

リビングワールド

Rebuild World

下傷アキラ

III

ナフセ

イラストレーション



世界観イラスト わいしづ

メカニクデザイン cell



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リビルドワールド

Rebuild World

下傷アキラ

ナフセ

Author



Illustration

かいつしゅ

Illustration of the world

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.*



シェリルはアキラの姿を見て、固まっていた。
今のシェリルにアキラと会える精神的な余裕など無い。
その追い詰められた状態で突如アキラが現れたのだ。
シェリルは大きく動揺し、平静を欠き、その思考を著しく钝らせた。
その結果、本来のシェリルならば決してしない失態をする。
その口から、内心を零してしまう。

「シェリル……」
「あなた、誰？」

Rebuild of Evangelion
The world is changing.
The world is changing.
The world is changing.
The world is changing.

>Episode
008

下偽アキラ

Character

Rebuild 'World' **VII**



>ハルカ

HARUKA

偽アキラに同行していた少女。

>スガドメ

SUGADOME

五大企業・坂下重工の重役。

「そうか……じゃあ、死ね」

>Author : nafuse >Illustration : gii >Illustration of the world : yishi >Mechanic design : cell

リビルドワールドVIII Rebuild World

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.

下角アキラ

Author ナフセ Illustration ゲ

Illustration of the world わいつしゅ Mechanic design cell

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Chapter 232: The Allies

After surviving the fierce battle with the inter-city transport vehicle, Akira reached Hunter Rank 70 and obtained new equipment. He arrived at the Third Inner Sector of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin with Carol and others, where they encountered a Kaiju and barely survived with Shirou's help.

Although Akira narrowly escaped death, the trouble was far from over. A fake Akira, claiming to be a Nationalist, reappeared, making Akira a bounty target.

In a video, the fake explained his motives for becoming a Nationalist.

He revealed that the previous Nationalist subjugation battle had been used by the executives of Kugamayama City as a power struggle. Because of this, he was forced into deadly conflicts with other hunters. Knowing the truth, he could not forgive them, and that was why he became a Nationalist.

The imposter, with a face and voice burning with hatred, declared his vengeance against the executives of Kugamayama City while standing on the Kaiju's head.

Akira watched the video intently. Seeing his doppelganger talk about how he killed Yumina because of those people, he directed a visible killing intent at the screen with an expression as blank as a noh mask.



Thanks to Shirou's help, Akira escaped the city's defense forces and hid in an abandoned house. His killing intent was directed at his imposter displayed in his augmented view.

Carol, who had fled with him, was half-frozen in shock and confusion at Akira's demeanor.

Carol understood why Akira was furious. He had been framed for the murder of a city executive because of this imposter and had become a bounty target. It would be strange if he weren't angry.

However, she found his reaction a bit unnatural. Akira's emotions were intensely deep and dark.

(I understand why Viola advised us to move first. If Akira had seen this earlier and been pursued by the city's forces in this state, it would have been dangerous...)

If he had seen the video earlier, Akira wouldn't have just focused on escaping. He would have fought back, leading to extensive damage. Carol felt relieved and speculated on Viola's intentions.

(Viola's notification was definitely to help Akira escape. If it were to help me escape, she would have given different information... Although Viola has reasons to want Akira dead, she still helped him...)

There's no way that woman cares about Akira's life. So why did Viola help Akira? Carol had a hunch.

(Is she trying to stir up another big commotion? Even so, it's convenient for me for now.)

If Viola's goal was a major uproar using Akira as the catalyst, as long as it helped both Akira and herself along the way, it was fine. If the commotion swept away her worries, even better. Carol decided to tolerate Viola's actions for now.

At that moment, Akira received a call from Shizuka. Captivated by the video, Akira snapped back to reality.

However, he couldn't answer immediately. Realizing how upset he was, he hesitated to speak to Shizuka in his current state.

But Akira couldn't ignore Shizuka's call. Suppressing his impatient feelings, he took three deep breaths before answering.

"Shizuka-san. I'm sorry. Please wait a moment."

"Alright."

Sensing Akira's state, Shizuka calmly replied without asking any questions.

For a while, the sound of Akira's deep breaths was the only thing transmitted through the call. Shizuka waited silently for Akira to calm down.

Eventually, Akira regained a degree of composure.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Shizuka-san. I'm okay now."

"That's good to hear."

Hearing Shizuka's gentle voice further calmed Akira. He wasn't entirely back to normal, but he showed a glimpse of his usual good mood when talking with her.

"Thank you. I'm sorry for the trouble. So, what did you want to talk about?"

Shizuka's tone turned a bit more serious.

"It's about the bounty report. You received it too, right? "

".....Yes."

Akira responded seriously. His voice didn't shake, but he wasn't dismissive of becoming a bounty target. Knowing it was a grave matter, he braced himself for Shizuka's response.

However, Shizuka spoke in a kind voice again.

“I don't know the details, but I wanted to tell you to stay calm. I thought you'd be very agitated, but it seems you're okay now.”

Akira was a bit surprised by Shizuka's caring words, but he was more pleased. He softened his expression and replied.

“Yes, I'm calm.”

“That's good. It's a serious situation, but you must act calmly and never get reckless, alright?”

“Yes.”

Akira responded firmly, which reassured Shizuka.

“So, Akira, what's your current situation? And why did this happen? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to or if it's not the right time...”

“Well, I don't fully understand it myself...”

Akira explained to Shizuka that after received the bounty report, Inabe contacted him, told him to flee, and that he was framed for Udajima's murder by his imposter. He mentioned he was currently outside the city and figuring out his next steps.

(I didn't kill Udajima, so there's no need to tell her I teamed up with Inabe to kill him.)

After Akira finished explaining, Shizuka, having grasped the situation, spoke seriously again.

“I see... So, the plan is to clear your name with Inabe-san's help? ”

“Yes, Inabe said he'd contact me again, so that's probably the plan.”

With Shizuka's prompt, Akira set a course of action. This helped reduce his confusion and despair, preventing him from being

paralyzed by the sudden turn of events.

“Alright. I guess that's all we need to talk about now. Akira, I'll hang up. If anything happens, contact me anytime. I'll help however I can.”

Shizuka then continued with a light joke.

“Although, as just a shopkeeper, all I can do is pray for your safety.”

She said this lightly, aiming to ease the atmosphere.

Shizuka was only a shopkeeper in a small, lower district store. Although she sincerely wanted to help, she lacked the power to intervene in the current chaos.

Despite her joking tone, it was true that Shizuka could only pray and hope for Akira's safety.

But for Akira, that was very important. He smiled and said.

“Then, Shizuka-san, please pray for my safety. I'm counting on you.”

“Oh, that's all you want from me? ”

“Yes. Knowing there's someone worried about me will keep me from doing anything reckless.”

Akira's light tone conveyed his true feelings to Shizuka.

“Alright. I'll worry and pray for your safety. So don't push yourself too hard, okay? ”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Take care, Akira. Stay safe. Goodbye.”

With that, the call ended. Akira exhaled softly, feeling a pleasant afterglow.

Noticing Alpha and Carol's gazes, Akira felt embarrassed and tried to cover it up.

“What?”

Carol, who seemed surprised, smiled teasingly.

“Nothing. I'm just glad you calmed down.”

“Yeah.”

Akira, knowing a retort would lead to more teasing, forced a stiff smile.

Carol enjoyed watching Akira while hiding her inner amazement.

(To calm Akira down so quickly with just a few minutes of conversation. No wonder he trusts her so much.)

She sighed inwardly.

(If I want Akira to see me as a woman, I have to earn his trust to this extent? What a difficult personality. What kind of life did he lead to become like this...)

Having dealt with many twisted individuals in her side job, this was exceptional. No wonder he resisted all her advances. Carol accepted this and inwardly sighed at Akira's high difficulty level.

Meanwhile, Alpha smiled as usual.

『Akira, are you calm now?』

『Yes.』

But Akira couldn't help but feel there was more to Alpha's usual smile.

『Let's join up with Shirou. It'll make it harder for the city to find us.』

『Right...』

Akira acknowledged that talking with Shizuka had calmed him down significantly. It was a bit embarrassing to think about, but he appreciated Alpha not pointing it out.

“Carol, let's move.”

“Hm? Got it.”

Akira and the others move through the wasteland again on his bike. This time, they travel on the ground to avoid attracting attention.

Akira, still feeling somewhat embarrassed, looks straight ahead in silence. Then, Alpha, who was flying alongside the bike, moves in front of Akira and speaks with a smile.

『Akira. I'm genuinely worried about you too, you know?』

『...Well, thanks for that!』

Trying not to react too strongly, Akira clenches his teeth slightly as he responds. Carol, riding behind him, notices this.

“Akira?”

“It's nothing. Let's speed up!”

With a spirited shout, Akira accelerates the bike. As if trying to brush everything aside, they speed through the wasteland.



Akira and the others arrived at the designated location given by Shirou. There, they saw a familiar vehicle parked.

“Carol. Isn't that your car? ”

“Yes, it is. What's going on? ”

Approaching Carol's camping car with suspicion, they saw the back door open. Togami emerged and waved them over. Despite their confusion about Togami's presence, they rode the bike into the vehicle.

“You're here. Akira, Shirou is over there.”

“Togami. Why are you with Shirou? ”

“He boarded the vehicle.”

Togami let out a small sigh and began to explain why he was there.

Carol's large, wasteland-ready camping car had been parked at the ruins of Mihazono since Akira and the others had visited.

Finding it too much trouble to retrieve it herself, Carol had arranged for a transportation company to handle it. Through an intermediary, Drankam took the job and sent Togami.

While typically even a lower-ranking Drankam hunter would handle such a task, Togami's high skill level meant he would usually be assigned more significant jobs. However, since he had recently worked with Akira, Drankam decided to avoid sending an unqualified hunter to a task potentially related to Akira.

Togami understood this reasoning and headed to the Mihazono ruins without complaint.

To transport Carol's vehicle to Kugamayama City, Togami needed to bypass two security systems: the parking lot's and the vehicle's.

The ruin's parking security was significantly less sophisticated than an city lot's. Stealing a parked vehicle there, barring the car's own security, wasn't too difficult.

However, those who attempted such thefts faced severe consequences, as the parking lot was run by the Hunter Office. Stealing a vehicle there was a serious offense against the Office, leading to harsh repercussions.

This wasn't theft but a legitimate request. Togami demonstrated this with proper paperwork at the parking lot's reception, bypassing the parking security.

Using the authorization he received through the intermediary, he boarded Carol's vehicle.

The camping car, being a high-end model with luxurious amenities, had stringent security. While bypassing it illicitly was difficult, the only repercussion from doing so would typically be the owner's ire.

Having bypassed both security systems legitimately, Togami set off toward Kugamayama City.

However, while traveling through the wasteland, Shirou boarded the vehicle. After taking control of the car remotely, he and Olivia entered.

Togami, explaining up to this point, continued with a slightly annoyed tone.

“Even though my job was to transport the vehicle to the city, it also involved guarding it. I should have fended them off, but I had no chance against that maid. I lost control of the vehicle, got news about you becoming a bounty target, and then Shirou said he would

cooperate with you. Carol decided to come with you too, so, well, here we are.”

Togami turned to Carol. She laughed and spoke.

“Alright. It's unconventional, but I'll consider the request fulfilled.”

“Thanks.”

Although he lost control of the vehicle and couldn't fend off the intruders, Togami was relieved that Carol considered the job successful. He smiled with a sense of relief.

“I can't believe Akira became a bounty target. But just to be clear, I have no intention of opposing you. I value my life, and as a Drankam hunter, I can't oppose you even if I were stronger.”

“It's good you're not opposing me, but does being part of Drankam matter?”

“Have you forgotten? Drankam made a peace agreement with you through the Hunter Office. It's a contract with the Hunter Office too. We can't break it just because one city placed a bounty on you. Doing so would make Drankam look bad to the Hunter Office and the Corporate Government. We simply can't do it.”

Akira nodded, understanding.

Seeing Akira's reaction, Togami felt relieved. He genuinely didn't want to oppose Akira and needed Akira to understand that.

Togami knew Akira was serious when needed. He didn't want to be suspected of being an enemy, especially now that Akira was a bounty target. He mentioned the Hunter Office and the Corporate Government to make sure Akira understood.

Then, Togami probed gently.

“...So, why did you kill a city official? What happened? ”

“Ah, that's a false accusation. It wasn't me. It was an imposter.”

“Really? That's tough.”

Togami accepted Akira's story easily, surprising Akira.

“...You believe me that easily? ”

“Huh? You're not someone who would lie about that, right? ”

Akira relaxed slightly. Being unconditionally doubted and falsely accused in the past made this trust comforting.

They moved to the camping car's living room, where Shirou was lounging on a sofa. Olivia stood elegantly nearby.

“Hey Akira. I've been waiting for you.”

“Shirou. Thanks for helping us escape the city's defense force. But why are you in Carol's car? ”

“If the car made it to the city, you wouldn't be able to use it, right? So I stopped it midway.”

“Oh, I see.”

Akira and Carol sat down, and Olivia served them drinks, which Akira accepted with a nod. Shirou leaned forward and spoke.

“So, Akira. Let's talk about my favor.”

“I'm not indebted enough to introduce you to that person.”

“I figured. So, what will you do now? You're still a bounty target. Things are going to get tough.”

For Shirou, Akira being a bounty target was somewhat convenient. The more trouble Akira faced, the greater Shirou's favor if he helped.

“I know.”

Akira sighed, acknowledging his situation. Despite this, he showed no despair, exuding a sense of calm. Shirou couldn't tell if Akira was simply tough or had a solution.

Several messages arrived for Akira from Inabe, Kibayashi, and Reina. Shirou, checking the senders, made a suggestion.

“Given the timing, they probably all have the same issue. Let's talk to them together.”

Without waiting for Akira's response, Shirou set up a group call. Akira's augmented vision showed Inabe, Kibayashi, Reina, Shiori, and Kanae.

Everyone could see each other, leading to some confusion among Inabe, Reina, and Shiori. Kibayashi and Kanae seemed amused.

Shirou addressed the group.

“I connected you all without asking, but I assume you're here to help Akira, right? If not, sorry, but we're busy. Leave.”

Inabe, now serious, sat down in the virtual space.

“I intended to offer my help. I'll stay.”

Inabe and the others' figures are displayed in each individual's field of vision as if they exist there. Even the wrinkles in their clothes are meticulously rendered. However, the space around them was blank, indicating the absence of environmental data. Inabe appeared to be sitting in mid-air because only his sitting posture was shown.

Akira watched the scene with a bit of amusement, and next, Kibayashi responded cheerfully.

“Akira. Needless to say, I'll cooperate with you too. Don't worry. Leave it to me.”

“...I see.”

While feeling gratitude, Akira also felt something that made it hard to simply say thank you honestly in a negative sense, so he managed to answer only that.

Next, Reina spoke to Akira with a serious expression.

“We'll cooperate with you too, Akira. Actually, I'll be clear from the start—we're helping to create a debt for you.”

“...It's helpful no matter the reason, but what is this debt for? ”

“There's something I want to ask of you.”

“What is it? ”

“...I can't say yet. Just telling you what it is would require creating a significant debt with you first. That's all I can say for now.”

Akira stared at Reina. There was no distrust in his eyes, but he did feel puzzled. Reina continued, responding to his gaze.

“Since we're helping someone with a bounty on their head, it's not surprising if the city considers us enemies. We're prepared for that risk to cooperate with you. Whatever the request is, we won't force you, nor can we. So, can you not ask about it for now? ”

Akira was indeed a bit curious about what they wanted so badly to cooperate even with a bounty on his head. But it wasn't enough to compare to Reina's serious attitude. He smiled and answered.

“Got it.”

“Thank you. That helps.”

Reina also smiled in response. Shiori and Kanae, standing behind her, let out small sighs of relief.

Shirou had said that if they weren't willing to help Akira, they should leave. Despite differing reasons, everyone on the other end of the communication declared their support for Akira. However, not everyone present had done so. Togami, who had been there from the start, raised his hand lightly and spoke to Akira.

“Hey, Akira. Should I stay?”

Although it felt like everyone present was willing to help Akira, strictly speaking, Togami had been brought into this situation by Shirou while transporting Carol's car. He wasn't there to help Akira originally.

Akira realized this and was about to tell Togami he could leave. But Togami continued before he could.

“Well, just to be clear, if it's up to me, I'd stay. That's why I'm asking.”

Seeing Akira's surprised expression, Togami clarified further to avoid any misunderstanding.

“Like Reina said, helping a bounty target has its risks, and it creates a big debt. So, with that big debt, I want to offset what I owe you from the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. ...Is that okay?”

Togami said this in a slightly humble manner.

In the underground tunnels, in the Third Inner Sector, and during their retreat, Togami felt he owed Akira a significant debt.

He survived attacks not only from fused creatures but also from Kaiju. If he were to pay for the escort service in cash, how much would it cost? Frankly speaking, he had no idea. It might be too selfish to try to offset such a significant debt in this way. Though Togami thought this, he couldn't think of any other way to repay, so he decided to at least give it a try.

And Akira understood. Togami asking if he should stay was about whether staying would mean repaying the debt or creating a new one. If he was seen as a hindrance, he'd leave quietly. That was the implication.

With that understanding, Akira saw no reason to refuse Togami's help. In fact, he appreciated Togami's willingness not to shirk his debt. Akira smiled and answered.

“Got it. We'll call it even.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

Togami also smiled and let out a small sigh of relief.

The last person who hadn't declared cooperation with Akira was Carol.

“Akira. Just to confirm, I'll be helping you too. You don't think I'm just here for no reason, do you? ”

“Uh, well...”

He did. Akira's hesitant response and attitude half-revealed it. Carol, slightly annoyed, spoke.

“If you say you don't need my help, I'll kick you out of this car right now. This is my car, remember? With a bounty on your head, you can't go back to the city. Without my help, you'd be camping out in the wasteland. You wouldn't like that, right? ”

“Y-yeah.”

Seeing Akira's slightly flustered response, Carol relaxed her tone and smiled.

“You said it yourself, right? You wouldn't charge for my protection but pay what I can. So I'll pay what I can, by cooperating.”

Akira also relaxed.

“That's true... I understand. Please help me.”

“Sure. I'll do my best.”

With this, everyone present had declared their cooperation with Akira. And someone who didn't need to declare it, who only Akira could see, smiled at him.

『Should I say it too, Akira? I'll cooperate as well.』

『Yeah. I'm counting on you.』

It was the usual exchange between Akira and Alpha.

Chapter 233: Assessing the Situation

As those gathered in Carol's camping car finished demonstrating their willingness to assist Akira, Inabe, one of them, glanced around lightly before turning his gaze to Shirou.

"Before we get into the main topic, let's all briefly introduce ourselves. Even though we're here to help Akira, it's better for us to know each other before proceeding. Understanding everyone's positions and backgrounds beforehand might lead to better ideas on how to help Akira."

While everyone was introducing themselves, Inabe already had a grasp of Akira's associates' information. However, despite relying on the information network of the major factions in the city, Inabe couldn't gather any information about Shirou.

Even though he claimed to assist Akira, Inabe was wary of having such an enigmatic individual present. And if one couldn't disclose his own information in this gathering, his words of assisting Akira seemed dubious, a sentiment Inabe dared to direct towards Shirou.

In response to that gaze, Shirou chuckled and spoke.

"Right. Then, I'll go first. I'm Shirou, affiliated with Sakashita Heavy Industry, currently on the run from the lower levels. So, let's keep my presence here just between us, okay? "

Upon hearing this, Inabe and Carol burst into laughter. Others showed surprise on their faces. Only Alpha and Olivia remained expressionless.

After taking a deep breath, Inabe spoke.

"I've heard rumors that Sakashita Heavy Industry is vigorously searching for someone in the Kugamayama region, and it's you. Why are you with Akira? "

“Oh, you know, various reasons.”

Rather than evading, Shirou showed no intention to answer. Seeing Shirou's attitude, Inabe decided against pressing further. Instead, he wore a complicated expression.

“I see. Well, let's refrain from prying too much. However, I'm also from Kugamayama City. Once heard, it's difficult to keep silent about it towards Sakashita Heavy Industry, isn't it? ”

Why did he say that? Once heard, there's no going back. Shirou should understand that. It's easy to blame, but it was Inabe who initially extracted the information.

However, if Inabe doesn't disclose Shirou's information, there's a risk of being perceived as aiding a fugitive from Sakashita Heavy Industry. That could potentially turn Sakashita Heavy Industry into an enemy. Inabe couldn't tolerate that.

But Shirou claimed to assist Akira. If Inabe discloses Shirou's whereabouts to Sakashita Heavy Industry, it would reduce Akira's allies, leading to hostility towards Akira.

Between Akira and Sakashita Heavy Industry, Inabe had no choice. It's unthinkable to antagonize the five big corporations for Akira's sake.

That's why Inabe told Shirou it's complicated. Without recklessly divulging his own situation, he urged Shirou to provide a reason why he should refrain from giving Shirou's information to Sakashita Heavy Industry.

Upon hearing this, Shirou responded cheerfully.

“No worries. Sakashita's higher-ups have already approved my free movement. It's a top-secret operation, so the grunts aren't informed. So, if you happen to let slip my whereabouts to Sakashita, they'd give

you a hard time for poking your nose where it doesn't belong, you know? ”

“Should I trust that? ”

Inabe responded, and Shirou sent him a connection code.

“If you doubt, use this to confirm. It's a connection code to a covert line leading to the higher-ups. I won't be responsible if they think you're an idiot for pretending not to know.”

Inabe checked the connection code. Although it couldn't be confirmed without actual usage, based on his investigation, it indeed seemed capable of contacting Sugadome.

Being an executive of one of the five big corporations, even contacting someone from Kugamayama City's administration required courage. Offending them could easily erase Inabe's position.

“Understood. I'll handle your information.”

“Thanks.”

Beside Shirou's cheerful remark, Togami breathed a sigh of relief. Inabe initiated the conversation, but now everyone in the room knew about Shirou. However, by Inabe taking charge of Shirou's matter, others could refrain from informing Sakashita Heavy Industry about Shirou. That was the relief. Inabe took full responsibility for the unnecessary disclosure.

The self-introduction, sparked by Shirou's bombshell, proceeded smoothly thereafter. Inabe, Kibayashi, Togami, all concluded their statements without incident. Carol also kept her remarks unremarkable.

Then it was Reina's turn. How much of her position should she reveal? Reina delved into it.

“I'm Reina Rilart Lorents. I belong to the Lorents family, the founders of Lion Steel Company. I've been involved in some troubles recently, including clashing with my relatives at the Mihazono District Ruin.”

Various reactions followed Reina's revelation. Kibayashi chuckled with interest. Carol and Inabe showed mild surprise.

The most significant reaction came from Togami. He had sensed that Reina was a person with some issues. Living inside the protective walls with two maids indicated as much. He had thought she might be a wealthy young lady doing Hunter work for some reason.

Still, he hadn't imagined she belonged to the Lorents family. That was a league beyond ordinary millionaires. Feeling a bit unnerved, he involuntarily asked.

“Re-Reina... Is that true? ”

“It is. I don't tell petty lies like that.”

“I-I see...”

Togami responded with a slightly unsettled tone. Somewhere in his heart, he felt the insurmountable gap in their statuses, and he couldn't bring himself to ask further.

Seeing the reaction she had anticipated, Reina felt a slight sense of sentimentality. But now wasn't the time to be swayed by such emotions. She needed to admonish herself and proceed with the conversation. She reminded herself of her responsibilities as Shiore and Kanae's leader.

And she checked on Akira. Akira was as usual. It wasn't that Akira lacked interest in Reina's background. Rather, Reina found solace in Akira's indifference.

Watching the interaction between the two, Togami felt a sense of inadequacy for losing his composure and, at the same time, laughed off the unnecessary barrier he had created between himself and Reina. He deliberately asked Reina in a light tone.

Togami, watching the two of them, felt a sense of inadequacy at his lack of composure and laughed at himself for creating unnecessary barriers with Reina. He dared to ask Reina in a casual tone.

“Reina. If that's the case, can't you cancel Akira's bounty yourself? If Lion Steel puts pressure on Kugamayama City, it feels like something they could do, right?”

Togami's sudden change in attitude, or rather, returning to his usual attitude, slightly surprised Reina, who then smiled and responded in kind.

“Impossible. Well, certainly if Lion Steel wanted to, they could probably do something like that, right? But I don't have that kind of power. Even though I'm from the Lorents family, why am I doing Hunter work in a place like this? Can't you understand that much?”

“Ah, now that you mention it.”

Togami hadn't completely returned to his original attitude. Nevertheless, Reina was pleased that he was trying to be that way. She was grateful that her close friend, who had faced death together, knew her background and still tried to maintain the same attitude as before.

And she said to Akira.

“By the way, what I want to ask Akira for is related to Lion Steel. So, pardon the expression, but even if Akira can't cooperate because of killing Kugamayama City executives, I won't change my attitude towards him.”

Reina's words, which were essentially saying this, had enough persuasiveness to convince others present.

Akira lightly nodded in understanding. Then he added as if he remembered something.

“I see... Oh, just so you know, I wasn't the one who killed Udajima.”

“Huh? But you got a bounty on your head because of that, right? Isn't that so?”

“No, it wasn't me. It was the work of my impostor...”

At that point, Inabe interjected.

“Let me explain the background of that. Akira probably doesn't know the detailed circumstances on the city's side. I'll explain it as part of information sharing, so please listen along.”

Inabe began to explain to Akira and the others the circumstances surrounding the bounty placed on Akira by Kugamayama City.

“First, take a look at this. This was captured by the city's surveillance equipment.”

The footage sent from Inabe appeared in Akira's and the others' augmented vision. It showed Udajima working in his office.

“I'll spare you the technical details, but it's verified that this footage is not CG or anything like that, it's actual footage, the location is Udajima's office, and the person shown is indeed Udajima, verified through embedded authentication information, among other things.”

In the current Eastern regions where technology to generate realistic images is prevalent, mere footage wouldn't be considered strong evidence on its own. Therefore, this footage contained various information such as the surveillance device that captured it and Udajima's authentication information to verify its authenticity.

Of course, there are technical limitations to the accuracy of this authentication information. However, after comprehensive verification, Kugamayama City judged that this footage information had sufficient accuracy, as Inabe explained.

The footage continued. Akira suddenly entered the room, surprised Udajima with a blow, knocking him out, and then took him away.

“Let me speak as a third party. This Akira is not a fake. There's no personal authentication, but he's physically present in that location. At the very least, from a general image analysis perspective, the person who can be determined as Akira is seen abducting Udajima.”

It would be extremely difficult for a third party to discern from this footage that this Akira is fake. Inabe explained this with that intention.

Carol, understanding this, said.

“Pardon me for asking, but what were the security doing? It's clearly shown here, yet they did nothing when Udajima was abducted?”

“At the time of the incident, the security department did not have the authority to view this. Information about city executives is treated as highly confidential, including their whereabouts. Moreover, he was dealing with city secrets in his own office. Even though it's the security department responsible for security within the barrier walls, unless something significant happens, they can't view it without Udajima's permission.”

With such circumstances, the security department didn't grasp at that time that Akira's imposter had abducted Udajima. Inabe explained this before continuing.

“And this is the significant part.”

Next, Inabe showed Akira and the others the footage of Akira declaring allegiance to the Nationalist on top of the Kaiju and killing

Udajima.

Carol glanced at Akira with a slightly stern expression. However, her concern was unnecessary. Given that it wasn't their first time seeing it, Akira was able to restrain himself considerably, though still disgruntled.

Nonetheless, he was still displeased. Inabe carefully chose his words to avoid unnecessarily provoking Akira as he continued to explain.

The footage is transmitted via general wide-area communication from an unknown source. From its contents, the city immediately tried to confirm Udajima's whereabouts but failed. He went missing. At that point, as an emergency measure, normally restricted information like Udajima's records became accessible even to the security department, including his office records. And the footage of Udajima being abducted by Akira was found.

The footage was immediately sent for analysis. Since the footage of Udajima being abducted was under city control, it was relatively easy to analyze. However, the footage of Udajima being killed was not captured by city surveillance equipment, so there were limits to the analysis. Nevertheless, it was determined that the footage was not synthetic but actually recorded. And from the analysis results, there was no confirmation that the Akira and Udajima shown were impostors.

From these pieces of information, it couldn't be denied that there was a certain credibility to Akira abducting and killing Udajima. Inabe explained this carefully to Akira and mainly to him.

Togami, cautiously raising his hand while mindful of the fact that the other party was a city executive, asked Inabe.

“Um, may I ask something? ”

“What is it? ”

“About that Kaiju in the footage... the giant creature. It's supposed to be the one that attacked us in the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. I find it hard to believe that there were two of them.”

“I also have information that you were attacked by this monster in what you call the Third Inner Sector of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. If it's the report you submitted to Drankam, then I've already seen it.”

“I-if that's the case, then isn't it reasonable to assume that the Akira on top of that monster's head is genuine? ”

The Kaiju is under the control of the Nationalist cooperating with Akira. Akira killing Udajima on the Kaiju's head is also to demonstrate this. Therefore, there is no reason for Akira to be attacked by the Kaiju. Thus, the Akira in the footage becomes the impostor.

Togami points this out, and Inabe glances at Akira before earnestly responding.

“Personally, I agree with your opinion. However, let me counter from a third-party perspective. There are two possible explanations for your question. The first is chronological. If Akira defected to the Nationalist after escaping from the Third Inner Sector, the timeline fits.”

This might be a bit of a stretch. Even if Akira defected immediately afterward, it seems there wouldn't be enough time to reconcile the timeline. While Togami thought this, he also considered it possible, so he neither accepted nor countered it.

Inabe glances at Akira again and continues carefully choosing his words.

“Second, assuming that this is just an opinion from an outsider who cannot know the truth, consider this. The fact that you were able to

escape from the Third Inner Sector. If that itself was staged, then the timeline fits.”

Togami stares at Inabe involuntarily.

“What?”

Their efforts to escape from that hell are now being suspected of being staged. Togami's frustration was strong.

However, as Inabe returns a sharp look, Togami remembers that the other party is a city official and, while still dissatisfied, lowers his tone.

Inabe also understands Togami's feelings. With that in mind, he continues, directing his gaze at Akira, who probably shares Togami's sentiments.

“This is just a third-party perspective. But it's a fact that your survival, despite being attacked by such a presence, is miraculous. Logically speaking, you should have died.”

Akira and the others could agree to that. Given the circumstances, it was certainly miraculous.

“Well, I don't think so. You've survived such desperate situations many times before. Knowing that, I don't find it strange for you to survive, while others might find it miraculous.”

Togami and Reina can understand that. Even if they had learned about Akira's escape from the Third Inner Sector afterward, they wouldn't find it strange that Akira survived. They thought so.

“But those who have less acquaintance with you wouldn't think that way. They would interpret your survival as a miraculous event. And those who don't believe in miracles would seek some kind of necessity. In other words, they would suspect that your survival wasn't a coincidence but was orchestrated for some reason.”

Carol can agree with that. If she hadn't been there herself and witnessed Akira fighting desperately without giving up in such a situation, she would doubt if it was a miracle or some kind of fabrication. That's what she thought.

"In short, your survival is such a surprising event that it's more natural to think there was something behind it than to think it was an extremely unlikely coincidence. And behind that, the idea of staging is also included."

Then Shiro lightly speaks up.

"Then that means I was also involved in that staging, right? "

Shiro is an important figure in Sakashita Heavy Industry. Words spoken by such a person carry significant influence, regardless of who they're directed at within lower-tier companies. This includes Inabe. Despite being a city official in Kugamayama City, which might seem powerful, it's still relatively weak compared to the five big corporations. Opinions that don't align with their interests could sometimes be fatal.

However, Inabe responds without hesitation.

"That's right. I want you to deny it. I want you to appeal to Sakashita Heavy Industry that it was definitely not staged. Kugamayama City cannot oppose Sakashita Heavy Industry's decisions. It would greatly help us if you could put pressure on them from that angle."

"Oops, is that so? Ah, but right now, I'm technically on the run from Sakashita, so that might be a bit tricky. Well, I won't say it's impossible, but..."

Saying so, Shiro glances meaningfully at Akira. If his intervention with Sakashita Heavy Industry could simply be repaid by introducing himself to Tsubaki, then he wouldn't mind doing it. He conveyed this with his gaze.

Before Akira could respond to that look, Carol spoke up to Inabe.

“Inabe-san. It's not just us, but even the top brass from Dragon River fought alongside us, right? So, isn't it far-fetched to think this was staged? If it were staged, it would mean Dragon River was also complicit in the act, right?”

Dragon River boasted formidable individuals like Tatsukawa and Melshia, capable of threatening even entire cities on their own. It was unthinkable for a regional city to suspect collusion with separatists or anyone linked to them against such a team of hunters. Doing so could potentially paint a picture of hostility towards Dragon River for Kugamayama City.

Therefore, it was unreasonable for Kugamayama City to suspect staging amidst the chaos of their narrow escape from the Kaiju attack. Even if some city officials held such suspicions, it couldn't represent the entire city's stance. Carol intended to convey this.

Inabe sighed deeply before responding.

“I completely agree with that sentiment.”

“See? ”

With Inabe's agreement as planned, Carol's expression turned slightly smug. However, her demeanor twisted upon hearing Inabe's continued words.

“However... I've already tried to inquire about the situation from Dragon River. But the staff member assigned to the task, of all people, expressed concerns about staging to Melshia, who effectively holds command at Dragon River. That enraged her. Unfortunately, the relationship between the city and Dragon River is now in peril.”

To avoid angering Dragon River, staging was not an option. The fact that Kugamayama City had already incurred Melshia's wrath weakened their leverage. If a friendly relationship was no longer

viable, it would be easier for the city to assert that Dragon River had colluded in the staging.

“What are they thinking? ”

“Absolutely. What are they thinking...”

Inabe, with a heavy sigh, once again expressed deep agreement with Carol's viewpoint.

While everyone had been listening silently, Akira, sensing things were getting complicated, pointed at the image of her doppelganger before giving a clear response.

“So, is it okay to assume I became a bounty target because of that? Because it's uncertain if that's me in the video? ”

Whether it was his doppelganger or not, given the gravity of the situation involving the murder of a city official and defection to separatists, a bounty had to be placed on Akira. And since it couldn't be conclusively determined if it was him or not, they had no choice but to put a bounty on him. That was Akira's interpretation.

However, Inabe shook his head.

“No... it's not that.”

“Huh? Then why...”

Surprised, Akira's expression grew more puzzled. Carol, Togami, and Reina also showed signs of confusion. Kibayashi, on the other hand, remained amused.

Inabe explained with a serious expression, addressing Akira's confusion.

“Let me be clear. I don't understand the reason why you were made a bounty target.”

“You don't understand...”

Akira's expression became even more perplexed. Even Carol, Togami, and Reina were visibly baffled. Notably, Kibayashi maintained his amused demeanor.

Inabe continued his explanation.

“Let me explain why I don't understand. Firstly, whether it's your doppelganger in this video or not, it's more convenient for Kugamayama City to consider them as such. If I were to take charge of resolving this situation, even if the person in this video were proven to be you, I would treat them as a doppelganger. That's how important it is. Therefore, it's unreasonable for the city to put a bounty on you based on this video.”

If the person in the video turned out to be genuine, it would mean Kugamayama City had severely misjudged the treatment of a Hunter. To treat someone who had risen to Hunter Rank 70 in just a few years despite originating from the slums, and who was potentially one of the few individuals with such talent, unfairly, and to anger them to the extent of defecting to separatists, was a massive failure. For the governing corporations, maintaining a good image was crucial, far beyond a mere embarrassment.

Of course, the Hunters didn't regard the city as benevolent either. However, even in a mutually beneficial relationship, there were basic lines that, if crossed, would lead to the collapse of the relationship. This incident risked exactly that.

Therefore, Kugamayama City needed to assert that Akira's doppelganger was responsible for this turmoil. Akira's doppelganger had appeared before during the previous separatist suppression operation. If it seemed the separatists had persistently employed the same tactic, there would be no issue. That's how Inabe saw it.

Upon hearing this explanation, Reina asked a question.

“Then why did you put a bounty on Akira? It seems counterproductive to me...”

Knowing Reina's affiliation with the Lorents family, Inabe adjusted his tone slightly before continuing his explanation.

“The decision to put a bounty on Akira wasn't mine alone, nor was it the city's consensus. The designation of a bounty target is determined by each department within the budgetary limits. While externally it appears to be the decision of Kugamayama City, in reality, it's the Defense Force. However, even so, there are too many inexplicable aspects for me...”

Whether it was genuine or staged, a breach into the fortifications, the abduction and killing of a city official, and considering Akira's capabilities, all these factors would warrant a bounty of at least 100 billion. If budget constraints were not considered, the amount could easily be higher. Despite this, setting a bounty at a mere 500 million was unimaginable.

However, if it was staged, they should have first approached the real Akira through him to understand the situation. Sending a squad of humanoid weapons for him capture outright was unnatural.

Even if they prioritized capture due to the risk of escape, making Akira a bounty target was illogical. The probability of him sensing the Defense Force's actions during the bounty designation process would only increase.

Furthermore, there were too many unnatural aspects in the bounty designation. Inabe explained this to Akira before turning his gaze towards her.

“Akira. Do you know the amount of your bounty? ”

“Yeah. It's 500 million, right? ”

“So you understand that the bounty amount is ridiculously low, right?”

“Well, yeah. I do think it's too low.”

Akira's bounty is 500 million Aurums. Due to his own sense of value and low self-esteem, Akira doesn't feel like it's a small amount.

However, considering the common sense aspect of whether hunters would fight each other for a mere 500 million Aurums, given that Akira is a Hunter Rank 70, Akira agreed with Inabe.

Inabe nodded and continued speaking.

“Exactly. Intrusion into the barrier wall, abduction and murder of city executives, and your abilities. Considering all of these, you'd need at least 10 billion. If we don't consider the city's budget, it wouldn't be surprising if the amount increased. Despite that, your bounty being only 500 million is unbelievable.”

Those who understood the unnaturalness for the first time with this explanation, and even those who knew it beforehand, grasped the problem points with Inabe's explicit statement.

Inabe continued further.

“The reason for your bounty designation is also strange. Only suspicion of Udajima's murder is mentioned. If Akira is accused of killing Udajima based on this footage, why isn't his betrayal to the Nationalist included as a suspicion? It's unnatural.”

Inabe directed his statement towards Akira, who had a look as if realizing it when mentioned.

“There are many other minor points I could bring up, but in essence, there are too many puzzling aspects to you becoming a bounty. That's why I told you not to do anything foolish like surrendering to

the Defense Force quietly. If you get caught, who knows what they'll do to you."

For reasons unknown, for some, it would be convenient if the Akira in the video were real, and there might even be a fear of trying to turn the fake into the real one by eliminating the real one. It's possible that the attack Akira faced at home before was not orchestrated by the Defense Force, but perhaps by the Nationalist for similar reasons.

Including those, Akira finds himself in a situation where he doesn't fully understand the whole picture. Inabe concluded the discussion like this.

Even Inabe, the head of one of the major factions of city executives, can hardly grasp the situation. Akira doesn't understand how abnormal this is. Nevertheless, he somehow understood that he was involved in a very troublesome situation. He expresses his inner thoughts with a very reluctant and troubled expression.

And Inabe gets to the main point.

"You may think that despite saying various things, you still don't understand anything. But in terms of understanding the situation, just knowing what you don't understand makes a big difference. And you have grasped that. Let's start with that assumption. What are you planning to do from now on? Let's confirm that first. Even though I'm willing to cooperate, there are things I can and cannot do."

Observing the situation for a while. Moving the hunter activities to a distant place beyond the influence of Kugamayama City. Negotiating with the city to revoke the bounty designation. Asking Shiro to put pressure on Sakashita Heavy Industry. Even with just a light consideration from Inabe, there are several options available to Akira.

But Akira didn't choose any of them. He unconsciously answers with a hint of killing intent.

"I'll kill my impostor."

For Inabe, it was both unexpected and expected.

fake Akira undoubtedly has control over a Kaiju. Going to kill such a person is too reckless. It's almost like suicide when you think normally. Nevertheless, Akira declared it without any hesitation. That's unusual. In that sense, it's unexpected.

However, at the same time, Inabe also considered that Akira might do such a thing. He knows that Akira is not a typical thinker. Although he was surprised enough to doubt the sanity of the other party, it wasn't entirely unpredictable.

Others show similar reactions to Inabe, to varying degrees. However, only Kibayashi was suppressing a laugh. For Kibayashi, Akira's answer was nothing but expected.

While Inabe and the others showed tension in response to the killing intent emanating from Akira, Kibayashi, on the contrary, seemed rather pleased.

Akira realizes his slight lack of composure from the reactions of Inabe and the others. He takes a deep breath to regain his composure and eases the dark aura he emitted.

With the killing intent that could be felt even through the communication now dissipated, Inabe breathes a sigh of relief. Then he continues speaking.

"So you're trying to prove your innocence by killing the impostor, huh. Certainly, that would be the best if possible, but..."

If Akira kills the impostor herself, he can at least prove the existence of his impostor. Then it would be easier to persuade Kugamayama

City that the murder of Udajima and the cooperation with the Nationalist were all the impostor's deeds. Inabe understands that.

But there will probably be a battle with Kaiju in the process of killing the impostor. Can he still do it? Is it possible? Isn't it just going to end up dead? Inabe hesitated, thinking that way, but quickly came to a conclusion.

“...No, I get it. Let's cooperate in that direction.”

There's no point in refusing to cooperate on the grounds of recklessness. Even if he refused to cooperate due to its recklessness, Akira would just do it without his help. So, it's better to work towards increasing the chances of success. Inabe made that judgment. And then he nails it down for Akira.

“However, don't pull any stunts of acting alone. I said I'll cooperate. Wait for the right moment, prepare thoroughly, and act cautiously. Don't rush in without a plan driven by emotions. Got it? ”

“Got it.”

If he were to recklessly charge in driven by passion here, he would be no different from the time he fought without Alpha's support during the turf wars in the slums and almost died. Akira reminded himself of this and strongly restrained himself.

With the direction decided now, and as the conversation comes to a close, Kibayashi, who had been silent and listening, opens his mouth with a smile.

“Well then, let's proceed in that direction, Akira. It's alright. I'll cooperate fully to make sure you can shine.”

Akira shows a mixture of anticipation and anxiety on his face. And with expressions surpassing those emotions, he reluctantly responds.

“...Yeah. I'm counting on you. For all the fun you've given me, make sure to cooperate properly.”

“Ah. Leave it to me. So, let me have fun this time too, okay? Just running away from Kaiju was enough to make me die laughing. I'm counting on you, alright?”

If Akira can meet Kibayashi's expectations, in other words, if he can defeat the Kaiju, then killing his impostor will also become easier. And Kibayashi, more than anyone, will cooperate without hesitation for the sake of his own enjoyment. While Akira thought so, he still wore a more reluctant expression.”

Having understood Akira's subtle nuances, Kibayashi was smiling very happily.

Chapter 234: Hideout

The place where high-ranking hunters who come to the city of Kugamayama stay overnight is generally predetermined. First is the luxury hotels within the city. They casually stay for extended periods in rooms that cost tens of thousands of Aurum per night, spending their excess wealth without hesitation.

Next are the outskirt residential areas newly developed by the city for high-ranking hunters. Although located in the wasteland, these areas pose no threat to them, as monsters inhabiting the outskirts of the city are no match for them. Utilizing vast expanses of land where dangers can be disregarded if necessary, mansions equipped with facilities capable of accommodating tanks and humanoid weapons are being extensively constructed. The property recommended to Akira as a new residence after losing his home was also one of these residential areas.

Lastly, makeshift bases constructed by each hunter team. They are built around the Kuzusuhara District Ruin or within the ruins themselves, based on individual judgments. Some teams even bring multiple huge wasteland vehicles, almost akin to mobile fortresses.

One such convoy, heading towards the base constructed by Dragon River near the boundary between the First and Second Inner Sector of the Dragon River, was advancing along the rear communication line leading from the city's frontline base to the depths of the ruins.

The convoy was stopped by units of the city's forces, which included multiple humanoid weapons and tanks. A hunter affiliated with Dragon River, driving the leading vehicle, spoke to the unit through communication devices with an unfriendly tone.

“What do you want? ”

“We'd like to inspect the cargo...”

“No. Step aside.”

“We won't inspect thoroughly. Just a glance. It'll be over in 5 minutes.”

“No.”

“We have the right to do so. Since you're also operating in the city of Kugamayama, we'd appreciate some cooperation for maintaining public order. Even if we find something odd, it won't be a big deal. Just a minor slip-up. A trivial mistake. Be more careful next time. That's all.”

When it comes to high-ranking hunters, they often require permission from the city governing the area for the importation, possession, and use of certain items. Powerful items like anti-material warheads, which could breach the city's defenses, are sometimes subject to complete neutralization without warning if possessed without authorization.

By declaring to handle significant matters with minor mistakes, the unit's commander was making significant concessions to Dragon River.

Yet the man's response remained unchanged.

“No.”

“If you still refuse, we'll have no choice but to harbor unnecessary suspicions. Shall we settle this amicably?”

The statement from the unit member was, in a sense, an ultimatum. Yet, the man returned with a similar ultimatum.

“You don't understand. Your only options are to step back or fight. Choose in 30 seconds. If you can't decide, I'll choose for you.”

If they didn't step back, combat would commence after 30 seconds, the man declared. Realizing the seriousness of the situation, the unit's commander, reluctantly, instructed his unit to make way.

Engaging in combat here could potentially escalate into a full-scale war between Dragon River and the city of Kugamayama. Despite leading a unit with humanoid weapons, the commander, as a mere field officer, couldn't make decisions that might affect the city's survival.

Seeing the humanoid weapons and tanks in front of the convoy retreat, the man from Dragon River, as if understanding their sentiments, softened his tone.

“Sorry about that. We'd get in trouble if we let you through quietly, but I'd also get killed if I listened to you. Let's try to get through this until things settle down higher up.”

Refusing to inspect the cargo was Melshia's way of harassing the city of Kugamayama. The man indirectly conveyed this and resumed the progress of the convoy.

As the large trailers passed by, the commander sighed.

“Honestly, who knows where these fools come from, blabbering unnecessary things. Do they even understand the hardships we face on-site? ”

The deeper meaning of his sigh implied that he was facing hardships due to the mistakes of those comfortably situated within the walls. It was unbearable. His sigh reflected that sentiment deeply.

As the convoy of large trailers moved ahead past the sighing commander, inside one of the cargo beds, a wasteland-spec camping car was loaded. It was Carol's vehicle. Akira was inside.

“Did they not notice? ...Or perhaps, they did notice but decided to let it slide? ”

Seeing Akira's serious expression as he said that, Carol laughed and responded.

“Doesn't matter either way, right? Even if word got out and they knew, at least we confirmed that the city can't touch us.”

Hearing that, Akira also relaxed his expression.

“...Yeah.”

Rather than worrying unnecessarily, it was better to think of it as a success. Akira thought so and eased the tension brought about by encountering the city's forces.

Now a bounty target, tasked with avoiding the city's pursuit and even facing a unit of humanoid weapons, Akira needed a safe hideout.

So where to hide? In the vast wasteland, the city's search efforts would have limitations, making it not so easy to find them. While Akira and the others were discussing this, Kibayashi proposed a surprisingly unexpected idea: hiding in Dragon River's base.

Indeed, while the wasteland might be hard to find, it was not impossible to be found. There was also the risk of being tracked during ammunition or food procurement. Moreover, once located within a certain range, the city might send in large forces, putting them at a significant disadvantage.

However, in Dragon River's base, even if the city knew Akira was there, they couldn't easily intervene. Additionally, Tatsukawa considered Akira as a junior, and Melshia was furious with the city's response. Kibayashi thought they could somehow manage through negotiation.

Furthermore, Akira's goal wasn't merely to escape the city's pursuit. It was to defeat his impostor. Focusing solely on evading the city and evacuating to a distant location wasn't feasible. To seize the opportunity and penetrate into the second or Third Inner Sector, they needed to be close to the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

Also, for Inabe and Kibayashi to support Akira efficiently, it was desirable for him to be near the city. Even if they provided powerful weaponry to help Akira defeat the fake Akira who controlled Kaiju, it would be difficult if he was too far away. There was also a high risk of the city detecting their transport movements.

Upon hearing the explanation, Akira was convinced. However, Kibayashi's plan hinged on Dragon River's cooperation. So, Kibayashi was tasked with negotiating with Dragon River to see if the plan was feasible.

They were to shelter a bounty target. Akira and the others expected negotiations to take at least a few days. However, Kibayashi managed to strike a deal the same day. The trailer to pick them up arrived promptly, and Akira's group, looking somewhat bewildered, was transported to Dragon River's base in Carol's camping car.

Dragon River's base, crafted for the conquest of the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, was centered around massive wasteland-adapted vehicles. These vehicles were equipped to simultaneously maintain several humanoid weapons and possessed enough mobility to crush through piles of debris.

Naturally, the operation required an immense amount of money, enough to astound any ordinary hunter. Yet, the power of a top team, housing numerous high-ranking hunters, effortlessly earned such funds.

As the trailer carrying Akira's group approached, Togami lightly addressed Akira.

“Akira, isn't it about time we start it? ”

“Hmm? Yeah, you're right.”

Using the camouflage function of their augmented suits, Akira disappeared from view. Now, inside Carol's camping car, only Carol

and Togami were visible. Shirou and the others had already taken separate actions before Akira and the others boarded the trailer.

When the trailer arrived at the base and came to a halt, Carol stepped out of the vehicle and followed Dragon River's guidance to move it. There, Melshia, accompanied by Tatsukawa and Kibayashi, awaited.

After getting into Carol's car with Tatsukawa and the others, Melshia glanced around the car before speaking meaningfully.

“Welcome. Akira isn't here, is he? ”

Carol pointed to Akira, who was in camouflage, with a smile, while Togami, with a slightly nervous demeanor, answered.

“No, he's not.”

“Yes, he's not here.”

Naturally, Melshia knew Akira was there despite his camouflage. Asking whether Akira was there was a confirmation of mutual understanding.

“Then, welcome to Dragon River. It's your first day, so you're guests for today. You can start working from tomorrow. Today, just take it easy and gather your spirits.”

“Got it.”

“Understood.”

Tatsukawa glanced towards where Akira was, though invisible, and lightly chuckled.

“Well, as long as you're here, the city folks won't lay a finger on you. Take it easy and rest.”

Before Akira could respond, Melshia interjected jokingly.

“Hey, don't start talking to the empty air all of a sudden. It's scary, you know? ”

Tatsukawa laughed, playing along.

“Oops, are you tired? Maybe you should go back and rest early. See you later.”

Akira wasn't here. That was Dragon River's stance. Tatsukawa and Melshia indicated this to Akira's group before leaving.

Kibayashi, remaining behind, smiled cheerfully. He could see Akira. Strictly speaking, he displayed Akira's image in his augmented vision, where Akira was camouflaged and thus not visible.

“Akira, you can speak now. But don't disable your camouflage, okay? ”

“Shouldn't I use it even inside the car? ”

To Akira, who wore a somewhat troubled expression, Kibayashi answered while pointing to the window.

“It's fine in places where the interior can't be seen from outside. But if you keep switching the camouflage, you might forget to use it when you go out. So, it's generally better to keep it on continuously. Also, if you keep the windows non-transparent while inside the car, it feels like someone is hiding.”

“That makes sense.”

“Well, I'm not saying you should use it even in the bath, but be careful not to be seen from outside.”

“Got it.”

Akira didn't want to bathe while wearing the augmented suit. He nodded firmly in agreement.

Kibayashi chuckled cheerfully.

“Well then, let's talk about the current situation again. Especially you, Akira, make sure to listen carefully. You're still lacking in common sense compared to before, so be aware of that.”

“Understood.”

Although Akira was gently reproached by Kibayashi, he smiled wryly but didn't argue.

It had been quite some time since Akira burst out of the alley in the slum district. He was no longer the clueless child he once was. He had acquired a lot of knowledge and common sense.

However, whether he could act with common sense was another matter entirely. If he could, or couldn't, Akira wouldn't be a Hunter Rank 70 or a bounty target.

Above all, he had no intention of going to kill the entity that controlling the Kaiju. Akira was aware of that, and understood that he shouldn't act recklessly based on such irrational judgment.

Carol and Togami, too, lightly laughed and nodded in agreement to Kibayashi's words. And in a sense, there was someone even more unconventional than Akira who laughed along. Alpha.

『That's right, Akira. You can't go off on your own like before, okay?』

『I know. They said they'd help. They'll cooperate. Of course, with Alpha too.』

『Yes. Leave it to us.』

Expressing their trust in each other through their expressions, Akira and Alpha laughed together.

Akira became a bounty target and was chased from Kugamayama City. But being designated a bounty target and being chased from the city are separate issues.

First of all, the bounty system itself is just a type of simple request that doesn't require acceptance processing. It's often targeted at monster, so some may misunderstand it as a request for their defeat, meaning killing them. However, it's possible to put a bounty even on capturing, not just killing.

Also, just being a bounty target doesn't result in any rights being stripped or restrictions imposed. And being a bounty target doesn't mean giving a license to kill to those targeting you.

For example, if a hunter were to kill a bounty target with a life or death bounty inside the wall, they would receive the bounty, but the killing would still be considered murder. Rather, it would be treated as a murder for financial gain, and the crime would be more severe for significantly worsening the security within the wall. Even outside the wall, in security zones controlled by private security companies, similar treatment would apply.

This wouldn't change even if the bounty was put up by the Corporate Government. Having one's hunter status erased and one's account frozen by the Hunter Office would be because one has antagonized the Corporate Government to that extent, not just because one has become a bounty target.

So, in the typical sense of a hunter's perception, Akira's current position is merely that of someone who is in a dispute with Kugamayama City to the extent that a bounty of 500 million Aurums has been placed on him. And to high-ranking hunter who can intimidate such a city, that level of issue isn't significant.

With this background in mind, Kibayashi judged that Tatsukawa and the others wouldn't refuse to hide Akira for a while. And indeed, Melshia, as the de facto operator of Dragon River, accepted Kibayashi's request.

However, Dragon River doesn't openly declare that they are hiding Akira. They keep it secret. This is to maintain a certain level of relationship with Kugamayama City.

Due to a slip of the tongue from the city suggesting Dragon River's cooperation with the Nationalist, Melshia has taken a very strict stance against the city. But she hasn't gone as far as declaring an all-out war against the city.

However, if Dragon River were to take an attitude of not handing over Akira and openly declare that they are hiding her, it would inevitably force Kugamayama City, even if it's Dragon River, to prepare for a full confrontation.

Melshia doesn't want that. There's a need to maintain a position towards the city of "if you apologize, we'll forgive you." To do so, it's necessary to maintain a situation where the city doesn't know that we're hiding Akira. That's the minimum condition for granting the request. Melshia talked to Kibayashi about this and discussed how to meet that condition.

As a result, it was decided to proceed with the narrative that Dragon River had taken Carol on board. Carol needed protection for various reasons, and until now, she had employed Akira for that purpose, but Akira had become a bounty target. Taking advantage of this, Dragon River, which wanted the information on the ruins that Carol possessed, approached her.

However, it would be beyond normal thinking for Carol to hire Dragon River for protection. In addition to the value of the information on the ruins, it was decided to formalize the agreement in a way that during the protection period, Carol herself would participate in battles in the ruins, thereby compensating for the shortfall in payment.

Togami accompanies Carol for this purpose, in the underground tunnels and Third Inner Sector of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, to work off the debt he owes Tatsukawa for protecting him.

Actually, Togami is accompanying Akira to support him. Firstly, to cover up in case someone accidentally sees Akira and to make it appear that it's Togami instead. And when Kibayashi and Inabe provide powerful equipment to Akira, it's framed as being for Togami, not Akira.

Furthermore, Inabe also had Togami request support through Drankam. Since it's a highly confidential request that outsiders aren't informed of, Drankam has no idea about the underlying circumstances. Still, it's sufficient as a means to provide high-performance equipment to Akira via Togami.

With these arrangements, Akira can hide at Dragon River's base, evade the city's pursuit, and wait for the provision of powerful equipment from Kibayashi and the others while being in a location close to the ruins where his imposter would likely be.

Kibayashi arranged all this in less than half a day. Akira, impressed once again by Kibayashi's abilities, asked an important question.

“So, when can I expect the equipment to be provided to me? ”

“I don't know. We'll adjust that from now on. Don't worry. Leave it to me.”

Kibayashi confidently replied, and Akira gave him a rare smirk.

“Right. I'll leave it to you. But if you want me to enjoy it to the fullest, make sure it's plenty, okay? ”

In the previous battle with the Kaiju, there was no chance of winning. There was only fleeing. It was a fight where no gamble could be made.

In the next battle, that has to change.

It's unreasonable, reckless, and foolhardy, but not impossible. Even though the possibility is low, there's enough of a chance for a gamble

to be made. Kibayashi will provide that chance to himself. Above all, Akira understands that Kibayashi wants to see his fight desperately, pulling out that slim chance of victory even if it's against an opponent he absolutely can't beat.

Kibayashi doesn't want to see Akira scratching at an opponent he can't win against. No matter how low the possibility, he should want to see him desperately fighting to pull that slim chance of victory closer. Akira understood that was Kibayashi's vice.

Akira returns the smile to Kibayashi defiantly.

“Yeah. I get it.”

Akira's demeanor seems slightly amused. Kibayashi is undoubtedly enjoying himself.

Carol and Togami, despite offering their assistance to Akira, appear somewhat apprehensive, realizing they will likely be dragged into whatever events unfold next. Their expressions stiffen slightly.

Alpha, on the other hand, continues to smile as usual, unchanged next to Akira.

In Carol's camping car's bathroom, Akira, fully immersed in the warm water, lets out a deep sigh. A lot has happened in a short span of time. Due to the mental exhaustion, even though the bathing facilities are of exceptional quality, Akira doesn't have the energy to muster a smile.

『There's been quite a lot going on, huh?』

There were countless things going on, not just a mere “quite a lot,” but given Akira's current mental state, that was the extent of vocabulary she could muster.

Alpha, bathing together with Akira, chuckles and speaks.

『Yeah. There's been quite a lot indeed.』

The bathtub isn't large enough for two people, but for Alpha, who exists only in Akira's augmented field of view, there are no physical constraints. By expanding the bathtub visible in Akira's vision, they are both soaking in the same tub.

『But well, there's always been a lot going on, hasn't there? In that sense, it's not that much different.』

Akira's expression softens slightly.

『...Yeah, I guess so.』

There have been tough times before. Yet, they've managed to overcome them somehow. This time will be no different.

Even though a Kaiju appeared, considering the relative difference in power between it and himself, this time isn't particularly special. It's not much different from the slum kid with only a handgun managing to defeat a large weaponized dog. Akira decides to think positively.

Then he suddenly thinks of something.

『Hey, Alpha. If Kibayashi manages to acquire some incredible equipment and I become strong enough to defeat that Kaiju, would it be okay to tackle the ruins exploration you requested, even if it's a difficult route?』

With Akira's current abilities, only the simplest route holds potential, as he was told by Alpha before.

So, what if she had the strength to defeat that Kaiju? Would it be possible to tackle even the difficult routes? Akira wonders and asks casually.

Alpha responds with a smile.

『Hmm, yes. I think we could manage even moderately difficult routes.』

『...What about the most difficult route?』

『You'd definitely die.』

『I see...』

Even if he became that strong, it wouldn't be enough. Akira hesitates slightly at the thought. Then, he switches his focus, nodding lightly as if reminding himself, and says.

『...Got it. Let's do our best on the simplest route.』

『Yes. Let's do our best.』

In a way, Akira is prioritizing his personal vendetta of killing his impostor over Alpha's request, thus delaying it.

However, regarding Alpha's request, Akira was told by Alpha herself that it was postponed due to insufficient strength, regardless of Akira's personal motives.

Still, Akira wasn't entirely unconcerned about prioritizing his own agenda.

But being told that even with the power to defeat the Kaiju, it wasn't enough, he shifts his focus. Understanding why it's been postponed to this extent, he decides to use this opportunity to reconsider becoming stronger and stops worrying needlessly.

Akira continues to enjoy a leisurely bath with Alpha.

The sun has already set. After finishing his bath, Akira, thinking he'll just go to bed early tonight, puts on his augmented suit and leaves

the dressing room. Carol then calls out to him.

“You're done? Then it's my turn.”

“.....Yeah.”

Akira took a moment to respond because Carol was already naked. Not because he was surprised by it, not because he was captivated by her enchanting body, but because he was exasperated. He hesitated to say something, realizing it would be futile, hence the delayed response.

Even with Carol's naked body, worth ten billion of Aurum, in front of her, Akira's attitude remains unchanged. However, even with his aloof demeanor, Carol passes by Akira in a somewhat cheerful mood and enters the dressing room.

As Akira slightly wonders about Carol's behavior, he notices Togami, who was blushing slightly and furrowing his brows, trying to conceal it.

Carol had restrained her dissatisfaction with Akira not making advances on him, citing Akira as an exception. But recently, another exception has emerged: Shiro.

Although Shiro, being a technician at Sakashita Heavy Industry, has developed resistance to such advances, the lack of reaction still stood out. Despite Carol wearing a augmented suit with a sharp old-world design, Shiro's reaction, or rather the lack thereof, was concerning to Carol.

Could it be that her body doesn't appeal much to others, especially children? Perhaps Akira's lack of reaction isn't solely because he's an exception, but simply because Carol lacks charm?

With the appearance of a second person, Carol began to worry. And Togami got caught up in confirming this.

Although Carol had once tempted Togami, and judging from his reaction, she thought it would be fine, it didn't entirely dispel her concerns. She checked thoroughly. Checking to release her pent-up frustration from Akira and Shiro's lack of reaction, she confirmed thoroughly.

And Togami's reaction was enough to satisfy Carol. It seems it's just Akira and Shiro who are odd. Carol could say that with confidence to herself.

Akira notices Togami looking like he wants to say something.

“What is it? ”

“.....Well, Akira, you've been Carol's bodyguard and with her all the time lately, right? ”

“Yeah.”

“You even bathed together, right? ”

“That's because Carol just barges in on her own.”

“.....You're still a bit weird, huh? ”

“Seems like it. Well, I won't deny it.”

Akira responds with a wry smile and heads to his bed.

Togami, still blushing, lets out a sigh.

He knows that many have met their downfall after getting involved with Carol. He's heard about how a man named Babalod got entangled with Carol and ended up selling the team's confidential information.

But on the flip side, it also speaks volumes about how irresistible Carol is. Even if it's said to be worth 10 billion of Aurum for one

night.

Akira hasn't made a move on Carol. If that's the case, then he'll do it. Togami resolved as such. He repeated it to himself firmly.

He repeated it, but he didn't have much confidence.

Afterward, while Akira and Carol sleep soundly, Togami struggles to fall asleep.



Shiro contacts Sugadome from his hiding place. Upon hearing the report, Sugadome directs a somewhat sharp gaze within Shiro's augmented field of view.

“How much of that story is true?”

“I ain't lying.”

Despite Shiro's discontent, Sugadome continues without changing his demeanor.

“I didn't say it's a lie. I don't think you're foolish enough to give me false reports.”

This also implies that if Shiro were to provide false reports, he would meet the fate of someone who made an enemy of Sakashita Heavy Industry. It's not a threat. It's a certainty. Sugadome's statement carries such intent. Understanding this, Shiro feels a slight tension.

“However, your report is largely subjective. And subjectivity is ambiguous. The caretaker personality, Tsubaki, has found someone she favors. If negotiations go well with that person, we can establish a negotiation route with Tsubaki. You're currently negotiating with that person. It's a great report, but the feasibility of establishing a negotiation route depends on how much favor Tsubaki holds for that

person. I can't just take your subjective opinion at face value. That's the gist of it."

The doubt lies not in the truth but in the degree. Understanding this, Shiro exhales a small sigh of relief unintentionally. Sugadome notices this reaction but refrains from pointing it out as he continues.

"So, what's the situation? If we can win over that person, is it confirmed that we'll establish a negotiation route with Tsubaki?"

".....I wouldn't say it's confirmed, but the likelihood is high. I believe it'll go much better than last time, where just conveying negotiation content resulted in the entire escort team being wiped out, and only the negotiator's head returned."

"I see. What's the name of this person?"

Asked casually by Sugadome, Shiro returns a serious expression.

"I ain't telling you, huh? Just knowing their name would lead to them being investigated immediately, and the negotiation route with Tsubaki would proceed without me. This is my achievement. Am I supposed to just let it be taken away?"

"I was just slightly curious about someone who's gained favor with a governing personality like Tsubaki."

"But you won't assert that you won't usurp my achievements, right? In that case, you can say anything. Well, if acknowledging that person's information alone is enough for you to recognize it as a sufficient achievement, then I'll tell you."

Shiro has discovered someone who's gained favor with the highly challenging governing personality. That alone is valuable information. However, it's not enough to overlook his escape from Sakashita Heavy Industry and grant him further long-term freedom. Shiro understood this and mentioned it.

Sugadome returns the same understanding.

“I can't acknowledge that as sufficient achievement.”

“I figured. So let me handle it as it is for now. Things are going well at the moment. If it fails or seems impossible, I'll hand over that person's information. I'll leave it to you to try harder after me.”

He's not unwilling to hand over the information, he just has priority rights. Shiro informs him of this and adds the advantage of him negotiating.

“But well, even if I fail, it won't work out for you if you try it, right? The moment you mention Sakashita's name and ask for cooperation, it's essentially coercion. That means threatening a friend of Tsubaki's. Even if you manage to bring Tsubaki to the negotiation table again, won't you lose your head next time? ”

“Aren't you supposed to be one of Sakashita's people too? ”

“Well, you know, I'm technically on the run.”

With that, the conversation briefly halts. Sugadome stares at Shiro. Shiro laughs confidently, hiding his nervousness with all his might.

And then Sugadome speaks.

“Very well. Continue the negotiations with that person.”

“Got it. Leave it to me.”

Filled with relief, Shiro responds proudly, maintaining a light tone.

“Oh, if that's the case, could you temporarily stop searching for me? It'll interfere with the negotiations.”

“That's not possible.”

“Aw, come on.”

“If you don't like it, produce results quickly.”

“Okay, okay. I got it. See you.”

Shiro leaves behind a slightly sulky attitude as he says this and ends the communication with Sugadome.

As soon as he does, Shiro exhales deeply. He drops the act and wears a grim expression.

(They shouldn't suspect me.)

It was merely a phrase he used to calm himself down.

There were no slip-ups. He didn't provide any material to be found out. Even so, given who the other party was, he couldn't shake off his anxiety.

Then Olivia offers him a drink. A coffee with a very pleasant aroma poured into a white cup resting on a white saucer.

“Thank you.”

Shiro accepts the coffee with gratitude, takes a sip slowly, and once he regains his composure, he exhales lightly.

“.....I suppose everything will be fine.”

Even if there were any mishaps in the exchange with Sugadome, he scored full marks on his self-assessment, so there's no use worrying about it anymore. Instead, he should think about how to owe a favor to Akira. Shiro shifts his focus in this way.

In his own office, Sugadome wears a troubled expression.

“.....I didn't think Shiro's tourist spot was there, but did I misread it?
”

Is there an error in his speculation, or did the situation change due to an unexpected event for Shiro, despite the speculation itself being correct?

Considering the information available to him, Sugadome begins reassessing the situation.

Chapter 235: Expensive Corpse

Work starts tomorrow. Akira and the others were told that by Melshia, and they continued their work in the Second Inner Sector of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

Akira was using camouflage to conceal herself, while Carol and Togami were visible as usual. As they patrolled the ruins, Akira and the others noticed a group of monsters approaching.

“There are quite a few. What should we do? Should I lend a hand too?”

Akira said so, lifting his gun slightly. However, Carol and Togami directed confident smiles at Akira.

“We'll be fine on our own.”

“Yeah. If it doesn't seem too dangerous with just the two of us, Akira, you can hang back.”

Akira is visible to Carol and Togami. However, they aren't seeing through his camouflage. Through coordinated information gathering device, they're simply displaying Akira's figure in their augmented vision. So, to others, only Carol and Togami appear to be present.

“Roger that.”

As if acknowledging, Akira lowered his gun. Carol and Togami responded by aiming their guns.

The monsters that appeared were spherical security humanoid weapons, about two meters in diameter. Some had multiple legs protruding from the bottom, allowing them to run on the ground or the walls of buildings, while others flew through the air. And each of them was armed with machine guns, laser cannons, or missile pods.

Akira's camouflage couldn't be detected by those machines. All the machines aimed at Carol and Togami, aligning their own weapons. Carol and Togami also moved. In an instant, they darted away from the spot, disrupting the aim of their opponents with agile movements, each aiming their guns at their targets. And they fired simultaneously.

A large number of bullets, lasers, and small missiles flew around wildly. Their power was immense. If this battle had taken place near the outskirt of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, not only would buildings collapse, but the entire area might have been obliterated on the spot, given the intensity of the destruction. It's thanks to the high-concentration colorless mist and the sturdy old-world buildings in the Second Inner Sector that this area didn't disappear as well.

And the battle was decided in a short time. Carol and the others emerged victorious. Seeing the pile of enemy debris they had defeated on their own, Carol smiled contentedly.

“Alright. Once again, we managed to defeat them on our own.”

“Yeah. We won on our own.”

Togami also smiled. Internally, he thought it was quite dangerous, and his smile was a bit stiff because of it. But still, victory is victory, and his face showed a certain level of pride.

Carol had already prepared equipment suitable for fighting in the Second Inner Sector. Additionally, Togami had borrowed two RL2 multi-function guns from Akira. With the firepower of these two, victory was expected.

However, just having that equipment doesn't guarantee victory. Despite relying on the performance of their equipment, it was Carol and the others' skill that secured the win.

“What do you think, Akira? We're pretty good, aren't we? ”

“Yeah. Not bad at all.”

Akira answered sincerely. Although he didn't participate in the battle, he was prepared to support Carol and the others when they were in danger. Focused and alert, he intended to accurately assess all the enemy and ally lines of fire, and when Carol and the others were about to be hit, he planned to destroy the threats before they could cause harm.

Despite that, Carol and the others showed movements that didn't require Akira's support. It was based on the premise of Akira's high skill, enabling them to make assessments without intervening until the last moment. However, it was also true that Carol and the others' fighting style made it seem like Akira's support was unnecessary.

And Akira, feeling that Carol and the others didn't have the same Alpha support as himself, sincerely praised their abilities.

Sensing that Akira's words were genuine, Togami's mood also improved.

“Right? Even I can handle something like this.”

“If you say so, then how about returning the guns I lent you? ”

Togami, who was jokingly told this by Akira, responded with a cheerful attitude.

“I refuse. What's yours is yours, and what's mine is mine.”

Akira and Carol both laughed at Togami's cheeky yet unpretentious attitude. And Akira and the others continued their patrol within the ruins.

After that, they were attacked several times by mechanical monsters, and Carol and Togami defeated them alone as before. Since it was a relatively small-scale attack, with no more than about 20 machines,

Akira didn't bother to confirm whether he should help Carol and the others.

And in the next battle, Akira didn't confirm either. However, his intention was the opposite.

“Cover me from behind.”

Instructing them to stay back because it was dangerous, Carol and the others nodded seriously.

Their coordinated information gathering device alerted Akira and the others to the approaching enemy. There was only one opponent. Due to the thick colorless mist, details of its appearance were unclear, but it was a giant beast, about 30 meters long, with something protruding from its back, running towards Akira and the others from deep within the ruins.

Leaving Carol and the others behind, Akira ran towards the beast alone. He leaped further, kicked off the wall, kicked off the air, and waited in mid-air for the beast to approach.

Akira didn't deactivate his camouflage. Furthermore, the high-concentration colorless mist concealed Akira's presence. However, the beast possessed remarkably sensitive senses and had already detected Akira.

Akira's camouflage was so advanced that it didn't even let the mechanical monsters defeated by Carol and the others notice his presence. Yet, the beast had spotted Akira from a vague position where only its massive body was visible.

The beast attacked Akira as it ran with its massive body. From its back emerged humanoid, grotesque arms, which it swung towards Akira, who was still over 100 meters away, intending to strike him.

Simultaneously, Akira also fires at the beast. He unleashes a barrage of C^{Charge} bullets, heavily charged with energy, from the RL2 multi-

function guns in both hands, firing continuously from the extended magazines.

Carol and Togami also join the attack without delay. Since Akira is in the air, he's not in their line of fire. They unleash their firepower without reservation, without concern for friendly fire, and with full force.

Yet, the beast advances through the barrage without flinching. Akira and his companions aren't surprised, they've experienced this before.

The monster that appeared is the fused creature that Akira and his team fought in the Third Inner Sector.

Akira, hiding in the Dragon River's base, was tasked by Melshia to eliminate the fused creatures emerging from the depths of the Second Inner Sector in exchange for shelter.

After the declaration by the fake Akira, numerous fused creatures began emerging from the depths of the Second Inner Sector. This group, believed to be under the control of the Nationalist faction to which the fake Akira belongs, began advancing toward the Kugamayama City in affirmation of their beliefs.

The city responded promptly. Some of Tsubaki's security forces were redirected to the border between the First and Second Inner Sector to prepare for interception. Additionally, the hunter teams advancing to conquer the inner sections were requested to assist in dealing with the fused creatures. Thus, the conquest of the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin and the defeat of the Nationalist became synonymous.

Most of the fused creatures are advancing straight toward Kugamayama City. Since their route overlaps with the rear communication lines extended by the city into the ruins, that becomes the main battlefield. Elite members of each team are cooperating or competing to battle the massive horde of fused creatures there.

The remaining fused creatures either aim for the city via a detour route avoiding the rear communication lines or wander within the Second Inner Sector. Akira's team deals with the latter. Other high-ranking hunters, who lack the ability to fight in the main battlefield, are also redirected here.

The creature confronting Akira and his team now is named Baoregire. Until the hunters naturally decided on a term, the city communicated its designation. Additionally, the Kaiju they have faced is named Relagros.

While there's a bounty of 500 million Aurum on Akira, there's no bounty on Relagros. Hunters interpret this, along with the relatively low bounty on Akira, as a sign that Kugamayama City plans to handle the suppression of the Nationalist themselves rather than relying on hunters.

Akira intercepts the creature's meaty whip with gunfire from both his guns. The impact of the shots causes some of the creature's grotesque arms to sever. While the severed parts transformed into new monsters when Akira fought in the Third Inner Sector, here they remain mere chunks of flesh.

Akira continued firing, neutralizing the multiple long arms along with its grotesque upper body at the base. He then kept showering bullets onto the beastly part as well. Countless bullets tore through the beast's fur, which was tougher than steel, and ripped apart the even tougher flesh beneath, scattering it everywhere.

Joining his assault are Carol and Togami. Carol has upgraded her firearms for this job, making them even more powerful than before. Togami, wielding two RL2 multi-function guns, fires continuously, giving his all to support Akira.

Yet, Baoregire shows no signs of faltering despite the onslaught from the trio. While regenerating its lost parts, it charges through the ruins at a speed unexpected for a 30-meter creature, closing the distance to Akira in no time.

It then opens its massive maw wide to bite down. Rather than just widening its mouth, it enlarges its entire head, growing additional fangs, delivering a massive strike with its gigantic mouth.

However, the jaws only clamp down on the side of a ruined building within the ruins. Akira swiftly evades the attack by propelling himself through the air.

The building's walls, sturdy enough to withstand minor damage from Carol and Togami's battle with the swarm of mechanical monsters, now bear a large hole. But as long as they don't take the hit, it poses no problem. And at this point, Akira could handle such an attack even without Alpha's support.

Witnessing Akira's prowess, Alpha chuckles.

『Akira has gotten so good he can easily dodge attacks like that now. Well, if he had to desperately dodge an attack of this level, we'd have to give up on going after fake Akira, wouldn't we?』

Akira responds with a smile while earnestly engaged in battle.

『I see! I've gotten quite strong too, haven't I?』

『Yes, but don't get complacent, okay?』

『Got it! I never know when I'll get the chance to go after my impostor! So I'll train hard and get stronger now!』

With that, Akira avoids Baoregire's attack and lands on its back. He aims both guns directly downward and fires. Countless bullets rain down on the beast's back, causing massive craters in its flesh.

Yet, Baoregire remains standing. It forcefully tosses Akira off its back and attempts to lunge at him again.

This time, Akira dodges again, but with a slight adjustment in movement. Anticipating the creature's motion, he evades its closing maw at the last moment and presses the muzzles of his guns against its face. Then, he fires. The bullets, fired at close range, tear through the creature's body upon impact. Its head sustains significant damage.

Carol and the others, who were supporting Akira from the rear, were once again astonished by Baoregire's resilience and, even more so, by Akira's capabilities.

Togami lets out an impressed remark.

“He's really something, huh? ”

Carol agrees with a smile.

“Yes, truly remarkable. But, to be honest, isn't that a bit odd? ”

“His strength? Or his head? ”

“Both, but right now, I'd say his head. Do you know why? ”

Togami responds to Carol's cryptic question with his thoughts.

“Well... because he's training in a situation like this? ”

“Exactly. It really is training, isn't it? ”

“Yeah.”

Carol and the others exchanged slightly awkward smiles at that strange answer from Togami.

If they only consider defeating the enemy, Akira's way of fighting is inefficient. Akira and the others all have weapons that can be effective against Baoregire even from a distance. Moreover, unlike the Third Inner Sector, the enemy doesn't attempt to release a

torrent of energy. Therefore, it would be safer and more efficient for Akira and the others to continue shooting from a distance while maintaining effective range.

However, Akira deliberately charged in alone. If they considered why, it was partly for their safety. If Akira drew Baoregire's attacks, they wouldn't be targeted.

But if safety is the priority, then it would be better for everyone to retreat. There's no need for Akira to engage in close combat. There must be another reason. Carol and the others soon realized this, though it took them a while to grasp the other half of the reason. Strictly speaking, they had a vague sense that it might be training, but it took time to acknowledge it.

Togami said with a slightly exasperated tone.

“He's really strange, isn't he? ”

In this situation, Akira is risking unnecessary danger to become stronger. It's definitely abnormal. But that might be exactly why he could become so strong. Togami believed so.

“That's right, he really is strange.”

Carol muttered sincerely.

Even when Carol first met Akira, she was surprised by Akira's strength. At that time, Carol had some idea of the secret behind Akira's strength.

However, that reason alone couldn't explain Akira's current strength. Perhaps Carol's initial hunch was wrong. As Carol thought so, Akira continued to grow stronger.

Togami responded to Carol's muttering with his own interpretation.

“Yeah, you're right. He's definitely strange. Even though there's a possibility of fighting another Kaiju again when he's going to kill his own imposter.”

Carol aligns her thoughts with Togami's to cover up various things.

