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イラストレーション 吟

世界観イラスト わいっしゅ

メカニックデザイン cell

VIII

リビルドワールド

Rebuild World

上 第3奥部

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リビルド ワールド

Rebuild World

上 第3奥部

Author ナフセ

Illustration 吟

Illustration of the world わいっしゅ

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.



>Episode
008

上 第3奥部

Character

Rebuild World **XXII**



> **アキラ**

AKIRA

スラム街から成り上がるためハンターとなった少年。都市間輸送車両の護衛任務と坂下重工からの補償により、多額の報酬と新装備を入手する。



> **キャロル**

CAROL

地図屋としても活動する女性ハンター。高ランクハンター達を相手に“副業”で一晩数十億オーラムを稼ぐ悪女。

「相変わらずつれないわね」

Author: nafuse Illustration: giti Illustration of the world: yash Mechanic design: cell

リビルドワールド

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Chapter 212: Sensitive Topic

A boy who dashed out of the alleyways of the slums, dreaming of rising to the top, risking his life to head towards the ruins. There, he met a mysterious woman who drastically changed his future for better or for worse. The ordinary weakling became strong after enduring numerous hardships, eventually becoming a formidable warrior capable of defeating even towering monsters.

Obtaining worn-out clothes, safe food, and a room with a roof, the dreams he once harbored in the alleyways have already come true. Yet, the boy continues to seek further power.

There are two reasons for seeking power. One is to fulfill Alpha's request. And the other is to gain the power to spare those he doesn't want to kill, those he doesn't want to see die.

Even after becoming capable enough to receive escort requests for inter-city transport vehicles, defeating swarms of giant insects that attacked those transport vehicles, and even emerging victorious in battles against superhumans, he still feels he lacks the power he desires.

One might say, “Just kill all your enemies.” That's the power he desires. The wish he held when he was rolling on the ground of the alleyways as a weakling still hasn't been fulfilled. But now, without wishing for it, while changing that wish, Akira continues to fight, seeking the power to make wishes come true.



After finishing the fierce battle on the inter-city transport vehicle and returning home, Akira enjoyed a luxurious bath in the refurbished bathroom, relishing the pleasant sensation, then headed to the bedroom and fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, Akira woke up, sat up on the bed, and stretched, feeling unusually refreshed.

At that moment, Alpha spoke up.

『Good morning, Akira. You seem to have slept well.』

『Good morning, Alpha. Oh yeah, like a log. That bath yesterday really did the trick.』

The fatigue from the intense battle had completely disappeared. Feeling the relief, Akira smiled happily. Alpha smiled back at Akira's demeanor.

『It was worth spending a good amount on renovating the bathroom.』

『Yeah. Considering I'll be using that bath every day from now on, it's actually pretty cheap. I guess I've become quite the luxury lover.』

However, even with such luxury, compared to the earnings of high-ranked hunters, it was still modest and frugal. Nevertheless, Akira had finally broken free from the living standards of ordinary hunters.

Akira left the bedroom to prepare breakfast. He didn't cook; he just warmed up processed food that only needed heating and put it on a plate. Despite that, Akira enjoyed selecting slightly higher-priced items for his daily meals, and their taste far surpassed that of cheap restaurant dishes.

As Akira consumed those items as usual, he wore a slightly puzzled expression unlike before.

“Hmm... Was it always like this? ”

Seeing Akira's slightly perplexed expression, Alpha sensed and lightly chuckled.

『It seems like you've gotten used to the meals on the inter-city transport vehicles, and your palate has become more refined, Akira.』

The main users of inter-city transport vehicles were the city elite. Naturally, the standard of the meals served onboard catered to their satisfaction. Having consumed those meals continuously throughout the escort mission, Akira's palate had grown accustomed to the gourmet food for the wealthy.

『Well, you can always buy tastier items from now on. Even if your food expenses increase a hundredfold, it's not much of a burden for you now, Akira.』

“Well, yeah... that's true, but...”

『Is there something bothering you? 』

“Well, I was just thinking if I'm gradually becoming the type who only accepts expensive things.”

Akira expressed his concern with a slightly troubled expression, to which Alpha responded with a meaningful smile.

『Akira, when you've equipped yourself with gear worth billions of Aurums and gotten used to using mountains of medicines and bullets worth millions of Aurums in battles, I think it's already too late to worry about that, don't you? 』

“...Yeah.”

Although he agreed with that assessment, fully accepting it emotionally was still difficult. Akira chuckled wryly.

Lowering the standard once raised was challenging, both in terms of daily life and combat. This was true even for hunters.



Akira was summoned by Inabe and had come to the hospital. Although not undergoing detailed examinations, he received thorough medical attention, and apart from slightly elevated levels of residual nanomachines, he was diagnosed as healthy. He underwent the necessary removal procedure and was then escorted to the hospital room he had used before.

In the hospital room, Inabe and Hikaru were waiting for Akira.

“I heard it was quite tough on Gigantes III, but I'm glad to see you're doing well.”

“I got treated inside the vehicle, so wasn't it unnecessary to have an examination? ”

“Even though I called you for an examination as a pretext, it would be unnatural to do nothing. Besides, I wanted to make sure you were in good health, considering the intense battle you went through. It wouldn't be surprising if there were lingering effects. It's better for you to check your body's condition, isn't it? ”

“Well, yeah, but...”

After exchanging such light conversation, Inabe changed her demeanor.

“Now, before we get to the main point, I need to explain something to you. I'll say it upfront, but this concerns Sakashita Heavy Industry. Even if it makes you uncomfortable to hear, as long as they're involved, just keep it to yourself. There will be a reward for this matter as well. Understand? ”

During the escort mission of the inter-city transport vehicle, Akira fought against a superhuman named Erde and barely defeated him.

At that time, Erde had mistakenly identified Hikaru as a old-world connector for Sakashita Heavy Industry.

Hikaru was neither affiliated with Sakashita Heavy Industry nor a old-world connector. Normally, there wouldn't have been such a misunderstanding, and upon hearing it from Erde, Hikaru was extremely shocked and confused.

However, Erde didn't make such a mistaken assumption without any information. He had enough evidence and information to attempt to abduct Hikaru at all costs. And due to that mistaken information, he ended up fighting Akira and facing death.

This misinformation was part of Sakashita Heavy Industry' manipulation. Harmers had given the order, and Shirou had executed it.

Sakashita Heavy Industry' confidential information. A plan to secretly transport an extremely important figure, a highly skilled old-world connector, who rarely leaves the company's facilities to a distant city. Erde and his team were adept at information warfare to the extent that they could obtain such sensitive information.

But Shirou's manipulation was so effective that it deceived even individuals like them. Erde's team had already begun their assault, leaving no time to verify the false information.

As a result of this manipulation, Hikaru was unwittingly made a decoy for Sakashita Heavy Industry' key personnel protection. This led to her being targeted by the Nationalist' superhumans, resulting in a miserable ordeal.

Akira was briefed by Inabe on the outline of these events. Individual names like Harmers and Shirou weren't mentioned; it was simply summarized as manipulation by Sakashita Heavy Industry. Despite wearing a slightly displeased expression, Akira nodded in understanding.

“So that's what happened...”

Observing Akira's reaction, Inabe reiterated with a pointed remark.

“I'll stress this again, the other party is Sakashita Heavy Industry. Even if you feel dissatisfied or uncomfortable, don't go beyond that. Understood? ”

Akira looked at Hikaru with a troubled expression.

“Is that okay with you, Hikaru? You were almost made a decoy and nearly died...”

Hikaru frowned slightly but returned a smile.

“Well, to be honest, I'm pretty annoyed too. But considering I'm not willing to make an enemy out of Sakashita Heavy Industry over something like this, and since they came clean about it afterward, even if it was after the fact, and promised compensation, I'll just let this frustration out by bargaining for a higher reward.”

“I see...”

Upon hearing that, Akira relaxed his stance.

Hikaru, not himself, had been made the decoy. If Hikaru was fine with it, there was no need to make a fuss. Besides, Akira could have escaped alone. It was his choice to fight Erde instead. He realized that it wouldn't be quite right to blame Sakashita Heavy Industry for nearly dying because of that choice.

“Got it. I won't make a fuss. Is that okay with you, Hikaru? ”

“Yes, thank you. That helps.”

While the two chuckled lightly, Inabe let out a small sigh of relief beside them. Remembering how Kibayashi would have excitedly

instigated Akira, he praised his decision to assign Hikaru to Akira and congratulated himself on his judgment.

“Now let's get to the main point. That Erde who attacked you both was quite a formidable opponent, judging by Sakashita Heavy Industry' military strength. By defeating such a person, you greatly contributed to the protection of Sakashita Heavy Industry' important personnel. For this contribution, Sakashita Heavy Industry intends to reward you. I called you here today to discuss the specifics of that reward. But before that...”

Inabe cast a meaningful glance at Hikaru, who understood and excused herself from the conversation.

“No, this is an issue that requires a personal visit from Inabe District Chief. Despite being his handler, it doesn't seem appropriate for a low-ranking employee like me to know about such matters. I'll wait outside.”

With that, Hikaru politely bowed and left the hospital room.

Akira, who silently watched Hikaru leave, then looked at Inabe with a puzzled expression.

“Um, what exactly do you want to talk about? ”

“As I mentioned earlier, it's about the reward from Sakashita Heavy Industry. But it also involves Udajima's affair, or more precisely, the means of killing Udajima. Since she sensed that, she chose to leave. It's a plan to assassinate a city official. Knowing about it might be fine if you simply suspected it, but once you know, you can't pretend you didn't. To maintain the position of those unrelated, it's important to intentionally keep them in the dark.”

“Ah... I see.”

“You should be careful too. Just because she's handling you doesn't mean you can let your guard down. If you accidentally let something

slip to Hikaru, she'll bear responsibility for knowing, and we'll have to deal with it. If you don't want her involved in this matter, it's better to keep silent for her sake.”

“Understood. I'll be careful.”

Observing Akira's sincere and earnest nod, Inabe raised his evaluations on Hikaru a little more. He didn't like involving unrelated individuals. Even if it was just that kind of consideration, Akira still cared for Hikaru.

“Now, let's get to the main point. I'll make it clear that this is just presenting options. I have no intention of forcing you. It's up to you. This is just to prevent any misunderstandings later, like me intentionally hiding it from you, knowing there are such means available. Understand? ”

Inabe's persistent attitude bewildered Akira slightly. Wondering what exactly he was going to talk about, he answered somewhat hesitantly.

“Uh, yeah. And then? ”

“Regarding the reward from Sakashita Heavy Industry, you've essentially done them a favor. You can simply demand money or a higher Hunter Rank, or ask for something else. To put it bluntly, there's also the option of asking Sakashita Heavy Industry to pressure Kagamayama City for you. That way, Udajima will be completely ousted. He'll be pushed outside the walls. The obstacle to you killing him will be removed.”

Inabe stared at Akira intently.

“I'll handle negotiations with Sakashita Heavy Industry. No problem there. It's up to you now. What will you do? ”

Faced with such a sudden choice, Akira was puzzled.



When Hikaru reported the escort request for inter-city transport vehicles to Inabe, she also mentioned the information provided by Kibayashi. Of course, she omitted the fact that Inabe and Akira were planning the downfall, exclusion, and assassination of Udajima, in collaboration with Akira.

Inabe's reaction upon hearing the story was intriguing to Hikaru.

Firstly, Inabe speculated that the information provided by Kibayashi was a trap set by him for Hikaru.

Upon informing Hikaru that Akira is a dangerous individual, Kibayashi further reveals that Udajima, who is in opposition to Akira, is also aboard the same vehicle. This leads to the possibility of Hikaru having Akira removed from the vehicle to prevent him from attacking Udajima.

It would be an abrupt decision to remove personnel from the escort of inter-city transport vehicles. Naturally, it would be a significant failure. If Hikaru were to be removed from Akira's assignment due to this failure, it might work in Kibayashi's favor, as he seems to be enjoying Akira's company.

Separately, there's a speculation that Udajima might have set a trap for Akira.

Udajima is also keeping tabs on Akira's movements. It's not even a highly confidential request. It's easy enough to figure out that Akira has received the escort request for inter-city transport vehicles.

So, Udajima makes a reservation for the vehicle he will board and, in reality, does not board it. Instead, he finds a way to convey to Akira that he is there. If the deceived Akira attacks Udajima's room inside the vehicle, Akira would be eliminated by the security of the vehicle.

