**Prologue: The Mission of *Sub/merge***

**Scene ???**

The hum of the submarine faded into the distant background as Aoi’s mind sank into restless sleep. In his dream, he was back in the car with Emi, the sunlight streaming through the windshield, warm and golden. Her laughter filled the air, light and musical.

**Emi**:  
“You drive like an old man, you know that?”

Aoi glanced at her, smirking.

**Aoi**:  
“Someone has to be responsible. You get distracted too easily.”

She leaned back in her seat, rolling her eyes playfully.

**Emi**:  
“Responsible, huh? That why you keep postponing our trip? I’m starting to think you don’t want to go.”

**Aoi**:  
“It’s not that. It’s just—”

**Emi** (interrupting):  
“Work. Always work. Aoi, we promised. Somewhere by the sea, remember? Just you and me. No distractions.”

Her voice softened, and she reached out, placing her hand on his.

**Emi**:  
“Let’s make it happen, okay?”

Aoi opened his mouth to respond, but the sunlight began to fade. The warm, golden glow shifted into cold, blinding headlights. A deafening screech of tires filled the air.

**Aoi**:  
“Emi! Hold on!”

The car spun violently, the world tilting and crashing around them. Shards of glass sparkled like stars in the darkness. Aoi reached out, his hand searching for hers.

**Aoi**:  
“Emi! Are you okay? Answer me!”

Her voice came, faint and distant, as though carried on a whispering wind.

**Emi**:  
“Aoi...”

His surroundings shifted abruptly. He was no longer in the car. He was underwater, the silence broken only by the distant echo of his own heartbeat. The ocean pressed against him, cold and suffocating. He thrashed, his limbs heavy as if bound by unseen forces. Above him, Emi floated, her hair drifting like seaweed, her face obscured by the shimmering light.

**Aoi**:  
“Emi! Please, I’m here! I’m trying!”

Her voice was clearer now, tinged with sorrow.

**Emi**:  
“You promised, Aoi. You promised you wouldn’t lose me.”

Aoi reached for her, but the water seemed to stretch the distance between them. Her silhouette began to change, warping and elongating. Her eyes glowed with an unnatural light, and her outstretched hand became something monstrous—alien and clawed.

**Emi** (in a distorted, echoing voice):  
“You let me go. You’ll let them go too.”

Aoi screamed, bubbles escaping his mouth, but no sound emerged. The glowing figure lunged toward him, its claws reaching for his chest. The light around him grew brighter, unbearable—

**Scene Transition: Awakening**

Aoi gasped as he jolted awake, drenched in sweat. His chest heaved, his lungs burning as if he’d truly been drowning. He sat up in his bunk, clutching the edge of the mattress.

The faint hum of the submarine returned, grounding him in the present. He looked down at his hands—they were trembling. His wedding ring caught the dim light, the cool metal pressing into his skin like a reminder.

**Aoi (whispering)**:  
“Emi... I didn’t let you go.”

But deep down, a voice lingered in his mind, echoing her final words in the dream.

**Voice (Aoi’s memory)**:  
“You’ll let them go too.”

Aoi closed his eyes, steadying his breathing. He knew he wouldn’t sleep again that night.

**Team Meeting**

The briefing room buzzed with faint murmurs as the *Sub/merge* crew gathered for their final meeting before the descent. The lights were dim, the screen at the front displaying an artist’s impression of a submerged metropolis, its spires stretching eerily toward the ocean’s surface. Despite the sense of awe the image inspired, the atmosphere was heavy with tension.

Aoi Nishihara sat quietly at the back, his fingers gripping a cup of coffee gone cold. His sharp eyes, lined with dark circles, flicked across the room, scanning his crewmates. They were some of the best in their fields, but he wondered if even their expertise could prepare them for what lay ahead.

At the front of the room, Chief Daichi stood tall, his presence commanding the room's attention. His voice carried a calm confidence, but there was an edge to it, a kind of hunger that Aoi couldn’t ignore.

**Daichi**:  
“Ladies and gentlemen, what we’re about to undertake is unprecedented. This isn’t just another expedition—it’s a journey into the unknown. The city we’re about to explore is unlike anything humanity has ever discovered. It’s ancient, untouched, and, most importantly... it’s ours to uncover.”

The screen shifted to show sonar scans of the submerged city, its sprawling ruins faint but unmistakable.