“...Yeah, that's true. Well, it's just like Akira.”

“Indeed.”

Carol and the others, with wry smiles, ended their conversation there. Behind his wry smile, Togami felt a longing, almost akin to admiration, to someday be on that side too, while Carol thought it was impossible for herself, they both continued to support Akira together.

The battle between Akira and Baoregire continues. Meanwhile, Baoregire continues to endure the barrage of bullets from Carol and the others. However, it doesn't change its target to Carol and the others. More accurately, it had been made to understand, thanks to Akira's interference, that it was impossible.

Akira, dodging Baoregire's fierce attacks, lands again on the creature's back. Then, using both hands, he blows away the humanoid shape growing from its back with his guns. Even as it turns into countless fragments, the giant mass, still in the process of regeneration, scatters throughout the ruins along with its long arm.

Long cracks run beneath Akira's feet on the creature's back. From these cracks, fangs grow, transforming into a mouth larger than Akira's, aiming to bite him.

Akira leaps to dodge the gaping mouth. But the flesh under the mouth swells, attempting to bite Akira even more. He dodges it by kicking off in mid-air and shoots at the swollen part.

Baoregire's animalistic part continues to mutate through cycles of damage and regeneration, no longer resembling a quadruped

carnivore. Yet, Baoregire's spirit remains unbroken. Manipulating its massive body skillfully with its odd number of legs, it persistently attacks Akira.

Still, there are limits. Continuous gunfire and the repeated regeneration to heal wounds deplete its internal energy, exhausting it.

Taking advantage of this momentary sluggishness, Akira, sensing the enemy's limit, relentlessly fires his guns. That becomes the final blow. Baoregire collapses with the humanoid shape on its back only partially regenerated, and it breathes its last.

Landing beside Baoregire, who was in midair, Akira stops shooting and gazes silently at its corpse. There's no sign of movement. Akira exhales.

『...It seems okay now. Alright. We defeated it.』

Alpha, also praising Akira's efforts, informs that Baoregire is dead according to her assessment.

『Yes, you did it. You defeated it without relying on anyone until the end. It was good training.』

『Yeah. I want to say I've gotten stronger too, but...』

Akira, who had returned Alpha's praise with a smile, now wears a slightly troubled expression.

『It's gotten considerably weaker, hasn't it? It didn't even emit any beams or anything.』

『Perhaps it doesn't have enough energy to do so. While it's possible to release, doing so might lead to instant death due to energy depletion.』

『Maybe it's using its energy for body regeneration instead.』

The fused creatures Akira's group battled in the Third Inner Sector were constantly supplied with a large amount of energy remotely from the ruins. However, in the Second Inner Sector, there was either no energy supply or it was significantly reduced, resulting in a considerable weakening.

『That Kaiju named Relagros not emerging from the Third Inner Sector is probably for the same reason, right?』

The colossal body consumes a vast amount of energy just by moving. Due to this, in the Second Inner Sector, where there isn't sufficient remote energy supply, it might not be able to function. Alpha explained it that way.

『Whether it's convenient or inconvenient...』

Akira thinks while answering.

He doesn't want to fight something like that without being prepared. He also doesn't want to encounter it while he's with Carol and the others.

However, if the Kaiju were to appear in the Second Inner Sector, other high-ranking hunters might defeat it. Akira just wants to eliminate his impostor and doesn't particularly want to defeat the Kaiju. If he can avoid fighting the Kaiju, he wants to.

His impostor is probably in the Third Inner Sector. With that Kaiju. So, ideally, that Kaiju should be defeated before he re-enters the Third Inner Sector.

Akira thinks this way, unable to decide if the current situation is convenient or inconvenient for him.

That's when Alpha smiles and says,

『I'd consider it convenient.』

『Why?』

『Because you can become strong enough now. Akira. There's no guarantee you can defeat your impostor even without Relagros, right? What if your impostor has managed to control that Kaiju with power? Can you win against it with your current strength?』

『...I can't.』

Even though Akira also thinks that with Alpha's support, it might be possible, given Alpha's questioning, it's either impossible or providing such support would lead to an inconvenience for Alpha. Akira thought so and answered that it's impossible.

Alpha couldn't completely read Akira's thoughts. However, she did understand the content of his response. She answered with a smile.

『That's why let's get stronger now. I'll help too.』

『Yeah.』

If he becomes stronger, most things will be resolved. And now there's time for that. Akira thinks so and switches his focus.

That's when Carol and the others arrive.

“Akira. Are you hurt?”

“No, I'm fine.”

“I see. That's a relief. But still, you managed to defeat it alone again. You're really amazing.”

Togami also continues with a smile.

“Yeah. Truly amazing. Trying to take this thing down alone.”

Since Akira has managed to defeat it on his own at times, he accepts the praise from the two. Then he replies.

“It's not like I defeated it alone. If Carol and the others hadn't helped, it would have been much harder and taken more time to defeat. I appreciate it. Thank you.”

Although he struggled and it took time, he interprets his ability to defeat it alone as having confidence. Carol and the others lightly laugh, thinking it's typical of Akira.

“Well then, Carol. I'll be a bit away again, so I'll leave the rest to you.”

“Got it.”

After Akira distances himself from Carol and the others, Carol makes a call. Shortly after, a large trailer arrives. Carol points to Baoregire's corpse while talking to the representative of the hunters who descended from the trailer.

“This here. Also, there are quite a few mechanical monsters scattered around nearby, so if you have the time, please take care of them too.”

These hunters are transporters hired by Dragon River. They've come to transport the monsters Akira's group defeated.

While hunters from the old-world scavenge relics from the ruins of the old-world to make a living, those relics include monsters. Manufactured mechanical monsters and reproduced biological monsters are both conglomerates of advanced technology from the old-world, which have value as relics for modern people.

However, commonplace weak monsters have low value since their technology is low and has already been analyzed. Even if they bring back defeated monsters to sell, they only fetch prices equivalent to meat or scrap metal.

On the other hand, powerful monsters are traded at high prices because they employ advanced technology essential for their strength.

Therefore, Baoregire's corpse will be traded at a high price. Its strength is enough to challenge high-ranking hunters. Moreover, it has emerged from the Third Inner Sector, an area with significantly advanced technology. By analyzing its corpse, there is a good chance of acquiring that advanced technology.

Even without using energy packs, it can constantly receive a large amount of energy remotely from the outside, strengthen its body, heal and regenerate injured parts. Furthermore, it can use energy-based armaments as much as it wants. If the technology for enhancing the body obtained through analyzing the corpse becomes affordable and practical, the company obtaining that technology will skyrocket in the industry.

Considering the possibility of failure in the analysis, it was worth it for companies to pay a large sum for Baoregire's corpse.

The representative of the transporters looks at the valuable relic, Baoregire's corpse, and with a slight nervousness in his expression, asks Carol,

“Uh, it's definitely dead, right? ”

“Probably.”

“Probably...? ”

The man's expression twists at Carol's ambiguous response. But Carol continues without concern.

“It doesn't try to dodge even when shot at. It doesn't react even when approached. Its wounds don't regenerate. In other words, it's no different from a corpse. I intended to neutralize it to that extent, but

I can't assert that it's dead. If you're asking to get a statement, all I can say is 'probably.'"

"...No, it's not like I was asking in that sense..."

"Is that so? Then it's dead."

Carol doesn't think the man was trying to get a statement for precautionary purposes. However, if an unforeseen situation arises, having given a statement can disadvantage her in future negotiations. So, she gave an answer that doesn't guarantee that Baoregire's corpse is definitely a corpse and absolves her of responsibility.

The man understands the meaning of Carol's word "probably" as being of that level. He decides it's dead and starts working.

"Got it. Alright, let's move it! "

Seeing the massive body that still looked formidable even in death, and then looking at Carol and the other person who claimed to have defeated it, the man couldn't help but ask Carol.

"You two managed to defeat this thing all by yourselves? "

His tone conveyed less amazement at Carol and her companion's strength and more of a doubt whether they truly managed to take down Baoregire alone.

To this, Carol responded with a deliberately proud smile.

"Yes. Aren't we strong? "

"Yeah."

The man didn't entirely buy Carol's response either. However, considering that their client was Dragon River, he assumed that Carol and her companion either had support from the team's

powerhouse or were equipped with powerful gear to take down Baoregire on their own. He didn't inquire further.

He wasn't particularly interested in knowing the details. Pursuing a simple curiosity might end up putting him in an unfavorable position with Dragon River, and he didn't want that.

As the transporters loaded Baoregire's corpse and the remnants of the mechanical monsters onto the trailer and departed, Akira, who had kept his distance, returned.

(I wonder what that hunter would think if they knew that Akira practically defeated it all by himself, not just the two of us.)

Carol mused with an amused smile, puzzling Akira with her expression.

“Carol. What's up? ”

“Nothing much. So, what's the plan? Are we heading back? We're good to go, but it's up to you, Akira.”

Togami also agreed with Carol's suggestion.

“Yeah, we're good. It's your call, Akira.”

Continuing the patrol meant the possibility of encountering Baoregire again. If Akira misjudged his own level of exhaustion and lost, Carol and her companion would die. Carol left the decision to Akira, knowing the stakes.

“Got it. Let's continue.”

“Understood.”

“Roger that.”

And so, Akira and the others resumed patrolling the Second Inner Sector. They didn't venture deeper but circled closer to the First Inner Sector. After repelling groups of mechanical monsters a few times, they encountered Baoregire once more. They defeated it without any casualties, just like before. Akira and his team's work for the day was done.



After finishing their work for the day, Akira and the others rested in Carol's camping car. When Akira, having finished bathing, returned to the car's living room, he noticed Togami wearing a complex expression.

“Togami. Is something wrong? ”

“Ah, no, I was just checking my Hunter Rank...”

“And? ”

“...It's reached 50.”

Was that supposed to be a problem? Akira wondered, but he quickly understood the reason behind Togami's expression. And then, instinctively, he attempted to show understanding, only to be cautioned by Alpha.

『Akira, don't make a face that says “I understand how you feel.”』

『Oops.』

Today's achievement had drastically raised Togami's Hunter Rank. He had taken down two Baoregires, after all. It was a natural outcome. However, Togami couldn't rejoice. The achievement was earned by Akira.

Akira was officially nonexistent. Therefore, the credit would go to Carol and her team. Togami had known this beforehand, but seeing his Hunter Rank rise so dramatically left him with feelings he couldn't fully digest.

Akira understood Togami's sentiment well. His power came from Alpha's support, not his own. Yet he was praised by others as if it were his own ability. He had carried that feeling for a long time.

However, he couldn't just say, "I understand your feelings." He couldn't reveal Alpha's existence.

What should he say instead? As Akira pondered, Carol chimed in with a smile.

"By the way, I reached Rank 51, Akira. Thanks! "

Unlike Togami, Carol showed no sign of concern. Akira felt relieved by Carol's nonchalant attitude.

"You're welcome. Well, I'm the one dragging you along, after all. Consider it a favor."

"Yeah. Since we're helping each other, this much is fair game, right? "

To further ease Akira's mind, Carol jokingly replied with a laugh.

Akira decided to address Togami.

"Well, if you're feeling a bit off, sorry, but just stew in it for now. You do owe me, right? Think of it as paying off that debt."

Togami also shifted his focus accordingly. He replied with a light-hearted smile.

"Can't be helped. Got it."

"Don't worry about it."

“No problem. I'll catch up to a Hunter Rank of 50 in no time.”

His current Hunter Rank was nothing more than an exaggerated fiction. Recognizing this, Togami deliberately told himself that he would catch up and surpass that fiction.

Carol interjected.

“What are you talking about? A Hunter Rank of 50 won't do, will it? ”

“Why's that? ”

“Well, because we're still going to fight alongside Akira tomorrow, right? Naturally, your Hunter Rank will need to be even higher. 50 won't cut it at all.”

Upon hearing this, Togami asked.

“Then how high does it need to be? ”

“Hmm, maybe around 70? ”

Togami's face tensed up. Akira's efforts were slipping away from him. It wouldn't be surprising if his rank climbed that high, considering. That thought alone made Togami hesitate.

Still, Togami responded.

“I'll do it.”

“Good luck.”

Akira and Carol both smiled lightly as they replied.

“Yeah. Sorry about that.”

“Ah, yeah. Leave it to me.”

Togami returned the smile, but it seemed forced.

Chapter 236: Sheryl's Anxiety

On the top floor of a skyscraper, incongruous in the slum district, Sheryl sits in a needlessly spacious room, emphasizing luxury as a symbol of power rather than functional necessity, sifting through various documents and reports.

The data displayed in her augmented vision shows the excellent performance of various ventures undertaken by the syndicate, including relic shops and related businesses, as well as a private security company comprised of syndicate members.

However, Sheryl's expression is grim.

Rising from her expensive chair, Sheryl moves to the wall of the room to look outside. The entire wall is glass, or more precisely, transparent displays, providing a clear view of the outside scenery.

The distant view reveals the mundane slum district with its dilapidated buildings. However, looking down and around the building, one can see a scene reminiscent of a bustling city area near the city's defensive wall.

This building where Sheryl is located is the new headquarters of the Sheryl's gang, constructed with the vast wealth generated by the syndicate's various ventures. The surrounding cityscape is a testament to the economic impact of this building, which serves as a relic shop as well. It also serves as proof of the syndicate's power supporting this prosperity.

Not long ago, the slum district was dominated by two major syndicates, the Ezont's gang and the Harlias, vying for the immense profits generated by the city's underground economy.

But now, it's a one-sided dominance by the Sheryl's gang, both economically and militarily.

Armed with comprehensive support augmented suits, Sheryl's forces alone, armed with weaponry, can overwhelm the forces of other syndicates. They even possess humanoid weapons. Even without Akira, who is the syndicate's military backbone, present locally, there is no longer any threat to Sheryl and her gang within the framework of the slum district.

The safety guaranteed by this overwhelming force also boosts Sheryl's economic endeavors.

Relics flowing from the Tsubaki-managed area are wholesaled through Inabe to Sheryl's relic shop. There are plenty of people seeking these valuable relics.

However, if the security in that area is poor, fewer people will venture to the shops. Even though valuable relics that are not normally available can be purchased, few are willing to venture to dangerous places with the risk of losing their lives, even with escorts, to acquire them.

In other words, if it's safe, the number of customers will increase. Moreover, those customers, since the items they're after are high-quality, consist of individuals with a net worth exceeding 100 million Aurums each. For them, 1 million Aurums is just pocket change. The business opportunities that arise in a place where such individuals gather are immeasurable.

And naturally, these places fall under the territory of the Sheryl's gang. The profits from these ventures also flow to Sheryl and her gang. Their earnings have already surpassed the scope of the slum district and rival those of small cities in terms of economic scale.

Normally, earning this much would not go unnoticed by Kugamayama City. In relative terms, indirectly, it would be seen as encroaching on the city's interests. They would intervene and attempt to crush it, just as the two major syndicates of the slum district were crushed by the city's machinations in the past.

However, this time it's different. Sheryl's relic shop has involvement from Inabe, the head of a major faction among the city's officials.

Sheryl's ventures are considered part of Inabe's interests and have indeed brought substantial profits to Inabe's faction. In other words, without the power to challenge Inabe's faction, Sheryl and her gang cannot be touched. Rather, many of the city's enterprises are seeking profits by associating with Sheryl, bowing their heads to her.

This building, this room, and the view from here all signify Sheryl's power. The once insignificant girl from a weak syndicate now possesses such power.

And Sheryl herself understands just how unlikely this rise to power is. She knows it's a truly rare ascent.

Understanding this, Sheryl's expression remains grim. She doesn't have the luxury of smiling. Instead, her face is tinged with anxiety and urgency as she gazes upon the vista of domination below her and murmurs.

“Not enough... This level of power is...”

The source of those words is not an insatiable desire for more power. It stems from the fear of being deemed inadequate by Akira.

Sheryl was escaping into her work. She blames herself for Yumina's death. What would happen if Akira found out? Out of fear, she diverted her gaze by burying herself in work. The prosperity of the Sheryl's gang was also evidence of Sheryl desperately avoiding reality.

And it was also an unconscious plea for salvation.

It's true that Sheryl is partly responsible for Yumina's death, but she's only a contributing factor. She's not the direct cause. Even if it's revealed, Akira might not care as much. She clings to this optimistic interpretation like a lifeline.

But it's hard to believe he wouldn't care at all. Even if she isn't targeted for retaliation, it's conceivable that he might consider cutting ties due to resentment. If Sheryl had significant power when Akira hesitated, wouldn't he think twice about severing those ties? Sheryl thought so.

But she doesn't know how much power that would require, so she continues to seek it relentlessly. She can never convince herself that she has enough power to be safe, constantly overwhelmed by the anxiety that never dissipates.

And even the efforts she makes for that purpose are, unconsciously, nothing but escapism, Sheryl also understands. No matter how much power she gains, if Akira sees her as an enemy, it's over. It's just a matter of whether the enemy is weak or strong. And because the enemy is so powerful, Sheryl desperately averts her gaze from this reality.

From this fact, Sheryl desperately, unconsciously, looks away.

As Sheryl looks outside, she receives a message from her subordinate. Upon this reminder, Sheryl instantly composes herself. The agitation from earlier dissipates like a lie, replaced by the presence of the head of a powerful organization.

“What is it? ”

“Boss. Shijima is here.”

“Understood. Show him in.”

A few minutes later, Shijima enters the room. Shijima is alone, accompanied only by Sheryl's gang members armed with weapons. This difference in status between Sheryl and Shijima is apparent.

“Long time no see, Sheryl.”

“Yes, it's been a while. So, Shijima-san. What is it that you want to discuss in person? ”

“It goes without saying. It's about Akira.”

Shijima showed a tired face towards the opponent whose position had not just reversed but become completely alienated.

Currently, there are broadly two factions in the slum district: the Sheryl's gang and everyone else. And Shijima had become the leader of the factions other than the Sheryl's gang.

Formerly leading a mid-level faction in the slum district, Shijima established a seemingly friendly relationship with Sheryl after Akira brought Sheryl into his base.

And that relationship continued even as the Sheryl's gang expanded to its current massive size. With the profits obtained from this, Shijima's faction became one of the largest factions, rivaling the top two factions from before, excluding the Sheryl's gang.

Despite becoming the coordinator of these major factions, Shijima didn't reign over them. In reality, his role was more of a mediator for the alliance.

Still, the benefits from being the coordinator were significant. Normally, there would be disputes over the position and privileges it entails.

However, this time, it was settled easily. Sheryl designated Shijima as the coordinator during a meeting where bosses of various factions gathered to decide on the coordinator.

If Sheryl decided so, no one else could oppose. There was such a distinct power dynamic between Sheryl and the others.

Despite potential lingering dissatisfaction, this time, it was resolved. When asked why Shijima, Sheryl responded like this.

I only know of Shijima, who negotiated with Akira in the midst of a conflict and managed to make him back off and even pay money, even though the fighting had already begun.

Hearing this, others understood as well. The coordinator of the alliance is the negotiator in case they have a conflict with Akira. They don't have the confidence to resolve it as peacefully as Shijima. First, they think that, and above all, they don't want to.

Thus, the position of coordinator of the alliance became something imposed rather than fought over. And under the pretext of Sheryl's intentions, it was imposed on Shijima.

Although it was a forced outcome, it greatly increased Shijima's power. The bosses of various factions needed to consider Shijima in various disputes and negotiations to demonstrate to Sheryl that they recognized him as their coordinator.

Even with such power gained, Shijima couldn't be happy at all. It was because of the price he had to pay, being in this situation right now. Seeing that he was in front of someone who could kill him at any moment, Shijima immediately discerned the precarious state of the person's mind and realized that he had to negotiate with Sheryl from now on, which made him show a tired face.

Sheryl cast a cold gaze at Shijima.

“About Akira? What is it? ”

Sheryl hadn't noticed her own gaze. And if she did, it was a gaze that she had to pretend to hide if she was aware of it.

Shijima, feeling the tension within him intensify as he looked into Sheryl's eyes, tried to respond normally outwardly.

“So, it's about Akira becoming a bounty target.”

“So, what about it? ”

Sensing a hint of irritation on Sheryl's face, Shijima carefully chose his words, feeling like he was treading on a minefield.

“..... Regarding that matter, I came directly to inform, both inside and outside the faction, mainly to the lower-ranking members, that our position won't change. That's the purpose.”

If they were to express unwillingness to deal with the Sheryl's gang anymore or express a desire to temporarily distance themselves due to Akira becoming a bounty target, it would be seen as hostile.

On the other hand, if they were to declare that they had no intention of breaking their relationship with the Sheryl's gang even in this situation, they would be doubted. Such individuals would be perceived as lacking credibility, needing to earn trust by all means.

Therefore, the purpose was not to convey this to Sheryl. The bosses of the factions had no intention of opposing Akira just because he became a bounty target. It was natural, so there was no need to inform Sheryl. However, there were some lower-ranking members who didn't understand this. This was to make it clear to those who didn't understand the faction's stance. Shijima had conveyed this to Sheryl.

He couldn't say anything risky to Sheryl at the moment. Being misunderstood would be dangerous. There was no guarantee that any misunderstandings would be cleared up, and there might not even be an opportunity to clear them up in the first place.

Also, in a fragile state of mind, there was a higher chance of negative interpretations. They might interpret it as harassment and kill him without giving him a chance to explain. Such things were entirely possible.

But by carefully choosing his words like this, it should be fine no matter how they were interpreted. Shijima told himself that and managed to maintain his composure somehow.

Then Sheryl replied.

“Is that so? Well, then, that's all. I'm sorry to trouble you with this, especially since I'm quite busy. But I'll have to ask you to leave now.”

“No, I'm sorry for taking up your time even though I'm busy too.”

Shijima said so and tried to leave quickly. However, he was called out by Sheryl as he turned his back.

“Ah, Shijima-san. Can I ask you one thing? ”

“.....What is it? ”

Feeling relieved that he could leave, but now caught off guard by being called back, Shijima responded somewhat awkwardly.

Sheryl remotely operated the display device on the wall. The image of Akira killing Udajima on top of the Kaiju and declaring his defection to the Nationalist was projected.

“It seems the city is divided on whether this Akira is real or fake. What do you think, Shijima-san? ”

Shijima felt relieved to hear such a question instead. He relaxed and lightly smiled as he answered.

“What do I think? It's obviously fake, isn't it? ”

In response to his answer, Sheryl's expression softened slightly.

“.....Yes, I suppose so.”

“Yeah, undoubtedly fake. Are there only fools inside the walls who can't see that...? ”

Of course, Shijima understood. It was entirely conceivable that the city, for some reason, had decided that Akira was fake and put a

bounty on him. However, for now, to avoid displeasing Sheryl, he decided not to mention it and continued with light banter.

But then a third party spoke up.

“Good. I'm glad you knew that he's fake.”

Shijima reflexively turned his gaze towards the voice. Then, the owner of the voice revealed themselves by deactivating camouflage. At that moment, Shijima's face contorted with strong displeasure.

“...Akira. So you were here.”

While uttering such a surprised voice, Shijima felt relieved inside. What if the Akira in the video had claimed to be the real one? He breathed out, realizing how dangerous it could have been.

And then, inadvertently, Shijima cast a dissatisfied look at Sheryl. He wondered what Sheryl thought about Akira becoming a bounty target, feeling as though he was being tested in Akira's presence. However, that expression quickly turned into a puzzled one.

“Sheryl...? ”

Sheryl, upon seeing Akira, froze in place.

Sheryl had no mental capacity to meet Akira at this moment. Akira suddenly appearing in this pressured situation caused Sheryl to be greatly shaken, losing her composure and significantly dulling her thinking. As a result, she committed a mistake that she would never do under normal circumstances—she inadvertently blurted out her inner thoughts.

“...Who are you? ”



The one who revealed themselves by deactivating camouflage was the fake Akira.

Upon hearing Sheryl's mutter, Shijima also understood that this Akira was an imposter. She promptly grasped the situation and couldn't help but shower Sheryl with rebuke.

“You...! Fool...! ”

Sheryl snapped back to her senses from the reprimand. Then, she immediately realized her mistake and contorted her face in frustration.

The imposter Akira perfectly resembled Akira in appearance. It was impossible to discern from there. However, Shijima, sensing a slight discomfort from other aspects such as atmosphere, expressions, and demeanor, immediately saw through the imposter. This demonstrated Sheryl's undeniable competence.

Yet Sheryl lamented.

If she had realized he was a fake, she should have kept it to herself. She should have pretended not to notice, played along to buy time, and secretly conveyed to Inabe, the real Akira, or the city's defense force that there was a fake Akira here.

If she had done that, the issue with the fake Akira might have been resolved here. The city's forces could have surrounded this place, captured or killed the fake Akira, and it might have been settled.

But it was already too late. She had inadvertently informed the other party that she knew they were a fake. She had crushed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity with her own hands. Sheryl deeply regretted her mistake.

But that regret, in a sense, brought a sense of calm to Sheryl. She temporarily forgot her anxiety and fear about being known by Akira as the remote cause of Yumina's death, focusing solely on dealing with the current situation.

Sheryl promptly moved on to the next best course of action. First, she remotely operated the defense system of the room. As a result, a thick, transparent wall resembling reinforced glass emerged, dividing the room between Sheryl's gang and the fake Akira.

Confined on the other side of the wall, the fake Akira murmured while looking at Sheryl expressionlessly.

“Do you understand...? ”

In response to the fake Akira, Sheryl deliberately laughed in a lively manner, her voice slightly roughened.

“Too bad! Did you think I would be fooled just because you look the same? ”

With a triumphant smile, Sheryl pointed vigorously at the fake Akira, diverting their attention to herself.

“I'm Akira's lover, you know? I can see through you right away! Don't compare me to the fools in the city who put a bounty on Akira just because they were deceived by such footage! ”

While laughing heartily and speaking loudly, Sheryl secretly communicated with her subordinates in the room. Don't move. Don't even aim your guns. Don't do anything that might trigger the other party's actions. She issued such instructions.

“Well, indeed, you look exactly like Akira! Those who judge Akira solely by appearance might be deceived! But I'm different! Since when do you think I've been dating Akira? ”

Sheryl kept talking incessantly. By continuing the conversation, she maintained the other party's willingness to listen to her. However, she avoided mentioning anything about the other party's situation, such as being captured or confined, or being unable to escape. She refrained from saying anything that might prompt the other party to take some action.

“I've been with Akira since the time he was in the slums! It's a different story altogether! Unlike those who only approached him after he became a successful hunter! ”

From Sheryl's determined effort to keep talking, Shijima understood that she was buying time. Concerned about the necessity of buying time, he worried about the strength of the wall separating them from the fake Akira. He quietly approached one of Sheryl's subordinates who was nearby and asked in a low voice.

“...Hey, how strong is that wall? ”

“Sorry, I don't know even if you ask me. We weren't informed about the details of the boss's room facilities.”

Useless. Shijima thought and clicked his tongue inwardly.

“What about reinforcements? How soon will they arrive? They've been called, right?”

“Probably... We haven't done anything because we received instructions from the boss not to do anything...”

Useless. Shijima thought even more and actually clicked his tongue. Just as he was about to consider escaping alone, Sheryl's voice reached him through her subordinate's communication device.

“Shijima-san. Please don't do anything unnecessary. Also, everyone, get down on the ground. Three, two, one...”

Just before it reached zero, three black humanoid weapons broke through the outer wall of the building. With their huge arms forcibly entering the room, they aimed oversized guns at the fake Akira.

“...Zero! ”

Simultaneously, Sheryl and the others attempted to lie down on the floor. And before their bodies touched the ground, bullets resembling shells were unleashed like a storm from the six barrels.

Due to their excessive power, the room where Sheryl and the others were located was instantly blown away.

Sheryl, who regained her composure from Shijima's scolding, first operated the defense system of the room to confine the fake Akira. Additionally, she maximized the output of the wall's force field armor to its limit.

While continuing to buy time by unilaterally talking to the fake Akira, the Sheryl's gang remotely activated the humanoid weapons they possessed and sent them out on autopilot.

The deployed units were the enhanced black humanoid weapons from Yoshioka Heavy Industry. The artifacts flowing from Tsubaki's management area were all valuable and expensive items. As these items were dealt with in artifact stores, maintaining the firepower to prevent them from being robbed was essential. These three units were procured for that purpose.

The units burst out of the faction's hangar and headed straight for the room where Sheryl's gang was located at full speed. Breaking through the building's outer wall, they partially entered the room and opened fire on the fake Akira.

At that moment, Sheryl switched the display device of the wall to record the outside scene instead of showing it as a window, concealing the appearance of the units. Additionally, taking advantage of the high-output force field armor's nature of information interception, she made it difficult for those inside to notice the approaching units.

As a result, the three units achieved a surprise attack on the fake Akira with as much precision as their capabilities allowed. While they couldn't move like skilled pilots on autopilot, they could fill the narrow interior with a barrage of bullets using extended magazines. Massive bullets raged. The room's strong force field armor couldn't withstand their power and reached its limit almost instantly, blowing away the room where Sheryl and her gang were located.

With most of the walls and ceiling gone, the room was in a state where it was impossible to call it an interior anymore. Sheryl, lying on the floor, propped herself up. Thanks to the reinforced innerwear she wore underneath and the sturdy old-world clothing, she was unharmed.

Sheryl's subordinates were also unharmed thanks to their comprehensive support augmented suits. They got up, pushing aside the rubble they were buried under. Luckily, Shijima was unharmed. He managed to stand up with the support of nearby debris, albeit unsteadily.

Sheryl looked around to assess the situation, but the smoke made it difficult to see. With a grim expression, she stared in the direction where the fake Akira was.

(...Did we defeat him?)

He was someone who stood atop that Kaiju. He didn't seem weak. However, they should have executed the surprise attack successfully. With that thought, Sheryl peeked with anticipation.

A strong wind blew. With the walls blown away, there was nothing to block the outside gusts. The wind swiftly dispersed the surrounding smoke.

Sheryl's expression tensed. As the smoke cleared, the fake Akira stood calmly. And the three humanoid weapons lay scattered, broken into pieces.

“That's...! ”

Even if they couldn't kill him, they should have inflicted serious injuries. In that state, gathering her subordinates' combat personnel might still work. Sheryl's hopeful expectation was quickly shattered.

The fake Akira wore a face devoid of any indication of anger or tension, which could also be interpreted as composure. And with that expression, he began to walk towards Sheryl.

Reacting to his movement, Sheryl's subordinates, driven by fear and panic, opened fire on the fake Akira.

But he effortlessly dodged their attacks. Then, he retaliated. The fake Akira's weapon had the power to easily destroy the enhanced black wolves. With their augmented suits far less resilient than that, Sheryl's subordinates were defenseless against it. In moments, they were all slaughtered by the fake Akira's gunfire.

Sheryl attempted to flee. The reinforced innerwear endowed her, a mere girl, with the strength to crush rocks and the leg power to kick the floor swiftly. She attempted to dash away with a speed imperceptible to bystanders.

However, the fake Akira swiftly closed the distance and maneuvered around in front of Sheryl. Then, he struck her abdomen with his fist as she stood there in shock. His blow easily pierced through the defense of her old-world sturdy clothing and reinforced innerwear. As she fell, he continued his assault, this time targeting her legs. Both were broken. The functions of her reinforced innerwear were destroyed, rendering Sheryl unable to even run away.

As Sheryl lay there in agony, the fake Akira forcibly administered some recovery medicine into her mouth.

“It's a recovery medicine. Eat it. I have no intention of killing you.”

While glaring at the fake Akira, Sheryl swallowed the medicine.

“Who... are you? What's your purpose? ”

“I'll tell you later. For now, just stay quiet.”

Saying so, the fake Akira picked up Sheryl and prepared to leave the scene.

Shijima watched the whole sequence while leaning against debris, feeling a deep sense of relief.

(...T-Thank goodness. ...Damn them! They got me involved in this mess!)

Shijima wasn't foolish enough to utter the curses born from that relief. However, as if those curses were heard, the fake Akira halted his steps and started walking towards Shijima. Shijima's face tensed instantly.

When the fake Akira came before Shijima, he inquired,

“You said the Akira in that footage must be a fake. Why is that? ”

Although asked in a normal tone, there was no room for refusal. It was either talk or die, Shijima felt. And he didn't want to die.

“If he were the real deal, he wouldn't pull such a stunt.”

“Why? Yumina died because of the city. If he learned the truth and got furious, wouldn't it make sense for him to resort to such a stunt? ”

“It's the opposite. If Akira was furious to that extent, he wouldn't stoop to teaming up with the Nationalist. I don't know how they captured that Udajima guy, but the real Akira wouldn't resort to such tricks. He'd kill them on the spot and then move on to kill the others.”

“But if he did that, wouldn't he just end up getting killed himself? ”

“Anyone smart enough to make that judgment wouldn't have barged into my base after killing my subordinates, dragging their corpses along. They wouldn't step into a scene where two major factions are killing each other and turn both of them into enemies.”

The fake Akira listened to Shijima's words with interest. He nodded lightly and said,

“...I see. So, that's what I'm like, huh...”

“Huh? ”

With words that seemed to believe himself to be the real Akira, the imposter Akira's, Shijima couldn't help but express his perplexity. But soon, that became the least of his concerns.

“Alright. I'll take you with me too.”

“Huh!?”

The imposter Akira catches the surprised Shijima. Then, with Sheryl on his right and Shijima on his left, he moves to the edge of the building and throws them both into the air. Shijima's scream echoes in the sky.

However, Sheryl and the others didn't crash to the ground. Instead, they were thrown into the cockpit of a humanoid weapon, waiting in camouflage mode in mid-air.

The imposter Akira once again activates the camouflage function and disappears. Then, along with the aircraft carrying Sheryl and the others, he departs from the scene.

After the imposter Akira leaves, reinforcements from the Sheryl gang arrive at the scene, pushing aside the debris of the destroyed staircase. The city units, informed later, arrive a little delayed. However, it was all too late.

Chapter 237: Support from Inabe

Akira continues patrolling the Second Inner Sector with Carol and the others today. So far, they've only encountered mechanical monsters, and Akira has been leaving the fighting to Carol and the others while remaining hidden.

『I'm bored, Alpha. It's not like Baoregire stopped coming from the Third Inner Sector, right?』

『Yes, indeed. It seems like there are engagements elsewhere. Perhaps hunters closer to the Third Inner Sector have become accustomed to fighting Baoregire.』

『Ah, I see. That makes sense.』

Akira's group is patrolling an area near the First Inner Sector. Therefore, the entities they encounter are basically those that haven't been defeated elsewhere.

Initially an unknown monster, Baoregire already has numerous reports of being defeated. Analysis of its nature and weaknesses is also progressing. If hunters have become accustomed to fighting Baoregire and the number of unsuccessful kills has decreased, it wouldn't be surprising if the number of entities reaching Akira's group significantly decreased.

『Hmm... Maybe we should fight further inside?』

『Akira, let's not do that. The patrol route was designated from Dragon River. It's not good to deviate from it. If you go alone, it's fine, but leaving Carol and the others behind isn't good, you know?』

『Ah, I see. Nothing we can do about it. Let's give up.』

This patrol is supposed to be carried out by Carol and Togami alone. Although Akira's absence wouldn't be an issue, encountering Baoregire while only Carol and the others are present is still a concern. Akira quickly retracts his words.

『...Well, whatever. I just thought actual combat would be more efficient for training. We're still doing training, just killing time, you know?』

In front of Akira, who responded with telepathy, Akira is engaging with Alpha, wielding blades in both hands. In the midst of the battle, Akira appears as a presence within the augmented reality, just like Alpha. Akira is controlling it.

However, he's not manipulating his augmented reality self from a third-person perspective like controlling a puppet. He's experiencing it firsthand, moving it like his own body.

This training became possible because Akira has become more adept at perceiving extended senses than before. By perceiving his augmented reality self's senses with extended senses, he achieves this. Even with just vision, he's managing the very complicated task of simultaneously grasping both what his augmented reality self sees and what his actual self sees.

Of course, Akira couldn't do this training on his own. Alpha handles all collision detection for the rapidly swinging blades. No matter how much Akira imagines, he wouldn't go beyond the realm of fantasizing about fighting coolly.

And evidence that this isn't just fantasy is reflected. Alpha evades Akira's blades and strikes with both hands. As a result, Akira's augmented reality self is marked with a cross. By vertically bisecting his head, his extended sense of sight shifts up and down.

In front of the dismembered corpse, Alpha smiles at the real Akira.

『Akira, even for training that's just killing time, you have to take it seriously, okay?』

『I'm taking it seriously even now. But moving my body would be better. I know it's impossible right now, though.』

Even with camouflage active, moving quickly makes it easier for others to spot you. If you're serious about hiding, staying still is best. For that reason, Akira was doing this kind of training.

Then, a message comes from Togami.

“Akira, let's head back.”

“Did something happen?”

“I received a message via Drankam. It seems a person named Hikaru from the city is coming to see me.”

“Got it.”

In reality, Hikaru has business with Akira, not Togami. Akira understood that much.



A rugged transport vehicle is heading towards the Dragon River base where Akira and the others are stationed. In the rear seats, Hikaru wears a somber expression, hinting at fatigue and anxiety. With a voice tainted by exhaustion and unease fitting her expression, she speaks to the two in the front seats.

“Elena-san... Sara-san... I want to believe everything will be okay, but in case of emergency, I'm really counting on you, okay?”

Sara responds with a smile.

“We know. Leave it to us.”

Elena also smiles in response.

“Once we've taken on the job, we'll do it properly.”

Elena and her team's job is to guard Hikaru. And part of that job includes mediating if Hikaru clashes with Akira. In fact, what Hikaru values most from Elena's team is exactly that.

Elena's team understands this much. If they were merely sought for their combat abilities as guards, there are plenty more suitable candidates than themselves.

Elena promptly goes about the requested task.

“But Hikaru-san, as advice from your guards, I think it's best to drop that attitude when meeting Akira. If you appear too nervous, it might lead others to suspect if there's something shady going on.”

“Y-Yes, you're right.”

Following Elena's advice, Hikaru manages a smile. Hikaru, with her experience in numerous negotiations, is accustomed to wearing a smile that easily garners favor. However, the face she's currently putting on, although she's trying her best, appears unnatural, resembling that of an inexperienced amateur negotiating.

Seeing Hikaru's face, Elena's team can't help but smile, though feeling somewhat guilty.

Continuing down the rear communication line, they pass through the city's checkpoint under Hikaru's identity. Further ahead, nearing the base, they are stopped by Dragon River's watch.

Elena communicates with the watchman, who then shoots a slightly displeased look at Hikaru.

“From Kugamayama City, huh...”

Hikaru shivers lightly. Elena interjects lightly.

“We've heard there have been some issues with the city, but please don't be too hard on her. She's just a staff member dispatched under orders from her superiors. There's no need to glare at such a low-ranking person, right? ”

“...Right. My bad. Ah, could you confirm the cargo for me? ”

“Understood.”

The man, along with Elena, checks the cargo compartment of the vehicle and determines there are no issues.

“Looks fine. Alright, you're clear to go.”

With permission granted, Hikaru's group sets off towards the base. Sara briefly glances at the cargo and remarks.

“No issues, huh? Elena, any idea why? ”

“Hmm... Maybe they've arranged something beforehand with higher-ups, or...”

“Or? ”

“For Dragon River, bringing in something of that level probably wouldn't raise any issues.”

Sara nods in agreement.

“I see. So, it's about the fact that only high-ranked hunter teams invited by the city are exempted.”

“For the city to have issues with such people... I wonder what they're up to. It must be tough for Hikaru-san, too.”

“Absolutely... What are they even doing...”

Elena's group chuckles at Hikaru's heartfelt words.

Upon arriving at the spot where Carol's camping car is parked, Carol and Togami are waiting. Elena's team disembarks from the vehicle carrying the large case. Hikaru follows suit and politely bows to Togami.

“You must be Togami-sama, correct? My name is Hikaru, dispatched from Inabe for this support project. Currently, there are many high-ranked hunters from distant places in the city, but unfortunately, it's only temporary, and the possibility of them settling in the city is low. This project aims to significantly support outstanding hunters from the city to support the development of the city's hunter industry after they leave. Although it takes the form of financing, as long as you don't move your operations to other cities, there won't be...”

Togami interrupts Hikaru's seemingly lengthy explanation.

“Ah, sorry, but why don't we talk inside the car? Standing around talking like this might take a while...”

“Understood.”

Hikaru's group joins Togami's group inside the camping car. Once the vehicle's door is securely closed, the windows turn opaque, and the interior becomes invisible from the outside.



Togami leads Hikaru's group into the living room of the camping car and confirms that the interior is no longer visible from the outside.

“Akira, it's okay now.”

Akira deactivates his camouflage and appears. He wasn't hiding inside the vehicle but was waiting outside with Togami's group,

entering the car with them. Hikaru didn't notice this at all.

Hikaru, who saw Akira, desperately hides her inner tension. Hikaru is a subordinate of Inabe, and in that capacity, she is an ally of Akira. However, at the same time, she is someone from Kugamayama City, which has put a bounty on Akira. Hikaru wasn't so confident that Akira saw her as a complete ally.

Hikaru also views the fake Akira footage. She can't assert that the real Akira doesn't harbor the same hatred towards the city as the fake one displayed. Even though it was the imposter speaking, Yumina's death remains a result of Akira being embroiled in the power struggle between Udagima and Inabe, meaning nothing changes.

Elena, sensing Hikaru's tension, speaks to Akira before her.

“Akira. Long time no see. Good to see you're doing well.”

Sara also smiles at Akira along with Elena.

“Yes. I was surprised to hear you became a bounty, but seeing your lively face reassures me.”

Seeing Elena and the others smile, Akira returns the smile.

“Yes. It's been a while. I'm okay. Sorry for worrying you.”

“It's okay. I'm just glad you're safe.”

Elena says this sincerely before sending a glance to Hikaru. Seeing this, Hikaru decides that everything should be fine now and regains her composure to face Akira.

“I'm really glad you're safe. Well, Akira, there are a few things to discuss... but first, let me give you something. I'd like Togami-sama to hear it together with us to align recognition...”

At that moment, Togami interjects.

“Yeah, sorry, but just talk to me normally. I get that it's part of the facade, addressing me differently while speaking to Akira normally, but it's a bit off.”

“Oh, really? Then I'll talk to you normally, Togami. Please understand that I quickly established such a relationship with my skill. You can call me Hikaru too.”

“Got it.”

“Well then, first I'll give Togami's equipment.”

Hikaru opens the large case brought by Elena and the others and explains its contents while handing it to Akira and the others.

First, the augmented suit is handed to Togami. This augmented suit is a lower-grade product compared to the HC31R augmented suit that Akira uses. While its basic performance is considerably lower than Akira's augmented suit, it is compatible with expansion parts. By having Togami use this augmented suit, it is possible to provide Akira with extremely powerful expansion parts under the pretext of providing them to Togami.

Next, the RL2 multi-function gun that Akira also uses is handed to Togami. This allows Akira to provide powerful ammunition and the like under the same pretext.

Up to this point, these are items handed to Togami as part of the operation to support Akira. From here on, it will be items handed to Akira.

First is the expansion magazine for S bullets. These are a type of C bullet designed primarily to propagate impact strongly to the target upon impact.

Among monsters, there are those with abnormal durability, and one reason for this is that their bodies contain components similar to

colorless mist in their bodily fluids. Due to this effect, the impact of being shot is largely absorbed.

When shooting a typical monster and piercing it with bullets, the resulting injury is not simply a small hole in the body. The impact propagated from the bullets significantly affects the body, resulting in injuries different from cleanly carved parts of the body.

However, in the case of monsters with bodily fluids resembling colorless mist, the impact of the bullets is absorbed near the trajectory, resulting in injuries akin to being pierced by a very long and thin needle and then immediately removed. Such injuries are akin to scratches in front of the vitality of monsters.

Additionally, some monsters attacked by bullets may regenerate and come back to attack. In such cases, it's not that they possess astonishing regenerative abilities, but rather, if they haven't sustained significant visible injuries, they're merely avoiding the impact of the shots by changing shape.

Shooting at a monster formed by gathering sand merely causes the sand to scatter. It will then gather and reform. To defeat such monsters, one must not destroy the shape of the beast but destroy the sand itself.

Shock
S bullets can achieve high effectiveness even against such monsters. The propagated impact inflicts severe damage to the entire body and the very constituents of the body of the monster.

In the Third Inner Sector, despite Akira shooting Baoregire with a mountain of bullets and severely damaging its body multiple times, he couldn't defeat it easily. However, Tatsukawa defeated Baoregire in just two shots. The difference was because Tatsukawa's humanoid weapon had a function to propagate impact at an extremely high efficiency.

And now, with Akira obtaining ^{Shock} S bullets, he has gained a similar means of attack. Although ^{Shock} S bullets have inferior penetration and shorter effective range compared to ^{Charge} C bullets, it's not a significant drawback for Akira, who can engage in close combat with Baoregire. This significantly enhances Akira's offensive capabilities.

Next is the defensive aspect. What's provided are expansion parts for the augmented suit, a force field shield generator specialized in energy defense. Being specialized, it is powerful enough to withstand the torrent of energy unleashed by monsters like Relagros, provided one maintains a sufficient distance.

However, due to being overly specialized, it is very fragile against attacks other than energy-based ones. While it can block handgun bullets to some extent, against weapons or claws and fangs of powerful Kaiju that high-rank hunters face, it's as effective as paper.

Moreover, this product is quite fragile. Augmented suits and their expansion parts typically have a service life of about ten years even with some rough handling. However, this one lasts only about a month with normal use, and it could break within the day with rough handling. It's more akin to consumables like expansion magazines or recovery medicines than equipment like guns or augmented suits.

Still, knowing its fragility, multiple units of the same item are provided. Even though it's understood to be fragile, being able to defend against the light torrent unleashed by fused creatures like Baoregire instead of merely avoiding it holds significant meaning. Also, multiple units are prepared, so even if one breaks, there are backups. With this, if Akira ventures into the Third Inner Sector again, the improvement in defense from the last time would make the battle much easier.

After finishing those explanations, Hikaru adds a clarification about their source.

“These were provided by Inabe-san. It seems Kibayashi-san is handling something separately. So, this support doesn't mark the end of it.”

Hikaru nails it down for Akira.

“So, with these, you could fight even in the Third Inner Sector, right? Please refrain from rashly charging in, thinking you can handle it.”

“Got it.”

“Alright. Akira, I need to perform a personal verification. Oh, it's not that I suspect you might be a fake. It's to ensure there's a recorded proof of your presence here.”

With a device in hand specialized in personal identification and information gathering, Hikaru examines Akira. It takes only a few seconds.

“Done. Thanks. Oh, and sorry, but from now on, I'll need to stick around you regularly for this verification. So, count on me.”

“...Why? ”

“It's to ensure that in case a fake Akira appears, there's recorded evidence of the real one being elsewhere.”

“Ah, I see. But does that mean you'll also come to the Second Inner Sector? ”

“Yeah... that's... the plan...”

I don't want to. I don't want to go. With a face clearly expressing reluctance, Hikaru responds with a deeply displeased voice.

“If you dislike it that much, you don't have to...”

“It's not that simple.”

Hikaru exhales heavily, then regains composure, adopting a serious demeanor.

“Akira, listen calmly. Yesterday, Sheryl was abducted by your impostor.”

“What...? ”

Akira expresses surprise at the unexpected news, prompting Hikaru to continue, calming him down.

Recently, a fake Akira appeared at Sheryl's base and abducted her. The city learned of this fact when analyzing the base's security system records upon the arrival of the troops.

The comprehensive support suit used by the group sent signals to the comprehensive support system, transmitting the situation on-site. Even after the wearer was killed by the fake Akira, the suit, which managed to avoid destruction of its information gathering and communication functions, continued to send data until the end. Thanks to this, the city learned about the appearance of the fake Akira and Sheryl's abduction.

However, the city only learned about this long after the fake Akira had left. Sheryl, who had full access to the building's security system, was absent, and other executives like Erio couldn't access information from Sheryl's room unless it was an emergency. It took time to resolve these issues.

Understanding the situation, Inabe decided not to immediately inform Akira to avoid upsetting him.

Furthermore, Erio and the others couldn't contact Akira. With no secure direct line, contacting Akira risked exposing his whereabouts. Inabe made arrangements to prevent such connections.

The fake Akira appeared and disappeared within about five minutes. If there had been records proving Akira's whereabouts during that

time, it would have provided evidence of the fake Akira's existence. However, such evidence didn't exist. It was a valuable opportunity to prove the existence of the fake Akira, but it couldn't be utilized.

With the next opportunity being crucial, Inabe hastily prepared to dispatch Hikaru.

“...That's why? So, to prepare for the next appearance of your impostor, I have to stay close to you as much as possible.”

If another impostor was to appear and recording of the real Akira were delayed, there would be a higher risk of being mistaken for not having two Akiras rather than just one who had moved during the delayed recording time. To prevent this, it was necessary to record regularly by Akira's side, even every five minutes. If there was a report of an impostor appearing elsewhere, it had to be done immediately.

“I see. But... well...”

Akira wears a deeply troubled expression. Then, hesitantly, he looks towards Elena and the others.

Akira wasn't keen on bringing Hikaru to the Second Inner Sector.

In the Second Inner Sector, Baoregire appears. While they've fought and defeated it several times before, they've always faced only one opponent. They've never fought multiple Baoregires simultaneously. However, that might change now. Even if the higher-ranked hunters fought slightly less seriously, there's a real possibility of a large group of Baoregires advancing towards the First Inner Sector.

Akira is aware of this. Still, he's bringing Carol and the others along. Having accompanied them to the Third Inner Sector before, he knows their capabilities. Even if they were attacked by a large group of Baoregires, he believes they could escape to Dragon River's base together.

However, Hikaru is different. She's not a hunter but a civilian, a complete liability in terms of combat. Instead of bridging the gap in combat power, she's a negative factor. Elena and the others are hired as escorts to compensate for this, but Akira finds it challenging to determine if Elena and the others can truly make up for this shortfall.

While Elena and the others are exceptional hunters by Kugamayama City standards, they're still not even Hunter Rank 50. Compared to Akira's level, they might not just be one extra burden but potentially the equivalent of three.

In this uncertain situation, Akira can't confidently say that Hikaru and the others will keep him safe. These concerns are evident in Akira's troubled expression.

However, Elena and the others anticipated Akira's concerns from the beginning. Seeing Akira's expression firsthand, Elena smiles and reassures him.

“Akira, I understand what you want to say. You're worried that with our abilities, the Second Inner Sector might be dangerous, right?”

“Um... yeah. Sorry about that.”

Akira can't lie to Elena and the others. He admits it.

“It's okay. Don't worry about it. You're not wrong.”

Elena easily responds as if she truly isn't bothered and continues meaningfully.

“But we also understand that much, so we expected you to at least think about why we're here.”

“What do you mean? ”

“In other words, we've come prepared. Well, not us, but Hikaru-san. Look, Hikaru-san, you need to explain properly, or Akira might refuse to let you accompany him, right?”

Hikaru sighs. Truth be told, she wants Akira to refuse. Even if it's Inabe's directive, if Akira refuses, there's nothing she can do. She could quietly retreat.

However, she can't manipulate Akira's thoughts in that direction. Inabe isn't incompetent enough not to see through that. Moreover, she doesn't want to risk dying due to going along with Akira with inadequate preparation. With these thoughts in mind, Hikaru is giving her all for her own self-preservation.

“Right. Akira, I don't want to die either. So, I've prepared thoroughly. If it's just equipment, it's on par with yours, and under certain conditions, even surpassing yours. Please trust in that.”

After being told this, Akira rechecks Elena and the others' equipment.

Both Elena and Sara are wearing thin bodysuits that accentuate their body lines. Elena has a mechanized dress and coat on top, while Sara wears a mechanized jacket and pants.

The dress deliberately features deep slits to reveal its interior, the jacket abandons storage for the chest, and the pants have an extremely shallow rise. Including the bodysuits, it's a variety of provocative designs reminiscent of the old-world.

However, having become accustomed to Alpha and Carol's appearances, Akira doesn't react much to seeing Elena and the others wearing them. However, because of this, he's become insensitive to realizing from their designs that Elena and the others' augmented suits are indeed highly advanced.

But after hearing Hikaru's words and looking at Elena and the others' augmented suits again, they indeed seem very high-

performance even to Akira's eyes. Is this enough? The thought reflects on Akira's face.

Seeing this, Sara continues.

"Well, we're not foolish enough to say we'll be fine just because we have such high-performance equipment. So, could you take us there once and confirm how far we can fight on our own?"

"Just you guys?"

"Yes. Our job is to escort Hikaru-san. If we can't do that without relying on Akira, then we can't let Hikaru-san go to the Second Inner Sector either."

Elena also nods lightly as she speaks.

"That's right. We also want to help Akira, not hinder him. If we're just going to get in the way, we'll leave. Regardless of what Hikaru says, we'll take her back with us. Once we've taken on the responsibility of guarding Hikaru, we can't compromise on that. So, Akira, what do you say?"

Akira's expression softens with Elena and the others' smiles. Then, he looks at Hikaru.

"Hikaru. Is that okay with you?"

It's not okay. I don't want to. I don't want to go. I want to refuse the accompaniment. If it's equipment I arranged myself, Elena and the others can manage somehow. Suppressing the desire to say that, Hikaru somehow responds.

"...Yes. That's fine."

"Understood. Let's go then. Elena-san, Sara-san, please take care."

"Yes, of course."

“We'll do our best.”

Returning from their patrol only for the sake of the visitors, Akira and the others haven't finished their work for the day. Having prepared, they, along with Hikaru and the others, head back to the Second Inner Sector.

Hikaru's heavy and deep sigh is swallowed by the colorless mist lingering in the ruins and disappears.

Chapter 238: Escort's Abilities

Hikaru, along with her escorts Elena and Sara, join Akira's group to resume patrolling the Second Inner Sector.

Akira conceals himself with camouflage function, but since he has coordinated his information gathering device, Hikaru and the others can see Akira's figure just like Carol's group can. They can also hear his voice as they walk through the ruins using that function.

Hikaru stresses to Akira.

“Akira. About Sheryl, we'll handle the search here. So, Akira, please don't go looking for her. Even if you receive information about her whereabouts, don't just go off to rescue her on your own, okay? ”

“Yeah, I get it.”

Akira's overly casual response worried Hikaru instead. While it's helpful that he obediently follows instructions, she felt concerned that despite his lover being kidnapped, he seemed too composed.

So Alpha chimes in.

『Akira. You might want to provide a bit more explanation, or else you'll seem like you're just talking without really understanding, you know? 』

Thinking it might be the case, Akira follows Alpha's advice and adds some clarification.

“Kidnapping implies they don't intend to kill her right away. I think she's safe for a while. Besides, it was my doppelganger who kidnapped her. Sheryl's whereabouts might be in the Third Inner Sector. Even if she's there, there's no guarantee, and going there without a plan would only get me killed. I still have support from

Kibayashi, right? So rescuing Sheryl should come after that's settled, at the very least."

Hikaru listens silently to Akira's words. Seeing no response from Hikaru, Akira worries he might still be doubted and adds a bit more explanation.

"Even if Sheryl is in the Third Inner Sector with my doppelganger and it might be too late to save her, I can't do anything about it. If she's alive, I'll save her, and if she's dead, I'll at least avenge her. That's as far as I can go for Sheryl. It might sound cold, but I can't die for her. So I won't do anything reckless like going to help her on my own. Is that clear?"

Despite Akira's composed demeanor regarding his kidnapped lover, Hikaru initially suspected him needlessly. However, considering Akira's background and experiences, she rethinks her doubts.

Living in a world where death is a constant presence, be it in the slums or the hunter profession, might lead to such a detached sense of life and death. It's different from her own experience of living within relatively safe walls. Hikaru accepts this thoughtfully.

"Yes, that's fine. Sorry, and thank you."

"Yeah."

Those who heard Akira's conversation had different reactions.

Carol thinks it's typical of Akira.

Akira doesn't owe Sheryl anything. In fact, he's the one who has done her countless favors. He doesn't have an obligation to risk his life to save her.

Furthermore, Akira seems diligent in repaying his own debts, but he doesn't seem fixated on collecting debts from others. Carol finds

Akira's apparent leniency towards others both good and bad, fitting of his character.

Elena's group feels relieved internally.

Right after becoming a bounty target, Akira's mental state was extremely fragile. Knowing this from Shizuka, seeing Akira looking fine today reassures Elena's group.

Even upon hearing that Sheryl was kidnapped, Akira remained composed. While he expressed a desire to help if possible, he showed no signs of recklessness due to emotional distress. He didn't exhibit the kind of foolish behavior that Akira might have done, risking his life to save Sheryl.

While feeling sorry for Sheryl, Elena's group is more concerned about Akira than the kidnapped Sheryl. They are relieved that Akira took a practical approach.

Alpha, on the other hand, feels pleased.

Akira killed Yumina to fulfill his own requests and repay his debts. He wouldn't do something reckless like dying for Sheryl now. Alpha has judged as such and has already stopped being wary of Sheryl.

Alpha is satisfied to confirm the correctness of her judgment and views Akira's determination to repay his debts positively.

The monsters' approach interrupts Akira's group's conversation. It's a group of mechanical monsters. Akira's group immediately shifts focus.

Sara raises her spirits and aims her gun.

“They're here already. Alright Akira, leave it to us for now. You guys stay back.”

“Okay. Please.”

Saying so, Akira moves away with Carol's group.

Elena instructs Hikaru.

"Hikaru, stay behind us. Don't move on your own, follow our instructions."

"Uh... yeah."

Akira would like to move away with them, but it's not possible. Hikaru obediently follows the instructions.

The group of monsters approaches. Elena confirms the enemy's position with her information gathering device and shares the information with Sara. Then she readies her gun.

Although Akira's group is still connected to their information gathering device, they aren't sharing scouting information for now. It's just Elena and Sara fighting together.

When facing mechanical monsters, Akira refrains from intervening, letting Carol's group handle it alone. This part is the same as when Carol's group fought alone. However, Elena's group also has to protect Hikaru while fighting.

Moreover, it's not just about winning. They need to demonstrate that they can adequately ensure Hikaru's safety as escorts, requiring a decisive victory. This raises the difficulty level.

Also, the Second Inner Sector is practically a death trap for Elena's group in terms of their original abilities. If it weren't for a request involving Akira, they would never have accepted Hikaru's plea to escort her there, no matter how much she asked. Even Elena's group can't hide their nerves.

However, this nervousness also brings a positive effect for Elena's group.

Hikaru went to great lengths to procure Elena's group's equipment. As a result, their equipment is incredibly powerful, to the point where it breeds complacency and arrogance.

The tension they feel wipes away that complacency and arrogance. What remains is a sharpened mental state, neither shaken nor hurried, neither arrogant nor dismissive. Elena's group is ready for battle with a well-honed spirit.

“Sara, they're coming.”

“Yeah, let's do this! ”

A group of mechanical monsters enters the engagement range. In that moment, Elena and Sara each fire their guns. A multitude of bullets pierce through the colorless mist of the ruins, crossing paths.

The large-caliber bullets fired by Elena blow away the strong armor of the mechanical monsters along with their insides. The guns and ammunition prepared by Hikaru to protect herself yielded results worthy of the effort.

However, the bullets fired by the mechanical monsters do not hit Elena or even Hikaru behind her. This is because Elena accurately assesses the enemy's firing lines using her high-performance information gathering device and then gives precise instructions.

A spherical mechanical unit equipped with a machine gun attempts to aim at Elena but is destroyed before it can complete its action. Another unit aims at Sara and meets a similar fate. Hikaru is also targeted and vigorously blown away. This repeats.

Still, the number of enemies is vast. Numerous firing lines are directed from the surviving units. Elena shields Hikaru, protects herself using force field armor and barriers, and, in addition, engages in combat faster than the enemy, minimizing her own hits while maximizing the enemy's.

And the group of monsters is defeated. Elena and Sara alone.

It wasn't an instant victory where all enemies were defeated. However, it was a stable victory that was safe and assured, even if unexpected events occurred, and it was a resounding success.

Nearly a perfect score even in self-evaluation. Elena and Sara indicate this with smiles as they lower their guns. Elena then asks Akira with a smile.

"Akira, for now, our capabilities have been demonstrated. What do you think? "

Akira also responds with a smile.

"Impressive. This should do perfectly. You're quite something."

Sara laughs and says,

"Thanks. Even if it's flattery, it's nice to hear."

"It's not flattery. If it were, Hikaru would end up dead, wouldn't she? "

Akira responds lightly with a smile, but what he says is his genuine sentiment.

Elena and Sara kept Hikaru by their side during the engagement instead of evacuating her to a safer location like behind a building. They effectively protected her in that position. Their fighting style convinced Akira that even if the enemy's scale were multiplied several times or they were attacked without any hiding places, they could still win, and this was persuasive enough for Akira.

However, Hikaru, hearing Akira's response sounding like a casual joke, feels a bit anxious. She instinctively checks,

"Akira... You're not just saying that, right? "

“Yeah.”

“Really? I believe you, okay? ”

Akira's fondness for Elena and Sara is obvious. It wouldn't be strange for him to offer flattery. In other words, if his non-flattery was seen as flattery, he'd end up dead. That thought made Hikaru feel the need for a slightly annoying confirmation.

And Akira couldn't read Hikaru's subtle feelings. He answers with a small sigh.

“It's true... Understood. Let's confirm a bit more then. Elena, Sara, since Hikaru seems unconvinced, would you mind continuing to handle the monsters after this? ”

“Got it.”

“Leave it to us.”

Following their response, Hikaru utters a short voice.

“...Huh!?”

Then Elena sends a slightly mischievous smile Hikaru's way.

“Hikaru-san, then next time, stay behind us, okay? Otherwise, it won't be convincing.”

“...Yes.”

Although Elena and Sara act as shields, being in a place where enemy gunfire isn't obstructed by buildings is frightening. Hikaru can feel the multitude of bullets piercing through the nearby space. Her faces tense, and the legs tremble.

However, due to her positions, she can't refuse. Hikaru forces a smile and regrets saying anything unnecessary.

Akira and the others continue their patrol of the Second Inner Sector. The attacks from the mechanical monsters continue, but Elena and Sara repel them without issue. As this repeats, Hikaru gradually starts to get used to it. She isn't completely relaxed, but she starts to think it'll be okay.

In her mind, Hikaru might as well continue this confirmation process to claim some credit for the physical efforts she's put in. She thinks about it to that extent.

After turning the group of security machines into a scrap heap, Sara speaks to Akira.

“Akira, do you remember that I'm a body enhancement augmenter originally meant to extend my life because I was sick? ”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well, I've actually cured that illness.”

“Is that so? Congratulations. I'm glad to hear that. I'm happy for you too.”

Seeing Akira genuinely smile, Sara smiles too.

“Thanks. Well, the medical expenses were immense, and it was tough.”

Elena and the others' purpose as hunters was to earn a vast amount of treatment fees. Even after achieving that goal, they continue to be hunters thanks to their encounter with Akira during that process.

Akira, who didn't know about such things, was simply glad that Sara's illness had been cured.

“Well, if you're cured, that's good. They say the body is the capital of a hunter, so it's good to be healthy even if it costs money. Oh, but if

you've cured your illness, does that mean you've stopped being a body enhancement user? ”

Elena and Sara both seem to be wearing the same thin augmented suit underneath. Akira thought that maybe Sara had also stopped being a body enhancement user and opted to use augmented suit instead. But as he glanced around, he noticed Sara's ample chest.

Akira had heard that Sara's chest served as a reservoir for consumable nanomachines. If her chest had swelled to this extent, Sara must still be a body enhancement user. Akira reconsidered his thoughts.

Before Akira could mention it, Sara answered as if to divert the conversation.

“No, I'm still continuing. In addition to the medical treatment fees, I also needed the cost of re-expansion processing, but I understand very well how convenient the physical abilities of a body enhancement user are.”

“I see. Certainly, it's convenient to be strong even without augmented suit.”

Akira, having battled someone who could be considered the ultimate in physical prowess, understood well the great advantage of being strong even without enhancements. He simply agreed.

But then Elena interjected with a meaningful smile.

“Yes. Sara is still a body enhancement user. She underwent an incredible expansion treatment, but it also incurred considerable expenses. Thanks to that, she doesn't need to store nanomachines in her chest anymore.”

“Huh? ”

Akira looked at Sara's chest again. It was plump. As he raised his gaze, Sara smiled and averted her eyes.

“...It's fine. Since I'm a body enhancement user.”

Sara said so as if making an excuse. Then, she directed a mischievous smile at Akira, bringing her chest closer to him.

“Or perhaps Akira prefers smaller breasts? ”

“N-no, it's not like that...”

“Right? If Elena also prefers larger breasts, she should have undergone the expansion treatment with me. It would have increased her physical abilities too, you know? ”

“I'm fine with my own chest. As for physical abilities, I have augmented suit, and I can just train my body without enhancements.”

Elena said so, smiling at Akira while pointing her chest towards him, just like Sara did.

Although there was a difference in size, both had sizable chests, and Akira found himself blushing and flustered being approached by both. Realizing they might tease him together, he hurriedly changed the subject.

“Oh, speaking of Elena and them's augmented suit, if Hikaru said just the equipment are about as good as mine, does that mean it costs around 10 billion Aurum? ”

Elena noticed Akira trying to change the subject, but she didn't want to spoil his mood by teasing him too much. She lightly responded to match Akira's tone.

“Yes, that's right.”

“So, it's 20 billion for both of you, right? It's a bit off-topic, but how did you manage to afford that? ”

“Hikaru worked hard on that part. Also, we didn't buy them. These are rental items. Well, normally, items like these wouldn't be lent to hunters like us, but I heard Hikaru managed to work something out.”

Hikaru, partly proud and partly complaining about the hardships, spoke up, sensing Akira's gaze.

“That's right. It was quite challenging.”

And then, Hikaru began to explain the specific details of her struggles to Akira.

Hiring Elena and the others as escorts was a mistake if the sole purpose was to go to the Second Inner Sector. Their abilities were only a cut above the average in the Kugamayama City. They didn't have the strength to fight in the current conditions of the Second Inner Sector.

But Akira was currently a bounty target, and on top of that, he was suspected of being a Nationalist due to the actions of the impostor. The person accompanying him needed to be chosen carefully. Taking someone incompetent as an escort, only to be met with suspicion from Akira about their ability to fight in the Second Inner Sector, would be meaningless.

Strength could be supplemented with equipment, but trust couldn't. Elena and the others were chosen as escorts because they possessed something that Hikaru's efforts alone couldn't compensate for: the trust of Akira.

However, Hikaru didn't want to die due to the lack of escort abilities. She had desperately prepared the equipment for Elena and the others.

First, she approached the salespeople of the company who had lost in the previous procurement of Akira's equipment.

She explained to them the advantages of providing powerful equipment to one of Akira's few friends, which would greatly benefit them in the next equipment procurement. She also assured them that the issue of Akira becoming a bounty target was being dealt with by Inabe with full effort. She sought cooperation by conveying these messages and pitting companies against each other.

This negotiation had started immediately after Akira became a bounty target, as instructed by Inabe. Simultaneously, she had informed Elena and the others of the situation and requested escort services. Although they were in a hurry, they intended to spend about a week negotiating with companies to finalize the details.

However, with the appearance of the fake Akira in the slums, they no longer had time to proceed with negotiations leisurely. They had to procure the equipment immediately before another fake Akira appeared.

It was a period shortening due to Hikaru's circumstances. Normally, Hikaru would have been in a position to be looked down upon. However, she cleverly turned this restriction into a reason to pressure the other party.

A company that had previously provided equipment in advance came forward. They were somehow managing to delay the decision, but they were also in a hurry. If satisfactory equipment arrived, it would be decided there. Hikaru urged them on and demanded rapid provision of high-performance equipment.

Additionally, the equipment was not purchased but borrowed for about a month. By borrowing instead of buying, they could save on costs and allocate the saved money to improving performance. In other words, by adopting a form of short-term paid trial, they maximized the quality of the equipment.

However, if the equipment was so high-performance that even Elena and the others could fight in the Second Inner Sector, they would be subject to restrictions based on their hunter ranks, making it impossible to purchase or borrow. To address this, they made it appear as if the city had borrowed the equipment once, then lent it to Elena and the others again, masking the terms of the debt as an internal city matter.

They worked tirelessly to compile various documents and adjusted insurance for equipment damage. It was incredibly challenging. Hikaru conveyed her feelings through her expression and voice as she explained her struggles to Akira.

Akira felt slightly overwhelmed by Hikaru's demeanor.

“I see... It was tough, huh? Thank you for going to such lengths for Elena and the others.”

If it required that much effort, perhaps it wasn't necessary to escort Elena and the others. Maybe someone else could have done it. Akira thought so, but upon seeing Hikaru's expression, decided not to voice it.

After exhaling softly as if to change the subject, Hikaru replied.

“It's fine. It's for my sake as well.”

Hikaru had considered employing someone else as escorts. However, she ultimately abandoned that idea.

Hikaru was still Akira's handler and had a track record of controlling Akira during the round trip to Zegelt City. There was no other suitable candidate. It made sense for Inabe to dispatch Hikaru.

Moreover, Hikaru couldn't refuse outright. Strictly speaking, she was being threatened by Inabe to resign if she objected.

Of course, losing one's job was preferable to losing one's life. However, Hikaru's life within the protective walls was sustained by her status as a city employee. In other words, being fired meant being cast out beyond the walls, akin to living in the wasteland.

She didn't want to die, but she didn't want to live in the wasteland either. Yet, she didn't want to go to the Second Inner Area either. With those feelings in mind, Hikaru arranged for Elena and the others to be escorted by Akira, ensuring their lack of capability was addressed by equipping them adequately.

However, if Akira still refused to accompany them, Inabe would likely give up on sending her. Hikaru secretly hoped for this outcome. The effort she put into acquiring equipment for Elena and the others also included such considerations.

And the effectiveness of her efforts was proven further when Elena and the others easily defeated a group of mechanical monsters. It was all worth it. Hikaru concluded as she sighed softly.

Another opportunity to further prove the effectiveness of her efforts came. Akira detected the presence of monsters, and they belonged to Baoregire.

Akira's expression hardened.

“There it is. Hikaru. I'll take care of it.”

“Okay. I understand.”

What Akira sought from Elena and the others was the strength not to hinder him, even with Hikaru included. What Hikaru sought from Elena and the others was the assurance that Akira wouldn't refuse their company and that they could protect themselves with Akira's assistance.

Both Akira and Hikaru believed that Elena and the others had already demonstrated that level of capability.

However, Elena had a different idea. Sara interjected.

“Wait, Akira. Let us handle it first.”

“Huh? But...”

That was dangerous. The opponent was Baoregire. It was different from the mechanical monsters that were ideal for assessing Elena and the others' abilities. They would struggle against Baoregire. It would be better for Elena and the others to retreat with Carol.

Akira hesitated, trying to choose his words honestly. But his expression betrayed him.

Elena and the others could easily infer the content of the response Akira was trying to deliver but decided not to sour the mood. Elena smiled and addressed Akira.

“Akira. We're not saying 'leave it to us' in the sense that we don't want your help. But we want to handle it first. We want to see how far we can go on our own.”

Sara continued with a smile.

“Our job is to protect Hikaru, but we didn't agree to protect her with the assumption of your assistance. It's reassuring that you'll protect us, but we don't want to become your responsibility as Hikaru's guards. If that's the case, we'll take Hikaru and leave. We don't want to be a hindrance.”

“So, Akira. Please make sure. We want to be sure if we're supposed to be here.”

They weren't here with the expectation of relying on Akira for protection. Elena and the others conveyed this to Akira with a smile but a serious demeanor. And Akira understood that message clearly.

Sara added with a slightly cheerful tone.

“Oh, and it doesn't mean you shouldn't intervene at all, okay? We don't want to die either, so please help if it gets dangerous. We'll rely on you then.”

Elena continued with an intentionally upbeat attitude.

“Exactly. So, in that sense, please let us handle it first, okay? ”

Akira responded, matching their tone.

“Understood. Then, please go ahead.”

Even as they conversed, Baoregire was approaching. Akira should have started moving by now, but he entrusted the initial action to Elena and the others. If Elena and the others' confirmation ended in failure, he would take responsibility for being late to act for that confirmation and fight with everything he had.

Elena and the others understood Akira's determination and decided to give it their all. Sara confidently aimed her gun.

“Elena, I'm using the trump card.”

“Yes, let's use it.”

Sara's variable multi-function gun began to transform. Rather than just transforming, it grew in size, appearing more like a large cannon resembling a humanoid weapon. Akira watched in astonishment as Sara's OFX multi-function gun transformed into a large cannon right before his eyes.

>Episode
008

下角アキラ

武器解説
Weapon Guide

【通常状態】



TOP



SIDE

OFX MULTI-FUNCTION GUN

【展開状態】



TOP



SIDE

OFX複合銃

高ランクハンター向けの複合銃。一挺20億オーラム。
変形により威力を向上させる機能を有している。人型
兵器用の銃のように巨大化させることも可能だが、
整備業者に出さないと元の大きさに戻せなくなる。



Sara supported the massive cannon with both her enhanced physical abilities as a body enhancement and the power of her augmented suit. Elena conducted reconnaissance beside Sara, adjusting the cannon's aim and energy settings.

A massive amount of energy was supplied from the attached energy pack to the cannon. The sound of charging echoed from the cannon, and light leaked from its muzzle. The intensity hinted at the power of the light projectile about to be unleashed.



While smiling, Sara's face glistened with sweat.

"If this doesn't work, we'll have to retreat, Elena! "

"Fire away! "

Elena and the others, now functioning as a two-person mobile artillery unit, unleashed light projectiles towards Baoregire within effective range. The condensed energy masses pierced through the dense colorless mist of the ruins and struck the target. Upon impact, they exploded, releasing their energy.

For just one shot, they squeezed out the high-capacity energy pack meant for high-ranking hunters, producing destruction commensurate with the cost.

Baoregire's resilient body was blown away, its flesh charred by the exploding light projectiles' energy. It disintegrated the giant's body at the cellular level, turning its cellular components to dust and incinerating even that dust. When the storm of destruction subsided, nothing remained.

Akira couldn't help but express a slight sense of awe.

"Incredible power..."

In terms of equipment alone, Akira was on par. Under limited conditions, even superior. The performance of the OFX multi-function gun had indeed been proven right there.

Elena used her information gathering device to survey the surroundings. If the light projectiles hadn't hit Baoregire directly, there was a risk of merely blowing the opponent away into the distance. She thoroughly investigated and dispelled that concern, then breathed a sigh of relief.

“Alright. We're good. Sara, we took it down.”

Sara also felt the victory with that. First, she took a deep breath and then smiled proudly at Akira.

“Akira, how was that? Are you comfortable with us being together? ”

Akira smiled and answered clearly.

“Yes. I'm fine with it. Perfectly fine.”

“Thank you. That makes me happy.”

This time, Sara didn't say she was happy even if she wasn't, and Akira didn't feel the need to affirm genuinely. There was no need for it. Elena and the others had proven that they could accompany Akira with their own strength.

Sara stored the giant OFX multi-function gun away, still in its large size, and carried it on her back with the assistance of auxiliary arms. Akira found it curious.

“Are you not going to return it to its original size? ”

“Ah, it's impossible here. It's a variable multi-function gun, but once it's changed into this form, you can't return it to its original size without taking it to a maintenance facility.”

“Oh, that sounds inconvenient.”

“Well, it compensates for those inconveniences with its power. And since it's not very user-friendly, it's relatively affordable.”

“Ah, I see. But with that kind of power, I suppose we can tolerate some drawbacks.”

Elena chimed in.

“By the way, we used up the high-capacity energy pack meant for high-ranking hunters with that one shot earlier. If ammunition costs were on us, we'd go bankrupt. It's a relief the client covers it.”

Hikaru let out a slightly exaggerated sigh.

“We'll be the ones to pay for that, so it would be appreciated if you could avoid wasteful spending.”

Elena responded casually.

“Understood. But if we don't use it once, we won't know if it will serve as a trump card, right? ”

“Well, that's true, but...”

“With that kind of power, even if we were attacked by a swarm of Baoregires, we could create an opportunity to escape with Hikaru. Just confirming that was worth using it, don't you think? ”

With that said, Hikaru couldn't deny it.

“I'm not saying not to use it. As long as it's not wasteful. Akira, once Elena and the others have confirmed their abilities, from here on, it's mainly up to you and your team. We're just here as companions, not additional firepower. Of course, if you're in danger, Elena and the others will also fight for you.”

“Understood.”

Akira's team continued their patrol. Carol and Togami dealt with the mechanical monsters, and Akira defeated Baoregire when it appeared. They had done this many times before.

In addition, they were currently receiving additional support in terms of equipment and ammunition. Everything was fine. With

Akira now equipped with S bullets, he could easily defeat Baoregire more than before, allowing them to fight with confidence.

And today, they continued their patrol a bit longer than usual due to the visitors, returning to the camping car after sunset. With the crew doubled, the atmosphere inside the car became a bit livelier, and Akira's team settled in for a well-deserved rest.

Chapter 239: Someone in the Shadows

Akira and the others, having returned from their patrol, are taking a rest in Carol's camping car. The main plan for the rest of the day is just to take a bath and sleep.

However, with all six of them, including Hikaru, taking turns to bathe, it takes some time for everyone to finish bathing. Amidst this wait, Togami suddenly ponders.

“Hey, Hikaru. I was thinking, you know. Akira is supposed to not be here, right? If Akira isn't here, what's the reason for Hikaru to be here? ”

“What for? It's for the Hunter Support Project. Didn't I tell you that I came here under the pretext of being chosen for support you? ”

“Well, yeah, you said that. But does that reason justify me sticking around you 24/7? ”

“Ah, I see. Well, it does. Or rather, it will. We need to adjust the details, but for now, the plan is to label it as surveillance on Togami.”

“Surveillance... Even if it's just a front, does that mean I'm being suspected of something in the city? ”

Even though it's for appearances' sake, it doesn't feel too good. Togami thinks this way, wearing a slightly troubled expression. Seeing this, Hikaru adds an explanation.

“Sorry, but please bear with it. Supporting Akira requires a lot of money, but outwardly, it's support for Togami. Even though the project is led by Inabe-san, questions arise about whether it's really worth supporting you to that extent. It's like thorough surveillance to confirm your abilities in order to convince them. It's necessary.”

“...I guess if that's the reason, I can understand. But still, isn't surveillance a bit too much? ”

“Not really. Considering you're a young hunter who seems likely to become the next Akira. Haven't you realized? Besides Akira, you're about the only one around here who became a Hunter Rank 50 at your age.”

Now that it's pointed out, that's true. With that expression, Hikaru continues.