Furthermore, even if Udajima were actually on board the Gigantes III for some reason, Akira being on the same vehicle necessitates taking measures such as booking a room under a different name. Just having Udajima's name on the passenger list wouldn't serve as evidence that he was actually there.

Inabe concludes after discussing these points.

“Well, I've said a lot, but it's all just speculation. And even if those speculations turn out to be true, it doesn't change the fact that you handled Akira firmly in that situation. It's an impeccable achievement. You can expect good evaluations for your performance. Well done.”

“Ah, thank you very much...”

Inabe noticed a somewhat hesitant response from Hikaru, and she wore a slightly puzzled expression. Despite having given her almost a promise of advancement, he couldn't sense much enthusiasm from someone who should have been quite ambitious. And the reason for Hikaru's attitude continued from her mouth.

“...Inabe, Section Chief. I'm in charge of Akira, but I've realized my incompetence in this matter. I'm ashamed to say this despite being appointed directly by you, but could you please remove me from Akira's assignment?”

Hikaru yielded in this matter due to the recent events. Understanding this, Inabe lightly responded.

“...I see. That's unfortunate. Well, I won't force you. Forcing it will only diminish motivation. However, we can't remove you immediately. It will take time to select a replacement. And I suppose Akira has asked you to procure equipment? Continue until that's done.”

“Yes. Thank you very much. Then, if you'll excuse me.”

After exhaling a small sigh of relief, Hikaru politely bowed and attempted to leave. But then, Inabe called out to her meaningfully.

“Let me give you one piece of advice. You're exceptionally talented. That's why you can't fade into obscurity. You can't become insignificant. Also, being neutral doesn't mean being unrelated. And neutrality is only permissible for those strong enough to make enemies of everyone else but themselves. You're very talented, but you're not that strong yet. Be careful in steering your course in the future.”

Hikaru bowed once again and left Inabe's office. Inabe watched her leave without saying anything further.

As Hikaru left Akira's hospital room, she recalled her exchange with Inabe from the previous day and sighed softly in the corridor.

(Inabe's talk was definitely about Mr. Udajima's situation, huh...)

Hikaru is aware that Inabe is pushing for Udajima's downfall and possibly his assassination, in collusion with Akira. She's been informed of this likelihood through information from Kibayashi. Although there's no concrete evidence to support this information, it's likely correct, according to Kibayashi's speculation.

As a law-abiding citizen residing within the safe confines of the city, Hikaru has a strong aversion to the notion of murder. Prior to the point of not wanting to be involved in the power struggles among the city's elites, she simply didn't want to be involved in anything related to someone's killing.

Nevertheless, maintaining complete neutrality is difficult. Hikaru understands this as well.

She is assisting in raising Akira's Hunter Rank under Inabe. Additionally, she's been tasked by Akira with procuring equipment,

both of which contribute to the facilitation of Udajima's assassination.

Even if she were to claim neutrality or non-involvement to Udajima, it's unlikely that Udajima would accept it. Hikaru understands this.

“Being neutral is only permissible for the strong, huh...”

The ambition to rise using her relationship with Akira, a high-ranking Hunter, has already faded from Hikaru's mind. She broke down after experiencing the intense battle on the inter-city transport vehicle.

However, she hasn't given up on advancement itself. She still intends to climb through other means.

Nevertheless, the arrogance of believing that she could ascend to the level of the absolute rulers mentioned by Inabe, who permit neutrality from others, has greatly diminished within Hikaru.

Once that arrogance fades away, the current situation of being embroiled in the struggle between Inabe and Udajima becomes nothing more than a mere difficulty for Hikaru, offering no rewards.

She ponders how to overcome this situation.



Akira was presented with the option by Inabe to use the reward from Sakashita Heavy Industry to carry out maneuvers to drive Udajima out beyond the defensive wall. Akira was surprised by the suddenness of the proposition, but despite being taken aback, he answered without hesitation, albeit delayed by his surprise.

“As for the reward from Sakashita Heavy Industry, turn it into money and Hunter Rank for me.”

“Is that really okay? While I won't force you, it's an excellent opportunity, you know? ”

“Yeah. I prefer money and Hunter Rank. Just to clarify, I'm not willing to do anything to him like kill him or sacrifice everything for it. I'm not living just to kill him.”

As Inabe scrutinized Akira with probing eyes, Akira continued.

“I need powerful equipment regardless of Udajima's situation. I need to be able to survive even if I'm attacked by superhumans again. I don't know why, but I often find myself in such situations. I've asked Hikaru to procure equipment for me, but besides the issue of money, there are restrictions based on Hunter Rank, right? So, money and Hunter Rank would be better to solve those issues.”

Then, Akira turned his serious gaze towards Inabe.

“I have my priorities too. I understand your situation, but I'm not willing to put my equipment on hold for Udajima's downfall. I'm sorry.”

Inabe relaxed the atmosphere.

“No, no, it's a misunderstanding. As I said earlier, I have no intention of forcing you. It's fine. Understood. I'll ask Sakashita Heavy Industry for money and Hunter Rank.”

From Akira's reaction, Inabe roughly grasped how much priority Udajima's elimination held for Akira.

“But in that case, you could also ask Sakashita Heavy Industry for equipment, right? Even items restricted by Hunter Rank could be obtained easily there. You could acquire extremely high-performance equipment.”

“Ah, about that, I have contracts for purchasing the next equipment from Kiryou and TOSON. Hikaru is also handling it...”

Such contracts are easily negotiable with Sakashita Heavy Industry. They can be unilaterally terminated as much as desired. However, despite that, Inabe now viewed Akira's attitude, which placed importance on not breaking contracts, as somewhat rigid yet favorable.

Even if they despise each other enough to kill, they abide by the contracts they've made. Such principles are particularly important for individuals like Akira. Hunters who do not value contracts, or forces that cannot be controlled by contracts, are considered monsters by those who uphold order in the Eastern Region.

“That's right. Understood. Leave that to Hikaru. However, it will take some time to procure the equipment. It's not good to be without equipment during that time. I've prepared this for you.” Inabe said, directing his gaze towards a large case in the corner of the sickroom.

The contents of the case were Akira's equipment: CA31R augmented suit and two LEO multi-function guns. Both the suit and guns had the same performance as before. Inabe had negotiated with Kiryou and TOSON to provide them as loaned items for use during repairs.

When it comes to repairs, the augmented suit is so heavily damaged from the battle with Erde that it's beyond fixing. Inabe greatly utilized his own authority for the loan.

The gun used in the battle with Erde was completely destroyed and beyond repair. However, the one attached to the bike's auxiliary arm remained in a repairable condition. Thanks to that, Inabe was able to provide the loaned item with a simple negotiation.

Furthermore, the bike, which had been left on the roof of an inter-city transport vehicle, was recovered and taken to a storage facility by the vehicle's security. Afterward, Hikaru arranged for repairs, and it's currently undergoing maintenance.

Inabe added those details when talking to Akira.

“I'll take care of the expenses for this immediate equipment. Use it.”

“Is it okay? ”

“Yes. I don't want you to die on me, you see.”

After casually replying, Inabe showed a slightly serious attitude.

“If I may point out, from the time you returned to the city until coming to this hospital room, even though it was a short period of about a day, you didn't have proper equipment. Your home is outside the defensive walls, even though it's within the city. While the ethical difficulty of attacks is higher compared to the slums treated narrowly as wastelands, it's not impossible. There's a definite risk of being attacked by Udajima during that time. Be careful.”

“Understood.”

It was true when pointed out. Akira had been quite careless. Thinking so, Akira put on a serious expression. Then Alpha spoke up.

『But just to let you know, even if we were attacked, I'd make sure to sense it beforehand and get you out, okay? 』

『I see. Thank you.』

Akira wasn't left defenseless. Alpha's somewhat belated excuse could also be interpreted as words of gratitude, to which Akira responded normally.

Inabe continued from there.

“Also, if you had chosen to use Sakashita Heavy Industry' reward for Udajima's downfall, I would have intended for you to stay hospitalized for safety until Udajima completely fell from power. This hospital is managed by the city. Even if those under Udajima's

influence were to attack, as long as they are city residents, they would hesitate to assault such a place.”

“Is that so? ”

“Yes. That's why I specifically called you here. Depending on the negotiations with Sakashita Heavy Industry, I'm not sure how much your Hunter Rank will increase, but the higher it goes, the more it will encourage Udajima's downfall. In other words, if Udajima, who fears that, learns that you're trying to obtain powerful equipment, the danger will increase even further. Please be careful.”

“Understood.”

“My conversation with you...”

Should Inabe mention the possibility of Hikaru being reassigned from Akira's case? Inabe hesitated for a moment, then decided not to bring it up for now.

“...That's about it. Do you have anything to add? ”

“From me...”

『Alpha, do you have anything? 』

『Nothing』

“Nothing in particular.”

“I see. Then let's call Hikaru back. You've decided to turn Sakashita Heavy Industry' reward into money and Hunter Rank. Considering that, it's better to coordinate with her again regarding the next equipment procurement.”

After explaining the situation to Hikaru, who was called back to the room, Inabe left first.

Hikaru glanced briefly at Akira.

“What? ”

“...It's nothing.”

Akira chose money and a hunter rank as rewards from Sakashita Heavy Industry. Inabe had said so. The fact that he chose implies that there were other options. So, what were they? Hikaru had an idea.

But she decided not to ask. She let the conversation flow.

“Um, about the reward money from Sakashita Heavy Industry, are you sure it's okay to allocate it all to equipment expenses? ”

“Yeah. Including ammunition costs.”

“Understood. We don't know how much Sakashita Heavy Industry will provide, but since it's a reward from the Big Five corporations, it's definitely going to be a substantial amount. Although it may not be frontline equipment, we should be able to get something with performance close to it.”

“I see. It probably made negotiations more complicated, but sorry, I'll leave it to you.”

“Of course. Leave it to me. After all, I'm responsible for Akira.”

At least for now. Hikaru omitted those words and smiled at Akira.



Udajima received a report about Akira from his subordinate through communication.

“...Akira is alive and currently at the hospital where Inabe's influence lies. There's no doubt about that, right? ”

“Yes. That's confirmed information. I apologize. Unfortunately, we couldn't investigate the extent of his injuries.”

“Understood. Continue the investigation.”

Udajima grimaced as he ended the communication.

“...He's not dead. Damn it! ”

Upon learning that a large-scale attack had been launched on the inter-city transport vehicle, Udajima immediately sought to confirm Akira's status. If the high-ranking hunter, who undoubtedly viewed him as an enemy, were to die, it would somewhat alleviate the situation in the power struggle with Inabe, who had deep connections with him.

However, he couldn't obtain definitive information.

Inabe was also engaging in information warfare. Akira is alive. Akira is already dead. Akira returned home unscathed. Akira was brought to the hospital in critical condition. Such conflicting information swirled among Udajima's intelligence operatives.

Additionally, in the current state of Kugamayama City, Sakashita Heavy Industry was conducting a large-scale search for Shiro without informing the city of its purpose. This was adversely affecting the city's information gathering efforts.

Udajima reviewed the contents of the report from his subordinates once again.

“Akira's hunter rank is... 55? To raise it that high in such a short period... Unbelievable. Even if he went to Zegelt City, earning such results within just one week...? ”

Generally, the higher the hunter rank, the harder it is to increase it.

Suppose someone's hunter rank is 50, but their actual strength is around 55. For that person to raise their hunter rank to 55, they would need the equivalent of years' worth of hunter activity in a suitable region, or even a few months' worth in a higher region. This is because the hunter rank number reflects the individual's contributions to the Corporate Government, not just their actual strength.

In other words, operating in a region commensurate with one's combat abilities for about a week would not typically result in any increase in hunter rank. Even though Akira received a substantial amount of monster extermination requests from major distributors during that period, his hunter rank remained the same as before, 50.

Yet it is now 55. How many intense battles did Akira overcome during the inter-city transport vehicle escort request? Udaajima, who couldn't understand, wasn't someone to be underestimated.

He realized that he had made enemies of such a formidable individual, and this understanding twisted Udaajima's face with severity.

At that moment, he received a communication from Viola.

“What do you want? ”

“Oh, you seem in quite a sour mood. Did something happen? ”

“It's none of your concern. Get to the point.”

“It's about sales. Remember, about twelve hours ago? I asked if you wanted to buy some information. Haven't changed your mind, have you? ”

“That? No change. And can you explain the content without paying 20 billion Aurum? ”

The deal Viola proposed half a day ago, without any prior explanation, and requiring full payment of 20 billion Aurum upfront, was no joke. Udajima had declined it on the spot.