**Daichi**:  
“Our government has invested heavily in this mission because of what this city could mean for science, history... and perhaps even our survival. If the materials we’ve detected are as advanced as they seem, this could redefine our understanding of ancient civilizations—and of humanity itself.”

The murmurs grew louder as the implications of Daichi’s words settled over the crew. The stakes weren’t just professional—they were monumental.

**Aoi’s Perspective**

Aoi leaned back in his chair, his jaw tightening as Daichi spoke. He had been handpicked for this mission, not just for his technical expertise but for his level-headedness under pressure. But no amount of training could quell the unease gnawing at him. His thoughts drifted to the application form he had filled out months ago—the only thing that had kept his mind occupied since...

Since the accident.

**Scene: Final Preparations**

The submarine bay was alive with activity as the *Sub/merge* crew gathered for their final briefing. The hulking mass of the submarine loomed over them, its sleek design both awe-inspiring and imposing. Floodlights bathed the dock in a cold, sterile glow, illuminating the faces of the 14-member team. Despite the air of professionalism, tension crackled beneath the surface.

Daichi, the chief of the expedition, stood front and center, his posture rigid and commanding. His sharp, calculating eyes scanned the team as they assembled. Each member carried their own expertise—and their own burdens.

Daichi began his briefing, his voice cutting through the hum of machinery.

Daichi:  
“Ladies and gentlemen, this is it. We are standing on the brink of history. What lies below isn’t just a city—it’s a key to understanding civilizations far older than we ever imagined. But make no mistake: this mission is not without risks. Once we descend, the ocean will test us. The city will test us. I expect each of you to perform your roles with precision and discipline.”

His words hung in the air, heavy with unspoken implications.

Miyu stepped forward, her calm demeanor and compassionate voice a contrast to Daichi’s cold authority.

Miyu:  
“If anyone feels uncertain, now’s the time to speak. This mission is dangerous. There’s no shame in stepping back.”

No one moved. Aoi watched as her words lingered, the crew exchanging glances. He caught Rikona’s expression—her analytical eyes scanning the submarine’s hull as though calculating its odds of survival. Beside her, Satoshi and Kawa adjusted their tool belts, their banter subdued for once.

Satoshi:  
“This baby’s solid. We’ll keep her running no matter what.”

Kawa smirked.

Kawa:  
“Unless, of course, something bites through her first.”

Kenji, the team’s security expert, rolled his eyes and tapped his holstered harpoon gun.

Kenji:  
“If something bites, I’ll make sure it regrets it.”

Hana, the marine biologist, couldn’t hide her excitement despite the somber atmosphere. Her wide eyes darted toward the holographic projection of the submerged city.

Hana:  
“Do you think we’ll find life down there? New species, maybe? I’ve been dreaming of this since grad school.”

Gen, the diver specialist, crossed his arms with a wry grin.

Gen:  
“Let’s hope whatever we find doesn’t dream of eating us.”

The room chuckled nervously, but Takiyo, the communications specialist, remained focused on her tablet, running diagnostics.

Takiyo:  
“Surface comms are stable for now, but don’t expect miracles once we’re under. The ocean doesn’t like to play nice.”

**Aoi’s Perspective**

Aoi stayed quiet, observing the crew. They were a mix of personalities—brilliant, resourceful, and occasionally clashing. But beneath the banter, he could sense the tension in their movements, the weight of the unknown pressing on them all.

His own thoughts drifted to Emi, her memory never far from his mind. He touched the photograph tucked inside his suit’s chest pocket—a small gesture of connection to a world that felt increasingly distant.

Daichi’s voice brought him back.

Daichi:  
“Nishihara. You’re the calm in the storm. Make sure you stay that way.”

Aoi met his gaze and nodded.

Aoi:  
“Always.”

**The Plan**

Daichi turned to the holographic projection of the submerged city, his tone shifting to one of clinical precision.

Daichi:  
“Our initial scans show the city is spread across five major sectors, with the central spire being our primary target. It’s where we’ll find the artifacts that could redefine history. Navigating the ruins won’t be easy. Toshiko, you’ll lead the mapping effort. We can’t afford to get lost.”

Toshiko adjusted her wrist-mounted navigation display, her silver hair catching the light.

Toshiko:  
“With the way this place shifts, staying on course will be a challenge. But I’ll get us there.”

Daichi nodded and continued.

Daichi:  
“Hideyo, you’ll work with Rikona to decode inscriptions and study the ruins. The rest of you know your roles. Stick to them.”