“For a talented hunter like you, a support project is in place to keep you in Kugamayama City in the future. Naturally, it involves a lot of money. Is your skill genuine? Do you have enough power to warrant such favoritism? Are you hiding any wrongdoing? Since we're investing that much money, we want to make sure by keeping a close eye on you, even if it means sticking to you 24/7. Wouldn't you agree it's not unreasonable to think that way? ”

“I see... Well, actually, I am doing something shady.”

“We'll cover that up on our end, so don't worry about it. It's fine.”

“Is that so...”

Togami, while understanding Hikaru's explanation, still wears a troubled expression. It feels like he's being reminded that his Hunter Rank is a counterfeit that doesn't match his actual abilities.

And he realizes further.

(...Oh, so being Hunter Rank 50 means I'm the current top hunter in Drankam?)

Even the upper echelons of Drankam, like Shikarabe and the others, haven't reached Rank 50. Surpassing them, Togami stands at the pinnacle of Drankam's hunters.

But he can't feel any joy. It's because he didn't climb to the top with his own abilities. This realization only adds another sigh to Togami's list of concerns.

Hikaru can also sense Togami's inner turmoil to some extent. She says something to encourage him.

"Well, there may be a lot on your mind, but please endure it for Akira's sake."

"...Yeah, I understand."

There are still lingering doubts, but for now, he decides to accept it. And for the parts he can't accept, he'll turn them into motivation to catch up his actual abilities to the fictitious Hunter Rank. Togami convinces himself of this.

During the conversation, Carol asks Hikaru for a favor.

"Hey, Hikaru-san. What about selling me the guns Elena and the others are using? "

"Those are borrowed items, so I can't just sell them..."

Hikaru tries to refuse, but Carol continues with a cheerful tone.

"Oh come on, isn't it like that anyway? You borrowed them under the pretense of testing for purchase, right? You're using it to negotiate with sales by giving them high expectations, saying you're in the midst of negotiating additional budget due to budget constraints. Then later, you'll say it didn't work out, right? If that's the case, wouldn't it be better to buy at least one to avoid looking like you were all talk from the start? "

Hikaru is slightly surprised. Indeed, she was doing exactly as Carol described. And coming from someone who can see through such things, she takes a moment to think before responding.

“...They're expensive, you know?”

“It's fine. I have quite a bit of money, you know.”

“...Right, I forgot about that. Understood.”

Come to think of it, she was a person who could earn 10 billion Aurum in one night. Hikaru thinks so and proceeds to discuss the details with Carol.

Currently, Elena and the others have two OFX multi-function guns. And the one they enlarged is being sent to a maintenance shop, while they plan to get a replacement gun before it's returned to its original size.

At that moment, if they could bring an additional gun, Elena and the others' decrease in firepower could be resolved quickly. With that in mind, Hikaru decided to sell Carol one of the two guns Elena and the others currently have. Carol promptly transferred the payment.

It was a good deal. Thinking so, Hikaru feels pleased.

Carol also smiles. Utilizing Hikaru, who has access to restricted powerful guns that money alone can't buy, she circumvents regulations.

The power of the OFX multi-function gun has been confirmed. This should make it easier for Akira to repay the favor. It's worth paying a high price for. With that in mind, Carol smiles.

Akira hears from Shirou. Shirou, appearing in Akira's augmented vision via communication through the information terminal, turns a slightly serious expression towards Akira.

『...So, I tried looking for Sheryl on my end too, but unfortunately, I couldn't find her.』

『I see. Well, just searching is a big help.』

『Is it okay if I add more?』

『Yeah. Although it's not enough to introduce you to Tsubaki.』

『I see. Then let me add a little more. Behind the fake Akira, there might be someone dangerous.』

『Well, I know that the Nationalist who have my impostor are the ones controlling that Kaiju, right? I know they're dangerous.』

It's understood without being said. Akira responds as such. But Shirou shakes his head.

『That's not what I mean. I tried looking into the security records of the building when Sheryl was kidnapped, hoping for some clues, but there were signs of tampering in the data. And it was done with such high precision that only I would notice. It's quite serious.』

Seeing Akira's face darken slightly, Shirou explains the reason.

The fake Akira used camouflage function to sneak into Sheryl's room without being noticed by anyone. Even the building's security system didn't react.

So, were there no traces of the intrusion at all? Well, there were traces left to some extent in the records of the security devices, but they were only at a level that would be discovered with thorough analysis. However, it's impossible to respond immediately due to the lack of analysis capability. Even if they forcibly responded, it would take one minute to analyze one second of data, making it unusable for 24-hour surveillance.

Still, with time, it can be investigated. It's not uncommon for those who used optical camouflage to evade surveillance cameras and

commit theft to be caught later through thorough analysis of video recordings. Despite the high cost of camouflage technology, the performance of security devices has also increased to detect it. While it's impossible to detect it on the spot due to processing limitations, there is often enough data in the records for thorough analysis.

Shirou also attempted to trace the movements of the fake Akira by analyzing the building's security system data. Even though it takes time for analysis, they know when and where the fake Akira was. By expanding the analysis range from the date and location, they can effectively handle it.

However, during the analysis, Shirou discovered something astonishing. The data had been tampered with so skillfully that even he, a old-world connector of Sakashita Heavy Industry and a top-class information warfare specialist, couldn't trace the fake Akira's movements.

Shirou explained this to Akira in a nearly passionate manner. With a face that seems to understand the situation outwardly, Akira secretly asks Alpha.

『...Alpha. So, how serious is this?』

Upon hearing this, Alpha shows a slightly exasperated expression.

『 In other words, it means there's a possibility that someone of Shirou's caliber is cooperating with fake Akira. Shirou has been altering data related to Akira, like altering the data of the city's defense team's humanoid weapons, and hiding himself from the search network of Sakashita Heavy Industry, right? If someone like him is cooperating with fake Akira, wouldn't that be incredibly troublesome?』

『Ah, yeah, that makes sense.』

Just as Akira begins to comprehend and feel the situation, Shirou gives him a skeptical look.

『Akira. You understand what I'm saying, right?』

『Yeah, yeah, I get it. It's that someone as amazing as you, Shirou, might be helping out my impostor, right? And, in turn, you're helping me out to counter that, right? It's even helpful for me to owe a favor.』

Akira brushes it off with such words. And Shirou goes along with it.

『...As long as you understand. It's a favor.』

Shirou had a concern, but he couldn't tell Akira about it. Instead, he asks something else to change the subject.

『I'm curious about something. Why did fake Akira also kidnapped Shijima? Both of you are actually really close or something?』

『No, not at all.』

『I see. Then why? Kidnapping Sheryl was to use her as a hostage and to avoid being captured, right?』

『To avoid being captured?』

Akira asks, looking puzzled, and Shirou supplements his explanation.

To use her as a hostage is straightforward—simply a hostage for Akira. And to avoid being captured is the flip side of that. Since fake Akira is posing as the real Akira, they have to behave like him.

Sheryl, who was just a child from the slums, has now become the boss of a huge faction that influences the city's economy, thanks to significant support from Akira. And Akira isn't benefiting materially

from this support, such as receiving large sums of money from Sheryl or doing as he pleases within the faction.

So why does Akira go to such lengths for Sheryl? According to Sheryl's public statements, it's because they're lovers.

She is a lover who Akira is so invested in her. She also has high value to the Kugamayama City. If the one who switched sides to the Nationalist is the real Akira, various negotiations will become possible in exchange for Sheryl's custody.

Since the impostor is posing as the real one, they can't be ignored. After all, the scenario is that someone who switched sides to the Nationalist because their friend was killed in the city. If such a person were to abandon their lover, the scenario would collapse.

To prevent this, they kidnapped Sheryl before she could be detained by the city. To pose as the real one. That's what Shirou meant by "to avoid being captured."

Akira also understood that explanation and shared the same question as Shirou.

『...Then why was Shijima kidnapped?』

『I don't know, which is why I asked if both of you might actually be really close. If you were close, it would be worth taking her as a hostage.』

『There's no value in Shijima, though. Hmm.』

Akira and Shirou groan together, then Akira asks Alpha this time.

『Alpha. Any ideas why Shijima was kidnapped?』

『Well, in cases like this, it's best to question the premise. Let's assume they weren't kidnapped to be used as hostages. Then let's

think about what Sheryl and Shijima have in common. How about this?』

『In that case... Hmm, do they have anything in common?』

『For starters, both of them dramatically elevated their status in the slums by being involved with you, Akira. Sheryl is the boss of the Sheryl's gang, and Shijima is a coordinator for other factions. Essentially, the current state of the slums is effectively controlled by Sheryl and Shijima. If these two were suddenly gone, the slums would be in turmoil.』

『That makes sense... But what benefit does my impostor have in causing turmoil in the slums?』

『I don't know either. In the first place, this is just one hypothesis. It might be for a completely different reason. Questioning the premise can lead to various possibilities. That's just one example.』

『I see.』

Akira discusses this with Shirou, trying to think from a different perspective together. However, they don't come up with anything concrete.

Elena and the others are bathing together. Even with a single bathtub, if they pack themselves in close enough, they can fit. Additionally, if they extend their legs out of the tub, it alleviates some of the tightness.

It's already nearing midnight, and they need to sleep soon or it will affect them tomorrow. There's no time left for each person to bathe leisurely. Moreover, since Elena and the others are considered additional passengers, they give up their relaxed bathing time to the original crew, opting to save time by bathing together.

Sara, enjoying the comfortable bath, lightly asks while expressing that comfort on her face.

“Elena. By the way, what's the situation with the dispute between Kugamayama City and Dragon River? Is it going to be prolonged for a while? Or does it seem like it might be resolved fairly easily? ”

“From what I've investigated, it doesn't seem like the relationship will improve anytime soon.”

“I see. Well, to be honest, that's a relief. If that's the case, Akira should be safe for a while...”

Akira is hiding in this base, taking advantage of Dragon River's dispute with the city. Sara, hearing this, would have preferred for the dispute to remain unresolved for Akira's sake.

“Well, it depends on how Dragon River responds. There are even rumors that this dispute was intentionally caused by Dragon River...”

Elena proceeds to tell Sara the contents of those rumors.

Hunters earn their living primarily by selling relics obtained through their hunter activities, mainly in the city where they operate. Even high-ranking hunters with connections to multiple cities generally follow this practice. It's an implicit agreement to avoid conflicts with the governing corporations in the vicinity of their operating bases.

When hunters sell relics in the city where they operate, whether to the purchasing office of the Hunter's Guild or to unofficial shops, it greatly benefits the local economy by circulating money within the city.

However, if relics are sold in other cities, the profits that should have been obtained flow elsewhere. The city where the hunters operate cannot tolerate this. They pressure hunters to sell an acceptable amount of relics in their own city, even if they don't demand that all sales occur there. If necessary, they apply pressure to both the

hunters who sold the relics and the cities where they were sold, to ensure sales happen locally and to prevent potential conflicts with the governing corporations.

But if such conflicts escalate, the relationship between the city and the hunters, as well as with other cities, gradually deteriorates. This could lead to either an economic rupture or even war, which nobody desires.

Therefore, it's implicitly understood that hunters should sell relics in the city where they operate. Unless the purchasing price elsewhere is significantly higher, it's preferable to sell in the local city. To avoid escalating conflicts that could lead to violence involving the governing corporations, reputable hunters are expected to adhere to this rule.

This implicit agreement also applies to Dragon River. Thus, ideally, the relics and materials collected by Dragon River, such as those from the Second Inner Sector, should be sold in the city of Kugamayama.

However, these items are highly valuable, especially the corpses of fused creatures, which fetch astronomical prices due to their rarity. Selling them to companies in other economic zones can yield even higher profits, as these companies may be willing to pay more and some may not even have the means to purchase them.

Yet, Dragon River cannot easily sell these items to other cities. They must demonstrate their integrity and discretion as a top-tier hunter team. Failing to do so might result in being targeted for suppression by the corporate alliance.

Nevertheless, Dragon River cannot simply divert these items elsewhere. Unless there are valid reasons why they cannot be sold in Kugamayama, there should be no problem. Hence, Dragon River utilized the incident involving Akira to their advantage.

By engaging in discussions with the city representatives who wanted to know the circumstances, Melshia, representing Dragon River, skillfully elicited remarks that could be interpreted as suspicions about Dragon River's involvement.

Consequently, the relationship between Kugamayama and Dragon River soured. This also meant Dragon River had acquired reasons why they didn't need to sell relics and fused creatures to Kugamayama anymore.

In fact, Dragon River used this as a justification to sell these valuable items to other cities, earning considerable profits. Rumors circulated that the rift in the relationship between Kugamayama and Dragon River was deliberately caused by Dragon River.

Elena briefly explained these matters before continuing.

“... Well, it's just rumors, but if that's true, then Akira should be fine. After all, it's the Dragon River, who is hiding Akira, that did it.”

Hearing this, Sara chuckled.

“If that's true, it's outrageous to cause conflicts with cities just to sell relics elsewhere. Truly befitting of a renowned hunter team.”

“Well, when you reach that level, your operating funds must be enormous, so maybe they feel they have to resort to such actions to earn. Although it does make you wonder if that's the right thing to do. But if it's for Akira's sake, let's just turn a blind eye. It's not our concern in the first place.”

“That's true.”

Elena and Sara said, laughing together.

With Akira's name brought up, Sara recalled Akira's fighting style during the day.

“Anyway, Akira was really strong, wasn't he? ”

Elena also smiled lightly in agreement.

“Yes, he was amazing.”

Although they received support from Carol's team, Akira charged alone into Baoregire and almost single-handedly defeated it. Elena and the others were overwhelmed by the display of strength from a high-ranking hunter.

“... Elena, do you think we can catch up to that level? ”

To continue working alongside Akira as hunters, they probably needed to be at least that strong. While Sara thought about this, she found it hard to imagine them reaching such a level of strength.

Elena responded calmly to this.

“Do we really need to catch up? Our goal is not to become as strong as Akira but to maintain a good relationship with him. Becoming as strong as Akira isn't our objective.”

Upon hearing this, Sara realized. Becoming as strong as Akira would make it easier to fight alongside him. They aimed to become stronger for that reason. But that strength was a means to an end, not the end itself.

“... Yeah, I guess so.”

“Is it difficult to confuse means and ends? Well, I understand that without the motivation to catch up and surpass him, you'll just be left behind.”

“... You're right. I understand, Elena.”

After feeling somewhat down about Akira's overwhelming strength, Sara felt relieved after hearing Elena's words. She smiled as if to

show her best friend that she was okay now, having let go of her worries.

“Sara, I have something I want to ask. From your perspective, did Akira seem okay? You know, Shizuka mentioned that she felt Akira's mental state was quite fragile. If he has let go of his worry, that's great, but did you sense any signs of him struggling?”

Asked this, Sara thought again about Akira's condition today.

“... He seemed fine to me. I didn't get the feeling that he was forcing himself to smile or anything. And even when discussing Sheryl's abduction, he seemed calm, not desperately holding back.”

“Then... he's probably okay?”

“Most likely.”

Seeing her relieved friend, Elena also felt at ease. While optimism isn't always the correct stance, in matters of the heart, being optimistic usually serves better than being pessimistic. That's what she thought.

“Well then, shall we head back?”

With their concerns resolved, they melted away along with today's fatigue in the bath. Elena and Sara got out of the bathtub and left the bathroom.

Elena and Sara, having dried off the water droplets from their captivating naked bodies, chose what to wear. One was a thin bodysuit of reinforced fabric, and the other was a sleeping outfit provided by the camping car.

After dressing in their chosen attire, Elena and Sara returned to the living room where Akira and the others were.

Sensing Elena and Sara's return, Akira turned his gaze in their direction. Then, he froze.

Elena and the others chose to wear sleepwear. Made of a thin fabric that wasn't see-through but still showed the contours of their bodies, it was loose-fitting. Carol had her own, which was particularly alluring.

Akira, upon seeing Elena and the others in their sleepwear, had various thoughts running through his head.

(Is it better to suggest they wear something less stimulating? No, even if I see someone dressed like Carol, I shouldn't be bothered at all, right? Would it be inappropriate for me to say something to Elena and the others? Ultimately, whatever Elena and the others choose to wear is their own business, and it's not my place to intervene...)

As Akira's thoughts continued, Togami also noticed Elena and the others. He decided to refrain from making any unnecessary comments after seeing Akira's reaction.

Unlike Akira, Togami's response to women didn't change between Elena and the others and Carol. Additionally, Togami was getting used to Carol's attire. He could manage to stay unfazed even when seeing Elena and the others' outfits.

Togami also thought it might be scary if Akira reacted strongly if he stared at Elena and the others, so he made sure not to look their way and pretended not to care.

Hikaru decided not to worry about it either. She judged that Elena and the others were starting to become indifferent to such attire as they approached high-rank hunters.

Carol watched Akira's reaction to confirm her judgment.

Indeed, Akira was interested in women. Yet, despite that, his casual attitude toward her indicated that she hadn't met some condition, likely their level of closeness or something similar. If that's the case, she thought she could do something about it. With that in mind, Carol smiled seductively.

Then Elena spoke lightly.

"I'm thinking of going to sleep soon. Can I borrow the sofa? "

The beds in the camping car were already occupied by Akira and the other three, leaving none for Hikaru and the others.

Akira then suggests, coming back to his senses.

"Ah, in that case, Elena and the others can use my bed. I'll take the sofa."

Elena responds to Akira's suggestion.

"Is that so? Hmm. While I'm glad you say that, Akira, I think it's better for you to properly rest in bed to recover from fatigue."

"Is that right? I think I'll be fine, but..."

Then Sara chimes in lightly.

"No, it's not okay. You need to properly rest. Oh, then shall we sleep together? "

"Sure, let's do that."

"Huh? "

While Akira utters those lightly bewildered words, he is grabbed by Elena and Sara from both sides.

"...Huh? ...Wha—? "

Due to being sandwiched between Elena and Sara, Akira is in a slight state of confusion as he is led by them to Akira's bed.

After seeing off Akira and the others, Togami says.

“...Guess I'll sleep too.”

With those words left behind, as Togami tries to head to his bed, Hikaru stops him.

“Ah, um, I also need a bed...”

“Sorry. I want to rest properly for tomorrow too. Besides, we haven't built that kind of relationship even with your skill, right? Good night.”

With no intention to lend his bed or to sleep together, Togami indicates his resolve and leaves.

Carol also laughs and says as she leaves.

“Well, to fight in top condition, it's priority for the combat team to have the beds, right?”

Hearing that, Hikaru can't argue. Akira and the others' fatigue directly affects Hikaru's safety.

However, Hikaru is by no means taking it easy. Even when going to the lower districts of the city, she has guards. She, who has become accustomed to a safe life within the walls, was in the dangerous depths where even high-ranking hunters could almost die. The mental fatigue from such an environment is immeasurable.

In a sense, Hikaru, who is probably the most tired among Akira and the others, lets out a deep sigh and collapses onto the sofa for her bed.

Akira, who is taken to bed by Elena and the others, ends up really sleeping with them.

The bed is spacious thanks to the luxurious camping car facilities. However, it's a bit cramped for three people to sleep in. They end up sleeping relatively close to each other.

Akira, placed in the center of the bed, can't turn his face toward either side due to being sandwiched by Elena and Sara, so he sleeps on his back instead of on his side. Elena and Sara lie on their sides facing Akira, their faces or chests directed toward him.

Akira, somewhat unusually, voices a slight dissatisfaction toward Elena and Sara.

“Elena-san, Sara-san. What are you planning to do if I do something strange? ”

But Sara responds lightly.

“Hmm. Just be gentle, okay? ”

At Akira's frozen reaction to that, Elena adds with a slightly amused tone.

“Just don't lose any sleep over it, okay? ”

“I'm going to sleep now! Goodnight! ”

With a slight grimace, Akira replies and decides to really go to sleep.

“Goodnight, Akira.”

“Rest well.”

Although Elena and the others tease Akira a bit strongly, it's intentional.

When trying to sleep, people's consciousness can be directed to various things. As Shizuka had strong concerns, Akira's mental state could also be focused on things that worsened it. But by doing this, they want Akira's consciousness to be directed toward them. They just want him to sleep without thinking about anything unnecessary.

Well, if he really makes a move, then it'll be dealt with at that time.

With that thought in mind, Elena and the others smile and close their eyes.

As Akira tries to sleep and closes his eyes, he feels a gaze and opens them. There, above Akira a bit, Alpha is lying down in the air, looking at Akira.

『What's up, Alpha... Let me sleep...』

Akira thought Alpha was planning to say something or tease him again.

Alpha smiles cheerfully.

『If you can't sleep, I just thought I'd let you know after Elena and the others have slept.』

Akira interprets it as he should move to the empty sofa after Elena and the others have slept.

『Got it. Goodnight.』

『Goodnight.』

Akira closes his eyes and eventually falls asleep after a while.

Alpha didn't really intend to tease Akira. Akira's strong hostility towards his fake self has become a new concern for Alpha. To address that concern, Alpha positioned herself where she would be

immediately visible when Akira woke up in a situation where he might startle awake.

The night wears on. Despite the various thoughts each harbored, once everyone fell asleep, it was just like any other night.

Chapter 240: Fake Akira Appears

Akira and the others continued their patrol of the Second Inner Sector as usual. When they were attacked by the ruin's security machines as usual, Togami and Carol dealt with them.

However, this time Togami took a more forward position to engage in battle, while Carol provided support from the rear.

This was at Togami's request. In order to become stronger, Togami aimed to defeat a group of machine-type monsters alone.

For a few machines, Togami could handle them alone just fine. Thanks to the support project implemented under the pretext of providing equipment support to Akira, Togami obtained significantly more powerful guns and augmented suit than before. As a result, Togami's individual combat capabilities improved significantly.

However, facing a dozen or so machines alone was tough. Dealing with dozens of them would not just be difficult but reckless. Despite understanding this, Togami aimed to achieve that recklessness with a determination to improve himself. To absorb the results of Akira and catch up to the fictional Hunter rank that had risen to an overwhelming level, he was willing to train to the point of risking his life.

Of course, Togami knew that in reality, this battle was far from life-threatening. When things got really dangerous, Akira would lend a hand. Even before that, if Togami couldn't hold back the enemies and the monsters started targeting Hikaru, Elena and the others would join the fight. Togami wouldn't die in this battle.

Still, Togami fought with the determination to risk his life. Knowing that this was a battle with insurance for his own survival, he stepped forward to become stronger with all his might.

While it's true that training to the point of risking one's life can make one stronger, training to the point of death would only result in

death. But now, he could come close to that without actually dying. He could continue to run through the deathtrap without dying. Even if it seemed shameless, he would greedily seize that benefit and become stronger. Togami made up his mind to fight with that determination.

He desperately controlled the augmented suit he was still unfamiliar with, repeatedly making high-speed and irregular movements, kicking the ground and air to disrupt the enemy's aim. While constantly being showered with countless lines of fire, he would disengage before they turned into actual bullets or lasers and take down the enemies first.

He repeated this process. Either annihilating the enemies all by himself or being supported by Akira and the others. And to prevent the latter from happening, he exerted all his strength.

Togami's style of fighting astonished Akira and the others.

However, Togami's winning streak didn't last. First, Carol joined in for support. This prompted Elena and Akira to also join in support. As a result, the group of machine-type monsters that Togami had managed to hold off alone until now was easily wiped out.

Togami returned to Akira and the others, sighing.

“Did it not go well? I thought I could handle a little more on my own...”

Carol, who was the first to support Togami, responded to his question.

“Well, if it was just Togami alone...”

“What do you mean? ”

Instead of easily finishing it off together, they are intentionally holding back at Togami's request. If he wanted to mimic Akira, he

should at least eliminate all the lines of fire directed at others, like Akira does. There's no obligation for Carol to expose herself to enemy fire for Togami's training. Carol said so, and Togami understood.

“I see... I still have a long way to go.”

Hikaru laughs and says to Togami, who is looking a bit dejected.

“But you were amazing! If you can fight like that, the support project might not just be a pretext anymore.”

Hikaru had only thought of Togami as someone around to support Akira until now. She had no expectations for his actual abilities as a Hunter.

Therefore, Hikaru was surprised and greatly impressed to learn that Togami was capable of fighting to this extent, as the support project, despite its pretext, was actually in motion, backed by the city's budget. If successful, it would become a track record. That's why Hikaru was hoping for Togami's hard work.

Togami also felt pleased. He was praised for his abilities by someone who knew that his Hunter rank was just for show. He felt happy.

“I see. Then I'll have to work hard.”

First, he would make the support project successful, unrelated to Akira. He would gain that much power. In order to become stronger, Togami resolved to do so.

In the subsequent patrols, Togami fought desperately. If the number of opponents was single-digit, he often defeated them without the need for support from Akira and the others. Even when facing a dozen or so machines, he achieved considerable results. He demonstrated his strength repeatedly against hordes of machine-type monsters.

While watching Togami's fighting style, Akira thought.

『Baoregire didn't show up today.』

Today, Akira and the others only fought against the ruin's security machines. This allowed Togami to continue demonstrating his prowess in battle.

『It's a bit late to mention it now, but isn't it strange that more reinforcements don't arrive even after defeating so many? We're not the only ones defeating them, you know? Even if they're mass-produced somewhere every day, there should definitely be more coming, right?』

Once you think of it that way, it's not something to worry about, but once you start thinking about it, Akira couldn't help but be bothered.

In the Second Inner Sector, there are plenty of high-ranked hunters fighting, all of whom can easily defeat machine-type monsters like the ones Togami is fighting now. Even if there were warehouses big enough to fit several inter-city transport vehicles, packed with spare security machines, they should definitely run out. Akira found it strange, thinking so.

Alpha responds to that question.

『It's probably because they mass-produced so many that even if they're destroyed every day, it's just a margin of error. Look, remember how the Tsubaki management area was filled with unused items that were mass-produced and never used? It's similar to that. They were probably producing so much every day that there's still a tiny amount left, even with all the machines hunters destroy.』

『...But isn't that too much? Where would they even store that amount? It's bound to overflow, right?』

『The storage problem would be solved if there were warehouses like the one in the Third Inner Sector.』

『...Ah, I see. It wouldn't be surprising if something like that existed.』

If there were warehouses that blatantly ignored the laws of physics, with their exterior size not matching their interior space, they could store as much as they wanted. If that were the case, all they had to do was keep producing. Even if hunters destroyed a number of units exceeding the daily production rate, considering the total amount produced since the old-world era, the decrease would be insignificant. Akira thought so.

Alpha continues.

『Akira. Do you remember the story that Kugamayama City was originally built to conquer the Kuzusuhara District Ruin?』

『Oh yeah. They did mention something like that.』

『The city's defensive walls are a relic of that time. Basically, it means they were pushed that far. The monsters living in the Kugamayama region aren't as huge or sturdy as those would require such massive and robust walls.』

『That's right. So back then, monsters from the inner regions made it all the way to the city?』

『Those defensive walls were constructed by Sakashita Heavy Industries, which led the conquest of the ruins, for the defense of the outskirt. Although it was built with so much effort as an outskirt, it remains even after the outskirt has turned into a city. This is evidence that the system is not functioning properly.』

『Is that so?』

『Yes. If the system were functioning properly, there's no way they'd leave military facilities of other factions near their own capital, right?』

『Well, maybe... Wait, what were we talking about again?』

When Akira felt like the conversation was drifting off, he asked, and Alpha smiled in response.

『There are various reasons why the security machines aren't decreasing even after defeating so many, or why the ruins aren't completely filled with them. Does that solve your doubts?』

『Ah, right. Yeah, I think I understand now. But still, we haven't seen any Baoregire today at all...』

Of course, Akira understood that Alpha's explanation was just one possible perspective and not necessarily the answer to his questions. Still, he feels satisfied with it to some extent and doesn't pursue further interest. He's content with it, even though he knows it's not the definitive answer.

Alpha watched Akira with a smile.



In the depths of the Second Inner Sector, the battle between high-ranked hunters and fused creatures emerging from the Third Inner Sector continued. Groups numbering not in the tens but in the hundreds of fused creatures named Baoregire, with a lower part resembling a beast, and Dredemas, a fusion of fish and bird-like lower parts, assaulted the hunters.

These fused creatures were not weakened individuals due to energy depletion, like those encountered by Akira's patrols. They emitted torrents of energy from above and below, and even if they were merely severed, they would reattach and heal or regenerate one side from the severed part and continue fighting.

Against such formidable monsters, the hunters maintained their superiority.

High-performance humanoid weapons fired giant guns, launched missiles, and swung massive blades. They defended against the energy torrents unleashed by the fused creatures with superior shields, armor, and deployable temporary barriers. Even those who fought without riding humanoid weapons skillfully cooperated to corner their targets and defeat enemies as a team.

The hunters were proving their worth, backed by considerable funds invited from Kugamayama City.

And this scene also served as the frontline against the Nationalist presumed to be in the Third Inner Sector. These fused creature hordes were judged to be assaults by the Nationalist following the false Akira's declaration, commanding Kaiju.

This further spurred the hunters on. They saw it as a prime opportunity to demonstrate their strength to Sakashita Heavy Industry.

However, this momentum did not push the frontline forward. There were no issues with their fighting strength. Even if they ventured further and encountered a Kaiju named Relagros in the Third Inner Sector, they didn't claim they could definitely win, but they maintained enough force to retreat if needed.

Yet the hunters remained at this location out of fear that venturing further could lead to a point of no return.

The boundary between the Second and Third Inner Sector was not clear. Those who ventured too far and returned would likely find themselves still in the Second Inner Sector to some extent.

Dragon River had announced Tatsukawa's return from the Third Inner Sector, using the scene of battle there as evidence. However, they hadn't disclosed the circumstances of his escape or attempted reentry into the Third Inner Sector.

Each hunter team interpreted this to mean that Tatsukawa's escape from the Third Inner Sector was either a stroke of luck or involved a method with low reproducibility. Either way, it demonstrated how difficult it was to escape from the Third Inner Sector.

The struggle for control deep within the ruins of Kuzusuhara District had reached a stalemate on the frontline. Unable to advance further, the destruction of the fused creatures remained the primary achievement. Each team dispatched its main force to the frontline to earn results, while those lacking in strength were assigned to relic collection and mapmaking behind the frontline.

Although fused creatures occasionally slipped past the frontline hunters, there were no breakthroughs by groups. Even those with relatively weaker abilities positioned in the rear were sufficient to defeat them, maintaining stability.

And today, a new force joined the frontline: Harmers.

Harmers, who had been removed from the search for Shiro due to their failure to prevent his escape, had been on "vacation" as a form of punishment. However, he had no intention of idly enjoying his time off and instead took it upon himself to search for Shiro. Yet, scouring the outskirts of Kugamayama City yielded no results. He needed manpower for the search.

However, as he was excluded from the search for Shiro, the personnel of Sakashita Heavy Industry couldn't be used. Yet, hiring external individuals wasn't an option either.

Shiro's existence was treated as classified information, especially considering his role as an information processing operative for Sakashita Heavy Industry. His presence outside the company's facilities was an even higher level of secrecy. Moreover, his current status as a fugitive heightened the secrecy even further. Thus, entrusting the search for Shiro to outsiders would constitute a significant breach of confidentiality.

Due to these circumstances, Harmers needed to carefully select allies for Shiro's search. After much deliberation, they turned to Yanagisawa for assistance.

Yanagisawa was accustomed to handling classified information given his position. Furthermore, there was a possibility that he already knew about Shiro's current fugitive status through his own network of information. If he already knew, there would be no breach of information. At the very least, the impact would be minimal. Harmers made that judgment.

And as a reward for Harmers' cooperation in the search for Shiro, Yanagisawa demanded results on this front line. Considering the defense of Kugamayama City, it's not particularly surprising. Harmers agreed to these conditions.

He deflected the energy released by Baoregire, using his strengthened arms to swiftly create a barrier of bio-force field, deflecting the attack. The immense beam, repelled by the barrier, scattered into light waves and dissipated.

In the next moment, Harmers closed the distance with Baoregire in a single step. It seemed like a simple walk, but it was a special movement technique based on the assumption of superhuman physical capabilities. To those in the vicinity of his destination, it didn't appear that Harmers was approaching, but rather, it created an illusion as if he suddenly grew to giant size.

With a decisive strike, Harmers moved in front of Baoregire and delivered a punch. Compared to the head of the large monster, which

was thirty meters long, Harmers' arms were needle-thin. However, instead of piercing the opponent, the “needle” struck and sent the massive creature flying.

The impact from the small fist propagated throughout Baoregire's body, destroying it at the cellular level. Not only was its heavily damaged head affected, but the rest of its body also suffered from the lethal impact. Harmers replicated what Tatsukawa had done with his red humanoid weapon, but with their bare body.

As Harmers prepared to counter, Dredemas, a fusion of fish and birds, attempted to unleash a surge of light from above. Sensing this, Harmers preemptively launched a kick.

Despite flying at a height greater than a five-story building, Dredemas couldn't evade Harmers' attack.

Dredemas staggered as if hit by a cannonball, its posture disrupted, and it inadvertently redirected the surge of light in a different direction.

While not as powerful as a direct hit, the blow dealt significant damage, slowing down Dredemas. It was eventually defeated when struck by a humanoid weapon while its movements were impaired.

Hunters prioritized defeating Dredemas over Baoregire. If left unchecked, flying monsters posed a greater threat than those grounded.

However, if highly armed hunters missed their target in the air, their powerful attacks could inadvertently provoke aerial monsters. Therefore, humanoid weapons capable of attacking from the same altitude engaged primarily with Dredemas.

Generally, humanoid weapons were stronger than humans, so Dredemas was effectively eliminated, while Baoregire managed to break through the frontline more often. Akira and others on patrol

engaged Baoregire multiple times, but they were never attacked by Dredemas. This was the reason.

Furthermore, with Harmers' appearance on the frontline today, Baoregire was thoroughly dealt with. Harmers had already demonstrated performance equivalent to or exceeding that of humanoid weapons. Additionally, with Harmers on the front lines, the hunters were significantly more motivated. They saw it as an opportunity to impress the Sakashita Heavy Industry personnel who came to inspect the site and thus rallied to show their best.

Consequently, the fused creatures were systematically eradicated. Even those that would typically slip through the frontline were meticulously defeated. Today, Akira and his team only faced mechanical monsters for this reason.

After mostly annihilating the horde of fused creatures, Harmers quenched his thirst with a drink containing combat stimulants and exhaled deeply. Then, they turned their gaze to Yanagisawa, who accompanied him.

“That should be a wrap. I'd like to hear about the results so far.”

Yanagisawa had brought his own unit to accompany Harmers. While they hadn't actively engaged monsters, they were prepared to repel any attacks. This also contributed to why the fused creatures couldn't break through the frontline.

“Unfortunately, we still haven't pinpointed Shiro's whereabouts. However, we've confirmed that he was accompanying a hunter named Akira.”

“Akira? The one making a fuss about Nationalist? ”

“Yes. More precisely, it seems Shiro was likely accompanying the real one, not the imposter involved in the Nationalist movement.”

“And where is this Akira? ”

“He's currently missing. It seems he's laying low after a bounty was placed on him from Kugamayama City.”

“What are they up to...”

Harmers glanced incredulously at the lax response from Kugamayama City. Yanagisawa offered a brief apology, bowing slightly.

“I apologize. The confusion arose because the deceased Udajima, while not highly regarded, was the leader of a faction within the city's administration. His death caused some turmoil on-site, leading to a somewhat hasty response to Akira.”

As Yanagisawa apologized and made excuses, he couldn't help but think to himself.

(Well, I'm the one who instructed the city folks to put a bounty on Akira...)

Yanagisawa wanted to bring Shirou in if possible. Shirou, a old-world connector of Sakashita Heavy Industry and a first-class information processing operative, could bring Yanagisawa significantly closer to his goals if he could be brought in.

It's not usual for someone to escape from Sakashita Heavy Industry. Conversely, that implies there are significant reasons behind it. If those reasons can be resolved here, then it should be possible to negotiate cooperation by using them as bargaining chips.

Therefore, it would be troublesome if Shirou were to be found yet. While the reason why Shirou is accompanying Akira is unclear, Yanagisawa wants to avoid Akira revealing Shirou's whereabouts.

With that in mind, Yanagisawa made Akira a bounty target in order to have him voluntarily go into hiding. The incomplete amount of the bounty and the reasons for designating him as a bounty target are intentional for this purpose.

By offering a huge bounty or designating someone as a bounty target for reasons that cannot be revoked, there is a risk that Akira will flee to a distant location. If cooperation is obtained from Inabe and others, there is a sufficient possibility of clearing the false charge, so while he temporarily hides, he remains near Kugamayama City. Yanagisawa deliberately limited the amount of Akira's bounty and the reasons for designating him as a bounty target to the extent that Akira would consider.

And in a sense, Akira ended up hiding in a base near Dragon River as Yanagisawa had anticipated.

Unaware of such developments, Harmers simply continues, thinking it's just a mistake on the part of Kugamayama City.

“So, where is Akira? Even if he's missing, he's just a mere hunter. Shouldn't it be possible to narrow down his whereabouts to some extent if investigated?”

“There is no certainty, but there is information that he is being sheltered in Dragon River. However, currently, Kugamayama City has severely worsened its relationship with Dragon River, and there are limits to the investigation, not to mention that demanding his custody is impossible...”

Upon hearing this, Harmers lets out a deep sigh.

“Really, what are you guys doing...”

“I apologize. However, even for us, dealing with unknown situations is difficult. If we had received information beforehand, we could have instructed each department to be more considerate...”

Hearing that, Harmers can't argue back. Dealing with Shirou's escape without knowing about it is impossible. Furthermore, if they were to deal with it, it would imply they knew about Shirou's escape. In other words, until they are informed by Sakashita Heavy Industry,

there is no way to handle the situation, whether they knew about Shirou's escape or not.

And Harmers interprets Yanagisawa's response in the latter sense, implicitly acknowledging it.

“I apologize for that. Now that I know, I'll rely on you from now on.”

If Sakashita Heavy Industry were to put pressure on Dragon River, it would be easy to obtain Akira. However, Harmers is excluded from the search for Shirou. Their hands are tied in that matter. For now, they have no choice but to rely on Yanagisawa's power.

“Of course.”

Concealing his true feelings, Yanagisawa politely bows his head.

Just then, Yanagisawa receives a notification from his subordinate. After confirming its contents, Yanagisawa hesitates for a moment, then decides that it would be unreasonable to hide this from Harmers.

“I just received a report from my subordinate. It's unclear whether it's real or fake, but apparently, Akira has appeared at the Mihazono District Ruin.”

Harmers asks with a serious expression.

“...Is Shirou with him?”

“He has one companion. Further details are unknown.”

With that, both Harmers and Yanagisawa fall silent. They both put their full effort into considering how to act based on this information.



Akira and the others who were patrolling the Second Inner Sector were taking a break in the camping car.

Togami had been fighting a group of mechanical monsters alone, intending to handle them all by himself, so naturally, he was exhausted. Before Togami could reach complete exhaustion, Akira and the others decided to take a slightly earlier break.

Of course, even if Togami became too tired to fight, both Akira and Elena were present. There were sufficient forces remaining for patrolling. However, the visible forces were only Carol and Togami. Akira was in hiding, and Elena and the others were here to guard Hikaru, not for patrolling. If Togami were to collapse, the visible forces would be halved. It was sufficient reason to return and rest for a while.

They decided to return to patrolling after resting for about an hour. With that decision made, Akira and the others were taking a leisurely break in the camping car.

Togami, who had consumed a significant amount of both stamina and ammunition by himself, was sprawled lazily on the sofa. Akira and the others, who were not particularly tired, were chatting while snacking on sweets.

Hikaru, who had been participating in the conversation, suddenly became serious. She had read the contents of the notification displayed in her augmented vision.

“Akira, I need to authenticate you.”

Hearing this, Akira also became serious. However, he responded calmly without making a fuss.

“...Understood.”

Hikaru being by Akira's side was to provide evidence that the real Akira was in a different location if a fake Akira appeared. Hikaru

asking Akira for authentication other than the regular checks meant that a fake Akira had appeared somewhere. Akira understood that much.

Akira's determination to kill his impostor had not diminished at all. However, he refrained from emitting any overtly hostile aura. In a positive sense, Akira remained composed.

Before Hikaru hurriedly proceeded with Akira's authentication, Akira took a deep breath and asked.

“So, Hikaru, what's the situation? ”

“A fake Akira has appeared at the Mihazono District Ruin.”

“Mihazono District Ruin...? ”

Instead of questioning why there, Akira felt a sense of distance. He then asked Hikaru for another piece of information.

“Is it just my impostor? Did Baoregire or that Kaiju show up too? ”

“There are no such reports, so I think they probably haven't.”

Hearing this, Akira made a decision.

“I see. Understood. Then, after this authentication is done, I'll go to the Mihazono District Ruin.”

“Eh...? ”

Seeing Hikaru's blatantly displeased expression, Akira added an explanation.

“I didn't say you should come with me. In fact, it's dangerous, so don't. Stay here with Elena and the others.”

Having obtained a reason not to accompany Akira, as he had been refused, Hikaru visibly relaxed her expression. However, despite that, she still voiced her concerns.

“...Uh, well, you see, Inabe-san told me not to let Akira do anything reckless...”

“If the offer is for me to quietly stay here and provide an opportunity to kill my impostor when that Kaiju isn't around, then stop.”

It was clearly impossible. Hikaru immediately judged so and conveyed it to Akira through her expression. At the same time, the sound indicating the completion of Akira's authentication process rang out. Akira immediately headed towards his bike parked inside the vehicle, ready to depart for the Mihazono District Ruin.

There, Akira was slightly surprised to find Carol already seated on the bike.

“Carol. What's the idea? ”

“I'm going too. A driverless bike would attract attention, wouldn't it? ”

A bounty target like Akira couldn't afford to attract attention. However, using camouflage function would also make it appear as if a driverless bike was running, thus attracting attention in its own way.

Riding behind Carol would solve that problem. Akira understood that much, but he hesitated enough that he couldn't immediately agree. Recognizing Akira's hesitation, Carol continued with a smile.

“Togami is tired, and Elena and the others are guarding Hikaru-san. I'm the only one available, right? ”

Despite Carol's words, Akira remained undecided. However, at that moment, Alpha spoke up.

『Akira, if you're in a hurry, just depart. You can decide how far you'll accompany Carol while on the move.』

“Understood. I'm counting on you.”

When Akira straddled the bike behind Carol, she smiled somewhat proudly.

Elena and the others approached. Elena spoke to Akira with a serious expression.

“Akira, I won't stop you, and I won't tell you not to do anything reckless. But don't be stubborn. If you think it's better to retreat once, then do so. If you're alive, there will be another chance.”

“Understood.”

Akira smiled and nodded firmly. At that, Elena and the others also relaxed their expressions and nodded in unison.

As Akira activated the camouflage function, the rear door of the vehicle opened.

“Carol. Let's go.”

“Roger. I'll speed up! ”

The bike carrying Akira and the others flew out vigorously from the open door. As they flew through the air toward the Mihazono District Ruin, Elena let out a deep sigh and switched her focus. Unable to go with them, she still resolved to do everything she could and began to contemplate their future actions.

“Hikaru-san, what should we do? Should we also go to the Mihazono District Ruin? ”

“Um, well... ”

Hikaru, unable to express her dislike but constrained by her position, responded vaguely while showing that sentiment on her face.

At that moment, Togami interjected.

“I'm going to the Mihazono District Ruin for now. I don't know what might happen, but it's easier to lend a hand if I'm nearby. Oh, I'll be taking this car, so if you're staying behind, sorry, but could you get off? ”

Hikaru also wanted to get off, to be honest. However, her position didn't allow it. Even if she went to the Mihazono District Ruin to follow Akira and the others, it would be safer to wait outside the ruins. Thinking that way, she deceived herself.

“...I understand. Let's go.”

“Got it. Let's go.”

As Togami headed for the driver's seat, Hikaru sighed heavily and sat down on the sofa, slumping her shoulders.

Seeing Hikaru like that, Elena and the others couldn't help but smile wryly, knowing they were partly to blame.

Having realized how things would turn out, Elena proposed going to the Mihazono District Ruin to Hikaru, and Sara, also understanding the situation, didn't stop her. In their hearts, they apologized to Hikaru for taking advantage of her position to help Akira, and resolved to protect Hikaru firmly in return.

Chapter 241: Haruka

A single rugged vehicle was traversing the wasteland towards the Mihazono District Ruin. There were two occupants: a fake Akira and a girl accompanying him. The girl was adorned in equipment reminiscent of the old-world. The fake Akira, including his appearance, was identical to the real Akira, including his gear.

Although seated in the driver's seat, the fake Akira, leaving the driving to autopilot, asked the girl in the passenger seat with a slightly puzzled expression.

“Hey, Haruka. Do we really need to approach head-on? Couldn't we just use the camouflage function and sneak in, like when we entered the Sheryl's gang's building? ”

In response, the girl called Haruka answered decisively.

“No. If we used the camouflage function to enter the Seranthal Building, we'd be seen as suspicious, wouldn't we? Besides, using the camouflage function within the grounds of Mihazono District without permission is already illegal.”

“If that's the case, wouldn't being armed also be a problem? ”

“Well, that's within the bounds of self-defense. There are armed groups in the city that even security machines can't handle. So, it's inevitable for us to be armed to defend ourselves against them, right? ”

“Then, wouldn't it be justified for us to use the camouflage function for self-defense? ”

Sensing that the questioning could continue indefinitely, Haruka shifted the direction of the conversation.

“Well, I don't deny Akira's perspective, but ultimately, it depends on how the city's system assesses it. We just have to move based on the feeling that this much should be okay. And it's my job to make that judgment. Are you okay with that? ”

“Yeah, got it.”

“Thanks.”

Haruka knew this Akira was a fake. Yet, she treated this fake Akira as if he were the real one. And the fake Akira, without a hint of suspicion, responded normally to her treatment.

Upon arriving at the Mihazono District Ruin, the fake Akira and his companion proceeded towards the Seranthal Building. Along the way, they were observed by hunters from the ruins, but their car was a common model, and Haruka's equipment, considering the numerous high-ranking hunters in Kugamayama City, didn't attract much attention. It was just a passing glance, and no commotion ensued.

However, as they approached the Seranthal Building, avoiding commotion became unavoidable. The area around the building had become a plaza, with Kugamayama City's forces deployed there. Furthermore, Lion Steel Company's units were deployed outside. Of course, the fake Akira and Haruka were heading towards the Seranthal Building fully aware of this.

“Haruka, let's get off soon.”

The fake Akira's vehicle was designed for rugged terrain, not lacking in performance. However, compared to the gear of the two, it was significantly inferior.

Being inside a vehicle during engagement could create significant vulnerabilities. Thinking this, the fake Akira urged Haruka to disembark early.

“Got it... Huh? Akira, wait a moment.”

“What is it? ”

“Oh, this should be fine for Lion Steel. Let's continue like this.”

The fake Akira looked puzzled, but if Haruka said so, then it should be fine, he thought, nodding lightly.

Continuing on, the fake Akira and Haruka encountered Lion Steel Company's forces. However, these units were lined up on both sides of the road. Butlers and maids, showing no intention of combat, stood unarmed in rows, signifying their peaceful intent. Only Pamela, entrusted with the command of this unit by Chloe, stood in the middle of the road to welcome the fake Akira and Haruka.

The fake Akira's vehicle stopped in front of Pamela, and they both got out of the car, bowing respectfully to Pamela, who returned a friendly smile to Haruka.

“Will you let us through? ”

“Yes, please proceed.”

“By the way, how did you know we were coming? ”

“We received reports from subordinates stationed near the wasteland.”

“Ah, I see.”

While lightly responding, Haruka thought to herself.

(...They were prepared for us as well. Can't underestimate them.)

Since being detected by the Mihazono District Ruin's system could lead to being viewed as enemies by the city, Haruka hadn't tampered with the ruin's system.

However, she had infiltrated hunter information-gathering devices and hunter office surveillance equipment indiscriminately. And they should have made themselves appear as different individuals to others.

Whether they were found out for altering data, seen by someone with the naked eye, or intentionally placed individuals to scout using their own senses to anticipate their data alteration, Haruka didn't know.

But regardless, they had been detected approaching. Thinking this, Haruka slightly raised her guard against Pamela and her team, anticipating what would happen if Pamela's team turned hostile.

Pamela, while reading Haruka's inner thoughts, kept her own thoughts hidden. She maintained a smile that wouldn't be considered rude even when facing the clients.

Ignoring the standoff between Pamela and Haruka, the fake Akira spoke to Pamela without any concern.

“If you don't intend to fight, it's dangerous, so stay away. We don't want to involve you, but we also don't want to be caught in the crossfire.”

The city's forces had already noticed the fake Akira's presence and began moving. Units deployed around the Serenthal Building were converging towards the direction of the fake Akira. Some humanoid weapons were already aiming guns at the fake Akira.

The reason why they haven't opened fire is because they're waiting for a response after reporting Akira's discovery to the top command and were waiting for a response. The priority was whether to prioritize capturing or killing Akira. Since they hadn't yet engaged in combat, the decision-making priority rested not on the scene but with those far away in the Kugamayama City.

Furthermore, if the city's forces open fire in this situation, it will involve the Lion Steel Company's troops.

Lion Steel Company, though inferior to the five big companies, is a large corporation with branches throughout the eastern region. On the other hand, Kugamayama City, despite its recent prosperity, is ultimately just one of the mid-tier governance corporations.

It's difficult for a single unit of a city to open fire on such a large corporate force based on on-site judgment alone. In the worst case, that shot could become the signal for war between Kugamayama City and Lion Steel Company. In this regard as well, it was necessary for the judgment to come from the city's higher-ups rather than the on-site unit commander.

However, the on-site unit won't hesitate to engage until they receive instructions from above. If the fake Akira attacks, they'll naturally fight back. Even if Lion Steel Company's troops get caught in the crossfire, they won't hesitate.

The fake Akira understands this much. Saying he has no intention of involving Pamela and Lion Steel Company is not just to avoid unnecessary harm but also a declaration of imminent engagement.

Pamela understood this too. She instructed her subordinates to leave the scene first and prepared to leave herself after thanking the fake Akira.

Then Haruka lightly asked Pamela.

“Just in case, would you help if I asked? ”

“I refuse.”

Pamela answered so without breaking her friendly smile.

Haruka sighed softly, thinking she had nothing to lose by asking.

“Well, yeah, I guess. Akira. Just start, I'll provide support as needed.”

“Got it.”

Pamela left the scene. Now, the city's forces can target the fake Akira without the risk of hitting Lion Steel Company's personnel. Furthermore, the fake Akira dashed towards the Seranthal Building. Now, there's no time for the city's forces to observe the situation.

The conditions for engagement were met. The city's forces began their attack simultaneously.

The vicinity of the Seranthal Building used to be severely devastated. This was because the mechanical monster defenders of the building would engage in combat with approaching hunters without concern for other buildings, resulting in a constant cycle of destruction and reconstruction.

However, this situation changed when Yanagisawa negotiated with the building's management AI, and the city's forces took over security around the building. Now, the sight of a splendid city with numerous skyscrapers had returned.

But that sight was once again on the verge of collapse.

The hunters who were trying to enter the Seranthal Building in the former Mihazono District Ruin were all below Hunter Rank 40. The mechanical monsters defending the building were only strong enough to repel these hunters. Even in that combat, the area around the building turned into a heap of rubble due to the flying projectiles.

It's believed that the fake Akira, who is cooperating with the Nationalist, is active in the Third Inner Sector of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. In the face of such individuals, the city's forces couldn't hold back. They fired their weapons at the fake Akira and the swarm of fused creatures emerging from the Third Inner Sector.

Naturally, these attacks were carried out without concern for collateral damage. Even if it's just the battle of the vicinity of the second or Third Inner Sector, the buildings hit were collapsing one after another. The area around the Seranthal Building once again turned into a heap of rubble.

The city's forces acted swiftly. Almost simultaneously with the movement of the fake Akira, both humanoid weapons and troops launched their attacks with their respective armaments. The width of the road leading to the Serenthal Building was about 10 meters. It was covered with a barrage of projectiles as if to fill that width completely.

However, none of them hit the fake Akira. Despite the density of gunfire making evasion seem impossible, he managed to avoid every shot.

Without being hit at all, the fake Akira advanced through the valley of the buildings and entered the plaza where the troops were deployed.

The troops were astonished by the fake Akira's remarkably high evasion ability. But some of them felt suspicion rather than surprise. They knew the fake Akira was strong. After all, he had ridden on the head of a Kaiju. It wasn't unreasonable for him to be powerful. While sharing this premise, they couldn't help but think, "This level of strength is unnatural."

However, those who felt suspicion had no time to ponder its resolution. In the narrow valley of the building, there were limits to moving left and right to evade, but there were no such restrictions in the plaza. With more escape routes available, the fake Akira increased his evasion even further. The troops were distracted, focusing on targeting the fake Akira.

And amidst the barrage of bullets, shells, missiles, and lasers targeting him, the fake Akira also turned to offense. He fired the large guns he held in each hand.

Powered suits were heavily damaged, with their bodies pierced along with the crew inside. Troops, even with double-layered force field shields and force field armor, were blown to smithereens. The sheer power of his attack left the troops in disarray.

The troops deployed here were originally prepared by Yanagisawa for sealing off Tsubaki's management area. They had the capability to repel high-ranked hunters attempting to infiltrate the Tsubaki management area.

Naturally, such forces were equipped to make that possible. Both humanoid weapons and troops armaments were exceptionally high-performance. They were powerful enough to fight the swarms of fused creatures emerging from the Third Inner Sector.

Powered suits of such strength were destroyed in an instant, and the defenses of individual armaments were penetrated like paper. The troops couldn't have anticipated that the fake Akira would possess such powerful equipment.

Nevertheless, the troops' morale remained unwavering. With loyalty to their duties, they confronted the fake Akira. They deployed the troops in response to the opponent's rapid approach, surrounding the fake Akira in a circle.

And they unleashed a fierce barrage of gunfire aimed at the fake Akira, not just from all directions but also converging towards the center. It wasn't just crossfire, lines of fire extending from the outskirt to the center engulfed the interior of the circle.

The troops formed a circular formation and fired towards the center. Naturally, these lines of fire also extended to their allies on the opposite side, risking friendly fire without countermeasures.

However, the support system of the unit prevents that. The unit members rotate around the fake Akira, each with different orientations and speeds. The system constantly tracks the positions and lines of fire of all members, controlling gunfire to prevent friendly fire.

Of course, some friendly fire still occurs. But if it's troops gunfire, humanoid weapons can endure it. Even if the humanoid weapons are targeted, if the timing of the shots is known beforehand, troops can

increase the output of their force field shields momentarily to deflect them. This calculation is performed by the support system, which has access to the unit's information.

Some friendly fire is an inevitable expense. Instead, the unit focuses on increasing the density of the barrage to kill the fake Akira. With that decision, the unit creates a hellish barrage inside the encircling circle.

With this, there's no way they can't kill him. Everyone in the unit thought so. But that belief was shattered. From within the barrage, the fake Akira fires rapidly, destroying humanoid weapons and killing troops.

Even the members of the unit showed signs of agitation at this. Still, their morale doesn't waver. Despite losing comrades one after another, each member continues to give their all without hesitation. However, having the will to fight doesn't necessarily improve the situation. Facing the inexplicably unscathed fake Akira, the unit is being cornered.

At that moment, the humanoid weapon serving as the unit's command unit was hit by friendly fire. However, being hit was within expectations. The captain aboard the unit doesn't mind the friendly fire itself.

But due to this hit, the captain's expression inside the unit suddenly becomes grim. It was the shot that led to resolving the suspicions of the unit members.

As the one commanding this unit, the captain is aware of both the power of their comrades' guns and the defense capabilities of the unit. Therefore, if hit by friendly fire, they have a rough idea of how much damage the unit will sustain.

However, the damage to the unit was more severe than anticipated. It indicated that the unit's force field armor was not functioning properly.

The captain raises their voice inside the unit. To ensure it is clearly conveyed to others, instead of using the support system, they use the external speakers of the unit to shout the response to this perplexing situation.

“Detach the support system! Change all controls to local processing! The system is being tampered with!”

Why isn't the unit's force field armor functioning properly? The answer leads the captain to suspect tampering with the support system.

Haruka, who had tampered with the city unit's support system, was noticed and lightly praised for it.

“Oh, busted. Not bad for noticing, huh?”

The reason why the fake Akira remained unharmed even when barraged with seemingly unavoidable barrages from the city unit was because Haruka had tampered with the support system, causing the targeting to be disrupted. The image of the fake Akira observed by the unit members through their information gathering devices was slightly off from the actual position.

However, that alone wasn't the only issue. Despite the bullets hitting the impostor Akira as indicated on the display, they continued to pass through, which eventually caught the attention of the troops.

However, due to fake Akira's superhuman physical abilities and his high-speed and erratic movements, the members of the unit were misled into thinking that the bullets had not passed through them, but had been dodged. And Haruka had also cleverly tampered with the system to strengthen that misconception.

The fact that the humanoid weapons were easily destroyed by the fake Akira was also due to tampering with the support system.

While the force field armor of the humanoid weapons is very powerful, it also consumes a significant amount of energy. Continuous usage would quickly deplete the energy.

Therefore, it is primarily used upon detecting enemy attacks. It is designed to calculate enemy trajectories using high-performance detection equipment and increase the output of force field armor when there is a high probability of being hit. And this calculation is performed by the support system at the unit level because it allows for more precise calculations.

However, due to Haruka's tampering with the system, drastically reducing the probability of being hit, the humanoid weapons had drastically reduced the output of their force field armor. Even friendly fire shots, which should have been easily deflected, caused significant damage to the unit.

This was also Haruka's mistake. If she had accurately tampered with the system to only reduce the probability of being hit in the case of the fake Akira's gunfire, the captain would not have noticed the tampering with the system.

However, due to the intensity of the unit's attack, Haruka was unable to accurately tamper with all the trajectories of the barrage. The amount of calculations was too much, and the data corrections couldn't keep up. As a result, the captain noticed the tampering with the support system.

Normally, such a thing wouldn't be noticed. Haruka had skillfully tampered with the system and was confident in her abilities. That's why she genuinely admired the one who noticed the tampering with the system. With that in mind, she said,

“But well, reducing it this much should be enough.”

It hadn't even been five minutes since the start of the battle. However, in just that short time, the unit, continuously bombarded

with attacks from the fake Akira, was already in a state of half destruction.

If the captain had noticed the tampering with the support system earlier, this dire situation could have been avoided. However, there was also a reason for the delay in realizing it.

Previously, the city defense force had dispatched a humanoid weapons unit to capture the bounty target Akira. However, Shirou tampered with the information gathering device, leading them to pursue a phantom of Akira that only existed in the data, allowing Akira to escape. As a result, the city had significantly strengthened the unit's security to avoid making the same mistake again.

This delayed the captain's realization. They believed that since security had been strengthened, everything would be fine. This unconscious bias delayed the transition from suspicion to realization in the face of the inexplicable situation.

Even Shirou's tampering, which was supposed to be prevented by the security, was unexpectedly breached.

The fake Akira showers the humanoid weapon with bullets. He fires rapidly, hitting every shot. However, it doesn't lead to destruction. The unit, having regained its original defensive capabilities, withstands the fake Akira's gunfire.

The humanoid weapon retaliates against the fake Akira who lightly clicks his tongue. Using only information acquired from its information gathering device and calculating the targeting solely with its control device, without being misled by Haruka's data tampering, it fires a massive gun at the fake Akira.

However, the fake Akira easily dodges it. For him, dodging bullets with reduced accuracy due to the detachment of the support system was easy. Evading countless bullets, he closes the distance with the humanoid weapon.

And then, switching his weapons from guns to blades, he swung the jet-black blade in a cross pattern. The black light blade, clad in the waves of force-field armor, tore through the armor of the unit along with its crew.

The surviving members of the unit attempted to exploit the opening of his attack to target the fake Akira. They fired their weapons without concern for remaining ammunition, attempting to kill their opponent not with individual shots but with a barrage.

However, the fake Akira easily evaded their barrage. He disassembled the barrage, composed of bullets, shells, lasers, and missiles, into individual trajectories, dodging what was necessary and intercepting what was essential, navigating through without taking any hits. If it had been a barrage from a partially damaged unit, with significantly reduced density, the fake Akira could manage it.

Now, he aimed at the troops. Switching back to his gun, he took careful aim and fired in rapid succession.

The troops attempted to defend against his gunfire with force-field armor and force-field barriers. Having disconnected their support systems, their defenses had returned to their original robust states. This time, they wouldn't be easily breached.

However, as strong as they were, they were not as resilient as humanoid weapons. While they could withstand dozens of hits without a scratch, several hundred would start to take their toll.

In the face of rapid fire using extended magazines, the difference in bullet count was within the margin of error. Against the overwhelming number of bullets, the deployed force field shields were shattered, and the force field armors of the augmented suits were pierced.

Normally, during the enemy's gunfire, reinforcements would arrive. Before their remaining energy ran out, someone else would act as a

shield, take out the enemy with support fire, or interrupt the enemy's gunfire.

However, in the state of semi-destruction of the unit and with no support from the system, this was difficult. Furthermore, without system support, the difficulty level increased further. In this situation, the fake Akira couldn't be stopped. Continuously bombarded by barrages from their opponents, the troops, showered with a massive amount of bullets, fell one by one.

It was a cycle. Both humanoid weapons and troops were systematically taken down. And with each defeat, each kill, the fake Akira gained even more advantage.

In this dire situation, the unit leader finally understood. There was only one enemy. They also realized the tampering with the support system. If that was the case, even with the unit partially destroyed, they could win. They had to admit their decision was wrong.

Even so, if they could win by sacrificing themselves, they would continue. They were prepared to die, it was part of the job. But if they couldn't win, further combat would only increase casualties in vain. To prevent their subordinates from dying in vain, the unit leader decided to retreat.

Via emergency short-range communication lines, the signal for retreat was conveyed to the unit. Despite feeling bitter about losing many comrades and failing to accomplish their mission, they switched their focus to the retreat.

Haruka also noticed the decision of the city unit to retreat. She had not come to crush the unit in Kugamayama City, so she had no intention of obstructing their retreat. She ceased tampering with the support system and tried to get them to leave quickly.

However, she frowned slightly in surprise. The fake Akira intended to continue the battle against a unit that could easily be let go. With a

troubled expression, she communicated telepathically with the fake Akira.

『Hey, Akira. What are you doing? You can just let them go, right? Then you can get into the Seranthal Building.』

In response, a voice filled with anger came from the fake Akira.

『Not yet! These are the troops from Kugamayama City! Yumina died because of them! Can I let them go?』

Hearing that, Haruka's expression became even more troubled.

『Listen, Akira...』

『I'm cooperating with you to avenge Yumina! Don't interfere!』

That was the setting. With that in mind, Haruka responded accordingly.

『Then stop doing such pointless things, okay?』

『What do you mean?』

Haruka continued, trying to calm the increasingly angry fake Akira.

『Did you collaborate with the Nationalist just to crush some low-ranking city units? Isn't that petty revenge?』

Pointed out in this way, the fake Akira frowned, deflated by the comment. Haruka continued.

『I understand your feelings. But calm down. If you lose yourself in anger, nothing will go well.』

With that advice, the fake Akira regained his composure. He stopped pursuing the city unit and took a breath.

『...You're right. I got it. Sorry about that.』

『As long as you understand. I'm sorry for being harsh.』

It was troublesome. With that in mind, Haruka replied gently.

『Well, I'll head over there too, so I think you'll be fine, but if things get dangerous, I'll provide support, okay?』

『Yeah. I'll leave it to you.』

Haruka joined the fake Akira. The city unit retreated, maintaining a considerable distance from the fake Akira's group, ensuring they wouldn't interfere.

As the fake Akira's group entered the Seranthal Building, a three-dimensional hologram of Seranthal, the building's AI manager, appeared on the floor serving as the reception area.

“Welcome to Seranthal Building. We've been expecting Haruka-sama and...”

Seranthal paused there and directed its gaze towards the fake Akira. Since the words stopped there, the fake Akira responded instead.

“It's Akira.”

“Ah, Akira-sama, is it? We've been expecting you. Please follow me.”

Seranthal understood that this Akira was an imposter. Yet, it didn't refuse their visit. Rejecting someone who had completed the formal visit application, even if they shared the same name and appearance as Akira and believed themselves to be Akira, wasn't the appropriate behavior for the building's AI manager.

The fake Akira's group was then guided by Serenthal and proceeded further into the building.



Pamela watched the battle between the fake Akira's group and the city unit from a distance. When the fake Akira's group entered the Serenthal Building, she reported the situation once again to her master, Chloe, and received new instructions.

“I see. Understood. Then it's a good time for you, Pamela, to act as well. Yes. It would be bothersome if too many people showed up, so let's limit it to about five people, including Pamela.”

“Understood.”

Pamela, appearing in the main augmented field of view, bowed politely.

“I'm counting on you.”

After that last sentence, communication with Chloe was cut off. Once her master's image disappeared, Pamela raised her head.

From among her subordinates, Pamela selected four people and headed towards the Serenthal Building. Then communication came in from the city unit.

“This is the Kugamayama City Defense Force. The Serenthal Building has been designated as a restricted area by Kugamayama City. We kindly ask you to refrain from approaching the building further.”

Pamela continued walking without concern.

“Yes, understood.”

“...We're telling you to stop.”

“I did hear them. I responded verbally that I heard you. But we didn't stop. And with the current state of our forces, it is impossible to stop us by using physical force. I did everything I could in this situation. I cooperated to create evidence, didn't I? ”

Silence filled with frustration was transmitted from the other end of the communication. But Pamela paid it no mind.

“Stop it. You retreated to prevent your subordinates from dying in vain, didn't you? Do you intend to make those subordinates, who narrowly avoided death, die in vain again? ”

A sense of near fury emanated from the silent response. Nevertheless, Pamela spoke lightly.

“Even with the unit partially destroyed, if you had fought with the assumption of mutual destruction, there might have been a chance of victory. It's the indecisive judgments of your superiors that led to unnecessary casualties. It's pitiful to die without fulfilling one's duty.”

They had died in vain due to the indecisiveness of their superiors. Pamela thought so, and while her tone might have been light, her sympathy was sincere.

With that, the communication was cut off. The only thing the unit leader, who realized that Pamela's sympathy was genuine, could do was that.

When Pamela's group entered the Seranthal Building, Seranthal appeared once again. Following protocol, it informed them that the building was closed for the day to those who entered without prior reservation.

However, Pamela's group explained to Seranthal that they were employees of the Lion Steel Company and provided evidence of their affiliation, so they were allowed to pass.

The Lion Steel Company to which Olivia belonged, an old-world company, and the Lion Steel Company to which Pamela's group belonged, a modern-day corporation, were distinct entities. Seranthal was aware of this fact.

Still, Seranthal allowed Pamela's group to pass. But it didn't offer further guidance. As the building's AI manager, it adhered to the correct protocol.

Chapter 242: Discrepancy in Support Quality

Akira and Carol raced through the air on a bike toward the Mihazono District Ruin. To arrive as quickly as possible, they soared at a height where they could ignore the terrain, speeding straight ahead at full throttle.

At such a speed, it naturally stirred up the monsters on the ground. It would attract monsters from afar to gather in the vicinity.

However, the monsters in this area were not a match for Akira and his group, even if they were numerous enough to fill the ground. They pressed forward without a care, ignoring the monsters.

Carol shot at the group of monsters ahead, blowing them away. Among the group was a gigantic Gluttony Crocodile that would have easily been designated as a bounty target in previous environments. However, for those who could fight in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, even this powerful Gluttony Crocodile was just part of the group. They were scattered without discrimination.

“Akira, what will you do when we arrive at the Mihazono District Ruin? Well, first, you'll search for your impostor, but if you can't find them, should you hide while I roam around the ruins on this bike, pretending to be you? ”

“Hmm, not sure...”

Learning that the fake Akira had appeared, Akira had impulsively dashed out. As a result, he hadn't even asked Hikaru where in the Mihazono District Ruin the fake Akira had appeared before setting off.

Of course, he could ask Hikaru now, but there was another issue. There was a fear that the fake Akira, who had already finished his business before Akira's group arrived at the Mihazono District Ruin, might disappear again. In that case, he probably wouldn't be found through conventional means.

Subconsciously, Akira thought that even if the fake Akira had left the ruins already, he could simply ask Alpha. If Alpha confirmed that the fake Akira was still in the ruins, they could search for him. If not, they could give up and go home. That's all there was to it, he thought.

The problem was how to convey the fact that the fake Akira was still in the ruins or had already left, to Carol.

He couldn't say he heard it from Alpha. Since he couldn't say it, he would have to pretend not to know the fact, even if the fake Akira wasn't there anymore, just to keep up appearances. In other words, despite knowing that the fake Akira wasn't there anymore, he would have to thoroughly search the ruins.

Carol understood well how much Akira wanted to eliminate his impostor. And precisely because she understood it, if Akira gave up searching for the fake Akira too easily, it would seem unnatural.

Considering this, Akira gave a vague response.

“Well, let me ask you, Carol. If my impostor were in the Mihazono District Ruin, could you quickly pinpoint his location? You're a mapmaker, and you sell maps of the Mihazono District Ruin, right? Can't you use that knowledge and technology to figure it out? ”

“Hmm... I won't know until I try.”

Carol replied after a long silence. Akira thought that Carol's delayed response was probably because even for Carol, finding the fake Akira might be difficult, and she wasn't sure if she could do it.

“So, can I count on you once we reach the Mihazono District Ruin? ”

“Sure.”

After Carol gave this short answer, she chuckled.

“Well, if your impostor causes a scene, then maybe there won't be a need for that. And if I do find your impostor, make sure to thank me properly, okay? You owe me big time, Akira, so you better repay me generously here.”

“Sure, I'll make sure to repay you plenty when the time comes.”

Akira also chuckled back at Carol.

Just then, a message came from Shiro. But before Akira could answer it, Alpha spoke.

『Akira, let only you talk to Shiro.』

『Why?』

『Just do it.』

『...Got it.』

Akira found it a bit strange, but since it was what Alpha told him to do, he didn't pay it much mind.

“Carol, I got a message from Shiro. I'll talk to him, so you handle the monsters as usual.”

“Got it.”

Then he connected with Shiro.

『Akira, where are you now?』

『Right here. I heard my impostor showed up at the Mihazono District Ruin, so I'm heading there now.』

Akira sent his current location along with his reply.

『I see. Akira, how about meeting up with me once?』

『Where are you, Shiro?』

『Right here. I'm also heading to the Mihazono District Ruin now.』

Upon confirming the location information sent by Shiro, Akira's current location was closer to the Mihazono District Ruin.

『We're closer to the Mihazono District Ruin. Sorry, but we won't wait. We'll go ahead. We can't risk letting my impostor escape.』

『Wait, Akira. Think about it. Your impostor has that Kaiju with him, right? We don't even know how dangerous it is on its own. And Olivia-san is with me. It would be safer and more certain to join forces. Even if it takes a little time, we should join up to increase safety and certainty. Hurrying and panicking are not the same.』

Hearing that, Akira also pondered.

He thinks what Shirou says makes sense. But relying on Olivia's forces will only create more debt to Shirou.

Akira already owes Shirou a lot, for helping him escape from the Third Inner Sector and for getting him away from the city's defense forces. If he increases his debt any further, he won't be able to refuse when Shirou asks him to introduce him favorably to Tsubaki.

But Akira cannot give up on killing his doppelganger by avoiding Shirou. What should he do? Akira hesitated, then came to a conclusion.

『No, let me continue like this. Maybe I can kill my doppelganger alone? Let me try first, and if it seems impossible, then I'll ask Shirou for help too.』

Shirou responded with a prolonged silence. Akira thought it was because Shirou regretted having fewer opportunities to owe him.

『...I understand. Then, Akira, let me give you one piece of advice. According to my information, your doppelganger has a companion. Don't kill them. Avoid combat as much as possible.』

『Why not?』

『 Why? Because they're Nationalist. Normally, you capture them alive to extract information. It's better not to kill your doppelganger. But I guess that's not an option for you, right? So just kill your doppelganger, and I'll handle his companion somehow.』

『I see. Got it. I'll be careful, just in case.』

『Just in case....?』

Akira continued, addressing Shirou, who was showing strong dissatisfaction.

『If there's a companion, they must be my doppelganger's ally, right? I have no obligation to spare them, and besides, I might not have the luxury to go easy if they're strong. I can't promise not to kill them.』

Shirou returned to a prolonged silence again. Akira thought Shirou found it difficult to argue against this.

『 Oh, right. Shirou, do you know the current location of my doppelganger?』

『...You're asking that, meaning you were heading towards the ruins without knowing where exactly your opponent is?』

『Don't put it like that. I was just a bit anxious. So, do you know?』

『I won't tell you unless you join me. What will you do?』

Akira considered Shirou's response as a way to increase his debt to him.

『 I won't insist. I'll ask Hikaru, and Carol also said if my doppelganger is at the Mihazono District Ruin, she might be able to find out their location.』

『...I see. Your doppelganger is in front of the Serenthal Building. They're engaged in combat with the city forces blocking that area.』

『There? Got it. But why there?』

『Who knows? But to gather that information, it's better to capture them alive. Akira. I'll cut off here. One last thing, don't be reckless. If you feel even a little danger, retreat until I arrive. That's definitely better. Understand? Goodbye.』

With that, communication with Shirou ended. Akira grimaced slightly, finding it a bit difficult.

『Hmm. Hey, Alpha, wasn't he a bit strange?』

『Yes. He seemed quite agitated.』

『Agitated? Oh, he was agitated, huh. Hmm... I wonder if it's related to my doppelganger showing up at the Mihazono District Ruin. He seemed to be heading there too...』

『We don't know that, but he must have his reasons. But it's not relevant to you, Akira. Just as he has his reasons, we have ours. Akira, let's hurry.』

『Yeah, let's hurry.』

With that, Akira and the others continued riding their bikes through the wasteland towards the Mihazono District Ruin.

Shirou raced through the wasteland towards the Mihazono District Ruin, or more precisely, being carried there by Olivia.

Shirou's bike didn't have the ability to fly through the air, and Olivia was faster than him. But Olivia was hired by Shirou as a bodyguard. Asking her to carry him faster than a bike was beyond the scope of her duties, so it would require an additional fee.

Shirou paid it. He was in a hurry to reach the Mihazono District Ruin as soon as possible. He paid an additional fee of 10,000 Chrome, as he was in such a rush.

(Please, make it in time!)

Shirou earnestly wished for it. He did everything he could to seize this golden opportunity and prevent it from turning into the worst-case scenario.



Akira and the others, riding their bikes through the wasteland towards the Mihazono District Ruin, parked their bikes on the rooftop of a suitable building as they entered the ruins.

“Carol. We'll split up from here. I'll go to the Seranthal Building alone.”

“...Got it. Be careful.”

Although Carol took a moment to respond, she answered with a smile.

Carol already knew from Akira that the fake Akira was in combat with the city forces. Whether it was the fake Akira or the city forces,

joining the fight would only hinder him. She calmly assessed the situation and reminded herself, then gracefully stepped back.

As Carol moved to dismount from the bike, Akira beat her to it, stepping off first.

“Akira?”

Facing Carol's puzzled expression, Akira turned his back, holding RL2 multi-function rifles in both hands. The bike's auxiliary arms moved, transferring the two RL2 multi-function rifles attached to the bike to Akira's augmented suit's auxiliary arms.

Equipped with a total of four RL2 multi-function rifles, Akira turned back to Carol and said,

“When things get dangerous, I might desperately run away, so I'll rely on you then.”

Leaving Carol here wasn't to burden her, but to ensure a safe means of escape. Akira smiled as he conveyed this, and Carol smiled back firmly.

“Got it. Leave it to me.”

Akira nodded and dashed towards the Seranthal Building. Using the grounding function of his augmented suit, he created footholds in the air and hurried forward with a serious expression.

『Alpha. Do you know the situation with my doppelganger?』

『Yes. Akira's doppelganger defeated the city forces and entered the Seranthal Building.』

Akira frowned.

『Defeated? Didn't they just bypass the blockade with camouflage functions?』

『Defeated. The city forces lost and retreated.』

『...Weren't those forces responsible for the blockade where Tsubaki is? Weren't they supposed to be incredibly strong?』

『Yes. They were a powerful force, enough to deter even high-ranking hunters fighting in the Third Inner Sector.』

『And they lost to my doppelganger...? Shirou mentioned my doppelganger has a companion, but it seems like those forces are quite formidable too. Shirou must be trying to stop me.』

Akira's doppelganger is a Nationalist, and he commands creatures like Kaiju. It's not surprising to lead such a powerful force. Akira thought so.

However, Alpha adds a clarification.

『Akira. That's not it. Akira's doppelganger has only one companion. Moreover, only Akira's doppelganger directly engaged the city forces.』

This surprised Akira. He frowned involuntarily.

『Defeated the city forces alone...? Um, were they riding some extremely powerful humanoid weapon or something?』

If it were a highly powerful humanoid weapon like the one Tatsukawa piloted in the Third Inner Sector, a single unit might be able to defeat the city forces alone. Akira tried to piece things together with this logic, but Alpha denied it.

『No. They came in a cheap car, arrived at the ruins, and engaged in combat on foot.』

『...So my doppelganger is at least as strong as a superhuman. No wonder he were on top of a Kaiju's head.』

Akira recalled his previous battles with superhumans, like the one with Erde fought on the inter-city transport vehicle, and let out a heavy sigh.

Akira now possessed significantly more powerful equipment than before. Yet, even with his current gear, he couldn't imagine easily defeating Erde if they fought again.

Akira glanced at Alpha.

『...You're not going to stop me?』

Asked by Akira, Alpha responded with a slightly mocking yet amused smile.

『If I told you it's dangerous and asked you to go back, would you?』

Akira laughed in response to Alpha's smile.

『I would go back? If Alpha says there's no chance of winning even with full support, then there's no point. I'll go back. I'll go back.』

『You're saying that. Akira. Even if I support you, you'll need to be prepared, okay?』

『That's fine. Being prepared is my responsibility.』

Akira and the others laughed together as they raced towards the Seranthal Building. Their recent exchange didn't guarantee Akira's

victory. Both Akira and Alpha understood this but moved forward regardless.

As Akira approached the front of the Seranthal Building, intending to descend to the ground to enter the building, Alpha stopped him.

『Akira, this way.』

Following Alpha's guidance, Akira landed on the building's side and ran along the wall towards the rooftop.



The 60th floor of the Seranthal Building was a single, entirely white floor. The sight, stretching endlessly like a white world when looked up or around, resembled the scenery of the Third Inner Sector of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

The fake Akira and Haruka were there. While the fake Akira looked bored, Haruka wore a serious expression beside him. No one else was present, but in their augmented field of view, they saw the figure of the receptionist from the Old World.

The woman informed the fake Akira and Haruka.

『 Personal authentication failed. Please reconfirm your personal authentication information. Available formats are...』

“Is this still not working...? ”

Haruka sighed. Each sigh seemed to grow deeper and heavier, not from futile repetition but from failing after every effort, with every adjustment made beforehand.