Viola, at that time, didn't insist further and left with a meaningful smile.

“Well, about that, now it's 2 million Aurum. How about it? ”

“2 million? Were you really trying to sell me information of that caliber for 20 billion Aurum? ”

Viola responded to Udajima's strong irritation with a smirk.

“Of course not. The value of the same information can vary greatly depending on when you learn it, you know? Its worth decreases over time, and now it's just dropped to that.”

Udajima frowned and pondered. The information that was worth 20 billion Aurum twelve hours ago was now worth only 2 million Aurum. What kind of information was it? It certainly piqued his interest.

“...Fine. I'll buy it. Payment sent.”

“Thank you for your purchase. Sending it now.”

Udajima, upon receiving the information, was astonished.

“Th-this is...! ”

The information was about Akira. It contained evidence that Akira had lost almost all of his equipment during the inter-city transport vehicle escort request. Additionally, it was noted that he returned home without any escort in that condition.

In other words, the information indicated an exceptional opportunity to kill Akira, who possessed astonishing combat abilities.

“You! Why didn't you tell me at that time that the item for sale was information about Akira? ”

Viola didn't flinch at Udajima's furious words.

“Don't be ridiculous. If I had told you that much before selling it, you would have guessed the value of Akira's information, which is worth 20 billion Aurum, and the deal might have fallen through, right? ”

Udajima fell silent. If he denied Viola's words, it would mean admitting that he was incompetent, unable to see such things for himself.

“The price of 20 billion Aurum was high enough, and if possible, I wanted to keep it hidden. But the value of a commodity depends on the person willing to pay for it. That's how business works, right? So, that's it. Goodbye.”

“I see. I understand your point. Then why did the value of this information drop to 2 million Aurum? ”

“For that information, it's 5 million Aurum.”

After Udajima made the payment, the content arrived immediately. It detailed Inabe's negotiations with Kiryou and TOSON corporations. It also included evidence that equipment from these two corporations had been delivered to the hospital where Akira was staying.

It was clear that Inabe had procured new equipment for Akira, who had lost his previous gear. Therefore, Akira was no longer defenseless. Any attack on him now would only result in failure with mediocre forces. The once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of attacking Akira in a vulnerable state had been lost.

Understanding this, Udajima clenched his teeth to restrain his anger, and Viola teased him.

“That's it for me. Oh, perhaps you think 20 billion Aurum was too much for this information, but I don't deny the price I set considering the buyer's capacity. That's how it goes in business, right? Goodbye.”

With that, Viola cut the communication.

Udajima slammed the table forcefully. But that was it. He contained his rage with just that.

(Even if I had paid 20 billion at that time, there was no guarantee I would have received the same information. She could have casually provided different information. It's true that I missed an opportunity, but my judgment wasn't wrong.)

Udajima feared that Viola might have made him pay 20 billion Aurum for worthless information about Akira, which she could then sell to Inabe as an achievement.

Moreover, even if Akira was in a vulnerable state, as a city executive, it would be difficult for him to secretly dispatch a large force to a residential area outside the city's defensive wall. Considering this, the information wasn't worth 20 billion Aurum. She herself had said it was a price based on the buyer's capacity.

Udajima continued to affirm such thoughts to maintain his composure.

“It's not over yet! I'm not finished yet! ”

Udajima encouraged himself, determined to find a way to turn the tables despite feeling cornered.



After the conversation with Udajima, Viola laughed cheerfully in her office.

“Just a little more... I suppose.”

Those who are cornered are more likely to take extreme actions. They are more likely to take reckless gambles. That applies even to city executives. Just as Inabe, when he was cornered, utilized the ancient-world information terminal he obtained from Akira for fraudulent activities related to the origin of relics.

Udajima, too, will eventually explode. Probably soon. Believing this, and to expedite it, to make it more significant, Viola poured fuel on the fire with her sinister grin.

The unprecedented uproar caused by Akira, a colossal explosive, is what she wants to see. Driven by that desire and nature, Viola laughed.

Chapter 213: Shirou's Sightseeing

In a room within a special lease area located in the upper section of Kugamayama City, currently leased to Sakashita Heavy Industry, Harmers bows deeply to Sugadome, an executive of Sakashita Heavy Industry.

“I'm terribly sorry.”

Matsubara, who is also present, continues to report on Shirou's search status.

As of now, Shirou has not been found. Surveillance device records both inside and outside of Kugamayama City confirm 2812 sightings of Shirou. Of course, all of them are fake, existing only as data. Even if the manipulated data is erased, it gets added back within minutes. Just to be sure, personnel were sent to investigate on-site, but no discoveries have been made.

Nevertheless, considering the frequency and accuracy of the data manipulation, it's almost certain that Shirou is at least somewhere near Kugamayama City. The decision whether to let outsiders search for him as just a person of interest, concealing the information about his connection to Sakashita Heavy Industry, is under consideration.

After hearing these reports, Sugadome turns his gaze towards Harmers, which only heightens Harmers' tension.

“The escape of Shirou is your failure. However, it cannot be said that there was gross negligence on your part. While it could have been prevented if you had not left his side, you did confirm with me before temporarily leaving him. And it was I who gave that permission. While there may be some self-defense involved, both you and I made judgments that can be sufficiently justified given the circumstances.”

“Thank you very much.”

With essentially a verdict of almost innocence, Harmers breathes a sigh of relief.

“If I may add a little more, it was quite impressive how Shirou handled things. It was I who made the decision to prioritize your treatment, but the data on which that decision was based had been manipulated. According to that data, you were in critical condition. So, there was a reason for allowing you to separate from him. Given the positions both of you hold, one might say that such matters should have been discerned, but let's leave it at that.”

Matsubara, who was also eyeing Harmers with a critical gaze, suppresses his own dissatisfaction from Sugadome's attitude.

Observing his subordinate's demeanor, Sugadome concludes the discussion about the consequences of this incident. He adjusts the conversation's direction for future actions.

“Harmers, your job is to guard and monitor Shirou, but currently, Shirou is on the run.”

“Yes! I will do my utmost to find him! ”

In an earnest expression, Harmers replies. But Sugadome continues.

“No, you will stand by. Your combat capabilities are indeed superb, but assigning you to search for a person is not appropriate. It's a matter of finding the right person for the right job. Until suitable assignments are determined, take a little rest.”

“.....Understood.”

Harmers replies with a pained expression. Sugadome adds further.

“However, while I say rest, you may receive requests for assistance in capturing Shirou from the search teams. It wouldn't be desirable for you to completely relax as if on vacation. Be mindful of that.”

“Yes! ” There's still a chance for redemption. With determination evident in both his face and voice, Harmers responds vigorously, then bows politely and exits the room. Sugadome looks at Matsubara with a slight smile.

“Are you dissatisfied with the lenient punishment? ”

“.....No, it's not like that.”

Although Matsubara's response leans towards denial, he knows that Sugadome sees through it. To avoid prolonging this topic, he changes the subject.

“Nevertheless, there are aspects of this recent attack that are puzzling. While it seems they aimed for Shirou, bringing in monsters from the upper airspace, it's not surprising if Shirou were to die in such circumstances. They even breached our company's security. It was necessary, considering the circumstances, but...”

The attackers, if they hadn't caused such a commotion, wouldn't have been able to get close to Shirou. Despite failing to capture him, Matsubara's speculation is not incorrect. However, he still feels something unsettling.

In response to Matsubara's puzzled expression, Sugadome lightly responds.

“They probably didn't care much about that. The capture of Shirou was likely a secondary objective to them.”

“...Huh? Well, I mean, the attack was supposed to target Shirou, though...”

As Matsubara becomes puzzled, Sugadome elaborates on his explanation.

“Perhaps saying they didn't care is too much. Capturing Shirou was just a part of the overall operation, and compared to the main

objective, it was of lower priority. Of course, they would have preferred to succeed, but the primary goal was something else.”

Seeing Matsubara's increasing confusion, Sugadome further explains his speculation in detail.

It was a strategy to lure monsters from the upper airspace. Naturally, the cost of the attack would be enormous. If the sole purpose of the attack were simply to target Sakashita Heavy Industry, there are plenty of other facilities they could have targeted. Furthermore, by deliberately targeting the inter-city transport vehicle convoy, the opponent's objective must have been the capture of Shirou. Matsubara concluded as such.

Sugadome then interprets this attack, emphasizing it as a shipment of materials to Kugamayama City, including numerous humanoid weapons and other supplies useful for the conquest of the deeper parts of Kuzusuhara District. Sugadome's interpretation differs from Matsubara's, viewing the attack as an assault on the supply line for the conquest of those ruins.

“That was probably just a show of force, a reconnaissance. The attack itself was the main objective, to gauge whether we were serious about resuming the conquest of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, or to gauge our reaction after the attack.”

“...A reconnaissance!? That's what it was!? ”

Contrary to Matsubara's astonishment at the contents, Sugadome continues calmly.

“Exactly. That's why they didn't prioritize Shirou. Even if he died as a result of the attack, it wouldn't matter. Whether we hastily arrange a replacement for Shirou will also show our seriousness. That's the idea.”

“...But, still, it's hard to believe that an attack of such scale was just a reconnaissance...”

“That might also be part of an attack on the supply line for the conquest of the deeper parts of the ruins, assuming we were serious about resuming the conquest. In that context, it's not such a significant scale. We were advancing into the deeper parts about 50 years ago, though it ended in failure. Compared to the forces we had then, this attack isn't that significant, right? ”

“Well... that's true, but...”

As Matsubara's expression gradually changes from confusion to understanding, he voices a new concern.

“...So, who was behind this attack? ”

“The cost of an attack of that scale is substantial. There are limited entities capable of spending that much for reconnaissance. It's probably another one of the Big Five corporations. They likely want to know whether we are seriously committing to the re-conquest of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.”

“In that case, is it doubtful that the perpetrators are Nationalist? What about the fear of other corporate units? ”

“No, the perpetrators themselves are probably Nationalist. There's also the possibility it serves as a disposal of individuals contaminated by their ideology. Even if it's the latter, there won't be any concrete evidence. Well, even if clear evidence were to surface, it would be troublesome. We'll handle it as usual.”

The Big Five corporations are key components of the Corporate Government. As rulers of the Eastern Region, they form the federation and outwardly maintain a strong cooperative relationship.

However, beneath the surface, intense conflicts occur frequently. There are countless valuable relics and ruins that can only be obtained through the use of force, as well as casualties in various covert operations. If publicly exposed, such incidents could easily escalate into war.

However, if the Big Five corporations were to initiate full-scale warfare, it could potentially lead to the destruction of the Eastern Region. That's something neither Sakashita Heavy Industry nor the other Big Five corporations desire.

To avoid decisive conflicts, it has become a common practice to attribute such incidents to Nationalist, even though it's known otherwise, and to issue mutual condemnation statements against Nationalist to conceal the truth. For this purpose, they have even established their own organizations pretending to be Nationalist and sometimes conduct joint operations with actual Nationalist.

Sugadome is in a position to plan such operations as needed. Given this background, he was considering whether this attack might be a similar operation conducted by another of the Big Five corporations.

However, this customary practice also has its drawbacks. Those who masquerade as Nationalist need to deeply understand Nationalist ideologies. In the process, some may show understanding of and empathy with the enemy's ideology, leading them to defect to the Nationalist side.

These defectors wouldn't betray for money. The Big Five corporations issue and control currency, so defectors would question the governance by the federation.

Additionally, operatives typically endorse unethical means for the sake of their cause's righteousness, so once they defect to nationalism, they become troublesome. They no longer act in accordance with the righteousness from the federation's perspective but rather adopt the Nationalist perspective.

Such betrayers are put into operations where they're expected to die for the cause of Nationalist righteousness. Among those who died in this attack, there may have been individuals earmarked for such disposal. Sugadome also considered this possibility.

Upon hearing the conversation, Matsubara voiced his emerging concern.

“As Sugadome-san speculated, could this attack have been reconnaissance by other Big Five corporations like Tatsumori or Tsukisada, trying to gauge our reaction to determine if we're truly committed to resuming the conquest of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin? How would they perceive it? Would they judge that we've seriously committed to the deepest conquest? ”

“It's hard to say. But at the very least, the likelihood of such a judgment has increased. We forced a large-scale deployment, even coercing the departure of convoys of inter-city transport vehicles to Kugamayama City as scheduled. Originally, Kugamayama City served as the forward base for the conquest of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. We have a firm determination to protect the supply line for the deepest conquest of the ruins. So, it wouldn't be strange to make that judgment.”