His gaze swept over the team, lingering on Haruto, who stood silently at the edge of the group. Daichi’s loyal accomplice, Haruto’s presence was unassuming, but Aoi noticed the subtle glint of something sharp at his side—a ceremonial dagger, its design unsettlingly ancient.

**Final Moments Before the Descent**

The crew filed into the submarine one by one, their conversations quieter now. The enormity of what lay ahead was finally sinking in. Aoi stood at the hatch, watching as each member disappeared inside. Miyu paused beside him.

Miyu:  
“Are you ready for this?”

Aoi hesitated, then gave a small nod.

Aoi:  
“I don’t think anyone can be ready for something like this. But we’ll get through it.”

Miyu smiled faintly, then climbed aboard. Aoi followed, the cold metal of the hatch sealing behind him like a tomb.

As the submarine powered up, the hum of the engines filled the cabin. Daichi stood at the helm, addressing the crew one final time.

Daichi:  
“Remember—this is history in the making. Whatever we find down there, it will be worth it.”

The submarine began its descent, the surface light fading into darkness. Aoi sat by a viewport, watching the ocean swallow them whole. The weight of the abyss pressed against the glass, and the shadows seemed to shift.

In the silence, Aoi’s thoughts returned to Emi, her voice faint and distant in his mind.

Emi (memory):  
“You’ll come back, won’t you?”

**Chapter 1: Sabotage and Descent**

The interior of the submarine was bathed in the soft, pulsating glow of control panel lights, casting eerie shadows across the tight space. The hum of the engines was a constant backdrop as the submersible descended into the inky depths, cutting through water as black as the void itself. Aoi sat at the helm, his hands firmly gripping the controls, eyes fixed on the monitor displaying the ever-decreasing depth readings. His heart raced, but his expression remained calm, trained for this moment, even if his mind was filled with doubt.

Aoi: *(voice tight, eyes fixed on the monitor)*  
“Depth reading... three thousand meters and descending. Everyone, gear check.”

The team was scattered throughout the cramped sub. Each member had their own role to play, each with their own thoughts racing as the darkness outside deepened, swallowing them whole. The city below was still a mystery to most of them, a place no one had ever returned from—or so the legends claimed.

Daichi, sitting across the room from Aoi, leaned back in his seat, his fingers tapping rhythmically on the console in front of him. He looked almost too calm, an unsettling sense of ease in his demeanor.

Daichi: *(calmly, almost too calm)*  
“We’re on track, everyone. Remember, this is the opportunity of a lifetime. A glimpse into the unknown. Not everyone is brave enough for this journey.”

Aoi’s eyes flicked to Daichi, catching his sly smile. His gaze then drifted to the others, each lost in their own preparations.

Miyu, the medical officer, whispered under her breath, her voice barely audible over the hum of the engines.

Miyu: *(whispering to herself)*  
“Let’s just hope it’s worth it.”

Satoshi, the engineer, sat hunched over a set of diagnostics, his brow furrowed in concentration as he scanned the readouts.

Satoshi:  
“Power’s stable. Nothing’s cracked… yet.”

Kawa, the other engineer, leaned back in his seat with a wide grin, tossing a playful glance over at Satoshi.

Kawa: *(grins at Satoshi)*  
“Only because I made those adjustments. We’ll get there in one piece.”

Aoi took a deep breath, scanning the team. This was it—the moment they had all been waiting for, the descent into the unknown. But even as the words of assurance left their mouths, he couldn’t shake the nagging sense of unease gnawing at him. There was something about the city that didn’t sit right, but he wasn’t about to say it aloud.

Aoi:  
“Remember, once we’re down there, communication with the surface will be difficult. Takiyo, can we keep a stable link?”

Takiyo, seated in the communications booth, glanced up from her terminal. Her face was pale, her expression focused.

Takiyo:  
“Stable enough… but I’d prefer not to test it too much.”

Daichi’s voice broke through, his tone light but carrying a subtle edge, as if he were trying to calm any lingering fears.

Daichi: *(with a slight smirk)*  
“Oh, we’re prepared. Let’s show the world what they’ve been missing beneath these waters.”

Aoi felt the weight of his words, the hollow sense of foreboding growing heavier with each passing second. He couldn't shake the feeling that they were venturing into something far darker than they anticipated.

**Choice 1: Aoi expresses concern over the risks of the mission.**

Aoi’s voice broke the silence, more to himself than to the others, as his eyes darted nervously across the control room.

