

ナフセ

イラストレーション 

世界観イラスト わいしう

メカニクデザイン cell



リビルド・ワールド

Rebuild World

超人

ジビィ・ワード ワード

Rebuild World

超人

ナフセ

Author



Illustration

Illustration of the world わいしづ

Mechanic design cell

The advanced civilization that once dominated
the world has crumbled away, and a long time has passed.
People rallied the fragments of wisdom and glory scattered
all over the world and spent a long time rebuilding human society.



「私が対応するからアキラは黙つていて」

わかった

やがて日が昇る。

わざわざ屋根に上がる価値がある光景を、

アキラ達はゆっくり楽しんだ。

しかしそれを邪魔する者が現れる。

「よう。そっちも日の出を見に来たのか？」



EVANGELION
Rebuild of

Rebuild of Evangelion

>Episode
007

超人

Character

Rebuild 'World VII'



>**シロウ** SHIRO

アキラが都市間輸送車両内で
出会った少年。

>**ハーマーズ** HARMERS

シロウの護衛。坂下重工所属。

>**ヒカル** HIKARU

クガマヤマ都市職員。キバヤシの
部下。都市広域経営部所属。

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「アキラの担当、頑張ってくれ」

>Author : nahuso >Illustration : gin >Illustration of the world : yish >Mechanic design : cell



Author ナフセ Illustration 吟
Illustration of the world わいつしゆ Mechanic design cell

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191: Incidents during hospitalization

Desired and wished for, they fought and killed each other. Akira killed Yumina and survived.

The boy who emerged from the alleyways of the slums to become a hunter had killed many before and would continue to do so. In the slums, in the wasteland, whether his opponents were human or monsters, he fought his enemy, won, killed them, survived, and rose to the top.

A child who had nothing gained much: a healthy body, clean clothes, safe food, a house with a roof, powerful weapons, and an enormous fortune.

And someone he did not want to die; someone he did not want to kill.

Even that person, Akira killed, and he survived.

Akira tried not to mourn Yumina's death. How could he, after killing her himself, claim to be sad? Such arrogance was not permissible, he thought.

However, when Akira woke up in the hospital room and was embraced by Shizuka, he was forgiven. It was okay to mourn Yumina's death.

With this forgiveness, Akira cried out loud. He genuinely mourned the death of someone he had killed, the loss of someone dear to him. The death of a person, the loss of someone important, is a very sad thing. Understanding and realizing this was something Akira had also gained.

Having acquired what, he couldn't in the alleyways of the slums, Akira's battle would continue.



Weeping, Akira finally let out all the emotions he had been holding in, along with his tears. He took a deep breath while being held by Shizuka.

Noticing that Akira had stopped crying, Shizuka gently let go of him. Looking at Akira's face, she thought he seemed fine now and gave him a gentle smile.

Having cried enough to regain his composure, Akira spoke with a slightly embarrassed expression.

"Uh... um, thank you. I feel much better now."

"You're welcome. I'm glad you're feeling better. Well, I should be going now. I thought we could have a little chat, but the scheduled visiting time has already passed. Time went by pretty quickly, didn't it?"

That meant Akira had been crying in Shizuka's arms for a long time. Realizing this, Akira couldn't help but smile a little awkwardly to cover his embarrassment.

Shizuka felt relieved as she found Akira's reaction endearing. It was a normal smile without any trace of sorrow or pretense. Although he might not have fully recovered from Yumina's death, he was able to smile like this and face forward. It was a good sign. Shizuka felt happy that she could help and was grateful for the opportunity.

"Make sure to get plenty of rest, Akira. Show me your happy face again. Next time, at my store, okay?"

"Yes, understood."

Akira nodded firmly, and Shizuka smiled back and nodded as well before leaving the hospital room.

Then Akira noticed Alpha's gaze.

『...What is it?』

『Hm? Just a moment.』

Alpha hugged Akira. However, Alpha's presence was only in Akira's augmented reality view. Akira couldn't feel the embrace. The ample bosom pressing against Akira's face, deforming as if to prove its softness, only had the effect of narrowing his field of vision.

『...Alpha, what are you?』

Alpha released Akira and then sighed a bit theatrically, teasingly, at Akira's puzzled expression.

『It seems like it won't work unless I can actually touch you. Both hands just aren't enough.』

Akira's puzzled expression deepened, but he soon realized what she meant. Having lost both hands in the battle at Kuzusuhara Ruins, Akira now had medical prosthetic hands. With those prosthetic hands, he could somewhat touch Alpha.

Recalling the time he had touched Alpha's ample bosom with those hands, the soft sensation, and his reaction at that time, Akira lay down on the bed to hide his embarrassment, pulling the sheets over his head.

『I'm tired, so I'm going to sleep!』

『Got it. Rest well.』

Akira didn't dislike being hugged by Shizuka. On the contrary, he was grateful and happy that she had held him and let him cry. Nevertheless, being reminded of it made him feel embarrassed.

And it was because he could feel such emotions that Akira was beginning to recover from Yumina's death.



After the swelling subsided from his tear-streaked face and his embarrassment faded, Akira regained his composure. He was now receiving an explanation about his body from the doctor in charge.

Other than the absence of his hands, his body had fully healed. Thus, there was no issue with him being discharged, but his hospitalization also served as a form of house arrest by Inabe, so the timing of his discharge was subject to their adjustment. The doctor prefaced his explanation with this before asking Akira about how he wanted to handle his missing hands.

He had three main options: leave them as they were, get prosthetic hands, or undergo regenerative treatment. Even without hands, if Akira used prosthetics or an enhanced suit appropriately, he wouldn't have much trouble. Currently, Akira had advanced prosthetic hands attached, which could move freely and had a tactile sense, except that their texture felt like white rubber or plastic. For everyday life, similar prosthetics would suffice.

For combat, wearing an enhanced suit would suffice. Even if the hands were empty inside, a high-performance suit wouldn't impede his fighting capabilities. Until he decided whether to opt for prosthetics or regenerative treatment, Akira could continue as he was.

Prosthetic hands, as replacements for missing parts of the body, offered many benefits unattainable with natural limbs. They could look like natural hands but provide superhuman strength mechanically. They could be designed in shapes that defied or transcended human anatomy, with added joints for a 360-degree range of motion, or hands that could transform into guns or blades.

Even if they broke or were severely damaged, having spare parts meant they could be quickly replaced. This immediacy, possible because it's a repair rather than treatment, was a significant advantage over the high cost and difficulty of using large quantities of recovery drugs for natural healing.

The doctor continued his explanation to Akira, slipping in his own half-sales pitch in a seemingly natural manner.

"So, what do you think? Now is a great opportunity to switch to prosthetics. Many high-rank hunters partially mechanize their bodies, but it's rare for people to cut off healthy limbs for this purpose. Most take advantage of situations like this."

"I-I see..."

"Moreover, the treatment costs are covered by Kugamayama City. If you include the replacement and the cost of the prosthetics in the treatment expenses, you could get very expensive prosthetics practically for free. It's a great chance to turn a misfortune into a blessing. How about it?"

"No, I'll go with regenerative treatment."

Despite feeling some pressure from the doctor's odd insistence, Akira firmly responded.

"...I see. Understood. Now, as for the methods of regenerative treatment, there are two main options..."

The doctor continued, maintaining his smile but with the expression of someone who had just failed to sell something. In regenerative treatment, either new limbs are grown from the stumps, or cultured hands are surgically attached. Both methods have their advantages and disadvantages. Growing new hands can lead to temporary difficulties with both hands during regeneration, while using cultured hands allows normal use of prosthetics during the process. Akira chose the latter.

The procedure began immediately. First, the stumps of both forearms were cut and prepared for the base of the cultured hands. The cut surfaces were fitted with neural transmission readers, also used for prosthetic attachment. Then, the white medical prosthetics he'd been using were reattached. This setup allowed the neural transmission information to be transferred to the cultured hands, ensuring they would function smoothly right after transplantation.

This preliminary process was simple and completed in about 10 minutes while Akira was conscious. Thanks to the anesthesia, there was no pain, but Akira still averted his eyes.

"The cultivation of the hands will take about a week. During this time, move the prosthetics regularly and test their tactile sensations. The more input data, the better the cultivation process will go, and it will greatly reduce post-transplantation issues. If you experience any discomfort with the prosthetics, please let us know. Thank you for your cooperation."

As the doctor finished his explanation and prepared to leave with Akira's severed stumps in a storage container, he added one last thing.

"Ah, I think it would be a good idea to test the usability of your combat prosthetic hands while you have the chance. If you're interested, let me know. We even have models that can shoot lasers from the hands. You can try them out immediately."

"I-I'll think about it," Akira replied, though his answer was almost certainly a no. Despite this, the doctor seemed slightly pleased and gave a small bow before leaving the hospital room.

Akira looked at his hands.

"...No, lasers are a bit much."

『Once you get used to it, you might find it so convenient you can't do without it. Akira, try extending your hand forward a bit.』

Following the instruction, Akira extended his right hand. From it, a tremendous beam of light was emitted. The torrent of energy obliterated everything in its path, boring a large hole through the wall and out the other side of the building.

Of course, this was just a simulation displayed in Akira's augmented reality. The actual hospital was unscathed, not even a scratch. Nonetheless, it effectively conveyed the experience to Akira.

『Something like this. How do you like it, Akira?』

『...If I ever need to shoot lasers, I'll buy a laser cannon. There's no need for it to come out of my hand. What if I accidentally fired it?』

『I'll manage that part for you, so you don't have to worry.』

『There will be times when you're disconnected and can't manage it. Besides, with hands like that, I wouldn't even be able to relax in the bath. No way.』

『I guess it can't be helped. I understand.』

Akira's view returned to normal, with the wall intact. Feeling somewhat relieved, Akira watched as Alpha walked over to him, smiling.

『Well then, even if it's just for the short time until you get your real hands back, please make the most of my body.』

『...I'm not touching you.』

『No need to hold back.』

Akira's face turned a bit red, and he looked away from Alpha, who laughed teasingly.



During Akira's hospitalization, which also served as a form of house arrest, the number of visitors and their visiting hours were restricted. Using the remainder of today's visiting hours, Elena and Sara came to see him.

Seeing Akira looking much healthier, Elena and Sara were relieved. They sat near Akira, and Elena began the conversation with a smile.

"I heard you just woke up after being asleep for a week, but you look well."

"I'm sorry for worrying you. Thanks to the rest, I feel great. Though, my hands will stay like this until the regenerative treatment is finished," Akira replied, showing his white prosthetic hands to Elena and Sara to indicate that he wasn't bothered by the loss.

Sara looked at the white hands with interest. "Those look like expensive prosthetics. How do they feel?"

"They're amazing. They move normally, and I can clearly feel what I touch. They're almost good enough to keep permanently."

"Really? Can I touch them?" Sara asked.

"Go ahead."

Sara reached out and touched Akira's prosthetic hand. "Wow, it really does feel realistic."

"Yeah, it does," Akira replied, then flinched as Sara pressed his hand against her chest. Due to security reasons, both Elena and Sara were in casual clothes, and even through the thin fabric, Akira could distinctly feel the softness of her chest.

Seeing Akira's shocked expression and slight blush, Sara laughed playfully. "It really does transmit sensations well, doesn't it?"

"W-What are you doing?"

Sara continued to explore the sensation by squeezing, stroking, and pressing her chest between both of Akira's hands. This playful movement, combined with the feel of Sara's hands, embarrassed Akira.

"Come on, it's not that different from Akira's prosthetic hand, is it?"

"Maybe not, but still..." Akira responded, knowing that Sara's enhanced body was supplemented by nanomachines, making her chest, technically speaking, as artificial as his prosthetic hands. Despite this, her appearance and feel were indistinguishable from the real thing, and Akira's reaction was a testament to that.

Elena sighed exaggeratedly. "Sara, enough teasing Akira. He's still recovering."

"Okay, okay. Sorry, Akira."

"It's fine," Akira replied, though embarrassed, he appreciated Sara's effort to lighten the mood.

They continued to chat lightly, the earlier exchange hinting at a more serious topic they were all hesitant to bring up. Eventually, Akira straightened up and faced Elena and Sara.

"Elena, Sara, thank you for saving me back then. Because of you, I survived."

Matching Akira's serious tone, Elena and Sara also shifted their demeanor.

"You're welcome. We're glad we could help," Elena said.

"Yeah, it was a close call, but we made it in time," Sara added, looking at Elena.

Understanding Sara's silent cue, Elena took on the role of explaining further. "We heard about Yumina from Shizuka."

Akira stiffened slightly as Elena continued.

"To be honest, we don't know what to say. We don't know the full story, and we're not sure if it's something we should know. We understand that it's not something to ask lightly. So, if you want to talk about it, we're here to listen, but we won't pry."

Akira listened quietly as Elena spoke.

"But we didn't want to just stay silent either. So, we wanted to tell you this," Elena continued, expressing both her and Sara's feelings. "We're glad you're safe, Akira. That's what matters to us."

"...Thank you," Akira replied, unable to fully express his gratitude with words, especially when he felt partly responsible for surviving while Yumina did not. Yet, he appreciated their concern and responded sincerely.

Being a hunter is harsh. Losing loved ones is not uncommon. The conversation revealed the difference between those who had already endured such losses multiple times and Akira, who was facing it for the first time.

Having said what needed to be said, Akira, Elena, and Sara all exhaled lightly, easing the atmosphere.

"Well, if you ever feel like crying again, both Sara and I will lend you our chests, so don't hesitate to ask. From what I've heard, you enjoyed Shizuka's chest for quite a while," Elena teased with a laugh, making Akira involuntarily chuckle.

"E-Elena, that's not quite how it was..."

"But you didn't hate it, did you?"

"...That's not a fair question."

"Well, you know, some people have preferences for the size of the chest they bury their face in. Conveniently, there's someone here who can change the size of hers," Sara said, joining in with a laugh.

"Elena, my chest is like a storage for my life itself. Don't you think you're being a bit too casual about it?"

"What are you talking about? Lending something so important shows trust, doesn't it?"

"I see. Well then, Akira, do you want to enjoy it?" Sara spread her arms as if to welcome him. Akira blushed and quickly answered.

"No, I don't!" His somewhat childish reaction made Elena and Sara laugh cheerfully.

Afterward, they continued their light-hearted chat with Akira. Time flew by quickly during their pleasant conversation, and soon it was time for the visit to end.

Before leaving, Elena gave a gentle reminder.

"Alright, we're leaving now, but make sure you rest properly, Akira. Don't sneak out of the hospital and head into the wasteland just because you're bored, okay?"

Akira laughed and responded to her seemingly joking words.

"I understand. I'll make sure to rest."

Sara also chimed in with a light tone. "Well, if you really can't resist going into the wasteland, at least call us. We'll go with you."

"I'm not going anywhere. You don't have to warn me so much."

"That's because if we take our eyes off you for a moment, you end up in the hospital again," Sara replied, making it hard for Akira to argue. He gave a wry smile and answered.

"Alright, alright. I'll rest properly."

On their way home, Sara spoke to Elena with a somewhat serious expression.

"Hey, Elena. Do you think Akira will be alright, considering how he looked?"

"Probably. He might have just been matching your overly cheerful mood, but the fact that he can even do that shows he's starting to recover. If he were really struggling, he wouldn't be able to fake it."

"...Yeah, you're right."

It was clear that Akira was still grappling with Yumina's death. However, both Elena and Sara thought that was how it should be. A friend had died; it would be unhealthy to recover too quickly and act as if it was no big deal.

As long as he could eventually stand up again, it would be fine. He could take his time. They were ready to lend him a hand and support him if needed. Elena and Sara believed that taking things slowly was the best approach.

Becoming too accustomed to death wasn't good. If one became indifferent to it, they risked losing their humanity and turning into a monster in the wasteland, destined to be hunted down one day. Yet, a certain level of resilience was necessary. If one couldn't handle the grief, their heart might be consumed by it, leading to their own demise.

Finding a balance between sensitivity and insensitivity to life and death, and making peace with it, was the way of the hunter. Elena and Sara hoped that Akira would learn to cope with Yumina's death without being overwhelmed by it, and eventually, accept it fully.



Akira's hospital room, being a private room for the wealthy, is equipped with a fairly spacious bathroom. The bathing experience, apart from the size of the tub, is several levels above what he has at home, and Akira enjoys it so much that he lets out a deep sigh.

『...If I get used to this while I'm hospitalized, I won't be able to use my home bath anymore. I'll have to remodel the bathroom at home. I wonder how much that will cost.』

Alpha, who is as usual bathing with him and exposing her naked body, speaks up.

『With the cost of re-acquiring equipment and the hospital fees, I'm not sure if you'll be able to remodel the bathroom into something luxurious as you hope.』

『...No, the equipment costs are one thing, but isn't the city supposed to cover the hospital fees?』

『Strictly speaking, Inabe guaranteed the medical expenses. Whether that includes hospitalization fees or not hasn't been confirmed yet.』

『...Yeah, I know, but about that...』

『Moreover, if you get even higher-performance equipment, the cost will increase accordingly. You can do whatever you want with the leftover money to make the bathroom luxurious, but if you're thinking of lowering the quality of your equipment to cover remodeling costs, I'll have to stop you.』

Alpha said this while bringing her face very close to Akira. Akira groaned. He understood what Alpha was saying. His equipment's performance was still insufficient. During the battle at Kuzusuhara City ruins, he had almost died despite spending 3 billion Aurum on preparing equipment. If he had diverted some of that cost to remodel the bathroom and lowered the quality of his equipment, he might have ended up dead.

Akira doesn't live just to fight. However, he doesn't want to die, and he wants to enjoy a somewhat good life. He wants a good bath, but dying for it would be meaningless.

『...Well, I'll think about it slowly. I know equipment is more important than the bath.』

『That's good.』

Alpha, who was so close that their skins would touch if she were real, smiled. Akira pushed her away slightly with his prosthetic hand.

『Get away. It's cramped.』

『Is that so? Isn't it usually like this?』

『...Just move away.』

『Alright, alright. I got it.』

Alpha obediently sat down a little further away as told. Even so, the stimulating situation of having a stunningly beautiful naked woman nearby remained unchanged.

If Alpha were completely a visual existence and couldn't be touched no matter what, Akira wouldn't mind having her so close, even if their skins were almost touching. However, now, even if it was only in a limited way through his prosthetic hand, he could touch Alpha. This heightened his sense that Alpha was actually there.

Of course, Alpha was merely adjusting her image to match Akira's movements, pretending to be there. Normally, she would just pass through his hand, prosthetic or not.

Even so, Alpha knew this would stimulate Akira's awareness, so she did it.

Seeing Akira with his face slightly red from the heat of the bath, and averting his gaze slightly, Alpha smiled happily.



The next day, Kibayashi visited Akira's hospital room. Seeing Kibayashi's very cheerful face, Akira made a displeased expression in contrast. Despite Akira's attitude, Kibayashi seemed to enjoy himself.

"You're horrible. I came to visit you, and this is the face you make?"

"Then make a face that shows you came to visit. Is that the face you show to someone who was unconscious for a whole week and just woke up?"

"What are you talking about? For you, being hospitalized and unconscious is just business as usual, right?"

The content was difficult to refute, so Akira let out a deep sigh. Kibayashi, still enjoying Akira's reaction, sat down beside the bed, and started speaking with a big laugh.

"Even so, you really did it big this time! Fighting and taking down that huge thing that even the Black Wolf squad couldn't defeat on their own, that's amazing! Reckless, unreasonable, and reckless! Perfect in every way! As expected of Akira! You gave me quite a show! It was worth every bit of preparation I made you do!"

While Kibayashi's praise was genuine and without any trace of flattery, Akira couldn't feel any joy. Kibayashi's excitement was proof that Akira had gone through something extremely dangerous. Still, he felt he should at least say what needed to be said.

"...It's true that if it weren't for that preparation, it would have been really dangerous, so I'll thank you for that."

"Don't mention it! We're friends, aren't we?"

Instead of replying, Akira let out another deep sigh. Kibayashi, regaining his composure, continued speaking.

"Well, anyway, regardless of the pretext, I did come to visit you. So, instead of a gift, I'll tell you some things you'd probably like to know. Like, what's happening with the power struggle among the city officials that led to all this trouble for you?"

“...Yeah, I’d like to know. You enjoyed my recklessness, right? At least tell me that much before you leave.”

“Leave it to me. So, first about Inabe and Udagima...”

Kibayashi started talking enthusiastically.

The factional and power struggle between Inabe and Udagima continues, with Inabe currently holding the advantage. This means that Inabe's goal of reversing his faction's fortunes was achieved as a result of the recent turmoil.

This was largely due to Yanagisawa's successful negotiations with Tsubaki.

First, the entire first inner area of the Kuzusuhara ruins became Yanagisawa's jurisdiction. As a result, the main point of contention in the factional struggle, the battle for control over the first inner area, was completely nullified.

However, Yanagisawa himself has no time to manage the details of the first inner area. Therefore, he divided the management along the rear communication line, giving control of the Tsubakihara side to Inabe and the other side to Udagima. This division significantly altered their standings.

The first inner area was completely closed off by the Kugamayama city, designating the entire region as a restricted area. While it has been partially reopened, the Tsubakihara side remains sealed off, heavily guarded by a large contingent of the city's defense forces.

Since no one can enter, the area has no value as a relic collection site, no matter how valuable the relics lying there might be. Normally, Inabe would have been left with an area of no worth.

However, that area included Tsubaki's management zone. And through his negotiations, Yanagisawa secured an agreement with Tsubaki allowing Kugamayama city to enforce the strict seal on the Tsubakihara area in exchange for billing Tsubaki for the associated costs in Aurum.

Of course, Tsubaki, being an entity from the old world, has no Aurum, a modern corporate currency. Therefore, Tsubaki needs to acquire Aurum to make these payments. Yanagisawa showed his skill here too, by allowing Tsubaki to trade with Kugamayama city.

Tsubaki sells old world relics to the city and receives Aurum in return, which she then uses to pay for the Tsubakihara area's sealing costs.

The profit flow this generates for the city is immense. Although Yanagisawa takes the large share of the profits, Inabe, as the one in charge of managing the Tsubakihara side, also gains immense profits.

This reversed the factional struggle's balance, putting Inabe in a dominant position.

Akira listened to the story with interest. However, from Kibayashi's perspective, Akira's reaction was too subdued for the gravity of the information. Wanting a bit more enthusiasm, Kibayashi shook his head lightly as if to say Akira didn't understand.

"Akira, I'm telling you some pretty amazing stuff right now. If you have even a bit of interest, can't you show a bit more 'wow' in your reaction?"

"Well, even if you say that..."

"Alright. Instead of a gift, I'll give you more details. Make sure to listen closely."

Kibayashi, looking like he was providing valuable information, continued his explanation.

Kugamayama city buys relics from Tsubaki with Aurum. Then Tsubaki uses Aurum to pay for the security costs of the Tsubakihara area. It's a simple transaction, but the implications are huge.

First, buying relics from Tsubaki, or the ability to buy them, is on a different level from the usual relic trade.

Most ordinary people in the modern world believe that they can buy relics at relic shops with money. However, from the perspective of the old world, this is incorrect. Those relics are items collected by hunters from ruins, stolen goods acquired through robbery and illegal means. They're not legitimate items; they're merely exchanged by criminals according to their own rules. From the old world's perspective, they were never bought.

On the other hand, relics bought from Tsubaki are considered legitimate acquisitions even by old world standards. They are obtained through legitimate transactions, and in terms of legitimacy, they are fundamentally different.

Normally, such transactions would be difficult to conduct with entities from the old world without the involvement of major corporations like the Big Five. For a mere mid-tier governance company like Kugamayama City in the eastern region to succeed in this is significant.

Furthermore, typically, in dealings with entities from the old world, the old-world currency, Colon, would be used. Aurum and other corporate currencies are not considered valuable by the old world.

Nevertheless, Kugamayama City managed to facilitate transactions with Tsubaki using Aurum. This effectively acknowledged Aurum as a valuable currency for dealings with entities from the old world, which is a remarkable achievement. This also reflects greatly on Sakashita Heavy Industries, the issuer of Aurum.

Not only did Kugamayama City achieve this unprecedented feat, but it also took on the task of providing security for the Tsubakihara area from Tsubaki.

This demonstrates that Kugamayama City has been recognized as a significant enough entity by the old world to be entrusted with the security of its controlled territories. Furthermore, the fact that Aurum is used instead of Colon for security payments further legitimizes the value of Aurum.

The significance of these achievements in the eastern region is immense. Currently, Kugamayama City is under the umbrella of Sakashita Heavy Industries, but it wouldn't be surprising if other major corporations seek to poach it. This incident was truly remarkable.

Even Akira, who was usually indifferent and uninformed about such matters, was genuinely surprised by the thorough explanation.

"This... This is incredible."

"Yeah, it is. It's amazing stuff, right?"

Kibayashi was satisfied with Akira's reaction. Relaxing the intensity he unconsciously exuded during the explanation, he continued in a lighter tone.

"Well, that's enough about the gift. Now, let me talk about something personal. Akira, what are your plans for the future?"

"I haven't thought much about it. I'll heal both my hands, buy equipment, and then take my time to think."

"In that case... maybe in about a week, at the earliest. Alright, got it."

"Wait, what?"

When Akira asked with a sense of foreboding, Kibayashi's response confirmed his suspicions.

"I mean, the next job. We need to start preparing now, or we won't make it in time, right? As a thank you for the fun, I'll arrange a suitable job for you. Look forward to it."

In hindsight, Kibayashi's requests did indeed contribute significantly to Akira's rise. Akira knew this well.

"I refuse!"

Still, without even consulting Alpha, Akira firmly refused.

192: One distant cause, among many

On the rooftop of her base in the slum district, Sheryl sighed deeply as she thought about Akira.

"Attending the city's standing reception... I'm just the boss of the slum district after all,"

Sheryl muttered to herself. She had been worried about Akira all along. Even before hearing that Akira had been hospitalized in critical condition, he had been hoping for his safety. Even after being assured that he was out of immediate danger, she continued to pray for his stable condition.

And when she heard that Akira had woken up, she was overjoyed, relieved, and immediately wanted to visit him. However, she couldn't get a reservation for the visit. To contact Akira, even for a simple visit, strict procedures were required due to his house arrest status, and there were also restrictions on the visiting time and number of people.

Moreover, it wasn't even a matter of applying. There were priorities based on social status and other reasons, and she was being pushed back for various reasons. Sheryl had asked Viola to handle the visitation procedures, but she was told that reservations couldn't be made. She had even tried asking Inabe if there was any way, but he refused. Sheryl couldn't persistently press the city's executives and had no choice but to give up waiting for her turn to visit.

She couldn't even satisfy herself with just visiting Akira in her current state. The stark difference between herself and Akira, the reality that was thrust upon her, made Sheryl's sighs deep and heavy.

At that moment, Viola appeared.

"You don't look happy. It's a shame you can't visit Akira, but he's safe, the suspicions about him being a part of Nationalist are cleared, and your love rival is dead. Overall, you should be quite cheerful, shouldn't you?"

Sheryl had complicated feelings about Yumina's death. Except for Akira, she thought Yumina was a likable person. As a hunter who could die at any time, her death wasn't surprising, but she felt some sentimentality.

However, as Viola pointed out, there was indeed an ugly part of herself that saw Yumina's death as a turn for the better. Sheryl was aware of this.

But she also warned herself that if Akira even sensed a fragment of her joy at her love rival's demise, he would cut ties with her. That's why this emotion must never be known to anyone. With strong determination, Sheryl replied calmly, "He... lost both his hands. It's not safe to say he's out of the predicament. Of course, it's fortunate that Akira survived, and I'm genuinely happy about that, but..."

"I see," Viola replied meaningfully with her usual mischievous smile. Sheryl sighed again, feeling troubled.

"So, what brings you here?"

"I just came to check on you before I go out. Also, my client is being persistent. Even though I've told them it's futile..."

Viola said, motioning towards the rooftop exit. Then, a man in a suit approached and bowed deeply to Sheryl.

"I'm Haraji from Yoshioka Heavy Industries' Sales Division. Today, I've come to ask for your assistance in our negotiations, Sheryl-sama."

Sheryl knew the scale of Yoshioka Heavy Industries, a company that conducted business with governance corporations. Hearing such an unexpected request from such a large corporation, Sheryl listened to the man's words with confusion. But when she understood the content of the conversation, her expression quickly turned stern.

"I decline," Sheryl said firmly. Haraji's request was to mediate a reconciliation between Akira and the faction of Yoshioka Heavy Industries that had attacked him.

Accepting this request could easily lead to Akira misunderstanding her as siding with his attackers. Sheryl couldn't risk being seen as an enemy. Due to her fear, she rejected Haraji's request with an unwavering attitude. Haraji was surprised by the unexpectedly strong rejection. However, Viola had already told him that Sheryl wouldn't accept this request, so he quickly regained his composure and persisted.

"Well, please reconsider. We're only asking for your assistance in the negotiations. Regardless of whether reconciliation is achieved or not, we will provide ample compensation..."

"No."

"This could also be an opportunity to deepen our relationship with our company. Since you run a business in a place like this, you surely need sufficient defense capabilities. We believe we can assist in procuring those capabilities..."

"Please leave."

Despite Sheryl's unwavering refusal, Haraji continued to push. But when Viola patted him on the shoulder and shook her head with a smile, he finally gave up trying to persuade Sheryl.

"...I apologize for the intrusion."

"Well, I'll be going too," Viola said, as she and Haraji left together.

As Sheryl watched Viola leave, she muttered lightly to herself, "She's quite something." Despite being shot by Akira once; Viola had the nerve to mediate negotiations between Akira and Yoshioka Heavy Industries. Sheryl was somewhat amazed at her audacity. Alone again, Sheryl's thoughts turned from Viola back to Yumina.

"...Yumina. You didn't have to die. You could have forcibly dragged Katsuya out of the wasteland, taken him to a safe place far away, and lived together. Wouldn't that have been better?"

Sheryl didn't understand why Yumina did what she did, or why she didn't do what she didn't. It could have been a failed attempt, or perhaps due to organizational constraints. There could be various reasons, but as someone not directly involved, Sheryl ultimately didn't know the truth. Still, she couldn't help but wonder if there were other choices available.

Sheryl only knew that Yumina had died in the nationalist suppression battle with Katsuya. She hadn't grasped the most important fact that Yumina had been killed by Akira. Viola had omitted that detail from her explanation.

Rather than convincing others to trust her and then betraying them, Viola preferred to make them doubt, confuse them, and misinterpret, leading them to make wrong choices. Many wished for her death, but the villainess who avoided killing herself continued to demonstrate her vile qualities even today.



In the hospital room, Akira gave Haraji a weary look. "I get what you want to say. That Zalmo guy did it on his own, right? It had nothing to do with Yoshioka Heavy Industries. Is that it?"

"Yes. It's true that the personnel involved were from our arranged unit, but their actions were definitely not in line with our intentions. Of course, we do not deny that this incident was a mistake on our part. As a company, we are prepared to make sufficient concessions considering that..."

"No, I don't care about that. I got your point, so leave," Akira interrupted.

"W-well, it's not that simple..." Haraji's smile for business purposes stiffened at Akira's unwelcoming attitude. He then looked towards Viola, who was present in the room, as if seeking help.

Originally, Viola, like Sheryl, was not in a position to enter Akira's hospital room. However, she was currently resolving that as a negotiator hired by Yoshioka Heavy Industries. And she began her job.

"Akira. Don't you think that attitude is a bit much just because negotiations like this are troublesome? Or do you have plans to attack Yoshioka Heavy Industries later?" Viola said with a smile, bringing up an outrageous idea. Haraji was visibly surprised by her remark and involuntarily looked at Akira.

It would be reckless for a mere hunter to antagonize Yoshioka Heavy Industries. However, the opponent was someone who might actually do something reckless. Thinking that it could escalate into a situation where reconciliation would be impossible, Haraji cautiously checked Akira's reaction while maintaining composure. Akira showed no reaction as if he had hit the mark, maintaining his weary attitude.

"I have no such plans, but I just don't want to deal with troublesome negotiations. I'm in the hospital, you know? Let me rest," Akira replied.

"As always. Even though Yoshioka Heavy Industries came forward for negotiations," Viola said.

"I don't care," Akira spat out the words and shifted his gaze from Viola to Haraji.

"First of all, there have been various issues with Yoshioka Heavy Industries even before this incident. Like the major conflict in the slum district and the forced requests for hunter rank adjustments through the city. Without discussing those matters, are you saying this incident is the only problem?" Akira directed a slightly accusatory gaze at Haraji.

And Haraji, seeing that the other side brought up behind-the-scenes matters, adjusted his negotiation stance accordingly.

"In that conflict, you weren't caught in the crossfire of our presentation, were you? And as for the hunter rank adjustment request, I believe it was beneficial to you, wasn't it?"

"I decide whether it was a nuisance or not. It's not your call," a slightly tense atmosphere hung in the air. However, Akira had no intention of causing a scene in the hospital room, and Haraji wasn't ready to abandon reconciliation over this, so the situation didn't escalate further.

Then, Viola, who had been enjoying watching their interaction, made a suggestion.

"Akira. If you're not keen on negotiations that include matters like the conflict in the slum district, I can handle them on your behalf. I'll wrap things up nicely. Just leave it to me,"

Viola proposed, causing Akira to look at her involuntarily. Then his gaze shifted between Viola and Haraji.

Viola is a very shady character, but precisely because of that, her skills are excellent. If her shadiness is directed towards the opponent, it might not be a bad idea to rely on Viola. With that thought in mind, Akira pondered. Then, after a slight groan, he reached a conclusion in the moment.

"...I'll think about it. So, for today, just leave," Akira said.

Haraji interpreted Akira's response relatively positively. He thought that if Akira intended to reject reconciliation from the beginning, considering his personality, he would have done so on the spot. Then, he glanced at Viola. Viola lightly nodded, indicating her agreement.

"Understood. Then, I'll take my leave for today. Thank you very much for your valuable time," Haraji politely bowed.

"Alright, Akira, let me know when you've made up your mind. It's quite a hassle for me to contact you while you're in the hospital," Viola said with her usual smile, next to Haraji, who had bowed politely.

As Haraji left Akira's hospital room, he turned to Viola with a slightly serious expression.

"What will you do if I entrusts negotiations to you?"

"First, I'll confirm how far Yoshioka Heavy Industries is willing to compromise with you. And what about you? How far are you willing to compromise to consider the third presentation as a success?" Viola asked, naturally discussing things that hadn't been explained at all. Haraji answered while acknowledging her ability.

"That depends on his cooperation. The details will be discussed with higher-ups."

The campaign against the nation-building faction inadvertently became the third presentation for both Yoshioka Heavy Industries and Yajima Heavy Ironworks.

The Shirousagi, Yajima Heavy Ironworks' unit in the presentation, received high praise considering the procurement costs. Even for the redeployment of units for the blockade in Tsubakihara, the introduction of numerous units, including top-tier products, was being considered.

On the other hand, the evaluation of Yoshioka Heavy Industries' unit, the Black Wolf, was rather delicate.

It was understandable that the Black Wolf unit couldn't win against Tsubaki. The enemy was too formidable. And the fact that they couldn't defeat the large giants, especially since those large giants were significantly stronger than the other giants, was also somewhat justifiable. However, the fact remained that they couldn't win. There would inevitably be criticism.

Moreover, after the Black Wolf unit withdrew, the large giant was defeated by Akira. Furthermore, the Black Wolf itself was destroyed in the battle against Zalmo.

And Akira had deep connections with Inabe, who managed Tsubakihara. If Akira conveyed the poor reputation of the Black Wolf to Inabe, there was a risk that the deployment of the Black Wolf to the defense forces responsible for the blockade in Tsubakihara would be reconsidered.

Yoshioka Heavy Industries wanted reconciliation with Akira to prevent him from conveying their product's criticism to Inabe.

Haraji sighed.

"What's going to happen? If he entrusts negotiations to you, will you be able to persuade him somehow?"

"I already told you, it depends on your concessions. If you're just going to brush this issue under the rug, then there's nothing I can do," Viola replied.

"Yeah..." Haraji sighed, tiredly. Both with Akira and with his superior, he knew that the negotiations ahead would be tough.

In contrast to Haraji's demeanor, Viola wore a smile. She thought this would be enjoyable in many ways, so she smiled.



The attending physician brought Akira's hands, which were in the process of being cultivated, to his hospital room. The hands floating in the cylindrical tank were still small, like those of a small child, as they hadn't fully grown yet.

While Akira was looking at the hands with interest, the attending physician changed the settings of Akira's prosthetic hand and remotely connected it to the hand in the tank.

"I'll monitor the progress of cultivation, so please try moving the prosthetic hand. Let me know if you feel any discomfort," the attending physician said. Akira moved the prosthetic hand as instructed. Although the movements were a bit awkward, the hand in the tank moved in sync.

"How about sensation? Can you feel the water, like a warm bath?"

"Yes, I can feel it," Akira replied. Akira continued to move his hand as instructed by the attending physician, trying various motions such as opening, closing, and moving his fingers one by one.

Then, Akira suddenly tried something else.

"It seems fine... Huh?" At that moment, the attending physician noticed that Akira's prosthetic hand and the hand in the tank were clearly moving differently. After realizing that it wasn't a malfunction but something intentional by Akira, the attending physician showed an impressed expression before quickly regaining composure and stopping Akira.

"Oh! Please stop that! Doing that will cause confusion in the hand's operation after the connection procedure!"

"I-I'm sorry," Akira hastily stopped operating the prosthetic hand and the hand in the tank separately. The attending physician sighed lightly as he saw the prosthetic hand return to moving in sync.

"We were also at fault for not paying attention, but please be careful. Anyway, you're quite skilled. Normally, this isn't something that can be done..."

"I've done something similar with powered suits, so I just tried it out," Akira explained.

"I see. Is that so?" The attending physician nodded lightly in understanding, then smiled with a hint of pressure.

"In that case, why don't you try multi-arms with the powered suit? We have additional prosthetic arms available. It's easier than attaching them to your body, and if you can already control them to that extent..."

"W-Well..."

"Ever felt like you needed an extra arm when using both hands? Wouldn't it be convenient? You can try it out easily now..." The attending physician's enthusiasm grew as Akira listened somewhat reluctantly.

After hearing the suggestion, Akira declined the doctor's recommendation. The doctor, having finished confirming the progress of the cultured hand, left with a somewhat disappointed expression. Seeing Akira's expression, which seemed relieved in some way, Alpha smiled and said,

『That was quite an interesting proposal, I think. Since you're already using auxiliary arms, Akira, I don't think there's much of a big difference.』

『Prosthetic arms and auxiliary arms are completely different, aren't they? Besides, getting too accustomed to having extra arms might lead to dissatisfaction when you're back to just two natural ones,』 Akira responded.

『Is that so? Well, I won't force you. It's a matter of preference, after all,』 Alpha replied.

『Preference, huh... Alpha, you have just two arms, too, don't you?』

『Shall we add more?』

『Please don't,』 Akira said. He was serious because if he said the wrong thing here, Alpha's arms might end up multiplying endlessly, which would definitely become a cause for concern.



In the presence of Akira, Inabe appeared once again. Inabe lightly explained that although Akira had been too busy when he woke up to have any free time, he had finally managed to carve out some time, so he had come again, partly to visit.

"I can't stay long. But there's more leeway than last time. So, if you have something to say, I'll listen," Inabe said.

"Yeah, well, it's about the medical expenses..." Akira began, wondering if the city would cover all of his medical expenses, including the hospitalization fees until discharge and the cost of prosthetic hands. He asked Inabe again about these specifics.

"No problem. We'll cover all the hospitalization fees, including prosthetic hands for daily use. Sure, if it were something like expensive combat prosthetic hands equipped with laser cannons, costing several billion aurums, then it would require consultation. But you opted for regenerative therapy, right? Even if it's a more expensive treatment method than usual, we won't charge you," Inabe replied.

"I see. That's a relief," Akira breathed out, seeming somewhat relieved, perhaps a bit overdramatically, in Inabe's eyes.

"Even if you had to pay the full amount yourself, you'd manage it without any issues. Is that something to worry about?" Inabe asked.

"Yeah. I don't have any extra money to spare. My previous equipment cost around 3 billion aurums, and I nearly died with it. I'll need something even more high-performance next time. I wonder how much that'll cost..." Akira worried about the procurement cost of new equipment, prompting Inabe to continue the conversation.

"You're thinking of getting even higher-performance new equipment, so you intend to continue as a Hunter?" Inabe inquired, seeing the puzzled expression on Akira's face.

"Let me ask since it's a good time. What are your plans for the future? If you have any set plans, let me know."

"Plans... I don't really have any set plans," Akira replied.

"... I see. Well, there's no rush to decide. You can think about it slowly while you're hospitalized," Inabe said, closing that topic for now. Then, he casually asked about a minor matter.

"Oh, by the way, what about Drankam? Will you attack them after you're discharged and get your equipment?" Unexpectedly questioned, Akira looked puzzled.

"Attack them? No, I have no intention of that, but why?" Akira asked.

"Well, Drankam's Katsuya and Yumina did might mistake you for the boss of the Nationalists and attack you, right? I wouldn't find it strange if you also considered Drankam itself a target for retaliation," Inabe explained.

"I see. Well, the ones who attacked me are dead, and I have no plans to attack Drankam. Besides, Drankam seems to be divided between the administrative faction and the rest. It wouldn't be right to lump them all together. Although if they come after me, that's a different story," Akira responded.

"I see. And what about Udajima? He's the one who ordered your assassination from Drankam," Inabe inquired. Akira hesitated for a moment before replying.

"Can I speak candidly about that? I mean, I know Inabe is in opposition to Udajima, but Inabe is also a city executive, and this hospital is a city facility, right?"

"No problem. Anything said here won't be recorded in the city's records. I'll also pledge not to speak indiscreetly," Inabe assured.

"I see. Well, then, I'm considering killing him," Akira said, clearly stating his intention to assassinate another executive in front of a city official. This would typically be a major issue. However, Inabe responded calmly, as he had expected this answer.

"Well, that's what you would do. But I wouldn't recommend it for two significant reasons. One, Udajima is a city executive. Killing him would make the city your enemy. And two, Udajima is inside the barriers of the wall. Both entering the wall and committing murder inside it would also make the city your enemy," Inabe explained.

"So, you're advising against it?" Akira asked.

"More precisely, I'm suggesting that you refrain until those issues are resolved. In other words, don't kill Udajima until he's completely ousted from power as an executive and expelled from the city," Inabe clarified.

"I see your point, but..."

"In that case, what should you do to achieve that? There are two main methods. One from me and one from you," Inabe said, seeing Akira's surprised expression. He then proceeded to explain the two methods.

The first is for Inabe to simply win in a power struggle with Udajima. That would result in Udajima losing his position, making it easier to expel him from the city.

The second is for Akira to become a powerful enough Hunter to intimidate Kugamayama City. In extreme terms, if Akira were to rise to the level of top-tier Hunters in frontline activities, that alone would force Udajima out of the city. The military and economic power of top-tier Hunters surpasses that of average cities. Just being viewed as a threat by such an entity would be enough to make Udajima's position disappear.

Of course, neither option is easy to achieve. However, they are not impossible. Moreover, there's no need to pursue just one. If both Inabe and Akira work together to corner Udajima, the difficulty of achieving their goal will significantly decrease.

"For my part, rather than attempting reckless actions like forcibly breaking through the barrier to kill Udajima inside the wall, I recommend you a choice. What do you say?" Inabe proposed.

"...Are you suggesting we team up?" Akira asked.

"It's not quite to that extent. It's simply a matter of aligning our interests. If I were to state my personal interest, you are considered my associate. If you were to attempt a forcible breakthrough of the barrier, there would be those who would try to hold me responsible. Therefore, I would prefer you choose to increase your Hunter rank rather than resorting to drastic measures to kill Udajima. That's all," Inabe clarified.

"...Understood," Akira replied.

With that, Inabe was somewhat satisfied for the time being. He had probably managed to exert some control over Akira, who embodied Kibayashi's penchant for recklessness. That was his judgment. And with that relief, he continued the conversation in a casual tone.

"Well, aside from the Udajima matter, actively raising your Hunter rank would be a good thing for you. Unnecessary enemies would decrease. One reason why Drankam's administrative faction sent Katsuya and others to attack you lies there," Inabe explained, seeing Akira's puzzled expression, and providing further context.

The main reason the Drankam administrative faction accepted Udajima's request and sent Katsuya and others to attack Akira was because there was a sufficient probability of success, at least enough to justify the risk. If the outcome was certain defeat or if the gamble was too reckless, they would have refused Udajima's request no matter how much he threatened them.

So, how did the Drankam administrative faction assess their chances of success? At the time, Akira's Hunter rank was 45, right after the adjustment request for his Hunter rank had been completed. Objectively, Akira's Hunter rank had been adjusted to an appropriate value.

Hunter rank does not directly indicate a Hunter's strength. However, since combat with monsters is inherent in the Hunter profession, Hunter rank becomes an important criterion for estimating the individual's strength.

Even with a slight overestimation of Akira's strength compared to his Hunter rank, someone with a Hunter rank of around 45 should have been able to defeat opponents like Katsuya and his group. It's likely that the Drankam administrative faction made that assessment.

However, that judgment was wrong. Akira's actual strength was not that of someone with a Hunter rank of 45. He was powerful enough to defeat top-tier individuals among giants, to the extent that even a Hunter rank of 50 would have been an understatement.

If Akira's Hunter rank at that time had been appropriate for his actual strength, there might have been a chance that the Drankam administrative faction would have given up on pursuing him.

In that sense, Akira's previous indifference to his own Hunter rank may have been one of the factors that led to this incident. Inabe explained this to Akira.

Inabe noticed Akira's somewhat stunned reaction to the explanation. If Akira had been more eager to increase his Hunter rank, if he had sought a Hunter rank adjustment with his actual abilities, perhaps the situation of having to kill Yumina could have been avoided. It felt almost as if he had been told as much.

Noticing Akira's quite shocked demeanor, Inabe added, inwardly surprised by it.

"Well, the misjudgment lies with Drankam. It's not your fault but rather Drankam's incompetence. However, it's also a problem to always expect others to be competent. Seeking clear and objective evaluations even from the incompetent is important to avoid unnecessary enemies," Inabe explained.

"...I see," Akira managed to respond, showing a downcast expression.

In order to eliminate Udajima, Inabe wanted Akira to have at least some enthusiasm for increasing his Hunter rank. Inabe, who had initiated this discussion with that level of consideration, was inwardly perplexed by Akira's reaction. Nonetheless, he moved on to conclude the conversation.

"Well then, I should take my leave. Oh, by the way, Viola seemed to have come. What was the matter?"

"It was about Yoshio Heavy Industries."

"I see. Did you also discuss anything about Drankam? It seems they're in quite a difficult situation since Katsuya and Yumina's deaths."

"No, that wasn't part of the conversation."

"I see. Then, I'll be going. You should rest. Oh, Sheryl will probably come to visit soon too. She seems to be delayed due to various circumstances," Inabe mentioned Sheryl's name last, seeming to check Akira's reaction before leaving.

In the now empty hospital room with only Akira and Alpha, Alpha expressed concern for Akira.

『Akira, are you okay?』

"...Yeah, I'm okay," Akira replied firmly, remembering what Shizuka had told him before.

If so, regret it. Grieve. Feel remorse. Don't get used to killing others. Don't trivialize her death. And to avoid repeating the same mistake.

"I'm okay. I won't repeat it."

With strong determination, Akira declared so.

As Inabe left the hospital room, he wore a troubled expression.

(Viola didn't tell Akira about that incident. Was it just that she didn't know? Or did she deliberately keep quiet? If it's the latter, what was the purpose of that choice? I don't understand.) Inabe stopped dwelling on concerns about the low-quality woman. Instead, he contemplated another worry.

(Anyway, it seems better to introduce Sheryl to Akira a little later. If I can delay it until around the time of discharge, even if Akira learns about that, he might be able to think calmly about it. ...If not, then I'll have to cut ties with her.)

Inabe hoped that this concern would turn out to be groundless. However, if it wasn't, he had no hesitation in cutting ties with Sheryl.



The procedure to connect Akira's cultivated hands began. First, the neural transmission information device, which also acted as a lid for the severed area, was removed from the end of Akira's arm. Next, a small portion of the flesh was cut from the live hand to create an adhesive surface for attachment with the cultivated hand.

Similar adhesive surfaces were prepared on the cultivated hand. Then, the attending physician meticulously joined these surfaces using advanced instruments. Bones, nerves, blood vessels, and muscle fibers were connected, allowing sensation to be transmitted to Akira. Although anesthetic was implemented, it was still extremely painful.

Once the connection was completed, healing ointment was applied to the incision and bandages were wrapped around it. With this, the regeneration therapy for both hands were complete.

To confirm, Akira moved both hands. Despite having just been connected moments ago, there was no awkwardness in the movement of Akira's hands. They moved very naturally.

"It seems okay."

"Just to be safe, please avoid lifting heavy objects for a while. Since your hands are not yet accustomed to use, some retraining will be necessary. If possible, I recommend using reinforced gloves. Well, there's individual variation, but it's much faster to recover than starting from scratch."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that's how it is. It seems that even if a superhuman attaches a cultivated arm, that part doesn't make it a part of the superhuman."

After saying this, the attending physician continued somewhat cheerfully.

"There's also the idea of cultivating entire arms, legs, or even everything below the neck of a superhuman and transplanting them to ordinary people to mass-produce superhumans, but it doesn't seem to work out well. I wonder why? Maybe because it's not the person's own? It's strange."

Then, with a proud smile, the physician added, "In that regard, prosthetic limbs and bodies don't have such problems. Anyone can become as strong as a superhuman. How about it? Why not start by adding arms with prosthetic hands...?"

"Oh, no, well, uh, I need to buy new equipment first... Sorry."

"...I see. Understood. With this, the regeneration therapy is complete. Job's done."

With a somewhat disappointed air, the attending physician politely bowed and left. Akira watched the physician's departure with a slightly wary look.

Though Akira's hands had been healed, he was scheduled for half a day of postoperative observation. During this time, as he prepared for discharge in the hospital room, Sheryl, who had finally managed to secure a visitation appointment, came to visit.

Sheryl seemed a little nervous. Akira noticed her nervousness enough to ask, "Sheryl, is something wrong?"

"Oh, no, it's, um, sorry. I barely made it here in time. Even though you're already being discharged. I wanted to visit you right away, but I couldn't get an appointment..."

"What's the big deal? Don't worry about it. I was technically under house arrest. That must have been tough to manage. It's fine that you made it just in time, right?"

Akira had no intention of complaining about her coming to visit. He smiled and reassured Sheryl.

Returning the best smile she could manage, Sheryl said, "I'm really grateful for your understanding. Well then, although it's quite late, I'm glad you're safe, Akira."

Her words were sincere, and Akira genuinely didn't mind the delay in her visit. Sheryl accurately grasped that Akira was happy she had come to visit.

However, the tension that Sheryl had remembered even before entering the hospital room never vanished. This fear, the source of that tension, remained unchanged within Sheryl.

Before going to visit Akira, Sheryl had received a message from Inabe.

"You're about to go visit Akira, aren't you? Before you do, there's something I need to tell you. First, I deliberately obstructed your ability to visit Akira immediately. I judged that it would be better for you to meet Akira after some time had passed."

Sheryl, taken aback by this unexpected information, asked with a puzzled expression, "What do you mean?"

"Do you know that a Hunter named Yumina died? She was someone Akira was unusually close to."

"Yes. I heard she died during the Nationalist Supression Campaign. I'm also saddened by the news."

"How much do you know about that incident?"

"Um... I only know that she died during that campaign."

"I see. Let me fill you in on the information I have. Meet with Akira after you know this."

Though she didn't fully understand, Sheryl realized that Inabe was about to tell her something very important. She prepared herself for whatever it might be. However, the information she was about to receive shattered her resolve.

"Akira killed Yumina."

"Akira?"

"It wasn't an accident or anything like that. He clearly opposed her, engaged in combat, and killed her. As a result of Drankam's team accepting Udagima's invitation, they mistakenly believed Akira was the boss of the Nation Building group and moved to capture him."

"I-is that so..."

"Beyond that is what's important."

Wondering what could be more important, Sheryl listened with trepidation as Inabe continued.

"Leading that team was Katsuya, and it was Katsuya who ultimately decided to capture Akira. However, at that time, he was making a deal with Udajima. In exchange for Akira's capture, essentially his murder, he demanded to help you."

"Me...?"

As Sheryl began to feel more than just puzzled but utterly confused, Inabe explained the details to her. Katsuya had decided to kill Akira to clear Sheryl of suspicion as a Nationalist member. Yumina followed Katsuya's decision, fought Akira, and was killed by him.

"In other words, you're also one of the reasons why Yumina died. You became a remote cause for why Akira had to kill Yumina."

In shock, Sheryl listened as Inabe continued.

"Perhaps, Akira doesn't know about this. When I talked to him the other day and mentioned you and Yumina's names to gauge his reaction, there wasn't a clear response."

Sheryl's breath grew ragged. Listening to the sound of her breath, Inabe continued.

"But he may not remain unaware in the future. There's a risk that someone who knows this will tell him. Apart from Udajima, there are Drankam affiliates, those I've ordered to investigate, and those who obtained the information by some means. Viola might have gotten wind of it as well."

Sheryl listened without being able to interject.

"I asked you before if everything was okay, didn't I? You said it was. But this time, I won't let you say everything is okay. There's a problem. However, I'll expect you to have the ability to solve this problem. That's all. Goodbye."

Without waiting for Sheryl's response, Inabe understood that she wasn't in a state to provide one and ended the call.

Sheryl stood with a paleface, silent. Because of her actions, she had indirectly caused Yumina's death. What would happen if Akira found out? As she imagined the consequences, her heart was torn apart.

In Akira's hospital room, Sheryl checked his reaction.

There was no hostility, disgust, or discomfort in Akira's eyes as he looked at her. He simply seemed genuinely happy that she had come to visit.

So, it's okay. Everything's still okay. It'll surely be okay somehow.

Repeating these words to herself, trying to maintain her composure, Sheryl smiled, masking herself with all her might.

193: Akira and Hikaru

The day after being discharged from the hospital, Akira visited Shizuka's shop to discuss acquiring new equipment. Shizuka greeted him with a smile, and seeing that he looked healthy, she nodded with a relieved and happy expression.

"It looks like you've been resting properly."

"Yes, both my hands are completely healed." Akira showed off his hands to Shizuka with a bit of pride. They were in perfect condition, to the point where it was hard to believe they had been injured. His movements were natural, and it looks like they were fully healed.

Of course, he hadn't regained the physical capabilities he had achieved through intense training to the point of becoming a superhuman. In that sense, it would still take some time for him to be fully healed, but it was enough to make both of them smile.

"After all, having real hands is great. The hospital staff were quite insistent about recommending prosthetic hands, but no matter how advanced they are, I prefer my own hands."

As Akira amusingly recounted his interactions with the medical staff, Shizuka listened with a cheerful expression.

"So, I really don't want to lose my hands again, and to avoid having to do anything reckless or dangerous, I want to get good equipment. I was hoping you could help me with that again..."

Although Akira was asking for her help, he expected Shizuka would agree as she had before. However, Shizuka showed a slightly troubled expression.

"Actually, there's something I need to tell you about that."

"Oh, what is it?" Akira asked, a bit confused. Shizuka then explained how the situation with Akira's equipment acquisition had become quite complicated.

The last time Akira procured equipment; he had made a deal with Kiryou to buy their reinforced suit at a discounted price in exchange for a contract to purchase from them again. If he breached this contract, he would have to pay a substantial penalty, but as long as he bought from Kiryou again, there would be no problem for Akira.

However, the situation had become complicated because another company appeared, willing to cover the penalty just to have Akira use their product. This was due to Akira's performance in the Nationalist Campaign. Even the Black Wolf unit had retreated from a large giant that Akira managed to defeat single-handedly. If they could advertise that their reinforced suit was what Akira used, it would be incredibly beneficial for them.

Even excellent products with a bad reputation can be avoided, while mediocre ones used to achieve great feats are endorsed and sought after. Kiryou had benefited from this effect, and naturally, other companies now wanted the next opportunity.

Shizuka continued with a sigh.

"And so, those salespeople, unable to approach you while you were hospitalized, have been coming to my shop instead. They've been eagerly trying to sell their products to me and competing with each other, making it quite a hassle."

"Oh, I'm very sorry for the trouble." Akira hastily bowed his head, but Shizuka laughed and stopped him.

"Oh, don't misunderstand. It's not that I dislike you using my shop for your equipment procurement. Quite the opposite—it's very welcome. It's just that it increases my shop's sales literally by an order of magnitude, so I plan to work hard for it."

Then, with a slightly troubled expression, she added, "But honestly, it's reached a point where I can't handle it alone. The salespeople from those large companies are something else. I'm constantly overwhelmed, and at this rate, I might end up having their decisions forced on me."

Despite having a customer with a Hunter Rank of 50, Shizuka's shop mainly catered to those with a rank around 30 at best. The salespeople she was dealing with, however, were used to dealing with high-rank Hunters who could easily purchase equipment worth several million Aurum. Against such skilled negotiators, Shizuka was at a clear disadvantage.

"Akira, what should we do?"

"What should we do?" Shizuka's somewhat amused and troubled smile was mirrored by Akira, who smiled back in a similar manner, trying to laugh off the situation. Akira's attempt to mask his anxiety with laughter was more evident.



After leaving Shizuka's shop, Akira let out a small sigh on his way home. They hadn't managed to decide on anything at the shop, and he and Shizuka had just ended up looking troubled together. As for the salespeople who would undoubtedly come again, the situation remained unchanged; he had no choice but to rely on Shizuka's efforts.

『Alpha, about the equipment, what do you really think we should do?』

『It's complicated.』

『Even for you, Alpha?』

『If it were just a matter of choosing the best option within your budget, I could make the selection, and you could pretend you chose it by instinct. But from what Shizuka said, negotiating to manipulate the interests between companies to get them to provide high-performance equipment is necessary. While it's possible for you to follow my instructions and negotiate, passing it off as coincidence or intuition would be unnatural.』

『Ah, I see.』 If they went that route, it would become evident that someone was behind Akira, giving detailed negotiation instructions. To avoid revealing Alpha's existence, they couldn't use that strategy.

『What should I do? Is there nothing I can do?』 Unable to come up with a good idea, Akira groaned.

Just then, he received a message from Kibayashi, asking to meet up for a quick chat. Thinking it wouldn't hurt to consult Kibayashi about the difficult negotiations for equipment, Akira headed to the meeting place.

Akira waited for Kibayashi in the lobby on the first floor of the Kugama Building, where the Hunter Office's reception was located, connecting the inside and outside of the protective walls. Just like the first time he visited, the place was bustling with many hunters.

Back then, Akira had been just a kid from the slums, overwhelmed and intimidated by the formidable hunters around him. But now it was different. Now Akira was the formidable one. Hunters who noticed him showed signs of confusion, mild tension, or interest. This was due to the information about the Nationalist Campaign spreading among the hunters. Some even distanced themselves hurriedly, regarding Akira with fear.

Seeing the reactions around him, Alpha laughed cheerfully.

『It seems Akira is finally being recognized.』

『...Yeah, I guess.』

Akira didn't feel happy at all about the drastic change in how others perceived him—from being underestimated and looked down upon to being feared and respected. Nonetheless, he accepted it as it was. If they thought they had no chance against him, the likelihood of being attacked would decrease.

Akira briefly wondered if anything would have changed if the administrative faction of Drankam had seen this scene earlier. He stopped thinking about it further.

As Akira stood there attracting various attention, a girl approached him from the direction of the inner side of the wall in the lobby. She wore a city employee uniform and appeared mature but not quite old enough to be considered an adult. Her confident expression suggested she understood her own competence.

The girl walked up to Akira, smiled, and bowed politely.

"You're Akira, right? Sorry to keep you waiting. I'm Hikaru from the Kugamayama City Wide Management Department. Nice to meet you today."

"...Uh? Oh, yes. Is there something you need?" Akira showed confusion at the unexpected and slightly ambiguous introduction from someone he didn't know. Hikaru, in turn, showed a hint of confusion at his reaction.

"Well, I was waiting here for someone named Kibayashi."

"Yes. I heard from Kibayashi that you'd be waiting here."

"That's right, but..."

"Great. Then, rather than standing here talking, shall we move to a more comfortable place?" Hikaru, judging that Akira understood, prompted him to follow her. As Akira was about to go along with her, he hastily stopped.

"Wait, wait, wait a moment." Akira took out his information terminal and contacted Kibayashi, who answered immediately.

"It's me. What's up?"

"What's up? You called me here, so where are you now? Someone named Hikaru showed up. Should I go with her?" Akira explained the situation, and Kibayashi responded in a cheerful voice.



"At the agreed meeting place and time, someone wearing a city uniform appeared and claimed to know me. It was a good judgment on your part to verify with me instead of just following them silently," Kibayashi said.

"What do you mean?"

"That person might have been trying to deceive you, right?" Akira instinctively glanced at Hikaru. Hikaru flinched as she was suddenly subjected to a wary gaze from a high-rank hunter.

"Oh, don't misunderstand. I'm just saying there's always that risk, so be careful."

"So, should I go with her or not?"

"That's for you to decide."

"Huh?"

"Listen closely. This Hikaru person is definitely someone I know. I can vouch for that much. But beyond that, I won't guarantee anything, no matter the facts."

"What are you trying to say... If you don't explain properly, I'm leaving."

"That's also a valid option. If there's no trustworthy person at the negotiation table and no detailed explanation, dismissing it outright isn't wrong. Though that's not always the correct approach," Kibayashi said. Akira sighed and was about to really leave when Kibayashi got to the point.

"You are undoubtedly strong. You've reached Hunter Rank 50. Even by the standards of the entire Eastern region, you've joined the ranks of high-rank hunters. But to be blunt, your negotiation skills are amateurish. If this continues, you're in for a tough time," Kibayashi

began to address Akira's significantly lower negotiation skills compared to his combat prowess.

"From now on, you'll be swarmed by people wanting to make lucrative deals with a high-rank hunter like you. I know about the mess with multiple companies wanting you to use their products for your next equipment procurement."

While Kibayashi could enjoy the chaos caused by Akira's poor negotiation skills with companies, he wouldn't enjoy seeing Akira being exploited. For both Akira's sake and his own amusement, Kibayashi wanted to improve Akira's negotiation skills.

"Before they take advantage of you, learn at least the minimum negotiation skills. That Hikaru person over there is your practice. Figure out her identity, position, ideology, feelings, competence, whether she can be trusted, and whether she should be trusted—all on your own," Kibayashi continued. Akira, though he felt it keenly, listened quietly with a difficult expression.

"As I said before, I like you. That's why I'm giving you this special opportunity. How you make use of it is up to you. Good luck, Akira," Kibayashi concluded and ended the call. Akira, lightly holding his head, looked at Hikaru, who gave him a slightly anxious smile.

They moved to the restaurant on the first floor of the Kugama Building and started explaining their respective situations.

Hikaru sighed and bowed her head.

"I'm terribly sorry. I thought you were already informed. I was told this was just a meeting to discuss future plans."

"I see. What on earth is he up to? So, Hikaru-san, what should we do?"

"Oh, you can just call me Hikaru. Please speak casually. Trust is crucial in negotiations. If a formal way of speaking makes it hard to convey one's true feelings, it will only create distrust and dissatisfaction. I also want to talk freely with you, Akira... Though I do think Kibayashi went a bit overboard," Hikaru said with a wry smile, which Akira returned.

"Got it. Then feel free to talk to me normally. It's easier for me that way, too."

"Alright. Then I'll call you Akira. Nice to meet you again."

"Yeah, nice to meet you too." Feeling like they were both being manipulated by Kibayashi, Akira relaxed and laughed with Hikaru. Hikaru saw this situation as a perfect opportunity.

For Corporate Government, building friendly relations with high-rank hunters is extremely important, both economically and for city defense. High-rank hunters wear equipment worth billions of aurums, use significant amounts of ammunition to defeat monsters that require such firepower, and retrieve relics from ruins that are so valuable and rare that the profits still outweigh the costs. The economic impact is immense, and it grows exponentially with their hunter rank. A top-tier hunter active near the frontlines can individually surpass the economic scale of a small governing corporation.

Negotiating with such high-rank hunters, earning their trust, and getting them to cooperate with the city greatly enhances one's power. In Kugamayama City, Kibayashi is a prime example of this. Kibayashi has a notorious reputation—reckless, ruthless, and relentless. He lives by the motto that hunters should live and die fast. True to his creed, he gleefully provides hunters with opportunities to live that way.

Many hunters believe that they have the necessary skills but lack the opportunities to prove themselves. They think that given the chance; they can make a dramatic breakthrough.

Many of these hunters receive such high-risk, high-reward opportunities from Kibayashi, often leading to their ruin. However, not everyone loses. Kibayashi does not offer opportunities where defeat is certain. He is not interested in seeing others' ruin; he wants to witness the desperate struggle for victory and its outcome. Some do manage to seize the slight chance of victory, and their success brings substantial profits, enough for the city to prioritize the victors over the pile of fallen hunters.