Matsubara, with a slightly stern expression, directed a question tinged with tension toward Sugadome.

“So, is that a misunderstanding, or... is it the truth? ”

Will Sakashita Heavy Industry really resume the complete conquest of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, which it once abandoned? What will be gained from it? Is it really worth causing such a commotion for reconnaissance by other Big Five corporations? Do the top executives know what it is?

Was Sugadome dispatched to Kugamayama City to take command of the conquest of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin? Is Shiro's transport part of that operation?

Realizing that she's asked quite delicate questions, Matsubara waited for Sugadome's response, aware of the potential sensitivity of the subject.

Sugadome responded without changing his demeanor.

“I'll answer that question if there's a necessity for you to know that information. For now, that's all I can tell you.”

“Understood.”

Matsubara understood that it wasn't information he should be privy to at the moment. To divert from the touchy subject he inadvertently touched upon, he changed the topic.

“By the way, why do you think Shiro would attempt to escape? We received reports that he's not someone with such destructive ideologies.”

Despite having restricted freedom, Shiro should have understood that it was for his safety. And despite that limitation, he should have enjoyed a situation far better than most. Despite all this, Matsubara couldn't comprehend why Shiro would take such drastic action. Sugadome lightly responded as if joking.

“...Maybe he just wanted to go sightseeing alone.”

“Sightseeing, you say? I see. He's become quite indulgent. Perhaps we've pampered him too much, despite him being one of our excellent old-world connectors.”

Understanding Sugadome's comment as a joke, Matsubara laughed and went along with it, then left to return to his duties.

Alone now, Sugadome directed his gaze to the center of the room where a holographic display unit was installed on the floor.

“Connect.”

Following Sugadome's command, the display unit activated. Then, a person from a remote location appeared via Sakashita Heavy Industry' secure line, projected as if they were there in person.

“Let's hear the progress. Have there been any developments in establishing a negotiation route with her? ”

“Not particularly. It's not something that can be done so quickly.”

“I won't press, but if there's no progress, it'll be difficult for me to wait patiently. I just wanted to remind you of that.”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it.”

The holographic image of a young boy sighed heavily. It was Shiro.

On the night Shiro escaped, Sugadome was working alone in his office when the holographic display unit in the room activated on its own, projecting a familiar figure. Upon seeing it, Sugadome was slightly surprised before adopting an expression of exasperation.

The person displayed was Shiro.

“You're quite audacious, aren't you? Make an appointment next time.”

Seeing Sugadome's composed demeanor, Shiro initially looked surprised. But he quickly regained his composure and, with a smile, spoke in a casual tone.

“Well, I did consider it, but going through the official channels seemed like too much of a hassle.”

“I see. So, did you come to explain your escape? Why did you even escape in the first place? You were living a rather comfortable life here. Was there something unsatisfactory about it that made you want to run away, even if it meant turning Sakashita Heavy Industry into an enemy? ”

Shiro had made an enemy of Sakashita Heavy Industry. When this was pointed out to him, cold sweat ran down Shiro's cheek. Nevertheless, Shiro managed to maintain a seemingly frivolous smile and exaggeratedly shook his head, as if to make it clear that he was joking.

“No, no, no, I'm not dissatisfied at all. I'm grateful every day for the luxurious life I'm living, you know? It's true. But, you know, living in a facility all the time feels suffocating, and sometimes I just want to relax and go sightseeing. Is that not allowed? ”

It was expected that the request, audaciously made by one who had escaped from Sakashita Heavy Industry, would naturally be rejected. However, Sugadome responded calmly without showing any anger.

“Fine. However, it's too dangerous to go sightseeing without an escort. I'll send a guard immediately. Send me your location.”

Despite the fact that Shiro's request, which should never have been granted, was accepted conditionally, he showed signs of panic instead.

“...Huh? Ah, but wait, the one who'll be sent is from Harmers, right? That's kind of uncomfortable... and sightseeing with a bunch of guys wouldn't be fun, you know...”

“Then I'll send a female guard. We'll also take appearance into consideration. Is that acceptable? ”

“Ah, actually, I'm the type who gets shy around people I don't know. So, even if she's beautiful, sightseeing with a stranger makes me feel suffocated, so, um, a little...”

Sugadome was showing an unprecedented level of concession to the escapee. Despite this, Shiro continued to refuse, displaying an attitude of rejection while showing signs of panic.

“You know, I don't have any intention of defecting to Tatsumori or Tsukisada or anything like that. I'll come back as soon as I'm satisfied. So, please, just overlook it for a while. Please? Right? ”

“No.”

Feeling pressured, Shiro attempted to take control of the conversation by resorting to forceful means. He directed a meaningful smile toward Sugadome.

“Changing the subject, I actually have control over the security of this room right now. I've secretly connected it to a hidden line on this display device, and I've made sure it doesn't leave any records.”

“So it seems. Well, it's not our company's facility. It would be cruel to demand such high-level security to prevent your intrusion.”

“No, even I had a hard time infiltrating this place, you know? So you can rest assured about that.”

After saying so lightly, Shiro, not only with his expression but also with his voice, subtly infused a sense of intimidation.

“...So, regarding the safety of this room, I'm currently in control. Just by adjusting the air conditioning, I could easily kill everyone inside. Bearing that in mind, I'd appreciate some leniency regarding my outings.”

Shiro threatened Sugadome with a refusal, asserting his dominance even further. “As long as I'm here, your life and death are in my hands. This applies not only in this room but also in places where security measures as strong as those of Sakashita Heavy Industry are not in place.”

In reality, Shiro was capable of doing that. And Sugadome knew it. As an executive of Sakashita Heavy Industry, he was well aware of the abilities of their exceptional operatives.

Nevertheless, Sugadome remained completely unfazed.

“If necessary, do it. And you should come to know firsthand what it truly means to make an enemy of Sakashita Heavy Industry.”

His calm tone contained not a hint of intimidation. It was just like having a normal conversation about the weather, a completely ordinary voice.

Yet, this calm demeanor sent shivers down Shiro's spine. Sugadome remained as composed as ever. But there was a readiness to accept his own death calmly. And there existed the nerve to issue instructions for experiments that would lead the subjects to extremely dire fates, all in a similarly calm manner.

If he pushed further, he would become an example of that fate himself. Shiro understood that. He withdrew while maintaining a façade of bravado.

“...I went too far. I'm sorry.”

Shiro had decided on that fate when he escaped from the vehicle. But that resolve was not to be used here and now. For the sake of achieving his goal, making Sakashita Heavy Industry a true enemy should not be for such trivial matters. Shiro made that judgment and, despite breaking into a cold sweat, maintained a cheerful smile.

Sugadome, having seen through Shiro's psyche, waited a moment before speaking.

“Very well.”

Upon hearing that, Shiro let out a sigh of relief. It was close. That feeling overwhelmed him.

Sugadome continued speaking.

“Let's get back to the subject. Sightseeing without an escort is not permitted. Furthermore, you won't be given leisurely vacations to enjoy sightseeing. You'll be working.”

Once he understood his position, Shirou was puzzled by the lack of mention of such matters. However, his doubts were dispelled by the following words.

“If you produce satisfactory results, your outings will be considered necessary expenses for that purpose.”

Permission for continued outings. Shirou, surprised by the conditional acceptance of what he had wanted, even if it meant threatening the executives of Sakashita Heavy Industry, eagerly latched onto the conversation.

“What should I do? ”

“Sending it now.”

Documents were sent to Shiro. As he looked at the top priority task listed, Shiro's expression became grim.

“...You want me to establish negotiation channels with Tsubaki, right? The one where the negotiator ended up decapitated and all the guards were wiped out, isn't it? ”

“That's correct. Despite the necessity, it was a tragic incident. We must repay their dedication.”

“...I'm not really cut out for negotiations like that.”

“The construction of that negotiation route refers to communication channels.”

“So if I act as an intermediary via the old-world, we can negotiate safely? But even through the old-world, those guys are still likely to come after us...”

“That risk is not a concern.”

“No, the risk of being killed is a concern.”

“It's not that. There's no problem. Don't consider it a problem. The fact that you're in danger of dying means that there's no need to consider it once you're outside without any protection.”

Shiro couldn't argue with that. If he didn't like it, he could just come back. That was what it meant.

“If you can establish negotiable communication, we will handle the negotiations ourselves. But it's up to you. It depends on your performance. The more significant results you achieve, the more expenses will be recognized.”

“...Got it. I'll give it a try.”

“Good. Oh, and just to make it clear. We won't stop searching for you. If you don't want to be brought back, produce results quickly.”

“I'll do my best. See you.”

Shiro achieved a favorable outcome considering his position as an escapee. While thinking so, Shiro ended the communication with a stern expression.

Alone in the room, Sugadome scrutinized his conversation with Shiro.

There was no sense of lies in Shiro's reactions. He was grateful for the luxurious lifestyle. He had no intention of defecting to the other major corporations. He would return once satisfied. These words could be considered sincere.

What did someone like that, who had taken such drastic measures as escaping from Sakashita Heavy Industry, want to do? Did he refuse the escort simply out of fear of being brought back?

Shiro, as an extremely skilled operative and a valuable asset of the company, was in a position to demand considerable recklessness from Sakashita Heavy Industry. However, why did he resort to escaping without any consultation, demands, or negotiations?

Sugadome delved deeper into these thoughts, pondering Shiro's intentions. And he voiced the words that had caught his attention during his conversation with Shiro.

“Sightseeing, huh? ”

It was evident that Shiro's purpose was not merely sightseeing. However, it was unlikely that he didn't understand the risk of lying to a Sakashita Heavy Industry executive. So, he intentionally used words that wouldn't be considered lies, such as metaphors, euphemisms, slang, or colloquialisms. What lay beneath those words?

Sugadome delved into further speculation. The content derived from scant information was surprisingly close to Shiro's true intentions, enough to astonish Shiro if he were to hear it.

Sugadome casually asked Shiro, who appeared in holographic form to report progress.

“How's the sightseeing going? ”

With just that simple question and Sugadome's gaze fixed on him, Shiro felt a slight unease and anxiety. He answered while averting his eyes slightly.

“...Oh, you know, just going around seeing stuff.”

“I see. I'd like you to return satisfied sooner rather than later.”

“Well, you see, there aren't many places here that satisfy me. Just wait a little longer.”

Shiro tried to laugh it off. Sugadome didn't point it out and lightly added a warning.

“I'm not rushing you, but you're using your freedom in exchange for your achievements so far. Don't think you have much time left.”

“I understand. It's impossible to achieve results so quickly.”

“I'm expecting good news in your next report.”

“Okay, then. See you.”

With a deliberately dissatisfied expression, Shiro ended the communication.

Sugadome murmured with a serious expression.

“Sightseeing isn't going well, is it? ”

It was still too early to mobilize all their forces to capture Shiro. Sugadome made that judgment.

Chapter 214: Confidential

Hikaru was working energetically again today. She wanted to vigorously promote the high-ranking hunter, Akira, like a company product. Dealing with numerous companies desiring the same, she continued negotiations, utilizing her talents to the fullest.

“...Yes, that's right! Akira raised his Hunter Rank to 55 by accepting that inter-city transport vehicle escort request. Despite being at 50 before the request, it only took one week, you know? ”

Hikaru's responsibility is to handle Akira until the acquisition of Akira's new equipment is completed. In order to repay the favor she received from Akira and to quickly step down from being Akira's handler, Hikaru is enthusiastically involved in challenging negotiations.

“Do I even need to explain how significant of an achievement this is? It's an unparalleled opportunity to switch such a high-ranking hunter to your company's products! I believe this is where you need to make your move, don't you think? ”

Although negotiations are tough, companies that are proactive are those who want to use Akira to promote their products. The difficulty lies in how much high-performance equipment can be provided by enticing them, and Hikaru is making various companies compete for favorable conditions.

“Inabe is also showing proactive support for the mentioned hunter. Similarly, Kiryou is granting special treatment to the extent of lending out new equipment under the guise of repair during the escort request, despite the previous equipment's repair costs being covered by Kiryou. It seems like Kiryou will be the choice again this time, but it's not confirmed. There's still a chance to turn things around.”

The sales representatives of the companies on the other end of the communication are eagerly listening to Hikaru's words. If they can

acquire high-ranking hunters as clients, it could lead to significant revenue. If they can make the hunters like their products and maintain continuous transactions, profits will increase exponentially. Sales representatives are putting their efforts into this.