Aoi: *(nervously glancing around the control room)*  
“What if this is all too much? What if we can’t make it back?”

The words hung in the air, thick with a fear Aoi had tried to suppress. He knew the risks, of course—everyone did—but the weight of their journey, the isolation, and the strange legend of the city seemed too much to ignore.

Daichi, ever the confident leader, leaned forward, his piercing gaze meeting Aoi’s.

Daichi: *(assuringly)*  
“Aoi, trust me. We’re doing what no one else has dared. And we will succeed. The world will remember us for this. We’re not backing out now. Not when we’re so close.”

Aoi felt his pulse quicken. Daichi’s words should have been reassuring, but something about them set him on edge. He didn’t trust this mission, not entirely, and the creeping unease gnawed at his gut.

**Choice 2: Aoi pushes for more safety measures, demanding extra precautions.**

Aoi turned in his seat, his mind racing with concern. He clenched his fists tightly before speaking, his voice firm, but with an edge of anxiety.

Aoi:  
“We need to make sure every system is double-checked. I want a full status report, now.”

Satoshi looked up from his console, irritation flickering in his eyes. He had his own doubts about the mission, but pushing the team for more checks in the middle of the descent seemed like overkill.

Satoshi:  
“Aoi, we’re fine. Relax. We’ve run these systems a hundred times. Everything’s working as it should.”

Daichi’s tone shifted, becoming more stern, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Daichi: *(sternly)*  
“This is no time for hesitation. We’re going in. You either trust us, or you don’t. We’ve prepared for this. All systems are go. No turning back.”

Aoi swallowed hard, the weight of Daichi’s words sinking in. They were deep underwater now, descending further into the abyss. The familiar, comforting sound of the surface was already a distant memory. He couldn’t afford to show weakness, but a lingering voice inside him screamed that something was terribly wrong.

The submarine continued its descent, the dark water pressing in on all sides. Aoi's gaze shifted to the faint, flickering outline of the cursed city in the distance, a shadowy silhouette rising from the ocean floor. Something ancient and terrifying awaited them. The deeper they went, the more the atmosphere seemed to thicken, the air growing heavy with the weight of the curse that loomed over the city.

The quiet tension was broken by a sudden jolt, causing the crew to grip their seats. The sub groaned in protest, and a few of the monitors blinked out of sync. Aoi’s heart skipped a beat.

Aoi:  
“What the hell was that?!”

Kawa quickly checked his console, his fingers flying over the keys.

Kawa:  
“Nothing to worry about, just a minor fluctuation in pressure. We’re fine.”

But even as he said it, the discomfort in Aoi’s chest remained. They were heading into the unknown, and despite the reassurances, it felt like they were drifting into the very heart of darkness.

Suddenly, the lights flickered again. A sharp, eerie sound reverberated throughout the sub, like something scraping against the hull. The team froze, eyes wide, as the distant shadows of the city drew closer, the feeling of isolation pressing down on them.

Aoi couldn’t help but feel like they were being watched, like something in the depths was waiting for them.

The descent continued, and the city loomed larger, an ancient presence rising from the dark, its secrets waiting to be uncovered—at a cost no one yet understood.

But one thing was certain.

They were not prepared for what lay beneath.

**Chapter 2.1: Shadows of the Past**

The deep ocean was a silent expanse around them, swallowing the sound of their breaths as Hana and Gen moved cautiously toward the massive gate. The city lay before them, its ancient walls half-buried in strange coral formations, giving the eerie impression of a long-dead place that had been preserved in the deep sea’s cold embrace. The faint glow from their helmets illuminated only a small fraction of the city’s true size. It was unlike anything they had ever seen. There was no turning back now.

**Outside the Submarine—The Gate**  
Hana reached out, her gloved fingers brushing the cold stone of the gate. A sharp shiver ran through her, not from the temperature, but from the deep unease that gnawed at her. There was something off about this place—too silent, too still.

Hana: *(voice tight, whispering into the comms)*  
"This place... It's too quiet. Like it’s waiting for us."

Gen turned his head sharply, his own eyes scanning the surroundings. He nodded in agreement, though he didn’t want to admit it out loud.

Gen: *(checking his gear, his voice low)*  
"Yeah, it's like the ocean is holding its breath. No currents, no sounds. Just us and this... gate."

They both paused, staring at the gate as if it were some kind of barrier between them and the unknown. Something felt wrong—something in the way the symbols etched into the stone seemed to pulse, faintly glowing as they watched.