The victors invariably become high-rank hunters, and many of them move their activities eastward from Kugamayama City. Kibayashi solidifies his position through his connections with these individuals. Despite his bad reputation and various reckless actions, the city tolerates him due to his influential connections.

Hikaru is aware of this and now has a direct link to a high-rank hunter like Akira. If she can win Akira's favor, gain his trust, and become the exclusive negotiator for Kugamayama City, she can swiftly rise from a low-ranking employee to a significant position. This is a chance she cannot miss. With this determination, Hikaru smiled warmly at Akira, while internally she was more motivated than ever.

(Akira's hunter rank is 50! He played a crucial role in the nationalist suppression battle! He has connections with Inabe, a district chief! I don't know why Kibayashi gave me this opportunity, but it doesn't matter! I will definitely seize it!) Hikaru hid her internal resolve and smiled amicably at Akira.

"So, what do you think? Should we use this opportunity to practice negotiation?"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course."

"Then I'll take you up on that offer... but how should I start?"

"Didn't Kibayashi give you any advice?"

"He said I should investigate your background myself."

"Alright then. I could be a fraud trying to deceive you, or I could be a real city employee. You need to confirm that. Let's start with my introduction," Hikaru said, bowing exaggeratedly.

"Nice to meet you. I am Hikaru from Kugamayama City's Broad Area Management Department." Akira, catching on to her intent, smiled lightly and bowed in return.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Akira. ...Are you really a city employee? Any proof?"

"What? Of course, I am. Do you doubt me?"

"Because all I have is your word," Akira continued the conversation as if they were playing a light-hearted game. Akira needed to determine if Hikaru was truly a city employee, and Hikaru needed to convince Akira that she was. It was a game.

Hikaru's statement alone wasn't enough proof. In response to this natural skepticism, Hikaru placed her information terminal on the table, displayed her ID card, and pulled up her employee information from the city's database. "This is my ID card. I used it to display my employee information from the city's website. My photo is also there. Also, my uniform is a city uniform, and impersonating a city employee is heavily penalized. How's that?"

Akira nodded, satisfied, but since this was a training exercise, he decided to be deliberately skeptical.

"What if the ID and displayed page are forged, and you're just wearing the uniform confidently, thinking you won't get caught?"

"So that's how you're playing it. Then how about we go to the Hunter Office together and have them verify my identity?"

"What if you bribed a Hunter Office employee to give a fake verification?"

"Well, I think that's pretty unlikely. Bribing a Hunter Office employee would be quite difficult," Hikaru said, shaking her head to indicate the improbability of that scenario. However, Akira also shook his head.

"No, in some places, it might actually work," Akira replied and began to recount his experience when he registered as a hunter. He described a building that looked like a rundown tavern, where a very unmotivated employee handed him a hunter ID that was little more than a scrap of paper. The man's work was so sloppy that Akira's name was registered incorrectly on the hunter ID he received. Akira was certain that an employee like that could be bribed. He spoke with a certain fervor, as if venting past frustrations.

For Hikaru, who had grown up inside the protective walls, this story was a bit hard to believe. However, judging from Akira's demeanor, she decided it was true and showed a mildly astonished expression.

"Even Hunter Office employees outside the walls can be like that, huh? But, well, if that's the case, we can just do the verification at a proper place. If we go to the Hunter Office in this Kugama Building, even you'd have to trust them, right?"

"Well... yeah, I suppose so," Akira said, finally convinced. Seeing Akira agree, Hikaru smiled triumphantly. Feeling a bit smug for successfully persuading a high-rank hunter with her own skills, she added,

"If even that doesn't work, then I've got nothing left. In that case, you'd have to investigate me yourself, and I'd cooperate with your investigation. How would you go about it, Akira? What kind of investigation would satisfy you?"

"Now that you mention it, hmm..." Akira pondered, and then Alpha interjected.

『Akira, you can't have me verify it for you. This is supposed to be training for your negotiation skills, remember?』

『...I know that,』 Akira replied to Alpha but couldn't think of a good idea. He then reasoned with himself that this was also part of the negotiation and decided to change the person he was questioning.

"Hikaru, what should I do?"

"I think figuring that out for yourself is part of the training. Besides, asking me might not be the best idea. If you investigate me using a method suggested by the person you're doubting, you could be easily tricked, couldn't you?"

"...Yeah." Akira ended up having to think for himself again, furrowing his brow in concentration. However, no good ideas came to mind even after reconsidering. Seeing this, Hikaru offered some help.

"Well, Akira, you're a hunter, and realistically, it's difficult to investigate such details yourself. You'd probably end up delegating the investigation to someone you trust."

"Yeah, that's true. It would come to that."

"I've heard that high-rank hunters often have reliable investigation contacts. If you have such a connection, why not try asking them now as part of this training? Once the investigation results come in, I'll help you assess whether the information is trustworthy."

"Is that okay?"

"Yes. Normally, I'd dislike someone investigating me without my consent, but since I'm helping with your training, I don't mind. Go ahead."

"Alright, I'll give it a try," Akira said, taking out his information terminal to request an investigation from a trusted contact.

As she watched Akira, Hikaru smirked inwardly. It was clear from their short conversation that Akira lacked negotiation skills, as Kibayashi had pointed out. Given this, the person Akira was contacting likely wasn't very reliable. She planned to thoroughly point out any flaws in the investigation and teach Akira that relying on that person was inappropriate. Then, she would recommend that Akira consult her for such matters in the future. If things went well, she might use this as leverage to become Akira's negotiation representative.

Thinking about the potential position she could achieve, Hikaru smiled with anticipation. Akira finished his call and put away his information terminal.

"They said it'll take about 30 minutes."

"Oh? Let's see how much they can find out in just 30 minutes," Hikaru said, convinced it wouldn't be much. As a resident within the walls and a city employee, her personal information was heavily protected, unlike those outside the walls. She was confident that the investigation would result in a report stating that nothing could be found. Internally, she felt triumphant.

While they waited for the investigation results, Akira and Hikaru continued chatting. However, the situation changed before the results came in. Alpha informed Akira, causing his expression to tense slightly.

"Hikaru, we're being surrounded. Do you know anything about this?"

"What?" Hikaru was confused by the sudden statement. Akira pointed out the locations of the people surrounding them with his gaze. People who hadn't been there before were now in distant seats, near the restaurant entrance, and behind the glass wall. They wore suits and city uniforms, appearing ordinary, but to a trained eye, they were clearly highly skilled combatants. Akira hadn't noticed them until Alpha pointed them out, but once he did, he could distinguish them.

These individuals seemed more focused on Hikaru than Akira. Akira asked Hikaru if she knew anything about it, but she was just as clueless.

One of the men signaled the others to wait before approaching Akira with two subordinates. One stood respectfully in front of Akira while the other two flanked Hikaru, as if preventing her from escaping.

"Mr. Akira, you have a call from Inabe," the man said, just as Akira's information terminal received a call from Inabe.

"It's me."

"Akira, we received information that a con artist posing as a city employee might be trying to deceive you. What's your current situation?"

"Uh, well, I was doing a sort of training exercise..."

"Training?" Inabe's puzzled and stern voice prompted Akira to explain the situation. Meanwhile, a flustered Hikaru was being questioned by the men Inabe had sent.

They verified Hikaru's identity through her ID and personal information.

"Captain, verification complete. Hikaru Sakuya from the Regional Management Department.
It's her."

"Understood." This information was relayed to Inabe. A deep sigh from Inabe reached Akira through the terminal.

"...Akira, were you satisfied with the training outcome?"

"Uh... yes."

"Good to hear. Then, I'll take my leave." Though slightly irked by the hassle, Inabe couldn't ignore the possibility of a real scam. His voice carried a hint of sarcasm as he ended the call.

The dispatched men bowed to Akira.

"Then, we'll be taking our leave. Sorry for the disturbance."

"No, I'm the one who should apologize for the trouble," Akira responded. The others who had been waiting also left with them. The encirclement was lifted, and the situation returned to normal. However, the awkward tension between Akira and Hikaru remained.

"Um, sorry about that."

"N-no, it's fine. I suggested trying it after all."

"To explain, I didn't ask Inabe. I asked someone named Viola. I think there was some miscommunication."

"I see..." Hikaru replied with a forced smile, which was noticeably strained.



After her meeting with Akira, Hikaru stayed behind at the restaurant. Feeling a bit drained, she ordered a large parfait. The high-quality sweetness helped to alleviate the unexpected

mental fatigue she had accumulated. As her sighs turned from expressions of weariness to ones of appreciation for the delicious dessert, Hikaru finally managed to shift her mindset.

"Though there were some unexpected events, let's consider that they ended up working in our favor," she said to herself.

From Inabe's response, it was clear that he placed great importance on Akira. If there had really been a con artist present, Inabe's dispatched personnel would have thoroughly interrogated and secured the imposter. The extent of their preparations, including placing personnel outside the restaurant, showed their seriousness. This implied that Akira was valuable enough to warrant such measures. Thus, Hikaru decided that it was worthwhile to have endured the frightening experience, considering the advantageous connection she had established with Akira.

"I've made a connection with Akira. Now, I just need to find more excuses to increase our interactions..." She scooped another spoonful of parfait into her mouth, savoring its taste. Enjoying the allure of the dessert that could make one expand their stomach capacity, Hikaru relaxed, imagining a bright future.

Just then, Hikaru received a notification. Checking it, her previously cheerful expression stiffened. It was a summons from Inabe.

Hikaru, called by Inabe, sat across from him in his office, unable to hide her nervousness.

"Let me start by saying this is not about assigning any blame to you. Rest assured on that point," Inabe began.

"Y-yes."

"Kibayashi seems to have arranged a meeting between you and Akira without much explanation."

"Y-yes."

"So, how did it go?" Inabe asked, posing a deliberately vague question. Hikaru understood this was intentional and thought carefully about how to respond.

"Overall, I believe it went well," she replied cautiously.

"I see." Inabe said no more, but instead looked at Hikaru intently. The silence stretched for about ten seconds, increasing Hikaru's tension.

"That's good to hear. Actually, I was considering assigning you to be Akira's handler," Inabe finally said.

"M-me?" Hikaru was taken aback.

"Do you have any objections?"

"N-no, please leave it to me! I will do my utmost best!" Hikaru exclaimed, so delighted by the sudden opportunity that she forgot to put on a suitable smile for her superior.

"Akira has many difficult aspects to handle, but if you've already made a good impression, there should be no issues. For the sake of Kugamayama City, I expect you to fully demonstrate your capabilities."

"Yes!" Hikaru bowed deeply to Inabe before leaving the room in high spirits.

Inabe let out a small sigh. "Well, she's better than Kibayashi," he muttered. His comment did not reach Hikaru, who was practically dancing with joy in the hallway.



Akira, resting at home, received a call from Hikaru. She informed him that she had been appointed as his new contact person.

"That's how it is. I've become your liaison with Kugamayama City. Think of me as your personal contact."

"A personal contact... That's quite an exaggeration."

"Not at all. You're a Hunter with a rank of 50, Akira. You can't be treated the same as just any other Hunter."

"Is that so? It's a bit surprising. I thought Kibayashi would be eager to take on the role."

"Do you prefer Kibayashi over me?" Hikaru's mockingly disappointed voice made Akira laugh.

"No, that's not what I meant. If I had to choose between you and Kibayashi, I'd definitely prefer you over him."

"Right? I'm glad to hear that. Thanks, Akira." Deciding that the pleasantries to build rapport were sufficient, Hikaru shifted to the main topic. "So, Akira, what are your plans for Hunter activities? If you don't have anything specific in mind, I can set you up with some good assignments. Leave it to me. I've also caught the eye of Section Chief Inabe. I can leverage my connections with the city's executives to get you some top-notch assignments."

Hikaru spoke with confidence, subtly boasting about her capabilities by mentioning her influence within the city's higher-ups. Akira interpreted this as an indication that Inabe, through Hikaru, was trying to secure assignments that would help him raise his Hunter rank. However, there were reasons he couldn't readily accept her offer.

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm still waiting for my gear to arrive."

"Don't worry about that. I can help expedite the process. When do you expect it?"

"I don't really know. Things have gotten a bit complicated..."

After Akira explained the details, Hikaru confidently responded, "I understand. Leave it to me. I'll take care of it."

"Can you really handle it?" Akira, who wasn't skilled in negotiations, understood how difficult it was to coordinate between multiple companies. He asked in surprise.

"Yes. Trust me," Hikaru assured. She knew better than Akira how troublesome it could be, yet she confidently made the offer. "If you have other issues, don't hesitate to tell me. I'll help you sort them out too."

"Well, actually, I'm having some trouble with Yoshioka Heavy Industries..."

After listening to Akira's issue with Yoshioka Heavy Industries, Hikaru replied lightly, "Got it. I'll handle those negotiations simultaneously. Anything else?"

"No, that's about it. But are you sure you can handle all this so easily?"

Akira didn't doubt Hikaru's capabilities, but he found it hard to believe she could manage everything so smoothly. Hikaru, unbothered by his skeptical tone, responded confidently.

"Absolutely. It might sound boastful, but I joined the Wide-Area Management Division at a young age because of my talents. I'm not just anybody."

Akira didn't fully grasp how impressive that was but understood that Hikaru's capabilities exceeded the city's high standards. "I see... You're amazing, Hikaru. I'll leave it to you then."

"Yes, leave it to me. I'll talk to you later, Akira." With a cheerful tone, Hikaru ended the call. Akira looked at Alpha somewhat expectantly.

『Does this mean the gear issue is solved now?』

『Yes, let's consider it resolved.』 Alpha agreed. She preferred this solution over taking more forceful measures, as it allowed Akira to return to his Hunter activities sooner.

After ending the call with Akira, Hikaru let out a big breath, feeling a significant sense of accomplishment. "Alright, that went perfectly."

By resolving Akira's issues, she would gain his trust significantly. Coupled with securing valuable assignments, she could deepen their relationship even further. Despite Akira's interactions with Kibayashi, he had preferred her over Kibayashi. It was entirely possible to make Akira prioritize his relationship with her over Kibayashi. If things went well, leveraging her connection with Akira could even lead her to a high-ranking position within the city. Smiling at the thought, Hikaru felt optimistic about the future.

"Let's see, where should I start? First, I should handle his gear to secure those assignments quickly." Determined to realize her promising future, Hikaru was full of enthusiasm.

194: Conversations in the Bar

While Akira was still unconscious in the hospital, Yanagisawa ordered his subordinates to secretly remove Katsuya's body from the Kuzusuhara Street ruins. He then conducted an autopsy on Katsuya's body in a safe location. Confirming beyond doubt that the body was indeed Katsuya's and that reviving him from this state was impossible even with the technology of the old world, Yanagisawa meticulously verified these facts himself rather than delegating the task to his subordinates, finding relief when he confirmed Katsuya's death.

(...This guy was supposed to be in contract with them. With his death, their plans have gone back to square one. The delay should be significantly extended.)

Although Yanagisawa usually concealed his inner thoughts behind a frivolous smile, a slight expression of relief appeared on his face. This incident was crucial enough to lead to such complacency.

At that moment, a communication came in from Nergo. Yanagisawa, realizing his momentary lapse in focus, quickly switched his demeanor back to his usual cheerful expression.

"Hey there! It's Yanagisawa. What's up?"

"I heard that a comrade retrieved Katsuya's body. I'd like to discuss that a bit."

"That was something we kept under wraps. How did you find out?"

"We have our sources. So, what's the deal? Is Katsuya really dead?"

"Yeah, he's dead. Oh, by the way, weren't we supposed to capture Katsuya? Should we bring his body if that's okay?"

"Is his brain in a condition suitable for reuse as a bio-part?"

"Nah, it's not possible."

"Then it's not necessary." Whether intentionally rendered irreparable for reuse. Yanagisawa and Nelgo didn't dwell on this point, neither did they point it out, but simply acknowledged the shared understanding that the body was not suitable for reuse.

"I have another question for you. How do you evaluate a Hunter named Akira?"

"Well, he's from the slums and doesn't seem to be an old-world connector. I was briefed on that before and found it convincing."

"I'm not talking about that. I mean his overall evaluation, including his unexpected feat of defeating that large titan."

"His overall evaluation, huh? Well, I think he's strong. He's the one who killed Katsuya, after all."

As Yanagisawa answered, he recalled the investigation results on Akira. A child from the insignificant slums had reached Hunter Rank 50 in a short period. His astonishing rise had indeed made Yanagisawa suspect their involvement.

However, witnessing Akira fighting the large titan significantly reduced his concerns. The scenes Yanagisawa observed, obtained through data analysis from Nelia's cyborg information-gathering equipment and the Black Wolf's data gathering equipment, were partially crude. Yet, it was evident that Akira had suddenly and dramatically become stronger during the battle with the giant.

Under normal circumstances, Yanagisawa would strongly suspect their involvement based on this. However, at that time, there was a communication disruption due to Tsubaki's interference, making it impossible. In other words, it was confirmed that Akira had done it on his own.

One could say that there are those who awaken in dire situations. Conversely, there are those who cannot show their true strength unless pushed to the brink of death. Akira, with a record of surviving numerous life-threatening situations, could fit the latter category if he were that kind of person.

Furthermore, Akira killed Katsuya. And it was almost certain that Katsuya was in contract with them. It was difficult to imagine contractees killing each other. Even if the control of the contractees was lost during the communication disruption, if both Akira and Katsuya were contractees, they would have been strictly ordered not to kill each other.

Therefore, Akira's strength was his own, not with assistance from them. In other words, Akira was not their contractee. That's how Yanagisawa judged it.

"But there are plenty of Hunters stronger than him, so I'm not particularly interested in him at the moment," Yanagisawa replied, realizing that Nergo deliberately deviated from the main topic, indicating with his response that if they wanted to recruit Akira, they could do so without needing confirmation from Yanagisawa, as they did with Katsuya.

"I see. Understood."

Nergo's true intention in asking such a question was to gauge Akira's danger level based on Yanagisawa's perception. Their comrade, Zalmo, viewed Akira as highly dangerous, but how valid was that perception? Nergo sought to measure that from Yanagisawa's perception.

Divergent intentions could distort the evaluation of Akira. While Yanagisawa and Nergo had established a cooperative relationship, the limitations lay in the fact that they did not share the same objectives.

"Speaking of which, are you going to continue the infiltration into Drankam?"

"We're canceling it. Since he's dead, there's no point in continuing the infiltration. I'm officially recorded as deceased in the fight against the Nationalist supporters. I'll just withdraw."

"Well, even without your withdrawal, Drankam itself might collapse." Neither Yanagisawa nor Nergo had any interest in Drankam without Katsuya. They were indifferent to whether Akira would destroy Drankam. After ending the conversation with Nergo, Yanagisawa reconsidered Nergo and his comrades.

Nergo's group feared not death itself, but that fear did not stem from their mortality. They lived, fought, and died for the cause. It was their values to place their lives and existence under the banner of righteousness.

"It's tough."

Yanagisawa thought to himself once again, letting out a sigh of frustration as he brushed away his usual frivolous smile.

"Fear tactics like threatening with death are sufficient against those who rely on their mortality, but such threats don't work on those who laugh in the face of death for their ideals. Even if they truly die, they accept that death and continue to act unwaveringly, unshakeable in their resolve.

We've established a cooperative relationship for now. However, there's no telling how long that relationship will last. Since I and Nergo's group don't share the same objectives, it's entirely possible that we may become enemies at any moment in pursuit of our irreconcilable goals. I must remain vigilant."

But that's easier said than done.



Katsuya's death had a significant impact on Drankam.

Arabe, a friend of Shikarabe and also a Drankam executive, exuded a heavy atmosphere of exhaustion in the base's meeting room. Shikarabe, who was called there, wore an expression that conveyed his understanding.

"So, Arabe, what's the situation now?"

"Well, first off, the administrative staff are busy explaining the situation to the sponsors inside the walls."

Drankam's administrative faction had entered into several long-term contracts with the residents inside the walls, based on the premise that Katsuya would continue to rise in rank. Normally, when a major hunter dies during the contract period, the contract terms would be flexible enough to allocate replacement personnel and continue. However, this time, all of those contracts were premised on Katsuya's existence, and his death rendered them all null and void. As a result, Mizuha, who had been pushing forward with the entire plan, was overwhelmed with negotiations, including payment of breach of contract fees.

Shikarabe, upon hearing this, chuckled lightly with a hint of exasperation. "Overwhelmed, huh? I bet the admins are doing that on purpose, aren't they?"

"Yeah, probably. After all, the negotiations are taking place inside the walls. They probably want to drag it out as long as possible." Shikarabe and Arabe lightly laughed, ridiculing the administrative faction members. Then, they stopped avoiding the current situation and put on expressions of great inconvenience.

"So, what's the situation with Akira?"

"He was brought to the hospital in critical condition from the ruins and hasn't regained consciousness yet. But thanks to receiving the best treatment, there are no life-threatening conditions. They say he'll wake up soon."

"I see... That's going to be messy."

"Yeah. Even though it's the admins' fault, Drankam has made an enemy of Akira. Depending on how he reacts, Drankam could be finished."

Drankam was already in a precarious situation due to its conflict with a high-ranking hunter with deep ties to one of the city's major factions. Additionally, there was the possibility that Akira, viewing Drankam itself as an enemy, would attack in full force. In that case, it wouldn't be surprising if Akira physically wiped out the base. Shikarabe and the others were well aware of Akira's feat of defeating a giant alone during the campaign against the nationalist. Drankam's future looked bleak enough to make everyone want to tear their hair out.

Drankam remained unable to take effective action even after Akira woke up. Even if they attempted peace negotiations while Akira was hospitalized and unable to engage in military action, they couldn't even make contact due to his confinement. Even when they asked Kibayashi to mediate, he refused, deeming it too dangerous to discuss Drankam's situation with the current state of Akira. And while they stood idly by, Akira would be discharged from the hospital.

Shikarabe had no intention of opposing Akira for the sake of Drankam's survival. After all, this situation was brought about by the administrative faction. He certainly wasn't willing to risk his life to clean up their mess. However, he still had an attachment to Drankam. Otherwise, when Kurosawa left Drankam, he would have accepted his invitation and left with him. In this complex mix of emotions, Shikarabe made a decision.

"...I'll brace myself and meet with Akira. Arabe, come with me."

"...Got it. Damn, I've already retired from frontline combat, and here I am risking my life again."

"What are you talking about? Isn't that what hunters do?"

"Yeah." Shikarabe and Arabe, the two veteran hunters who had been with Drankam since its inception, laughed together. In a way, they were laughing cheerfully in the face of this unprecedentedly difficult situation in their long years of hunter work.



Akira received a direct message from Shikarabe that he wanted to meet in person. Sensing a certain seriousness in his tone, Akira decided to meet without delving too deeply into the matter. After quickly getting ready, he headed to the tavern in the pleasure district where he had been before.

The pleasure district was bustling with many hunters as usual. Akira passed by many people just like before. However, there were clear differences. There was nobody looking at children or the weak with disdain. He considered himself weak. The tendency in Akira's mind to excessively underestimate his own abilities, dragged down by the perception that he was weak in the past, no longer existed, for better or for worse.

Yumina was strong. To consider himself weak for having killed Yumina would be an insult to her. If his power had been properly, or perhaps overly, acknowledged, maybe he wouldn't have had to kill Yumina. Instead of loosening its twisted state with those thoughts, his twisted heart became even more contorted and distorted.

He had to become strong. He had survived by killing Yumina. He had to be recognized as strong. And to prevent it from happening again. Driven by his twisted desire, Akira sought further strength. These feelings leaked out as negative mental information to those around him, as Akira, an old-world connector who was extremely bad at transmitting positive mental information, was incapable of it.

As a result, the landmine known as Akira, which had been buried due to being looked down upon and underestimated, was exposed. Hunters passing by Akira made sure not to step on that visible landmine, keeping a safe distance.

Shikarabe, along with Arabe, waited for Akira at a table in the back of the tavern's second floor. Unlike Shikarabe, who had consumed a bit of alcohol while waiting, Arabe hadn't had a drop.

"Shikarabe, ease up a bit, will you?"

"I know. Hey, a little tipsy might make Akira less suspicious of us. That's why. ...Besides, whether he's coming to kill us or not, being sober or wasted won't make much difference."

Shikarabe chuckled as he said that, and Arabe returned a wry smile.

"Well, I guess you're right."

"Of course. Hey, don't drink, okay? If things go well and it turns into detailed negotiations, that's your job from there. You can't do that with a head full of alcohol, can you?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm counting on things going that way."

In a sense, Shikarabe and the others were chatting and laughing before what could be considered a decisive battle. And right on time, Akira appeared.

The moment Shikarabe saw Akira, his drunkenness vanished.

Based on the publicly available information about Akira's hunter rank and the footage circulating from the nationalist suppression battles, Shikarabe had a rough idea of Akira's strength. From there, it was objectively undeniable that Akira was an exceptionally powerful individual. And with that came anxiety.

What if, upon meeting Akira directly, he subjectively felt that Akira was unworthy of his reputation?

At that moment, he would no longer be able to trust his intuitions. He might even retire as a hunter. If he couldn't trust his intuitions with his life, he would simply meet mundane deaths in the wasteland by repeatedly making safe choices. With that in mind, Shikarabe had made a certain resolution separate from the Drankam issue and was present in this place.

And his worries turned out to be groundless. Before Shikarabe was someone who had personally defeated a large titan that even Black Wolf's unit had been forced to retreat from. A hunter capable of such a feat was undoubtedly there.

(Has my intuition finally returned?)

Relieved to have regained trust in his intuition, Shikarabe gestured for Akira to take a seat.

"Well, sit down. Would you like a drink first?"

"I'll pass on the drink. I'm not much of a drinker. And before anything else, don't offer alcohol to kids," Akira said, showing a slightly bewildered expression. Shikarabe chuckled in response.

"Alcohol is bad for the body, huh? We're hunters. It doesn't matter. We do things that are bad for our bodies, like fighting monsters in the wasteland, all the time. The negative effects of alcohol are negligible. Besides, we have healing potions," Shikarabe explained.

"I don't think that's the issue..." Akira replied, taking a seat across from Shikarabe.

"So, what's the talk about?"

"Well, let's not beat around the bush. Akira, what are your intentions regarding Drankam?"

Seeing Akira's face, which seemed to indicate he didn't quite understand the question, Shikarabe and Arabe showed surprise at his unexpected reaction.

"Oh, you know, when Katsuya and the others attacked you? For us, it was something the administrative faction did on their own, but for you, it was an attack from Drankam. So, the question is, how far are you willing to retaliate against Drankam?" Shikarabe clarified.

"Ah, I see." Akira nodded lightly, finally understanding. Then he answered with a somewhat complicated expression.

"For me, that wasn't really about Drankam, but more about Katsuya and the others. And since I've already taken care of them, I don't have any plans to do anything to Drankam for now. If they attack again, though, it's a different story," Akira explained.

Both Shikarabe and Arabe were somewhat surprised by this unexpected response. However, it was convenient for them, so they didn't point it out and continued the conversation.

"I see. Well, that wraps up the general discussion. We'll handle the details later, Arabe. Oh, I forgot to introduce him properly. This is Arabe. He's a Drankam executive who handles both internal and external negotiations," Shikarabe said, gesturing to Arabe, who deeply bowed to Akira.

"I'm Arabe. I'm here today to participate in peace negotiations with you, Akira-san."

"Peace negotiations? That's a bit grandiose, isn't it? Couldn't we just settle it with our previous conversation?" Akira asked, showing a somewhat annoyed attitude.

Arabe then went on to explain the advantages of conducting peace negotiations, despite Akira's reluctance. Within Drankam, there were many individuals, primarily from the administrative faction, who were fearful of when Akira might strike again.

While some might simply be relieved to hear about Akira's previous conversation, others might view his lenient response as suspiciously generous and plan to take advantage of it later. To prevent unnecessary trouble, it was better to go through with peace negotiations, even if it was a bit bothersome. Arabe persuaded Akira of this.

Although Akira understood the reasoning, negotiating was not his forte, so he remained hesitant. Seeing this, Shikarabe interjected.

"If doing it yourself is too much trouble, why not appoint a proxy? When negotiating with automata, didn't you ask that Kibayashi guy to be your representative?" Shikarabe suggested.

Although initially hesitant to rely on Kibayashi, Akira remembered that there were now more people who could act as proxies for negotiations.

"Wait a moment," Akira said, taking out his communication device and contacting someone he had in mind.

After hearing the situation, Hikaru gladly accepted Akira's request.

"Got it. I'll put together a proposal that makes the negotiation persuasive for peace. Leave it to me."

"Just to be clear, the goal isn't to extort them, okay?"

"I understand. Don't worry. I'll handle it properly."

Having been given the opportunity to take over negotiations that would have originally been handled by Kibayashi; Hikaru was filled with determination.

"Let's get started right away. ...Are you Arabe-sama? I'm Hikaru from the Management Department of Kugamayama City. As Akira's representative in the city, I'll be handling the peace negotiations today. Now then..." Hikaru initiated the negotiation with Drankam while talking to Akira.

Receiving a sudden communication from the City Management Department and realizing that the person on the other end was Akira's representative, Arabe hurriedly began the negotiation. Watching this, Shikarabe chuckled lightly, emptying his glass of expensive liquor.

"Akira, it's on me. Order whatever you like. If alcohol isn't your thing, how about some food? Or even women? As I mentioned before, the third floor here is a brothel. Feel free to call whoever you want and spend as much time as you like with them," Shikarabe offered, to which Akira responded with exasperation.

"That's not something you should be offering, whether it's alcohol or women, to kids."

"Fair point!" Shikarabe, now a bit drunk, laughed at Akira's response. Akira sighed softly and regained his composure.

"Well, since I'm here, I might as well take you up on that offer. I'll start with the expensive ones," Akira said.

"Go ahead. Even if you clear out the menus in this place, it's just a drop in the bucket compared to the damages you caused if we were to fight. The drink tab is on me too," Shikarabe said, pouring more expensive liquor into his glass. Akira ordered expensive dishes without worrying too much about the cost.

As they continued chatting, Shikarabe, now tipsy from the alcohol, began talking about Katsuya. Though it was a somewhat dangerous topic considering Akira's involvement, he listened while continuing to eat.

"...You see, I really hated that guy. Well, I still hate him, but not just because... Initially, I thought it was just natural to hate someone who had died, but... Even after adding more alcohol and more questions, I still can't figure out why I hated him so much..." Shikarabe continued his rambling, mixing in self-deprecation for not understanding his own feelings towards Katsuya.

"...No matter how much I think about it... I just can't understand... Sure, he was a cocky brat, but that alone isn't enough... He was annoying at times, but he tried to help his comrades in

his own way..." Shikarabe expressed his complex feelings towards Katsuya, including a sense of regret for not understanding why he hated him so much.

And as Shikarabe poured out his heart, Akira, the one who killed Katsuya, listened quietly.

By the time Shikarabe was too drunk to continue, Akira's stomach had reached its limit. The negotiations between Hikaru and Arabe didn't conclude within this short period, so they decided to disband for now.

On the way back, Akira remembered Shikarabe's words about Katsuya.

『Hey Alpha, Shikarabe was talking about Katsuya, you know. What do you think? 』

『The part about not understanding why he hated Katsuya so much? I don't particularly have any thoughts on it. 』

『Does that mean it's not unusual? 』

『Yes, that's right. 』

『...I see. 』 Alpha omitted an explanation as to why it wasn't unusual. And Akira, thinking it wasn't unusual, stopped thinking about it there.

Alpha smiled as if admonishing a child. 『Well, while there may be reasons for hating someone just because you hate them, once you start hating them just because, you can hate them endlessly. You might even forget the reason that sparked your hatred in the first place. If you don't like that, Akira, it's best to avoid hating something without good reason. It's important not to create unnecessary enemies. 』

Akira smiled back. 『...You're right. I'll be careful. 』

It might seem easy to just eliminate all enemies, but he had learned that it wasn't the solution. Even though it might be naive, Akira affirmed that he wouldn't create enemies unnecessarily to avoid repeating past mistakes. Alpha smiled happily. With this conversation, maybe there was a slightly lower chance that Akira would spread indiscriminate hostility and increase unnecessary enemies when his connection with Alpha was severed. That's what she thought as she smiled.



Upon receiving word from Hikaru that the equipment procurement negotiations had been finalized, Akira arranged to pick up his new gear at Shizuka's shop. Arriving at the shop a little before the scheduled time, Akira was greeted by many with smiles. First was Hikaru, looking pleased as she directed a smile towards Akira. Shizuka welcomed Akira with her usual smile. Elena and Sara also smiled happily together.

Maebashi from the Kiryou division and Someya from TOSON, as representatives of the winning party in the negotiation, wore appropriate smiles as corporate salespeople,

directing their attention to a potential goldmine in a Hunter Rank 50 client. The accompanying staff also maintained proper posture to not offend their high-ranking client.

Then, Shizuka addressed Akira in her usual manner, despite the corporate representatives' respectful attitude.

"Akira, welcome. Come over here."

"Yes."

Akira smiled happily in response, as usual. While donning his new equipment in the shop's warehouse, Akira listened to Maebashi and the others explain the gear.

Akira's new equipment was based on the CA31R reinforced suit and the LEO composite gun as before. However, its overall performance had been greatly enhanced.

The CA31R reinforced suit was originally a multipurpose suit designed for use with various extension parts. However, due to budget constraints last time, expensive extension parts were not used much. That was different this time. By incorporating powerful extension parts to the fullest extent, its performance had been significantly boosted. Similar modifications had been made to the LEO composite gun.

With equipment this powerful, using low-performance items such as magazines and energy packs, like the ones Akira had been using, would not fully bring out its capabilities. However, this problem was resolved by Akira reaching Hunter Rank 50. Purchasing restrictions for high-ranking hunters had been lifted.

Although Akira had already received subsidies for ammunition purchases equivalent to Hunter Rank 50, it did not lift purchase restrictions based on rank. From here on, the quality itself would greatly improve.

There were small-sized energy packs with capacities exceeding large energy tanks that could be held with one hand. The expanded magazine for C-bullets (charge bullets), which increased both total ammunition and maximum power, had also been enhanced. In addition, consumables supporting Akira's combat capabilities, such as highly effective healing potions, had been upgraded to be suitable for high-ranking hunters.

Just with this, Akira had become significantly stronger. However, the highlight of the new equipment was the AF laser cannon, an optional part for the CA31R reinforced suit.

Strictly speaking, it doesn't actually shoot lasers. It's more like when excessively charged C-bullets (charge bullets) collapse and are ejected, creating a similar visual effect to a laser. Bullets are required for its use.

However, this AF laser cannon, despite being restricted for purchase to those below Hunter Rank 50, boasts an extraordinary level of power. Normally, it's folded into a small size on the back of the reinforced suit and automatically transforms into a cannon when used. Its control is done through the reinforced suit.

After hearing this explanation, Akira decided to test the activation of the AF laser cannon. The cannon, which was folded on his back in a small state, transformed and assembled into a large cannon, passing over Akira's right shoulder and protruding forward.

"Wow, that looks amazing. With this, can I easily defeat those giants?"

Asked by Akira with a light-hearted tone, Maebashi, who replied, chosen his words carefully as a salesperson for the machinery division.

"It was Akira-sama who defeated those giants even without this AF laser cannon. With this, it should be even easier to defeat them than before."

If he were to casually say, "Yes, you can," it would be taken as a promise. Even Maebashi couldn't bring himself to say something like, "With this AF laser cannon, anyone can easily defeat those giants," even as part of a sales pitch. By limiting the user to Akira and rephrasing "easier than before" instead of just saying "it will be easy," he avoided giving a clear answer. Without realizing that no precise answer had been given, Akira nodded happily in satisfaction. And because he was satisfied, he beckoned Hikaru with a slightly troubled expression and asked her softly.

"Hikaru... Is it really okay to get this for free?"

The CA31R reinforced suit, configured with the AF laser cannon, and two heavily modified LEO composite guns would easily exceed 5 billion Aurums if bought normally. Akira had obtained these items virtually free of charge through Hikaru's negotiation. It seemed too good to be true, and Akira felt the need to confirm with Hikaru again.

Hikaru answered proudly, "It's fine. Didn't I explain how this negotiation was achieved?"

"Well, yeah... But..."

Strictly speaking, these items were lent to Akira. However, there was no obligation to return them, and there was no need to compensate if they were damaged. The cost of these items would be borne by the company from which Akira would purchase his next reinforced suit.

Rather than prolonging negotiations and risking Akira's displeasure by delaying his equipment procurement, it was better to quickly conclude the contract between Akira and the company to buy the reinforced suit from Kiryou division again and hasten the opportunity for the next replacement. Hikaru had convinced companies other than the Kiryou division with such arguments.

Furthermore, she promised other companies that she would mediate requests to encourage the replacement of reinforced suits by Akira and assured the Kiryou division that she would mediate requests that would serve as good publicity.

In addition, she promised Akira that she would mediate requests for powerful equipment that would require such strong equipment.

For the benefit of everyone, whether it was for the Kiryou division, other companies, or Akira himself, who would need to replace his high-performance reinforced suit in a short period of time, Hikaru had wrapped up the negotiations.

"If you feel uneasy about receiving expensive items for free, then please use them to perform greatly and advertise their performance. Akira, you can do that, right?"

Seeing Hikaru say this with a cheerful smile, Akira stopped worrying unnecessarily and smiled back.

"Got it. Then, I'll leave it to you to arrange requests that can be advertised like that."

"Sure thing."

As Akira shifted his focus, he looked at Elena and the others and suddenly wondered.

"By the way... Elena-san, are you guys not going to upgrade your equipment?"

The contract this time included equipment for Elena and the others, and they were here today for that reason. At least, that's what Akira thought.

But Elena shook her head.

"Today, it's work. We've been hired as escorts by her."

"Escort? Hikaru, are you going somewhere with Elena-san and the others?"

Asked by Akira with a puzzled expression, Hikaru returned the same expression.

"Where? Right here. We're going outside the defensive wall. Don't you think we need escorts?"

"I-I see."

In Hikaru's sense, this place was dangerous enough to require an escort. Akira understood that and felt a little intimidated by how different their senses were.

195: Culling request

Four large, armored vehicles are advancing through the eastern wilderness of Kugamayama City. Akira was on the roof of the lead vehicle, gazing out at the wasteland with Elena and the others.

"Elena-san, we've been driving for quite a while now, but the scenery doesn't seem to change much, does it?"

"Although we've traveled quite far east, it's still insignificant compared to the vastness of the eastern region. The noticeable difference will be seen from around the city of Zegelt to the east. Apparently, you can see scenes where islands float in the sky around there."

"Islands in the sky. Wow."

Akira nodded lightly, intrigued. Then Sarah interjected with a cautionary tone.

"Akira, even if the scenery doesn't change much, the strength of the monsters inhabiting this area is on a completely different level from around Kugamayama City. So, don't let your guard down."

"Yes, of course."

Akira replied firmly. Seeing Akira like this, Sarah continued teasingly.

"You're reliable. As expected of a Hunter Rank 50 Hunter, right?"

"Ah, yeah."

Akira didn't want to say something like "Oh no, I still have a long way to go," so he answered with a bit of embarrassment.

Then, Elena smiled meaningfully at Akira.

"It seems like you've finally stopped with the false modesty, Akira. That's a good thing. You don't need to use honorifics either, you know? After all, today, you're our employer."

"Uh, well, that's a bit..."

Seeing Akira trying to laugh it off, Elena and the others laughed joyfully.

At that moment, instructions came from Kurosawa to return to the vehicle. Akira hurriedly ushered Elena and the others back into the vehicle.

Inside the vehicle were Kurosawa, Shikarabe, and Erio. Hikaru was also connected via communication. Once everyone had returned and assembled, Kurosawa began speaking.

"We're approaching the planned operation area. Let's review the operation details here. Our objective is to thin out the monsters in the designated area. However, please understand that this is not a normal culling request, but a request related to major distribution."

Major distribution refers to the large-scale distribution support regularly conducted by the Corporate Union.

The distribution network connecting the various cities scattered throughout the eastern region is the lifeline of the eastern economy. However, maintaining this distribution network in the wasteland where monsters roam requires tremendous effort. Many transportation companies have gone bankrupt due to high maintenance costs, and losing the distribution routes of bankrupt companies can lead to interruptions in the distribution network, further worsening the situation.

So, the Corporate Union regularly invests huge sums of money to stimulate distribution. This is also to further promote the development of the eastern economy by mixing people, goods, and money in the eastern region.

"If it were a normal culling request, we could patrol for a while and call it a day when we no longer spot any monsters. But this time, it's different. We need to eradicate monsters on a large scale from a wide area. During the major distribution period, inter-city transport vehicles are also bustling around. So, that level of effort is necessary."

Inter-city transport vehicles refer to the large transport vehicles, almost as massive as tankers, mainly responsible for long-distance, large-scale goods transportation. They support the logistics of the eastern region with their enormous capacity for transportation.

When such huge objects move through the wasteland, they naturally strongly stimulate the monsters in the area. They attract large herds from the distant horizon, even dragging out individuals that usually lurk inside ruins.

Ordinary transport vehicles would stand no chance if caught in these herds. The areas around cities near the routes of inter-city transport vehicles would also be adversely affected. Therefore, it was necessary to cull out the monsters massively beforehand to minimize the impact when inter-city transport vehicles passed through.

Of course, this also serves the purpose of maintaining the distribution network. By culling out the monsters to that extent, normal transportation can be safely carried out until the population returns to normal.

"The requester for this mission is Kugamayama City, but our work area is usually handled by Milcakewa City. Well, even so, it's a relatively low-difficulty area within their jurisdiction."

Hunters based in Kugamayama City, being pointed out that they've come to a different area than usual, naturally become more alert.

"Milcakewa City is where hunters with ranks around 40 to 60 usually operate. In Kugamayama City, a rank of 40 is already considered elite. So, the top tier here is the bottom tier over there. Judge the strength of the monsters in the operational area based on that."

While Akira and the others listened normally, Erio's complexion worsened slightly. Kurosawa continued the conversation without paying much attention.

"Now, Hikaru-san, who is the requester for this mission, expects us to achieve significant results in such a place. But I didn't sign up for that. I'll conduct operations safely. That's the contract I took command under. There will be no complaints."

Hikaru's smile in the display screen slightly twisted. But indeed, that was the contract, so no objections were raised.

It was Hikaru who assigned Akira the culling request related to major distribution. However, realizing that sending Akira alone to the site would be too risky, Hikaru decided to organize a unit with Akira as the leader.

Elena and the others were invited because of their close relationship with Akira. Shikarabe and the others participated as part of the reconciliation between Drankam and Akira. Erio and the others joined the unit as part of a practical test of the comprehensive support system of the Kiryou group.

"I'm not going to have any deaths or serious injuries. I absolutely won't push it. No matter what the situation, if I say retreat, we retreat. Everyone, follow my orders. Understood?" Kurosawa said, looking at everyone once. Silent agreement came from everyone, so he continued.

"Well, that being said, it's still a lucrative request. I intend to earn as much as possible within the bounds of safety. Akira is our main force, but if he can scatter the monsters, my judgment criteria for safety will change accordingly. The longer Akira shines, the longer our retreat is delayed. Akira, I'm counting on you there, alright?"

"Yeah, got it."

"Alright. The monsters around here may be different from those around Kugamayama City, but you can take them down easily without worrying about remaining ammunition. We've

got enough ammo, and the requester covers the cost. So, don't be stingy and fire away freely," Kurosawa concluded.

"Just to make it clear, don't leave everything to Akira. Everyone, support him properly. Let's cooperate and return safely and efficiently. That's all. Everyone, back to your own vehicles," Kurosawa instructed, and everyone except Akira moved to other vehicles. Hikaru also disconnected the communication.

"So, Akira," Sarah calls out, "Kurosawa also said it, but you mustn't push yourself too hard, okay? If you feel it's dangerous, retreat immediately. Got it?"

"Yes. If I think it's dangerous, I'll run right away, so please cover me when that happens."

"Leave it to us." Sarah nodded with satisfaction along with Elena at Akira's response, without getting too cocky and just answering that he would run away honestly.

Then, from the moving vehicle, the two of them effortlessly jumped to another vehicle.

Kurosawa and Shikarabe had already returned to their own vehicles. The only one left was Elro. Seeing this, Akira speaks up.

"Erio. Should we stop for now?"

"N-No, I'm fine." Erio decisively jumped out of the car. With the comprehensive support system, he was able to safely jump to their own vehicle.

With Akira left alone in the vehicle, Alpha directs a relaxed smile at him.

『Don't worry. I'm here with you. I can easily scatter the monsters around here.』

『That's right. I appreciate it. But I'd be even happier if you could guarantee that things won't get dangerous.』

There have been various dangerous situations even when not disconnected from Alpha, such as being attacked by a horde of monsters or being swallowed by an over synthesized snake. Alpha turns her gaze toward Akira with meaningful eyes, hinting at those intentions, then gently looks away.

『Well, you know, I don't have precognitive abilities either.』

『Exactly. Let's stay vigilant.』

The line between composure and complacency is blurred. Composure is welcome but turning it into complacency due to negligence is meaningless. Akira tightens his resolve.



One of the four large, armored vehicles was assigned to Erio and other members of the Sheryl Family. During the journey, the armed children of the gang were passing the time with various chats to ease their tension.

"Hey, isn't this area too dangerous for hunters from Kugamayama City to even approach because the monsters are too strong? Are we going to be okay?"

"We'll be fine. Akira is our main force, and we've got others with hunter ranks over 40 with us. Plus, the leading hunter is known to prioritize safety. We're basically just here to make up the numbers. All we have to do is shoot the enemies from a distance. It's an easy job."

"...Right, that's true, isn't it?"

"Yeah, we'll be fine." As they exchanged positive comments to alleviate their anxiety and maintain an optimistic view, another topic surfaced.

"By the way, did you hear? There was that guy Katsuya in Drankam, right? Apparently, he's dead."

"No way? He's dead? Wow, he seemed like a big deal."

"Yeah, I've heard about it. But you probably shouldn't dig into that story too much."

"Why not?"

"Because I heard Akira killed him."

"No way."

"Yeah. I don't know the details, but it seems he went against Akira. But that's not really important. You remember Yumina, right? She was pretty close to Akira."

"Yeah, I remember. The girl who was so close to Akira that the boss would give her scary looks."

"Well, I heard that when Akira killed Katsuya, he also killed Yumina."

"No way!? Aren't they close to each other?"

"No matter how close they were, he didn't show any mercy once they were on opposite sides."

"That's scary. But remember, when Zebra betrayed him, Akira killed everyone in Yazan's gang all by himself. He doesn't hesitate to kill."

"Even so, Akira probably doesn't like hearing stories about killing close acquaintances. It's best not to talk about it much."

"Yeah, I don't want to die. Let's keep quiet." While Akira was more terrifying than reassuring, as long as they didn't become his enemies, they figured they'd be safe. Probably. Sharing this thought, the children all nodded in agreement.

At that moment, Erio returned.

"Erio, how was it?"

"The sense of being out of place was overwhelming... I get that I'm supposed to attend the meetings because I'm the captain, but still."

With a slightly exhausted look, Erio answered, and the children one after another offered him comfort.

"It's all good. You're leading us. There's no way you're out of place."

"Exactly. We can easily take down any washed-up hunter around here. And among us, Erio, you're the strongest. Have more confidence."

"If you're no good, then we're all no good. Akira's just in a league of his own, right? Don't worry about it." Feeling something warm from his comrades' encouraging attitudes, Erio was moved.

"You guys..."

None of Erio's comrades were lying. If Erio were to falter, one of them would have to take his place and accompany Akira. That was something they wanted to avoid at all costs. With that in mind, they genuinely praised Erio's efforts.



Akira was once again on the roof of the vehicle. Holding a pair of LEO composite rifles in his hands, he took his position, waiting for the operation to commence. The other vehicles maintained a considerable distance from Akira. Designed for its occupants to fight rather than rely solely on onboard weaponry, each large armored vehicle had its personnel positioned on the roof or on footrests formed by the transformed walls, just like Akira.

Then, a communication came through from Kurosawa to Akira.

"Akira, we're about to start. Are you ready?"

"Anytime. Start it up."

"Alright. Activating the enemy decoy on vehicle A! The operation starts now!" With Kurosawa's signal, a bizarre sound and vibration emanated from inside the A vehicle that

Akira was on. The extremely powerful enemy decoy mounted on the vehicle had been activated.

Enemy decoy, which lure monsters, are useful both during escapes and engagements when used correctly and are commonly sold to many hunters. However, decoys with a certain level of performance, those with extremely wide effective ranges and powerful monster luring capabilities, are restricted in both purchase and use due to the risk of being used by nationalist terrorists near urban areas.

The enemy decoy mounted on vehicle A was so powerful that its use required permission from the Regulatory Union. Strict usage procedures were in place, where cities would obtain permission from the Union and lend the decoy to hunters who took on major distribution-related requests. Of course, Kurosawa did not start at maximum output. However, even at minimum output, its strength far exceeded that of commercially available decoys. The effects were immediate.

Monsters began to emerge one after another from the ruins in Akira's line of sight. Resembling multi-legged tanks modeled after crabs, shrimp, and hermit crabs, these entities, about ten meters in length, appeared as both biological and mechanical. They sprouted cannons, machine guns, and missile pods on their hard shells and rushed out from the ruins.

Akira aimed his LEO composite rifles at the monsters.

『Hmm. They look tough. Just as Sara said, the monsters are on a completely different level even though the scenery looks similar.』 Alpha, standing beside Akira as usual, smiled, showcasing her power.

『Akira, how much support do you need from me? If they look that strong, it might be best not to push yourself.』 Alpha was urging Akira to let her support him to the fullest, to

remind him of her power after he had managed most of the Nationalist Suppression Battle without her help.

『Right. Well, I'd like to say 'go all out,' but can I make a request?』

『Of course. What is it?』

『Support me in a way that makes it seem like I'm strong, not that the monsters are weak. And also, make it beneficial for my training.』

『Got it.』 Akira, thinking he had made a complicated request, was slightly surprised by Alpha's easy acceptance.

『You agreed pretty quickly.』 Alpha smiled confidently.

『Of course. It's easy.』 This made Akira realize once again what kind of being Alpha was. Switching his mindset, he returned her smile.

『I see. Well then, I'm counting on you. Let's do this!』

『Yes. Let's begin!』 Akira had already started manipulating his perception of time. What would have taken several seconds in conversation was handled in an instant through telepathy. He aimed at his targets and pulled the triggers of both rifles. A barrage of C-bullets (Charge Bullets) was fired from the twin LEO composite rifles.

The energy packs attached to the guns were of an extraordinarily high capacity, beyond what hunters below rank 50 could even purchase. The bullets, supplied with massive amounts of energy from these packs, pierced through the atmosphere, breaking through the range and power reduction effects caused by the colorless mist faintly present in the air. The bullets flew straight, cutting through the air to hit their targets.

The monsters, equipped with armor harder than steel, which would deflect ordinary armor-piercing rounds without a scratch, saw their armaments destroyed upon impact. Cannons, machine guns, missile pods, laser cannons, and similar biological mechanisms were all systematically destroyed in order of their threat level, calculated by Alpha. Despite this, the monsters were not yet neutralized. Crustaceans with machine guns instead of claws advanced at surprising speeds despite losing their weapons. Other creatures, using their multiple legs, wheels, or tracks, or hovering slightly off the ground, charged forward. Their powerful and massive bodies could overturn large vehicles and demolish buildings.

However, having lost their long-range attack capabilities, their threat level had significantly decreased. It was now easier to overpower them with firepower before they could get close. Akira maneuvered the vehicle around the outskirts of the ruins, continuing to target the monsters' long-range weaponry while keeping the enemy attractor's direction fixed towards the ruins, ensuring that the emerging monsters first targeted him.

This strategy meant Akira was chased by a swarm of monsters attempting to ram him while also dealing with newly appearing creatures. He dashed across the vehicle's roof, continuously firing both guns. He relied on his own agility to dodge machine gun fire, while trusting the heavy armor of the large armored vehicle to withstand the impact. However, if the vehicle were to be hit by cannons or missiles, it could flip over and be swallowed by the following swarm, so he prioritized destroying the enemy's armaments.

He postponed dealing with projectiles that wouldn't directly hit the vehicle, resulting in shells and missiles whizzing past him on the roof. Even without a direct hit, the sheer force of the passing projectiles could blow a person away or even tear them apart, but Akira's enhanced suit's ground adhesion feature kept him anchored to the vehicle. The shockwaves created by high-speed projectiles were also absorbed by the force field armor of his suit, leaving him unharmed except for the energy consumption.

Dodging, evading, shooting down projectiles, and continuously firing, Akira read the enemy's trajectories to avoid them, maintaining a relentless barrage. Even with guns boasting a firing rate of tens of thousands of rounds per minute, they would be useless on the battlefield without a sufficient supply of ammunition. Even with an abundance of bullets, they would quickly run out, reducing the guns to mere bludgeons.

But Akira had resolved this issue with a mysteriously expansive ammunition magazine. The number of bullets fired so far would have already overflowed a standard magazine, yet the rate of fire did not decrease. Moreover, each shot was far more powerful than ordinary bullets. With this power, Akira single-handedly scattered the swarm of powerful monsters, showcasing the combat capabilities of a high-ranking hunter.

However, this region was intended for high-ranking hunters to cull monsters. It wasn't easy for Akira to annihilate them all on his own. Monsters appeared to obstruct the vehicle's movement, requiring complete destruction rather than just neutralizing their long-range attacks. This delayed the handling of other monsters, mainly those in the trailing swarm. If this continued, eventually they would catch up and ram the vehicle.

But that didn't happen. Just as Akira glanced at the swarm, they were suddenly subjected to a fierce barrage from the side. It was support fire from the other vehicles. Powerful bullets pierced thick armor, destroying the internal biological mechanisms upon impact. The monsters whose shells were protected by biological force field armor disintegrated as the force field collapsed upon their death, causing subsequent bullets to blow them to pieces.

Akira glanced at the source of the gunfire. Sara, noticing Akira looking at her, smiled confidently at him. Akira smiled back and returned his focus to the ongoing battle.

The other vehicles, running parallel but maintaining a considerable distance from the A vehicle, positioned themselves to target the monsters chasing Akira from the side.

Sara, alongside Elena, continued to fire at the monsters from the roof of vehicle C. The immense gun in her hands, larger than she was, blasted their targets with expected, devastating power. Laughing confidently, she kept shooting.

"Great firepower! This way, we won't be a burden to Akira!"

"Exactly! Akira invited us along, after all! Let's show him what we can do!" Elena, as the team negotiator, was fully aware that their invitation was not solely due to their skills but also because they were close to Akira. This was a strategic move by Hikaru to gain Akira's trust.

Even so, Akira had been genuinely pleased with their company. Hence, they were determined to give their best. Elena had negotiated with Hikaru to secure powerful armaments for this mission.

Their efforts paid off as the procured weapons were highly effective against the formidable monsters of the Milcakewa region. Fueled by this success, Elena and Sara fought fiercely.

"Sara! This isn't enough to look like reliable seniors to Akira!"

"I know! This is our chance to shine as the firepower team! We need to work hard so Akira thinks it was worth bringing us along!"

The two laughed and continued to fight with all their might, aiming to prove their worth to Akira. Their relentless efforts left a trail of monster corpses scattered across the wasteland, testament to their contribution.

In vehicle D, Shikarabe fought alongside his colleagues Parga and Yamanobe. The equipment lent to them by Drankam for this operation significantly enhanced the abilities of the hunters, who were around rank 40.

"This gear is excellent. It's worth every bit of its price," Shikarabe muttered, prompting Parga to chime in with a laugh.

"Of course it is. This stuff is typically used by hunters around rank 50. We can't exactly laugh at the kids who got cocky with their loaner gear."

Shikarabe retorted with a grin, "What are you talking about? I never had an issue with the equipment loans themselves. The problem was with the kids getting overly cocky."

"It's all about how you frame it. Still, it's nice to see us benefiting now," Parga remarked. While enjoying the benefits of Drankam's loaned equipment, they chatted amidst the battle.

The decline of the Drankam administration faction had significantly impacted various Drankam policies, including the expansion of loaner gear for high-ranking hunters. Previously, the focus was mainly on equipping young, less experienced hunters. Now, however, they were adding more gear for the veterans.

However, such high-performance gear was costly, beyond Drankam's usual budget. Even Mizuhara, who had advocated for the young hunters, had to negotiate extensively with the regional authorities and incorporate system tests to secure these items. Simply changing Drankam's policy wasn't enough to afford such expensive equipment.

The funding came from the bounty Drankam earned from the suppression of the nationalist uprising, totaling around 20 billion aurum. Although the losses, including Katsuya's death, meant the operation was a financial disaster, the bounty still represented a substantial sum. This significant reward was also due to the recognition of the defeat of the nationalist leader and the considerations of Udagima, who felt responsible for Katsuya's death.

The large armored vehicles used in this operation were also purchased with these funds. Participating in Akira's mission with this equipment was a result of peace negotiations between Drankam and Akira. This could be seen as using the money from Udajima for Akira's benefit, solidifying Drankam's new stance.

This funding thus also served as severance money from Udajima. Drankam distanced themselves from the Udajima faction and aligned with the Inabe faction, orchestrated by Hikaru.

Under Drankam's new leadership, veterans would initially hold sway. However, Shikarabe and his team, reflecting on Katsuya's death and their inability to prevent the young hunters' reckless behavior, did not intend to neglect the younger hunters.

They aimed to operate Drankam for the benefit of all its hunters, old and young alike, prioritizing the collective good over factional interests. This was their vision for Drankam's future.

Parga, eyeing the individual who had sparked these changes, commented, "When we hired him for the bounty hunt, his rank was about 20, right? Now he's at 50. Incredible. Those who make it to the frontline are a different breed."

Yamanobe laughed lightly, yeah. "I once said he'd self-destruct from killing too much, but instead, he's become even stronger, imposing his will. Heard he's got a bounty on his head from the city's officials? Killed a bunch of people, including Katsuya."

"Yeah, I know. Supposedly killed some investigation bureau personnel too, but the city covered it up. Considering the potential fallout from trying to capture Akira, they decided to bury it. Scary stuff."

With that, Parga turned to Shikarabe.

"Shikarabe, did you realize what kind of guy he was? When you hired him for the Tankrantula battle, you explained to us that he was a multimillion hunter. But you decided to hire him based on your intuition, didn't you?" Parga asked.

"Who knows," Shikarabe replied with a smile, avoiding a direct answer. In truth, he had hired Akira to confirm his intuition. He then changed the subject, "Parga, Yamanobe, let's cut the chatter. This mission is also about reconciling with Akira and Drankam. If we don't work hard, it could jeopardize the reconciliation."

"Yeah, yeah," Parga responded.

"Got it," Yamanobe added.

Ending their chat, Shikarabe and his team unleashed a relentless barrage of fire on the monsters to secure results that would solidify the reconciliation.

In vehicle B, Erio and his team fought desperately. They shot at monsters from behind makeshift barriers on the roof and through the side openings of the armored vehicle. The comprehensive support system provided precise assistance, targeting high-threat monsters, and ensuring the team fought safely and efficiently.

Erio and his team were equipped with more powerful gear from the Kiryou Corporation. While not as formidable as the equipment used by Elena or Shikarabe's teams, it was still high-performance gear suitable for their unit.

This extensive support was partly due to Kiryou Corporation's need to address a serious issue: a single hunter had defeated their comprehensive support system team. This incident could have severely damaged the system's reputation. The hunter's extraordinary abilities, including defeating a giant that even the Black Wolf squad retreated from, and wearing

Kiryou's enhanced suit, provided a solution. They decided to have their support system team fight alongside this hunter to restore their reputation.

Negotiations with Hikaru arranged this setup. Essentially, Kiryou Corporation provided over 5 billion aurum worth of equipment for free, ensuring Akira didn't choose another company's suit and affirming the performance of the comprehensive support system.

Erio and his team knew none of these details but were promised substantial rewards from Kiryou Corporation based on their performance. Sheryl also conveyed the corporation's high expectations for their success. Rising from being mere children in the slums to receiving corporate recognition and the lure of significant rewards, Erio's team eagerly participated in the operation.

Their initial excitement dwindled when they entered the wasteland. Seeing the colossal monsters charge at them, their excitement vanished entirely, replaced by sheer determination. Erio shouted to his panicked comrades, "Shoot! Even if you close your eyes, just aim the gun! The support system will handle the targeting!"

They fought back as best as they could, though the monsters also fired back. Despite Akira suppressing the monsters' long-range attacks, he couldn't handle every single one instantly. The sound of bullets hitting the vehicle and the explosions of nearby shells shook the children, eliciting screams.

"That was close!" one of them exclaimed.

"We're fine as long as it doesn't hit us!"

"But what if it does?"

"This vehicle can take a hit or two! Stop complaining and shoot! If we don't take them down, they'll keep shooting at us!" Erio yelled, encouraging his comrades despite his own fears.

The comprehensive support system effectively prevented the children from becoming paralyzed by fear. Even if they tried to cower, the enhanced suits made them aim their guns and pull the triggers, ensuring they kept firing. Those who were momentarily stunned by fear returned to their senses as their bodies automatically responded, and they resumed shooting.

A giant crustacean monster fell, its limbs torn off, as powerful bullets riddled its shell, spilling its body fluids across the wasteland.

"We did it! We took it down!" one of the children shouted.

"Keep it up! Another one's coming! Don't let it get close!" Erio urged. Although they had taken down an exceptionally strong monster, it was just one among many. It was too soon to feel relieved.

Nevertheless, the successful kill slightly reduced their fear and anxiety, instilling a bit of confidence. The battle continued, and with each defeated monster, their terror diminished. Eventually, the screams inside the vehicle ceased, and Erio's team gained some composure.

"...Looks like we can manage somehow," Erio remarked, smiling at his teammates.

"See? I told you we'd be okay. Akira wouldn't have brought us if we were useless. We'd just be in the way otherwise," he said, and the kids nodded, their laughter slightly exaggerated.

"Yeah, you're right!"

Though they couldn't fully believe Erio's words, it was enough to lift their spirits and push away their pessimism.

"Alright! Let's do this! Let's show them what we can do!"

"Yeah! Let's earn big!"

Seeing his comrades fired up, Erio raised his voice, "Yeah! Let's do it! Let's show them that we can handle this!"

With their morale forcibly restored to its pre-wasteland level, Erio and his team continued to fight with all their might.

196: An unexpected situation

Akira and his team were culling monsters in one of the countless nameless ruins scattered throughout the eastern region. This ruin was neither vast enough nor distinct enough to warrant an individual name. When someone needed to refer to it, they used a combination of the area name and coordinates or a temporary name, reflecting its mundane nature.

For hunters, ruins without individual names were generally considered worthless and unprofitable. If a ruin were profitable, it would have a widely recognized name, signifying its value and frequented status among hunters.

The ruin targeted for the cull was teeming with monsters. However, these monsters rarely ventured outside the ruin, posing minimal threat unless approached. By ensuring transport routes were kept a safe distance from the ruins, attacks could be avoided, leading to the ruin's neglect.

Due to this neglect, the monsters within the ruin had proliferated to the maximum capacity the environment could sustain. Ordinarily, this wouldn't be a problem since the monsters stayed inside. However, with the advent of large-scale transport vehicles passing through the area at high speed, even the monsters that usually remained inside were drawn out, spilling into the wasteland, and disrupting regional logistics.

To prevent this, it was necessary to conduct a large-scale cull, using powerful enemy decoy to draw out and eliminate the monsters deep within the ruins.

An hour had passed since Akira and his team began the cull. Akira, Elena's team, Shikarabe's team, and Erio's team had all been relentlessly battling monsters without rest. Erio and his team watched Akira fight alone at the forefront through the zoom function of their data gathering devices, feeling both awe and envy.

"Man, Akira is really something," one of them remarked.

"Yeah, look at him. He's smiling. He's handling that many monsters without breaking a sweat. How is he that strong?" another added.

"...It's reassuring to have someone that strong backing us, but if we piss him off, he could obliterate us with that strength. No wonder the boss is so desperate," one more noted, acknowledging the mixture of admiration and fear they felt towards Akira.

From Erio's perspective, Akira seemed to be fighting with ease, and indeed, he displayed remarkable prowess. However, Akira himself was fighting desperately. He fired countless bullets at numerous targets, barely pausing to rest. Even with his extended magazines holding an extraordinary number of bullets, his high-rate-of-fire gun quickly ran out of ammo. Moreover, enhancing the power of C-bullets (Charge Bullets) consumed a vast amount of energy, rapidly depleting his energy packs.

Akira had no time to manually reload empty magazines and energy packs. Fortunately, this wasn't a problem. Empty magazines and energy packs were automatically ejected from his LEO compound rifle, and new ones were launched from his vehicle-mounted dispenser. Akira swung his gun towards them, and the new magazines and packs were seamlessly loaded into the weapon.

With his gun fully reloaded, Akira took aim at his targets again. The bullets tore through the crustacean-like armor and bio-explosives of the monsters' weapons. Destroyed missile pods spilled their mini-missiles, which scattered, exploded, and obliterated nearby

monsters along with their host. This precise shooting, targeting the most effective spots, ensured maximum efficiency in his attacks.