However, they cannot endlessly compete for favorable conditions for this purpose. Beyond the discretion of the salesperson, they must seek their superior's decision. The higher the demanded conditions, the more the decision of those in higher positions is required.

And if they are forced to such conditions, unfortunately, withdrawal becomes inevitable, considering that. The hesitation is evident on the faces of the sales representatives.

It's Hikaru's job to create doubt and raise favorable conditions. There's no point in retreating. Hikaru, who discerns the opponent's hesitation, speaks with a slightly serious expression.

“...This is confidential, but I really want you to keep it to yourself. Actually, Akira is receiving additional rewards beyond the escort request you're aware of.”

“...What kind of rewards are those? ”

“I can't be specific. But it could potentially overshadow the current reward by a significant margin.”

“Even so...”

The sales representative's face shows increased suspicion and confusion. The credibility of vague information depends on the relationship with the other party. And Hikaru hasn't built that level of trust. In other words, Hikaru's words, at this point, are nothing but suspicious hints to inflate conditions for negotiation purposes.

Of course, Hikaru understands this. To increase suspicion, she deliberately kept something hidden, and she conveys it with an even more serious expression.

“...Please, keep this strictly confidential. Actually, the additional reward is from Sakashita Heavy Industry.”

Surprise appears on the face of the sales representative. Sakashita Heavy Industry. One of the five major corporations. That name shouldn't be mentioned lightly, almost like talking about a scam. Therefore, the lack of specifics isn't because the content is false, but rather to avoid touching upon Sakashita Heavy Industry' confidential matters. That concern reflects on their face.

They provided just enough information to make the sales representative judge. Feeling the response from the negotiating partner, Hikaru continues with a slightly remorseful expression, indicating she might have said too much.

“...I really can't say more than this. I also have my own position to consider.”

“With that additional reward, how far do you think his Hunter Rank will rise? Around 58... or perhaps 60? ”

“I can't say. Providing specific numbers might lead to various speculations. However, I can say that he was looking for equipment suitable for frontline deployment.”

In reality, Hikaru herself doesn't know how far Akira's Hunter Rank will rise. Negotiations are currently ongoing between Inabe and Sakashita Heavy Industry. There's no way to know.

Nevertheless, Hikaru makes the other party think that she knows something she can't reveal, under the guise of not knowing. Additionally, by mentioning Akira's desire for frontline equipment, she suggests the possibility that Akira's Hunter Rank might rise enough to obtain such items.

The sales representatives, dealing with numerous high-ranking hunters, cannot simply discard such an excellent opportunity to have

them use their company's products. Their subsequent decisions will align with what Hikaru desires.

“Understood. I'll discuss this with my superiors.”

“Thank you very much. Then, I'll take my leave.”

Hikaru bows deeply to the person displayed in augmented reality. Then, after ending the communication, she breathes a sigh of relief, feeling a significant response.

“...Alright. If this is the reaction, then it should be fine. Shall I move on to the next? ”

Afterward, Hikaru continues to share the confidential information with other companies. She receives positive reactions from all of them.

Taking a break after finishing her work, Hikaru is approached by a female colleague. During casual conversation over snacks, she hears an unexpected piece of news: that Kibayashi has taken a liking to her. She responds with a puzzled expression.

“What do you mean by that? ”

“I mean exactly what I said. But honestly, it was surprising. I knew you were ambitious, but I didn't expect you to accept Kibayashi's invitation to that extent. Didn't you ever think about what would happen if you failed? I was confident that I would succeed, but did I underestimate you? Well, you did succeed, and it seems like I may have underestimated you? ”

Hikaru understands what she's saying. Kibayashi's notorious reputation. He offers extreme gambles, with either great success or great failure for those seeking advancement opportunities. Hikaru rode that gamble to a successful outcome. Thus, she gained Kibayashi's favor. She understands this interpretation.

However, Hikaru has no recognition of herself engaging in such behavior. She denies it, bewildered.

“Wait a minute. Are you talking about that thing with Kibayashi? I didn't accept any such invitation.”

“There's no need to hide it. You won, didn't you? If you lost, it'd be one thing, but since you won, there's no harm in admitting it. And now, you've even got Kibayashi's favorite hunter as your responsibility, right? Your promotion seems assured now. It's quite something. If you become my boss, I'll rely on you.”

“No, it's really not like that. I'll be relieved of Akira's responsibility once I finish the equipment acquisition I'm currently handling. Inabe has informed me of that.”

The female colleague initially brushed off Hikaru's explanation, but when Hikaru denied it again, and even brought up Inabe's name, she reconsidered. Believing Hikaru's words, she asks with a puzzled expression.

“Is that so? That's odd. But there haven't been any talks about selecting your successor... or is it just that the information hasn't reached me? Hmm...”

Hearing that, Hikaru also wears a perplexed expression. He's not just any hunter. The successor is Hikaru's replacement. It will take time and careful consideration to make the transition. Even from Hikaru's perspective, it seemed odd that the process of selecting a successor hadn't already begun.

The fact that there's no discussion about it means that she will continue to be Akira's replacement. It was because her colleagues also thought so that she agreed to Kibayashi's offer. But now she's stepping down from being Akira's replacement. It doesn't add up. Something is off. Hikaru thinks so, feeling increasingly uneasy.

“Sorry, I have something to attend to. I'll excuse myself.”

“Oh, uh, yeah. See you later.”

Hikaru, parting ways with his colleague, contacts Kibayashi once she's alone. She gets through immediately.

“Hikaru, huh. What's wrong? Ah, I'm sorry about the other day. But overcoming that situation was truly remarkable. If it's Hikaru, I believe you can do it too...”

Hikaru interrupts Kibayashi's words with a serious tone.

“Kibayashi-san. I'd like to talk to you in person. Do you have some time? ”

“Talk? What's up? Sorry, but I'm busy too. I know it's an important conversation, but can't we switch to a secure line to talk? ”

Kibayashi seemed unenthusiastic. Hikaru restrains himself from shouting as she mutters, trying to avoid attracting attention.

“Even though I won the bet, can't I have my selfish demands met to that extent? ”

Then Kibayashi's attitude changes. A voice returns, implying an extremely cheerful, delighted smile.

“Well, if you put it that way, I can't refuse. Alright, let's meet. What about your schedule? ”

“I'm available right now.”

“Then let's meet in the lobby of Kugama building in 30 minutes.”

“Looking forward to it. See you then.”

After ending the call, Hikaru murmurs desperately, trying not to scream.

“That bastard...! ”

The gamble was offered to her without her knowledge. Understanding this, Hikaru clenches her teeth with a stern expression.

Hikaru waits for Kibayashi at the agreed meeting place. She has regained her composure to the extent that she doesn't need to clench her teeth tightly, but her expression still shows strong frustration.

Kibayashi arrives on time. His expression is somewhat gleeful, indicating that his attitude during their previous communication regarding the inter-city transport vehicle was purely an act.

He doesn't bother hiding it. Seeing Kibayashi's attitude, Hikaru's frustration intensifies further. Kibayashi, in turn, seems delighted by Hikaru's demeanor.

“You're here. Hikaru. So, what's the talk about? ”

“...But before that, can I punch you once? ”

“Fine by me.”

Hikaru swings at Kibayashi. However, the blow, fueled by anger and thrown with reckless by an amateur within the protective walls, fails to connect with Kibayashi, who frequents the wasteland for his hobbies and bad habits. He easily deflects it with one hand.

“Now, where are we talking? Is here alright? I haven't heard what we're talking about yet, but it'd be better to discuss it in an appropriate place, right? ”

“I was on the verge of dying, you know? ”

“Glad you didn't. ”

Despite glaring and even striking, Kibayashi remained completely unfazed. Faced with his seemingly indifferent attitude, Hikaru let out a heavy sigh and lowered her fist. Then, with a serious expression, she spoke.

“Will you tell me anything if it's the right place? ”

Kibayashi responds with a meaningful tone.

“I can't say anything and everything, but it seems the winner of the bet is asserting that right. If it's the right place, I might even tell you some pretty risky stuff. After all, that's why I bothered to come.”

“I see. Then please let Kibayashi-san decide the appropriate place.”

At this, Kibayashi responds meaningfully.

“Is that okay? ”

To discuss sensitive information, an appropriate setting is necessary. Even if it's the same topic, what can be said differs significantly between a roadside and a sealed room.

Entrusting the choice of that setting to Kibayashi also means leaving it to him how much to disclose about what. There was a risk that merely knowing certain information could endanger one's life.

Understanding this, Hikaru responds, “That's fine. I leave it to you.”

Already, Hikaru knows very dangerous information: that city officials are planning to collaborate with hunters to eliminate other officials, including fatalities. Strictly speaking, she learned this from Kibayashi.

If that's the case, what good would it do to hesitate now? Hikaru thinks she must accurately assess her situation and, despite the danger, first know this information to overcome the current situation

based on it. With this in mind, Hikaru resolves herself and dares to step forward.

Kibayashi's smile deepens at Hikaru's attitude, which may seem reckless and unreasonable.

“I see. Then, this way.”

Hikaru tried to follow Kibayashi, who was leading the way. But she stopped inadvertently.

Thinking she would be guided to a highly confidential location, Hikaru had expected to go to somewhere like a meeting room within the walls, where measures against information leakage had been taken. However, what Kibayashi was heading towards was the lower section, outside the walls.

Originally, Hikaru didn't trust the security outside the walls enough to go to Shizuka's shop without an escort. Furthermore, even in the security-maintained interior of the inter-city transport vehicles, where security measures were supposed to be as strict as within the city's walls, she had experienced dangerously close calls. Because of those experiences, Hikaru had a slight trauma about going outside the walls.

Kibayashi teased Hikaru, who had stopped in her tracks.

“What's wrong? Come this way. If you're scared... do you want to stop? ”

Kibayashi didn't find Hikaru's attitude strange. It was a common story for those who had lived safely within the walls to venture out into the wasteland lightly, only to suffer trauma and subsequently become pathologically reclusive inside the walls.

Still, despite cutting a big fuss earlier, Hikaru thought it would be unacceptable to back down here. He watched Hikaru's reaction without revealing his inner thoughts.



And Hikaru responded.

“I'll go.”

She didn't go without hesitation. But with a will to overcome that fear, surpassing her trepidation, Hikaru moved forward without retreat. Kibayashi seemed very amused.

The place Kibayashi guided Hikaru to was a restaurant in a lower section relatively close to the walls. It was a decently high-class establishment, but not even a private room was available. Hikaru couldn't imagine this being the place to discuss classified information.

“Kibayashi-san. Are we really going to talk here? ”

“That's right. Sometimes a place like this is more suitable than a meeting room within the walls. Ah, of course, while using a secure line. Here, use this.”

Kibayashi sent the connection code for the secure line. Hikaru looked a little puzzled but connected it as instructed.

『... This isn't the code for Kugamayama City, is it? 』

『 Of course not. If we used the city's code, the content would be easily intercepted by the city, right? What we're about to discuss is that kind of matter. But you'll also use it as a dummy.』

Hikaru connected with Kibayashi, using the city's code. Separate documents were sent through the city's secure line and the secure line provided by Kibayashi.

『Well, I understand you probably want to know a lot of things, but it would be quicker if I explained things first. You can ask detailed questions later.』

“Oh, do you want me to ask you something? ”

『Understood. Go ahead, please.』

“Yes, let's start.”

Transmission through the air. The city's secure line. Another secure line. Using all of these, Hikaru and Kibayashi's secret conversation began.

Hikaru finished listening to Kibayashi's explanation. Some of the information she already knew or had anticipated, but by gaining more detailed information, she deepened her understanding of the situation.

The background of the power struggle between the two major factions that ruled the slum districts. The falsification of the origin of the artifacts by Inabe. The power struggle between Inabe and Udajima mediated by Akira and Katsuya. From there, Hikaru understood the plan to eliminate and assassinate Udajima by Akira and Inabe, not as vague speculation but as a situation based on high-precision information.

Also, although she didn't know, by significantly raising Akira's Hunter rank, she realized that she had significantly contributed to the plans of the two. Because of that, she also understood that she would likely be viewed with hostility by Udajima.

And she understood the misunderstanding she was receiving from her colleagues. She had been under the impression that she had been manipulated by Inabe, tempted by advancement, to participate in

Kibayashi's gamble, then had taken over Akira's responsibilities from Kibayashi, and had received the escort request for inter-city transport vehicles for Akira. And if that was what was believed, then she could understand that attitude.