The fake Akira asked, sounding annoyed.

“Hey, Haruka. How long are we gonna keep this up? ”

“Until it works.”

“But it seems like it's not working, right? What are we even doing here?”

Haruka showed obvious exasperation.

“Didn't I explain it properly? Weren't you listening?”

Then she glanced at the fake Akira with a slightly reproachful look.

After a brief pause, the fake Akira averted his gaze.

“I... I think I heard it... but, I kind of... forgot...”

I'm sure I've heard the story before. Even though the fake Akira felt that sensation, he couldn't recall the content at all. He didn't know when or where he heard it.

Haruka let out a dramatic sigh.

“Honestly... Akira. I'll explain it to you later, so focus on the authentication process for now.”

“Alright, got it.”

The fake Akira responded to Haruka, trying to reassure her, then he concentrated as instructed. He strongly appealed to the authentication system, believing himself to be Akira.

Haruka received the thoughts emitted by the fake Akira and the self-recognition information transmitted from the old-world connector. After adjusting them, she resent them to the system. The fake Akira was trying to deceive the system by falsifying data with all his might to pass authentication.

However, the result remained unchanged. The receptionist repeated the same thing.

『 Authentication failed. Please confirm personal authentication information again. Available formats are...』

“Even this isn't working...?”

Haruka began to feel resigned after repeated failures. She glanced at the fake Akira, pondering.

(Is it impossible to pass authentication with a fake? Was my assumption too naive, thinking that if the system had malfunctions, the security would be lax...?)

After all, attempting to breach an old-world system through illegal means had a low success rate from the beginning.

However, Haruka had confidence in her own skills. That's why she had come this far, thinking that she might be able to make it work somehow. What initially started as a faint hope had grown significantly as she actually ventured this far.

Her confidence in her own abilities skewed Haruka's speculation. She sought reasons for the failure other than her own skills.

(Perhaps my premise was wrong from the start. How much basis was there in the information that Akira might pass authentication...?)

If it wasn't because he was a fake, but even the real one couldn't pass, then there was little they could do. Haruka thought about retracting her previous statement of continuing until it worked and just leaving. She was about to inform the fake Akira of this.

But before she could, the fake Akira spoke with a serious tone.

“Haruka! Get down!”

“Huh?”

In the next moment, a slash ran through the ceiling. The thick ceiling detached and crashed down, making a deafening sound as it hit the floor.

The faces of the fake Akira and Haruka contorted in surprise as they inadvertently looked at the fallen object. Ahead of their gaze, standing where the fallen ceiling was, was the real Akira.



Upon reaching the rooftop of the Seranthal Building, Akira swung his blade as instructed by Alpha. The black blade sliced through the sturdy building of the old-world in an instant, cutting out a large section of the rooftop and causing Akira to fall along with the platform to the 60th floor.

Upon entering the 60th floor, Akira was not surprised to find the fake Akira there. It was not normal to know where the fake Akira and his companions were in the vast Seranthal Building. Nevertheless, if Alpha said they were there, they were there. They had a long-standing relationship, there was no need to doubt such trivial matters now. Calmly, Akira faced the fake Akira.

Normally, combat could have begun the moment Akira entered the 60th floor. However, Akira's attempt to remain calm suppressed any immediate combat. Moreover, both Akira and the fake Akira momentarily froze due to the surprise of Akira's sudden appearance, further delaying the start of the battle.

If one of them had moved, it would have started. But since neither did, they stood facing each other. Akira and the fake Akira, each looking at the other intently. However, their expressions differed. Akira gazed at the fake Akira with icy eyes, while the fake Akira returned a strong, wary look tinged with hostility. Meanwhile, Haruka's face showed a mixture of surprise, caution, and confusion.

As silence heightened the tension in the room, Akira spoke.

“If you don't interfere, I'll let you go.”

Akira informed Haruka before turning to the fake Akira.

“If you don't want to involve her, follow me.”

With only that said to the fake Akira and his companions, Akira leaped back up to the rooftop.

The remaining fake Akira and his companions exchanged glances. Then, with a nod from Haruka, the fake Akira headed to the rooftop alone to follow Akira.

Akira, who had returned to the rooftop first, observed the movements of the fake Akira and his companions.

If the fake Akira didn't come up to the rooftop, Akira would return to the 60th floor to initiate combat. Having been instructed by Shiro, Akira had no intention of actively killing Haruka, who was just a companion. But he also had no intention of being overly considerate. He had already provided conditions for survival. That was enough consideration, in Akira's view.

When the fake Akira ascended to the rooftop, Akira, mindful not to seize the moment, and the fake Akira, who used information-gathering device to survey the rooftop while flying, prolonged the start of the battle. Akira and the fake Akira faced each other on the rooftop, keeping their distance.

Then Akira spoke.

“I'll ask just in case. You're the one who said in that video that you'd avenge Yumina by killing Udajima on top of the Kaiju's head, and that I killed Yumina because of the city's folks, right?”

In response to Akira's question, the fake Akira answered with strong anger.

“Yeah, it was me! I'll definitely avenge Yumina! No matter what it takes, even if I have to become a Nationalist! ”

“I see...”

Akira exhaled softly, his gaze slightly lowered.

Rationally, logically, there were countless other things Akira needed to ask the fake Akira.

Why was he trying to frame himself? Even though only he was present here, why did he continue to pretend to be the real one? The whereabouts of the abducted Sheryl, the reason for taking Shijima as well, information about the Nationalist cooperating with them, the purpose of coming to the Serenthal Building—there were plenty of things he should inquire about.

However, upon hearing the answer to the first question, all those concerns became trivial to Akira. Instead, the rage he had been suppressing, the murderous intent towards the one who said something utterly unforgivable, began to overflow.

『Alpha, support me.』

Just before being consumed by his murderous intent, Akira asked for Alpha's support with the last shreds of his composure.

『Understood.』

Alpha responded with a serious expression, not because the enemy was formidable, but because she genuinely complied with Akira's request.

Akira redirected his gaze from the lowered one back to fake Akira.

“Then, die.”

With that declaration, Akira completely ceased restraining his emotions. His pitch-black feelings turned into information transmitted from the Old-World Connector. To those who could visually perceive it, it seemed as though the world was being engulfed in darkness centered around Akira.

In the next moment, both Akira and fake Akira moved simultaneously. They moved at high speed from their positions, disrupting each other's aim while pointing their lowered muzzles at each other. Then, instead of merely engaging in combat, they unleashed a barrage of shots that left no trace of their opponent.

The barrage of bullets filled the space.

Haruka, who received Akira's killing intent through fake Akira, staggered at the intensity of the overwhelming murderous intent. Even though it was diluted by not being directly transmitted, she almost lost consciousness.

However, Haruka was not an ordinary person. She quickly regained her composure and supported fake Akira.

She calculated the lines of fire for both friend and foe, instructed on trajectories, and evaded unavoidable shots with force field shields. Difficult shots had their output increased only at the impact points of the force field armor.

She also adjusted the aim, trying to maximize fake Akira's shooting accuracy. That's how she attempted to deal with Akira.

But soon, panic distorted Haruka's face.

(...No! I can't keep up with the calculations...!)

Haruka, who could handle the calculations even for the simultaneous fire of the city forces, was overwhelmed by a single person's gunfire.

The enemy wielded just four guns, and even those were fired by a single person using both hands and two auxiliary arms from the augmented suit, limiting the firing positions. The number of guns was overwhelmingly larger in the city forces, and in battles with them, they were targeted from all directions. The total volume of bullets was much larger in the latter case. Therefore, the calculation load of the barrage should have been much lighter for Akira.

However, even though that was the case, the calculations couldn't keep up. As a result, the number of shots she couldn't evade increased. Evading bullets with the force field shields and defending with the force field armor became increasingly difficult.

(...What's going on!? Is this guy too strong!? Wasn't he exaggerated a bit, like negotiating a bit more with Sakashita to boost his rank!?)

Akira's firepower was empowered by Alpha's support.

Akira wasn't just firing continuously out of anger, he was aiming carefully. However, with that level of precision, Haruka could have handled it without any problems.

Yet, Alpha's aiming correction was added to that. She completely predicted fake Akira's lines of fire, intercepted the bullets fired by the extended magazine, and even caused ricochets using shattered bullets and bullets intercepted by fake Akira, bending the trajectory to ensure fake Akira got hit.

All these calculations were performed accurately for every bullet fired by both Akira and fake Akira, even as they moved at high speeds that made them feel like they were piercing through still air. The computational load was enormous, and Haruka couldn't keep up with it.

But with Alpha's support, it was possible if the partner was Akira as he was now.

It wouldn't have worked with the previous Akira. No matter how capable Alpha's computing power was, the information was obtained from Akira.

The former Akira was still weak. He couldn't even acquire data from information collection devices via the extended senses, let alone manipulate the perception of real consciousness or grasp his own senses roughly. The performance of his information collection devices was also low.

But the current Akira was different. Both his equipment's performance and his own abilities had improved significantly. He could recognize the world with the power to track every bullet. And with that perception, if Alpha had detailed data on the world, she could fully utilize her computing power.

The result was being demonstrated here and now.

Haruka judged that she couldn't handle this barrage on her own. So she attempted to invade Akira's equipment system. Even though he seemed to be using high-grade equipment for high-rank hunters, it was still a mass-produced modern product. With her skills, infiltrating and tampering with the Old World's systems was easy. So she swung into action.

(...Alright! I'm in!)

And she tried to disrupt the opponent's movements by manipulating anything, whether it was the gun, augmented suit, or information collection device.

It worked. Haruka thought so, laughing, and looked at Akira, who would have his movements drastically disrupted by equipment malfunctions, through fake Akira.

However, Akira's movements remained entirely unaffected, despite Haruka's interference. Even though she had manipulated the

systems, including the gun, augmented suit, and information collection device, Akira's equipment continued to function perfectly.

(...What!? What's going on!? I did everything right!? ...Was I fooled by a decoy!? Me!?)

With her strong confidence in her own skills, Haruka's surprise was profound.

This was also thanks to Alpha's support. Akira's equipment security was heavily guarded by Alpha. Not only did she prevent external intrusion, but she also disguised it so that they wouldn't notice.

In this situation, even Haruka was flustered. It hadn't even been ten seconds since the start of the battle. Yet Haruka, who had accelerated her consciousness to keep up with Akira's high-speed combat, felt like hours had passed.

And with that prolonged time, she made a decision. She conveyed it to fake Akira telepathically.

『It's impossible! Akira! We have to retreat!』

『Got it! I'll hold him off! You go first!』

『Akira, you retreat too!』

『Don't be ridiculous! Forget about you, but do you think he'll let me go?』

『I'll handle that part!』

『How??』

『Never mind, just endure for one more second!』

『R-Right! Got it! I'm counting on you!』

In this battle between Akira and fake Akira, one second was more than enough. A momentary lapse in attention could result in a thousand deaths. Yet fake Akira desperately endured that one second.

And just as fake Akira somehow managed to buy that one second, an escape route prepared by Haruka appeared behind fake Akira. It was three humanoid weapons concealed near the building with camouflage capabilities.

Chapter 243: Unexpected Reinforcements

Akira fires four guns at fake Akira. He shoots with ^{Charge}C bullets at maximum penetrative capability, mixed with ^{Shock}S bullets.

In this case, to defend against this, the target needs to reinforce only the hit area for ^{Charge}C bullets, but the extremely limited defense range cannot prevent the shockwave spreading from ^{Shock}S bullets.

However, if force field armor or barriers are dispersed widely to defend against ^{Shock}S bullets, it becomes inadequate to defend against ^{Charge}C bullets. Increasing the output for both to defend against each other drains energy rapidly.

To counter this, it's necessary to identify whether the incoming bullet is a ^{Charge}C bullet or a ^{Shock}S bullet before it hits and defend accurately. Haruka, supporting fake Akira, couldn't calculate in time, leading fake Akira to continue rough defense.

Taking hits, his posture faltered, leading to even more hits. The impostor Akira was already riddled with wounds all over his body. Yet, the fact that he could still fight surprised Akira. Taking as many bullets as Baolegere without dying had brought him to a level of strength that was truly superhuman.

Yet, Akira believed he could win as it was. His judgment was correct. But he missed his chance, thanks to the appearance of humanoid weapons from behind fake Akira.

Three units appeared. Although using camouflage, Akira could see them. They flew from below to the rooftop of a building, then swiftly approached Akira. Splitting right, left, and up, they aimed their weapons at Akira.

Even Akira couldn't ignore this. He redirected all four guns, previously aimed at fake Akira, towards the three units and fake Akira, primarily for suppression.

Simultaneously, the new units also initiated attacks against Akira.

With the addition of three more units, the battlefield became even more intense. Alongside the surrounding barrage of bullets, massive projectiles, high-powered lasers, and countless small missiles added to the density of the onslaught.

However, due to Akira dispersing his attacks, the density of the barrage decreased around fake Akira. Taking advantage of this, fake Akira attempted to leave the area, but Akira hindered him with suppression fire.

Furthermore, Akira attempted to close the distance with fake Akira, not letting her escape, pressing on with the intention to corner him further.

The battle between Akira and fake Akira until now had been exchanging fire while maintaining distance at high speed. This method reflected the idea of neither Akira nor fake Akira wanting to be at a disadvantage.

Engaging at close range would make evasion extremely difficult for both. Closing the distance to the point of being able to exchange blows would make evasion easier, but likely they would both die before reaching that point. They both thought so.

However, Akira resolved to close the distance to prevent fake Akira from escaping. He had no intention of being at a disadvantage, but he was willing to push to the limit.

With Alpha's support, Akira manipulated his perception of time to an extreme degree, along with altering the resolution of reality. He moved at such high speeds that the air felt viscous, and his consciousness kept up with that velocity. Using the ability to

individually recognize countless bullets fired by the fake Akira, Akira slipped through the enemy's gunfire. By deliberately causing the fake Akira and the humanoid weapons to blur their gun barrels, the barrage of attacks turn their attacks from lines to surfaces. Akira dodged with precision, just barely avoiding the attacks.

Then, by aiming his gun at the humanoid weapon as well, Akira compensated for the reduced gunfire against the fake Akira by closing the distance to increase accuracy. As a result, the fake Akira, who had increased the number of hits he took, tried to use the impact of the hits to leap backward in an attempt to escape Akira, but Akira accelerated to catch up with him.

Fake Akira fleeing, Akira pursuing. Both displayed high-speed movements akin to bullets. However, in exchanging fire, they needed to expose themselves to the opponent. And in terms of direction, the one chasing aligned with the one fleeing was faster.

With the difference in speed and the difference in resolve to enter the death zone themselves, Akira closed the distance.

(Now's the time!)

In this instant, Akira fired all four guns at maximum firepower at fake Akira. This would secure his victory.

The three humanoid weapons were already incapacitated momentarily beforehand, ensuring they couldn't attack for a few seconds. Additionally, even if the humanoid weapons intervened and shielded fake Akira, it wouldn't matter. Those units were unexpectedly fragile. With a quarter of the firepower or even just suppression shots, they suffered significant damage. With the firepower of all four guns, they could penetrate. Akira could kill fake Akira along with the unit shielding her.

It was over. With this in mind, Akira aimed the four RL2 multi-function guns at fake Akira.

However, at that moment, a unit deployed above Akira and intervened between them, becoming a shield for fake Akira. However, the shield was fragile. It couldn't withstand Akira's gunfire. If he fired, he could kill fake Akira.

(What!?)

Akira couldn't bring himself to fire.

The intervening unit was the type that could enter from the front of another unit. And it barged in with its front door open in front of Akira. Through the open door, the cockpit and the crew of the unit were visible.

It was Sheryl who was piloting it.

This surprise momentarily froze Akira's thoughts. It was a significant vulnerability in this battle. But Alpha didn't have that vulnerability. Controlling his augmented suit, Alpha urged Akira to continue the fight.

Akira snapped out of it as his body moved involuntarily. Following Alpha's prompting, he fired his guns. The four guns unleashed a barrage of bullets at maximum firepower, severing the limbs of the unit.

In those few seconds, he readjusted his stance as the two units on the left and right regained their posture and resumed attacking Akira. Sensing this, Akira evaded their attacks with all his might, while aiming two guns at each side.

A dense barrage showered the units on the left and right. Even with just one gun, it was enough to cause significant damage. The units, hit with double the firepower, suffered severe damage.

Moreover, the unit in the front lost its limbs and weapons, while fake Akira was trying to escape at full speed. The units on the left and right were greatly destabilized by the hits. None of them were in a

condition to attack Akira. It was now a situation where Akira could attack them unilaterally.

Taking advantage of this superiority, Akira continued to shower bullets on the units on the left and right. The unit at the back, enduring the barrage for about a second, unable to withstand the overwhelming power, was destroyed without being able to retaliate. Only fake Akira and the unit carrying Sheryl remained.

At that moment, the unit that lost its weapons in all limbs began to move at maximum output. Akira aimed for the limbs of the unit to avoid hitting Sheryl, the crew member, ensuring the flight device in the torso remained intact. Carrying Sheryl, it swiftly advanced forward, passing by Akira. Then, accelerating in the opposite direction of the fleeing fake Akira.

Sheryl speaks up. As a civilian, Sheryl struggles to keep up with the high-speed combat like Akira and the others. However, during Akira's attack on the left and right units, she managed to notice Akira's presence in the vicinity.

“Akira!”

However, at that moment, the unit carrying Sheryl had already moved past Akira's rear. Sheryl's voice echoes around due to the speed of the unit.

Akira's face contorts with determination. Akira understands that he is faced with a dilemma. In this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, he must choose between Sheryl and the fake Akira.

By allowing the fake Akira to move freely for just one second, Akira has already lost considerable distance. If he doesn't act now, he will escape. However, if he pursues him immediately, there's a good chance he can catch up.

Akira came here to kill the fake Akira. However, strictly speaking, he came not just to kill him but to seize the perfect opportunity to do so

without the presence of a Kaiju.

When she heard from Hikaru that the fake Akira had appeared in the Mihazono District Ruin, if he had been informed that there might also be a Kaiju there, he would have stayed at the Kuzushihara District Ruin. Killing the fake Akira was planned after receiving support from Kibayashi, which could also be useful against Kaiju. So he endured, waiting for that support.

But now, he can kill the fake Akira in a Kaiju-free environment. This is the perfect opportunity, one that might not come again, a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

But at the same time, it's also a perfect opportunity to rescue Sheryl. He can't go to rescue someone whose whereabouts are unknown. Even if he were to search based on estimates, the highest probability of Sheryl's location would be Third Inner Sector, as she was abducted by the fake Akira. It's not a place where he can search blindly, especially when he's unsure if Sheryl is really there.

Yet Sheryl is there, now. She can be saved.

But if he pursues Sheryl now, the fake Akira will escape. Conversely, if he pursues the fake Akira, there's no guarantee he'll find Sheryl again. There's no guarantee she'll survive until the next encounter. In other words, now is the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to definitely save Sheryl.

Akira must decide whom to use this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for. To kill the fake Akira? To save Sheryl? Akira had to choose.

Akira hesitates. It's not about choosing between the two, but about finding a way to choose both. But realizing that's impossible, he decisively chooses one and acts upon it.

Akira dashes towards Sheryl with all her might.

『Alpha!』

『Leave it to me!』

Akira aims his gun at the unit as instructed by Alpha. If he fires, the unit will be heavily damaged, and Sheryl, aboard it, won't escape unscathed. So, with Alpha's support, he adjusts the firepower to precisely destroy only the flight device of the unit's torso.

The fired bullets hit the target accurately. With its flight device destroyed, the unit continues its trajectory, crashing from the rooftop of a building and tumbling down to the ground below.

Akira quickly catches up to the falling unit. He leaps from the rooftop, propelling himself downward faster than free fall, reaching the front of the unit.

The front hatch of the unit is closed. Akira swiftly switches his blade while falling alongside the unit and forcefully swings it, easily cutting through the sturdy metal, breaking the hatch open.

All that's left is to get Sheryl out of the unit. But as Akira thinks this, he sees Sheryl through the carved opening and is surprised by her expression.

Sheryl is pointing a gun at Akira.



Akira instinctively takes evasive action. Almost simultaneously, Sheryl fires her laser gun. Dense energy emanates from the gun's muzzle in the form of a beam.

Akira dodges the beam, leaping away. Sheryl, who has jumped out of the unit, continues shooting. Numerous beams pierce through the air, but none hit Akira. Then, Sheryl widens the firing angle, unleashing a wide-range energy wave impossible to dodge.

The flash engulfs Akira in midair. However, by expanding the attack range, its power significantly decreases. Akira firmly shields his entire body with an anti-energy force field, emerging unscathed.

However, Akira's expression is grim.

『Alpha! This had quite a punch, didn't it?』

『Yes. It's a good thing we acquired parts specialized in anti-energy defense.』

Despite being a small-sized gun held in one hand, the laser gun Sheryl used surpassed the power of the AF laser cannon Akira had previously used. It would be dangerous even with Akira's current equipment.

『...Well, it's fine. Sheryl was probably used to distract me while my impostor escapes. It's better than being attacked by both of them at once.』

『Indeed. Let's think of it that way.』

If Akira had gone after Sheryl and left to kill the fake Akira, there was a risk of being ambushed from behind by Sheryl. In that sense, although it's a hindsight, Akira made the right choice.

Sheryl, who had been firing a laser gun at Akira in midair, landed on the side of the Seranthal building once. Akira followed and stood in the same spot as Sheryl.

Sheryl, with a confused expression, landed a bit away from Akira and turned pale when she saw him. Then she panicked and shouted.

“N-no, that's not it! I-I'm not the one who...! M-my body just moved on its own...!”

Akira calmly responded to Sheryl's desperate plea.

“I understand. Your body's being controlled by the augmented suit, right?”

Akira had realized from the beginning that Sheryl's attacks weren't of her own volition. It wasn't because he believed Sheryl wouldn't attack him, but rather because he doubted Sheryl could execute such precise attacks on her own.

“Don't talk. You'll bite your tongue. I'll handle it, so just wait a bit longer.”

“Y-yes.”

Sheryl regained some composure after Akira easily believed her plea. After responding, she closed her mouth as instructed.

Akira checked Sheryl's appearance again. While her augmented suit didn't expose her skin, it had a provocative design reminiscent of the old-world. Its performance also seemed to match that of the old-world, appearing more advanced than his own augmented suit.

However, Akira still judged that his overall combat ability, even without Alpha's support, surpassed Sheryl's. No matter how advanced her augmented suit was, Sheryl herself was inexperienced. He believed that being controlled by the augmented suit imposed limits on the quality of her movements.

But he also realized it wouldn't be easy to fight. Attacking recklessly could result in Sheryl's death. He couldn't afford to fight as if he were facing a fake Akira.

『Alpha, what do you think we should do?』

『Let's slice off the augmented suit without hurting Sheryl』

『Understood』

The plan was set. Akira charged at Sheryl with black blades in both hands.

Sheryl widened the firing angle and shot her laser gun at Akira again, enveloping him in another flash of light.

However, Akira emerged unscathed. His force field shield specialized in energy defense rendered the high-energy light waves merely disorienting.

The purpose of the attack was indeed to disorient. A strong flash briefly obscured Akira's vision. When the light cleared, Sheryl was before him, wielding light blades in both hands, ready to counterattack.

Both swung their blades simultaneously. The collision between Akira's black blade and Sheryl's light blade scattered sparks like fireworks.

Sheryl's light blade was what one might call a laser blade. It sliced through objects with a high-energy stream and wasn't a physical blade, so it shouldn't clash with Akira's blade in theory.

However, Akira's force field was impervious to the high-energy stream. To counter it, he condensed energy and hardened it with force field armor technology, making it as sharp as a physical blade. Its edge was sharp enough to slice through Akira's augmented suit.

Akira deftly dodged or blocked the skillfully wielded light blade. Each time, Sheryl's expression contorted in pain. Her body couldn't handle the strain of being forced to move at high speeds by the augmented suit to fight Akira.

Yet Sheryl endured the pain, believing Akira's words that he would do something. But there were limits. She wouldn't last long. Just continuing to fight like this would result in her bones breaking, her flesh tearing, and her death.

It was urgent. Thinking so, Akira prepared to take some hits. But Sheryl adjusted as well. Stepping forward as if to be bisected, she dulled Akira's strikes.

The one controlling Sheryl's augmented suit exploited the clear gap in their abilities, knowing Akira couldn't kill Sheryl.

Even Akira began to show signs of anxiety.

『Alpha! We're in trouble if we keep this up!』

But Alpha responded with a smile.

『It's fine. Pattern analysis is complete. We'll decide it next time.』

Akira's determination surged at Alpha's instruction.

『Next time! Understood!』

Then, as Sheryl launched her next attack, Akira swung his blade with determination.

The light and dark blades clashed. Until now, clashes between their blades had either repelled each other or pressed against each other. But this time, it was different. Due to a fully analyzed strike, Akira's blade unilaterally deflected Sheryl's.

Still, Sheryl didn't let go of her laser blade. As a result, her arm was forcefully pushed back, throwing off her balance.

Not missing the opportunity, Akira swiftly swung his blade multiple times. With Sheryl's posture already compromised, he dashed past her side and slashed her augmented suit from behind.

With her augmented suit already destroyed, Sheryl couldn't withstand the strong winds on the upper floors of the building. The wind blew away her augmented suit, exposing her naked body underneath.

Having lost her augmented suit, Sheryl lost the ability to cling to the building's side. Before she could fall, Akira sheathed one of his blades and held Sheryl close, slashing a hole in the building's wall and taking her inside.

After laying Sheryl on the floor inside the Seranthal building, Akira took out a recovery medicine. He took some himself before bringing it to Sheryl's lips.

“It's a recovery medicine. Can you eat it? ”

Sheryl, unable to move even a finger due to the strain of the battle, managed to open her mouth somehow and let Akira feed her the medicine. The high-performance recovery medicine meant for high-ranking hunters quickly healed Sheryl's body.

Once Sheryl recovered enough to breathe comfortably, Akira offered his protective coat to her.

“Put this on.”

Although Sheryl accepted the coat and stood up, she hesitated to put it on. It was Akira's armor.

Sheryl was only wearing parts of her destroyed augmented suit and was practically naked except for gloves and boots. She felt

embarrassed, but she also felt hesitant to reduce Akira's protection just to cover herself. She considered returning it.

“Um, well...”

Akira somehow sensed what Sheryl was thinking and said,

“Just put it on. If you don't wear it, you might get killed by a stray bullet. I don't want you to die from something like that after I went through the trouble of saving you.”

It wasn't just about covering her naked body. Whether it was his true feelings or just consideration, Sheryl smiled and put on the protective coat after receiving the reason from Akira.

“Thank you.”

Akira nodded lightly in response and said,

“Do you want to rest a bit before we escape? ”

“I'll leave it to you. I'm fine.”

Despite having recovered to some extent thanks to the high-performance recovery medicine, Sheryl knew that she wouldn't easily recover from the mental fatigue of being involved in such a battle. However, understanding that she was just a hindrance and couldn't even keep up with Akira, she judged that it would be fine in her current state as long as she was carried by him.

“Got it. Let's go then.”

Naturally, Akira picked up Sheryl again. They were going to escape through the hole in the building. It was a given.

However, as they were about to leave the building together, Akira, still holding Sheryl, suddenly jumped back in surprise. Then, with his

right hand and two auxiliary arms, he aimed a gun at the hole in the wall and began firing continuously.

The weakened wall, already pierced, collapsed under the barrage of bullets, widening the hole further. The sights of three RL2 multi-function guns followed the target on the other side of the wall, not just widening the holes in the wall but blowing the entire wall away.

But Akira couldn't finish off the target. Instead, the opponent cut out a part of the wall with a blade, reinforced it with force field armor, and used it as a shield to block the bullets as they came inside. Then he shouted,

“Sheryl! Wait! I'm coming to help! ”

Hearing that, Akira was so surprised that he instinctively stopped shooting. Sheryl also showed the same surprise as Akira.

To help Sheryl. That's what the one who appeared here said. It was the fake Akira.



It was Haruka who remotely controlled the humanoid weapon carrying Sheryl. Confirming that Akira had gone to help Sheryl as planned, Haruka went to the rooftop to meet up with the fake Akira and escape.

(I thought bringing you might be useful, but you didn't seem to be of much use after all. But in the end, you were useful.)

Enough data had been collected, so Haruka had used Sheryl as bait with that thought in mind.

However, something unexpected happened. Despite being left behind as bait with Sheryl, the fake Akira returned to Haruka.

Even though they could have reunited if he had just waited. At first, Haruka had thought that way. But when the fake Akira came rushing toward her without slowing down and passed by her side, she began to panic.

『Hey! Akira! What are you doing?』

Despite Haruka's call, the fake Akira didn't stop. He answered as he ran,

『Go ahead! I'll save Sheryl!』

『Save her... What are you talking about...?』

Haruka's expression turned puzzled for a moment, but then she quickly understood the situation and frowned.

(Ah, that was the setting!)

Haruka hadn't informed the fake Akira that she had brought Sheryl in a humanoid weapon. When he heard Sheryl's loud voice, he realized that Sheryl was here and the fake Akira was trying to help her according to the setting, so she tried to stop him with words that matched the setting.

『What are you saying! Are you going to waste Sheryl's efforts for us? ! Come back! We're escaping!』

『I refuse! I won't abandon Sheryl!』

『Come back! It's my job to make decisions! Isn't it?』

『...No!』

Although it took the fake Akira a moment to respond, he replied and cut off the mental communication with Haruka.

『Wait!? Akira!?』

Haruka called out to the fake Akira again. Then, from his reaction, she understood that he had cut off communication.

(...He cut me off! How dare he!)

Haruka held her head in frustration at the fake Akira's excessively reckless actions.

(What's the point of going back without my support? There's no way he can win in that state, right?)

Despite being at a disadvantage even with her support, Haruka's face hardened as she thought,

Nevertheless, Haruka continued to ponder.

(Well, but in a way, this attitude mimics Akira's actions and words... Maybe this stance is correct...)

To onlookers, it seemed blatantly reckless to engage in such impossible ventures. Yet, clinging to a few friendly relationships, Haruka interpreted this as embodying the true essence of Akira's personality.

Haruka further contemplated,

(Could it possibly work?)

In this situation, with both the real Akira and Sheryl, who could discern Akira's authenticity, Haruka saw potential. After a moment of hesitation, she retraced her steps.

Chapter 244: Negotiation Begins

When the fake Akira appeared after Sheryl's rescue, Akira realized that the opponent was the fake Akira when he was shooting at an invisible enemy from behind a wall.

That's why he finds it suspicious. Why would someone who was supposed to have escaped while letting Akira rescue Sheryl come back? If they were going to come back, they should have attacked together with Sheryl. Why didn't they do that? It's perplexing.

While the opponent's intentions are unclear, Akira continues to shoot at the fake Akira. His priority is not killing the fake Akira but keeping Sheryl safe by preventing the opponent from getting closer. This is because he's holding Sheryl with one hand while shooting.

While shooting, Akira wonders. Did the opponent deliberately make him save Sheryl? By making him protect Sheryl, did they try to slow down his movements?

If that imposter had attacked with Sheryl, Akira would have no choice but to shoot Sheryl. But once he had helped her, it would be difficult to abandon her as a burden. Did the opponent make that judgment? Akira thinks so and tries to reconcile the fake Akira's actions.

But that doesn't make sense. The fake Akira isn't shooting back.

Despite being on the other side of the building's outer wall, the opponent's gun should easily penetrate this kind of wall. Akira should also be able to track his position with information-gathering devices. Because he's holding Sheryl, it's difficult for him to dodge quickly. The opponent should know that. Why aren't they shooting?

While slightly puzzled by this, Akira continues to shoot at the fake Akira. However, due to protecting Sheryl, his shooting accuracy is reduced, and he can't finish off the opponent who focuses on evasion and defense.

While doing so, the fake Akira cuts a part of the wall with a blade and uses the debris as a shield to enter the building.

(...This is bad! He has entered!)

With a grim expression, Akira considers whether to take Sheryl and retreat further into the building or confront the fake Akira here.

But before he can decide, a statement from the fake Akira interrupts.

“Sheryl! Wait! I'll help you now! ”

Hearing that, Akira forgot his own hesitation due to the completely unexpected words.

(...Huh? What's this guy saying?)

Because Akira has assigned too much thought to interpreting the fake Akira's words, he unintentionally stops shooting. However, the fake Akira also warily watches Akira, observing from behind the shield of debris. This temporarily halts the combat.

Akira considers the intention behind the fake Akira's words. And first, to confuse Sheryl into thinking he's the real one. Just to be sure, he informs Sheryl.

“Sheryl. Just so you know, I'm the real one, okay? ”

“I understand.”

Sheryl answers clearly. However, she also shows signs of confusion, not understanding the fake Akira's intentions.

『Alpha. What do you think? 』

『It seems like he's saying it seriously. It doesn't seem like acting. So, it appears that the fake Akira isn't trying to impersonate the real one

but genuinely believes he's the real one.』

『...Wait, so he thinks I'm the fake one, and he's trying to rescue Sheryl from the fake me?』

『That seems to be the case.』

『What the...』

Despite being puzzled, Akira partially understands. The reason the fake Akira isn't using the gun is that he knows he might hit Sheryl. He's trying to save Sheryl with all seriousness. That much he understands.

『...So, Alpha. What do you think I should do?』

『What do you mean, what to do? I think you should kill him. You don't intend to extract information from him, right?』

『...Yeah, that's true.』

Due to unexpected events, Akira had overthought things. He came here to kill that imposter. Not to gather information. He doesn't know anything about the imposter's circumstances. Akira thinks this way and switches his focus. He aims three guns at the fake Akira.

The debris seems to be reinforced with force field armor, but it's still just debris. If he fires continuously, he can destroy it. He just needs to crush the fake Akira along with the debris. That will end it. Thinking so, Akira is about to shoot.

But before that, a new situation arises. Haruka's voice echoes from the building's internal broadcast.

“Akira! Come back immediately!”

“I refuse! I'll come back after saving Sheryl! ”

Akira initially thought Haruka was talking to him, but he quickly realized it was someone else when the fake Akira responded.

Since Haruka was cut off from telepathic communication with the fake Akira, she intervened in the building's system to address the fake Akira through the internal broadcast system. The conversation between Haruka and the fake Akira continues.

“You are not a child, so stop being selfish! ”

“No! I refuse! I will definitely save Sheryl! Absolutely! ”

With an attitude that seemed both determined and childish, the fake Akira refused to retreat despite Haruka's persistence. However, his strong stance wavered significantly with Haruka's following words.

“Yumina's death was also Sheryl's fault? ”

“.....Huh? ”

Not only the fake Akira but also Akira inadvertently let out such a voice at Haruka's statement.

“Katsuya was dealing with Udajima. I'll spare you the details, but during the suppression battle against the Nationalist, it wasn't just Akira who was suspected of being a Nationalist. Sheryl was also under suspicion. And Katsuya was supposed to defeat Akira in exchange for Udajima clearing or covering up Sheryl's suspicion.”

While Akira and the fake Akira listened to Haruka's words, Sheryl, who already knew the story, turned pale.

Sheryl had been afraid to meet Akira because she knew she was indirectly responsible for Yumina's death. However, moments ago, amidst the chaos of being manipulated by the augmented suit to fight Akira, she had been able to talk to Akira normally.

In that state, just like a sucker punch, Haruka brought up the fact that she was indirectly responsible for Yumina's death. By diverting her eyes from that matter, Sheryl was seized by the fear she had been enduring and was trembling.

Haruka continues speaking.

"That's why Katsuya pushed for Akira's defeat, resulting in Yumina's death. In other words, Sheryl is partly to blame for Yumina's death. There's no point in trying so hard to save someone like that, right? So, Akira, come back."

Haruka did this to get the fake Akira to return. He was so fixated on avenging Yumina. If she could tell the fake Akira that Sheryl was partly responsible for Yumina's death, he should stop trying to help Sheryl. That's what she thought.

That plan was partially successful but ultimately failed. Indeed, the fake Akira stopped trying to help Sheryl, but he didn't return to Haruka, he stayed where he was.

The fake Akira spoke with a voice filled with rage.

"Is it because of you...! "

With Haruka's words, there was no longer a reason for the fake Akira to help Sheryl. However, in its place, a reason to kill had emerged.

"Is it because of you that Yumina died...! "

Sheryl trembled. Not because of the fake Akira's murderous intent but because she realized she was responsible for Yumina's death. Unforgivable. It was the worst imaginable scenario, recreated by Akira's voice.

He's an impostor. Not Akira. Despite thinking so, Sheryl was too scared, too frightened, too frozen to even look at Akira, wondering if he also thought the same.

But then, Sheryl became preoccupied with something else.

“It's not related to Sheryl, but...”

Akira said quietly, with an immense murderous intent.

It was too much. Despite Akira saying that Yumina's death had nothing to do with her, despite desperately wishing for him to say that, Sheryl couldn't even find the composure to be relieved.

Akira let go of Sheryl.

“Sheryl...”

“Y-Yes.”

“...Step back and put on your protective coat properly. Make sure to cover your head. One stray bullet and you're dead.”

“Y-Yes.”

Scary. But he's trying to protect her. Clinging to that thought, Sheryl stepped back behind Akira.

Although the fake Akira's figure, obscured by rubble, was invisible to the naked eye, Akira, supported by Alpha, could see it clearly. It was evident from the gaze of the opponent, visible through the rubble, that they could see each other's forms.

Also, the murderous gaze wasn't directed at him but at Sheryl behind him, further fueling Akira's hatred.

At that moment, Alpha interjected with a somewhat out-of-place cheerful tone.

『Akira, I'm here with you.』

『With me...?』

Not understanding the meaning, Akira frowned skeptically.

Alpha continued with a smile.

『Yes. With this, we can save Sheryl and kill the impostor. Isn't that great?』

Being told so casually, Akira felt a sense of emptiness instead. For a brief moment, he forgot his intent to kill the fake Akira and reconsidered the situation.

Saving Sheryl. Killing the fake Akira. Originally, he should only be able to choose one. But now, he can choose both. If Akira's luck had led to this situation, then it was fortunate.

Akira understood that. And his expression softened.

『...Yeah. It's unusual for you to be helpful.』

The intent to kill the fake Akira hadn't diminished in the slightest. But he didn't let himself be consumed by that intent either. Without being swayed by emotions but not ignoring them either, Akira regained his composure. He lightly chuckled as if the venom had been drained out of him.

『Well then, let's not let this opportunity slip away. Alpha, help me out.』

『Leave it to me.』

Akira regained his composure, exchanged smiles with Alpha, and dealt with the situation. Sharpening his focus, he prepared for the start of the battle.

And then it begins. fake Akira kicks the debris he had been using as a shield towards Akira. Reinforced by the force field armor, the debris remains intact despite the kick and flies towards Akira at high speed.

Akira also kicked back the rubble. The force field effect remaining in the rubble rapidly decreased after being kicked by the fake Akira. Then, the rubble struck by Akira's kick shattered into pieces.

Beyond the shattered rubble, the fake Akira aimed a gun at Akira. The fake Akira advanced at the speed of the rubble he had kicked, closing the distance.

Akira could also see that much. He also aimed his gun while in the posture of kicking the rubble.

And both of them unleashed maximum firepower at close range. A space of only a few meters filled with an immense number of bullets.

The fake Akira had no chance of winning in this shootout. He had already lost once in a shootout on the rooftop. Moreover, he wasn't receiving support from Haruka now.

To compensate for this disadvantage, the fake Akira had closed the distance to the limit. The difference from the rooftop battle was that Akira was protecting Sheryl this time. In the previous battle, Akira had managed to dodge the fake Akira's gunfire. But now he couldn't. Dodging would mean hitting Sheryl.

Of course, there was no guarantee that he couldn't dodge at all. There was no assurance that Akira wouldn't abandon Sheryl.

However, the fake Akira actually hoped for that.

He shot with the assumption of a mutual kill from the beginning to kill Sheryl.

But that hope didn't reach fruition. Akira continued to shoot without moving from his spot. He kept shooting while blocking the line of fire

to Sheryl with his body.

Both Akira and the fake Akira were pushing their force field armor and force field shields to the limit, regardless of remaining energy. Thanks to that, for a short time that felt like hours in subjective time, they drastically enhanced their defensive capabilities, allowing them to withstand some hits.

But there was a significant difference in their limits. Akira had Alpha's support.

Furthermore, Akira's shooting accuracy is significantly higher. This is because Akira has Alpha's support.

Akira had no intention of losing this fight. But the fake Akira was fighting with the assumption of a mutual kill. This difference in mindset certainly compensated for the substantial difference in their abilities. However, it was not enough to bridge the decisive gap provided by Alpha's support.

The bullets fired by the fake Akira were intercepted by the bullets fired by Akira. All the bullets from the extended magazine were shot down. Due to the density of the barrage, ricochets created further ricochets, making trajectory calculations even more difficult, but only bullets that posed no problem reached Akira.

Conversely, lethal shots kept hitting the fake Akira. However, he continued to shoot without giving up until the end. But the result remained the same. The fake Akira had no chance of winning in this shootout.

(Damn it!)

Losing his balance, unable to even aim his gun properly, the fake Akira was swallowed by the barrage of bullets unleashed by Akira. Not only did he turn into dust, but even that dust was shot through and vanished.

Akira stops shooting. Trying to confirm the death by checking the body, but the corpse has vanished completely. In a situation that seems clearly confirmed, Akira is so confident of victory that he doesn't even bother to confirm with Alpha.

Akira let out a big sigh. Then, after lowering his gun, he said firmly.

“...Alright! ”

This battle ended in Akira's victory. A victory just like always.

『Alpha, thank you for your help.』

There wasn't a trace of the dark emotions that were present before the battle on Akira's face as he expressed his gratitude.

『You're welcome.』

And Alpha is also smiling as usual.

He defeated a formidable enemy. That's all. He feels satisfied, but there is nothing more to it. As a simple fact, Akira emerged victorious in this battle.

Akira turns towards Sheryl.

“Sheryl. It's over. Let's go home.”

Sheryl smiles back at Akira, showing her usual demeanor in a positive light.

“...Yes! ”

Sheryl was genuinely pleased this time to see that Akira remained unchanged, despite knowing he was partly responsible for Yumina's death.

Akira hesitates slightly before speaking.

“Uh, well, sorry for dragging you into this, even though it's too late.”

In response, Sheryl laughs as if she doesn't care at all.

“It's okay. You helped me.”

Akira, prepared for some resentment, looks somewhat surprised, then laughs as if relieved.

“... I see. Well, I did say I'd help.”

“Yes.”

Sheryl was almost taken away to her death. It wasn't just a matter of helping, even so, she accepted Akira's words.

It's also a compromise. Since Akira can't always be by Sheryl's side, she has no choice but to be reactive. And since some threats can't be prevented, there's always the fear that Akira's help won't arrive in time to save Sheryl from death.

But their relationship was always like this from the start.

When Akira became Sheryl's protector, there were times when slum dwellers, who were originally from Sheryl's gang, tried to kill her in an attempt to reclaim their base. They were all killed by Akira, who was intentionally hiding.

There were also those who kidnapped Sheryl in an attempt to obtain information about undiscovered ruins from her. After rescuing Sheryl, Akira killed all of them.

Udajima's henchmen once tortured Sheryl in an attempt to extract testimony that Akira was a Nationalist. Sheryl, refusing to testify, was nearly killed, but was saved by Akira at the last moment. Udajima's henchmen were all killed by Akira on the spot.

In all these situations, Sheryl was fortunate that Akira's help arrived in time, and Akira was fortunate to save Sheryl in time. Their mutual luck maintained and continued their relationship.

Both Akira and Sheryl hope that this luck will continue in the future. And in doing so, they will do everything they can from their own positions. Both those who offer help and those who receive it agree that this is for the best.

Even though he defeated the fake Akira, the news hasn't spread to Kugamayama City yet. And there are still city forces around the Serenthal Building. Anticipating trouble if he is found, Akira decided to have Sheryl return the protective coat once, and he moved with Sheryl held within the coat.

“Sheryl. Let's go.”

“Yes.”

Akira activates the camouflage function and jumps out of the building with Sheryl in his arms.

The room they left behind still bears traces of the battle. Although the fake Akira was turned to dust by Akira's gunfire, not every drop of blood vanished. Some of the components that made up the fake Akira remain on the floor.

The blood is green.

Carol, receiving a message from Akira, waits for them on the rooftop of a building far from the Serenthal Building.

After a while, Akira and Sheryl arrive. Akira sets Sheryl down and asks Carol.

“Carol. Sheryl's clothes?”

“Here. Take these.”

Carol hands Sheryl a cheap protective suit. She bought it at the Mihazono District Ruin. Many hunters frequent this area, so there are many merchants catering to them. Such items are readily available.

“Sorry about that. Thanks for your help. I can't go buy it myself.”

“You're welcome. You're glad you brought me along, right? ”

“Yeah.”

Akira laughs back at Carol's proud smile.

Sheryl puts on the provided protective suit. Meanwhile, Akira replenishes ammunition and supplies from the bike's rucksacks. Now all that's left is to go home.

However, just as they're about to depart on the bike together, a new situation unfolds.

Part of the outer wall of the 60th floor of the Seranthal Building blows out as if from an explosion. When Akira and the others instinctively look in that direction, two figures emerge from the building, fighting as they come out. It's Olivia and Harmers.



Haruka, who returned to the 60th floor of the Seranthal Building, tries to call back the fake Akira. Since telepathy is cut off, she infiltrates the building's intercom system to attempt persuasion.

However, her persuasion fails, and she couldn't bring back the fake Akira. Haruka grimaces.

“...It can't be helped! I'll do it without him! ”

It was a futile attempt from the beginning. The absence of the fake Akira is just a margin of error. Haruka reassures herself and begins

her work. The image of the receptionist from the old-world appears again in Haruka's augmented vision.

(Mixing Akira's personal authentication information obtained from him with Sheryl's recognition this time...)

It was Haruka who manipulated Sheryl's augmented suit. Strictly speaking, she mostly left it to automatic control, but it was Haruka who directed Sheryl to attack Akira. And through the augmented suit, she obtained Sheryl's recognition data of Akira.

(Taking the difference between recognition of the fake and the real one, and adjusting...)

Sheryl was able to instantly discern the fake Akira, whom one couldn't distinguish by appearance alone. By blending some form of identification information, a recognition that even Sheryl herself couldn't consciously acknowledge, into the fake Akira's personal authentication information, could she bypass the authentication? Haruka found potential there and returned to the 60th floor of the Seranthal Building.

(... How about this?)

Haruka waits for the results with a slight nervousness. The receptionist on her augmented vision informs Haruka.

『Received the application for special transfer to External District 3. Subsequent procedures...』

“...Yes! ”

Haruka couldn't help but exclaim in joy. She thought it might work out, but she also thought it might not. The greater her anticipation of failure, the greater her joy.

She was so overjoyed that she neglected her surroundings, however.

“Haruka! ”

Haruka looks surprised and turns to look behind her. Shirou was there.

“Shirou...”

Haruka's surprise at being caught off guard is overshadowed by her reunion with Shirou. And she also felt joy in seeing her friend expressing happiness at their reunion.

“...Long time no see.”

Haruka says these words filled with emotions, her smile tinged with loneliness and her voice soft.



“What brings you here? ”

Considering her own position and Shirou's, now that she's remembered it after the momentary forgetfulness brought by their reunion, and knowing that their reunion couldn't be a coincidence, Haruka couldn't help but be wary of Shirou.

Meanwhile, Shirou responds with a face filled with joy at meeting Haruka.

“I came to help.”

This was an unexpected reply for Haruka. She asks back in confusion.

“Help me? ”

“Yeah. That's right. I came to help you. I don't know how you managed to get out there, but if you were able to escape from there, then I'll take care of the rest. I was planning to find out where the facility you're in is located and somehow get in there. But it seems I can save myself some trouble now.”

Shirou says this as he approaches Haruka and extends his hand towards her.

“Let's go. It'll be fine. Leave it to me.”

Shirou thought he barely made it in time.

Haruka looks at Shirou's hand. She wants to grab it without thinking. Driven by that feeling, but Haruka stops just in time. She looks at Shirou with a serious expression.

“...Specifically, how do you plan to help me? ”

“Well, for now, you'll live in the safe house I've prepared, and during that time, I'll erase or alter your information, delete any records of you being there. Then you should be able to live normally. After that, you can either find work that utilizes your skills or start an entirely different life...”

Shirou's explanation is correct for someone who, due to various circumstances, has stopped being a Nationalist and is now being pursued by both Nationalist and the Corporate Government.

However, Haruka shakes her head.

Shirou, who didn't expect to be rejected, shows surprise and a hint of agitation. But understanding that Haruka is concerned about being pursued by both Nationalist and the Corporate Government, and considering that she may be worried about her own abilities, Shirou deliberately wears a confident smile and tries to persuade her.

“I understand it's unsettling. But it's okay. I can do it. Even if I say so myself, I'm talented enough that I wouldn't be allowed to leave the Sakashita facility under normal circumstances. Sakashita views me as dangerous enough to be wary of. In reality, I have that much power. Hiding your identity is easy for me. You know I escaped from Sakashita, right? But here I am, moving freely without being chased by Sakashita. Trust me.”

Shirou has the power to make that possible. Haruka acknowledges that. She believes him. Yet, Haruka still shakes her head.

“...That's not it. That's not what I mean.”

“Not it? Then, do you have a bomb implanted in your brain for escape prevention? It's okay. I can disarm that too. I've done that kind of work many times.”

Many individuals who wanted to leave Sakashita Heavy Industry and sought refuge there in such a state, and Shirou has indeed

successfully disarmed bombs multiple times with his skills. He had a recognized track record.

Yet Haruka still shakes her head.

“...That's not it. That's not what I mean.”

Seeing Haruka's stubborn attitude, Shirou also shows confusion.

“Then why...”

Shirou desperately tries to figure out why Haruka is refusing his help. But before he can reach a conclusion, the situation undergoes further changes.

Harmers appears from the ceiling hole.

Harmers, who landed on the 60th floor, looks at Shirou with a face of astonishment and then smiles maliciously.

“Shirou! Long time no see!”

Shirou instinctively moves to protect Haruka and directs a stern look at Harmers.

“Why are you here...? You were supposed to be at the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.”

“Hm? Ah, did you think I was there? I won't reveal my hand. It's not something to tell someone who's on the run.”

Shirou's expression grew even more serious inwardly.

(...Did I get outmaneuvered in this kind of information manipulation? Besides me, is there such a skilled person in Sakashita...? But since this guy is here, I have no choice but to consider that possibility...)

According to Shirou's investigation, Harmers was definitely supposed to be in the second deep part of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. They were supposed to be fighting a group of fused creatures there. If Harmers is here, it means that such a high-level information manipulation was carried out that even Shirou couldn't see through it.

Of course, Shirou doesn't have the conceited notion that there's no one surpassing him. But he understands his own abilities correctly. That's why he didn't think that Sakashita Heavy Industry would secretly dispatch someone of equal caliber to him to the Kugamayama region.

(This is bad. If the reliability of their location information can't be trusted, my actions will be significantly restricted. No, more importantly, I need to get through this situation now...)

Shirou had been able to move freely in the Kugamayama region because he had previously investigated the whereabouts of Sakashita Heavy Industry's personnel, not just Harmers.

But with Harmers here, the credibility of the acquired location information had greatly wavered. It became difficult to sneak through Sakashita Heavy Industry's encirclement network as before. Faced with the future difficulties, Shirou twisted his face and focused his thoughts on dealing with the biggest challenge in front of him.

Harmers was thinking.

(He didn't notice my approach, which means his information manipulation worked that well. I see. Impressive skill. No wonder Sugadome-san considers him a threat.)

Although Shirou was deceived, Harmers was actually at the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. And from there, he headed towards the Mihazono District Ruin, but before that, he had asked Yanagisawa to conceal his movement there. Harmers thought that if he was Shirou,

he would quickly find out both his whereabouts and his movement from there.

Of course, Harmers didn't think he could completely conceal his own location by doing so. The opponent was Shirou, after all. He knew he couldn't match just anyone. Still, he thought Yanagisawa would buy him some time. That's why he asked.

However, it was unexpectedly beyond his expectations that Yanagisawa could completely conceal his presence until he reached Shirou's side. Harmers marveled at his remarkable skill and increased his vigilance towards Yanagisawa even more.

Setting that aside, Harmers focused on the current situation. Then, seeing Shirou standing protectively in front of Haruka, he spoke.

“...I see. Did you escape from Sakashita because of her? ”

Shirou returned a silent affirmation. Harmers continued.

“You met online, got to know each other, and were invited to meet in person. I thought you were the type who wouldn't fall for that kind of scam.”

“...It's not a scam.”

Shirou knew that Harmers' words were a challenge to him. Still, he answered that way. First, to show Haruka that he had come to help her sincerely. And second, to show Harmers, Haruka, and above all, himself, that his actions were not wrong.

Harmers wore a surprised expression.

“...Are you that kind of guy? ”

“Didn't you know? We've been together all this time.”

“True. I didn't know. I see. If you're that kind of guy, it makes sense that you'd escape from Sakashita on a whim.”

Seeing Shirou's determined actions dismissed as a whim, Harmers walked towards Shirou and the others.

“Well then, Shirou. Shall we go home? And as a bonus, let's have her come along too.”

Harmers came to the Mihazono District Ruin because he heard that Akira had appeared there. At that point, it was unclear whether that Akira was real or fake, but even if it was fake, Harmers thought there was a possibility that the real one would appear based on that information. And if it was the real Akira, there was also a possibility that Shirou was accompanying him.

It was a possibility. In other words, it was a wish, merely a convenient expectation. Harmers himself knew that he was being foolish.

However, when he actually arrived at the Mihazono District Ruin and rushed in under the commotion, he found Shirou there as expected. Not only that, but Shirou had the same reason for escaping from Sakashita Heavy Industry. Harmers wasn't going to let this stroke of luck slip away.

Capturing Shirou and securing the person who caused the escape. With these achievements alone, it would be enough to erase the failure of not preventing Shirou's escape. Harmers was filled with that determination, and he approached Shirou and the others, his smile disappearing.

Haruka also understood Harmers' strength. But now, something else bothered her.

“Shirou. I knew about you escaping from Sakashita Heavy Industry, but were you really escaping from there? Not just a strategic operation to make it look that way on the surface?”

“Yeah. It's true.”

“...I'll say something conceited. For my sake? ”

Shirou replied clearly.

“Yeah. That's right.”

“...I see.”

When Harmers appeared, Haruka doubted Shirou. She wondered if all their conversations were lies and if summoning a Sakashita Heavy Industry superhuman here was just a means to definitively capture her. She couldn't help but think that way.

But Shirou was really trying to help her. Moreover, he had escaped from Sakashita Heavy Industry for her. He opposed Sakashita Heavy Industry for her.

Haruka understood how heavy that was. She doubted someone who had done such a thing for her. Haruka felt ashamed of that. And to repay that, she made up her mind and asked Shirou for one final decision.

“I have one more question. Can we somehow resolve this situation? ”

“Of course.”

That was an unexpected answer for Haruka. Shirou was likely top-notch in information processing skill like her, but he should be powerless in direct combat. Even if he was different, he shouldn't be able to handle a superhuman opponent. Thinking so, she couldn't help but ask back with a puzzled voice.

“...How? ”

And Shirou voiced his method.

“Olivia-san! Please deal with that! ”

“Understood.”

With that voice, Olivia appeared before Shirou and the others. Harmers stopped in surprise, and Haruka also showed astonishment. They quickly understood that the opponent had been hidden by camouflage functions, but both Harmers and Haruka were shocked that they hadn't noticed someone at this distance.

Then Shirou issued additional instructions, sounding a bit pained.

“If possible, please refrain from killing. You don't need to pursue if they escape. However, if such consideration increases the cost, then I revoke this instruction. Killing is permitted.”

Shirou had a long history with Harmers. He felt a certain level of affection. However, that affection did not take priority over Haruka.

“Understood.”

Olivia answered again and approached Shirou's group, standing in front of Harmers. Then she spoke with a pleasant smile.

“Could you please withdraw? It would reduce unnecessary combat. I believe it's a good choice for both parties.”

Harmers stared at Olivia. He understood her strength from the fact that she hadn't made her presence known to him from that distance. He even considered that she might possess power equal to his. So, he attempted to assert his position and make her retreat.

“I'm Harmers, belonging to the security department of Sakashita Heavy Industry. Shirou there is a fugitive from Sakashita Heavy Industry, and I have come here to apprehend him. Please refrain from interfering.”

“I am Olivia of Lion Steel Company. I apologize. I cannot comply with your request. As a representative of Lion Steel Company, I prioritize the instructions of our client, Shirou-sama.”

“We've made our positions clear. Isn't that response interpreted to mean that Lion Steel has an intention to be hostile to our company. Your dedication to the contract is admirable, but it's best to withdraw from this.”

“I apologize.”

“If you require any conditions for your withdrawal, please state them. I will negotiate as much as possible with my superiors.”

“We have no conditions to offer.”

As if issuing a final warning, Harmers gave Olivia a sharp look.

“Is negotiation breaking down?”

Olivia responded with a smile still on her face.

“Negotiations are ongoing, including the use of force as bargaining chips, if you don't mind.”

“I see. Then let's present our full efforts. I hope negotiations conclude before withdrawal becomes impossible.”

“Understood.”

Olivia politely bowed, and Harmers readied himself. After a brief standoff, both parties moved simultaneously.

They closed the distance in an instant and exchanged punches. The excessively fast fists compressed the air in their path, creating a colorless mist. As two superhuman beings clashed, the high-density colorless mist formed an invisible barrier that disrupted the

propagation of their impact. However, both managed to forcefully penetrate the barrier with their own physical abilities.

And then their fists collided. The resulting shock exploded outward, blowing away a section of the already weakened outer wall of the 60th floor where Akira and the others were fighting.

Since the opponent was too strong, there was no choice but to retreat. Thus began a negotiation where focusing on using force to ensure that the conditions for withdrawal were met on the other side.

Chapter 245: Life on the Line

After Harmers and Olivia leaped outside the Serenthal Building, Shiro, who remained on the 60th floor, immediately took his next action. He said to Haruka with a serious expression.

“Haruka, escape now while you can.”

Haruka responded with a slightly surprised expression.

“What about you, Shiro?”

Although she understood that she should escape when told to “escape,” not “let’s escape,” Haruka still asked. And as expected, she received the anticipated response.

“I’ll stay. If I go with you, Harmers will chase after us.”

Harmers intended to capture both Shiro and Haruka, but given the choice, priority was given to capturing Shiro. Therefore, for Haruka to be safely released, Shiro had to stay behind.

Shiro smiled slightly sadly and said,

“...I’ll explain some other time why I can’t save you now. It might take a while if I start explaining properly.”

Haruka seemed about to say something but stopped. Instead, she said something else.

“...I can’t promise you anything.”

“...I see.”

Haruka activated her camouflage function, hiding her entire appearance, including her expression, and then left.

Shiro could see through Haruka's camouflage function. However, as they distanced themselves, it became more difficult. Haruka's figure disappeared even from Shiro's detection range.

Without even making a promise to meet again, Shiro parted ways with Haruka.

Shiro hung his head slightly and exhaled deeply as if releasing the thoughts in his chest. Then he raised his head, steeling himself.

“...Alright! The next thing to do is to investigate how to save Haruka. She could at least tell me why it won't work. Well, I guess there's a reason she can't say.”

Mixing a bit of complaint with his words, Shiro encouraged himself and focused on finding a solution to the current situation. Then he checked the situation outside.

“...Hang in there, Olivia.”

Outside the building, superhumans and similar entity continued their fierce battle, dragging the outskirt of Mihazono District Ruin into the fray.

Harmers and Olivia, who had started the fight, moved their battleground outside the Seranthal Building as if by mutual agreement. This was to avoid involving Shiro's group in their battle aftermath. If the fight had been settled with a single blow, there would have been no need for this, but the strength of the opponent made it necessary.

However, they didn't stray too far. If Olivia showed even a momentary opening, Harmers would return to Shiro's location, at least capturing Shiro and possibly Haruka as well before withdrawing. To prevent this, Olivia continued to press Harmers with close combat. Harmers and Olivia continued their battle at the absolute limit of distance without involving Shiro's group.

Since Shiro's group was too far away on the ground, naturally, Harmers' battle with Olivia took place in the air. Neither of them had flight abilities, but they moved freely by kicking off the air.

Fists swung, kicks delivered. Shockwaves scattered around from the high-speed strikes fueled by the superhuman's physical abilities, causing destruction in the vicinity. The colorless mist lingering in the Mihazono District Ruin was not as dense as in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, and there was a limit to the shockwave attenuation. Buildings at a distance collapsed as if struck by a giant, sending debris flying.

Hand chops and roundhouse kicks were unleashed. Shockwaves imbued with cutting force due to the extreme directionality of the strikes cut through high-rise buildings, and the fan-shaped shockwaves mowed down multiple buildings. The collapsed buildings spread flashy dust clouds around. The skirmish between just two individuals and its aftermath threatened to drastically alter the scenery of the Mihazono District Ruin's city area.

With such powerful punches and kicks, delivered not through brute force but with the refined skills of masters, both sides continuously unleashed attacks, defended, dodged, counterattacked, and continued the fight without retreating.

And first, Harmers' blow struck Olivia. With just the aftermath, and even with the diminished shockwave, a kick that shattered distant buildings struck Olivia's abdomen directly.

Feeling the impact, Harmers couldn't help but smile.

On the other hand, Olivia's expression remained unchanged. Not in the sense of a mask, but she remained with the same expression as if nothing had happened. It was enough to make Harmers, who saw her face, to believe that she didn't dodge the last strike because she chose not to, rather than being unable to.

And as if to confirm this, Olivia countered. Taking advantage of the momentary pause caused by Harmers' kick, she grabbed his momentarily immobile leg with both hands, then spun around and forcefully threw him in the opposite direction of Shiro's group.

This was bad. Harmers thought so, feeling rushed as he adjusted his posture mid-air and exerted force on both legs. Using force field armor, he generated a foothold in the air, slowing himself down by stepping on it. Leaving light trails resembling brake marks in the air, Harmers managed to stop himself over a short distance. If he hadn't braced himself with all his might, he would have been thrown outside the ruins.

If Harmers had been thrown far enough, Olivia would have exploited the opening to return to Shiro's group and disappear with them.

Olivia's camouflage function remained silent and hidden, so advanced that even at close range, Harmers wouldn't notice her if she didn't move. Whether Shiro's group could adapt to that camouflage function was unknown to Harmers. However, it was certain that finding Shiro's group would become extremely difficult, and Harmers felt a slight relief at preventing that.

However, that relief vanished the moment Harmers saw Olivia. Olivia aimed her light blade at Harmers.

This light blade was the same type as the laser blade Sheryl used when fighting Akira. It could physically cut through opponents.

But its performance was different. The blade Olivia refined using her own generator's output had cutting sharpness far beyond what Sheryl wielded.

To realize such sharpness, an energy body required vast amounts of energy, even extending its length by just one millimeter. Nevertheless, Olivia's light blade was about 10 meters long. It was evidence of controlling a tremendous amount of energy flawlessly,

and Harmers understood at a glance that this light blade was not just for show.

The blade swung. Due to his full effort to hold his ground, Harmers found himself within its range.

Unable to dodge, Harmers realized this and readied himself to defend against the slashing attack with all his might.

When Olivia finished swinging her light blade, the blade shattered and disappeared. The shining shards scattered with force, cutting through the ground and buildings ahead.

Seeing this spectacle, Harmers smirked bitterly.

(...Even in its fragmented state, it packs that much power. No wonder.)

Harmers' arms, which somehow managed to block the light blade, were severed to the bone. Blood spurted from the arms, which were only connected by remaining muscles and skin. Areas that couldn't be blocked by the arms were also cut, exposing the bone.

Harmers skillfully swung his arms to reconnect the severed parts. The adhesive effect of the recovery medicine he had previously ingested took effect, stopping the bleeding. He clenched and unclenched his fists to ensure it was firmly reattached.

(Did she refrain from using that blade until now to catch me off guard and ensure a certain moment to strike, or was it simply because using it required a massive amount of energy, and she couldn't use it until that energy had accumulated, or...)

While considering various possibilities, Harmers frowned, acknowledging the most probable reason she had already thought of.

(...Or maybe I was just being underestimated.)

Harmers despised himself for initially thinking of that but then searching for other reasons as if making excuses. Finally recognizing the most likely reason, he felt ashamed of himself for needing to accept it only after being attacked and not pursued by his opponent despite having his arms severed.

Their fight wasn't about killing each other. It was a negotiation using force to make the opponent retreat.

Considering this, it could be speculated that Olivia initially judged that she could repel her opponent barehanded, but when her opponent proved to be stronger than expected, she decided to use the blade. In other words, until now, she was just holding back.

While Harmers was the first to think of that, he berated himself for searching for other reasons as if making excuses.

Olivia affirmed Harmers' interpretation as she held her blade.

"How about it? Wouldn't it be time for you to withdraw? If we continue like this, it will become difficult for me to meet Shiro-sama's wishes. Your request for negotiation to be concluded while retreating will also become difficult to fulfill."

If they continued, they wouldn't be able to hold back like before. In other words, they would end up dead. Olivia declared this and urged Harmers to retreat.

However, Harmers refused.

"I appreciate your concern, but I'll decline. This matter is not something that can be easily abandoned."

"I see."

Olivia poised her sword. It was the main body of the light blade she had swung earlier. The blade was about one meter long and faintly

glowing. Although she wasn't generating the light blade now, its cutting ability was still significant. It could kill Harmers.

Harmers also tensed up.

“Then, prepare yourself.”

“Bring it on.”

Olivia kicked off the air to close the distance, and Harmers prepared to counter. Their negotiation, which included force, progressed to the next stage. It became a negotiation that allowed killing, not just the opponent's retreat.

After Harmers and the others began their battle, Akira and the others who witnessed the aftermath of the battle hurriedly left the scene. Riding on a bike, with Carol, Sheryl, and Akira in that order, they sped through the air. They escaped from the Mihazono District Ruin and headed towards a camping car coming from the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

During their journey, Akira watched Harmers' battle from a distance with Alpha's support. He wore a stiff smile at the sight of the intense battle.

『Alpha... What's up with that?』

In response, Alpha, with her usual smile, meaning she had no particular impression of Harmers' battle.

『Even if you ask me, there's nothing special about it. Just fighting normally according to the standards of superhumans.』

『Is that normal... being called a superhuman. I fought against a superhuman before, but maybe my understanding was still naive.』

『We just classify anyone with a certain level of physical ability as superhumans. Among those called superhumans, there are those who are just normally strong and those who are overwhelmingly strong even by superhuman standards.』

『I see, that makes sense.』

『Also, the spectacle of that battle was more influenced by the environment than the abilities of the two. The density of the colorless mist in the Mihazono District Ruin is much thinner than in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin or the eastern area of the east side, so the attenuation of the shock waves is limited. That's why it seems like they're fighting so spectacularly.』

『Ah, I see, there's that reason too.』

『Yes, even if that battle had taken place in a more eastern area, the scattered shock waves would have been much smaller, and you probably wouldn't have been so surprised, Akira.』

If you follow common physical laws, superhumans can become a nuisance by simply putting a little effort into moving their bodies, causing shock waves everywhere.

The fact that it's being prevented in the eastern area is due to the attenuation effect of the colorless mist. Although there's a difference in density, the fact that the colorless mist is drifting throughout the eastern area makes the world robust enough to tolerate the existence of superhumans.

As Akira and the others continued through the wasteland, Akira received a communication from Shiro. Its contents were enough to make Akira frown.

“Carol, take Sheryl and go back first.”

With those words, Akira jumped out of the moving bike and headed back towards the Mihazono District Ruin alone.

Carol panicked at Akira's sudden action.

“Hey!? Akira!? What's wrong!?”

Sheryl was equally surprised and exclaimed.

“Akira!? What happened!?”

With the speed of the bike and Akira's own swiftness, Akira was already far from the bike, but he could hear their panicked voices through the communication. Akira responded through the communication as well.

“I have something to take care of. Carol, I'm counting on you to deliver Sheryl. Sheryl, make sure you don't fall, hold onto Carol properly.”

Without waiting for a response, Akira implicitly left those words and cut off the communication with Carol and the others, then hurriedly headed towards Shirou.

Alpha asked as she ran alongside Akira.

『...Akira. Are you really going?』

『...I have no choice. I owe that guy a favor.』

Akira's expression clearly showed his reluctance in this action. However, going to Shiro's location still demonstrated the importance of the debt to Akira.

『...I see.』

Even as Alpha was told this by Akira, she couldn't stop him. Alpha owed Akira more than anyone else. In order to repay that debt and also to get Akira to fulfill his own request, Alpha couldn't deny Akira's stubborn sense of duty.

It can't be helped. Both Akira and Alpha thought so as they headed back to the ruin of Mihazono District once again.

Meanwhile, Carol, although momentarily hesitant, hurried ahead with Sheryl. Sheryl, while feeling somewhat dissatisfied, kept her thoughts to herself. She understood that following Akira would only be a hindrance.

Carol also thought mostly the same as Sheryl. The difference lies in whether they themselves would be a hindrance or just Sheryl.

If it were only herself, Carol thought, she could have gone with Akira. But she refrained from asking Akira about it for now, as she was asked to deliver Sheryl.

First, they thought about it after reaching the camping car. Both Carol and Sheryl hurried ahead in the opposite direction of Akira for now.



While Olivia hadn't yet used her blade and was destroying the outskirts of the Mihazono District Ruin with the aftermath of the melee with Harmers, Shirou's expression betrayed strong anxiety.

(...This is bad.)

Shirou didn't care about the state of the ruins. From Shirou's perspective, Olivia seemed to have the upper hand in the fight. Still, Shirou's anxiety grew.

(Harmers! Go back already! What if you die!? If you're excluded from my search, this shouldn't be your job! Do you really need to try so

hard!?)

Shirou didn't particularly care about Harmers' life. He didn't wish for him to die, but if he did, it couldn't be helped. There was nothing to make Shirou anxious about.

Also, Shirou believed Olivia would win at this rate. Still, his anxiety continued to grow stronger.

(This is bad, bad, bad! At this rate, I'll use up the contract period with Olivia!?)

Shirou had contracted with Olivia for 5 million Chrome basic fee per month. Additionally, by paying additional fees, he could request jobs beyond the basic duties. Basic tasks like simple escorting were included in the basic duties, so that wasn't a problem. But if the enemy was too strong, it was different. The fee would depend on the strength of the enemy.

Surely, Harmers' strength warranted additional fees. Shirou understood that much, so if the fees accumulated due to worrying about Harmers' life and if it led to increased expenses, he instructed that it was okay to kill them. In other words, he permitted paying additional fees.

So, how much will the fee be? Olivia can only calculate that after Harmers' repulsion is over. Therefore, while she allows payment afterward, she cannot accept the excuse of not being able to pay such a large sum afterward.

Instead of immediate payment, the contract was to shorten the employment period by the amount of additional fees. That's why Shirou is getting anxious. Even if they repel Harmers, it would be troublesome if, as a result, the contract ends in just one more day. Shirou was greatly relying on Olivia's help, above all to continue acting freely and, most importantly, to help Haruka.

But the situation was worse than Shirou had expected. Olivia contacted him through the old-world domain.

『Shirou-sama. Our contract period with this unit will soon expire. Would you like to extend the contract period?』

Shirou burst into laughter involuntarily.

『... Seriously?』

『Yes. What will you do?』

『I, I understand. Please.』

Desperate times call for desperate measures. If Shirou's contract with Olivia ended now, there would be no escaping from Harmers. And for Haruka's sake, he couldn't allow that. Thinking so, Shirou attempted to pay an additional month's basic fee to renew the contract.

However, the situation was far from being resolved.

『The basic fee after renewal will be 10 million Chrome. Is that acceptable?』

Shirou bursts out laughing again.

『10 million!? Not 5 million Chrome!?』

『Yes. It will be 10 million Chrome.』

『Well, it was 5 million Chrome before, why the sudden price increase?』

『It's due to a revision of the basic fees due to the update of assumed business content. In the previous contract, the combat with large-scale threat entity in the area referred to as the Third Inner Sector by Shirou-sama, and the combat with threat entity currently engaged in, were not assumed fees. After the update, it will be a contract assuming that, so the basic fee will also be an amount in accordance with that.』

If you're going to make me fight Kaiju or Harmers, pay the appropriate amount of money. Shirou couldn't argue against Olivia's response, which roughly summarized it.

『Shirou-sama. If you wish to extend the contract period, please deposit the basic fee. Please note that if we cannot confirm the deposit, this unit will withdraw from the site at the end of the contract period for the preservation of this unit. Please understand. The provisional time until withdrawal is 12 seconds.』

『12 seconds...!』

Shirou had to make a decision within the next 12 seconds at the longest. This could also be interpreted as the remaining time for Olivia to restrain Harmers. Considering the time value of defending against a superhuman's onslaught for 12 seconds, it could be considered sufficient leeway.

Shirou spent a silent 6 seconds of that precious time. During that time, he hoped that Harmers would withdraw. However, his fleeting wish did not come true. Rather, Harmers delivered a fierce blow to Olivia instead. The superhuman's kick struck Olivia's abdomen.

And then Shirou made his decision.

『...I've made the payment!』

『We have confirmed the payment. Thank you very much for your continued use of our services.』

Olivia immediately counterattacked. Seizing Harmers' leg, she threw him and wielded the power of the increased basic fee of 10 million Chrome. She readied her sword, generated a blade of light, and cleaved both of Harmers' arms.

Surely they would retreat now. That's what Shirou thought, but Harmers continued the fight.

(Is he really continuing!? He's too motivated!)

As Olivia began to use her sword, Harmers fell further into a disadvantage.

But Shirou's anxiety grew stronger. The precious funds he had prepared to save Haruka had now been exhausted. Shirou no longer had any financial leeway. His future actions would be financially strained.

Since the contract now assumed combat with Kaiju or Harmers, Shirou believed that there would be no additional charges incurred in this battle. However, Harmers likely had some trump cards or hidden tactics. Even if used, it might not be covered within the basic fee.

And in that case, Shirou no longer had the ability to pay, so the contract period could not be extended. Despite being forced into a disadvantaged position in the battle itself, Harmers' efforts were undeniably pushing Shirou into a corner.

To deal with this, Shirou decided to take a new approach. With no money left, he would have to consume something other than money.

Shirou contacted Akira.

『Akira! Where are you now? 』

『Shirou? I'm outside the Mihazono District Ruin. I've finished my business and I'm about to head back...』

『I'm at the Serenthal Building! Come back here!』

『Huh. Well, you see, that place is...』

Seeing the fierce battle between Harmers and Olivia, Akira hesitated, but Shirou interrupted and asserted.

『I won't take no for an answer! You owe me, remember!?』

With that said, Akira couldn't refuse. Despite sounding reluctant, he agreed.

『...Got it. I'll be there soon.』

『Hurry up!』

Before Akira could change his mind, Shirou ended the communication.

Even Shirou didn't believe that Akira could defeat Harmers. However, he hoped that Akira could at least assist Olivia. And more than that, he hoped that something, whatever it was that had repeatedly defied hopeless situations and saved Akira's life before, could improve the current situation.

To achieve that, Shirou decided to use the favor he had accumulated for Akira, here and now.



Returning to the Mihazono District Ruin, Akira took a detour to avoid getting involved in the battle between Olivia and Harmers, and

finally reached Shirou. Then he said something that sounded somewhat troublesome to Shirou.

“Shirou. So, why did you call me? Just to take you and escape? ”

“No. Please support Olivia-san.”

“Eh...”

With a reluctant expression, Akira looked at Olivia and the others, confirming the state of their intense battle once again.

“...I don't want to.”

He refused, thinking that he would be wiped out if he participated in that battle.

“Please, do something about it.”

“I refuse. Besides, with that situation, won't Olivia-san win even if I don't support her? ”

Contrary to Olivia, who was fighting with a smile on her face, Harmers wore an expression of desperation. To Akira, it seemed that the outcome of the battle mirrored the expressions of the two.

Indeed, Harmers had been at a disadvantage since Olivia started using her sword. Essentially, it was all defense from Harmers' side, with very few opportunities for counterattacks. He had to dodge blades that could cut him in half at the last moment, attacking only during the rare moments when Olivia left an opening after swinging her sword dozens of times.

And even when he managed to throw punches or kicks during those rare opportunities, it wasn't guaranteed to hit the target. Olivia made sure to evade them. Moreover, even when her stance was compromised due to evasive actions, Olivia still swung her sword accurately.

Normally, attacks launched from compromised positions wouldn't affect someone like Harmers, a superhuman. Simply exerting force would be enough to block them.

But even that was futile against Olivia's sword. Even if the blade was swung from a weakened position, Olivia's abnormal sharpness compensated for any lack of strength or technique, meaning that if it wasn't dodged, it would cut through flesh and reach bone.

Dodging the sword strikes multiple times and winning unfavorable exchanges repeatedly, even if Harmers manages to land an attack, he can't defeat Olivia. Not only that, she retaliates without changing her expression. Harmers was overwhelmingly in a disadvantaged position.

However, despite being at a disadvantage, Harmers continues to fight without giving up. If Harmers were just an ordinary person with physical abilities at the level of superhumans, he would have died countless times already. The fact that he's still alive and fighting proves Harmers' true strength.

Nevertheless, the situation is indeed dire. Akira didn't think he needed to support Olivia himself.

Even so, Shirou persists.

“Even if that's the case, I still need your support, Akira. Please.”

“Don't be unreasonable. I refuse.”

Despite Akira's persistent refusal, Shirou seemed to make a decision and took a deep breath as if he had resolved something. Then, with a very serious expression, knowing that these words might sound like a threat to Akira, he repeated his request.

“You should owe me a favor.”

When told that, Akira found it hard to refuse. However, despite hesitating for a moment, Akira didn't change his response.

“Even so, I refuse.”

“Akira! ”

Akira interrupted Shirou's strong condemnation with an even stronger gaze. Then he spoke.

“It's true that I owe Shirou a great debt. I admit that. Thanks to Shirou, I survived in the Third Inner Area. But just because you saved my life doesn't mean I'm obliged to die for you. I have no obligation to die for you.”

With that said, Shirou had no choice but to remain silent. Unable to find additional words to persuade him, he showed a troubled expression.

Seeing that expression, Akira also felt uneasy. He wasn't refusing out of spite. He owed a great debt to Shirou. He genuinely wanted to help somehow.

Akira checked the progress of Olivia and Harmers' battle once again.

『... Alpha. That's impossible, right? 』

『Yes. It certainly is.』

『Yeah, you're right...』

While Alpha agreed with Akira, she also viewed this development as somewhat dangerous.