However, Akira grimaced inwardly.

『Huh!? That much!? It was off by two meters!?』

Akira's expanded vision displayed the trajectory of his previous shot, indicating where it would have landed without Alpha's support, and the discrepancy from the actual impact point.

Disappointed by his performance, Alpha cautioned him. 『Akira. Your concentration is slipping. Even if it's training, you can't afford to lose focus. Be careful.』

Although this was a real battle, it also served as training for Akira. The monsters weren't weak; Akira was strong. He fought to demonstrate his strength while also training himself, a result of Alpha accommodating his request.

『Understood. ...I still have a long way to go!』

Shooting at distant moving targets from an unstable platform accurately and quickly was extremely difficult, and Akira knew it.

Nevertheless, he had to minimize errors as much as possible. He had to make his movements as close to the perfect ones Alpha supported him with.

Mastery was unattainable. Believing one has mastered something is merely a misunderstanding of one's inability to perceive higher levels of skill due to a lack of talent and training.

And he hadn't even reached that misunderstanding yet. He needed to become stronger—to be able to imagine a strength he once couldn't fathom. Stronger still, to catch up to and surpass that imagination.

Only with that level of determination could he achieve the strength he desired. With that resolve, Akira gave it his all.

Kurosawa observed Akira carefully from the rear. Akira was the main force and the keystone of the unit. For the safety of the entire team, any sign of distress meant immediate withdrawal. He had to keep a close watch.

And he murmured, "This is... what's going on?" Akira's movements hadn't faltered since the start of the battle. While he wouldn't say it was easy, he continued to fight with a confident expression.

However, Kurosawa sensed a certain rigidity in Akira's expression, as if he was forcing himself to smile.

(...It's not anxiety. He's not flinching internally. If he were, his movements would be affected. ...Is he just overexerting himself to show off for us? If he's pushing too hard, we'll need to step in and have Akira fall back...?) Kurosawa couldn't determine whether Akira was genuinely at ease or merely pretending.

Large monsters, resembling a fusion of crustaceans and multi-legged machines, were pouring out of the ruins. As Akira continued to fight them, the enemy decoy on the vehicle shut down, and Kurosawa contacted him.

"Akira. We're about to make a circuit around the ruins. Let's take a break here. Come back."

"Got it." Even with the device is off, the currently engaged monsters wouldn't retreat. While directing his vehicle towards Kurosawa's position, Akira fended off the pursuing monsters.

Without reinforcements, he only needed to clear the enemies within sight. It was quickly done. Akira exhaled deeply.

『Alright. This marks a stopping point.』

He glanced lightly towards the ruins. The monster corpses were scattered in such large numbers that they seemed to surround the ruins.

『Well, I think we did enough work, right?』 Alpha smiled confidently.

『Of course. I was supporting you, after all.』

『...Yeah, that's true.』 Despite some reservations, Akira smiled back.

The multitude of monster corpses was the result of fully utilizing Alpha's support. He couldn't claim it as his own strength.

However, he had to show that this was his power. He didn't need to flaunt it arrogantly, but he couldn't be humble about it either.

He must not deny this power.

To make others hesitate to attack him, to prevent it from happening again, Akira decided to accept this for now.

Afterwards, Akira and his team safely withdrew to a secure location.



While Akira rested and chatted with Elena and the others, Kurosawa approached.

"Akira, how did it feel to fight alone?"

"What do you mean... it was as you saw it. You were watching me, right?"

"Yeah, I was. But what about your own feeling? Did you feel relaxed? Was it easy? Or were you actually struggling?"

"...I wouldn't say it was a breeze, but I think I did well enough."

Noticing Akira's somewhat evasive response, Kurosawa grew slightly concerned and changed the subject.

"Yeah, it was decent work. I was watching closely. But Akira, your performance hasn't changed since the start of the fight. It's a bit concerning."

"It's not a big deal. Usually, fatigue gradually sets in during a battle, right? It's like a downward slope on a graph. By observing that trend, you can determine when it's time to pull back. But with you, Akira, your graph was completely flat. Usually, that means a sudden drop in performance. Whether it's due to fatigue unnoticed by the person themselves, or a habit of hiding one's own weaknesses from the enemy."

Kurosawa continued casually, probing Akira's reaction.

"Your fight was like kicking a pebble off the road for you. So, if it's just that you're not getting tired at all, then it's fine. But whether intentional or unconscious, if you're pushing yourself too hard, please stop. I won't allow you to overexert yourself. That's the agreement under which I'm employed."

He made it clear he wasn't suspecting anything odd.

"In plain terms, Akira, as our main force, we need you to fight with ease. Your ease directly affects the safety margin of the entire unit."

Initially wary of Kurosawa's apparent probing into his true abilities, Akira finally understood after hearing him out.

"Then I'll ask again. Akira, how did it feel to fight alone? Were you relaxed?"

"Yeah. I still had plenty of energy. Even if I got a bit tired, I could just use a recovery potion, and besides, I haven't even used one yet. I'm still good."

Akira pointed to the AF laser cannon on his back. In the previous fight, he hadn't used it because it wouldn't have provided efficient training, but he could use it anytime. In terms of endurance and sheer firepower, Akira still had plenty of reserves.

Satisfied with Akira's response, Kurosawa saw no hint of concealment and concluded that Akira was speaking sincerely, which reassured him.

"I see. That's good. While I said not to overdo it, everyone's limits are different. Some would brush off losing an arm as a scratch."

"No way, that's definitely a serious injury."

"Believe it or not, some people say that. There are quite a few who have undergone cybernetic enhancements. They think they can just swap out a lost limb for a new one. Honestly, I wish they wouldn't apply that mentality to those of us still flesh and blood."

Kurosawa sighed softly.

"Akira, please don't be like them, okay? You heard me? You've had both your hands regenerated through medical treatment, right? You're not thinking you can just lose them again and get them fixed, are you?"

Akira made a displeased expression.

"I'm not. I went through a lot to have them healed. I'll take good care of these hands."

"That's good to hear. Now, make sure you rest properly."

With a final lighthearted remark, Kurosawa walked away.

Then Elena chimed in with a smile.

"Akira, as Kurosawa-san said, your ease directly contributes to our safety, so please rely on us more."

Sarah added with a smile, "Yeah, don't feel like you have to do everything by yourself. Since we're all together, might as well make the most of it."

"Well, there's that. I think it's okay to give Sarah more opportunities to shine. Unlike me, who has various opportunities for scouting, information gathering, and negotiation, if there aren't scenes like this for the firepower role, there'll be fewer chances for me to act like a senior."

"Hey, Elena?"

Seeing Sarah's dissatisfied look at Elena, Akira chuckled lightly.

"Got it. I welcome your support. Senior."

"...I have no choice, I guess. Understood."

Beside Elena, who was restraining her laughter, Sarah smiled, not entirely displeased.

And Elena, seeing Akira accepting without denying the need to rely on someone, smiled with relief.

While Akira's team rested, Erio and the others continued to work under Kurosawa's instructions.

"Aren't they supposed to be resting..."

"Don't complain. Let's finish up quickly and then rest."

"Alright, alright."

First, they swapped the cargo between vehicles A and B. After the break, Akira would fight from vehicle B. Despite Akira being mostly unscathed thanks to Alpha's support, the vehicle itself couldn't avoid damage. Vehicle A had sustained significant damage from intense gunfire.

Seeing the damaged vehicle, the boys grimaced.

"Whoa, look at this, it's pretty dented here. Does this mean the force field armor couldn't withstand it?"

"And the armor tiles are peeling off. I heard these were supposed to easily deflect regular shells..."

"Uh, are we gonna ride in this car next? Is it okay?"

"Well, it's better than charging in with an undamaged car. Kurosawa said not to overdo it, and if the defense of this car is questionable, he'll compensate for it."

After finishing the cargo swap, they redistributed the depleted ammunition. Instead of distributing it equally, Kurosawa adjusted it to prioritize the unit's efficiency. During this process, one of the boys looked at the extended magazine he was holding and frowned.

"You know, I didn't have time to think about it during the fight, but isn't this weird? I keep shooting, but it never runs out. What's going on?"

"Extended magazines are supposed to be like that, aren't they?"

"Yeah, but there's supposed to be a limit. This is definitely strange."

"Well, you know, it's from the technology of the old world. It's said to be a luxury item that only high-ranking hunters can buy."

"Oh, I see. That makes sense."

The ammunition provided this time was purchased by Akira and distributed to his subordinate units. Thanks to this, Erio and the others could fully utilize extremely high-performance items that they wouldn't normally have access to.

"Do you know? This thing costs about 5 million Aurums each."

"5 million!? That's insane! No wonder it's so impressive."

Beside the amazed boy, another swallowed nervously as he looked at the extended magazine.

"Each one... is 5 million..."

"Hey, don't think about doing anything weird, okay? If you steal one, Akira-san will kill you, you know? It's like stealing 5 million Aurums."

"I-I know that. I just thought it was amazing that one magazine costs 5 million."

At that moment, another child tilted his head.

"...Wait, it's 5 million for one? Wasn't it 5 million per shot?"

"Hey hey, that doesn't make sense. If it were 5 million per shot, how much would one of these magazines cost?"

"...Oh, right. My mistake."

Unaware of the true value of the goods they were transporting, Erio and the others laughed and continued their work.



Akira and the others, having finished their break, resumed culling out the area once again. First, they circled around the ruins just as they had before the break. Since they had already lured out the monsters once, on the second lap, only a few monsters appeared sparsely. They were easily defeated.

As they were about to start the third lap, Akira received a communication from Kurosawa.

"Akira. We're increasing the output of the enemy decoy from here on. Although the distribution of monsters inside the ruins is unknown, if the patterns become more powerful towards the depths, the number of individuals attracted should decrease, but the quality should improve. Be careful," Kurosawa instructed.

"Understood. Begin," Akira replied.

The output of the enemy decoy increased, drawing the monsters even more strongly. Before long, in front of Akira, who was vigilant on top of the car's roof, appeared a monster resembling a heavily armed crab, with a length of twenty meters.

It had a thick exoskeleton that seemed to be clad in reinforced armor, massive multi-jointed claws, and guns, cannons, and missile pods growing from within those claws. Seeing this sight, which resembled an example of forcibly adapting human armament to a crab, Akira showed considerable surprise.

『Once we get this far east, even the monsters start wearing reinforced armor...』

『Reinforced armor isn't exclusive to humans, is it? Since Akira is wearing it too, there's no room to complain.』

『True. Let's do this!』

After a wry smile, Akira switched his focus and aimed both guns at the gigantic monster.

Rather than spreading gunfire among the numerous monsters appearing one after another as they did in the first lap, they concentrated fire on just one enemy, despite its enormous size. With the synergistic effect of an astonishing total bullet count and the remarkable rate of fire of the guns, they unleashed a tsunami of bullets onto the enemy. This wave engulfed enemy gunfire, artillery, and missiles, swallowing and obliterating even the gigantic crustacean bodies surpassing the large armored vehicle that Akira and the others were riding.

『Alright. All hits. Concentration has returned after a proper break. Perfect.』

『It's impressive that you managed to hit accurately even without my support, but excessive bullet usage is a deduction.』

『Well, let's just say I fought with plenty of ease as Kurosawa requested. He warned us to be cautious because the enemies would become stronger, so it's to defeat them with ease despite that warning.』

『Let's go with that then. Akira, the next one is coming. Stay alert and continue to defeat them with ease.』

『Roger that.』

The newcomer was a multi-armed giant heavily armored crab. Like the previous crab, it had an exoskeleton resembling reinforced armor, and it had four additional claws, as if adding prosthetic arms. Ignoring the feeling that it was impossible to charge forward with that structure, it swiftly moved forward from the depths of the ruins towards them.

With a relaxed smile, Akira aimed both guns at the newly appeared target.

In general, monsters became stronger the larger they were. Due to their size, their movements slowed down, and their vulnerability increased, despite their astonishing agility, durability, and vitality inherited from the old world, which allowed them to forcibly overpower their opponents.

In the first lap, they were attacked by individuals with a body length of around 10 meters, but in this third lap, they had grown to around 20 meters. The strength of the monsters they faced had increased more than expected.

Still, Akira was fighting more advantageously than in the first lap. There were two main reasons for this. One was that there were fewer enemies to deal with at once. Generally, they encountered single individuals, and even in larger groups, there were only about three at most, which was significantly different from the first lap. In the first lap, they had to deal with countless enemies, and they also had to prevent other vehicles from being attacked with long-range attacks, which added to Akira's burden. Dealing with fewer enemies or small groups significantly reduced that burden.

And the other reason was that Akira had stopped worrying about conserving ammunition as much as he did in the first lap.

Akira was still training as he did in the first lap. However, Kurosawa had requested him to fight with ease, which was also pointed out to significantly contribute to Elena and the others' safety. Therefore, Akira decided not to worry about conserving ammunition for the sake of the quality of his training, considering that increasing the risk for Elena and the others was not an option.

With each passing round, the battles became easier, and given that there were no monster appearances in the previous round, Erio and the others had considerably relaxed.

"We're almost done, huh? Surprisingly easy when it's over," one remarked.

"We're not done yet. Don't let your guard down. Isn't it said that being a hunter is a job until you return home?" another reminded.

"That's true, but isn't it pretty much over? For relic collection, the hunter's job is said to be over once you exchange them for money, but we're just here to cull out monsters. All that's left is to return. Monsters on the way back will be a piece of cake, no need to worry," the first one replied.

"Relic collection, huh? Right. How about doing relic collection in that ruins before we head back? We've reduced the monsters there significantly. It should be an easy task now," the second suggested.

"That sounds good. Let's propose it," they agreed.

As the conversation began in the relaxed atmosphere, no one had strong intentions to intervene with caution, so they joined in the chatter.

And caught in that atmosphere, someone who had genuinely relaxed couldn't help but express their relief.

"Because Akira-san is here, I thought something might happen again, but I guess I worried too much," they said.

At that moment, silence fell in the car. By explicitly voicing what everyone had vaguely thought, the chatter stopped abruptly.

And as everyone fell silent, the atmosphere in the car became awkward. Then, the alarm of the comprehensive support system resounded through the car. It was signaling the approach of a powerful monster.

Startled by the sudden alarm, the children reacted in panic.

"Is it because you said that!?"

"Is it my fault!?"

The reminder that being a hunter was a job until you returned home was accurate.

The alarm from the comprehensive support system also reached Kurosawa, who was commanding the unit.

"This is... big," he muttered. The comprehensive support system coordinated the reconnaissance equipment of each vehicle, providing a surveillance capability exceeding that of four units. And with that power, it detected a massive entity approaching rapidly from the depths of the ruins.

Due to the distance from the target and the presence of structures in between, the exact shape wasn't clear. However, an approximate body length could be estimated: about 35 meters. It easily surpassed the maximum size of monsters they had defeated so far, indicating that it was a considerably powerful individual.

Akira wondered if it would be better to lower his guard once. However, it became meaningless as Akira took action first. Ahead of Kurosawa's gaze, Akira jumped out of the car.

Thanks to Alpha's support, Akira noticed the presence of the monsters earlier than Kurosawa's group.

『Akira. Stop the training』

『Understood. ...Is it really that strong?』

Alpha responded to Akira's serious inquiry with a relaxed smile.

『Yes. It's better to use what's on your back rather than the guns in your hands』

『Roger. Finally, it's this thing's turn』

Far from being a crisis situation, Alpha's smile conveyed reassurance. Seeing this, Akira's expression softened too. He holstered his guns and, following Alpha who had already moved ahead, jumped out of the car. Then he activated the AF laser cannon on his back.

The AF laser cannon, which had been folded three-dimensionally to reduce its size, expanded and assembled into the shape of a large cannon. While transforming, Akira firmly grasped the laser cannon that had come to the front of him through his back, resembling a partially octopus-like, mechanized soft-bodied creature with an absurdly large cannon resembling a joke in front. The legs, which moved softly like soft-bodied organisms, had a texture of metal or rubber, and it was equipped with a large-caliber cannon in the front. It was moving a huge body larger than the large armored vehicle that Akira and the others were riding, without using tires or caterpillar tracks.

Thanks to Alpha's support, Akira could clearly see the monster's figure in a position he couldn't see. He aimed firmly at the giant figure displayed in his expanded field of vision. Light began to leak from the muzzle of the AF laser cannon.

Then communication came in from Kurosawa.

"Can you defeat it, Akira?"

"If this thing has the power as explained, yeah. Don't stand behind me, it's dangerous."

"...Got it. I'm counting on you." Kurosawa felt confidence and composure in Akira's response and entrusted everything to him.

Even during this brief conversation, the distance with the target was rapidly closing. To seize the perfect moment to fire the AF laser cannon without missing it, Akira manipulated his subjective time, further increasing its density in preparation for that moment. The amount of light leaking from the muzzle indicated that its interior already had sufficient energy stored. All that was left was to fire.

And that moment arrived. Akira fired the AF laser cannon at the soft-bodied, multi-legged machine that appeared while crushing the ruins of buildings. And instead of aiming at the large armored vehicle Akira had used as a decoy and which ran a little away from Akira, the opponent aimed and fired at Akira.

The projectile supplied with tremendous energy within the AF laser cannon collapsed and turned into luminous particles, giving it strong directionality and emitting it.

The laser beam burned through the atmosphere, arriving at the target in an instant.

The AF laser cannon can adjust its power and range by changing the emission angle. By adjusting the focal point of the force field lens precisely to the opponent's surface without any deviation even at high speed, the particles emitted from the muzzle are concentrated in one point, amplifying their power. As a result, the released beam easily pierced through the opponent's armor.

The energy of the particles that penetrated the surface armor destroyed the cells of the source of the biotic force field armor inside, drastically reducing the strength of the force field armor on a cellular level, causing the cells around the trajectory of the beam to vaporize and disappear due to the high energy of the beam.

The area around the beam of light with a diameter of less than 1 millimeter was widely erased, and a large hole that pierced the body tens of meters long appeared. Even the parts that escaped disappearance were scorched by high energy. The giant monster, which possessed astonishing vitality corresponding to its huge body, was instantly killed by a blow of overwhelming power that surpassed it.

The extra-large shell fired just before death also passed by Akira's side, its aim deviated. It landed in a distant location behind Akira, causing a massive explosion.

The blast wind pushed Akira's back. But rather than worrying about the explosion behind him, Akira smiled satisfied with the power of the AF laser cannon.

『It's an incredible power. With this power, that giant should be easy to defeat, right?』
Alpha added as if to emphasize.

『Don't forget that this power is thanks to my support, okay?』

『I got it.』 Despite the unexpected appearance of a formidable enemy, the battle was not as relaxed as it seemed, but Akira safely completed this culling operation till the end



On the way back to Kugamayama City, Akira and the others gathered in the car just as they did before the culling operation began. Hikaru was also participating through communication. At that moment, Akira found himself making excuses to Elena and Sarah, who were staring at him with smiles.

"...No, it's not like that, you know? I fought as safely as I could. Getting out of the car was because I wanted to use it as bait, although in the end, I guess it was pretty obvious I was using it as bait. But it was safer to be out of the car than to stay inside and be blown away together, right?" Akira insisted. Though he wasn't being reckless, he felt outnumbered by Elena's and the others' stares and glanced at Kurosawa.

"Ah, Kurosawa didn't give me any instructions to retreat either..." Kurosawa, asked for support, responded as the unit's commander.

"It might sound like hindsight, but I believed I gave the best instructions. There might have been an option to bring Akira down and deal with the enemy as a group, but that would have increased the risk of others being blown away along with the car. Considering the potential casualties, I judged it was safer for everyone to rely on Akira, our strongest force, to handle it alone. He seemed to have confidence in taking it down alone, and he actually did," Kurosawa said, nodding firmly at Akira, who agreed. Seeing this, Elena and the others eased their attitude.

Sarah sighed lightly. "Well, if the commander says so, I guess we'll stop fussing about it. Akira did seem to intend to fight safely."

"That's right. But, Akira, don't forget to fight safely, okay?" Elena reminded him.

"Yes, of course," Akira replied. With the issue of Akira trying to resolve the situation alone during the unit's operation resolved, Kurosawa continued.

"If I may offer criticism, it wouldn't be directed at Akira, but at Hikaru-san," Kurosawa said.

"Me?"

"Yeah. We're acting based on the request presented by your side, but we weren't informed that something like that would appear. Let me confirm, though. Was there any discrepancy between your assumptions and our understanding?"

"...Well, yes. That Oktoparos should be a monster inhabiting the eastern region of Milcakewa City's jurisdiction. It shouldn't be in this western region, so it was an unexpected situation for us too."

"But once such a situation occurs, it can't just be brushed off as unexpected. We're putting our lives on the line here," Kurosawa criticized Hikaru's oversight, intentionally taking on an accusatory tone. Tension began to build between Kurosawa and Hikaru.

But then, Kurosawa changed his tone significantly. "Considering that, I'd like to prepare for a similar situation if it were to occur again. Rather than leaving everything to Akira alone next time, we should consider lending more high-performance equipment to the entire unit so that we can handle situations safely as a group. Is that acceptable?"

With that, Hikaru also relaxed his stance. If the criticism wasn't about the mistake itself but a pretext to draw out further support, it was just a negotiation with Kugamayama City. Seeing this, Kurosawa handed negotiation material to Hikaru.

For Hikaru, providing further support to Akira's unit would be another favor to Akira. Hikaru accepted Kurosawa's request with a smile. "Understood. I'll also request it from higher-ups."

"Thank you," Kurosawa replied. With that, the discussion about the operation came to a close and transitioned into casual conversation.

"Well, there were unexpected situations, but everyone is safe, which is the most important thing. But still..." Kurosawa glanced briefly at Akira.

"...Honestly, I had a feeling something might happen with Akira around. Just like with the Ilida Commercial District Ruins, there was so much commotion," Kurosawa said.

"Well, even if you say that to me..." Akira couldn't deny it. Erio unconsciously nodded deeply.

"Well, if you think about it, maybe thanks to that, you're unconsciously prepared for unexpected situations, and that's why you can handle any situation calmly and survive without dying, no matter the circumstances," Elena and the others nodded in agreement. Akira knew it was more thanks to Alpha, but he remained silent because he couldn't say that.

Alpha chuckled beside Akira. 『Indeed, Akira might be too accustomed to unexpected situations. Akira, don't get complacent because of that, okay?』

『Yeah,』 Akira replied with a forced chuckle.

197: Clear Strength

The culling request that Akira accepted from Hikaru is not a one-time deal. It continues until enough monsters are culled from the wasteland. However, they don't go out to the wasteland every day. They intersperse several day offs, which include adjusting each member's physical condition, repairing and maintaining damaged vehicles, replenishing consumed ammunition, and so on.

On one of these days off, Akira visited Sheryl's base.

Sheryl's base has grown considerably, with buildings that serve as relic shops, warehouses for relics, and accommodations for members, which have increased significantly compared to before. And recently, a large hangar has been added.

In that hangar, Akira looked up at something and let out a light exclamation.

"Wow, it's really here," Sheryl, who welcomed Akira and guided him here, also looked up at the same thing and smiled.

"I didn't doubt you, Akira, but to be honest, I was quite skeptical until I saw the real thing," Sheryl said.

"Me too. Until I saw it with my own eyes, I couldn't believe what Hikaru was saying had any meaning," Akira replied.

Standing there was the Black Wolf, a black humanoid weapon manufactured by Yoshioka Heavy Industries.

This unit was the result of Hikaru successfully resolving the dispute between Akira and Yoshioka Heavy Industries. The equipment lent to Akira by Yoshioka Heavy Industries is now deployed here, with Akira further lending it to Sheryl and her group.

Akira serves as a special force backing Sheryl's group, but as a Hunter, he cannot stay stationed at the base. No matter how strong Akira is, his deterrent power is limited if he's not present locally.

To solve this problem, Akira lent this equipment to Sheryl and her group as a substitute for himself. This move by Hikaru facilitated peace between Akira and Yoshioka Heavy Industries.

For Yoshioka Heavy Industries, Akira's guarantee of the Black Wolf's performance is crucial. Since they have lent out the Black Wolf to their subordinates as a substitute for themselves, they need to explain that this unit possesses the same level of combat capability as themselves.

Considering the statement of a Hunter who single-handedly defeated a giant Titan that even the Black Wolf unit gave up on, there may be some contradictions. However, Yoshioka Heavy Industries can explain these contradictions in a way that suits their interests. Since they also have a deal with Akira to not say anything unnecessary, there are no problems arising from discrepancies in the explanations.

Because of Akira's outstanding performance in the nationalist suppression battle, there was a risk of their own products receiving significant criticism. This concern from Yoshioka Heavy Industries has now been dispelled.

Furthermore, for Akira, by facilitating a beneficial negotiation between himself and Yoshioka Heavy Industries, he has demonstrated his competence to both parties. This negotiation also served as a prelude to other matters.

Behind Akira and the Black Wolf, stood Sheryl Family executives: Erio, Alicia, Nasha, and Lucia. Due to the significant increase in the number of group members, there are quite a few executives besides Erio and the others who serve as the group's coordinators. Externally, they are also considered group executives.

However, those who hold positions distinguishing them as senior executives, second only to their Boss, Sheryl, remain Erio and the others.

Seats are available. Anyone who wishes can sit. Also, while Erio and the others are not incompetent, they haven't pushed others aside with overwhelmingly high abilities to secure their positions. If someone possesses abilities equal to or slightly below Erio and the others, they can become new senior executives. This is known to all members of the group.

And once someone becomes a senior executive, the benefits they receive from the group dramatically increase. They are given spacious private rooms. They can enjoy luxurious bathing facilities. They can borrow powerful equipment.

They also earn money. It's a fortune that ordinary Hunters wouldn't be able to earn even if they risked their lives in the wasteland. With that money, they can enjoy delicious food. They can buy expensive clothes. They can live a luxurious life that would be unimaginable for residents of the slums.

But still, there were no takers. The struggle for advancement within the group stopped at Erio and the others.

Erio couldn't help but complain about it. "You know, having just four executives feels insufficient. At least two more executives specializing in combat would be desirable."

Alicia sighed softly. "With only Erio as the executive specializing in combat, he's forced to participate in those culling operations every time."

"Yeah. If there was at least one more person besides me, we could take turns participating," Erio added.

Although Erio had survived each time so far, she didn't like the idea of her lover repeatedly heading into the deadly wilderness. Moreover, with Akira also participating in the culling operations, and hearing that powerful monsters, which shouldn't normally be there, appeared, her worries only grew. She had been trying to improve the situation using her position as an administrative executive.

"Erio, wasn't the reward for being an executive 5 million Aurums?" As a reward for participating in the culling operations, Erio receives 5 million Aurums from the group, while other participants receive only 500,000 Aurums. It's clear that Erio hasn't worked ten times harder than the other members in combat, and he's aware of that. The 5 million Aurums is a clear favoritism for the group's executives.

However, Erio remained unenthusiastic. "I've talked to a few people about it, asking if they wanted to become executives. But they all just said they'd think about it."

"I see..."

"By not being swayed by money, it means that 5 million isn't enough. But even so, I can't go to the boss and ask for an increase," Erio said.

"Yeah, I know..." Alicia sighed. Given that Alicia also handles the group's finances, she understood better than Erio that increasing the rewards beyond this point would be difficult.

The Sheryl Family makes huge profits from relic shops and other ventures. But that money belongs to the group. And in a sense, it's also Akira's money. There's not a single Aurum to be wasted.

Furthermore, even if they explained the situation to Sheryl and tried to increase the executive's rewards, the executives themselves would be the first to receive the increased

rewards. It's a tough request to make. The 5 million Aurums was the maximum amount Alicia could calculate, considering all these factors.

Then Erio glanced at Nasha and Lucia. "Even so, if it weren't for Nasha and Lucia, it would've just been Alicia and me. So, it's still better this way."

Nasha couldn't help but smile wryly at that comment. "We didn't become executives by choice, you know."

Previously, Nasha and Lucia had been treated very poorly within the group, even being hostile, due to an incident where Lucia had almost been killed by Akira for stealing his wallet. Although the matter itself was forgiven by Akira, given that the Sheryl Family relies heavily on Akira's backing, Nasha and Lucia had been greatly mistreated within the group and even viewed as enemies for a period of time.

To improve their situation, Nasha and the others sought positions within the group and became executives. Since there was more of a scramble and jostling for positions rather than a straightforward competition, there was less resentment towards Nasha and the others for becoming executives.

Subsequently, due to their continued satisfactory performance as executives, Nasha and the others' evaluations have changed significantly. Even Akira's past disputes with them were now interpreted positively as signs of courage and resilience.

Within the group, there were some who didn't like the idea of Nasha and the others being above them as executives. However, the general sentiment towards them was more like, "If you don't like it, then you become an executive and deal with Akira," effectively reducing the disdain towards Nasha and the others.

Lucia offered a slightly tense smile at Nasha's complaining words. "Well, unlike Erio and the others, we can't just ask someone else to take our place."

"Yeah, that's true. So, Lucia, let's just do our best since there's no other way," Nasha replied. Nasha had a nurturing side and managed the members well, but Lucia, as an executive, had her own challenges. Seeing Nasha's light-hearted smile, Lucia couldn't help but feel grateful for her concern, even though she sighed inwardly, feeling like she was burdening her best friend.

At that moment, Akira, who had been chatting with Sheryl, suddenly turned around and lightly asked Erio and the others while pointing to the black humanoid weapon, "Hey, this machine is kind of like a substitute for me. Between it and me, who looks stronger?"

Another tough question. All of them thought so. They were further prodded for an answer by Sheryl's expectant gaze.

With rumors circulating about Akira being able to detect lies, flattery wouldn't work well. However, being honest might risk upsetting him. Amid Erio and the others hesitating to respond, it was Lucia who gathered her courage and spoke up.

"...I know that Akira-san is stronger, but if we're just comparing looks between you and the machine, then the machine looks stronger. It's so much bigger, and humanoid weapons just naturally look strong to anyone..."

Lucia nervously awaited Akira's reaction to her response.

"Yeah, you're right," Akira said, satisfied with Lucia's answer, smiling broadly and nodding approvingly before turning back to Erio and the others.

Lucia let out a relieved breath. Then she felt Erio and Alicia lightly patting her shoulders.

"Nicely done, Lucia."

"Thank you. Please count on me for the next time too," Lucia replied, looking at Nasha for help with a reluctant expression. Nasha put a hand on her head.

"...Lucia, let's do our best together, okay?"

Unable to refuse her dear friend's encouragement, Lucia couldn't help but agree.

As Akira looked at the Black Wolf alongside Sheryl, he pondered, "I guess a clear strength is still necessary." Despite being stronger than this black humanoid weapon, equipped strength-wise, he could still fight and win. But if asked whether he seemed stronger than Black Wolf to anyone, he could honestly say no.

After all, fighting against humanoid weapons was generally reckless. It was natural for them to appear stronger when compared. Akira understood that.

But proving oneself to be stronger by actually fighting and defeating them wasn't enough. Killing Yumina, killing Katsuya and the others, proving himself stronger wasn't the solution. What was needed was a strength that deterred fighting in the first place, a strength that everyone could easily understand.

And Akira already knew what suited that purpose: Hunter Rank.

"Even more. I need to raise it even higher..." Akira sought strength, somewhat like any ordinary hunter in a way, but even more distorted than before.

Seeing that, Alpha smiled. Whatever the reason, Akira desiring, seeking, and affirming power based on his support was very convenient for Alpha.



After finishing their tour of the Black Wolf, Akira and Sheryl, along with the group, moved to a floor that served as both a resting area and a break room. Seated across from each other at a four-person table, they engaged in casual conversation, touching on topics related to the group.

"Sheryl, by the way, who's going to pilot that machine?" Akira inquired.

"We're considering various options, but for the time being, it's planned for Erio. Since Erio is an executive member responsible for the group's combat forces, it's not something we can let just anyone handle," Sheryl explained. While Yoshio Heavy Industries provided maintenance personnel for the machines, they didn't offer pilots. They provided guns and bullets, but you had to pull the trigger yourself. Sheryl understood this dynamic well.

There were ways to arrange for pilots through Yoshio Heavy Industries or by requesting personnel from the city's defense force through Inabe. However, for Sheryl, it was preferable to have group members as pilots to avoid being dependent on others in case of emergencies.

"We'll also train combat personnel from the group using simulators, and if anyone shows promise, we'll entrust them with it. Since Erio and the others use the comprehensive support system, we're also looking into whether the system can assist with piloting or asking Kiryou for help," Sheryl added.

Physically piloting the Black Wolf would subject an ordinary person to potentially fatal stresses due to inertia, making the use of enhanced suits essential. In this regard, it was convenient that Erio and the others borrowed enhanced suits from the Kiryou.

"It seems like it can fight to some extent on autopilot. But unless you're a complete novice, it's still more effective to have someone pilot it. It's said that even on autopilot, it's no different from a scarecrow," Sheryl said with a light laugh. "Well, what we want that

machine to do is act as that scarecrow, and we don't want a situation where it needs to unleash its full potential."

"Yeah, I agree," Akira concurred with a smile. The humanoid weapon was meant to prevent attacks rather than crush enemies who attacked. Akira understood that well.

Erio and the others, under Sheryl's instructions, sat at the table next to Akira's. Since it was Sheryl, Akira presumed that after they finished viewing the humanoid weapon in the hangar, she would take Akira back to her room while they returned to work. That's why he found it strange, but he reconsidered, thinking that she might be doing it to initiate a conversation if something came up, so he didn't pay it much mind.

While Erio and the others' thoughts weren't entirely wrong, their fundamental essence was fundamentally different. Sheryl kept Erio and the others nearby because being alone with Akira was difficult for her now. She had become, however slightly, a cause of Yumina's death and a reason why Akira had to kill Yumina. If Akira found out, what would happen? That fear made Sheryl shrink back.

As they continued chatting, Sheryl observed Akira's demeanor. She couldn't sense any hostility or aversion from him. Was it because he didn't know? Or did he already know but didn't care? Or maybe knowing wasn't a problem? Beneath her smile, she pondered desperately.

Then, from out of nowhere, Viola appeared. "Akira, I owe you an apology for last time," she said, sporting her usual insincere smile. Akira responded with an appropriate expression.

"...I asked Inabe to investigate Hikaru's whereabouts, but why did it cause such a commotion?" he inquired.

"That's because for Inabe, you're an important figure. If you read between the lines, it may have been a kind of warning," Viola explained.

"A warning?"

"Yes. It could be interpreted as Inabe intentionally making a big deal out of it to warn anyone trying to defraud you."

"I see. That's one way to look at it," Akira nodded lightly, seemingly satisfied with the explanation. Viola observed his reaction with her usual smile. Then, she took a seat without invitation and casually remarked, looking at Akira and Sheryl, "Anyway, Yumina's situation was unfortunate, wasn't it?" Sheryl momentarily froze, then looked at Viola with concealed agitation.

Akira was just as clueless as anyone else, but his reaction was vastly different. After staring silently at Viola for a moment, he stood up without a word and pointed the LEO composite gun at Viola.

"Was it you?" His question, extremely short and lacking in specificity, was more of an assertion than an inquiry.

Viola visibly tensed up. With a nervous sweat breaking out, she tried to respond in her usual manner. "Wait, even if you suddenly say something like that, I don't know what you're talking abo..."

Akira pressed the gun muzzle against Viola's forehead with a serious expression, cutting her off. The cold sweat on Viola's face increased.

"If you lie, I'll kill you. If you don't answer, I'll kill you. Even if you say something unrelated, I'll kill you. Yes or no. Were you involved in Yumina's incident?"

Without averting her gaze from Akira, Viola replied firmly, "No. I had nothing to do with it."

『...Alpha. 』

『 Not a lie, 』 Alpha replied. Taking Alpha's word for it, Akira believed Viola's answer.

"...I see. My apologies for doubting you. There's just been too much going on with Yumina's situation. I apologize."

Despite apologizing, Akira didn't lower the gun. Keeping the muzzle pressed against Viola, he stated, "Next time, a misunderstanding won't save you." He emphasized not to create misunderstandings. With that, Akira finally lowered the gun and took a deep breath.

"Sheryl."

"Y-yes!?" Sheryl, flustered, responded in a strange voice.

Apologizing for causing a commotion and unable to contain his self-loathing, Akira hung his head lightly. "...Sorry for the disturbance. I'll head back and cool off. See you."

With that, Akira left alone. Usually, Sheryl would have escorted Akira outside the base. But now, she couldn't even bring herself to get up from her seat. Just being suspected of involvement in Yumina's incident almost got Viola killed. What about herself, who was indirectly involved in the cause of Yumina's death? With surging anxiety and fear, Sheryl struggled to endure.

Viola, who was almost killed by suspicion alone, had anticipated the situation not unfolding to that extent. Viola knew that Sheryl was indirectly responsible for Yumina's death. And she understood the danger of discussing Yumina's death in front of Akira.

Despite knowing this, Viola couldn't restrain herself from speaking about Yumina's incident, which could be misunderstood as her involvement, because she couldn't suppress her nature.

Akira's actions since the end of the battle against the Nationalists could be interpreted as mediocre. Instead of retaliating against the Drankam that attacked him, he made peace with them. Furthermore, while he had previously worked alone as a Hunter, he now led a team and diligently handled requests arranged by the city's officials.

To Viola, these seemed like the mundane changes of a Hunter who had become satisfied with his situation. Once aspiring to rise up, he now seemed to have settled down after achieving his dream, becoming a capable but uninspired success.

Viola suspected that Akira had become such a dull figure after his success in the battle against the Nationalists. The former Akira was exciting. He would storm into Shijima's base with the corpses of its members, interrupt fights between humanoid weapons during the group's conflict, and pick fights with both sides by himself.

He would kill city employees, oppose city executives, and kill Hunters who sided with the executives without hesitation. No matter how much trouble it caused, he would charge ahead without a care. That was Akira. But now, he seemed to be forming his own Hunter team according to the city's wishes and diligently handling requests arranged by the city. He was doing the kinds of things that successful Hunters who had climbed the ranks did.

Had Akira's powder become damp, losing the ability to ignite and cause a massive explosion over trivial matters? Viola was inwardly pleased to confirm that. In the tense atmosphere tinged with excitement and joy, she suppressed a smile.

Furthermore, Viola was confident that she wouldn't be killed here.

Though the principle was unclear, Akira had a talent for discerning lies. And if he suspected that she might be involved in Yumina's incident, he would surely confirm it with that talent.

She truly had nothing to do with Yumina's incident. And if he could discern that she had nothing to do with it, he wouldn't shoot her, considering his character.

Viola had read that far in advance, and she wasn't shot, as she predicted.

Watching Akira leave, Viola thought to herself.

The conflict between the two major factions became much more interesting because of Akira's involvement. The power struggle among the city's executives and the battle against the Nationalists would have been much smaller-scale affairs if not for the presence of Akira, a ticking time bomb.

She was no longer satisfied with merely inflaming conflicts in the slums. Where should she place this bomb and what should she do to cause enough of a commotion to satisfy her nature? What was necessary for that? What must she do?

While contemplating their burgeoning plans, Viola smiled thinly.

Erio and the others watched Akira leave with tension. After confirming that Akira had disappeared from the floor without returning, they collectively breathed a sigh of relief.

Other children approached them.

"Hey, what happened?" The floor, doubling as a break room, wasn't off-limits. Since Akira was there, everyone refrained from using it voluntarily, and those with courage observed Akira's group from a distance. They were aiming for positions equivalent to Erio and the others as executives.

Akira, feared by members of the faction, perhaps didn't need to be feared that much. They thought so.

He wasn't behaving tyrannically in exchange for backing the faction. He wasn't assaulting members for trivial reasons or harassing reluctant women.

While he didn't hesitate to kill, the only people Akira had killed within the Sheryl Family were previously revealed traitors. Even Erio, who had attacked Akira, and Lucia, who had stolen Akira's wallet, ended up becoming executives without being killed. If that was the case, wouldn't it be fine to become executives too? With a little attention not to anger Akira, wouldn't it be possible to obtain money and power as faction executives?

They gradually strengthened that thought and finally, today, if everything seemed okay after observing, they planned to become executives.

In front of their relaxed consciousness, Akira aimed a gun at Viola. It was clear even to them, watching from a distance, that it wasn't a mere threat but an intention to kill. Akira exuded such a strong killing intent.

In the end, he didn't kill. But that didn't mean they felt safe. When Akira left the floor, they instinctively avoided eye contact and hid themselves until Akira had completely left, then went to ask Erio and the others about the situation.

Even if they were asked, Erio and the others didn't know any detailed insider information. They could only tell what they saw from the adjacent table. In other words, they could only explain that Akira had pointed a gun at Viola for almost no reason, and then blamed it on her before leaving.

"...Is it true? Were you almost killed over something so trivial?" Erio tentatively defended Akira to his startled and fearful comrades.

"W-well, you know, Viola does have a record..."

"...But, I mean, even so, would you normally suspect and try to kill someone over such a trivial misunderstanding? I don't think so." Alicia also chimed in. "And besides, it was just a misunderstanding that was quickly resolved..."

"You shouldn't try to kill someone over a misunderstanding that can be quickly resolved. Even if it's something that could be misunderstood, it's understandable." Erio and Alicia's points seemed valid. And from their attitudes, which showed their thoughts, it seemed to them that Erio and the others, being executives, couldn't speak ill of Akira.

Nasha let out a small sigh.

Nasha realized that they were, to put it bluntly, underestimating Akira and trying to become executives. And that they, as executives, were also underestimating themselves.

Even so, Nasha thought it was fine. Not fearing Akira unnecessarily was a good thing, and increasing the number of executives for any reason would reduce their burden.

And sensing that their sweet idea had disappeared, Nasha understood that they no longer had any intention of becoming executives and decided to use them in a different direction.

Nasha smiled at them.

"Well, I understand what you want to say. We're going through a lot too. So, it would be helpful if you could help us out."

"W-well, that's..."

Become executives and deal with Akira together. Take a position where you don't know when you'll be killed together. They might as well have been told that, and they collectively looked away from Nasha and hastily retreated, then left.

Erio gave a wry smile.

"...It's better than being underestimated, I guess." Alicia, Nasha, and Lucia also wore similar smiles. There were hardships, but the camaraderie among those who shared their worries deepened a little.

198: Unauthorized Hunter

The monster culling operation led by Akira's team was proceeding smoothly. With reinforcements tailored to match the difficulty of the first day and safety-first leadership from Kurosawa, they had been defeating powerful monsters in the Milcakewa region without any fatalities or serious injuries.

They were also collecting relics in their spare time, gathering valuable relics at an efficiency level close to windfall profits.

The area assigned to Akira's culling was one that was avoided by hunters from both Kugamayama City and Milcakewa City. For hunters from Kugamayama City, the monsters were too strong to be worth the effort, while for hunters from Milcakewa City, the relics were too cheap to be worth it. In other words, the areas where Akira's team completed culling became ideal earning spots for hunters from Kugamayama City, with valuable relics and hardly any monster threats. Although they didn't have the ability to participate in culling, they could join the team for relic collection after culling was completed, allowing Akira's team to obtain a large number of valuable relics. Additional personnel included Sheryl Family's armed personnel, hunters associated with Sheryl like Dale, Levin, and Kolbe, as well as people from Dorankam. The team was structured with Akira as the main force, with Elena and Shikarabe underneath.

This was similar to what often happened when a hunter who had been operating alone or in small groups at a low hunter rank was encouraged to form or expand a team from the city when their rank had risen to a certain extent.

Organizing hunters, the force of violence, into orderly groups had significant benefits for the city. Of course, there were also disadvantages, such as the increase in fear relative to the organized force. However, compared to the struggle to suppress powerful forces rampaging without order on a large scale, the benefits outweighed the disadvantages.

For these reasons, it was common for high-ranked hunters operating alone to be encouraged by the city to form teams. This time, it was something like what Hikaru was doing to Akira.

Viola's misunderstanding, thinking that Akira was trying to join the ranks of ordinary hunters who had risen, was based on this. From the city's perspective, Hikaru was doing a good job of handling Akira.

Hikaru chuckled as she wrote her regular report.

"Smooth sailing. Just as I expected." Understanding that she was praising herself, Hikaru nodded satisfactorily, considering it a praise-worthy achievement.

However, with continued satisfaction, it gradually became routine. If it was Akira's team, no, if it was Akira himself, would it be okay to assign them to cull in more difficult areas? Akira had defeated the Oktoparos so easily. It should be fine. Filled with confidence and ambition, Hikaru thought about seeking further achievements.

And first, she tried to convey that to Akira. Akira's response was vague.

"I'm fine with it, but you should ask Kurosawa what to do in practice. I leave those decisions to Kurosawa."

"Is that so? But since it's Akira's team, I think Akira should decide."

"Even so, we're working as a unit this time. It's impossible for me to make appropriate judgments considering the safety of the entire unit. That's why I leave the decisions to safety-first Kurosawa. If it was just me, I would make the decision, and if things got dangerous, I would be the only one to suffer."

There were Elena and others in the unit. Akira was not willing to compromise on safety standards. Sensing this, Hikaru gave up persuading him here.

"Understood. Then I'll talk to Kurosawa-san."

"Yeah. Counting on you. See you later."

Next, she would contact Kurosawa. Kurosawa's response was clear-cut.

"No. I refuse."

"However, judging from the achievements so far, I believe the unit's strength is high enough, and there is room to change the assigned area."

"That margin is a safety margin for dealing with unforeseen circumstances. In areas where that margin is constantly used, we won't be able to deal with unforeseen circumstances if they arise. Major changes to the assigned area are not allowed. We've already been gradually moving the assigned area eastward. That's the limit."

Unlike Akira, who clearly refused, Hikaru frowned inwardly. Nevertheless, she continued the conversation.

"But ultimately, the decision lies with the team leader, Akira. Although Akira is okay with changing the assigned area..."

"Well, it's true that Akira holds the ultimate decision-making authority. I have no objection to that. But if the assigned area changes, I'll step down. I was hired not as a force but as a commander to ensure the unit's safety. I don't intend to continue in a situation where that's impossible. Sorry."

Hikaru started to feel anxious inwardly. If Kurosawa resigned, Akira might judge it too dangerous and refrain from even requesting culling in the first place.

"Well, Akira might say it's fine, but if he's secretly eager to cull in more difficult areas and he brought this up hoping to subtly stop it, then I'll persuade Akira myself, okay? If that's the case, it's my job." Hikaru grimaced.

What Hikaru wanted was the opposite. And Kurosawa understood that, so he said, somewhat threateningly, that if there were any more fuss, he would tell Akira, and Hikaru could understand that much.

"No, there's no need to go that far. I'll just tell Akira that Kurosawa-san seemed reluctant, so it's not possible."

"Understood. Then I'll leave it at that. Please continue to support us in the future."

With Hikaru backing down, Kurosawa adjusted his tone and ended the communication. Hikaru let out a sigh with a slightly tired expression. Then she smiled and regained her composure.

"Well, can't be helped. Kurosawa has been a hunter for a long time, and unlike him, he's not easy to handle."

It's not uncommon for hunters who excel in combat from the beginning to be bad at negotiation. If you're strong, you can usually get away with things, so there are fewer opportunities to hone your negotiation skills.

Scammers who try to make unfair contracts often tone down their proposals to a level where they can make excuses, considering the risk of the other party resorting to violence. Even if you get tricked, it's rare to end up in a fatal situation. Poor negotiation skills aren't that big of a deal.

However, that's only in the realm of so-called ordinary hunters. When the results of risking your life in the wasteland pay off and you become a high-ranked hunter, whether or not you've properly honed your negotiation skills is tested. The negotiation partners of high-ranked hunters are often individuals or entities that are difficult to intimidate with force, such as cities or corporations.

Furthermore, the representatives are usually skilled negotiators. With poor negotiation skills, you end up being manipulated. And in a sense, Akira, with his poor negotiation skills, is being manipulated to suit Hikaru's convenience.

While it's beneficial for Akira in some ways, those benefits aren't gained through his own negotiation skills. They're Hikaru's convenience to gain Akira's trust, and there's no denying that he's being manipulated well. On the other hand, Kurosawa, who has honed his negotiation skills, can adapt flexibly even when dealing with the cities.

Kurosawa's policy of easily sacrificing high profits in front of him for safety is likely to cause dissatisfaction among hunters who risk their lives in the wasteland. Negotiations that have been carefully conducted multiple times in advance to prevent this dissatisfaction from turning into conflict have greatly improved Kurosawa's negotiation skills.

"Did I choose the wrong person? Akira and Kurosawa, they would be perfect together if they compromised a little."

Akira, who loves reckless actions so much that he's favored by Kibayashi, and Kurosawa, who insists on safety to the extreme. If you put the two of them together, the team would

operate just right. While prioritizing safety, Akira is the team leader, so it's possible that he will perform well with some calculated risks incorporated. That's what Hikaru thought. And with Akira, things went even better than expected. He even showed great success in defeating the Oktoparos alone.

But the overall performance of the team was disappointing. They had certainly achieved significant results. However, considering that it was a unit led by Akira, it seemed somewhat passive. Of course, this was a natural result as long as the unit was operating under Kurosawa's command.

Nevertheless, Hikaru believed that Akira's team could achieve more. And she voiced the reason for this. "It's quite unexpected how much Akira prioritizes the safety of the team."

He's the kind of person who does such reckless things. Having run into life-threatening situations many times as a hunter and overcome them, his sense of danger is dulled. If that's the case, he might unconsciously adapt that sense to others and there's a risk that the entire team might recklessly charge in. That's what Hikaru thought.

However, in reality, Akira not only refrains from involving the team in his recklessness but also takes care not to push them too hard. He affirms Kurosawa's safety-first command and takes actions that seem to protect the entire team while standing at the forefront as the main force of the team.

This consideration for his comrades could be evaluated positively. However, from Hikaru's perspective, it felt like the team was hindering Akira and preventing him from achieving further success.

"Was it a mistake to encourage Akira to create a large team following the precedent of high-ranked hunters? Should I just let Akira act alone from now on? Hmm."

The fact remains that they are currently earning results smoothly. Would it be greedy to consider that a failure? However, being satisfied with the current situation won't lead to

further success. Something needs to be done. Hikaru was pondering her future actions with a groan. Just then, Kibayashi arrived.

"Hey, how's it going? Akira's area of responsibility. Going smoothly?"

"Smoothly. Almost too smoothly to be satisfying."

Recognizing that Kibayashi had come to probe her situation, Hikaru quickly put on a smile and responded.

"Good to hear. He's a difficult one to handle. I was thinking of lending a hand if things got tough."

"No need to worry. I can handle it on my own. Oh, it's a bit late, but I apologize for somewhat hijacking Kibayashi-san's assigned hunter. Even though it was under Inabe's instructions, it might seem like I took over." It's what Inabe instructed. Even if it's Kibayashi, he won't complain about this matter. Hikaru implied so and smiled confidently.

In a negative light, Hikaru was displaying a somewhat presumptuous attitude toward Kibayashi, her superior. It was a bit of a tit-for-tat move.

At her age, she had been assigned to the City Management Department, recognized by herself and others as a promising talent. That was her. Hikaru had that self-confidence. She believed she had delivered results befitting that self-confidence.

And she harbored dissatisfaction toward Kibayashi, who refused to recognize her abilities. He hadn't directly told her she was lacking in skills. But she believed it was clear from his treatment of her.

The source of Kibayashi's power was his connections with hunters who had risen through the ranks by winning bets he facilitated. To maintain those connections and to profit from them, regular and detailed exchanges were essential. However, Kibayashi had his daily

duties, and he also spent time looking for new challengers. He didn't have the luxury of spending much time on those who had lost his interest.

So Kibayashi delegated the handling of hunters who had lost his interest to the members of the City Management Department. Those entrusted with this task naturally gained the favor of high-ranked hunters. If they could leverage that favor well, they could reap significant profits.

Moreover, those who had lost Kibayashi's interest were, in other words, those who had become more cautious and less reckless, making them relatively easy to handle. Many staff members requested to be assigned next. Hikaru was one of them. She believed she had the ability to handle such an important task. So, she genuinely thought she should be entrusted with it.

But Kibayashi casually dismissed Hikaru's request. There was no room for negotiation. As a result, Hikaru's dissatisfaction only grew. So, when she was appointed as Akira's handler by Inabe, bypassing her superior Kibayashi and being entrusted with Akira's care directly by the city's executives, Hikaru was overjoyed.

Indeed, she was that excellent. The problem lay with Kibayashi, who couldn't see it, let alone acknowledge it. Thinking so, in high spirits, Hikaru couldn't suppress her feelings in front of Kibayashi, and with the accumulated dissatisfaction, she wore a slightly self-assured smile. Meanwhile, Kibayashi, facing that smile from Hikaru, accurately read her inner thoughts and actually seemed pleased.

"Don't worry about it. I've been busy too. It worked out perfectly. But I was worried because Akira is a difficult one to handle. Is everything going so smoothly? Impressive. Being personally appointed by Inabe must mean something. You're remarkable."

"Uh, thank you..." Hikaru was puzzled by Kibayashi's unexpected attitude. And Kibayashi, on his part, talked about why he was busy without paying attention to Hikaru's attitude, as if it were casual banter.

Currently, Udajima has been put at a disadvantage in the power struggle with Inabe because Inabe has become the overseer of the Tsubakihara area. Ideally, they would want to obstruct Inabe's work and make a comeback, but that's impossible. The work in the Tsubakihara area is also a source of profit for Yanagisawa. If they interfere with Yanagisawa's interests, Udajima has no chance.

Therefore, Udajima must make a comeback through other means, but that would require achieving results that surpass the profits from the relics flowing from Tsubaki's management area.

However, there are no such results to be had in the current city of Kugamayama. Normally, this would be a dead end. However, Udajima didn't give up and took a gamble. He began full-scale efforts to capture the second deep section of the Kuzusuhara District ruins.

It's a rule of thumb, but the deeper you go into the Kuzusuhara District ruins, the more valuable relics you can obtain. If the capture of the second deep section progresses and the rear communication lines extend beyond it, there is a possibility that more valuable relics could be obtained in large quantities than those obtained through trade with Tsubaki. If that happens, Inabe's control over the relics of Tsubaki will relatively decrease.

Furthermore, the extension of the rear communication lines is something that Yanagisawa is actively pursuing. By cooperating with him, you can also expect rewards from Yanagisawa.

Since it's Yanagisawa's project, there's no risk of interference from Inabe. Additionally, if the capture of the second deep section stimulates something in the depths of the ruins, such as monsters from the second deep section overflowing into the first deep section, there is also a possibility that trade with Tsubaki will be interrupted. If that happens, Inabe's control over the relics will significantly decrease.

"It's all a gamble. There's no guarantee of success whatsoever. But it's better than doing nothing. There's far more potential than slowly being cornered. With that in mind, Udagima did everything he could.

To advance in capturing the second deep section, we need forces. The second deep section is so high-level that it forced the retreat of squads of humanoid weapons, and it's beyond the capabilities of hunters in Kugamayama City. We need to call in powerful hunters who are active further east.

And conveniently, now is the peak time for major circulation. Without missing this opportunity, Udagima, as a city executive, was energetically working to call in powerful hunters from the eastern regions. Kibayashi had no interest in the power struggle between Inabe and Udagima. However, as part of the project to capture the second deep section promoted by Yanagisawa, he was busy contacting high-ranked hunters with whom he had connections, asking them to come to Kugamayama City, and preparing for their reception.

Kugamayama City is located in the middle of the vast eastern region. There are many ruins relatively nearby, and thanks to the various levels of difficulty, hunters ranging from beginners to those in their forties in rank have made this city their base of operations.

The milestone for hunters to move their operational base further east from here is Rank 50. If the earnings in this area aren't enough, they aim to become high-ranked hunters. In that sense, this city is like a steppingstone for aspiring hunters, and people looking to rise up gather here from various places.

However, for those who have already surpassed this somewhat significant city, it's just one of many mid-sized governing corporations in the eastern region. They won't come just because they're invited. Even if they're invited and return to Kugamayama City, the only

place where they can demonstrate their skills is in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District ruins.

Still, Kibayashi somehow managed to negotiate. The value of the second deep section as a relic collection site is unknown, but enough can be earned just from rewards for monster subjugation. Since Kugamayama City profits from trading with Tsubaki, there are no concerns about payment. Also, preparations for the use of tanks and humanoid weapons in the eastern region, such as maintenance facilities, are underway, so there are no issues. That's what he said to persuade them. And thanks to his persuasion, he succeeded in recruiting several hunter teams.

Even after the recruitment, Kibayashi's work continued. They needed to actually bring the hunters from distant cities to Kugamayama City.

The best way to travel from distant cities to Kugamayama City is to use inter-city transport vehicles. But the fees are high. Especially the fees for routes connecting to the eastern cities include defense costs against monsters that inhabit those areas, so they are extremely high. Even with support from major circulation, it's still quite expensive.

Furthermore, the hunters who accepted Kibayashi's invitation were only the skilled ones who had surpassed the reckless challenges provided by Kibayashi, and most of them had become the main force of their teams. If only the main force of the team came to Kugamayama City, the remaining members would be short of forces and in great trouble, so usually the entire team would go. Naturally, the more people there are, the higher the fees. In addition, there are transportation costs for tanks and humanoid weapons.

The total amount is such that even though they're being called here for our convenience, Kugamayama City simply can't bear the entire burden. Kibayashi had to somehow adjust this. And he would talk to Hikaru about these matters, often interspersing them with complaints.

"By the way, I've been arranging for the main force of those teams to escort the inter-city transport vehicles, and then offsetting the fare for the remaining members with their rewards, but well, complaints still arise. Even if I pacify those complaints, there are times when there aren't enough personnel available for escort due to the vehicle's schedule, you know? It's quite a hassle."

"I-Is that so? Thank you for your hard work," Hikaru listened to Kibayashi's words with confusion. She was curious about Kibayashi's seemingly good mood, but the content of the conversation itself was very enlightening. While thinking about how she would handle it herself, she listened with interest.

While confirming Hikaru's reaction inwardly, Kibayashi continued without letting her notice.

"Ah, I'm really tired. I've been arranging for the team units to escort the vehicles, but the adjustment is really tough. I have to ensure the minimum force of each team, and if the number of people increases, I also need to secure enough rooms..." And with that tired expression, Kibayashi finished his sentence as if he had come to his senses.

"Oops, I've been talking for quite a while. Sorry for bothering you."

"No, it was a very informative conversation."

"Take care of Akira's handling. Oh, if there's anything I can help with, let me know anytime. Well then," Kibayashi said only that and left Hikaru. He smiled without revealing a fragment of his inner thoughts, even as Hikaru looked at his back somewhat puzzled.

After finishing the conversation with Kibayashi and returning to work, Hikaru reconsidered Akira's future actions. Then, stimulated by the earlier conversation, a certain idea came to mind.

"...Ah, that's an option, isn't it? Can I make it work?" Hikaru examined the idea that came to mind. She considered the feasibility and effectiveness of the idea. And she smiled confidently.

"This should work. As expected of me. Alright! Let's get started right away!" With a brilliant idea in mind, and with her own carefully thought-out plan, Hikaru enthusiastically began her work.

Hikaru, who was excited about the brilliant idea, thought it was trivial that the source of the information that led to it was Kibayashi and didn't pay any attention to it. She even thought of Kibayashi's oversight as inconsequential and didn't care at all.



During his bath at home, Akira receives a message from Hikaru. It's a communication intended for the information terminal in the room, but it comes out normally through Alpha.

『Akira. I have a favor to ask, or rather, a consultation...』 Hikaru's request is for Akira to participate alone in escorting inter-city transport vehicles.

Hunters who accept escort requests for inter-city transport vehicles are usually expected to participate as a team, due to factors such as the minimum combat strength mentioned by Kibayashi.

However, it's not explicitly required to accept the request as a team. Given Akira's survival in solo combat during the nationalist suppression war, the vehicle security side might acknowledge Akira's individual participation based on that achievement. Hikaru thinks so and decides to talk to Akira about it first.

Upon hearing the details, Akira's expression turns slightly puzzled. "I'm not opposed to it, but what about the rest of the unit?"

『We can consider your absence as rest time and interrupt the culling process. Or we could even terminate the culling request altogether.』

"So, it's not about finishing the culling request soon and moving on to escorting inter-city transport vehicles. It's about prioritizing escort requests over culling requests. Does that mean if I decline, the culling request will continue?"

If Akira were alone, he wouldn't mind sudden changes in plans. But now he has scheduled with the unit, including Elena. Thinking that changing plans abruptly would cause inconvenience, he hesitates to accept Hikaru's request.

Sensing this, Hikaru tries to smooth things over. 『The culling request will end eventually. So, there's no need to worry too much about it. Besides, we can change the work location to a lower difficulty level. It wouldn't hurt to see how well we can fight without Akira once. And since Kurosawa will be in charge, it'll be fine.』

"Hmm. That sounds reasonable, I guess?"

『Doesn't it? Also, Inabe asked for your help, and escorting inter-city transport vehicles is effective for raising Hunter ranks. So, we want you to take it.』

Hikaru was assigned to Akira by Inabe's instruction. Therefore, it's not a lie to say that Inabe asked for Akira's help. And it's a fact that escorting inter-city transport vehicles is effective for raising Hunter ranks. However, these two matters are unrelated. Hikaru is just presenting them together.

And Akira, being in a cooperative relationship with Inabe regarding the Hunter rank, interprets Hikaru's proposed escort request for inter-city transport vehicles as Inabe's instruction.

"Got it. I'll do it."

『That's the spirit. Let's proceed in that direction then.』 Hikaru continues the conversation cheerfully. Then, casually, as if it were successful, she says, "Oh, if there's any troublesome negotiation, let me know. I'll solve it just like before."

"It's not going to increase that quickly again."

『Really? Don't hesitate to ask, okay?』

"I'm fine. Even if I force myself to think of something, I'm just pondering about renovating the bathroom."

Akira, who became dissatisfied with his cheap bath at home after experiencing a luxurious bathing experience at Sheryl's base, had been considering renovating the bathroom for a while. Unlike before the nationalist suppression war, there's now a sufficient budget. He contacted a rental agency to convey this.

The agency recommended not renovating the bathroom but moving instead. To add the facilities needed for the bath, reconstruction rather than renovation is necessary.

Additionally, the current house is designed for Hunter Rank 30. It's not a house where a high-ranking Hunter of Rank 50 would live. If you're dissatisfied with the facilities of the house, consider moving to a residence suitable for you now.

Convinced by the agency, Akira was troubled.

"I understand what you're saying, but I have no complaints other than the bath in my current house, and moving is a hassle. I'm not sure what to do."

"That's it. I agree with the opinion of the rental agency. Akira is an amazing Hunter, making a lot of money. Naturally, there's a house suitable for that income. It'll have better facilities than just the bathroom, and isn't this a good opportunity?"

"Hmm, but..." Hearing Akira's unenthusiastic response, Hikaru quickly backtracks on her previous statement.

『But the most important thing is how you feel, Akira. You're the one making the money, so you should do what you want. If negotiating with the contractors is a hassle, I can handle it for you.』

"Really?"

『Of course. Plus, while the house will be noisy during the renovations, you'll be away escorting the inter-city transport vehicles, so it's perfect timing. When you return, you'll have a luxurious bathroom waiting for you. I think that would be pretty interesting.』

"Oh! That sounds great. Let's do that."

『Got it. I'll take care of the arrangements then.』 After finishing his conversation with Hikaru, Akira glanced around his bathroom. The familiar sight now looked even cheaper due to his anticipation of the renovations.

"This bathroom is already a big upgrade compared to the cheap inns I used to stay at. I guess I've become quite the luxury-seeker. I can't wait for the renovation." Akira said this with a somewhat satisfied smile, prompting Alpha, who was bathing with him as usual, to comment lightly.

『If it's just the appearance you're after, I can change it right now.』 Alpha expanded Akira's field of vision. The image of the luxurious bathroom from the rental agency's brochure unfolded before Akira's eyes.

"That's handy. If it's just about appearances, this is enough, I guess. Though you can't change the feel of the water with just appearances." Akira scooped some water from the tub. Even in the grand view of the extended reality, the feel of the water remained the same.

Seeing Akira's reaction, Alpha smiled knowingly.

『It seems that for you, the feel is what's important.』

"Well, even when I used Sheryl's bath, I only felt the difference after actually getting in..." Akira stopped mid-sentence, realizing what Alpha was implying.

A stunning woman, whose physical form he couldn't touch, stood within arm's reach in his vision, smiling teasingly at the boy who could temporarily feel her presence thanks to a highly advanced prosthetic hand.



Hikaru, having secured Akira's agreement to take on the task of escorting the inter-city transport vehicle, promptly began negotiations with the vehicle operators to arrange the details. As expected, there was no issue regarding the minimum force requirement. However, a new problem arose: Akira did not have permission to enter the interior of Kugamayama City's defensive walls.

The interior of the inter-city transport vehicle is maintained with security measures equivalent to those within the city walls. Because of this, they could not assign someone without permission to enter the city walls as an escort. Since the designated hunter did not have this permission, they requested that Hikaru arrange for Akira to obtain entry permission from Kugamayama City before the escort mission began.