**Inside the Submarine**  
Aoi was watching the feed from the outside, his hand resting on the console. His gaze flicked from the live camera feed to the faces of the crew around him, before landing on the deep, foreboding gate outside. He could feel the tension building, an unease that seemed to settle in his chest. His mind raced with questions. What was this place? Why did it feel like something ancient was stirring?

Aoi: *(nervously, more to himself than anyone else)*  
"This gate... It looks like it’s been here for centuries. But these symbols…"

He turned toward Hideyo, who had been silent, his face unreadable as he analyzed the symbols on his own monitor.

Aoi:  
"Hideyo, any idea what they mean?"

Hideyo’s eyes narrowed, and he leaned closer to his monitor, scanning the strange symbols. There was an unsettling hesitation in his voice when he finally spoke.

Hideyo: *(softly, as though unsure)*  
"It’s ancient, no doubt. But these symbols are unlike anything I’ve seen before. I could try to decode them, but... I don’t know what might unlock if I’m wrong. Some of these symbols, Aoi... they don’t just make me uneasy—they feel... wrong."

Aoi swallowed hard. The unease in the air was tangible, even here inside the sub. A gut instinct told him to be cautious. But Daichi, who had been silent until now, spoke up, his tone as calm and collected as always.

**Daichi’s Influence**  
Daichi: *(speaking without turning from the screen, his voice smooth and confident)*  
"This is a monumental discovery, Aoi. We’re standing before something the world has never seen. Don’t let fear get in the way of history. We came here to explore the unknown, and that’s what we’ll do. We push forward."

Aoi hesitated, his fingers twitching over the controls. The mission was critical. But was it worth pushing forward blindly? The city could be ancient, but it was also dangerous.

**Choice 1: Aoi decides to continue the exploration, despite the ominous feeling.**

Aoi: *(firmly, as if making a decision for the team)*  
"We’re not turning back. We came here to uncover something no one else has ever seen. Let’s push forward—keep your wits about you, but we’re not stopping now."

As Aoi gave the command, the crew inside the sub shared uncertain glances. The air felt heavier, thick with the weight of what they were about to uncover. Hana and Gen exchanged a quick glance outside, neither of them particularly comfortable with continuing, but both knowing that retreating would only lead to missed opportunity.

Inside the sub, Aoi felt a creeping unease, but he stood firm. He could feel Daichi’s approval, and a part of him knew that pushing forward was the only option left. Yet, beneath his resolve, a subtle tension was building—a suspicion that lingered in the back of his mind.

**Choice 2: Aoi insists on caution, suggesting they investigate from a distance first.**

Aoi: *(his voice carrying an edge of caution)*  
"Let’s not rush in. I want a full assessment of the gate before we proceed. I don’t trust that it’s as simple as it looks. We need more data first."

The suggestion was met with silence for a moment. Daichi’s face, though still calm, betrayed the slightest hint of frustration. He took a step forward, his expression hardening.

Daichi: *(his tone sharper now, losing some of its usual coolness)*  
"We’ve come this far, Aoi. We didn’t fly halfway across the world to hesitate. This isn’t the time to be cautious. We need to act now before we lose our edge."

Aoi’s insistence on proceeding carefully was met with some resistance, but the team reluctantly acknowledged his concerns. Hana and Gen, however, were relieved. They too felt the creeping dread, and the thought of investigating the gate from a safer distance made them feel somewhat better.

Inside the sub, Aoi’s choice to take extra caution began to cast a shadow of doubt. Was he truly just being cautious, or was there something he was holding back from the team? It didn’t help that Daichi’s expression now appeared more guarded, as if there was something more he wanted to say.

**Chapter 2.2**

The strange silence of the underwater city weighed heavily on the crew as they proceeded with their exploration. Outside the submarine, Hana and Gen, equipped with their diving suits, slowly approached the ancient gate. The city, half-buried in eerie coral, loomed large in the faint light, casting long, dark shadows.

**The Investigation—Outside the Submarine**

The team inside the sub watched intently as Hana and Gen advanced toward the gate. The air inside the submarine was tense, the quiet punctuated only by the soft hum of the equipment. Aoi's hands hovered over the controls as he monitored the live feed. His unease about the mission was growing with every passing moment, but he held his tongue. This was no time for doubt.

Aoi: *(watching the screens, voice steady but taut)*  
"Hana, Gen, check that area for any signs of structural integrity. We need to know what we’re dealing with."