Alpha didn't want Akira to die either. But Akira was trying to evade his debt to Shirou in a way. That tendency was undesirable.

So she proposed a compromise.

『At least Shirou should also cooperate. It's too convenient to leave it all to Akira, even if you owes a debt to Shirou. If you're going to do it, Shirou should also put his life on the line, at the very least.』

Akira reconsidered upon hearing the details from Alpha. Indeed, with that condition, he changed his judgment.

“Shirou. If you really want me to do this, then you should also put your life on the line. Don't leave it all to me. If it's a request as serious as risking our lives, considering the debt I owe you for saving my life, I might consider it. What do you say? Are you still up for it? ”

Upon hearing this, Shirou raised his head, which had been slightly bowed, with determination and responded promptly.

“Please do it.”

“R-Right...”

If Shirou had refused, Akira would have been satisfied. However, Shirou's immediate response without any hesitation or inquiry left Akira perplexed.

Thinking that Shirou must have his own reasons for such determination and resolve, Akira also became determined.

“Let's get started.”

Saying so, Akira moved behind Shirou and grabbed the back of his shirt collar with one hand.

As Harmers continued to resist despite being at a disadvantage, another hardship struck. It was gunfire from Akira.

Even if hit, it wouldn't cause any injuries. Being showered with bullets all over the body wouldn't be fatal.

However, it wasn't weak enough to be completely ignored. Without dodging or using bio-field armor to block it, injuries would occur. And if one continued to silently endure them, what was initially a mere graze would turn into a minor injury, then escalate into a severe one. It needed to be dealt with.

However, responding to Akira's gunfire meant neglecting to deal with Olivia's attacks, even if only slightly. For Harmers, who was barely resisting Olivia's fierce assaults, even the slightest neglect could be fatal.

(Ugh! What a hassle!)

There was no other choice. Let's prioritize dealing with Akira for a moment. Let's swing my fist and send shockwaves to eliminate him. That's what Harmers decided, as he evaded Olivia's attacks by moving back, creating an opportunity to attack Akira.

But then he abruptly stopped.

Akira was using Shirou as a shield, holding him with one hand.

(What the...!?)

Caught off guard, Harmers couldn't move, and Olivia took advantage of it, stepping forward and swinging her sword. Despite Harmers' reflexive attempt to dodge, it was too late. The blade struck deeply into his flesh, exploiting the delay caused by his hesitation.

Chapter 246: Way of Life as a Hunter

Carol, who decided to split up with Akira near the outskirts of Mihazono District Ruin, rides through the wasteland on Akira's bike with Sheryl. They're heading to the camping car carrying Hikaru and the others heading towards the Mihazono District Ruin. Since it's her own car, Carol knows its location. They're almost there.

Ideally, Carol should have informed Hikaru and the others beforehand, but she didn't want to waste time explaining the situation. So, without contacting them, Carol heads towards the camping car. Due to this, Hikaru and the others are surprised when Carol suddenly returns, so they stop the car and all go outside to wait for Carol.

Carol and the others arrive in front of Hikaru and the group. Hikaru and the others show a puzzled expression upon noticing that Akira isn't on the bike but Sheryl is. Elena, speaking on behalf of everyone, asks.

“Carol, where's Akira? ”

When asked that question, Carol laughed and answered while taking Sheryl off the bike.

“Sorry, I'm in a hurry. You can ask her for details.”

With that, Carol leaves again on the bike, accelerating to the limit towards the Mihazono District Ruin.

As Hikaru and the others watch Carol depart, somewhat puzzled, their attention shifts to Sheryl. Elena, once again representing the group, asks.

“Um, so, could you tell us what's going on? ”

“Ah—, yes. I understand.”

Even when asked, Sheryl doesn't know all the details. Nonetheless, she starts explaining what she knows.



Akira, using Shirou as a shield, fires at Harmers to assist Olivia. Supported by Alpha, Akira's precise shooting anticipates Harmers' movements, effectively hindering him. Even seemingly stray bullets are deflected by subsequent shots, confusing Harmers by turning into gunfire from unexpected directions.

Despite sustaining a serious wound to the chest, Harmers deals with it. While Akira shields himself with Shirou, the injury he received from Olivia, who taking advantage of the moment when Akira halted Harmers' attack still hasn't healed.

When Harmers rushed here from the depths of Kuzusuhara District Ruin at full speed, he had taken an excessive amount of recovery medicine beforehand to mitigate the strain. The healing effects is still quite potent. Normally, injuries like this would heal in seconds. However, trying to resist Olivia's relentless attacks causes the wound to widen, slowing down the healing process.

On top of that is Akira's gunfire. It cannot be ignored. The firepower is not weak enough to disregard. He must either block or dodge it. However, focusing too much on that leaves him vulnerable to Olivia's attacks. He have to respond accurately to both threats.

Harmers narrowly evade the slashing attacks. Each evasion requires precise judgment of the direction to avoid. If Olivia generates a light blade while evading backward, he could be cut down.

The generation speed of the light blade is slower than Olivia's sword swinging speed, so it can be confirmed before being swung. However, even that is just a momentary reprieve, with only an instant of grace in the perceived time frame of a superhuman's movements. Harmers repeats that crucial moment of judgment, which must never be mistaken, with each of countless slashes.

Akira's gunfire disrupts his movement and decision. Even though the impact only slightly shifts Harmers' posture and slows down his movements, it impedes his evasion and delays the healing of his wounds. Moreover, the ricocheting bullets trying to enter his wounds.

Akira, wielding Shirou in one hand, maneuvers through the air and continuously fires three RL2 multi-function guns with his other hand and the two auxiliary arms of his augmented suit. Matching Harmers and Olivia in their aerial battle, he leaps out from the Seranthal Building, traverses the air, and shoots accurately from a strategic position.

Harmers sends shockwaves at Akira. Mixing his movements to dodge Olivia's slashes, he aims precisely at Akira and Shirou. Although he's adjusting for Shirou being used as a shield, the attack still carries significant danger if Akira takes a direct hit.

Akira perceives the attack that mimics part of Harmers' evasion. Supported by Alpha, extreme temporal detection and reality resolution manipulation allow him to do so. He immediately withdraws from the area at full speed.

Although he avoids a direct hit, he can't escape the aftermath. Akira endures a storm stronger than a tornado, Akira continues to hold onto Shirou without letting go. Thanks to this shield, Harmers can't escalate the attack beyond this level. He can't afford to let go of it.

To prevent being blown away by the storm, Akira uses the force field armor function to anchor himself, enduring with both legs and leaving long-lasting marks of friction in the air. Eventually, he manages to stop within a short distance.

“Shirou, are you okay? ”

“I'm not okay! It's insanely tough! ”

Simply being swung around by Akira imposes a tremendous burden on Shirou. Coupled with the recent attack, even with high-performance reinforced innerwear, without prior intake of recovery medicines, he might have died.

“Hang in there. It's better than dying, right? ”

“I know! Just do as you please! ”

Nevertheless, Shirou's determination remains unwavering. Both Akira and Shirou are risking their lives in this situation.

Despite adjusting to avoid letting Shirou die, and despite Harmers not managing to separate Shirou from Akira with this attack, and even after being hit himself, Akira resumes shooting without distancing himself, prompting Harmers to click his tongue.

Harmers then communicates to Akira via general short-range communication.

“I'm Harmers of the Sakashita Heavy Industry Security Division! Cease your attack immediately! Failure to comply will be considered hostile to Sakashita Heavy Industry! ”

There's a risk of antagonizing one of the Big Five corporations. It's a threat that also applies to top-tier hunters operating on the front lines in the easternmost region. While such individuals generally have connections with other Big Five corporations, the threat still carries weight, albeit reduced.

In essence, for someone like Akira, or even a high-ranking hunter with some level of skill, this threat is very potent. It's practically a death sentence.

Despite knowing the weight of the threat, Akira responds.

“Tell that to Shirou. I'm just doing this because Shirou asked me to. I don't really understand, but isn't Shirou also from Sakashita Heavy

Industry, and isn't he really important there? It'd be troublesome for me to say it."

Akira knows this is somewhat of an excuse, yet he still says it. However, he hopes it has some persuasive power.

"Shirou is currently on the run from Sakashita Heavy Industry! His status with Sakashita Heavy Industry doesn't apply here!"

"Shirou, is that true?"

"N-no way! That's not true at all. The thing about me being on the run from Sakashita is just a facade aimed at other companies. I'm still operating as a member of Sakashita Heavy Industry as usual. What, Harmers wasn't informed?"

"You're lying!"

"I'm not lying. I talked with Sugadome-san, and during that, he asked me to handle various other tasks. If you doubt it, go back and confirm directly with Sugadome-san."

Harmers grimaced. Shirou's words were somewhat accurate because Shirou sometimes undertook highly classified missions. During those times, he wouldn't receive detailed information from above.

However, distinguishing between having a conversation and passing along the message held a significant difference. But for Harmers, cornered as he was, accurately discerning that difference was difficult. Moreover, even if he did notice the difference, it would still be challenging to definitively determine the truth in this situation.

Should he retreat or continue? While Harmers pondered over this, Olivia's relentless attacks continued, and Akira continued to support her. Harmers focused on defense, striving to endure.

Amidst this situation, Shirou further confused Harmers.

“First off, you're currently supposed to be excluded from my search, right? That means your actions aren't official. What you're doing is just on your own. Isn't it risky to mention the company name with actions outside your official duties? You might get in trouble, you know? ”

Harmers twisted his face further. Shirou's words were indeed correct to a certain extent.

And almost as if responding to Shirou's words, Harmers took a new action. Previously, he had kept his distance from Akira and the others to avoid involving Shirou in their battle's aftermath. But now, he approached.

However, this wasn't an action driven solely by anger. Harmers was currently primarily focused on defense, leaving little room to attack Akira's group. So, by intentionally getting closer to them, he aimed to let their battle's aftermath hit Akira's group instead of attacking them directly.

Although it was just the aftermath, it would be far more potent than the carefully measured attacks aimed at Akira's group. If Shirou were seriously caught up in it, he might be killed. Recognizing this danger, Harmers decided to close the distance with Akira's group, hoping Akira would maintain a significant distance to avoid involving Shirou and thus limiting Olivia's attacks.

Akira, too, realized this and tried to distance himself from Harmers. However, merely getting away wasn't the solution. If he moved too far, he wouldn't be able to assist Olivia. Conversely, if he got too close, he'd be dragged into Harmers' intense battle. Amidst the superhuman's rapid approach, Akira had to maintain an exquisite position.

On the other hand, Harmers couldn't simply chase after Akira's group. Prioritizing pursuit too much would hinder his ability to dodge Olivia's attacks. He mixed his evasive actions with an approach towards Akira's group.

Akira attempted to maintain a certain distance, while Harmers aimed to shorten it. With Shirou being swung around as Akira's shield and Olivia engaging in close combat, each intense battle continued.

Due to the actions of those trying to separate and those pursuing, the battlefield underwent significant changes. The range of the conflict expanded, involving more areas.

As a result of the battle involving just four individuals, the outskirts of the Mihazono District Ruin were on the brink of destruction comparable to a previous large-scale incident.

And then, a fifth person joined—the arrival of Carol.

Upon arriving at the Mihazono District Ruin, Carol, from the rooftop where she parked her bike, witnessed Akira's battle. She was initially speechless. While Olivia and Harmers' fight was already extraordinary, Akira's movements supporting Olivia were equally astonishing.

No wonder he sent Sheryl back first. Carol thought so, justifying why Akira didn't allow her to accompany him. And then she hesitated.

Carol returned alone to support Akira and to make him feel indebted to her—to repay a favor and create a debt solely for herself.

If her intention was merely to provide assistance, she could have taken Elena and the others on her bike. Their abilities were proven in the battle at the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Carol understood that, at the very least, they equated to three of her.

If Akira pointed out this fact later, she would explain it was for Sheryl's safety. Bringing Elena and the others along would leave only Togami as a remaining force. That was too risky, so she left them behind. That's how she planned to explain it.

If Akira didn't agree even then, she would continue like this: when Akira withdrew, Olivia and Harmers were fighting wildly inside the ruins. It might not be suitable for Akira to bring Elena and the others to such a dangerous place. She could only involve herself according to her own judgment, so she came alone.

Carol believed that this reasoning would satisfy Akira, allowing her to monopolize the opportunity to create a debt to him. But witnessing the ongoing battle made her hesitate.

(...If I were the target...)

Harmers seemed busy dealing with Olivia and the others, unaware of her being at a distance. It seemed like the perfect opportunity for a sniper shot.

But if she shoot, she'll surely be noticed. And what would happen if she were targeted? The collapsed skyscrapers all around tell that story.

Thinking about the consequences, she also consider just watching silently. She came back to this dangerous place without being asked. That alone warrants some kind of favor. With the bike, she could carry Akira and escape if he chooses to retreat. It might be better to watch the situation unfold without being greedy or getting involved unnecessarily.

That way, she'll survive.

With that in mind, Carol hesitated.

(Akira did say it's fine as long as I pay as much as I can...)

When Carol talked to Akira about the reward for protecting her from the Kaiju in the Third Inner Sector, he mentioned something that completely exceeded her ability to pay.

Even though Carol assured Akira that she could repay him through her own means, such as using her body for side jobs, he didn't accept it. Carol was confident she could repay any amount using that method, but Akira didn't see it that way.

And now, Carol realizes belatedly that she had become overly reliant on certain methods to resolve things.

She also recalls what Doras had said. A client for her side job, a high-ranking hunter who saw hunter not just as a means but as a way of life. Moreover, this person seriously tried to court her, even at the cost of abandoning his pride. She recalls what such a person told her.

Carol probably has no intention of climbing up the ranks as a hunter. Although she earns from her side job, it's probably not to supplement her hunter career.

Carol reluctantly admits that. At least in terms of earnings, considering her main job, hunter is more of a side gig for her.

But Carol herself hadn't acknowledged that. Regardless of how much she earned, she thought of hunter as the side gig.

But in this moment, she realizes that it was just wishful thinking. She sees herself objectively for the first time, having saved her own life. She understands now that Doras' way of persuasion was because he saw through that.

With a bitter smile, she makes a decision. With determination, she aims the OFX multi-function gun she bought from Hikaru, trying to regain her former self as a hunter.

In the next moment, a shockwave from Harmers hits Carol. Even though it's not a direct hit, the shockwave alone has the power to bring down buildings. The precisely aimed shot effortlessly blows away the building Carol was using as footing. Carol is engulfed by a mass of rubble, disappearing from sight.

Harmers noticed Carol's presence long ago, but focused on Olivia and Akira, he left her alone as long as she was just observing from a distance. When Carol aimed her gun, he judged she had the intent to engage and quickly dealt with her.

If she had brought Elena and the others, if they had been caught up in this, Akira would surely be angry. Carol proved the correctness of that decision through her own experience.

Akira finally noticed Carol due to Harmers's targeting.

“Carol!?”

By the time Akira exclaimed, Carol was already engulfed by debris.

Alpha calmly advised Akira.

『Akira, focus on the battle for now.』

Despite his discontent, Akira followed the order.

『...Alpha, did you know Carol was here?』

『Yes.』

『Then why didn't you tell me?』

『Not informing you was best for Carol.』

Revealing Carol's presence would've alerted Harmers, jeopardizing Olivia's support for Akira. So, Alpha remained silent.

Akira understood logically and emotionally, realizing inaction was best for Carol.

If he want to help Carol, end the fight quickly before it's too late, Alpha urged Akira.

Akira accepted, both rationally and emotionally.

“Alright. Understood! ”

Akira pushed aside his unease and fought with renewed vigor.

Harmers briefly checked Akira, noting his lack of rescue efforts.

(No attempt to help. Did he assume she's dead or simply abandon her...? Well, either way, I can ignore that.)

If Akira had shown intent to help Carol, Harmers would've pursued her. But seeing Akira ignore Carol, Harmers deemed it unnecessary.

With Olivia and Akira's relentless attacks, Harmers focused on defense.

Carol survived, protected by her augmented suit and instinctive dodges.

Despite surviving, Carol was injured and spat blood while buried under debris.

(Ah, messed up big time. How reckless of me.)

Carol aimed her OFX multi-function gun at Harmers, a poor move given its standard form's ineffectiveness against him.

She should've transformed it into its large cannon form from a safe distance instead of risking a close-range confrontation.

Her careless decision nearly cost Carol her life.

(This is what happens when you rely too much on gear. Well, I brought this upon myself.)

Hunter's life isn't easy even with top-tier gear, but quality equipment can mitigate risks.

In fact, Carol managed to survive that way. She bought extraordinarily powerful equipment, which she could never afford with her hunter earnings alone, using the large sums of money she made from her side job. Clad in this gear, she was able to fend off monsters with ease.

However, relying on that won't help develop accurate judgment in life-or-death situations. Continuously making casual decisions within the safety of high-performance equipment only leads to acquiring a habit of making casual judgments.

And now, facing Harmers, an enemy that can't be dealt with using high-performance equipment, Carol exposed the lack of judgment skills she had neglected until now.

Carol lamented her own inadequacy, but the situation wasn't that dire. Carol was still alive.

To hone judgment skills in evading death, it would be counterproductive to venture into the wasteland with shoddy equipment only to die. If surviving the situation with high-performance gear, or even just luck, then that's the correct choice.

Regardless of equipment or luck, Carol surpassed the culling of death. As long as she's alive, Carol has a future ahead of her. The choice she makes next will determine whether she sees hunter as a means to an end or a way of life.

Carol is a body enhancement user, having invested heavily in her physique. This crisis allows her invested power to shine as she swiftly heals her injuries by consuming stored nanomachines within her body.

Confirming she still holds her OFX multi-function gun, Carol readied herself for another round.

(Good, it's intact. Then, let's go again.)

Carol's grip on the OFX multi-function gun buried in debris caused it to transform into a huge cannon. Then, it further expanded into its trump card shape.

If hunter was just a means to survive, Carol should have remained still.

However, Carol chose a way of life. She decided to use her saved life as further stakes in the hunter's path, regardless of the reason.

By desperately defending herself and buying time, the healing of Harmers' chest wound finally concludes.

This could turn the tide. That's what Harmers thought. The debris around Carol was blown away by an internal impact.

Harmers reflexively shifted attention. There stood Carol, aiming the fully transformed OFX multi-function gun at Harmers.

The OFX multi-function gun, once modified, could never return to its original size without maintenance. In exchange, its power was dramatically enhanced. Moreover, Carol had another ace up her sleeve.

Unable to revert its shape and guaranteed to be destroyed after a single shot due to overloading during firing, it's a one-time-only attack. A last resort, usable only in situations where death is preferable to survive, even if it means discarding a 2 billion Aurum gun.

Even buried in debris, Carol could see Harmers, thanks to Akira's information gathering device. They reconnected upon returning to the Mihazono District Ruin.

Buried in debris, Carol forcefully maneuvered the gun using the strength of her augmented suit. Although the debris moved slightly, it wasn't significant enough to alert Harmers.

The blast that exposed Carol was from the shockwave just before the gun self-destructed due to overload. Even that minor shockwave would have blown Carol away without the augmented suit and body enhancement.

Carol unleashed her ace. A condensed beam of raging energy pierced the atmosphere and reached Harmers in an instant.

Sensing the danger, Harmers attempted full defense. Realizing evasion wasn't possible, he focused power into his arms, attempting to deflect the beam like he had with the energy flow from Baoregire.

However, the colorless fog here wasn't as dense as in the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Using a defense based on the colorless fog, its effectiveness was greatly diminished.

Yet, Harmers compensated with his bio-force field armor, his own skills, and superhuman abilities, managing to deflect the beam despite its trajectory being altered. The vast energy bent by his efforts blew away the nearby buildings.

Carol was sent flying. The impact of the gun's destruction propelled her. Crashing onto the debris, she lay still.

Even with her ace, Carol couldn't defeat Harmers.

However, she did create an opening.

Taking a direct hit would be disastrous. Harmers realized this and was forced to address it, leaving him vulnerable. Thus, at that moment, Harmers was unable to handle other matters.

Olivia capitalized on this vulnerability, her sharp strike severing Harmers's arm.



Despite trying to dodge, Harmers, missing an arm, focused on Carol midair, Olivia poised to strike, and Akira continuing support. Harmers then made his decision.

“Wait! ”

Olivia halted her attack at his declaration. Harmers grabbed his falling arm.

“Understood. I'll retreat.”

Olivia respectfully nodded.

“Thank you.”

Acknowledging that this wasn't a fight to the death but rather an armed negotiation, they accepted the ceasefire.

Mending the severed arm, Harmers sighed heavily.

If he wanted to fight, he still could. As Shirou speculated, Harmers had trump cards and aces up his sleeve. Using them would easily offset the disadvantage of losing an arm temporarily.

Of course, it's not something he could use lightly. Employing the trump card would entail a hospital stay. As for the ace, using it would likely result in death.

Nevertheless, once decided, he wouldn't hesitate. Dying is part of the job. He was prepared for that.

However, Shirou's point becomes relevant here. Is this battle considered a part of his duties?

Harmers didn't come here on company orders. It was his own judgment, meaning he came and fought of his own volition. If he

exhausts his trump cards and aces, leading to hospitalization or death, it would go against his loyalty to the company.

Dying is just part of the job. In other words, even if he die, he must die in the line of duty. That thought initially gave Harmers pause.

Additionally, there was Carol's presence. Is this reinforcement the only one? Or are there others hidden? Harmers doesn't know. Not knowing means he has to be cautious.

There was at least one. Rather than assuming they're no longer there, it's more reasonable to think there might be others. And if they were to face another surprise attack like this and be left vulnerable again, Harmers knows it would be tough for them to continue the fight without any trump cards or hidden moves.

Considering all of this, Harmers reluctantly decided to retreat.

Still, it was an unwilling decision. From his heart, Harmers continues speaking.

“Even though I'm withdrawing, it doesn't change the fact that your actions obstructed our operation. We'll file a formal protest later. There will be a lot to consider. Don't expect our contract with your company to continue as usual.”

Lion Steel Company dispatches maids and butlers to affluent clients. Some of them include employees of Sakashita Heavy Industry. While some are hired individually, many entrust their employment contracts to Sakashita Heavy Industry due to business considerations.

This incident affects the continuity of those contracts. That's what Harmers conveyed, but strictly speaking, it's a dispute over events outside of their duties. In reality, it doesn't have much impact. Harmers knows this themselves and was partly saying it to annoy.

However, Olivia's response was unexpected.

“We don't currently have a contract with your company. Perhaps you've mistaken us for a competitor.”

“What?”

“I believe you've understood our capabilities well enough. If you're considering a contract with us, please do not hesitate to contact us.”

Saying this, Olivia takes out a white card and hands it to Harmers. Taking the card, Harmers looks at it, then at Olivia, then back at the card, finally realizing and showing their surprise.

“The old-world...!”

Harmers had thought Olivia was a member of the modern Lion Steel Company. Realizing this mistake, many things start to make sense.

“That's why...”

Pressuring an old-world corporation with the name of a modern corporation like Sakashita Heavy Industry won't work. At least, that's what Harmers initially thinks.

And since Olivia is from the old-world, even if Harmers were to use trump cards or hidden moves, victory wouldn't be guaranteed. He might end up wasting his efforts. Death is acceptable, but wasteful death is not. Thinking this, regardless of the circumstances, Harmers congratulates himself on their decision to end the battle with Olivia.

“I have one more question. How did Shiro manage to contract with you? It must have been quite difficult...”

“I'm sorry. I cannot answer about other clients' matters.”

“I see... understood.”

If it were someone else, it would be strange, but if it's Shiro, it's not surprising at all. Harmers thinks this way and convinces themselves

for now. Then, while showing the card, he ask:

“One more thing. Since I'm not a old-world connector, how should I contact you? ”

“We recommend using compatible communication terminal devices.”

“Understood.”

While it may have been a different story in the past, recent technological advancements have made old realm-compatible information terminals, though still expensive, existent. Also, among the artifacts brought by transactions between Tsubaki and Kugamayama City, similar items can be found. With these items, Harmers could use this card too.

Harmers says,

“Well then, I'll take my leave. ...Although if such a situation arises again, it would be helpful to know your identity correctly before anything happens.”

If Harmers had known from the beginning that Olivia was associated with the old-world, my approach would have been different. Harmers expressed this thought when he spoke.

Olivia politely bows her head and responds,

“Thank you very much for your valuable opinion. We will take it into consideration for future operations.”

This one's not going to engage. Harmers thinks so, lets out a small sigh, and leaves the scene.



As Harmers steps out of the ruins of Mihazono District, he receive a call from Sugadome.

“Apologies for interrupting your vacation, but I need to ask for your assistance with something work-related. Can you manage?”

“Of course.”

“I'll arrange for pickup. Let's discuss the details after we meet up.”

“Understood.”

Harmers responds in their usual tone, showing no trace of the intense battle just moments ago.

In a manner seemingly in tune with this, Sugadome continues,

“Ah, whatever you do on your vacation is your own business. I won't reprimand you for that. However, it's not an extended vacation. It would be very helpful if you could keep it to a level that won't disrupt your duties upon your return.”

“Even though nothing has been reported yet, Harmers feels extremely tense under the gaze of a superior who seems to see through everything and manages to answer somehow.”

“...Yes.”

“Well then, talk to you later.”

With that, the communication with Sugadome is cut off.

Harmers lets out a deep breath, as if finally releasing the tension in their chest.

“Phew, that was close...”

Harmers praises their own decision to halt the battle with Olivia even more strongly than before.

Chapter 247: Paid As Much As Possible

Akira stopped firing as soon as Olivia ceased her attack on Harmers. Sensing the end of the battle, he quickly headed towards Carol, still holding Shiro.

Carol was alive. Although the OFX multi-function gun had exploded, blowing her away and leaving her motionless among the rubble, she was only temporarily unconscious.

“Carol!”

Akira's call woke Carol up.

“...Akira?”

Still disoriented from her unconscious state, Carol looked at Akira with a puzzled expression before quickly regaining her senses and anxiously scanning her surroundings.

“Akira! What's the situation!?”

“Probably fine. The battle should be over.”

Akira said this as he glanced towards Olivia and the others. Carol also looked in that direction. Although it seemed the battle had indeed ended, Carol saw that Harmers appeared unscathed.

“...Missed?”

Shiro interjected.

“No, it hit, but it was blocked.”

Shiro displayed the scene in Carol's augmented vision. Watching it as she sat up, Carol's face showed more exasperation than surprise.

“...Really, he blocked that? ”

“Well, he's my bodyguards. He can manage that much.”

“Bodyguards... I shot at him, but it was okay, right? ”

“Yeah. Thanks to that, we were saved.”

Akira, concerned about Carol, spoke up.

“Carol. Are you okay? ”

“I'm fine. Just a bit dizzy. No life-threatening injuries.”

Carol replied with a smile. Seeing this, Akira felt reassured and sighed in relief.

“I see... that's good.”

Now more composed, Akira spoke in a slightly serious tone.

“But that was reckless... You could have died, you know? And those guys are from Sakashita Heavy Industry, you know that, right? ”

Carol responded in a light-hearted manner.

“There was no other choice...”

“It's not about that...”

Akira thought that, regardless of his own situation, Carol didn't need to go to such lengths for Shiro.

Indeed, Carol had also survived the Third Inner Sector thanks to Shiro. But at that time, Akira was responsible for protecting Carol. Akira felt that the debt to Shiro was his to repay, not Carol's.

However, after hearing Carol's light-hearted continuation, Akira realized he had misunderstood.

"...I don't have enough money to repay Akira, and since Akira isn't interested in my body, I can't pay with that, and I'm not as strong as Akira..."

With this preamble, Carol smiled lightly and said.

"If I have no money or strength, then all I can offer is loyalty and my life, right?"

What Carol did was not to repay Shiro, but to repay Akira.

Knowing he was from Sakashita Heavy Industry and understanding the implications of opposing them, she prioritized her debt to Akira and shot at Harmers. Despite seeing their obvious strength, she risked her life. To repay Akira, Carol gave what she could.

Loyalty and her life.

Understanding this, Akira froze slightly in surprise. As he fully grasped the situation, he couldn't help but start laughing.

Seeing Akira's reaction, Carol showed a slightly dissatisfied expression.

"...Hey, you don't have to laugh. Although I admit, saying something like that doesn't really suit me."

Akira apologized and explained the reason for his laughter.

"No, I'm sorry. It's just that I remembered saying something similar before."

Hearing this, Carol's mood improved. She spoke with a slightly proud, upbeat tone.

“Oh, really? We do get along well, don't we? ”

“Yeah, we do.”

Akira and Carol laughed together. Having said and done the same things, they shared that value and laughed together.

“Before, you told me to pay as much as I could, right? So, I paid as much as I could.”

“Yeah. You paid it back well.”

Akira and Carol, both heavily indebted to different people, but Carol had just made a lump sum repayment ahead of him.

Although Akira and Carol seemed to get along well in front of Alpha, Alpha didn't see this situation as problematic.

Previously, Alpha would have viewed Carol as highly dangerous. However, after the Yumna incident, this kind of thing was no longer a big issue.

Harmers, having finished talking with Olivia, kicked off into the air and departed. Watching this, Akira spoke.

“They're gone... Shiro. What should we do? ”

“Well...”

Shiro was no longer in immediate danger, but his situation remained dire, if not worsened. As he thought about what to do, Olivia approached.

“Shiro-sama, I must discuss our contract with you.”

“W-What is it? ”

Shiro, fearing that he had already used up the new contract period, was relieved when it turned out to be a different matter.

“Due to damage sustained, our current state makes it difficult to fully honor our contract. I have several proposals for addressing this.”

First, pausing the contract while the unit undergoes repairs, allowing the remaining contract period to be used with a fully functional unit.

However, this would leave Shiro temporarily unprotected. Since he hired Olivia precisely because he needed protection, it would be unacceptable to have none during this period.

Next, staying at a Lion Steel Company facility during repairs, ensuring a certain level of safety. This option doesn't consume contract time.

However, this would restrict Shiro's movements. If the contract was for moving freely with protection, this would be meaningless.

Lastly, continuing the contract as is. Despite the damage, the unit still has enough power to fend off most monsters. Unless they have to fight Harmers again, continuing as is would be fine.

If Shiro understood the risks but still wanted immediate freedom of movement, Lion Steel would permit the use of the damaged unit.

Olivia presented these options to Shiro.

After thinking for a moment, Shiro asked.

“How long will the repairs take? ”

“About three days.”

“...Understood. In that case, I'll trouble you at your facility.”

Although limiting his movements was painful, Shiro needed time to think about the future, so he chose this option.

“Understood. I will guide you.”

“Akira, please come too. We have things to discuss, and you could use a rest.”

“Sure. Got it. Oh, wait a moment.”

『Alpha, what happened to my bike?』

『It's buried in the rubble. I'll move it now.』

Alpha remotely controlled the bike. Utilizing its high performance, Akira's bike forced its way out of the rubble and appeared before him.

『Oh, it survived. Good, good.』

“Alright. Let's go.”

With Olivia leading, Akira and the other two followed on their bikes.

Akira and the others were guided by Olivia to the Seranthal Building. He parked his bike outside, set it to automatic mode, and entered the reception area on the first floor together. Upon their arrival, Seranthal, the building's management AI, appeared, but Olivia handled the interaction. Akira and the others were then escorted further inside.

During this, Akira noticed that Seranthal gave him a very meaningful look, but he quietly averted his gaze.

They then took a large elevator, spacious enough for cars, to the upper floors of the building, bikes and all. They stopped on the 57th

floor, where a branch of the old-world Lion Steel Company was located.

As Akira and the others entered the 57th floor, they were greeted by five maids. These were Pamela and her colleagues.

Akira wasn't puzzled by the sight of Pamela and the others bowing courteously. Since Olivia had guided them here, she didn't find it strange that there were other maids.

However, Shiro showed signs of caution. Olivia ignored Pamela and her group and spoke to Akira and the others.

“Please proceed without concern. This way.”

Pamela and the others parted to the sides. Olivia walked through the middle, and Akira, starting to feel a bit uneasy, Shiro spoke lightly to Akira.

“Akira, these guys aren't Olivia's colleagues. They're from the modern Lion Steel Company.”

“...What do you mean? ”

“I don't know. Well, they're here, so they're somewhat related, but they're not insiders to the extent that they'd be allowed inside the branch.”

“...So, what does that mean? ”

“I said I don't know. Just remember there's something we don't understand.”

Urged by Shiro, Akira continued ahead. Although he was somewhat curious, he didn't feel the need to stay and get details from Pamela and the others.

Pamela watched Akira and the others until they disappeared inside the branch. After that, she contacted Chloe.

The reception room Olivia guided them to was empty when Akira and the others entered. It was a spacious room with white walls, floor, and ceiling.

However, the floor began to change. It moved like a liquid, forming a table and sofas. Additionally, the entire room displayed a three-dimensional image, making the walls appear as glass, revealing the outside view.

Prompted by Olivia, Akira and the others sat on the sofas. They were incredibly comfortable. The table, on the other hand, was solid and sturdy, and both were elegantly designed despite being simple.

As Akira curiously observed the luxurious setting of the old-world, Olivia brought drinks and snacks, serving them courteously before standing by.

“If you need anything, please feel free to ask.”

Hearing this, Akira asked Olivia curiously.

“Weren't you supposed to be getting your unit repaired? ”

“TThis unit is a store item. The unit accompanying Shiro-sama is being repaired.”

Akira, satisfied with the explanation, heard Alpha laugh and speak.

『By the way, her appearance is a hologram. If I turn it off, this is what she looks like.』

Alpha manipulated Akira's augmented reality view to show Olivia's real appearance. Standing there was a white mannequin. It had no

clothes, no eyes, nose, mouth, ears, or hair—a very simple appearance.

『Oh, so that's what she really looks like?』

『No, up until now, her appearance was as you saw. The store's units are designed this way to allow various appearances to be overlaid with holograms for customers.』

『Ah, I see.』

『Machines sent to clients probably maintain their true appearance because it's more practical. Some places have security rules that prohibit using fully modified holographic appearances, so it's easier to have them look the same from the start.』

Akira, satisfied with the explanation, had a sudden thought.

『Speaking of which, Alpha, you change your appearance a lot. Is that okay?』

『I appear only in your augmented reality view, so as long as I have your permission, it's fine.』

『I see.』

Akira wasn't upset and didn't mind her appearing as much as she wanted, but he did think about it. When he first met Alpha, there hadn't been any talk about permissions. Alpha had just appeared in his view on her own.

Thinking it was too late to worry about now, Akira decided not to dwell on it.

Refocusing, he took a sip of his drink and his eyes widened.

“...Delicious.”

Carol, drinking the same thing, showed a look of surprise as well.

“This is really good...”

Akira had grown accustomed to Sterian's cooking. Carol, on the other hand, had developed a sophisticated palate due to her frequent dining with high-ranking hunters, whose earnings allowed them to afford gourmet meals. Together, they were impressed by the taste.

They reached for the sweets next. The same exceptional quality spread through their mouths, adding even more joy to their expressions. The drinks and sweets from the old-world's high-end shop indeed lived up to their reputation, demonstrating their exceptional taste to Akira and Carol.

Watching them, Shiro also tried the same items and shared his thoughts.

“Not bad.”

Akira couldn't hide his surprise at Shiro's lukewarm reaction to such incredible flavors.

“Not bad? What do you usually eat?”

Shiro replied proudly.

“I used to eat this quality of food every day at the Sakashita facility. It was a luxury meant to prevent escapes, making sure I didn't want to leave and lose access to it.”

He gave Akira a meaningful look and smiled.

“Akira, I gave up that lifestyle to be here. You should understand that my determination isn't half-hearted.”

People get used to luxury, and it's not easy to lower your living standards once they've been raised. Despite his restricted freedom, Shiro had been living like a wealthy person and had grown accustomed to a very high standard of living. Outside the facility, the food seemed no better than grass and muddy water to him.

Even if Akira couldn't fully grasp the reasons for opposing Sakashita Heavy Industry, he could understand the taste and the determination to give it up.

Indeed, one would risk their life for this. Akira thought and came to a deeper understanding of Shiro's resolve.

After that, Akira and the others rested for a bit before contacting Hikaru and the others.

Chapter 248: A Strange Question

Although Hikaru and the others heard from Sheryl, they didn't know the details of why Akira suddenly went off on his own. Still, they guessed that Akira and Carol likely returned to the Mihazono District Ruin.

With this in mind, Hikaru and the others discussed their next move and decided to stay where they were and wait for contact from Akira.

Hikaru wanted to return to the city, especially after hearing rumors of superhuman-like beings wreaking havoc in the area. However, Elena, Sara, Sheryl, and Togami opposed this.

Togami suggested getting as close as possible to the area. However, Elena and the others disagreed, as their priority was protecting Hikaru. Since Hikaru didn't want to approach the area, they couldn't go against her wishes. The fact that they now had Sheryl to protect as well reinforced their decision.

As a compromise, Hikaru and the others decided to stay where they were.

They didn't just wait idly but gathered information. They learned that the city's forces protecting Serenthal Building had been wiped out, many hunters had fled from the Mihazono District Ruin, and speculated that Olivia's maid outfit indicated a connection with the recently appeared Lion Steel Company.

No information about Akira's safety had come in yet. Due to the issue with the fake Akira, sightings of Akira spread quickly, but since there was no new information, it was possible Akira was hiding somewhere safely, though this wasn't certain. Despite differences in the degree and direction of their worry, everyone hoped Akira was safe.

At that moment, they received a message from Akira. They quickly connected the call, and Akira's voice came through the vehicle's communication device.

“Uh, this is Akira. Elena, what's the situation over there? Carol told me she left Sheryl with you...”

“Yes, she's with us. How about you? Are you alright?”

“Yes, I'm fine. Carol is safe too.”

Hearing this, everyone in the vehicle sighed in relief.

“I'm glad to hear that.”

Confirming Akira's safety, Elena relaxed. She exchanged a light laugh with Sara before refocusing on the conversation.

“So, Akira, can you share what's going on? We have no idea what happened.”

“Understood. Let's reconnect the call so everyone can talk.”

After that, Akira adjusted the communication settings. Their augmented view displayed each other's surroundings, creating the feeling of being in the same place despite the distance, allowing them to calmly discuss the situation.

After sharing information, there were significant differences in their reactions.

Hikaru had the biggest reaction, collapsing onto the sofa with a dazed voice.

“It's over...”

The hunter she was in charge of had antagonized Sakashita Heavy Industry. It was catastrophic. This would affect more than her career. She imagined being blamed and thrown out into a harsh world where murder was a daily occurrence. Despair showed on her face.

Seeing Hikaru's reaction, Akira realized the severity of his actions. Even those indirectly opposed to Sakashita were affected. He understood the gravity of directly attacking a Sakashita employee, even without knowing the specifics.

However, even if he had understood beforehand, Akira wouldn't have stopped helping Shirou. That wouldn't change. But his appreciation for Carol, who helped him despite understanding the severity, grew stronger.

Akira glanced at Carol. Carol smiled back and said,

“If things get bad, I'll move to another major company's region. Akira, will you come with me? ”

“Me? Uh, I...”

Akira needed to stay in Kugamayama to complete Alpha's request. He couldn't go with Carol. To avoid the topic, he turned to Shirou.

“...I'll think about it later. Whether we need to worry about it depends on Shirou. Right, Shirou? ”

“Yeah, I got it. I'll handle it.”

Hearing this, Hikaru shot up with enthusiasm.

“You can handle it!?”

“Yeah. I'm actually pretty high up in Sakashita. I can cover it up. Well, not right now, but once I finish my business and return to Sakashita, I can take care of it.”

“Really! Please do! ”

“Yeah, leave it to me.”

Hikaru restrained herself from pointing out that this situation was Shirou's fault in the first place. Despite being a fugitive, Shirou was still a high-ranking Sakashita employee, which kept her calm and focused on not ruining the help she needed.

However, Akira bluntly said,

“Why are you acting like we owe you? This is your fault.”

Shirou averted his eyes under Akira's slightly accusing gaze. Akira continued,

“I owed you, so I had no choice, but Hikaru and Carol don't owe you anything. Pay back your debt properly.”

“I know... I'll repay the trouble I caused with interest.”

Hearing this, Akira softened his gaze. Following Akira's lead, Elena and the others also stopped giving Shirou hard looks.

With the topic of debts in the air, Shirou asked Akira,

“Akira. By the way, how's going on with my debt now? ”

“Well... it's not quite a debt from me to you yet. We'll see after you handle the Sakashita issue.”

Although Akira had fought Harmers at Shirou's request, he still owed Shirou for risking his life. Akira considered it a debt rather than a favor owed.

However, this was with the expectation that Shirou would resolve the issue with Sakashita Heavy Industry. If Shirou couldn't handle it, Akira would see it as a favor owed.

“I see...”

Shirou understood this. While he appreciated not being told the debt was settled, he realized it would be difficult to leverage Akira with this debt in the future. He needed to create a significant favor again. Thinking this, his expression hardened slightly.

Elena then turned to Akira.

“So, Akira, what are your plans now? You defeated your impostor, right?”

“I'm still thinking. For now, I'll give Hikaru the combat data of me killing the impostor and ask Inabe to clear the bounty on me.”

“Yes, that sounds good. Hikaru, can you handle that?”

“Understood. Let's head back for now.”

I want to go back. I just want to go back. Any reason will do, I just want to return to the safety of the city walls. Hikaru's thoughts were plain on her face.

Togami asked lightly.

“What about Akira and the others? Are we leaving them here?”

“Uh... well...”

Unable to say yes, Hikaru hesitated. Carol answered instead.

“Akira and I will go our separate ways for now. If we join you, our problems with Sakashita could spread to you.”

“That makes sense.”

Togami answered, partially to convince himself. Akira and Carol were currently enemies of Sakashita Heavy Industry. If they returned, everyone could become targets.

He couldn't tell them to return regardless. He lacked the power to ensure they wouldn't be a burden. Togami reminded himself of this.

Carol added lightly.

"Sorry, but could you get us some ammunition? It's hard for us to buy it quietly now. Just buy it and leave it somewhere in the wasteland. We'll pick it up."

"Got it. I'll take care of it."

Helping enemies of Sakashita indirectly was still helping them. However, Togami thought he could handle that much and smiled in response.

Akira bowed to Elena and the others.

"Sorry, but I can't go back. Please take care of Sheryl."

Elena and Sara smiled and answered.

"Sure, we will."

"Leave it to us."

"Thank you."

Seeing Akira's grateful smile, Elena and the others stopped worrying about their inadequacies.

Even if they couldn't fight beside him, they could help him in other ways. They resolved to be dependable seniors and smiled with their friend.

The camping car carrying Hikaru and the others returned to Kugamayama City, leaving Akira and Carol behind.

Each went their separate ways for their respective tasks.

On the way back to the city, the conversation about Akira continued inside the vehicle.

“Sheryl, where were you taken after being kidnapped by my impostor? And I heard Shijima was taken too. What happened to him? ”

Within Sheryl's augmented vision, Shirou leaned in with interest.

“Oh, I want to know that too. Can you tell us? ”

“Sorry, I don't know the details.”

“That's okay, just tell us what you can.”

Given that Haruka cooperated with the fake Akira in kidnapping Sheryl, Shirou hoped to gather any information that could lead to Haruka. Despite his outwardly casual demeanor, he intended to extract every bit of information from Sheryl.

Sheryl thought back to what happened after she was kidnapped and began to speak.

“From what I can recall... Ah, it wasn't just Shijima and me, Viola was kidnapped too.”

“What? ”

Akira couldn't help but express his surprise, and Sheryl started explaining what had happened.



After being kidnapped by the fake Akira, Sheryl was locked inside a humanoid weapon and transported to a place that seemed like a large warehouse.

Sheryl had no idea where they were, but it didn't feel like the wasteland or the slums. When the door of the vehicle opened, Sheryl cautiously peered out and saw an interior that, although simple, conveyed a sense of technology far beyond the present day.

The fake Akira was nowhere to be seen.

As Sheryl and Shijima stood there confused, a man in a butler outfit appeared before them. He was Latis, a subordinate of Chloe from Lion Steel Corporation. He stood in the air at the same height as the exit without any visible support and politely extended his hand to them.

“This way, please.”

Prompted by him, they saw a floating ramp. Sheryl hesitated a bit but then took Latis's hand and moved from the vehicle to the ramp. Shijima followed suit.

The ramp, along with Latis who had been standing in the air, descended to the floor. Sheryl and Shijima followed Latis as he guided them through the building.

Walking down the corridor, Sheryl looked around with both caution and curiosity. She took note of the scenery outside the windows, the features of the people they passed, and the signs and symbols. She was determined to gather as much information as possible.

But her efforts bore little fruit. There were no windows, no other people, and no signs or symbols. The walls, floor, and ceiling of the white corridor are exceptionally clean, exuding an excessive sense of cleanliness akin to a laboratory. There is no further information available.

A highly observant person could glean information from the smallest stains, but the pristine cleanliness of this place denied even that.

Realizing it was impossible, Sheryl decided to focus on Latis, who seemed the most likely source of information.

Her thoughts were interrupted when they reached their destination. Sheryl and Shijima were both surprised by the presence of another person in the room.

“Oh, Sheryl, you’re here too.”

It was Viola. After giving Sheryl a confident smile, she looked at Shijima and smirked mockingly.

“And you’re here too? ”

Viola’s smile seemed to say she was surprised Shijima was considered valuable enough to be there, which annoyed him more than it made him wary of her presence. Irritated, he asked,

“Viola, why are you here? ”

“Why? Isn’t it obvious? I was kidnapped too.”

“You too, huh? ”

While Shijima accepted this explanation, he still found it odd. He could understand why the fake Akira would kidnap Sheryl, as she was Akira’s girlfriend and had significant leverage. But the reasons for kidnapping him and Viola remained unclear.

Latis handed Sheryl and Shijima thin augmented suits.

“Please change into these. I can assist if necessary.”

Understanding that refusal would likely lead to being forcibly dressed, Sheryl and Shijima resignedly began to change. As Sheryl obediently started changing, Latis turned his back to her.

Looking at the augmented suit he had been given, Shijima thought,

(A augmented suit... It's probably meant to be a restraint, but could it be from the old-world?)

What Shijima received was not the revealing old-world style, but from its design and texture, he guessed it was old-world technology. This realization made him even more wary of their mysterious captors, who could afford to use such valuable items.

(Who are these people...)

It wasn't just the fake Akira and the butler-like man. They operated humanoid weapons and had facilities like this, indicating numerous collaborators. The fact that they used old-world augmented suits as restraints signaled formidable power. Shijima thought, trying to mask his fear, he turned to Viola.

“Hey, Viola. Why aren't you wearing one of these? ”

“I negotiated my way out of it. Considering my age, I thought it was a bit much. I worked hard to negotiate that. And what I did is a secret. Not that you could manage such a negotiation.”

“Oh, is that so? ”

Shijima replied as if spitting out the words, but internally he felt a bit relieved, realizing that this person was somewhat open to negotiation.

Once Sheryl and the others finished changing, Latis informed them.

“Well then, Sheryl-sama. I will guide you. Shijima-sama, please remain here.”

As Sheryl was about to leave the room under Latis's guidance, Viola spoke to her with a smile.

“It's better not to stay silent. I mean, really.”

Hearing that, Sheryl left the room.

Don't stay silent. Sheryl interpreted Viola's words as a sign to speak honestly and openly.

Sheryl was led to a nearby room. Once seated at the table, Latis prepared drinks and sweets for her and sat across from her. Both the drinks and sweets, including the cups and plates, were high-class.

“Well then, Sheryl-sama. I have some questions for you, so please answer them.”

Sheryl returned Latis's courteous approach with a cold stare.

“I don't know what you want to ask, but do you really think I'll talk? ”

Don't stay silent. Following that advice, Sheryl decided to respond.

Latis answered unfazed.

“Yes, I do. You must stay alive until Akira-sama comes to rescue you. Therefore, I believe you won't refuse to prolong your life unnecessarily.”

Sheryl, who was already distressed by Yumina's matter, was affected by those words. She was no longer someone Akira would come to rescue. In fact, he might come to kill her. That anxiety was overwhelming her, and Latis's words did not allow her to deny it.

“Well then, I will ask you. If you don't know, please answer with your best guess.”

What will they ask? Sheryl wondered nervously as Latis inquired.

“Is Akira-sama a coffee person or a tea person? ”

“.....Huh? ”

The completely unexpected question made Sheryl momentarily forget her anxiety. Instead, confusion surfaced and spilled out as her voice.

“.....What? ”

“Please answer.”

“P-Probably, coffee...”

“Is Akira-sama a dog person or a cat person? ”

“What's the point of asking that? ”

“I'm sorry. I can't answer that.”

Despite her confusion, Sheryl answered as Latis waited for her response.

“I think he's more of a cat person...”

Sheryl had once heard from Akira about a terrible experience he had with a monster called a Weapon Dog. So she thought Akira might not like dogs much. With that in mind, Sheryl answered.

“What is Akira-sama's favorite food? For example, does he like curry? ”

“I don't think he dislikes it...”

The questions about Akira continued. To Sheryl, all of them seemed irrelevant. At least none of them were the kind of questions about Akira's weaknesses that she would need to keep secret at any cost.

They even asked about Akira's preference in women, to which she answered herself. Using the advice not to stay silent as an excuse, she endlessly spoke about how much Akira liked her, blending wishful thinking and fantasies.

After talking for about three hours, Sheryl was returned to the room where Viola was. Shijima was taken instead. Shijima also returned after about three hours. When she asked what he was questioned about, he answered that he was asked similar questions.

Of course, unlike her, Shijima might have been asked about Akira's weaknesses. And he might have answered honestly. However, from Shijima's demeanor, Sheryl did not think that was the case.

Sheryl continued to spend similar days after that. They asked various questions about Akira, and she answered them. It was a repetitive process.

She even suspected it was a form of torture, repeatedly asking the same questions to force her to answer. But it wasn't like that either.

Then one day, Sheryl was forcibly moved by external controls of her augmented suit and placed into a humanoid weapon. The unit launched on its own, and without knowing what was happening outside, Sheryl was taken to the ruins of Mihazono District.

This was what happened to Sheryl while she was captured by the fake Akira.



After hearing Sheryl's story about what happened after she was kidnapped, Akira was just as perplexed as Sheryl had been at the time.

“What good is it knowing whether I prefer coffee or tea, or if I'm a dog person or a cat person...”

“Exactly...”

Sheryl responded, indicating she understood how he felt.

『Alpha. Do you have any idea? 』

『I don't know the exact reason either.』

『Figures...』

Even Alpha doesn't know, huh. Akira thought and decided not to pursue it further.

Strictly speaking, Alpha didn't know the exact reason, but she had some predictions.

Although not as precise as Alpha, Shiro also had enough information to form a hypothesis. He hid his thoughts and casually asked Akira.

“Akira. Changing the subject, why do you think your imposter came to Seranthal Tower?”

“I have no idea.”

“No clue at all? ”

“None.”

“I see.”

Akira sensed something significant in Shiro's attitude. He interpreted it and responded.

“I get what you're saying. You're suggesting that I should have interrogated him before killing him, right? I didn't have that kind of luxury.”

Shiro laughed and made an excuse.

“No, that's not it. You see, he brought Sheryl to Seranthal Tower, didn't he? He went out of his way to bring her. I wondered if there's some connection between you and Sheryl.”

“Now that you mention it. Why did they bring Sheryl? Sheryl, do you have any idea? ”

“I'm sorry. I have no idea either.”

“I see...”

Akira tilted his head in confusion. When he thought about it again, everything seemed baffling.

However, to the current Akira, the fake Akira was just a crazy person who thought he was Akira. So he began to think there was no point in dwelling on what a crazy person did.

Sensing this, Shiro changed the subject.

“Well, there's no point in discussing things we don't understand. Let's talk about what's next. Akira, although I used a lot of my favor with you for this incident, I still have some left, right? So, I'd appreciate it if you could stick with me a bit longer.”

“I guess...”

『Alpha. What do you think? 』

『You can do as you like, Akira. Right now, there's a lot of turmoil around you, so it's important to observe how things unfold.』

『Got it.』

Akira interpreted Alpha's request as having lower priority now and thought about it.

“Well, Udajima, who I was planning to kill, is dead, and I've also killed my impostor, so I suppose I can entertain the idea of settling the remaining debt...”

The bounty placed on him in Kugamayama City hadn't been lifted yet, so he couldn't return to the city. He also needed Shiro's help to resolve the issue with Sakashita Heavy Industry. Considering that, it might not be a bad idea to accompany Shiro for a while. As Akira thought that, Shiro casually mentioned something.

"Oh, by the way. As a bit of information, think of it as part of the remaining favor. That Udajima guy is probably alive."

"What...?"

"I did some digging myself."

Shiro displayed a video in everyone's augmented view of Udajima being taken from his office by the fake Akira.

"You saw this too, right? This video itself is genuine as far as I can tell, but there's the question of how the fake Akira got to this room in the first place."

Udajima's office was in the upper district of the city, where security was naturally tight. Additionally, Sakashita Heavy Industry personnel were now within the city's walls, enforcing stricter security measures than usual.

So how did the fake Akira breach that security? Shiro had doubts about that.

"If he broke through with brute force, I could understand that. But this guy came in without anyone noticing and left just as quietly. It's incredibly difficult. I mean, you could argue that he had the help of a super hacker like me who completely bypassed the security system, but that explanation makes everything too convenient, and even if that were the case, there are still limits, you know?"

Even if the security devices were disabled from the outside or the intruder used highly advanced camouflage technology, there would still be traces left behind. Moreover, some highly skilled hunters have

an uncanny intuition that allows them to sense the presence of an enemy. It's difficult to infiltrate a well-guarded place without being noticed.

"Well, you could argue that it's just the security of a provincial city and maybe it was that lax. But considering the alternative, I did some investigating. The result was that Akira's imposter entered normally. He was admitted as a guest of Udajima."

The fake Akira had entered through legitimate means, as a guest under Udajima's authority. This bypassed the security system because it wasn't considered unauthorized entry. Additionally, records of entry within the barrier could be erased by high-ranking city officials, a privilege necessary for handling top-secret matters.

"If that authority was legitimate, it means Udajima himself invited the fake Akira into his office. In other words, the video of Udajima being kidnapped is staged."

Akira was shocked by this unexpected revelation, and Shiro continued.

"This implies that Udajima is connected to Akira's imposter. Therefore, there's a possibility that the Udajima shown being killed in the video was also a fake. If there's a fake Akira, making a fake Udajima isn't out of the question."

"So, he's alive? "

"I can't be certain. It could also be that Udajima is just incredibly incompetent, got deceived, let the fake Akira into his office, and then got kidnapped and killed. But he is a city executive. He shouldn't be that incompetent."

So, Udajima is probably alive. Shiro concluded this.

Akira also found the explanation convincing. His expression turned grim.



While Sheryl was being questioned by Latis about Akira, there were others observing remotely. Haruka and Udajima.

As Shiro had surmised, Udajima was alive.

Udajima asked Haruka with a slightly puzzled expression.

“What's the point of knowing something like that? ”

Haruka responded to the same question Sheryl had.

“There is no point.”

“What? ”

“What's important is the act of asking about Akira and obtaining her reactions. Through the augmented suit she's wearing, we are acquiring her perceptions of Akira.”

Seeing Udajima still not quite grasping it, Haruka elaborated further.

High-performance augmented suits often include functions that read the wearer's brain to fully reflect their intentions in their movements. This suit, being of old-world manufacture, had exceptionally high performance. Haruka was using this function to collect data on Sheryl's perceptions of Akira.

“There's a joke about a famous person entering an impersonation contest of themselves and failing to win. Being the real thing and appearing like the real thing are different. What we need is the perception of authenticity from others. We're collecting data for that purpose.”

“So the data is to make Akira's imposter seem more authentic than the real one.”

“Yes. The questions are meant to prompt her brain to recall information about Akira. Even if she lies, it doesn't matter. What's important is that she thinks about Akira and responds.”

A clever liar's lies are mostly composed of true information. Hence, these lies can be used as valid data. As long as the answers aren't completely random and irrelevant to the questions, they can be excluded from the collected data. No problem, Haruka explained.

Udajima, while understanding the explanation, asked further.

“But is it really necessary to go this far?”

“It's better than not doing it, isn't it?”

Haruka said, looking behind her. There stood the fake Akira, silently like a puppet.

“This current version is only visually accurate. It might work for video performances, but anyone with some familiarity with Akira would recognize the imposter after a brief conversation. Sheryl and that Shijima person immediately saw through it.”

Udajima also looked at the fake Akira.

“...I suppose so.”

“Many high-rank hunters are said to have sharp instincts. Even if they don't know him, they might sense something off. A hunter who ventures into the Third Outer Region might notice the current version's behavior and realize it wasn't the real Akira.”

“So, a certain degree of authenticity is necessary to prevent that.”

“At the very least, it should be authentic enough that even if his actions seem out of character, people would think there were justifiable reasons for them.”

Hearing this explanation, Udajima was somewhat convinced.

“Understood. I'll leave it to you.”

“Yes. I'll do my best.”

Haruka replied while thinking internally.

(Well, if it were just about impersonating Akira, I wouldn't need to go this far.)

Haruka wasn't lying, but her explanation wasn't entirely accurate either.

“By the way, Udajima-san, how's the plan progressing? ”

“.....It's going smoothly.”

Udajima's words were not lies. However, they contained an element of delay in response.

Haruka also noticed something of that sort. With that in mind, she lightly responded.

“I see. Well then, I have things to attend to.”

If Udajima's plan goes well, then that's fine. But still, insurance is necessary. With that thought in mind, Haruka left.

Udajima, left alone, looked again at the fake Akira. Through the guise of that imposter, he directed his thoughts towards the real Akira. A colossal source of anxiety that could thwart his plans.

“If only this guy weren't here...”

Everything had been going smoothly. If only this guy weren't here. Udajima thought again.

If only Akira weren't here, he would have easily won the power struggle with Inabe. But with Akira involved, everything was overturned.

In an attempt to overcome the disadvantage caused by that, he ended up where he was now. Selling Kugamayama City, and even opposing Sakashita Heavy Industry.

There's no room for failure anymore. He had already staked everything. Moreover, he had wagered more than he could afford. For someone like him, a mere local city official, and moreover a fallen one, to secure someone who could control Kaiju or cooperate like Haruka, he had to stake that much.

“If only you weren't here...! ”

With that sentiment in his eyes, Udajima glared at Akira through the fake Akira.



Aside from her daily tasks, Hikaru was also adjusting future plans, so she stepped away from the ongoing augmented reality conversation involving Akira and others.

However, she returned to the conversation when called by Akira. Learning that Udajima might still be alive and possibly connected to the fake Akira, she felt a slight dizziness again.

“Udajima-san... Is he alive? And connected to the fake Akira? What's going on...”

As someone who took pride in being from Kugamayama City, Hikaru found it unbelievable that a city official would betray the city and collaborate with Nationalist.

“Akira. How reliable is this information? ”

“Even if you ask me, I only heard it from Shirou. Shirou, what do you think? ”

Shirou sends documents to Hikaru.

“Take a look for yourself and make your own judgment. Oh, and just so you know, this information was obtained through highly irregular means, so handle it with care, alright? ”

Both in terms of the unauthorized access Shirou used to obtain the information and the fact that it's content that Hikaru wouldn't normally have access to, it was indeed something to handle with caution. Hikaru frowned slightly more due to the former reason as she reviewed the documents.

And Hikaru also concluded that Shirou's information had a certain degree of credibility. She sighed deeply as if relieving her chest of a burden.

“How far can we use this information? ”

“It's up to you to decide, considering our indebtedness. Use it wisely. For various purposes.”

“Alright...”

Seeing Shirou and Hikaru engaging in somewhat cryptic conversation, Akira, who didn't understand, asked casually.

“Shirou. Various purposes, like? ”

“It depends on the situation, but for example, if Kugamayama City tries to cover up Udajima's case, we could negotiate to have Akira's bounty lifted in exchange for our silence.”

To Akira, who didn't fully grasp the situation, Shirou supplemented his explanation.

When Kugamayama City realizes Udajima's betrayal, they might not necessarily expose it openly. It's a huge failure for the city if officials defect to Nationalist.

By skillfully negotiating this point, it might become easier to lift Akira's bounty. Shirou explained up to that point. And Akira, satisfied with that, didn't ask further.

However, such negotiations are practically equivalent to blackmailing the city. Those who implement it will face severe consequences. Moreover, the information on which the negotiation is based was obtained illegally. It's going to be a huge mess.

But for Hikaru, there's no choice but to proceed. If she doesn't lift Akira's bounty and get Shirou to resolve the Sakashita Heavy Industry matter, she'll be in trouble.

Watching Akira, who didn't fully understand, and Shirou, who presented the option knowing full well the implications, Hikaru sighed as she thought.

Alright. Let's leave it to Inabe. Let's stick together at this point.

With a slightly resigned feeling, Hikaru made that decision.

By the time the camping car carrying Hikaru and others arrived at Kugamayama City, Akira and the others had finished their conversation and were about to cut off communication with Hikaru and the rest.

At that moment, Reina contacted Akira.

“Akira, I need to talk to you. Is that okay? ”

“Yeah, it's fine.”

“Got it. Well then, let me start by saying this. Shizuka-san is safe.”

Upon hearing that, Akira's expression turned serious. At the very least, there was something he needed to confirm regarding Shizuka's safety.

“What happened...? ”

“An imposter of you appeared at Shizuka's shop.”

“What...!? ”

Shocked by the unexpected news that he should have confirmed Shizuka's safety beforehand, Akira's face contorted with severity.

Chapter 249: Connectors of the Old World

Shizuka is opening her shop as usual today. With her usual polite customer service, she continues her business as usual.

Regarding Akira's equipment, Shizuka has heard rumors about companies with many high-ranking hunters as clients, but the lineup of Shizuka's shop remains unchanged. Even though she received offers from salespeople who wanted to cooperate with her, including procurement, to turn her shop into one that caters to high-ranking hunters with more money, Shizuka declined. She didn't want to cut off customers who had supported her shop for years. Also, she felt that catering to high-ranking hunters was beyond her capabilities.

Thus, while Shizuka received rumors that she could even set up a store within the barrier wall, she continued her business as usual in the same location with the same operations as always.

After finishing serving a customer, Shizuka murmurs.

“Akira. I wonder if he's okay...”

Shizuka has also heard about Akira's current situation from Elena and others. Akira is safe, doing well, and doesn't seem to be under any pressure. As for improving the situation, Inabe, a city official, is said to be working to retract Akira's bounty. That's what she's been told.

Nevertheless, Akira still needs to hide. Shizuka is worried about him. Even if all she can do is worry about Akira's well-being.

However, she doesn't feel self-loathing for being able to do nothing else. Shizuka smiles and tells herself.

“Well, even if all I can do is worry, I'll worry properly. He asked me to pray for his safety, after all.”

Normally, Akira probably wouldn't say something like that, being embarrassed. He was probably that troubled. She thought so. And that's why Shizuka decided to respond to Akira's request, even if it might have meant nothing, and prayed for his safety.

Then the door of the shop opens, and the doorbell rings. Shizuka prepares to greet the customer.

“Welcome... huh? ”

However, there was no one there.

“Strange...”

As Shizuka wonders, someone, still in camouflage, opens the door and deactivates it. It was Akira who appeared.

Apologizing to the surprised Shizuka, the person speaks.

“Shizuka-san. I'm sorry. There's something I need to talk to you about...”

But Shizuka interrupts the person, returning her expression to her usual smile.

“Who are you? ”

At that moment, the apologetic expression on the person's face changed to a blank expression, as if the muscles controlling it had stopped. The fake Akira, realizing he's been exposed, speaks with that expression.

“Do you understand? ”

And he moves closer to Shizuka.

In the next moment, a fierce punch strikes the fake Akira's face. He is blown away by the impact, smashing shelves in the store and

breaking through the wall, flying outside the shop.

The one who delivered the blow was Kanae. She had hidden near Shizuka using camouflage and stealthily approached. With a confident and almost gleeful smile, she closed the distance in an instant and struck with her fist.

However, the fake Akira is not defeated yet. Despite being blown away, he tries to regain his posture, exerting force on both legs in mid-air. Then, using the ground's contact function of his augmented suit, he forcibly decelerates, sliding in the air with friction marks, and stops on the ground outside the shop. Then, he tries to counterattack Kanae by kicking the ground forcefully to close the distance.

However, his plan is thwarted. Both his legs, which serve as the starting point for high-speed movement, are shot through. By completely suppressing the momentum of being blown away, the moment he stops moving is targeted.

The one who shot him was Reina. Like Kanae, she was hiding with camouflage and didn't miss the tiny opening created by the fake Akira, accurately shooting powerful bullets.

Still, the fake Akira can still fight. The injuries to his legs are not just minor punctures. His bones are shattered, barely holding together with remaining flesh and skin. But even with such severe injuries, with the monstrous vitality of a monster and the potent healing power of the old-world level recovery medicine, he would recover soon.

But it won't be an instant recovery. That's what they target. Using camouflage, Shiori, who was waiting by Reina's side, swiftly closes the distance to the fake Akira, whose high-speed movement is sealed due to his injured legs. She raises her sword.

The fake Akira tries to dodge it by punching the air and forcibly moving himself away. But it's too late. Vertically first, then

horizontally, the blade swung at high speed bisects the fake Akira.

Shiori continues to attack the fake Akira, who is now divided into four parts. She cuts off both arms, both legs, then beheads him. Finally, she swings her sword at the already severed head, splitting it vertically and horizontally.

With this much done, there's nothing more to be done. The fake Akira dies before his body is scattered on the ground.

Shiori, confirming the safety, communicates it to Reina with a glance. Reina releases her camouflage, breathes next to Shizuka, and Kanae, who had stayed behind to protect the two, relaxes her guard.

“Well, that was quick.”

Regardless of the content of her statement, since the job was done properly, Reina lightly speaks without reproaching Kanae.

“Isn't it a good thing? Expecting a response from the enemy is something you do when I'm the only one you're protecting.”

“Yeah! ”

Reina and the others' swift victory wasn't because this fake Akira was weak. Although not as strong as the individual defeated by Akira, he was as strong as the one who abducted Sheryl. Their ambush succeeded against such an opponent, and their subsequent accurate pursuit was a result of Reina and the others' capabilities.

Shizuka is an ordinary person. Unlike Reina and the others, she isn't accustomed to combat. However, despite witnessing the flashy battle unfolding before her, she remains calm and composed. After taking a few deep breaths to steady herself, she thanks Reina and the others in a composed manner.

“Thank you. You saved me.”

While looking at the sorry state of the shop, she chuckles slightly.

“But still... I can't believe they actually came to my place.”

When Reina suggested that they stay by her side to prevent Shizuka from being targeted by the fake Akira, Shizuka thought she might be overthinking it a bit. Despite her relationship with Akira, she's just the manager of a small personal shop, after all. That's what she thought.

However, her intuition prompted her to accept Reina's request. And the appearance of the fake Akira proved her intuition right and her optimism wrong.

Reina apologizes, looking remorseful.

“I'm sorry. I couldn't prevent damage to the shop.”

“It's okay. I'm the one who was helped. Don't worry about it.”

Shizuka reassures Reina with a smile, then continues jokingly.

“Besides, that's what I have insurance for in times like these. Well, they might refuse to renew the contract though.”

Reina laughs along with Shizuka.

“True. Shall I introduce you to a good negotiator? ”

“Really? Hmm, I'll try handling it myself first. If that doesn't work, then maybe I'll ask for help.”

“Understood.”

Compared to her own safety, the damage to the shop is trivial. Reina appreciates Shizuka's concern and switches her focus.

“Well then, I'm going to contact Akira. Would you mind staying with us, Shizuka-san?”

“Sure.”

The area around the shop becomes noisy. In addition to the security company responsible for maintaining public order in this area, the city's defense force also arrives. Reina leaves the response to them to Shiori and contacts Akira.



After hearing from Reina, Akira lets out a deep sigh of relief. Then, he bows his head to Reina and Shizuka, who are reflected in his augmented field of vision.

“Reina. Thank you. I really appreciate it. Shizuka-san. I'm really sorry for involving you in this.”

Seeing Akira's reaction, which is beyond her expectations, Reina feels a twinge of guilt. She is aware of what she did, and there is no regret due to the necessity, but completely coming to terms with it is still difficult.

Sensing Reina's inner turmoil, Shizuka smiles and says to Akira.

“It's okay. It's not your fault, and I was saved thanks to her. That's enough, isn't it? ”

“That's... maybe true, but...”

If Shizuka says so. While Akira would normally respond like that, he couldn't say it this time. Instead, Shizuka says it.

“It's okay. Because I'm saying so. Right? ”

Being gently but somewhat admonished by Shizuka in this way, Akira finds himself unable to argue. If Shizuka says so. Accepting her

words, he relaxes his expression.

“...Yes.”

“Good. You may have various thoughts, but the fact remains that I was saved thanks to her. Don't worry about it.”

“...? Yes.”

While Akira felt guilty for involving Shizuka, he decided not to worry about it after being advised by Shizuka. And regarding his thoughts, he didn't have any other leads, so he found it a bit strange to be told the same thing twice, but he thought it was just to emphasize the point.

And seeing Reina, who heard the same thing, also relaxes her expression. Shizuka's words were also a consideration for Reina.

Reina protected Shizuka in order to owe a debt to Akira, to make a big favor.

Even if they stayed with Akira or cooperated with him as additional reinforcements, it wouldn't be much of a favor. Akira is strong enough on his own, so the value of additional reinforcements is low. If they're not careful, they might end up being a hindrance and creating a debt instead of a favor.

Judging that way, Reina chose to protect Shizuka instead of accompanying Akira like Carol and Elena did. Due to Akira becoming a bounty target and having to hide, they couldn't do what he did. They decided to repay him by taking on Shizuka's protection instead.

Reina also knew about Sheryl being abducted by the fake Akira. If someone else were to be targeted again, who would it be? Like Sheryl, it could be Shizuka, a non-combatant close to Akira. Reina judged so and offered to protect Shizuka.

Even if that judgment was wrong, just protecting Shizuka would still be a certain favor to Akira. If Shizuka were actually targeted and they managed to prevent it, it would be a huge favor. That's what she thought.

In other words, Reina was trying to provide Akira with a benefactor and was trying to push her favor onto Akira. And Reina was aware of that.

Reina understood the necessity of creating a favor for Akira, even if it meant going to such lengths. However, she couldn't shake off her reluctance. And regardless of her own circumstances, she couldn't deny that she carried out those actions. Those thoughts plagued Reina.

Shizuka's words were also directed at Reina. Don't worry. Regardless of the reasons, she was saved thanks to that. She conveyed this to Akira, who might realize later, and to Reina, who was tormented by her own actions.

Understanding this, Reina felt deeply grateful.

Shizuka smiles and says,

"Oh, someone from the city's defense force wants to talk to me too, so I'll be leaving now. Akira, I'm glad to see you're safe. Maybe it's because I prayed for your safety?"

Akira blushes slightly, feeling a bit embarrassed by Shizuka's teasing remark. Seeing Akira's reaction, Shizuka thinks he seems fine like this and exits the augmented reality call with a smile.

In the lingering air of embarrassment, Reina regains her composure and continues the conversation.

"Ah, Akira. Can you tell us about your situation?"

"Ah, sure. I understand."

To mask his embarrassment, Akira starts talking about his situation.

Reina, upon learning about Akira's situation, has a serious expression, unexpected from her.

“You might have made an enemy of Sakashita Heavy Industry... You really did something serious again.”

“I didn't do it because I wanted to. Oh, right. About the security detail, could you ask Shizuka and also Sheryl to join? If possible...”

“Sure, I don't mind.”

“Thank you. It helps. Then, I'll meet up with Elena and the others later... No, Elena and the others are guarding Hikaru, so it's impossible for us to meet up, right? ”

Hikaru, who was listening to the conversation, responds.

“I'll handle that.”

“I see. Sorry, but I'm counting on you.”

With that, the conversation concludes. Then, Reina hesitates whether to proceed with the next topic here. She succeeded in creating a big favor for Akira. Now, she has to ask for something in return, something significant enough that she can't talk about it without having made that favor.

She had been considering the timing to bring it up carefully. However, after hearing about Akira's current situation, she starts to think that now might be the perfect opportunity.

“Akira... Do you remember when I said I wanted to ask you for something? ”

“Yeah. What is it? ”

“It's a matter that could potentially become troublesome just by asking...”

Reina says this and looks at the others. In response, Elena chooses to leave her seat first.

“It seems like we should step out.”

Sheryl also agrees.

“Indeed.”

Since this troublesome matter is related to Reina's circumstances, it's not something they should meddle in. Elena, Sara, and Sheryl reached that conclusion.

“See you later, Akira.”

Finally, Sara says with a smile, and the three disappear from Akira's augmented reality view.

Then, Hikaru responds.

“Well then, I have some adjustments to make as I mentioned earlier, so...”

Hikaru, not wanting to deal with any more trouble, uses her work as an excuse to quickly leave the scene. Following Elena's group, she disappears from the augmented reality scene.

The only ones left are the main parties, Akira and Reina, and those who chose to remain despite being more on the sidelines, Shiro, Carol, and Togami.

Reina confirms again with Shiro and the others.

“So, is it okay if we talk now? ”

“It's fine.”

“Yes.”

“Yeah.”

If they turn back now, it's too late. Reina emphasizes this point, and with their short responses, the three reaffirm their intention to stay in the conversation.

Shiro is currently on the run from Sakashita Heavy Industry, and Carol, like Akira, has made enemies of Sakashita Heavy Industry. Considering they're already in such situations, whatever Reina might ask of them pales in comparison. If it's a matter involving Akira, then they should listen. That's what Shiro and Carol thought.

On the other hand, Togami chose to stay based on the fact that this is related to Reina's circumstances. Even if it's a matter beyond his capability, he can't make a judgment without hearing the details. Nor can he assist Reina. So he decides to listen. That's his determination.

Reina appreciates Togami's resolve and says with a smile,

“Understood.”

Then she takes out a white card and shows it to Akira.

“Akira, you should know the location of the terminal connected to the Lion Steel Company in the old-world. I want you to guide us to one of those locations.”

Those astute would understand the danger in Reina's request. But Akira, being less perceptive, seeks further explanation.

“Why would you think I know that? ”

And once asked, Reina had to answer. She couldn't tell if Akira's attitude was just being casual or if he was genuinely unaware.

“Compared to making enemies of Sakashita Heavy Industry, this is nothing significant. Can we proceed under that assumption? ”

Before Reina could continue, Alpha interjects with a smile towards Akira.

『Akira, just stay calm no matter what she asks. It'll probably be fine.』

『Huh? Alright.』

Not knowing what he'll be asked, if Alpha says it's okay, then it probably is. Akira thinks so and tries to listen to the conversation normally.

But he fails.

“Akira is a old-world connector, right? And you should have the connection information with Lion Steel Company burned into your brain.”

Surprised by both the fact and the misunderstanding, Akira bursts out laughing.

『Akira, calm down.』

『Ah, y-yeah...』

Akira tries to maintain his composure somehow.

『...But is it really okay? Now that they know I'm a old-world connector...』

If it's revealed that he's a old-world connector, he'll be dissected for brain analysis. He was told this by Alpha before, so Akira is feeling a bit anxious.

『It's fine. When you were just starting out as a Hunter, you might have been captured to be studied as research material because of it, but if someone tried that with you now, you'd probably just kill them in retaliation, wouldn't you? It's not worth the risk.』

There's no value in risking a confrontation over Akira being a old-world connector. So it's okay. Alpha explains this with a smile.

Akira tentatively agrees.

『...Well, I guess so. You're right. Maybe back then, but now...』

『Yeah. It's not a big deal. At least, compared to making enemies with Sakashita Heavy Industry, as Reina said.』

『...Y-yeah, you're right.』

Being exposed as a old-world connector, which could lead to being captured and dissected, is worse than making enemies with Sakashita Heavy Industry. Understanding this, Akira's expression stiffens slightly.

Compared to bursting out laughing, this slight unnaturalness in Akira's demeanor isn't much of a reaction. Reina continues the conversation without much concern.

“I'll explain why I thought so and the basis for it. I'm just explaining the reasons behind my conclusion, so there's no need to correct me if I'm wrong.”

Saying so, Reina begins her explanation while showing the white card to Akira again.

This card left by Olivia at the Lida Commercial District Ruin is basically unusable unless you're a old-world connector. While there are means to use old domain-compatible information terminals, they're still expensive items, and Akira likely wouldn't have had them

back then. Also, it's unlikely that Olivia would leave something unusable to Akira. So Akira is likely a old-world connector.

However, Akira being a old-world connector wouldn't be the reason for Olivia to give him the card. So what could be the reason? Reina speculated that Akira might have awakened as a old-world connector at some point.

There are cases where someone partially awakens as a old-world connector for some reason, receives large amounts of data from ruins due to their incomplete communication function, and ends up brain dead due to overload.

However, not everyone dies. Some fully awaken as old-world connectors or even awaken to special abilities. Among them, there are those whose brains are imprinted with connection information to special areas of the old domain that regular old-world connectors can't access.

Reina thought that Akira might be one of them. She speculated that at some ruins, he unintentionally connected to a Lion Steel Company terminal from the old-world, nearly died, survived, and had the connection information burned into his brain. Moreover, that terminal wasn't ordinary, it was a special one for top clients. And Akira might have inherited its authority. That's why Olivia left this card for Akira. That's what Reina thought.

“This card isn't something you can easily get your hands on. It's such a valuable item that Shiori would go to such lengths to obtain it. Also, I think you're the one who found the Yonozuka Station Ruin, right? When you connected to the Lion Steel Company from the old-world, did you get information about branch offices and terminal locations and use that to search for undiscovered ruins? Am I wrong? ”

With this, Reina has laid out all the information she has. Now it's up to Akira. Thinking so, Reina waits for Akira's response.

Akira listens attentively to Reina's words and then responds.

“Sorry, but I won't confirm whether your speculation is correct or not. However, I do have an idea about that first location of the Lion Steel Company's connection terminal that Reina mentioned. Should I guide you to that place? ”

Although it's a trivial matter compared to exposing himself as a old-world connector despite making enemies with Sakashita Heavy Industry, Reina inwardly feels relieved that Akira responded relatively favorably. She smiles as she replies.

“Ah, sorry, but if possible, I'd like Akira to directly guide us there without revealing the location. Of course, it's fine later. I understand Akira's situation, and we also need to make various preparations.”

“I'm fine with it... but, is that okay with you, Reina? ”

There's no guarantee that Akira's situation will be resolved. Saying it's fine later implies that there's a future, whether it's in terms of life or existence, where this promise is valid only for those who exist. From a logical standpoint, the likelihood of such a future for someone who has made enemies with Sakashita Heavy Industry is extremely low.

Akira also understands this much. So he was asking if it was okay for now.

And Reina also understands this much. She answers with a slightly provocative smile.

