboratory only just a door away, unpleasant sounds continued to echo.

"Oh...ahh...he-...help...."

The voice of the office personnel grew weaker and disappeared. Then he heard the sounds of something heavy being dragged across the floor, gradually moving away from the lab he was sealed in. That meant that Frederick would be safe in the lab.

Am I abandoning him?

Even as he thought this, Frederick felt relief in his heart. The sound outside the door faded into the distance. Slowly, slowly, it got more and more distant, until he couldn't hear it anymore.

I didn't have a choice. I couldn't because....

He didn't want to die. It was the natural human will to survive. Frederick was tormented by wishful thinking that he might have been able to help. But no matter how much he despaired, it

was already too late. Not long after, the noise outside the door was completely inaudible. In other words, whatever was out there was already gone.

"Ha, hahaha... ha....."

Frederick's voice echoed in the silence of the lab. He stood there and thought about his own cruelty. But he knew that he had to get out of this lab anyway. Frederick's voice sounded as if he was trying to beat himself up.

"You stupid bastard!"

He swung the axe as hard as he could. It made a dull metallic "thunk" as the axe blade bit into the door, but it was slightly out of alignment with the locking unit he was aiming for, and didn't manage to budge it open.

"Why... Why did I abandon you?!"

He shouted the question that he knew the answer to, and swung the axe with all his strength again.

"I am I'm so damn selfish!"

They say that many scientists are selfish, but Frederick was disgusted with himself for being such a heartless man when faced with an emergency.

"But it's better than dying! I had no choice!"

One strike, two strikes. Then three. The axe, wielded in anger, eventually struck the knitting of the auto-lock. And this time... Crack!

"What?!"

It was a good hit. But at the same time, the handle of the axe was now broken. In the heat of the moment, Frederick slammed his body against the door and leaned against it. It was completely unexpected that the handle of the steel axe would break.

"Hah, hahah. You piece of shit!"

He swore at the broken handle in his hand.

I deserve this punishment, don't I.

Frederick thought as he collapsed, looking up at the ceiling and enduring the pain of his body hitting the door. Maybe it was because he had screamed so many times, but he felt a little

better. Anyway, there was no point in continuing to feel regret. He looked up at the door and saw that the other part of the axe, the broken blade, was still stuck in the lock unit. There was a small gap between the door and the wall. Frederick stood up, inserted the broken handle into the crack of the door, and forcefully pried it open. At that moment, the smell of blood hit him hard. It would have been preferable if Frederick had just been having a bad dream, but it was obvious from the situation at his feet that a tragedy had actually taken place there earlier.

He gazed down the dimly lit hallway with only emergency lights, just like the lab. At the end of the corridor, there was a large pool of blood that was incomparable to the small bloodstain on Frederick's neck and clothes. Only a part of the pool of blood extended to the end of the corridor, and it was slowly drying up and disappearing into the darkness. It was the only trace of the unidentified beast that had dragged the previous employee away.

I'm so sorry.

Staring at the emergency lights glowing eerily at the corner of the corridor, Frederick apologized in his heart. He took a deep breath and took in the scene in front of him. This bloodstain and smell were an unmistakable reality. Then he regained his composure and thought about this unnatural situation that had been going on since he woke up in the lab earlier.

"There's so much I don't understand...."

His memories had been blurry for almost an entire month. What was the explanation for the dried blood crusted around his neck without any visible wound, and the reason for his collapse? Additionally, he had no explanation for the mysterious beast that killed and ate that laboratory staff member, or the sounds that he shouldn't have been able to hear. There were so many unknowns that even if he tried to think about it, he couldn't come up with any answers. But whatever it was, he was certain that something terrible was happening in this laboratory, which sprawled underground like a tree spreading its roots. So, if that was the case...

"...I hope Aria and Asuka are okay."

Now free from his lab, Frederick's first thoughts were about the safety of his partner and of his best friend. This place where Frederick's lab was located was in a division called the Beta Section. He wondered if the Gamma Section, where various classified research was gathered and where the two of them, Asuka and Aria, were supposed to be working on the Gear Project, was in the same situation as here.

Have they already evacuated as instructed by the emergency alarm? Or are they still in the lab?

Frederick looked at his watch as he thought about it.

"Only 10 minutes until 10:00 A.M...."

In other words, it was 9:50. At that time, Asuka and Aria would normally both be in the Gamma Section. But that's if nothing had changed in the period of Frederick's unreliable memory.

Don't think about... Just don't think about it.

Frederick shook his head as Aria's loving smile seemed to fade from his mind. She's still alive. She was definitely still alive. Frederick decided to believe that and started planning what he needed to do next. Gamma Section, which had a high level of security, could not be accessed with Frederick's ID card. The entrance was not something that could be opened with an axe, and it would be difficult to go looking for an ID card to open it now. If Aria's condition was not good, she could be in the infirmary.

The reality was that there was something going on in the lab right now, and there was even a mysterious beast that was killing people, so they needed to get out of there as soon as possible. Then, the first thing to do was to follow the emergency evacuation instructions and head for the evacuation route. Along the way, Frederick could stop by the infirmary and check if Aria was there. It would be fortuitous if he ran into Aria and Asuka along the way, or even with the rest of the laboratory staff, who he might be able to give him some information about them or the situation in the Gamma Section. An even more pressing concern was the mysterious beast from earlier.

"I wish I had a weapon, at least."

I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to do this, but I'm going to have to.

He didn't know when that thing would show up again. For self-defense, he would have to get a new axe. Fortunately, there were plenty of emergency supplies, so it would be relatively easy to find one without having to look too hard for it, but if Frederick encountered the beast before then....

No, I can't stay here just because I'm afraid. For now, I must act.

Shaking his head to dispel his doubts, Frederick began to walk alone down the dark corridor. The hallway was long and dimly lit, and the occasional emergency light drifted by. The red color stirred up an inexplicable anxiety.



The most important section of the underground laboratory, which housed the core of various highly classified projects, had its own independent power system. Unlike the Beta Section, where Frederick stayed and worked, Gamma Section's power supply was still intact. The lights on the ceiling were shining brightly, and the equipment in the room was making a continuous humming sound. In that laboratory was Asuka R. Kruetz. Asuka's nervous face was surrounded

by a number of other researchers. In the hands of these researchers, however, were black, rugged firearms that did not seem appropriate in a laboratory. Upon closer inspection, it was possible to tell that they were wearing something else. Their bodies were slightly bulging under their white coats, and their behavior was clearly different from that of a normal researcher. It was as if they were soldiers or something in disguise.

"Looks like you're taking a long time."

A man who was a bit too big to be a scientist sarcastically called out to Asuka.

"It's an urgent matter, after all. You can't just show up and ask me to make preparations right away. It's not something that can be done quickly. It's a lot of work just to get things in order."

Asuka's expression was very gloomy as he answered. But the tone of his voice was bright, as if he was trying to sound cheerful.

"As long as we can recover what we need for the humanoid, we're good to go. I already told you that you can discard all other research data. I told you that I don't need it."

The man pointed his gun at Asuka's back as if to threaten him. But Asuka, who turned around, simply gave it an acknowledgement and said with a sigh

"Setting up a...test subject is an absolute necessity."

The man with the gun's eyes narrowed.

"The subject doesn't seem to be the same as the one on our list; what does that mean?"

"The list is constantly being updated as we find better matches. It's just that you didn't know the latest subject, and next week, she may not be a subject anymore."

Asuka walked freely through the lab, confident that he would not be shot. He stopped in front of a large oval cryosleep capsule that could easily accommodate a person.

"Anyway, we can't start until she's set up, and I can't go until then either. I know you guys want to hurry, but I can't change how long it will take."

"Hmm, okay. I'll tell you what, don't get yourself into any trouble. No matter what you do, our operation will go on as planned."

"Right on schedule...."

Asuka coughed and looked around the lab.

"I'm not sure if it's because I'm not a big believer in the concept of the experiment, but is there something more important than me and this 'Gear Project'?"

He wondered how much of a point that was really making.

"You don't need to know that."

The man with the gun's immediate response was indifferent. At that moment, a little light glowed from inside the man's pocket. What was quickly taken out was a personal communication terminal with legal power. The man listened to someone's voice coming from the other side of the terminal, but then quickly moved away from Asuka, as if he didn't want Asuka to hear him. Asuka, who was left alone in the room, reached for the cryosleep capsule. Through a small window at the top of the capsule, he could see the face of a female subject. Aria Hale. Frederick's girlfriend, a talented young woman who had participated in the Gear Project as Asuka's assistant, was sleeping peacefully in the capsule. At the sight of Aria's sleeping face, Asuka clenched his teeth in pain.

"I'm sorry, Aria. I'm sorry it ended up like this...."

He apologized in a voice so quiet that no one else could hear him.

Chapter Two『ENCOUNTER』

Only the soft sound of cautious footsteps echoed in the silence. Frederick, who had gotten a new fire axe in another lab where the door had been left open, walked little by little down the dark corridor, his hand on the wall to guide him. The total area of the underground laboratory was much greater than that of even the largest sports stadium. There were many laboratories lined up in the middle of the building, and the corridors were quite intricate. Frederick knew the complex well, but the darkness made it difficult to grasp the space, making it seem like a maze. Even though his eyes were getting used to it, it was still discouraging to see only the red, and occasionally green, emergency lights as regular landmarks.

Most importantly, why was it that Frederick had not found anyone else yet? There must be a large number of researchers working in the lab on a regular basis, even in the Beta Section. But he hadn't seen a single one of them so far. Frederick went to the infirmary to confirm Aria's absence, and then continued on his way to the emergency evacuation route, which was an independently powered emergency escape elevator hall on the outskirts of the Beta Section. While he was doing this, almost thirty minutes had passed. In such a large underground laboratory, it was indeed unnatural to have gone that long without seeing anyone.

Is it because of that strange animal?

So far, he hadn't heard nor seen any sign of it. However, judging from the bloodstains that could sometimes be seen splattered here and there on the floor illuminated by what little light there was, it had definitely been through the area.

"A facility that is much too large for a man-eating beast.... It's like an escape game."

Frederick sighed and then winced as he noticed another new pool of blood. It was then that he heard something clacking and fiddling with a keyboard. Frederick started walking a little faster and turned down the hallway. The door to the lab at the end of the hall was tightly closed, but.... He was still unsure of himself, but if he listened carefully, he could even hear the breath of the person behind the wall.

Really, I don't know how I can tell those sounds apart.

"Hey! Who's there?"

Standing in front of the door, Frederick called out to the person inside. The reply came quickly.

"I'm here! I'm here!"

A pounding on the door, followed by the voice of a young woman. Like Frederick a short time ago, she must have been trapped by the sudden loss of power in the Beta Section. With that in mind, Frederick readied his axe.

"Get away from the door! I'll pry it open from the outside!"

"Oh, no, I'm fine! Wait a minute. This should open...."

"Open, you say?"

He did as he was told and waited for a bit, and then there was a click around the auto-locking unit on the door, and then another click, and then the sound of the lock opening! Frederick had to pry his door open with an axe, but apparently the woman in this room had disassembled the unit on her own and disengaged the auto-lock.

"Good, good...."

A small gap appeared in the door and thin fingers appeared. But the heavy door did not slide easily, as if the woman was not strong enough.

"Let me help you...."

Frederick placed the axe on the floor and inserted his hands into the gap in the door. Then, with all his strength, he slowly slid the heavy door open. The door opened more easily than he had expected, with surprisingly little effort.

"Wow, aren't *you* a strong one?"

On the other side of the open door, a young woman rolled her eyes. She had black hair that was cut into a bob and dark brown skin. At first glance, she looked to be of South Asian descent. Despite the dim glow of the emergency lights, Frederick could tell that she had a pretty face.

"Thank you. Huh, I'm finally out."

"By the looks of things, you've been trapped in here since the emergency alarm?"

"Well, that's mostly right. I was really surprised when it all happened so suddenly."

It was probably because she had been sitting in the middle of the room for a while trying to unlock the door, but she moved stiffly at first. As she exited the lab, she stretched out a couple of times, then popped her hip with an audible crack. Then she looked at Frederick again and furrowed her brow.

"Ugh. You...okay? You've got blood all over your neck."

"Yeah, I guess so. I'd love to know what happened too."

"I don't know what that means, but..."

Suspicion in her eyes. She took a few steps back, with good reason. If the man covered in blood wasn't wounded, the first question would be where the blood came from. And he has an axe, even if he says it's just for emergency preparedness.

It's no wonder she thinks I'm dangerous, huh?

But Frederick had no other way to answer.

"Amnesia is a bit of a bitch, but there's nothing I can do about it right now."

"...Are you joking?"

"No, I'm dead serious. It may be difficult to ask you to trust me with how I look right now, but..."

As he said this, he put his hand in the breast pocket of his lab coat and took out the ID case that hung around his neck.



Showing the ID card in it, Frederick said his name.

"I'm Frederick Bulsara. I work here. My specialization is Gear cells, if that helps."

"So you're from the Gear Project?"

"Well, I don't think I'm notable enough to be able to say that I am. I'm kind of a subcontractor."

"Hmm... I see."

She was still staring at Frederick's ID card with narrowed eyes, though, as if in doubt.

"So, what about you?"

Frederick asked, gesturing with his ID card.

"I'm...Viidia. Don't ask me my last name. It's quite long."

Frederick wondered if it was a name from her or her family's country of origin. Anyway, since they now both knew their first names, they wouldn't have any trouble for the time being, and they didn't need last names to communicate.

"Okay, Viidia. And while we're here, let me ask you something. What's going on in this underground lab right now? Do you know anything about it?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't have been locked in here, would I?"

"You're right. Then we're in a very similar situation."

Frederick said, and walked into the lab he had just opened. He headed straight for the fire extinguisher station, grabbed another emergency axe, and headed back to the hallway.

"Here, take it."

He held out the axe to Viidia.

"...What do you mean? I thought we were evacuating."

Viidia tilted her head with a strained laugh.

"I intend to, but it's better to be prepared."

Frederick handed her the axe as he briefly explained what had happened so far, about the mysterious beast and the people who were attacked by it.

"I didn't see it, but it attacked people, killing and eating them with ease. It seems that such an unidentified beast, or rather monster, is here in the Beta Section right now. We can't be sure when it will attack us."

"Monsters. You know, I think you've been watching too many movies, like the one about amnesia...."

Viidia, who was laughing bitterly, suddenly stopped speaking. Her serious gaze was fixed at something behind Frederick's back.

"Is that the thing you mean?"

At these words, Frederick turned around quickly.

How did I not notice that?!

It was a blunder that he didn't notice until he saw it with his own eyes. Soon to be another tragedy. He was caught completely off guard. Maybe it was the sound of talking that brought it to them. But now that Frederick was aware of it, he could hear its breathing and the slight sound of its claws on the floor.

A dog...no, a hound.

It was easy to see that that was what it was. Out of the corner of his eye, emerging from the light of the emergency lamp, was a Doberman. It was acting like a police dog chasing a criminal, and tasted the smell of them in the dim corridor's recesses. There seemed to be a sheen around the mouth of the hound. That dampness must be liquid. Even if it is not reflected in the red of the emergency light, it was probably the same color.

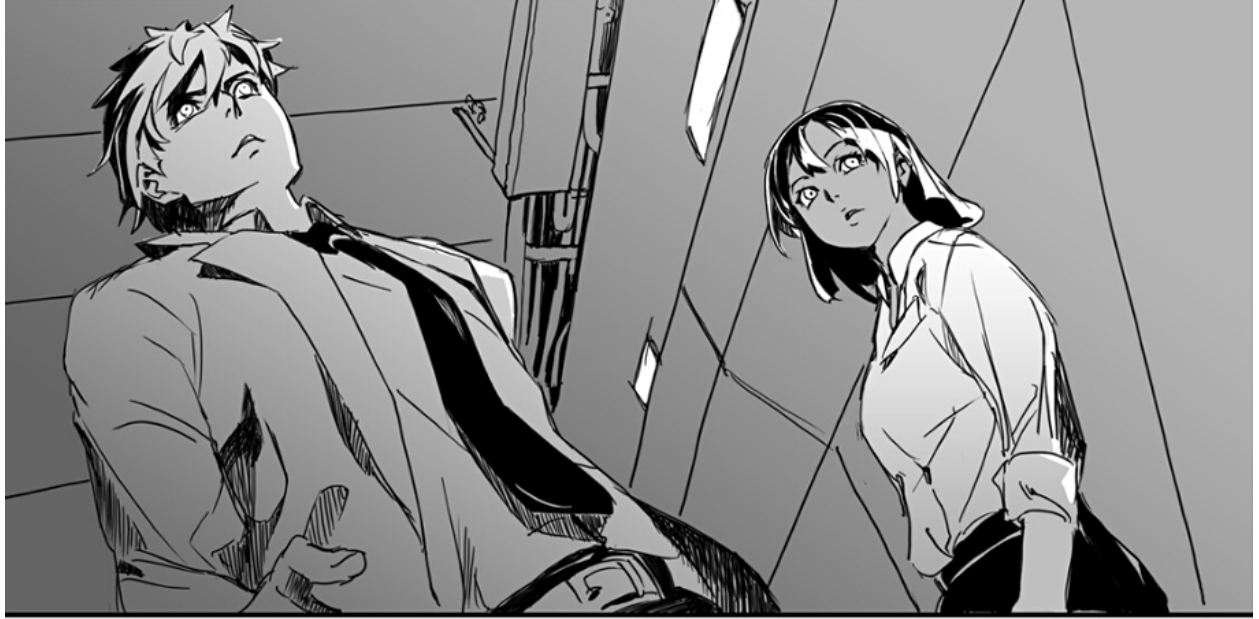
"Is that what you call a monster? It seems like some kind of lab animal to me."

"I wish it was."

Frederick, who had already heard and witnessed the hound's capacity for murder, nervously held up his emergency axe.

"At the very least, this dog can kill."

Perhaps in response to Frederick's words, the hound sniffing in the corner of the corridor suddenly raised its head as if it had noticed something.



Then it saw Frederick and Viidia. The hound's eyes glowed suspiciously, similarly to how photographed eyes glow red in the reflection of a camera flash.

"Are its eyes glowing?"

So Viidia, at last, decided that the thing was no ordinary dog. Behind Frederick, she raised her axe in the same way he had. The hound looked at them, tongue hanging slackly, and took a short, huffing breath. At that moment, liquid drooled out of the hound's mouth. The liquid, which was very likely red, could be of the employee that Frederick had abandoned only a short time ago. And just when Frederick thought he had it all together. The hound kicked the floor with a violent stomp. Then, with unexpected speed, it quickly closed the distance and jumped at Frederick.

"Fast...!"

"Woah?!"

Frederick and Viidia just ducked to the end of the corridor and dodged the hound's charge in the nick of time. But right after that, an unfamiliar sound of destruction followed the hound as it charged past.

"You've got to be kidding!"

How much momentum had been built up in that instant? The hound jumped and ran into a corner on the other side of the corridor. The wall that the hound crashed into was heavily indented, like a crater. Cracked concrete wall fragments were launched from the impact. Frederick and Viidia were able to avoid the debris that flew at them, but both were shocked at the thought of what might have happened if they had been hit. In addition, this hound that had just done such massive destruction must have felt something from that impact, but it turned around and lowered itself, as if to say, "Let's go again!"

"This is ridiculous! It's not natural!"

"You think it's a dog with some kind of scientifically enhanced muscles? You've gone too far, there's no way! It's a complete monster. It could be a weapon...."

Frederick broke off as the hound charged at them again.

This time, he went to the center side of the corridor. He dodged again, but this time, perhaps because he was originally near the wall or perhaps because the hound had learned, the hound faced him with its flank against the wall.

"What?"

The hound opened its mouth and jumped again, aiming for Frederick. It was going to bite him. Frederick's instincts told him to hold the handle of the axe in front of his body. But the hound's fangs easily chewed through the iron handle and charged straight at him. The momentum was lessened by the axe taking the brunt of the force, but Frederick was still pushed to the floor by the hound.

"Guh-aghhhhh?!"

Without pause, the hound snapped its teeth at Frederick until its fangs sunk into his left shoulder. The disgusting sound of fangs into flesh as the hound continued to bite down harder and harder. The heat in Frederick's left shoulder seemed to boil over instantly, and the intense pain he felt caused his vision to flicker like a flash."

"Frederick! Oh, my God! You bastard!"

It was then that Viidia swung her axe with both hands at the hound, which had stopped moving. The axe struck the hound's torso directly, ripping deeply into its flesh. Viidia backed away in disbelief. The blade of the axe did not cut through the bone, but stopped when it dug into the hound's torso. However, the hound did not seem to care at all, and shook its head from side to side in an attempt to bite off Frederick's shoulder.

"Ugh?! You've got to be kidding me!"

Fighting back the pain that made him want to scream, Frederick struggled, bashing the hound one, two, three times with the broken axe handle that remained in his right hand. He slammed the broken handle of the axe into the hound once more. But even as the handle pierced its neck, the hound still shook its head as it bit down. The fangs that dug deeper and deeper into his left shoulder made Frederick foresee the arrival of death.

Du-dum.

That's when Frederick heard it. The moment when he strengthened his will to fight back, not broken by the intense pain. He heard the sound of his heart beating, unnaturally rising in his chest. For some reason, an unusual heat was rising in his throat.

"Damn it! Let go...!"

He clenched his right fist, which was losing its strength. Live. It felt like his body was screaming at him.

"I'm not... food!"

He swung his right arm as hard as he could at the hound's face. And the fist connected with it solidly. The beast screamed, and the pressure on Frederick's shoulder disappeared. The hound spun around violently, got up, and ran off down the hallway.

What?

He was sure that only he alone had hit it. For a moment, Frederick didn't know what had happened.

It was only a punch, okay? It's not possible for it to be blown away like that....

It had been hit with the raw brute strength one unlocks in rare moments of extreme distress. Yet, for all that, they still couldn't let their guard down.

"Ouch...ah..."

Frederick sat up, holding his left shoulder, which was bleeding badly.

"Frederick! Are you alright?!"

Viidia appeared from inside the lab with a fire extinguisher in her hand. Was she going to beat the hound with it? Frederick had assumed that she had already escaped on her own.

"Ha, haha, hahah...."

Frederick laughed out of nowhere, probably a little crazy from the pain.

"Stop laughing, we have to run!"

"Run away to...?"

For a moment, Frederick was puzzled. Viidia's statement was correct. So, why was he confused? He wasn't sure what he was doing.

What the hell am I thinking...?

Frederick couldn't help but look at his right hand. He opened and closed his fist, as if to check it for anomalies.

A foolish stroke of luck on the verge of death? Even so....

That punch was so powerful that it was impossible to believe that Frederick had done it himself.

"That's a nasty wound. Can you walk?"

"Oh, yeah...."