Hana: *(her voice crisp over the comms)*  
"Understood. We’ll take a look at the gate itself. If we see anything off, we’ll report immediately."

Gen: *(in the background, his voice muffled but firm)*  
"All clear so far. Nothing unusual."

**Inside the Submarine—Rising Tension**

The rest of the crew watched as the feed from outside flickered momentarily. Aoi’s brow furrowed.

Aoi: *(slightly anxious, eyes narrowing)*  
"Can you hear us, Hana? Gen?"

There was no response.

Takiyo: *(checking the comms system, his tone tense)*  
"We’re losing signal. It’s coming from the area around the gate."

Daichi: *(slightly irritated, looking at the monitor)*  
"Not a surprise. We're in uncharted territory. Maybe their comms equipment is being interfered with."

Satoshi: *(glancing over at the team, frowning)*  
"They should be fine. The signal’s just weak."

Kawa: *(fiddling with the controls, his grin replaced with a look of concern)*  
"Or it could be something else. I’d say we get them back inside quickly."

**Choice 1: Aoi decides to send a rescue team to check on Hana and Gen, despite the risk of losing contact with the sub.**

Aoi: *(after a brief pause, his voice firm)*  
"We can’t wait any longer. We’re going after them. Takiyo, keep the sub’s comms running. The rest of you, suit up. We’re going to investigate."

Takiyo: *(nervously adjusting the comms equipment)*  
"Aoi, the signal’s getting worse the farther you go. You need to be careful."

Aoi: *(staring at the flickering screens, resolute)*  
"I know the risks. But we can’t leave them out there. We go now."

Daichi: *(more to himself than anyone else, his voice almost a growl)*  
"Fine. But we’re not walking into the unknown without a plan."

**Outside the Submarine—The Descent into the Unknown**

The rest of the team followed Aoi’s lead, stepping out of the submarine and into the oppressive quiet of the underwater ruins. Hana and Gen’s last position pinged on the sonar, leading them toward the imposing gate. As they approached, the eerie coral and decaying stone stretched out before them.

The moment they crossed the threshold of the gate, the light from their helmets seemed to dim, as though the city itself was sucking the life from them. They could no longer hear the hum of the submarine's machinery or the familiar voices of their team members. A thick, suffocating silence enveloped them.

**Inside the Submarine—Fraying Nerves**

Aoi: *(looking at the feed as it flickers out completely, voice rising in panic)*  
"Dammit! We’ve lost them. I’m going in."

Takiyo: *(fingers flying over the controls, his voice shaky)*  
"I can’t raise them, Aoi. The signal is completely dead. It’s not just interference—something's blocking the comms."

**Choice Impact—Choice 1:**

As Aoi led the charge into the city, the team’s hearts pounded with the growing realization that something was very wrong. They stepped past the gate, crossing an invisible boundary. The air grew colder, thicker. The further they moved into the city, the less they could hear of the outside world. The eerie silence wrapped itself tighter around them.

But then, as they ventured deeper into the city, the gate behind them sealed with an unnatural hiss, sending a wave of panic through the team.

Aoi: *(eyes wide with realization)*  
"Wait—what just happened? The gate… it’s sealed!"

Satoshi: *(gritting his teeth, panic starting to rise)*  
"We’re trapped… There’s no way out. No way to call for help."

The realization hit hard. The city had not only consumed their communications—it had consumed their escape.

**Choice 2: Aoi insists on caution and decides not to risk sending a rescue team just yet, advising the team to wait for the signal to clear.**

Aoi: *(looking to the others, his voice still calm but laced with concern)*  
"No one moves. We wait. If the signal’s lost, it’s better to wait for it to clear up. We need a strategy."

Hideyo: *(nodding, but still uneasy)*  
"Fine. But if something happens to them…"

Aoi: *(interjecting quickly)*  
"We’ve taken all precautions. Hana and Gen are trained for situations like this. We just need to be patient."

The seconds ticked by, then minutes. But as the silence dragged on, there was no sign of Hana or Gen. The only sound was the occasional crackle of static from the comms.

Suddenly, a piercing shriek echoed over the radio, garbled and unintelligible. The team froze. Then, there was a terrible silence. No response from Hana. No answer from Gen.

Aoi: *(eyes wide, his breath catching in his throat)*  
"Hana? Gen? Answer me!"