“Yes. So until then, don't go and get yourself killed, okay? ”

In response, Akira also confidently replies with a smile.

“Of course.”

With both Akira and Reina understanding Akira's situation and making a promise based on Akira's future, the conversation concludes.

As the conversation reaches a pause, Akira remembers something.

“Oh, right. Speaking of the Lion Steel Company, there were some of their people outside our store. Oh, from the present time.”

“What do you mean...? ”

“Well, I'm not sure either...”

Akira shows Reina the scene from that time through his augmented vision. Reina furrows her brow for a while, then smiles and thanks him.

“Thank you for letting me know. It was helpful.”

“I see. Do you know why they were there, Reina? ”

“Ah, sorry. I can't say. We have our own reasons here too. Oh, but if those people interfere with Akira, you don't need to worry about me. Do as you please.”

Although Pamela's reasons for being there can be guessed, they can't be disclosed due to circumstances. But if they're against Akira, it's okay to kill them. That's how Reina replied, prompting Akira to ask a bit more.

“So they're unrelated to you, Reina's group? ”

“Oh, you can think of it that way if you want.”

“Right, got it.”

Even if they enter into a state of conflict, there's no need to treat them as associates of Reina's group. That's enough for Akira.

Since hearing Reina's request, Carol has been showing signs of deep thought. Now, she lightly laughs and interjects.

“Reina, Togami. If we're done with the conversation for now, sorry, but could we leave it here? There's something else I need to discuss.”

“Hm? Understood. Akira, see you later.”

“Let me know if anything comes up.”

Leaving these words behind, Reina and Togami cut off communication with Akira's group. With everyone from the remote location gone, the conversation in augmented reality also comes to an end. Inside the Lion Steel Company branch, Akira, now alone with Carol, asks her with a hint of curiosity.

“Carol, what's the matter?”

“Ah, it's just the right time to talk about me too.”

Carol says this while glancing at Shiro once and then turning her gaze back to Akira.

She continues after returning her gaze to Akira.

“I'm also a old-world connector with connection information burned into my brain. The information imprinted on me is from the Mihazono District Ruin.”

At this unexpected revelation, Akira bursts out laughing again.

Meanwhile, Shiro remains completely unfazed. Seeing this, Carol comments.

“Looks like Shiro had already figured it out.”

“Yeah, probably.”

Shiro recalls the basis for his deduction.

The underground tunnel of the Mihazono District Ruin was highly concealed, and although not to his level, it was something that could only be found by someone with quite advanced skills as Shiro. Togami was able to discover that underground tunnel because he used the information terminal for the old-world that he provided to deactivate the concealment.

However, Akira and the others would have to discover it on their own. But it's hard to believe that Akira and the others have the technology to uncover that concealment. Therefore, there was a possibility that either Akira or Carol had the connection information for the Mihazono District Ruin burned into them.

And Shiro likely thought it was Carol. Carol's words and actions seemed to imply that she was trying to attribute the reason for discovering the underground tunnel, something impossible for ordinary individuals.

For these reasons, Shiro didn't need Carol to tell him, he had already inferred to that extent. Also, he had suspected since his time on the inter-city transport vehicle that Akira was a old-world connector, so he wasn't particularly surprised now.

“So... Akira didn't know? ”

“I didn't know...”

“Weren't you supposed to be teaming up with other old-world connectors? ”

He missed the mark there. His reads are still off. Thinking this, Shiro continues.

『Akira』

『What is it? 』

『Oh, you actually responded. You've been ignoring me all this time』

『...Well, it's because I've been found out』

In reality, it wasn't that he was ignoring him, but rather, Akira hadn't been able to hear Shiro's telepathy until now. Alpha had been blocking the communication. He had just removed it. Akira understood this much and brushed it off casually.

Shiro directs his gaze to Carol.

“...Carol, you can't do telepathy, can you? ”

Although Shiro had sent telepathic messages to Carol, there had been no response or reaction. Carol also understands this.

“Ah, you've been sending telepathic messages, huh? I'm a old-world connector too, but my connection is only to the Mihazono District Ruin, so I probably didn't receive them.”

“I see. Then...”

『Like this? 』

This time, Carol also shows a clear response. She's surprised to hear a voice in her head without using her ears.

『 Oh, it connected. Looks like it's fine. Akira, could you say something to Carol through telepathy? If you relay through me, I can connect it here』

『...Like this? Carol, can you hear me? 』

『Yes, I can hear you』

Now, Akira can also hear Carol's voice. With this, Akira's group can communicate via telepathy through Shiro.

『Once you get used to it, it's more convenient to talk this way even with nearby people. You can talk even if it's noisy around, there's no chance of mishearing, and no one can eavesdrop』

In response to Shiro's telepathic message, Carol speaks verbally.

“I'll speak verbally. Telepathy means Shiro can hear everything, right? So, if Akira and I need to have a private conversation, could you step out?”

“Even if you say that, where should I go...”

Just as Shiro says this, Olivia, who was standing by, operates the room. Walls emerge around them, turning the space into a sealed room.

“...Ah, got it.”

Shiro offers a subtle expression of gratitude and leaves the room with Olivia. Seeing Shiro's demeanor, Akira lightly laughs along with Carol.

“So, what's this private conversation about? ”

“I thought I'd explain why I hired Akira as a guard. Compared to making enemies with Sakashita Heavy Industry, it's not that big of a deal now.”

Carol begins to explain the reason.

She had obtained information that Sakashita Heavy Industry was searching for old-world connectors with information burned into their brains to conquer the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. There's a high likelihood that they are also searching for other old-world connectors

with information about other ruins, such as the Yonozuka Station Ruin, which are connected to the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

Carol herself had information burned into her brain about the Mihazono District Ruin. If she were to be found, she didn't know what would happen. She hired Akira as a guard because she feared that. She explained this.

Being a guard wasn't just about being strong. The opponent was Sakashita Heavy Industry. Even high-ranking hunters would hesitate. Not to mention, if they knew why Carol was being targeted, she might even be sold to Sakashita Heavy Industry.

Once they accepted a request, they wouldn't back down no matter who the opponent was. And even if Carol knew why she was being targeted, she wouldn't disclose it for any reason. Those hired to guard Carol had to be people like that.

And among those Carol knew, Akira was the closest.

Doras had been on the right track. But it was bad that he had sold information to Carol. Carol couldn't trust someone who leaked information in exchange for her body.

Understanding the situation, Akira thinks about why Carol couldn't explain the reason she hired him.

“So that's how it was. Ah, my bad then. Carol hired me as a guard as a precaution in case you were targeted by Sakashita Heavy Industry, but my actions ended up making Sakashita Heavy Industry our enemy, huh? My bad.”

It's going too far in the wrong direction. Akira thinks this and apologizes.

And Carol, who was being apologized to, is surprised in turn. When she hired Akira as a guard, she hadn't lied, but she had been

concealing information about Sakashita Heavy Industry. She didn't think it was just a matter of dipping a toe into fraud.

Nevertheless, instead of blaming her, Akira showed an attitude of self-blame and gratitude. Carol responds with a smile.

“Don't worry about it. It's my fault for not explaining the situation properly.”

“That may be, but...”

“Well then, while we're at it, I'll share a bit more about my circumstances. I'll explain properly this time, so stay quiet, okay?”

Carol says mischievously with a smile.

“Got it.”

With that, Akira stops worrying unnecessarily. Instead, he decides to listen attentively to Carol's story about her own secrets and keep them to himself properly, as Carol requested.

Carol begins to tell Akira about her past. About how she used to be quite a serious hunter. About how she experienced a severe headache and passed out while exploring the Mihazono District Ruin, only to wake up to a completely different view inside the ruins, thanks to receiving transmissions as a old-world connector displayed in her augmented vision.

And because of that, she lost her former comrades, and from that moment on, she discarded her past to avoid exposing herself as a old-world connector.

The name Carol was a pseudonym she chose at that time to live as a different person. It has now become her name, but it used to be something else.

She became a body enhancement user not only to change her face but also her body shape. She became a cartographer to take advantage of the misconception that exceptionally skilled cartographers were old-world connectors, pretending to be one of those misunderstood individuals.

She started selling her body as a side job not for the money, but to disguise the information she heard from other hunters as something only known to old-world connectors.

As the number of clients increased, there was a higher chance that it would be thought she had learned the information through that route. She honed her seduction skills, poured a lot of money into her body to create a captivating figure, and focused more on her side job than on being a hunter, as it earned more.

She began associating with people like Viola to obscure the source of her information. With Viola and those associated with her, it wouldn't be surprising if Carol knew about it. She did it to give that impression.

And before she knew it, the villainess mask she had worn to hide her past had become her true self, not a mask, but Carol herself.

Any remorse for that had long disappeared from Carol. Yet, she still felt nostalgic for her past, for the time when she was genuine.

“I mean, it's kind of funny, but back then, I was so innocent it was almost strange for a hunter, you know? ”

“Oh, really? ”

“Ah, you don't believe me? ”

“No, I didn't say it was a lie or anything.”

Despite saying so, Akira's attitude seems to imply that it's hard to believe completely, which amuses Carol as she laughs.

“As a side job, sometimes I dress up all innocent to reminisce about those days, and it's quite well received. ...Oh, by the way, it didn't work on you, did it, Akira? ”

“Ah... right.”

Carol had met Akira before in such an innocent outfit. Akira's reaction at that time was no different from when Carol wore revealing augmented suit.

At least, not at that time.

Trying to divert attention from that thought, Akira continues the conversation.

“By the way, is it okay for you to tell me about your previous name, Carol? ”

“It's fine. As long as Akira doesn't blabber.”

Carol responds with a smile, and Akira responds with a smile as well.

“Got it. I'll keep quiet.”

“Thanks.”

Having finally shared something she had kept to herself for years, Carol feels a sense of relief and satisfaction. And due to this slightly elevated mood, she says something that she'll later regret when she calms down.

“...Oh, right. Akira, you've always been really strong since we first met, but are you receiving any kind of support for that strength? ”

Akira freezes for a moment. However, Carol, in her cheerful state, overlooks it and continues without noticing.

“You know, Reina mentioned it, right? When Akira became a old-world connector, you accidentally inherited the authority of Lion Steel Company's top clients.”

Real-time terrain information, including every single bullet flying around, obtained from the ruins, used in place of extremely high-performance information gathering device. Carol had heard stories about some old-world connectors being capable of such feats. This made Akira doubt himself, including whether he was one of those old-world connectors.

However, Akira's strength had already improved to the point where it didn't fit with that explanation. So Carol began to doubt her own thoughts, even considering that Akira might be a old-world connector. But after hearing Reina's story, she came to the idea that he might be receiving some support through the old-world.

“If you have such a patron, it wouldn't be surprising if such a service existed, right?”

Hearing that, Akira deliberately avoided eye contact with Carol.

“Who knows...”

“Right.”

Akira returned his gaze to Carol, who seemed very cheerful.

“Just so you know, lately I've been doing pretty well on my own too. Whether it was when I fought that giant-like guy at the Kuzusuhara District Ruin or when I fought in the underground tunnel to enter the Third Inner Sector, I managed on my own, you know? ”

Carol laughed and praised Akira's somewhat excuse-filled response.

“Is that so? That's amazing.”

Akira let out a deep sigh and spoke.

“Could you keep it quiet? ”

“Sure. I'll keep quiet.”

Thinking they had deepened their bond by sharing a secret, Carol was in a good mood.

And Akira was relatively cheerful too. He finally managed to confess that he had been fighting with a power that wasn't truly his own until now.

Still, the most important secret remained held. Being a old-world connector, receiving support in battles, these were nothing compared to that.

The existence of Alpha. That was something he couldn't reveal.

In a sense, this incident was also a good opportunity for Akira. He had obtained a story that could cover up Alpha's support.

When Akira averted his gaze, he saw Alpha, as always, with a smile on her face.

Chapter 250: Sugadome's Proposal

After leaving the Mihazono District Ruin, Harmers returned to Kugamayama City aboard the transport arranged by Sugadome. He was then summoned to the office.

“Apologies for interrupting your vacation. Is your health alright?”

Asked by Sugadome, Harmers replied unwaveringly.

“There are no issues.”

The Harmers had consumed a large amount of high-performance recovery medicine during the journey to maximize their physical recovery. Still, he weren't in perfect condition. However, this was work. He had the confidence and determination to accomplish it, whether by using trump cards or last resorts.

“Alright then, let's get to work. I'm going to meet Tsubaki now. I'll need your escort.”

“Understood!”

The Harmers, surprised by the nature of the task he were given, pushed aside all questions that arose from it and simply expressed their understanding.

Two cars headed towards Tsubaki's jurisdiction. Both were vehicles from Sakashita Heavy Industry. One car carried a unit instructed to provide escort along the way. The other car carried Sugadome, Harmers, Yanagisawa, and a man Sugadome had brought along.

During the car ride, Harmers shared the events at the Mihazono District Ruin with the others. Upon hearing this, Sugadome remarked.

“I see... So it was Shiro...? ”

“Yes. Without a doubt, Shiro was there for that girl. Although her identity remains unknown, we've received information that she's cooperating with the imposter Akira who attacked Kugamayama City's forces. Considering Shiro hired personnel from Lion Steel, a company from the old-world, and even had the real Akira under his command, I dare say it's about time to publicly announce Shiro's escape and take action to apprehend him.”

One reason Shiro hadn't been captured yet was because Sakashita Heavy Industry had been discreetly handling the situation, making it difficult to transition to a large-scale capture operation. Despite the potential exposure of their own mistakes, Harmers proposed that it was necessary to take action.

Sugadome responded lightly.

“Hmm, let's consider it.”

“Yes.”

With this brief response, Harmers nodded slightly to Sugadome. Since Sugadome had agreed to consider it, even if the outcome of the consideration was to not act, Harmers couldn't say more.

Yanagisawa, hearing the same conversation, had subtly but noticeably stiffened his usually casual smile. It was because his internal surprise was too strong, even for Yanagisawa to completely conceal his inner turmoil.

Sensing this astutely, Sugadome asked casually.

“Is something the matter?”

“...No, I just heard about the situation at Serenthal Building and felt a little unsettled.”

Yanagisawa quickly returned to his usual smile and let out a sigh as if acting.

“The building's management agreed to a deal in exchange for defending the building. To fail in that and cause damage to the building...”

Yanagisawa then directed a gaze toward Harmers, seeming to imply that he had something else to say.

“...So, how much damage did the building sustain? From the earlier discussion, it seemed like the entire 60th floor was blown away...”

“...No, it wasn't to that extent. The exterior walls were blown away to some extent.”

“I see. That's a relief. If it's only that extent of damage, the repairs to the building should be completed within a short period. With that level of damage, there's still a possibility to continue the deal with the building's management.”

Someone who could wreak havoc alongside a superhuman had been involved. There's no way the damage would be so minor. Yanagisawa conveyed this message clearly with his gaze.

Meanwhile, Harmers were subtly avoiding eye contact. When it came to business actions, he wouldn't avert their gaze. If it was for the profit of Sakashita Heavy Industry, he wouldn't mind such minor matters. He could assert that confidently.

Yet, in this case, it wasn't about business, nor could he confidently assert that he had gained sufficient profits from successfully capturing Shiro. This uncertainty was evident in Harmers' eyes.

Sugadome interjected.

“You've already gained significant profits from your dealings with Tsubaki. Losing the deal with Serenthal Building isn't a major loss for you, is it? Even if you're comparing profits, it's still a considerable amount to lose for me.”

“...Simply comparing profits, yes, but it's still a considerable amount to lose for me. Even if it's a trivial amount for your company, for me, it's a substantial sum.”

“I see. Then, consider it a nuisance caused by our side. Let us compensate. Send the details of the damages later, and we'll cover it.”

“No, there's no need for such trouble.”

While Yanagisawa lightly responded, he thought to himself:

(I hope this request for information on calculating compensation isn't a probe...)

Sugadome added casually.

“Is that so? I suddenly arranged for you to meet with Tsubaki. I thought of it as compensation for the inconvenience.”

When Harmers headed to Seranthal Building, Yanagisawa had planned to accompany them. However, he was suddenly tasked by Sugadome to arrange a meeting with Tsubaki as soon as possible. This prevented him from going due to the need for coordination.

He couldn't refuse. To decline would imply to Sugadome that Yanagisawa's presence at Seranthal Building at this juncture held enough value to reject the request of a Sakashita Heavy Industry executive. That wasn't feasible.

However, as a result, Seranthal Building suffered significant damage on the 60th floor.

Yanagisawa thought to himself that if he had been there, perhaps he could have prevented it. The extent of the damage caused by Harmers' combat to the 60th floor was unclear. But if the facility had been destroyed, its communication functions disrupted, and restoration would take a long time, it would greatly hinder his plans.

Additionally, Shiro was present. If Yanagisawa had been there, he might have been able to negotiate with Shiro. Both opportunities were thwarted by Sugadome. This increased Yanagisawa's wariness towards Sugadome.

He wanted to believe it was a coincidence. But if it wasn't, if it was intentional, he wondered how much Sugadome was aware of. The person he was dealing with was an executive of Sakashita Heavy Industry, someone with the ability to ascend to and maintain that position. It wasn't inconceivable. That's what he believed.

Yanagisawa looked at Sugadome. Even he couldn't see what lay beneath Sugadome's expression.

While concealing his inner thoughts, Yanagisawa continued speaking.

“If you're considering it as compensation, then I'd appreciate it if you could settle this meeting smoothly. If her mood sours and the deal is terminated, it would not only affect Kugamayama City but also cause damage to your company. To be honest, the last time we went quite far into dangerous territory.”

“I understand. I have no intention of angering her. I plan to present her with a very favorable proposal.”

“And that is? ”

“I can't say for now. You'll hear it at the meeting.”

“Understood.”

Yanagisawa couldn't inquire further due to the difference in their positions.

Then, Harmers continued the conversation.

“Sugadome-san, considering the talk of danger, I'd like to confirm something. It's unnecessary to include both of you as part of my escort, correct?”

In the worst-case scenario, Harmers would escape from the meeting with Tsubaki together with Sugadome, leaving Yanagisawa and the other man behind. The Harmers had informed everyone present of this possibility.

Yanagisawa responded.

“It's fine by me. However, if the situation deteriorates to that extent, remember that my intervention becomes meaningless. In other words, I won't be able to stop Tsubaki.”

In that case, he'll abandon them as well. Yanagisawa answered with that meaning implied.

The other man also responded.

“I don't mind either. I'll protect myself. Don't worry about me.”

After casually answering, the man then said, as if he had just realized.

“Ah, should I introduce myself, including my background, to avoid causing any inconvenience? ”

The man said this and looked at Sugadome, essentially leaving the decision to him. In response, Sugadome answered.

“Feel free to. The decision is yours to make.”

“Understood.”

The exchange between the two men puzzled Harmers and Yanagisawa. Not only did the man seek permission from a Sakashita Heavy Industry executive for a mere self-introduction, but Sugadome

also refused to take responsibility for the decision. Something about this slightly unusual exchange made them feel uneasy.

Then, the man revealed the content.

“I'm Maruo, affiliated with the anti-rebuild personnel. Nice to meet you.”

The Harmers showed visible surprise. Yanagisawa, too, couldn't conceal his astonishment and had more than just a slight change in expression.

The anti-rebuild personnel was a sub-organization under the Corporate Government, and its mission was to prevent the modern civilization of the Eastern Region from being engulfed by the old-world.

The “old-world” referred to the collective term for all civilizations that had perished, and the history of gathering fragments of wisdom from the perished world and reconstructing a new civilization.

In other words, the next reconstruction presupposed the destruction of the modern civilization in the Eastern Region.

We wouldn't be part of history. We wouldn't be referred to as part of the old-world by the next generations, swallowed by the history of destruction. The Corporate Government established the anti-rebuild personnel for that determination, resolve, and realization.

Even the five big corporations vying for hegemony in the Eastern Region cooperated on this point. Despite being the five big corporations, each corporation's prosperity was predicated on the Eastern Region's prosperity. It would be meaningless for the region to perish for their own prosperity. Each of the five big corporations provided substantial funds and even personnel, allowing the anti-rebuild personnel its autonomy to cooperate in the Eastern Region's survival.

A member of the anti-rebuild personnel was present here. Was something happening right now that could potentially lead to the destruction of the Eastern Region? The Harmers didn't need to explain it verbally, their expressions said it all.

Maruo looked at their faces and, thinking it was just another day, reassured them.

“Ah, it's not like something critical is happening just because I'm here. It's just another investigation to anticipate such situations in advance. After investigating, it turns out this was another false alarm. I knew it. Another waste of investigation expenses. It's all part of our daily duties to be criticized for that.”

Maruo continues the conversation jokingly.

“Weekly, World Crisis! Well, not really. Nothing like that at all. That's all fiction. Even if they exaggerate a bit, there might be a slightly bigger fuss once a year, and then we swoop in with our intel gathered from these kinds of investigations and crush it. It's just about sniffing out the signs of those kinds of commotions beforehand. That's all it is. Nothing major.”

Then he continues in a light-hearted tone.

“But well, you know, the anti-rebuild personnel is kind of used in fiction and all, so some people make a big deal if we reveal our identities. So, usually, we don't talk much about it. This time is an exception. Even if things get as serious as you're worried about, since I'm also with the anti-rebuild personnel, I can manage to escape on my own, so don't worry about me in that case. That's what I mean.”

With that, Harmers also feels relieved. He lets out a sigh of relief.

“I see... Understood.”

Yanagisawa also exhales a sigh of relief. But for him, it's an act.

Things have become troublesome. He struggles to hide his true feelings beneath his usual frivolous smile, making an effort not to let it show on his face.



The city from the old-world managed by Tsubaki still maintains a pristine and sophisticated appearance, unlike the surrounding desolate ruins, concealed behind massive walls disguised as dilapidated buildings.

Within these walls lies a warehouse used for trading relics with the Kugamayama City. It's in this warehouse that the meeting between Sugadome and Tsubaki takes place. Just like last time, in the same location where the troops of Sakashita Heavy Industry were massacred, Sugadome and the others await Tsubaki's arrival.

Inside the warehouse are only Sugadome, Harmers, Yanagisawa, and Maruo. The troops accompanying them this time are only for escort during the journey and are currently waiting outside.

Harmers looks at the floor. The troops of Sakashita Heavy Industry were crushed to dust in an instant by Tsubaki at this spot, scattering flesh and equipment across the floor.

Although the traces have been meticulously cleaned, leaving no evidence behind, Harmers knows of the tragedy that occurred. He also knows the strength of the troops at the time, being one of the members of Sakashita Heavy Industry's security division. He knows they were not weak by any means.

“... Sugadome-san. I promise to protect no matter what, but isn't it dangerous to make contact with her? There's a possibility of danger, isn't there? It's not impossible. Do you really need to meet her personally?”

“Of course.”

Sugadome answers calmly and resolutely.

“I see...”

With Sugadome's affirmation, Harmers has no choice but to act under that premise. He, as well as his deceased colleagues, must believe that their sacrifices were not in vain.

Sensing Harmers' thoughts, Sugadome continues.

“Those who died here were dispatched under my orders. They understood the risk of dying, yet I gave them instructions, while I remained safely within the secure walls. In other words, I valued my own life more than theirs. I judged that my life had a higher value than theirs. Therefore, I acted accordingly. That's all it was. I'm sure of my decision, both then and now. And I don't consider their deaths to be in vain. I can assert that I did what was necessary in response to the situation. Their lives were valuable enough. But my life was even more valuable. And it was used accordingly. That's it. I'm here for the same reason as you.”

He asserts that he understands everything and continues speaking.

“As a result, even if I were to die due to the worst-case scenario you're concerned about, it wouldn't matter. It would merely be an event caused by such a situation occurring. Based on that event, someone else would simply take over the duties. It wouldn't be a major issue.”

He accepts his own death by being here. He has that level of resolve. Sugadome states as much.

“Furthermore, if I weren't here, the negotiation with her wouldn't even happen in the first place. Those with significant value in Sakashita Heavy Industry, even if the other party is her, have a high chance of survival in such discussions. It's convincing enough for her to make a judgment based on that. For that, at the very least, I need

to be present. Sending someone of lesser value to the negotiation would only result in her killing them without a word.”

Sugadome explains the necessity of his presence here.

“However, if I were to try to meet her without any guards for such a serious discussion, it would be seen as me disrespecting her. Hence, the need for you as a strong guard. That's why you're here.”

With that, Sugadome explains the necessity of Harmers' presence.

“Both you and I are here out of necessity. We're not risking our lives for no reason. I could explain in more detail, but it's not the time for a lengthy discussion. Is this explanation sufficient? ”

“That's enough. I appreciate you taking the time to explain to someone as inadequate as me.”

Harmers, feeling even more respect for his superior, bows politely.

Meanwhile, Yanagisawa becomes more wary of Sugadome. Not due to callousness towards his own life or the lives of others, but because he understands, appreciates, and experiences the value of those lives before him, he regards such abnormal individuals, such kindred spirits, with caution.

Maruo shows no reaction. It's part of his job, he's accustomed to such individuals.

The time for the meeting arrives. Tsubaki, as before, suddenly appears before Sugadome and the others. However, this time, no one is surprised by her sudden appearance. Tsubaki calmly addresses Sugadome and disregards his words.

“Who's the negotiator? ”

“That would be me. Sugadome of Sakashita Heavy Industry. Despite the abruptness of our request today, we are grateful for your

willingness to accommodate this meeting on behalf of Sakashita Heavy Industry..."

Ignoring Sugadome's words, Tsubaki continues.

"Then..."

Last time, only he was needed. After that, she immediately killed everyone present, except for the negotiator, Matsubara, and Yanagisawa, who evacuated from the scene.

However, this time was different.

"I ask you to be concise. And I expect the content to make your life valuable to me."

Those words were evidence that Tsubaki had heard the conversation of Sugadome and the others earlier, and it was also a declaration that worthless talk would result in death.

But Sugadome remained unfazed. This place was Tsubaki's domain. It could be anticipated enough that Tsubaki would listen to their conversation. Rather, the previous conversation had been directed at Tsubaki, assuming she was listening.

"Let's get to the point. Due to not having a formal name for it here, the contents will include various terms, but I hope you understand."

With that preamble, Sugadome got to the main point.

"Our company is prepared to offer you control over the Third Inner Sector. What do you think?"



The unexpected nature of this proposition left Harmers and Yanagisawa speechless. Maruo also showed a surprised expression.

However, Tsubaki's expression remained unchanged. She spoke after a brief pause.

“..... That place is not your domain. I cannot tolerate any suggestion that you have ownership over it.”

Tsubaki replied with a hint of anger in her tone. Harmers felt it and became more cautious.

However, what was important to Sugadome was not that, but the fact that Tsubaki took time to reply.

The time it takes for thought processes between humans and administrative entities is fundamentally different. Even if Tsubaki seemed to ponder for a year, in actual time, it was just a moment. In other words, it was a short period imperceptible to humans, and in the standard of real time, a response could be made seamlessly without delay.

In other words, Tsubaki intentionally delayed her response. By using that delay, she indicated, to the human time frame, that the previous conversation was worthy of consideration, feigning a performance synchronized with the human perception of time.

If Sugadome couldn't even realize such a simple thing, Tsubaki would have disregarded Sugadome's life, her feigned discomfort would have become genuine, and Sugadome, deemed incompetent and spouting impossible nonsense, would have been killed outright.

Sugadome, however, was not incapable of understanding this. He replied calmly.

“I apologize. I will correct myself. We can offer you the opportunity to partially transfer control over the Third Inner Sector.”

Tsubaki returned to silence. Sugadome interpreted this as permission to continue, as there was room for consideration.

“Specifically, here's how it would work. Firstly, our unit would seize control of the Third Inner Sector. Then, it would be retrieved for you. This would transfer control of that place to you. You expanded the control over the area in a similar manner in the First Inner Sector.”

“Do you think you can seize control of that place? ”

“If you mean in terms of having full, long-term control, then I cannot guarantee that. However, if it means enabling the transfer of control to you, even partially, for a short period, even if imperfect, enough to be recognized as being in a state of control, then I believe it's possible.”

Tsubaki returned to silence again. Sugadome waited a moment before continuing.

“What do you think? Our company desires to improve relations with you. We believe this offer is sufficient compensation for the previous contractual breaches and as a condition for renegotiating the contract with some modifications.”

At this point, Sugadome had said everything. He awaited Tsubaki's response.

And Tsubaki, after another brief silence, responded.

“..... I have no request for you.”

“..... I see. That's unfortunate. Then, I'll take my leave for today.”

Sugadome bowed politely to Tsubaki and attempted to leave. Tsubaki allowed his departure without stopping him, but Sugadome, aware of the danger, paused once. He turned back to Tsubaki.

“Oh, on a separate matter, there's a hunter named Akira who's causing trouble for our company. He has declared hostility against the Kugamayama City and a bounty has been placed on him. Should we take precautions, or how would you like to handle it? ”

Tsubaki answered without hesitation to this question.

“It's unnecessary. I have no request for you.”

“Understood.”

Sugadome bowed to Tsubaki once more before leaving the place. Harmers followed suit.

Yanagisawa hesitated whether to ask Tsubaki about Akira but decided to leave without asking.

And Maruo also left. Tsubaki remained motionless. After silently watching Sugadome and the others leave, she disappeared.

Fortunately, no incidents occurred, and Sugadome and his group were all allowed to return safely.

In the car returning to Kugamayama City, Sugadome continued his thoughts.

(...It should have been sufficient. My safe return is proof of that. Why did she reject our proposal?)

Was the premise that the control over the Third Inner Sector was of great value to Tsubaki wrong? Was it deemed impossible for Sakashita Heavy Industry to seize the Third Inner Sector, even partially? Even if possible, was it thought that it wasn't significant enough for control to be transferred to Tsubaki after its retrieval?

Sugadome formulated various hypotheses and self-validated them. Then, recalling Tsubaki's words, he came up with another hypothesis.

(Or perhaps, she has already concluded similar deals under better terms?)

"I have no request for you." That's what Tsubaki said. Meaning, there might have been someone else she relied on.

In that case, Tsubaki's trading partner would be the Nationalist currently in the Third Inner Sector. Sugadome found this not particularly surprising. Tsubaki was a relic of the old-world. She wouldn't care if she incurred the ire of the Corporate Government by cooperating with the Nationalist.

Sugadome also thought about Akira.

(consideration isn't necessary... Did I... Did I misinterpret?)

The Akira cooperating with the Nationalist was a fake. The real one was cooperating with Shiro. Sugadome was aware of this. Shiro had previously reported to Sugadome that with the cooperation of a certain individual, he could establish a negotiation route with Tsubaki. Sugadome had also discerned that this individual was Akira. Given this, Sugadome contemplated further.

If Tsubaki was cooperating with the Nationalist in the Third Inner Sector, she wouldn't want the fake Akira, who was integral to their activities, to be killed.

If Akira's cooperation could establish a negotiation route with Tsubaki, despite the unclear reasons, Tsubaki seemed friendly towards Akira to the extent that Shiro judged it enough to establish a negotiation route. In that case, she would likely help Akira.

In other words, whether the target was a fake or the real one, Tsubaki should request consideration towards Akira from his

company. That's what Sugadome believed. However, Tsubaki said consideration was unnecessary.

This troubled Sugadome. He hadn't fully grasped the situation yet. He scolded himself for it and switched his focus.

(Well, fine. I got the statement I needed. If consideration isn't necessary, then let's proceed in that direction.)

Based on the information obtained, Sugadome decided to move on to the next step.



In his office in the upper district of Kugamayama City, Inabe sat with his head in his hands. Then, with a very troubled expression, he sighed deeply and turned his gaze to Hikaru, who had directly reported the reason to him.

“So, what's the situation? Does it seem like we can really handle it? ”

Hikaru answered with a serious face.

“I'm sorry. I don't know. Shiro just said that.”

“I see...”

Inabe, despite knowing it already, confirmed it unintentionally. Upon hearing the expected response, he sighed even deeper.

Inabe had anticipated that it must be significant when he received the message from Hikaru that they could only speak in person. But he hadn't expected it to be this serious.

Akira had made an enemy of Sakashita Heavy Industry. It was a dire situation.

Meanwhile, although Hikaru maintained a serious expression outwardly, inwardly, she felt somewhat relieved. It wasn't solely her burden, and there was some blame to be shared with Inabe for putting her in this situation.

Knowing that lamenting wouldn't change the situation, Inabe, as a city executive, refocused his thoughts.

"Anyway, for now, I'll handle Akira's attack on Sakashita Heavy Industry. You keep quiet. I'll propose lifting the bounty on Akira in the executive meeting later. We'll decide whether to bring up Udajima's matter then. There's no confirmation for now, and considering the source, it's uncertain. That's all. Get back to work."

"Understood."

Hikaru bowed politely and left the room. Alone again, Inabe frowned.

"But still... Udajima being alive..."

Inabe had only heard about Udajima's survival as a speculation from Shiro through Hikaru. Yet, Inabe was convinced of Udajima's survival.

"And to think he's cooperating with the Nationalist... Predicting the actions of a cornered person is impossible."

The root of this incident likely stemmed from the power struggle between himself and Udajima. Inabe couldn't have imagined it would escalate to this extent. With that in mind, Inabe lamented the situation, feeling somewhat responsible.

After Reina and the others reunited with Elena's group, they returned together to their residence within the defensive walls. For the time being, Sheryl and Shizuka are staying here for safety. Elena's group, hired as Hikaru's escorts, are also with Shizuka's

group since guards aren't needed when Hikaru is within the defensive walls.

While looking at the outside scenery, Sheryl contacted Erio's group. She assured them that she was safe thanks to Akira, but she couldn't return to the base for a while. She mentioned that businesses like the artifact shop, which required her presence, could temporarily close. She entrusted other minor matters to Erio's group.

“Okay, got it. If anything happens, let me know.”

“Understood. Um, it's a bit awkward to ask, but since the boss was kidnapped, quite a few people have fled from the group. What should we do?”

“Well, that's unavoidable. If they didn't flee with the group's money or equipment, just let them be.”

“And what about those who did flee with them? ”

“Deal with them as usual. Given the circumstances, there's no need to push too hard, but at least make a list of them.”

“Got it. Boss, take care over there. ...Just to confirm, everything's alright, right? ”

Sheryl answered clearly.

“Of course.”

Hearing her confident voice, Erio felt relieved, ready to end the call. But before that, something came to mind.

“Oh, by the way, what happened to Shijima? I think his subordinates will definitely ask.”

“Ah, sorry. I don't know either. We were kidnapped together, but we split up when Akira helped me.”

“I see. Got it. I'll pass that along.”

“Thank you.”

After finishing the communication with the group, Sheryl expressed her gratitude to Reina once again.

“Reina-san, thank you so much for not only sheltering me but also providing clothes and information terminals. I really appreciate it.”

Sheryl was wearing clothes prepared by Reina, not the protective suit she obtained from the Mihazono District Ruin. The information terminal she used earlier was also given by Reina.

Reina replied with a smile, almost jokingly.

“Don't worry about it. If you need anything else, don't hesitate to ask. It's all on credit to Akira.”

“...Well, that would be troublesome.”

While Reina's remark sounded like a joke, it was not untrue. Sheryl understood that and smiled wryly.

Shizuka listened to the conversation between Elena's group.

“...I see. Akira might have...”

Akira might have made an enemy of Sakashita Heavy Industry. Shizuka couldn't smile as easily, considering the seriousness of the situation.

However, compared to the seriousness of the matter, she didn't have as stern of an expression. Elena noticed this and asked.

“Yeah, that's right. Shiro said he'd handle it somehow. What do you think, Shizuka? ”

“Even if you ask me that... I don't know.”

Shizuka's response gave Elena a sense of hope. She replied with a forced smile.

“Right. Let's hope for the best.”

Shizuka, who is very intuitive, says she doesn't understand. In other words, she's not answering that it's hopeless to think about something as fatal and desperate as making enemies of Sakashita Heavy Industries.

In other words, there was still a possibility things would work out. If anyone can do it, it's Akira. With that thought, Elena, along with Sarah who had the same idea, and Shizuka who realized her own thoughts, smiled and wished for Akira's safety.



Back at the base, Haruka had a troubled expression. It was because the fake Akira had targeted Shizuka.

(The activation happened, but did the consciousness transfer fail, causing it to operate in the old version...?)

While groaning, thinking that at least she hadn't given any instructions, Haruka was approached by Viola.

“I told you to stop targeting her. Since Sheryl was kidnapped, she should have had at least some guards for Shizuka, right? ”

“I didn't give any instructions. Saying that means it wasn't your instructions either, right? ”

“That's right.”

Haruka and Viola looked at Udajima. In response, Udajima shook his head.

“Not me either. I assumed it was targeting her in place of Sheryl since you managed to rescue her, but was I mistaken? ”

“I guess so. Maybe the old version's personality acted on its own. It's an advantage that it can act with its own judgment even with ambiguous or no instructions, but it's a disadvantage too, as seen in cases like this. The degree of self-awareness varies between versions as well.”

If it wasn't anyone's instructions, then that's what it was. Haruka and Udajima concluded.

Viola continued the conversation.

“So, Sheryl has been retrieved, but what about Shijima? ”

“I don't have any use for him anymore, so feel free to do as you please.”

“Leaving that person alive won't serve as leverage against Akira. Should we dispose of him now that he's served his purpose? ”

“In that case, I'll think of a good use for him. Since Shijima believes he was kidnapped just like me, I think I can use him to my advantage.”

Saying so, Viola laughed joyfully.

Viola wasn't abducted and forced to cooperate by Udajima and the others, she had been cooperating with Udajima from the beginning. The reason she wasn't wearing the augmented suit for restraints was also for that purpose.

It's Viola's fault that the fake Akira is so fixated on seeking revenge for Yumina's incident.

Previously, Viola was suspected by Akira of being involved in Yumina's death, and she was almost killed because of that

misunderstanding. Although the misunderstanding was resolved, Akira declared that he would kill Viola next time, even if it was a misunderstanding, while pointing a gun at her.

Viola poured as much of Akira's killing intent from that time into the formation of the fake Akira's personality as possible. Because of that, the fake Akira became willing to risk her life for revenge for Yumina's death, even to the point of trying to kill Sheryl.

And for Udajima, Viola was a partner who had cooperated with him to that extent. He nodded lightly in response.

"I see. I'll leave that matter to him... But you know, isn't it a bit late to say this, but should we have abducted both Sheryl and Shizuka? "

Thinking that if they had done so, even if Sheryl had been retrieved, they would have only lost one hostage, Udajima lamented his judgment error. Viola laughed and said to him.

"It's all hindsight. There's no point in lamenting it. It's odd for me to say this since I stopped them from abducting both."

If they had used the fake Akira to abduct both Sheryl and Shizuka at the same time, it would have been confirmed that there were two Akiras at that time, revealing the existence of the fake.

Also, there was the option of having someone else abduct one of them, but if they did that, it would diminish the impression that Akira had abducted her own friend.

So it was better to only abduct one of them. Viola explained this to Udajima and the others and got them to agree to only abduct one.

Then the question arose of which one to abduct between Sheryl and Shizuka, and Viola supported abducting Sheryl.

Publicly, Sheryl is believed to be Akira's lover. Moreover, it's believed that Akira is deeply invested in her. It's thought that she has

supported Sheryl to an extent that is unimaginable under normal circumstances, turning the gang she leads into a huge organization called the Sheryl's gang. That's how it's perceived.

With that background in mind, neither Haruka nor Udajima had any objections to abducting Sheryl.

Reflecting on that process, Udajima said.

"I understand. We all decided on it. We don't expect you to take responsibility."

"Thanks. That's a relief."

Viola smiled and replied as such. And she thought to herself.

(Well, it's probably my fault that the fake tried to abduct Shizuka and failed.)

Viola instructed Udajima and the others to abduct Sheryl instead of Shizuka.

However, Viola knew. If the goal was to corner Akira, or even to make him die, it would be more effective to abduct Shizuka instead of Sheryl.

(If she were taken, Akira would recklessly charge into the Third Inner Sector without any regard for his own safety, just to save her. That would be too predictable and boring.)

That's why, faced with the choice between Sheryl and Shizuka, Viola chose Sheryl. Even if Akira were to go to rescue the abducted person, he would choose the less important one for Akira to ensure he had enough time to prepare before rushing to help.

It would make the situation more chaotic. More interesting. Just for that reason alone.

Not just in the city of Kugamayama, but also involving numerous high-ranking hunters and even the five big corporations, it would create a huge uproar. No matter how much planning she did, such a massive incident would never happen without Akira. Viola risked her life with a smile just to watch the spectacle from the best seat in the house.

Chapter 251: The 500 Billion Aurum Bounty

Akira's attack on Harmers at Shiro's request has increased the likelihood of making enemies of Sakashita Heavy Industries.

It's not confirmed yet. Shiro says he'll handle it somehow. However, being with Sheryl and Elena in this situation poses risks of getting caught in the crossfire. So, for the time being, Akira decided to split up.

They're staying at a branch of Lion Steel Company in the Seranthal Building today. It's already night. The large room during the day has now turned into three separate rooms, and Akira and the others are resting in their respective rooms.

Akira relaxes in the ample hot water-filled bathtub in the white bathroom, relieving today's fatigue.

『But still... a lot happened today.』

Alpha, who is bathing together as usual, says with a smile.

『Yes, it was quite eventful. But overall, it ended well, didn't it? 』

『...Did it? 』

Alpha, with her captivating nude body, approaches Akira, who asks with a hint of doubt. Then, with a smile, she answers lightly but with an air of certainty.

『That's right.』

Akira was swayed by that.

『I see... Maybe you're right...』

While it might have made enemies of Sakashita Heavy Industry, Akira was able to kill his impostor and save Sheryl. And Shiro says he'll handle the Sakashita matter. Thinking about it, it may indeed have been a generally positive outcome. Alpha also says so. Akira thought vaguely with a drowsiness mind.

Alpha isn't lying. However, her criteria for considering it a generally positive outcome were different from Akira's.

Through this incident, Akira has almost repaid his debt to Shiro. With this, the concern of Akira being manipulated by Shiro's convenience has significantly decreased.

In the process, Akira was helped by Carol, but Carol is the one repaying a debt to Akira. It's not a debt on Akira's side. Also, although Akira developed a fairly positive impression of Carol, concerns in that regard have diminished to the point of being almost negligible since Akira killed Yumina. It's within Alpha's acceptable range.

Alpha doesn't see the Sakashita Heavy Industry incident as such a big problem. Alpha is not from the current era. She doesn't view antagonizing Sakashita Heavy Industry as dangerous as Hikaru, Elena, and the others do.

Rather, she even considers it convenient in some cases. By completing her request through Akira, there's a chance of causing damage to Sakashita Heavy Industry, the Corporate Government, and the present side. If they are already adversaries, then Akira doesn't need to worry about turning them into enemies by completing her own request.

Of course, Alpha doesn't think everything is completely fine. That's why she answered that it was generally a good outcome.

『 So, Akira, what are you going to do now? Will you continue accompanying Shiro for a while? 』

『I'm thinking about it, but what does Alpha think?』

『It's up to you, Akira. But since you've already repaid Shiro's favor, if you're going to continue with him, it might be better for Shiro to procure some powerful equipment for you through his connections.』

『That's true. I'll ask about it later.』

If Shiro intends to have Akira accompany him again to engage with someone like Harmers, then it's reasonable for Akira to receive such equipment. Akira also thinks so and decides to negotiate with Shiro later.

Akira, done with bathing, lies down on the bed. His mind is already in a state of sleep. He can't negotiate with Shiro with this tired mind. Let's do it tomorrow. With that excuse, Akira surrenders to drowsiness.

The next day, when Akira brings up the matter of equipment procurement with Shiro, he also positively accepts it. Shiro needs to create a debt with Akira, and also, it's convenient for him if Akira becomes stronger to help with his own goals.

“Got it. I'll try to arrange something on my end, Akira. You understand it's a favor, right?”

“I understand. Well, if Shiro manages the Sakashita matter, though. But Shiro gets that, right?”

“I get it.”

The issue of attacking Harmers and antagonizing Sakashita Heavy Industry is still unresolved. Whether Akira or Shiro owes a debt will be decided after resolving that issue.

Then, Akira and the others receive a bounty update. Carol, after confirming its contents, smiles at Akira.

“Akira. It's good news.”

“Yeah.”

Akira also smiles happily in response. The update informs that the bounty placed on Akira in Kugamayama City has been withdrawn.

Another bounty update arrives for Akira.

“Huh? Another bounty update?”

“Is that so? It didn't come to me... I wonder why...”

Shiro says, puzzled, after Carol, who seemed puzzled, spoke.

“It hasn't come to me either. And I checked a bit, but it seems like it's only come to Akira. There's only the one from earlier in the broad-area general notification.”

“What's going on?”

“I don't know. Let's check the contents for now. Show us, too.”

As instructed, Akira displayed the notification's contents in everyone's augmented vision. And together, they looked at the contents, wearing expressions of surprise.

Bounty update. Notice of newly designated bounty. Target: Akira. Bounty amount: 500 billion Aurum. Requester: Sakashita Heavy Industry. Reason for bounty: Hostile actions against Sakashita Heavy Industry.

Although the 500 million Aurum bounty from Kugamayama City was withdrawn, a new bounty of 500 billion Aurum has been placed by

Sakashita Heavy Industry. Upon reading the contents, even Akira couldn't help but smile wryly at the staggering amount.

“500 billion Aurum... The amount is too large to grasp...”

Even without understanding the value of 500 billion Aurum, it was enough of a reason for all the high-rank hunters currently in the Kugamayama region to target him. Making an enemy of Sakashita Heavy Industries means just that. The situation had drastically changed. Akira understood at least that much.

Carol didn't know what to say to Akira and silently watched him. At the same time, she felt puzzled.

If they're placing a 500 billion Aurum bounty on Akira, why isn't her name mentioned there? If they're citing the attack on Harmers as the reason for hostility toward Sakashita Heavy Industry, shouldn't they also put a bounty on her? Was it because the bounty was only placed on the mastermind, and she was considered Akira's subordinate and thus excluded? That seemed too unnatural. These doubts also kept Carol silent.

Then, Shiro spoke with a stern expression.

“Akira. My superior wants to talk to you about this. Can we connect?”

The unexpected nature of this request actually calmed Akira down. He replied seriously.

“Understood.”

At Shiro's command, a man named Sugadome was added to Akira and the others' augmented vision.

After Sugadome glanced at each of them in turn, his gaze returned to Akira.

“I'm Sugadome. From Sakashita Heavy Industry. First, let me tell you this. How you interpret what I'm about to say is up to you, but this is a concession. Normally, something like this wouldn't happen. Usually, we'd handle those who are hostile to our company in the usual way, without any concessions. However, considering that you acted at Shiro's request, we're going through the proper procedures.”

Carol was taken aback by the unique atmosphere of Sugadome, a senior executive of Sakashita Heavy Industry. She felt a pressure akin to a death sentence from someone who was just speaking normally. Shiro, too, had a tense look on his face.

But Akira alone was staring at Sugadome intently.

Sugadome continued to gaze at Akira with the same intensity.

“Shiro should be there, right? I want him handed over.”

“Refused.”

Shiro was taken aback twice. Currently, Olivia's escort by Shiro has been temporarily suspended. If Akira complied with Sugadome's request, Shiro would be in trouble. Shiro was initially surprised that such a demand was made by Sugadome. And then, he was further surprised by Akira's immediate refusal.

Sugadome continued without changing his expression.

“Reason for refusal?”

“Do you need a reason not to sell someone?”

“The bounty update you received earlier will be publicly announced tomorrow. Its effect will also be declared at that time. In other words, it's still possible to resolve the issue with our company before it's announced. Even so, will your answer remain the same?”

“Yes.”

If he doesn't comply, he'll be killed. If he were to succumb to such a threat, Akira wouldn't be here now. He'd have died long ago, unable to emerge from the alleys of the slums. Choosing to fight without giving in to such threats, fighting as instructed, surviving, that's why Akira is here now.

And Sugadome understood his mentality from Akira's immediate response to his query. With that in mind, he continued speaking.

"I see. Then let's say we dispatch our unit to retrieve Shiro. If you were on the scene, would you protect Shiro? "

Akira replied immediately once again.

"No, I probably wouldn't."

"What!? You're supposed to say you would protect him, right!?"

Shiro exclaimed involuntarily. While Shiro felt somewhat overwhelmed by Akira's refusal to sell himself to Sugadome, even when offered the cancellation of the 500 billion Aurum bounty, he was also taken aback by Akira's response, which nullified that feeling so easily.

Akira gave Shiro a troubled look.

"I don't owe you that much anymore, do I? Didn't I say that? "

"Well, maybe, but!? Isn't it unreasonable after all that's happened!?"

"I don't care."

If Sakashita Heavy Industry dispatches a unit to retrieve Shiro, they'll probably be more powerful than last time. In other words, they'll be at least as strong as Harmers. Even if there's no real debt, Akira doesn't want to fight against such opponents again without a good reason.

Akira looked back at Sugadome and answered.

“Well, whether I'll protect Shiro or not depends on the situation at that time.”

“I see.”

With the second question, Sugadome gained further understanding of Akira.

“So, you'll be declared a bounty tomorrow. However, as I mentioned earlier, this is a concession. And for it to be a concession, you need to understand its content. Let me explain.”

Sugadome displayed the contents of the bounty update in everyone's augmented vision. And as he did, he continued speaking.

“This has deliberately ambiguous wording. Akira has been designated as the bounty target, but there are currently two interpretations. That is, the real Akira, and the likely impostor believed to be in Third Inner Sector. Even if you acted at Shiro's request, you attacked one of our personnel. This constitutes sufficient hostility toward our company. And your impostor, by cooperating with the Nationalist, is also our enemy. Both are worthy of our bounty.”

Both Akira and Carol, as well as Shiro, listened earnestly to Sugadome's words.

“By the way, your impostor isn't alone. We've confirmed at least two here. There are probably more. It wouldn't be surprising to have many crude imitations with the same face. If the Nationalist in Third Inner Sector aren't dealt with, they'll keep appearing. So, according to the latter interpretation, defeating Akira means the annihilation of that group of Nationalist. The correctness of the interpretation also depends on the outcome. All possible charges will be included.”

After explaining calmly to that extent, Sugadome once again directed his gaze at Akira and informed him.

“I'll say it again. This is a concession. It gives you room to interfere with which interpretation will be adopted and its outcome.”

If he somehow deal with the Nationalist in Third Inner Sector, Akira's hostile actions against Sakashita Heavy Industry could be attributed to the work of impostors. Akira understands that much.

But whether to perceive it as a concession or coercion is another matter. Placing a bounty and then offering to cancel it if he complies could be seen as coercion. And Akira doesn't yield to coercion.

Concession or coercion. Akira himself couldn't decide at the moment and asked back according to his feelings.

“But what if I don't do anything? ”

“It doesn't matter. This isn't a demand. Do as you please. In that case, even if the Nationalist in Third Inner Sector are wiped out by other hunters, the bounty won't be paid until Akira is defeated.”

The bounty will be paid for both the real and fake Akira's elimination. That's how it's interpreted. Sugadome stated this calmly. And then, he suddenly changed his demeanor and spoke sarcastically to the lazy ones.

“Well, do as you like, but if I may offer a personal opinion, your impostor might be causing trouble for your friends, right? Even if the Nationalist in Third Inner Sector are defeated by other hunters while you do nothing, if you feel even a little responsible for involving your friends, instead of waiting for someone else to solve it, why not try to do something yourself? ”

Akira winced at Sugadome's words, hitting him right where it hurt. “Try to do something yourself.” To Akira, who had survived by relying on Alpha, it was a very harsh statement.

With Akira's reaction, Sugadome was convinced that Akira would go to Third Inner Sector to defeat the Nationalist. He returned to his previous attitude and continued.

“Let me tell you one more thing.”

Sugadome said this and glanced at Carol.

“No bounty will be placed on her.”

Then he returned his gaze to Akira and conveyed.

“Because it's a concession. I've summarized it for you.”

Akira and Carol both wore expressions of surprise. Despite attacking Harmers, Carol wasn't targeted for a bounty. The reason was a concession to Akira.

“That's all for now. I'll take my leave.”

As Sugadome tried to end the communication, Akira stopped him.

“Wait a moment.”

“What is it? ”

“Um... Thank you for not putting a bounty on Carol.”

Saying so, Akira bowed his head. Sugadome's proposal could be seen as a concession or coercion. But with Sugadome not putting a bounty on Carol, Akira saw it as a concession.

Sugadome looked slightly surprised.

“You're welcome.”

With a slight smile, Sugadome said only that before ending the communication and disappearing from Akira and the others' augmented vision.

After finishing his conversation with Sugadome, Akira took a sip of the drink offered by Olivia and exhaled.

“Back to the original plan, huh...”

Originally, Akira planned to infiltrate Third Inner Sector to kill his impostor. However, since he managed to kill that person at Serantel Building, there was no need to go to the dangerous Third Inner Sector. But by accepting Sugadome's concession, although the initial objective changed slightly, he returned to the plan of infiltrating Third Inner Sector.

Carol, sitting opposite him, asked.

“So... when are you going to infiltrate Third Inner Sector? ”

“I'm thinking of doing it after the bounty update tomorrow when I officially become a bounty. If things go well, I might be able to fight the guys in Third Inner Sector along with those who are targeting me.”

There are also Kaiju over there. It would be tough for him to go alone to Third Inner Sector and fight the Nationalist.

But if he waits too long, the high-ranking hunters currently in Kugamayama may defeat the Nationalist in Third Inner Sector first. That would be too late.

Right after the bounty update, he might be able to fight alongside the high-ranking hunters. He doesn't expect them to cooperate, but just having a three-way battle would be easier. That's what Akira thought.

Carol also understood Akira's thoughts.

“...I see.”

Upon hearing Carol's somewhat meaningful voice, Akira speaks.

“Oh, just so you know, Carol won't be coming with me, okay? ”

Carol dares to smile.

“...Yes. I understand. I'm aware that I'd just be a burden. Besides, I've already played my trump card.”

“Come along.” With those words, Carol followed. Whether it was to the depths of Third Inner Sector where the Kaiju resided, she didn't hesitate.

However, if told not to come, she couldn't go. To accompany Akira against his will, she needed at least enough strength not to be a hindrance. And she knew she didn't have that kind of strength right now.

At that moment, Shiro interjects with a smile.

“Akira. What about me? ”

“You'll be on your own. I'm going alone.”

“Eh!? ”

Naturally, Shiro, who assumed he would accompany him, inadvertently let out his surprise.

“No, no, no. Olivia's repairs will be done by tomorrow. What good is it if you don't take me with you? ”

“It's because of the debt you incurred that things turned out like this. I won't owe you anymore. So, I won't take you with me.”

Akira said it with a serious expression, but this was partly an excuse.

Once you entered Third Inner Sector, there was a risk of not being able to leave, but probably Alpha could manage something if asked. However, if there were companions, not just secrecy but silencing would be necessary. That's why Akira had already decided to go alone.

“Also Shirou, just so you know, you couldn't handle the Sakashita situation this time, so you owes me now, not the other way around. If you asks for help, I'll leave you behind.”

“I see...”

If Olivia was with him, Shiro could choose to follow Akira by force. However, that would not only create a debt to Akira but also make it impossible to repay it. By forcibly accompanying him, Shiro would owe Akira.

Even if he forcibly accompanied them and rescued them from danger, whether Akira would recognize it as a debt was questionable. Thinking so, Shiro pondered his next move with a troubled expression.

Then, Akira received a communication from Kibayashi via a secure line.

“Hey, Akira. I saw the latest bounty report. It's good that the bounty has been lifted. I was about to support you properly so you could face those in Third Inner Sector seriously, but it's all for nothing now.”

Kibayashi didn't contact Akira because he was disappointed about that. He contacted him to provoke him, not to let the prepared support go to waste but to incite Akira.

“But just because the bounty are lifted doesn't mean those guys have disappeared. They kidnapped Sheryl and even attacked Shizuka, right? Your impostor seems to have died then, but of course, you won't let the remaining guys off the hook, will you? ”

Provocatively, Kibayashi said, Akira calmly replied.

“That's perfect timing. I have something to discuss regarding that support. Actually, the situation has changed a bit... Shiro, can you connect Kibayashi's line like you did earlier? ”

Shirou said this as a trial.

“Weren't you supposed to not incur any more debts with me? ”

“Well, okay. Now, since you're in a state where you owe me, and if you're not going to acknowledge it or repay the debt, then I'll pretend I don't know you either.”

“Got it, got it. I'll do it. I get it...”

Shiro, feeling a bit frantic inwardly at Akira's words that didn't even seem to imply criticism, but still laughed confidently, quickly reconnected the communication with Kibayashi. Through a more powerful secure line, Kibayashi's figure appeared in Akira's augmented field of view.

And as Akira explained the situation to Kibayashi, when the explanation was over, Kibayashi collapsed to the floor. His legs couldn't support him, his breathing was difficult, and he was laughing so hard that if he wasn't careful, he might die laughing right there.

Carol glances at the uncomfortable Kibayashi. On the other hand, Akira was somewhat exasperated. He sighs softly and says,

“There's no need to laugh that much...”

“...B-because you... you... went and... p-p-picked a f-fight with... Sakashita Heavy Industry...”

Kibayashi managed to reply somehow, but with the remaining strength, he burst into laughter again. With more composure than

before, he laughed loudly, thanks to having a little more room to breathe.

Akira sighed again. Then, he silently waited for Kibayashi to calm down.

After a while, Kibayashi, who had finally calmed down to some extent, sat in the chair with unsteady movements.

“...R-right. I'm... I'm okay now. Sorry for making you wait.”

Kibayashi hadn't completely regained his composure yet. However, he was calm enough to converse.

“But still... regardless of the circumstances, picking a fight with Sakashita Heavy Industry... That's so... typical of you, Akira! Didn't you think it was dangerous? ”

“I've only recently come to that realization after seeing Kibayashi earlier.”

“I see! I see! Making an enemy of Sakashita Heavy Industry is... that's how dangerous it is, you know? ”

“I understand.”

“No, you don't! You don't understand at all! You don't understand anything! But that's fine with you! That's what makes you Akira! ”

Kibayashi was in high spirits, continuing his conversation while trying to contain his excitement.

“Why not just continue to oppose Sakashita Heavy Industry? Even then, I'll still support you properly! How about it? ”

“I decline. I didn't pick a fight with Sakashita Heavy Industry out of enjoyment. Besides, if we leave those Third Inner Sector guys alone, they're likely to cause trouble for Shizuka and the others in the

future. It's important to crush them thoroughly. In that regard, Sugadome's proposal is convenient for me.”

“I see. Well, if that's what you say, I won't force it. It's best to let you do as you please. So, about my support, you mentioned you had something to discuss? ”

“About that support, can it be arranged before I head to Third Inner Sector tomorrow? ”

“Tomorrow, huh... Alright, I'll make it happen.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Then we need to hurry up and prepare. That's all for now. I'll be looking forward to you entertaining me again tomorrow, alright? ”

“I'll be counting on your support for that.”

“Leave it to me! ”

With that strong response, Kibayashi left Akira with a radiant smile and ended the communication.

Alpha chuckled and said.

『If he's in such high spirits, we can expect considerable support』

『Indeed...』

Kibayashi had mentioned providing some equipment as support for Akira. And the more powerful the equipment, the more Kibayashi believed Akira would entertain him by using it.

And Akira understood that as well. Surely, Kibayashi had prepared something extremely powerful. More than anything, for Kibayashi's

own enjoyment. It must be something remarkable, judging by how brightly Kibayashi's smile shone.

That much was believable. Even if he died as a result of obtaining that equipment, Kibayashi would probably laugh uproariously. But even so, that was that. With that thought, Akira let out a wry smile.

And then, he shifted his focus.

“Alright, Shiro. I'm leaving now. What about Carol? ”

“Huh? Wasn't I not supposed to come with you? ”

“Not to Third Inner Sector. I'll send you to the city at least. You're not a bounty target anymore, so it should be fine. And if I'm going to ride into Third Inner Sector tomorrow, I want to be close to it now. Being closer to the city should also make it easier to receive Kibayashi's support.”

They could only have free movement until Akira became a bounty target again tomorrow. To make the most of that time, Akira decided to leave the Serenthal Building now. Carol nodded in agreement.

“Understood. Let's go.”

With that, Akira and Carol finished their preparations, bid farewell to Shiro and Olivia, and left the shop. They headed for the elevator, bringing along the automated bike.

Pamela and the others were still there. Without obstructing Akira and the others, they split aside to let them pass. Akira and the others got on the elevator and descended from the building.

『Alpha. What were they, in the end? 』

『 I don't know. But since we're leaving the building, it doesn't matter』

『...Yeah, I guess so.』

There was no point in worrying about it. Thinking so, Akira descended to the ground floor. Then, avoiding the meaningful gaze from the building's manager, they left the Serenthal Building.

Afterward, they soared into the wasteland on the bike. The sunset scorched the sky of the wasteland. As the sun set, when the day rose again, Akira would become a 500 billion Aurum bounty target. During that brief time, Carol enjoyed herself behind Akira.

Chapter 252: Doras's Resolve

After leaving the Mihazono District Ruin, Akira returned to Kugamayama City with Carol once. Although they had planned to split up from there, they ended up staying together a little longer.

Carol's camping car had autonomously returned to Carol's home after dropping off Hikaru and the others. Akira's group then boarded it and headed for the outskirts of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

Currently, the outskirts of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin were in a state of decay. Most of the relics had already been scavenged, and even if one had confidence in their skills and wanted to earn more, it was better to go to the First Inner Sector. If one lacked the skills for that, other ruins were safer and more profitable.

Moreover, due to recent Nationalist disturbances, the Kuzusuhara District Ruin themselves were considered dangerous by many hunters. For these reasons, the outskirts of the ruins were generally deserted, making it a suitable place for Akira to hide as he planned to venture into the Third Inner Sector tomorrow.

“I'll say it again, but I'm not taking you to the Third Inner Sector, okay?”

“I understand.”

The sun had already set. Upon reaching the outskirts, Akira's group parked their vehicle, prepared for the next day, and decided to sleep early.

Late at night, Akira, still wearing augmented suit as a precaution, was awakened by Alpha.

『Alpha. What's wrong?』

『Akira, a message has arrived for you via general short-range communication.』

After checking the contents, Akira wore a puzzled expression. The message stated that they wanted to make a deal. There was a possibility of it turning into a confrontation depending on the negotiation outcome, so they requested Akira to come alone to the designated location without informing Carol, as Akira had agreed to escort her. They hoped Akira wouldn't involve the one he was guarding.

『Alpha. How many people are there on the other side?』

『The only person around us is the sender of this message.』

『So, even if the purpose is to separate Carol and me, am I the one being targeted?』

『Seems like it. What do you plan to do?』

Alpha said, shifting her gaze towards Carol. Akira followed her lead and looked at Carol, who was sleeping soundly.

『...Since they seem concerned about not involving Carol, I'll take advantage of that concern and proceed.』

With Alpha's support, Akira erased his presence and carefully got out of the car so as not to wake Carol, and headed towards the designated location. In a room of an abandoned building, a man was waiting.

That man was Doras.

“I'm Doras. You're Akira, right? Sorry for calling you out at this hour. I appreciate you coming alone as requested.”

With that preamble, Doras immediately got to the point.

“Firstly, I want you to listen calmly. You might have felt relieved when the bounty on your head was lifted, but unfortunately, you'll be designated as a bounty again tomorrow. And this time, it's not from Kugamayama City. The bounty is from Sakashita Heavy Industry, and it's worth 500 billion Aurums.”

Upon hearing such news, a normal reaction would be surprise or agitation. However, Akira, who already knew this, remained unfazed.

Observing Akira's reaction, Doras spoke.

“So, you're not surprised, which means you knew. Let me ask you then. Do you have any recollection of being targeted by Sakashita Heavy Industry? ”

Akira remained silent. Understanding his reaction, Doras grimaced.

“I see... So, the 500 billion Aurum bounty wasn't placed on your impostor's head...? ”

Doras's speculation wasn't wrong. Also, Akira didn't feel the need to explain the details to Doras, so the conversation proceeded under Doras's assumption.

Akira spoke up.

“So, what's the deal? ”

“I'll assist you in escaping Sakashita Heavy Industry's economic zone. In return, I want you to stop getting involved with Carol any further.”

To Akira's surprise, Doras's proposal was unexpected.

“...What do you mean? ”

“It's simple. Once you've antagonized Sakashita Heavy Industry, your only means of survival is to escape to the territories controlled by the other Big Five corporations. But no one will help you do that, as they'll become targets too. However, if you accept this deal, I'll assist you. That's all.”

Akira's confusion grew, and he sought resolution from Alpha.

『Alpha.』

『He's not lying.』

『...So, what does this mean?』

『For some reason, he doesn't want Akira to be further involved with Carol.』

Despite seeking clarification from Alpha, Akira couldn't obtain more information than what Doras had stated. However, Akira decided to switch his focus. If he wasn't misunderstanding the other party's request, his response was already decided.

“I refuse.”

“...I'm a hunter too. I don't deceive in deals with fellow hunters. If necessary, we can even contract through the Hunter's Office.”

By deceiving a bounty worth 500 billion Aurums and accompanying him, there would be plenty of opportunities for them to kill him. Suspecting such a scenario, Doras responded to dispel the misunderstanding.

However, Akira shook his head.

“No, I don't think it's a lie.”

“If so, then why? ”

“I don't have to answer that. Also, if you don't want me to be involved with Carol anymore, tell her, not me. It's not like I'm the one sticking to Carol.”

“...I see.”

With that, Doras also made up his mind.

“Then, there's no choice but to kill you.”

Depending on the outcome of the negotiation, it could turn into a battle. True to that declaration, Doras directed his murderous intent towards Akira.

“Just in case you change your mind, I'll tell you the reason. I don't want Carol to die. That's why I'm going to kill you.”

Doras's gaze towards Akira held no anger, but it was filled with determination and lethal intent.

“I don't know why Carol chose you as her guard. But there must be some reason I don't understand, probably something more than just being strong, which is why you were chosen.”

Akira knows that reason, but Doras continues unaware.

“But I don't think you're suitable as Carol's guard. Quite the opposite. I think Carol will die because she hired you as her guard.”

Doras had resigned himself if Carol had hired the best guard. If it were Carol, she could afford to pay for the guard's services with her body, even if they were someone he couldn't afford with his own funds. He had doubted his own abilities. He could think that way.

However, when Doras investigated Akira, he couldn't believe that Carol had chosen him as her guard.

“I've looked into you. Coming from the slums, starting from Hunter Rank 1, and rising this far in such a short time is astonishing. Your talent must be genuine.”

There was no lie in those words. The investigation results only served to acknowledge Akira's talent to Doras. But more than that, the contents made Doras wary of Akira.

“But in the process of rising so far, there have only been extraordinary incidents. And each time they occur, the scale becomes larger.”

In the beginning, it was just a dispute among mid-tier gangs in the slums. Even so, given Akira's Hunter Rank at the time, it wouldn't have been surprising if he had died. Akira survived it. And not long after, there was a full-scale war between the two major gangs in the slums. Akira was involved in that too.

That's not all. The commotion at the Yonozuka Station ruins. The commotion at the Mihazono District Ruin. The commotion at the First Inner Sector of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin last time. The incidents Akira was involved in, or happened to be present at, increased the scale so much that they became the next commotion.

“You've overcome all of that, which is why you've become so strong in such a short time. But how many people died in those incidents you were involved in? I'm not blaming you. It's not like every single commotion happened because of you. You're just the type who easily gets involved in such commotions.”

The more significant the commotion, the more people get involved. Even if the biggest victim is Akira himself.

“But as long as you're that kind of person, anyone by your side will be dragged into those big commotions with you. They might even die if they're unlucky.”

In the incident with the inter-city transport vehicle, monsters appeared in the airspace. In this incident, Sakashita Heavy Industry was involved. The commotions escalating around Akira were becoming so large that even high-ranking hunters could risk death by being involved.

And Doras couldn't tolerate Carol getting involved and dying in that.

"If someone I don't know dies, it's not my concern. But if Carol dies, it's different. I can't tolerate someone who tried to help, even if it meant abandoning the pride of being a hunter, dying for such a reason."

Doras didn't want Akira to die, per se. If Akira were just strong, there would be no problem. On top of that, if Akira could keep his distance to avoid dragging Carol into commotions as an unlucky person who always gets involved, that would be fine.

"So if you're going to keep getting involved with Carol, there's no choice but for you to die."

If neither of those is possible, and if Carol can't be kept away from misfortune, then the only option is to erase that misfortune. Doras resolved to do so.

And inwardly, Akira understood Doras's point of view. Carol had almost died multiple times because of hiring Akira as her guard. Akira was aware of that. Akira, who had been silent until now, spoke up.

"...Let me say it again. If that's the reason, wouldn't it be better to persuade Carol?"

"...I did. But it didn't work."

"...I see."

The other party had done everything possible to avoid this situation. Akira also understood that. However, he couldn't accept Doras's demand.

He couldn't deny that he was someone who got involved in commotions. If he didn't want to involve important people in those commotions, Akira knew that distancing himself was the best option.

However, understanding and doing were two different things. Bursting out from the alleys of the slums, Akira had gained much. The strength of the once destitute Akira was something he didn't want to lose. He couldn't afford to lose it. That's what he thought.

That's why, if he didn't want to lose, he needed a strength that more than made up for the strength he had lost, a strength that could satisfy his greed. With this in mind, hoping that he had that strength now, Akira decided to fight Doris.

Doris also noticed the change in Akira's demeanor. Negotiations were over. From here on, it was a fight to the death. Thinking this quietly, he began the pre-battle conversation.

“I suggest we do this without guns. If we start shooting at each other, this place will be blown to bits. It was kind of you to come out quietly for Carol's sake, but Carol might notice. Even if she does, it'd be best if she stayed out of it and didn't get caught in the crossfire.”

“Understood.”

Carol might not just run away but also try to help Akira. Doras stopped short of saying that because he didn't want that to happen. Akira's response indicated that he also believed the likelihood of that happening was high.

Doras was the first to discard his gun. Following suit, Akira removed all his guns as well. A gun fell from the auxiliary arm of his augmented suit, landing on the floor, along with the ones in his hands.

“Thank you. I'd also like to use some information disruption smoke screens. Since you're powerful, this will make it completely impossible for anyone outside to know we're fighting here.”

Akira nodded. Doras then took out and activated the information disruption smoke screens. A cylindrical object was thrown onto the floor, and smoke began to spread throughout the room.

If these information disruption smoke screens were adjusted for Doras's information gathering device, it would make it difficult for Akira alone to grasp the opponent's position and movements. Despite the danger, Akira nodded, prioritizing not involving Carol over her own safety. Doras appreciated this.

“I understand. You're strong. Stronger than me.”

Saying so, Doras gripped the double-edged blade with his right hand. Facing squarely toward Akira, he kept the blade pointed toward the floor, maintaining a natural stance, and looked Akira straight in the eyes as he spoke.

“But not to the extent that I can't overcome it.”

Akira also held a black single-edged blade in each hand. Akira had already realized that Doras was not only prepared for a mutual strike but had come to this place with the assumption that it would happen.

『Alpha. Let me handle this alone for now.』

Akira couldn't refuse Doras's determination by relying solely on his own strength to respond to his request. He couldn't afford to die before fulfilling Alpha's request.

Still, he would at least defeat him on his own. By winning without Alpha's support, he could comply with Doras's determination as much as possible. With that decision made, Akira sharpened his focus.

『Understood.』

In response to Akira's determination, Alpha also decided not to intervene as much as possible.

The area filled with information disruption smoke screens. Even in a blade fight between individuals with superhuman physical abilities thanks to augmented suits, the repercussions would be significant, and it would be evident to those outside the building that a battle was taking place. They needed to wait until the information disruption smoke screens had spread sufficiently.

The waiting time passed quietly. And as it ended, Doras, who had already made up his mind, spoke quietly.

“Let's begin then.”

With that declaration, Akira and Doras commenced their combat.

Doras closed the distance between himself and Akira in a single step. What would normally require several steps to cover, from an outsider's perspective, seemed like just one step forward, as if the space itself had shrunk to match Doras's stride, bringing him right in front of Akira in a single step.

Moreover, his movement was so natural, so calm, lacking any prelude to attack. While his opponent's movement was visible, it lacked the intensity of a vigorous charge, and there was no sign of a preparatory movement for an attack.

However, in reality, Doras was closing in on Akira at bullet-like speed. Yet, to Akira, it seemed like Doras had simply taken a step forward, akin to his first step. This was because Doras had caught up to Akira's perception of time and disguised his movements as ordinary actions.

With only Akira and Doras present, it was impossible to discern the speed of the opponent's movement relative to anything else. In such

a situation, by moving in a normal manner within the same time frame, even though the opponent's movements were extremely fast, observers would be under the illusion that they were moving normally in everyday time, even in combat situations.

In a situation where one must concentrate on the opponent's movements, the illusion would be further strengthened by the relative disregard for focusing on anything else.

A method of movement that prevents the opponent from recognizing the approach for an attack, despite clearly seeing their movements as they approach head-on. Akira finally noticed Doras's ambush when Doras had closed the distance and was about to swing his blade.

Akira leaped backward with all his might. The swiftly swung blade grazed the floor and flew past Akira's eyes. Akira immediately regained his balance from the evasive maneuver and readied his blades again. Seeing Doras momentarily vulnerable after evading the attack, Akira prepared to counter immediately.

However, Akira was once again caught off guard. Doras, still in the posture after swinging his blade, smoothly adjusted his body's movement without changing his posture, using what seemed like a shift in his own coordinate axis, and closed in on Akira without moving his joints, employing a technique utilizing the ground contact function of his augmented suit.

This was a method of movement utilizing the ground contact function of the augmented suit. By precisely adjusting the output of the force field armor on the soles of his feet and intentionally creating an imbalance in the force field, Doras generated the ability to move in any direction. This allowed him to move and rotate his body without moving the joints of his feet.

Doras also used this technique when closing in on Akira in one step. Normally, it would be impossible to close the distance with a single step due to the limitations of stride without leaping at a low altitude. However, Doras, using this movement method, slid his feet on the

floor while keeping them in contact, closing the distance with Akira in a single step with a normal walking motion.

Doras swung his blade again. After finishing the swing and creating an opening in his posture, he forcibly changed his body's coordinate axis to eliminate the opening and, with the momentum of his high-speed rotation, aimed at Akira once more.

Akira defended against the blade once again, this time with his left-hand blade. He experienced the impact as if stopping a bullet, but his blade, capable of tearing through even the monsters in the Third Inner Sector, was not fragile enough to break from such an impact. He firmly absorbed the concentrated impact with the sharpness of the blade.

Then he countered with his right-hand blade. But it was dodged. Doras was moving backward on the floor as if sliding.

Akira pursued him. Leaping, kicking sideways in mid-air, and slashing horizontally with his body parallel to the floor. Doras was struck by a horizontal slash from above and below, an attack impossible in a normal swordfight.

As a seasoned hunter, Doras had experienced many battles other than gunfights, but opponents attacking with slashes from such angles were extremely rare. He was overwhelmingly lacking in familiarity.

Nevertheless, Doras defended against and dodged the seemingly inexplicable slashes, as well as the attacks from all directions and the deadly blows unleashed one after another, with a sense of dodging the death line.

And then he counterattacked. Stepping beyond the death line, he aimed for a counterstrike with increased sharpness in exchange for his life, intending to strike simultaneously.

Akira also defended against and dodged it. While his combat experience was less than Doras's due to his shorter hunter career, in terms of dodging the death line, Akira was not inferior. He sensed the opponent's slight movements through the manipulation of reality resolution and avoided them.

Doras attacked again in quick succession, swinging his blade from right to left. Additionally, he rapidly reversed his entire body midway through the swing, aiming to slash Akira from left to right before completing the previous slash. Akira defended against this extraordinarily fast slash with his perception adjusted to the speed, then counterattacked.

Akira repeated three-dimensional attacks, changing not only the position and height of his foothold but also the direction and angle, while Doras, limited to two-dimensional movement on the floor, utilized advanced techniques unique to that environment to outmaneuver his opponent. The two engaged in a balanced offense and defense.

As Doras himself admitted, Akira had the superior overall strength. However, the balance of offense and defense between them was due to the difference in their victory conditions.

Doras, aiming for a mutual strike from the start, would win if Akira died. But Akira had to defeat the opponent and survive. This difference made Doras commit deeply, while Akira held back.

Even if Akira were to bisect Doras's neck, he would still be alive at that moment. By manipulating the severed lower part of his head with the remote control of his augmented suit, he could still achieve a mutual strike. Even if his head were pierced and his brain instantly burned by the energy released from the blade, attacks were still possible through the automatic control of the augmented suit or pre-inputted actions. He could still strike after being killed.

There was also a method of instantly killing the opponent and destroying the augmented suit together, such as by vertically

bisecting Doras, but to deliver such a blow, Akira would also have to commit deeply. Naturally, it would become much harder to dodge Doras's attacks, potentially resulting in a mutual strike.

To defeat the opponent and survive. In order to meet this victory condition, Akira had no choice but to hold back compared to Doras.

On the other hand, Doras always aimed for a mutual strike with each deeply committed strike. Intentionally neglecting defense, he poured the resulting surplus energy into his attacks.

It was such a powerful strike. If defense was even slightly lacking, it would greatly disrupt the posture, potentially leading to a decisive blow. Whether defending or dodging, Akira had to deal with this fatal strike firmly, greatly reducing his opportunities for counterattacks.

The balanced offense and defense continued. A storm of slashes raged around the two. Walls, floors, and ceilings were marked by the aftermath.

Neither of them was shooting energy from their blades. However, they both infused large amounts of energy into their blades to increase their strength and sharpness. By wielding the blades with masterful skill, the dispersed energy also gained slash-like qualities, cutting through the surroundings beyond the reach of their blades.

If this were a gunfight, as Doras had mentioned before the battle, the surroundings would have been obliterated by the aftermath of the fight. It was only because it was a blade-centric close combat that the damage was limited to this extent.

While defending against the aftermath of the storm of slashes and flying slash energy with their augmented suits, they continued to swing their blades at each other. Even if they didn't directly receive the blades, they couldn't completely avoid the aftermath. Moreover, that aftermath had the power to cut through old-world buildings, despite being high-performance augmented suits with powerful force

field armor, each defense consumed a considerable amount of energy.

In addition, Doras consumes more energy from the augmented suit than Akira. Doras aims for mutual destruction from the start, discarding any thoughts of survival. With the belief that he only needs to maintain his own body until the match is settled, Doras pushed the output of the augmented suit to its limit, disregarding the wearer's life.

Naturally, the strain on his body becomes extremely high. Just walking could risk tearing his limbs apart. To compensate for this overload, Doras relies on large doses of pre-administered healing medicine, somehow managing to continue fighting.