Viidia, holding the fire extinguisher, supported Frederick's unsteady body and helped him to stand up slowly. And then, from the other side of the corridor, they heard the deep growl of the hound. When they looked again at the hound that Frederick had blown away, they saw that it was in an incredibly strange state. The axe that Viidia had wielded was still sticking out of its torso, and its neck was completely bent to the side. It was not a matter of interpretation, the bones in its neck must have been broken. The direction of the head itself had changed, and was now hanging slackly. The hound's legs were shaking as it tried to stand up, as if the connection between its brain and the rest of its nervous system was damaged. But, to begin with, it was strange for it to be able to move at all with a broken neck like that.

"That's... mildly horrifying."

"Yeah, it's not an amusing sight at all."

The hound slowly walked towards them on shaky legs. It hadn't given up yet. Then Viidia pulled out the pin of the fire extinguisher and threw it in the direction of the hound. Red and green lights mixed together and reflected off the fire extinguisher's discharge. The ensuing glow turned the whole area bright yellow, as if the sulfurous fumes of hell had risen before them.

"It might only be a temporary distraction. Let's go! We need to get you some first aid. "

"Literally went up in smoke, huh?"

Frederick and Viidia walked away, following the green lights that indicated the emergency evacuation route. The hound was still barking behind them, and their steps naturally quickened.



Frederick and Viidia, who had managed to escape from the monstrous hound by taking advantage of the smoke screen made by the fire extinguisher, sat down in the corridor on their way to the emergency elevator. Normally, he would have gone to the infirmary, but Frederick had confirmed that it was closed before he met Viidia. Since they couldn't get in there and the place was right behind the hound, they decided to get him temporary first aid elsewhere.

"Let me see the wound for now. If it's a broken shoulder, you're going to need emergency treatment."

"Do you know how to...?"

"I'm a biologist. I'm also somewhat familiar with medicinal care."

With Frederick seated right under the green light indicating the emergency exit, Viidia lightly wiped some of the blood from his left shoulder with the sleeve of his lab coat and checked the wound. Frederick had clenched his teeth, thinking that the touch of the wound would cause severe pain, but the wound was shallower than he had expected, which was quite disconcerting. Not exactly because of that, though.

“You've got a lot of guts, you know that?”

Frederick joked with Viidia while she examined the wound.

The staff of the laboratory were all insufficiently active to begin with. There was a gym room in the Beta Section, but no one used it, so it was covered with dust. Viidia, on the other hand, had a way with an axe that wasn't like a scientist at all.

You're young. Have you had a difficult life or something?

“I'm just used to blood, that's all. Besides, with a monster like that, wouldn't it be more dangerous to be alone?”

“The one who runs away dies in the end, huh? It's a classic in the movies.”

“Apart from that... I want to hear what your part in this is.”

Viidia, who was examining the wound on his shoulder, stopped and turned to Frederick. It was the same suspicion that she had expressed when she had just met him.

“Frederick. Who are you really?”

“...What do you mean?”

Not understanding the meaning of the interrogation, Frederick asked back. Viidia suddenly clenched her fist and punched Frederick's bloody left shoulder with a little extra force.

What?

“Is it still hurting? Incredibly, I don't see any wounds.”

“...Wait a minute, what do you mean?”

“I meant what I said. The bones are fine. Not only are your bones intact, but your lab coat and the shirt underneath it are definitely torn and bloody. And yet, your skin is flawless.”

“That's ridiculous...”

Frederick also touched it, to check the wound himself. But even though he felt his shoulder roughly, it didn't hurt at all, and the wound was completely gone, revealing only his healthy skin beneath the tattered coat. Just a few minutes ago, he was in such pain that he could barely walk, so where did the bite wounds go? When he came to his senses and became more calm, the pain was no longer there in the slightest. It was as if the wound had never existed in the first place.

"I'll ask you again, Frederick. Who are you? Are you actually a subject of classified research?"

"No, not at all. I'm really just a scientist. I'm just a scientist!"

Frederick was in a state of disbelief when it occurred to him, and suddenly it happened.

"...Ugh!"

The abrupt headache made him hold his forehead. At that moment, a flashback appeared in his mind. Just as when he had first woken up in his lab, images began to flow into his mind.

—

"Guh-aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

It was a memory of rolling around on the lab floor, Frederick holding his head in his hands. His throat was burning hot. Eventually, he couldn't even scream anymore. Back arched, convulsing. And then... That's when his vision and memory faded.

Ugh!

Frederick couldn't help but put his hand to his throat. It wasn't in any real pain, but his throat still felt like the impression of the heat and pain was there.

Yes, I'm sure I'm....

The reason why Frederick's lab was such a mess when he woke up was because he had been writhing and flailing. Even though Frederick thought for sure he was dead at that moment, he woke up...for some reason. He had been unable to remember this until just now.

What happened to me? Why was I writhing in agony then? What does this have to do with the fact that I'm having memory issues?

Frederick's mind tried to remember what happened just before the flashback, but all that came up was the image of himself in agony, a severe headache, and a burning throat.

I think... Did I die? No way, you're kidding yourself....

But if his memory was correct, then it's not hard to understand why the wound on his shoulder had disappeared. The blood around his neck was probably because that wound had also disappeared, just like the shoulder wound. The strange sensitivity in his hearing and the strength of the punch to the hound's head could be explained if he imagined that he had become an altered person, or something ridiculous like that.

What's going on with me...?

A tsunami of anxiety surged through his chest. And then Viidia sighed, as if she had no choice but to accept what he had told her.

"Huh. By the looks of it, you really have no idea."

"I'm sorry.... But I told you, didn't I? I think I have amnesia."

"Normally, I'd suspect a brain injury, but...when something out of the ordinary like the disappearance of a major wound like this happens, it's natural to assume something else is wrong."

"I'm in trouble because I can't figure it out. I've got amnesia and I was almost eaten by a monster, but somehow I'm safe and I... I feel like I'm having a bad dream."

"A bad dream. I agree with you on that point. I don't want to be eaten by that monster and die, that's for sure."

Viidia said decisively, standing up and staring at the green emergency lights.

"I don't know what to do. If we stay in this place, we might be attacked again."

"Oh.... Yeah...."

Frederick decided to take her word for it even if, for the moment, there were still many things that didn't make sense to him. The two of them walked side by side down the dimly lit corridor, following the green lights that marked the direction of the emergency exits. This time, he paid close attention to unusual sounds so that he wouldn't run into any more unexpected obstacles. There had been a number of bloodstains in the hallway so far. It was as horror-stricken as their own attack had been. If these kinds of tragedies were happening all over the place, and Frederick was able to find Viidia, how many others might still be alive? It would be reassuring if they could meet up with other staff along the evacuation route, both in terms of getting information and in terms of gaining manpower.

Frederick couldn't help but wonder what was really going on in the underground laboratory elsewhere right now. It was hard to imagine that a mere accident or biohazard could create such a monster. Was it a terrorist attack aimed at some kind of research being worked on in the facility? What if this situation was caused by malicious human intention? Thinking about this, Frederick suddenly asked Viidia, who was still walking next to him.

"Hey, Viidia, do you know what time it is?"

"Right now? Well...."

Viidia took her pocket watch out of her pocket and checked the time.

"It's just after eleven."

I see.

Frederick narrowed his eyes and sighed lightly.

"What's wrong?"

Frederick, despite his anxiety, regained his composure and said,

"Ah, well, I've been worrying all day about whether anyone I know was safely evacuated."

"Are they your colleagues from Project Gear?"

"They're not in the same section, but they're the ones who sometimes come by to check on me when lunchtime rolls around. I hope they didn't get caught up in all this...."

Frederick wondered if Aria and Asuka had been safely evacuated. He walked along carefully, thinking of their faces.

"Hmm?"

He stopped suddenly, reacting to an unusual sound he heard too clearly. Wondering what happened to them, he started getting anxious again. Anyway, what he sensed with his strangely acute hearing was a small human voice. They were the voices of the people waiting at the end of the evacuation route.



Frederick and Viidia continued down the evacuation route until they arrived at a large hall that opened up like a small park. Nearby there were a few benches, some bushes, and even a vending machine. When they arrived at the section with the emergency elevator, they found a

small group of scientists crouched by the bushes, hiding and holding their breath. There were ten people in total wearing white lab coats reflected in the emergency lights. Armed with emergency axes and crowbars, they were huddled together in fear. But why had they not evacuated yet?

The elevator doors are open, but....

One of the employees noticed Frederick and Viidia. He put one outstretched finger to his mouth and then slowly pointed upward.

Be quiet and look up...?

Frederick looked up at the ceiling, which was exceptionally high in the hall, and saw a number of smallish, uncannily red, glowing spots of light where layers of pipes ran and the hall's lights couldn't reach. Two by two, a pair close together, they occasionally flickered.

Are those glowing eyes? There's something up there. A lot of them.

Occasional, barely audible, muffled hooting could be heard coming from them.

Viidia squinted and whispered.

“Do you think those are...owls?”

If the red eyes were counted, there were about ten in total. However, judging from the frightened looks of the staff, Viidia assumed that the things on the ceiling were probably monsters similar to the hounds that had attacked Frederick and the others earlier.

“Looks like a lot of bad news.”

“Let's join them over there for now.”

Frederick and Viidia crouched down and slowly approached the group of employees, taking care not to make any noise. There was no one in the group who was acquainted with Frederick, but there was one person from the group who came toward Frederick and Viidia, signaling with his hand to keep the others back. He must have been about forty years old. He looked like an English gentleman with a head of slightly gray hair stroked back, and when he saw Frederick, he widened his eyes for a moment. Frederick's reaction reminded him of when he first met Viidia.

Well, with how I look it's no wonder he's surprised.

A bloody lab coat and a tear in it from the hound bite. From an outsider's point of view, it could only look like Frederick was seriously injured.

"Are you...okay?"

"Yeah, it looks worse than it is, but it's nothing major."

Frederick conversed in a hushed voice, as did the lab personnel.

"What's going on here? Why haven't you evacuated?"

"I'm afraid I can't do that even if I wanted to. I'm Serge. And you are?"

Frederick had a feeling that he had seen him before, but he couldn't remember where. However, there were many people who worked in the underground laboratory. They must have crossed paths at some point before.

"Since we're in this situation, I'd appreciate it if you could show me your ID."

"ID? Yeah, sure."

He and Viidia showed their ID cards to Serge. He compared the photo on the ID with their faces a few times, then slowly turned around half-way and gestured to the group behind him with an "Okay" gesture made with his index finger touching the tip of his thumb with the other three fingers raised. He then signaled for Frederick and Viidia to follow him, and walked back to the group.

"What do you mean we can't evacuate?"

Frederick asked first as he followed Serge to join the group. Serge pointed with his thumb towards the elevator. Only one of the emergency elevator doors was open, and light was leaking from inside. The light in the dark hall seemed to be a ray of hope.

"The backup power is still working, but somehow the elevators are stuck. I went over there earlier and tried it, but something must have broken the wire because the doors wouldn't even close when I pressed the button."

"Oh, so that's how it is."

Frederick sighed.

"I don't see the point in having an emergency plan that doesn't work."

"You're right. With the way it's all going, I'm starting to suspect it's man-made sabotage."

"...Man-made?"

Frederick was about to ask the rest of Serge's story when he heard,

"You, the man who just came in. Do you know the time?"

He was in his early thirties or so. A white man with a fat build and a pale face, who looked like he had been inattentive, suddenly approached him. When Frederick realized the meaning of his words, he looked at his watch and answered immediately.

"It's ten minutes before 11:40."

"...I see. Thank you. I'm Dustin Burley."

"Frederick Bulsara. This is Viidia."

Frederick introduced himself casually, but Viidia looked at him with a look of dissatisfaction.

"I thought you had a watch?"



"Even if I have a watch, am I not allowed to ask the time?"

"Don't you think it would've been faster to look at your own watch?"

"Sorry about that."

But right now, Frederick was more interested in the ID card Dustin had shown him. His ID card had a different color line than Frederick's and Viidia's cards did. It was the same as Aria's and Asuka's. A biometric ID card that was supposed to be used by those working in the Gamma Section.

"Dustin, did you escape from the Gamma Section?"

Frederick asked Dustin, hoping for some information.

"No, I have been here since this morning to see the progress of my colleague's experiment. Thanks to that, I've been here for almost two hours now. I shouldn't have come."

"I see...."

He wanted to ask Dustin if the same thing was happening over in the Gamma Section as here, but if that was the case, he wouldn't know anything about whether Aria and Asuka were safe. Frederick decided to leave the two of them aside for the moment and asked Serge again about the current situation.

"Serge, you said earlier that you suspected human intervention."

"I'm just saying that's what I think it is, based on what everyone else is saying."

Then Serge explained in detail how he had come to believe that the situation was man-made. First, there was an explosion in the Alpha Section. It seemed to be different from the one Frederick had felt when he had woken up in his lab, just before the section had been powered down. In other words, it had happened while Frederick was unconscious. Once that happened, the emergency alarm went off and the staff began to evacuate. But then there was a problem. It was a monster that attacked and ate people, just like the hound that Frederick and his friends had encountered.

"If those biohazardous creatures came in here from the Alpha Section where the explosion took place, don't you think the time doesn't add up?"

Serge continued, pointing his finger at the ceiling.

"I don't know where they came from, but those owls have already taken out a number of us. You can't see them from here, but there are some unfortunate victims sleeping in the shadows around the area."

"You're saying you were ambushed?"

"Isn't it strange to think so? It's too fierce to be a laboratory animal, and I don't understand why it would target people. Now that it's dark, it seems to be reacting to sound and won't attack if you're quiet."

Serge said, looking as if he had no control over the situation.

"I don't want to run into one of those things when I try to get to the other emergency elevators, and even if I do, there's a chance I'll be in the same situation as here. There are other monsters like dogs and crocodiles, and they're all running to this place. I want to get out of here before they get here."

"So we're stuck here, I guess."

Was this a nightmare, a biohazard accident, or some kind of terrorist attack? Frederick had thought of such possibilities, but perhaps it was better to assume that there were several different types of tragedies occurring at once that equally influenced each other.

"What about the idea of prying open the rescue door in the elevator ceiling? The lab is far underground. I wonder if the shaft has a ramp or something."

Viidia interrupted him, looking at the open elevator doors, but Serge only shrugged his shoulders.

"Is there a problem with...?"

"No problem, but who would go?"

When Serge looked around, everyone in the office turned away from him.

"Whether you open the lid of the elevator's cage, break the lock on the door with an axe, close it manually, or lock yourself in for the night, you're going to make some noise."

Oh, it's turning into a game of chicken, isn't it?

The movement to get into the elevator will make more than a little noise. Since that was the case, it was easy to imagine that the owls on the ceiling would attack everyone the moment they started getting the hatch open. No one would want to take the initiative to be attacked by a

bunch of those killer owls. Of course, it was the same for Frederick. But then a thought occurred to him.

Could I do it...?

The bite wound that the hound had given him earlier had somehow healed without a trace. If his wounds could heal in the same way as they did back then...

Ugh. I don't know what I'm thinking. It's impossible.

He shook his head to get rid of any more superhuman thoughts.

"Hey, Frederick."

Viidia turned to Frederick.

"Please don't do this. I don't want to die either."

"I haven't said anything yet...."

"If I'm wrong, then please continue."

When she replied back to him, Viidia squared her shoulders and closed her mouth. She had read his mind without him telling her even a word. It certainly felt like a possibility, but Frederick didn't think it was okay to do anything just because the wound would heal. First of all, if he were to be injured again, there was no guarantee that he would heal. Even if it did heal, what if it was his head that was injured? What if it was a wound that tore off a part of his body?

I don't think it's going to go away.

He knew that something was wrong with his body, in how his hearing and strength had seemingly improved, but he had not yet accepted his condition to the extent that he could be so sure he was a monster. But the situation would not allow him to stay like this, and while he stayed quiet, another monster might arrive.

It's hell to go, and hell not to go.

In that case, go for the one with the best possibility of survival. Frederick started to think about how he could persuade himself. Suddenly, there was a loud vibration. A momentary earthquake. Frederick's hearing could distinguish its true nature.

Down below...another explosion?

At the same time, something fell to the floor, and there was a sound like glass breaking. The shaking now caused the lights hanging from the ceiling to fall. Looking up, other lights on the ceiling and pieces of building materials began to fall one after another. The places where they had fallen intensively were extremely bad.

"Whoa!"

One of the staff members shouted reflexively as he was hit by a falling piece of lighting.

Huh?! You stupid bastard!

It was so sudden. The employee couldn't be blamed for it, but the situation took a drastic turn. If he shouted out, the owls on the ceiling would naturally react.

"Giaaaaah!"

The hooting and hollering that came from seemingly everywhere sounded like that of a great monstrosity. Several owls rushed down through the dim air, red eyes like flashing emergency lights.

"Get down!"

When Viidia shouted, Frederick dropped to his chest on the floor. Just above his head, the sound of wind through wings whistled past. Frederick's head would have been grabbed by the owl's talons then if he hadn't fallen on his face immediately. However, not all of them were able to react as Frederick did....

"Gugh? Ahhhhhh!!!"

It was only for a moment that the difference was made. From the perspective of Frederick, who was prone on the ground, several of the nearby employees' flailing legs appeared to float into the air as they were carried away. Was it one, two, or three people? It was hard to tell in the heat of the moment.

"Ow, that hurts! Let go of me! Let me go! Let me go!"

"Aaaaahhhh!"

The sound of screams and flocking wings. The disgusting sound of flesh being ripped and torn apart. As they were lifted into the air, their future, whatever form it might take, was no longer something they needed to think about, because they could immediately determine it. Serge, Viidia, Dustin, and the rest of the personnel silently stood up and ran to the elevator, taking advantage of the opportunity. It was a cruel but correct decision. There was no way they could

help, it was too late, it was bad luck, it was a noble sacrifice. Frederick told himself, biting his lip, then he also stood up, though belatedly.

"Huh?!"

A crowbar that must have been in a victim's hand fell in front of Frederick's eyes and made a high-pitched sound as it crashed into the hard floor. It stopped him in his tracks. At the same time, the sound of something that might have been a person falling somewhere echoed. And more flapping of wings followed.

Oh, shit.

Unfortunately, Frederick's position was between the elevator and the flock of owls. It would be his turn next. Such fear gripped Frederick's entire body. The people ahead of him, Serge and the others who had entered the elevator's cage, were already using the emergency axe to break the locks at the top and bottom of the cage door. If it worked, the heavy doors of the elevator could be closed by human power. If that happened...

Hey, wait....

He was late to the party, and now he was like a shield for them, about to be ruthlessly abandoned. Just as Frederick had done earlier to the man who was chased by the hounds.

Du-dum.

His heart was beating faster, and he suddenly felt the heat in his throat.

Give me a break!

Frederick picked up the crowbar in front of him, shouting. The sound of his own heartbeat, his own breath, and the rustling of his clothes. The sound of the owl's wings and the sound of the wind. He bent down, his ears still strangely perceptive, to detect the presence approaching at high speed. A moment later, Frederick's knees buckled as he lost his balance and toppled over, but fortunately for him, one of the owls passed right over his head. However, the second and subsequent owls were clear; they stayed in the air beside Frederick and attacked him.

"Damn! Let me go!"

One of the owls grabbed his left arm as he raised it to shield his head as quickly as possible. The pressure on his left arm was like a vise, trying to crush it. If he were to be lifted into the air, he would end up like the other victims. Frederick screamed at the creature and hit the owl on his left arm with the crowbar in his right hand. The scream of the beast echoed, and his arm was released. He then chased off the incoming owl with another swift swing. Timing his shot with the

sound of the approaching wind, Frederick then swung the crowbar as hard as he could. The blow knocked down the next owl, but that didn't stop the other owls from attacking again.

"Auragh!!!"

Ba-dum.

Another shot, as if in rhythm with his rising heartbeat. And then one more. Frederick swung the crowbar around incessantly. Crunch, crunch, crunch! The crowbar caught the owl several times. The recoil was exhilarating to say the least.

I've never been to a batting cage like this!

In the end, he was still outnumbered. But if he lost the will to resist, he would be instantly finished.

"Guh....hah...."

Even though the gliding owl's talons ripped into his left shoulder again, where the hound had bitten him earlier, Frederick steeled himself. You can't die in this place. You don't want to die. Motivated by this thought, Frederick swung the crowbar with all his might. When he looked at the owl he had just knocked down, its wings were broken and it was twitching on the floor.

...You can defeat it.

The moment he realized that, his heartbeat started thumping, thumping, and thumping even harder. As if pulled by it, his will to live also strengthened.

If I can kill them all, I can survive!

Frederick found himself thinking such grandiose thoughts. The urge for destruction welled up in him. As he swung the crowbar, he counted the number of owls he needed to kill in his mind, listening carefully to the sound of their hooting and flapping wings. It was still seven birds, but strangely enough, he didn't feel any problem with it. In fact, as he continued to knock down the owls, a smile slowly began to appear on Frederick's face, even though it was out of place. But then he suddenly heard a shout from behind him.

"Yes! The door is working! Here!"

"What are you doing? Close it!"

"I'm working on it! Shit, it's heavy! Stop watching and help me!"

Huh? What the hell was I thinking?!

As if he had been splashed with cold water, he quickly came to his senses.

"Frederick! Hurry up!"

When he turned around at Viidia's shout, several of the office staff were working together to close the thick doors of the elevator cage. He was about to be left behind. As the fear of being abandoned crept back into his mind, he felt a pang of regret. He should have headed for the elevator even as he intercepted it, but why had he stayed where he was? Why did he think he was going to defeat all those monstrous owls?

You're such an idiot! There was no way I could do it! I don't know who I am anymore.

However, there was no doubt that the pathway that had been opened up by the fact that he had managed to stay alive was now about to be closed before his eyes.

Damn it! Just in time! Just in time! Come on, come on, come on!

Frederick threw aside the crowbar and ran for the elevator. The unceasing sound of wind grew closer. A monstrous owl hooted at him. A hot streak ran down Frederick's back, as he heard his white coat rip from the owl's talons. This time, however, he didn't stop.

"Hey, don't bring that idiot here!"

"What are you doing?! Close it quickly!"

The staff members in the elevator were frightened and showed their rejection, but this was no time to hold a grudge. Frederick clenched his teeth against the pain in his back and sprinted as fast as he could. He slipped one hand into the gap between the elevator doors that were about to close, just in time.

"UOOAAAAGGGHHHHH!!!"

Frederick howled with the single-minded rage of a roaring fire and all the power that comes with it. Even though it took several staff members to close the door, Frederick was able to force it open, despite being alone and using only one hand. He then leapt into the elevator cage. The momentum of his body knocked away the people who were trying to close the door, but he didn't care. If the owls followed Frederick into the elevator, he would have simply led them all to their deaths.

Frederick quickly turned and stood up, and this time he put his hand on the elevator's door from the inside. Once again, he howled with all his might. With the same force with which he had just opened the door, he closed the heavy door completely. Immediately after that, a dull sound echoed in the cage from the other side of the door. The owls that followed Frederick must have

collided with the door. Everyone's thoughts were the same as they imagined the owls breaching through the door, and a sense of tension ran through the elevator. The ragged breathing of the staff echoed in the air. But when the door of the elevator was closed, the owls seemed to have given up, and the dull sound that had echoed several times ceased to be heard. After a moment of silence, everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Thanks for nothing....