The radio was dead. And then, the signal from the outside completely cut off.

**Choice Impact—Choice 2:**

Aoi’s choice to delay action came at a cost. As the team waited in a growing sense of dread, the horror of their situation began to sink in. Hana and Gen’s absence was becoming a void they couldn’t fill. The eerie silence grew more oppressive with every passing moment. The uncertainty gnawed at them, and Aoi’s resolve wavered as he stared into the void of the city. The longer they waited, the more the sense of inevitability weighed on them.

When they finally decided to venture out to find their missing teammates, the gate slammed shut behind them with an ominous thud. The city had trapped them inside. There was no turning back now.

**The Trap is Set—No Going Back ver. 1**

Aoi: *(gripped by realization, fear creeping into his voice)*  
"It’s too late… We’re inside the city now. We can’t go back. This—this was never part of the plan."

Daichi: *(his voice cold, tinged with anger)*  
"What the hell is going on here? What did we just walk into?"

The team turned to face the looming, shadowy structures of the city. There was no way back through the gate. No radio, no signal, no chance to call for help. They had entered the city—*and now*—they were trapped in its depths, with no idea what waited in the shadows.

**Choice Impact:**

* **If Aoi chose to continue the exploration (Choice 1):**  
  Aoi’s decision to push forward without hesitation has started to raise some concerns among the team. Though they’ve agreed to follow his lead, a growing suspicion surrounds Aoi’s motivations. Why was he so eager to continue? Did he truly believe in the safety of their mission, or was there something deeper at play? Hana and Gen, in particular, began to question the rush to proceed, despite their own unease about the gate. As they moved closer, they couldn’t shake the feeling that Aoi’s decision was leading them into a trap they weren’t prepared for.
* **If Aoi chose to insist on caution (Choice 2):**  
  Though Aoi’s concern was valid, his hesitation cast a shadow over his leadership in the eyes of the team. Daichi, in particular, seemed frustrated, and though the decision to be cautious seemed reasonable, it sparked doubts about Aoi’s ability to make tough decisions in moments of crisis. The rest of the team, though relieved, couldn’t help but wonder: was Aoi really just being careful, or was he hiding something from them? This suspicion only grew as the team continued their investigation at a slower pace.
* **If Aoi chose to continue without hesitation (Choice 1):**  
  The team, now trapped inside the city, started to doubt Aoi’s decision-making. What had been a bold move now seemed reckless. They had crossed an invisible line the moment they stepped inside, and the city—*alive with dark secrets*—held them in its grasp. The fear that Aoi had led them into a trap, and that his decision had doomed them, began to grow within the group. Whatever haunted the ruins would now begin to stir.
* **If Aoi chose to wait and be cautious (Choice 2):**  
  Aoi’s insistence on caution had only delayed the inevitable. Though his decision initially seemed prudent, the silence and growing uncertainty slowly crushed the morale of the group. As the signal failed and Hana and Gen disappeared, the team felt their worst fears realized. The city had already closed its grip on them. And now, with no way back, they had to face whatever horrors waited within its ruins.

**The Trap is Set—No Going Back ver. 2**

Aoi stood at the entrance of the city, his hand still gripping the cold metal of the gate that had sealed behind them. His breath was shallow, his heartbeat quickening as the weight of their situation became clear. They had entered the city, and now, there was no way back. A dark, foreboding silence stretched out before them, amplified by the oppressive pressure of the ocean.

**Aoi**: *(gripped by realization, fear creeping into his voice)*  
"It’s too late… We’re inside the city now. We can’t go back. This—this was never part of the plan."

Daichi stepped forward, his usually calm demeanor replaced by cold anger. The tension in his voice was palpable, cutting through the silence like a knife.

**Daichi**: *(his voice cold, tinged with anger)*  
"What the hell is going on here? What did we just walk into?"

The team stood in stunned silence, their eyes shifting between Aoi and the dark ruins ahead. The gate, now sealed shut, loomed behind them like a permanent reminder of their irreversible decision. They had ventured too far, and now they were trapped—inside the city. There was no radio, no signal, no way to contact the outside world.

The atmosphere in the team shifted. The initial excitement of exploration quickly faded, replaced by suspicion, fear, and the growing sense that something had gone terribly wrong.

**The Growing Doubt—The Team Turns on Aoi**

Satoshi, ever the pragmatist, was the first to voice the doubt that began to gnaw at them.