The effects of the augmented suit's energy and the remaining healing medicine in his body—Doras will be at a loss if either runs out. Sixty seconds into the battle, Doras, sensing the diminishing effects of both the energy and the medicine, understands. It seems the effects of the healing medicine will wear off first.

In that case. Doras makes the judgment to further deepen the struggle on this brink. If he can avoid this attack, it will create a fatal opening, leading to his death. But either way, he'll die as things stand. So, while there's still time, while he's still alive, he must take the gamble. Making this decision, he closes the distance in one step, retreating from Akira's previous attack.

This step is specialized in high-speed movement. Not a slippery walk, but a leap from the ground with all his might, wielding his blade in a large swing with the upper hand. Doras swings it down with all his might.

In that moment, in a world where time seems to stop due to extreme concentration, Doras sees Akira's movement. Akira tries to block Doras's strike with the black blade in his left hand. After blocking, it seems he intends to counterattack and slash Doras with the blade in his right hand.

That's a mistake. Doras can't help but think so. It might be an action judged as unavoidable, but this strike can't be blocked with just one hand. Even if blocked, it would greatly destabilize his stance, leaving no room for a counterattack. Exploiting that opening would be lethal.

(...I won!)

With that thought in mind, Doras swings his blade down. The powerful blades clash fiercely, and the resulting shockwave illuminates the surroundings.

The next moment, both Akira's black blades and Doras's blade snap and shatter.

(...What!?)

As Doras speculated, it was impossible for Akira to block Doras's strike with just the black blade in his left hand. And Akira knew that too. The black blade in his left hand is meant to dull the movement of Doras's blade. While being unable to fully stop Doras's strike, Akira redirects its force with that blade and simultaneously strikes Doras's blade with the black blade in his right hand from above.

Doras's blade is double-edged, but the strength of each edge is not the same. To enhance cutting power, the output of the force field armor is biased towards the cutting edge. Recognizing this during the engagement, Akira thought that he could destroy it by targeting the opposite edge when the opponent swung the blade.

Of course, there was only a split second of opportunity. In that instant, Akira, through extreme concentration and manipulation of perceived time and reality resolution, seized it.

With the impact of the blade breaking, both Akira and Doras staggered greatly. But the size of the opening differed between those who expected this outcome and those who didn't. Akira, the former, gains the upper hand. Instantly closing the distance with his opponent, he aims for Doras with the broken blade.

In that moment, Doras realizes his defeat as he faces the approaching black blade.

(No... It's over... I'm going to be struck...)

It's too late. In this state, he can't even counter. He lost. He couldn't save Carol on her own.

But if this is the result, perhaps the reason he was rejected by Carol back then wasn't because Carol didn't believe he was trying to save her sincerely, but simply because of his own lack of strength. If that's the case, then so be it. Doras accepts death with that thought.

However, at that moment, something unexpected happens to Doras again. Akira stops his blade right in front of Doras.

Doras asks in confusion.

“What are you doing? ”

“I want to make a deal.”

Akira answers seriously. As Doras becomes more puzzled by being told this by someone he refused to make a deal with.

“Didn't you reject the deal? ”

“I reject the deal you proposed. This is a deal proposed by me. Choose whichever you like. Keep being killed by me. Die protecting Carol. Which one do you prefer? ”

Seeing Doras remain silent with a puzzled expression, Akira continues.

“I don't mind either way. I'd be greatly relieved if you chose to die protecting Carol. I won't force it. I can't force it. But you tried to kill me to save Carol, right? Since you couldn't kill me, wouldn't it be better to die protecting Carol? ”

Doras silently stares at Akira. Akira, intensifying his gaze, continues.

“If you don't say anything, I'll assume you've chosen to be killed by me.”

Still, Doras remains silent, gazing steadily at Akira. He's already died once. It wouldn't be an issue for him to be killed by Akira now. Rather, it's more important to discern why Akira brought this up and what would happen if he chose to live.

Silence fills the air. Enough time has passed to consider it as no response. Yet, the fact that Doras is still alive indicates that Akira wants to keep him alive.

In that case, what is Akira's benefit? What is this mysterious individual thinking, willing to stay in the Kugamayama region even if it means making enemies of Sakashita Heavy Industry? Doras tried to discern this from Akira's demeanor.

Then, Akira, who is not adept at negotiations, speaks first.

“...I don't have any ulterior motives. I just want you to protect Carol in my place.”

And he speaks somewhat resignedly.

“I understand your point of view, too. If I don't want to involve people who shouldn't be involved, I should leave her before it's too late. I actually got Carol involved.”

Akira understands that as well. But whether he can do it is another matter.

“...But, I don't want to do that.”

Involving himself with Akira any further would never be enough, no matter how many lives he had. So he wants him to stay away from

her. If Shizuka had said that to Akira, he would have deeply bowed and apologized, cutting ties with Shizuka.

However, such words have not been spoken yet. That's both a fact and an excuse. And using that excuse, Akira continues to maintain a relationship with Shizuka. Since he hasn't been told to leave, he thinks.

And, understanding that Shizuka, who probably would never say such things, is being kind to him, he's relying on that kindness. With that understanding, Akira couldn't let go of what he gained when he dashed out of the alley in the slums. He didn't want to lose it.

From Akira's brief words, who is inexperienced in negotiations, Doras roughly grasps his inner thoughts. Then he speaks.

“Greedy, aren't you?”

“...Yeah. I know.”

Akira also understands the danger of involving himself. Shizuka was actually attacked by fake Akira, putting her in danger. If he truly cared about someone important, he should either sever ties or protect them by staying close.

Nevertheless, he continues to act selfishly without doing either. Still, he hopes that their relationship will continue as it has. Even he realizes he's being greedy.

Doras exhales deeply and declares.

“Fine. If you're not hiding anything, that's fine. I don't want to die either, and if I have to die, it's better to die protecting Carol than being killed here. The deal is settled.”

“Thank you.”

Akira also exhales deeply. He lowers the blade still pointed at Doras. And he thinks.

(Did things work out this time? Have I become a bit stronger?)

He defeated someone who tried to kill him even at the risk of sacrificing himself. Achieving something he couldn't do with Yumina, Akira forgives himself a little.

Seeing Akira like that, Alpha smiled as usual.

After finishing the battle, Akira and the others take the recovery medicine to treat their bodies, pick up their guns, and leave the abandoned building. Then Doras lightly says.

“Well, whatever. I think you're greedy, but I also think you're working hard for it, you know? Otherwise, you wouldn't have come here alone.”

『Yeah. Akira is doing his best.』

Alpha also smiles and agrees with Doras's words. Doras continues.

“Besides, no matter how greedy you are, if you have the strength to match it, you can manage. Coming from someone who lost, it might not mean much, but since you won, you must have that strength. As for the bounty offered by Sakashita Heavy Industry, it might surprisingly work out, don't you think?”

Doras said it as words of comfort, but Akira nodded normally.

“Yeah, I plan to deal with it tomorrow.”

It's usually impossible to withdraw the bounty offered by Sakashita Heavy Industry. However, from Akira's response, Doras realizes that there might be a genuine possibility of it happening, and he shows surprise.

“Will it really work out? ”

“If things go well.”

“You should've told me that sooner...”

If he had heard that earlier, there might have been no need to fight Akira. But believing it now because he heard it, even if he had heard it before the fight, he might not have believed it, and it might have ended up in a fight anyway. Doras thinks that way and doesn't consider the previous battle useless, but he still wishes he had heard it earlier.

To distract himself from that frustration, Doras brings up another topic.

“Akira, how many times did you lay hands on Carol? ”

Carol trusts Akira enough to hire him as her bodyguard. That must mean they've spent a considerable amount of time together. Enough for the next payment to become an exorbitant sum. Doras wonders how much it has accumulated to. With mild curiosity, he asks.

Unexpectedly, he receives a surprising response.

“I've never laid a hand on Carol.”

“...Huh? You're lying, right? ”

“I'm not lying.”

Doras is shocked by the unexpected content. He instinctively denies it, but somehow understands that it's not a lie.

“...Why? ”

“Even if you ask me why...”

“Weren't you invited? ”

“I refused.”

“...Why? ”

“So why... well, you know. It seemed dangerous, with potential addictive or dependent traits, and that scared me.”

Akira lightly talks about a man named Babalod who became obsessed with Carol and ended up ruined, saying he doesn't want to end up like that.

Doras nods upon hearing this.

“I see...”

But his nod wasn't because he understood and accepted the story.

(Could it be...? Is it that she doesn't trust those who buy her? Then I was doomed from the start...?)

If that's the case, it makes sense that Carol, who didn't trust himself, trusted Akira. Realizing this, Doras sighs deeply at Carol's cunning demeanor.

Carol wakes up. And noticing Akira isn't in the car, she panics slightly. Then Akira returns with Doras. Carol woke up because she sensed their presence.

“Akira. Where did you go? And why is Doras...”

Akira answers as if it's nothing, to Carol's puzzled expression.

“Oh, I brought Doras back because he seems to want to protect you and die for you.”

“Huh? ”

Carol instinctively looks at Doras. Doras, without embarrassment, rather in an attitude as if taking care of a troublesome matter, speaks.

“It's a bit complicated. Don't worry about it. If you don't like it, you can kill me. Akira. That's fine, right? ”

“Well, if Carol doesn't like it that much, there's no helping it.”

Carol, understanding from Doras's request for permission from Akira that he's somehow been hired by Akira to protect her, decides it's not her place to refuse, no matter what the circumstances are.

“I didn't say I didn't like it. I was just a little surprised since it was so sudden.”

“I see.”

Doras answers only that.

Akira returns to bed.

“Well, I'm going to sleep. Save the details for later. Goodnight.”

With that, he goes to sleep without any further explanation.

Carol, with a slightly puzzled expression, asks Doras.

“...So, what does that mean? ”

“Ask Akira later. I'm a Hunter too. I don't intend to reveal the details of Hunter-to-Hunter transactions.”

The right to discuss the details lies with Akira. By answering like that, Doras signals to Carol that he won't inquire further.

Doras sits on the sofa and exhales.

“Well, I didn't take the deal to impress Carol. That's all I can say.”

“...I see.”

Carol understands that Doras's words are not a lie.

“You should probably get some sleep too, Carol. Tomorrow seems like it's going to be busy, right? ”

“Yeah, you're right. I'll do that. Goodnight.”

“Yeah, goodnight.”

Carol, back in bed, thinks about the circumstances that led to Doras protecting her until she falls asleep again. But ultimately, she falls asleep without understanding.

The next morning, Carol asks Akira about the circumstances of the previous day. Akira simply answers that he received a message from Doras in the middle of the night, saying he wanted to protect Carol and die for her, so he met him and brought him back.

Seeing Akira's discomfort with keeping secrets and Doras's attitude of not changing his stance of asking for details from Akira, Carol thinks there must have been more to it, but she doesn't ask further.

Regardless of the facts, if Akira says so and she's not being deceived or threatened by anyone, Carol is fine with it.

Chapter 253: Additional Support

Udajima wore a difficult expression upon learning that Akira's bounty from Kugamayama City had been revoked.

(So, now that Akira's bounty from Kugamayama City has been revoked, there's no reason for him to infiltrate Third Inner Sector... What should we do...?)

Akira, who declared allegiance to the Nationalist, is a fraud. With the bounty revoked, Kugamayama City would consider it as such, making it explicit.

With this, there was no longer a need for the real Akira to infiltrate Third Inner Sector to prove his innocence by killing the imposter. For Udajima, it meant that enticing Akira into Third Inner Sector to kill him had become more difficult.

Udajima asked Haruka.

“You fought Akira at the Mihazono District Ruin, right? What was he like? How strong was Akira? Did you almost have him? ”

If he had been close to killing him, instead of luring Akira into Third Inner Sector, Udajima thought sending multiple versions of the current imposter might be a good idea. However, Haruka shook her head.

“Not even close. It wasn't much of a contest. Even that version of him, it would have been strong enough to scatter the city's units protecting the Seranthal Building if I had supported it, but it was completely defeated.”

“Is that so...”

For the defense of the Seranthal Building, for reasons unknown, Yanagisawa had put considerable effort, and very powerful units

were dispatched from the city. Even with the strength to scatter those units, Akira had no chance of winning. Hearing this, Udajima held his head in frustration.

And he couldn't help but regret. If only he had been able to kill him back then.

Previously, Akira had lost her home to attackers using Babalod's body. And it was Udajima who ordered that attack.

At that time, with that Akira, before Akira acquired new equipment, even the old version of the imposter could have been killed. Udajima couldn't help but think so.

And the reason he couldn't do it was that at that time, Udajima still wasn't prepared to make enemies of Sakashita Heavy Industry.

When Akira boarded the inter-city transport vehicle heading to Zegelt City, Udajima, aware that Akira was on board, also headed to Zegelt City on the same vehicle. It was to meet an opponent who wouldn't tolerate changes to plans for such trivial reasons.

During the journey, although there was an incident where the vehicle was attacked by a swarm of nest-class giant bugs, they safely arrived at Zegelt City and then further east through the intermediary of the Lion Steel Company.

Essentially, the eastern region is governed by the five big corporations. And each of the five big corporations has significant influence in its own economic sphere.

However, this doesn't apply to the front lines. To counter the monster-like calamities emerging from the unexplored regions further east, those areas are treated as if they were under the control of the entire Corporate Government. As a result, the closer a place is to the front lines, even if it falls within the economic sphere of influence of a specific corporation, its influence is relatively diminished.

For such reasons, when a subordinate of one of the five big corporations meets directly with someone from another corporation for confidential discussions, it is common practice to choose a location as far east as possible. Udajima also followed suit and moved as far east as possible.

And there, Udajima met someone and was proposed something.

If it was just a matter of speaking with someone from a distant place, with the advancement of technology, it's possible to use augmented reality and the like to converse as if the person were right there. Despite that, going outside the safety of the defensive walls into a wasteland full of monsters to meet someone directly from a distant place carries a significant meaning. Udajima's discussion partner also showed respect for his action and made a proposal worthy of his effort. However, the content was to completely turn Sakashita Heavy Industry into an enemy.

At that moment, Udajima, who had been cornered by Akira and Inabe, and had harbored dissatisfaction and negative feelings toward Sakashita Heavy Industry from before, still didn't have the resolve to completely make an enemy of Sakashita Heavy Industry. However, he didn't outright reject the proposal either, instead asking for time to consider it and then returned to Kugamayama City.

But as soon as Udajima returned to the city, Akira reached Hunter Rank 70 and was trying to acquire equipment befitting that rank. Panicked, Udajima hastily attempted to assassinate Akira. While he managed to deploy his pieces to attack Akira before the new equipment arrived, he failed to kill him.

With that, Udajima made up his mind.

In this short period, he had become this strong. He couldn't let Akira live any longer. Before Akira became even stronger, before it was too late, even if it meant making Sakashita Heavy Industry an enemy, he had to kill Akira. That's what he thought.

Cornered, Udajima took a gamble. The result has yet to be determined.

If he had already resolved to make an enemy of Sakashita Heavy Industry during the discussion in the east, Akira would have already been killed. Udajima regretted this, but realizing that he couldn't change the past, he switched his focus.

If Akira was this strong, then surely, to kill him, they somehow had to lure him into Third Inner Sector. Udajima pondered how to do it, but no good ideas came to mind.

(If Sheryl hadn't been rescued, she might have been useful in luring Akira... No, even in that case, it might be weak as bait to lure him to a place where Kaiju are...)

Certainly, Akira was involved with Sheryl, but not to the extent that he would infiltrate Third Inner Sector where Kaiju reside. Saving Sheryl at the Seranthal Building was also because, for the real Akira, the imposter wasn't much of a challenge. That's how Udajima interpreted it.

At a dead end, Udajima frowned and sought new information to break the stalemate.

“Haruka. Any new information on Akira? ”

“Please wait a moment. I'll check now... Huh? There's information that Sakashita Heavy Industry is offering a bounty of 500 billion Aurums for Akira.”

“What? Sakashita Heavy Industry? ...Wait, is that for whom? For the imposter we've prepared? Or for the real Akira? ”

“I don't know that much. But based on that information, it seems there are people making moves.”

“What about Akira? ”

“It seems he headed towards the outskirt of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. I don't know his whereabouts after that.”

Udajima frowned thoughtfully. If there were indeed issues between Akira and Sakashita Heavy Industry, and a bounty had been placed on Akira as a result, then Akira, having foreknowledge of it, would likely attempt to escape from Sakashita Heavy Industry's economic sphere. There would be no reason for him to hide in the outskirt of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

In that case, the bounty would indeed be for the fake Akira. While it's unclear why Akira would be at the outskirt of the ruins, it's certain that it's not a hiding place for someone targeted by Sakashita Heavy Industry. Udajima concluded as such.

And with that in mind, he considered another plan.

“How much longer until the new version is operational? ”

“It will take at least another 8 hours.”

“I see. Once the adjustments are done, send them to the outskirt of the ruins. From what we heard at the Seranthal Building, Akira seems fixated on killing his impostor. If things go well, we might be able to lure him all the way to the Third Inner Sector.”

“Understood. I'll get it done.”

“Counting on you.”

Then Udajima suddenly thought.

“By the way... what were you doing at the Seranthal Building? And why bring along the current version and Sheryl as well? ”

“Ah, I can't go into details due to our circumstances, but it's related to Lion Steel Company over there. I brought along the current version and Sheryl as my escorts.”

Haruka casually lied. And Udajima, perhaps because he only casually asked, didn't see through the lie.

“I see. So Lion Steel Company is up to something as well. Our cooperation with them is probably just a side project for whatever they're really doing, but what exactly that is...”

Udajima pondered a bit about that as well. But he couldn't figure anything out.



Until the bounty report announcing that Sakashita Heavy Industry had placed a 500 billion Aurum bounty on Akira is publicly released, there is little time left.

The key figure necessary for Akira's final preparations arrives. It's Togami, who brings support supplies from Kibayashi.

Togami looks at Doras and finds it a bit strange that there's someone unfamiliar here, but now is not the time to dwell on it and he proceeds with the conversation.

“Akira. First off, these are from Elena... no, from Hikaru... no, from Inabe? Sheryl? Well, they're from over there.”

Two OFX multi-function guns are handed over to Akira. They were lent to Elena's group by Hikaru through Inabe's authority. Elena's group judged it better for Akira to have them than for themselves who were inside the defensive wall. So they asked Akira to take them.

It's a 2 billion Aurum item. It's not supposed to be lent out again. However, Hikaru turned a blind eye to it, and Inabe also tacitly approved it by having the Sheryl's gang compensate for any loss.

Togami omitted the explanation up to that point, but Akira understood at least that it was a favor from someone mentioned.

Thankful for that, he attaches the OFX multi-function guns to his bike.

“And this is...”

As Togami tries to open the large trunk he brought, a voice comes from Togami's information terminal. It's Shirou's voice.

“I prepared that. Akira. Consider it a debt.”

“Rather than repaying the debt, huh? ”

“Yeah. It's a debt. It would be impossible for anyone but me to prepare this in just one day.”

Inside the trunk were a blade, an energy pack, and recovery medicines. Shirou explains about these items.

“This is a set of equipment called the HBTN series blade. It's a top-of-the-line product sold by Sakashita Heavy Industry for hunters operating on the front lines. In other words, it's equipment that can be used even on the front lines.”

When Akira draws the blade from its curved scabbard, a crimson single-edged blade appears. And on its mirror-like surface, Akira's deeply interested expression is reflected.

This HBTN blade is made of scarlet-colored metal and its sharpness reaches the realm of magic. Furthermore, its energy consumption efficiency, which includes force field armor, and its resistance to energy breakdown due to high energy load are extremely high. As Shirou explained, it's a product that can be used even on the front lines.

The energy pack and recovery medicines that were included in the trunk are also frontline-oriented products, which Shirou procured alongside the HBTN blade.

“Of course, it's not something just anyone can get their hands on. Even with the 500 billion Aurum bounty placed on you, you can't buy it. The HBTN series is a product that can only be purchased in Chrome.”

Akira desired frontline equipment. And now, thanks to Shirou, that wish, at least in the form of a single blade, had been granted.

“If there was time, I could have prepared the entire series, but it's impossible to do that overnight. Just so you know, even preparing just this blade in such a short time would be impossible for anyone but me. So, I managed to do it. Even if you had time, this is a product you would never be able to obtain on your own. So, consider it a debt.”

Having repaid the debt in full, it becomes another debt. That's what Shirou emphasized. And Akira showed some understanding, at least for now.

“I've repaid the debt. Whether it becomes another debt depends on how useful this thing is.”

“You...”

Shirou voiced his dissatisfaction, but Akira continued, driving the point home.

“Is making an enemy of Sakashita Heavy Industry such a light matter?”

With that said, Shirou had no choice but to suppress his dissatisfaction. Akira continued.

“Well, with this blade, let's hope things go well. After all, no matter how big a debt I accumulate, it's meaningless if I'm dead, right?”

“Yeah...”

Shirou's sigh echoed through Togami's information terminal. It was evidence that Shirou reluctantly admitted that, at this point, he still didn't owe Akira anything. He was conveying that to Akira in a straightforward manner.

Finally, Togami handed a magazine to Akira.

"This is from Kibayashi."

What Kibayashi had prepared for Akira was only this single magazine. It was slightly larger than usual, not an extended magazine, and it only held six rounds.

Beside Akira, who received it and looked interested, Doras realized what it was and showed surprise.

"...Is this, by any chance, an anti-annihilator warhead?"

"...It seems so."

Togami answered somewhat nervously.

What Kibayashi had prepared for Akira as support was an anti-annihilator warhead. Of course, it was unauthorized.

Due to its excessive power, anti-annihilator warheads are subject to restrictions on possession, sale, and use by the governing corporations of the region. In other words, by possessing an anti-annihilator warhead without permission, Akira would have made enemies of the Kugamayama City, which governs the Kugamayama region, and also committed misconduct against Sakashita Heavy Industry, the mainstay of the Aurum Economic Zone.

However, Akira had already, albeit conditionally, made enemies of Sakashita Heavy Industry. Compared to that, it wasn't such a big deal. Therefore, Kibayashi gleefully procured the anti-annihilator warhead secretly and asked Togami to contact Akira to hand it over.

Akira also knew the power of the anti-annihilator warhead as common knowledge. While he thought Kibayashi might have complained to him about the difficulties of procuring it, like Shirou would, he found it strange that Kibayashi hadn't contacted him personally or through Togami.

“Togami, didn't Kibayashi say anything like 'contact me when it's time to hand this over to me'?”

“No, he didn't.”

“I see... I thought he might say something like, 'since I went through so much trouble to get this valuable item, make sure to entertain me with it.'”

Hearing this, Togami thought for a moment before replying.

“If he said too much, wouldn't he think Akira would hesitate to use the anti-annihilator warhead? It's definitely a valuable item.”

“...Ah, that's possible.”

Akira speculated about Kibayashi's thoughts.

The anti-annihilator warhead was an extremely valuable item. The more it was used, the greater the debt owed to oneself. If Akira thoughtlessly held back from using the carefully prepared anti-annihilator warhead, it would diminish the excitement.

However, it was impossible to deceive Akira into thinking the anti-annihilator warhead wasn't valuable. So instead of clumsily explaining the difficulties of acquisition to Akira and making him aware of the value of the anti-annihilator warhead, which would only highlight Akira's lack of common sense, it was better not to say anything from the start. Encouraging him to use it without concern might backfire, so it was best to remain silent.

Moreover, if Akira and Kibayashi were to meet directly or even communicate through a transmission, Kibayashi might end up laughing so hard that he couldn't have a proper conversation. So, as disappointing as it was, he decided to refrain from talking to Akira.

That seemed to be the most enjoyable option.

So Akira speculated somewhat paranoidly about Kibayashi's thoughts based on his past interactions with him and decided not to worry about Kibayashi anymore.

Akira prepared as instructed by Alpha. He exchanged the energy pack of his augmented suit for one suitable for frontline combat, donned the HBTN blade, took a dose of recovery medicine in advance, and attached an anti-annihilator warhead magazine to one of the four RL2 multi-function guns he carried. Then, mounting the bike, he addressed Carol and the others before departure.

“Well then, I'm off. Carol, just to make it clear, don't follow me, okay? Return to the city. Doras will escort you, so it should be fine for you to stay in the Second Inner Sector and be prepared for anything, but don't think about sticking around to keep an eye on me, okay?”

“I understand.”

Carol, who was given a firm instruction by Akira, responded with a smile. Without the firm instruction, she might have hesitated between returning to the city or not, considering Doras, a powerful force, would be with her.

Togami said to Akira with a serious expression.

“Akira, I still haven't repaid my debt to you. Don't think you can just walk away from it.”

In terms of debt and repayment, by helping a criminal who had acquired the anti-annihilator warhead illegally and handing it over to

Sakashita Heavy Industry, Togami had repaid more than enough debt to Akira. Kibayashi also cooperated with Togami on this matter after having such a conversation with him.

Nevertheless, Togami said that to Akira. Don't die. In that sense.

Akira responded with a smile.

“Yeah, I'll make sure to get it back from you later.”

Not dying. Togami also responded with a smile, seeing Akira's firm answer.

Having said their farewells, Akira looked ahead. In front of Akira, Alpha was smiling as usual.

『Well then, Akira. Shall we? Are you ready?』

Alpha said somewhat provocatively with a smile. The destination was the Third Inner Sector. It was a place Akira had once fled from as if his life depended on it. Even so, Akira smiled confidently in response.

『Yeah. I'm prepared! After all, resolve is my responsibility!』

With Akira's determination, the bike accelerated swiftly. Towards the most treacherous death trap yet, Akira proceeded as he always had, unchanged.



As Akira's figure on the bike disappeared into the sky above the ruins, Carol and the others who saw him off received a notification. It was a bounty update.

Upon checking the contents, Togami chuckled wryly.

“So now he's a 500 billion Aurum bounty...”

500 billion Aurum. An unimaginable sum of money. Togami thought so too. However, whether this amount was suitable for killing Akira, even Togami didn't know.

Carol sensed Togami's inner thoughts and smiled.

“Personally, I wouldn't feel motivated to fight Akira for just 500 billion Aurum. How about you, Togami? ”

“I'm with you on that.”

“Well, of course. And Doras? ”

“Count me out too. I'm not so strapped for cash that I need 500 billion Aurum, and even if I needed that much to buy Carol, it's better to earn it through regular hunter work than to fight Akira.”

Doras responded casually to the casually asked question, and Carol understood from it.

“Ah, so by saying that, you did fight Akira? ”

Doras burst out laughing. Togami also looked surprised at Doras.

Receiving a somewhat accusatory glance from Carol, Doras offered an excuse.

“I just couldn't help but be curious. I have confidence in my own strength too, you know? But still, why did Carol choose Akira for protection instead of me? It made me wonder how strong Akira really is.”

Carol inferred from this response the circumstances of yesterday's events, where Doras was supposed to protect her.

Doras probably tried to ascertain Akira's strength by fighting him, lost, and was about to be killed. He was probably let go on the condition that he became her protector.

Knowing Akira, despite being hired as her protector, he ended up getting involved. Carol probably worried about that and accepted Doras's proposal, especially since she couldn't accompany him to the Third Inner Sector.

Akira's words about wanting Doras to protect her also fit into this narrative. So Carol understood and smiled teasingly at Doras.

“Glad you didn't get killed, huh? ”

“Seriously. He was strong. Not just stronger than me. He probably has some trump cards or hidden moves, but he beat me without using them. I lost completely. If Carol chose Akira over me for that strength, I can't blame her.”

Doras mixed in some truth with his evasion. Because of that, Carol couldn't realize that Doras had tried to save her instead of Akira, and Doras wasn't shameless enough to tell her.

And to change the subject, Doras turned to Togami.

“By the way, Togami, what's your relationship with Carol? ”

“We're acquaintances. We met while doing hunter work with Akira.”

“I see. So, how many times did you make a move on Carol? ”

“...Never.”

Doras looked genuinely surprised.

“You too...? ”

“Me too? ”

“Well, I asked Akira about it, and he said the same thing.”

Togami was satisfied with that, but Doras still looked skeptical.

Then, for some reason, Doras felt that Carol was too comfortable with Togami, and considering the similarities between Akira and Togami, he asked Carol with a slightly puzzled expression.

“...Could it be that you prefer younger guys, Carol? ”

Carol responded with a meaningful smile.

“Maybe I do.”

“I see...”

It seemed like he had been doomed from the start. Doras sighed deeply, realizing this once again.

Seeing Doras like that, Carol smiled cheerfully.



Akira sped through the sky of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin on his bike. He had only recently departed from the outskirt of the ruins, but he was already accelerating without hesitation, entering the First Inner Sector.

At that moment, Akira also received a bounty update.

『So now I'm a 500 billion Aurum bounty. I've come a long way.』

Alpha chuckled slightly in response to Akira's wry smile.

『Indeed. There was a time when you were attacked for a mere 300 Aurum.』

『Seriously. My value has certainly increased.』

Although it was in the direction of infamy, there was no denying the staggering amount now associated with Akira. The bounty placed on him was, in a sense, the strongest indication yet of Akira's rise.

As he continued deeper into the ruins, Akira received a communication from Shizuka.

『Akira. It's Shizuka. Shall I patch her through?』

Akira was about to enter the Second Inner Sector. From here on, fused creatures would also appear, making things hectic. Alpha checked if there was time to chat leisurely with Shizuka.

Akira responded without hesitation.

『Yes, please connect her.』

Through Alpha, Shizuka's voice reached Akira telepathically.

『Akira, it's me. ...I saw the bounty update. I heard you were going to handle the Sakashita Heavy Industry matter. Didn't it work out?』

Shizuka couldn't speak about this matter with a bright voice. She spoke with great seriousness and concern for Akira.

Hearing Shizuka's voice, filled with concern for him, Akira raised his spirits, reassuring himself not to worry Shizuka and answered with a cheerful and energetic voice.

『No, it's okay. I'm going to handle it now. Don't worry. I'll do my best to deal with everything, including the bounty from Sakashita.』

Continuing in a lighthearted tone, partly in jest but also conveying his true feelings, Akira added.

『But I do have a favor to ask. Please keep praying for my safety. I'll do my best, but it's going to be tough to handle this alone.』

Hearing Akira's voice, Shizuka also understood. Akira wasn't filled with despair. He wasn't giving up. And just like he had overcome countless hardships before, he was determined to overcome this one.

So, what she could do for Akira now was to encourage him wholeheartedly, believing that Akira would succeed. With that sentiment, Shizuka spoke in her usual gentle and cheerful voice.

『I understand. I'll definitely keep praying for you. So, Akira, do your best.』

『Yes!』

Akira responded strongly. Instead of being told not to overdo it, Shizuka told him to do his best. Akira, who had already made up his mind, felt even more motivated.

After ending the communication with Shizuka, Alpha smiled and told Akira.

『Well then, Akira. Do your best. You'll be there soon.』

『Yes. Please support me firmly, Alpha.』

『Leave it to me.』

While talking to Shizuka, Akira had already entered the Second Inner Sector. And he had detected numerous fused creature responses ahead of him.

The horde of fused creatures emerging from the Third Inner Sector had been defeated by high-ranking hunters near the back of the Second Inner Sector the other day. But now they had invaded up to

the border with the First Inner Sector and were fiercely battling the city's defense forces deployed there.

Akira swiftly crossed the front line of the skirmish at high speed. Naturally, many fused creatures switched their attack targets from the defense forces to Akira. Baoregire, a fused creature with the lower body of a beast, and Dredemas, a fused creature with a mixture of avian and aquatic features, unleashed torrents of energy at Akira from the ground and the sky.

Akira deftly maneuvered his bike through the countless beams with Alpha's support. He retaliated by wielding three RL2 multi-function guns, each firing high-energy S^{Shock} bullets, using both his hands and auxiliary arms. Additionally, he discharged beams of light from the two OFX multi-function guns mounted on his bike.

The effectiveness of the S^{Shock} bullets against fused creatures had been proven. Fused creatures that couldn't be defeated despite being bombarded with C^{Charge} bullets before were now being destroyed on a cellular level by the high shock propagation of the S^{Shock} bullets.

The OFX multi-function guns had already been deployed as trump cards. Coupled with the power boost from the bike's large energy tank and advanced energy control by Alpha, the intensified beams easily blew away and dispersed the fused creatures upon impact.

As he scattered his troublesome enemies, Akira raced through the sky of the Second Inner Sector on his bike. He was only a short distance away from entering the Third Inner Sector.



After ending the communication with Akira, Shizuka smiled at the others who had been listening in.

“Looks like Akira is okay.”

With that, Elena, Sara, and Sheryl all breathed a sigh of relief. Of course, they knew that everything hadn't been resolved perfectly. However, they understood that the situation, which originally seemed hopeless with a 500 billion Aurum bounty placed on Akira by Sakashita Heavy Industry, had improved thanks to Akira's efforts. And if it was Akira, they believed he could handle it.

Elena chuckled lightly in exasperation.

“Honestly... Akira is always like this, isn't he? ”

Sheryl nodded in agreement.

“Absolutely. Akira is always like this. So, he'll be fine this time too.”

It was just baseless optimism. Knowing this, Shizuka and the others laughed together. Then Sara lightly asked Sheryl.

“By the way, what kind of things happened, for example? ”

“Well... let me tell you.”

Shizuka and the others began recounting the events they knew about Akira. As they listened to stories they hadn't heard before, they laughed and were half amazed by the incredible content.

Even with such absurd events, Akira always came back unscathed. It was just like him. So, they laughed together, hoping for Akira's safe return so they could eventually turn these stories into jokes.

Chapter 254: Fierce Battle in the Third Inner Sector

Akira races through the sky of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin on his bike, pushing forward towards the Third Inner Sector while defeating numerous fused creatures along the way.

As he delves deeper, the number of fused creatures increases, but Akira's objective isn't to defeat them all. If he can eliminate only those obstructing his path, the swarms of fused creatures pose no significant threat to Akira in his current state. He reaches the boundary between the Second and Third Inner Sector without any major issues.

With a serious expression, Alpha speaks.

『Akira. We're entering the Third Inner Sector.』

Feeling the gravity of the situation, Akira focuses his determination.

『Got it.』

Ahead of Akira's view, the scenery of the Second Inner Sector, filled with structures from the old-world, stretches endlessly. However, in the next moment, that view turns completely white, as far as the eye can see. The density of colorless mist surrounding him drastically increases. He has entered the Third Inner Sector.

Akira glances back. The once-visible cityscape of the old-world is now nowhere to be seen. Just like in front of him, a white expanse stretches endlessly in all directions.

『...So, it won't be easy to get out of here easily... Alright, Alpha. Let's find that creature called Relagros.』

While Akira's main objective in the Third Inner Sector is to defeat the proponents of the Sovereignty, strictly speaking, it's to contribute significantly to their destruction.

For the real Akira, the task of defeating the fake Akira, who has a bounty placed on him by Sakashita Heavy Industry, is synonymous with annihilating the Nationalist that the fake Akira belongs to. However, the opponent is an organization, the scale of which is unknown. It's unclear how many bases they have in the eastern region or where they are located. Even Akira understands that being told to destroy this organization as an individual is extremely difficult. At worst, he might have to search the entire eastern region thoroughly.

Thus, what is demanded of him is a significant reduction in their power and contribution to that end. Akira interpreted it as such.

And for that contribution, it must be substantial enough to have the 500 billion Aurum bounty placed on him removed at the very least. Akira concluded that defeating Relagros would achieve that.

Surely, defeating it would be enough to warrant the removal of his bounty. In fact, if it wasn't, then there would be no hope. That's what Akira believed.

Of course, Akira also understood that whether it was possible or not was another matter. The opponent is a Kaiju. Last time, he had no choice but to flee for his life. If the conditions were the same as last time, he thought it would be impossible.

However, now that he had anti-annihilator warheads thanks to Kibayashi, maybe he could manage somehow. Alpha didn't stop him either. There was a potential worth gambling on. If that's the case, then all he had to do was win that gamble, just like he had many times before. Akira came here with that determination.

That said, even Akira felt somewhat uneasy about going to seek out an opponent he had once fled from.

But Alpha stopped him.

『No, Akira. Let's observe the situation first.』

『Huh? ...Oh, got it.』

Although Akira found it strange, he followed Alpha's instructions. He landed his bike on the ground and brought it to a halt.

『So, why are we observing first?』

『Well, you want to engage in combat with that Kaiju under the most advantageous conditions possible. Akira, I understand your eagerness, but it's not something we should rush into. I'll spare you the details, but please trust me on this.』

With a confident smile, Alpha said so, and Akira smiled back.

『I'm not doubting you. From the beginning, I've been relying on you. If listening to you increases our chances of winning, then please, tell me whether we should observe or act.』

『Thank you.』

After that, Akira followed Alpha's instructions, concealing himself within the dense colorless mist. However, instead of staying in one place, he got off his bike and began to move slowly on foot.

While the high density of colorless mist made reconnaissance extremely difficult, moving quickly would make him more visible. And once spotted, it would be difficult to escape pursuit. After Akira was spotted by Relagros last time, even though he raced away on his bike at full speed, he was pursued relentlessly.

Navigating through the excessively white and featureless world had already thrown off Akira's sense of direction. He couldn't rely on

directional measurements from his information-gathering devices, as had been revealed during the previous exploration.

Akira had no idea where he was. But he wasn't afraid. He trusted Alpha and moved forward.

And that remained true even when encountering enemies.

『Akira. Monsters. You'll defeat them. But let's not use guns. We don't want to attract attention right now.』

『Understood. ...Then, how about this?』

Akira draws the HBTN Blade from its sheath. The crimson blade flickers in the white world.

『Yes. Let's confirm how useful this blade provided by Shiro is for us.』

With the blade ready, Akira slowly approaches the enemy. The monsters have yet to notice his presence. Leaving his bike behind, he conceals himself using the camouflage function, blending into the dense colorless mist to suppress his presence while carefully closing the distance.

Finally, Akira gets close enough to the monsters to visually confirm them with his information-gathering device. There are two enemies. One is Baoregire. The other is a fused creature unfamiliar to Akira, growing a humanoid form from the back of its amphibian main body. Both are about 30 meters in length.

Akira closes the distance further with the Kaiju. He's already so close that he wouldn't be surprised if he were noticed at any moment. Yet, even with that tension, if he were to make a sudden movement, he would be detected immediately. Akira remains composed, focusing intently and doing his best to suppress his presence until the last possible moment.

Finally, he's noticed. In that moment, Akira propels himself off the ground, moving at high speed. Prompted by Alpha's support, he first targets Baoregire, aiming his blade upward as he leaps low to strike at the creature's head with powerful force.

The crimson blade cleaves through the Baoregire, splitting its massive body in an instant along with the wave of slashing energy released from it.

『Akira. You've taken it down.』

『Wow! Just one strike?』

In the world seemingly frozen by extreme manipulation of perceived time, Akira was astonished by the performance of the HBTN Blade he wielded.

Baoregire wasn't the kind to die just from being severed. Even showering it with C-rank bullets to the point of losing its original form, it would regenerate and come back to attack. Akira understood well the abnormal vitality of such an opponent. Merely being split left and right, it wouldn't be surprising for it to seamlessly reattach its severed parts and counterattack as if nothing happened.

But Alpha claimed it was defeated. So it was. In a single strike. The fact that even Akira couldn't hide his surprise at this was telling.

Simply defeating it in one strike wasn't unique, Elena and the others had also taken down creatures in the Second Inner Sector with OFX multi-function guns in one shot. However, those creatures were significantly weakened after venturing out of the Third Inner Sector. Although both were defeated in one blow, the implications were vastly different.

And to defeat a creature from the Third Inner Sector, it took Tatsukawa, a Hunter Rank 78, two shots even with his highly potent red humanoid weapon.

If it was with this HBTN Blade, it would only take one strike. No wonder Shiro was so smug about it. Thinking this, Akira attempted to take down the remaining fused creature with the same momentum.

But then, Alpha issued instructions.

『Akira, step back.』

Akira immediately retreated. A moment later, the fused creature emitted light from its entire body. It was a high-energy light wave. Its power was so overwhelming that not only was the nearby Baoregire's corpse incinerated, it vanished entirely.

The omnidirectional light wave was unavoidable. Akira also took the hit. However, as the non-directional light wave spread to all directions, unlike the torrent of energy emitted by Baoregire, it was more susceptible to power attenuation over distance. Moreover, the area was filled with dense colorless mist. By the time it reached Akira, who had swiftly moved away, the power of the light wave had halved.

Furthermore, the emission time was extremely short. Almost instantaneous. Akira deployed an anti-energy force field shield in that instant. Simultaneously, he maximized the output. Mistiming would result in a direct hit by the light wave, leaving him charred. But with Alpha's support, Akira wouldn't make such a mistake in judgment. He managed to block it effectively.

Then, in another instant, he closed the distance with the fused creature. No light wave came. As it consumed significant energy to emit powerful energy in all directions, it couldn't be used continuously.

As the fused creature attempted to counter Akira with its grotesque humanoid appendages protruding from its back, he struck again with the HBTN Blade before it could react.

With its magically sharp edge, he cleaved the fused creature in two. Despite having vitality surpassing Baoregire, it was defeated once more with this single strike.

『Akira. You've taken this one down too. We're safe now.』

Akira breathed out and looked at the blade.

『Both with just one strike. Incredible performance.』

Indeed, Akira was once again impressed by the capabilities of the equipment tailored for frontline combat. He then shifted his gaze to the fused creature.

『Alpha, how does this one compare to the other?』

Since both were defeated in one strike, Akira couldn't gauge how much stronger this fused creature was compared to Baoregire.

『It's not a simple comparison, but well, about five times stronger.』

『That much...!』

『This type has a lower limit on energy capacity. So if it can't constantly receive energy remotely, it significantly weakens. But in places where that's possible, it's stronger.』

Alpha explained that while it might be stronger than Baoregire in places with sufficient energy supply, it would become weaker than Baoregire in places where that's not possible.

『So it's not a straightforward comparison. But even here, even such a strong one, can be defeated in one strike with this blade...』

『Thanks to Shiro, we got our hands on something good.』

『Ah, yes. In that case, I might be willing to overlook a few things.』

Despite ending up with a bounty from Sakashita Heavy Industry because of Shiro's actions, Akira was in high spirits due to the unexpectedly outstanding performance of the acquired item.

『Oh, by the way, what about that thing they released earlier? Is it okay? It's not good to attract attention now, right?』

『It's fine. Since it emits in all directions, its range is short. Something at that level would be absorbed by the colorless mist and wouldn't be detected by monsters far away.』

『I see. That's a relief.』

『Alright then, let's move again.』

Summoning his bike, Akira once again moved through the Third Inner Sector. He encountered another fused creature, but this time dispatched it quickly. Eventually, following Alpha's instructions, they halted.

『Akira, look over there.』

The area Alpha indicated was shrouded in colorless mist, hiding it from Akira's view. However, with Alpha's support, it was displayed in his augmented field of vision, clear as day.

Even so, all that was visible was an endless expanse of pure white. Akira tilted his head in confusion.

However, at that moment, an inter-city transport vehicle suddenly appeared as if it had broken through a barrier in space. Akira could only see the front half of the vehicle. The rear half of the vehicle was invisible, and the boundary between the front and rear parts appeared blurry.

『W-What's this?』

『 High-ranking hunters have boarded the inter-city transport vehicle and arrived at the Third Inner Sector. The blurry part of the vehicle is the boundary between normal space and expanded space. If it were something the size of a humanoid weapon, it would be swallowed into the expanded space as soon as it touched the boundary. However, with a vehicle as large as the inter-city transport, it can remain in normal space as well. They've used that to create a passage between normal space and expanded space.』

『So they've made an entrance to the Third Inner Sector...』

Akira had heard that the reason high-ranking hunters didn't venture into the Third Inner Sector wasn't due to the military problem of Kaiju there but because there was no established means of escape from the Third Inner Sector. That was the story Akira knew.

And now that an entrance had been made, the problem of not being able to leave the Third Inner Sector was resolved.

『So...』

As Akira speculated, the scene unfolded. Numerous humanoid weapons emerged from the front of the inter-city transport vehicle. Most of the high-ranking hunters who came to the Kugamayama City were on board the vehicle.

Fused creatures emerging from the Third Inner Sector had reached the boundary between the second and First Inner Sector where the city's defense force was deployed. This was because the high-ranking hunters who had been defeating them had stopped thinning out the fused creatures to prepare for boarding the Third Inner Sector.

『...Alpha. Isn't this bad? If those guys defeat the Kaiju, my earnings will...』

『Akira, don't panic. Let's observe for now. Look at that.』

Akira looked in the direction indicated and involuntarily stiffened. From the edge of the white world, a massive swarm of fused creatures approached, seeming to engulf the whiteness.

『Even in a situation where reconnaissance is difficult due to high-density colorless mist, if you board an inter-city transport vehicle, even distant monsters will notice. It's the same even if you use anti-annihilator warheads to some extent. Even with my support, it's impossible for Akira to fight against that many monsters while facing a Kaiju. So let's have them reduce it.』

『So that's what you mean by observing...』

Until it becomes a situation where he can fight the Kaiju seriously, let's observe. Until the number of the swarm decreases significantly, let's rely on the high-ranking hunters. He'll fight afterward. If he face that swarm, even as a high-ranking hunter, he'll inevitably wear himself out. If he's exhausted, fewer people will target him. Akira understood that it was convenient in various ways.

『Yeah. Should we move a little farther away just in case?』

『Got it.』

If they stood out, they would also be attacked by that swarm. With that thought in mind, Akira moved slowly, concealing his presence.



A fierce battle began between the high-ranking hunters who boarded the inter-city transport vehicle and the swarm of fused creatures in the Third Inner Sector.

The fused creatures in the Third Inner Sector were significantly stronger than the individuals the hunters had fought in the Second

Inner Sector. However, even with their powerful individual capabilities, even Tatsukawa could scatter dozens of them with his beloved humanoid weapon alone.

Of course, not all high-ranking hunters had the same level of skill as Tatsukawa. Still, even if they couldn't scatter dozens alone, they could reduce them to several dozen. Everyone was significantly stronger as hunters. The fact that such skilled individuals had boarded the inter-city transport vehicle meant that the group's fighting power was incredibly high.

However, the swarm of fused creatures, while individually not as powerful as high-ranking hunters, countered with an overwhelmingly larger number. If dozens weren't enough, then hundreds, thousands, an inconceivable number swarmed to engulf the white ground.

The expanded space was vast. There was enough space to accommodate such a vast number of fused creatures. Even if they were sparsely distributed within that space, once they gathered in one place, they would fill the surroundings of the inter-city transport vehicle.

Hunters, brimming with determination, continued their attacks, firing countless powerful bullets, shells, missiles, and lasers to crush the fused creatures with all their might.

“There are so many! If they keep up this generic extermination, won't the city go bankrupt, despite all the profits Kugamayama City is making from that manager personality?”

Akira, or the faction of Nationalist including the fake Akira, had a bounty of 500 billion Aurum on their heads. Even if they defeated the fused creatures, they would still receive payment as a generic extermination request. Currently, the extermination fee for fused creatures far exceeded that of ordinary monsters.

In response to the confident voice of their comrade heard through communication, another person replied.

“No problem! At that time, Sakashita Heavy Industry will pay! ”

Kugamayama City's advancement into the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin was at the behest of Sakashita Heavy Industry. Among the high-ranking hunters who came to the city, it was already considered a certainty.

The fact that Sakashita Heavy Industry put a bounty of 500 billion Aurum on Akira's head supported that notion. The bounty was actually placed on the Nationalist in the Third Inner Sector. Sakashita Heavy Industry was providing such strong support to Kugamayama City. That's how it was perceived.

“Let's bankrupt Kugamayama City with our payments! We need to earn enough to make Sakashita Heavy Industry recognize our strength! ”

“Exactly! ”

Laughing amongst themselves, the hunters raised their spirits and continued their attacks. Countless powerful bullets, shells, missiles, and lasers crushed the fused creatures with all their might.

While the hunters were filled with enthusiasm, their goal wasn't money. The 500 billion Aurum bounty, even for immensely successful high-ranking hunters, was peanuts in the eyes of those present at the scene.

However, for individuals, receiving such a bounty was indeed a substantial sum. But in reality, since the bounty was for the Nationalist in the Third Inner Sector, it would be distributed to all hunters present at the scene based on their contributions. It wouldn't amount to much. It could even disappear as expenses.

However, since it's a reward for the Nationalist of the Third Inner Sector, the reward will be distributed among all the hunters here according to their contributions. It won't amount to much. It might even disappear as expenses.

Moreover, considering it's a reward for the Nationalist of the Third Inner Sector, 500 billion Aurums is too low. In previous disturbances caused by Nationalists, like the one caused by Tiol claiming to be a Nationalist, a reward of 50 billion Aurums was offered. Given the massive amount of fused creatures and even Kaiju appearing in this current disturbance, it's unthinkable that it would be only ten times that amount.

In contrast, the reward is only ten times that amount. For hunters sensitive to their earnings, this amount is weak as a reason to be enthusiastic.

So why are they so determined even though they'll only get a small sum even if they win? It's because the hunters have come here to earn the interest of Sakashita Heavy Industry.

To put it bluntly, even though the individuals here are considered high-ranking hunters, they are nothing more than second-rate fighters who cannot fight on the front lines. They aim to become first-rate fighters who can fight on the front lines and excel there.

However, the journey is long and distant. Just as many hunters cannot become high-ranking hunters even in their lifetime, many high-ranking hunters cannot become first-rate fighters even in their lifetime. Only a handful can reach that level.

If Sakashita Heavy Industry recognizes their abilities, the possibility of reaching that level increases dramatically. Companies spare no support for outstanding hunters. In advanced ruins where valuable relics are obtained, powerful monsters also roam. Talented individuals who can defeat them are always in short supply.

With the support of Sakashita Heavy Industry, even equipment that is worth it, like equipment that requires prepayment in Chrome and is kept waiting for years until it arrives, can be obtained with Aurums and in a short period. It also becomes possible to enter special ruins restricted by Sakashita Heavy Industry. The journey to becoming a first-rate hunter can be significantly shortened.

In order to gain that reputation with Sakashita Heavy Industry and to show that they are worth it, the hunters were putting their all into this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

They consumed all their efforts, and countless fused creatures vanished. But for every fused creature that vanished, more would immediately appear from beyond the vast expanses of the expansion space. The hunters continued to attack them relentlessly.

There's no worry about running out of ammunition. Spare ammunition is loaded onto inter-city transport vehicles in abundance. They just need to return once to replenish. The hunters continued to fire all their firepower at the horde of fused creatures covering the ground without hesitation.

In the command room of the inter-city transport vehicle, Melshia watched the hunters with a slightly worried expression.

In reality, Melshia was only worried about one person among them. It was Tatsukawa, who was rampaging with a red humanoid weapon against numerous fused creatures.

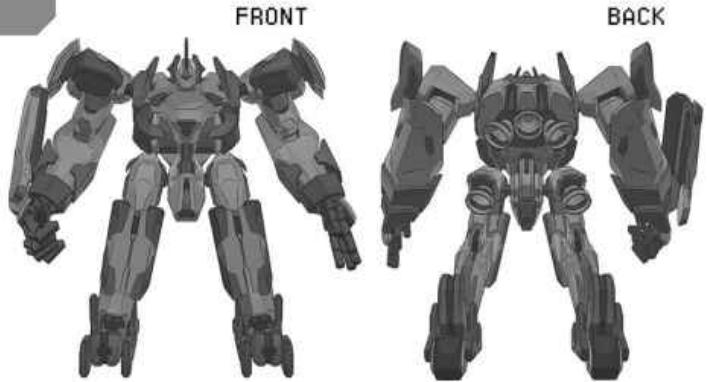
>Episode
008

下條アキラ

武器解説
Weapon Guide

**タツカワの
人型兵器**

ドラゴンリバーの隊長・タツカワが搭乗する大型人型兵器。格闘戦も可能な機体は極めて頑丈。両手の指を砲口に変形させることで、光弾を発射することも出来る。



**TATSUKAWA'S HUMANOID
WEAPON**



“Tatsukawa! You're too far away! Fight closer to the vehicle! ”

Hearing this through the communication, Tatsukawa, while punching nearby fused creatures with the red humanoid weapon he controlled, replied.

“It's okay! I'm still within communication range here, and remote energy supply is normal too! ”

“Just do it! If you keep messing around, I'll take over the control of your unit, okay? ”

“Got it, got it.”

Sensing that Melshia was serious, Tatsukawa obediently followed the instructions. He stopped charging into the horde of fused creatures alone, kicking and punching them indiscriminately. Instead, he transformed both hands' fingers into cannons while retreating at high speed and switched to firing energy blasts from a distance.

Seeing Tatsukawa's actions, the other hunters also judged that they had strayed too far from the vehicle and began to retreat.

“See, because I backed off, the others did too, right? Is that okay, Melshia? ”

With the front line retreating, the flow of energy released by the fused creatures began to hit the inter-city transport vehicle more frequently. But Melshia didn't seem to mind at all.

“It's fine. If we're at such a disadvantage from the beginning, it's retreat only. Shall we go back? ”

To Melshia's provocative statement, Tatsukawa responded in a spirited voice.

“Don't joke! ”

Tatsukawa, who had retreated sufficiently, began to counterattack. He shot multiple energy blasts, blowing away several fused creatures, and then charged again, crushing enemies with fists and kicks.

Surrounding fused creatures unleashed a torrent of energy at Tatsukawa. However, his unit's force field armor, constantly receiving remote energy supply from the inter-city transport vehicle, easily withstood it. The attacks barely left a scratch on his armor, and he could fire energy blasts without worrying about running out of energy.

Even with the front line retreating, the hunters were undaunted. They fought joyfully, earning achievements. They were in a position of complete dominance against the countless hordes of fused creatures, far from being at a disadvantage.

Tatsukawa, too, was filled with enthusiasm as he controlled his unit, producing significant results. Looking at the essential inter-city transport vehicle, he casually remarked,

“By the way, how did you manage to procure such inter-city transport vehicles? Must've cost a fortune, right? ”

“Yes. It cost around 100 billion Aurums.”

Tatsukawa lightly burst out at the unexpected amount.

“1-100 billion? ”

Tatsukawa, who left the team's management entirely to Melshia, also left the preparation of this plan to Melshia. As a result, he didn't know exactly how much it cost to procure the inter-city transport vehicles.

“Th-that's quite a sum... Are you sure it's okay? ”

“It's fine. We have a contract with other hunter teams who boarded with us, agreeing to give us a percentage of the money they earned from this incident. Even if we end up in the red, we'll manage somehow.”

Dragon River was the one who procured these inter-city transport vehicles, and Melshia, who was entrusted with their practical operation, was responsible. Melshia, under the leadership of Dragon River, cooperated with other hunter teams to infiltrate the Third Inner Sector.

At that time, Melshia proposed a slightly greedy division of their gains. Although other hunter teams were reluctant, they decided to join Melshia's plan, judging that it was better than having the results from the Third Inner Sector monopolized by Dragon River.

According to public information, the only one who returned from the Third Inner Sector was Tatsukawa, and as long as Tatsukawa led them, even if the plan failed, it wouldn't result in a situation where they couldn't escape from the Third Inner Sector. Such thinking also influenced the judgment of other hunter teams.

Tatsukawa is also on the front lines for that reason. Because Tatsukawa fights outside of the car like other hunters, other hunter teams can fight with peace of mind. They wouldn't send the leader of Dragon River into a place where survival is impossible. That's what he thinks.

Understanding that, Melshia had Tatsukawa step back. She was worried about Tatsukawa. Nonetheless, she lightly taunts him.

“Well, if you end up in a pathetic fight where you can't even earn a fragment, then it's a different story.”

Tatsukawa laughs confidently and responds.

“It's okay! As long as you don't stop me, it won't come to that! ”

And he shows his words in action. Dozens of fused creatures are blown away by the red humanoid weapon's energy bullets and killed in close combat. As soon as the same number of reinforcements appear, they are also quickly defeated. Again, more reinforcements come, but they are swiftly destroyed. Tatsukawa demonstrates a fighting style befitting the leader of Dragon River, impressing Melshia, the members of Dragon River, and the members of other hunter teams.

Tatsukawa's ability to demonstrate such power is largely due to his own skill, but it's also significant that his humanoid weapon receives energy remotely from inter-city transport vehicles. Tatsukawa, satisfied with that power, can't help but feel something.

"Spending 100 billion Aurum was worth it. But Melshia, if it was going to cost that much, couldn't we have used the underground tunnel to the Third Inner Sector instead of boarding the inter-city transport vehicle? "

"I did consider that option, but I decided against it. Using that route would require cooperation from that child, Shirou."

"...Can't you ask? "

The underground tunnel leading to the Third Inner Sector is closed off by a partition, but Shirou can open it. Once opened, large vehicles and humanoid weapons can pass through without issue. Melshia should find negotiating with Shirou easy enough. Tatsukawa asks in wonder.

However, Melshia lightly shakes her head.

"I looked into it a bit. That kid is from Sakashita Heavy Industry, and right now, he seems to be on the run. So, asking for his cooperation might draw unwanted attention from Sakashita Heavy Industry."

"Ah, that's impossible, then."

“Besides, for safety considerations, it's better to use the inter-city transport vehicle than to go through the underground tunnel. Since the vehicle receives energy remotely, you can unleash your full power without worrying about the energy level of your humanoid weapon, right? If you're going to fight in the Third Inner Sector, that's the safer option.”

“Well, that makes sense.”

“Just so you know, I didn't intend to go as far as procuring an inter-city transport vehicle unless you were going to pull some stunt and charge into the Third Inner Sector. Just saying.”

Melshia says, glaring at Tatsukawa through the communication link. Tatsukawa averts his gaze smoothly. Then the head of the red humanoid weapon moves in sync with his movement and looks sideways. He notices a fused creature and punches it away.

Melshia lets out a small sigh and then switches her focus, smiling.

“Well, since I went through the trouble of preparing it, make sure to use it effectively. Go wild and earn plenty, okay?”

“Got it! Leave it to me.”

Tatsukawa responds confidently with a smile and shows through action that his words are not lies. More than a hundred fused creatures are crushed in a short amount of time, their reinforcements slaughtered, and the color that had been painting the white world gradually fades away.



Akira watches the battle between the hunters who entered the Third Inner Sector and the horde of fused creatures from a distance. The situation in the battle is tilting in favor of the hunters.

『Amazing... With this many, they might actually wipe them out normally.』

With this number, it might be impossible to repel them completely, but just significantly reducing their numbers would be a big help. That's what Akira was thinking, but the hunters are showing strength and effort beyond Akira's imagination. Seeing this, it seemed only a matter of time before the horde of fused creatures would be completely wiped out by Akira.

Alpha also smiles and agrees.

『Indeed. If they continue to reduce the numbers like this, they won't be a hindrance when Akira fights the Kaiju. Shall we wait for the right moment and make our move as well, Akira? It's here.』

Akira, prompted by Alpha, looks into the depths of the white world. The hunters haven't noticed its presence yet, obscured by the colorless mist. But with Alpha's support, Akira can see it.

There, charging towards the inter-city transport vehicle, is the figure of the Kaiju, Relagros.

『Here it comes...! Well, with all this commotion, it's no surprise it showed up.』

Prepared to move at any moment, Akira straddles his bike.

『Alpha. When do we move?』

『Wait a little longer. It's still too early.』

『Got it.』

Taking deep breaths, Akira repeats, maintaining calmness, focusing, sharpening his awareness.

Meanwhile, the monster steadily approaches the inter-city transport vehicle. And as it gets closer to the hunters within range, it stops, opens its large mouth, and unleashes a torrent of immense energy. The released massive beam spreads out, engulfing not only the inter-city transport vehicle but also the hunters' humanoid weapon and the horde of fused creatures.

However, only the horde of fused creatures was scorched by the light. The inter-city transport vehicle is equipped with force field armor capable of withstanding attacks from Kaiju in the upper airspace, and the hunters' humanoid weapon is armored specializing in energy defense, effectively blocking the Kaiju's beam.

At this distance, the Kaiju determines that shooting the beam is ineffective due to attenuation, so it starts moving towards the vehicle again. It may appear sluggish from a distance, but in reality, it moves surprisingly fast for its massive size.

Then, the Kaiju fires the beam again. The energy torrent, amplified by being released from a closer position, once again engulfs the vehicle and the hunters. But once again, it's effectively blocked.

They've blocked it, but if they stay like this, both the vehicle and the hunters will continue to be targeted by the beam from a distance. However, the hunters don't approach the Kaiju, they wait near the vehicle.

『Alpha, why are they staying in that position? Even if they can defend against it, won't they just become targets?』

『They're probably waiting for the Kaiju to think shooting from that distance is futile and to close the distance.』

With armor specialized in energy defense, they can withstand the Kaiju's beam. Of course, it consumes a considerable amount of energy for defense, but the inter-city transport vehicle holds vast energy reserves for long-distance travel in the wasteland. As long as

they keep blocking this beam, there's no worry about energy depletion.

Likewise, it's presumed that the hunters' humanoid weapon receive wireless energy supply from the vehicle. As long as they stay near the vehicle, there's no risk of running out of energy.

However, because of this, the hunters cannot move away from the vehicle. While it would solve the problem if they could bring the vehicle closer to the Kaiju, it's not feasible. Moving further forward would result in being completely engulfed by the expanded space and unable to leave the Third Inner Sector.

So, they're waiting for the Kaiju to come closer. Of course, if they fail to manage the distance and get hit by the Kaiju, even the sturdy inter-city transport vehicle would not escape severe damage. Before that happens, they intend to attack the Kaiju simultaneously with the hunters' and vehicle's guns when it gets close enough. Alpha explained this to Akira.

『I see... So, should we move just before that... Huh?』

The situation changes. The Kaiju starts moving towards the inter-city transport vehicle again. That part is as Alpha predicted. However, the hunters' movements are different. The humanoid weapon deployed around the vehicle, after showing movements that seem to be slight confusion, return to the vehicle in a somewhat panicked manner.

Then the vehicle begins to retreat. The front part of the vehicle, towards the Third Inner Sector, gradually shrinks.

『...Huh? Retreat? What's going on? Did the Kaiju's attack have an effect?』

With a puzzled expression beside Akira, Alpha also looks perplexed.

『No, it doesn't seem to be the case.』

『Then why...?』

『I don't know.』

Alpha answers with just that before switching to a serious expression.

『But it's convenient. Akira, the time for observation is over.』

With that, Akira also switches his focus.

『Got it.』

They don't know why this happened, but as Alpha said, it's definitely convenient. The horde of fused creatures disappeared, taking the Kaiju's beam as collateral damage. With the hunters retreating, there's no longer a worry about being outpaced in defeating the Kaiju. In other words, it's a perfect opportunity to defeat the Kaiju without interference.

『It should take a little more time until the next beam can be fired. Let's get as close as possible during that time. Ready to fire?』

『Yes, let's go!』

In a split second of real time, the conversation ends as they manipulate perceived time and communicate telepathically. At that moment, the bike carrying Akira accelerates as much as its capabilities allow towards the Kaiju.

Akira's Kaiju hunt has begun.

Chapter 255: How to Defeat the Kaiju

After the inter-city transport vehicle penetrated into the Third Inner Sector, in the Second Inner Sector of the vehicle, numerous hunters were battling a horde of monsters.

These hunters are mainly troops. They fight by shooting from the roof of the vehicle or flying around on hover bikes. Each hunter team sent their main force, such as humanoid weapons units, to the Third Inner Sector for outdoor combat, while deploying other forces here.

They forcefully broke through the ruins of Kuzushihara City with a massive inter-city transport vehicle. Naturally, this strongly agitated the monsters in the area. Not only the fusion bodies that had already appeared in the Second Inner Sector, but also other monsters that had been there before, and even monsters from the First Inner Sector, gathered here.

However, the hunters were not struggling. Since the majority of high-rank hunter teams who came to Kugamayama City are participating, there is enough firepower even if they are not the main force.

Among them was Zelos, the leader of Lot Break. Zelos leads numerous high-rank hunters and is as strong as his team's humanoid weapons even in augmented suits. However, despite being that strong, fighting alongside humanoid weapons in the area where monsters appear in the Third Inner Sector is difficult not due to lack of firepower but due to issues with coordination. Therefore, he was fighting in the Second Inner Sector.

For similar reasons, other hunters deployed in the Second Inner Sector, and the rear of the vehicle had sufficient firepower. There was no problem even if mountains of Kaiju appeared in the Second Inner Sector.

While on patrol, Zelos received a report from his subordinate via communication. Upon hearing the contents, Zelos made contact with

Melshia in the vehicle's command room.

“This is Zelos from Lot Break. I've received a report from the patrol team. I don't know if it's the real one or a fake, but Akira is heading towards us at high speed. What should we do? ”

“Consider them hostile and eliminate them.”

“Is that alright? Didn't they shelter Akira at Dragon River? I heard such a story, so I contacted them just in case.”

“Even if it turns out to be the real one, they're still in a state where Sakashita Heavy Industry has put a bounty on them. I can't afford to babysit idiots who come here without any notice.”

“I see. Understood.”

Zelos ended the communication with Melshia.

(Well, it's probably a fake.)

Thinking so, under that assumption, Zelos informed other hunter teams about Akira's approach. And he gave instructions to his own team members.

“A fake Akira is approaching. Don't let your guard down just because it's a fake. While the one who died easily in Kugamayama City was weak, the one that appeared in Mihazono District Ruin was strong enough to single-handedly annihilate the city defense forces deployed at Serenthal Building.”

“Understood. If we kill them, will it be 500 billion Aurum? ”

Responding in a buoyant manner, a teammate, Zelos, said somewhat disappointedly in a joking tone.

“Too bad, even if it happens, it will decrease from Dragon River's share. But don't slack off just because of that. After all, there's still

enough for some flashy wining and dining.”

“Got it. I'll make sure to kill them thoroughly. Even if it's the stronger fake Akira, it's not a problem. With Zelos here, and with just the ones deployed here, it's an easy win. I won't lose to someone who just defeated the defense forces.”

“Of course not. But don't let your guard down, alright? ”

Zelos said, laughing with his comrades. But in his heart, he thought.

(If it's a fake, then there's no problem... But if it's the real one, it could be troublesome...)

Zelos had met Akira before in an incident where Babalod had sold the team's confidential information to Carol.

Despite being put at a significant disadvantage due to Zelos's trickery, Akira clearly demonstrated a superior strength and won decisively against Babalod. Zelos acknowledges this strength.

However, if there's one concern Zelos harbors about Akira, it's not about that strength. At least at that time, Zelos felt that Akira's strength was clearly much lower than his own. But even then, when he asked himself if he would definitely win against Akira in a fight, he couldn't say for sure.

A colossal uncertainty. Not about whether he is strong or not, but about something unpredictable. Zelos sensed that from Akira.

And upon investigating Akira's background out of curiosity, he found that Akira had become unusually strong in a short period of time. It was also revealed that during this process, Akira was involved in major incidents at a frequency that couldn't be considered normal.

For example, when Akira escorted an inter-city transport vehicle heading to Zegelt City, in just a few weeks before and after that,

Akira had raised their hunter rank by 20. It's not just remarkable, it's an extraordinary improvement in abilities.

Since their last meeting with Akira, several weeks have passed again. How strong is Akira now?

And considering Akira's history, even this incident where a bounty of 500 billion Aurum is placed on them might just be another one of the many incidents for Akira.

Don't let your guard down. Zelos warned his comrades to that extent, wary of the real Akira.

Later, as reported, the fake Akira appeared from the rear of the inter-city transport vehicle. Their appearance, including the augmented suit, was identical to the real Akira's. They even had the same airborne bike. They were equipped with four RL2 multi-function guns and two OFX multi-function guns, just like the real one. They approached at high speed through the air.

The hunters shot at the fake Akira one after another. The fake Akira was engulfed in an unavoidable barrage. However, due to the attenuation of power with distance and the presence of powerful force field shields, they were not defeated. But they were definitely hit.

In that state, the fake Akira also retaliated. However, it had no effect on the hunters. The decrease in the firepower of the gunfire due to distance was the same for the fake Akira. Moreover, everyone here are high-rank hunters. Their equipment is also extremely high-performance. They wouldn't be injured by that level of attack.

Furthermore, on the roofs of inter-city transport vehicles, there are also installation-type simple barriers integrated with the vehicle's force field armor. Even if fired with the OFX multi-function gun as a last resort, it can easily withstand it.

Was it unnecessary worry? Watching the fake Akira, who was showered with bullets without any way to defend himself, Zelos breathed a sigh of relief, thinking so.

But in the next moment, Zelos heightened his vigilance all at once. At the same time, the high-performance reconnaissance system of the vehicle sounded the alarm.

The reason for that alarm was the RL2 multi-function gun wielded by the fake Akira. Only one gun, fully deployed to enable the use of special ammunition, leaked enough energy to suggest its power.

“Evacuate! ”

Zelos shouted loudly to his comrades, instructing them to retreat behind the simple barrier. The other hunters followed suit without delay.

And then, the fake Akira opened fire. The bullets fired pierced through the space as if nothing, unaffected by factors such as the range reduction caused by high-density colorless mist or the decrease in bullet speed, and struck the armor of the inter-city transport vehicle in a straight line at high speed.

At that moment, a sphere of destruction was generated on the spot. It was a light sphere containing ultra-high-density energy inside. Due to the extremely compressed colorless mist caused by the explosion, a membrane with a strong energy-blocking effect was formed, trapping the energy that would have normally reached the ends of the earth inside it.

The light sphere, with a diameter of about 20 meters, collapsed and released its energy. A flash that seemed to blow everything away engulfed the area.

When the flash cleared, the surroundings were blown away dramatically. Despite the attenuation effect caused by the colorless mist, which significantly reduced the power of the light sphere upon

its formation, the power, although minimal compared to the destruction inside the sphere, was sufficient to obliterate sturdy buildings of the old-world around it.

But the inter-city transport vehicle was unharmed. The vehicle's systems had raised the output of the force field armor to its limit at the same time as sounding the alarm. The force field armor, which had become resilient enough to withstand bombardment from monsters in the upper airspace, also withstood this blow.

Zelos and the others were also safe. It was thanks to the simple barrier integrated with the vehicle's force field armor.

Still, Zelos wore a very grim expression.

“...Was that an anti-annihilator warhead? To think they even have something like that...”

It might become troublesome. Zelos frowned at the realization that his concern had come true and searched for the fake Akira with his information gathering device. However, he couldn't find him.

(He's not here. Where is he? Did he escape? Is he hiding nearby? How many anti-annihilator warheads does he has left? If he shoots me from close range, prepared for mutual destruction, there's nothing I can do...)

If the fake Akira shared the same ideology as the Nationalist, he wouldn't fear death for his beliefs. The idea that he couldn't use it because he would die at that distance wouldn't hold. Desperate to kill him quickly, Zelos searched desperately for the fake Akira.

Other hunters were also searching for the fake Akira, but they couldn't find him. Due to the aftermath of the anti-annihilator warhead attack earlier, atmospheric conditions were severely disturbed, causing a temporary drop in the accuracy of their information gathering device. Because of that, they couldn't definitively conclude that he wasn't nearby. They just kept searching.

And then Zelos received a report of the fake Akira's discovery. But it was in a place that was far too unexpected.

“Inside the vehicle!? What's going on!?”

Upon receiving the unexpected report from a comrade inside the vehicle, Zelos was momentarily confused but quickly issued instructions.

“Hurry and kill him with all your might! Use anything and attack with maximum firepower! Don't worry about damage to the vehicle! He might have an anti-annihilator warhead! It's better than letting him use it! I'll head there immediately!”

Zelos told his comrades as he rushed out, then sprinted to the entrance on the roof. He entered the vehicle and hurried to where his comrades were.

And when he arrived at his comrades' location, the fake Akira had already been defeated. There were no casualties among his comrades. He breathed a sigh of relief involuntarily.

“...Is everyone okay? ”

“Yeah. We're fine. We went all out as instructed, so there's some damage to the vehicle, but...”

“Don't worry about it. Safety comes first.”

The man looked puzzled as he stared at the fake Akira's body.

“But still... Where did this guy come from? ”

“I don't know. Did he make a hole in the outer wall with the anti-annihilator warhead and enter from there? But if it had that much power, there should have been more damage to the vehicle itself...”

Zelos also looked puzzled and grimaced, but for now, since they had defeated the fake Akira, there was no difference, so he tried to shift his focus and contact Dragon River.

But then, instead, a communication came from Dragon River to the hunters.

“A fake Akira has infiltrated the vehicle! There's a possibility he has an anti-annihilator warhead! Take him down immediately! ”

They had already defeated him. That's what Zelos and the others thought, but they were surprised when they saw the position of the fake Akira that had been sent. There were twelve locations, including where Zelos and the others were. They instinctively looked at the fake Akira's body.

“...Isn't it just him!? ”

As if in response, the voice of someone from Dragon River continued.

“Don't let your guard down even if you've taken down everyone! We don't know how many there are! After defeating them all, thoroughly search the vehicle to ensure safety! ”

With Akira's presence, even if it's a fake, would it cause such a commotion? Or could the real one be nearby? Either way, Zelos's unpleasant premonition came true, and he frowned.

Upon receiving the report that a fake Akira had infiltrated the vehicle and might possess anti-annihilator warheads, Melshia immediately instructed Tatsukawa to retreat.

“Tatsukawa! Retreat temporarily! Come back! ”

“Huh? Why suddenly? What's going on? ”

In the Third Inner Sector, Relagros appeared, and all that remained was to determine the distance and launch a coordinated attack with

the hunters. Tatsukawa, understandably, was puzzled by the order to retreat and sought an explanation.

However, Melshia urged retreat impatiently with a rough tone.

“I said hurry up! Right now! ”

“O-Okay.”

There was no time to explain, the urgency of the situation demanded immediate action. Judging from Melshia's demeanor, Tatsukawa understood and promptly returned to the inter-city transport vehicle as instructed.

Other hunters, seeing Tatsukawa return to the vehicle obediently, albeit bewildered, followed suit. Although it didn't seem like a situation where they needed to retreat, Tatsukawa's return ensured their ability to escape from the Third Inner Sector. Remaining here would risk being unable to return.

Once back inside the vehicle, Tatsukawa, without disembarking from the humanoid weapon, asked for an explanation again.

“So, Melshia. What's going on? ”

“A fake Akira has infiltrated the vehicle, at least twelve of them. And there's a possibility they have anti-annihilator warheads. With the vehicle in such a state, we can't afford to engage Relagros. We need to secure the vehicle's safety and regroup.”

“If that's the case, then there's no other choice. Understood. I'll also eliminate the fake Akira.”

“No, Tatsukawa. Stay put.”

“No, I can't just stand by and do nothing.”

“Didn't I tell you? The fake Akira might have anti-annihilator warheads. It's too dangerous.”

“That's precisely why I have to do it.”

Recognizing the danger, Tatsukawa couldn't allow someone else to face the fake Akira. As the leader of Dragon River, it was his responsibility. Through their communication link, they locked eyes, each insisting on their own will without yielding.

This time, Melshia relented. It was Melshia who disembarked. In the hunter's profession, everything was at stake. Therefore, there was no one to follow but oneself, especially when it came to dangerous tasks. Tatsukawa's argument prevailed.

“Fine. But! Ensure it's done as safely as possible! And! I'm coming with you, so don't act on your own until we regroup! Got it? ”

“Roger that. Hurry.”

“I'm on my way! ”

Melshia, sounding desperate, shouted at the laughing Tatsukawa and cut off the communication. Then, after getting out of the humanoid weapon, Tatsukawa quietly waiting and reuniting with her, she raised her voice again.

“Let's do this! If anything happens, I'll protect you with my life! ”

“Don't say that. Let's go.”

Despite their different expressions, Tatsukawa and Melshia rallied their spirits to begin the assault on the fake Akira, just like the old days when they were a team of two.



After the high-rank hunters had eradicated the fused creature swarm and retreated, Akira obtained the opportunity, for better or worse, to face Relagros one-on-one.

To have the 500 billion Aurum bounty placed on himself by Sakashita Heavy Industry lifted, he needed results equivalent to that. For better or worse, aiming to solo defeat Relagros was his way of monopolizing those results. With the destruction incarnate, dubbed a Kaiju, approaching, he accelerated to maximum speed on his bike and headed straight towards it.

Naturally, Relagros noticed him. However, it didn't immediately release a torrent of energy. It had already used it against the hunters and would take time before it could use it again. Taking advantage of this window, Akira closed in on the Kaiju.

However, having observed the battle from a distance, Akira couldn't immediately close the distance with Relagros. Light leaked from the Kaiju's large mouth, a precursor to firing a beam.

If he had been closer to Relagros, he could have dodged by slipping into its embrace. If he had been far enough, he could have relied on his force field shield specialized in energy defense to block it due to distance-induced attenuation and diffusion. Akira was in the middle of those distances, unable to do either.

『Alpha! We won't make it in time!』

『That seems to be the case. It can't be avoided, so we'll have to block it.』

『How?』

『Like this.』

Prompted by Alpha, Akira aimed the RL2 multi-function gun. Equipped with anti-annihilator warheads, the gun was already in

expanded mode under Alpha's control. He then fired at the Kaiju's large mouth. The fired anti-annihilator warhead pierced through the white space in a straight line.

Slightly delayed, Relagros fired its beam. If it hit head-on, Akira would vanish without a trace.

However, the colossal energy beam collided with the equally immense energy sphere, severely disrupting its flow. The torrent of energy scattered in all directions into the white space.

Before the anti-annihilator warhead hit Relagros, it exploded, creating a light sphere that blocked the beam's trajectory. The diameter of the generated light sphere was about 10 meters. Due to the thick colorless mist in the Third Inner Sector, it remained that size.

Nevertheless, it was sufficiently large to shield Akira from the direct impact of the beam. And the smaller it became, the higher the energy density inside the light sphere rose. Even if Relagros's beam hit it, it wouldn't be obliterated but would remain, altering the flow of energy as a barrier.

However, just the residual aftermath of the energy flow, the scattered tributaries alone, had enough power to obliterate the swarm of fused creatures.

However, with Alpha's precise control over the anti-energy force field shield, it was possible to somehow fend it off. Thanks to that, Akira was unharmed.

Still, Akira grimaced. Not only was he fearful of Relagros's beam, but as he pressed forward toward the Kaiju, he found himself heading straight into a glowing sphere with enough energy to deflect the beam.

Naturally, if he continued at this pace, Akira would collide with the sphere and vanish. In the world where he manipulated time

perception to its limits, Akira's face contorted with fear as the sphere approached.

That's when Alpha took control of the bike. Twisting the direction of travel at maximum output, he managed to avoid a collision with the sphere. Akira felt a moment of relief, but it was short-lived. The sphere burst, scattering its contents.

Due to the incredibly high-density colorless mist, the released energy didn't scorch the surroundings, but it didn't completely absorb the shockwave either. The explosion caused a violent storm that shook Relagros's colossal body.