Frederick then slumped against the door, slipping down until he was sitting at the base of it. The light in the cage, which was naturally bright, gave him a strong sense of security. When Frederick looked up, he saw that there were eight people, including himself, who could be seen by the light in the elevator. Each of them was looking at Frederick with a mixture of resentment and apology. The man who had so blatantly tried to abandon him had been spared. Frederick supposed that had been unavoidable.

"Don't give me that look.... I didn't want to die either."

"Anyway, I'm glad I spared you guys from having to exert yourselves too hard. Let's pretend like that never happened."

Frederick said in a deliberately light tone, considering the feelings of the staff.

"Oh, ah, I appreciate you saying that, but...."

Dustin's eyes flickered over Frederick's head as he said this. Frederick looked up to see what was going on and realized,

"Oh."

There was so much blood on the door of the elevator he had just slid down that he wanted to run away.

"Haha... That's not good."

The wounds on his back from the owl were deeper than he thought. As a result, Frederick survived, but there was a lot of blood loss. He was bleeding profusely and would not normally have survived.

"In fact, if you hadn't stopped the owls, we wouldn't have made it in time either. I'm sorry to say that I abandoned you. I'm sorry...."

The rest of the staff followed suit as Serge bowed his head in apology. But Frederick didn't want to blame them, because if it had been the other way around, he would have abandoned them as well. That was all Frederick could manage. This was the second time now that he had been

attacked by an animal, after the hound. His torn and bloody white coat was already revealing the healthy skin underneath.

"Keep your head up. The least we can do for now is get me some first aid."

He was temporarily saved, but if he continued like this, he would die before long. It was only natural for Serge and the others to judge Frederick's condition. However, only Frederick, who saw the skin on his left shoulder, and Viidia, who was already aware that something was off, were different.

"Fredrick, just in case, let me see your back."

"Oh..."

Sitting down on the floor, Frederick turned his back to Viidia. Wiping the blood from his back with the sleeve of his lab coat, he felt her hand across his skin. He frowned as he felt some pain, but it was far from what he would call intense pain.

"It's hard to believe, really...."

"What's going on?"

"It's slowing down, but it's starting to close up. It's like watching a recording in reverse."

"Yeah, I see...."

It's certainly gratifying to be able to survive a wound that would normally lead to death, but it was hard to accept that Frederick was supposed to be a normal person after all of this.

What's going on with me? Why am I like this, a monster?

This nonsense about fatal wounds closing automatically only existed in fiction. If this was possible, they wouldn't need the underground laboratory in the first place. As a scientist, Frederick understood how impossible this was, especially since he was involved in the development of next-generation medicine. But the fact of the matter was that Frederick's fatal wounds, twice now, were about to become a thing of the past.

"This is not normal by any stretch of the imagination. When we get out there, we'll get you checked out by a proper agency."

"I don't want to be a guinea pig, but...well, we'll see about that when we get out."

Frederick coughed and let out a deep sigh.

“ ‘I'm not going to be a guinea pig.’ What's that you're talking about? What do you mean?”

The researchers around him were suspicious, and Serge began to speak.

“Your wounds healed? That's absurd.”

Dustin raised an eyebrow as he checked Frederick's back.

“Oh my God, are you kidding me? That's impossible!”

“Yeah, I guess so. I think it's crazy too.”

“Are you saying that Frederick will be saved...?”

“No, it's more like a regenerative power beyond human comprehension....”

Frederick stood up slowly as Dustin looked over to Serge. His gait and awareness were firm. It was the same unhurried movement as usual. The only difference was that his bloody lab coat had been torn in many places.

“I still can't believe I'm doing this either. It seems I'm in over my head.”

Frederick shrugged his shoulders. Dustin put his hand on his chin and thought about it for a moment before saying.

“Frederick, who the hell are you? Are you an experiment in some kind of research?”

Dustin's confusion was similar to what Frederick had heard from Viidia not so long ago.

“I'm sorry, but I'm just a scientist. Although, my memory is a little foggy.”

“Are you kidding me? There's so much wrong with you! This is like a miracle!”

“Dustin, calm down. Everyone else thinks it's insane too. It's impossible.”

Serge calmly tried to soothe Dustin.

“I'd like to ask for some clarification. Frederick. You said you had some confusion with your memories. How long has this been going on? Are you saying that you have no idea why this is happening to you?”

“I just woke up a few hours ago. Something must have happened during that time. I wish I could explain it to you, but I can't, so I'm stuck.”

Frederick's words baffled the staff. Some of them were about to call Frederick's story a lie, but Serge raised a hand and they quieted down.

"Okay. If that's the case, it won't do us any good to talk about it now. We'll think about it when we get out of here. Is that alright with everyone for now?"

When Serge said this, the people in the elevator mumbled and agreed with each other. It was hard for Frederick to agree with that decision, as it would only make it more difficult for him to follow up on something he couldn't answer. After confirming this, Serge pointed his finger at the ceiling of the elevator cage. There was a square frame that looked like an under-floor storage unit, probably because it was an emergency elevator.

"Here's what we need for now. Some of you get a foothold. I'll pry the top off."

Serge grabbed the emergency axe and carefully stepped onto the backs of some of the office staff who had gotten down onto the floor on elbows and knees to form a human step-stool. The axe clanked against the metal of the hatch as he swung the axe a few times to raise the rescue opening, then he pushed up on the handle to secure the exit. He then jumped off the backs of the personnel and hauled himself out of the elevator. From the top of the roof, he held out his hand and pulled them up, one by one.

"Each of you be careful not to fall."

Frederick was also pulled up by Serge, but the elevator shaft was almost completely devoid of emergency lights, and the darkness was eerie and troubling, especially since he had just experienced the brightness in the cage. The other elevator in the shaft didn't seem to be nearby, so if anyone was to accidentally step off the top of the elevator, they wouldn't be able to save themselves.

While Serge was pulling everyone up, Frederick used the faint light leaking from the open hatch in the elevator to locate the position of the scaffolding ramp against the wall. If they could climb up the ladder to the top, they could escape. There were a lot of unsettling factors, such as the sudden explosion and the monster, but for now he had to believe that they could make it out and move. Eventually, after pulling everyone up to the top of the cage, Serge said to Frederick,

"Frederick, I'm going to need to rely on you. Do you mind?"

"Yeah, no problem."

No one knew what might happen next. In that situation, where everyone was scared and wanted to escape, if there was a metahuman in the group who could heal from grievous wounds, everyone would make the decision to send them first. The first penguin. That meant lead the way and be a shield; to be the first into the metaphorical water to check for danger. It was also a way to ease the group's anxiety as much as possible. Frederick had been prepared to be told

this when he had mentioned earlier that his wounds would heal in the elevator. That's why he took the initiative to put his hand on the ramp even before he was told. If he had been in the opposite position, he would have asked the same.



In the laboratory of the Gamma Section, a buzzer suddenly sounded. It was the sound of Aria's cryosleep capsule completing its treatment. Asuka sighed with a somewhat resigned look on his face. At this stage, the cryosleep capsule would be able to switch from being powered by the lab's power source to being powered by its own internal battery, making it possible to move it. Sure enough, the overly-built man pointing a gun at Asuka confirmed it as soon as he heard the buzzer.

"Well. Sounds like the subject can be moved now."

"Yeah, I guess so...."

As soon as Asuka replied to the man, a group of armed, non-scientific men swarmed around the cryosleep capsule. They deftly removed the many connections from the capsule, and then called out to each other as they lifted it and placed it on a large cart. Then they carried it out of the lab. The large man poked Asuka in the back with the muzzle of his gun.

"Doctor, time to move. We're heading to Special Lab 6."

"Special Lab...?"

Asuka asked curiously.

"You're going to the deepest part of the section instead of the surface?"

If you wanted to take the results of your research out of an underground laboratory, normally you would want to go above ground. But the man grinned and said to Asuka,

"There are things you don't know, Doctor. Now go. You'll be leaving this lab, but you'll have to continue your research on the Gear cells."

Asuka's back was poked once more with the muzzle of a gun. This time, Asuka obeyed and walked after the capsule that had been taken away. As they moved through the corridors of the Gamma Section, Asuka suddenly felt a small rumble in his stomach and looked at the watch on his wrist.

(Ten minutes before 12:20, huh?)

It was the time of day when he would usually go outside for a change of pace and have an idle chat with Frederick and Aria. However, such a peaceful moment would never come again.

(It's been three hours since.... Frederick, you are now....)

As he walked, Asuka looked up at the ceiling and thought of his old friend, as if he was regretting someone lost.

Chapter Three『HOPE』

As it turned out, the group's attempt to climb the ramp was an exercise in futility. If there had been a little more light, they might have been able to notice it before it happened. Frederick, who was leading the way in the darkness, gradually began to feel unnatural and subtle deformations in the ramp after climbing five floors. It soon became clear to him that the situation was hopeless.

"Everyone stop. This isn't right."

Frederick said, looking down below. Even in the dark, he could feel a shadow next to the ramp. He reached out with one hand and saw the cage of the next elevator. But it was in a sharply slanted position.

"What's going on, Frederick?"

Serge's voice echoed from below.

"The ramp, or rather the entire shaft itself, is blocked."

Could it be the result of the several explosions that had occurred earlier? In a sense, it was a miraculous balancing act, as a large amount of jagged concrete rubble lay on top of the slanted elevator cage next to it. The ramp was cut off, as it was swallowed by a sea of rubble. The gap in the ceiling, where the ramp ended, wasn't visible, and it didn't look like it was possible to climb any further, at least not at the moment.

"You can't be serious, we've come all this way."

"You're not lying, are you?"

"Are you sure you can't pry it open?"

The people near the lower end of the ramp started to complain. There was no benefit to Frederick in lying, but considering the unusual situation and the distrust of the staff, it was understandable.

"If I hit it hard enough to move it, rubble will rain down on you. So if you want to give it a try, be my guest."

Frederick said with a sigh.

"Wait, I'll check it out. Frederick, move a little to the right."

Obedying Serge's words, Frederick pulled himself to the right side of the ramp. Soon after, Serge came up next to him and, like Frederick before him, reached up and to the left to check the situation.

"There's the other elevator over there, it's at an angle, but I think it's what's holding this up."

"Well, it certainly doesn't look good."

"We'll have to go down a level"

"I agree. It's too risky to try to push this thing."

Serge agreed with Frederick, and there was another grumble from the station personnel.

"We're going down? What are we going to do? We can't escape...."

"We've just escaped from murderous owls, and now we're stuck in the middle of nowhere...
Damn it!"

"I know how you all feel, but we've got no choice," said the voice of Viidia, now at the end of the line.

"Hey, there's a duct on the way that looks like it could hold people, how about we take the other way?"

"You want me to jump off the ramp? You've got to be kidding me."

Frederick chuckled. It wouldn't work so well in real life as it did in the movies. Frederick knew that the ducts existed, but they were some distance from the ramp, and the grid cover sealing it off was locked firmly in place. He couldn't just jump into it, he would have to remove or break the cover. To do so by stretching out from the ramp was too risky.

"But we can't give up on escape, can we? Even if it's dangerous, if there's even the slightest chance of getting out-"

"Well, then, why don't we just go to the bottom?"

Dustin, who was in the middle, interrupted Viidia.

"I think it's safe to go in the ducts then."

"The bottom? What do you mean, Dustin?"

Frederick asked, and Dustin's voice sounded pained.

"Well, can I explain it to you as we go down? To be honest, just stopping like this is already quite painful for my hands, and it's hard not to move around"

"Alright then, Dustin. Let's all go back down to the other elevator."

At Serge's words, they all headed back down the ramp they had just come up.

In the middle of this, Dustin began to talk to the others.

"To put it simply, in the special laboratory at the bottom of the Gamma Section, there is an escape craft. It's exactly what we need to get all of our classified research out of there."

"But the power to the lab itself is out. Will it work?"

"Gamma Section's power system is independent of this lab, and the systems around the escape craft are completely self-sustaining, so I'm sure they'll be fine."

"Then you should have told us from the beginning...."

"Yeah, why didn't you tell us until now!"

"I'll just be happy to get out of here in one piece, you know?"

Dustin continued to be harangued by the staff's questions.

"The Gamma Section has the strictest confidentiality requirements for those working in the special labs. But there's no point in protecting it under these circumstances. As long as this is going on, I'm sure all the escape boats have already left."

"What's the point then?"

"I think if we walk through the escape boat tunnel, we'll eventually be able to get out. As long as the power supply on the other side is still active, I can use my ID to get to the second special lab."

I see.

Frederick was strangely convinced after hearing that. In fact, Dustin's ID card was indeed the same type of card that could access the Gamma Section, just as Aria's and Asuka's were. And if the power system there was different from the one in the Beta Section, then there was a good chance that Dustin's card could get everyone in, if they could get to the adjacent part of the section they were currently in.

Even Aria and Asuka couldn't reveal the details of their research to Frederick. Though, he had heard rumors about the existence of a special laboratory in the deepest part of the Gamma Section, where information management was the strictest. If there really was such a thing as an escape craft there, it would probably be used for evacuation to some extent. And the Gear Project that the two of them were involved in must have a certain level of importance in the underground laboratory. If that's the case, then there should be a way for Aria and Asuka to have evacuated.

I want to believe they were able to escape.

In the meantime, the group made it all the way back to the elevator cage. The light from the emergency power source coming through the hole in the top of the elevator temporarily eased their fear of the dark.

"Ah, I've got blisters on my hands..." Dustin said, waving his hand idly. "You really are a cruel scientist."

Looking around, the rest of the staff were also massaging sore spots on their hands and shaking the pain out of them. Some of them were even out of breath from just walking up and down the ramp. They were lab geeks who were not exercising on a regular basis. It wasn't unreasonable for them to be this tired after being thrown into such an abnormal situation. However, Viidia and Serge seemed to be unaffected by the situation, which was strangely disconcerting.

"If you die from injuries like those, at least you won't have to worry about them anymore. Hold on until we get out to a place where we can take a break."

"I know, I know. I envy you, Frederick," Dustin said, turning towards Frederick.

"Don't say that. I have to admit, I'm a little overwhelmed by my own abnormalities."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I just feel so silly looking at you. If instant regeneration of wounds is possible, then next-generation medicine is pointless research."

"I'm not superhuman...."

"But I'm intrigued. If we make it out of here in one piece, let me examine you. Every inch of you."

"You'll have to wait until we're out of here before we start talking about stuff like that," Frederick said and put his hand on the ramp again. Even if the direction of travel changed from up to down, he was sure that he would be sent to the front.

"We're going down to the bottom, is that correct?"

"Yes, structurally we should be at the bottom of the Beta Section, about the middle floor of the Gamma Section. We'll go as far as we can. Is that okay with everyone?"

Serge confirmed, and the words of approval came back.

"Upstairs or down, in this dark. It's no laughing matter if you get your hand stepped on and cause an accident. Everyone, be careful with your spacing."

With that, Frederick started down the ramp. The sound of the ramp echoed in the dark elevator shaft. By the time Frederick, who was ahead of Dustin, had gone down the ramp about three floors, all eight of them could be heard walking along.

We're supposed to be trying to get to the surface.

It was a strange feeling to be going down instead of up when escaping. It was too dark in the shaft, and Frederick felt as if he was jumping into an abyss. However, the end of the journey, which seemed to go on forever, came much sooner than they had expected.

...What?

Frederick's feet, which he thought were about five floors yet from the bottom of the shaft still, hit against something other than the even-surfaced ramp. Something that was definitely hard.

"Stop for a second."

Frederick said, and then he bumped his foot against the surface of it a few times.

A foothold...?

He checked cautiously, and sure enough, there seemed to be a floor.

It's a little uneven, but it feels like... rubble and broken tiles?

Looking back at the explosions Frederick had detected so far, the first one before he woke up, the one just after he woke up, and the one he felt earlier when he was in front of the elevator were all from below. Then, was this the aftermath of those explosions as well as the one from above? No, there was too much debris on the upper side. Should it be considered that the bottom side was clogged by the large amount of debris that fell when the upper floors came down? While Frederick was thinking about this, Serge's voice echoed from the top of the ramp.

"What's happened? Is there something wrong down there too?"

"Yeah, there's a bunch of loose debris all over the place. I don't think we can go down there, and it might not be a good idea for all of us to go down together. Wait a little longer while I check it out."

Frederick held onto the ramp and slowly began to put both his feet onto the loose rocks, but the rubble on the ground appeared to be stacked solidly and did not move an inch.

Can we go this way...?

But what if the rocks came loose just as he put all his weight on it? He couldn't predict what was underneath the rubble, and if it was as precariously balanced as the rocks at the top of the shaft, it was hard to ignore the possibility of suddenly falling through them. Rarely in such fear, Frederick felt lost and-

"Yo!"

"What?! Hey!"

Viidia, who was just above Frederick, suddenly jumped off the ramp and landed on the loose rubble blocking the shaft. While chuckling, she grabbed the ramp on which Frederick's feet rested.

"...Yeah, it's fine. At this rate, I'm sure we can get a couple more people on here."

Viidia bounced around on the debris, checking the stability of the foothold.

"Really, you are entirely too bold...."

"You're too indecisive," Viidia said. "Sometimes you have to make decisions."

"Call it cautious, but I'm glad it turned out alright. Still, don't be reckless."

"My weight is the lightest. Come on, Frederick, get down here."

"Adding more weight might cause it to collapse, though."

Frederick said while slowly lowering himself down onto the rubble with both feet. The loose rock floor seemed to be quite stable. Frederick's strangely acute sense of hearing picked up the sound of falling debris, so it must be hollow underneath, but not so much that there was any sign of immediate collapse.

"It's all right, amazingly."

He breathed a sigh of relief. But it remained to be seen, if it was safe for the weight of all eight people to be placed on it.

"Let's look for air ducts," Viidia said. "Frederick, you take that side."

Viidia headed toward the wall of the shaft, watching her footing. Frederick also headed for the opposite wall, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. He saw a duct that looked like it could accommodate a person, and it was positioned at the perfect height, above the stairway-like stack of rubble. Of course, the duct had a steel grid-patterned cover, but if there was a proper foothold nearby, it could be broken. And once it was broken, they could enter. But unfortunately, both Frederick and Viidia were empty-handed.

"There is a duct over here. Someone, an axe or crowbar or...."

Frederick was about to say something when a voice from behind him startled him.

"Okay, I'll do it."

He realized that Serge was standing on the floor of rubble now, next to Frederick and Viidia, and holding an axe.

"I thought you were going to drop it or give it to me," Frederick said.

"It's dangerous, isn't it? Besides..."

Serge stood in front of the duct as if replacing Frederick and said in a whisper, "I don't like the idea of leaving you in charge."

"That's exactly what you've been doing up until now."

"There's a little bit of pride in this too. I'm a man, after all."

Serge said and swung the emergency axe in his hand vigorously into the duct's covering. A high-pitched metallic contact sound echoed down the shaft. With two swings, Serge precisely broke the upper clasp and screwed the blade of the axe into the gap between the wall and the hanging grating. Then he gave the axe a twist in a circular motion. He bent the grating limply,

kicked it down with his foot, and swung the axe two more times, completely removing and cutting off the grating of the duct. Then Serge looked into the duct. Frederick did the same and saw the red luminescence of an emergency light at the end of the duct. It must lead to some room.

I hope there's nothing on the other side. Will there be another monstrous dog or some other animal? This could really turn into a bad situation fast.

Considering what had happened so far, there very well may be some kind of monster up ahead. Since there was a possibility of that, Frederick thought that he would be the one to be sent first again.

"I'll go check it out," Serge said. "Frederick, you're in charge of guiding the others."

"What? Oh, oh, ok"

Surprisingly, Serge took the initiative, bent over with his axe in his hand, and crawled into the dark ducts.

"Looks like there's another one with some balls."

Viidia chuckled at Frederick, who was unexpectedly stunned.

"Well... Maybe it's just reckless."

"Do you think you should be the one to go?"

"No friggin' way. If there's someone who can take over for me, then that's so much better."

Frederick shrugged and stared at Serge's feet as they moved further down into the ducts. Soon, he heard a banging sound, as if Serge was breaking the grating on the other end. Then, with a clang, that grating also fell down.

"This must be the gym room. Doesn't look like anything in particular, but I'll go check it out."

Serge's voice echoed through the ducts. The thud that followed must have been the sound of Serge descending from the duct into the room on the other side.

"Hmmm.... I'll go take a look too then. I have a bad feeling about this."

"You have a bad feeling...?"

"I'd say it's a woman's intuition, but that's about it. Frederick, call the others down, will you?"

Frederick did not know what that meant, but Viidia bent down and went into the ducts herself. Now, with Serge and Viidia in the ducts, there was no doubt that the weight on the floor was lessened.

"Um, can we go down now? I think it's time to get moving."

Dustin's voice echoed from overhead, to which Frederick replied with a strained smile.

"Yeah, I think we're good for up to two people for now, so let's take turns...huh?!"

But while he was speaking, Frederick's hearing detected it. He looked up the long, vertical shaft and heard a slight, but perceptible, anomaly far overhead. It was the sound of metal being pierced in the distance. No, before that, a slight shudder?

Explosion?!

It came from the top of the blocked elevator shaft. Something further up than that. The strained groaning sound of the metal above was a sign that the situation was about to change very rapidly.

"Hurry up and get off!"

Frederick shouted as quickly as he could to the staff following him. Because the abnormal sound upward meant that...

"It's coming down!"

Collapse.

"Oh, wait, Frederick, it's coming down! Which way should we go?"

"This way! Follow the sound!"

It was too dark for the others and there wasn't time for their eyes to adjust. Frederick picked up the lid of the duct that Serge had destroyed earlier and repeatedly slammed it against the wall to make noise.

"This way? Uh...Oh, there?!"

Frederick grabbed Dustin by the shoulders as he came near and roughly tossed him into the duct.

"Move along! Don't clog it up!"

There was a sound like metal being pierced, followed by the cracking of concrete. As if in a dam, the roar of the collapse echoed from overhead. A buzzing sound was heard, and even the wires supporting the elevator cage were shredded. Everything that was jammed up above was coming down in one massive avalanche. The time for response was now a matter of seconds with not a moment to spare.

"Hurry up! Hurry!"

One by one, then another. Frederick threw the next station worker, and the other that followed, into the ducts, as did Dustin. Two more! Just as he thought, the first chunk of concrete that came down hit the loose rubble that had been the floor with a crash. It was the elevator cage that had been jammed at an angle as it headed upward. The cage, which would have been quite heavy even just by itself, easily smashed through the loosely supported rocks on the floor with a single hit, perhaps because of the speed of the fall.

Shit!

The balance of the rocks was lost. The already loose rock floor fell further down. Unable to even stand, Frederick quickly slid his lower body into the ducts. This would save him. But...

That's not my style!

Du-dum.