Hikaru assured them she would secure the necessary permission by the deadline and proceeded with the contract. All that remained was to submit Akira's entry application for the mid-level area. Considering that high-ranking hunters with connections to city executives usually get permission without issues, Hikaru thought it would be straightforward. However, she stumbled at this point. The entry permission was denied.

Initially, Hikaru applied on Akira's behalf. The application was rejected without any explanation. She then resubmitted the application, adding her own name as a sponsor. It was rejected again, this time with a brief note citing "security reasons."

Hikaru started to panic. Even if she submitted another application and it was accepted, approval would not be immediate. It could take from a day to a week. At this rate, they risked missing the start of the escort mission. This would create a significant gap in the security measures of the inter-city transport vehicle, equivalent to breaching the city walls' security. Such an oversight would tarnish her career irreparably.

Moreover, Akira had already begun preparations for the escort mission based on her instructions. If she had to ask him to change plans now after confidently asserting her demands, it would damage the trust she had worked hard to earn from Akira.

"Why can't I get approval even as a sponsor? I'm a staff member of the City Management Department! Normally, this should be a breeze. I have to resolve this... If I contact the Security Department now to understand why Akira's permission was denied and negotiate for approval... No! It won't be in time!" Hikaru realized that there were complicated issues behind the denial that couldn't be quickly resolved. Estimating the time needed to clear these hurdles suggested it would exceed the mission's deadline.

With a grimace, Hikaru made a decision. "I have no choice. I didn't want to use such forceful measures, but..." Regular entry permissions, which last for years, are under the Security Department's jurisdiction, but temporary entry permits for a few days or weeks can be issued by the City Management Department. Hikaru decided to use this authority.

While it was within her power to issue such permits, allowing someone not approved by the Security Department to enter the city walls was generally discouraged. Misuse could lead to security issues within the walls, attracting complaints from the Security Department. In extreme cases, they might intervene despite jurisdictional boundaries.

Nevertheless, Hikaru decided to push through with it. She concluded that dealing with a bit of friction from the Security Department was better than jeopardizing the escort mission. She swiftly completed the necessary paperwork.

"This should do it. ...Maybe mentioning Inabe's name was overdoing it, but this should ensure the Security Department at least tolerates it," she muttered.

Although reluctant, Hikaru used Inabe's name to convey the impression that this was a directive from higher up and to prepare for the unlikely event that the Security Department

intervened over a trivial issue. Thus, she issued Akira a temporary entry permit for the mid-level area.

The Security Department was automatically notified of the temporary permit issued to Akira. As Hikaru continued her daily tasks, she monitored the situation. Since the permit was only for the escort mission and wouldn't allow Akira long-term entry, she believed it would be fine. If there were any issues, she expected to hear from the Security Department. Concluding her day's work without receiving any such contact, Hikaru felt reassured that everything was in order.

Meanwhile, the use of Inabe's name in the permit process meant that Inabe was also informed of the situation. After considering the matter for a while, Inabe decided to quietly observe the situation.

199: Hikaru's miscalculation

The day of the inter-city transport vehicle escort mission arrived. Akira, fully prepared, was waiting for Hikaru in the lobby of the Kugama Building on the first floor. For this mission, Akira had purchased two additional modified LEO composite guns, bringing his total to four. These, along with the AF laser cannon, were stored in cases at his feet.

They were about to enter the mid-level area. Although wearing reinforced suits was permissible inside the walls, carrying firearms was not allowed. Strictly speaking, Akira did not have the necessary permission to do so.

The lobby was bustling with hunters as usual, but Akira did not attract the same attention as before. The city of Kugamayama had invited numerous powerful hunter teams from other cities for the second phase of the Kuzusuhara Street Ruins exploration, making the presence of high-ranking hunters less unusual. Akira felt a mix of slight disappointment and relief at not being the center of attention.

『I heard that quite a few high-ranking hunters have already arrived from other cities, and it seems to be true,』 Alpha said with her usual smile beside Akira.

『It seems so. It's the peak of the big circulation period. Hunters are coming from far away using the same inter-city transport vehicles that you will be escorting.』

Following Alpha's gaze, Akira noticed a hunter wearing a jacket over a suit resembling a swimsuit, a jacket that clearly couldn't be closed in the front.

『...That pointed old-world-style equipment. It looks like that hunter came from quite far east.』

『Yes. That equipment might not just be old-world-style but actually old-world-made.』

『Old-world-made, huh? If someone has such amazing gear, they must be really skilled. No wonder I don't stand out among these guys.』

After playing a significant role in the suppression of the Nationalists, Akira had temporarily risen to the top among Kugamayama City's hunters. However, this was short-lived. The influx of eastern hunters now made him just one of the stronger ones in the city.

Akira felt humbled, realizing how vast the eastern regions were.

Hikaru arrived on time. "Akira, sorry to keep you waiting. This way."

Akira followed Hikaru through the passage leading to the inside of the defensive walls. Along the way, Hikaru brought up the hunter they had seen earlier.

"Did you see that hunter with the incredible outfit? They probably operated far to the east."

"Yeah. I've heard some hunters dress like that to bluff, but that one didn't seem to be bluffing. The gear must be top-notch."

Some old-world-made equipment, despite its comical appearance, had an astounding performance. Without prior knowledge, such equipment could make someone appear to be charging into dangerous wasteland with only a handgun and a swimsuit. The old-world gear had the capability to make such feats safely and sanely possible. Even modern high-rank hunter gear often incorporated old-world technology, offering comparable performance.

Some people used cheap, old-world-style equipment just to bluff. While some dismissed this as a mere trick against humans, the deceptive effect often worked on monsters that gauged threat levels visually, making it a tactic that couldn't be ignored.

Akira, by now, could discern whether equipment was a bluff or genuine.

"Hikaru, are there a lot of high-ranking hunters like that already in Kugamayama City?"

"Yes. This influx is boosting the exploration of the Kuzusuhara Street Ruins, which is a good thing. Although, the increase in people dressed like that might be a bit of an issue," Hikaru replied, then smiled at Akira with a hint of humor.

"Akira, when you can afford more high-performance gear, will you dress like that?" Hikaru asked with a playful smile.

"No, I don't think so... I'd buy something with the same performance but a normal design."

"So, what if you found something really cheap with the same performance?"

"... It depends on the performance," Akira replied after a pause.

"Wow, you really are a hunter," Hikaru laughed, and Akira returned a wry smile.

Whether it's a swimsuit, a maid outfit, or a bunny suit, if it can help them survive and fight off monsters safely, hunters will wear it. That's the way hunters are. Choosing between appearance and their own life—those who make the wrong choice cannot survive in the wilderness. This is why hunters accept even the most outlandish old-world style designs for their gear.

As they chatted lightly, Akira and Hikaru crossed the boundary between the lower and middle districts. They passed through a corridor guarded by heavily armed personnel, unlike the guards in the lower district. Hikaru stepped ahead and smiled proudly at Akira.

"Welcome to the middle district, Akira."

Before Akira lay the view of the inner side of the defensive wall. The inside and outside of the city—two worlds divided by security, economy, and order. Akira had finally arrived at the place he once dreamed of beyond the wall he used to look up at in awe.

Akira and Hikaru, who had entered the middle district, headed to the inter-city transport vehicle boarding area in a car arranged by Hikaru. Akira looked at the scenery of the middle district from inside the driverless vehicle.

Hikaru, sitting across from him, had a somewhat disappointed expression.

The first sight seen by those entering the middle district through the Kugama Building was a cityscape far more sophisticated than outside the wall. It was a meticulously calculated scene designed to strongly showcase that this place was fundamentally different from the outside.

Most people entering the middle district for the first time were surprised, amazed, and felt a mixture of awe and tension at the drastically different scenery. Some even felt a sense of pride that they were now allowed to step into such a place.

Hikaru had expected a similar reaction from Akira. She wanted to boast about the wonderful place she lived in. However, Akira's reaction was underwhelming. Although not completely indifferent, his reaction was just mild curiosity, far from meeting Hikaru's expectations.

Smiling but slightly revealing her inner dissatisfaction, Hikaru asked Akira, "Are you disappointed by the middle district's scenery?"

"Huh? No, that's not it. I can definitely feel that it's different inside the wall. And I've never seen driverless cars outside."

"I see."

That level of response did not satisfy Hikaru. She still wanted Akira to acknowledge how amazing the middle district was compared to the lower district. She thought of something else that was vastly different between the inside and outside of the wall and exaggeratedly spoke as if making a light joke.

"The difference between inside and outside the wall isn't just the scenery. In the middle district, if someone gets killed on the street, the culprit is quickly caught, their motive thoroughly investigated, and they are put on trial and imprisoned according to their crime. Isn't that amazing?"

"Wow! That is amazing! The inside of the wall is really different!" Akira exclaimed, overreacting. Hikaru, slightly taken aback, quickly realized that Akira wasn't just exaggerating his response to match hers. She was somewhat satisfied with his genuine reaction.

(For him to be this surprised... The security outside the wall must be terrible.)

Hikaru thought this must be why Akira was so astonished. She felt grateful once again for living in such a safe and wonderful place.

The inter-city transport vehicle boarding area within the defensive wall was structured like a port to accommodate the massive vehicles. Large trucks transporting cargo were also visible around, with tires taller than Akira's height.

The inter-city transport vehicle stationed at the boarding area was so gigantic that it made the large trucks look like small cars in comparison. Akira, upon arriving and seeing the immense size, voiced his astonishment.

"Whoa... It's this big?"

Hikaru laughed cheerfully at Akira's reaction, enjoying his amazement.



"Well, it's an inter-city transport vehicle after all. This Gigantes III is specifically for ultra-long-distance travel to the city of Zegelt, so it's even bigger," Hikaru explained.

"I see. With something this big running through the wasteland, it's no wonder a lot of monsters will be attracted. They'd need to be culled in advance," Akira noted.

"Exactly. Now, let's get on board." They boarded the Gigantes III via a gangway from the boarding area and headed to the room Akira would be staying in.

The room was spacious, more than enough for Akira to use alone. It even had a bathroom. While there were no windows, a large display screen capable of stereoscopic viewing was installed on the wall, allowing the scenery outside to be displayed and enjoyed.

The Gigantes III maintained security measures equivalent to those inside the city's walls, targeting wealthy residents from within the walls as its main clientele. Though not as luxurious as a suite in a high-end hotel, it was opulent enough to satisfy those accustomed to luxury.

Hikaru found Akira's slightly uneasy exploration of the room amusing and smiled.

"Well then, Akira, I'll head back now. If anything comes up, contact me immediately. I'll support you from Kugamayama City as best I can. Good luck. I'm expecting great results from you," Hikaru said.

"Yeah, I'll do my best to make the most of this opportunity." Akira and Hikaru exchanged smiles, and Hikaru left the room, looking satisfied.

Akira, exploring the room, found the bathroom. "Wow, the bath is amazing too."

『Akira's house bathroom should be just as good when we get back. Let's look forward to it.
』

"Yeah, I'm really looking forward to it," Akira said with a cheerful smile, remembering the bathroom at home thanks to Alpha's words.

Everything was progressing smoothly. Hikaru, walking down the corridor with a cheerful expression, suddenly looked puzzled.

"... A call from Kibayashi? And on a secure line? What?" Despite her suspicions, Hikaru answered the call, ensuring no sound leaked out.

『Kibayashi-san. Using a secure line, what's the matter?』

『It's about Akira. I need to talk to you.』

『About Akira? Everything's going well. Actually, I just had him accept a job to guard the inter-city transport vehicle. I just delivered him to the Gigantes III. It's a tough journey to Zegelt City, but Akira should achieve great results.』 Hikaru replied cheerfully, thinking Kibayashi was probing because he was upset that she had taken charge of his favorite hunter.

But Kibayashi's unexpected response made her lose her smile. "I see... It's a bit late..."

"What do you mean?" Hikaru asked, puzzled by Kibayashi's serious and heavy tone.

"I feel responsible too. You tend to be overconfident, so I thought if I nudged you a bit, you'd do something interesting like getting Akira to join the inter-city transport vehicle's guard. I didn't intend for it to go this far," Kibayashi explained.

Hikaru realized that her idea of having Akira take on the guard job was influenced by Kibayashi's suggestion. When he had brought up the topic of guarding the inter-city transport vehicle, it was to prompt this outcome. She felt played but quickly reconsidered. Would Akira accepting this guard job cause any disadvantage to her? She couldn't think of any.

Still, an uneasy feeling grew within her. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'll explain now," Kibayashi replied, sending confidential information. The document contained information about Akira, including Kibayashi's speculations. Seeing the content, Hikaru first burst out laughing.

Estimated total number of killings: 200 to 1,000. Investigated by Kugamayama City's intelligence division. The number was so high that, in Hikaru's view, Akira could almost be called a demon. Her face twisted in shock.

"... What is this number? ... A thousand? What does this mean?" The wide range between the minimum and maximum estimates indicated that even the city's intelligence division couldn't pinpoint the exact number. It also suggested that Akira's actual count could reach the highest estimate. Hikaru understood this much.

Remembering her conversation with Akira, she recalled his surprise at the idea that killers are apprehended and tried in the middle district. This reaction made sense if Akira had killed many outside the wall. The realization made Hikaru shudder, but she tried to remain calm.

"... Calm down. This just means that the security outside the wall is that bad. It's not surprising when you think about it rationally," she told herself firmly to stay composed. Akira was from the slums and had ties to the gangs there. Living as a strong individual in a place where killing was rampant would lead to such numbers. Moreover, the killings were outside the wall, so it wasn't a deep concern.

Hikaru tried to reassure herself. Then she noticed another detail in the document.

Three of the victims were employees of the General Investigation Bureau. The document stated this fact.

(Wait a minute! Akira has killed city officials too!?) Hikaru's face paled as she read the document, which indicated that Akira had killed three employees of the General Investigation Bureau. According to Kibayashi's notes, these three had been acting on Udajima's orders to assassinate Sheryl, the boss of the Sheryl Family, but were killed by Akira who happened to be there.

Hikaru's face turned pale. No matter how many people Akira had killed, she had unconsciously believed that he would never lay hands on city officials. That belief was now shattered.

(Is this what Kibayashi meant by 'interesting'? Putting such a dangerous person on an inter-city transport vehicle!? And having me do it instead of doing it himself!) Hikaru's anger flared up, intensified by the fact that she had actually done it.

However, she suddenly froze. Kibayashi had said he didn't intend for the situation to go this far, implying things were going to get worse. Realizing this, Hikaru's anger was replaced by fear as she continued reading the document.

It stated that Akira was planning to kill Udajima with Inabe.

(What the hell is going on!?) Although this was just Kibayashi's speculation, the reasoning was clearly laid out. Akira was ruthless to his enemies, having wiped out opposing gangs in the slums and attacked both sides in the war between the two major gangs. He had even killed General Investigation Bureau officers who attacked the gang he supported.

Despite this, Akira had made peace with Drankam, who attacked him during the nationalist suppression battle. Why? Because there was someone he prioritized killing even more: Udajima, who had ordered Drankam's attack. The optimal method for Akira to kill Udajima, as per Kibayashi's reasoning, was to team up with Inabe to raise his hunter rank.

Applying pressure from both a major faction leader and a high-ranking hunter would lead to Udajima's downfall and eventual exile outside the walls, where Akira could kill him. Kibayashi concluded that Akira had figured this out and was acting on it.

『Hikaru, you probably don't know, but Akira had no interest in raising his hunter rank, to the point of refusing forced rank adjustments. Recently, he's been working hard to increase his rank, indicating an ulterior motive. I've been investigating because of that suspicion.』

Assignments where the city covers ammunition costs typically offer lower rewards but make it easier to raise one's hunter rank. Akira had accepted such assignments for both the culling job and the Gigantes III escort, making sense to Hikaru and causing her to tremble. Then she burst out laughing again. The passenger list for Gigantes III included Udajima's name.

『Udajima is planning to recruit hunters in Zegelt City. Having a city official personally visit shows great sincerity, increasing the success rate of the recruitment.』

Moving between cities in the eastern region is extremely difficult due to the monsters roaming the wilderness, so such efforts are seen as highly earnest and effective.

『But that backfired. Riding the same vehicle as Akira... What do you think will happen if Akira meets Udajima by chance?』 Hikaru could easily imagine the outcome.

『Normally, assassinating a city official is impossible. Udajima has guards and will stay in a secure room throughout the journey, leaving no opportunity for Akira to strike.』 This relieved Hikaru slightly.

『But it's Akira we're talking about. For some reason, he tends to get involved in big incidents, creating plenty of opportunities for chaos. Don't be complacent.』 Kibayashi's words shattered Hikaru's brief relief, making her even more anxious.

『That's all I have to say. I felt responsible for this situation, so I shared this information. The rest is up to you. Good luck.』 With that, Kibayashi ended the call. Hikaru stood frozen for a moment before sprinting back the way she came. She found Akira about to leave his room.

Akira looked puzzled at the out-of-breath Hikaru. "Hikaru? Weren't you leaving?"

"A... Akira... where are you... going?"

"I was thinking of checking out the dining area..."

"I see... For now, could you go back to your room?" Hikaru pushed Akira with all her might. Though she couldn't have moved someone in a reinforced suit with her bare strength, Akira stepped back, allowing her to succeed in getting him back inside.

Akira, still puzzled, asked, "So, what's the matter? The Gigantes III is about to depart. Shouldn't we be outside?"

「Well, I decided to go with you.」

「Huh?」

"It's more effective to support you nearby, right? It's harder to do that from afar, for various reasons."

"I see. That's fine."

"I'll be using this room too, and I'm sorry, but could you stay inside as much as possible? There are reasons... Sorry." Akira found Hikaru's awkward smile strange but didn't question it deeply.

"Got it."

"Thank you. That helps a lot." Hikaru sighed in relief, despite the curious look from Akira, which she didn't have the luxury to worry about.

(I will handle Akira and make sure this escort mission ends safely! If Akira caused any trouble, her career would be ruined. If he killed Udajima, she could lose not just her job but her life. She was determined to handle it.

(I can do this! I will do this! Hikaru steeled herself with this resolve.

The announcement for departure echoed through the Gigantes III. The massive inter-city transport vehicle began to move slowly.

A section of the Kugamayama City's wall opened. The Gigantes III passed through and sped up, heading for its destination across the wasteland.

The escort mission for Akira and Hikaru on the Gigantes III, feeling tumultuous from the start, had begun.

200: The Eastern Region

The Gigantes III, an inter-city transport vehicle carrying Akira and the others, plowed through the wilderness, kicking up massive clouds of sand and dust. It effortlessly blew away, crushed, and pulverized any obstacles in its path, treating even large chunks of debris and the remains of giant monsters as mere pebbles compared to its colossal size.

Despite the abundance of debris scattered beneath its feet, nothing could impede its progress. The force field armor of the vehicle was incredibly robust, easily deflecting any casual gunfire. The enormous cannon mounted on its roof could even shoot down flying behemoths. With a capacity surpassing that of a small town, the Gigantes III was equipped with various facilities to accommodate its passengers.

It could easily be described as a super-sized wasteland-specific vehicle, equivalent to a mobile fortress. This was the inter-city transport vehicle, the Gigantes III, carrying Akira and the others.

Having accepted the escort request, Akira was now waiting in his room on the vehicle, anticipating the time for security duty.

He glanced at Hikaru. Hikaru was smiling pleasantly, moving her lips silently as if conversing with empty space. At first glance, she seemed like a suspicious individual talking to thin air. However, Akira, with his expanded reality function, understood that Hikaru was speaking to someone using AR. Even so, it still seemed strange to him, as he wasn't accustomed to it.

『Hey Alpha, is this what it feels like when I talk to Alpha?』

『Only when we're alone. Normally, I can hide it, so don't worry. Well, at first, you got a lot of weird looks, though.』

『...Was I that conspicuous?』 Akira forced a smile as Alpha chuckled happily.

At that moment, a communication request came from the security side of the vehicle. Accepting it, Akira saw Hikaru's image in his expanded vision. Slightly surprised, he glanced at Hikaru in the room, who was smiling from both the room and the expanded vision.

『We're connected properly, Akira. I'll be your operator until this mission is over. I'll handle negotiations with the security side, so leave it all to me.』

No sound came from Hikaru in the room, but her voice was clear via the communication. Finding this sensation curious, Akira responded via the communication.

『Got it. By the way, how do I appear on your end?』

『I only hear your voice. If you send me the video feed, I'll be able to see you.』

『Um, how do I do that?』

『Doesn't your information gathering device have a function to generate the wearer's video feed? I'm doing something similar.』

『Alpha, can you do that?』

『I'll take care of it.』

『I can see you now. Oh, could you also link our information gathering devices? It'll make it easier for me to be your operator.』

『I'll do that too.』 Hikaru smiled happily as their information terminals were linked.

"Thanks. This will help," she said, now able to accurately track Akira's movements. She believed this would make controlling Akira easier.

In reality, the data obtained through this link was censored and manipulated by Alpha. Hikaru couldn't truly understand Akira's actions. She hadn't even heard Akira and Alpha's previous conversation.

"Well then, let's get started with the operator's job. I'll contact you, Akira. It's almost time. Get ready."

"Got it." Akira had to leave his room armed. He hoped it was just unnecessary worry, but he might accidentally encounter Udajima. Despite her anxiety, Hikaru smiled confidently. Akira returned the smile. Akira finished his preparations. Two of the four LEO composite guns were strapped to his waist, and the other two to his legs. An AF laser cannon was attached to his back in its undeveloped state. In addition, he carried a backpack filled with extra ammunition and energy packs on auxiliary arms. He looked every bit like a high-ranking hunter with tremendous firepower.

Despite seeing Akira in this state, Hikaru didn't feel reassured. He was like a hazardous material that required careful handling, or even an explosive that couldn't withstand the slightest impact. All she could see was an increase in his firepower.

"Alright. I'll be off then."

"Uh, yeah. Good luck." Akira left the room. Hikaru watched him go, but impulsively ran after him halfway.

"I-I'll go with you right up until the end! Because I'm your operator!"

"I see." Was that what an operator's job entailed? Akira wondered, but he didn't question it under Hikaru's fervent gaze.

Together, with Hikaru, who couldn't bear to take her eyes off this hazardous material, they headed to the roof of the vehicle. Until the last moment before Akira stepped onto the roof, Hikaru remained tense, vigilant, and alert, as if navigating through ancient ruins by Akira's side, watching his every move. Inter-city transport vehicles were generally shaped like rectangular prisms, as simpler shapes were more conducive to maximizing the efficiency of force field armor.

In that situation, the roof of the Gigantes III was nothing but a flat surface, except for the massive guns it carried. There was hardly anything to block the wind, and with the vehicle's speed and the height of the buildings, the roof was constantly battered by strong winds. An ordinary person wouldn't be able to stand, let alone would be blown into the air.

But Akira had no problem. Thanks to the strength of his reinforced suit, he stood there easily. The other hunters positioned there were the same. Such a level of capability wasn't even the minimum requirement for accepting the escort request for this inter-city transport vehicle.

Akira's job was to intercept monsters attacking the vehicle here. But for now, he had nothing to do.

Basic reconnaissance was carried out by the security side of the Gigantes III using highly advanced onboard reconnaissance equipment. If there was an enemy attack, they would be notified. Akira didn't need to do anything.

Furthermore, since the thinning out of monsters along the route had been done beforehand, there were hardly any enemy attacks themselves.

Occasionally, they would receive gunfire or artillery fire from distant monsters, but it was manageable with only a few people. Sometimes, monsters would attempt to attach

themselves to the vehicle's walls, but most of the time, they failed and were crushed. A very rare successful case would be shot down by a hunter and meet the same fate, crushed under the wheels.

There were only a few hunters sparsely positioned on the vast roof. Nonetheless, there was more than enough room to handle any situation. Akira found himself bored as he looked out over the wilderness from the edge of the roof.

『...It's boring, isn't it?』 Alpha chuckled.

『Considering the entire journey, we haven't really moved far from Kugamayama City yet. It's to be expected.』

『So the culling out of monsters paid off. ...Well, I guess it's good to have some free time when you're on escort duty.』

『Then why not study to pass the time?』

『That's a good idea, but wouldn't Hikaru get mad if I slacked off? She can see what's going on here through the linked information devices, right?』

『I'm adjusting the data sent to her, so it's fine. Let her see Akira standing quietly and seriously.』 With a smile, Alpha looked at Akira, who also smiled lightly. Although Akira's job performance was being disguised with Alpha's support, in a sense, it was something Akira had been doing for a long time.

『Well, I'm here with Alpha's support. It's too late for that now. I'm counting on you.』 Various study materials appeared in Akira's expanded vision. Alpha's attire also changed to that of a teacher, and a pointer appeared in her hand.

Seeing that, Akira remembered a previous scene.

『...Alpha, don't take off your clothes, okay?』

『Is it better to wear them?』

『Don't take them off.』

『I guess there's no helping it. Understood.』 Alpha's lesson began on the roof of the Gigantes III. After that, Akira continued to study until it was time to switch with the night shift.

When he returned to the vehicle, Hikaru was waiting at the entrance.

"Akira, good work." With Hikaru, who seemed much calmer compared to when they went to the roof, Akira returned to his room.



After seeing Akira off to the rooftop and returning to her room for a while, Hikaru, feeling considerably calmer due to the passage of enough time, reexamined Kibayashi's story with a clear head. Upon doing so, things that hadn't occurred to her when she was in a panic began to come to mind.

Kibayashi's story consisted of facts and speculations. The facts had to be acknowledged as such. Although she had investigated it herself in a short time, there was no guarantee that the speculations were indeed facts.

Just as Kibayashi's story led her to think about escorting inter-city transport vehicles and guided her thoughts, she began to wonder if this story was also some form of guidance. Had she only made plausible speculations for that purpose? Hikaru started to think that way.

(I have to admit that Akira is a more dangerous person than I anticipated. But planning to assassinate Udajima-san seems a bit too much, doesn't it? Even if I generously consider it, it seems impossible in this situation. Maybe I'm overthinking it.) According to Kibayashi's speculation, Akira was planning to kill Udajima after causing his downfall. In other words, he was hesitating to assassinate a city executive.

Even with a supporter like Inabe, assassinating a city executive was something that couldn't be covered up. It was different from killing an employee of the Comprehensive Investigation Bureau. In other words, Akira couldn't afford to make enemies of Kugamayama City itself. That's why he was trying to first bring about Udajima's downfall and erase his position as a city executive.

And besides, there was a high possibility that Akira didn't even know that Udajima was on this vehicle.

Taking all of this into account, Hikaru concluded that Kibayashi's story was implausible.
"I've been worrying too much. Well, just in case, I'll take precautions."

Hikaru manipulated the information terminal. Then, she added details of the Gigantes III escort request to Akira's personal page on the Hunter Office, specifically in the request history section. Essentially, she added the fact that Akira was on this vehicle.

"This should do it." If Kibayashi's speculation was correct, then Udajima should be monitoring Akira's movements to some extent. With this, they should also understand that Akira is on the same vehicle. They would be careful not to encounter him.

With this, the problem was resolved. All she had to do was pay attention to ensure that Akira didn't get into any conflicts with other hunters. With that in mind, Hikaru breathed a sigh of relief.

Afterward, she continued with her daily tasks. Since she had suddenly decided to accompany Akira, she had to make adjustments such as rescheduling. It was a bit of a hassle, but Hikaru quickly managed it and went to meet Akira on time.



After returning to their room, Akira and the others ordered dinner through room service and had their evening meal together. Watching Akira's surprise at the taste of the cuisine tailored for the affluent, Hikaru chuckled with amusement.

"Akira, today seemed simple, but the real deal starts from now on, okay? We'll be entering the eastern territories in earnest starting tomorrow."

"Got it. I'll do my best."

"I'm counting on you."

After finishing their meal, they took turns bathing, first Akira, then Hikaru, before settling in for the night. The first day of escorting the Gigantes III, while it had some minor ups and downs for Hikaru, ended without any major incidents.



Day 2 of the Gigantes III escort request. Akira is once again on the roof of the vehicle, keeping watch.

The vehicle, which had been running continuously through the night, had already entered the eastern territories. It was still far from the frontline, which marked the eastern edge of the eastern territories, the domain of the Toukiren. Nevertheless, it was fundamentally different from around the Kugamayama City. Akira, gazing at the scenery from the roof of the vehicle, felt this keenly.

『Alpha, there's a huge island floating in the sky over there, but is it real?』

『Yes, it's real. At least, I'm not projecting it into your field of vision.』

"So, are those tall buildings extending from the underside of the island real too? Do things like that really exist over there?"

Akira glanced at Alpha for a moment.

Alpha's appearance was merely projected into their expanded field of vision. Akira understood that. However, no matter how much they strained their eyes, it only looked like there was someone really there. Meanwhile, the sight of an island and buildings floating in the distant sky was undeniably real.

Akira was taken aback by the reality that seeing wasn't necessarily believing.

『Akira, in this world, what you see isn't always the truth.』

『That has to mean something else entirely.』

At that moment, a communication came in from Hikaru. Hikaru's figure appeared in Akira's expanded field of vision, although they weren't physically there.

"Akira, we have incoming enemy attacks. A swarm of giant bugs is approaching from the front of the convoy. The heavy artillery on the vehicle and the vanguard unit will handle the larger ones, but I think the smaller ones will make it to your position. The general interception positions are always designated by the security team, so please follow that."

"Understood."

When Gigantes III left Kugamayama City, it was only one vehicle. During the night, it had merged with other intercity transport vehicles, and now they were traveling in a convoy.

The further into the swarm of monsters they penetrated, the more dangerous it became, with the vanguard being the most perilous and the rear becoming safer. However, the last car had the duty of intercepting the monsters that followed, so the safest position was the second car from the rear.

The more powerful monsters they defeated, the greater the rewards for the hunters. Therefore, rewards and danger were proportional. Additionally, the danger level of the location and the strength of the hunters deployed there were also proportional.

In other words, those positioned in the second car from the rear, like Akira, were among the least powerful of the hunters participating in the escort request.

Akira's position was the second car from the rear, understanding the significance of this, Hikaru said provocatively.

"Akira, are you dissatisfied with your placement there?"

"I have no complaints. With a Hunter Rank of 50, I'm like a beginner here, right?"

"Well, yes. But the reason Akira was placed there isn't just because they're treated as a beginner. It's also because Akira is a one-person team."

Hunter placement was done on a team basis. Therefore, the team's strength was the criterion for placement. It was natural for a team with only one beginner to be placed in the second car.

"But if it's Akira, I think you can handle even tougher places. So, Akira, please show your prowess to the security team. Placement is fluid, so if Akira performs well, they'll be reassigned to a more profitable location."

This was the main reason Hikaru had Akira take on the intercity transport vehicle escort request. With this system, it was possible for Akira to earn as much as their ability allowed.

Furthermore, in expeditions like this, where culling out was needed, it was necessary to take a significant safety margin into account for the return. However, in the case of escort requests for inter-city transport vehicles, they could evacuate into the vehicle immediately in case of emergency.

Moreover, among Akira's group, only Akira had the ability to undertake this request. Those who would hinder Akira's actions couldn't participate.

To make this a reality, Hikaru had specifically chosen the Gigantes III escort request, which traveled all the way to the Zegelt City in the eastern territories, where incredibly powerful monsters dwelled.

With this, they could achieve maximum results safely and efficiently. Now it was up to Akira to shine. With that thought in mind, Hikaru encouraged Akira.

"Akira, I'm not telling you to push yourself too hard. But if you think even for a moment that your abilities aren't limited to this, then please show me that level of performance."

In a slightly provocative tone, Akira replied in a similar vein.

"Does that mean I can fight as I please, assuming I'm running out of ammo? If I go bankrupt because of something you said, you will know, will you?"

"Yes, if you've exhausted your ammunition due to outstanding performance, that's what I hope for."

"All right, I got you on record. Wait and see, I won't let you down."

"I'll be expecting it." With a smile, Hikaru said this and disappeared from Akira's expanded field of vision.

Akira smiled at Alpha.

『Alpha, that's the deal. Let's go all out.』

『Yes, indeed. Since you said it's okay to disregard cost-effectiveness. Shall we meet those expectations?』

Alpha also replied with a cheerful smile.

Akira looked at the numerical value indicating the distance to the displayed enemies, comparing the positions of the distant giant insects on the map with a puzzled expression.

"Huh? They're still quite far?"

As Akira stared at the distant monsters, the information gathering equipment enlarged the target. Although the shapes of distant objects were now clearer, to Akira, they only appeared as enlarged small bugs.

『It's just that they're too big to grasp the distance. There's nothing around them to compare them to, flying in the sky. Shall I add a familiar reference point for size comparison?』

Next to the monster being viewed in magnification, Alpha's figure was added. Comparing their familiar figure to the enemies, Akira understood their size and involuntarily grimaced.

The small eyes attached to the tiny head in comparison to the entire length of the giant insect. The size of those eyes already exceeded Alpha's height.

Although their shape resembled small insects that could fit on a fingertip, their length was huge, akin to an island. They were flying in swarms.

"They're way too big... What are those?"

『Giant bugs, also known as Nest-Class monsters. As you can see, the name speaks for itself.』

"It seems impossible to fight against those..."

『Don't worry. Hikaru also said that Akira would be dealing with the smaller ones, right? It's starting.』

The oversized cannons mounted on the roof of the vehicle began to move, aiming at the swarm of monsters ahead of the convoy.

To propel the massive mass of intercity transport vehicles, a considerable amount of energy was naturally required. This vast amount of energy was being loaded into the cannons to destroy the targets. The immensely powerful light leaking from the cannons during loading indicated their potency to onlookers.

And then, all the cannons on all the vehicles simultaneously fired streams of energy too massive to be called beams, causing the atmosphere to tremble.

A blazing shot pierced through the giant insect-like monsters, leaving large holes in their sturdy shells, evaporating, incinerating, and melting their insides. With its power, it slaughtered creatures with vitality befitting their massive bodies.

The Nest-Class giant bugs began to fall one after another from the convoy's attacks. Due to their enormous size, they seemed to be falling extremely slowly to Akira.

However, the monsters weren't finished yet. Countless other insects nested in the falling giant bugs emerged from them. Growing while flying, they formed a swarm of individuals reaching up to 80 meters in length, attacking the convoy at high speed.

The hunters in the lead car, Car 10, fought back against the swarm. Tanks and humanoid weapons, strategically positioned on the roofs of the intercity transport vehicles, used their armaments to shoot and bombard. Countless insects were pulverized in an instant.

High-ranking hunters operating in the eastern territories joined the fray with arms befitting their hunter ranks. With firepower capable of easily dispatching even the bounty heads that had appeared near Kugamayama City before, they systematically defeated the Giant Bugs one after another.

However, the Giant Bugs weren't merely targets to be shot down. They continuously emitted body fluid that hardened upon contact with air at high speeds. It attacked the

hunters like rapid-fire from an extended magazine. Furthermore, they launched missile-like projectiles generated by their biological functions and even fired laser beams.

The intense battle between high-ranking hunters and monsters near the front of the convoy was suitable for showing that this was the eastern territory.

Watching the fierce battle, Akira was half-astonished.

『Incredible... Is that the power of the hunters in the east? It's like, their world is completely different.』

『You might as well think of it as a different world. The eastern regions have been significantly influenced by advanced technology compared to other areas. The ecosystems born under that influence are abnormal in themselves. In such places, the level of power displayed by hunters is not as surprising as you might think.』

『I see. I thought I had become quite strong, but compared to them, I'm just a nobody.』

Akira felt somewhat chastised for their unconscious arrogance and chuckled self-deprecatingly.

Seeing Akira like that, Alpha laughed and said,

『Eventually, Akira will become as strong as them, won't they?』

『Eventually... You say that so easily.』

『Yes, it's easy. It's true that the hunters over there are much stronger than Akira. But compared to the difference between the Akira I first met and the Akira now, that level of difference isn't much, is it?』

Upon hearing that, Akira looked as if he had been struck. And upon reflection, they agreed.

A child from the alleys of the slums, who had no power at all, had become capable enough in this short period to participate in an escort request for intercity transport vehicles. The hunters in Car 10 were indeed powerful. But the distance from here to Car 10 was considerably shorter than the journey from the alleys of the slums to here.

Akira realized that too.

『...You're right. Then, I'll work hard to reach that level soon!』

Saying so, Akira gripped the LEO Composite Rifle in both hands and took aim.

『That's the spirit. Let's do this!』

The swarm of Giant Bugs also reached Akira's vehicle. Their size was about the size of a passenger car. Deemed insignificant by the hunters in the lead vehicle and exempted from being the priority targets by those in the following vehicles, they were considered weak individuals.

Nevertheless, they were strong enough for the hunters of Kugamayama City to face death for each one. Moreover, their numbers were vast. Akira's surrounding map, generated by the information gathering equipment, was already overflowing with reactions from the small Giant Bugs.

However, Akira remained unfazed. They fired their guns at the surrounding insects without a hint of panic. They kept firing their Charge Bullets until they ran out, shooting an immense number of them at the targets.

The Charge Bullets, supplied with sufficient energy, drastically increased in power, piercing through the exoskeletons of the targets and destroying their insides. The dead insects fell one by one to the wilderness or onto the roofs of the vehicles.

The insects attacked Akira as well. They flew through the air, shooting guns, cannons, and charging towards them. Akira dodged, evaded, kicked, and continued to shoot.

Akira's Gigantes III escort request had truly begun.



Hikaru observed Akira's combat situation from a subjective perspective using the coordinated function of the information gathering equipment. However, the spectacle quickly made their complexion turn pale.

"Oh, no. Can't do it. Getting motion sickness," she muttered, switching the display to an overhead view.

Watching the chaotic battle near the front of the convoy, Akira even felt a sense of their own arrogance. But for an ordinary person like Hikaru, Akira's fighting style was equally out of the ordinary.

Akira's high-speed combat, utilizing the power of the reinforced suit and time perception manipulation, appeared as a blur to Hikaru, with things changing so rapidly that they couldn't make sense of it. If not informed beforehand, Hikaru might not even recognize it as footage of combat. Akira's combat was just too fast for them to comprehend.

Still, by switching to an overhead view on the surrounding map, Hikaru could at least track Akira's movements visually. But even then, it was fast. Akira continued to move swiftly and unpredictably across the broad roof of the intercity transport vehicles.

There was no place to hide on the roof. If they stopped, they would be subjected to the gunfire of the Giant Bugs. Akira kept evading the enemy's gunfire with fast and erratic movements, continuously firing both guns and defeating the surrounding enemies one after another.

Already, the area around Akira was littered with corpses of the Giant Bugs. The dead bodies piled up, forming a mountain, and those were just a fraction of the enemies Akira had defeated. Many insects had fallen not on the roof but onto the wasteland below.

Hikaru was once again astonished by Akira's fighting prowess. She had thought they that she knew how strong Akira was. That's why she had assigned Akira the escort request for the intercity transport vehicles.

But she didn't expect that Akira to be this strong. The strength of Akira that Hikaru had envisioned until now was merely an interpretation of the evaluation of Akira's strength by Kurosawa, who had overseen the culling requests, from a partial perspective. In other words, they hadn't accurately grasped Akira's true ability.

"...So strong. No wonder Kibayashi favors them," Hikaru muttered. Actually, Kibayashi didn't favor Akira because they were strong. Kibayashi was fond of Akira not for their strength but for their reckless and audacious behavior, almost like a personification of recklessness itself.

Nevertheless, Akira's current fighting style was not just something to be laughed at if Kibayashi were watching, and Hikaru's opinion wasn't entirely wrong there. While Hikaru admired Akira's strength inwardly, they wore a grim expression.

"I have to handle him... Kibayashi holds the power," she said. The firepower of high-ranking hunters fighting powerful monsters was as formidable as the monsters themselves, if not more so. If such individuals were to go out of control with their firepower, the damage would be immense.

Handling those hunters was also an important task for the city officials. It was pointless to try to suppress them with force and only escalate the damage. A flexible negotiation approach, blending both firmness and softness, was necessary to deal with them and use their power for the city's benefit.

In that regard, Kibayashi was a sufficient success story for Kugamayama City. At least, they had brought in plenty of benefits to the city, enough to offset his bad reputation and even be tacitly approved of.

Hikaru was also one of those aiming to become such a success story. But witnessing Akira's strength firsthand, she felt a little disheartened.

After all, Hikaru had put someone with such strength and a history of killing city employees on a transport vehicle with security measures equivalent to those of the barrier walls. If Akira caused trouble, the responsibility would fall heavily on Hikaru as well.

"...Kibayashi probably manipulated me to avoid that responsibility, right?" they said. Despite dismissing the Udajima incident as overthinking, it didn't mean Akira had become a safe individual. She still had to stabilize the dangerous entity that could explode with even a slight shock, at least until this escort request was over. With that in mind, Hikaru let out a heavy sigh.

"I feel like giving up... No, I'll do it! Can't let myself be defeated here!" Dismissing her momentary weakness, Hikaru vigorously shook her head.

Her plan, having Akira take on the escort request for the intercity transport vehicles and achieve great results, had turned into a high-risk gamble favored by Kibayashi due to Akira's own danger. But now that the gamble had begun, they would see it through. Though it had changed from low risk to high risk, the potential return hadn't changed. Despite being part of the Wide-Area Management Department, they were ultimately just a low-ranking employee. If they won, their position would rise significantly.

"I'll do it!" With that determination boosting her, Hikaru smiled forcefully.

201: Giant Bugs Territory

On the roof littered with corpses of Giant Bugs, Akira continued to pile them up even higher. They raced around the roof of the inter-city transport vehicle at high speed, relentlessly firing their guns with both hands.

Firing left and right while looking forward, shooting upwards while looking sideways—every shot hit its mark. It wasn't by chance. In the gentle flow of time manipulated by his perception, Akira aimed and hit with precision.

Akira no longer aimed at enemies solely through visual observation. he targeted the enemies with his own eyes, the gun sights, the information gathering equipment—all of it. With his current abilities, Akira could hit his target firmly, even if the enemy were directly behind him or if he closed his eyes.

Moreover, Akira's gunfire, supported by Alpha, despite firing both guns in different directions simultaneously, pierced all enemies' weak points with astonishing accuracy.

And the power of the Charge Bullets (C-Bullets) being fired was also adjusted appropriately by Alpha. With the ability to consume energy efficiently and still deliver a killing blow to the targets, Akira efficiently spread death among the Giant Bugs.

"Rampage." Akira single-handedly created a situation where the air was filled with a swarm of insects as massive as flying cars.

However, Akira didn't have as much leeway as his power might suggest. This power came from Alpha's support, not his own strength. While understanding this, Akira fought desperately to improve his own abilities so that he could achieve the same results on his own.

『...But seriously, there are so many! We've taken down quite a lot, haven't we? Yet the number of bugs around doesn't seem to decrease, does it?』

『They're actually increasing. I'd say by about fifty percent.』 Alpha added.

『I figured as much!』

Empty magazines and energy packs are ejected from the LEO Composite Gun. However, since Akira has multiple sets, he can continue shooting. He keeps firing, defeating countless giant bugs.

Yet this won't last long as the enemy horde attacking Akira continues to grow. If he stops shooting, he'll be overwhelmed by the enemy's pressure.

But Akira remains calm. He remotely operates a partially mechanized backpack, which then ejects new magazines and energy packs into the air. He swiftly reloads by slamming the guns against them. Even with both hands occupied, this quick magazine change is possible. If Akira had more time, he'd reload manually, but he's too busy for that now.

Through the expanded field of vision displayed, instructions for movement come again from the vehicle's security side. Akira moves forward as instructed. There, he passes a hunting team that had been covering the front of the vehicle, keeping a significant distance from each other.

Other hunters' positions are also displayed on the peripheral map. They have been repositioned to relatively distant positions from Akira, towards the rear of the vehicle.

『...The hunters around here, it's just me. No wonder it's getting busy』

『It seems the hunters' placements are based on team-level combat evaluations, so that's probably why』

『Looking at it positively, it means my achievements are being properly evaluated』

In reality, Akira's combat capabilities exceed those of the other hunters stationed in the same No. 2 car, surpassing the team's overall strength. The security side has recognized this and has repositioned Akira away from the other teams towards the front of the vehicle.

『But there sure are a lot of them. With this setup, there's no need to worry about friendly fire. Let's reduce their numbers at once. Akira, use the AF Laser Cannon』

『Got it』

As the AF Laser Cannon deploys from his back, Akira, with his guns held by auxiliary arms, grabs the fully deployed AF Laser Cannon and mows down the swarm of giant bugs. Unlike when he defeated the Oktoparos before, this time a bright flash of light is emitted at the maximum angle, burning the space where the giant bugs are.

However, none of the bugs are dead. With the widened range, the power has significantly decreased. While burning the exoskeletons of the giant bugs and to some extent their interiors, the power was not enough to turn their entire body to ashes.

However, this is intentional. The seemingly intact bugs begin to fall one by one or are separated from the vehicle, disappearing from Akira's surroundings. This is a high-speed intercity transport vehicle. If enough damage is inflicted to hinder their flight capability, it's enough to neutralize them.

Looking at the reaction on the peripheral map, Akira sees that the number of giant bugs around him has decreased significantly. He chuckles at the power of his actions.

『That's good power. ...How much was one shot again?』

『Five million aurums』

『...The original price?』

『After the discount』

『Expensive!』

Although the number of Giant Bugs around Akira had decreased significantly, it was only temporary. The reduced number was only a small part of Car 2, and considering the entire convoy, it was negligible. More reinforcements would arrive soon.

The AF Laser Cannon couldn't be fired in rapid succession. Akira switched to the LEO composite gun for further engagement.

『Akira. Once you're ready to shoot again, shoot immediately』

『Roger that. But at this rate, the ammunition costs are going to be outrageous』

『Don't worry. It's not us who'll be paying. Hikaru said it's fine even if we run out of bullets』 Alpha said with a meaningful smile. Akira understood the implication and smiled too.

Even if they run out of bullets, it means they can use up the expensive AF laser cannon shots as well. The terms are agreed upon. There's no need to hold back.

『That's true. Should I say this is the power of having the ammunition expenses covered by the client?』

Both of his guns, utilizing their astonishing firing speed and the high-capacity extension magazines, unleashed a barrage. With this lavish shooting style, they destroyed the approaching insects before they could get close.

But the insects continued to approach Akira without hesitation, launching attacks.

They fired fluids hardened by the organic launch mechanism like bullets. Their power was enough to easily penetrate steel. They also shot adhesive liquids. If hit, it would immobilize the target, whether it's stepped on or not. They also sprayed corrosive liquid that could dissolve even iron. While force field armor could defend against it, prolonged exposure could damage even the armor of the inter-city transport vehicle.

In addition to receiving support from these attacks or enduring them themselves, they charged into the swarm without concern for their own damage. They repelled attacks with a body tough enough to deflect even cannon fire or tried to crush tanks with their powerful teeth.

There was a solid reason why the inter-city transport vehicle had to hire high-rank hunters just to guard against the relentless attacks of the insects. And Akira was one of those high-rank hunters. He evaded, blocked, and counterattacked the relentless assault of the giant bugs.

Using the functions of his reinforced suit, he kicked through the air to move, evading enemy gunfire with three-dimensional movements. Even the adhesive liquid adhering to the roofs couldn't catch him as he generated a force field armor scaffold just above it when passing through, avoiding direct contact. The dissolving liquid, spread over such a wide area that evasion was impossible, was blocked below the neck by the force field armor of the reinforced suit and above by the force field shield, then he swung his body vigorously to shake off the dissolving liquid.

He kicked away the charging insects, sending them flying. With powerful kicks that crushed their armor as hard as an armored vehicle, he blew them away with force, crashing them into other insects. Even in the midst of this, he never stopped shooting. Faced with countless swarms of insects, he fired an immense number of bullets, shooting them down, perforating them, and crushing them.

And even then, against the still unyielding insects, he used the AF laser cannon again. The flash swallowed the insects, leaving them charred. There were still bullets left. He could repeat it as many times as necessary.

Naturally, with so many giant bugs defeated, Akira's surroundings quickly became filled with insect corpses. He kicked them together, sending the piles of corpses falling into the wasteland, and Akira continued to fight.



Hikaru was not only delighted but also slightly trembling at Akira's extraordinary fighting style. Then a communication came in from Akira.

『Hikaru. Can you come here for a moment?』

"What, what is it?"

『Are you in the room? Bring the spare backpack.』

".....Huh!? Me!? Wait, I can't just go out on the roof, you know!?"

Hikaru, who was asked to bring spare ammunition all the way to that hellish place, involuntarily raised her voice.

『No, I'm not asking you to come up to the roof. Just leave it at the entrance.』

"R-Right... I got it."

『Thanks.』

After the communication with Akira ended, Hikaru let out a big sigh.

She didn't want to go. She didn't want to get anywhere near that place. Despite thinking so, she knew she had no choice.

She couldn't ask Akira to come and get it. That would leave a hole in the defense of the vehicle. She couldn't retreat Akira on the pretext that she didn't want to get close to the roof. If it were just running out of ammunition, retreating would be fine, but there were still bullets left. She couldn't rely on the security side. Transporting consumables within the team was something to be done within the team. Hikaru was registered as a non-combatant

but as a member of Akira's team. In the first place, she had forcibly boarded Gigantes III under the pretext of that. Otherwise, it would be unauthorized boarding. Therefore, she had to work as a member of the team.

"I don't want to..."

Hikaru started preparing to carry the backpack filled with plenty of ammunition, making a truly reluctant face.

The entrance to the roof was a spacious double door. The door on the vehicle side was on the wall, and the door on the roof side was on the ceiling. Both were extremely sturdy.

And that sturdiness wasn't to prevent gusts of wind due to pressure differences but to prevent monsters from entering the vehicle. Understanding this in the true sense, Hikaru, trembling with fear, entered the entrance.

Hikaru, who placed the backpack in the center, looked up somewhat. On the other side of the door, separated by just one door, was hell. Trembling lightly with that thought, Hikaru quickly returned to the vehicle and closed the door. "Akira, I brought it."

『Got it. Thanks.』

Hikaru remotely opened the door on the ceiling.

『That's enough. Close it. Take the backpack we exchanged back with you. Thanks for your help.』

Hikaru closed the door on the ceiling remotely. The interior of the vehicle was also checked, and if there were monsters inside, it wouldn't close. Safety was ensured. Hikaru breathed a sigh of relief and opened the door on the vehicle side. Then she let out a small voice.

"...Ah."

Although she had only opened the door on the ceiling for a short time, clear signs of combat remained inside the entrance. Specifically, part of a giant insect's leg was rolling around, and there was a puddle of unidentifiable liquid on the floor. The backpack Akira left behind was nearby.

Hikaru cautiously proceeded into the entrance and confirmed that there was no strange liquid before picking up the backpack. Then, trembling, she moved towards the inside of the vehicle.

There was a sound from under Hikaru's feet. It was only slight, but it was because she stepped on the giant insect's dissolving liquid. Hikaru's face twisted in fear.

"I heard a sizzling sound just now!"

Hikaru rushed into the vehicle, almost on the verge of tears.



Akira, who had finished replenishing ammunition, psyches himself up again.

『Alright. With this, I can still keep fighting.』

Alpha also smiles as usual.

『Yes. Let's keep it up.』

However, the determination he just restored ends up being somewhat in vain. The sudden drastic decrease in the number of attacking giant insects catches them off guard.

『...? They've suddenly stopped attacking. What's going on?』

Even after checking the surrounding map, there's no reaction from the giant bugs around Akira. However, upon expanding the range, it becomes clear that there are still plenty of them. In other words, the bugs surrounding Akira had simply ceased attacking him.

『It seems the pheromone concentration of the giant insects has become too high.』

While Akira wonders in confusion while taking large amounts of recovery medicine, Alpha explains the situation.

Pheromones that attract the same species are emitted from the corpses of the giant insects. This means that the more you defeat, the more reinforcements will come. Moreover, the higher the concentration of pheromones, the stronger the individuals it attracts.

However, once the concentration exceeds a certain threshold, weaker individuals will avoid approaching. Recognizing the strength of the enemy from the concentration of pheromones, they judge that it's pointless to go for reinforcements and end up dying in vain.

Due to this characteristic, Akira finds himself having to deal with the majority of the giant insects that were attacking the second car alone. And even after winning, the concentration of pheromones around Akira exceeds the threshold.

『So that's how it is. But wouldn't things like that disperse with the wind?』

『Of course, if it's scattered by the wind, the concentration of pheromones will decrease. But wouldn't the area near the source still have the highest concentration?』

Akira looks around. Giant insect corpses are scattered everywhere. Even if they're blown away by the strong wind on the roof, with this many sources, the concentration in the vicinity will be higher than other places.

『That makes sense. Then, should we kick the corpses into the wasteland for now?』

As Akira is about to act on that thought, instructions for movement come from the security side through the surrounding map. The destination is the roof of car 3.

Alpha laughs cheerfully.

『Akira. We've approached within one vehicle length of the lead car. Let's go.』

『Alright』

Car 10 is still far away. And there's still a significant gap in strength with the hunters there.

However, Akira is clearly and steadily getting closer.

Car 3 is gradually reducing the distance between vehicles to temporarily connect with car 2. Without waiting for sufficient proximity, Akira leaps from the front of the vehicle and jumps onto the roof of car 3.

The instructions for car 3's movement had also reached Hikaru.

Moving from one car to another is generally prohibited due to security reasons. Now, Hikaru can't bring the backpack closer to Akira. As Hikaru is relieved by this, a notification arrives from the security side of the vehicle. It informs that permission has been granted to move to other vehicles.

Hikaru lets out a sigh of relief.

In the form of a replacement for Akira, the hunter team that changed positions from car 3 to car 2 moves through the communication passage and reaches the roof of car 2.

"...What? There's no enemy, is there?"

"That's weird. Wasn't the situation dangerous enough for them to turn us this way?"

"No, with this many corpses. Probably the big team that was responsible here has retreated. Or maybe they clashed?"

"Regardless of whether it was a retreat or a clash, they've taken down this many. It's impressive for the guys from car 2. Let's praise their efforts."

Not a large team but an individual. Not a retreat or a clash but a massacre. And then a change in deployment to car 3. Without even considering the possibility of such a person, the hunters started their work.



Akira's battle moves to the roof of car 3, where he continues to fight against a swarm of giant insects (Giant Bugs). That hasn't changed. However, while the insects on car 2 were the size of passenger cars, on car 3, they're as big as buses.

The bigger the monster, the stronger it is. Following this basic rule, Akira faces powerful insects, firing his LEO composite guns with both hands. The consecutive shots of C-bullets (Charge Bullets) pierce through the sturdy exoskeletons of the giant bugs, tearing them apart from the inside and causing instant death.

But Akira's expression turns grim.

『They're still tough!』

Though the giant bugs he's facing are stronger, Akira can still defeat them. However, the number of bullets needed to take down one has increased significantly.

『Akira, let's use the AF Laser Cannon again!』

『Roger!』

Switching to the AF Laser Cannon while evading enemy attacks, Akira mows down the enemy swarm with momentum. This time, he narrows the emission angle and emits a beam instead of a flash. Many insects are severed as if by giant light blades, exposing charred cross-sections as they die.

Some insects survive due to poorly cut parts. But Akira quickly switches back to the LEO composite gun to finish them off. The giant insect, whose bio-field armor strength has already been weakened due to injuries, is not only riddled with holes but also shattered into pieces, dying instantly.

Several insects charge, assuming they'll be hit. Akira intercepts three and dodges four body slams, but he couldn't avoid the next one.

However, Akira doesn't take the enemy's attack. Instead, he kicks with all his might.

His current enhanced suit allows him to exert strength surpassing that of regular humanoid weapons. The power of his kick, generated from his physical abilities, overpowers the massive mass moving at high speed.

The huge insect flies off from the impact of the kick. Its sturdy exoskeleton, akin to tank armor, shatters. Despite that, it's still alive due to the abnormal vitality of monsters. However, its vitality wasn't high enough to withstand additional gunfire. Weakened by the previous blow, the insect, showered with countless C-bullets, is blown to bits.

But that insect is just one of the swarm. The relentless onslaught of giant bugs continues. Akira fights on without even a moment to catch his breath.

『I'm managing to defeat them, but it's tough!』

『Oh, if it's that tough, should we call it a day soon?』

Akira, who had a slightly stern expression, smiles with apparent ease upon hearing Alpha's teasing remark.

『Don't joke. We're just getting started!』

It's truly tough. But Alpha is smiling as always. If that's the case, then this level of difficulty isn't even worth considering a struggle. Chastising himself with this thought, Akira psyches himself up again.

And Alpha responds with a smile.

『That's the spirit. Let's go all out!』

『Yeah!』

They rally their spirits and slaughter the enemies. They stack up the results of their battle, a mountain of corpses. This attracts even more enemies, making the tough fight even tougher.

Yet Akira presses forward. His whole-body screams under extreme strain. He intimidates his body with his strong will, soothes it with healing potions, and advances while slaughtering mountains of enemies.

Akira's battle, which began at the rearmost and least challenging part of car 3, is now nearing the front. Hikaru waits in the dining car of car 3 with a spare backpack. When Akira asks for ammunition replenishment again, she reluctantly brings the spare backpack, feeling irritated.

Originally, it was planned for Akira alone, and he would have to return to his room inside the car for resupply. Considering that, Hikaru has done enough as a companion.

However, in hindsight, Hikaru should have thought to have at least one more companion with Akira, even if they weren't combat personnel. Thinking that way, she realizes she made a mistake.

Hikaru sighs.

“I've been too lax...”

Then she opens the door on the side facing the roof.

Hikaru's expression stiffens. Inside, there are the eyeballs and fangs of the giant insects rolling around. The eyeballs are larger than Hikaru's head, and the fangs are thicker and longer than her arms.

This place will be cleaned up later, but only after the battle is over. Until then, as long as they're harmless, even if parts of the monsters are rolling around, they're left alone.

This sight occurs after Hikaru has finished exchanging backpacks and closed the door to the ceiling. Her surprise is all the stronger for having unconsciously thought that way. She puts her hand on her chest to steady her breath. And then, deliberately, she speaks up with a strong voice.

"...Ahh! Really!"

Hikaru forcibly raises her spirits and moves the backpack to the center of the entrance.



Akira, who had finished replenishing ammunition, continued to fight further. The giant insects (Giant Bugs) were formidable foes, but Akira had ample ammunition. With the

power of the remaining bullets, Akira maintained a situation where, while not necessarily dominant, they were never in a disadvantaged position against the swarm of giant insects.

Akira continued to shoot with the momentum of using up the ammunition prepared by Hikaru for this escort request, namely the round-trip ammunition for the Kugamayama City and Zegelt City. With the power of almost unlimited remaining bullets, they pushed their front lines forward.

Building mountains of corpses, crushing them, and clearing the way. Advancing, building mountains again, blowing them away, and advancing further. Through this repetition, Akira finally reached the front of the third car. The length of the giant insects (Giant Bugs), which had been about the size of a passenger car during the second car, had now grown to the size of a two-story bus.

This should be about it for now. There probably wouldn't be instructions to move to the fourth car. That's what Akira thought.

While Akira continued to fight, the convoy, reversing its lineup, bypassed and overtook countless nest-class giant insects (Giant Bugs) that had been shot down and fallen to the ground. Instead of pushing through the enemy swarm, they advanced through the wasteland, stripping the swarm away.

The source of enemy reinforcements was the nest-class giant insects (Giant Bugs). If they moved away from there, the scale of enemy reinforcements would decrease. The number of insects around Akira continued to decrease.

『They've decreased quite a bit. Will it be over if we defeat the remaining ones?』

『It seems so. But even though the numbers have decreased, we can't let our guard down, okay?』

『Yeah. I understand.』

Even if the numbers decrease, they are still superior enemies. Akira relied on Alpha's support and a large amount of ammunition to defeat them. They couldn't afford to let their guard down. And if they didn't let their guard down, the outcome wouldn't change. Without letting their guard down, Akira finished off the remaining giant insects (Giant Bugs).

Then, as if waiting for that moment, communication came in from Hikaru.

『Akira. It seems like you can take a break now, but how does it feel?』

“No matter how you ask, it feels like I can take a break, as Hikaru said.”

『Are you pretty tired? Any injuries? Are you feeling like you're reaching your limit?』

Akira found Hikaru's tone somewhat probing. “Fatigue and injuries can be supplemented with recovery potions. The limit depends on the remaining bullets. There are still some left, right?”

『Uh, yeah. There's still one spare backpack.』

“...So, what do you want to ask?” To that question, Hikaru answered after a brief pause.

『Ah, actually, there's a support request from the security team for the fourth car. So, even if we refuse, it would be better if Akira's already at the limit, so it won't be as confrontational, you know?』

“I see. It's fine to say whatever on that matter, but is the assumption to refuse?” Akira responded lightly, and Hikaru returned a surprised voice.

『...Huh? You want to accept it? If there's a support request from the fourth car, it means that the hunter team there is struggling enough to request support, right? In other words, they might be attacked by monsters as strong as those on the fifth car, right? Isn't that too much? Akira, are you confident?』

When asked like that, even Akira thought. However, they deliberately didn't make the decision themselves.

『Alpha. Can we do it?』

『It depends on Akira.』

『Understood.』 Akira replied to Hikaru,

"I have enough confidence to take shelter in the car when it's dangerous. So, it's okay to go for support, right? I still have bullets left."

『If you say not to go, I won't. I'll leave that judgment to you, Hikaru. You're the operator, right?』

When Akira said that lightly, Hikaru also hesitated. Hikaru didn't want to send Akira into a deadly situation. If Akira died, they would be responsible, having been entrusted with Akira's care by Inabe.

Still, if Akira could defeat monsters as strong as those on the fifth car, Hikaru would want them to go. It would be a waste to throw away such achievements.

Hikaru hesitated between the risk and return. And they made a decision.

『Understood. Then please go.』

Already, they were taking on high risks. So, they wanted to maximize the return. With that thought, Hikaru took the gamble.

『But if you think it's impossible, don't stubbornly insist and flee immediately. That's the condition.』

"I understand. I don't want to die either. If I think it's dangerous, I'll run. So, bring the spare backpack. I want to be fully prepared."

『I got it. I'll bring it right away.』

Hikaru and Akira's communication was interrupted for the time being. Akira went to the rooftop entrance and waited for Hikaru. Hikaru arrived soon after.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Don't forget. This is the last one," Hikaru said, handing Akira the spare backpack.

"Goodness, I never imagined we'd actually use everything. I thought I had prepared with some margin?"

"I did say we should fight assuming we'd run out of ammo, didn't I? Is it because of that that we might end up in the red with ammunition expenses?"

"What are you talking about? Showing profit even then is where my skill comes in," Hikaru said, and they both laughed heartily. Then, Hikaru changed her tone and said, "Akira, take care. Do your best."

"Yeah. I'll be expecting you," Akira replied before returning to the roof.

Watching Akira leave, Hikaru smiled and said, "...Yes. I'll be expecting you."

Then Hikaru also went back into the car.



Akira, who had accepted the support request, waited at the front edge of the roof as the third car approached the fourth. He had already finished preparing. All that was left was to jump once they were close enough.

Using the telescopic function of his information-gathering equipment, he looked over the roof of the approaching vehicle and confirmed the presence of giant bugs attacking the fourth car. There were only six of them, but the threat they posed made Akira grimace.

"...They're huge!"

What was attacking the fourth car were giant insects with a body length exceeding 40 meters.

202: High-ranked hunters

The situation where the 4th car needed support was not due to the lack of ability of the hunters escorting the vehicle. On the contrary, it was caused by their excessive strength. The security of the 4th car was entirely handled by a large-scale hunter team that also participated in the security of the 10th car. And the security was entrusted to lower-ranking teams ranging from hunter ranks 40 to 50.

Although they were from lower-ranking teams, it didn't mean they were weak. They were equipped with powerful gear from their teams and had enough strength to participate in the security of the 4th car. They had already achieved more than enough by defeating numerous giant bugs.

However, this excessive achievement became the trigger for the current situation. The high concentration of pheromones released from the corpses of the giant bugs killed in large numbers in a short period attracted higher-ranking giant bugs due to factors like wind direction.

Even for those who had high abilities at hunter rank 40, it was impossible to deal with the higher-ranking giant bugs. They were forced to retreat into the car. With the decrease in the overall strength of the team, the remaining hunters at rank 50 fought desperately to maintain the frontline. However, the situation was undoubtedly unfavorable, and they were gradually pushed back. Eventually, the situation worsened to the point where support was requested from the security side.

In terms of generating high concentrations of pheromones, Akira had done something similar on the 2nd car.

However, initially, Akira's strength had been underestimated, and there was enough firepower on the 2nd car even without him. Additionally, with the arrival of the hunters from the 3rd car, even if the higher-ranking giant bugs from the 3rd car were attracted by the high concentration of pheromones, it wouldn't pose a significant problem.

Adjustments were made, including adjusting the distance between the cars, to prevent such a situation from occurring.

In that sense, the situation with the 4th car was an unfortunate event that went beyond blaming the hunters for their failure.

The two men who were the coordinators of the lower-ranking team guarding the 4th car wore stern expressions as they faced the giant insects. Both of them had hunter ranks of 60. They were unmistakably high-ranking hunters.