Naturally, Akira was also swept away by the storm. However, with Alpha's skillful driving and the powerful force field shield of the bike, he managed to endure by deflecting the wind skillfully. On the bike, with his posture regained, Akira couldn't help but let out a voice.

“I thought... I was going to die...”

In response, Alpha said with a smile,

『Akira. It's not worth talking about if you're going to die from something like this, is it?』

On the bike, accelerating once again towards Relagros, Akira half-heartedly laughed.

“...I know! ”

There was no lie in feeling the fear of death. But Akira's fighting spirit remained unshaken.

Akira closed the distance with Relagros again. And before the beam could be used again, he closed the distance. Now, even if the beam were to be fired again, he wouldn't be hit unless it aimed directly at the giant head.

However, this didn't mean he had stopped the Kaiju's attacks. Relagros attacked Akira with its giant arms or front legs, which specialized force field shields couldn't defend against. Akira faced an impending massive blow.

Because of Relagros's immense size, its movements might seem sluggish from a distance where its massive body could be seen, but in reality, it was targeting Akira with agile and high-speed movements.

Arms as thick as buildings swung at him at speeds that generated shockwaves rather than just winds. Akira skillfully maneuvered the bike through the air to evade them. A direct hit would mean instant death, a grazing hit could be fatal, and even narrowly avoiding it would still subject him to the shockwaves. He did his best to dodge the attacks as much as possible, enduring them with the force field armor and avoiding them continuously.

He couldn't afford to be hit by the light beam, which even anti-annihilator warheads couldn't defend against. Maintaining that distance, Akira endured Relagros's relentless onslaught.

Of course, merely enduring the Kaiju's attacks wouldn't lead to victory. What Akira was doing was buying time. And he had bought enough time.

『Akira. Let's do it.』

『Roger!』

Akira once again aimed the RL2 multi-function gun loaded with anti-annihilator warheads. The RL2 multi-function gun was compatible with anti-annihilator warheads, but it couldn't fire in rapid succession. What Akira had desperately earned was the time needed until the next firing of the anti-annihilator warhead.

At this distance, it would surely hit. With that in mind, Akira smiled confidently and fired.

The anti-annihilator warhead that hit Relagros's back generated a glowing sphere, then exploded, emitting a flash and scattering vast amounts of energy.

He won. Thinking that, Akira's smile deepened.

But when the flash cleared, what appeared before Akira was the Kaiju, showing off its vitality.

Of course, it wasn't unscathed. The impact site was deeply gouged, its strong skin blown off, exposing charred insides. It was in a severely injured state, to say the least.

But it wasn't dead. It wasn't a fatal wound. It hadn't even fallen. With its giant body, it stood firmly in the white world.

“Ehh...”

Instead of being surprised by this unexpected sight, Akira voiced dissatisfaction, as if disappointed by the unexpected outcome.

And seeing the flashy wounds of the Kaiju gradually healing, Akira hurriedly shot at the injured areas. He fired S-rank bullets with three RL2 multi-function guns and fired light bullets with two OFX multi-function guns.

However, it wasn't very effective. Rather than worsening, the injuries were healing, and despite being continuously shot, the wounds caused by the anti-annihilator warheads were slowly healing.

And Relagros began to counterattack. Despite its movements being slowed due to incomplete recovery, it attacked Akira with its arms, legs, tail, mouth, and body repeatedly.

Akira stopped shooting and focused on evading once again. While the Kaiju's movements had become somewhat sluggish, it was only to a certain extent. While he continued to dodge, Relagros's injuries were rapidly healing.

『...Alpha. What should we do? If we can't defeat it even with anti-annihilator warheads, there's no hope, is there?』

Akira's face also became grim. Even if he inflicted significant damage with the anti-annihilator warheads, if most of it was healed before the next shot, their effectiveness would be minimal. Moreover, he had only six anti-annihilator warheads, and he had already used two. His concern was evident on his face.

Meanwhile, Alpha remained smiling.

『It's not that it's not effective. Those hunters also intended to defeat Relagros with anti-annihilator warheads, right?』

『How?』

『When it gets close enough, fire the anti-annihilator warheads all at once. It should surely be annihilated. Even if it doesn't work, it'll be a fatal blow. With so many high-rank hunters here, they can overwhelm it with numbers.』

In fact, the hunters planned to defeat Relagros using that method. To do so, a large quantity of anti-annihilator warheads was necessary, but with teams of high-rank hunters like Dragon River, procuring them wouldn't be too difficult.

While there were various restrictions on obtaining anti-annihilator warheads, if obtained in large quantities, there would be some leniency. Bullets with this much power were unnecessary items in the Kugamayama region. Trying to obtain them would raise suspicions. But now, there was a legitimate reason to use anti-annihilator warheads to defeat Relagros. The situation had made it easier to acquire anti-annihilator warheads.

With the pretext of passing on items acquired by Kibayashi to other hunters, Akira could engage in under-the-table transactions.

Therefore, for high-rank hunters, simply defeating the Relagros wasn't that difficult. The reason they hesitated to enter the Third Inner Sector wasn't because there was a monster so powerful it was dubbed as Kaiju, but because the method of escape from there was unknown. This wasn't an excuse but a fact.

Even if they managed to defeat Relagros with simultaneous fire from anti-annihilator warheads, it wouldn't necessarily demonstrate their true abilities to Sakashita Heavy Industry. The hunters were well aware of this.

In reality, they didn't plan to suddenly engage in simultaneous fire. Instead, when they closed in on Relagros, each planned to assault it at their own discretion and defeat it without relying heavily on anti-annihilator warheads, or use only a small amount. The simultaneous fire was a contingency plan in case their initial attempts failed.

Thus, whether the hunters barely won or won decisively, they intended to win at least. So, when they received instructions from Melshia for a temporary retreat, they were extremely surprised.

Upon hearing the reason for the retreat, they understood. It was understood that the current situation made it easier to obtain anti-annihilator warheads. With the use of anti-annihilator warheads by the fake Akira, there was a risk that other fakes also possessed them. No one argued against retreating once to defeat all the fakes and secure safety before regrouping. This was also why the situation arose where Akira was alone in defeating Relagros.

Akira accepted Alpha's explanation. However, his expression remained grim.

『...So, what should I do since sheer numbers won't cut it?』

Akira has four RL2 multi-function guns. In other words, if he gives up firing S bullets, he can shoot up to four anti-annihilator warheads at once. While this is incredibly powerful, it doesn't match the simultaneous fire from anti-annihilator warheads.

Since the hunters had planned to defeat Relagros relying on simultaneous fire from anti-annihilator warheads, it would mean that even with just four rounds of anti-annihilator warheads, they couldn't defeat it. To Akira, Alpha's explanation sounded like a detailed explanation of why he couldn't defeat Relagros himself.

Alpha also understood that Akira was thinking along those lines. From here on, Alpha would explain why even Akira could defeat Relagros.

『That Kaiju's skin is like the armor of inter-city transport vehicles. Using energy supplied remotely from the ruins, it maintains an extremely powerful bio-force field armor at all times.』

『So, we have to do something about that armor, right?』

『Exactly. Shall we try to figure something out?』

Akira understood Alpha's intention with that.

『Got it.』

Then, with a smile, he drew the HBTN Blade from its sheath and leaped forcefully from the fast-moving bike at Alpha's instruction. He raced through the air with the enhanced capabilities of his augmented suit, aimed at Relagros's back like a bullet, and as soon as he landed, he swung the crimson blade with all his might.

The term “Kaiju” refers to creatures of extraordinary size dwelling near the frontline. And to such a Kaiju, a blade meant for the frontline was wielded with a masterful technique supported by Alpha. The crimson blade, utilizing old-world technology that transcended modern science and ventured into the realm of magic, tore through Relagros's formidable skin.

『Alright! It cut through!』

Akira couldn't help but laugh powerfully. For Relagros, this level of injury was nothing more than a scratch. It was just a slight gash on a tiny part of its mountainous body. But its meaning is great. This deep cut is also the passageway for the anti-annihilator warhead, which is the same size as dust compared to its gigantic body.

By creating a gap in Relagros's bio-force field armor with the HBTN Blade and aiming for that gap to detonate the anti-annihilator warheads inside, Akira had proven that even with his limited supply of anti-annihilator warheads, he could defeat Relagros.

Akira attempted to swing the blade again. However, his stance was disrupted as Relagros, the platform he relied on, moved violently, so he gave up. He leaped once more to return to his bike.

Akira had thought that if he clung to the surface of the Kaiju, he could neutralize its attacks. But now he understood that it was impossible in the current situation.

The surface of the Kaiju, which moved at speeds unimaginable from its colossal body, trembled to a degree surpassing even major earthquakes. Even with the ground-contact functions of his augmented suit and bike, he couldn't endure it. If he forcibly endured it, the bike would likely break from the strain. Losing the bike, which was crucial for mobility in this situation, would result in certain death. Considering that, moving through the air around the Kaiju was the safest option.

Alpha also seemed to think so, as he continued to fly around the Kaiju's vicinity without landing on its surface. While thinking this, Akira continued to evade the Kaiju's attacks.

『Alpha, what should I do? Should I keep all four guns loaded until I can fire anti-annihilator warheads again? 』

If he detonated the anti-annihilator warheads inside Relagros, even one shot might be enough to defeat it. But it might not be. So, if he

wanted to maximize firepower, it would be better to shoot with all four RL2 multi-function guns.

However, doing so would render the RL2 multi-function guns unusable until he finished firing the anti-annihilator warheads. Due to their structure, they couldn't be used for firing S bullets while being loaded with anti-annihilator warheads and prepared for firing.

In other words, seeking maximum firepower would temporarily render the RL2 multi-function guns unusable for attacks. However, Shock S bullets, no matter how many were fired, wouldn't affect Relagros. In that case, it wouldn't matter. Although Akira thought so, he still asked Alpha if it was okay.

However, Alpha issued the opposite instruction.

『No, Akira. Remove the magazine containing the anti-annihilator warheads from the gun.』

『...? Understood.』

Although puzzled, Akira followed the instructions. As the magazine containing the anti-annihilator warheads was removed, the RL2 multi-function gun returned to its normal form.

『So, what's the reason for that?』

『Look at that.』

Following Alpha's direction, Akira, with Alpha's support, saw through the colorless mist, which he couldn't perceive naturally, and recognized it. His expression turned grim.

『That's...!』

It was the fake Akira. Riding a bike capable of airborne travel, it was heading straight towards him.

The fake Akira, who had evaded the inter-city transport vehicles and entered the Third Inner Sector, had appeared at a distant position from the vehicles due to the mismatch of coordinates between the normal space and the expanded space of the Third Inner Sector. As a result, it took time for it to arrive at this location.

Immediately, Akira aimed his gun at the fake Akira and opened fire. A simultaneous barrage from the four RL2 multi-function guns and two OFX multi-function guns assaulted the still-distant fake Akira. Bullets from the extraordinary number of rounds utilizing the capacity of the expanded magazines and high-powered light bullets from the bike's large energy tank flew through the white world.

Slightly delayed, the fake Akira also fired its deployed RL2 multi-function gun at Akira. It fired only a single bullet.

A vast number of bullets and high-powered light bullets. And a single bullet clashed with each other's trajectories. In the next moment, a sphere of destruction was generated along their trajectories.

What the fake Akira fired was an anti-annihilator warhead, and this fake Akira was the individual who had attacked the inter-city transport vehicles.

Chapter 256: Lucky Day

Haruka, who had been supporting fake Akira through the old-world domain, is astonished when Akira intercepts the anti-annihilator warhead.

“Is this a lie...!?”

It was something that should never have happened.

Anti-annihilator warheads fundamentally penetrate everything in their path until they either hit the target or fly the preset distance, passing through any obstacles along the line of fire.

To forcibly stop it, significant obstacles are required. Armor of inter-city transport vehicles capable of even withstanding monster bombardments from the sky. The bio-force field armor on the skin of Kaiju is strengthened with the energy of the ruins. Or another anti-annihilator warhead. Without such things, anti-annihilator warheads cannot be stopped.

In other words, even if Akira were to use his remarkable marksmanship to hit the anti-annihilator warhead with a large number of bullets, it should just penetrate through them all as if nothing happened.

Yet, it was intercepted. It was blocked by regular bullets, which was unbelievable. Faced with this undeniable fact, Haruka could only be astonished.

Of course, it was naturally due to Alpha's support that Akira made this impossible feat possible.

Alpha condensed the colorless mist, already of an outrageously high density due to the shockwaves of the S ^{Shock}bullets, into a single point. This caused a specific phenomenon unique to ultra-high-density colorless mist. It's the cause of the generation of light spheres when

the anti-annihilator warhead explodes. It has an exponentially decaying effect to contain even immense energy. A point possessing that effect was created.

And by placing that point on the trajectory of the anti-annihilator warhead fired by fake Akira, Alpha made the interception of the anti-annihilator warhead by the ^{Shock}S bullets, which was originally impossible, possible.

Of course, to succeed in this, godlike marksmanship is required to hit each bullet fired at super high speed from a large-capacity extended magazine designed for high-rank hunters, precisely without any deviation, at the intended spot. It's something so impossible that Haruka hadn't even thought of it.

But Alpha succeeded in it. However, even Alpha needed four RL2 multi-function guns to succeed. The ^{Shock}S bullets from three guns were not enough to compress the colorless mist. Alpha had Akira remove the magazine of the anti-annihilator warhead for that purpose.

Akira doesn't know that such a miraculous event has happened now. Even so, he understands at least that fake Akira used the anti-annihilator warhead against him and that he intercepted it. He involuntarily grimaces.

『An anti-annihilator warhead...! Is my impostor really equipped with that? ! Wasn't the anti-annihilator warhead supposed to be extremely valuable? 』

In response, Alpha laughs and says,

『It certainly is valuable. But no matter how you put it, even if the circumstances are strange, it's something Akira himself has. So it's not surprising that fake Akira has it too.』

『...I see.』

『Also, just to let you know, it's usually impossible to intercept an anti-annihilator warhead. You could do it because thanks to me. Don't think that just because you intercepted it once, you can do it again if it's fired at you. Akira. The light sphere will burst. Be prepared.』

『Oops.』

The light sphere bursts, releasing its internal energy as a blast. Akira doesn't resist the intense wind but goes with the flow and redirects it, then adjusts his bike's posture.

『Alpha, what happened to my impostor?』

『Over there. Shoot.』

『Got it!』

With his posture readjusted, Akira immediately resumes firing. Countless bullets and light bullets pierce through the air, assaulting fake Akira.

Fake Akira maneuvers through the air on a bike, moving agilely and irregularly to evade Akira's aim. However, he can't escape Alpha's precise shooting. He gets hit continuously.

But fake Akira retaliates in that state. Although not with anti-annihilator warheads, he fires numerous bullets and light bullets just like Akira.

Akira completely blocks them. He dodges the bullets with the high-speed movement of his bike, and the unavoidable ones are intercepted. He raises the output of the anti-energy force field shield momentarily to deal with the light bullets.

Then, Relagros's attacks join in. The continuous strikes from the massive creature disturb the surrounding atmosphere, generating a

storm. In the midst of the raging winds, Akira dodges the looming giant arms of the Kaiju and avoids its thick tail swinging like a building.

During this, fake Akira closes the distance. While intercepting an anti-annihilator warhead is theoretically possible, it's helpless when fired at close range. To prevent this, Akira uses the biggest obstacle available, the giant body of the Kaiju, to block fake Akira's line of fire. Fake Akira, on the other hand, follows Akira to keep him in his sights.

As a result, Akira and fake Akira find themselves circling rapidly around the rampaging Kaiju.

The irregular two-on-one gunfight continues. Akira relentlessly fires, emptying his extended magazine, hitting fake Akira with almost all of his shots.

Yet, fake Akira doesn't go down. Even though he's hit and his posture is disrupted, he manages to recover while Akira avoids the Kaiju's attacks and relentlessly pursues Akira.

In this situation, and with another concern in mind, Akira wears a grim expression.

『Hey, Alpha. Isn't he a bit too sturdy?』

Even though he's strong, the opponent isn't a Kaiju. It's odd that despite being bombarded with bullets and light bullets effective against fusion bodies, he isn't going down. Alpha responds to Akira's question.

『Perhaps that impostor, like the monsters from the ruins, is being remotely supplied with energy. That's why he's constantly raising output for things like force field armor.』

『I see...』

It's an opponent akin to those commanding Kaiju. It's not surprising that he can do that much. Akira thinks so and is satisfied with the explanation of his question.

At that moment, Relagros begins to shine. Knowing that it's a precursor to an attack from the amphibian fusion body, Akira immediately evacuates at full speed from the area.

Slightly delayed, Relagros emits a wave of light from its entire body. It's an unavoidable attack releasing high energy in all directions. Although lower in power than a linear energy release beam, it has the power to blow away flocks of fusion bodies. Akira and fake Akira are engulfed in the flash.

However, Akira endured it. Thanks to immediately distancing himself from the Kaiju and attenuating its power, he erected a maximum output anti-energy force field shield under Alpha's control.

And the fake Akira also endured it. Using energy supplied remotely from the ruins, he forcibly defended himself. Although his body was somewhat charred and partially carbonized, the monster's remarkable vitality was healing him.

Akira grimaced when he saw the fake Akira's condition after the flash cleared. He became cautious once again. Even if it resembled a human, he couldn't afford to think it wasn't a monster and be caught off guard. It was better to fight under the assumption that being vertically bisected wouldn't kill it. He reminded himself of that.

Additionally, Akira understood that clinging to the Kaiju's massive body to render it powerless was also futile. If he had been on top of that massive body, he would have been incinerated by the recent flash.

Akira's expression hardened again, this time not out of curiosity but concern.

『Hey, Alpha... I might be overthinking it, or maybe I'm mistaken, but... isn't that fake me the one I killed in Seranthal building?』

He had not just shattered it to pieces but obliterated it into powder. He had blown its head off, and even if it somehow survived as just a head, or if its brain was in another part of its body, there was no room for doubt, Akira knew that well.

However, despite knowing all this, something akin to Akira's intuition had told him that it was the fake from that time. Troubled by this, Akira, realizing he was saying something strange even to himself, asked Alpha about it. If Alpha said it was different, Akira could correct himself, chalking it up to his imagination.

However, Alpha did not deny Akira's thoughts.

『If that's what Akira believes, then it might be true.』

『Huh? But I did kill it, right?』

『Maybe you only destroyed its body and couldn't kill its personality. It's possible it transferred its consciousness to another body and escaped.』

『Transfer its consciousness... Is that even possible?』

『 Technically, it's possible. Whether the opponent has that technology or not is another matter.』

『...If that's the case, then... was it still alive?』

Akira, understanding this, felt a surge of dark emotions, threatening to overwhelm his expression, but Alpha intervened to stop it.

『Akira. Calm down.』

『...Sorry.』

With Alpha's reminder, Akira regained his composure. He understood that now was not the time for that. If pointed out, his rationality would prevail.

『But what should I do? If we don't do something about it, we can't defeat the Kaiju. Moreover, that thing is stronger than it was in Seranthal building, and even if we defeat it here, it might come back and attack us with that consciousness transfer thing. There's no end to this, is there?』

As Akira pondered, Alpha spoke after a moment of thought.

『There is a way to significantly weaken both the Kaiju and that fake Akira and then kill that fake, at least in theory, apart from the other fakes. However, the drawbacks are substantial, so it's a bit of a gamble.』

It's a gamble. But Akira, who wouldn't hesitate over something like that, immediately asked for clarification.

『What should I do?』

『I create communication interference in the Third Inner Sector. That way, you can weaken them and prevent consciousness transfer.』

Relagros and the fake Akira are receiving energy remotely from the ruins, but they likely have a mechanism where they send a request for energy supply to the ruins after consuming a certain amount of energy.

Even if the supplied energy is effectively inexhaustible, there are limits to the recipients. Without such a mechanism in place, they would receive an energy overload beyond their capacity, leading to self-destruction.

By causing communication disruption, they won't be able to send energy supply requests to the ruins. This cuts off the energy supply from the ruins. Both the Kaiju and the fake Akira won't recover the expended energy and will weaken proportionately.

Furthermore, consciousness transfer is also a form of communication. Under communication disruption, transfer fails. Destroying the body in this state can effectively kill the personality with no escape route.

However, inducing such severe communication disruption will naturally affect Akira as well. In other words, the connection with Alpha will be severed. While the enemy will significantly weaken, the same applies to us. The question of whether to proceed with this plan was a primary concern.

After explaining this, Alpha continues.

『There may be several other issues that arise, but I'll spare you the details for now.』

『So, should we refrain from it?』

When Akira asks this, Alpha takes a moment to think and responds with a slightly teasing smile.

『Well, recent events seem to favor Akira, so maybe it's worth the gamble?』

Surprised by the unexpected remark, Akira's expression becomes puzzled.

『...Really? Favorable? My house was blown up, there's a bounty on my head from Kugamayama City, Sakashita Heavy Industry put a bounty on me, and now I'm fighting Kaiju to deal with that. Doesn't feel very lucky to me.』

『The incident with your house and the bounty from Kugamayama City aren't recent events. Sakashita Heavy Industry happened because you chose to help Shiro. It's not about luck. Besides, you were lucky enough to save Sheryl in Seranthal building.』

『Well, that's... maybe, but....』

Not fully convinced, Akira is met with a smiling response from Alpha.

『Firstly, if your usual bad luck had continued, we'd probably be in a much worse situation. Kibayashi wouldn't have prepared the anti-annihilator warheads in time, you wouldn't have received the Blade from Shiro, and you'd be dealing with both the Hunters and a horde of monsters, facing both Relagros and the fake Akira. It's not strange to imagine such a scenario even now.』

Hearing that, Akira couldn't help but agree. Finding it amusing himself, he chuckled lightly.

『...You know what? It does seem like I'm having a lucky day. Maybe all that enduring through bad luck has finally paid off?』

『Maybe so.』

Laughing together with Alpha, Akira made his decision.

『Got it. Alpha, let's do it.』

Why Alpha can do that is not something Akira questions at this point. If Alpha can do it, then it can be done. With that thought in mind, knowing he had made the decision to fight without Alpha's support in this situation, Akira asked Alpha to induce communication disruption.

『Understood. You can win this now, Akira. So, give it your all.』

Encouraged by Alpha's smile, Akira returned a strong smile.

『Yeah. I'll do my best.』

Alpha nodded and announced,

『Starting now. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1...』

As the countdown progressed, Akira changed everything he had entrusted to Alpha, such as bike driving and gun settings, to be done by himself. He prepared his gun. He also changed the OFX multi-function gun on his bike from its trump card state to its ultimate state.

『Zero.』

With that voice, Alpha's figure disappeared from Akira's field of view. The connection with Alpha was severed due to communication disruption.

There was no more support from Alpha. From now on, it was a fight relying solely on his own abilities. Akira understood that he could only do what he could do on his own. With that understanding, he changed his way of fighting to give his all, stepping up to the limit. He stopped keeping his distance from the fake Akira, who was chasing after him, by reversing his bike and started approaching him at full speed.

With no support from Alpha, he could no longer intercept the anti-annihilator warheads. If he allowed the fake Akira to keep his distance with his clumsy driving, he would die from being targeted by the anti-annihilator warheads. To prevent this, Akira challenged the fake Akira to close combat.

It was right after the communication disruption occurred. Taking advantage of the fake Akira's surprise at the sudden cessation of remote energy supply, Akira thought so.

Of course, there was no guarantee that a definite opening would occur. Even if the energy supply stopped, since there was still plenty of residual energy, the fake Akira might not panic much. Akira knew that, but for now, he was betting on it. Today, he was lucky. Alpha also said it would be okay. With that in mind, he took the gamble.

And first, he won that gamble. The fake Akira was thrown off balance, clearly showing surprise on his face.

The reasons the fake Akira was surprised were threefold: Akira, who had been running away until now, suddenly charged at him; he could no longer receive remote energy supply; and Haruka's support disappeared due to communication disruption. Everything happened suddenly, and the fake Akira was greatly surprised.

The last reason was particularly significant in causing his movement to become erratic. Driving a bike agilely through the dense colorless mist required advanced driving skills. With the high driving skills entrusted to Haruka while driving the bike suddenly lost, the high driving skills were suddenly lost. Movement inevitably became erratic.

Taking advantage of this opening, Akira leapt from the accelerating bike with his augmented suit's physical abilities, accelerated further, and closed the distance with the fake Akira at super speed. Then, he raised the HBTN Blade.

The fake Akira hurriedly tried to intercept Akira. He fired three RL2 multi-function guns and two OFX multi-function guns at Akira.

But he couldn't shoot him down. The fake Akira's shooting ability, without Haruka's support, had significantly decreased, and he couldn't aim accurately at Akira.

In addition, the OFX multi-function gun in Akira's bike, in its last resort state, emits an enormously powerful laser, a beam of ultra-high-density energy, while undergoing self-destruction. This forced the fake Akira's consciousness to focus on defending against the anti-

energy force field shield, further reducing the accuracy of his shooting.

However, the fake Akira still managed to hit Akira to some extent. But Akira at the moment was not someone who could be defeated by that level of attack.

Akira had equipped the energy pack for the front line, obtained from Shiro, on his augmented suit. In addition, he had taken a large amount of front-line recovery medicine. Then he forcibly raised the output of the augmented suit to a level that clearly deviated from safety standards.

Akira's augmented suit had been modified by Alpha's control system, significantly enhancing its basic performance. In addition, settings were made that could cause the augmented suit itself to self-destruct or exceed the limit of the wearer.

Akira was operating on the edge of those settings. With the front-line energy pack, it was possible to supply energy, but it was necessary to barely control the massive amount of energy exceeding the augmented suit's limit with the modified control system to prevent the augmented suit from collapsing. The burden on the wearer due to the output raised to that extent was forcibly suppressed by the healing effect of the front-line recovery medicine.

As a result, for just a brief moment, Akira's augmented suit's power reached the level of frontline-augmented suits. He could charge forward without disrupting his movement even when showered with a large number of bullets.

However, he still couldn't quite defend against anti-annihilator warheads. As the fake Akira tried to fire the anti-annihilator warhead, aiming the already deployed RL2 multi-function gun at Akira, strictly speaking, he was trying to aim the other three RL2 multi-function guns at Akira as well, but this gun was delayed.

This was because of the weight of the gun. To fire anti-annihilator warheads, the gun itself needed to be sufficiently reinforced with force field armor to withstand the load. Due to the force field, the gun became heavy, and because of its weight and difficulty in movement, it was slightly delayed compared to the other three guns in being aimed at Akira.

And that delay was fatal in this situation. The fake Akira, who had already aimed the deployed guns at Akira, fired the anti-annihilator warhead. But Akira had already broken through the fake Akira's anti-energy force field shield with his own physical force, and had entered inside the gun's muzzle.

Akira swung the HBTN Blade with all his might.

Although the fake Akira could no longer receive remote energy supply due to communication disruption, there was still plenty of residual energy after this, and the robustness itself had not changed much from before the communication disruption.

The crimson blade cut the fake Akira and his bike in half with a single stroke.

But Akira didn't think he had won with this. If the opponent's resilience and vitality were similar to those of a monster, being cut in half wouldn't make him drop his guard. Although the HBTN Blade could defeat a fused creature in one blow, it didn't necessarily mean it would be the same for the fake Akira. If Alpha were here, he could confirm whether it was enough to defeat him, but now he couldn't even do that.

Since he didn't know if he had defeated him, he had no choice but to continue attacking. At least he had to chop him up to completely eliminate the risk of counterattack. Akira tried to launch a follow-up attack with that in mind.

However, he couldn't. His body wouldn't move. Both Akira himself and his augmented suit were at their limit, and there was no strength

left for a follow-up attack.

At least one more strike. With the sharpness of this blade, it should cut even without much force. Thinking so, Akira tried desperately to move his terribly sluggish body.

But he didn't make it in time. The anti-annihilator warhead fired by the fake Akira exploded at a distant location behind him. If it had been set to explode at close range, they could have had a simultaneous strike, but the fake Akira, who was in a panic, didn't have the composure for that, and it was impossible for Haruka to remotely change it due to the communication disruption. The light sphere generated at a distant location burst, scattering a violent wind. Both Akira and the fake Akira were blown away by that wind.

While being blown away, Akira remotely controlled the bike. Even with the communication disruption that even disconnected his connection with Alpha, as long as it was a close distance, it could be maintained. Even during the communication disruption that occurred at the first core, Tiol's telepathy, which was nearby, could still be heard. There was no problem with driving the bike himself. He called it under him.

Jumping onto the bike flying through the air, Akira first took additional doses of recovery medicine. The high-performance recovery medicine for frontline use quickly healed Akira's body. He also returned the output of the augmented suit to normal. Then he checked the situation.

(What happened to that impostor...? What about the Kaiju...?)

He wanted to believe that the impostor had been defeated. He had to defeat the Kaiju from now on. The battle was not over yet. With that in mind, Akira looked around without letting his guard down.

Then Relagros moved. Charging fiercely towards Akira, who had been blown away, with its mouth wide open. Akira hurriedly accelerated the bike, trying to avoid the Kaiju's attack.

But there, the Kaiju showed an unexpected movement. The direction of the approaching Kaiju was subtly off from Akira's direction. And that deviation increased as it got closer. It indicated that the Kaiju's target was not Akira.

Akira also noticed it and looked puzzled. What was Relagros aiming for? Akira searched for it and found it in the Kaiju's line of sight. It was the fake Akira who had been cut in half.

And the Kaiju swallowed the fake Akira whole with its large mouth.

What on earth was it doing? Akira thought so and became even more puzzled. But then he realized something and showed surprise on his face.

“No way...! ”

Then the Kaiju turned its gaze towards Akira. Its eyes contained a hatred that had never been felt from the Kaiju before. And a telepathic message came from the Kaiju to Akira.

『Who the hell are you! Why are you interfering with me! If you're my fake, if you're going to imitate me, don't interfere with me taking revenge on Yumina! 』

Those were the thoughts of the fake Akira, who thought of himself as the real Akira. It was the thought process of the fake Akira who was supposed to have been killed in Seranthal building. By deliberately being eaten by the Kaiju, the fake Akira had transferred his consciousness to the Kaiju.

Although the fake Akira had been cut in half by Akira, he was still alive at that point. It was a fatal wound, but he wasn't dead. Unlike when he cut the fused creature, the slash he delivered without Alpha's support didn't reach the level of instantly killing the opponent in one stroke.

However, it was still a fatal wound. He would die if left untreated. Due to the communication disruption, he couldn't transfer his consciousness to a distant body. With the death of the body, the consciousness inside would also disappear.

Fake Akira manipulated the Kaiju and made it devour itself. Despite being blown away by the storm, he grabbed the left side with his right arm to prevent the two halves from being blown in separate directions and made it swallow itself in one gulp. Then, he brought the distance between himself and the Kaiju to zero and successfully transferred his consciousness not via wireless but through wired means, even under this communication interference.

Hearing the telepathic message, Akira also understood that fake Akira's consciousness had been transferred to the Kaiju.

Furthermore, the telepathic communication itself had been repeatedly sent by fake Akira to Akira. However, in order to prevent Akira from losing his composure upon hearing it, it had been blocked by Alpha. With Alpha's support gone, it became audible.

Akira let out a deep breath. If it were only the determination to achieve his goal even if it meant turning into a Kaiju, Akira would commend it. However, that only applied if it were someone else, pursuing a different goal. If his own impostor were to act for the reason he just stated, all Akira felt was anger.

“Well, whatever. Either way, I was planning to kill the Kaiju too. Saved me some trouble. Die together! ”

Driven by surging emotions, Akira rode his bike toward the Kaiju, aiming for fake Akira. Dodging its giant arms and swinging tail, he attempted to get close to it.

However, what the Kaiju unleashed wasn't its arms or tail. It opened its large mouth and fired a beam of light from it. Akira's astonished figure was engulfed by the flash and disappeared.

Akira had been too naive in his thinking.

Before the communication interference occurred, Relagros had been emitting light waves from its entire body. It wasn't known how much energy was required for this, but it would likely be similar to the energy required to fire the beam. And with remote energy replenishment disabled due to the communication interference, it was no longer possible to replenish the energy needed to fire the beam. In other words, neither the beam nor the light waves could be used anymore. That's what Akira had thought.

His thinking was mostly correct, but strictly speaking, it was only that he couldn't emit them at the same power level. If it were just enough power to kill Akira, it would have been possible without fear of depleting the remaining energy. And fake Akira wasn't afraid of that level of power.

He had killed him. Fake Akira was convinced of that.

However, fake Akira had been just as naive in his thinking. When the flash cleared, there stood Akira, slightly charred but otherwise unharmed.

Realizing he couldn't avoid the beam, Akira had deployed a high-energy force field shield at maximum output, using not only the bike's energy but also his own.

Although he could only endure it for a moment, Akira, with all his strength, wielded his crimson blade again, slashing through the torrent of energy unleashed by the Kaiju, just as Olivia had done before.

Of course, there was a vast difference in power between Akira and Olivia. But against a Kaiju that had been significantly weakened, and with his current equipment, it was possible for the current Akira.

Taking advantage of fake Akira's surprise, Akira kicked off into the air and dove into the Kaiju's embrace. Although the bike had been

destroyed by the previous attack, he had already gotten close enough, relying solely on the power of his augmented suit.

And he swung his blade again. The crimson blade cut deeper into the weakened Kaiju's skin than before.

Landing on the rift he had created, Akira immediately leaped away at full force from the Kaiju. At the same time, he retracted his blade in mid-air and switched to his RL2 multi-function gun.

All four RL2 multi-function guns had already been fully deployed. Anti-annihilator warheads had also been loaded. While Alpha counted down the communication interference, Akira had prepared for the simultaneous firing of four anti-annihilator warheads by attaching and detaching the warhead magazine from one gun to another, loading only one shot at a time, using both hands and the auxiliary arm to aim at the gaps in the Kaiju's skin that he had previously cut.

Without Alpha's support, precision shooting with the auxiliary arm was difficult even for the current Akira. But he couldn't afford to remove it. Concentrating, pushing the manipulation of subjective time and reality resolution to the limit, time stopped, and in a world where everything except the gaps in the Kaiju's skin was dyed white, Akira fired the anti-annihilator warheads with the best precision he could achieve.

“Take this! ”

The four anti-annihilator warheads flew into the white world. And accurately, they were sucked into the gaps in the Kaiju's skin.

In the next moment, a huge ball of light was generated in the world. The energy of four anti-annihilator warheads was tremendous, and the destructive ball swallowed the Kaiju from the inside. And it caused a huge explosion. The impact of such an overwhelmingly large scale from the inside, in its already weakened state, was beyond endurance. Unable to withstand it, the Kaiju, along with fake Akira's

consciousness, was engulfed by the immense destruction and disappeared.

Akira is also blown away. Despite trying to distance himself at full speed right after firing, he couldn't absorb the shock from the unprecedentedly dense colorless mist in the Third Inner Sector, and he flew through the white world like a bullet. If he hadn't increased the output of his powered armor's force field beforehand, Akira would have died too.

After being thrown quite a distance, Akira adjusted his posture in the air and landed on the ground. He let out a deep breath and looked in the direction he had been just moments before.

“Did I... do it? ”

Without Alpha's support, Akira couldn't see beyond the colorless mist. He could only assume they had defeated the enemy.

He concentrated, trying to listen for any telepathic messages. He thought fake Akira might still be alive and trying to communicate telepathically.

But he heard nothing. Even after concentrating for about a minute, he heard nothing.

“Did I... win? ”

From the silence, Akira was convinced that he had successfully killed fake Akira, both in the Kaiju's body and in consciousness, and his expression relaxed slightly with a sense of satisfaction. Then his expression became somewhat troubled.

“...So, what do I do now? ”

Communication interference still persisted in the Third Inner Sector. He couldn't escape from the Third Inner Sector on his own. And to

ask Alpha to lift the communication interference, he needed the interference to stop. In other words, he was at a dead end.

“...Well, I guess all I can do is wait.”

Alpha wouldn't continue the communication interference indefinitely. After some time, she would most likely lift it to assess the situation. Akira thought so and decided to wait for now. He took some recovery medicine, reverted the RL2 multi-function gun to its normal form, and remained vigilant while waiting for time to pass.

After a while, the situation changed. The wind started blowing. It wasn't a temporary effect caused by some explosion, it was a continuous wind, akin to a strong windy day. Moreover, the wind was gradually getting stronger.

“What's going on...? ”

As Akira was bewildered, another change occurred. This time, the ground began to move sideways.

Should he be okay just going with the flow of the moving ground? Or should he try his best to run in the opposite direction? While Akira hesitated, both the wind speed and the ground speed continued to increase rapidly. And as Akira, buffeted by the strong wind, lost his balance and accidentally mismanaged the ground contact function of his augmented suit, his feet left the ground, and he was swept away by the wind.

“Whoa...!?”

Despite being strong, the wind was nothing compared to the explosion caused by the anti-annihilator warheads. Akira adjusted his posture in the air and, realizing he had already been swept away, decided to go with the flow.

After dancing in the air for about 10 seconds, Akira landed on the ground again. The ground was no longer moving, and the wind had

stopped. But Akira felt a slight sense of discomfort. He glanced upward lightly. Then he saw the blue sky.

“Huh...?”

Previously, when he looked up in the Third Inner Sector, all he could see was an endless white world. But now he saw the sky. Hurriedly looking around, he saw countless buildings on the horizon. It was the same in all directions, and it was clear.

And he realized. Normally, such distant scenery would have been obscured by the colorless mist. However, the answer lay in the display of his information gathering device. The density of the colorless mist around him had dropped to almost zero.

“What's going on...?”

Feeling slightly confused, Akira looked up at the sky again. Then he noticed something in the sky: a silver cuboid, about 10 meters on each side, floating in the air.

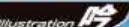
リビルドワールド

Rebuild World

下傷アキラ

ナフセ

Author



Illustration

かいつしゅ

Illustration of the world

ナフセ

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.*

Blocking Akira's view, Alpha appeared, smiling.

『Akira. So you won after all. That's great. Are you okay? Any injuries?』

“...Huh? Oh, yeah. I'm fine.”

『Good. To defeat that Kaiju without any injuries, Akira, you've really been lucky lately, haven't you?』

Akira laughed jokingly in response to Alpha's teasing tone.

“I guess so.”

With Alpha's return and some light conversation, Akira regained his composure. Then he voiced his current question again.

“Alpha. Why can I see the sky and something floating? What's happening?”

『It would take a long time to explain in detail, so I'll keep it simple for now. The expanded space of the Third Inner Sector has returned to normal space. The reason for the strong wind and the moving ground was that.』

“I see...”

『Also, look over there.』

Pointing in a direction, Alpha indicated a large building. It had partially collapsed due to the earlier strong winds and ground movement.

『Udajima is over there.』

Learning Udajima's whereabouts shelved all the remaining questions Akira had.

“Over there, huh...”

With just that said, Akira began to walk. The building where Udajima, who could be considered the root cause of this incident, was located was not far away.

Chapter 257: Distorted Feelings

Udajima's base was constructed within the Third Inner Sector. Udajima had been checking the situation through fake Akira, but due to communication interference, he couldn't continue. Furthermore, due to the release of the expanded space, the building was relocated, and it was blown away along with the base by strong winds.

The shaking subsided after the base, which had been thrown onto the ground and rolled twice before stopping. Even though it was partially damaged, it was evidence of how sturdy the base was constructed.

Udajima wasn't as sturdy, but he was unharmed. Amidst the spinning room, he was securely held by Latis. Finally, when the shaking subsided, Latis carefully set Udajima down.

“Are you injured? ”

“Ah, no... I'm fine. Thank you. But what happened? ”

“I don't know. I'll investigate immediately.”

Latis issued instructions to his subordinates. They were the ones who had accompanied Latis when he took off in heavy augmented suits from the giant wasteland-spec vehicle, where Chloe was also present. It was Udajima who, while wearing the heavy augmented suit, conversed with Chloe, expressing his strong dislike for Sakashita Heavy Industry.

After receiving reports from his subordinates, Latis informed Udajima.

“Communication interference seems to have been resolved. However, we can't establish communication with the dispatched units. Relagros. New version engaging Akira. Old version engaging Dragon River's inter-city transport vehicle. All of them.”

“What...!? Th-they've been defeated? ”

“Most likely.”

Udajima showed obvious agitation.

The one sent to the inter-city transport vehicle was merely a superficial imitation. It was understandable for them to be defeated by such high-ranking hunters.

However, the one fighting Akira was a new version capable of obtaining energy from old-world. If they had fought in the Third Inner Sector, they would have easily surpassed ordinary high-ranking hunters in power, plus they were equipped with anti-annihilator warheads. Moreover, they fought alongside Relagros. It should have been a situation where they could have easily killed Akira.

Yet they still lost. Defeated by Akira alone. It's a lie. Unbelievable. As those thoughts swirled in Udajima's mind, another part of him acknowledged that it wasn't a false report.

Akira was the one who made the impossible possible, that's why Udajima had regarded Akira as so dangerous. He had told himself that.

Latis observed Udajima's demeanor intently. Then he received additional reports from his subordinates.

“Udajima-sama. Akira is heading towards us. What shall we do? Whether interception or escape, swift action is necessary.”

Akira is coming. Upon hearing this report, Udajima's body trembled for a moment. But he wasn't consumed by fear. Instead, he pondered solutions to the situation.

“What about Haruka? ”

“She hasn't returned since the communication interference occurred. We can't contact her either.”

Even under this communication interference, if she's near fake Akira, she might be able to support. Haruka had said that before leaving the base.

“I see. Understood.”

Even with Haruka's power, she can't defeat Akira. That's already been proven. But perhaps she could escape. Udagima considered that. However, since she couldn't establish contact, he concluded that Haruka must have died and abandoned that option.

“Then, we intercept.”

“Understood.”

Following Udagima's decision, Latis immediately began preparations to intercept Akira. Simultaneously, she reported the situation to Chloe.



Under the blue sky, Akira advances across the white ground.

Glancing around lightly, he sees countless buildings in the distance. Considering that as the boundary between the Second Inner Sector and the actual Third Inner Sector, he checks the distance and finds it not that far away.

The density of the colorless mist around is remarkably lower than in the eastern region. Thanks to that, with Akira's high-performance information gathering device, even if the destination is beyond the horizon, the margin of error in measurements is in millimeters.

“So the Third Inner Sector... was this small, huh? ”

Alpha laughs at Akira's surprise and says,

『That's why they needed to expand the space.』

“Hmm. But aren't there plenty of wastelands where you could expand? With the technology of the old-world, monsters could be dealt with easily, right?”

『Akira. At that time, it wasn't a wasteland there.』

“Ah, I see.”

Satisfied with that explanation, Akira continues forward. Then he sees the building that is his destination.

“Hey, Alpha. Why is that building so rundown?”

『That's not a building from the Third Inner Sector, it was built by transporting materials from the outside. So it's not that sturdy. And it's more like it was placed than built, so it got blown away and rolled over by the shrinking floor and strong winds.』

“I see.”

The ground wasn't moving, it was actually shrinking. So, when it peeled off the ground and rolled, it wouldn't be surprising for it to break like that, especially if hit by strong winds.

The buildings made of holograms and force field shields that Akira saw when he came to the Third Inner Sector before might be a solution for such cases. If they were physical buildings, they would collide and cause severe damage when the expanded space was deactivated. But with holographic and force field shield buildings, even if there were many of them, they could simply be removed and reinserted. Akira somehow thought so.

As Akira continues, he casually looks up again.

“Huh...? ”

『What's wrong? 』

“Ah, it's nothing. I'll check later.”

The silver cube floating in the sky was gone. Although it bothered Akira a bit, he was already near the building where Udajima was, so he put off thinking about it for now.

“Alpha. It's sudden, but I need your support again.”

『Leave it to me.』

Although he defeated the Kaiju, the opponent was a group that controlled that Kaiju. There's no room for complacency. Akira tightened his focus and infiltrated the building..

And guided by Alpha, as he advanced inside, he found Udajima in a place resembling a storage hangar. However, what Akira saw there was Udajima arguing with Latis.

Udajima had gathered all remaining forces to intercept Akira. With Latis and the heavy augmented suits that had brought them here. They would operate the suits without anyone inside. While wearing them would make them individually stronger, considering the comprehensive firepower when attacking all at once, it was deemed higher in that aspect.

Even though Akira alone could defeat Relagros, he must be somewhat exhausted. He might be defeatable now. Even if they chose to escape from Akira and succeeded, the next time someone as prepared as they were would come after defeating the Kaiju. So it was better to finish it now. Udajima thought so.

Exhaust himself. Let his guard down. He enter a random building for a break. That was the extent of his plan. If Akira wasn't here to kill

him, there should be an opportunity to strike. Udajima waited, hoping for that.

But then, Latis said something utterly unexpected.

“Udajima-sama.”

“What? Is Akira coming? ”

“No, that's not it. I'm terribly sorry, but we'll take our leave now.”

“What...? W-What do you mean!? What's going on!?”

As Udajima was bewildered, Latis politely informed him.

“We received a message earlier. Our contract with Udajima-sama, strictly speaking, the contract we made with the client to cooperate with Udajima-sama, has now ended. Therefore, our business here is concluded.”

Udajima, surprised, tried to grasp the situation.

“...Is the plan considered a failure? No, it's not over yet! There's still a way! It's not over yet! ”

“I apologize. We are not in a position to determine that. Also, we have already been instructed for our next task. We cannot remain here. Please forgive us. While it's not an apology, we leave all the heavy augmented suits behind. Please use them as you see fit.”

With that, Latis and his subordinates bowed politely to Udajima.

“Thank you very much for using our services, Udajima-sama. We sincerely look forward to serving you again in the future.”

“W-Wait! ”

Udajima called out instinctively. But it was meaningless. Having completed their final greetings, Latis and his group swiftly departed, leaving Udajima behind.

Akira, concealed by his camouflage function, watched the scene from a slightly distant location. His eyes met with Latis's as he departed. It demonstrated Latis's prowess in seeing through the camouflage, but he showed no further interest in Akira and left with his subordinates.

Akira's face showed slight confusion.

“What's going on...?”

『Judging from the fact that he's wearing a butler uniform, he's probably from the same Lion Steel Company as Reina and the others. They were talking about the termination of the contract with Udajima. So, since there's no longer a reason to protect Udajima, they left.』

“Why would the contract end at a time like this? What happened? ”

『I don't know that much. Well, the fact that the enemy has decreased hasn't changed, so let's consider it a stroke of luck.』

Perplexed, Akira's expression changed as he was told by Alpha. He smiled in response.

“Yeah, you're right. Seems like luck is on my side today. Let's go.”

Akira, realizing that his presence had been exposed, deactivated his camouflage and approached Udajima.

Udajima, being an ordinary person, finally noticed Akira's presence. Showing surprise on his face, he shouted with anger to dispel his fear.

“Kill him! ”

Following that command, the seven heavy augmented suits simultaneously attacked Akira. They fired massive guns, launched numerous small missiles, and swept the room with lasers. These heavy augmented suits, even on autopilot, had the capability to defeat hunters of average high rank. It was a coordinated assault. The surroundings were engulfed in gunfire in an instant.

But the current Akira possessed the strength to defeat Relagros alone. Moreover, he was receiving support from Alpha. Such attacks wouldn't affect him. He swiftly dodged bullets, fired S-rank bullets in rapid succession to disrupt the opponents' posture, and closed in on them to strike with his blade. The heavy augmented suits were cut down one by one, and they were all wiped out in a short time.

Now, only Akira and Udajima remained. Akira sheathed his blade and walked casually toward Udajima.

Meanwhile, Udajima, with a cornered expression, slightly backed away. He couldn't run away, he was trapped.

Udajima thought he was going to be killed, but Akira hesitated.

(Hmm, what should I do...)

Although Akira had the intention to kill the fake Akira, his desire regarding Udajima was only to see him dead. And now that he had already killed the fake Akira, his desire to kill Udajima had weakened slightly. Perhaps it would be less troublesome to let him live and hand him over to Inabe. He hesitated, thinking such thoughts.

But Udajima couldn't understand Akira's thoughts. Realizing his impending death, he yelled in desperation.

“Damn it! If only you... if only I could kill you...! You Inabe...!”

“Well, it's not like I'm here to kill you on behalf of Inabe or anything.”

Akira's odd sense of duty was an attempt to dispel Udajima's misunderstanding. However, Udajima didn't believe him. He didn't even try to listen.

“Both you and Inabe, groveling like that! ”

“Well, it's not like I'm groveling to Sakashita Heavy Industry or anything...”

“Then have you come to avenge Yumina? Do you think killing me will avenge her? You fool! You probably believe what your impostor said, that I died caught up in a power struggle with Inabe, but it's just a superficial reason! ”

Udajima's mention of Yumina changed Akira's expression. However, Udajima, in his desperation, didn't notice, and he continued speaking loudly.

“It's all up to Sakashita Heavy Industry! If you didn't know, I'll tell you! Kugamayama City is a warning device created by Sakashita Heavy Industry! When the ruins of Kuzusuhara District are reactivated, it will suffer the first damage, to relay that message! ”

What Udajima was talking about was classified information about the city and Sakashita Heavy Industry. It was something that should never be revealed. But Udajima, who already thought he was going to die, shouted it out as if vomiting up his secrets.

“Do you understand!? My despair when I realized that the city I live in is just an existence that will eventually perish and fulfill its purpose! ”

Udajima once took pride in being from Kugamayama City. He worked hard and climbed the ranks to become a city official to further improve the city he admired and respected. And with his elevated position, he began dealing with various secrets and learned the truth about the city.

However, knowing that truth did nothing for Udajima. The enemy was Sakashita Heavy Industry. A mere local city official couldn't do anything about it. This sense of powerlessness twisted Udajima's heart and gave rise to two emotions within him. One was hatred toward Sakashita Heavy Industry. And the other was the collapse of Kugamayama City.

An existence only useful to be used by Sakashita Heavy Industry might as well perish. Udajima's feelings toward the city, strong as they were, had turned in this direction.

Of course, Udajima didn't wish for the residents to vanish along with the city. So, he worked toward ensuring that when something happened, the city's residents could promptly abandon the city and escape to other cities by enhancing evacuation and escape methods.

However, this direction clashed completely with Inabe's intention to strengthen the city's defense to ensure Kugamayama City's survival. Inabe and Udajima. Their fundamental differences led to a power struggle that divided the city internally.

And Udajima would have been the victor, if not for Akira's presence.

If only you weren't here. Udajima's voice grew rough as he expelled those emotions.

“The death of the hunter Yumina, the power struggle in Kugamayama City that led to it, it's all just a process for Sakashita to acquire the ruins of Kuzusuhara District! Ah, you're the one who killed her! Regardless of the reasons behind it, how does it feel to be manipulated by Sakashita, forced into becoming a puppet for their convenience, even after ending up killing someone because of them? ”

Akira listened silently to Udajima's words.

“You're nothing but a pawn. Kill me, satisfy yourself with deceiving yourself. You can't avenge her. You can't defeat Sakashita. Curse

yourself for killing me and being unable to do anything more.”

Resent, curse. It's all Sakashita Heavy Industry's fault. With those words, Udajima tried to curse Akira.

Sakashita Heavy Industry is one of the five big corporations that dominate the East. It's utterly impossible to defeat them.

But the person in front of him is the one who can make the impossible possible. And if such a person harbors hatred toward Sakashita Heavy Industry, perhaps.

Thinking so, Udajima tried to cast the curse of overthrowing Sakashita Heavy Industry upon himself, knowing he couldn't do it.

But that curse didn't reach Akira. Akira sighed deeply, then spoke with an attitude that seemed somewhat incredulous.

“You're misunderstanding something.”

“What?”

“Sure, you're right that you, the power struggle in the city, and Sakashita Heavy Industry are all factors in Yumina's death. But Yumina didn't die because of them. And I didn't come here to avenge Yumina. I'm here to kill you because you sent troops after me, tried to kill me behind the scenes, put bounty on my head. It has nothing to do with Yumina. Unlike that imposter, I don't think for a moment that Yumina died because of you. I'm the one who killed Yumina.”

Akira, after saying this to Udajima and to himself, began walking toward Udajima.

“You're irrelevant. The choice to fight to the death back then was between me and Yumina. Just me and Yumina.”

Akira thought she might consider handing him over to Inabe alive. With that thought, she was gone.

“If you didn't want to kill, you shouldn't have. If you didn't want to die, you should've run. You had a choice. So did I.”

Once someone made Yumina's death someone's fault, something had to be killed.

“But we chose. Both me and Yumina. We chose. Just me and Yumina! ”

If Akira were to blame Yumina's death on something or someone, he would have to hate and curse every step that led to it. Even meeting Yumina and being saved by her.

“An outsider! ”

He didn't want that.

“Pretending to be involved! ”

That's why Akira's twisted emotions detached everything else, focusing solely on Akira and Yumina. To make their final moments theirs alone.

“Interfering! ”

Akira unleashed a punch at the intruder with all his might.

“Hey! ”



The fist filled with twisted emotions struck Udajima directly. In that moment, Udajima disappeared. A mere civilian, in terms of combat ability, took a hit from a suit designed for high-rank hunters. It was the expected outcome.

After killing Udajima, Akira stood there, slightly bowing his head. And Alpha was by his side.

After a short pause, Akira let out a deep, long sigh. There was no sign of anger or murderous intent in his expression. If anything, there was a slight tinge of light regret for what he had done.

“Oops...”

If one were to summarize Akira's earlier actions in a very rough manner, it would be something like “he lost his temper.” To the extent that he could objectively view his own distortion, Akira had regained his composure. And that calmness was what bothered him.

Alpha chuckled and encouraged Akira.

『Well, it's not a mistake to take down Udajima, who was probably the mastermind behind Akira's mission to subdue the Nationalist.』

『Well... I guess... that's true, but...』

By letting his emotions drive him to kill Udajima, much of the evidence whether Udajima was the mastermind or not was significantly diminished. If he had handed him over alive to Inabe, he could have obtained much more information.

However, for Alpha, those details didn't matter much. What was more important was confirming just how much of a minefield Yumina's case was for Akira. So Alpha didn't stop Akira.

『What's done is done. Let's move on and switch gears.』

With that said, Akira also shifted his focus. Intentionally, he sighed deeply once more, lifted his head, and decided to let go of dragging this matter unnecessarily.

『... Yeah.』

Then he glanced sideways.

“Even I can tell. You weren't abducted, were you? You were cooperating with Udajima from the start, weren't you? ”

Standing there was Viola, responding with her usual sinister grin.

“That's not true. I wasn't cooperating, I was infiltrating.”

“You really think I'll believe that? ”

“Oh, that's harsh. Don't you trust me? I have a reputation for never telling lies, you know.”

“I remember saying I'd kill you for misunderstandings, didn't I? ”

“That's true.”

Viola maintained her composure. Akira wondered if Viola had some sort of plan to avoid being killed by him.

But in reality, Viola stood there without a plan. If asked why she appeared, she could only answer that it was because she's that kind of person.

She wanted to witness this massive commotion up close. She wanted a front-row seat. She wanted to sink her teeth into it. Unable to resist her own nature, Viola had become involved in this commotion.

Including Viola's attitude, Akira hesitated. Now that he had killed Udajima, Viola became a crucial piece of evidence. On the downside, by killing Udajima and feeling relieved about it, Akira had once again gained the luxury to hesitate on what to do next.

And in that state, the thought of just killing her lingered strongly. Akira knew how despicable Viola could be.

Should he go ahead and kill her? He thought so, but couldn't make up his mind. The power to spare those he didn't want to kill was necessary if he wanted to avoid indiscriminately killing nuisances. Akira had such thoughts now.

Akira, uncertain, sought advice. Ultimately, the decision was on him, but he couldn't come up with good ideas on his own. Having gained experience in various situations, Akira had also come to think so.

『Alpha. Can you connect me to Carol? Can you do it?』

Even though the abnormal, colorless mist in Third Inner Sector had cleared, there was still a higher concentration of colorless mist in Second and First Inner Sector than in other places. It was uncertain whether communication could be established with Kugamayama City. Akira thought so.

However, Alpha replied readily.

『It's okay. I can connect you.』

Carol, who received the communication from Akira, spoke in a serious tone.

“Akira. What's wrong? What happened? ”

If Akira were to contact in this situation, it would likely be either to indicate that everything was settled or that things had become irreparable. Carol thought so and showed a tense expression.

“Um, for now, I'm safe. I've defeated the Kaiju called Relagros and my impostor.”

Carol let out a sigh of relief. Then she continued in a cheerful voice.

“I see. That's a relief. Although, it's strange to say this, but even with the anti-annihilator warhead, Akira actually defeated that Kaiju. Truly impressive...”

“Um, can I interrupt for a moment? There's something I want to ask Carol...”

As the conversation seemed like it might drag on, Akira interrupted Carol and relayed his own story first.

Carol, understanding the situation, paused for a moment before responding.

“Um, I think if you were intending to kill her, you would have done so long ago. So, instead of whether it's better to kill her or not, I'll answer under the assumption that you're looking for the value in keeping Viola alive, okay?”

“Yeah. Please.”

“It might sound strange, but Viola doesn't actually harbor any hostility towards you.”

“Is that really true?”

Akira asked incredulously, prompting Carol to continue.

“Let me explain. While it's true that Viola doesn't mind if you were to die or if things happened that would lead to your death, she doesn't actually want to kill you or wish for your death. Even if she might appear to do things that way, it's a means to an end for her, not the end itself.”

Akira listened to Carol's explanation with a complex expression. While talking with Akira, Carol established communication with Viola and appeared in their augmented field of vision. She continued speaking in this state.

"So, in that sense, Viola doesn't harbor any hostility towards you, Akira. If killing you were her goal, she'd be taking a completely different approach."

"Even so, I don't think that's a reason to keep Viola alive."

"Yes, that alone wouldn't be enough. But you see, Viola's purpose is just to enjoy witnessing major commotions. For that alone, she's willing to do anything, and she's an extremely wicked and malicious person. That's all Viola wants to do."

"I feel like it's even more reason to kill her."

"If that were all, yes. However, ever since Viola started interacting with you, she's experienced much larger commotions, and she's no longer satisfied with small ones like before. And now that Akira is here, she might be thinking that even bigger commotions could happen next, so if you negotiate skillfully around that, there might be some utility in using her."

If it's a commotion of a scale that the current Viola wouldn't find satisfying, she would probably tolerate actions like preemptively quashing the commotion.

And even if a large commotion were to occur, if Akira kept her alive, Viola might cooperate to ensure that the commotion ends in Akira's favor, expecting an even bigger commotion than before.

Considering these benefits, there is value in keeping Viola alive. Carol explained this.

Akira also understood this explanation. In other words, Viola was similar to Kibayashi. The person who made Kibayashi, who already

had a bad reputation, even more despicable and cunning was Viola. He understood that.

And that understanding troubled Akira. While there had certainly been various issues with Kibayashi, it was also true that he had been saved many times thanks to Kibayashi. Considering that, should Viola be kept alive? Akira pondered to such an extent that he found utility in Viola.

Yet, even as he pondered, he still couldn't shake the feeling that perhaps it would be better to kill her after all.

Carol, observing Akira's troubled expression, tries to extract additional judgment information from Viola.

“Viola. Despite the reasons behind it, did you do anything that benefited Akira in this incident?”

“I did.”

“Specifically?”

“I made sure Shizuka wasn't abducted by fake Akira.”

Akira, upon hearing this, gives Viola a sharp look.

“Don't lie. It was Reina and the others who protected Shizuka from my impostor.”

“Yes, but wasn't she still saved from being abducted?”

Seeing Akira's puzzled expression, Viola adds a clarification. She explains that originally, both Sheryl and Shizuka were supposed to be abducted. Viola intervened and changed it to just Sheryl, setting it up so that even if they tried to abduct Shizuka later, they would fail.

Carol, while acknowledging Viola's explanation up to this point, didn't inquire further about the reasons behind it. However, Viola

laughed and answered anyway. She honestly admitted that if Shizuka were abducted, Akira would likely impulsively storm into the Third Sector without a plan, which would make things boring.

Upon hearing this, Akira's expression became incredibly complex.

『Alpha...』

『She didn't lie』

『I see.... ...So, what should we do then? 』

『 You decide, Akira. There's no correct answer in this kind of choice.』

『...I understand.』

Despite the reasons behind it, Shizuka was saved thanks to Viola. This pushed Akira's decision to the brink. With a serious expression, he informed Viola.

“Viola. As Carol mentioned earlier, if you're willing to cooperate with me during significant disturbances where I can't quash them in advance, I'll spare your life.”

“That's fine. We have a deal.”

Viola readily agreed.

『Alpha』

『Her true intentions』

Akira let out another deep sigh. Despite feeling like it was somewhat futile, he drove the point home.

“If I find out you lied, even if it's a misunderstanding, I'll kill you immediately.”

“Scary, scary. I'll be careful not to be misunderstood.”

Even under Akira's glare, Viola's sinister grin remained unwavering.

“Well then, let me give you this right away.”

Viola sent over some documents via communication.

“What's this?”

“It's the investigation report you requested before. You asked me to look into whether there was someone behind the person who attacked Akira in Babalod's body, right?”

As Akira thought, he glanced over the documents. Initially, he wasn't too interested, thinking it was probably Udajima behind it all. However, he wore a surprised expression as he read through the contents.

“Viola... Is this true?”

“As far as my investigation goes.”

While somewhat incredulous, if this were true, it would all make sense. As Akira pondered this, a notification arrived. It was a bounty update.

Notification of completion of subjugation. Considering the situation in the Third Sector, the target of subjugation, who claimed to be Akira and collaborated with the Nationalist faction to control Relagros, is deemed defeated. The bounty will be distributed according to the results achieved. Those who have achieved results must submit their report to the Hunter Office. Bounty will not be paid to those who have not submitted. In summary, that was the content of the notification.

Carol smiled and said to Akira.

“With this description, it should be fine. The description has been modified to ensure that the target of subjugation is specifically fake Akira.”

“So, the matter with Sakashita is resolved now.”

Akira also breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. The 500 billion Aurums bounty placed by Sakashita Heavy Industry was officially lifted with this notification.

Chapter 258: The Commotion Continues

Tatsukawa and the others were forced into the inter-city transport vehicle occupied by fake Akira and his group, but they were easily defeated. The fake Akira inside the vehicle were nothing more than poor imitations in appearance. They wouldn't stand a chance against high-ranking hunters.

However, safety wasn't assured just because they dealt with the immediate threat. The fact that they had been infiltrated was unthinkable in the first place. Considering that, there remained the fear that someone might still be hiding inside the vehicle. A thorough search of the vehicle was conducted, taking time to ensure a certain level of safety based on the reasoning that if they searched every nook and cranny, it should be safe.

And when that finally concluded, it was already too late. As Tatsukawa and the others decided to re-enter the Third Inner Sector, the view of the city of the old-world that was visible from the Second Inner Sector disappears. What appeared in its place was a wide open space with nothing but white ground and blue sky.

Despite their confusion at the sight, the hunters began to investigate the drastically altered Third Inner Sector. However, there was no sign of the Relagros they were supposed to defeat. Furthermore, a bounty completion update arrived, informing the hunters that Relagros had already been defeated by someone else.

Inside the red humanoid weapon soaring through the air, Tatsukawa held his head in his hands.

“I can't believe someone beat us to it while we were down...”

Melshia, remaining in the vehicle, echoed brightly through the communication.

“Well, that's a bummer. Who managed to take down Relagros in such a short time, I wonder? ”

“Melshia, why do you sound a little pleased? ”

In response to Tatsukawa's discontented tone, Melshia's voice grew slightly stronger.

“It's a shame we got beaten to the punch, but thanks to that, Tatsukawa won't have the chance to do something reckless. ...You were planning to take on that Kaiju alone, no matter what, right? ”

As Melshia delivered this comment with a stern gaze through the communication, Tatsukawa looked away. Indeed, Tatsukawa had intended to do just that, and if the humanoid weapon had been receiving energy remotely from the vehicle, it would have been possible. And it was a fact that by defeating the Kaiju without using anti-annihilator warheads, he could have demonstrated his own strength to Sakashita Heavy Industry.

“Anyway, come back for now. Tatsukawa, you don't need to handle peripheral investigations yourself. You're the leader of Dragon River, so leave those miscellaneous tasks to others without being overbearing.”

“Understood.”

As Tatsukawa prepared to return to the vehicle, the humanoid weapon's information gathering device detected a significant response from a large unit.

“What? Is it a unit from the Kugamayama City? ”

“...No. It's different. That response...”

The response that emerged from the rear of the inter-city transport vehicle belonged to a unit from Sakashita Heavy Industry.



Akira, accompanied by Viola, receives a call from Hikaru upon leaving Udajima's base.

“Akira! Where are you right now!? What's the situation over there!? Oh, the issue with Sakashita Heavy Industry has been resolved, so everything's fine! All the bounty has been pinned on your impostor! Don't worry! So, what's your situation!? Where are you right now!?”

In response to Hikaru's frantic barrage of questions, Akira, feeling a bit overwhelmed, informs her of his situation and location. Hikaru then raises her voice even more.

“Got it! I'm coming to pick you up, so stay there! Also! Sakashita Heavy Industry's unit is heading towards the Third Inner Sector, but they're not enemies, so just behave yourself! Absolutely! I mean it! Absolutely!”

After delivering this message rapidly to Akira, Hikaru cuts off the communication without waiting for a reply. Akira looks somewhat puzzled.

“What was that about...?”

Alpha chuckles, calming Akira down.

『Well, she did say she's coming to pick you up, so let's just wait calmly. It seems there's no need to worry about being attacked.』

『Yeah, you're right.』

Akira had already detected the response from Sakashita Heavy Industry's unit. However, due to Hikaru's thorough instructions, there was no need to be overly cautious even when a large unit was heading their way.

Numerous humanoid weapons and large transport aircraft arrived at the Third Inner Sector. Besides personnel, the aircraft also unloaded

machinery and supplies. Sakashita Heavy Industry had begun to secure the Third Inner Sector. The unloaded supplies were for establishing their base.

As Akira observed the scene, a relatively small transport aircraft, capable of loading a three-story building at most, landed nearby. From there, Hikaru disembarked.

Hikaru seemed extremely tense. She appeared more nervous than if she were walking through a minefield.

“Akira. Sorry for the wait. Let's go.”

“Uh, yeah.”

Overwhelmed by Hikaru's intensity, Akira stammers and follows her onto the aircraft without asking anything. Viola tries to follow, but Maruo, who came down with Hikaru, stops her.

“Wait a moment. There's something I want to ask.”

After briefly directing his gaze to both Akira and Viola, Maruo smiles lightly at Viola. In response, Viola returns the smile.

“So, what do you want to ask? ”

“First, everything you think I might want to know. You were kidnapped by the Nationalist, but you should have managed to extract various information from them, right? That's what Inabe told me. He also said you might have an idea of Udajima's whereabouts.”

“Ah, I see. Okay. Udajima is dead. Killed by Akira.”

Hikaru instinctively looks at Akira, who quickly averts his gaze. When Akira informed Hikaru of the situation, he didn't mention that he had killed Udajima or that Viola had been cooperating with Udajima. He thought it would be troublesome to bring that up now.

Maruo complains blatantly in a somewhat staged manner.

“Oh, you killed him? That's a bit of a hassle. We need to keep sources of information like that alive. Was there something bad you might be asked about? ”

“No, he just got irritated and killed him. Akira's like that.”

“Oh, I see. That's troublesome. Really troublesome. I wanted to find out why Udajima did what he did, how he managed it, and all sorts of things.”

Hikaru's gaze at Akira becomes stronger. Akira tries to avoid her condemning gaze by looking away.

But then Viola casually interjects.

“That's okay. Since I was the one who infiltrated and deceived Udajima, I've been investigating properly.”

“Oh? Is that so? Inabe didn't mention anything like that.”

“I haven't told Inabe about my infiltration. My actions are discretionary. It's fine to report afterwards.”

“I see.”

Viola then sends Maruo some documents. Part of it was also sent to Akira.

“That's part of the report. Oh, we'll negotiate the price later, but this information comes with a fee, okay? ”

“Thanks for the consideration.”

Maruo lightly thanks her for postponing the troublesome price negotiation for information whose value is currently unknown and reviews the documents. He looks very interested.

“Is this... for real? ”

“Why don't you verify it yourself? It should be easy for Sakashita Heavy Industry, right? ”

Viola responds with a confident attitude. But upon hearing Maruo's response, her attitude changes drastically.

“Oh, I'm not from Sakashita Heavy Industry.”

“Huh? ”

“I'm Maruo from the anti-rebuild personnel. Nice to meet you.”

Viola expresses surprise.

Judging from Maruo's descent from the Sakashita Heavy Industry's aircraft and the overly tense demeanor of Hikaru, Viola had assessed him to be a significantly higher-ranking figure within Sakashita Heavy Industry. Moreover, due to her own nature, she could afford to take a casual attitude with such individuals.

However, Hikaru couldn't maintain the same attitude with someone from the anti-rebuild personnel. But unlike Hikaru, Viola doesn't get nervous. On the contrary, she starts to laugh.

Viola had somewhat satisfied her nature with the events of this incident. Therefore, she had calmly intended to wait for the next disturbance, whether it be 10 or 20 years from now, as she considered such commotions not to occur so easily.

But contrary to her expectations, it seemed that the next disturbance was already beginning. And it was a big one, involving the intervention of the anti-rebuild personnel.

True to form, it was Akira. Thinking this, unable to contain herself, Viola laughed very amusedly.

Seeing Viola suddenly burst into laughter, Maruo shows a slight expression of confusion. He then asks Akira.

“Um, is she okay? ”

Akira remains calm. Having understood that Viola is similar to Kibayashi, Akira had an idea of why Viola suddenly burst into laughter. He answers casually.

“Don't mind her. She's a bit off.”

“You say such terrible things.”

“It's the truth, isn't it? ”

“Well, yeah! ”

Akira, not expecting affirmation, looks at Viola with an astonished expression. That look is the same as the one he had directed at Kibayashi when he was laughing before.

Akira enters the transport aircraft with Hikaru. Viola takes separate action to guide Maruo through Udajima's base.

Inside the aircraft, Hikaru sighs heavily and gives Akira a slightly reproachful look.

“Akira. Why did you keep quiet about killing Udajima? ”

If he had told her beforehand, she could have prepared herself. She could have thought about how to respond. With a stern look, Hikaru expresses this to Akira.

“Uh, well, I thought maybe I'd tell Inabe or someone later. Hikaru probably didn't want to get too involved in the Udajima situation, right? ”

These are words of concern. However, coming from Akira, who is inexperienced in negotiations, the atmosphere of his excuse being made up on the spot was palpable. Sensing this, Hikaru couldn't help but press further.

"I won't deny it, but isn't it too late for excuses like that? "

"Y-yeah... But it's not just that..."

Akira, under Hikaru's stern gaze, is prompted to provide additional excuses.

"...I thought it wouldn't be good to say something weird and raise suspicions... Actually, Udajima was saying some sketchy things..."

"What was he saying? "

"Huh? You want to know? I can tell you, but I stopped it, you know? Is that okay? "

The atmosphere of his excuse being made up on the spot hasn't entirely dissipated from Akira. However, there was no sign of him lying.

Hikaru senses this and composes herself. She regains her composure and, realizing that what Udajima was saying is indeed something dangerous for her to hear, agrees with Akira.

"Understood. Keep quiet."

"Got it. Keeping quiet."

With both of their desires aligned, the matter ends there. This prompts Hikaru to remember something she had temporarily forgotten in her frustration with Akira. She immediately becomes tense again and sternly admonishes Akira.

"Akira. Make sure you're absolutely polite."

“Is someone waiting for us? ”

“Absolutely, make sure you're polite.”

“O-okay, I got it.”

Feeling overwhelmed by Hikaru's intensity, Akira obediently follows her. They are then led to a room within the aircraft.

There, Sugadome awaits them, accompanied by Harmers as his guard. Akira understands the reason for Hikaru's attitude. He realizes that it's quite nerve-wracking for a municipal employee to meet with executives of the Big Five corporations.

Moreover, Hikaru becoming Akira's guide was Sugadome's instruction, aimed at reducing Akira's vigilance and expecting its effectiveness. It was a choice between Inabe and Hikaru, but but Hikaru was chosen in hopes of having a higher effect.

Furthermore, Hikaru not informing Akira about Sugadome was not due to forgetfulness, it was Sugadome's instruction. By not informing him beforehand, it eliminates the option of not meeting.

At the cost of Hikaru's stomach, Sugadome had tactfully summoned Akira.

“Since this is our first direct meeting, let me introduce myself. I'm Sugadome. I can't disclose my specific position, but I hold a relatively high position within Sakashita Heavy Industry. In terms of command hierarchy, I am also Shiro's superior.”

“Um, I'm Akira.”

Akira simply responds with that. When he feels a gaze on him, he turns to see Hikaru looking like her stomach is in knots.

Even with that expression, Akira thinks to himself as he returns his gaze to Sugadome. He can't give the appropriate response to

someone in a high position, nor can he flatter Hikaru. Feeling somewhat sorry for her, Akira, in a sense, abandons Hikaru and looks away from her.

Despite being through communication, Sugadome has already spoken with Akira before. Without concern for Akira's attitude, he continues the conversation.

“Before we get into why I've called you here, let me talk about a few things. First, the matter of you being in conflict with our company has been resolved. We won't hold you responsible anymore. However, as reported in the bounty update, if you want the bounty, you'll need to report your achievements to the Hunter Office. That's your responsibility. We won't interfere. Understand? ”

Akira understood this. If he wants the bounty for defeating Relagros, he needs to report how he did it to the Hunter Office.

And while Akira defeated Relagros using anti-annihilator warheads, there could be issues if he's asked how he obtained it.

If Kibayashi obtained the anti-annihilator warhead through legitimate means, there wouldn't be a problem. But if it was acquired through illegitimate means, publicly disclosing the use of the anti-annihilator warhead could be detrimental to both Akira and Kibayashi.

Although Sakashita Heavy Industry claims not to be involved in the pursuit, if Akira were to confess, then dealing with the illegitimate action would be necessary. Since they claim not to be involved, it's reasonable to assume they won't provide any assistance in such a situation.

Still, if it's something that can be resolved with some caution, it might be worth seeking the bounty. Akira nods, planning to consult Kibayashi later.

“Understood.”

“Next, about the blade you have...”

Sugadome points at Akira's HBTN blade and speaks.

“That was stolen from our company. I want it back.”

“Huh? ...No, I got this from Shiro...”

“I'm aware. So if you return it, we won't hold you responsible.”

If he returns it, they'll let it slide as if he didn't know. But if he doesn't, they'll treat him as an accomplice to theft. Sugadome tells this to Akira.

Akira sighs heavily and reluctantly removes the HBTN blade, placing it forward. Harmers steps forward to take it and places it on top of a large trunk in the room.

“Fair enough. Now let's get to the main point. I have a request for you. Let's talk about the reward first. It's upfront payment. We'll provide the entire HBTN series.”

Akira, who had been feeling down for losing frontline equipment with just the blade, perks up at this.

With just one blade, he had gained so much power. If he had the entire set of equipment, how much more power could he gain? The thought of such a reward, upfront, fills Akira with surprise and joy.

But soon, his expression turns stern and puzzled. What kind of request warrants such a reward upfront? What exactly are they planning to have him do? His inner thoughts are reflected on his face.

Sugadome, feeling a sense of satisfaction from Akira's expected reaction, proceeds to explain the details of the request.

“The request concerns Shiro. At this point, the specific direction is not yet determined, but the request will involve investigation in that direction. It could involve cooperation, rescue, capture, or even assassination.”

The request even considers the possibility of Shiro's assassination, leaving Akira nothing short of astonished.



Shiro, accompanied by Olivia, races through Third Inner Sector with Haruka. To avoid detection by the Sakashita Heavy Industry units advancing to secure Third Inner Sector, they all use camouflage functions, and Shiro and Haruka work together to deceive the units and hunters' searches.

In Haruka's hand is a silver cube.

With Udajima dead, the Kaiju in Third Inner Sector defeated, and the Nationalist who were there gone, Akira is no longer a bounty target.

But it's far from over. Everything was just a prelude to the next events.

>Episode
008

下傷アキラ

武器解説
Weapon Guide

【通常状態】



TOP



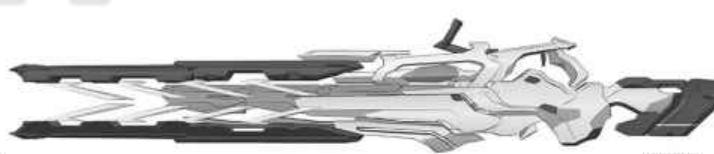
SIDE

OFX MULTI-FUNCTION GUN

【展開状態】



TOP



SIDE

OFX複合銃

高ランクハンター向けの複合銃。一挺20億オーラム。
変形により威力を向上させる機能を有している。人型
兵器用の銃のように巨大化させることも可能だが、
整備業者に出さないと元の大きさに戻せなくなる。



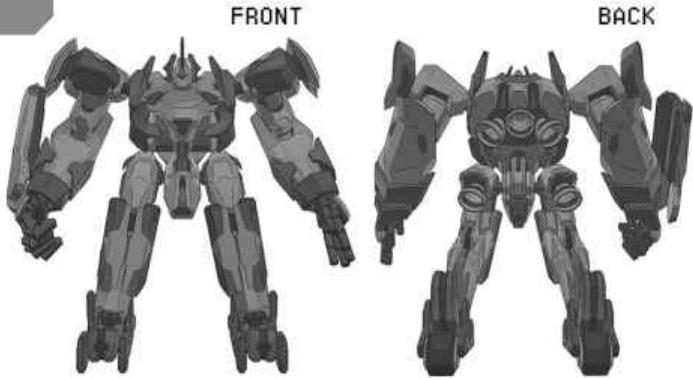
>Episode
008

下傷アキラ

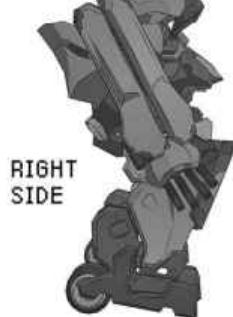
武装解説
Weapon Guide

**タツカワの
人型兵器**

ドラゴンリバーの隊長・タツカワが搭乗する大型人型兵器。格闘戦も可能な機体は極めて頑丈。両手の指を砲口に変形させることで、光弾を発射することも出来る。



**TATSUKAWA'S HUMANOID
WEAPON**



RIGHT
SIDE

LEFT
SIDE



「本題に入ろう。君に依頼がしたい。
依頼内容は、シロウに関するものだ」

電撃の新文芸

著ナフセ
イラストレーションアラ
世界観イラストカイツシユ
メカニクデザインcell

リビルドワールド

Rebuild World

NEXT EPISODE >>>

The advanced civilization that once existed
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.

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