Driven by the pounding of his heart, Frederick immediately reached out of the duct.

"Grab me!"

"Oh! Ahhhhhh!"

He managed to grab the hand of the other nearby scientist, who was barely supporting another person at the edge of the cliff of sliding rubble. Then, of course, the one at the end of the line would not make it.

"Wait, wait...AHHHH?!"

Frederick gritted his teeth at the sound of the distant screams. The roar continued to echo. After numerous crashes of concrete and metal, the loose floor on which he had been standing just a few moments before collapsed completely. As luck would have it, Frederick and the others, who were half leaning out of the ducts, were not hit by the falling rocks.

If I had...

If he had told the rest of the group to get off immediately. Or if he had not been too cautious. If he had been just a little bit faster, they might have all survived. Frederick couldn't help but think that. Eventually, the last of the rubble and concrete fell away. The sight of the elevator cage, which had been jammed up in the falling debris for a moment earlier, falling downwards with its inner light fading, seemed as if hope was crumbling, casting an indescribable shadow over Frederick's mind. But, now, however...

"Don't let go! Don't ever let go! Please, God, don't let go!"

"If you've got time to yell, just hang on!"

There was one life that was saved at the last minute, that was for sure.

"Come on up, I'll lift you up! Count! Three, two, one!"

Sacrifices had to be made. But this time, of his own volition, he did not abandon it. It was a relief for Frederick to be able to do so. Even if his own body, which could easily support the entire weight of the staff member who was about to fall with just one arm, was in a strange state of shock. He saved himself in that way, and it was a sign that he had not lost his human heart yet.



At the end of the duct, where Serge had made sure it was safe, was a gym for the employees in the facility to use. When he stroked the textured rubber handles of the treadmills with his fingers, they felt remarkably rough. The dust settled on the exercise machines indicated that the place was barely used. It was ironic that it would become a place for a short break. A vending machine in the gym had been smashed open with Serge's axe and bottles of water passed around. The cool water was a relief to everyone's exhausted bodies, which had been strained by the continuous tension of the day.

This is what it feels like to be alive....

Frederick couldn't bring himself to eat any of the high-nutrition food that was in the machine alongside the water. The mysterious explosion, followed by the hounds and owls, and then the elevator shaft. There, he had seen a large amount of human blood. And the deaths he experienced. Now reminded of those things, there was no way he could find an appetite.

I'm sure I'll just throw it back up.

Frederick sighed, as he stared at the simple nutrient bar in his hand.

"I think you should force yourself to eat it, don't you? We don't know what's going to happen next."

Viidia came over to Frederick, holding out her own ration.

"You're really tough, you know that?" Frederick said to her.

"It's in extreme situations that people are tested. I just don't want to give up on life."

"I honestly don't know how you do it."

Frederick couldn't help but chuckle.

"You know, Frederick, you might be the only one who is holding back, right? In times of panic, it's surprising how these scientists can calm down. They're tougher than you might think."

Viidia asked him to look around, and he saw that Serge had just returned to the gym, having checked the outside of the room while the group was taking a break. It was indeed tough to see that he would take the initiative to go out to look around when there might be monsters such as hounds or owls prowling about. Frederick felt like he was supposed to be the one forced to take such a role given the circumstances, but since the incident in the elevator shaft, Serge seemed to be strangely proactive. He also felt like Dustin and the rest of the staff were having a serious discussion about him.

"Oh, Frederick, can I check with you for a minute?"

Dustin, who had just turned to look at him, spoke up.

"We were all trying to figure out what's going on here, and we're all trying to figure out what the possibilities are... What's your area of research, here?"

"What, me? I'm at the bottom end of the Gear Project, in case you're wondering..." Frederick answered, and each of the staff members coughed or nodded.

The way they glanced at Frederick made him uncomfortable.

"Dustin, why do you ask?"

"I'm just thinking that if we're going to be targeted in some kind of terrorist attack, it's going to be the Gear cells," Dustin said.

"Gear cells targeted by...? What makes you think that?"

"It makes sense, considering you're using Gear cells to heal your wounds. Did you experiment on yourself, by any chance?"

"No, I wouldn't...."

Human experimentation was done at the end of research results. As a preliminary step, experiments are naturally repeated on animals such as mice, and as far as Frederick knew, the Gear Project, in which Asuka and Aria were playing a central role, should not have reached such a stage.

But, Dustin continued, "I think that's what your condition is all about."

"...Aren't you being too paranoid?"

Frederick couldn't remember having Gear cells implanted in him, but even if he did, it wouldn't instantly heal his wounds like he was able to now. It was only a part of the Ecosystem Enhancement Plan, and definitely not the kind of plan that created monsters.

"I don't think so. There was a lot of talk about the dangers in the news the other day."

"...What?"

Dustin spoke about these events that Frederick couldn't remember as if they were a matter of fact.

"News...? Danger?"

Frederick involuntarily put his hand to his forehead.

"I'm sure that caused some commotion here too. Ugh, I'm having a hard time remembering. I'm sorry, but can you remind me about what happened yesterday?"

"About a week ago, there was a report in the press about our research," Viidia added as Frederick struggled to form words.

"A report about the...Gear cells?"

"More precisely, about its dangers."

"Gear cell danger?"

The thought of it made his heart flutter terribly.

"The leaked information was a brief outline of the basic theory. Even if the research is meaningful, if there is a risk of the research being diverted to weapons, shouldn't we stop now? That was the gist of it."

Each project at the Next Generation Medical Research Institute, not only the Gear Project, was supposed to be strictly controlled by the government. It was a matter of great importance that the contents of that research were reported to the public through the news.

Weapons diversion? That's ridiculous. There's no way Asuka would allow such a thing.

Once, when the basic theory of Gear cells was completed, Frederick had discussed its possibilities and dangers with Asuka. However, Asuka, the person who developed the Gear cell, limited its use to peaceful purposes as a condition for disclosing and transferring the contents of the basic theory to the government. The government's approval of that condition should have been the reason for the research that continued to this day. If there was such a fact in his lost memories, a missing period of time...

Has Asuka's research progressed that far since I left? No. If they had been able to go that far, even Aria's TP infection would already have been....

Frederick's mind suddenly replayed an event that happened yesterday for him, but from the current perspective, was about a month ago. It was outside on the lawn, when Asuka, Aria, and him were talking. He recalled Asuka and Aria's pained expressions. He thought their research was not going well.

Is that what this was all about?

It would be unthinkable for the media to report on the basic theory of Gear cells, which was also classified research. If that was the case, the information must have been leaked from someone inside the company, someone close to the center of the company.

At that moment, Frederick thought to himself, "Who in the world could have leaked that information to...?"

Tsk?!

Like a flickering video, an image appeared in Frederick's mind. It was a flashback to another memory he'd had before.

—

"Military...animal experiments? Wait a minute Asuka! Then..."

The first thing I heard was my own raspy voice.

"Regrettably, you're right, Frederick."

Myself and Asuka arguing outside the institute.

“Ridiculous! Why did you approve something so reckless!”

“It pains me too, really. But if we don’t do something about it, we’ll never be able to stem the tide. That’s why I’m asking you to do this.”

As he said this, Asuka was holding out a small data terminal, about the size of his pinky finger, to me. A moment of silence. I stared at the data terminal. But then I sighed as if giving up, took it and...

“If you can’t stop it inside, do it from the outside, huh? So we’ll just leave it to Professor Vince?”

“I guess so. He will surely bring it to the proper authorities.”

“But the government is very slow. It’s not likely to happen immediately. What if you can’t make it in time?”

“Then I will do my best to avoid the worst possible future. But for the time being, I hope this move will be made in time.”

Then Asuka turned his back to me.

“I’m counting on you, Frederick.”

—

Ugh?!

A severe headache ended the memory, like a dream cut off on waking up.

Did I leak the information...?

One part of the memory came back to him vividly, along with some of the events around it. Frederick, who worked in the Gamma Section and was not as restricted in going out as Asuka and his colleagues, breached the institute’s security by wrapping that data terminal Asuka gave him in plastic, hiding it in his mouth, leaving the facility, and then spitting it out. He delivered it to Professor Vince MacDonnell, their trusted mentor and overseer of early Gear cell development.

The result was reported in the news: [The Dangers of Gear Cells?](#)

But what I heard from Asuka at that time was even more dangerous....

Asuka had told him about the more dangerous weapons applications and he believed it. In other words, the leaked information itself was not being propagated in the press. However, the diversion of Gear cells to weapons, which Frederick had feared in his discussions with Asuka, was already underway without Frederick's knowledge. Therefore, it was reasonable to say that Gear cells were a target of terrorism.



Because, as hard as it was for Frederick now to admit and believe, he was not yet willing to accept the truth.

So, then, that hound and the owls are all....

They were in the leaked documents that Asuka showed him that day.

You've got to be kidding me.

And if Frederick's current state of rapidly healing wounds, strangely acute hearing, and superhuman strength were due to the implantation of such weaponized Gear cells, as Dustin and the others had said earlier, then....

Again, with his head in his hands, Frederick searched through his memories. When, where, and why did it happen? Frederick had no recollection of being a test subject. It was hard to believe that he was in such a position during that period in his missing memories.

What else could it have been other than that time?!

The memory of his throat burning hot and the outburst of violence from earlier came back to him. Considering that he woke up after that, it must have been from when Frederick collapsed in his lab. And when he woke up, he saw his own blood around his neck. It was only then that Frederick's wound, which should have been fatal since it seemingly went so deeply into his neck, regenerated and led him to waking back up again. But he couldn't remember why or how it had happened. No matter how hard he tried to pull it back, the threads of his memory were cut off. But he felt that if he could just remember that part, something, somewhere, would connect.

"Remember! Remember! What happened to me? Remember! Frederick Bulsara!"

He fell to his knees, digging his fingers into his head and hair, searching for memories.

"What's wrong with you all of a sudden, Frederick?"

"I'm supposed to know...."

"Know what? Frederick! Explain it to me!"

Viidia shouted, grabbing Frederick by both shoulders. But the connection between the two was soon severed by a third party.

"I'm sorry, but if you want to reminisce, you can do that later."

Frederick looked up to see Serge, with a mysterious look on his face, separating him from Viidia.

"Our priority right now is to get out of here."

Looking in the direction Serge pointed, they immediately understood the meaning of his words. Illuminated by the red and green of the emergency lights, the floor was beginning to reflect the light and cause ripples.

"...Water?"

It was more than if someone had only spilled it.

Frederick followed the ripples on the floor to see what was going on, and found that water had flowed back from the dust chute by the wall and was overflowing.

"Is it flooding...?"

Was it the result of the several explosions that had occurred earlier? But anyway, Frederick and his team were heading for the lowest level of the Gamma Section. The escape boat, or the pathway to the escape boat, was supposed to be in that special laboratory. If the Beta Section, where they were now, was not alone in quickly becoming flooded, then there was certainly no more time to waste.

Frederick was still wondering about his memory, and about this situation, but he had no choice. He shook his head once to clear his mind and stood up. Seeing this, Serge turned to Dustin.

"I didn't see any gates that looked like it on this floor, Dustin, but what floor is the junction with the Gamma Section on?"

"From the very bottom of the Beta Section, there should be five floor divisions."

"Got it. Then let's hurry and head downstairs. I found them earlier."

"Down...? If you want to make sure you get into the Gamma Section, wouldn't it be better to go up?" Viidia disagreed with Serge's assessment.

"If the water is coming this far up, even though it's backed up from the air duct, the lower gate might not work anymore."

"Of course, we thought we might be able to escape by the stairs, but unfortunately the stairway to the top was blocked for a whole floor."

"The aftermath of the earlier collapse?"

"Maybe it could be the effects of an explosion from when this was all starting?"

In answer to Frederick's question, Serge clapped his hands twice.

"At any rate, if the escape boat and its tunnel are submerged, there will be nothing we can do. Let's hurry!."

With these words, they all started to move.

"I guess that's okay..."

For some reason, Viidia seemed dissatisfied, but Frederick's hearing did not miss the barely audible complaint she let out shortly thereafter.

"Tunnel, huh? Disgusting."

"Well, there's only one way. It happens."

"What? Did you hear that?"

"Don't think anything of it. I'm sick of this sharp hearing too"

Frederick patted Viidia on the shoulder as if to comfort her and started walking away.

"Frederick, I'm sorry, but can you take the lead again?"

The line would naturally form without being told to do so. Frederick consented, accepted the last of the emergency axes that Serge offered him, and led the group out of the gym and into the corridor.

Then he said, "Serge, which way to the stairs?"

"Straight ahead, then right at the end."

"Roger that."

Frederick followed the instructions from Serge's voice behind him and started down the hallway. Since Serge had looked around earlier and was fine, it was unlikely that a monster would attack anytime soon, but what would have happened if he had gone down one floor was unknown. As the staircase came into view in the glow of the emergency lights, Frederick braced himself once again. But when he looked behind him, he saw only Viidia there.

"What happened to the others?"

"I guess they don't want to be anywhere near danger, huh?"

Frederick sighed at Viidia's unconvincing smile.

They're willing to let me get eaten at the first encounter.

It wasn't hard to understand the desire of the staff to leave a leg to run on, or to keep some distance from Frederick.

"But they just told us they didn't have much time left."

"Well, if we keep going, they'll follow."

"Are you sure you want to be at the front of the line?"

"If you think about it, it might be safer for me to be behind you."

Viidia flashed a quick wink at him.

"I'm not sure if I've made you feel better or not...."

"Well, I suppose I'll make a good physical shield substitute," Frederick said, and Viidia shrugged and looked back down the hallway where the rest of the group were.

But for some strange reason, her eyes, looking behind her, seemed somewhat cold.

"Hm. Looks like they're finally here."

Frederick followed her gaze and blinked a few times involuntarily. The red of the emergency lights, visible behind the following station staff. He thought he saw it flicker for a moment.

Was it my imagination?

If not, the people behind him wouldn't be walking so leisurely.

"Sorry I'm a little late."

Serge took the second lead behind Frederick and the remaining staff caught up behind him. But then, for some reason, Frederick had a strangely bad feeling. He stared at the red of the emergency lights shining behind them until Serge spoke up.

"What's wrong? Keep moving."



The smell of stale underground water filled the air. To his disgust, Frederick, who was in the lead, had already sensed that the floor below had begun to submerge during the time it took the group to descend three flights of stairs. A film of water flowed down and down the descending staircase. As his footsteps began to splash in the shallow water, the spiraling turn of the staircase finally broke off. Then this floor must be the lowest level of the Beta Section. The floor had long since been flooded. Almost the entire floor reflected the haze from the emergency lights. But considering the number of stairs up to that point, the water shouldn't be too deep.

"The water seems to be leveling out."

Frederick descended the remaining steps one by one, checking the water level with the handle of the axe in his hand. When he reached the end of the descent, he found the surface of the water about two flights of stairs, or roughly below his knees. He was afraid that if the flooding was too severe, the gate to the all-important Gamma Section might not open.

It's not too late. We could still make it, just barely.

"Dustin, can you point me in the direction of the gate?" Frederick asked behind him.

"I'm sorry, I don't know, I don't use this route all the time."

So which way should Frederick proceed? It would be quite daunting to try to weave through the vast floor space, even if it was only one floor at this water level. But he was sure that he would be able to find his way eventually.

Since I don't know, I guess I'll just have to keep going.

Frederick moved along the floor, the water splashing around him. Similar sounds of disrupted water soon increased as Viidia followed, then again as one by one the rest of the group pushed on, the noise echoing through the corridors of the floor in unusual layers. And so Frederick walked for a while, looking for the gate without any guesses.

In no time at all, a feeling of resistance came to both feet. Lifting up and stepping out against the water pressure, his legs felt several times heavier than usual. They say that just walking in a pool is good for weight loss, and this was exactly what he was doing, albeit to a harder degree. If he did not take a strong first step, the water pressure might cause his legs to tangle and sweep out from under him.

Are those who don't get enough exercise going to be alright?

When Frederick looked behind him, he could see only two of the seven people who were supposed to be standing in line, except for himself. He could hear the occasional shout as if they had fallen down, and the splashing of water was especially loud, so they must be following

him. But the distance between Viidia and Serge, who was coming next, was now completely open, as if to say that Serge was the second leader.

“Frederick! Wait a minute! There's a floor map on the wall!” Serge's voice came from the rear.

Frederick turned around to see Serge coming out of the T-junction that Frederick had just passed, signaling to him. Frederick was so focused on moving forward and looking for what looked like a gate that he didn't notice the map, but he was honestly impressed that Serge had managed to notice it in the dark.

“Serge! Which way to the gate?”

“Keep going straight for now, then take the next T-junction at...”

Frederick stopped while waiting for Serge's guidance. The sound of the water that had been stirring up until then suddenly stopped, perhaps because everyone else stopped as well. But it was not complete silence.

The water stopped. Huh..?

Suddenly, Frederick's hearing caught a sound.

It was a watery sound, quite different from that made by human footsteps. And on top of that, it was coming from beneath him.

Du-dum.

Tension rose rapidly and Frederick felt his heart begin to beat harder in his chest.

What's going on?

Looking down, Frederick saw ripples of water hitting against his feet. But what in the world was making these ripples? They came from behind Frederick, who had turned around to wait for the others, from the direction he had been walking towards until now.

Is there something in the water?

Fearfully, he looked over his shoulder to the surface of the water behind him. That's when it happened.

“Ah, shit!”

Suddenly, the screams of the office staff echoed from the back of the line. Frederick heard what sounded like the rumble of some beast, and the water rushed around violently. He looked

forward again, and saw that at a far corner, just under an emergency light at a break in the path they had come through, the last worker had fallen unnaturally and was struggling.

"What the hell is this thing!"

The thrashing form of the worker then disappeared around the curve of the staircase.

He was dragged in?

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh!"

A desperate scream echoed through the air. The murky surface of the water illuminated by the emergency lights now flowed dark with blood. The staff who had been dragged off was no more.

"Attacked? You've got to be kidding me, after we've come this far...", Viidia's voice trembled at the sight before her eyes.

Immediately after, the surface of the water rumbled once more, this time violently behind Frederick. Not a moment later, Frederick turned at the sound and saw the mouth of the creature.

Crap! Here too?!

A long, vertical maw, lined with an outlandish number of fangs, loomed right in front of him.

"GUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!!"

Reflexively, Frederick swung his axe. Just in time. The monster let out a horrifying scream and Frederick felt the axe rip through its flesh. The axe lodged deeply into the meat of the monster, which reeled backwards in the aftermath of the blow. But Frederick couldn't care less. He let go of the axe, which was being pulled, and immediately shouted.

"Run! There's something in the water!"

He then started running and pushed Viidia's back.

"What is it?"

"It's a monster! They're attacking from both sides!"

After a moment of confusion, Frederick pulled away from her and ran as fast as he could. He was not sure if he could have defeated that one that had attacked him, but now he wanted to get away from the threat of the monster as quickly as possible. If he went back the way he had just come, he would run into the other monster that had attacked the tail end of the group. Then the way to go was the T-junction where Serge had been; the one Frederick hadn't gone to

earlier. Even if the group went that way, they might be attacked again by a monster lurking in the water. And since they had lost the last of their emergency axes, they would no longer be able to resist. But the situation was urgent. Clutching at straws, Frederick turned at a T-junction.

“This way! Hurry!”

Serge and Dustin were already on the path ahead of him.

“Let's get out of the water first! There's a staircase this way!”

By the time Dustin shouted, the two men who would have been at the end of the line had also fled and joined Frederick and the others who had run the other way. And so, the group ran on, the water rumbling violently. Driven by the fear of not being able to see, they pushed forward single-mindedly. Every time Frederick glanced backward, every time he turned, he saw something round floating on the surface of the water

“How many are there?!”

The round things in the water had a square tile-like pattern. It was probably the back of the same monster as before, but it was coming after them like a swiftly flowing stream. Moreover, one by one, the floats were coming together as they advanced. If they lost sight of the back of Serge ahead of them here, or if they stopped, they were sure to be attacked again. However....

If only we could get out of the water!

With this in mind, Frederick kept running. But, perhaps at the limit of his physical strength, one of the staff members running alongside him tripped over his feet.

“Damn!”

Frederick quickly stretched out his arm to support the off-balance worker. The weight of the man's body caused Frederick to involuntarily fall to his knees.

“I'm sorry!”

“Don't stop! Get back up!”

He shouted and pushed the staff member back. Now Frederick was in last place. Quickly he got up and started to run after the staff member, but the monster glimpsed on the surface of the water was almost upon him.

“Left! Right! Next left! And I see stairs!”

Viidia's voice could be heard up ahead, guiding the staff to the next step, but Frederick had lost sight of her. Given the speed difference between them and the monster, Frederick would at least catch up with the lead one. Just as Frederick was thinking this, he looked behind him, and with a loud splash, a large mouth with fangs protruded once again from the surface of the water.

“Woah!”

Frederick managed to dodge just in time, and this time he saw the creature's figure. It was a crocodile. But as it turned out, the situation was worse. The back of the crocodile that had just passed by Frederick's side turned around and blocked his escape route. Frederick had to stop again, but it was clear that if he continued to dawdle, the crocodiles behind him would catch up and he would be completely at a loss for what to do. A moment's hesitation could be fatal. Therefore, he had to make a quick decision.

Frederick summoned up all his courage once again and chose to cross the crocodile in front of him. If the crocodile reacted just a little later, he would be able to pass through safely. Frederick ran on the third beat of his heart, feeling hopeful. At that moment, however, something unexpected happened. A sudden explosion occurred right behind Frederick.

“What the hell?!”

A large column of water blasted upward. The impact of the explosion hit Frederick, who had only enough time to turn his back and brace against it.

“Guh!”

His feet left the floor and his body was blown away by the roaring wind and water. So Frederick was unintentionally sent flying over the head of the crocodile in front of him, and his body slammed hard into the wall around the bend of the hallway. The collision with the wall was such a shock that he thought every bone in his body was broken, but fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, Frederick's body, which was in an unusual state already, was still moving despite the pain.

Saved?! No, not yet!

Frederick sat up dizzy, but it was still too early to feel relief. The explosion came from below the floor. Although this floor was the lowest level of the Beta Section, there was a large hole in the corridor, as if there was a plumbing system or something underneath. As if sucked into that large hole, the water, which had pooled up to Frederick's knees, was swirling violently. He saw a number of crocodiles that were closing in on him being sucked into the vortex and falling down into the hole. But Frederick himself was no exception. If he too was swallowed by the vortex, there would be a large number of crocodiles in the water ahead of him. If that were to happen, he would certainly not survive.

Left, right, and left!

Remembering Viidia's guide earlier, Frederick paced with his hands on the wall, resisting the violent force of the water current. Frederick, however, was horrified by a sudden wobble in his step.

Huh?! This is bad!

Was it the aftermath of the explosion or the effect of the water flow? The hole that had just formed in the corridor was gradually widening, and the entire floor of the area was about to collapse.

Shit! Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!