**Satoshi**: *(his voice sharp, staring at Aoi with rising frustration)*  
"Aoi, you *knew* something was off when we entered. You felt it too, didn’t you? And still, you led us in here. Why?"

Aoi’s eyes widened, his throat tightening as the accusation hung in the air. His response faltered.

**Aoi**: *(stammering, trying to maintain composure)*  
"I— I had to make a decision. We couldn’t turn back now. We came this far—"

**Kawa**: *(interrupting, his voice tinged with disbelief)*  
"You couldn’t even listen to the rest of us? We’ve all been feeling it—the city’s wrong. The gate? The radio failure? Everything! But you just pushed forward, like none of it mattered."

**Hideyo**: *(eyes narrow, his tone accusing)*  
"Exactly. We’re trapped here because you wanted to push deeper, *into the heart of whatever this is*."

Aoi’s hands clenched into fists, but he knew the truth—they were right. He had ignored the signs, driven by a desire to uncover the mysteries of the city, to prove himself. But now, it was clear the cost of that decision was much greater than he had imagined.

**Aoi**: *(his voice barely above a whisper, strained)*  
"I didn’t... I didn’t think it would be like this. I didn’t know the gate would close. We still have a chance to figure this out. I—"

**Ryota**: *(cutting him off, his face twisted with frustration)*  
"We should’ve never come here! *You* insisted on going further, and now we can’t even get out! What were you thinking?"

The rest of the team stood silently, the weight of their suspicion palpable. Aoi could feel their eyes boring into him, cold and accusatory. They had trusted him to lead them, but now they were questioning everything. The trust they had in him was unraveling fast.

**Daichi**: *(his tone low and dangerous)*  
"You wanted answers, Aoi. You wanted to prove something. But now we’re all paying the price for your recklessness. There’s no coming back from this."

**The Team’s Growing Fear**

The tension in the air was suffocating as the team stood at the precipice of a city that was both ancient and *alive* with malevolent energy. The structures in the distance seemed to loom over them, shadows stretching long into the abyss. They had walked into a trap, and now they were caught, their only way forward shrouded in uncertainty.

**Toshiko**: *(voice trembling, trying to stay calm)*  
"What do we do now, Aoi? You’ve got us stuck here—no way out. What’s your plan?"

Aoi swallowed, his mind racing. He had no answers, just the overwhelming feeling that the city was closing in on them. The way the gate had sealed behind them wasn’t normal, and neither was the unnatural silence that had settled over the ruins.

**Aoi**: *(voice cracking, searching for an explanation)*  
"I... I don’t know. But we need to keep moving. We need to figure out what’s going on here. We need to find Hana and Gen."

But even as he spoke, a part of him feared that the city might be *alive*, reacting to their intrusion. The sense of dread was growing, and with each step, the team’s resolve weakened. Doubts about Aoi’s leadership began to creep into their minds, and whispers of distrust began to take root.

**Gen’s Voice**: *(suddenly crackling over the radio, distorted and panicked)*  
"Aoi—*Aoi, can you hear me?* Something’s wrong. We— we—"

Then, the radio cut out again. The team froze.

**Aoi**: *(desperately speaking into the comms, his voice shaking)*  
"Hana? Gen? Report! What’s happening?"

There was no response. The eerie silence pressed down upon them once more.

**Choice Impact:**

* **If Aoi chose to continue without hesitation (Choice 1):**  
  As Aoi pushed the team forward into the ruins, the weight of their suspicion began to bear down on him. His leadership was in jeopardy. The further they went, the more fractured the team became. Whispers followed him as the tension built, and Aoi could feel the walls closing in—not just from the city, but from the people around him. The trust he once had from the team was slipping through his fingers, replaced by a simmering resentment. The city seemed to respond to their arrival with an almost malicious awareness. What had seemed like a simple exploration was now a nightmare, and they were all trapped in it together.
* **If Aoi chose to wait and be cautious (Choice 2):**  
  Though Aoi had hesitated to push forward, the team’s feelings toward him hadn’t eased. Their doubt had already taken root, and his hesitation only served to deepen their uncertainty. The longer they stood in the shadows of the city, the more it felt like they were *waiting* for something to happen—something worse. Even though Aoi’s decision seemed to align with caution, it did nothing to quell the growing animosity between him and the rest of the crew. The city seemed to grow darker with every passing second, and the echoes of their own voices seemed to taunt them as they lingered. The distrust that simmered beneath the surface would only grow as they ventured deeper into the unknown.