『Kibayashi-san. When you told me about escorting inter-city transport vehicles that time, was it just to prompt me to get Akira to accept that escort request? That's it? 』

『Yeah, that's it. I mean, even though I was prompted to get Akira to accept the escort request for inter-city transport vehicles, it was you who chose that vehicle, right? 』

『Well, yes, but...』

『Even if I were to assume, hypothetically, that I knew you well enough to predict you would choose that vehicle, it would be impossible to arrange for Uda-jima to board it. After all, even I can't interfere with the plans of the city's executives.』

The pieces of the story fit together. While Hikaru thought so, it was difficult for her to accept it with the attitude of the person in front of her. But she accepted it with the following words.

『At that time, I said I didn't intend to create such a situation, but it was just difficult to contain my laughter. What I said wasn't a lie.』

『Is that so? 』

Hikaru said sarcastically to Kibayashi, who seemed delighted. Then she sighed softly and continued.

『So, Uda-jima wasn't actually on that vehicle. Because I believed that story, I went through so much trouble...』

Hikaru, who showed her feelings on her face due to being deceived by false information, was lightly spoken to by Kibayashi.

『Udajima was on it. Well, maybe not on the way back, but almost certainly on the way there. So don't regret it.』

『...Huh? 』

『That's why I sent out that information to you, even if it meant leaving you behind to take care of Akira.』

Additional documents were sent from Kibayashi. Hikaru, surprised after reading them, felt perplexed. If the information contained was correct, Udajima had booked a separate room under a different name in the same vehicle.

『What do you mean? They should've known in advance if Akira was on board...』

『Who knows? We couldn't investigate that far. But considering they were actually on board, they must have had a reason to risk encountering Akira, whether by chance or being attacked, even with the knowledge of it happening.』

Kibayashi also looked genuinely puzzled, but since it was a matter of little importance to him, he switched gears and continued the conversation.

『Well, personally, I wouldn't say I'd be bored by the prospect of Akira attacking Udajima on board or vice versa. Whether he gets killed by the vehicle's security or turns the tables, it seems like it would just end there. To prevent such uninteresting situations, I had you work hard.』

The real reason Kibayashi provided Akira's information to Hikaru at that time was for such entertainment, a hobby, and a shallow

motivation. Hikaru looked disgusted by those thoughts, while Kibayashi grinned gleefully.

『And you really did a great job. I couldn't stop laughing. Just the fight with the giant insect on the way there was amazing enough, but then to fight off attackers targeting Sakashita Heavy Industry' old-world connectors, and to win! I didn't expect you to control Akira to that extent! 』

In contrast to Kibayashi's laughter, Hikaru showed a somewhat weary expression. It closely resembled his reaction when Akira told him a similar story involving Kibayashi.

『You seemed to think I underestimated your abilities and felt dissatisfied, but I apologize! You were right! Keep entertaining me with Akira in the future. I'm counting on you, okay? 』

Facing Hikaru with genuine anticipation, Kibayashi made her involuntarily twist her face in disgust.

『I decline. I'm stepping down as Akira's handler.』

『Ah, that's not possible.』

『Huh? 』

『Hikaru. Inabe wouldn't let go of someone who can manage Akira like you.』

Hikaru's face showed bewilderment at the unexpected reply.

『No, I actually obtained permission from Inabe-san to step down after acquiring Akira's new equipment...』

『Did you believe that? 』

『Believe that...? 』

As Hikaru grew more perplexed, Kibayashi cheerfully interjected.

『Alright. Let me explain that part thoroughly for you as well. I like you, so I'll give you special treatment.』

Like he did to Akira before, Kibayashi began explaining with a smile.

Sakashita Heavy Industry rewarded Akira for the Erde incident, but to be precise, they rewarded both Akira and Hikaru. Akira was rewarded for defeating Erde. And Hikaru was compensated for being involuntarily used as a decoy to protect the company's old-world connectors.

Hikaru was surprised to hear this when she read the documents.

『Th-that's... I didn't know about this.』

『Do you think that kind of information would be promptly and politely given to you? You're naive. To ensure such information reaches you, you should establish your own information network.』

Despite being a member of the Wide Area Management Department, Hikaru was ultimately just a lower-level employee. She didn't have an information network that could grasp the movements of the upper echelons of the city.

Pointing out her naivety, Kibayashi continued.

Regarding Hikaru's reward, although it couldn't be promptly conveyed to her personally, it would eventually be disclosed to her. Inabe utilized this time gap.

While money and Hunter rank constituted Akira's reward, Hikaru, as a city employee, received a reward in the form of an improved position within the organization. In other words, a promotion. On the flip side, being removed from the assignment of a high-ranking Hunter generally equated to a demotion.

From Sakashita Heavy Industry' perspective, if the one who was supposed to receive the reward ended up not only not getting promoted but also being demoted, it wouldn't be surprising if they felt that the city was disrespecting them.

Using this as a pretext, Inabe persuaded Hikaru to stay. After explaining this to Hikaru following the procurement of Akira's new equipment, Inabe expressed apologies for not being able to go against Sakashita Heavy Industry' request and instructed Hikaru to continue handling Akira.

There was no doubt it would turn out that way. Kibayashi asserted as much.

Hearing this, Hikaru put her head in her hands. There were no flaws in Kibayashi's explanation, and even if she thought it over herself, the probability of it happening was extremely high.

『...T-this, what should I do... Ah! If Kibayashi-san were to take over as Akira's handler instead...』

『 Overturning personnel matters related to Sakashita Heavy Industry is beyond me. It's beyond Inabe as well. That's why it becomes a good excuse.』

Hikaru's immediate idea was promptly crushed, and she hung her head. The anxiety of being dragged into such a commotion again because of continuing as Akira's handler was clearly written all over her face.

To Hikaru, Kibayashi smiled and said.

『Shall I figure something out? 』

“Can you really figure something out!?”

Hikaru eagerly took Kibayashi's offer, almost instinctively voicing her response rather than communicating through the device.

“Yeah. But there are conditions.”

Prompted in this manner, Hikaru recalled that the man in front of her was a person of very dubious character, a figure with such a bad reputation. Nonetheless, she couldn't ignore the lifeline extended to her.

“W-What is it...?”

“Let me assist in acquiring Akira's new equipment.”

Hikaru couldn't help but look puzzled.

“...What are you planning?”

“Don't say things that make me sound bad. I just want Akira to get the best equipment possible. I'm favoring him, you know. I just want to help him get high-performance gear. Of course, the better his equipment, the more likely it is for big trouble to happen, and I won't deny that I'll enjoy it. So, what do you say?”

There was no need for Hikaru to respond.

Chapter 215: Side Job of the Wicked Woman

In a luxurious hotel room located in a lower section of the city, Carol is once again engaged in her side job today. Her client is a hunter named Doras. His hunter rank is 63. He is undoubtedly a high-ranking hunter.

High-ranking hunters, whose earnings are on a different scale compared to regular hunters, naturally have vastly different payment capabilities. They possess the financial means to afford rooms costing tens of thousands of Aurum per night for extended periods without any difficulty.

However, as the time for payment arrives after their business is concluded, Doras's expression is no different from that of the many hunters Carol has dealt with before, despite his high rank and the exorbitant fees.

“...Hey, isn't this too high? ”

The initial fee was 10,000 Aurum. While it would have been fine to offer her services for free, engaging in this kind of business makes offering it for free somewhat uncomfortable. Thus, as payment, she would be satisfied if he generously treated her. Doras had casually accepted Carol's invitation after meeting her at a tavern and enjoying a pleasant conversation.

However, in that first encounter, the game was somewhat settled. Although Doras, as a high-ranking hunter, had received numerous invitations and was accustomed to womanizing, his experience with Carol was so remarkable that it overshadowed everything he had experienced before, and he became entranced. He arranged to meet again and continued the relationship from there.

And that's when she took advantage. The fee, which was initially a mere 10,000 Aurum, increased with each subsequent meeting. And not just gradually, but exponentially.

Merely treating her to drinks soon became insufficient. Lavish meals were also no longer enough. Despite repeated meetings, even the cost of staying at a luxury hotel could no longer be offset. And now, Doras, who could casually handle around 1 million Aurum, was struggling to make payments.

It's definitely too high. Can you lower it? Carol laughed off the familiar complaint she had heard many times from the clients she had dealt with up until now.

“If you don't like it, you don't have to pay, you know? I can't force you to pay me, and for the last time, I'll let it slide,” she adds with a smirk.

“...I didn't say I wouldn't pay.”

If he doesn't pay, their relationship will end. He thinks it's a shame.

Even with a clear head after their encounter and realizing it's too expensive, knowing that the price will increase even more next time, he still can't bring himself to end the relationship.

Doras is deeply entangled with the wicked woman who provides inexplicably stimulating moments, despite the exorbitant surcharges that make him grimace.

The wicked woman smiles as she speaks.

“Yes. Well then, today... I'll waive the remainder and make it 2 billion Aurum.”

“2 billion...”

2 billion Aurum for one night. Although Doras is a high-ranking hunter, paying such an amount for a single night is simply impossible. Moreover, Carol always demands full payment upfront, exacerbating the difficulty of payment.

In reality, given the circumstances, their relationship should have already collapsed. However, it continued. Doras decides to employ the same method he has used before to keep the relationship going.

“...Alright. In that case... start with this.”

Doras sends data to Carol's information terminal. It's a list of valuable information that only high-ranking hunters would know.

Although Carol demands exorbitant sums as payment for indulging in her body, she only receives a portion of it in Aurum. As long as the payment corresponds to the invoiced amount, she accepts non-monetary forms of payment.

So Doras assists Carol as a mapmaker in exploring the Second Inner Sector of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin together, as part of his payment. He helps increase her hunter rank and buys powerful equipment restricted by hunter rank for her.

Employing a high-ranking hunter as exclusive protection could cost tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions. Normally, such payment would settle the debt to a woman one spent the night with.

However, Carol's payment knows no bounds. Unable to offset the fee even with a slightly increased escort fee, Doras decides to provide Carol with hard-to-obtain information to make up for it.

The value of information is ambiguous. Even if the investigation cost billions of Aurum, the information's content might not necessarily be worth that much. It might not even be worth a single Aurum. Conversely, it could be invaluable to someone else.

In other words, if one can convince the other party of the value of the information, its price can be raised as high as desired. Doras sells information to Carol, a lower-ranked hunter, at a high price, using information that only high-ranking hunters like himself would know.

From the information Carol is presented with, she selects recent movements of high-ranking hunters and the latest maps of the deep sections of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. When the total reaches about 400 million Aurum, she finds something intriguing among the available information.

“...What's this? ”

Doras wears a meaningful expression. It's a trick to inflate the price of the information.

“That? That's expensive. Yeah, it's about 1 billion.”

“Oh? 1 billion. Sounds interesting. Tell me about it.”

Despite understanding the other's trick, Carol smiles cheerfully, as if nothing is amiss, beneath her enticing smile that lures in clients.

The information provided states that Sakashita Heavy Industry is fervently searching for old-world connectors in the Kugamayama region.

After reviewing the provided documents, Carol concludes that the content is sufficiently credible. She then directs a slightly skeptical smile at Doras.

“Hmm. I'm not questioning the content, but is this true? I understand that old-world connectors are valuable, but for a company like Sakashita Heavy Industry, wouldn't they have numerous former connectors already? Would they be so fervently searching? Could it be a cover for something else? ”

Even when doubted, Doras remains unshaken.

“Well, it's not surprising to think that way. But I don't believe it's a cover-up. You see, there's talk that Sakashita Heavy Industry might

be planning to resume the full conquest of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. There are many hunters who recently came to Kugamayama City with expectations in that regard.”

There's a rumor going around that a senior executive from Sakashita Heavy Industry is in Kugamayama City on a secret mission. Some time ago, a convoy of inter-city transport vehicles was subjected to a large-scale attack, and there are rumors that the vehicles were targeted because they were loaded with crucial supplies needed to conquer the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

Even for staunch Nationalist, it's hard to imagine attacking a convoy of inter-city transport vehicles. Conversely, that implies there must have been a significant reason behind it. It's highly likely that Sakashita Heavy Industry is considering resuming the conquest of the ruins. Doras expressed this opinion. In response, Carol said,

“Hmm. So, is there a possibility that Sakashita Heavy Industry will embark on a large-scale conquest of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin like they did 50 years ago? But is there any connection between that and Sakashita Heavy Industry actively searching for Old-World Connectors? ”

“If you consider that premise, various possibilities come to mind. You know, there's talk of hunters suddenly dying in the ruins, right? There's that thing where people who awakened as Old-World Connectors halfway through receive an overload of data from the ruins and end up brain-dead due to overload.”