Frederick put all his strength into both feet and managed to run against the current. The floor on which he stepped sank rapidly, and he almost lost his balance. In a panic, he put his next foot forward, and the floor sank again. There was no telling how far this floor collapse would go, so he couldn't stop running. And if the step he took now was delayed even for a moment, Frederick would also fall into the hole.

“AAAARGGGGHHHHHHHHHH!!!”

Frederick moved his feet with a single effort, screaming. He kept running, running, running to escape the water current and the collapse. After turning left, right, and left down the hallway, he finally saw the stairs.

Almost there. I can't stop yet. I cannot rest.

Frederick finally arrived at the staircase and ran up to the landing on the upper floor, then turned around and looked back the way he came. He was so intent on running that he did not notice that the floor had collapsed, but it had stopped somewhere along the way, and only the pooled water was flowing like a river in the direction of the hole. After confirming that much, Frederick finally took a breath.

“It looks like we're safe...”

Really, it was a close call. Frederick propped himself up with his hands on his knees and bit his lips in relief.

“Oh, thank God you're alright.”

Viidia's voice made Frederick look around, and he saw that the staff who had preceded him were breathing heavily, their shoulders swaying up and down. With the earlier attack, they were down another man, six in total.

"I guess we made it," he said. "Your guidance saved my life. Thank you."

"Yeah? I'm glad I could help. What happened?"

"Crocodile explosion. I don't understand it at all. Normally, I'd be dead."

But Frederick survived because he was no longer normal. He had mixed feelings about whether he should be happy about that or not.

"Oh, no, I can't...keep going. I simply can't...."

Dustin flopped down and fell over in a heap. Taking this as a cue, each member of the group sat down on the stairs or sat on the floor and leaned against the wall to catch their breath. But now that this had happened, even though he had been saved, he could not settle down as before. There was a large number of crocodile monsters, and even a collapse caused by an explosion. It would be impossible to get to the gate on the lower floor. Then, of course, they would have to find another way.

"How's it going up there? Can we go on?"

Frederick asked Serge, who was the first to go to the top of the stairs to check on the situation. But as he came down the stairs, his expression was gloomy.

"I'm afraid not," he said. "We can go up one more step, but it's just another pile of rubble."

"I see."

He was hoping to get to the other gate, which was at least five floors up, but that was not possible, so he had to say that they were blocked in all directions. They couldn't enter the Gamma Section. They couldn't go toward it. In other words, no escape. The thought of being in such an impasse cast a dark shadow over the group, and they gradually began to show signs of giving up.

"What are we going to do? We've come all this way!"

"Are we going to die here after all?"

"I'm not going to die of hunger! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!"

"I don't want to die either! I don't want to die! If there are monsters roaming around on this floor, then...one day they might.... I don't want to die!"

Frederick was involuntarily caught off guard by the negative questions and answers from Dustin and the station staff. Frederick wanted to scream like that, too. Frederick wanted to scream like that, too. Instead, he punched the wall once.

“Don't make a fuss. Everyone is anxious in a situation like this. But it's too early to give up.”

Yes, it was still early. Give up only after you have done all you can do. You can't give up until you've exhausted all possibilities. There were still at least two things Frederick had doubts about.

“I have a question, Viidia.”

Frederick sighed once, heavily, and then said, “If you've got a better way out of this, you've got to share it with us.”

“Huh? What's wrong, Frederick, you suddenly look scared.”

“I have a feeling that you know something about all this that you aren't sharing with us.”

It was a question that had been nagging at Frederick ever since he had met her. Frederick had thought that if he could escape, that would be fine, and that there was no need to disturb the harmony of the group, but now that he was stuck in this situation, he felt that he had no choice but to pursue that possibility.

“I'm sure it's nothing but, tell me, Viidia. Who are you? What are you hiding?”

“Uh, yeah? Huh? What's with this interrogation? I'm not hiding anything....”

Viidia tried to cover it up with a bland tone, but she was failing.

“Hey Frederick, what did you mean by that? I don't understand. Explain it to me!”

“I just thought there might be a possibility. Because...,” While everyone was paying attention, Frederick explained, “Because, unlike us, Viidia doesn't work here.”



The sixth special laboratory was the lowest level of the special laboratories in the lowest level of the Gamma Section. Even Asuka, the project chief of the Gear Project in that classified section, had never been to that place before. The laboratory, too large to be called a room and with a high ceiling, was like a hall. The large hole surrounded by fences in the center of the laboratory, whether for experiments or not, was so deep that the bottom could not be seen, even though this was the lowest level of the laboratory.

Surrounding such a large hole were a number of huge cylindrical capsules. The capsules, set up in a circular pattern, contained nothing but green liquid, except for one, which was currently empty of the liquid. However, it was easy to imagine what had been in the capsules by looking at the one capsule that still had something other than fluid inside it.

“When did this happen?”

A huge body floating in the capsule. It was probably an experimental animal from the special laboratory, and it had the appearance of a huge bear, but of course, this could not be just any bear. At the very least, it was certainly the same as the other experimental animals that Asuka had seen so far, and it was certainly the same body in which Gear cells had been implanted.

(No, this is already a step beyond that....)

Asuka pinched his eyes tightly with his fingers to hide his pain.

“As expected, the doctor seemed surprised. This is our laboratory.”

Behind Asuka, a large man with a gun proudly stated, “That's a state-of-the-art experimental weapon. Unfortunately, we will have to destroy it here.”

“Destroy? Does that mean it's a failure?”

“It is still difficult to control.”

However, since the doctor would be joining in the research from now on, this problem would likely be solved soon.

“And the Gear cells will be our trump card in the military.”

Asuka responded to that word, “military,” with only a cold shrug. Asuka had never dreamed that there was such a large scale laboratory so close by. He also did not expect their military research to be so advanced. The situation was much worse than Asuka had expected. Asuka regretted that he had not anticipated the sudden change in the situation today. He had already regretted his actions since the first time he allowed the military to intervene, but the sudden change in the situation today made him feel it even more strongly.

“Now, doctor, go to the escape boat. This laboratory will be blown up immediately, and the whole place will collapse.”

Asuka walked out from in front of the capsule at the urging of the large man. On the far wall of the special laboratory, an airlock as wide as an aircraft had been opened. Through the door, the frozen capsule in which Aria slept was carried ahead of him to the escape boat.

(There is no turning back now....)

Already, Gear cell research was beginning to leave Asuka's hands. If this continued, the future would eventually go through the worst possible scenario Asuka could have imagined. But not yet. Asuka shook his head lightly, knowing that not all the outcomes were in place yet. He had taken the steps he could take, even in the midst of today's sudden change in circumstances.

(I hope I get some answers before I leave here....)

It turned out to be a gamble, but only if that "seed" would sprout. If only it would bear fruit. Asuka could still believe in it. No matter how long it took, the worst-case scenario could always be avoided.

Chapter Four『DOUBT』

“Because unlike us, Viidia doesn't work here.”

As soon as Frederick asserted this, the eyes of everyone gathered on the staircase landing focused on Viidia. The only one with a half-smile on their face was Viidia herself.

“No, no, Frederick, what are you talking about? I work here just like everyone else.”

She tried to cover it up, but once she started, Frederick had no intention of stopping.

“The explosion before I woke up set off the evacuation alarm. That's why I didn't see many strangers after I left the lab. Of course, everyone had already evacuated, just like when we met in front of the elevator hall. And yet I ran into you.”

“So it was just a matter of being trapped, is all.”

“What were you doing in an empty lab?”

Now to get to the bottom of Viidia's true identity.

“There is more to the story. The scientists here basically don't get enough exercise,” Frederick continued determinedly, “That's why there's dust in the gym. You look like you've had some kind of training, haven't you?”

But, above all, Frederick had already secretly confirmed suspicions with his first test. He didn't dare mention it at this stage considering he could use it again in the future if he had to.

Now, how will this go?

Convinced, Frederick quickly continued.

"I think you are connected to the people who are causing all this trouble. What's the real story?"

"I can tell you for sure that's not the case...."

When Viidia immediately denied Frederick's suspicions, she looked thoughtful for a moment and then sighed loudly.

"Oh, God," she said, "I've got it now, I get it. I understand, so don't look at me like you're looking at the real suspect in an important case, okay?"

Viidia raised her hands in a pose of surrender.

"So, Viidia, are you really...?"

Dustin interrupted her fearfully, and Viidia put her hand on his shoulder.

"No, I don't work here."

Frederick had expected her to be a bit more deceptive. He was surprised at how easily she admitted the truth.

"Even I don't have the luxury of time anymore. I just decided that if I was going to get into trouble because of suspicion, it would be better to prove my innocence by revealing my story."

"Then I'd like to...request a more detailed explanation?"

"Okay, then."

Viidia then pulled out a board-type terminal for personal use from the pocket of her lab coat. The personal possession of devices like that was forbidden to the staff of the facility for the purpose of information management control. The light emitted from the terminal's screen illuminated its surroundings like a small flashlight. While operating the terminal, Viidia began to speak.

"I belong to the Central Intelligence Agency. I've been undercover here as an intelligence officer for three days now, and I'm involved in this situation today, just like everyone else."

"Central Intelligence Agency...CIA? What's someone like that doing here?"

"I'm here on a top-secret internal investigation."

"What's this investigation about...?"

Viidia showed everyone the terminal screen in response to Serge's question. What was displayed there was one of the monstrous owls that attacked the group in front of the elevator and.... No, that wasn't all. As she scrolled down the screen, the next thing she showed was the hound that Frederick had first encountered. Then, the crocodile they had just seen was also listed.

What?!

"Wait a minute, why is that monster's data on...?"

Frederick was speechless and Dustin was surprised almost simultaneously.

"The investigation was about the diversion of Gear cell research to weapons."

Viidia's answer gave Frederick goosebumps.

The threads of Frederick's memory, which had been so nearly connected, were partially reconnected.

I remember this.... It looks familiar.

The document Viidia had just shown him was a detailed account of the leaked information Frederick had received from Asuka and given to Professor Vince. In other words, if Viidia's words were true – no, they were true. But, in any case, the research information leak that Asuka had entrusted Frederick with had led to the CIA's action.

"The CIA had been concerned for some time that the military was out of control, but there was no decisive step to take to actually go undercover. It was because of this leak that someone sent me through a certain person so that the undercover investigation could begin. If this is true, the country absolutely has to stop it. So, it's my mission to find out what's really going on and to support the leak."

But still.

You mean it's too late?

Frederick thought he must be imagining ridiculous things. But with Viidia's words, his brain began to form a dim picture of the worst that could happen in the underground laboratory.

“When I met with Frederick, he was looking for a large terminal that could be used to contact the outside world for a situation report. I knew right away that the worst-case scenario had been set in motion much sooner than I had expected at the start of this whole mess.”

“What's the worst-case scenario...?”

Dustin asked fearfully, and Viidia sighed.

“Can't you imagine that the 'experimental individuals' I was looking for turned out to be the ones attacking and killing lab personnel?”

He was immediately at a loss for words.

You're going to go that far? Really...?

If so, this wasn't an accident. Of course, it was not a terrorist attack targeting the results of some research.

“There is only one possible escape route...that is blocked by the unfortunate explosion.”

Viidia gave the answer to Frederick, who was still in disbelief.

“This is a military coup to keep the diversion of Gear cells to weapons a secret. It's a big cover-up against the Next Generation Medical Research Institute. From what Dustin has told me, they're likely going to take all the important data and personnel out in an escape craft, then blow up the facility.”

"That's...insane...."

“It's not possible that they would go that far....”

The station staff were puzzled by Viidia's prediction.

“But what about Frederick? Does that mean Frederick is also a product of military research?”

Perhaps he did not mean to offend, but Dustin's words completely changed the game.

“Yes, that's right! It's funny how his wounds heal!”

“So you're saying this guy is a spy for the military?”

The suspicion turned on Frederick as Viidia's true identity was almost uncovered. The suspicion that he was a traitor.

"Wait a minute! I'm-!"

"Don't worry, I don't think Frederick has anything to do with it, okay?"

And, surprisingly, Viidia offered to help him out of this.

"I doubted him at first, too. After all, he was involved in the Gear Project. But when it comes to a person with superhuman abilities such as healing wounds, strength, and good hearing, of course I had my suspicions."

With that said, Viidia went behind Frederick and put her hand on his shoulder.

"But if he's a runaway military official, there should be no reason for him to take the initiative to help us out, just to make us disappear later. You should remember that."

"Yes, I agree."

The person who said this was the same person Frederick had saved when the elevator shaft collapsed. Regardless of what the others thought of Frederick's previous actions, he was the only one who clearly witnessed that Frederick had risked his life to save him. Looking back on it now, Frederick thought he had done something quite reckless, but he never imagined that his actions would come back to him in this way.

"He's a victim, too. Just a little different from us, and has some special abilities, sure."

As Frederick's suspicions began to move in the direction of being cleared, Viidia said, "As an intelligence officer, I think it's about time you remembered something, because that may be closer to the heart of the matter than you realize. What do you think, Frederick?"

"I'm not so sure. Unfortunately, so far..."

And when Frederick began to answer, Viidia whispered in his ear, "I'll take over the rest. Stay alert."

What?!

Those words reminded him. Having been cornered into this situation of losing his way, Frederick had decided to try to uncover Viidia's true identity, and he had two possibilities in mind. There was still one more possibility left.

"Hey, Frederick," Viidia said, "You really can't remember anything? Think about it. With your memory, you might be able to put a stop to the military's rampage if you could just get out of here."

It was precisely with this in mind that Viidia's continued encouragement seemed so terribly clear in his ear.

"Maybe we don't have much time left."

It began abruptly. With a single word from Viidia.

"Hey Serge, what time is it?"

"Right now...?"

Serge looked at the watch in his hand and replied nonchalantly.

"It's just past 1500."

Huh?!

"Hey?"

"What?"

"...Pfft...."

The reaction of Frederick, as well as Dustin and the two station staff, was exactly the same.

Viidia narrowed her eyes at Serge for his response.

"I guess I was right after all."

"What is it? Viidia, what do you and the others mean by...?"

Serge looked around at everyone with a puzzled look on his face. But now he was looking at Viidia and Frederick with the same skepticism that he had been looking at them with earlier. The fact that these two facility personnel were said to be innocent before this turn of events only deepened his suspicions.

"The answer is simple. You don't work here either."

"Oh, come on, you've got to be kidding me in a situation like this."

"Are you serious? I didn't know and neither did you, so we were exposed. I heard that this institute has an unwritten social custom. I'm sure it's a very antiquated method and not very accurate."

How she could have noticed that without asking anyone was a mystery, but that's what the CIA does. Viidia's comment, which sounded as if she had just caught the devil's head, was right on the money. There was a little local rule among the staff in this underground laboratory. It was to judge the other party's affiliation by checking the time. When asked what time it was, they simply responded, "Ten minutes before the hour." No one knew who started it, but it was a laboratory that also handled highly classified research. It must have come about naturally as a precaution against people coming in and out of the building.

The rule already existed when Frederick was transferred to Next Generation Medical Research Institute, and he had actually learned about it during a lunchtime chat with Aria and Asuka. In a sense, the rule was a failure, because it had a flaw in that the newcomer may have just arrived at the institute, but if they answered a casual question about the current time from a staff member in a normal manner, they were suspected of being an outsider. So when Frederick first became suspicious upon seeing Viidia's physical abilities, situational judgment, and calmness, he asked and confirmed it. On the other hand, when he met Serge, he did not ask it; instead, Dustin did. Frederick's answer cleared his suspicions about Viidia with him, but perhaps Serge was also put out of the question by the response of someone else who was with him in the group.

"So," Viidia said, "Serge, it's your turn to come clean."

Like Viidia, Serge was physically strong and fit. Looking back, it was true that he, too, was not like the scientists of the institute. He didn't think Viidia would confirm it, but now at least Frederick's suspicions were confirmed. So who was this Serge?

"Hm...."

Frederick waited for his next words. But it was Viidia who spoke first.

"Can you tell me about it? How to avoid being attacked by that monster that has Gear cells implanted in it, and where I can go to escape?"

What?

Viidia suddenly asking such a question was, to say the least, unexpected.

"What nonsense. What makes you think I know that?"

On this point, Frederick agreed with Serge. Viidia, however, was confident and did not stop her pursuit.

"I have a lot on my mind," she said. "Why did you go all the way into the potentially dangerous ducts in the elevator shaft in the first place? Did you know at the time that there was going to be an explosion?"

“That's a wild guess. It was just a coincidence.”

Serge shook his head in disgust.

“It's strange to be brave enough to patrol outside the gym room alone when you don't know where the monster might be. But if there is a way to avoid being attacked, I want to know about it,” she continued.

“Viidia, I'm just trying to...for God's sake.”

“I think you were in that position because you knew we were going to be pinched from the front and back at the flooded bottom level earlier by the crocodiles. I suspected as much, and I'm sorry for Frederick, but I thought it would be safest between him and you. And, in fact, it was.”

It was like watching an interrogation. Frederick had a mild suspicion of Serge, but not to this extent. But now that Viidia had told him, he was beginning to think that was the case. In fact, Serge had been the first to act and reach a safe zone at the time of the owls, at the time of the elevator shaft collapse, and when they were attacked by the crocodiles earlier.

Wait a minute. If that's true....

He was reminded of Viidia's earful earlier. Increased vigilance. Frederick's heart beat faster.

“Damn, I don't think you're going to believe me no matter what I say.”

“Yes, that's right. Well, actually, there are a lot of holes in my hypothesis. If it's not my worst imagination, I'd like you to come clean here. So, Serge, who are you?”

“Okay, I'm in trouble, Viidia....”

Serge sighed slowly.

“Here's your answer.”

And in no time at all, he was in the pocket of his lab coat....

...This guy!

Immediately after, a sound Frederick would never get used to hearing reverberated through the hallway and staircase. But it was a sound he still knew. It was the sound of two gunshots. If he had not been alerted in advance, he would not have been able to react. Frederick had immediately pushed Viidia away from him as soon as he heard the gunshots.

"Guh!"

A bullet pierced Frederick's outstretched second arm. But there were two gunshots. At that moment, the other shot that remained was....

"Ah—!"

A small hole was punched in Dustin's forehead. A huge flower of blood bloomed all over the wall. No time to think. Instant death.

"...Dustin...?"

"Oh, my God!"

The remaining staff members began to scream once it sank in what had just happened.

"Tsk...."

Serge clicked his tongue, perhaps because he had failed to finish off his target, Viidia. Frederick endured the pain and immediately stood up to protect Viidia behind him. But more gunshots rang out.

"Argh—!"

"Stay calm, anomaly."

Heat in both legs. A wobbly body after being shot through the thigh. But still.... Du-dum. For Frederick, who clenched his teeth, his throat was burning hotter.

"Fuck you...!"

He jumped at Serge, not caring about the pain. More gunshots rang out, and Frederick felt heat in his side, but strangely he felt no fear. He didn't want to admit that he was a monster, but if he didn't stop Serge now, they would all be shot dead here. With this in mind, Frederick gathered all his strength.

"What the...?"

Frederick grabbed Serge's wrist and with his momentum he twisted it.

"Tch! Let go of me!"

Almost simultaneously, Serge's knee slammed into the newly created gunshot wound in Frederick's side, but that didn't stop him.

"UOOOOOAAAAGHHHHHHHH!"

He endured the dull pain and leaned forward with his remaining hand on Serge's shoulder. Frederick pushed Serge down to the hallway floor, then climbed on top of him. Serge's struggling body was held down with all his might.

"You monster!"

Serge's face showed his astonishment. A monster. That word, "monster," pierced Frederick's heart. Frederick, who was still moving with bullets in his arms, legs, and even in his side, was certainly doing enough to be called a monster. But whatever they called him, now....

Du-dum. An impulse that sprouted in his chest.

Frederick's body was overwhelmed by the sensation that his thoughts were being overtaken and controlled. Gasping, he put all his strength into his right hand, which gripped Serge's wrist, and with a dull recoil, snapped the wrist that gripped the gun with ease.



“Gaaaaaaaaaahhhh?!”

Serge screamed and suffered in agony. The gun spilled out of Serge’s pulverized fingers that could no longer grip it. Frederick involuntarily smiled and, on impulse, raised his freed fist. Then he swung it towards Serge’s face with all of his strength....

“Don't kill him!”

Argh!

Frederick's fist, redirected just in time, shattered the floor of the corridor. But what if this fist had struck Serge, who was powerless beneath him, in the face? If Viidia, who was behind him, had not shouted to stop him.

I'm sure I would have...killed him.

With this threat, which was unthinkable for a human being.

Oh, I'm....

Even for the sake of self-preservation, he tried to kill someone, following his impulses. Even with a smile on his face. As soon as he recognized that fact, the urge that welled up from within his chest quickly faded.

“Someone give me something to tie him up with”

He mouthed the words as he squeezed them out, holding Serge in his grasp still. The pain gradually receded from his body. The blood from the fresh bullet wound had already stopped flowing, and the wound was beginning to close up, as if it were a video recording playing in reverse. It had happened several times before, but this was the first time he could actually see the process, his abnormality.

No. No, I'm not a monster, I thought.... I want to believe.

But the more he thought about it realistically, the more he realized that he was nothing more than a monster. He felt as if this abnormality was invading his human mind as well. Frederick continued to grit his teeth while the staff tied Serge up.



Gently closing the eyes of Dustin's corpse, Frederick stood up. There was no way to prevent Dustin's tragedy when Serge had a gun in his hand. Still, Frederick felt self-conscious about his thoughts from when he attacked Serge, but he could no longer ignore that his thinking went out of sorts when he got like that now.

I'm not a hero. Without a doubt, I am a monster.

But anyway, they were still alive. They survived. So he decided to do what he could now to survive to the end and get out of there in one piece.

"This is what it means to be caught flat-footed. I failed, badly. "

Serge's hands were tied behind his back with an ID lanyard. His wrist that had just been broken by Frederick hung limply in the strap, but he did not seem to be affected by the pain. Perhaps that was why he was sitting in the corridor with a large drop of greasy sweat on his forehead. In front of him, Viidia, who had picked up the pistol, was pointing it at him.

"The military has officially adopted this pistol. I feel like I don't need to ask who you are. Serge, why would someone from the military be in the middle of a situation like this?"

"I'd say they're here to make sure everyone is dead. What you just said is pretty much true. This is a covert military operation. We don't want any survivors. Especially someone like you, Viidia."

"Well, I'm surprised you're so open and honest about it."

"I may be a special agent of the military, but I am not a pawn in their game. If I am left here to interrogate people for too long, I will run out of time and end up dead myself. Whether I return or not, the operation will be carried out as planned, and this entire laboratory will collapse."

The entire vast underground laboratory was a big secret that needed to be destroyed. Viidia had predicted this earlier, but when it came from the mouth of someone in the military, Frederick could not help but be horrified.

"But you have a way out of a situation like this, don't you?"

"Of course I do. This, too, is the same as what you might have already guessed: the escape boat in the Gamma Section."

"You shot and killed Dustin, so his biometric ID won't work," Viidia said. "How are you going to get into the Gamma Section?"