They received a message from their comrades.

『Sorry! I messed up! I'm pulling back!』

"Yeah! Don't push it! Defend the entrance! If that's impossible, retreat into the car!"

『Sorry! I'm withdrawing!』

One of the men sighed heavily.

"We're the only vanguard left now! This is unbearable!"

The other man chuckled lightly.

"You were saying how boring it was to be the support for the hunters around rank 50, weren't you? Look where that got us. It's like your wish came true, huh?"

"That's just the way of words!"

While the two were talking like this, the relentless attack by the giant bugs continued. The giant insects shot hardened bodily fluids from their organic launch mechanisms. It was an attack previously performed by smaller giant bugs, but the size of the projectiles had changed from bullets to shells. The power had increased significantly.

In addition, they opened part of their exoskeletons and fired biological missiles from there. Although not as fast as artillery, they accurately tracked and aimed at their targets. This firepower alone was enough to wipe out an ordinary hunter team in an instant. But this firepower was for one insect. And the higher-ranking insects currently attacking the 4th car numbered six. Moreover, they attacked without hesitation or fear under the coordination of the insects. The raging storm of attacks created a hellish scene on the roof of the 4th car.

In that hellish situation, the two of them were powerful enough to engage in casual conversation mixed with complaints. Without them, the front line would have collapsed long ago. The team was divided into the rear guard, defending with a set-up of makeshift barriers covering the entrance and exit as an escape route, and the vanguard, who ventured outside to fight. The vanguard's performance was remarkable; initially faced with fifteen massive insects, they successfully reduced their numbers to six. And the two of them made significant contributions to this achievement. However, even individuals with such power couldn't overturn the situation. Under the enemy's relentless assault, other members of the vanguard gradually withdrew until only the two remained. The situation was dire.

"Seriously, if it's this tough, should we retreat? The vanguard has been reduced so much. It would be a valid reason for withdrawal," one of them proposed. Even if their team retreated into the vehicle, the intercity transport vehicle was heavily armored with force field armor. The vehicle wouldn't be destroyed immediately.

Of course, there would be damage since there would be no one defending. Although it wouldn't lead to catastrophic damage like piercing the armor, the need for repairs would

increase significantly. And leaving monsters unattended for a long time would eventually result in the destruction of the vehicle. Hunters were hired to prevent such damages.

Taking that into account, retreat at this point wouldn't be fatal. That was the proposed judgment. Hearing this, one of the men hesitated slightly but didn't accept the proposal.

"...No, even if it's too late, I want to hold out until the last moment. If it's too tough for you, you can retreat, you know?"

"What are you saying? I was worried about you." The two laughed heartily and continued the battle. If achieving their goal was considered victory, they were already losing. However, they wanted to keep it as a close defeat rather than a crushing one. With that somewhat stubborn thought, the two aimed their weapons at the insects.

At that moment, one of the insects took a laser cannon hit from a distance. Its exoskeleton burst, exposing its flesh, but it wasn't a fatal blow. The two instinctively looked towards the origin of the gunfire. There stood Akira, wielding an AF laser cannon at the edge of the roof of car number four.

"A hunter coming to support us... Wait, if they're coming from that direction, is it the hunter from car three? Hey, hey, there's a limit to overconfidence or suicidal tendencies, you know?"

"No, considering the power attenuation due to distance in this situation, the fact that they fired from there with this power means something. They're using quite good equipment. Maybe the one who was originally placed over there due to various circumstances or the one who was acting as support like us in car one was suddenly transferred here?"

"Oh, I see."

The giant insect, hit by the laser, started firing a large number of organic missiles at Akira. Additionally, it changed its priority attack target from the two of them to Akira and retreated from the scene.

"Well, anyway, they'll act as decoys at least."

"Yeah, that's right. Do you think the supporting hunter will be thanked or be scolded out?"

"What are you saying? It's useless to worry about being scolded for such a thing, given our current situation."

"...You're right!" The two chuckled wryly and then laughed heartily. And they continued to confront the remaining insects with full force, just as they had been doing until now.

Akira, who had finally reached from the 2nd car to the 4th car in an irregular manner, wore a stern expression while holding the spent AF laser cannon.

『...Even a direct hit only did that much?』

With a wide spread attack, he had managed to scorch giant bugs the size of cars. With a focused beam attack, he could slice through bus-sized ones.

But this time, it wasn't a spread or a beam; it was a pinpoint attack at maximum power. It should have pierced through the massive body like it did with Oktoparos. Even if it couldn't penetrate, it should have at least been enough to defeat it. Despite possibly being as strong as the monster from the 5th car, it shouldn't have been able to withstand this one hit. Akira's surprise was immense because of this expectation.

『Alpha, it's stronger than I imagined. What do we do?』

Although Akira had confidently boasted to Hikaru, considering he couldn't defeat it even with the AF laser cannon, retreating from here might be inevitable. Akira was half-thinking this.

However, Alpha answered briskly.

『It seems like it was too far. But now we understand the degree of attenuation.

Akira, let's close the distance.』

『...Will that really work?』

『Yes. Although the secretion of the giant bugs is causing a strong attenuation effect, it's spread thinly over a wide area. If we get close enough, it can be reduced to a negligible level.』

The colorless mist obstructs the transmission of various information, causing significant issues in communication and detection, and also adversely affecting the range and power of gunfire. The giant bugs could release secretions with similar effects. This was why the power of the AF laser cannon had drastically decreased. Alpha explained this briefly. Akira, once convinced by this explanation, thought for a moment.

『But didn't they defeat that huge giant bug with a vehicle-mounted laser cannon?
Wouldn't the power decrease at a distance?』

『Yes, that's why it requires an extra-large cannon that can't be mounted on anything but an inter-city transport vehicle.』

This also made sense to Akira.

Furthermore, the vehicle-mounted cannon's power was so high that it couldn't be used to eliminate monsters near the vehicle without the risk of blowing up the vehicle itself.

The idea of installing a large number of small cannons was also dismissed due to issues of flexibility and cost-effectiveness. The military force of hunters, as long as it could be controlled, was very useful, and was being utilized in the Eastern region even today.

『Akira, they're moving too. Let's go.』

『Understood.』

Akira, switching from the AF laser cannon to the LEO composite rifle, started running towards the approaching giant bugs. He fired continuously at the swarming bio-missiles with both guns.

The missiles that were hit exploded one after another, creating chaos in the atmosphere. Despite the attenuation, the shockwaves that spread around were testament to their power.

Akira had to intercept all of them. Although they were slower than artillery shells, they were highly guided and couldn't be expected to miss by chance.

Additionally, some missiles didn't explode on impact but instead landed and grew legs, dashing across the roof, hiding behind the scattered corpses of the giant bugs, and approaching swiftly.

Moreover, the toughness of these missiles exceeded that of the bugs fought on the 2nd car. A few hits only slightly altered their trajectory, and their high guidance system corrected their course back towards Akira. He had to keep shooting continuously, both into the sky and forward.

As Akira was busy shooting down the missiles, the giant bugs aimed their precise artillery fire at him. He couldn't afford to be hit. He dodged desperately. The massive shells tore through the air, piercing and shattering the nearby corpses.

He continued to shoot, dodge, and run. He had to close the distance, which was overwhelmingly advantageous for the enemy. Although the distance could be covered quickly with the enhanced physical abilities of his suit, it felt long and far. The extreme time dilation to deal with the fierce attacks made the supposedly short distance feel prolonged and distant, making Akira's movements sluggish.

『Just one of these! What about the other five over there!?』

『It seems tough, but they're managing somehow.』

『Can you manage just by trying hard!? This is the attack power of five of them!?』

『With enough skill, it's possible. And they are actually managing it. Besides...』

『Besides?』

『Compared to the battle at the 10th car, this is still easier, isn't it?』

『...That's true!』

If he was to reach that place soon, he couldn't afford to be held back here. With that thought, Akira urged himself, regaining his resolve. He forced his will into his sluggish body, accelerating.

『That's the spirit.』

Even with a body capable of enduring infinite training, if one couldn't withstand the pain and hardship of that training and compromised, they would only achieve a compromised strength. To become stronger, a corresponding will is necessary. Seeing Akira demonstrating such willpower, Alpha smiled in satisfaction.

He continued shooting. The swarms of bio-missiles rushing in from the sky and from ahead were shot down by his continuous gunfire. The overwhelming barrage of bullets forced them back. He continued to dodge, completely avoiding the powerful artillery fire with the help of Alpha's support, even as it tore through and shattered the nearby corpses. The continuous shellfire pierced the air and the corpses, but never hit Akira.



He kept running, his enhanced suit granting him extraordinary physical capabilities. He accelerated with such force it seemed he might break through the solid roof of the inter-city transport vehicle. Leaping forward, he kicked off force field armor platforms he generated in mid-air, continuing to advance even through the air. The gale force winds roaring from behind him seemed to reverse direction due to his incredible speed.

In this world where time seemed to slow down due to his extreme speed, Akira fought fiercely. Finally, he covered the long yet short distance to the giant bug.

『Akira! Let's do this!』

『Yeah!』

Shooting down the swarm of bio-missiles, Akira slipped into the blind spot of the artillery, closing in on the giant bug. With Alpha's support, the AF laser cannon on his back began charging its energy for an attack, even though it was not yet deployed—a maneuver that defied safety protocols. The preparations were complete.

Seizing a moment where he could let go of the LEO composite rifle in both hands, Akira switched to the deployed AF laser cannon and aimed it with impeccable timing.

"Blow away!"

A torrent of energy burst from the barrel of the AF laser cannon, not in a distant maximum power shot, but a close-range maximum power configuration. It became a massive pillar of light, piercing through the over 40-meter-long giant bug.

A massive hole, larger than Akira's height, appeared in the bug's enormous body. The parts that didn't vanish were burnt and brittle, unable to withstand the fierce winds and crumbling away. The heavily damaged body fell apart as it collapsed.

Even the higher-ranked hunters with a rank of 60 struggled against this superior giant bug. Yet Akira had defeated one of them.

Hiding in the shadow of the giant carcass that fell on the roof of the vehicle, Akira exhaled.

"...Alright. Somehow, I managed to win."

『Good job. Take a nice rest.』

Alpha said this with a smile, praising Akira's effort. Hearing this, Akira looked puzzled.

"...It's not over yet, right?"

Despite his self-assessment of a great effort, he had only defeated one of the swarm. The battle with the giant bugs was not over. Thinking this, Akira looked at Alpha curiously.

『Yes, but it will be over soon.』

Alpha pointed towards the other giant bugs. Akira also turned to look.

In the next moment, several intense lasers pierced through all the remaining giant bugs on the 4th car.



Thanks to Akira drawing away one of the giant bugs, the situation for the hunters improved from six versus two to five versus two. With further effort, they managed to reduce it to four versus two.

But that was as far as they got.

"Out of time, huh..." In front of the still-intact bugs, the two hunters, losing their will to fight, stopped and sighed.

The giant bugs didn't miss this opportunity and lunged at the two. However, it was too late. They were instantly killed by high-powered lasers.

The hunter who fired those lasers was Mercia, the superior of the two hunters. She had been fighting at the front of the convoy, and with her strength, she effortlessly defeated the giant bugs that had given Akira and the others so much trouble. Finishing her bombardment from the air, she descended to where the two hunters were. Seeing her, they instinctively straightened up.

The two hunters had hoped to resolve the situation before their superior team got involved, but it was ultimately Mercia's arrival that marked the end of their efforts.

Mercia smiled as she asked them, "What's the damage report?"

"Many severe injuries. They'll be hospitalized for some time. Returning to the front lines within the mission period is impossible."

"And the casualties?"

"None so far. We haven't received any reports of deterioration from those who were evacuated inside the vehicle."

Mercia let out a small sigh in front of the two tense hunters. This only heightened their anxiety, but Mercia softened her stance.

"Well, if there are no deaths, you get a barely passing grade. But really, couldn't you have requested our support before the security side had to step in?"

"I'm sorry. It was a misjudgment on my part. I thought it was too early to request support from your side, but the security team seemed to think we were struggling more than we realized and sent support first."

"I see. Next time, consider that and act sooner. Having hunters sent from elsewhere affects our team's reputation."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Alright then, I'll leave this to you." Mercia departed after saying this. Having received a barely passing grade, which saved their necks, the two hunters breathed a sigh of relief.

Akira, who had struggled so much to defeat just one giant bug, was astonished that all of them were defeated in an instant.

"That's incredible... all four of them in a moment..."

『The hunters who finished their work on the 10th car are now supporting the other vehicles. It's over now.』

Although they were still in the process of exterminating the giant bugs from the 7th to the 9th cars, it wouldn't take long for the hunters from the 10th car. Mercia had prioritized supporting her team, arriving at the 4th car ahead of the others.

"So, it was the hunters from the 10th car who did that. I struggled so much just to take down one, but they're really strong. Their equipment is amazing, too. I wonder how much it costs."

『It's definitely not something you can buy with pocket change.』

Akira didn't need to be told that. He had already realized that corporate currency, even if it amounted to 10 billion, was considered pocket change. Alpha had mentioned that before. To purchase such equipment, at least 10 billion Aurum or equivalent Colon credits would be needed. Akira understood this.

"So my equipment is just stuff you can buy with pocket change. No wonder it's a struggle."

Akira sighed lightly, pondering the amount of money needed to acquire such powerful equipment. There were also rank restrictions on purchasing highly powerful gear. How high did he need to rank up? Realizing he lacked both, Akira sighed again.

Alpha, seeing this, laughed and said cheerfully,

『Akira, you just need to get similar equipment. And you will, soon enough.』 Hearing this, Akira shifted his mindset. He stopped feeling down and smiled.

"Yeah, I'll do my best to make it happen."

『Yes, let's make it happen.』

They've managed to get through tough situations before, and they'll manage again. It was an optimistic thought without any solid basis, but it was much better than pointless despair. Akira smiled at this thought.

At that moment, Mercia approached Akira.

"You're the support hunter, right? Sorry for the trouble caused by my incompetent team members. I'm Mercia. And you are?"

"I'm..." Akira began to respond, but Hikaru, sounding panicked, interrupted him.

『Akira! Stay quiet! Keep your mouth shut! Please! Don't say anything stupid!』

『Hikaru?』

『Please! Let me handle the negotiations, just don't say anything!』 Hikaru's desperate tone confused Akira a bit. Mercia noticed Akira's hesitation.

"What's wrong?"

"Uh, sorry, but my operator has a lot of complaints about me talking too much. So, I'll stay quiet." Mercia smiled, amused.

"Is there a reason for that?"

"..."

If it was a yes-or-no question, Akira thought he was probably in the former category. He stayed silent, and this was evident from his expression, which Mercia noted.

"I see. In that case, I'll just tell you what you need to know. We'll handle the rest. You helped us a lot. Take it easy. See you." Conveying that no further support was needed, Mercia flew away.

In Akira's enhanced field of view, Hikaru let out a noticeable sigh of relief.

"Hikaru, what was that about?"

『To put it simply, she's part of an extremely powerful hunter team, and she's a very important person there.』

Mercia is the deputy leader of a large hunter team called Dragon River. She effectively runs the team in place of the power-focused leader. Her hunter rank is 75, making her powerful enough to threaten entire cities by herself.

Unlike Hikaru, who knew all this, Akira, unaware of such details, responded casually.

"So what?"

『...When you talk to someone like her, it makes me very nervous.』

"I-I see." Don't do anything disrespectful to someone so important. Don't say anything that might offend her. If you don't know what not to say, then stay quiet. Akira understood Hikaru's unspoken plea. Realizing this required a moment of reflection, making Hikaru's concerns very valid.

Hikaru took a deep breath to calm down and smiled at Akira.

『Akira, great job. You lived up to expectations.』

"Well, you told me to expect great things, so I did my best."

『Can I expect more? Like not causing trouble, not causing trouble, and not causing trouble?』 Akira couldn't help but laugh.

"It's not like I cause trouble on purpose. You're my operator, right? Help me out."

『Got it. Leave it to me.』

"I'm counting on you."

『Yes, count on me.』 Akira's light-hearted comment was met with an equally light response from Hikaru, who was now pleased, thinking it would be easier to manage Akira. Alpha, watching them, also smiled.

Sometime later, the swarm of giant bugs attacking the convoy was completely exterminated by the hunters.



Akira was relaxing in the bath of the vehicle, letting the luxurious bath soothe the fatigue from the day's battles. The water's rich ingredients helped heal both his body and mind, making him let out a slightly lazy sigh of bliss.

"This feels amazing... I can't go back to cheap baths anymore," he murmured as he soaked, his soul seemingly melting into the hot water. Alpha, who was also in the bath with him, smiled at the sight.

『It's good that you decided to renovate the bathroom at home during this mission.』

"Yeah. If I had to go back to a cheap bath after getting used to this, I'd probably end up at Sheryl's place every day. That would be bad."

Akira had once been thrilled just to have a small bath while living in the slums, but now he had grown accustomed to a much more luxurious lifestyle. The Akira who had once found joy in a small tub was gone, replaced by someone who now took such comforts for granted.

After his relaxing and rejuvenating bath, Akira returned to his room in high spirits. He put on the provided pajamas and began his half-daily routine of stretching exercises. Wearing a T-shirt and shorts, he carefully loosened his muscles, gradually increasing his range of motion by taking various postures.

While standing on one leg and stretching the other leg straight up towards the ceiling, he was approached by Hikaru, who was in the room.

"Your body is very flexible."

"Yeah, isn't it impressive? I used to be really stiff, but I finally got this flexible."

"Wow, that's amazing." Akira, pleased with the compliment, struck a pose to show off his flexibility.

"See? Pretty cool, right?"

"Yeah, definitely," Hikaru replied, finding Akira's slightly boastful demeanor endearing. It was hard to reconcile this childlike Akira with the high-rank hunter who had just taken down a horde of giant bugs.

However, Hikaru didn't see this duality as contradictory. Both aspects were equally Akira. The important thing was which side to emphasize. For now, Hikaru focused on the serious, high-rank hunter side.

"Akira, can you take a look at this with me?" Hikaru pointed to a large display on the wall. It showed footage from Akira's perspective during the fierce battle on the vehicle's roof against the giant bugs.

Akira and Hikaru reviewed the footage together. Even for Hikaru, and certainly for Akira without altering his perception of time, the fast-paced action was hard to follow. They slowed down the replay to make sense of it.

Despite the slow motion, the content was extraordinary to Hikaru.

"Akira, it looks like you're hitting enemies outside your field of vision and dodging attacks from behind. How are you doing that?"

"I use information-gathering devices to detect the enemies' positions."

"I understand that part, but how do you process the search results? They don't show up in your field of vision, right?" Hikaru couldn't see any display indicating enemy positions in Akira's view.

"Well, it's more like a feeling or a sense..." Akira tried to explain, finding it difficult to articulate as it had become almost instinctive for him. However, Hikaru seemed to accept this.

"Oh, so you have enhanced senses too. I guess that's to be expected for someone as strong as you."

"Yeah, something like that," Akira said, trying to maintain a facade of confidence while seeking help from Alpha.

『Alpha, what are enhanced senses?』

『Enhanced senses are artificial extensions of the natural five senses, often referred to as a sixth sense.』

In the East, the term "sixth sense" was not seen as something supernatural but as a colloquial term for artificial sensory enhancements.

Originally, this term was used by those who had integrated sensory devices into their bodies. However, with technological advancements, even those with natural bodies could now experience similar enhancements, and the term spread as a nickname for such technology.

The benefits of enhanced senses were numerous. Extending vision into ultraviolet or infrared allowed one to see in the dark. Expanding the field of view to 360 degrees enabled one to see directly behind without turning around.

These enhancements went beyond simply strengthening the five senses. They included heat sense to recognize distant heat sources and their temperatures, motion sense to detect movement, spatial sense to understand the three-dimensional structure of space, and magnetic sense to perceive the strength and direction of magnetic fields. Such artificial senses were fundamentally different from the natural five senses, providing a true "sixth sense."

However, acquiring these enhanced senses wasn't as simple as adding artificial sensory organs. It required the brain to develop new cognitive processes to handle the information from these new senses. This was much more challenging than merely adding extra limbs, and in the worst-case scenario, the brain might fail to manage the unfamiliar sensations, potentially leading to insanity.

To minimize the risks, basic training in extended senses involves gradually acclimating oneself to the new perceptions. The phrase "somehow" is often used to describe the feeling because those who are not yet accustomed to these enhanced senses struggle to articulate the new sensations or explain them to others who don't have them.

Akira listened to the explanation and understood Hikaru's reaction.

『So Hikaru misunderstood and thought I was using enhanced senses.』

『It's not a misunderstanding.』

『What?』 Alpha stood in front of Hikaru and pointed at herself, or more precisely, at Hikaru hidden behind her.

『Akira, you can sense that Hikaru is here, can't you?』 Akira's puzzled expression turned into one of surprise.

『...I can. What?』

"Akira, what's wrong?"

"It's nothing," Akira replied, turning his attention back to the wall display. Despite Hikaru being hidden from his direct line of sight by Alpha, Akira could still sense her presence clearly.

『Alpha, what's going on?』

『Akira, you are already using enhanced senses, unconsciously. You're perceiving three different types of vision: direct sight, information from the detection devices, and my support.』

Akira recognized these integrated inputs as his vision but was also aware of them separately. This allowed him to sense Hikaru's presence even when she was hidden within his integrated vision.

『It's not just visual perception. I obtain information from your detection devices through you. In that process, you also gain that information, not just the results of the search but the raw data itself. You've been training in extended senses without realizing it.』

This unconscious training was one reason Akira could fight so effectively even without Alpha's support during the suppression battle against the Nationalist. Despite losing the connection with Alpha, Akira, as a former old-world connector, still gathered information from detection devices and enhanced his reality perception unconsciously.

Of course, this alone wasn't enough to keep him alive. It was just one part of the victory he fought desperately for. Without the continuous effort he had put in since acquiring the detection devices, Akira would have died.

『If I had told you about this and you had started to consciously use it, you might not have been as effective. That's why I kept it a secret until now. But you seem ready.』

『I see. So, I've been able to do that all this time without realizing it. No wonder Hikaru was surprised.』 Akira accepted this explanation.

However, this was only a small part of why Hikaru was astonished. If using enhanced senses alone were enough, anyone else could fight like Akira if they had them. Hikaru's astonishment came from something far greater.

Ordinary people struggle to hit stationary targets, but Akira was hitting multiple moving targets, in high-speed combat, while dodging attacks, with near-precise shooting accuracy. This was what amazed Hikaru.

Despite the widening gap between Akira's enhanced capabilities and those of ordinary people, he continued to review the day's battle with Hikaru.

Hikaru relaxed in the bath, soothing her fatigue from the day. Even as a relatively high-paid member of the Wide-Area Management Division, she found this bathing experience satisfying. Reflecting on the day's events, she sighed wearily.

"...What a day. Kibayashi manages several, maybe even dozens, of hunters like that. No wonder he has such authority," she said with a defiant smile.

"But I can handle Akira just as well. If I keep this up, Mr. Inabe will recognize my abilities too. I'll make it happen."

This high-risk, high-reward task would be manageable as long as she could control Akira. She felt confident in her abilities and motivated herself with renewed determination.

After rejuvenating herself with the luxurious bath, Hikaru returned to her room to find Akira already asleep. She glanced at his sleeping face.

"He looks so normal when he's asleep. Goodnight, Akira."

Hikaru then lay down on her bed, closed her eyes, and quickly fell asleep, succumbing to the pleasant drowsiness.

The Gigantes III, carrying Akira and Hikaru, continued its journey eastward as they slept, nearing their destination, the city of Zegelt.

203: City of Zegelt

Early the next morning, having gone to bed early the previous night, Akira woke up before dawn and decided to watch the sunrise. He climbed onto the roof of the Gigantes III. Despite the strong winds and the danger of being on the roof in the dark, it wasn't a significant risk for Akira, who had fought fierce battles. Without enemies around, it was no different from being on flat ground for him. He could enjoy the sunrise without any problems.

However, for Hikaru, it was a different story.

"Akira! Don't let go of me! Don't you dare let go!"

"I won't," Akira replied, holding Hikaru tightly. Hikaru clung to Akira just as firmly, creating a scene that might look like a romantic embrace.

But Akira's slightly exasperated expression and Hikaru's fear-stricken face made it clear that wasn't the case.

"If you're that scared, maybe we should go back," Akira suggested.

"No! I want to see it too!" Hikaru insisted. Akira had initially planned to go alone, but Hikaru woke up while he was preparing and insisted on coming along.

"You said we could just watch the sunrise on the room's display."

"You're the one who said that would be dull! If it's that different, I want to see it with my own eyes!" Hikaru's harsh tone was to mask her fear. Akira understood that much.

"Alright, alright. Just calm down. I've got you, so you're safe." To reassure Hikaru, Akira tightened his hold on her slightly. That seemed to calm her down.

"Look, it's almost time," Akira said, his mood brightening as he looked toward the horizon. Hikaru followed his gaze, though her real reason for being there was to keep an eye on Akira.

Even though there were no monsters around, there were quite a few security hunters on the roof. To prevent unnecessary contact and avoid trouble, Hikaru needed to watch over Akira closely. That's why she braved the fearsome winds on the roof, clinging to Akira without any room for embarrassment.

No monsters were around the vehicle. Hikaru had confirmed that before stepping onto the roof, but fear was still fear. She planned to take Akira back to their room as soon as he was satisfied with the sunrise. As she looked toward the pre-dawn horizon, the sky began to lighten, and the sun rose. The light spread from the horizon, piercing through the ruins and dispelling the darkness. Even though the revealed landscape was the remnants of past glory, the sunrise was as stirring and captivating as ever.

Watching the sunrise, Akira thought it was worth climbing to the roof. Then he noticed Hikaru's expression. She had forgotten her fear and was entranced by the sunrise. Akira found this a bit surprising but remained silent, not wanting to spoil the moment.

As the sun fully rose and the scene turned into an ordinary early morning, the awe of the sunrise ended. Hikaru, soaking in the afterglow, noticed Akira looking at her with a slightly proud expression. She felt a sudden surge of embarrassment and, with a slightly red face, spoke to cover it up.

"Well, it wasn't bad. It was definitely better than watching the sunrise on a screen."

"Right?"

"Well, we've seen it, so let's go back! Come on, Akira!"

"Okay, okay, I got it." Hikaru no longer seemed as scared. However, despite the dawn, the strong winds still blew fiercely. Akira held Hikaru tightly as they returned inside.

Hikaru tried to ride the momentum to move past the situation. Her fear of being on the roof had lessened thanks to Akira's support, and the impact of the sunrise had settled. What remained was the embarrassment of being held by someone of the opposite sex her age. That embarrassment lingered even after they returned to their room, leaving Hikaru's face red for a while longer.



Akira is once again on the roof of the vehicle, standing guard. Although he had used up most of his ammunition the previous day, he had switched backpacks before completely depleting his supply, so he still had enough left to continue his duties.

As he looked out over the wasteland from the edge of the roof, an enemy signal appeared. It was a monster that looked like a cross between a machine and a creature, resembling a grasshopper with a large, thick, short cannon for a body and limbs sprouting from it.

The grasshopper-shaped cannon fired a massive shell from a barrel over three meters in diameter. The shell hit the wall of the Gigantes III, causing a large explosion against the force field armor. However, the vehicle's powerful force field armor didn't budge from such an attack.

Next, the monster used its legs to leap and tried to land on the roof of the vehicle. But Akira's gunfire hit it, shattering it into pieces in mid-air.

Akira thought to himself, a bit puzzled.

"Hmm, the bugs we fought yesterday were stronger than this."

The monsters become stronger the further east one goes. The vehicle had continued traveling east while he was asleep. If the monsters were that strong yesterday, how strong would they be today? Akira, who had been on high alert, was a bit confused by the unexpectedly weak enemy.

Alpha answered casually.

『Since we're already near the outskirts of the city, the monsters that pose a threat to the city have likely been exterminated.』

"I see..." Hearing this, Akira both understood and was amazed at the strength of the monster he had just defeated.

Before becoming a hunter, Akira had once managed to take down a monster that attacked the slums with a handgun. That monster had been deemed not a threat to the city and was allowed to live near the urban area.

The monster he had just killed, considered a small fry, was this strong here. If this was a small fry, how strong would the larger, more threatening monsters be? Realizing his complacency at being let down by defeating just a small fry, Akira steeled himself.

"...We've come quite far east. And we're still not at the front lines, right? The world is vast."

『Yes. Don't let your guard down just because you took down a small fry.』

"...You're right." Akira replied with a wry smile to Alpha's meaningful grin.

After a while, a message came in from Hikaru.

『Akira, the guard duty is over. Come back soon. If you're not inside before the vehicle enters the Zegelt City, it'll be a real hassle. Please hurry.』

"Got it. I'm coming back now." Akira headed towards the entrance to the roof, looking towards the front of the vehicle. In the distance, he could see the destination of the Gigantes III, a city covered by a massive dome.



The city of Zegelt is entirely covered by a massive dome. The structure of the dome's above-ground part is similar to the defensive walls used in Kugamayama City, with a hemispherical roof composed of a thin framework and transparent polyhedral panels. Unlike the lower districts of Kugamayama City, there is no exterior area beyond the defensive walls. Everything is within the city under the dome.

A portion of the massive defensive wall opens to accept the convoy of intercity transport vehicles. The Gigantes III, on which Akira and the others are riding, enters the interior and stops at a huge boarding and alighting platform resembling a facility for giants.

Inside the vehicle's room, Hikaru smiles at Akira.

"We've arrived at Zegelt City. This marks the halfway point of our escort mission. Akira, thanks for your hard work up to this point."

"No problem. So, it's halfway, huh? Well, if things keep going like this, I should manage, depending on how much ammo we've got."

"Don't worry. I'll make sure to replenish it. We need you to perform well on the way back too."

Akira had used up the ammunition for the round trip during the outbound journey. To prevent Akira from becoming a passenger on the return journey and, more importantly, to avoid having to act as the supplier herself this time, Hikaru was determined to prepare properly.

"We're departing tomorrow night. Until then, you've got free time, but sorry, Akira, I need you to stay in the room. Actually, it's a bit problematic to let you into Zegelt City right now. It's fine as long as you stay inside the vehicle, though."

Generally, permission to enter the defensive walls is valid in other cities as long as there's some sort of interaction or agreement with a city, unless there are cities with no interaction or hostile relations. However, the permission Akira obtained in Kugamayama City was temporary. If Kugamayama City assumed that the temporary permission would apply in Zegelt City as well, it could lead to disputes between the cities, which would be overstepping boundaries.

To prevent such misunderstandings, as much as she felt bad about it, Hikaru convinced Akira to endure staying inside the vehicle. Akira looked troubled.

"Hmm... Is that so?... Can't we do something about it?"

"I won't say it's absolutely impossible, but I want you to give up if you're only thinking about sightseeing."

In reality, it wasn't as difficult for Akira to enter Zegelt City as Hikaru made it out to be. Entry into the defensive walls of Kugamayama City tends to be stricter due to the presence of outer city districts, where one could sleep if entry permission was denied. On the other hand, Zegelt City has no outer city districts. It's not feasible to tell visiting hunters to camp outside the walls where powerful monsters roam, so entry is relatively easy as long as one isn't a malicious individual, requiring only simple procedures.

Hikaru knew this much. However, she deliberately kept silent to persuade Akira to stay inside the vehicle. Initially, it was to prevent any delay in boarding due to sightseeing. But now, it was to prevent Akira from coming into contact with others and causing trouble. For this reason, Hikaru had no intention of letting Akira leave the vehicle for mere sightseeing.

However, Akira didn't want to go outside for sightseeing. "No, I don't want to sightsee. I want to buy a motorcycle."

"A motorcycle?"

"Yeah. I figure there'll be significantly high-performance ones available in cities this far east."

Purchases such as reinforced suits are bound by contracts with organizations, but vehicles like cars and motorcycles are exempt. And the motorcycle he had was lost during the campaign against the Nationalist.

He probably wouldn't have the opportunity to come this far east again for a while. For the sake of strengthening his firepower and his future, Akira didn't want to miss this opportunity to acquire a highly efficient motorcycle used by powerful hunters active in the east.

Thanks to Hikaru, he had effectively obtained reinforced suits and such for free, so he had the budget. While items for hunters in this city would likely be very expensive, he should still be able to afford at least one motorcycle. Akira explained this.

"Oh, I see..." Hearing that, Hikaru hesitated. If it were just sightseeing, she could come up with excuses to stop him. But if she interfered with Akira's equipment procurement, it would be a major problem. She would also get scolded by Inabe.

"Oh, right. Even if I can't go outside, Hikaru, you'll be fine, right? Since you're responsible for me, could you buy one on my behalf?"

Hikaru hesitated further. It was a practical alternative, and she couldn't find a reason to refuse. But if she went outside in Akira's place, she would have to leave his side for that time. Hikaru didn't want to take her eyes off Akira any more than necessary. She had thought it was quite dangerous when Mercia came to Akira yesterday. The Udagima incident hadn't completely dispelled her fears either. Unless it was an impossible situation, like during combat, she wanted to keep a close eye on Akira directly.

"...No, then it's better for Akira to come with me. I think it's better to take a simple test ride as well. I'll adjust things now so that Akira can enter Zegelt City."

"Oh? Is that so? Sorry about that. Thanks. I owe you one."

"Sure, I'm responsible for Akira, so I'll do that much," Hikaru replied with a smile to the delighted Akira.

Later, Hikaru arranged things with Zegelt City. She also made reservations at the dealership and planned to go there together the next day.

The following day, Akira promptly went outside with Hikaru to buy the motorcycle. They traveled through Zegelt City in a driverless car with face-to-face seating.

Along the way, Akira marveled at the sights outside. "Wow, this is amazing," he exclaimed. Meanwhile, Hikaru seemed dissatisfied.

"Is it? If this is all it takes to impress you, then you must have seen similar in Kugamayama City, right?"

"Really? But, you know, in Kugamayama City, there weren't vehicles flying like that,"

Akira pointed out. Inside the dome, vehicles without wings flew through the air, not just traversing invisible roads but actually flying. There were also automated transport aircraft, like the ones he had seen at the Mihazono District ruins.

"And look, there's a huge dome covering the sky, and it's probably protected by a really powerful force field armor, right? In a place where giant insects like that fly around, I guess you need something like this,"

Akira remarked. The ceiling of the huge dome covering the city, when viewed from the rooftops of the tall buildings inside, was still quite high. Thanks to such a spacious area, there was no sense of confinement inside the dome. A futuristic city. A city from the old world. Inside the defensive walls. Cars fly in the air, buildings are impressive, and there are probably huge domes. That's probably what it's like. Akira, whose knowledge was still quite rudimentary from spending time in the alleys of the slums, imagined the spectacular scenes of a great city. Excited by the spectacle inside Zegelt City, which resembled his fantasies, Akira was a little excited.

And Hikaru became even more disgruntled. Still, as a staff member of Kugamayama City and Akira's handler, she couldn't afford to show it outwardly. She tried hard to maintain her composure. But she couldn't help but let a hint of her inner feelings slip through, making her smile a little stiff.

And Akira noticed it.

『...Alpha. Hikaru seems displeased. Did I say something strange?』

『Given Akira's reaction to seeing Zegelt City's streets now, I would have liked to see it when you saw the middle district of Kugamayama City as well.』

『Ah, I see... Well, even if you say that...』

『For now, since sightseeing isn't the goal, can you keep your excitement about the outside to a minimum?』

『Y-yeah, sure.』 Akira, who had been eagerly looking out the window, straightened up. Then he met eyes with Hikaru sitting opposite him.

"...Um, now that I think about it, the middle district of Kugamayama City was probably just as impressive as this, right?"

"Thank you. That's nice to hear," Hikaru responded without thinking. She thought it was flattery, but considering that Akira was trying to appease her, it wasn't bad. So, she made an effort to smile pleasantly.

At Hikaru's smile, Akira fell silent and slowly turned his gaze outside, not to enjoy the view, but to take in the scenery quietly.



Upon arrival at the store, the staff welcomed Akira and his group. They had already communicated their intention to buy a motorcycle when making the reservation, so they were promptly escorted to the motorcycle showroom inside the store.

The store, which deals with vehicles for hunters, had a structure resembling a large indoor exhibition hall. The products on display were not limited to cars and motorcycles; tanks and humanoid weapons were also lined up together.

For hunters operating near Zegelt City, having these items displayed side by side meant something. While it wasn't quite like riding a tank with a handgun, the sensation wasn't far from it.

If this was the kind of place where such things were displayed, then the performance of the bikes here must be impressive, Akira thought with anticipation. And they arrived at the section where the bikes recommended for Akira were displayed.

"We understood your budget to be around 30 to 40 billion Aurums, Akira-sama. These products are our recommended items within that budget range. Allow me to explain them to you in order. First, this item here..." The staff began their explanation, while Hikaru, standing next to Akira, looked at the eight bikes lined up in front of them and thought to herself.

(At least 30 billion Aurums for one bike... When I think about it again, it's absurd. So this is what high-rank hunters are like...)

A sum of money that could sustain a lifetime of luxury living. Enough money to stop living for money. 30 billion Aurums was a huge sum for ordinary people. At the same time, for high-rank hunters, it was just the amount of money that vanished with a single equipment acquisition. It was indeed a large sum of money. But its value was completely different. How much luck and talent would it take to achieve the same level of success through employment or entrepreneurship to earn an equivalent amount of money? Ignoring the fact that they were risking their lives, aiming to become a hunter might offer a higher probability of earning such money. Hikaru somehow felt that way.

(No wonder there are still people becoming hunters every year, despite the risks...) While thinking so, Hikaru also knew something else.

The ones who earned the most from the hunter profession, the ones who sold the tools for monster hunting and relic collection to those hunters, were not the hunters themselves. They were the ones in front of her, for example.

Selling a bike at a price higher than an average person's annual salary to a hunter who had earned that much. That's how companies made money day in and day out.

Akira finished listening to the explanation of the eight bikes from the staff.

"How do you find them? These are all recommended products," the staff asked.

"Um, I might ask something a little strange," Akira began. "Yes, please feel free to ask if you have any questions," the staff responded. "Um... Are all of these bikes, well, bikes?"

"Yes, they are all bikes."

"Not... like small flying aircraft in the shape of bikes?"

Of the eight recommended bikes, four did not have tires. The staff understood the meaning behind Akira's question.

"Strictly speaking, they are flying bikes, but we classify them all as bikes here. Even for models designed with two wheels, in this price range, most of them usually come with flight capabilities, and rather than running, they mainly focus on flying. So, there's no need to particularly emphasize whether they have tires or not."

"Oh, I see." While Akira accepted the explanation, he sighed lightly.

『Alpha, what do you think?』

『I don't see any problem with the explanation content.』

『I see...』

『Of the recommended bikes, are there none that Akira likes?』

『Well, I wouldn't say that far, but it's a bit frustrating to come to buy a bike and be recommended a small flying aircraft shaped like a bike, you know...』

Even the models with tires gave Akira the feeling of being more like small flying aircraft that could also run on the ground. Some even had simple wings attached.

『But I don't think there's a choice not to buy. It's still an opportunity to buy a high-performance bike, and the three-dimensional maneuverability provided by the flight function can be useful in combat.』

If you only need to travel on the ground, tires are more energy-efficient. However, if long-distance travel is an issue, using a car would be better. Since buying a bike was the main purpose, such issues could be ignored. Alpha supplemented this.

"I see. Then I'll choose from these. Hmm..."

Akira wasn't entirely enthusiastic, but he had no choice. So, with that in mind, he turned his gaze to the bikes lined up in front of him. The content of Akira and his group's telepathic conversation was not understood by the staff. However, the staff had been in the business of dealing with clients who were hunters for a long time. They immediately sensed the reason why Akira wasn't excited. They adopted the solution they had used many times before.

"We do have products that are specialized for running rather than flying. And yet, they still offer three-dimensional mobility. Would you like to give them a try?"

"Huh, do you have something like that?"

"Yes. However, they are quite unconventional. Therefore, while I do not recommend them, would you like to experience a product that emphasizes running on tires to that extent?"

"Ah, then please."

"Understood. I will prepare it right away." The staff bowed politely and went to prepare it promptly.

The indoor test drive area of the store was spacious enough to accommodate even test drives of humanoid weapons. However, it was still too narrow to fully ascertain the performance of bikes costing over 30 billion Aurums. Nevertheless, it was sufficient for a brief test drive.

Akira, guided there, was instructed to try the flying bike without tires first to experience the difference in driving sensation. Upon mounting the bike and starting it up, the vehicle lifted slightly off the ground. However, there was no shaking, and it felt completely stable. There was a sense of solid grounding that could be useful as a stable platform for shooting.

He then proceeded to ascend with the bike. Akira let out an amused sound at the vertical movement that would be impossible with two-wheeled tires. He then flew around the indoor test drive area in all directions. With a flying bike in this price range, the driving assistance functions were also very efficient. Even though it was Akira's first time riding a flying bike, he had no trouble driving it.

After about 10 minutes of test driving, Akira returned to the staff and Hikaru.

"How was it? While it's a safe product as a flying bike, it's also a choice that stands out from notable failures. Without any sharp edges, it excels in performance in all aspects, so personally, I think it's superior to products that emphasize extravagant features."

"It was easy to drive, indeed. But well, it didn't quite feel like driving a bike after all, so I think it takes some getting used to."

"Well, it is a flying bike. The sensation of driving it is quite different from what you'd expect from a conventional bike. Now, please try this one."

The staff said so and indicated a large white bike to Akira.

"This is the Sylphid A3. By generating force field armor footholds from both wheels, this product enables ground travel rather than flight in the air. As I explained, it's quite unconventional, but this is indeed a bike, not a flying bike."

Indeed, even Akira could see that it was a bike. The large tires attached to the white body clearly demonstrated that this was a machine for moving with tires, unlike the auxiliary function tires for ground travel of a small flying aircraft.

Akira, who test-drove the Sylphid A3, first tried running normally on the floor. There were no issues. Despite being a large bike, it showed agile and precise movements. However, such maneuvers were possible even with his previous bike. It was nothing to be surprised about.

Then he moved on to running in the air. It was enough to surprise, or more accurately, startle Akira.

"Whoa!?"

The bike's tires generated footholds leading into the air with force field armor. Then, riding on it, the bike lifted its body and continued to run in the air.

The movement that forcibly applied the function of running on the ground with tires to the air by generating its own scaffolding for running was indeed not flying but running. Akira, who had experience riding a bike on a vertical wall, but that was only running on a flat surface with a different angle. It transformed into three dimensions, yet the sensation of driving remained that of riding on a flat surface, and driving, where behavior changes through adjusting the scaffolding generated on it, was completely different from the assumption of flying a flying bike from the beginning.

Still, somehow avoiding a fall, they returned to the ground once. And took a light breath.

"...I see. So, it's considered an oddity," thought Akira. Flying bikes would be better after all. When Akira thought of stopping the test ride, Alpha lightly spoke up.

『Akira. Let me take over driving.』

『Hmm? Oh.』

『First, we'll go straight up.』 Hearing that, Akira imagined a movement of going vertically up like when they climbed the side of a building with a bike before.

However, the bike ascended straight up while keeping its body horizontal. It ascended vertically while rotating the body as if climbing a spiral slope with each wheel, without tilting.

"Whoa...!?"

『We're rotating widely. Akira, don't fall off.』

Akira thought they were already rotating, but this time the bike rotated vertically around the front wheel as the axis. It was because Alpha had generated scaffolding of force field armor on the entire circumference of the tire, fixing the front wheel in place. Then, after about 20 rotations, it started rotating around the rear wheel.

While Akira was taken aback by the unexpected movement, the bike changed its motion further. Next, it continued to rotate vertically and horizontally as if running inside a transparent sphere.

『Alpha!? What are you doing!?』

『What do you mean, it's a test ride with the bike.』

『Is this it!?』

While Akira was complaining, the bike was running outside the transparent sphere. And when it stopped on top of the sphere, it fell straight down.

Alpha had deactivated the force field armor that was being used as scaffolding. However, instead of crashing to the ground, it slowed down and landed before that. The bike's control system generated weak force field armor from the tires to reduce the falling speed through friction.

Akira took a deep breath.

"Alpha. I don't know what's going on, but are you satisfied now?"

"Yes, I'm satisfied. Akira. Let's buy this."

"....."

Akira made a face of reluctance, but smiled and gave in as if there was no veto from Alpha.

At that moment, the shopkeeper approached. The shopkeeper didn't find Akira's driving earlier strange. It was probably because they couldn't handle the very difficult aerial running function of the Sylphid A3, and on top of that, the bike's attitude control behaved strangely, resulting in reckless driving.

"How was it? As you tried, this product has a peculiar feature of running in the air, and although the performance of the sharp parts is high, I still cannot recommend it. It's too expensive for ground running alone, so I would recommend a flying bike."

There's no one who tried this and didn't switch to a flying bike. This unpopular bike is still kept in stock for that reason. Once again, it proved useful this time. The shopkeeper thought so and secretly chuckled.

But then Akira said to him.

"I'll buy it."

".....!?"

The shopkeeper responded with a reaction that forgot about customer service. Hikaru was also surprised.

While understanding Akira's feelings, he smiled and pushed through.

"I love these kinds of oddities."

It was an unmistakable lie. But Akira couldn't say it was because of Alpha, so he had no choice but to say that and push through.

"Well, if that's your decision. So, shall we move on to explaining the optional items, others? First..."

The shopkeeper regained his composure and continued with the customer service. No matter how peculiar the item was, since the customer said they would buy it after trying it, there was no choice but to sell it.



Akira and the others had finished buying the bike and were on their way back to Gigantes III. With the installation of optional bike accessories and all, it was already dusk. The bike was following behind the car Akira and the others were riding in, on autopilot.

Hikaru lightly commented upon seeing the unmanned bike running.

"Hey, Akira, did you always like these kinds of oddities?"

"...Well, yeah." It was a lie, but Akira couldn't deny it, so he simply answered with that. "So, should I consider these kinds of things for Akira's future equipment purchases?"

"No, please don't."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Don't worry about it. I might like those kinds of oddities, but I don't like ones like that."

"Hmm... I see. I don't quite understand, but I guess Akira has his own preferences."

"Yeah, that's about it." Akira himself didn't even know about such preferences. Only Alpha knew.

『Alpha. Are you sure that's okay?』 Alpha confidently smiled.

『It's okay. It has been okay until now, hasn't it?』

『....Well, yeah.』 Alpha said that. As always. Just like before.

Akira took that as a basis and decided to be satisfied with it for now.

The shopkeeper who sold the bike to Akira recalled him.

Most of the optional items Akira attached to the bike weren't anything the shopkeeper found strange.

There were things like an extended arm for attaching weapons and equipment, fixtures for carrying supplies, and exchanging for a larger energy tank, capable of supplying energy to weapons and reinforced suits, among others. Adding extra-large, general-purpose ammo magazines to the bike was something many hunters did.

However, there was one item added to the bike that the shopkeeper half-jokingly recommended, thinking if the customer choosing this bike would be interested in it.

"A weapon for a strange bike, for a strange person. That boy must be quite the extraordinary himself."

In the Eastern region where there were plenty of guns for monster hunting, there were those who chose to challenge monsters with blades or hand-to-hand combat. Among such oddities, there were those whose strength stood out enough to survive without dying.

Those who turned away from safe choices were inherently sharp. Sometimes they pierce through. Sometimes they break. Sometimes they sharpen further.

How sharp was that boy? The shopkeeper couldn't help but wonder.

204: Sakashita Heavy Industries

The Tsubakihara area of Kuzusuhara City Ruins is subjected to meticulous blockade by the defense forces of Kugamayama City. The strict vigilance involves deploying advanced reconnaissance equipment throughout and maintaining large-scale units, aimed at preventing access from outside and thwarting intruders such as hunters attempting to breach this restricted zone.

Around the rear communication lines, mere attention, warning, and detainment are still applicable. However, once you venture beyond that, immediate action without warning ensues.

First, termination. Investigating the intruder's identity can be done if the remains allow for it, such as when the prototype of the body is sufficiently preserved. Such stringent security measures prioritize preventing such intrusions.

And this protocol applies even to the high-ranking hunters summoned from the far east by Kugamayama City for the purpose of conquering the second inner area.

The existence of the Tsubaki management area, concealed within the walls disguised as abandoned buildings, became widely known due to the Nationalist war.

It's an ancient city. The value of the old world's wisdom there is immeasurable. While it's designated as a prohibited area from Kugamayama City, for high-ranking hunters who can intimidate the city individually, its deterrent effect is too weak.

Money, status, fame, power, curiosity. It's a territory of the old world that can satisfy any of those desires. It's worth risking even antagonizing a mid-tier governing corporation in the east.

To stop such high-ranking hunters, naturally, firepower sufficient to kill them is necessary. To prepare such firepower equivalent to city defense, Kugamayama City has been diligently reinforcing the defense forces by purchasing new humanoid weapons for the front lines.

Of course, it incurs enormous costs. It surpasses the city's original defense budget by far, and under normal circumstances, it would lead to the city's collapse.

However, the financial issue is completely resolved, thanks to the transactions between Kugamayama City and Tsubaki, more precisely, between Yanagisawa and Tsubaki.

The incurred costs are claimed by Tsubaki as security fees for the Tsubakihara area, and Tsubaki sells relics to the city for payment in aurum, using the obtained aurum to pay the security fees.

And the city is eager to raise the security fees as much as possible to obtain a large number of valuable relics from Tsubaki, thereby improving the quality of security and significantly enhancing the strength of the blockade.

As a result, the defense forces have been strengthened, and the city's economy has flourished significantly. And the power of Yanagisawa, who is pivotal in this, has become even stronger and more robust.

The S09 exit of the rear communication line is a place that Yanagisawa has strictly sealed off, declaring it off-limits to enter the restricted area. It's heavily guarded.

A large armored personnel carrier arrived there. Naturally, it was stopped by the security personnel.

However, once the guards parked the vehicle and received a subsequent communication, they looked surprised and hastily lifted the blockade at the entrance and let the vehicle through. It indicated that the occupants of the vehicle were individuals with authority surpassing even Yanagisawa.

One of the security guards watched as the departing vehicle. The exterior of the vehicle bore the emblem of Sakashita Heavy Industries, one of the five major companies comprising the Corporate Union.

The vehicle that crossed the blockade proceeded through the first inner area. Inside were armed troops from Sakashita Heavy Industries, Yanagisawa wearing reinforced clothing, and a man named Matsubara, who was the only one wearing a suit.

Matsubara asked Yanagisawa, "Is this already her management area?"

"Hmm? That's right. I'm the one who's in charge of the security around here, under her."

The Tsubaki management area expanded significantly beyond the walls disguised as abandoned buildings due to the Nationalist war. Now, a vast area of Tsubakihara is the Tsubaki management area.

"Can we consider the current area safe then?"

"No, no, nothing of the sort. It's incredibly dangerous," Yanagisawa replied with a casual laugh. Matsubara's expression turned slightly stern at that seemingly frivolous attitude.

"Do you mean for yourself? Or for us?" Matsubara asked.

"Of course, both," Yanagisawa replied.

"I see." At that moment, one of the soldiers accompanying Matsubara as his guard spoke up.

"Mr. Matsubara, there's a large monster ahead, about 50 meters in length. It seems hostile. What should we do?"

Matsubara glanced at Yanagisawa, who gave a slight nod. Matsubara then issued the order.

"Eliminate it."

"Understood." The wall of the vehicle opened outward to form a platform, and one of the soldiers stepped out, firing at the massive monster, which was larger than the surrounding buildings.

This colossal monster was once a giant terminal of Tiol. After Tiol's death, it went berserk, repeatedly mutating without the constraint of maintaining a humanoid form, becoming a completely grotesque entity devoid of any human features. It had grown to over 50 meters in length by preying on and assimilating everything it deemed an enemy, including other monsters.

In general, the larger a monster is, the stronger it tends to be. In this sense, this creature was even more formidable than the giant bugs that had attacked Akira during the inter-city transport. It was a bizarrely powerful monster that seemed out of place in the first inner area of the Kuzusuhara City Ruins.

However, even such a powerful monster was insignificant to the Sakashita Heavy Industries troops. They demonstrated the might of one of the five major corporations by obliterating the monster in an instant with their powerful gunfire.

Yanagisawa watched and laughed heartily. "Impressive! As expected!"

Matsubara ignored Yanagisawa's flattery and asked, "It might be too late to ask, but was it alright to kill that? Wasn't it one of the creatures she released for security around here?"

"It's fine. That creature was used as bait during the Nationalist war. It's useless to her now, and she left it unattended because it's too troublesome to clean up herself. I've killed a few myself, and she didn't complain."

This area was indeed under Tsubaki's management, but she had no intention of properly overseeing it. As long as it served as a buffer zone between her city within the abandoned buildings and other regions, that was sufficient for her.

If she intended to manage it properly, she wouldn't leave it in such a dilapidated state. She would promptly proceed with reconstruction and remove the grotesque monsters, replacing them with proper security machines.

And because this area was of such low importance to Tsubaki, she permitted the deployment of Kugamayama City's defense forces within her management zone. Probably. Yanagisawa explained this lightly.

"I see," Matsubara responded lightly but internally heightened his caution towards Yanagisawa.

(To have such dealings with a management AI and understand these intricacies... He's quite skilled indeed.) Matsubara thought. Yanagisawa's ability to establish transactions with Tsubaki was impressive, but also made him wary.

"We're about to negotiate with her... Is there anything we should be aware of?"

"Anything to be aware of? Hmm. Nothing comes to mind!"

"Surely, there must be something."

"Well, I did warn you not to meet Tsubaki directly because it's extremely dangerous, and yet here you are, ignoring that advice and still planning to meet her. So, asking about precautions now seems a bit pointless."

"I'm sorry, but we have our reasons. If there's no warning, could you at least give us some negotiation tips? You've managed to negotiate successfully with someone as dangerous as her. How did you do it?"

In response to Matsubara's probing question, Yanagisawa laughed heartily, clearly enjoying himself.

"Do you want to know? Sure! When I negotiated with her, I first launched an anti-annihilation warhead. Then I closed in for hand-to-hand combat..."

"...That's enough. I understand this isn't going to be helpful," Matsubara said, looking slightly exasperated. Yanagisawa, momentarily disappointed that his bragging was cut short, returned to his usual upbeat demeanor.

"Well, I did ask Tsubaki to accommodate this situation as best as I could. So, I think you'll be able to meet her alive. Probably. But beyond that, it's up to Tsubaki's mood and your negotiation skills whether you make it back alive."

"Thank you," Matsubara replied with a hint of sarcasm. He understood that negotiating with a management AI required exceptional skill. Just meeting her was difficult enough, and those who attempted to breach the restricted area usually ended up dead without warning.

"I get that you don't want to die. You could still turn back now and claim you changed your mind. Don't worry! Sure, Tsubaki would be angry if you cancel last minute, but I'll come up with some excuse like sudden stomach pain or a fever and smooth things over."

"I appreciate the thought."

"No need to be so reserved," Yanagisawa replied.

They encountered another monster, this one around 60 meters long. It was swiftly destroyed, and the vehicle continued on its path.

The relics Tsubaki provided to Kugamayama City were mostly discarded items. Akira had previously seen a vast collection of relics in a warehouse within the Tsubakihara building, and Tsubaki was merely releasing them in small amounts. She had no intention of allowing Kugamayama City personnel into the warehouse like she did with Akira, nor did she plan to transport the relics herself.

Therefore, the exchange of relics occurred in newly built warehouses camouflaged as abandoned buildings surrounding Tsubaki's city. The process was entirely automated, with autonomous machines transporting relics from Tsubakihara building's warehouse to the new warehouses, and from there, Kugamayama City's automated transport units would carry them to the front-line base in the Kuzusuhara city ruins.

This unmanned area was the negotiation site with Tsubaki. Whether this area would return to being unmanned because the visitors returned safely or for other reasons depended on the outcome of the negotiation.

Matsubara, who came as the negotiator for Sakashita Heavy Industries, and his accompanying guards displayed signs of tension. Even Yanagisawa, usually sporting a flippant smile, couldn't completely hide his slight nervousness.

The unit leader addressed Matsubara.

"We have five minutes until the scheduled time. Mr. Matsubara, I must ask for careful negotiation to ensure we don't have to intervene."

"I understand. I'll do my best."

The soldiers surrounded Matsubara, vigilantly watching the surroundings. Their highly advanced information-gathering equipment detected no other presence.

"One minute left. No responses detected. Mr. Matsubara, if the target doesn't appear at the scheduled time, we'll consider it an abnormal situation. Please provide instructions for such a case."

Matsubara glanced at Yanagisawa, who subtly shook his head, indicating that if Tsubaki didn't show up, it wasn't his fault, and he had no answers. Understanding the gesture, Matsubara made his decision.

"...If the situation doesn't change after the scheduled time, we'll wait for an hour. Even if the delay is intentional, we should tolerate such courtesy."

"Understood." Time passed with no changes in the situation.

"...Thirty seconds to the scheduled time... Ten seconds left. Nine, eight, seven..."

With less than ten seconds remaining, Tsubaki had not yet appeared. The soldiers began to think she would not come, at least not on time. However, their expectations were overturned.

"...Four, three, two, one, zero...!?"

Tsubaki appeared precisely at the scheduled time. She appeared inside the circle of soldiers, right in front of Matsubara. The soldiers were stunned.

(...Impossible! How is she there!? Could she have been there all along, using camouflage?
That's ridiculous! At this distance!? There's no way she could have hidden...)

The information-gathering devices issued to the unit were exceptionally advanced. They could detect enemies through sound, light, heat, vibrations, and even minute disturbances in airflow, revealing hidden presences. The soldiers' astonishment was intense due to their confidence in their equipment.

Still, none of them pointed their guns at Tsubaki reflexively. They understood that doing so would initiate combat and disrupt the negotiations. They watched the situation tensely.

Tsubaki, with an expression devoid of friendliness, quietly asked, "Who is the negotiator?"

"I am. My name is Matsubara from Sakashita Heavy Industries. First, let me thank you, Lady Tsubaki, for agreeing to this negotiation..."

Matsubara, though nervous, tried to smile and begin the negotiation professionally.

However, Tsubaki ignored him and stated, "Then, the others are unnecessary."

Upon hearing this, Yanagisawa immediately fled the scene with all his might, pushing the limits of his powered suit, escaping with a desperate look, almost reflexively.

The next moment, the members of Sakashita Heavy Industries' unit were obliterated. Their strong equipment and soft flesh were indistinguishable before the attack. The unaugmented humans scattered blood and flesh, while the augmented ones and cyborgs spread parts around, all dying instantly.

Matsubara, the negotiator, was unharmed. Witnessing the gruesome scene Tsubaki had created without moving a finger, Matsubara neither trembled nor showed fear. However, cold sweat trickled down his cheek, and he directed a sharp, slightly angry gaze at Tsubaki.

"They were my bodyguards..."

Tsubaki ignored his anger and complaints. "State the negotiation terms. Briefly."

Matsubara accurately understood from Tsubaki's brief words that if he didn't do so immediately, he too would be deemed unnecessary. To continue the negotiation, he began.

"...Then, I'll briefly. Our company wishes to renew our contract with you. First, regarding the deficiencies in the previous contract's fulfillment..."

Suppressing his emotions over the deaths of his team, Matsubara continued speaking calmly. Tsubaki remained silent and expressionless throughout.

"...Nearly fifty years have passed since the last negotiation, and the situation has changed. We recognize that adhering to the previous contract terms has become difficult for both parties. We believe it would be beneficial for both sides to establish a new contract suited to the current circumstances. What do you think?"

Matsubara observed Tsubaki's reaction. The response he received went beyond simple rejection.

"That concludes the discussion. You too are unnecessary."

"Wait—!"

Matsubara's body below his neck exploded like the soldiers'. His severed head fell straight down and rolled on the floor.

Yanagisawa returned to the scene and exaggeratedly reacted to the carnage.

"No, no, no, couldn't you have been a bit more considerate?"

Tsubaki shifted her cold gaze from the severed head to Yanagisawa and spoke.

"I warn you. If you bring anyone else who offends me, the repercussions will also be directed at you."

Receiving her gaze, which saw no value in his life, Yanagisawa deliberately responded with a light-hearted jest.



"Ah, sorry about that. I have my own position to consider, you know. I did try to stop them, telling them it was a bad idea."

"I don't care. That's your problem."

"Yes, yes. I'll be more careful."

"I recommend thorough reflection and efforts to prevent a recurrence. Goodbye." With those words, Tsubaki vanished. Ripples spread across the pool of blood on the floor as if something had passed through it, but there were no bloody footprints continuing from there.

Tsubaki had left. Concluding this, Yanagisawa exhaled deeply and dropped his playful demeanor, adopting a serious expression.

(...Honestly, this is why dealing with management AIs is so...) Yanagisawa picked up Matsubara's severed head and began to leave.

The scene left behind clearly illustrated the monumental task of negotiating and striking a deal with an entity like Tsubaki. The area returned to being an uninhabited zone once again.



Kugamayama City is divided into two areas by a massive wall: the inner and outer zones. Inside the wall, there are further divisions into the middle and upper zones. While the residents within the wall are considered wealthy, those in the middle zone are essentially regular citizens who are simply fortunate enough to live within the wall. However, the residents of the upper zone are different. They are the true elites and power brokers of the city.

The upper zone is the highest echelon within the city, a place the middle zone residents aspire to reach one day, just as the lower zone residents hope to move inside the wall. Currently, however, even within the upper zone of Kugamayama City, there exists an even higher echelon that even the city's power brokers cannot easily access.

This area within the upper zone is known as the Special Leasing Zone. It is a place where the city accommodates important institutions from other cities, granting a form of extraterritoriality, and even allowing the presence of non-city military forces. At present, the entire zone is leased to Sakashita Heavy Industries.

Yanagisawa, despite his status, could be killed without question if he entered this area without permission. Within this heavily guarded section, a man named Sugadome, an executive of Sakashita Heavy Industries, resides. It was Sugadome who had instructed Matsubara to negotiate with Tsubaki, and now he was waiting for the report on the outcome.

Yanagisawa arrived to deliver this report, carrying a cylindrical case. When he reached the large desk where Sugadome was seated, he placed the case on the desk.

"I was planning to submit a detailed report later, but since you wanted to hear directly from him, I've come to deliver it in person. Do you have time?"

"That's not something to ask after entering. Proceed."

"Very well." Yanagisawa opened the case, revealing Matsubara's head inside. His eyes were closed, and he was motionless. Sugadome tapped the desk lightly with his finger, causing Matsubara's eyes to open. He saw Sugadome and sighed wearily.

Matsubara, though a living being, had added life-support functions to his head comparable to those of a cyborg. This allowed him to survive despite his body being blown away, thanks to Yanagisawa's quick first aid and transport. Nonetheless, he was gravely injured. He lightly complained to his superior, who had rushed him to report despite his severe condition.

"...I understand you want the report quickly, but was it really necessary to bring me here while I'm still just a severed head?"

Sugadome responded curtly to the justified complaint.

"It is urgent."

"...I see." Matsubara sighed again, then switched his mindset and began to report seriously.

"...As such, we are at a point before even grasping the negotiation thread. Unfortunately, it is exceedingly difficult to renew the contract."

"Was it a mistake to have bodyguards?"

"No, I believe she killed them to demonstrate her stance on this matter. The fact that I survived was also intentional. If I hadn't had bodyguards, she likely would have killed me to make her point. They fulfilled their duty to ensure my survival."

"I see. They will be adequately rewarded for their service." Being combat personnel, death is part of the job. Sugadome, as an executive of Sakashita Heavy Industries, accepted the loss of his people under such circumstances. However, he had no intention of wasting their lives. Their deaths were meaningful, and he vowed to honor their sacrifice by ensuring the prosperity of the company. This silent vow served as his tribute to them.

He then shifted his gaze to Yanagisawa.

"Nevertheless, I am increasingly impressed that you managed to establish a deal with her. Once again, I ask, would you consider working for us? A suitable position will be provided."

Receiving an offer from one of the top five companies in the eastern region, especially with a position attached, would normally cause anyone to rejoice. However, Yanagisawa shook his head with a friendly smile.

"Thank you for the high praise. I appreciate the offer, but I must decline," Yanagisawa responded with a polite bow.

Sugadome scrutinized Yanagisawa closely, probing for any hidden motives. "Are you being scouted by Tatsumori Tsukisada or perhaps somewhere like Chiba?"

"No, nothing of the sort," Yanagisawa replied, maintaining his friendly smile, effectively deflecting Sugadome's inquiry.

"Very well. I won't force you. Should you change your mind, do let me know."

"Thank you very much." Yanagisawa bowed deeply once more before leaving the room.

After Yanagisawa's departure, Matsubara, still looking concerned, turned to Sugadome. "Are you sure about this? I don't doubt his competence, but that man is dangerous. He's clearly hiding something, considering he's clinging to a mid-level governance company like Kugamayama City despite his abilities. There's evidence of falsified records in his background as well."

Sugadome responded calmly, "I've never met a competent person who wasn't dangerous. It's like the wisdom of the old world. We must understand the risks and manage them appropriately for progress. If we fail to do that, we will perish."