“I see. And then? ”

“Well, the talk of those who died is just more noticeable, but apparently there are quite a few who manage not to die. Well, when I say quite a few, it's not like there are a lot, but they seem to exist if you look for them.”

“Hmm. So what's your point? ”

Seeing Carol's attitude urging him to come to a conclusion, Doras continued the conversation.

“So, you see? Among those who survived, there are some who fully awakened as Old-World Connectors, while others became completely useless. Of course, there are also those who remain halfway awakened, but among them, there are stories of people whose brains have been imprinted with connection information to the ruins.”

Due to the overload that could lead to brain death, malfunctions occur in the brain's communication function, and the individual's communication ability decreases to the point where they cannot be called Old-World Connectors. However, this malfunction sometimes works in reverse, allowing them to break through the ruins' security with a kind of bug.

Such individuals are said to be able to obtain information that even excellent Old-World Connectors cannot obtain, limited to specific ruins, namely those ruins where they almost died. Doras speculated that the Old-World Connectors Sakashita Heavy Industry is searching for might be such individuals.

“The story about skilled cartographers being mistaken for Old-World Connectors probably spread from similar backgrounds. Maps of areas within the ruins, where no one should have reached, are secretly being sold for some reason. It seems they're not fake. So that's one possible answer to how those maps were made.”

Carol listened with keen interest to Doras's story and expressed optimistic speculation.

“I see. So, Sakashita Heavy Industry is desperate to obtain accurate maps of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin for complete conquest. For that purpose, they've been ordering Kugamayama City to send in many hunters to the ruins. And finally, they've caught signs of an Old-World Connector with connection information to the ruins, right? ”

“Probably. But I don't think that's all. They're probably also searching for individuals with connection information to other ruins.”

“Why is that? ”

“Wouldn't it be good to have multiple routes to the deepest part of the ruins? To increase realistic progression routes, they're probably also searching for connection information to other ruins.”

It's believed that the huge underground tunnel in the Yonozuka Station Ruin leads to the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Currently, it's sealed off by Kugamayama City to prevent monsters from overflowing into the wasteland, but Sakashita Heavy Industry could open it.

Rather than using the rear communication lines where extension work is still ongoing to reach the deepest part of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, it might be safer to use that underground tunnel.

Additionally, there's a possibility that similar underground tunnels exist in other ruins. The Mihazono District Ruin have factory districts producing large quantities of goods. They might be using underground tunnels for transportation. There were likely also transportation systems for easy access to other cities in the city districts.

There's a good chance that similar facilities exist in other ruins or undiscovered ruins. Presumably, Sakashita Heavy Industry intends to investigate all of them to the best of their ability. That's probably why they're so diligently searching for Old-World Connectors in the Kugamayama region. Doras concluded this.

After hearing the story, Carol smiled inwardly.

“That was quite an interesting story. Well then, considering the content... including additional information and Sakashita Heavy

Industry-related information... let's make it worth 1.4 billion Aurums.”

“Oh? Alright. Just 200 million more. Well then, next...”

With the value estimated at 1 billion Aurums, and then increased to 1.4 billion Aurums, Doras felt pleased. However, his expression twisted as the conversation continued.

“So, pay the remaining 200 million in Aurums.”

“Uh...”

Doras couldn't help but voice his dissatisfaction. Carol, while laughing, also gave him a slightly exasperated look.

“Listen, even though I allow payments other than Aurums, at least pay some in Aurums. 200 million would only be 1/10th of the total payment, right? ”

“Well, that's true, but...”

Compared to earning 200 million Aurums in one night, it was indeed cheap, but it was still an outrageously high amount by conventional standards. Doras, accustomed to paying fees with work or information despite being a high-ranking hunter with astronomical earnings, couldn't consider it cheap. Then Carol smiles, pointing to her own body invitingly.

“You know, I've poured a lot of money into this body. Maintaining it costs a fortune, you know? But you've surely confirmed its value by thoroughly enjoying my body, haven't you? Could you chip in a bit, considering how much you've enjoyed it? ”

Doras smiled wryly.

“Is 200 million not enough to maintain that body? Well, I guess it's only fair. Alright.”

Although he didn't know how much was invested in that body, if it required that much maintenance, it was certainly different from just any woman. Thinking so, Doras transferred 200 million Aurums to Carol's account.

“Thanks. Well, you did have a woman other than for romantic affairs. Payment must be made.”

Carol, dressing herself, seemed to imply she had completed her task. It was an augmented suit restricted by Hunter Rank, designed for high-ranking hunters. With its sharp design reminiscent of the old-world, it would make those unaccustomed to it hesitate to wear it despite its performance, but Carol had been wearing such designs of augmented suits without any concern. With her familiar atmosphere, she appeared to even female hunters from the eastern territories.

This was where it all began, lured in by that atmosphere. While thinking about such things, Doras joked lightly.

“A romantic affair, huh... Does that mean you're bargaining for a lower price by charming me? ”

“It's not like that. Well, it's true I don't take money from lovers.”

“Do you have one? A lover? ”

“No.”

“Hmm...”

Doras responded with a seemingly disinterested reply. However, seeing through Doras's inner thoughts from his tone, Carol smiled enchantingly as she spoke.

“Sorry, but I'm not into loose-tongued men.”

“That's harsh.”

Doras, who sold information instead of money, was indeed somewhat of a loose-tongued man in a sense. However, it was Carol who was causing him trouble by making him do such things.

Being told by the person herself that she didn't like loose-tongued men, Doras could only smile wryly.

With a smile, Carol said,

“Well then, I'll be off. Call me again sometime. Well, I'd like to say 3 billion next time... but since you paid me 200 million in Aurums, let's make it 2.5 billion next time.”

“You're really going to raise it, huh? If it goes up that much, I might come to my senses and never call again, you know? ”

“See you later.”

Make sure he'll call her again. With those words and a smile on her face, Carol left..

Alone, Doras sighed heavily on the bed.

“I really fell for a wicked woman, didn't I? ”

Hunters who go bankrupt because they pour money into women are ultimately just second-rate, unable to earn more than that. That's what Doras had thought, but recently, he had begun to wonder if he should reconsider that belief.

He was being treated well. Despite knowing that, Doras couldn't bring himself to cut ties with Carol.

Carol was that kind of wicked woman.

While sitting on her bed, Carol had a very stern expression. After returning home, Carol remained like that for a while. The composure she had when she was with Doras was nowhere to be seen on her face. Strong anxiety was evident, mingled with even stronger fear.

“This is bad.”

Optimism, hopes, and desires, once crushed and overwhelmed by imagining the worst possible scenario, had already been obliterated. Trying to escape from the imaginable future, Carol racked her brains desperately for solutions.



After returning to the city of Kugamayama, Akira continued his days of studying and training at home. Today, he was once again sparring with Alpha in the garage.

After intense battles aboard inter-city transport vehicles, Akira had grown even stronger. Though it had only been about a week, the harsh and intense experiences had intensely trained Akira's mind and body. He dashed through despairing death traps, slipped through countless perilous situations, and seized even the slightest chance of victory without fail. This sharpened his almost godlike sense of combat, a strength that couldn't be attained just by wearing high-performance augmented suits. It was something Akira gained from overcoming intense battles.

And then Alpha's kick landed on Akira. The verdict: instant death. Akira's head was spectacularly blown off, and he collapsed to the floor.

Of course, this was just training. That headless corpse was merely a augmented vision representation, just a simulation of what would have happened in reality.

Seeing his own unlucky defeat, Akira let out a sigh.

“Alpha, how many seconds did I last this time? ”

『About five seconds.』

“Five seconds, huh... That's not bad for me... but I guess I shouldn't get too complacent.”

『It's not bad at all? But in real combat, dying even after five seconds isn't acceptable.』

“Yeah...”

While the actual elapsed time was just five seconds, it was five seconds under the manipulation of subjective time perception. Despite feeling exhausted from the short combat, Akira managed to catch his breath firmly.

“...Alright. Alpha, let's go again.”

Once again, Akira faced off against Alpha, maintaining a bit of distance.

『Akira, let's begin. Five, four, three...』

Although Alpha fought bare-handed last time, the weapon used changed each time. Various guns and blades were used, and sometimes Akira would even fight against ten opponents at once. In each scenario, Alpha's overall strength was adjusted to be on par with Erde's.

Akira faced off against Alpha or the multiple Alphas without any support. It was obviously a losing battle, turning into a fight to see how long he could survive. And managing to survive for five seconds was considered a decent result.

Survive, find a way to counterattack, counter, and win. Akira was stumbling at the first step of that process. The road ahead was long.

With his initial LEO multi-function rifle hanging limply in both hands, Akira carefully observed Alpha.

(...Another bare-handed fight, huh. Last time, trying to counterattack recklessly was a mistake. Alright. This time, I'll initiate the attack while keeping my distance.)

Alpha, set to be as strong as Erde, couldn't be defeated easily with just gunfire. However, since the setting didn't include dispersed particle effects, there was no high-speed filtering effect. Considering this, Akira thought he might be able to counterattack. Taking into account his previous failed attempt, he waited for the signal to start the fight.

『...Two, one, Zelos.』

And just after the signal to start, before Akira could aim his gun at Alpha, he was shot in the forehead and died instantly. A clean hole appeared in his head as he collapsed to the floor.

Alpha wasn't supposed to have a gun. Surprised by this, Akira saw Alpha move its hand as if to show him something. Though it appeared that it was holding nothing, the gun was added to the image displayed in its hand.

Understanding this, Akira spoke up.

“...Hey, Alpha, was that really necessary? ”

『 It was. I even sent you data to help you detect it with your extended senses. And even though I gave you five seconds to react, you still didn't notice it. That's why you died. That's all there is to it. It's a good thing this wasn't real combat, right? 』

Having to deal with opponents as strong as Erde resorting to such tricks was easy to condemn, but no matter how loudly one criticized,

the enemies would still use them. To avoid being killed by such tricks, one had to detect them and deal with them firmly.

When fighting against opponents with optical camouflage arms aboard inter-city transport vehicles, Alpha had detected them for him. But when he couldn't rely on Alpha's support, he had to detect them himself. If he failed, he would die in real combat. He had to become capable of doing so. Akira realized this and scolded himself, shifting his focus.

“Got it. Let's go again.”

Despite the instant defeats, Akira wasn't tired. He immediately moved on to the next round.

『This time, I'll make the gun more obvious for you.』

Large guns appeared in Alpha's hands. Akira thought they were indeed more noticeable, seeing their long barrels and prominent muzzles.

But in the next moment, Alpha multiplied into ten and surrounded Akira. Each of them held the same gun in both hands.

『Let's begin. Five, four, three...』

With the forces divided among ten Alphas, the strength of each individual Alpha was less than a tenth. Still, if Akira couldn't anticipate the trajectories of the twenty guns held by the ten Alphas, he would be riddled with holes.

Using his extended senses through information collection devices, Akira perceived the positions of each Alpha surrounding him and the angles of their gun muzzles. He concentrated to sharpen his awareness, waiting for the moment when all the firing lines pointing downward converged on him.

Manipulating his subjective perception of time and the resolution of his conscious reality to the limit, time flowed extremely slowly, and in a world where everything except him and the Alphas turned white, Akira focused intensely, awaiting that moment.

『...Two, one, Zelos.』

Countless bullets flew in the augmented reality. In reality, it would have been a barrage that would have obliterated the garage and his home in an instant. And when it subsided, Akira lay on the floor riddled with holes. He survived for two seconds. He defeated one of the Alphas. Considering the disparity in strength, it was a satisfactory outcome.

Still, Akira muttered dissatisfiedly.

“...Still not enough.”

Alpha lifted Akira, who was lying on the ground, by the back of his neck. Strictly speaking, he manipulated his augmented suit to do so. Although his feet were off the ground and he was floating slightly, with a augmented suit capable of generating a force field platform in mid-air, it was possible. Then, Alpha smiled, meeting Akira's gaze.

『Indeed, you still have a long way to go. But you managed to defeat one person, so it wasn't bad, right? 』

“Well, I guess.”

Akira smiled wryly as he stood up from the floor. Although he hadn't reached a passing grade, he decided to take the evaluation as promising and stay positive.

『Akira seems quite tired now. Shall we take it easy from here on? 』

“Got it.”