Viidia's question was valid, but Serge replied with a smug look on his face.

"I'm not going to spill the beans. As long as I'm the only one who knows the way, you won't kill me."

This was what Viidia meant when she shouted at Frederick not to kill him earlier. Without him, Frederick and the others would not know the escape route.

“So, how about you let me be your guide?”

“I could torture you and make you talk.”

“Then you should try it. I'll do my duty to the very end. If I choose to run out the clock without telling you, you will die as a result. That's all.”

Viidia sighed at the answer, as if she had no choice. And then, with the barrel of the gun still pointed at Serge, Viidia moved a little away from him and called the survivors close together. Then she said in a whisper,

“The situation is unfavorable. We'll have to follow his lead, but there's too much room for things to go wrong. Stay on your toes.”

“You mean he's still up to something?”

“Yes. I think he's trying to outsmart us somewhere.”

“Even though his wrist is broken and he's tied up?”

“And she's got a gun pointed at him....”

When the staff members expressed doubt, Viidia shook her head lightly and then said,

“People like this who act alone have special training.”

“Like you, huh?”

Frederick said, and she looked at him for a moment, but then immediately smiled.

“That's what I meant. Anyway, don't let your guard down. I don't know how you do it, but I don't think the monsters will attack you if you stay close together. But there's a chance they'll suddenly run and escape, so I'd like Frederick to stand in the lead and pin them down....”

Not again, Frederick thought for a moment, but then nodded his head

“Thanks. I believe in you.”

Viidia lightly patted Frederick on the shoulder and returned to the front of Serge again. She then helped him to his feet with the gun to his back and began to guide him along the escape route. With Frederick in the lead, they walked through the dimly lit floor, still lit only by the emergency lights. Flanked by Viidia behind him and Frederick in front, Serge first requested that they

search for a floor map of the wall like the one they had recently seen on the lowest level, and then confirm their location.

“Are we on the right floor?”

“Well, I doubt it.”

Serge brushed off Frederick's question. Apparently, he was not willing to give them more information than they needed to prevent them from trying to predict his next move before he could escape. Serge, as one might expect, remembered the general route they took to the stairs to escape from the lowest level, and led them to the location on the floor map they had seen on the lowest level, albeit on a different floor. He led them to the floor map he had seen at the bottom of the building, even though it was on a different floor.

“Hey, Frederick,” he said. “I wish I could remember, but if you don't mind, could you tell me what you're doing here?”

He suddenly came up to Frederick's back and said these words.

“Did you and the doctor have this kind of backup plan in place from the beginning?”

“Backup plan...? Who do you mean by ‘the doctor’?”

Frederick walked away and asked the question back frankly.

“Doctor Asuka. You know who I'm talking about, don't you?”

The face of his best friend suddenly flashed through his mind. Asuka was indeed the project chief in charge of the Gear Project. It was not surprising that he was acquainted with people in the military who were promoting the conversion of Gear cell research to weapons.

“I know, but a backup plan? What the hell are you talking about?”

“From my point of view, you've become a monster and interfered with my operation. A man who should have been shot dead right in front of me. I'm thinking that the doctor was playing a trick on me. I'll be the first to question him when I get back.”

“Did Asuka trick you into...?”

“If you remember everything, we'll get to the bottom of this.”

Frederick's lost memories. He could recall a few things that happened during that period of about a month, but it was inconsistent. Before that, though....

Was I shot and killed right in front of him?

Serge just said that for sure. Then, inevitably....

“Serge, have I ever met you?”

“Yes, earlier this morning, with the doctor. I must admit I was a bit nervous when you appeared in the emergency elevator hall. If you didn't have amnesia, I would have been very suspicious at that point.”

Wait, wait...wait!

As Serge spoke, Frederick involuntarily put his hand to his forehead. This morning, that is, before Frederick woke up in his own laboratory. The memory of the time just before that had already returned, albeit only briefly. He had been shot in the neck, was writhing in agony, sprawled on the floor, and had lost consciousness. Such was the memory.

Then...I am...!

His head ached. A thumping heartbeat. Was this a sign that he was remembering something? Frederick suddenly became dizzy and stopped.

“Was I shot by...Serge?”

“Oh, come on, you've got to be kidding me.”

The answer to the question was quite shocking.

“It was the doctor who shot you.”

Ah!

It didn't make any sense. He couldn't believe it. But the moment he said that, a flashback occurred in Frederick's mind, just as it had several times before.

The image, the memory, connected with that which had happened before.

—

“GUH, AH, AAAAAAAGHHHHHHHHH!”

This is the memory of rolling around on the floor of the lab, holding my head with both hands. My throat was so hot. I soon found myself unable to scream. I arched my back and

convulsed...and then my vision faded to black. Just before that, I was sure I was looking up. My best friend looking down at me as I was dying, with a gun pointed at me.

Asuka R. Kreutz's cold eyes.

—

"You idiot...!"

Frederick found himself shouting at the top of his lungs. But now that the threads of memory were connected in that way at last, it was an undeniable fact. It can't be, it can't be, and he was tempted to deny it, but now he remembered. He now remembered clearly.

Asuka had shot Frederick.

"Why...why?! Asuka!"

He shouted to his best friend, even though he didn't know where he was. Frederick desperately held his head, looking for a reason, but the flashback was the last thing he saw. All other memories, even the conversation before, were in the dark.

Serge snickered for a moment and then said, "I was told by the doctor that you were against the diversion of the research to weapons and that we would deal with you because you were a dangerous one who had even leaked classified information, but I guess not?"

It was true that Frederick was against the conversion of Gear cells to weapons, but he was sure that Asuka was the same way. Based on Frederick's partial recollections, Asuka had requested Frederick to leak the information, and Frederick had obliged.

I'm the dangerous one? How do I even process all this?

Why did Asuka say such a thing to Serge? Why did he shoot Frederick? The questions were endless, and Frederick had no answers to any of them, but it was hard to believe that Asuka had actually had a change of heart and was promoting the diversion to weapons because they had known each other for such a long time.

But anyway, he said he was tricked by Asuka and, unlike Frederick, he did not lack memory, according to Serge, who knew what really happened.

"I don't know what kind of magic trick you used to turn yourself into a monster, but I can't think of anything but the doctor's handiwork, if not your own preparation. Maybe he shot you to make it look like a kill. They even have a stash in our military, some special Gear cells or something. But that's just a guess, if such a thing really exists."

Frederick agreed with that suspicion, as to whether or not special Gear cells really existed. The late Dustin was also amazed at the way Frederick's wounds healed, but as far as Frederick knew, simply having Gear cells transplanted did not give something this kind of regenerative power. And cell research does not make dramatic progress in such a short period of time as a single month. But the reality was that Frederick's wounds could not have been regenerated without the help of Gear cells. It seemed natural to assume that there was something more than that. That was why it was even more confusing.

What are you thinking, Asuka...?

If he had only shot Frederick, it might be enough to say that Asuka had betrayed him. However, if he then turned Frederick into a monster like this, there's no idea what he was trying to do.

What were you planning, by making me like this?

He was frustrated and distrustful of his best friend, because there were so many things he couldn't understand. Frederick unintentionally punched the wall with all his strength. The roar of his fist, which slammed into the wall, seemed to prove that he was a monster, and it made him feel even more horrible.

Hah. It's so ridiculous it makes me want to laugh.

But there was no use thinking about all the things he didn't know. Frederick shook his head and decided to put his doubts to rest.

"It's rough. I would have liked you to remember everything, to see if the doctor was really a traitor."

"Even if I do get my memory back, I'll have to hear it from Asuka himself."

As long as this military soldier, this Serge, in front of him felt cheated, Asuka must have some kind of agenda that Frederick didn't know about. He believed it now, and he wanted to survive and meet Asuka to pry the truth out of him.

"I hope can get such confirmation," Frederick said to himself

Since Serge, who claimed to be a military man, used such words as "join us," Frederick hoped that meant Asuka might still be in the Gamma Section. It seemed Serge did not doubt the possibility of escape in the slightest, even in a situation like this, based on what he had said earlier.

Now that he knew that the military was behind this series of events, it was safe to assume that Asuka and Aria, who were at the center of the Gear Project, were more than a little safe. They

didn't know Asuka's unexplained behavior, but considering the forlorn expression he showed outside the institute that day and the details of the research leak Frederick recalled, he may have been forced to do so, as if he was threatened by the military. Frederick wanted to confirm this directly with him. Or, as he had hoped, to change his situation through external pressure with Viidia's help.

If we survive, we have a chance.

Frederick believed this and started down the corridor again. Then Serge suddenly approached him and said in a strange whisper, "Oh, Frederick, by the way, what time is it?"

Frederick looked at his watch and replied,

"Right now? 15:47, about ten minutes before the hour."

"Tell me exactly to the second."

"Seconds? Now 16 seconds to...."

"Stop!"

Viidia suddenly interrupted.

"Serge? What were you going to do when you heard the exact time?"

"I'm just confirming the time of the operation, Viidia. It's important. Let's proceed. Frederick, ahead of you, to the left. Then right."

Serge's guidance resumed. Viidia furrowed her brow for a moment, but when Serge moved, Frederick, in the lead, had no choice but to move as well. As he walked along, a new T-junction appeared in front of them.

"Frederick, take a left there and you will reach the objective"

"Objective? It's a dead end, Serge."

Frederick, standing at the turn ahead of him, could see the end of the corridor. But then Serge grinned.

"That's all right, three, two, one...."

Suddenly Serge's voice began to count down, and at that moment it reached zero. Serge quickly rushed out and slipped past Frederick's side. Frederick ran after him.

What are you going to do, head for a dead end?

Just then, it happened. Instantly, there was an explosion and vibration, forming a roaring wind and a cloud of dust.

What the hell is...?

The sudden pressure of the storm caused Frederick to collapse. The red and green of the emergency lights reflected in the cloud of dust, and the yellow mixture of the two together. He knew what had happened. An explosion had just occurred. It was right behind Frederick and the others, very close by.

Could this be the end?

Amidst the noise of the explosion, Frederick heard a loud boom. To be precise, his hearing was distinguishing between two sounds. The screams of the station staff, lost in the noise of the explosion. And the sickening sound of bones shattering.

"Damn.... Viidia! Everybody! Are you alive?!"

Frederick shouted, but no response was heard. Only someone coughing from nearby. He followed the sound through the smoke and found Viidia sitting on the floor.

"I wonder if I was lucky or unlucky...."

Viidia was apparently unharmed, but one of the staff was lying in her lap, folded over.

Argh!

In the aftermath of the explosion, Frederick wondered if the scientist was hit in the back by debris or something that blew up. The back of his white coat was covered with blood, and he was already not breathing. If this was the true source of the sound of bones shattering, then the other scream that remained, the one that was lost in the explosion, must be...

I'm not sure if this means he took a direct hit.

He couldn't hear his breathing, couldn't feel his presence. As the smoke from the explosion gradually thinned out, he could not see the other worker, but instead he could see a large hole in the wall. It had been pitch-dark up to this point, relying only on the light from the emergency lamps, but there was a sooty glow coming from the other side of the hole. It was, as it were, a light of hope shining from the heavens.

"How reckless...to blow up the wall to create a route."

"Is the Gamma Section connected to...?"

"Yeah, it is."

And then a presence passed next to Frederick again. Viidia was right in front of him, then it must be the other one who had fled just before.

"Serge! *You!*"

He must have turned the corner just before the explosion and escaped, slipping out of his bonds in the meantime. The lanyard of the ID that bound him was thrown away in front of him.

"Ha ha ha! As you wished, the escape route is open! Let the finale begin!"

With that, Serge entered the Gamma Section.

"Sorry, thanks for saving my life!"

Viidia also noticed and stood up, sending the last word to the station staff on her knees.

"We're going after him! Frederick!"

"I know! If we let him go, we're done!"

Frederick and Viidia followed Serge and dove into the large hole in the wall. The glare of the lighting, which would usually be the norm, made them squint. The floor of the Gamma Section was a single corridor, like a gentle slope spiraling up. The doors of each laboratory were lined up around the perimeter of the corridor. Looking down from the cavity in the center of the spiral, one could see that Serge was already several floors ahead. Frederick ran after him.

If I jump down, I can catch up with him, right?

For a moment, he thought so, but then he quickly shook his head.

I'm not some comic book hero!

Even if he was already a monster, he was still as scared as anyone else. He thought it would be more realistic to run and catch up with him since he had time to think about it. Frederick put all his strength into his legs and took each step as fast as he could, and the distance between him and Viidia quickly increased. While running, again and again, he could feel vibrations coming from above. The military's plan was to silence the entire underground laboratory, and since Serge had just called it a finale, it probably meant that a full-scale explosion – a collapse – had begun. However, either the Gamma Section was solid, or it would be the last to be blown up

after Serge's escape; and no major explosions had occurred, only vibrations from the other sections. Frederick continued to follow Serge, believing that it was not too late.

Looking around the main corridor, it was immediately apparent that the Gamma Section suffered the same unusual events that Frederick and his colleagues had experienced before. Several researchers in lab coats, covered in blood, were lying in the middle of the corridor. The corpses were inhuman to look at, with parts of their bodies missing and entrails protruding. On the other side of the automatic door of the laboratory, which opened and closed repeatedly on corpses caught in it, the gruesome scene began to unfold even further.

Although the power source was alive and the lights were on, it looked worse than many of the tragedies that had occurred in the Beta Section. On the contrary, as they made their way to the bottom of the Gamma Section, they passed more and more corpses in the corridors. The lower they went, the more damage was done.

Why is this happening?!

The answer became somewhat predictable as he ran. The blood of the corpses was almost dry. First, there was an explosion in the Alpha Section, and then the anomalies began. Then, the military bombing blocked the escape route, trapping the staff in the Beta Section, but where did the monsters that had been there come from? Perhaps this was the answer.

Did they come from here?

It all started here in the Gamma Section, which he thought was a safe zone, a path of hope. As Frederick ran down the spiral corridor with this thought in his mind, he suddenly looked at the lab doors that lined the perimeter of the corridor. Looking down from the center of the spiral, there was no longer a long way to go. Then he came to a door with the number "1" written in large letters. This probably indicated the number of the special laboratory on the lowest level. When Frederick saw the door with the number "2" on it, he thought of Dustin's face. If it were true, he would have escaped from here. Looking in through the half-open door, he saw that the room was a mess, as if there had been an explosion here too. It was clearly not the work of a monster, but rather human sabotage.

Even the emergency elevator in the Beta Section had been sealed off by an explosion. Now that he knew the heart of the situation, that is, that the entire underground laboratory had been silenced by the military, he could begin to understand what was going on. From the opposite point of view, escape boats from other special laboratories should have been the first means of escape to be sealed off. But his means of escape, to which Serge was now heading, was surely different. With this in mind, Frederick ran past Door 2.

He then ran through the spiral corridor in the order of "3" and "4", and saw Serge ahead of him entering a laboratory. This was the end of the spiral corridor, literally at the bottom in terms of the depth of the basement. It was a special laboratory marked with the number "6." Frederick

followed Serge and, a few seconds later, stepped into the sixth special laboratory. He was surprised to find an unexpected scene. Frederick gasped.

What is this place...!

It was not a room. The ceiling was high, and it was the size of a large gymnasium or a hall of some kind. There were several large screens on the walls, and an unusually large number of fixed terminals buried in the desks. What's more, there was a large, fenced-in hole in the center of the laboratory for whatever purpose. A big, deep, hole with no bottom in sight. Surrounding the circular hole were a number of huge cylindrical capsules filled with green liquid, but nothing else. This must have been the epicenter of the situation. Perhaps it was from these empty capsules that the other monsters they had encountered so far were unleashed and the tragedy in the facility began.

Where is he?!

The disorderly amount of capsules blocked the view from the entrance. Frederick looked around the too large special laboratory, searching for Serge.

"Frederick! Where's Serge?"

In the meantime, Viidia had caught up.

"Hey, this is...."

Like Frederick, Viidia took in the unusual scene of the laboratory, her eyes scanning over the capsules and the hole in the center.

"I didn't think there was such a facility here. No matter how many other places I looked, I couldn't find it."

And then, from the shadows of a distant capsule came the voice of the one they chased.

"I'm sorry, this is getting a little tedious. Now, where's that deactivation key?"

Frederick's hearing detected the voice, and he caught a glimpse of Serge behind the capsule. He was communicating with someone, dexterously operating a console under one of the huge capsules with only his left hand. Eventually, he found it. Frederick and Viidia quickly caught up with Serge, and he slowly turned to face them.

"Oh, I knew you'd come after me. Welcome to the military's secret laboratory."

The capsule he was next to, unlike the others, was filled with something. Intuitively, Frederick understood that the contents were the same kind of altered creature he had encountered before.

"It's...a bear...!"

Viidia said in alarm.

"Good answer. It's a species called the grizzly."

Was that the source of Serge's confidence? The green liquid started draining out of the giant capsule.

"The whole secret is out now. There's an escape boat at the end of that airlock, just like you wanted."

Serge indicated with his thumb at the wall behind him. A thick door, like the one on an airplane or a submarine, was buried in one corner of the wall.

"The boat's maximum capacity is one person, however. I'll sit in that seat, of course."

By the time Serge had finished, all the liquid in the capsule behind him had disappeared, and the transparent partition lowered with a mechanical noise.



"I hope this experimental weapon kills you both."

The grizzly bear's eyes opened, red and glowing suspiciously. Just as Frederick braced himself, Viidia screamed.

"But as long as it's an animal, if you shoot it in the head...!"

Viidia then fired at the bear with the pistol she had taken from Serge. Three shots echoed in rapid succession in the spacious special laboratory. All of the bullets hit the grizzly, two in the head and one in the shoulder, but for a moment, all that could be heard was the animal's yelp.

"It's ineffective?!"

"The conversion of Gear cells into weapons is now at the practical stage. If you want to kill this thing, you'll need explosive shells, not bullets."

Despite a few splashes of blood, the grizzly slowly descended from the capsule's pedestal as if nothing had happened. The few bullets that failed to penetrate spilled from its body and clinked onto the floor.

Perhaps it was an animal instinct, but the grizzly flexed its claws, scratched its head, looked around, and sniffed the air. In the meantime, Viidia kept firing.

"I guess that means he's just like someone else...."

The fresh gunshot wounds to the grizzly's head, shoulder, and torso disappeared in the blink of an eye, as if recorded images were playing backwards. Just as Frederick's wounds had closed up before.



An oval escape craft shaped like a small submarine sat docked, unmoving.. Asuka was sitting in an aircraft-like seat inside, together with military researchers. Small vibrations came one after another. It was probably caused by the explosion and collapse of the underground laboratory, as was the military's plan, but it was somewhat surprising to Asuka. He had expected to escape immediately after Aria was placed in the cryosleep capsule and all the materials to be taken out were transported to this escape boat. However, after putting on his seatbelt, the situation had not progressed at all.

(Are you waiting for something...?)

If so, what was it?

"There seems to be a lot of explosions, why haven't we escaped yet?"

Asuka asked the man who had been pointing a gun at him, precisely the one who had been sent by the military to watch over him.

"Don't worry about it. Just a little bit of a miscalculation."

The man on watch said as he faced a fixed terminal by the wall of the escape boat.

"Well, it won't take long to clear up."

"Something troublesome going on?"

When Asuka asked again, the man kneaded his shoulder and snickered.

"Well, I won't deny it. Do you remember the man who was on your watch earlier this morning?"

"I think he said...Serge. What's wrong with him? He's been out of sight for some time."

As a result, Asuka's warden had been replaced by this man, but it was indeed Serge who had informed Asuka of the military's urgent instructions first thing that morning, and had been watching him to make sure he did not do anything strange. His disappearance was also the cause of quite a bit of tension that continued to build for Asuka, who had made a deception that was as good as a gamble.

"I had an additional mission for Serge, and I don't know where I went wrong, but it seems I brought a terrible case of bad luck with me"

The warden rolled his shoulders in disgust.

"We'll leave as soon as we're done over there. Oh, yes."

The man grinned as if he had just thought of something good to say.

"If that's the case, doctor, would you like to see what's going on? An interesting experiment was about to begin. The findings may be useful for future research."

The man then got up from his seat in front of the fixed terminal and asked Asuka to look at the monitor of the terminal.

(After all this time, the experiment...?)

Asuka wondered for a moment, but there was only one individual left in that special lab. A huge bear that was created without Asuka's knowledge, an experimental weapon of the military.

"I understand. Let me see it."

The Gear Project was no longer in Asuka's hands. The extent to which the military had been able to achieve this was an important factor. Asuka unbuckled his seatbelt without prompting and moved to the seat the man had given up. Then, turning his eyes to the monitor in front of him, the first thing he saw was indeed that huge bear. Serge was standing next to it, but now facing him was....

"Huh? Frederick?!"

If these watchdogs were to find out Asuka's intentions, the whole thing could be ruined. Not to mention the fact that Serge was over there watching the process. He was the one who was in charge of monitoring in the morning, and now he must be having doubts about Asuka. Asuka must act like a fool for the time being, even if it meant betraying Frederick, his best friend.

"It is rather interesting to see the results of the military's research. Let's see what you can do."

Asuka almost sat up.

"What, do you know him?"

"Ah, he's a staff member with whom I have a very close relationship. I didn't think he was still alive."

Asuka, who was smiling, was so happy that he wanted to jump up and down with all his heart.

Frederick Balsara. The best friend who had been engaged in the research of Gear cells with him and had supported him from the beginning with the construction of the basic theory. That can only mean one thing: He was now able to see his best friend standing alive on the other side of the monitor.

(Thank goodness, Frederick, you were able to conform to the "seed.")

For Asuka, it was the confirmation of the greatest achievement of all. A gamble, won. No matter how much time it would take, this would avoid the worst-case scenario. Asuka's vision of the future was not far off.

(Even if only minimally, this is now....)

Hope was connected. With this in mind, Asuka clenched his trembling fists and stifled his joy.

"Don't you want to see a killing show of people you knew?"

"It's not a problem. I told you, I have a history with him. It would be better if he died."

Asuka put on his researcher's face and stared intently at the monitor. But his gaze was never on the military's experimental weapons.

(Live, Flame of Corruption....)

He was simply turning to his best friend, who was the link of hope.

Chapter Five『AWAKENING』

“I guess that means he's just like someone else....”

Viidia was puzzled as she watched the grizzly's gunshot wound close up in no time at all.

“It was a surprise when that happened to Frederick too, to be honest. It doesn't matter anymore.”

Serge quickly operated the terminal, and the door to Special Lab 6 slammed shut with a resounding thud.

Trapped? If you do that....

Frederick and Viidia would be chased around in the now locked room by the grizzly bear. The thought of it was horrifying, but Frederick didn't think Serge would get off scot-free either. But what made him so confident?

“I won't let you escape. Viidia, you spy hiding in there. I will track you down and kill you. It's my mission and I will make sure it gets done.”