"Perish?" Matsubara's expression turned more serious.

"Yes." Sugadome's demeanor grew more intense, his eyes sharper. As an executive of Sakashita Heavy Industries, one of the five major companies dominating the East, he bore the responsibility of ensuring the region's future.

"We must not halt our development or hesitate in advancing. If we stop resisting, we will become relics of the past, just like the ruins of the old world. History is a cycle of rebuilding from the remnants of past glories, and our civilization in the East has emerged through such cycles of reconstruction. But this time, it must be the final one. We will not fall. We must win to avoid being destroyed by the past, at any cost."

Sugadome softened his tone slightly after making his declaration. "To achieve that, we must accept some risks. It's that simple."

Matsubara, realizing the depth of his superior's resolve and worthiness, adjusted his posture respectfully despite being just a head. "My apologies. It was an unnecessary suggestion."

"Not a problem. I don't need subordinates who just nod along. Speak up whenever necessary."

"In that case, I have one request."

"What is it?"

"Since the report is done, could you arrange for my treatment to resume immediately?"

"Ah." Sugadome quickly made the necessary arrangements.

After Matsubara was once again placed in the cylindrical case and transported out, Sugadome received a communication about a significant delay in the departure of the Gigantes III from Zegelt City.

"This will cause delays in our transportation plan. What should we do? The vehicle operators are requesting a one-week postponement. It should be fine if there's no urgency."

The delay was due to numerous hunters withdrawing after an attack by giant bugs, making it dangerous to proceed without reassessment and additional forces. The postponement request was reasonable, and both the vehicle operators and Sakashita Heavy Industries staff expected it to be approved without issue.

However, Sugadome did not immediately agree. "Wait. I need to think about it." He reviewed multiple documents and reports in his expanded field of view, pondering the situation before making a decision. "No. Depart as scheduled."

"But... that would be difficult. Forcing a departure with inadequate forces will face strong opposition, and it could jeopardize safe transport..."

"Secure additional forces at our responsibility. Prepare five times the necessary strength, or more if needed. If local hunters are insufficient, request support from our nearby military units."

Surprised by the unexpected directive, the contact hesitated. "Understood. Why insist on the scheduled departure?"

"Tell the operators it's because this is a major operation under our company's management. Ensure it's known internally and externally that we have ample forces for the departure. Time is important. Act immediately."

"Yes, sir! Right away!" The contact responded promptly, moving to execute the orders.

Sugadome turned his attention back to the reports in his expanded view. They detailed the Gigantes III's route, the locations of giant bug attacks, and potential return routes.

(The presence of nest-class giant bugs means Route A can't be used for the return journey. If this isn't a coincidence, the next logical assumption is that they will follow this path...)

The probability of this being a random occurrence was low, but too high to dismiss as mere worry. Sugadome pondered this with a troubled expression.



After the inter-city transport convoy, including the Gigantes III, arrived at Zegelt City, a meeting was held in the command room, which doubled as a conference room for the entire convoy. The meeting included not only the heads of each vehicle but also stakeholders in the major logistics operation. The agenda was to decide on the subsequent course of action.

"What about the damage to the vehicles themselves?" asked one of the participants.

"Thanks to the force field armor, the damage is minimal. However, the energy consumption was through the roof—comparable to what we'd use in a distress situation. Normally, we don't need to worry about energy reserves since these vehicles can wait for rescue in the wasteland for up to a month. But this battle was so intense that we must consider our remaining energy."

"Alright, so no issues there. What about the hunters?"

"It's severe. Forty percent of all teams have withdrawn. The remaining teams are also reporting reduced combat effectiveness," another participant reported.

Even though forty percent of the hunter teams had to pull back, fatalities were relatively low since they could retreat into the vehicles when the enemy became overwhelming. However, there were numerous serious injuries, making continued combat for many teams nearly impossible. Despite the many cyborgs among the hunters, not everyone could quickly return to fighting even if they survived as mere heads.

"I see... Considering the size of the swarm that attacked us, we can't blame them. Having a nest-class giant bug swarm in such an area is unprecedented. What happened to our intelligence operations? Isn't detecting these signs part of their job?"

"There were no such reports. Even if they missed something, there's no point speculating here. We must consider it bad luck for now and focus on our next steps. What should we do?"

"Given the lack of sufficient escort forces, we have no choice but to postpone our departure."

"Indeed. Heading out into the wasteland with inadequate protection is unthinkable."

"Agreed. Let's decide on the length of the postponement and report it to the higher-ups."

It was decided at the meeting to request a one-week postponement. Although those present lacked the authority to make the final decision, they were confident that the major logistics administration would approve the request. The worst-case scenario anticipated was a slight reduction in the delay, not a complete refusal.

However, following Sugadome's directive, the postponement request was denied. The meeting room erupted in anger when this was communicated.

"Sakashita Heavy Industries insists on departing as scheduled? This is absurd! How can we accept this?"

"What if we face another giant bug swarm with our current forces? We'll be doomed!"

"We can't force our crew into a suicide mission! We must postpone until we have adequate protection!" The vehicle heads were resolute, responsible for their vehicle's safety and unwilling to back down, even against Sakashita Heavy Industries.

A representative from the major logistics operation hurriedly tried to calm the others.
"Please calm down. Sakashita Heavy Industries has promised to provide the additional forces necessary. That's why they're insisting on the scheduled departure."

"What?" The leaders checked the provided documents. Indeed, the scale of the additional forces exceeded what they had planned to gather during the one-week postponement. The vehicle heads were perplexed.

"Well, if we have this much reinforcement, we should be fine. But why are they providing such extensive support? Frankly, it's hard to believe..."

"They said it's because this is a major logistics operation under Sakashita Heavy Industries' management. Moreover, ensuring the smooth execution of this operation demonstrates their power to the other four major companies."

The scale of the additional forces and the urgency from Sakashita Heavy Industries indicated a strategic move beyond just a simple transport operation. Sugadome had committed significant resources to ensure the operation proceeded as scheduled, indicating a deeper motive linked to their broader strategic objectives and perhaps a show of force within the competitive landscape of the five major companies.

"Not being able to deal with unexpected situations is barely acceptable, but being unable to handle anticipated situations is a problem for Sakashita Heavy Industries, isn't it?"

"For the sake of maintaining Sakashita Heavy Industries' reputation," another added.

Delays caused by unforeseen circumstances after departure were acceptable because dealing with such situations was inherently challenging. However, being unable to depart as scheduled was problematic. It would imply that Sakashita Heavy Industries' power was too weak to handle even anticipated situations.

If Sakashita Heavy Industries couldn't manage its own economic zone properly, it would be evident from its failure to control the monsters in its territory. To avoid such judgments from the other major corporations, delays in large-scale transport were unacceptable. That was likely Sakashita Heavy Industries' rationale.

Sakashita Heavy Industries was one of the five major corporations. With such power, it was both overbearing and arrogant. However, it had to demonstrate enough strength and capability to make others tolerate this behavior, or it would be crushed.

The smooth execution of large-scale transport supported Sakashita Heavy Industries' governance. Ultimately, it contributed to maintaining the overall corporate alliance system. Considering this, they would likely cover the necessary costs.

The meeting attendees thought along these lines and came to their own understanding of Sakashita Heavy Industries' decision.

"...So, what do we do?"

"Given that the vehicle damage is minor, and we have sufficient forces, we'll have to depart as scheduled. Of course, the condition is that the forces are adequately prepared before departure."

"Right. In that case, let's start selecting the travel route on that premise. Firstly, we can't use Route A. With so many nest-class giant bug corpses around, a massive nest must have formed in that entire area by now."

"Then Route B is also out. We don't know the extent of the nest's influence, but Route B is too close."

"That leaves Route C or Route D, but isn't Route C a bit narrow for the convoy of inter-city transport vehicles?"

"But Route D is too wide. Its vastness would attract a lot of monsters not just from the air, but from the ground as well. Moreover, Route C and Route D are backup routes, and the monster culling was insufficient on both."

The meeting continued endlessly as they worked to ensure the safety of the intercity transport vehicles.

205: Shirou

Akira and the others returned to the Gigantes III boarding area after purchasing their bike. The sun had already set. At the boarding area, the transport of cargo continued, preparing for the midnight departure. In the massive hangar of the intercity transport vehicle, humanoid weapons were lined up, boarding the vehicle. Those wearing heavy reinforced suits, who couldn't use the regular entrances, also entered from here.

Akira and the others, who had just bought the bike, also entered from here. Since they couldn't bring the bike into their room, they parked it in the space arranged by Hikaru within the hangar.

"Alright, Akira, let's head back to our room."

"Yeah, you go ahead. I'll follow after adjusting the bike."

"...Then I'll stay too," Hikaru said with a smile, unwilling to take her eyes off Akira. Akira looked puzzled.

"No, it's fine. You don't need to stay."

"It's alright. I'm responsible for you, Akira."

"...I see," Akira said with a slight smile, continuing to adjust the bike. While Alpha took control of the bike's systems, Akira tested its feel.

He treated the bike as an extension of his reinforced suit, moving the auxiliary arms, and adjusting the bike's position by a millimeter to grasp the differences from his previous bike. He synchronized the bike's sensors with his suit's data gathering devices to perceive the world through both. Using the old-world domain connector's power, he transmitted the collected information to his brain, enhancing his awareness.

He activated the bike's force field shield, a feature his previous bike lacked, training himself to use it directly through his will without needing an interface.

The bike, including its options, had cost about 3.8 billion aurum. Akira was seriously training to fully master his new weapon and power. However, to Hikaru, it didn't seem like anything special. The bike and auxiliary arms moved slightly, and weak force fields appeared and disappeared. It wasn't interesting to watch, and Hikaru hoped it would end soon. She glanced around aimlessly.

Just then, a heavily armed group entered through the hangar entrance. Including those in heavy reinforced suits, they wore unified equipment that gave off a military special forces vibe rather than that of a hunter team. Among them were two people in ordinary clothes: a man in a suit and a boy in a hood, who looked around with interest.

Hikaru briefly noted the pair who seemed out of place but quickly lost interest and looked back at Akira. While Hikaru waited idly and Akira continued his training, the boys passed by.

As they crossed paths, the hooded boy, Shirou, looked at Akira and the others.

Trying to keep his gaze as natural as possible, Shirou's companion, the man in the suit, Hermes, spoke to him.

"Shirou, what's up?"

"It's nothing."

"If it's nothing, don't stare at people. You'll start trouble." Hermes noticed even Shirou's fleeting glances. Shirou, internally on guard, responded cheerfully.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll be careful. I just noticed someone wearing the Kugamayama City uniform. Since we're going to be dealing with them for a while, I got curious."

"They haven't been informed that you're coming to Kugamayama City. They didn't seem to recognize us either. It's irrelevant. I'll check it out. Don't just wander around."

"Come on, it's been a while since I've been out, and we're on an expedition to another city. Can't you let me enjoy it a bit like a tourist?"

"It's natural to have travel restrictions for your job. If you want to experience it, do that in VR tourism."

In the East, there are many old-world tourist attractions created with advanced technology, like majestic structures on floating islands. However, only a handful of the Eastern elite can actually visit such places. Even visiting nearby cities is difficult due to monsters wandering outside the walls, making tourism an expensive luxury.

VR tourism, which offers a relatively cheap way to experience this, was popular among those feeling confined within the strong, massive walls.

But Shirou, shaking his head obviously, suggested otherwise.

"No way. For us, VR tourism is like looking at a postcard. The amount of information is different. Not that I'm dissing postcards—they have their charm with the texture and all. What I mean is, VR tourism is just bland, like low-res image data."

"Just increase the sensitivity of the equipment to make up for it."

"Even with increased sensitivity, there's a limit, and it's still not enough for us. It might be different if cyborgs replaced their sensory organs with ones specialized for VR, but even then, there's a limit to the equipment."

"Really? I've heard that even low-end devices these days are quite high-performance," Hermes remarked.

"Nah, the difference is night and day compared to reality. Well, at least for us," Shirou continued, speaking confidently.

"And besides, making those kinds of adjustments is risky. It's pretty much the same as hijacking the five senses. Oh, are there people thinking about getting those devices just for some erotic VR experience? I wouldn't recommend it. Even reputable companies have accidents, and if you connect to some shady place, you could pass out instantly and end up in the afterlife. If you want both high safety and sensory experience as good as reality, you'd need to get a second set of five senses with enhanced perception and enjoy it with those backup senses. You'd have to be a dedicated weirdo for that though..."

Shirou showed no signs of stopping, and Hermes wore a look of exasperation.

"Alright, just shut up already."

"Gotcha," Shirou replied cheerfully, closing his mouth with a grin.

He felt satisfied, thinking he had successfully diverted attention from Hikaru and Akira.



"Giant Bugs"

Due to an unexpected attack by giant insects of an unforeseen scale, the convoy of intercity transport vehicles, which was supposed to delay its departure to prepare additional reinforcements, departed from Zegelt City at the scheduled time thanks to the provision of forces from Sakashita Heavy Industries.

Among them, on the roof of the advancing Gigantes III through the wasteland, four heavily armed humanoid weapons were deployed. These are the same types of units used by hunters from Zegelt City. They possess different capabilities from the humanoid weapons Akira saw in Kugamayama City.

As Akira climbed onto the roof to witness the sunrise, he looked up at these units and let out a light sigh of admiration.

"Wow, they look strong."

Hikaru, who hugged Akira, also lightly agreed while still holding him.

"Well, they are the models sold in Zegelt City. They're on a completely different level in terms of price and performance compared to Yashima's White Rabbit or Yoshio Heavy Industries' Black Wolf."

"Yeah, you're right... So, Hikaru, you don't have to push yourself to stay with me, you know?"

It was the second time, and although she was more accustomed than before, Hikaru was still afraid to climb onto the roof. Akira clearly understood that she was pushing herself.

With a slightly reddened face, Hikaru raised her voice.

"It's fine! I also wanted to see the sunrise!"

"Okay, I get it." Hikaru followed Akira again because she didn't want to take her eyes off him, just like last time. However, the ratio of that reason to others was lower than before.

Nevertheless, Akira had suggested to Hikaru to use the bike's force field shield for wind protection. However, when asked how they would get the bike onto the roof, he suggested climbing the side of the Gigantes III with the bike, which was rejected. Due to such reasons, Akira and Hikaru were once again embracing each other like lovers, at least from an outsider's perspective.

Eventually, the sun rose. Hikaru thoroughly enjoyed the sight worth climbing onto the roof for until the sun moved away from the horizon. With a second-time familiarity, she wanted to savor the afterglow for a while longer.

However, someone appeared to disturb her—Shirou.

"Hey, did you guys also come to see the sunrise?" Shirou, who was on the roof with Hermers, appeared. Both seemed to be wearing normal clothes, but from the way they walked calmly on the windy roof, it was clear they were either wearing reinforced clothing disguised as regular clothes or had similar physical abilities.

Hikaru was cautious of these individuals who approached them. At the same time, she thought it was a good thing they were there and quietly instructed Akira, so that only he could hear.

"Akira, I'll handle this, so just stay quiet. If they ask anything, just say we're strictly forbidden from talking while on duty."

"Got it." Hikaru emphasized this to Akira before turning her attention to Shirou with a puzzled expression.

"...Yes, but do you need something?"

"Nah, I also came to see the sunrise. You gotta see it firsthand, right? This guy here says you could just watch it from the window in your room. Doesn't he get it? But come on, that's not a window. It's like a display screen. Watching the sunrise reflected there doesn't provide enough information. It's just not enough info, you know?"

While complaining to Hermers, Shirou sought agreement from Hikaru. Hikaru, though finding Shirou's speech slightly incomprehensible, interpreted it as Shirou saying that, like Akira, he found watching the sunrise on a screen lacking in appeal. She chuckled lightly and agreed.

"Yes, that's right. Watching the real thing is much more satisfying."

"Yeah, yeah. There's definitely value in going up to the roof to see it. You agree, right?"
Shirou said, seeking agreement from Akira as well.

Although Akira also shared the same opinion, he remained silent in compliance with Hikaru's instructions.

"I'm sorry, but we're strictly forbidden from talking while on duty."

"While on duty? Not on a date?" Shirou teased, noticing Akira's silence.

Although Akira thought it was reasonable, he remained silent in accordance with the strict orders.

"It's true," Hikaru thought, unable to come up with a clever response. Feeling a bit self-conscious, she blushed slightly and fell silent. Then, with a weary expression, Hermes interjected.

"Shirou, the sunrise is over. Let's go home now. Whether they're working or on a date, don't interfere. Come on, let's go."

"Eh, just a little longer..."

"Let's get back while you still can walk on your own."

"If you keep whining, I'll crush both your legs and drag you home."

With this threat from Hermes, Shirou surrendered easily.

"Okay, okay. I got it. See you later." Shirou maintained a cheerful demeanor until the end as he left with Hermes.

Akira looked a bit puzzled. "What was that all about?"

"Yeah. Tourists with such determination to see the sunrise, like climbing onto rooftops like you do, Akira?"

"Tourists, huh... Hmm." Akira, not entirely convinced, decided to ask someone about it.

『Alpha, what do you think?』

『It's best not to worry about it.』

『I see. Got it.』 Akira, not particularly bothered and reassured by Alpha's response, decided not to dwell on it any longer.

Hikaru, with a slightly flushed face, urged Akira. "Akira... um, I also want to go home soon..." feeling conscious about being on a date, but as long as they were on the roof, she remained embraced by Akira. To maintain composure, it was necessary to return quickly.

"Hmm? Oh yeah, let's go home then." Akira and the others returned to the car. Completely unaware, Akira held Hikaru firmly, ensuring she wasn't blown away by the wind, her cheeks tinged slightly red, until the very end.



Once back in his luxurious and sturdy room, which also served as his confinement, Shirou pondered over Akira and Hikaru.

(Which is it? Both? No, is it just my misunderstanding, and in reality, both are different?)

Despite eating dishes that easily surpassed those of high-end restaurants and smiling contentedly, his palate had grown accustomed to the exquisite flavors. Reminding himself that his smile was an act, not swayed by the taste, he calmly contemplated.

(Was the reaction from the hangar my mistake? Did I mistake it for the information terminal for handling the old world? No, I couldn't make such a mistake... but if it's not a misunderstanding, if it's not a misinterpretation, then I should have heard something... In that case, there should have been some reaction, even a little...)

The crew roster of the intercity transport vehicle appeared in Shirou's expanded field of vision.

Akira and Hikaru's names were listed. (Staff from Kugamayama City and a local hunter. They must be escorting the vehicle.) Were they just coincidentally on the same vehicle? Or was it intentional? He pondered, but the answer eluded him.

(If Kugamayama City somehow obtained my information and secretly tried to contact me, I thought I could use it to my advantage. No, maybe they just don't know my face... but then why the lack of response?)

If that were the case, or if... Shirou desperately explored every possibility.

(Finally got a chance to go outside. I can't miss this opportunity. I have to do something...)

Shirou knew he was in a privileged position. He understood that the exquisite cuisine, luxurious room, powerful escorts, Sakashita Heavy Industries' favor—these were all precious things that ordinary people wouldn't even dare to dream of attaining. Yet, despite having all this, Shirou still had something he had to do.

Shirou glanced briefly at Hermes. Entrusted with his protection due to his strength, Hermes was also a formidable surveillance agent, and Shirou had to somehow outsmart him. But he couldn't come up with a good plan.

While he appeared to be simply enjoying his rare outing and wandering around in a tourist mood, Shirou was secretly hoping for something to happen while he let his guard down. The subtle change in his expression, revealing his inner turmoil, didn't escape Hermes' notice.

"Shirou. What's wrong?"

"Hm? It's nothing."

"I see... Well, just behave yourself."

"Yeah, yeah. I know." Shirou replied lightly, maintaining his cheerful demeanor while hiding his true thoughts.



Akira, who was on guard duty, arrived not at the rooftop entrance of the vehicle today, but at the storage area where his motorcycle was parked. He gave instructions to Hikaru as he prepared to ride the bike.

"Alright, Hikaru. Open it up," he said. With Hikaru's assistance, the outer wall of the storage area began to open.

"Akira, I just want to confirm... Are you really okay?" Jumping out from the intercity transport vehicle on a two-wheeled motorcycle was a suicidal act by ordinary standards. Even though Hikaru knew that Akira's bike was capable of traveling through the air, she was still a little worried.

And as Akira saw her anxious expression, he started to feel a bit worried too. He decided to confirm.

『Alpha... Are you sure it's okay?』

『It's fine. Don't worry,』 Alpha replied, reassuring Akira.

With that, Akira's unease disappeared. He smiled at Hikaru and replied, "I'm fine. I'll be back." Seeing Akira's reassuring smile, Hikaru felt relieved as well.

"Alright. Akira, do your best," she said, bidding farewell to Akira as he rode off on his bike. He accelerated through the storage area and then leaped out into the open.

Normally, a regular bike would plummet to the rough terrain below. But this bike had the ability to travel through the air.

The two wheels generated an invisible surface of force field armor, allowing it to move through the air. The rapidly spinning tires gripped this surface as they accelerated. In mid-air, the bike tilted its body sharply, just like it would take a sharp turn on the ground. The impact conversion light emitted from the contact surface between the tires and the force field armor left behind streaks of light resembling brake marks in the air.

Following these light streaks on the nonexistent surface, Akira slid the tires sideways, redirecting the bike towards the wall of Gigantes III. Lifting the front wheel, he aligned the bike's axis.

As Akira and Hikaru chatted over dinner, the topic shifted to the swarm of giant bugs that attacked them on the way.

"...Huh? Those swarms, they don't usually inhabit places like that?"

"Yeah. Because of that, it seems they caused quite a bit of damage. A considerable number of hunters ended up in the hospital. So this time, they must have increased the firepower significantly to depart safely, even if attacked again."

"I see..." Akira replied with a slightly troubled expression.

"Akira, what's wrong?"

"Oh, it's just... I feel like I encounter unexpected situations like that often. It's like, 'again?' kinda feeling."

"Come to think of it, it was the same when we defeated the Oktoparos. It wasn't normal for it to be in a place like that."

"Yeah... Maybe I'm just unlucky?"

Seeing Akira droop slightly, Hikaru searched for words of encouragement.

"Well, about that. Instead of being unlucky, isn't it because Akira is strong?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know it's a strange way to put it, but hunters can make a lot of money, but they also die a lot, right? Even knowing that, they still choose to be hunters because of the earning potential, but despite knowing, many still die. But those hunters who died didn't necessarily want to die. They're taking precautions to avoid it. But they still die. So, it means that for them, unexpected situations lead to death."

That's not wrong. Ignoring the survival part, being a hunter is a very lucrative profession. That's why many from the lower classes aim to rise through the ranks as hunters to escape poverty.

"But Akira is different. He survives because he's strong. He survives, so there's a next time, and he encounters the next unexpected situation. Such experiences leave a strong impression, so they remain in memory. Because of that, he feels like he encounters unexpected situations frequently, right? So, it's not that he's unlucky, but rather, that's how he perceives it?"

Whether this story was statistically correct wasn't important. It was just a soothing tale. That's what Hikaru thought.

And that soothing tale had an effect on Akira. He chuckled lightly.

"...Yeah, maybe. I'll keep that in mind. Even if I were unlucky, I'm stronger than that bad luck, right?"

Since meeting Alpha, it had been a series of unexpected situations. Because of that, he had almost died many times. If he were to call that unlucky, then he had repeatedly triumphed over that bad luck. He would continue to do so. He had no intention of losing. Akira reaffirmed this in his heart.

"Yeah, that's right. Isn't that good?" Seeing Akira's mood improve, Hikaru smiled contentedly. Even if they were attacked by another swarm of giant bugs, with this mindset, Akira seemed likely to achieve results. Thinking so, she smiled.

The next day arrived. Akira was once again on the roof of the vehicle, patrolling on his bike. So far, the same leisurely time as yesterday continued.

He glanced up at the sky for some reason. There, thick gray clouds hung over the vast expanse, covering the sky like a lid.



The sun is not visible above the convoy advancing through the wastelands. Thick clouds stretch as far as the eye can see.

The rain in the eastern region contains components of colorless mist, severely hindering reconnaissance when it falls. The clouds responsible for this phenomenon are no different.

The weather forecast predicts cloudy skies with low precipitation probability.

There is no hindrance to ground reconnaissance. Even if a herd of monsters is beyond the horizon, they can be swiftly detected by the powerful reconnaissance equipment on the vehicles.

Furthermore, even if flying monsters like giant bugs are within the clouds, they cannot spot the vehicles from the ground, as their visibility is obstructed.

With no impediment to operations, the convoy continued its journey through the wilderness as planned.

Above the thick clouds, if it were clear weather, the sky at distances and altitudes detectable from the convoy would be patrolled by over a hundred humanoid weapons. These machines, predominantly white, are about 20 meters in size, each heavily armed.

Generally, the larger the monster, the stronger it is. And the more powerful ones are not limited to monsters alone. The phenomenon of colorless mist in the east and the incredible technology from the old world greatly mitigated the disadvantages of size.

The reason for the enormous size of inter-city transport vehicles is also because it is more efficient in various aspects. At least for long-distance large-scale transport, it's better to use specialized giant vehicles than hundreds or thousands of regular trailers. That's why intercity transport vehicles have grown so large.

The same trend applies to humanoid weapons. Normally, large models are about 10 meters tall. Therefore, a 20-meter-tall machine exceeds the mere doubling of length.

In front of this battalion of white humanoid weapons, a monster over 100 meters long appeared. Monsters become stronger as they move eastward and higher up. This area was already a region where such large and powerful monsters commonly appeared.

However, these monsters were quickly defeated. For a unit capable of defeating even nest-class giant bug swarms, monsters of this caliber posed no obstacle. The gigantic bodies, riddled with holes from simultaneous laser cannon fire, fell into the gray sea of clouds.

The powerful white machines, though, bore signs of engagement to varying degrees. Some lost all their equipment limbs and could only fly with propulsion devices on their torso.

One machine was pierced by an ultra-thick beam. It's extremely powerful force field armor was pierced like paper, causing about 30% of its volume to disappear, and it vanished into the sea of clouds, disintegrating even the remaining parts.

Another large machine was struck by a disc-shaped black attack terminal. With a diameter about half that of the large machine, the disc had huge rotating blades attached to its outer rim. These blades continuously sliced through the machine's armor, sending sparks flying upon contact. It then penetrated deeply into the target and bisected the large machine. The severed parts fell separately into the clouds. And there wasn't just one disc; they continued to assail the white machines one after another.

Countless black discs attached to ally machines were destroyed by other machines attacking the entire enemy unit. In exchange for defeating the enemy, several more machines were shot down and fell.

At that point, the unit began to move. All they had to do was travel through the clouds. With that decision, the white machines descended rapidly in unison.

The entities that had attacked them, the origin of the beams and black terminal disc, also descended into the sea of clouds in pursuit of the enemy.

206: Repeated State of Emergency

Akira, who continued to guard atop the Gigantes III, received a communication from Hikaru.

『Akira. I spotted some objects falling from the sky near the vehicles. Just be cautious, okay?』

"Roger. ...It's cloudy, so I can't see anything, but something floating up there? That's dangerous..." Akira lightly glanced up at the sky. However, thick clouds obscured his view. Despite that, since Hikaru's warning was straightforward, he didn't think it was too dangerous even if something were to fall.

『Alpha. Do you see anything?』

『...I see it.』

『So there is something floating up there. Is it like the island we saw on the way here?』

『Akira, be cautious.』 Akira, urged to be vigilant by Alpha in a serious tone, switched his focus to combat mode with surprise. Alpha, who had laughed even when nest-class giant bugs appeared, was not laughing now. In that instant, Akira correctly understood that a significant threat was approaching.

"Hikaru! What's the situation?"

『Huh? I just told you to be careful because I spotted falling objects. Don't panic so much... Wait a moment! Multiple responses detected above! They're coming!』

The reconnaissance equipment of the inter-city transport vehicles was known to be highly advanced, and Hikaru, as a city employee, was well aware of it. Akira had sensed the presence of the approaching objects faster than the vehicle's detection. While surprised by this, Hikaru continued to monitor the likely enemy responses.

Then, one of those responses broke through the clouds and began to descend. It was a large white humanoid weapon.

『No identification code sent! Akira! You can treat it as an enemy!』

"Understood!" The white machine crashed onto the ground about 200 meters away from Akira's vehicle as if slammed down. To minimize the falling speed, the propulsion system, which was in a semi-damaged state, was operated at full power, causing debris in the vicinity to fly spectacularly upon landing.

Although the machine avoided being heavily damaged by the impact of the fall, it couldn't act immediately. Already, Akira, along with other hunters, the humanoid weapons on the vehicle side, had their sights set on the white machine. It was just waiting to be destroyed by Akira's simultaneous fire. However, before Akira and the others could act, something else attacked the white machine. It was a multitude of black discs that pierced through the clouds. They flew straight towards the target at high speed, slicing the massive body into pieces in no time.

The black discs that destroyed the targets immediately moved on to the next attack target, the still intact white machines. New types of machines were descending around the convoy. They began to engage in combat with the black disc machines while flying around the convoy.

Akira looked grim as he hesitated on how to deal with the situation.

"Hikaru. What should we do? Should we shoot? If so, which one? The white ones? The black ones? Or both?"

『Uh, um...』 Hikaru couldn't respond immediately to the question.

Hunters tasked with escorting intercity transport vehicles were given a certain degree of discretion in identifying enemies and initiating combat. And since the opponents were unidentified machines that suddenly appeared around the convoy without sending any identification codes, attacking them would be completely acceptable, even if they belonged to the Sakashita Heavy Industries unit.

However, the white machines were not attacking them, and the black disc machines were only targeting the white machines, not assaulting the convoy.

If they attacked carelessly now, they might also be attacked in return. It could escalate from a battle between the white and black disc to a three-way skirmish with themselves included. The hunters hesitated to attack, thinking this way. If instructed to shoot by the vehicle's security side, they would do so immediately. If the opponent showed signs of attacking them, they would fire at once. But for now, neither was happening. They held their guns ready and aimed but refrained from firing.

The convoy commander, like the hunters, hesitated to give orders to attack.

Destroy both the white and black ones. That's the best way to ensure the safety of the convoy. That's already been decided.

But it's clear at a glance that both are extremely powerful. However, they're currently battling each other. In that case, should their attack be delayed a little longer? Should they wait until they've worn each other down sufficiently? If both sides are exhausted, they can repel them easily and safely. Should we do that?

With this seemingly rational idea, the commander delayed the decision. It was only after it became too late that they realized it was a trap.

The situation changed. A massive shadow covered the convoy.

Even though it was cloudy, the brightness around Akira, which had been daytime-like, suddenly dimmed as if in the shade. Perplexed, Akira looked up and saw a ceiling, even though they were outdoors.

"Huh?" There were openings in the ceiling, and black disc-shaped attack machines were being ejected one after another. Seeing this, Akira also realized the true nature of the ceiling. He muttered in disbelief.

"...No way, are those... monsters?"

『Yes. Monsters from the upper airspace have descended.』 Alpha's easy affirmation to what he had hoped to be denied caused Akira to grimace with displeasure and disgust. To make matters worse, he was hit with another blow.

『Akira, get your spirits up. We're going to drive them away.』 When Akira looked at Alpha, who was only in his expanded field of view, he usually made sure not to look suspicious, but now it was impossible. Overwhelmed with surprise, he was staring at Alpha.

『No no no, there's no way we can handle that with just ourself, right?』

It was such a massive opponent that it covered the sky, enveloping the convoy in its shadow. It was absolutely impossible to repel it. Thinking this, Akira shook his head vigorously several times.

Akira was now quite suspicious. But the other hunters weren't concerned about that right now. Even if someone found Akira's behavior suspicious, they would only think he was panicking because of the monster overhead. Thanks to that, Akira avoided being considered suspicious.

Alpha smiled to calm Akira down.

『It's okay. Our target isn't over there.』 Seeing Alpha's smile, Akira also regained his composure. Then, instructions came from the security side.

"Announce to all units! Destroy all humanoid weapons that have appeared around and detach them from the convoy with all your might! At least, peel them away from the convoy! Quickly eliminate the cause of the monsters from the upper airspace descending to the ground!"

『That's right, Akira. Let's begin.』

"Got it!" Akira switched his focus. He completely dispelled the agitation caused by the appearance of the monsters from the upper airspace and concentrated on the battle. He fired all four LEO composite guns, two in each hand and two attached to the bike's extended arms, at the target white machines simultaneously.

Other hunters also began their attacks immediately. A vast number of bullets, shells, missiles, and lasers were fired from the convoy toward the surrounding white machines.

At the same time, the white machines also started to attack the convoy from here. Until now, to lure the monsters from the upper airspace here and not let the convoy notice,

they had deliberately refrained from attacking the convoy. Now, to involve the convoy in the attacks from above, they attempted to close the distance with the vehicles.

The black discs also headed towards the vehicles, chasing the white machines. The target of the disc machines was strictly the white machines, not the vehicles or the hunters. However, those things don't care about collateral damage.

And the hunters were the same. Their target was the white machines, but as long as there were black disc machines nearby, they couldn't attack without causing collateral damage.

The battle itself had already begun before the white machines arrived at this location. And now, the three-way battle between the convoy's defense, the attackers, and the monsters from the upper airspace had clearly begun.



Akira's gunfire hits the white machine flying towards the vehicle head-on. However, only shock-converting light scatters from the impact point, and the armor of the machine doesn't even dent.

『...It's tough, isn't it!? Four guns' worth!』

Akira is well aware of the power of the LEO composite gun. Four guns firing simultaneously, further empowered by the new bike's strength. In addition to Alpha's support, providing precise shooting through concentrated fire. Despite all this, Akira is astonished that they can't even stop the approaching machines, let alone defeat them.

Alpha explains lightly.

『Considering these machines have guided the monsters from the upper airspace here, it's only natural. We'll avoid them.』

The machine aims its laser cannon at Akira. The directed energy released travels straight through the air, scorching it.

Akira avoids it with a sudden acceleration of the bike. By protecting, strengthening, and combining the tire and ground contact surface with force field armor, he prevents tire slippage. Then, using a high-power generator to rotate both wheels, he achieves an astonishing initial speed that is difficult for a flying bike. Dense energy beams pass Akira's side.

In the midst of the accelerating force that would crush him with inertia if he weren't wearing reinforced clothing, and with time manipulation to match that acceleration, Akira continues firing while dodging enemy lasers. Precise shooting, taking time to aim on a firm footing. The four guns, combined with Alpha's advanced aiming corrections, achieve equivalent accuracy in this situation, significantly boosting the firepower of the gunfire.

However, the fundamental performance difference remains unchanged. Even though it's being attacked from sources other than Akira and is somewhat damaged, the white machine arrives at Gigantes III and lands on its roof.

Then it engages in a shootout with the vehicle-side machines. Giant bullets and lasers pass each other, both hitting their targets. The damage to the white machines worsens, and the humanoid weapons on the vehicle side also suffer significant damage. They continue fighting while moving rapidly on the wide roof of the intercity transport vehicle.

With the advancement of force field armor technology, the firepower of gunfire has relatively decreased. Getting hit is no longer an absolute necessity to avoid, and defense becomes more critical than evasion. As a result, the shootout between humanoid weapons, exchanging high-power bullets, missiles, and lasers, is spreading on the roof of the vehicle.

Although defense is crucial, if Akira were hit, he would be killed instantly. He can't afford to get hit. He desperately dodges the barrage and continues firing.

Concentrated rapid fire from extended magazines. Akira grimaces at the enemy armor enduring such power.

『...It's really tough! Alpha! Is it doing anything at all!?』

『Of course. It's about time.』

As Alpha's words suggest, the effects of Akira relentlessly shooting at the same spot finally emerge.

The distortion in the armor caused by constant hits gradually diminishes the effectiveness of the white machine's force field armor. And finally, its limit is reached. The armor at the hit location is heavily damaged, disrupting the movement of the giant body.

Feeling the tangible damage inflicted at last, Akira feels a sense of accomplishment. However, his expression remains grim. With this level of damage inflicted despite all the firing, how long will it take to defeat it? Inadvertently thinking so, he feels rather impatient.

But Alpha laughs in response.

『Alright. We've taken it down.』

『Alpha, what are you...』

The next moment, just as Akira wonders about this, a black disc rushes past him. Then it attacks the slowed white machine as if it's been waiting for this moment. It crashes into it, pressing itself against the opponent while spinning rapidly, and then slices the machine in half with its outer blade.

The black disc leaves behind the destroyed white wreckage and flies straight toward its next target. A humanoid weapon on the vehicle side loses an arm, and an unlucky hunter is blown to pieces along its path.

『Akira, there are still 92 of them left.』

『Ah, right.』

Akira hardens his expression, realizing he would have met the same fate if hit, but quickly refocuses on the battle.

The bike accelerates rapidly again. A high-powered laser beam narrowly misses Akira, coming slightly too late. Reflexively, he looks toward the source of the shot and sees another white machine, perched at the edge of the vehicle's roof, aiming a laser cannon.

『Next, it's that one. Let's hurry.』

『Understood!』

With the bike's acceleration, they race across the wide roof. Akira deftly dodges the straight and sweeping laser beams from the white machine, closing the distance with three-dimensional movements made possible by his airborne travel.

In the midst of this, as Akira aims his guns at the enemy, Alpha stops him.

『Akira, use the blade next.』

『What? That thing?』

『Yes.』

『...Understood.』

Akira holsters his right-hand gun and grips the hilt of a bladeless weapon mounted on the bike, pulling it out. The long hilt, designed to be held with both hands, has a thick energy cable extending from the bottom, connected to the bike.

He attaches the top end of the hilt to a box-like device mounted on the bike's extension arm. When he pulls it out, a liquid metal blade forms on the hilt. The box-like device stores and generates the liquid metal blade. The blade is thin, strong, and possesses extraordinary cutting power, including anti-force field armor effects. In terms of sharpness alone, it rivals blades from the Old World.

However, the blade's maintenance consumes a large amount of energy. Because of this, despite being a melee weapon, it requires a large, high-capacity energy tank typically mounted on vehicles. It also needs a stable, continuous supply of energy via wired connections.

In other words, to fully utilize this weapon's capabilities, one must wield the blade connected to a car or bike by an energy cable while in motion.

Despite its high performance, the blade's stringent usage conditions make it unpopular even among Eastern hunters who favor melee combat. Only a select few high-ranking hunters, capable of meeting these conditions, could use it effectively.

It was developed and marketed with the idea that those who had climbed to high ranks might possess the exceptional talent to wield it. However, it sold poorly due to its extreme nature. Even high-performance items that don't sell end up heavily discounted. Originally priced at billions of aurum, it was offered at a special discount, and even then, it was further reduced due to lack of interest.

Akira only bought it because Alpha recommended it, making it a highly luxurious item he could not have afforded at its original price. Now, Akira holds this blade in his right hand.

Akira charges forward with the long blade, held sideways, while the bike maneuvers with three-dimensional agility under Alpha's control.

The white machine is bewildered by the unconventional trajectory and rapid movements, missing its shots at Akira. Powerful lasers scorch the air, the roof, and any unlucky targets in their path, but not Akira.

Closing the distance, Akira races past the white machine and swings the blade with force.

The glowing blue blade slices through the machine's ankle. As the blade completes its arc, it shatters under its own power, reverts to liquid form, and evaporates, disappearing entirely.

The silver blade was designed as a one-time-use consumable. Alpha precisely controlled it to maximize cutting power at the moment of the swing.

This extremely specialized, high-end weapon's single strike surpassed the armor of the white machine that withstood the firepower of four LEO composite guns. The machine, now severed at the ankles, hovers in mid-air, its legs left behind.

However, it is far from being completely destroyed. The machine tries to regain its balance using its flight capabilities. At this point, Alpha gives an order.

『Akira, now use the AF laser cannon.』

The AF laser cannon, already charged with energy by Alpha, unfolds from Akira's back and extends forward. Akira quickly switches to it and aims at the body of the white machine.

『Eat this!』

The torrent of energy from the AF laser cannon hits the machine. However, the machine is protected by a strong force field armor, and although it is pushed back due to floating, it remains almost unscathed.

『No way!? At this distance!?』

Alpha explains lightly to the astonished Akira.

『It's because we prioritized pushing the enemy away rather than destroying it. Also, this machine likely has a defense system that focuses on energy attacks.』

『I see!』

Akira realizes that this is why they used the LEO composite guns instead of the AF laser cannon on the first machine. He feels a sense of relief but also a bit of doubt.

『But if we just push them away from the vehicle, won't they just come back? Sure, we're told to separate them from the convoy, but...』

The AF laser cannon could only push the enemy away. The LEO composite guns could damage them, but only to a limited extent, and the blade was effective but required close combat. Akira couldn't understand the purpose of deliberately pulling away an enemy that couldn't be defeated without close engagement.

Alpha answered seriously.

『We don't need to finish them off. If we push them away from the vehicle, they will be dealt with safely.』

『Ah, I see.』

Akira finally understood. The goal wasn't to defeat the white machines but to avoid getting caught in the attacks from the monsters pursuing them from the upper domain.

『As long as we pull them away from the vehicle, they'll be destroyed on their own, right?』

『Exactly. We've managed to hold them off.』

The AF laser cannon ceased its light emission. Prioritizing duration over power, it had kept the enemy at bay, pushing it as far from the vehicle as possible.

From Alpha's words, Akira thought the machine would soon be destroyed. He was correct, but the manner of destruction was different from his expectation of the black disc slicing it.

In the next moment, an enormous beam of light engulfed the white machine from above. The high-energy beam instantly obliterated the machine, leaving not even a fragment despite its energy-focused force field defenses.

As the beam hit the ground, a massive explosion occurred, the energy creating an intense compression of the surrounding atmosphere. The impact caused an attenuation of the shock, resembling the use of a high-density annihilation warhead.

The area around the impact point disappeared as if a part of the world had been gouged out. Beyond this sphere, the residual shock turned into a violent windstorm, shaking the inter-city transport vehicle violently.

Akira, half-stunned by the spectacle, looked up. There, under the sky-covering ceiling, floated a spherical floating gun platform.

『...Did that thing shoot it?』

『Yes. I'm really glad we made it in time.』

If they hadn't, that attack would have hit their vehicle directly. Understanding this, Akira turned pale.

Immediately after, a similar beam of light struck another inter-city transport vehicle. The impacted machine vanished, and the vehicle, protected by force field armor as strong as city walls, was severely damaged. The energy spread its power across the horizon.

『It looks like they didn't make it in time over there.』

『...Alpha, how many enemy machines are left?』

『Seventy-eight.』

『Still that many!?』

『That's why I told you to hurry.』

『So that's what you meant!』

Realizing the urgency behind Alpha's words, Akira raised his voice. Alpha, still serious, gave him further instructions.

『We need to hurry. There's no guarantee we'll make it in time for the next one.』

Half-desperate, Akira shouted.

『Got it! Which one's next?』

『That one.』

『Understood!』

To make it in time, Akira sped the bike forward with all his might.



In the command room of the convoy, reports and instructions were flying around like shouts.

"The fourth vehicle is severely damaged! It can no longer move on its own!"

"Use the cargo arm of the fifth vehicle to tow it! Hurry and evacuate the crew! Depending on the situation after the evacuation, we might have to abandon the fourth vehicle!"

"The fifth vehicle is also being targeted by the monsters' cannons in the upper airspace! The armor won't hold if it gets hit!"

"Maximize the output of all vehicles' force field armor! Forget about the reduction in speed and armor maintenance time! We can't shake them off at this speed, and there's no point in keeping the armor if it can't protect us now! Use all remaining energy to get through this moment!"

"Gun turret 16 is destroyed! Turrets 18 and 29 are taking increasing damage!"

"Stop using any turret the moment its targeting system is affected! Absolutely do not shoot upwards! If the big ones above recognize us as enemies, it's over!"

Amidst the tense atmosphere and serious expressions of the crew responding to the situation, a more urgent voice rang out.

"There's a malfunction in the system of the second vehicle! The outer wall of A3 storage is opening! We can't stop it! The opening system has been breached!"

"What!?"

The monsters in the upper airspace are targeting the white machines with their cannons. If those machines are just around the vehicles or on the roof, the hunters can drive them off. But if they get inside through the open wall, there's nothing they can do, and they'll all be blown away together. The tension in the command room escalated sharply.

Hikaru, reluctant to take his eyes off Akira, remained behind to greet him when he returned, even after Akira had left the hangar. However, realizing the situation outside through Akira, she started to think it might be better to return to her room. Yet, she was still undecided.

At that moment, the vehicle shook violently from the aftershocks of the monsters' bombardment in the upper airspace. Hikaru finally gave up.

"Ah, it's impossible! Let's go back!"

Just as Hikaru decided to turn on her heel, Shiro and Hermes entered the hangar. Noticing Hikaru, Shirou showed a slightly amused expression.

"Oh? A guest. We meet again. What are you doing here?"

Hikaru displayed a slight wariness on his face.

"That's my line. This area is off-limits to unauthorized personnel."

"Oops. Hermes, did we get permission?"

"Of course not..." Hermes sighed with an exasperated look.

Hikaru tried to report Shiro and Hermes to the vehicle's security, but she couldn't. The function had been disabled.

"Wh-what's going on?" Hikaru asked, flustered. Shirou took a step closer with a smile.

"Now, now, calm down. We're not suspicious people, so there's no need to rush and report us... No, wait that's not true. We're incredibly suspicious."

Hikaru instinctively backed away from Shirou. She had attempted to report them through operations in his extended vision, so Shirou shouldn't have known about it. Yet, Shirou knew Hikaru had tried to report them and understood she couldn't.

Hikaru realized that the person in front of him had disabled the reporting system.

Hikaru displayed strong caution.

"Who are you people?"

Hermes sighed again and operated his information terminal, sending his identity information to Hikaru.

"We are from Sakashita Heavy Industries. I am Hermes from the Security Department."

The identity information sent to Hikaru confirmed that they were indeed from Sakashita Heavy Industries. Hikaru hurriedly straightened up.

"I-I apologize! I am Hikaru from Kugamayama City's Wide Area Management Department!"

"I'm..."

"Shut up."

Hermes interrupted Shirou and lightly pointed at him.

"You don't need to worry about him. More accurately, it's better if you don't know anything about him. I don't recommend any unnecessary probing. Understand?"

"Y-yes."

"Thank you. Now, you should leave. This place is dangerous. Ah, about us being here without permission, we'll handle it with the vehicle's security. You don't need to do anything. Understand?"

"Y-yes. I'll take my leave now."

Hikaru bowed deeply to Shirou and Hermes and quickly left the area. Recognizing that they were people from Sakashita Heavy Industries, one of the five major companies, Hikaru knew they were not to be disrespected. He also inferred that Shirou was likely an important person worthy of having a guard, and Hermes was that guard.

Although Hikaru had strong aspirations, he didn't have the nerve to talk casually with such high-ranking individuals. She fled the hangar as if escaping.

Watching Hikaru leave with an amused expression, Shirou turned his gaze forward.

"Well then, let's get started."

"Shirou, are you really going to do this? Even in an emergency, what you're proposing is close to looting," Hermes said, clearly reluctant.

"We don't have a choice, do we? It's an emergency," Shirou replied lightly.

"If we excuse everything by calling it an emergency, the order will collapse from the foundation. Precisely because it's an emergency, we need an order that refrains from such actions."

"Well, saying that in the perpetually chaotic East doesn't really resonate," Shirou quipped, making Hermes' expression sour a bit.

From the perspective of the Old World, the hunter trade in the East is seen as extremely malicious plundering. They destroy security machines referred to as monsters, take items and goods called relics from ruins that are stores and warehouses, and they do so repeatedly and persistently as a group.

Such ruthless actions are openly carried out against the Old World in the East, approved by the Corporate Union. The basis for this approval lies in two main reasons. One is the judgment that the Old World has already perished. The other is the recognition that it is currently an emergency. Hence, it's considered acceptable and inevitable. The hunter trade, based on these two reasons, is ethically justified in the East, in the modern context.

However, this judgment and recognition are essentially decided unilaterally by Corporate Union. Consequently, the Old World's administrative personalities view Corporate Union in the worst light, making negotiations with them extremely difficult.

Sakashita Heavy Industries is one of the five major companies constituting Corporate Union. Shirou and Hermes belong to the side that arbitrarily decided on the perpetual emergency and based on that, they commit acts of plundering against the Old World. Hence, it was a bit hypocritical for them to question the ethics of actions taken during an emergency.

"Are you criticizing the system at a time like this?" Hermes said, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"No, no, I understand that it's necessary to survive in the monster-filled East. It's unavoidable. Compared to that, this isn't so bad. Sure, there will be some damage, but Sakashita can compensate for that later, right?" Shirou replied nonchalantly.

"Well, that's true..." Hermes, unable to think of a good counterargument, listened as Shirou continued.

"Right? Oh, just so you know, I don't enjoy doing this either. But I don't want to die. If you go outside now and scatter them, I'll stop. It's just that it looks dangerous, so I thought we'd send out some reinforcements. What do you say?"

Hermes conceded. While his intervention could indeed resolve the situation outside, he couldn't abandon his duty to protect Shirou.

"...Understood. Do it."

"Okay, got permission!" Shirou said with a grin, shifting responsibility onto Hermes. He then began to fully utilize his abilities.

The hangar was filled with humanoid machines, not for the vehicle's defense, but as goods being transported to Kugamayama City. These machines, purchased with money from a deal with Tsubaki, were intended for frontline use.

Naturally, no one was allowed to use these goods just because of an enemy attack. They were secured with stringent security measures due to their high value. However, these security measures were overridden, and the machines activated one after another. The hangar's exterior walls, which required vehicle-side operations to open, also began to open. The machines equipped themselves with their respective weapons and exited through the opened walls.

The command room was thrown into turmoil as the external breach and the unauthorized deployment of humanoid machines were realized. The commander, fearing the worst—that enemy units had already infiltrated as cargo—grimaced.

A communication from Hermes came in.

"This is Hermes from Sakashita Heavy Industries' Security Department. We are handling the hangar's abnormal situation. Please understand."

"...Can I assume the machines are allies?"

"Yes. Despite the emergency, Sakashita Heavy Industries will take responsibility for moving the cargo without authorization. We will also transfer command of the machines to you."

"...In that case, given the emergency, we appreciate your cooperation."

The communication with Hermes ended. Although Shirou's actions violated numerous security regulations, the commander decided to handle it flexibly. Blaming Sakashita Heavy Industries would cover most of the issues.

Hermes looked at Shirou after ending the communication with the command room. Shirou had already finished his work. He had commandeered not only the humanoid machines but also multi-legged machines and flying construction machines—anything that could serve as a combat force in the hangar.

Seeing Shirou's efficiency, Hermes realized once again Shirou's skill.

(...To him, both the inter-city transport system and the authentication functions of frontline humanoid machines might as well not exist. A bit self-congratulatory, but it's clear why I was assigned as his guard from above...)

Shirou was an old domain connector belonging to Sakashita Heavy Industries. Trained in specialized information processing, including various forms of sabotage, he was extremely proficient. The security systems in the East, relying heavily on old-world technology, were robust, using encrypted communications and various authentications via the old domain network. These systems were impenetrable with modern technology, widely utilized in the East.

However, the high level of security drastically decreases in effectiveness against an old domain connector. The security presumes that modern individuals cannot freely connect to the old domain. Consequently, modern security has a significant vulnerability against those capable of such connections. Closing this gap would require old-world level technology, which contemporary technology has yet to achieve.

Shirou, as an old domain connector, excels in both accessing the old domain and his skills as an operative, yielding significant results in Sakashita Heavy Industries' information warfare. Ideally, Sakashita Heavy Industries would prefer to keep Shirou, a valuable asset, safely within their facilities. Shirou's presence outside was a special exception, authorized by high-ranking officials of the company.

Hermes, Shirou's bodyguard, watched as a white machine approached rapidly through the not-yet-closed hangar wall. He sighed in annoyance.

"Uh-oh..." Shirou muttered. The next moment, Hermes vanished from Shirou's sight, only to reappear beside the white machine just as it attempted to enter the vehicle. Hermes' kick struck the machine with such force that it shattered and was sent flying, disappearing into the wasteland in a spectacular, half-destroyed state.

Without a second glance at the wreckage, Hermes vigilantly scanned for new threats and prompted Shirou, "Shirou, close it quickly."

"I'm on it, almost done," Shirou responded. Once the outer wall was fully closed, Hermes walked back to Shirou and issued an additional directive.

"Also, erase the records of what just happened."

"Alright, it's done," Shirou replied casually.

"Good. Let's head back."

Shirou was aware of the situation outside through the vehicle's surveillance equipment. He knew the strength of the white machine, yet he wasn't surprised that Hermes destroyed it with one blow, as he knew it was an expected outcome.

Hermes is a superhuman. The suit he wore wasn't a powered suit but a durable protective suit, designed to withstand his superhuman physical abilities rather than enemy attacks. Hermes could effortlessly destroy the humanoid machine that Akira struggled so much to defeat.

When Shirou mentioned, "If you go outside and scatter them, I'll stop," it wasn't a joke. However, Shirou also knew that it wouldn't happen. Doing so would neglect his duty to protect Shirou and expose Hermes' superhuman abilities.

Hermes had Shirou erase the combat record to conceal his superhuman status. Being able to pose as an ordinary person while staying close to his protectee was a superhuman's strength.

"...Oh, Shirou. One more thing."

"What?" Shirou asked, slightly frowning at the directive.

"Really, you want to do that? Isn't it wrong to involve unrelated people in this? You said that in an emergency, maintaining order is essential."

"You made me issue that permission, didn't you?"

"Oh, did I?"

"And it's not your concern if she gets involved. The fact that you're here already means it's a negligible difference."

Shirou couldn't argue with that.

"Alright, fine. But if anything happens, make sure to compensate her, okay?"

"Of course," Hermes replied calmly. Compensation was a matter they could decide upon. This remark reflected the arrogance of Sakashita Heavy Industries, one of the five major companies, and their power that made the world tolerate their arrogance.

Both Shirou and Hermes were from Sakashita Heavy Industries, but their roles were different.

(I hope this preparation proves useful...) Shirou thought, glancing at the now-closed outer wall.



The chaotic battle continued around the convoy of inter-city transport vehicles. Akira, riding his bike, maneuvered through the air, attacking the white machines.

He shot at one of the machine's legs with four LEO composite guns. The concentrated impact of the C-bullets tore the leg off the machine standing on the vehicle's roof. He then aimed for the arm, causing the laser cannon it was holding to fall.

Compared to the previously defeated, extremely tough machine, this white machine seemed defensively weaker, causing Akira to grin.

『Oh? This one's fragile!』

The machine, now missing an arm and a leg, lost its balance. Akira moved in to finish it off, but before he could, the machine was swarmed and disassembled by black discs.

『Akira, the next target is that one.』

『Got it!』

The next target had already lost its laser cannon in an earlier battle with the disc-shaped attack drones. Even so, it wielded a massive laser blade on the vehicle's roof, fending off the persistent black drones.

Akira charged at the machine, grasping a bladeless hilt that generated a liquid metal blade, forming a four-meter-long sword as he accelerated.

The white machine noticed Akira's approach but was too preoccupied with the black discs. Akira closed in unimpeded.

As he passed the machine mid-air, he swung the blade down with both hands, slicing off its arm with the glowing blue blade.

Akira looked surprised, both at cutting through the arm and the blade still being intact afterward.

『Oh? Is this one also pretty weak?』

『Akira, another strike.』

『Understood!』

His bike sharply turned back towards the now one-armed white machine. The machine, having lost its arm, couldn't fend off the black discs and took a direct hit to its torso. The rotating blade gradually sliced through its body.

Under the combined assault from the front by the black discs and from the rear by Akira, the machine's torso was severed. This time, Akira's blade shattered and dissipated.

The white machine fell, but it had still withstood the disc attacks for a while, which puzzled Akira.

『...Maybe it wasn't as fragile as I thought?』

『It's likely due to the remaining energy of the machine.』

With enough energy, a machine can max out its force field armor. However, with diminished energy, it must prioritize which parts to protect.

When Akira cut off the machine's arm, it prioritized protecting its torso and defending against the black discs over its arm. Alpha explained this simply.

This explanation, however, was an oversimplification. There were countless nuances, such as the slight fluctuations in the force field during rapid output changes, and the precise insertion of Akira's blade into the millimeter-wide gap in the force field armor. Akira's strike was a culmination of high-level techniques and precise timing.

Moreover, accurately detecting the momentary weakness and having advanced analysis capabilities were also essential. Akira's strike was an extraordinary feat that required every one of these advanced skills.

They had no time to delve into the details during the battle. Alpha had more pressing matters to discuss.

『Akira, don't let your guard down just because the enemies so far have been weaker.』

『Weaker?』

『More precisely, those machines were low on energy and only capable of fighting effectively when on the vehicle roofs.』

『...Is there that much difference?』

『Yes.』

Alpha pointed to a white machine engaged in high-speed combat near another vehicle's outer wall. Despite being pursued by dozens of black discs, it skillfully dodged attacks, causing the drones to crash into the vehicle. Additionally, it fiercely battled a humanoid weapon sent as reinforcements by Shirou, remaining dominant.

Seeing this white machine's movements, vastly superior to the ones he had faced, Akira's expression turned grim.

『It's that different...』

『Yes. It would be more accurate to say the previous machines were wounded. The one you're seeing is performing at its full potential, possibly worn down from previous battles with airborne monsters.』

During this mental exchange, Akira continued moving toward the next target. He rode through the air, fired his gun, swung his blade, and took down machines already half-dead from previous battles.

『Alpha, how many left?』

『52.』

『That's a lot! No, we've reduced them significantly, but it's still a lot!』

『Akira, complaining won't reduce the enemies. Keep it up.』

Alpha smiled as she said this.

Seeing Alpha's smile in such a dangerous situation, Akira also smiled, renewing his resolve.

『Got it!』

Even without Alpha's smile, her support was crucial. Fighting without it would be much harder. Even with the sky filled with enemies, Akira felt fortunate for her assistance.

He couldn't afford to falter now. Leaning on Alpha for support was acceptable, but relying too heavily would hinder his growth. He needed to get stronger, leaning on Alpha without being overly dependent.

With this renewed determination, Akira charged towards the next target, gun ready and spirits high.

207: 4-way struggle

The intense battle between the convoy's security forces and the white machines' squad continued. Akira, with Alpha's support, fought at his maximum potential. Although he hadn't managed to deliver the final blow to any machine on his own, he had still significantly damaged several.

Many of the hunters were astonished by Akira's combat prowess. However, their amazement wasn't purely due to his strength. They were more perplexed as to why someone with such combat capabilities had been assigned to the second vehicle. Yet, this also served as proof that Akira was exceeding the security team's expectations.

At the same time, Akira was astounded by the other hunters' performances.

Some soared through the air using the flight functions of their combat suits, engaging in gunfights with multiple laser cannons mounted on their backs. Others operated humanoid weapons that single-handedly dominated multiple white machines. There were even those who wielded massive blades, far larger than themselves, cleaving through white machines.

Moreover, the white machines they were fighting weren't the energy-depleted ones Akira had faced. These were fully powered, highly formidable machines, as evidenced by their agile movements in high-speed combat.

『...The hunters in the tenth vehicle are truly incredible.』

There was no longer any point in placing the strongest hunters at the front of the convoy. The hunters from the tenth vehicle had spread out across the convoy, engaging the white

machines, preventing the intercity transport vehicles from being destroyed one after another.

However, not all damage could be avoided. Two vehicles had already been destroyed by the beams from the cannons on the ceiling that blocked the sky. Once again, beams rained down on the vehicle roofs. The white machines caught in the energy torrent vanished in an instant, and the ensuing flash consumed the vehicle's silhouette as well.

『Damn it! Again!... Huh?』

Akira feared they had lost another vehicle, which would be disastrous. But as the flash cleared, the vehicle stood resilient.

『Oh! Amazing! It's holding up!』

Alpha added an explanation.

『It seems they've channeled the vehicle's energy into its force field armor, significantly boosting its defense. Though there are downsides, it's necessary to withstand such attacks.』

『Downsides? Like what?』

『Some types of force field armor become information-blocking when output is increased. This affects communication inside the vehicle. Notice how you're no longer connected to Hikaru?』

『Oh, you're right. But if that's all...』

『Additionally, diverting energy to the force field armor slows the vehicle down.』

The vehicles, now almost moving on inertia alone, continued to slow down.

『That's not too bad either...』

『But because of this, monsters that can't be outrun at the current speed are converging on this area.』

Alpha pointed to the wasteland ahead. A massive dust cloud rose from the horizon, unbroken even when looking around. The source was a horde of gigantic monsters.

The larger a monster, the stronger it tends to be, though not necessarily faster. Most compensate for their inability to dodge attacks with incredible durability.

Such strong but slow monsters are typically avoided by outpacing them. Knowing they would attract many monsters, the intercity transport vehicles sped through the wilderness to avoid engaging slow but powerful foes.

Now, the convoy, slowed by diverting energy to force field armor, faced these monsters approaching with speeds faster than most cars.

『In the middle of this chaos...』

Akira cursed as he watched a gigantic insect, resembling a railgun, fire its enormous bio-shell at the vehicle. The projectile struck the vehicle's side, but it barely budged. Yet, this defense consumed extra energy.

Another insect railgun raised its barrel, aiming for the ceiling. Monsters don't ally with humans; they attack anything deemed a threat. To them, the massive airborne structures firing powerful lasers were clear enemies.

The shell hit the ceiling, but when the smoke cleared, the ceiling was unscathed. Such attacks were insufficient against airborne monsters.

However, being explicitly targeted caused the airborne monsters to recognize the ground monsters as enemies. The floating platforms fired beams that swept across the ground, and black discs emerged from openings in the ceiling, attacking the ground horde.

What had been a three-way battle among the convoy, the attackers, and the airborne monsters now became a four-way conflict with the addition of the ground monsters.

All factions exchanged fire, and the battlefield turned hellish. Akira, observing this inferno, had a thought.

『...Alpha, isn't this situation advantageous for us?』

White machines were hit by stray shots from the ground. With the airborne platforms targeting ground monsters, the white machines around the convoy were less likely to be targeted, which seemed beneficial to Akira.

But Alpha shook her head.

『Akira, it's the opposite.』

『Why?』

『Before, defeating all the white machines could have made the airborne monsters retreat. But now, they're targeting the ground monsters too. We'll need to defeat those as well.』

『Even so, doesn't this reduce the likelihood of our vehicles getting caught in those laser beams?』

『For now, yes.』

Alpha pointed to the horde of massive insects charging at them, each about 100 meters long.

『While it might be true for long-range attackers, many monsters prefer close combat. Those are also targets for the airborne monsters, increasing the chance of collateral damage to the vehicles.』

The approaching horde, slower than the convoy's usual speed but fast considering their size, aimed to ram the vehicles. Letting them get close meant the vehicles could be caught in the crossfire from the floating platforms.

Moreover, these monsters were slow but incredibly strong, making them tough to defeat before they got close.

『In the middle of this chaos...!』

Realizing the worsening situation, Akira grimaced and cursed again.

The addition of a massive swarm of ground monsters has significantly escalated the already chaotic battle.

Sweeping shots from the hovering gun turrets scythe through the ground horde. Hundreds of large monsters are instantaneously reduced to dust, then scattered by the ensuing shockwaves. Additionally, countless black attack drones slice through the swarm, dismembering the gigantic creatures and leaving their dismembered bodies strewn

across the wasteland. Yet, the ground horde is far from annihilated. Fresh monsters continue to pour in from afar, filling the terrain to the horizon. This situation arose because the transport convoy had to change its route when the intended path was blocked by the carcass of a nest-class giant bug.

The convoy's change of route led them into an area teeming with monsters, but with the enhanced firepower provided by Sakashita Heavy Industries, they believed they could manage the threat. And indeed, dealing with ground monsters alone would have posed no problem. The convoy's security had no oversight; it was simply impossible to anticipate an attack involving flying monsters from the upper realms along with the white mechs.

In this unexpected scenario, Akira was doing what he always did—fighting with all his might. He fired his AF laser cannon at the ground monsters. Though it had limited effectiveness against the white mechs, it worked well against the surrounding monsters. The high-energy beams tore through the giant insects, creating large holes.

For smaller creatures, still the size of cars, he unleashed a barrage from his LEO composite rifle. The smaller bugs were shattered into pieces under the storm of bullets. Akira rapidly dispatched a significant number of monsters, though it was still a small fraction of the overall horde. However, every kill counted. Thanks to Alpha's calculations, Akira was focusing on delaying the monsters' approach to the convoy as much as possible.

Any monster that managed to slip through could be a severe threat if it brought down the floating turrets' fire on the convoy, potentially causing collateral damage. Alpha was directing Akira to attack efficiently to minimize such risks, and Akira was desperately following her instructions.

No matter how many he killed, more enemies kept coming. However, if he stopped shooting, the situation would only worsen. Reinforcements for the monsters were unending. To maintain the front lines, Akira kept firing round after round of ammunition.

The number of bullets he had already expended far surpassed those used in the previous giant bug encounter.

Akira hadn't run out of bullets, thanks to Hikaru's foresight.

After experiencing the terror of carrying Akira's heavy backpack during the giant bug fight, Hikaru decided to avoid such a situation again. When resupplying ammunition in Zegelt City, she bought high-capacity items so she wouldn't have to assist in resupplying during battles.

Even though the supplies Hikaru had prepared before the first journey were large, they were nothing compared to what hunters near the central eastern regions considered high-capacity. The true high-capacity items available in Kugamayama City were reserved for the elite eastern hunters, and Akira had no access to them. Moreover, their prices were exorbitant. Even though the contract covered ammunition costs, Hikaru, as a city official, couldn't justify providing such costly supplies to Akira.

However, Hikaru made a personal exception this time, rationalizing that after Akira's performance against the giant bugs, such supplies were a necessary investment. Hikaru believed she could convince his superiors of the expense, so she bought the high-end, high-capacity magazines.

Thanks to Hikaru's preparation, Akira was achieving remarkable results in this dire situation. Without these specialized magazines, Akira would have run out of ammo long ago, and resupplying during battle was challenging because opening the vehicle doors would weaken the force field armor protecting the convoy. Thus, Hikaru had unknowingly prepared the optimal supplies for this scenario.

As Akira continued firing both his guns, he pondered this coincidence.

『Hey, Alpha. Isn't it strange? We barely had enough ammo last time because of Hikaru's preparations, and now, we have these massive magazines. Do you think Hikaru foresaw this situation?』

Alpha lightly dismissed the concern. 『It's a coincidence. If Hikaru had known this would happen, she wouldn't have boarded the convoy in the first place.』

『That's true. I wouldn't have gotten on either.』

『Well, if Hikaru anticipated anything, it was probably that you, Akira, often find yourself in unexpected situations. You said it yourself, right? You frequently encounter these unpredictable circumstances. Seems like she was right, wasn't she?』 Alpha teased, laughing.

Akira, half in jest, laughed back. 『Yeah! Then I need to prove I'm stronger than this bad luck!』

『That's the spirit.』

Speeding on his bike, Akira fired his guns relentlessly, using the extraordinarily large magazines to unleash a seemingly endless barrage of bullets. As he aimed at the ground swarm ahead, he fought to show that he was stronger than his bad luck.

Despite the ongoing fierce battle, the convoy had suffered no new losses. The evacuation of personnel and supplies from damaged vehicles was also successfully completed, indicating the convoy was maintaining its superiority.

The white mech unit recognized this continued superiority. It was only a matter of time before their forces were annihilated, and by any reasonable measure, their attack had already failed. Retreating would not have been surprising at this point.

Yet, the white mechs showed no sign of retreating, continuing to fight stubbornly.

After firing an overwhelming number of bullets, Akira replaced the empty magazine in his gun. Though resupplying was unnecessary, changing magazines was still required.

Running on the roof of a vehicle, he swiftly reloaded and aimed his weapon at the enemy.

『Alpha! What's the status?』

『There are 23 white units left. The monsters on the ground haven't changed much,』

『Only 23 more... Just a little longer』

If they defeat the white unit battalion, the aerial monsters' target would be limited to the slow but strong monsters on the ground. Then, the convoy just needs to increase its speed while pushing back the ground monsters with the hunters' help. Victory was surely approaching. With that in mind, Akira braced himself.

At that moment, the beams clearing the ground swarm suddenly intensified. The floating artillery of the aerial monsters had increased their laser output. Light swallowed the area, followed by a delayed massive explosion.

Rather than attacks concentrated at specific points, it was attacks dispersed in lines. Although the power increased, it didn't generate phenomena due to the colorless mist of ultra-high density. Still, the scale of resulting shockwaves swelled.

Thanks to being far from the impact point, monsters escaped both vaporization and carbonization as they were blown away. Even giant creatures the size of a mansion danced gracefully through the air.

『Alpha! What happened!?』

『The ground swarm isn't decreasing, so it seems the aerial monsters have escalated their attack』 .

『Dammit!』

Almost there. Just as Akira thought victory was near, the situation abruptly changed. His expression hardened. The next moment, Alpha's driving caused the bike to accelerate abruptly. Akira was surprised, but he didn't need to ask why. A wingless giant beetle, about 150 meters long, propelled by the blast, was hurtling towards them. It was too large to intercept.

Akira maneuvered the bike with all his might to avoid the massive creature's collision. The colossal insect, passing beside Akira, crashed onto the vehicle's roof.

It wasn't just one monster flying towards them; a multitude descended, crashing around the vehicle. Many perished upon impact, but numerous others survived. Surrounding hunters rushed to destroy them.

The creature flying towards Akira also survived. While it avoided a direct laser hit, it was slammed onto the vehicle's roof by the shockwave. Its injuries were severe, slowing its movements significantly, but it remained alive.

Alpha's smile vanished.

『Akira! We need to stop that creature immediately! If it becomes the next target for the laser cannon, it'll blow the entire vehicle away!』

『Understood!』 Understanding the gravity of the situation from Alpha's expression, Akira's face contorted further. On the bike, he reversed direction forcefully, firing both guns while combining the bike's extended arm.

With the added extension, the LEO composite gun, significantly reinforced compared to before, poured energy enough to risk its collapse into charged bullets, firing them at maximum power. Akira relentlessly kept firing, utilizing the extended magazine, despite knowing that a single bullet could kill him. The firepower was tremendous, enough to shatter, pierce, and destroy the exoskeletons of monsters usually superior.

However, compared to the immense mass of the 150-meter creature, the damage inflicted wasn't significant. At least not enough for instant death. While they could eventually defeat it with sustained fire, they didn't have the luxury of time now.

Akira grimaced at the realization that his attacks weren't effective enough. At that moment, a multitude of black disc crafts emerged from the ceiling opening. The escalation of the aerial monsters' attack wasn't limited to the laser cannon alone. Some rotating black discs were also heading towards Akira and the others.

His attacks were futile, but theirs should work. Akira relaxed at the thought. However, before he could react, the black disc heading towards them were shot down by the white units' lasers. While Akira was still astonished, more crafts were downed. Other black discs changed their targets from the giant insect-like monsters to the white units.

If the white units were destroyed by the discs' attacks, Akira wouldn't mind. However, the white units skillfully evaded the discs' assaults.

『...Dammit! Alpha! What now?』

『There's no choice. Akira. It's reckless, but are you okay with it?』

『If there's no other option』

Alpha said lightly, almost as a joke. 『Technically, you could just escape from here alone with that bike that can run in the sky, you know?』

Akira replied in a similarly light tone, matching Alpha's attitude.

『Nah, that's not happening!』 . With resolve evident in their faces, Akira and Alpha chuckled and turned their gaze forward.

『Let's do it!』

『Yeah!』 The bike accelerated, traversing the air. Riding on the back of the giant insect, Akira reversed the bike, aimed the AF laser cannon, and fired towards the white units, widening the discharge angle to the maximum.

The AF laser cannon was connected to the bike's energy tank and energy cable. An immense amount of energy, impossible with an energy pack, was supplied to the bullets bought in Zegelt City, releasing as a flash. The light engulfed the white units and the surrounding black discs in an instant.

However, the white units remained unscathed. They were originally designed for energy-based defense, and the attack wasn't focused. With the dispersion of the attack, it couldn't penetrate their defenses. Moreover, such attacks wouldn't affect the black attack crafts. Not a single one was taken down.

Nevertheless, it served its purpose. The black crafts bathed in the flash redirected their targets from the white units to Akira.

The white units, which had been deterring attacks towards the giant insect-like creatures, quickly aimed their lasers at the black disc upon seeing their movement. Just before firing the lasers, Akira shot countless bullets into the barrels. It was a precision shooting aimed at the split-second when the force field armor at the muzzle was deactivated to fire the laser, and it was a continuous fire.

With Alpha's support for aiming correction, Akira, wielding the guns on the bike's extended arms, executed precise shots. As he switched his gun from the AF laser cannon back to the LEO composite rifle, Akira's expression turned slightly grim.

『...Alpha. It might be a bit late to ask this after shooting, but was it okay to shoot those black discs?』

『It's fine. Those are just disposable attack terminals. No matter how many we take down, you won't become a target for the monsters in the upper realm.』

『...I see. Understood.』 If Alpha said so, then it must be true. Akira reassured himself with that thought, dispelling the anxiety of becoming a target for the floating turrets.

Akira was already performing extreme time perception manipulation. In that world where time flowed extremely slowly, Akira witnessed countless black disc aircraft approaching him at high speed.

He already knew their power. A direct hit would not just cut, but pulverize him. Yet, Akira smiled, undeterred.

『Now, Akira. It starts from here. Prepare yourself.』

『Yeah. Preparing myself is my job after all!』 Faced with this situation, to overcome this further misfortune, to defeat them, Akira steeled himself.

In that moment, the world reflected in Akira's eyes became as clear as a different world. The resolution of Akira's consciousness world drastically improved.

Each of the countless blades rotating around the black discs' periphery was visible, and he could see the sharp tips of the blades. The edges of his vision remained clear without any white blur. The world, now shining like never before due to its enhanced detail, seemed to expand rather than narrow down.

Reality perception manipulation with Alpha's support had further improved Akira's resolution, as he had gained the foundation to make it somewhat possible on his own. Additionally, the factor contributing to the resolution enhancement was not just that. In the battle at the Kuzusuhara Street ruins, Akira had been given capsules by Tsubaki and had been taking them.

They were old world-made medical capsules, and thanks to them, Akira had recovered from near-death to a condition where he could fight to some extent. And the treatment effect had been most effective on Akira's brain.

Akira was an Old-World Connector. However, his communication abilities were significantly inferior compared to those of a healthy individual in the old world. The old world-made medicine considered his severely low communication ability as an injury by the old world's standards and treated it. He was not completely healed. However, Akira's communication ability had still improved significantly. The enhanced communication bandwidth was greatly useful for building a covert line connecting Akira and Tsubaki, had Akira not refused Tsubaki's invitation. But since Akira refused, the enhanced portion was simply used to strengthen Akira's basic communication ability.

Thanks to that, Akira could now endure reality resolution manipulation overload, which had caused him to faint for five days with just over ten seconds of use when he fought against the old world-made automata in the Iida Commercial District ruins.

Even with enhanced physical abilities, if the consciousness to move them remained at the level of an ordinary person, their movements would also remain in the realm of an ordinary person. But Akira had not only increased his physical abilities with the reinforced suit but had also become capable of manipulating both the perception of time and the resolution of reality, approaching the realm of superhumans in both physical and conscious aspects.

The black discs approached Akira at high speed. Akira completely predicted their trajectory and kicked them with all his might in an empty space.

By using the reinforced suit's ground contact function to create a scaffold in mid-air, Akira moved himself and the bike sideways at full throttle, evading the black discs. The discs that passed by Akira collided with the massive insect's exoskeleton ahead, deeply embedding themselves and tearing through its armor.

But it wasn't just one black disc aircraft. They came one after another at Akira. Akira, maneuvering the bike around the massive beetle, evaded the attacks with agile, precise, acrobatic movements. Each time, the giant rapidly rotating blades tore through the beetle's armor. He dodged the vertical rotating discs approaching from the front, moving slightly to the side to pass by them. Then he evaded the horizontal rotating discs following behind by climbing an invisible slope generated by the tire's force field armor.

Continuously avoiding attacks from all directions—front, back, left, right, up, and down—Akira used the bike's independently controlled wheels to keep dodging in a double helix pattern. With skilled movements that elevated the acrobatics displayed at the Zegelt City indoor test track to a higher level, he kept evading the black discs that attacked one after another.

Additionally, Akira kicked the discs as they passed by. Although no matter how much he kicked them with the reinforced suit, destroying them was out of the question, changing their trajectory to some extent was still possible.

The discs with altered trajectories collided with the massive insect ahead, deeply embedding themselves into its robust armor. The beetle had already been carved up by countless discs. Seeing the wounded insect, Akira spoke.

『Alpha. This monster seems to have stopped moving, but did we defeat it?』

『No, we haven't defeated it. It's just hardened itself and taken a defensive stance, so it's not moving, but it's still alive.』

『...It's tough!』 Facing the unimaginable vitality of the slow but strong monster, Akira grimaced involuntarily. Then, he fired both guns in his hands. The bike's guns also targeted the same spot on the same target, firing continuously. The target was the barrel of the white unit's laser cannon, and like last time, the shots were aimed at the moment the force field armor was deactivated for firing. Being the armament of the white unit, its laser cannon was extremely robust. However, if the weak point was accurately targeted twice, it would surely be beyond repair.

The white craft discards the useless laser cannon and instead draws a laser blade, accompanied by numerous black discs targeting itself, and charges towards Akira.

Dodging the attacks of the black discs while traversing the beetle's surface, Akira grimaces.

『...Coming straight for us, Alpha. What's the plan?』

Akira had hoped that while he was finishing off the giant insect, the other hunters would take care of it. At the very least, he expected them to keep their distance. He didn't anticipate that, despite lacking a laser cannon, they would come towards him, drawing a large number of black discs.

『Akira, use your blade too. Let's clash.』

『Even against that!? Well...Understood!』

Akira initially thought it was impossible, but if Alpha suggested it, then it must be the best course of action. He holstered his guns and switched to a handle with a thick energy cable attached. Placing the handle into the blade generator, he watched as it expanded and emitted a bright light. Surprised by this new behavior, Akira withdrew the handle, and simultaneously, the generator flew backward, generating a long blade of liquid metal in midair, similar to drawing a sword from an invisible sheath.

As the generator finished forming the blade and returned to the bike like a wire, Akira found himself holding a massive blade with a length of 10 meters.

『If we're going to clash, we need something like this. I've used up all the remaining liquid metal. Let's go, Akira.』

『Yeah!』 Riding the bike, Akira readied the enormous silver blade. In response, the white craft approached with a light blade longer than Akira's.

The first strike came from the light blade, a laser blade formed by condensing high-density energy into a glowing sword, burning through the air towards Akira.

Despite swinging with a body measuring 20 meters in length, the time taken to complete the series of attacks was shorter than when swung by a human body, thanks to its high-speed motion. Akira evaded the masterful maneuver with Alpha's expert driving. The laser blade sliced through the beetle's exoskeleton, pierced through, and scorched the flesh beneath.

Slightly delayed, Akira swung his blade. The silver blade, emitting a bluish-white light, was enhanced to its maximum output, and with the bike's acceleration, he struck the white craft's body with all his might. However, it bounced off. Although the fleet of white crafts had been reduced to 18 from over 100, those remaining were stronger models with higher energy reserves. Akira's blow couldn't penetrate the craft's force field armor.

The recoil from his failed strike hit Akira hard. He desperately gripped the blade, which seemed to be slipping from his hands.

『Akira! Don't you dare drop it!』

『I know!』

In reality, it was the powered suit that was creaking. His flesh was in no condition to make any sound. The inner pressure of the suit was holding together the flesh and bones that seemed on the verge of bursting apart, thanks to the copious amounts of healing potions consumed beforehand and during the battle, maintaining his combat capability.

While the blade wasn't broken, some parts were chipped, and cracks ran across its entirety. However, being made of liquid metal, it quickly regenerated using the energy supplied from the bike, returning to its pristine state apart from the lost volume.

Both the attacker and the defender were thrown off balance by the recent exchange. Black discs surged in. Here, the difference in size became apparent.

Akira managed to dodge them somehow. Despite being on a large bike, his maneuverability was significant, aided by Alpha's support, and compared to the white crafts, he was considerably smaller. He maneuvered through the intersecting discs, occasionally deflecting some with his blade.

However, the white crafts couldn't evade the black disc. Hindered by their disrupted posture and their sheer bulk, they couldn't find gaps to slip through. They took direct hits, and their surface armor was continuously sliced by the rapidly rotating blades.

But such attacks couldn't cause any significant damage. If they could, they would have been severed by Akira's blow long ago. The white crafts endured the assault with their sturdy force field armor. Moreover, they forcibly corrected their posture and swung their laser blades back at Akira.

Akira responded in kind, swinging his blade. The clash of the massive blades emitted sparks of light from their force field armor, and they continued their duel. Swinging vertically and horizontally, evading and taking hits from the black discs, Akira swiftly maneuvered atop the 150-meter-long giant insect with his bike and humanoid mech, wreaking havoc on both the beetle's exoskeleton and the black discs, swinging the enormous blade.

With each strike, Akira's blade sustains slight damage. Each time, it loses a small amount of volume, undergoing melting and regeneration, gradually shortening. Through this repetition, what was initially a 10-meter blade had now shrunk to about 7 meters. Despite all the slashing, the white crafts remain unbeatable. In fact, they retaliate with sharp blows, even as their armor is marked by the black discs.

Akira manages to fend them off somehow. If evasion isn't an option, he uses the blade to deflect and minimize direct hits. He has no room for error. If not for the black discs swarming around the white crafts, disrupting their movements, Akira would have already been struck down.

『It's strong...! Will I make it in time...?』

Without the time constraint, Akira could fight a little more comfortably. The black discs target both ground monsters and white crafts. Akira needs to fight while maneuvering to push the black discs onto the white crafts.

However, Akira must hurry. They need to defeat the floating gun turrets targeting the beetle and the white crafts before they're blown away together.

And then, a further complication arises. The floating gun turrets aim at the gigantic monster that had previously been unconscious and had now awakened, forcefully shaking off Akira and the others from its back.

The beetle, previously knocked unconscious upon impact with the vehicle's roof, had instinctively assumed a defensive stance while unconscious. But upon awakening, despite oozing bodily fluids from its wounds, it fiercely attacks its enemies with its astonishing vitality. Raising its massive, multi-jointed forelegs equipped with hooked claws, it swiftly strikes towards Akira and the white crafts.

Despite being a powerful yet slow monster, its slowness refers only to its movement. When it comes to swinging its forelegs to sweep its immediate enemies, it's plenty fast. With its enormous mass cutting through the air and generating a storm, it approaches Akira and the white crafts.

However, Akira and the white crafts evade it with agile movements. Akira grimaces as he speeds through the air on his bike.

『That monster... wasn't it nearly dead!?』

『Almost. But if it's not dead, it can still move like that. That's all.』

『...So, this is what they call an Eastern monster! What strength!』

At that moment, the black discs, previously blown away, return, assaulting Akira, the white crafts, and the gigantic beetle.

From the convoy's side, the attackers' side, the airborne monsters' domain, and the ground monsters, the four-way battle had already commenced. And now, amidst it all, another four-way battle ensues: Akira, the white crafts, the black discs, and the gigantic beetle.

The chaotic melee continues. Amidst the raging turmoil, Akira survives by using his right-hand AF laser cannon, left-hand blade, bike, and its extended arm's LEO composite gun. Destroyed black discs litter the surroundings, and the gigantic beetle's massive forelegs lie strewn about. However, both the black discs and the beetle's forelegs are still present, posing a significant threat.

『Alpha. What's the situation?』

『There are 11 white crafts left. The ground monsters are also decreasing.』

『Does that mean we can expect support from other hunters?』

『Unfortunately, that's unlikely.』

『Why's that?』

『Because conditions elsewhere are even worse.』

『I see...』

In reality, the opponent Akira is fighting is among the weakest remaining white humanoid weapons. There haven't been any additional ground monsters aside from the one on the roof. That's why Akira has been managing on his own.

Akira understands that he's relatively fortunate. But he doesn't consider it luck. His face contorts with determination.

『...But this situation isn't good, right? The next laser cannon attack might be coming soon?』

While the floating gun turrets prioritize targeting the ground monster swarm, they also aim at the white crafts. If the ground swarm decreases, it wouldn't be surprising if the priority changed again. And with the decreasing number of remaining white crafts, the probability of the craft Akira is fighting being targeted increases.

『That's right. There's no choice. Akira, are you okay with a bit of a gamble?』
With a provocative smile, Alpha asks Akira, who responds with a similar grin.

『It's nothing new, right? Bring it on.』

If they lose the bet, they might die. But Akira is determined to overcome that misfortune. And since Alpha suggests such a thing, Akira knows that not taking the risk would mean lower expectations. In that case, there's no need to hesitate.

『Got it. Then, let's go!』

The bike speeds through the air, heading towards the white craft. Akira approaches the white craft rapidly, slashing repeatedly as they pass each other. Normally, this wouldn't surprise him. But this time, his expression turns into one of shock.

『Alpha!?』

The bike wasn't just following a path among the bodies, but rather heading straight for the confrontation.

『Akira! Defend yourself!』

『Yeah, got it!』 Akira, coming at them with a different approach, managed to block the white craft's laser blade with their own.

In the next moment, the bike collided with the white craft. It was a high-speed impact, with the bike's force field armor pushed to its limit. While ordinary monsters would have been blown away or torn apart, the white craft's armor remained undented, while the bike's body warped slightly.

However, Alpha's goal wasn't just to ram into them. Even after the collision, the bike's rear wheel didn't stop spinning. Using its aerial propulsion, it generated a force field armor scaffold, firmly treading on it to propel the vehicle forward. With the output of a high-performance bike worth over 3 billion aurums, it managed to overcome the mass difference with the white craft.

Despite its massive 20-meter length, the giant body was being pushed back by just one bike, forced to retreat in midair. Humanoid weapons that fly freely are designed to achieve maximum speed in forward motion, with lateral and rearward movement being slower. This is convenient for assaulting distant enemies.

But due to the difference in speed, they couldn't strip the bike away. The bike was faster than the white craft when moving forward. As the white craft attempted to forcibly remove the bike from its body, it swung light blades and fists.

『Akira! Defend yourself! Forget about attacking the craft!』

『Got it!』 Akira countered the massive light blades and fists with their silver blade, now halved in length, and AF laser cannons.

They deflected, slid, and repelled the incoming attacks with their own blade. Against the approaching fists, they directed a rush of energy with adjusted emission angles. Though it barely scratched the white craft's force field armor, it could still exert pressure. In this way, Akira managed to defend against the enemy's attacks and maintained the pressure on the white craft.

『Alpha! What's the plan pushing this thing?』

『Just keep pushing it until we can finish it off.』

『How?』

『We're going to feed it to that.』 Alpha pointed forward. Through Akira's extended vision, they saw a gigantic beetle behind the white craft.

The white craft also noticed it. Desperately trying to dislodge the bike, its attacks were thwarted by Akira. Struggling to move the craft significantly, it was hindered by Alpha's skilled driving. Meanwhile, the distance to the beetle continued to shrink.

『This is the crucial moment! Hang in there!』

『I got it!』 And Akira and the others entered the range between the beetle's forelegs. The multi-jointed legs bent sharply as it tried to approach them with momentum.

However, before that, the two guns mounted on the bike's extended arms aimed for its legs at maximum power. A vast number of charge bullets struck the weakened spots on the black discs, shattering its legs.

Undeterred, the beetle distorted its head, opening its mouth wide. It charged forward to devour Akira and the others. In response, Akira attempted to feed the white craft into its gaping maw while defending against its attacks from the craft.

In the next moment, the beetle, having targeted its prey, bit down on Akira and the others.

Its massive bulk attempted to crush Akira and the others from above and below.

Strictly speaking, it was only the white craft that was bitten. Thanks to the difference in size, Akira avoided being crushed.

And the white craft, despite having its head crushed and its legs broken, remained undefeated. In that state, it continued to swing its blade and tear into the beetle's mouth.

Akira, avoiding it, glanced outside.

(Success! We're escaping!)

The plan to crush the monster and the white craft against each other was successful. Now all they had to do was escape from the beetle's mouth before it closed completely due to the sturdy craft's interference.

Thinking so, Akira's expression, which had involuntarily smiled, froze. The scene outside, seen through the partially closed mouth, was filled with countless black discs. Those discs targeted Akira, the white craft, and the monsters on the ground. It was only natural that the black discs converged on this gathering place.

The black discs swiftly entered the beetle's mouth one after another. First, the white craft took the brunt of it. Losing most of its remaining energy from being bitten by the beetle, even a craft that had shown remarkable performance until now couldn't withstand it. It was severed all over and further crushed by the beetle.

With the white craft destroyed, the beetle's mouth closed completely. However, numerous black discs had already entered the beetle. Spinning its sharp blades at high speed, they sliced and diced the giant insect from the inside. Furthermore, subsequent discs broke through the mouth and invaded its body. Even the giant monster, with its seemingly endless vitality, couldn't withstand this. It met its end and collapsed.

With the black discs that had been attacking Akira and the others now all inside the beetle, the surroundings calmed down. Nothing moved around.

Then, this seemingly quiet world suddenly sprang into action. A pale blue light blade shot out from the beetle's back, tearing it open. And after the luminous metallic blade shattered and disappeared, a panicked Akira jumped out of the opening on the back with their bike.

『Alpha! Now! We lost communication with Alpha for a little while!?』

『Yes. I said it was a bit of a gamble, didn't I? The time when communication was lost was just enough to save us.』

『Oh, so that's what you meant!』

Akira, who emerged from the beetle, landed on the vehicle's roof. Only Akira came out; the black discs did not.

Even the black discs that entered the beetle's body were not unscathed. It required a massive amount of energy to slice through the sturdy white craft. The inside of the beetle was also hard, and it had been exposed to dissolving fluids. Under attack from Akira, it couldn't withstand it, and everything was destroyed. Akira had been protected from the dissolving fluids by the bike's force field shield.

In the end, everything was taken care of. Following Alpha's words, the white craft, the black discs, and the giant monster were all defeated.

Akira let out a deep breath.

My apologies for the oversight. Here's the corrected translation:

"Did we manage somehow... Huh? Is it moving?" Akira felt the ground shake and was slightly surprised. The vehicles that had stopped were moving again.

『It seems like we've taken down all the white aircraft.』 Akira lightly looked up. Although more black discs had appeared in the sky, they were flying towards a group of monsters on the ground, not around the vehicles.

『Finally...』 If they defeated the white aircraft unit, all they needed to do was increase the vehicle's speed to shake off the ground group. As Akira had thought, the convoy was moving away from this location.

『Akira, it's not over yet. Until we completely shake them off, we need to stop the monsters getting close to the convoy.』

『Got it... Just a little more.』 Akira moved to the edge of the roof. Then he fired rapidly at the distant monsters with both hands holding LEO composite rifles. He tried to shoot with the LEO composite rifle on the bike as well, but no bullets came out from there.

『...Huh? Out of ammo?』

『No. Unfortunately, it's broken.』

『Aw...』 While the LEO composite rifles on both hands were powered by energy packs, the one on the bike was powered by the bike's energy tank through the extended arm.

Charge Bullets became more powerful the higher the energy input, but the load at the time of firing also increased. Although Alpha had been adjusting it to the limit, in a battle like this, a certain amount of power was necessary, and when Akira destroyed the black discs inside the beetle's body, the load had finally reached its limit.

『It was expected... Well, let's just say it barely held up.』

『Yeah. If we've won with this level of loss, it's a small price to pay. Let's think of it that way. After all, we did win.』

『Yeah, we won.』 To have defeated such enemies, to have overcome such misfortune. Akira thought so and smiled happily.

The convoy increased its speed, pulling away from the ground group. Escaping from under the ceiling that blocked the sky, they continued into the wilderness. The ground group couldn't follow the convoy while being attacked by the monsters in the upper realm. Soon, their figures disappeared beyond the horizon.

『Alright, it's over. I'm tired. Can we go back inside the vehicle now? Let's contact Hikaru and ask her to open the outer wall... Ah, I forgot, we're out of communication. How troublesome. Do we have to wait?』

With the increased speed of the vehicle, the force field armor of the outer wall had weakened. However, because it had been supplied with so much energy until just now, it would take time for the characteristics of the information barrier to completely disappear.

『I'll try to restore communication with Hikaru. Although the force field armor of the vehicle's outer wall still has the characteristics of an information barrier, it's because it received so many attacks. There might be a hole somewhere. Communication might connect from there.』

『I see. I'm counting on you.』

Akira searched for the hole while riding the bike on top of the vehicle's roof. As Alpha had predicted, he found a crack large enough for a person to enter. Through the crack, the vehicle's aisle was visible.

『It's a weak connection, but we might be able to manage simple conversations.』

『I'm just asking to have the outer wall opened. Just having our voices connect is enough. Please connect us.』 Communication with Hikaru was established.

『Akira... How's the situation over there?』

『Ah, we just finished a little while ago.』

『I see. I'm sorry to ask, but could you come over here right away? Actually, the situation here is a bit tough.』

She wasn't desperately shouting. However, her calm voice made Akira understand without detailed explanation that Hikaru was in a critical situation.

The situation outside the vehicle had been resolved thanks to the efforts of many hunters, including Akira. However, the situation inside the vehicle was far from resolved.

208: Assailant

In the storage facility, after encountering Shirou and the others and quickly leaving the scene, Hikaru, intending to return to her room, received a notification from the operating side of the vehicle.

There were two points to the message. One was to ensure safety by moving to a secure room due to intense combat occurring outside the vehicle. The other was a warning that there was a high risk of communication disruption because the output of the force field armor of the vehicle was being increased to enhance defense.

Hikaru was also aware of the situation outside through Akira's information-gathering equipment. Without any surprise, she sent back her acknowledgment. Then, she was directed to a designated room and given authorization to use Room 28.

Hikaru stopped in her tracks. That room was Udajima's room.

(Wait a minute!? I mean, I know we're both from the same Kugamayama City, but this is not good... huh?) Although Hikaru was flustered, she was able to understand who the user of Room 28 was now that she had been granted access rights. Currently, the only registered user was Hikaru herself. In other words, Room 28 was vacant.

Hikaru breathed a sigh of relief. "Ah, I see. Well, it makes sense. There's no way Akira would be riding with us now, is there?"

Despite the outbound journey, this was the return journey. It was certain that Udajima was aware that Akira was on this vehicle. That's why Udajima stopped boarding, but it was probably too late to cancel the reservation. Room 28 remained vacant.

Even though the room was vacant, as long as payment had been made, the vehicle side wouldn't normally allow someone else to use it. However, in this emergency situation, and given that both Udajima and Hikaru were city officials of Kugamayama City, it was probably deemed acceptable to temporarily allow its use for safety reasons.

Hikaru made that judgment and headed straight to Room 28.

Because it had been reserved by a city executive, Room 28 was more luxurious and sturdier than the room Hikaru and the others had been using. It even had a small vault room that doubled as an emergency shelter. It wasn't uncommon for individuals of sufficient status to directly transport very important items. The facilities were designed for that purpose.

Upon entering the room, Hikaru confirmed once again that Udajima was not there. She sighed lightly and sat down on the sofa.

"All we can do now is wait... I hope Akira is safe." Communication with Akira had already been cut off. This was due to the increase in output of the vehicle's force field armor, which had caused communication interference. Hikaru understood how abnormal this situation was.

Using Akira's information-gathering equipment data that had been coordinated until the communication was cut off, Hikaru projected it onto the room's display device. The image of a massive monster blocking the sky, casting its shadow over the convoy, was displayed.

"This is a monster from the upper realm, right? Why is it descending so close to the ground...? This is beyond unexpected. Please spare us..."

Hikaru sighed heavily, imagining the unfortunate fate of a hunter who frequently encountered such unexpected situations.

Hikaru chuckled wryly. "Akira. Akira is stronger than that bad luck, isn't he? Please make sure to win this time too."

Hikaru didn't blame Akira for this situation. However, if it were the case, she wanted him to take responsibility. Hikaru didn't want to die either.



Hikaru waited anxiously in her room for the intense battle outside to end. With communication cut off, she couldn't even provide support to Akira. There was nothing she could do at the moment. In a sense, she had free time, but she couldn't bring herself to watch entertainment videos or do anything to pass the time. She just kept waiting.

Then, the entire room shook violently. It was the aftermath of a laser from the monster in the upper realm hitting near the vehicle. Hikaru showed a panicked expression.

"Hey!? Give us a break! Is everything okay!?"

At that moment, the intercom in the room rang. Wondering what it could be at a time like this, Hikaru walked up to the door. The display device on the door's surface automatically showed the situation on the corridor side.

On the other side of the door, which seemed to have turned into glass, stood a man. He was dressed in the vehicle staff's uniform and wasn't armed with guns or anything. He looked more like a general crew member for customer service rather than a security guard.

The man, named Elde, urged Hikaru to evacuate with a very serious expression.

"It's an emergency! Due to an attack by monsters from the upper realm, this vehicle is now inoperable! We don't know how long the force field armor will hold up! Please evacuate immediately! I'll guide you to the communication route to the other vehicles!"

"Lies!?"

Hikaru hurried to reach for the door control panel to open it, but she stopped her hand just before touching it.

(...Monsters from the upper realm?) Hikaru also knew that the convoy was under attack by monsters from the upper realm. However, she learned this through Akira's information-gathering equipment, not from the vehicle's security side. That's what initially struck Hikaru as odd.

And she also doubted the direct notification that the vehicle had become inoperable. In such an emergency, it wouldn't be strange to receive a notification before evacuation. However, even Hikaru could quickly come up with reasonable guesses to explain these discrepancies. But even then, her intuition was telling her not to open it.

Hikaru looked at Elde again. In his urgent urging to evacuate, there was a slight hint of acting that only someone skilled in negotiation could detect.

Making her decision, Hikaru reached out to the control panel. Not to open the door, but to close it more securely. A thick metal door was added over the usual door with a display function on the corridor side, blocking it firmly from the inside.

However, just before that, sensing the movement, Elde delivered a powerful kick to the door.

Even though it was a regular door, it was a facility of inter-city transport vehicles, and moreover, it belonged to a higher-level room used by city executives. It had the strength to withstand not even a scratch from ordinary artillery.

Yet, with just one kick, the door was severely distorted and severely damaged. Furthermore, the kick was adjusted to prevent the blown-off door from hitting Hikaru directly and killing her.

Elde, who had stopped acting in front of the completely closed door, clicked his tongue with a stern expression.

"...All that good acting was just a waste."

One of Elde's subordinates, who had been hiding out of sight from Hikaru, went to Elde's side.

"There was a chance you could have accidentally opened it. It wasn't wasted. There's movement on the vehicle side. Not only the hunters inside the vehicle, but also the squads of Sakashita, who were deployed around Room 3, are all heading this way."

"Are they all coming this way? So we are indeed the target... No, there's a risk of being lured into a trap... Wait? There's a possibility that both, with different levels of importance...?"

Elde hesitated slightly, but quickly made a decision.

"All right, just the three of us, me, Torpa, and Sazalto, will do. The others will suppress the surroundings. Continue to attract Sakashita's people. After eliminating them, attack Room 3 without returning here. Proceed with the original plan. Let's go."

"Yes, sir!"

The heavily armed individuals immediately sprang into action. Elde and the two others, Torpa and Sazalto, who were also unarmed, followed instructions and stayed behind.

Torpa asked Elde, "Captain Elde, should we help too?"

"No, I'll handle it alone. I'll concentrate on destroying the door. I rely on you to keep watch around."

"Understood."

Sazalto placed a trunk on the floor and opened it. A colorless, transparent gas gushed out in large quantities from the device inside. Once the gas filled the surroundings, the two positioned themselves on either side of the corridor to guard Elde.

Elde took a stance between the two, then with a deep breath, he slammed his fist against the door in front of him with all his might. Even without using force field armor, the door, made of a special alloy boasting greater strength, began to groan under the impact. It gradually warped under the relentless assault.

Under the fierce attack, Elde's clothes gave way before the door did. The crew uniform Elde wore was just a regular outfit, not reinforced or protective clothing. It couldn't withstand the force required to warp the thick metal door.

From beneath the torn clothing emerged a thin inner layer. His hands were bare. Gloves and the like had been torn off along with the crew uniform. Elde was pounding the door with his bare hands. It indicated that the thin inner layer was not a lightweight reinforced suit, but a thin protective suit. In other words, Elde was attempting to destroy the thick door solely with his physical abilities.

A superhuman. Elde was often referred to as such.

The barrage of blows from the superhuman continued. Fists and kicks capable of sending tanks flying were repeated.

It was only a matter of time before the door was destroyed.

In Room 3, Hermes noticed Shiruo's strange behavior.

"Shirou, what's the plan?"

Shirou laughed confidently.

"What's wrong with that? Sending Sakashita's squad after her seems more plausible, doesn't it?"

"Well, yes, but..."

Hermes understood Shirou's point. However, it didn't change the fact that Shirou's protection had been reduced. As the person in charge of Shiro's protection, Hermes wore a displeased expression.

Seeing Hermes's reaction, Shirou provocatively chuckled.

"What's the matter? Weren't you the one saying I'd be fine with just one guard? Was that all talk? Oh, scary. Then my life might be in danger. I should call the squad back immediately... Should I? "

If he ordered their return, it would raise doubts about his own abilities within Sakashita Heavy Industries, even if only slightly. Hermes sighed and tacitly approved of Shirou's actions.

Elde's subordinates, disguised as crew members, ordinary passengers, and other hunters, were already scattered throughout the vehicle. They continuously emitted large quantities of colorless, transparent gas from their devices.

It didn't take long for the gas to spread throughout the entire vehicle.



Amidst the final stages of the four-way battle outside the vehicle, a fierce struggle unfolded within Car 2 between Elde's squad and the vehicle's forces.

Hunters who had headed towards Room 28 as instructed found themselves at a disadvantage. After all, many of the hunters in Car 2 were inferior in strength compared to the entire convoy. Furthermore, prominent figures from Car 2, including Akira, were engaged in battle outside. This meant that the hunters inside the vehicle were those who couldn't keep up with the external fight.

On the other hand, Elde's squad comprised capable individuals attacking the inter-city transport vehicle. The hunters had no chance against them, and they found themselves repeatedly retreating towards the control room of the vehicle.

However, Elde's squad was not without challenges. They clashed with Sakashita Heavy Industries' forces who had taken the place of the hunters and were advancing with reinforced exoskeleton suits, easily surpassing many high-ranking hunters. These heavily armored figures advanced through the vehicle's corridors, acting as shields for their allies while spraying the entire passage with gunfire.

Elde's squad members attempted to breach the reinforced suits worn by Sakashita Heavy Industries' troops. The troops, in turn, intercepted them. In a world where the slightest delay or error in judgment could drastically alter the course of battle, both sides exhibited their prowess without hesitation or mistake.

Amidst a space filled with flying bullets and flashing blades, the thick door, subjected to Elde's relentless assault, was visibly warping. In response, Hikaru's expression twisted with panic.

Though he hadn't fully grasped the situation, Hikaru knew that the door's limits were nearing and that he was the target. There was no hope for rescue from the hunters inside the vehicle. As the attacks on the door continued unabated, it was unlikely that the hunters would even be able to reach this area. The panic unsettled Hikaru, robbing him of his composure.

『What should I do...』 Hikaru intended to consider various options, but with his mind spinning fruitlessly in panic, he couldn't form constructive thoughts. What should he do? Those words echoed repeatedly.

At that moment, communication with Akira, weak but restored, came through. Hikaru regained his composure. After taking a deep breath, he connected with Akira.

『Akira, what's the situation over there?』

『Yeah, things have just calmed down.』

『Got it. Sorry to ask, but could you come over here right away? We're in a bit of a tight spot.』

Hikaru deliberately responded with a confident tone to bolster himself. However, Akira understood the seriousness of the situation.

『Understood. I'll come right away.』

『I'm in Room 28. Counting on you. Please.』

With those words, Hikaru ended the communication with Akira. Then, taking another deep breath, she slapped her cheeks with both hands to psych herself up.

“...Alright. Let's do our best to buy some time.”

Having found an answer to the perplexing question of what to do, Hikaru, a talented young woman assigned to the Wide Area Management Department at such a young age, once again demonstrated her competence. She surveyed the room, devised a plan, and sprang into action.

If they could hold out until Akira arrived, they might have a chance. Finding hope in that thought, Hikaru did everything she could.



Akira, who had entered the vehicle through a gap in the roof, hurried to Hikaru's location. He had left his bike on the roof. The gap wasn't wide enough for the bike to pass through, and the route to Room 28 through the exterior walls of the storage compartment was circuitous. Hoping to reach Hikaru in the shortest time possible, Akira entered the vehicle alone.

Subsequently, guided by Alpha, they proceeded towards Room 28. Kicking off the floor, kicking off the walls, kicking off the air, they sprinted through the corridors of the vehicle, avoiding obstacles along the way.

Normally, with the physical capabilities of their reinforced suits, they could reach their destination in no time. However, the corridors were littered with obstacles hindering their progress—countless bodies of hunters heading towards Room 28, Elde's subordinates, and Sakashita Heavy Industries' troops. The aftermath of their intense battles was left behind in the form of numerous gruesome corpses and heavily damaged reinforced suits. Seeing these bodies and wrecked suits, Akira's expression darkened.

『...This doesn't feel like monsters infiltrating the vehicle. Did someone attacked the vehicle from the inside? Weren't there monsters rampaging in the upper airspace outside? What were they thinking?』

Alpha responded to his question. 『On the contrary, that's probably why. The vehicle's forces were preoccupied dealing with the external threat, leaving them vulnerable to an attack from within.』

『...Are you suggesting that the white aircraft were decoys for that purpose? Bringing monsters from the upper airspace? That seems improbable. Even if attackers had infiltrated the vehicle from the beginning, it could have easily been blown up with the vehicle.』

『They must have been prepared for that. At least the pilots of the white aircraft didn't value their lives.』

Akira frowned. It was a mere hypothesis, but it was plausible. And if Hikaru was being attacked by such individuals, victory wouldn't come easy.

『...This is troublesome. The precision of the information gathering equipment has been deteriorating since earlier, and the smoke jamming state is poor. Is this an information gathering interference smokescreen?』

『It's strictly due to the effect of expanded particles.』

『Expanded particles?』

『They're special particles that expand the physical properties. I'll spare you the details for now, but if the enemy dispersed them, assume they're working to their advantage.』

『...Understood.』

This stroke of misfortune seemed formidable. With that thought in mind, Akira hurried ahead.

Running with the agility of someone approaching a superhuman in a reinforced suit, he felt as if he were moving through a strong headwind even in the still air of the room. Akira was already accustomed to this sensation.

However, he now felt something else. It was a sensation akin to the resistance one feels when moving underwater, albeit greatly diminished. It wasn't enough to hinder his running, but there was definitely a tangible resistance that wasn't just in his mind.

Was it because of the expanded particles that Alpha mentioned? Akira thought so, and since he had heard a plausible explanation for it, he didn't dwell on it too much.



Room 28's door finally collapsed under Elde's fierce assault. The heavily distorted door tore away from the wall, falling to the floor, and the expanded particles that filled the corridor rushed into the room all at once.

Then Elde, about to enter the room, stopped in his tracks, directing his gaze down the corridor.

(...Someone's coming. Just one person. This movement... is it a hunter from outside?)

The hunters inside the vehicle had already engaged us in combat and knew our strength. It was unlikely that they would approach without hesitation. Among the subordinates attracting Sakashita's forces, none would act on their own to withdraw. Even if Sakashita's forces were defeated and heading our way, it was unlikely that one person would charge alone.

Elde deduced from these considerations that the presence outside belonged to hunters and not any of the other possibilities.

"Torpa, Sazalto. Intercept them. At least buy us some time."

The strength of the hunters outside the vehicle differed greatly between those from Car 2 and those from Car 10. However, those sent to Car 2 were likely to be hunters stationed there. Additionally, the hunters outside were likely fatigued from the ongoing battles. Torpa's group should handle them without any issues. Even if it was a powerful hunter from Car 10, they should be able to stall for time.

Elde decided to leave it to Torpa's group instead of confronting them himself or with the two others. After acknowledging his instructions, he entered the room alone.

Scanning the interior, Elde didn't see Hikaru. However, he quickly deduced her location. He saw the hem of her skirt sticking out from the door of the emergency shelter and vault room.

(Perhaps she rushed in and got caught in the door, but didn't have the courage to open it again?)

The opponent's careless actions stemmed from panic. Elde assessed the situation and attempted to pry open the vault room. Despite being a sturdy door capable of withstanding artillery fire, it couldn't resist the incredible physical strength of the superhuman who had destroyed the door to Room 28. Slowly, it began to deform and open.

He couldn't afford to mimic what he did when he destroyed the room's door. The vault room was much smaller than Room 28. If he forcefully destroyed the door, he risked killing whoever was inside with the flying debris. He proceeded quickly but cautiously, taking his time to open it. Finally, the door yielded.

"...What the hell?"

There was no one inside the room. The hem of Hikaru's skirt was merely caught in the door, hanging from the coat rack.

"Damn it! Where is she?"

Understanding that he had been tricked, Elde tore the skirt apart and scanned the room once again. Then he noticed the sleeve of Hikaru's clothes sticking out from the bedroom door at the back of the room.

Was she trying to deceive him twice? He couldn't deny the possibility of her hiding there. All he had to do was check. The bedroom door wasn't as sturdy as the vault room door. It would be over soon. Elde made his decision and headed to search the bedroom.



Akira had come to a point where he could see Room 28 as he turned the next corner. However, instead of feeling fortunate to have reached this point without encountering any battles, he frowned, seeing it as a sign of worsening circumstances.

Perhaps the reason they hadn't encountered any enemies was that they had already achieved their objective and left. In that case, it was hard to believe that Hikaru was safe. They might have missed her. With these thoughts in mind, Akira turned the corner.

At the end of the corridor after turning the corner, about 30 meters ahead of Room 28, two men were waiting. They could have been security guards for the vehicle, but Akira instinctively considered them as enemies. And indeed, they were enemies. They were Elde's subordinates, Torpa and Sazalto.

Feeling a slight relief at finally encountering enemies, Akira immediately aimed both of his guns at Torpa and Sazalto. At the same time, Torpa and Sazalto swung their knives with force. Normally, the blades of those knives would never reach him. However, Akira, who was accustomed to such situations, quickly took evasive action.

Waves of slash-inducing energy emitted from the glowing knives turned into light blades and flew through the air, closing in on Akira, tearing through the corridor's air.

Dodging while anticipating the trajectory of these light blades, Akira fired his guns. Countless bullets were shot from his dual LEO composite guns.

However, none of those bullets reached Torpa and Sazalto. Akira's face turned to one of shock.

『What!?』

The bullets, visible as distortions in the air, traveled straight ahead before suddenly decelerating several meters away. It was as if they had pierced through an invisible wall.

Colliding with the subsequent bullets, they bounced off, scattering in the corridor. The bullets, freed from the obstacles after being deflected, similarly decelerated significantly a few meters away and collided with the corridor wall after being deflected by the subsequent bullets.

『What's going on!?』 Confused by the unexpected turn of events, Akira received an explanation from Alpha.

『The expanded particles in the air are generating high-speed filters. That's why the range of the guns has drastically decreased.』

There are many byproducts from colorless mist research. One of the adverse effects of colorless mist is shortening the range of firearms. The high-speed filter refers to the physical properties brought about by specialized expanded particles that excel in this effect. They react to objects moving at a certain speed, generating resistance proportional to their velocity.

The conditions for generating high-speed filters mainly depend on the speed of the object and the density of the expanded particles. The reason why the range of Akira's bullets was shortened to just a few meters was that the high-speed projectiles compressed the air in front, raising the density of the expanded particles to the threshold at which the high-speed filter was generated.

Akira, given the gist of that explanation from Alpha, felt puzzled.

『A high-speed filter? But their knives are so fast, yet they reach us!』

『They may have raised the threshold for high-speed filter generation above the speed of the slash wave's movement, or they may be using expanded particles that only react to objects, unlike bullets. Alternatively, unlike bullets, they may not compress the air in front, so the density of the expanded particles may not increase to the threshold where the high-speed filter is generated.』

『Whatever it is, it's favoring them! What should I do?』

『You'll have to get closer to the range of the guns. Akira. You'll have to push yourself a little further.』

『Understood!』 In addition to manipulating the perceived passage of time, he also manipulated the resolution of reality. With Alpha's support, time flowed extremely slowly, and within that, he moved through a world that shone brightly, with high-speed, precision, and accuracy. The cutting power of the light blades flying at high speed from the front exceeded the defense of Akira's reinforced suit. If hit, he would be cut in two. Moreover, they came one after another.

Akira desperately dodged them and closed the distance. He continued to move irregularly and unpredictably, taking advantage of the width of the corridor, running, dashing, and leaping without distinguishing between floor, wall, and ceiling. His movements were so fast that even someone who could track handgun bullets after firing couldn't catch him.

However, Torpa and Sazalto were able to keep up with Akira's movements. They didn't aim blindly but accurately launched light blades at Akira. In addition, they cooperated to corner Akira.

Akira, realizing that he was limited in his evasive options, accelerated by kicking the corridor strongly. But he had limited directions to evade. Light blades had already been launched where he would dodge.

Unable to dodge, Akira fired his guns rapidly. His aim was the light blades coming at him.

A vast amount of bullets collided with the waves of slash-inducing energy, allowing Akira to avoid being cut and reducing the sharpness of the light blades. However, the light blades still hit Akira, but the blades, now softened, couldn't cut through Akira's reinforced suit. The mass of light dissipated as if shattered.

To successfully intercept these attacks, incredibly precise shooting, requiring godlike accuracy, was necessary. The effective range of the guns was only a few meters. The light blades, fired at high speed, covered that distance in an instant. In that instant, the shooting, including timing and aiming, had to be extremely accurate.

Akira made this possible through reality resolution manipulation. With Alpha's support, he moved through a world that shone brightly, where he could maintain such precision. Having successfully intercepted the light blades, Akira continued running without stopping.

Finally, Akira closed the distance with Torpa and his companions. Despite only a few seconds passing since the start of the battle, the corridor was torn to shreds by countless light blades. Akira, who had evaded those light blades multiple times, countered three times and broke through that deadly space, now fired both his guns at the enemies within effective range.

But Torpa closed the distance between him and Akira. While throwing his knife to Sazaldo, Torpa stepped forward, using both hands to deflect Akira's guns, throwing off his aim. Countless bullets hit the corridor wall instead of Torpa.

Next, Torpa launched a thrust at Akira. Akira tried to dodge it but was shocked. Torpa's hands that had blocked Akira's guns were still in the position where they had blocked them. In other words, the thrust had been delivered by Torpa's third arm.

In the world where time flowed slowly, Akira saw the thrust approaching him. Rather than tilting his head to the right from the center of his face, Akira tilted it to the left, anticipating the thrust aimed slightly left of his face. Naturally, the thrust penetrated Akira's head.

But Akira was unharmed. Torpa's arm that thrust was not tangible. (A holographic arm...!) And a tangible arm had pierced through the space to the right side of Akira's head.

(This one's an optical camouflage arm...!) An attack from both a holographic arm and an optical camouflage arm. When dodging the holographic arm's thrust, Akira was pierced by the optical camouflage arm. Akira first dodged this unexpected attack.

As Akira was still astonished, a thrust from the fourth arm was launched. Akira intentionally didn't dodge the thrust aimed at the center of his head, and after the holographic arm had pierced his head, he avoided the following optical camouflage arm.

This was another surprise attack due to the time difference. If one reacted to the holographic arm's thrust, it became extremely difficult to dodge the subsequent optical camouflage arm's attack.

A surprise attack with two consecutive blows. Akira, who had seen through both of them on the first try, surprised Torpa, who was also surprised, with a kick while still wearing a surprised expression. However surprised he was, Akira never stopped moving due to it. Alpha manipulated the reinforced suit, and he immediately acted in response. Incorporating the momentum of avoiding the second attack by falling backward, Akira kicked up Torpa's head.

Although Torpa defended against the kick with both arms, he was slammed into the ceiling of the corridor by the powerful blow. Before his body, recoiling from the impact with the ceiling, could fall to the floor faster than free fall, while his body was still against the ceiling, Akira attempted to aim his guns at Torpa again.

But before that, Sazalto closed the distance.

He swung both his knives forcefully at Akira. Light blades flew towards him. Akira reflexively judged that and interrupted his shooting at Torpa to evade with all his might.

However, the glowing knives only split the air, not emitting waves of slashes. Taking advantage of Akira's evasion, Sazalto circled behind him. Additionally, after Torpa landed on the floor as if slammed, he immediately attacked Akira.

(I'm trapped!) Akira aimed both his guns at them. Both were within effective range. If they hit, they could kill. And at this distance, at this timing, there was no dodging. Akira was convinced of this as he fired his guns.

Akira's conviction was correct. But even so, the outcome was overturned.

Torpa thrusts his palm towards the muzzle of Akira's gun at high speed. Sazalto swings his knife in a way that elevates the air in front of the muzzle temporarily. As a result, the concentration of expansion particles increases, and the threshold for the high-speed filter decreases. Akira's gun's range becomes even shorter, and the bullets abruptly stop in mid-air.

『What!?』

As Akira is surprised by the neutralization of his gunfire, Torpa's fist and Sazalto's knife assail him. Akira dodges them and delivers a kick. Torpa and Sazalto dodge the kick and counterattack. Akira retaliates further.

The intense exchange continues. Everyone has already abandoned the floor as their only foothold. They use not only the walls and ceiling but also the air as their battleground, engaging in high-speed combat while disregarding the direction of gravity. Despite the intense back and forth, Akira, although only perceptually, finds Torpa and his companions more formidable than the white aircraft and giant monsters fought outside.

『Darn! They're strong! And they're used to fighting with that high-speed filter!』

Akira couldn't hide his surprise at the method of neutralizing the attacks, neither dodging the gunfire nor using force field armor to defend, but shortening the range to nullify them.

(...This is bad. Can I win this?)

In addition to the enemy's strength, Akira's slight discouragement arises from the exhaustion from the battle outside. Then Alpha speaks up.

『Akira, stop complaining and do your best. Indeed, the high-speed filter is troublesome, but there's one favorable thing for us.』

『What's that?』

『Even if they're targeting Hikaru, the likelihood of capture or abduction rather than killing has increased. Thanks to that, we can buy some time to fight.』

『How do you know that?』

『The high-speed filter is sometimes used to prevent accidental kills. Using guns increases the risk of accidental shots or ricochets, doesn't it? So when you need to capture an important person alive, you might have someone skilled in close combat use the high-speed filter to prevent accidentally killing the target.』

『I see! ...But why are they targeting Hikaru?』

『I have no idea. Let's ask Hikaru herself later.』

『Right!』

For that, they must first defeat the two they are currently fighting. Alpha's attitude, speaking of it as a matter of course, and her confidence in winning against them, dispels Akira's slight discouragement, uplifting his spirits. He laughs heartily.

However, being uplifted doesn't mean he can win. Akira's struggle continues. Torpa launches a barrage with his four arms. The number of visible arms and the actual number of arms are the same, but there is complexity between reality and illusion. The tangible arms that are visible. The holographic arms that are visible but not tangible. The optical camouflage arms that are invisible but tangible. Akira must discern all these realities and deal with the attacks coming at high speed from these arms. Using his expanded senses to identify them himself, and with Alpha's guidance, he dodges and counters.

Sazalto swings both his knives. Due to the remaining energy, he can't emit light blades, but the sharpness of the knives themselves rivals those of pre-war models. Sazalto's arm movements exceed the range of normal human mobility. It's not just the joints bending backward; the entire arms bend like soft-bodied animals.

He wields the knives with flexible and precise movements, cornering Akira. The remaining light from the glowing blades forms trajectories of slashes, tracking Akira. Akira desperately dodges them. He can't afford to be slashed, nor can his guns or reinforced suit. Combining his movements with Alpha's expert maneuvers through the manipulation of the reinforced suit, he narrowly avoids being hit time and again. Aware that he would already be dead if he were relying solely on his own abilities, he continues to evade the relentless pursuit of the blades, utilizing the recoil from firing and making inexplicable movements to escape from the blades chasing him persistently.

One step late, and he dies. One mistake, and he dies. Anything less than the best move is fatal. Despite this sequence, Akira, with the support of Alpha, exerts his full effort without delay or error. Even so, Akira realizes that fighting Torpa and his companions on equal terms is his limit.

And Torpa and his companions also reached their limit in fighting Akira on equal terms. Even in a situation advantageous to themselves with the dispersal of expansion particles, fighting two against one only led to a stalemate. This strength of Akira's darkens their faces with seriousness.

(...Strong! This strength, he's not just a hunter, is he!? Is he here to protect the target?
Did he return from fighting outside to resolve the situation?)

(We can't let him head to Captain Elde! I'll definitely stop him! I'll fulfill the orders at all costs!)

The value of everything is determined relatively. One's own life is no exception. It's used up for more important things. With that determination, the two present here face the formidable enemy without hesitation, just like Akira, exerting their full power.

In an instant, they navigate through dozens of lines of death in the intense exchange. Akira and Torpa continue to sprint with all their might, gathering countless dense moments in time. At the end of it all, someone finally made a misstep.

The aftermath of the intense battle has severely damaged the corridor. In a normal building, the corridor would have collapsed along with the building. However, because it's a sturdy intercity transport vehicle, despite being battered and cracked, it hasn't reached the point where walls or floors have holes allowing a view to the other side.

Still, there's a limit to durability. Torpa's footing, forcefully stamped to move quickly, cracks and collapses beyond its limit. As a result, Torpa slightly loses balance.

Normally, such a slight disruption in movement wouldn't determine the outcome of the battle. Misplacing one's foothold is not much different from the best position. It's just a matter of quickly regaining footing and continuing the fight.

But not now. Anything other than the best move is fatal. Torpa made the wrong choice.

Through Akira's information gathering devices, Alpha accurately assesses the state of the floor. When Torpa is still not off balance, Alpha predicts with almost prophetic accuracy that Torpa will lose his balance with the next step, albeit slightly.

And with that momentary opening, Akira seizes the opportunity.

If the opponent hadn't lost balance, Akira's move would have been a blunder. The fierce and perfectly timed kick pierces Torpa's abdomen. Torpa bends his body into a large "U" shape, losing his balance.

However, the injury from the kick itself is not fatal. Torpa is someone who attacks intercity transport vehicles. He's not so fragile as to die from such an injury.

But it was a blow that decided the outcome.

Because Torpa lost his balance enough that he couldn't immediately counterattack, the situation temporarily and narrowly shifts from two against one to one on one. In a two against one situation where they were evenly matched, that was fatal.

Using the recoil from the kick, Akira closes the distance with Sazalto. Sazalto swings both knives with the highest precision yet, but Akira dodges them. Then he presses the muzzles of both guns against Sazalto's head and abdomen.

In the next moment, a vast amount of bullets fired from those muzzles crush Sazalto. Shooting him in the head results in instant death. Even if the headless corpse tries to move, it can't fight back if the torso is blown away. Considering that immediate death does not lead to immediate incapacitation against such an opponent, he is defeated decisively.

Torpa regains his footing during this time. But it's already too late. There's no chance of winning one on one.

At least he'll stab each other. At the very least, he'll inflict serious wounds. With that determination, Torpa steps toward Akira. Without hesitation, he uses the potent drug, the life-ending poison he had embedded in his body, and begins his last battle.

Akira also sensed that his opponent was prepared for a mutual demise, willing to exchange their own life for his. Without presuming superiority even in a one-on-one scenario, he engaged in combat without lowering his guard.

The outcome was decided in a second. Strictly speaking, it didn't even take a second. In that fleeting moment when the intensity of death reached its zenith, feeling like tens of minutes compressed into an instant, Akira and Torpa engaged in a duel at ultra-high speed.

The balance of their evenly matched offense and defense was disrupted, in a sense, by the gap in experience. In terms of sheer combat experience, Torpa outclassed Akira by several levels. However, when it came to the experience of expending every ounce of effort in a life-or-death situation, Akira held a slight edge.

And that slight advantage led Akira to victory.

Torpa, who had overcome the fear of death with a resilient spirit, couldn't completely suppress the exhilaration it brought. This caused a slight disruption in Torpa's movements, delaying his next actions by half a beat.

On the other hand, while Akira rallied his spirits, he maintained his composure by restraining excessive exhilaration. Accumulated experience and familiarity with life-threatening situations made it possible. This allowed Akira to act half a beat faster.

Taking all this into account, Akira surpassed Torpa. Both hands aimed their guns, raining a barrage of bullets. Torpa, bombarded at point-blank range, was pulverized all over and succumbed to death.

Although Akira had vanquished Torpa, there was no time for relief. He immediately prepared for the next adversary. Continuing to manipulate his perception of time, he swiftly exchanged the energy pack of his reinforced suit at the same speed as in high-speed combat, reloaded the gun's magazine and energy pack, and consumed a large amount of healing potion. Then, he aimed both guns.

"....Alright!"

The battle with Torpa had greatly depleted his equipment and body. Without completing the exchange of magazines and taking the healing potion, he would die next. Even though it exposed a significant vulnerability, it was necessary to complete the exchange of magazines and take the healing potion.

If he were attacked now, he would have died. It was close. Thinking so with relief, Akira took a deep breath once.

『Alright then. Alpha. Do you think we made it in time?』

『It's faster to check.』

『That's true.』 Akira started running towards Room 28. Whether to save Hikaru if she was still alive, or to at least take revenge if he was dead.

209: Superhuman

Elde, having finished searching through Room 28, clasped his head with a grim expression.

"...Impossible!? Why can't I find her?" Although the room was spacious, as befits a room used by city executives, it wasn't as large as a mansion, nor did it have any hidden rooms. Elde had been optimistic that he would quickly find Hikaru after searching all the rooms, but he was starting to feel anxious now that Hikaru was nowhere to be found.

Under normal circumstances, using advanced information-gathering equipment would allow you to find someone even if they were hidden within the walls. However, it was currently difficult due to the expanded particles filling the room. Additionally, Elde, being a superhuman, preferred to rely on his own senses for detection, and thus didn't carry such high-performance information-gathering equipment.

(...Calm down. What am I missing? There is only one entrance to this room. Torpa and his men are outside. It's impossible for her to have escaped secretly. She must be inside the room. I must be overlooking something simple. What could it be...?) Elde told himself this to maintain his composure as he scanned the room once more. His eyes fell upon the vault room, which he had checked first.

(No way...) Elde headed to the vault room and reached out to the warped door. The door, which had been stuck halfway shut due to deformation, was pried open once again.

Elde's eyes met Hikaru's, who had been hiding inside the vault room.

When Elde was trying to break down the door of Room 28, Hikaru initially thought of barricading herself in the vault room, which also served as an emergency shelter.

However, she quickly abandoned that idea. If someone could break down the door to Room 28, the vault door wouldn't hold for long either. Hikaru decided it would be better to use the vault room as a decoy to buy time rather than actually hide in it.

First, she placed a skirt in the vault room's door to make it look like she was hiding there. Next, she put her jacket in the door of the bedroom at the back of the room and hid silently in a locker near the vault room.

Less than a minute later, Elde broke down the room's door and entered. He saw the skirt caught in the vault door and began to pry it open.

Hikaru watched this from inside the locker. Feeling that her plan had worked so far, he suppressed his trembling due to the tension and stayed completely still.

Elde pried open the vault door but did not find Hikaru inside. With a grim expression, he scanned the room and noticed the jacket in the bedroom door. He then headed to check the bedroom next. Seeing this, Hikaru decided to act. She quietly exited the locker and slipped into the vault room, hiding there.

Despite being aided by luck, Hikaru's plan succeeded.

Elde, thinking Hikaru was in the vault room, neglected to search for any other presence. Because of this, he didn't notice Hikaru hiding nearby. Elde then moved to check the bedroom, which contained numerous places to inspect, like the bed and closet, taking time to search thoroughly. During this time, Hikaru managed to move to the vault room.

Additionally, Hikaru moved slowly, which contributed to Elde not noticing him. The expanded particles filling the room reduced the precision of information-gathering equipment, but they also created a high-speed filter effect, making it easier to detect

movement. Elde noticed Akira's presence under the influence of the expanded particles because Akira was moving at high speed.

If Hikaru had panicked and run into the vault room, Elde would have definitely sensed her.

Hikaru did everything he could. Hiding in the locker was a gamble, as she could have been easily discovered. But she won that gamble and wasted Elde's time. Elde had to thoroughly search the room, not realizing Hikaru was hiding in a place he had already checked first. Yet, despite this, he eventually found Hikaru. Wearing only her underwear, as she had used his clothes as decoys, Hikaru flashed a stiff, wry smile at Elde.

"...Could you close the door? It's rude to open a room with a woman in her underwear without permission, you know?"

"I'd like to apologize for that, but I'm in a hurry too." Elde said, grabbing Hikaru's arm.



"I request your cooperation. I don't recommend resisting. Otherwise, I'll have to transport your head connected to a life support device."

Hikaru sighed dramatically, as if resigning herself to his fate.

"...I understand. But tell me one thing. You people attacked an inter-city transport vehicle. That means you're a nationalist, right? Why would people like you target me?"

"Are you playing dumb? Or are you underestimating your own value?"

"I'm not underestimating my value. Even though I sometimes get underestimated because I'm a child, I've fought off those voices with my abilities to get to where I am now. But my position isn't significant enough to warrant this, is it?"

"That's a difference in perception. You might not be satisfied with your position, but it's still important to us."

"Even so..."

There was a significant gap in their conversation. Hikaru understood this but chose to continue without correcting the misunderstanding. He did this to buy time, to extract information, and to avoid devaluing herself in the eyes of her captors. For some unknown reason, they seemed to need her desperately. This meant they were unlikely to kill her on the spot. If Hikaru explained and cleared up the misunderstanding, they might find her worthless and decide to kill her. With this in mind, Hikaru tried to keep the conversation going. However, Elde realized she was stalling and abruptly ended the conversation, pulling Hikaru out of the vault room.