When Serge declared this, he patted down his right arm, which had the broken wrist, with his left hand. Was there something around his wrist? An inorganic gray colored bracelet, not decorative but utilitarian, and somewhat like a watch, seemed to appear on Serge's wrist.

“Rip them apart, grizzly.”

At the moment Serge said this, the grizzly, who had been quietly gnawing at its claws and grooming its head, looked up with a start as if it had noticed something. Then, its unusually glowing red eyes grew brighter.

"GUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUHH!!"

The grizzly let out a loud roar like a mortar blast. Immediately after that, the huge animal rushed towards Frederick on all fours.

Ah! It's fast?!

Even the average speed of a normal grizzly bear is said to be close to 60 kilometers per hour [TL: 37mph], but this was even faster. With no time to think, Frederick reflexively jumped out of the way. He quickly hid behind a terminal under the capsule, but the grizzly stopped as soon as Frederick avoided the charge. It then turned around and rushed at him again.

"Uh oh!"

With the sound of shattering glass, the grizzly's huge body charged at Frederick, destroying the capsule. Frederick had no choice but to run for his life as the grizzly's behavior defied all obstacles. The large hole in the center of the laboratory limited the direction of his escape. He did not want to make the mistake of falling into it and dying there. But even if he ran, the bear was faster. It would soon catch up with him. If he couldn't escape, he would have to fight, but unfortunately, he didn't have any weapons.

"Heheh, you can't create a future if you keep avoiding it. Ready to go again?"

Frederick could hear Serge's voice, which was out of sight, perhaps hidden behind a terminal somewhere.

"Are you controlling this thing?!"

"If that's the case, I'll go for the source!"

Viidia fired a volley of shots, but they only made a metallic sound as if they had hit one of the metal terminals or walls.

"I see, you're going to aim at me. Not a bad decision, but is it the best one?"

The grizzly bear, which had been aiming at Frederick, suddenly changed direction and rushed toward Viidia, who was some distance away.

"There it goes!"

"Huh?!"

Viidia easily avoided the assault. As if in an action scene from a movie, she rolled over, got up quickly, and fired at the grizzly with the pistol in both hands. When the grizzly turned around, a

bullet hit between its eyes, but it was shallow. The bullet that did not fully penetrate its skull spilled out from the wound, which then began to regenerate in no time. However, its huge body stopped moving, even if only for a short time. Viidia, with a click of her tongue, ran over toward Frederick.

“This is a horrible joke, isn’t it? I’m running low on bullets....”

“Do you think killing Serge will stop that grizzly?”

“I don’t know, but I’m pretty sure the remote that he’s operating the grizzly with isn’t perfect. If we can get that bear near him or.... Frederick, I’ll go around and drive the grizzly into a corner. Then, lead the bear toward him”

“Easier said than done....”

Even though Frederick had a modified body, like the grizzly, he was by no means specially trained like Serge and Viidia. He was an amateur, to say the least. Therefore, it was all he could do just to escape from the grizzly bear that was attacking him.

“Here it comes!”

“Oh, shit!”

The grizzly that had rushed toward them, however, stopped right in front of them this time. Or rather, it stood up on two legs with the momentum of its lunge. However, this was an unexpected action for Frederick and Viidia, who had jumped to either side in an attempt to avoid the bear.

Feint?!

The grizzly’s arm swung sideways at Frederick, who should have avoided it.

Ah....

He had a gut feeling it was over for him.

However.... Du-dum.

His heart was pounding. As if to say it was too early to give up, his throat got hot.

“GUOOOOOOOOOOOOHHHH!”

Frederick, thinking he couldn’t endure a direct hit, crossed his arms and kicked the ground as quickly as he could at the moment the attack was felt. He felt a tremendous impact on his arms,

followed by the sound of bone cracking. The impact was likely lessened by the fact that he jumped just before the impact, but the result was that Frederick was blown away, spinning through the air.

“Guh!”

Unable to catch himself, his body was directly hit by a capsule. He was lucky that he was not sent toward the large central hole in the room, but a large piece of the destroyed capsule was lodged in his stomach, and Frederick vomited blood profusely.

Ha...hah.

Frederick couldn't help but laugh. Like the grizzly, the newly formed wound started to close. The pain had already begun to fade before Frederick had even really felt it. It was proof that he was a monster, just like the grizzly. But the rate of regeneration was much faster than before.

You've got to be kidding me, really.

It was a fact that Frederick still had a hard time admitting. The capsule that Frederick had crashed into was, as it turned out, right next to Serge.

"Hey, what a coincidence...."

"Damn, you're a monster!"

Serge immediately tried to run away from Frederick, but a shot was fired at his feet. Viidia's threat stopped Serge in his tracks. Frederick jumped out of the capsule, and the grizzly rushed in from behind him. If only he could throw Serge into the grizzly and hit it. Frederick reached out and grabbed Serge's arm.

“What?!”

Almost at the same time, Frederick's legs were swept out from under him, and his body seemed to float in the air for a moment.

“Guhah?!”

His back hit the floor hard and the air completely drained from his lungs. The result was a sudden loss of breathing.

It was what one might call in judo, a shoulder throw. [TL: 背負い投げ, seoi nage; also known as a back-carry throw]

“Don't underestimate me, Frederick.”

The technique, which was unexpected, considering Serge's shattered wrist, reflected the prowess of a trained military man. In the past, he was able to capture Serge because he pushed him down while being shot at, but this time it was the exact opposite.

The charging grizzly was already right in front of them.

"...Huh?"

Frederick thought he was going to be caught in the middle of all of it, but he couldn't believe his eyes. The grizzly slid slightly across the floor as if applying the brakes and stopped right in front of Serge.

"Would Viidia have expected that?"

Serge looked down at Frederick and grinned. Then showing off the bracelet on his wrist, he said, "I'm not going to be attacked."

"Pguh?!"

Serge kicked Frederick in the stomach, opening the distance. At that moment, the grizzly bear roared back into action.

"Shit!"

The grizzly's thick arm scooped upwards from under Frederick's body. The claws dug into his torso, and Frederick was launched back into the air, presenting him with a slow-motion view of the overly spacious laboratory below. His own blood, which he had just coughed up, looked like falling grains. Frederick's body began to fall slowly. He had only crashed into the capsule earlier, but now, by bad luck, he was sent flying toward the center of the lab, toward the large hole.

I've failed?

He desperately reached for the fence around the big hole, but it slipped away. His hand found purchase below it, and Frederick just barely gripped the edge of the hole.

"Damn...!"

His outstretched hand was the fulcrum around which his body swayed at the edge of the pit. The hole was like an abyss, so deep that the bottom could not be seen. If he fell in, it would be the end of the road. Frederick put all his strength into his arms and lifted himself up onto his chest at the edge of the pit, where he coughed up blood again. He could not lift his body any further. The wound seemed to have begun regenerating, but the direct hit from the grizzly's arm was far more damaging than the previous one, and he was still unable to fully exert himself.

Of course, he would be able to recover in a little while and crawl out completely on his own, but even with his elbow resting on the edge of the hole, he was in an undeniable predicament with half of his body hanging down. He didn't think Serge would wait that long.

"You're alive, Frederick!"

Viidia rushed over to him. The grizzly bear was slowly closing in behind her. There was no way they could get him out of there in time.

"Run, Viidia!"

He shouted with a great effort, as if he had to squeeze the words out of himself. But she had no idea what she was getting herself into at this point in time.

"Hold on tight. Hold on tight, okay? Don't let go, okay?"

With a stern look on her face, she turned her back on Frederick and faced the grizzly. It was a dangerous thing to do. A living person, even a monster like Frederick, could be killed instantly by a blow from a grizzly bear.

"What are you doing? Viidia!"

"It may be a bioweapon, but it's still an animal. What about its natural instincts?"

The grizzly raised its arm. At that moment, Viidia ran to Frederick's left.

"What runs away, the bear chases!" [TL: Couldn't think of a good way to convey this Japanese idiom in English]

As the saying goes, the grizzly was actually starting to chase after Viidia. But the gap between them was closing fast.

The future that awaited her was either a collision, like being hit by a car at great speeds, or getting ripped apart by sharp fangs. Viidia could not escape. It was obvious that the bear would eventually catch up with her. Just before completing a circle around the pit on the right hand side from Frederick, with whatever intentions she had, she quickly climbed up to the fence surrounding the big hole, moments before the grizzly caught up with her. She stood dexterously on the pipe-like top of the fence, and then-

"Whatever the circumstances, an eye's an eye!"

Bang! She turned around and fired a shot. The bullet hit the grizzly's eye. For a moment, the cry of the beast was heard and the grizzly's lunge was distorted, as if it were doing a great forward roll. But the huge body, now fully accelerated, did not stop immediately.

"Here! Jump!"

Just when it looked as if the redirected charge was going to hit Viidia directly, she dove into the big hole. She was about to collide with the grizzly bear behind her.

"Ah! You idiot!"

Frederick knew what she wanted to do. Viidia wanted to drop the grizzly into the big hole. But that would mean Viidia would fall in with it. She jumped at Frederick, who was still hanging on the edge of the hole, but she couldn't reach him because he was more than five meters away.

"Frederick, give me your hand!"

Viidia began to fall, reaching for him. The distance between the two felt incredibly vast, but not impossible. Frederick quickly grabbed the post of the fence with his right hand and used it as a support to step against the wall of the pit. Then he reached out for Viidia with all his might.

"Damn it! Graaaghhhhh!"

He should be able to reach her

"Hold on!"

Then, they barely connected, hand to hand. Viidia's weight was suddenly pulling down on Frederick's body. The damage to his body was still there, and the claw marks on his abdomen from the grizzly bear hurt, but even so, he could not let go of her hand.

Du-dum.

His heart pounded in his chest and his throat began to burn again. Looking back, it seemed that every time this happened, Frederick became less and less human, even though as his wounds healed and flashbacks occurred, he exhibited unusual physical strength. However, at that moment, it seemed like it was for the best.

"Nguaaaaaaaaaagghhhh!"

As he felt his body regain its strength, supporting the weight of one woman, felt easy. Viidia's body, perilously dangling due to gravity and inertia, swung like a pendulum around Frederick's hand, but it was okay. He could support her without any issue now. That's what Frederick thought, at least.

A violent crash sounded from below. It was the grizzly bear. The upper half of its huge body was completely buried into the wall on the opposite side of the large hole, indicating the severity of the impact of its charge. The lower half of the grizzly's body could be seen struggling to get out, but it was positioned about 10 meters below, much deeper than Frederick and Viidia. At that height, it would be impossible for the grizzly to crawl up.

"Just barely made it, huh?"

Viidia looked up at Frederick and smiled.

"A hell of a reckless..."

"But it worked."

She had an expression that did not seem as if she had just gambled for her life. Viidia's resolve was so strong that it couldn't adequately be described with words like "gutsy."

"What were you going to do if you didn't make it?"

"I'm still a trained special agent, you know. I'm not weak"

In any case, they couldn't just hang there like that forever. Frederick lifted Viidia's body with a jerk and hooked her upper body over the edge of the big hole. Then, he put his free hand on the bottom of her foot and pushed her up from underneath, helping Viidia quickly climb out of the hole. Frederick followed suit, also pulling himself out of the hole. After settling down on the floor, Frederick let out a deep breath. Now only Serge remained.

"Well done,"

Serge said as he emerged from behind the broken capsule.

"It's unfortunate that you survived, but I applaud the result. Good eye, Viidia."

"Are you sure you can afford to be so cavalier?"

Viidia quickly pointed her pistol at Serge.

"It's about time we took you hostage and put you on an escape boat."

"I think you'll just shoot me all to hell as soon as you get the chance, isn't that right?"

"You have company? Then in that case, I'm going to have to walk through the tunnel with you."

Serge had just communicated with them, and there was no doubt that he had friends. But even if Viidia was right and the escape boat was unusable, there seemed to be a good chance that they could escape by walking through the tunnel that the boat would take.

"I'm going to have to get you to come clean on a lot of things."

"I'm not going to tell you a damn thing."

If they could get him out of there, Viidia will be able to accurately tell the country about the military's involvement in the outbreak. That was why she would not kill Serge here.

"Above all, I don't feel threatened by a gun pointed at me that is out of ammunition."

Serge said, and Viidia, perhaps knowing this, shrugged her shoulders before lowering the muzzle of her gun.

"You were counting bullets?"

The nerve of these two people to do such a thing in a situation like this was beyond the comprehension of a civilian like Frederick.

"It can still be used as a blunt weapon. Besides, there's Frederick."

Frederick didn't need Viidia to spell out her plan to understand what she was getting at. He resembled a monster and she was no doubt well-trained. On the other hand, Serge, who had a broken wrist, was alone, even though he was also well trained. With a two-person team, it would be possible to capture him and take him away again. What they were afraid of were Serge's suicidal attempts to escape and leak false information about the facility, but that could be temporarily prevented by gagging him with a piece of clothing or other material. In other words, the situation was overwhelmingly in Frederick and Viidia's favor. Or so they thought.

"Don't you think it's still too early to be complacent?"

"What do you mean?"

"An animal that merely heals wounds is not an experimental weapon. I mean...."

Serge showed Viidia the bracelet on his broken right wrist.

"It's been dead for a long time."

She was distracted for just a moment. The sound of a strange noise came from right next to Frederick. It was a nasty sound. Frederick had no idea what had happened. However,

something was definitely sticking out of the center of Viidia's chest. It was positioned as if it was a stab to the heart.

"Guh...ghah?!"

As soon as she coughed up blood, something was pulled out through her chest.

"Wha-?! Viidia!"

Frederick supported her body, which had fallen down weakly, and helped sit her up.

No, this can't be happening. This can't...

A fatal wound. Frederick gritted his teeth as he realized immediately that Viidia would not survive.

"I thought I could get away with not using it so far, understand?"

Serge's mouth twisted into a generous smile.

"Serge! What have you done!"

"What? You saw it happen, you should understand."

Serge pointed behind Frederick and Viidia, where there was only the big hole. But from the hole, a tentacle-like thing emerged. The tentacle flew out of the hole, and this time it flew toward Frederick.

"Ug...agh?!"

He dodged as quickly as he could while still holding Viidia in his arms. Immediately after that, a sound like footsteps, like a series of cracks in the concrete, echoed. Frederick looked around.

"Are you kidding me?"

A huge body slowly crept up. The grizzly was floating above the big hole. But it was no longer just a grizzly bear. About six tentacles pierced through and out the back of the creature's body. Each tentacle seemed to have an independent mind, acting like the support structure of a rocket to lift and carry the grizzly out of the hole.

"This...monster...."

That was the only word Frederick knew to describe such a creature. The grizzly's body was at the center of its tentacles, but it was not a creature that existed in nature, by any stretch of the

imagination. An experimental weapon; Frederick was about to realize the meaning of these words.

"Guooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

The grizzly bear howled as it landed on all four legs. At the same time, the tentacles on its back lashed out and whip-cracked through the air, snapping terminals and capsules nearby, as if it had no other choice but to destroy them.

"Whoa?!"

It was not that it was aiming at anyone, but that it was seemingly attacking randomly. Even Serge, who should have been able to control it, rolled his body sideways to avoid the deadly tentacles.

"I guess it's dangerous to get close.... It's still not fully controllable?"

Serge got up and ran to the airlock.

"I didn't think it was even possible to do something like that...."

Viidia, in Frederick's arms, said breathlessly.

"Viidia! If you're conscious, pull yourself together! A wound like this is nothing!"

"Haha...I'm not you, I'll die like a normal person, I'm afraid. But you'll find out for yourself."

"Don't give up so soon, you damn bastard!"

Frederick couldn't help but shout. They had only recently faced the deaths of Dustin and others, but their deaths happened quickly and with no time to grieve. There was a big difference between that and watching someone die slowly in front of your eyes, even if it was a woman whom he had only known for a few hours. The sense of solidarity that forms by enduring hardships together, had certainly sprouted in Frederick.

"I know it's a crazy request. Since you're the one whose wounds can heal, maybe you can...?"

Viidia vomited blood, interrupting her words, as her eyes became increasingly unfocused.

"I'm not sure if it's a good idea. Don't talk anymore! Viidia!"

"The Gear cells should be used...peacefully. If you make it out of here alive, will you stop this...military nightmare for me?"

“I will! I will survive and I will stop it!”

He took her hand in his and made his promise. But the hand that should have held his in return slowly lost its strength.

“I know. Thank you.”

Frederick did not know that watching a person die in front of your eyes would be so heart-wrenching.

“So, it’s time to go...”

Viidia said and slowly closed her eyes.

“Frederick... if you survive....”

The hand he was holding fell to the floor. The more disgusted he became, the more he understood. His hearing, which had now imperceptibly improved, would not spare him the tragedy of the situation.

“Hope is still... alive.”

Viidia's breathing, her heartbeat, came to a complete stop. She was dead.

“Viidia...?”

He called out to her, but she could no longer answer. This reality, this nightmare, would not be reversed. Frederick was now alone. But he had decided to live. He was determined to survive. How many times had he thought that already?

Du-dum.

His heartbeat increased.

“Ah! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Frederick's head, chest, and above all, his throat, were burning. Hot, hot, hot, hot! Frederick clawed madly at his searing hot throat. However, the slashes made by his fingernails quickly regenerated and closed. It was the work of a monster, no matter how you looked at it. When he glanced down at his hands, he saw a monster's hands with hard, sharp claws. His hands were covered with strange cords of powerful muscles. He couldn't see it himself, but he could hear the sound of cloth tearing on his back.

I...am....

It was as if he was ceasing to be himself as his thoughts began to be burned by the flames of anger. As a human being, he felt as if something had snapped.

I am a... monster.

It was self-recognition of the reality that he kept denying. The moment he admitted it, something began to change rapidly. An empty realization overtook Frederick. His rationality was blown away, and he could feel his body and mind violently bristling. Although he was in a human form, his overall appearance must be that of a monster.

“Ough?!”

Frederick was suddenly blown away by a direct hit to his body and crashed into a stationary terminal, but Frederick, however, slowly got up. He could clearly see what had just happened. The tentacles of the grizzly bear approaching in front of him had shot Frederick away. It was an impact that would have originally, perhaps, severed his torso.

“Ha ha...Was that supposed to hurt?”

To the bitter end, he maintained composure. Now that he had admitted that he was a monster like that thing, Frederick couldn't even feel proper pain as a human being.



But, the goal he had set in his heart was burning like a wildfire.

"Don't get in my way. I've decided to live...."

He reiterated his determination. Why did Asuka shoot him? Why did he turn Frederick into such a monster? Why did Asuka allow Gear cells to be used as weapons? There were so many things Frederick wanted to find out. With these things in mind, he let himself be carried away by the current that welled up in his heart, as if to say, "This is not the end yet."

Was it hostility or the urge to destroy? At that moment, he felt as if his vision had turned yellow. Now that he was aware that he was a monster, what would he do to survive?

It's simple.

If the monster in front of you is the only thing standing in the way of your future...

"Are you ready for it?"

He had encountered many monsters up until that point. It was all he could do to survive and escape. However, as he had encountered hounds, owls, and crocodiles, he had somehow begun to realize the fact that he may be like them -- a monster. He just couldn't accept it as a human being. Like the time he pushed Serge down, captured him, and tried to kill him. Frederick's senses and physical strength were far from human now. And, like the beast before him, he had become an undeniable monster who could even heal his own wounds. So, what if he put everything he had as a monster into defeating his opponent? What if he chose to fight with all his strength?

"Mnnaargh!"

The floor was crushed and pulled away with great force by his hands. Somehow, this was possible. It was so easy for him to do it, too.

Frederick, who was feeling the heat in his throat, had some sense of how much of a monster he had become, although his calm thoughts were being washed away. Perhaps, he would not be defeated. He had no proof, but he had such confidence. That was why Frederick, floorboards in hand, walked up to the grizzly with ease.

"Move out of the way. I am going to survive".

Was it afraid? The grizzly loomed over Frederick threateningly as he approached. It was the grizzly's attitude that really annoyed Frederick.

"What's with that look?"

Even the tone of his voice changed wildly. Every part of his body urged him to destroy the enemy in front of him.

"Don't be scared now!"

Frederick kicked off from the floor in an instant and slammed the floorboards down on the monster's head. How much more inhuman could his body be? At the moment of impact, the floorboards in his hands were shattered, and the floor around him from where he had jumped was crushed in like a crater. An overwhelming impact. Yet, the grizzly was still alive and well. No, it was enduring. It grunted for a moment, but still waved its tentacles in defiance. Frederick, then, accurately caught the tentacles flying at high speed with one hand.

"It's so annoying!"

He easily, with a snap, ripped it off with both hands.

"GUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUH!"

The grizzly was writhing in agony, as if its sense of pain was still intact. The next moment, however, the grizzly's arms were swinging at Frederick again. The sound of a violent collision echoed through the air.

"And...?"

Frederick was still standing after receiving a blow from the grizzly to the side of his head. He was not moving slightly, not guarding himself or anything, and was taking the grizzly's blows without a care in the world.

"If you're going to hit me, you'd better put more energy into it."

Then, without taking a step back, he delivered a powerful counterattack.

"Oraaaaah!"

The fist of the monster with immense physical power had struck the grizzly directly in the stomach.



(Dragon install....)

Frederick had transformed into a monstrosity. And the grizzly bear was about to be beaten to a pulp. Asuka stared at the monitor showing the situation in Special Laboratory 6 and secretly

clenched his fist. The grizzly's transformation was a surprise to Asuka, but more than that, he was now second guessing his joy.

(*"Flame of Corruption." The "seed" has sprouted fully....*)

Once that happens, Frederick would never die again. Only Asuka, who had shot the "seed", could say that he had become such a being.

However, he could not be fully relieved from the bottom of his heart just yet. The possibility of avoiding the worst-case scenario had only strengthened slightly. The future that he wanted could not be reached without going through a number of difficult events starting with this one.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your fun, Doctor, but I'm going to have to ask you to return to your seat. We're starting the evacuation."

"Finally...? I understand."

Asuka replied and got up from his seat. The airlock of the escape craft opened and closed with a soft hissing sound. Asuka, who was watching on the monitor, knew it was going to happen sooner or later.

"You've got to be kidding me!"

When Serge appeared on the escape boat, Asuka took one look at him and braced himself. Seeing Frederick in that state gave Asuka hope for the future. Even though he would not be able to stop it at this point, if the whole story was misunderstood, it would be a problem at the very least for Aria, the other subject of the experiment. Asuka now had no choice but to play the fool.

"Doctor, what the hell was that all about?"

As expected, Serge immediately confronted Asuka.

"How could that man, whom you supposedly killed, be in such a state?"

"I'm the one who's surprised. I never expected that he would turn out like that. When did he implant Gear cells in himself...?"

"Ridiculous. That can't just be the result of Gear cells! What special Gear cell did you shoot that man with?"

"He is an expert in the study of varga hectacine, which is contained in Gear cells. He has recently been experimenting with accelerated cellular transformation and may have come up with some enhancement method that we don't know about."

"Is that part of your charade? Tell me the truth!"

Serge grabbed Asuka by the chest of his shirt with his left arm.

"Calm down, please. I really don't know."

Asuka maintained his ignorance.

"No, Serge, that's not like you."

The man in charge of the surveillance put his hand on Serge's arm to stop him.

"I'm curious about the data, but it's too dangerous to take it home. I'm sorry, but we're going to destroy it. Come on, Serge, we're going to move the escape boat. You, too, take your seat."

Serge seemed to have calmed down a little after being told this, and he quietly withdrew. However, his eyes were still filled with suspicion toward Asuka.

"I'll open it up in detail later...hah. The outcome was a disappointment for me too, I'm sorry. "

"Disappointment...? What do you mean?"

"He must have lost his grip at the last minute. I don't know what he's up to, but no matter how big a monster he is, he won't survive if he's completely under the rocks."

"I don't get it, Serge. It would be rather convenient for him to die. I told you he'd be a problem for me in more ways than one."

The engine of the escape craft began to make a high pitched whirring sound as it powered up.

It wouldn't be long now before it started moving.

"I'm not going to tell anyone. So we're going to keep it quiet."

But for some reason, Serge took a seat in front of the terminal instead of in his seat. In the Special Laboratory 6, which was still being projected, the battle between Frederick and the grizzly was just about to be settled. Serge was indeed a military watchdog. Asuka had hit a sore spot in an unexpected way.

"Then will you at least say goodbye in front of me?"

(... *Wha-*)

For a moment, Asuka was speechless. Serge quickly set up a two-way video communication and, with a scowl, gave up his seat to Asuka.

(That's what you mean, huh...?)

In other words, he wanted Asuka to step up to the plate. Asuka had thought that he would leave Frederick without telling him anything. Of course, he wished he could tell him about the situation if he had the chance, but if he said anything bad in a monitored communication, Asuka's entire plan and hope for the future would be destroyed. Hence, Asuka now had to lie directly to his familiar best friend.

(Sorry, Frederick.)

He felt like a ridiculous fool who hid all his true intentions.

(But if it's you now, I'm sure someday...)

Asuka stood in front of the terminal, anguished but determined.

Chapter Six『BETRAYAL』

How many times did he hit it? How many times had he punched the grizzly, regenerating each time his fist collapsed from the recoil? Frederick could no longer remember the exact count. He grabbed the grizzly bear by the neck and threw it bluntly to the ground. The only thing he was sure of was that he wanted the bear dead.

“What a goddamn pain....”

The grizzly's slovenly tongue stretched out, its lifeless eyes flashing white. Frederick, whose wounds had stopped regenerating, still had what looked like steam rising from his body. The impulse swirling in Frederick's body had not subsided even after the fierce battle. His mind, body, and even his tone of voice were still wild and hoarse.

"Ah? Where the hell is that son of a bitch Serge?"

In the aftermath of the battle with the grizzly, both the large capsule and the stationary terminal were in shambles. The view of the Special Laboratory 6 was now completely clear.

However, looking around, the next target, Serge, was nowhere to be seen.

Did he escape?

At that moment, a driving sound like an engine began to echo from the other side of the wall. An airlock door by the wall staring back at him. The impulse began to abruptly recede, and calmness returned to his thoughts.

Escape.... Yes, the escape boat!

Perhaps Serge escaped there too. If so, he should still be able to catch him.

I can pry open the boarding ramp.

Thinking this, Frederick ran to the airlock. Suddenly, the lab became much brighter. Looking around to see what was going on, he saw a number of screens embedded in the walls here and there, all of which had turned on at once. What was on the screen, though, was another story.

"Hey. Things have changed a lot, Frederick."

"Asuka...?!"

It was the familiar face of his best friend. Behind him stood Serge. The video was probably a communication with the inside of the escape boat. Asuka R. Kreutz was there with an air of pride. There was no hint of him being a hostage. It was as if he was a collaborator.

"What are you doing in a place like that?"

Just as he was about to say that, Frederick noticed. Placed behind them in the background of the video was a cryosleep capsule. From the small window in front of the capsule, it was possible to see...

Huh?! Aria!

He could see his partner's face.

"Aria is in... cryosleep? What's going on, Asuka?"

Despite suffering from an incurable disease, Aria had stubbornly refused to go into cryosleep. Why in the world would she be in a state of cryosleep now? Frederick's anxiety rapidly increased. He wondered if he had forgotten an important conversation with Aria, in his amnesia, or if she had somehow changed her mind. But the more he thought about it, the more he could not believe that Aria, who said that not dying was not living, and who had decided to cherish the time she had left, would accept cryosleep.

"It's all for the future of the Gear Project."

“The future? Do you understand? Do you realize that Gear cells are being weaponized by the military?”

“Yes, that's true.... But for the sake of research progress, the military's cooperation is inevitable.”

“Are you saying you...approve of this?”

“Would you believe me if I said yes?”

“You wanted to avoid this kind of diversion of the research!”

It was impossible that this was the kind of military intervention that Asuka approved of. At least Asuka knew Frederick would have tried to stop it. In fact, he asked Frederick to leak the contents of his research. And yet....

"Tell me what you really think, Asuka! The truth, too!"

“It was a long time ago, Frederick. People change. Sometimes we have to do what we have to do, to achieve our goals.”

“You're saying you've changed your mind?”

“I don't care how you take it. It doesn't matter to me anymore whether you agree with it or not.”

" 'Doesn't matter'? You've got to be kidding! Asuka, why?! Why are you doing this to me?! Explain it all to me!"

Frederick's memory of the past month was still mostly missing. Because of that, there were so many things he didn't understand. There were so many things he wanted to ask him. But Asuka slowly shook his head while Frederick was still talking to him.

“I'm sorry, but you don't have the right to know.”

His best friend smiled. With an unbelievably twisted face.

“It's about to come crashing down. I'm sorry, but the man, Frederick Balsara, will die here today. It's for the best.”

Asuka was not a man who would make a face like that. He was not a man who would say such a thing. Frederick didn't want to believe it. He didn't want to admit it. Frederick was so taken aback by his friend's air of being a different person, that he punched the wall.

"You've got to be kidding me! You've been using Gear cells for weapons, and you even twisted Aria's will, to put her into cryosleep."

"She would have agreed to it."

"Aria? Don't tell me that Aria would agree to this! She would never have agreed to it!"

"You're such a fool, I can't leave her in your hands anymore. I will take care of the rest. Aria is an indispensable asset for the future of my research and she is very supportive. But I'm leaving you here."

Saying this, Asuka in the video stood up from his seat.

"Goodbye, Frederick."

"Wait, Asuka! We're not done talking...!"

Before Frederick could finish, with a brief discharge of static, the image was cut off. At the same time, a nearby engine sound, which might be from the escape boat, increased in pitch. But the escape boat with Asuka and Aria on board should still be there in the dock.

"Damn it, I can't believe this!"

Frederick immediately put his hand on the airlock. With ferociously monstrous strength, he forcefully pried open the thick door. At the end of the path he opened, he found the escape tunnel he had been looking for all along. In a space resembling a ship's dock, the small oval-shaped submarine floated, its engines roaring. However, the cross-mesh bridge that would have led to the airlock on the side of the escape boat was out of alignment with the boat. The escape boat was already moving forward.

"Tch! Just in time!"

He ran as fast as he could on the bridge, and jumped to the escaping boat that was moving away from him. As soon as he kicked out, he heard the bridge crack. Thanks to the strength of such a monster's legs, Frederick's hand just barely reached the side of the escape boat.

"UOOOOOOOOOOGH!!!"

When he grabbed the escape boat to stop his body from slipping down, his deformed claws clamped the armor and became an instant handhold. Frederick managed to hang on to the escape boat, but he did not know if he would be swept off, if the speed of the boat continued to increase. He could get on top of the escape boat, for example, hold on tighter, and continue to follow it. Or, could he pry open the airlock and climb in? Frederick thought about his options, then reached for the airlock of the escape boat.

"Eh?"

The airlock of the escape boat opened from the inside. The thick door opened vertically, and the open part was like a small floorboard that stuck out from the side. Serge appeared at that spot, holding a pistol in his left hand.

"You monster! Get off!"

"G..uh?!"

Several shots rang out in rapid succession. One of them hit Frederick in the side. The bullet bounced off Frederick's body rather than going through it, but the impact of it still hurt. He put all his strength into his right hand, which was the only thing he could hold on to. And then....

"Huh? Hey doc, sit down!"

Serge said to the inside of the escape boat.

"It's going to be hard to aim with that hand. I'll do it. Switch places with me."

"What...?"

"I have to clear my name. It's what you want, isn't it?"

The familiar voice made it easy to recognize who was speaking. Soon after, Serge pulled back, and this time Asuka emerged from the airlock. In his hand, however, was the pistol he received from Serge.

"Hey! Asuka!"

"Frederick, you're not going to like me if you persist too much...."

The wind fluttered Asuka's white lab coat as he stood at the platform in front of the door.

"There is no seat for you on this side of the airlock."

Asuka sighed ruefully and pointed the muzzle of his gun at Frederick.

"Oh, come on, Asuka. You're kidding, right?"

Asuka would never do such a thing.

"It's a lie, isn't it? Hey, Asuka! Tell me it's not true!"

Frederick was still hoping, somewhere in the back of his mind, that as long as they talked properly, he, Asuka, and Aria would be best friends again, and they would be able to go back to those days they had missed so much. They had spent so many years together, and no matter how many words of rejection he received, he believed that it was not Asuka's true feelings, that there must be a reason for it. And yet...

"Gugh?!"

The reality that was confronted, instead of a reply, was a merciless shot. The bullet, released without warning, hit Frederick's forehead. Even his forehead was as durable as metal. The bullet bounced off and disappeared into the distance, but Asuka, his best friend, fired at him, trying to kill him. That fact weighed heavily on Frederick's mind.

"I'm not lying, Frederick. It's just the way it is."

Once again, the sound of a gunshot rang out. This time, the bullet struck Frederick in the chest. This triggered a flood of words from Frederick's mouth.

"Why are you doing this, Asuka...? Why are you complicit in the diversion of research to weapons! Why do you need to take Aria with you! Why.... You did this to me! How long have you been betraying me?"

"Betrayal. I'll take that word in stride. That's what I do. But I told you. You have no right to know. I can't tell you anything."

"Damn. I always thought I could trust you and that you were my...best friend!"

"You were the only one who thought so."

Asuka's gunfire intensified.

"Frederick, die. You have to die for the future. You die here and now!"

"No! No, Asuka!"

"Die! Die! Drop! Fall, Fredrick!"

"Asuka...Asuka! Wake up! This isn't who you are!"

Asuka's firing continued, perhaps seeing the futility of trying to hit him in the head and body, he now began to focus on Frederick's right hand.



Even now, he was just barely holding on to the advancing escape craft. And if he were to get a bullet impact on his barely clinging hand, he would be in a lot of trouble.

"The...me you know is not all there is to me."

Asuka re-adjusted his pistol with both hands and aimed at Frederick's right hand.

"I will continue my research, Frederick, even to your death."

And then the gun fired. Frederick's right hand was shot, and the impact caused the claw to detach from the armored ship.

"This time, it's goodbye."

A floating sensation enveloped Frederick's body, as he lost his support and fell to the ground. At that moment, the speed of the escape boat increased and the distance between the boat and Frederick's body rapidly grew. His best friend, who was moving away, was still looking down at him, but he could not read his expression, partly because of the hair covering his eyes. And then he fell. Frederick's body bounced on the floor of the tunnel. Frederick quickly got up, but by then the escape boat was far away and out of sight.

"Why... why...?"

Frederick punched the floor as hard as he could. Once more, once more. Again. and again, Frederick continued to lash out at the floor, fighting against a reality that was hard to accept. From behind him came the loudest explosion he had ever heard. The impact caused large cracks to appear in the walls of the tunnel.

"Why? *Asuka!*!"

Frederick shouted. The ceiling of the tunnel came crashing down with a roar.



Twilight set in and the light of a fading sunset illuminated the pile of wrecked tiles and debris that were once the Next Generation Medical Research Institute. This secluded suburban area in the mountains had been standing as if nothing had happened until a few hours ago, despite the underground commotion. But now it had completely lost its shape, due to the massive collapse of the vast underground space. In the corner of this pile of rubble, something unusual happened.

Suddenly, a deformed hand sprang up from the ground. Frederick, who had turned into an inhuman monstrosity, crawled out of the ground after pushing aside the destroyed tiles and debris.

He was buried alive in a tunnel deep underground, but he was able to reach the surface on his own, eliminating by force all the obstacles in his way, including the roof tiles, the earth, and even the concrete.

"It's a little bit crazy not to die from being buried alive."

He sat down on a corner of the rocky debris and exhaled heavily. The reflection in a piece of shattered glass was the first time he had ever seen his entire body transformed. Frederick was gradually beginning to laugh at the strangeness of it, which would have caused him to run away in surprise, if anyone else saw it.

"Haha, you're a complete monster, aren't you?"

Although he had calmed down, there was still a strong urge swirling in his body. His golden eyes were filled with murderous intent as they stared into the setting sun.

"You've gone to such lengths to continue your research, huh? You're a great traitor, Asuka R. Kreutz."

He spoke with resentment toward his best friend. Why Asuka turned Frederick into such a monster was completely in the dark, due to the separation between them now. It was no longer possible to confirm the truth. However, he had enough time to think about it, before he crawled to the surface.

"No matter. If that's the case, I'll die as you wish."

Frederick coughed as he looked out at the red sky.

"From this day on, I'm a nobody. I'm just one more monster, your... enemy."

With that, Frederick stood up and looked around the site of the Next Generation Medical Research Institute where he had worked for so long. The whole place was a wreck of rubble. There could be no other survivors. The faint sirens echoing in the distance were the sounds of emergency services, who had finally learned of the situation and were rushing to the scene. They were numerous, but still far away.

"If a monster like me is found, it's not going to be good...."

Coughing audibly, Frederick slowly walked away. The setting sun was shining on his back, which was no longer human anymore.

Epilogue

On the outskirts of a small town, there was an abandoned shack that appeared rundown, to anyone who looked at it. The tin used for the ceiling and walls was not only rusted everywhere, but also had holes in it, as if eaten by insects. It was an eerie sight that one would not expect to find someone living inside of.

A radio show was blaring inside the shack, as if the mere presence of the shack made other people feel distant from the place.

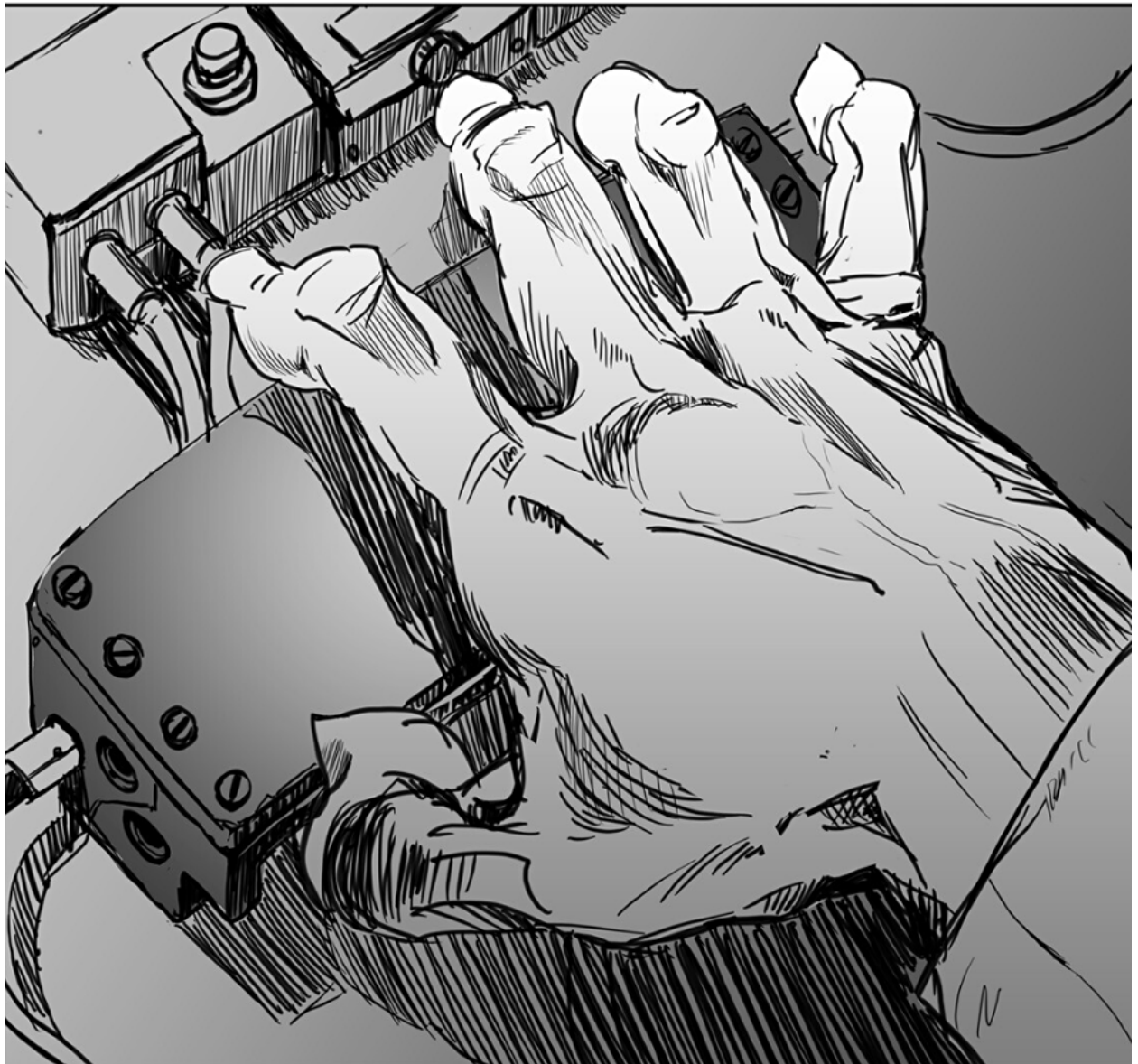
“It has been six months today since the massive explosion at the Next Generation Medical Research Institute that killed many people. The U.S. government has finally announced that it is scaling back the Gear program.”

“Some sources say this is unreasonable, as it is effectively a freeze on the project...”

The commentators responded to the program host's opening statement.

“Who's saying that? There were rumors that the military was behind it.”

“Isn't the military thing a hoax? In fact, there were concerns about the dangers of the Gear cells even before the accident, so I think the decision to freeze the project was rather late.”



“Well, the accident killed all the main researchers in the project. Even if they wanted to continue the project, they couldn't, I think.”

“Was it really an accident in the first place? There is strong speculation among the public that it was a terrorist attack aimed at the misuse of the Gear cells.”

“Could it be that exploitative research is continuing without our knowledge?”

“If that's the case, it is a little scary, isn't it? Of course, there is no way that the government is unaware of this, so I'm sure it's not true.”

At that moment, the sound on the radio was drowned out by a high-pitched noise. It was a beeping alarm of some kind. In the center of the shack. A table was filled with a plethora of out-of-place machinery. One of its parts rose up, as if to say it was finished.

An unpainted rectangular piece of headgear.

A deformed, inhuman hand with sharp claws takes it up. With a click of the clasp, the deformed hand finished attaching the headgear. Immediately after that, the monstrous hand began to change its appearance. The claws gradually shortened to a normal human level. A figure then stood in front of the cracked mirror, and its reflection was that of a man. His hair had grown unusually long, but it was indeed a human being.

“The suppression of the Gear cells has finally taken shape.”

The man laughed through his nose and stood in front of a wall.

On such a wall, there was a large map, marked here and there with studs and photographs. But all of them were marked with a large "X".

"Asuka.... Where are you now?"

—

The man who had now abandoned his name had regained his human form, but was forced to live a semi-permanent existence. He blended in with human society as a bounty hunter, but it was not until about 50 years later that he began to appear on the stage of history. The Gear Project was resumed with the undeniable goal of military use, and an unidentified "Gear hunter" destroyed its facilities and research results one after another.

He was also known as "Badguy.”

Afterword

First of all, thank you for picking up this book. My name is Kazuya Negishi, and I am the author of this book. Hello from a corner of the publishing industry. As many of you may know, this book is a novelization of the *Guilty Gear* series, a popular fighting game with a unique worldview and storyline. How did the main character, Sol Badguy, a man with various pasts and secrets, become the “prototype Gear”? How did a scientist named Frederick become a bounty hunter named Sol Badguy? We hope you enjoyed the story of *Guilty Gear Begin*, which is one of the oldest events in the timeline of the series’ history. In the story mode of the latest game in the series, *Guilty Gear Xrd Rev 2*, there are several scenes of Frederick, from Sol’s past. “That Man” and “Gear Maker,” Asuka R. Kreutz, who has been a mystery Sol has been chasing for a very long time, will also be beginning to make a full-fledged appearance in the film. In addition to being a great fighting game, the story mode of the latest title is an impressive volume that really is a complete movie, and it’s about the size of three movies. I recommend you to watch it. The historical timeline and various settings in the game are also fun to look at, as there are many discoveries here and there, making me think things such as “I didn’t know that” and “I didn’t know how much went into this.” I was really serious about reading and comparing each document when I was writing this book, and I thought, “Wow, this is really great!” I’m sure you’ll agree with me.

I have been a fan of the *Guilty Gear X* series since I was playing the first game in that series, and I also loved the versions that expanded to games arcades so much that it is no exaggeration to say that I devoted my youth to the series, and this year marks 20 years since the release of *Guilty Gear* (Wow!). That’s right, I’m getting old! As a game writer, when I wrote a strategy book for the *Guilty Gear* series and articles for arcade magazines, I thought, “I’ve come so far!” But to be allowed to write a story about the series on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the series, it’s like, “I’ve truly gone very far! I am so filled with emotions!” And it’s what we call episode zero. When I saw the story of the latest work, I thought that one day someone would write an episode from the past, but I never thought that I would be the one to write it. At this rate, I wonder if Testament, a character I once enjoyed playing, will become a playable character in the next installment of the series... I’m still waiting for the next game, hoping that it will happen, and practicing combos with Sol, whom I haven’t used much so far, because I had a chance to be a part of his story.

Now, I would like to begin with a few words of acknowledgement. First and foremost, I would like to thank Daisuke Ishiwatari of Arc System Works, the general director of the *Guilty Gear* series, for drafting, supervising, and illustrating this project. And the producer, Mr. Taketsugu Yamanaka. I would like to thank you all from the bottom of my heart for giving me this opportunity. I was under a lot of pressure because I was a big fan of the series myself, but I feel like one of my dreams has come true. I am very grateful to Mr. I, the editor in charge of this project, for his accurate suggestions and support in coming up with ideas. I am also grateful to the proofreader for all the trouble he has caused me, and I am almost on my knees. I would also like to thank fellow author, Ms. Mako Komao, for connecting me with this project. My mentor, Mr.

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Kazuya Negishi

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BEGIN

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