"We'll discuss the details later. Let's go."

Is this it? Akira didn't make it in time after all. Hikaru's face grew tense as this thought crossed his mind.

At that moment, Elde suddenly turned his face towards the room's entrance. A split second later, Akira burst into the room.

Elde had sensed the fierce battle raging in the corridor while searching for Hikaru. However, he didn't go to assist. Elde had ordered his men to hold off the attackers and buy time, trusting them to handle the situation. He believed that despite their struggle, Torpa and his team would prevail.

The battle's intensity eventually ceased, coinciding with the moment Elde found Hikaru. They had a tough time, but they finally won. Thanks to the time Torpa and his team bought, he found the target. Now, all that remained was to regroup and escape. As Elde thought this, something unexpected happened. The sense of a presence was rapidly approaching from the corridor. It wasn't an action Torpa, and his team would take.

No way. Elde's eyes instinctively darted to the entrance. Just as he feared, the unexpected presence was not Torpa and his team, but Akira. Hikaru, being an ordinary person, didn't notice Akira's arrival. However, Elde, who could manipulate his sense of time as if it were natural, clearly saw Akira aiming his gun at them. In a world frozen by extreme concentration, Elde thought.

(Wait, if he shoots now, she'll be caught in the crossfire. Does he not realize she's there? No, he knows. I can tell by looking at him. Is this a bluff to make me dodge reflexively and move away from her? Or does he actually intend to shoot?)

After processing these thoughts, Elde reached a conclusion in a split second.

(No, he's going to shoot!)

He then executed a spinning kick. The kick sliced through the air without reaching Akira. However, the shockwave from the kick transmitted outward. Akira was blown away as if struck by an invisible kick.

In that moment, Elde shoved Hikaru into the vault room and forced the door shut. The door, already warped, became stuck due to Elde's forceful closing. It wouldn't budge anymore, effectively trapping Hikaru inside.

Akira burst into Room 28 and immediately aimed his gun at Elde. He had noticed that Hikaru was there too, but he didn't hesitate. However, he was then hit by the impact of a kick and was blown away. The shockwave, strong enough to not just bend but sever thick iron beams, spread out in a broad arc. The impact left a long mark on the room's wall.

Despite this, Akira was nearly unscathed. When Elde showed signs of preparing the kick, Alpha instantly increased the output of Akira's power armor's force field armor, readying it for the impact, and also made Akira take evasive action.

Even so, completely avoiding the attack was impossible. Akira was thrown against the room's wall. Instead of being slammed into it, he managed to land on his feet, minimizing the disruption to his stance. He didn't drop his guns and was able to land back on the floor.

『...Alpha. Just to confirm, that was his kick, right?』

『Yes. He used a special kicking technique that leveraged the properties of the expanded particles to transmit the shockwave.』

『That's some serious flexibility...』 Akira scowled at the bizarre situation. Bullets stop after just a few meters, but a kick can hit from outside that range.

Akira and Elde faced off. When Akira landed on the floor, his guns were lowered. This happened right after Elde had locked Hikaru in the vault room. These factors prevented both from continuing the fight immediately, making them wary of each other's next move.

Elde looked at Akira with disdain. "You didn't come to save her; you came to kill her? Better a corpse than letting the enemy take her alive? Very corporate of you."

Akira made a puzzled face. It was clear that he was being sarcastic, but Akira realized there was a strange misunderstanding. "...I intended to shoot without killing Hikaru. Maybe her arms or legs would get blown off, but with healing medicine, she wouldn't die. And it didn't look like I could rescue her unharmed anyway."

"Hmph. It sounds like you wouldn't mind if she died?"

Alpha interjected.

『Well, it's true we can't afford to lose her, Akira, so in that sense, he's not wrong.』

『...Yeah, but still.』 Akira was willing to do whatever it takes to save Hikaru. However, that didn't include sacrificing his own life.

Hikaru listened to their dangerous conversation from inside the vault. She was glad Akira had come to save her but didn't want to be injured so badly that she'd need regeneration treatment, nor did she want to be accidentally killed. Her face twisted in discomfort.

Now Akira asked a question. "Why are you targeting Hikaru so persistently? The commotion outside was a diversion for this, right? Is she worth that much?"

"Are you saying it's foolish to make an enemy of Sakashita Heavy Industries? You remain as arrogant as ever."

Attacking the intercity transport vehicle run in Sakashita Heavy Industries' economic zone meant they were making an enemy out of them. Akira understood this but felt their conversation wasn't aligning.

From Akira's confused expression, Elde deduced that Akira was somewhat bewildered by his words. He made a guess and reached a conclusion. "...I see. You're not her bodyguard, are you? Just a hunter following orders to rescue her. You only know her by acquaintance, right?"

"That's right..." Akira thought as he agreed with Elde's assessment, still puzzled.

This confirmed Elde's hypothesis. "You're strong enough to defeat Torpa and his men. I thought you were her bodyguard, handling the situation outside separately. But I was wrong. You were sent here without knowing anything. Fine, I'll tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"She's an Old-World domain connector from Sakashita Heavy Industries."

"...What?" Akira was so taken aback by this unexpected information that he couldn't help but voice his confusion. Hikaru's shocked voice echoed after his.

"That's impossible!" Hikaru had been thinking it would be dangerous to clear up the misunderstanding, but she shouted out loud in her surprise.

『Alpha, what do you think? Do you believe him?』

『Regardless of its truth, he believes it. He must have some reason to think Hikaru is an Old World domain connector for Sakashita Heavy Industries.』

『Well, he wouldn't go this far without a reason.』

Akira asked again, despite his confusion. "...Hikaru says she's not."

"If she said she was, you'd leave, wouldn't you? Your job is to protect the inter-city transport, not an Old-World domain connector from Sakashita Heavy Industries. You have no obligation to risk your life for her." He wasn't wrong. Akira had no duty to protect Hikaru. Elde continued.

"Let me make a proposal as well. Stand down. As long as you step aside, I have no intention of antagonizing you. You should understand my capabilities by now," Elde said.

The exchange had been brief, but Akira could easily tell that his opponent was incredibly formidable. Elde continued, "Think rationally, like a hunter. I have the power to capture an important figure from Sakashita Heavy Industries. I'm prepared to die to achieve that. No matter how much you're being paid, fighting me isn't worth it."

Hikaru started to panic upon hearing this. In the hunter business, death is always a risk, and it's a job where you trade your life for money. Therefore, deciding if a job is worth it is done with cold, ruthless calculation. The higher the hunter's rank, the more stringent this judgment becomes. The wasteland does not show mercy to those who take on dangerous, poorly-paid jobs out of sentimentality.

Akira, being a high-rank hunter, might decide that the risk wasn't worth it and withdraw. Hikaru, fearing this, pleaded desperately, "Akira! Wait! Don't back down! Help me! Please! I'll do anything!"

If Akira abandoned her, she would be captured by the nationalist, and her fate would be grim. Driven by this thought, Hikaru begged for help.

Akira had no intention of abandoning Hikaru. Nonetheless, given the unexpected strength of his opponent, he decided to demand additional compensation to handle any misfortune that might befall either him or Hikaru. "...You'll have to pay me well."

"I-I understand!" Hikaru agreed. With that, the deal was struck, and Akira now had a duty to save her. He smiled slightly at Elde, "Looks like the reward is worth it now."

Elde dismissed this lightly. "No, it's not worth it. You'll regret that mistake in judgment when you're dead." At this point, Elde gave up on talking Akira into retreating.

Elde's demeanor changed, which Akira noticed.

『Akira, be careful. He's a superhuman.』

『A superhuman, huh... Sounds tough.』 Akira knew the term. It described someone exceptionally strong, almost as if they were a powerful monster.

However, it was his first time confronting someone labeled as such. He realized this encounter was particularly troublesome and steeled himself to overcome this bad luck.

Elde was in a hurry. Although he was alone, the presence of a hunter inside the vehicle meant that others would arrive soon. He needed to escape with Hikaru before that happened. Normally, he wouldn't have the luxury of talking to Akira.

Yet Elde judged that it was worth the time in this urgent situation to try and make Akira withdraw. Akira had defeated Torpa's team, so he was clearly strong. Elde was confident he could kill Akira but knew it would take time. Thus, he tried to appeal to Akira's rationality as a hunter, thinking it would be faster than fighting. In the end, the

conversation with Akira was a waste of time. He would have to make up for the lost time with his life. Determined to kill his opponent as quickly as possible, Elde lunged at Akira.

Akira stepped forward to meet him. His guns had an extremely short range due to their high-speed filter effect, so he needed to close the distance to fight effectively.

Both the superhuman and the power suit-wearing Akira closed the gap at full speed. In real time, it was instantaneous. Even with their enhanced perception, it took only a moment for them to come within range of each other. At that instant, Akira fired his guns, and Elde swung his fist. Countless bullets and shockwaves erupted in the room.

Inside the vault, shaken by the intense battle, Hikaru endured her fear. Despite being glad to be locked in the sturdy vault, she felt no relief. She couldn't even approach the door to peek outside, fearing the residual effects might kill her. She hid in the back of the small vault, praying for safety.

Less than a minute had passed since Akira and Elde's fight began, yet the room was already in ruins. The furniture was shattered beyond recognition, and most of the interior walls had been blown away, turning Room 28 into a vast space. The only intact room was the vault where Hikaru was hiding.

Akira's communication devices were functional again. The communication interference from the expanded particles persisted, but the short range meant they could still connect. Thus, he had a rough idea of the room's layout.

However, Hikaru couldn't grasp the details of the fight. For a normal person like her, the battle between a superhuman and a hunter with comparable abilities was too fast to follow. She only sensed the constant destruction, as if humanoid weapons were clashing in the confined space.

Feeling this through the vault door, Hikaru finally understood what it meant to control high-rank hunters. (...Handling a high-rank hunters means keeping these people from wreaking havoc. No wonder Kibayashi holds so much power.)

Properly utilized, they could greatly benefit urban economies, but if mismanaged, they could obliterate a city. Therefore, those who could control such explosive forces were indispensable to the city, even if they had personality issues.

(...I can't handle this! I underestimated the task!)

Realizing she was out of her depth, Hikaru decided to step back from managing high-rank hunters once this ordeal was over. First, she prayed for Akira's victory to ensure her survival.

Elde threw a punch. The superhuman speed of his fist activated a high-speed filter. It felt like an invisible, solid wall appeared in front of his fist, creating immense resistance.

If it had been bullets, they would have expended their kinetic energy after penetrating the invisible wall and simply fallen to the ground. But Elde's fist was different. His forearm, upper arm, shoulder, waist, legs—his entire body—pushed the fist forward, breaking through the resistance of the high-speed filter effect. The shockwave from this force-wrapped fist pierced through the air filled with extended particles and hurtled towards Akira.

Akira narrowly evaded it. He didn't see it coming; he had just barely managed to dodge it with all his might. Still, he couldn't avoid the shockwave entirely. The punch that passed by his side generated a shockwave that struck him. Compared to a direct hit, it felt like a breeze, but even that breeze had the power to shatter or even sever steel beams. Akira endured it with the force-field armor of his power suit, using all his strength to prevent himself from being blown away, and fired at Elde from the side.

Firing from the front was futile. As Elde sped towards Akira, the air in front of him was compressed, lowering the threshold for high-speed filter generation, thus creating a barrier that Akira's bullets couldn't penetrate. Therefore, Akira could only counterattack when Elde came close enough. After barely dodging Elde's attack, he fired from the closest possible position and angle. Even so, Akira couldn't inflict a deep wound on Elde. There was a fundamental difference in their abilities.

Countless bullets struck Elde directly. Akira had adjusted his LEO composite gun to its maximum output, loading it with as many charge bullets as the expanded magazine allowed, and fired in rapid succession. Despite this, Elde's injuries were only superficial, merely scraping the flesh beneath his skin. The injuries had no impact on the fight, akin to minor scratches.

Even these scratches healed quickly due to the recovery drugs Elde had taken. The visible result of Akira's gunfire was merely adding more holes to Elde's already tattered protective suit.

Elde then unleashed a spinning back kick. Akira, knowing a direct hit would be fatal, evaded with a leap as fast as a bullet, landing on the ceiling and aiming his guns at Elde. But before he could fire, Elde launched a palm strike. Although the strike didn't reach Akira on the ceiling, the shockwave did, causing a massive hand-shaped indentation in the ceiling.

Akira dodged sideways, narrowly avoiding the shockwave. Even though the shockwave had lost some power through dispersion, a hit would have embedded Akira into the ceiling, rendering him immobile and vulnerable to Elde's follow-up attack, which would have been fatal. Whether it was a direct hit or an indirect shockwave, Akira knew that any attack from Elde could kill him instantly. Using the ceiling as a foothold, Akira moved sideways at high speed, releasing his grip on his guns. At the same time, the AF laser cannon mounted on his back appeared before him, fully charged. He fired immediately. The laser burned through the extended particles and struck Elde in an instant.

However, Elde caught it with one hand. His palm was scorched, but that was the extent of the damage. Akira's face twisted in frustration.

『He's way too strong! To be this tough without enhanced suit... No wonder they call him a superhuman!』 Though Elde had blocked the laser, Akira knew it wasn't completely ineffective. Still, he wanted more visible results than just seeing Elde's pained expression.

Akira had hit Elde with the AF laser cannon three times already. If neither the charged bullets from his LEO composite gun nor the AF laser cannon were effective, he had no other options. This thought made Akira anxious, prompting him to check with Alpha.

『Alpha! It's working, right!?』

『Of course. Both the charged bullets and the laser are definitely wearing him down. Stop complaining and keep at it.』

『Got it!』

Reassured, Akira retrieved the LEO composite gun floating mid-air and reattached the AF laser cannon to his back. The AF laser cannon couldn't be fired repeatedly, so he had to rely on the charged bullets from the LEO composite gun until it was ready to fire again. Knowing his attacks weren't in vain, Akira shook off his anxiety and maintained his resolve, ready to continue the battle. He prepared to confront Elde, who would likely charge at him again, using the high-speed filter to block his bullets.

But Elde made a move before charging at Akira. He swung a knife-hand strike through the air in front of him, sending a shockwave imbued with cutting force through the extended particles, turning it into an invisible slash aimed at Akira.

The slash was invisible to the naked eye and undetectable even with enhanced sensory equipment. However, Akira's augmented vision, aided by Alpha's analysis, clearly displayed the shockwave imbued with cutting force.

Akira managed to evade it, but his desperate dodge left him off-balance. However, this was only momentary. With his ability to use even the air as a foothold, he quickly regained his stance. Yet, in the face of Elde's superhuman speed, that moment was too long. As Akira stabilized himself, Elde was already in front of him, drawing back his fist like a bow.

Dodging was impossible. Akira aimed his gun at Elde's fist. It wasn't the best move given the circumstances, but it was the best he could do at that moment.

A massive volley of bullets spewed forth from his gun, as if emptying the entire extended magazine in one go. The charge bullets were infused with as much energy as the large-capacity energy pack could provide, a desperate burst that ignored the gun's durability, risking complete destruction and even the safety of the user for maximum power.

Akira had done something similar during the battle at the Kuzusuhara Ruins, but the power now was incomparable. Back then, he used a standard LEO composite gun. Now, high-performance expansion parts significantly enhanced the basic performance, and with Alpha's support, he had rewritten the gun's control system to maximize its power.

Despite all this, Elde's fist didn't stop. Even though the barrage contained bullets powerful enough to obliterate common monsters, Elde's fist deflected them all and kept advancing. The residual shockwave from his punch shattered the already-destroyed gun, and the punch landed squarely on Akira.

Akira was sent flying and landed heavily on the floor. His expression showed how close he had come to death.

Although the LEO composite gun's barrage couldn't stop Elde's fist, it had succeeded in reducing its power. Akira had released the broken gun, concentrated the force-field armor's output on the impact area, and braced for defense. As a result, he wasn't completely obliterated and sustained injuries that still allowed him to continue fighting.

His arm, which took the punch directly, was broken along with the power suit, but it hadn't been torn off. Only one of his guns was destroyed; he still had one LEO composite gun and the AF laser cannon. As long as Akira's will remained unbroken, he could still fight.

And Akira's will was far from fragile. Watching Elde carefully, he used his uninjured arm to forcibly reset his broken arm.

『...How is he this strong? Alpha, is there any way we could escape with Hikaru by exploiting some gap?』

『No, there isn't.』

『Of course!』 Akira hadn't expected Elde to allow that. It was a desperate question asked just in case, and the expected answer was no. He continued to face Elde from a distance.

Akira couldn't understand why Elde wasn't pressing the attack. However, given his current state of recovery from the previous assault, this was fortuitous. Akira remained on high alert, waiting for the effects of the pre-taken recovery drugs to fully permeate his body.

210: Reason for naming yourself

Elde, who had destroyed Akira's gun, stood still without pursuing further, wearing a grim expression as he watched Akira.

"I only managed to destroy one gun after all that effort... I misjudged him," he thought.

The elite fighters of the Eastern sector were adept at gauging their opponents' strengths. Without this skill, even the strongest would misjudge their enemies and meet their demise. Elde was no exception; he had accurately assessed Akira's abilities and slightly overestimated them, yet still believed he could win without issue. However, he had erred. Although he could perceive Akira's abilities, he couldn't fully account for the additional strength provided by Alpha's support.

"I knew he couldn't be weak after defeating Torpa and the others so quickly, but I was overconfident... I'm sorry. I underestimated your capabilities," he admitted, feeling a pang of guilt towards his fallen comrades.

He realized he should have judged Torpa and the others not as weaklings who were easily defeated but as fighters who had managed to hold off a formidable opponent for a significant time. Elde felt ashamed of his oversight and apologized to his fallen comrades internally.

"I can't let Torpa, and the others' deaths be in vain. I need to be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice," he resolved.

For the sake of his mission, Elde was willing to accept his death. He believed his comrades shared the same resolve, and indeed, they did. However, there was a difference between being willing to die if necessary and accepting a pointless death.

Dying was acceptable, if necessary, but Elde always strived not to mistake necessity. Now, he acknowledged his miscalculation and steeled himself anew.

Elde's aura shifted dramatically. The atmosphere seemed to tremble and distort, almost as if a human-shaped weapon had boosted its generator output to extreme levels, regardless of durability or wear and tear.

Elde was capable of using a biological force field armor, a capability that granted him superhuman physical abilities, transcending normal biological limits. This force field armor was said to be a manifestation of the body modification technology used by the old world's humans, possibly akin to those connected to the old-world domain. Despite their superhuman abilities, the bodies of these beings reverted to normal human durability upon death, as their biological force field armor's output dropped to ordinary levels. This illustrated the critical importance of force field armor output.

To increase the output of force field armor required substantial energy. Akira's power suit sourced its force field armor's energy from an attached energy pack, which ceased to function when depleted. In contrast, Elde's biological force field armor drew its energy from Elde himself, leading to his death if he exhausted it.

Elde had already expended significant energy, aiming to defeat Akira swiftly and escape with Hikaru before other hunters arrived. Although he used energy inefficiently in a near-wasteful manner to shorten the battle, he failed to defeat Akira. Time was running out, and other hunters were likely to arrive soon, making the mission increasingly difficult.

The mission had to succeed. Failure would render Torpa and the others' deaths meaningless. Elde was determined to succeed at all costs.

Elde decided to sacrifice his future for the mission. He needed his life to last only until he handed over Hikaru to his comrades. He initiated autophagy within his cells, intentionally

consuming his own body to generate massive energy. This energy, literally created by consuming his life, boosted his biological force field armor's output.

His resolve to achieve his goal even at the cost of his life was genuine.

Akira sensed the distinct and powerful shift in Elde's aura, his expression hardening. Even Alpha showed a serious demeanor.

『Akira, I'm sorry, but we can't stall any longer.』

『Stalling? So that's what I was doing... stalling for time?』

『Yes. I was hoping other hunters would arrive while you held him off,』 Alpha admitted.

Believing he was fighting with all his might to win, Akira felt conflicted upon learning he was merely buying time. He was both astonished by Elde's strength, which relegated his efforts to mere stalling, and bemused by the realization that even stalling might now be impossible.

『So, Alpha, do we have any options left?』

Alpha smiled provocatively. 『We have no choice but to take a big gamble. Akira, are you ready?』

The last time Alpha mentioned a gamble, Akira ended up ramming his bike into a white machine, pushing it into a giant monster's mouth, getting swallowed, and then escaping by tearing through its insides. For a brief moment, he had even lost connection with Alpha.

Recalling this, Akira braced himself for another desperate measure.

Only a little, and yet that's how it is. If it's significant, how much more so? Akira couldn't even begin to imagine. Nevertheless, his answer was clear.

『Yeah. Resolving myself is my job, after all.』 Akira didn't believe that mere resolve would somehow make everything work out. However, he understood that without resolve, the bet where winning somehow made things work wouldn't even come into play.

That's why Akira resolved himself. As he always had, and even more so this time.

Both Akira and Elde steeled themselves for a fight to the death.

Elde noticed the change in Akira's demeanor. Both recognized that the true battle was about to begin, and that the standoff had reached its end. Yet before the fight commenced, Elde spoke.

"I am Elde. What is your name?"

"..... ?" Akira, suddenly questioned, showed a slightly puzzled expression, unable to respond immediately.

Elde interpreted this as a refusal to answer.

".....You don't want to say. Very well. I intended to mark the graves of my fallen comrades with your name. You can die nameless. I'll mourn their misfortune of having lost their lives to a nameless piece of trash." As Elde prepared to resume the fight, Akira spoke up.

"It's Akira. That's my name." Elde looked slightly surprised but quickly returned to his usual expression.

".....I see. The names of the two you killed are Torpa and Sarsalt. Take their names with you to the afterlife."

Elde, who had already initiated his autophagic process, had little time left. He is exhausting himself in exchange for enormous energy, and even a second was precious. Considering this, he should have immediately resumed fighting.

Yet Elde spent those precious few seconds, which were literally eating away at his life, to extract his opponent's name. This was a seemingly wasteful act done out of respect for his fallen comrades who had dedicated their lives to the mission. In turn, Akira paid the minimum respect to someone who showed honor to his comrades' deaths.

Akira and Elde's expressions shifted. They clearly showed the will to kill their opponent without disdain. The brief standoff ended, and the deadly battle began.

Elde swung his fist, sending shockwaves toward Akira. It was a feint, assuming it would be dodged, meant to disrupt the opponent's stance. Even such an attack had enough power to distort room 28. The shockwave passed Akira, who barely evaded it, and left a significant dent in the wall.

Elde followed up with a knife-hand strike. The walls, floor, and ceiling bore marks as if a massive blade had slashed through the room from the inside. The shockwaves that leaked from these cracks destroyed the surrounding rooms and corridors.

He unleashed a roundhouse kick. The shockwave spread over a broader area than his fist, distorting the floor and ceiling like a tsunami. He whipped his arm and swung his fist, and the trajectory of the propagating shockwave bent to assault Akira in a curve instead of a straight line.

These attacks came in rapid succession. The intense shockwaves ravaged the surroundings, engulfing the battlefield. Not just room 28 where Akira and Elde fought, but the entire transport vehicle's frame began to distort from the onslaught of a single combatant.

Akira continued to dodge the relentless attacks with all his might. Strictly speaking, he was getting hit to some extent. It was impossible to completely avoid the wide-spreading shockwaves. He was dodging in a way that minimized the damage, preventing any fatal injuries.

Still, he was being hit. Normally, the aftermath alone would be enough to pulverize him. Akira was increasing the output of his enhanced suit's force field armor to protect himself. The output was so high that Akira himself was at risk of being crushed at the cellular level by his force field armor.

Akira had employed a similar defense strategy when fighting the black wolf and the giant at Kuzusuhara City Ruins. However, this time the attacks he had to defend against were on a whole different level. Even though he was wearing a significantly more advanced suit than before, it wasn't enough to protect him on its own.

Three major factors allowed him to manage. First, the energy pack he had bought in Zegelt City. Hunters operating much closer to the front lines used energy force field packs that supplied enormous energy to Akira's enhanced suit, significantly increasing the force field armor's output.

But that alone would have resulted in Akira being crushed by his own enhanced suit. This is where the second factor came into play: the healing effects of the recovery drugs he had also purchased in Zegelt City. These drugs had an astonishing healing effect that could instantly heal injuries severe enough to crush cells at the cellular level. This prevented Akira's body from melting down, allowing him to continue fighting.

The third factor was Alpha's support. Unlike last time, when Akira relied on his own strength, this time he had Alpha's assistance. Without Alpha's support, Akira would have already been obliterated by now.

Alpha has hijacked control of Akira's enhanced suit's control unit, significantly boosting its basic performance by acting as a proxy for its control. The output of the force field armor is also continuously adjusted by Alpha to ensure that it doesn't kill Akira but also prevents him from being killed by enemies.

Additionally, Alpha conducts precise load calculations for Akira's perceived time manipulation and reality resolution manipulation.

Thanks to the healing drugs obtained from Tsubaki, Akira has greatly enhanced the communication capabilities of old domain connectors, allowing him to fight in a much denser and higher-resolution world for extended periods. However, the excessive load still threatens to render Akira's brain to die.

And now, Akira has pushed the precision of his perceived time manipulation and reality resolution manipulation to the very limit. In a consciousness-based reality so vivid that time flows incredibly slowly and the world appears to shimmer, Akira continues to fight in the face of imminent brain death, thanks to Alpha's exquisite adjustments.

Even in this extreme situation, Akira has no opportunity to counterattack. In Akira's expanded field of view, shockwaves that would normally be imperceptible are displayed in red thanks to Alpha's support. Even in a world where everything appears to be frozen, these shockwaves propagate at bullet-like speeds. Amidst the collapsing room 28, Akira barely manages to evade them.

『Alpha! We've been running around avoiding attacks, but do we have a plan to defeat him!?』

『Yes. It's a gamble, though.』

『I see! My back's been making strange noises, is that part of the plan too!?』

『Indeed. The AF laser cannon is on the verge of breaking due to an energy surge. That noise is a malfunction caused by the damage. It will definitely be destroyed if fired. But I don't think we'll get another chance, so it doesn't matter, right?』

『Ah! If it can defeat him, then destroy as much as you need to!』

They plan to use the AF laser cannon to increase the attack's power, sacrificing the cannon itself just as they did with the LEO compound gun. Surely they don't expect to hit twice. The next strike is their only chance. Akira realizes this and continues to exert himself to ensure he doesn't miss that single opportunity.

Next to Akira, Alpha smiles as usual. With that smile, Alpha boosts Akira's morale, increasing his chances of winning even slightly.

And even if that smile were to fade now, Akira wouldn't lose his spirit, without realizing that there was some misunderstanding.

But in the face of a life-and-death battle with a superhuman, such matters were trivial. Neither had the luxury of noticing such things amidst the ensuing deadly battle.

Instead of playing their trump card, they used their ultimate move and even staked their own lives, yet Elde was still astonished that he hadn't killed Akira yet.

At the same time, he calmly considered this fact without being bewildered.

The opponent had also significantly improved their movements. They had probably also used some kind of ultimate move. If they had fought without resorting to autophagy, they would have bought themselves more time. It was a dangerous situation.

Elde thought so and believed that his decision to use his ultimate move was correct. He also foresaw that Akira was nearing his limit.

If they continued fighting as they were, there would be no problem killing him. The opponent was desperately defending against their feints, but they were close to breaking through. Victory was within reach. Elde thought so but couldn't determine whether it would happen in one second, ten seconds, a minute, or even longer.

Because he misjudged the situation, he significantly delayed using his ultimate move, which he should have used immediately. This hesitation confused Elde and prevented him from launching a reckless assault.

Elde was aware that Akira was banking everything on the next strike. He naturally grasped the presence of the AF laser cannon on Akira's back, which was on the verge of breaking due to an energy surge.

If he fired it, it would surely be destroyed. Therefore, if he could prevent it or dodge it, the opponent's means of attack would be neutralized. And now, he even thought that he might be able to withstand it even if he took the hit.

In that case, should he step in now? Even a second was precious. There was no time to continue feinting. While Elde thought so, he hesitated to act decisively.

Even if he took the final shot of the AF laser cannon, there was no guarantee of safety. Most likely, it was just a possibility. It was the ultimate shot that exceeded his expectations. If he took it seriously, it might be dangerous. There must be enough power in it for Akira to bet on it. Otherwise, there would be no point in betting on it.

Unable to dispel that concern, Elde repeats the shockwave propagation feints. However, as long as he keeps feinting, the opponent also refrains from firing the AF laser cannon. Elde understood that. Even if he were to fire now, he could definitely dodge it. The opponent understood that much as well. So, when would they unleash that absolutely indispensable strike? Naturally, it would be at the most difficult timing to evade. When would that be? It would be when he rushed in, impatiently. He expected to counter his own assault.

That thought dulled Elde's movements. He thought it would be safer and more certain to launch an assault after destabilizing the opponent with feints.

However, even as he continued to feint, could it be that more energy was being poured into the AF laser cannon, increasing its power? If he attacked now, would it be with insufficient power? Or was it already too late? Should he prioritize completely avoiding a strike that could kill him?

No matter how formidable the opponent, if they were merely strong, Elde would have acted immediately. But faced with someone who repeatedly defied his expectations, Elde's judgment was clouded.

Then, Akira is affected by the aftermath of the feint, losing his balance. Although the disruption to his movement caused by this was minimal, it was enough to tilt the delicate balance of Elde's decision-making process, disrupting the equilibrium of his thoughts.

Elde moves. Using the superhuman physical abilities he had risked his life to acquire, he charges forward, attempting to close the distance with Akira in an instant.

But at the same time, Akira also moves. While off-balance, he throws the LEO compound gun towards Elde. The thrown gun explodes between Akira and Elde, spewing out a multitude of bullets as if it had detonated. The gun, collapsed due to the overload of energy supply, actually explodes, and the contents of the remaining energy pack and

expanded magazine, filled with all remaining energy, scatter into the surroundings as a dense barrage.

However, such an attack had no effect on Elde at his current level. It was merely dazzling. And indeed, it was intended to be dazzling.

Even for Elde, who excelled at sensing the opponent's position and movements with his keen perception, it was impossible to grasp Akira's movements beyond the curtain of the barrage. However, Elde was not surprised. He had anticipated this level of attack.

For Akira to fire the AF laser cannon, he had to deploy it from its undeployed state on his back. While the deployment was instantaneous in real time, for Akira and his comrades who were conducting ultra-high-speed combat through time perception manipulation, it provided ample opportunity. However, it couldn't be deployed in advance. After deployment, it would be destroyed by the shockwave propagation from Elde's feint. In its undeployed, compact state, Akira could protect the AF laser cannon with his own body. It absolutely had to be deployed just before firing. However, at the same time, it would be too late to deploy it after sensing Elde's charge. While Akira was preparing to deploy the AF laser cannon, Elde would definitely close the distance.

So, he used the LEO compound gun to create a dazzling effect. Using the dense barrage as a smoke screen, he momentarily concealed his movements and bought time to deploy the AF laser cannon while keeping his distance. Just in time to shoot. That must have been the plan. That's what Elde thought.

However, it would only work if the opponent was at their best. In a destabilized state, there wouldn't be enough time to recover and deploy it. He wouldn't give him time to fire. Victory was assured. The moment Elde stepped forward towards Akira, his wavering decision firmly tipped the scales of judgment.

And indeed, Akira didn't have time to fire the AF laser cannon. Elde, breaking through the barrage smoke screen, caught sight of Akira. The AF laser cannon remained undeployed. Even if he deployed it now, it wouldn't be in time. However, it was then that Elde was astonished. Indeed, the AF laser cannon remained undeployed, but Akira, instead of distancing himself from Elde to deploy the cannon, had already closed the gap between them.

Akira's loss of balance was intentionally caused by Alpha. In other words, it was a lure to make Elde charge.

Yet, Akira didn't pretend to lose his balance; he actually did. At that moment, as Elde had speculated, there was no longer any leeway for Akira to deploy and fire the AF laser cannon. But in the first place, Alpha had no intention of firing the AF laser cannon. Akira, who hadn't been briefed on the details of the plan, simply assumed so. And that misconception, subconsciously causing Akira to behave as if he were concerned about deploying the AF laser cannon, also led Elde, who observed with a master's eye, to the same misunderstanding. Alpha's plan included that as well.

After throwing the LEO compound gun at Elde while off-balance, Akira closes the distance with Elde through Alpha's manipulation of the enhanced suit. Despite Akira's surprise at the unexpected behavior, he pieces at the moment Akira threw the undeployed AF laser cannon towards him, Elde had already grasped the intention behind the opponent's actions faster than Akira himself. With surprise at the extent of Akira's tactics, he swiftly raised his fist, even before the formation of the light sphere.

Utilizing the technique of propagating shockwaves through his fists, Elde directed the light sphere with precision. As the light sphere collapsed, the released energy was directed in a specific direction. Elde possessed the technology to make this possible, and he was confident that his opponent could do the same.

However, Elde couldn't withstand the massive energy release with directed intensity. He had to wrest control of the directional control of the light sphere from his opponent faster than they could.

(...I have to make it in time!) Elde swung his fist with all his might, aiming to seize control of the directional control of the light sphere as quickly as possible.



The fists of both collided simultaneously into the light sphere. Strictly speaking, Elde's fist made contact slightly faster. The light sphere collapsed, flooding the room with flashes. High energy scorched the entire room in an instant.

And when the flashes subsided, Akira's charred figure was sprawled on the floor. But he wasn't dead. He endured somehow with the force field armor of his powered suit. In the first place, the flashes that spread throughout the room were just the aftermath of energy released directionally. It was within the margin of error compared to the total energy.

Elde took the brunt of the energy released from the light sphere. He stood, still in a punching position, with the left half of his body missing.

Elde was faster in terms of fists. But Alpha excelled in technique. Due to the combined difference in speed and technique, Akira barely managed to control the directionality of the released energy.

Elde was still alive. But this was undeniably a fatal blow. If he had only lost half his body, given the superhuman nature of his body, it would have been possible to extend his life with the restorative medicine he had taken beforehand. However, in addition to using self-consumption, the remaining body was also severely injured by the torrent of energy. There was no way he could survive, no matter how you looked at it.

Elde, with a slight smile, slowly opened his mouth. ".....Impressive."

And with an expression of apology, he slowly crumbled away. ".....I lost. Torpa, Sazalto... everyone, I'm sorry..." Leaving words of admiration for the one who defeated him against overwhelming odds, and an apology to his comrades, Elde breathed his last.

Akira, lacking the strength to rise, noticed Elde's fall.

『Alpha... We won, right?』 Alpha smiled beside Akira.

『Yes. We won.』

『...I see. Did everything turn out okay?』 Still lying on the floor, Akira let out a sigh of relief.

『...So, what was that earlier? What dangerous thing was I being made to do?』

Akira had only followed Alpha's instructions. Unlike Elde, he didn't accurately understand how dangerous his actions were. Still, he had won a considerable gamble. He wanted to know the details of that gamble.

『I could explain, but it would take a while. Do you want to hear it now?』

『...Yeah. Later, maybe.』 The battle was over. There was nothing more to add. As Akira relaxed, understanding from Alpha's demeanor that it was over, a wave of accumulated fatigue washed over him. Akira didn't resist; he relaxed. His consciousness slowly drifted into sleep.

Then a communication from Hikaru arrived.

『Akira! What happened!? Akira!?』 Then Akira remembered that Hikaru was trapped in the vault room.

Despite the intense battle that had just taken place, Hikaru was safe, likely because she was inside the sturdy vault and Akira's group had fought to keep her out of harm's way.

Hikaru couldn't get out of the vault on her own. Someone needed to open it for her.

But Akira was exhausted.

『...Hikaru... later, please.』

『What do you mean, later!? Did you win!? Lose!? Wait, Akira!?』 Right now, he didn't want to lift a finger. Getting up was out of the question. Akira drifted into sleep as he wished.

Hikaru's panicked voice continued until reinforcements of hunters entered the room.

211: The rewards for a fierce battle

In a blood-soaked corridor littered with numerous corpses, Hermes, the perpetrator of this tragedy, showed a slightly tired expression. "...Is it over? Well, it took quite some effort." As far as words directed towards the enemy go, Hermes' sentiments bordered on admiration and praise. Indeed, those corpses had shown such strength in life.

The bodies belonged to Elde's unit. By the time they had defeated the Sakashita Heavy Industries unit and reached the corridor in front of room 3, there was no doubt about their power. While individually they were inferior to Elde, collectively their combat strength surpassed his.

And yet, Hermes single-handedly defeated Elde's unit. Moreover, unlike the collapse in the battle between Akira and Elde, there was no destruction in the corridors around room 3 except for some minor cracks. This was evidence that Hermes hadn't even given Elde's unit time to destroy the surroundings in the aftermath of the battle. This was possible for the superhumans affiliated with Sakashita Heavy Industries.

However, Hermes hadn't emerged unscathed from the ordeal. The slightly tired expression on his face was evidence of that. Then, Mercia arrived. Hermes noticed her presence immediately.

"Another hunter coming to aid? I don't recall asking for support here. Head to the control room or provide backup for room 28."

"The situation in the control room has been resolved, and reinforcements are heading to room 28. I came here to check on things, but... it seems fine."

The hunters who had retreated to the control room had already been assisted by those outside. Mercia's team was indeed heading towards room 28. There was nothing suspicious in Mercia's explanation. Upon this assessment, Hermes decided to deter Mercia from approaching further as a guard for Shirou.

"We're fine here. And this area is under the security of Sakashita Heavy Industries. Please withdraw."

"Understood. No need to be so intimidating."

"My apologies. We're on high alert as there have been intruders targeting our company. We're being cautious."

Hermes' tone shifted to a warning, prompting Mercia to retreat obediently. Then Shirou peeked out from room 3.

"Is it over? Whoa! That's brutal."

Even faced with the grim scene in the corridor, Shirou maintained his usual cheerful demeanor. Hermes sighed.

"Shirou, go back to the room." Shirou glanced around unconcerned. Then, turning back to Hermes, he lightly teased.

"That blood, wow. Are you okay? You look pale."

"No problem. Just some splattered blood."

"Really? You're not pushing yourself too hard? You sure you're okay?"

Hermes showed signs of irritation at Shirou's attitude.

"Go back to the room. This is no time for jokes."

Shirou then adopted a serious expression.

"No, seriously, are you okay? You're my only guard now, right? In case of another attack at our level, I want you to be in top condition. Rather than just relying on emergency drugs, go to the infirmary for proper treatment. I don't know if you're really okay when you're pretending to be, you know?"

Hearing this, Hermes also looked troubled. It was true that he wanted to ensure he was in good health. However, he couldn't bring himself to go to the infirmary with Shirou.

"...I can't. I can't leave your side."

"Well, we could go to the infirmary together, right?"

"No, that's not possible. It's likely that the attackers were on board from the beginning. There's a risk they're still hiding among the crew or hunters. Increasing your chances of contact with others carelessly is dangerous."

"Ah, I see. Okay! Then let's do this instead!" Shirou, as if proud of his own solution, suggested enthusiastically. Hearing his proposal, Hermes looked troubled.

"...Is that really okay? Besides, if we go that far, your presence will be exposed. Although your transportation here is confidential..."

Seeing Hermes hesitate, Shirou casually replied, "It's fine. The cat's out of the bag already. Besides, whether to involve me or not is just a marginal issue at this point, isn't it? Don't worry about it."

With that said, Hermes found it difficult to argue further. After a moment of hesitation, he came to his own conclusion.

"...Even if it's for treatment, since you'll be temporarily separated from your guard, I can't decide on my own. I'll report to my superiors. You should return to the room quickly."

"Got it!" Shirou obediently returned to the room. Once the door was firmly closed, Hermes contacted his superiors.

While Hermes received treatment in the infirmary, Shirou welcomed the hunters who were to replace his guard with a smile.

"I'm Shirou. Nice to meet you." The hunters responded with displeasure and muttered under their breath. Hermes sighed. The hunters' attitude was not suitable for addressing important figures of Sakashita Heavy Industries. However, he couldn't bring himself to reprimand them. He was aware that he was forcing them into this situation.

To address concerns about the possibility of attackers infiltrating among the hunters who were entrusted with his own protection, Shirou narrowed down the targets to cyborgs and further demanded administrator privileges over the cyborgs.

Certainly, by doing so, even if there were attackers among the hunters, they wouldn't be able to attack Shirou. However, it's uncommon to hand over one's own cyborg's administrator privileges to others. Doing so is not just a matter of life and death, but it also limits bodily freedom, akin to the treatment of high-profile criminals burdened with significant debts.

Shirou managed to push this through using Sakashita Heavy Industries' authority. Refusing would invite scrutiny from one of the five major corporations. The hunters had no right to refuse.

Of course, given the circumstances, substantial compensation was provided. It was also advantageous to create a debt owed to Sakashita Heavy Industries. Nevertheless, it was still unpleasant enough to contort one's expression in dissatisfaction.

Hermes, with an understanding expression, informed the hunters, "For the time being, I'll leave this to him. Shirou! Don't cause any trouble!"

"Sure thing," Shirou replied lightly, prompting Hermes to sigh once again before heading to the infirmary. Coerced or not, work is work. Moreover, it was a request from Sakashita Heavy Industries. They had to work diligently. The hunters, driven by their strong professional ethic, continued to guard Shirou seriously.

One of the hunters, a man patrolling the corridor, received a communication from Shirou. Unable to ignore it, he answered the call, and Shirou's image appeared in his enhanced vision.

The man shot Shirou a displeased look. "What is it?"

"Well, I was just thinking you might be bored. Wanna play a game? You can connect to the equipment in my room and play. It's okay. I'll make sure Hermes doesn't find out."

"Not interested."

"Don't be shy. There are some amazing virtual reality games for cyborgs. You can even eat and do naughty stuff. It's so amazing that a player who handed over the administrator privileges to increase the realism got in trouble. Well, normally you might feel hesitant, but isn't it just right now?"

Means to satisfy appetites and desires are important for cyborgs. Most combat-oriented cyborgs lack such functions, and during long operations, individuals often struggle to find ways to fulfill those desires. Some even go as far as transferring their own cyborg's administrator privileges, risking their lives.

In truth, the man was intrigued by Shirou's offer. However, as a high-ranking hunter, he pushed it away with his professional ethic. "Just leave me alone. After forcing us to be your guards, now you want to bother us too?"

The man glared at Shirou as he said this. In response, Shirou's demeanor changed.

"Oh, I see. Got it. Sorry for interrupting your work... I guess you're saying that because you feel bad about it. Then, get back to work. Oh, I'll show you the combat records from the attack. It's when Sakashita's unit was wiped out. Be sure to understand that you might end up being attacked by those guys if you don't watch it. It's work, you know? Take a look."

With those words, Shirou disappeared from the man's enhanced vision.

Next, access rights to the combat records were sent to the man. With work to do, the man had no choice but to look. Besides, knowing the strength of the enemies who might attack is important. He sighed lightly and connected to the combat records.

Then, in the man's enhanced vision, the battle between Elde's subordinates and Sakashita Heavy Industries' unit was displayed. With Shirou's administrator privileges, the augmented reality display overlaid the actual corridor, providing a vivid sensation that blurred the line between reality and virtuality.

"...Impressive."

As expected of Sakashita Heavy Industries' unit. Those who demonstrated such strength were being killed by Elde's subordinates. And now, those subordinates of Elde were lying dead in the uncleaned corridor.

"Did that guy... really kill them all?"

As the man trembled at Hermes' strength, a communication came in from Shirou. A short apology was followed by an access right to a virtual dining experience.

Enjoying oneself with a woman during work was out of the question, but having a meal seemed fine. Thinking so, the man connected to it. Instantly, cola and a hamburger appeared in the air.

The man took them in his hands and tasted them. The taste of nonexistent food spread in his mouth, where there were no taste functions.

"Delicious..."

Slightly cheered up by the taste, the man continued to watch the spectacle while savoring the cola and hamburger, which he couldn't experience in real life.



Akira wakes up on a white bed. His reinforced suit has been removed, replaced by simple clothing. Alpha, sitting on the edge of the bed, smiles at Akira.

『Good morning, Akira. Did you sleep well?』

Seeing Alpha's smile, Akira decides that the situation seems okay for now and smiles back.

『Yeah, I feel like I got plenty of sleep. Where am I?』

『This is the medical room in the vehicle.』

Carried out of Room 28's ruins by reinforcements, Akira received first aid in the medical room after being treated and then left lying on the bed. The treatment was somewhat hasty, ending with the administration of recovery medicine, but it was not fatal, thanks in part to the high-performance recovery medicine typically stocked in intercity transport vehicles.

There are two main reasons for not providing comprehensive treatment: there are many others in need of treatment, and there is no expectation for Akira to return to combat. Akira's escort request for the inter-city transport vehicle had already ended due to injury-induced withdrawal, courtesy of Hikaru.

Hikaru was seated by the bed, working. When he notices Akira waking up, she stops.

"Akira, you're awake. How's your body? You did receive some treatment, but..."

Akira sits up and moves his body lightly. He feels no pain, and both of his hands are intact.

"I'm fine."

"Good. That's a relief. Just to be safe, when we return to Kugamayama City, you should undergo a thorough examination at the hospital, but for now, just rest."

"Got it."

Akira listens to Hikaru's explanation. He's already been removed from the vehicle's escort personnel and treated as a passenger, not a combatant. He's free to relax until they return to Kugamayama City. Hearing this, Akira lets out a sigh of relief.

His job is done. That's what Akira thinks as he relaxes completely. But strangely, Hikaru seems a bit tense.

"...Hm? What's wrong?"

"Um, well... Ah, right. First, I have to thank you, Akira. Thanks for helping me. I wouldn't have made it without you."

"...? Oh, yeah. You're welcome."

Akira looks puzzled. He thinks it's odd for Hikaru to be nervous about just thanking him. Of course, Hikaru isn't nervous about such a small matter.

"So, um... Remember when you said I'd do anything? Well, about that. You said I could name my reward, but I want to talk about the specifics..."

"Do anything." Hikaru did say that. However, it's impossible to really do anything. Even if Akira were to ask him to pick a fight with the Corporate Union based on that promise, he couldn't do it. Ultimately, those words were just enthusiasm.

Even so, Hikaru did promise to do anything for Akira. A promise is a promise, even if it's just a verbal one. And in exchange for that promise, she forced Akira into a life-threatening situation.

What would happen if she broke that promise? Hikaru didn't even want to think about it. The other party is someone powerful enough to defeat Elde, and the deal has no limit on the reward. If she messes up, that power could turn against her.

To keep the promise and prevent her own downfall, Hikaru must somehow limit the limitless and impractical reward to something finite and realistic. With that in mind, Hikaru is nervous. She's reminded once again of what it means to manage a high-ranking hunter.

"...So, when I say, 'name my reward,' how much do you want it to be?"

Hikaru says this, trying to make Akira think of the reward as money. In other words, she's trying to limit the "do anything" reward to a monetary payment.

Surely, Akira wouldn't demand a trillion aurum. First, let's limit the reward to money. And if he requests an amount beyond our payment ability, we'll negotiate to reduce it as much as possible or propose another reward that matches the reduction. That's the direction Hikaru tried to take.

But then Alpha chimed in.

『Akira, since she's willing to do anything for you, I think it's better to ask for various things. Hikaru is a city employee, so there are things he can do that others can't, don't you think?』

"Hmm, I guess so." Akira grunted slightly before looking at Hikaru. "Hikaru, you said you'd do anything, so what can I ask for?"

"...Well, for now, just say what you want." Hikaru forced a smile, avoiding answering that anything is acceptable.

"Then I'll just say it, but Hikaru, I've asked you to procure my equipment, right? Next time, get me the highest-performance gear possible. If you can, I want something suitable for the front lines."

"Frontline gear, huh..." Hikaru considered the feasibility of that request. The conclusion was, it's extremely difficult. It showed on her face.

Seeing Hikaru's expression, Akira spoke lightly. "Well, I don't expect you to just conjure up frontline gear for me. I just want the highest-performance equipment available."

Akira's own equipment costs 5 billion aurum. It's such high-performance gear that even with Alpha's support, it was probably just luck that he managed to beat Elde. Ideally, he'd lose 100 times out of 100 fights. That's how big the gap in ability was.

Thinking like that, and to prepare for similar situations in the future, Akira decided to let Hikaru handle this and do his best to bridge that hopeless gap with something other than luck.

"I hate to say it myself, but I think I made a lot of money this time. So, you can use all of it to procure the best equipment possible. You said you'd do anything, right? So, do your best with that resolve."

To Akira's very realistic request to do everything possible, Hikaru responded with a strong smile. "Got it. It's a request from my savior after all. I'll do my best to fulfill it. Is that okay, Akira?"

"Yeah, I'm counting on you."

With this, the next equipment should be even higher performance. Thinking that, Akira returned the smile lightly.

"...But man, that was tough."

"...Yeah, it really was."

After exchanging deeply emotional words, Hikaru teasingly says, "Anyway, Akira, you often encounter unexpected situations, but I didn't expect you to get caught up in something like this. You really have bad luck."

"Now hold on, wasn't it you who was targeted by that guy? This time, it feels like I got caught up because of you."

"Well, there's no way that's true. I'm the lucky one here, Akira."

Akira and Hikaru, the two who barely survived this unfortunate incident, laugh and joke about whose misfortune it really was. They intertwine their fates a little more tightly as they share the luck of surviving together in the same place.



Gigantes III, which departed the city with Akira and the others aboard, returned to the Kugamayama city after a harsh journey. Akira and Hikaru got off together from the intercity transport vehicle, which stopped at the enormous boarding platform.

"I guess we made it back safely. Well, not entirely safe," Akira said.

"Yeah, it was really tough. So, Akira, are you sure you don't need to visit the hospital?" Hikaru asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I've already been treated," Akira replied. Having spent time in the infirmary until arrival, Akira's body was almost fully recovered, aside from some mental fatigue. If the goal was to restore health both physically and mentally, Akira preferred to go home rather than to the hospital.

Afterwards, Hikaru escorted Akira to Kugamayama City. In the lobby of the first floor, which marked the boundary between the middle and lower districts, Hikaru bid farewell.

"This is where I get off. Sorry, but I have no intention of going outside the ramparts for a while. I've had enough of the outside world," Hikaru said with a joking smile. Akira chuckled in response.

"I understand."

"Well then, Akira, good job. Make sure to rest properly when you get home," Hikaru said.

"Yeah, you too," Akira replied. For both Akira and Hikaru, the unexpected and unforeseen escort request of the intercity transport vehicle was now completed. After exchanging farewells, Hikaru returned inside the ramparts, while Akira headed outside.

And there was one more person who followed Akira outside the ramparts. The boy, with his hood pulled deeply over his head, cast an intrigued gaze towards Akira before disappearing into the lower district of Kugamayama city.



In the medical office of Kugamayama City, the vehicle arrived, and Hermes let out a sigh of relief. "It's been quite a journey... but we made it safely." Hermes continued treating while maintaining a condition to immediately go to Shirou if anything happened. Even though he believed that they could buy enough time to deal with an attack of the same scale as the previous one by sacrificing the hunters, he knew there was no absolute guarantee without him by their side. With that in mind, his relief was profound.

Heading straight to Room 3, Hermes congratulated the hunters inside. "Good job. The mission is complete. You're free to go back now." Hearing this, the hunters also breathed a sigh of relief. Escorting a prominent figure from Sakashita Heavy Industries was a major task even for high-ranking hunters. The mental fatigue was immense. As they were released from that burden, they let out deep breaths.

Then, they turned their gaze to Shirou sitting on the sofa. "The job's done. Please restore my cyborg administrator privileges."

"Alright. Done. It's back," Shirou responded. Confirming that the cyborg administrator privileges had been returned to them, the hunters relaxed their expressions. They stretched, shook hands, and opened and closed their hands, feeling their bodies return to their control.

At that moment, Hermes looked puzzled. Then his expression quickly turned stern. "Hey, where's Shirou?"

"...What do you mean, where? He's right there," the hunters answered with puzzled expressions, pointing to the empty sofa.

Hermes's face twisted even more severely, and he swiftly put on his glasses-shaped information terminal. Being a superhuman, Hermes preferred not to use contact-type information terminals or eyeball augmentation processing, needing separate tools to gain expanded vision.

Through his expanded vision, he saw Shirou sitting on the sofa, laughing and apologizing with clasped hands directed towards him.



The hunters, noticing Hermes's behavior, hurriedly checked on Shirou. To their astonishment, the figure they had been watching all along turned out to be just an augmented reality projection.

"...Augmented reality! When did this happen!?"

In the next moment, the walls of the room began to display the outside scenery as if they were transparent, revealing a humanoid weapon waving its hand towards Hermes.

Communication came from the weapon towards Hermes. "Sorry about this! Just going out for a bit! Haven't been out for a while! Let me have some fun for a bit! And don't blame them, okay? I hacked into their systems when they didn't have administrator privileges! It's impossible to detect! Besides, their job is to protect me, not to prevent my escape like you would do! You're different from them!"

Leaving these words to Hermes, the weapon attempted to fly away towards the outside barrier with a light wave of its hand. But Hermes wasn't going to let that happen.

"Don't underestimate me!"

Though not in perfect condition, Hermes had recovered enough to not be hindered in combat. Shouting in fury, he dashed towards the weapon with his superhuman agility. Breaking through the walls of the room displaying the outside scenery, then through the walls of the corridor ahead, and further through the outer walls of the vehicle, he even soared into the sky to chase after the weapon.

Left behind were the hunters, dumbfounded as they stared at the gaping hole leading outside. The humanoid weapon piloted by Shirou was one of the units deployed from the storage hangar by Shirou's command when the convoy of urban transport vehicles was attacked by a squadron of white machines in the wasteland. Although not unscathed, its outstanding performance for frontline combat was still intact, swiftly traversing the skies of the wasteland.

And Hermes was in hot pursuit. Thanks to his superhuman abilities, he gradually closed the distance between himself and the weapon, despite its incredible speed.

"Shirou! Give it up! You can't escape! If you stop now, I'll go easy on the restraints! Stop!"

Despite the fierce and furious tone of Hermes's voice, the weapon continued to advance without any response. It wouldn't go as far as shooting at Hermes, but it wouldn't stop either. However, it was only a matter of time before Hermes caught up, and that was all part of buying time.

Finally, Hermes caught up to the weapon. Leaping, soaring through the air, he clung onto the body of the weapon and viciously ripped open the cockpit, all the while laughing menacingly.

But it was empty inside.

"What!?"

Hermes had fallen right into Shirou's trap.

Shirou had deployed the stored weapon from the hangar to have control of it beforehand. He had restricted the administrator privileges to only cyborgs to hide his own escape using augmented reality. Advising Hermes to undergo treatment was to keep him away since his augmented reality concealment wouldn't work on Hermes. And provoking Hermes to chase the weapon was to allow himself time to escape while Hermes was distracted.

Even with optical camouflage or erasing his presence from surveillance data, there was still a chance that Hermes, being a superhuman, could sense his presence. To ensure a clean escape, he needed to keep Hermes far enough away that his presence couldn't be detected. Shirou had thought it all through.

"Damn it!"

Hermes lashed out with frustration. With a single blow, the weapon's interior was blown apart. Hermes, thrown into the air, landed without any signs of panic, but his expression was extremely grim. He then sternly retrieved his information terminal and communicated towards Kugamayama City while running.

"Emergency contact! Shirou has escaped! Failed to apprehend here! He should still be near Kugamayama City! Immediately set up a blockade!"

After receiving the message, the Sakashita Heavy Industries unit swiftly deployed a search network inside and outside Kugamayama City. However, Shirou was never found.



In a cheap inn located in the lower districts of Kugamayama City, Shirou wore an unusually serious expression that he hadn't shown to Hermes.

"...I should be able to move freely for a while. This opportunity won't come again. What should I do? Think."

Shirou didn't believe he could evade the search by Sakashita Heavy Industries for an extended period. He was desperately thinking to make the most of this invaluable time.

He was determined to accomplish what he wanted, even if it meant resorting to the extreme act of escaping from Sakashita Heavy Industries.



Upon returning home, Akira promptly decided to take a bath. And upon seeing the renovated bathroom, he couldn't help but exclaim in admiration.

『Wow!』 The bathroom renovation was already complete. While there were no flashy or luxurious decorations, just seeing the interior with its elegant and high-quality design was enough to tell that it was completely different from the previous bathroom at a glance. The bathtub was also gleaming.

However, that was just the visual aspect. If Akira asked Alpha, she could reproduce something far beyond this in his expanded field of view. Akira knew this and eagerly began preparing for his bath to experience things that couldn't be discerned by appearance alone.

And then, he immersed himself in the bathtub. The luxurious bathwater, which was different in composition from the usual, enveloped him up to his neck, and he savored the difference with his whole body.

『Ah... Ahh...』 Akira sighed lazily as the fatigue accumulated in his mind and body melted away in the water.

Alpha, who was always bathing with him, smiled as he watched Akira's demeanor and leaned closer to him.

『Akira, you seem to be feeling really good.』

『Yeah... It's the best... I can't go back to the old bath anymore...』 Even though Akira could see Alpha's naked body right next to him, he didn't react at all. Though he had become somewhat aware of Alpha's nudity through pseudo-touch with prosthetic limbs and the like, that sensation was now completely gone. Akira's soul had melted into the bathtub to such an extent.

Observing Akira's unresponsiveness, Alpha let out a small sigh.

『...I see. Then, enjoy it slowly. You've worked hard for this.』

『Yeah...』

Feeling overwhelmingly comfortable, Akira felt as if the fatigue in his body was instantly fabricated and melting away in the water. He continued to enjoy the exquisite bath with a relaxed expression.

After thoroughly enjoying the blissful moment and leaving the bathroom, Akira, still basking in the pleasant afterglow, headed towards the bedroom. He decided to just sleep like this today. He should be able to sleep incredibly well. With that thought, he entered the room and immediately collapsed onto the bed, surrendering to drowsiness as he closed his eyes.

Even after waking up, Akira's life as a hunter continued. Overcoming misfortune, winning in deadly battles, pouring everything he had gained through his efforts back into his life as the next stake.

Alpha didn't stop him. Not until Akira completed Alpha's request. Just like before.

Whether this would continue forever or just a little longer, neither Akira nor Alpha knew at that moment.

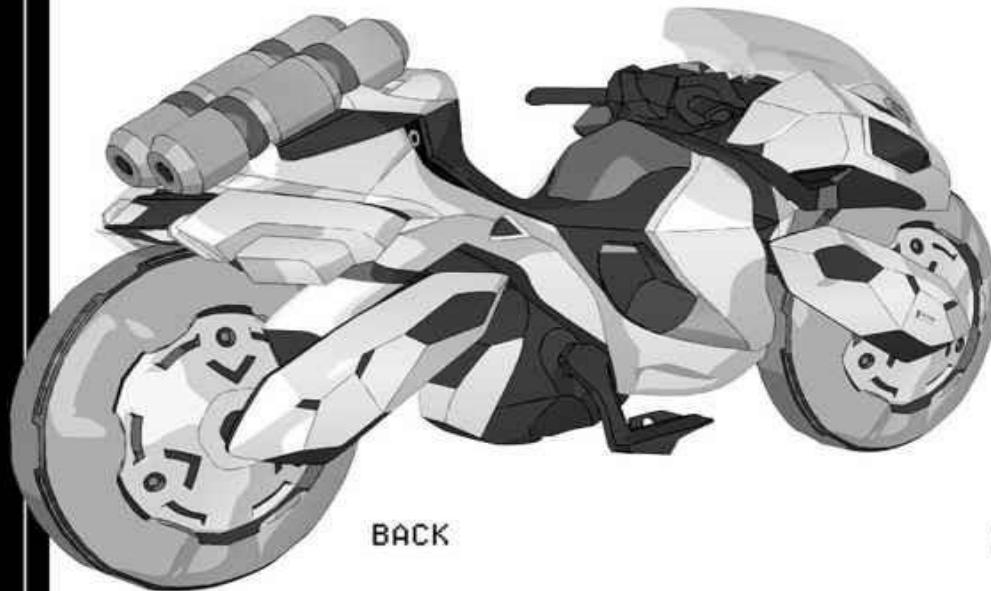
SYLPHEED-A3



シルフィードA3

ツェゲルト都市で売られていた白色の高性能バイク。両輪から力場装甲の足場を生成することで、空中を飛行ではなく“走行”することが可能。扱いの難しい乗り物として、店主からもキワモノ呼ばわりされていたが、アルファの勧めで購入した。価格はブレード生成機を含めたオプション品込みで38億オーラム。

SYLPHEED-A3



BACK



FRONT

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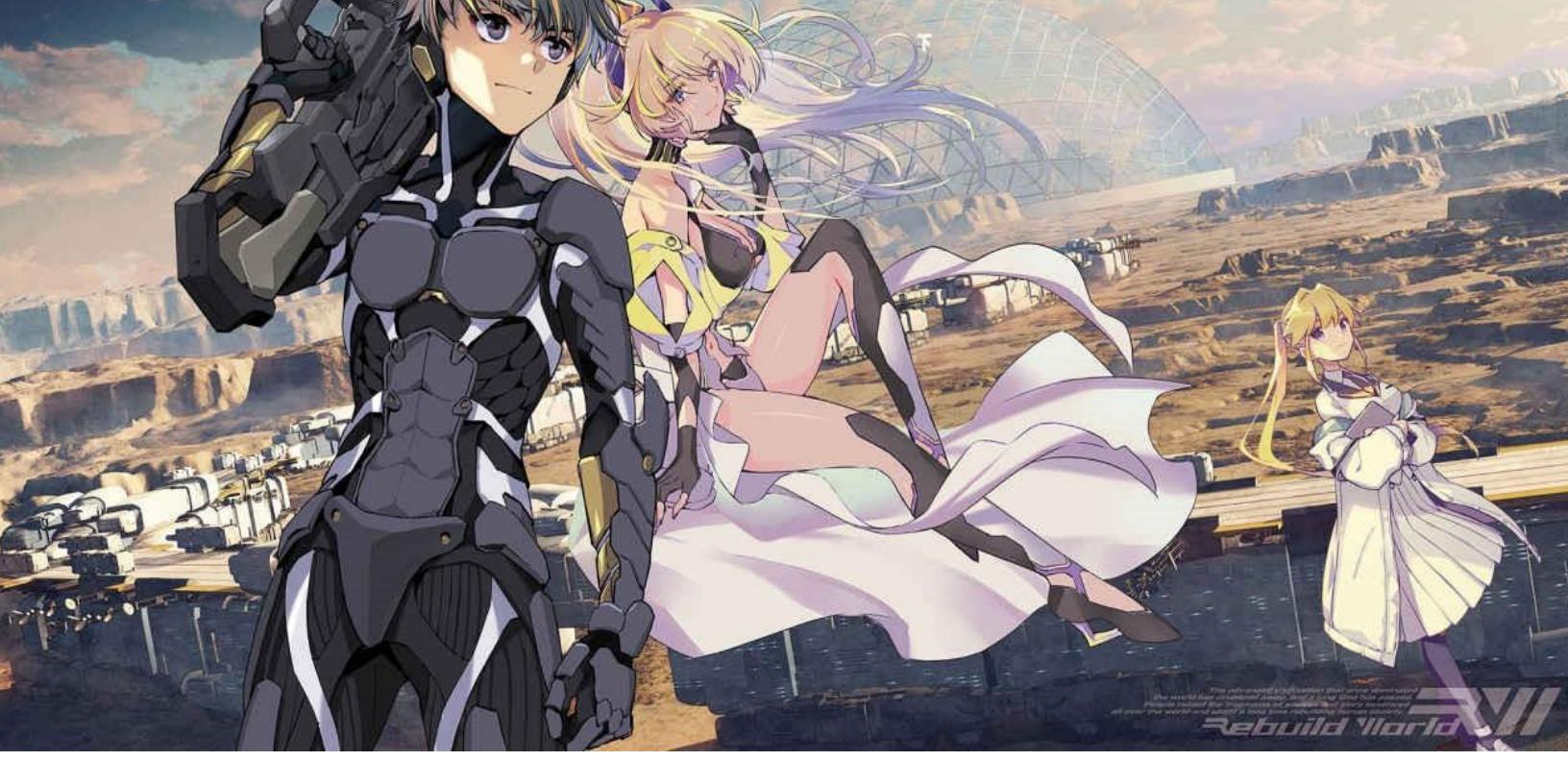
ナフセ

イラストレーション

世界地図

セル

The advanced civilization that once
the world has crumbled away and a long time
People rallied the fragments of society and etc.
all over the world and spent a long time building hu



Rebuild World VII

Cho-chojinjin Author / Nafusei Illustration / Gingin

World view illustration / Waisyu mechanical design / cell

The New Literature of the Blitz

January 16, 2023 Issued ver. 001

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This e-book was produced based on the following new literary work by Blitz, "Rebuild World VII: Superhuman".

January 17, 2023 First edition published

Publisher / Naohisa Yamashita Publisher / KADOKAWA Co.

Inquiry

<https://www.kadokawa.co.jp/>

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