In actual combat, one would continue by consuming a large amount of medicine, but this was just training. Instead of intense training akin to running through a death zone, he kept the simulated battle at a level where he could continue with a light break, thanks to the augmented suits capable of generating scaffolding force fields in mid-air.

The setting for Alpha this time was to be as strong as Akira, who didn't use either time manipulation or reality resolution manipulation. Yet, Akira and the others were engaged in high-speed combat that would be imperceptible to ordinary people. Amid victories and defeats, they conversed while engaging in combat.

“Nevertheless, it's a bit disappointing that I couldn't join Elena and the others in the end.”

He would soon acquire significantly powerful new equipment after waiting for a while. With rewards from escort requests for inter-city transport vehicles, he weren't in immediate need of money. There was no urgent reason to immediately resume his hunter activities.

Despite that, since Akira had returned to the Kugamayama City, he had intended to join Elena and the others in thinning out tasks as a team. However, when he conveyed that intention to Elena, she insisted that since Akira had just finished a fierce battle, he should rest properly.

Alpha lightly said to Akira, who was disappointed about it.

『 If you're so disappointed, you could have forcefully joined them. After all, that team belongs to Akira, so I think Akira had the right to decide whether to join midway or not? 』

“Well, yeah, but... if I stubbornly insisted, Shizuka-san would have scolded me for not resting...”

With that said, Akira had no choice but to back down. Furthermore, even Kurosawa, who was in charge of the team, gently declined

Akira's sudden participation, stating that it would cause problems if someone as strong as Akira joined abruptly. Additionally, Akira was informed that the team was planning to disband soon.

As the major circulation was coming to an end, so were the thinning out tasks. Furthermore, this team was formed by Hikaru to allow Akira to produce results. Once that reason was lost, there was little point in continuing the team's existence.

Of course, if Akira and the others wanted to continue the team on their own initiative, there was no problem at all. However, even if they continued, there would be no massive support from Kugamayama City as before. Hikaru, who wanted to step down from his role, had already finished the post-processing.

For these reasons, Akira decided to spend the time until he acquired new equipment on training and studying.

『Akira really can't stand up to Shizuka, huh? 』

“Well, that's fine. I owe her a lot, after all... Alright! ”

As they continued chatting, the shooting game resumed, and this time Akira emerged victorious. Alpha, who had been hit multiple times, collapsed to the floor with a hole in her forehead pierced through the force field barrier. However, unlike when Akira lost, there was no scene of a corpse lying there; Alpha immediately stood in front of Akira unharmed.

『You've prevented a three-game losing streak. Shall we move on to blade combat next? 』

“Got it.”

Akira holstered his gun, and a blade appeared in his empty hand. Taking hold of it, he assumed a stance. Alpha also replaced his gun with a blade.

『Let's begin. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0』

At the signal to start, Akira and Alpha both closed the distance between them and vigorously swung their augmented reality blades.

Their long sword blades clashed, and the sensation transmitted to Akira through Alpha's augmented suit manipulation made it feel as if the blade was actually there.

Akira, having been repelled by the impact, immediately regained his posture. Then, he leaped to attack Alpha from above. The notion that jumping easily would only result in moving through inertia in mid-air didn't apply to those who could create a foothold in the air. For those who could only fight on the ground, the position and stance from which the blades were swung seemed extremely bizarre.

Alpha parried the blow with his own blade. Then, deliberately generating a strong shock conversion light as a dazzling maneuver, he attacked Akira.

However, despite temporarily losing sight due to the strong light, Akira grasped Alpha's movements through sensory equipment and evaded the oncoming blade, slipping underneath, and counterattacked.

The intense back-and-forth continued as usual. Striking, dodging, defending, and counterattacking. Amidst the high-speed combat, they continued their conversation.

“Oh, right. Alpha. I plan to continue training without going to the ruins until I acquire the new equipment, but what are your plans after that?”

『 I intend to go to the Second Inner Sector of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.』

“There, huh...”

Akira had been to the Second Inner Sector before. However, he had half-heartedly retreated due to the overwhelming strength of the monsters. It happened near the boundary with the First Inner Sector. In the ruins where the difficulty increased the further you went, Akira had turned back in the early stages of the Second Inner Sector. At that time, it was his limit.

Thinking back on that time, Akira's expression became somewhat troubled.

“...Well, I'll be fine...right? ”

He was stronger now than he was back then. And he would go there after acquiring powerful new equipment. So he should be fine. While he thought so, Akira couldn't assert confidently due to the memories of his past struggles.

In response to Akira expressing such subtle anxiety, Alpha laughed and replied.

『You'll be fine. Although that area has become a hunting ground for high-ranking hunters summoned by the city, Akira is also one of those high-ranking hunters, isn't he? Moreover, you were able to fight in the inter-city transport vehicles. The monsters you fought in the Second Inner Sector before won't be opponents that the current Akira struggles with.』

Upon hearing this from Alpha, Akira also dispelled a bit of his unease. He replied with confidence.

“...I see. That's right.”

『 Yes, indeed. Let's see how far the current Akira can go in that place. Depending on the performance of the new equipment, if you can reach a sufficient position, it's about time for you, Akira, to seriously undertake my request.』

Akira was surprised to hear that.

Alpha's request. To conquer the ruins designated by Alpha. He didn't know the location or the name, but it was said to be a ruin of extraordinary difficulty, a place that was once considered impossible for him to reach. He had been fighting for the power to conquer such ruins.

It couldn't be said yet that he had finally achieved it. However, he had come a little closer to that point. With that determination, Akira smiled confidently.

“...I see. Then, I'll do my best! ”

With that determination, Akira swung his blade. A flash. He bisected Alpha's torso.

However, Alpha was smiling.

『Yes. Do your best.』

While still smiling, Alpha swung her blade with only her upper body and cut off Akira's head.

Seeing his headless body lying there and his own head rolling on the floor, Akira expressed a bit of disappointment.

“...It's a draw? ”

『No. It's Akira's loss.』

“Why? ”

『It's a difference in victory conditions. As the role of the enemy, I win even if we stab each other, but if Akira dies, he loses. You're not supposed to engage in a fight where it's okay to die. Isn't that right?』

“...That's true.”

Just because the opponent attacked with the assumption of mutual destruction didn't mean he had to comply with it. He couldn't afford to stab each other. He had to survive.

Just like in his fight with Yumina.

Akira realized this and switched his mindset, acknowledging his own naivety.

“Got it. It's my loss. I'll win next time, okay? ”

『Please follow through with your words, okay? 』

“Got it! ”

They resumed training. Although their abilities were evenly matched, the enemy had no intention of surviving. To overcome the disadvantage that arose from that, Akira fought hard.

After finishing today's training, Akira was once again healing his fatigue in the bath. He immersed himself in the bathtub, surrendering himself to the abundant hot water, enjoying the luxurious bathing experience he had paid a hefty sum for, even letting out a lazy sigh.

“Ahh, feels good.”

Alpha, who was soaking in the same tub, chuckled as she watched Akira's demeanor.

『Are you talking about the medicine you put in the bath? If so, I think it would work better if you just used it normally, don't you? 』

While not denying the incorrectness of Alpha's statement, Akira responded with a face melted into the water.

“Isn't it fine? I wanted to try it. With this, I won't let Carol call my bath cheap.”

Even though he earned a lot of money, he still bathed in a pretty cheap bath. Akira had been told that by Carol before. And when he heard about the facilities in Carol's home bath, he realized that compared to that, his bath did seem cheap.

What surprised Akira the most in that conversation was the fact that medicines were mixed into the bathwater. Despite being for the maintenance of Carol's Enhanced Body Augmenter, he found it quite luxurious, sparking his interest in such bathing practices existing in the world.

And in Akira's renovated bathroom, which could be called a reconstruction, such features were also installed. Remembering that, Akira promptly decided to try it out after being tired from training.

Carol needed to polish herself for her side job. To maintain the allure that captivated clients, she poured in a lot of money to soak her entire body in bathwater infused with medicines, removing even the tiniest blemishes from her skin, making her soft naked body shine.

Akira had no such need. Nevertheless, he soaked himself in bathwater infused with medicines out of sheer curiosity, unnecessarily making his skin shine.

Even though such extravagance would hardly affect the expenses of a high-ranking hunter, Akira sincerely enjoyed the modest luxury from his earnings as a Hunter Rank 55.

『Akira, Carol has requested a call from you.』

“...Hmm? Alright, connect me.”

Akira spoke to Carol through Alpha.

“...Carol. Sorry, but I'm in the bath right now. If it's going to take a while, can we do this later? ”

『 Even though such a beauty like me is calling, you're still as indifferent as ever. Even just talking would be more enjoyable than your home's cheap bath, don't you think? 』

Carol teased Akira like that, and he responded somewhat proudly.

“Too bad for you. My home's bath is no longer a cheap one. I renovated it with money. It's comparable to, no, it surpasses yours! ”

『 Really? But that's what Akira says. But perhaps you can say that because you haven't experienced my home's bath? 』

“Even you, Carol, haven't experienced the bath in my house... Let's put that aside. What's the matter? ”

Realizing the conversation veered off track, Akira promptly asks about the matter. Carol also gets to the point.

『 Actually, there's something I want to talk to Akira about in person. Can you make time? 』

“What's it about? ”

『 I want to talk to you in person, including explaining what it's about.』

“Well, alright...”

Akira, soaking in the bath without much thought, agrees. He discusses the matter with Carol half-immersed, and they arrange to meet at Carol's house tomorrow.

『 Alright then, see you tomorrow. I'll be waiting. Oh, since you're coming all the way, why don't you also use the bath at my place? 』

“Sounds good... See ya.”

After finishing the conversation with Carol, Akira relaxes his consciousness, which had briefly returned from the bath, back into the water. He loosens his expression and lets out a relaxed sigh.

“Ahh...”

Alpha watches Akira's demeanor with a smile.

Chapter 216: Escort Request

Akira visits Carol's house. Carol, who greeted him, lightly chuckled at the sight of Akira, armed with guns and augmented suit.

“Welcome, Akira. I've been waiting for you. But seriously, coming to a lady's house in augmented suit. It's so like you, Akira, but don't you have something more appropriate for visiting? ”

“I won't deny it, but this attire is for caution. Things have been a bit dangerous lately due to certain circumstances.”

“Hmm... Well, never mind. Come in.”

Carol's home is located in a lower district property, but being a unit in a high-end apartment where affluent earners reside, it is lavishly constructed. With many spacious rooms, various facilities, and excluding the bathroom, it's incomparable to Akira's living space.

Akira looked at the interior with curiosity, but he wasn't intimidated. Having slept in compartments of inter-city transport vehicles, he had developed a tolerance for high places. He was suggested to move to a similar property during renovations of his home's bathroom, but he felt he would be out of place living in such a house. That's what he thought and remained calm.

Guided to the living room, Akira accepts a drink from Carol, who is wearing casual clothes.

Carol is wearing tasteful attire that minimizes exposure. However, the attire doesn't suppress Carol's allure enough, and an undeniable charm leaks out as subtle sensuality.

Akira enters the conversation without paying much attention to it.

“So, what did you want to talk about in person? ”

Carol anticipated Akira's reaction, so she starts speaking without concern.

“Actually, I want to request your escort.”

“Escort? Are you planning to visit some high-difficulty ruins or something? Sorry, but I'm currently on a break from my hunter business. I'm waiting to get new equipment and finish repairing my bike...”

“Oh, wait. Let me explain first. We can get into the details later.”

Carol interrupts Akira and starts explaining the escort request.

After hearing the overview of the escort request from Carol, Akira had a puzzled expression. The nature of the request seemed somewhat perplexing to him.

Though termed “escort,” there's no need for constant vigilance. Being nearby to handle things immediately if something happens is sufficient. The duration is indefinite, but during that time, Akira is free to act as he pleases. Whether resting at home, collecting artifacts, defeating monsters, or even taking on other requests, it's all fine as long as Carol accompanies him.

The escort fee is 1 million Aurums per day. In addition to the basic fee, additional charges are payable for combat or similar activities. The amount varies depending on factors like the strength of the enemy and is subject to negotiation. Furthermore, an additional 100 million Aurums is payable monthly.

In addition, while undertaking the escort request, Akira is allowed to pursue Carol as much as he likes.

Upon hearing this, Akira, while thinking that the last part isn't beneficial to him as a reward, proceeds to ask another question.

“Hey, Carol. But what's the purpose of this escort request in the first place? Whom or what do I need to guard you from? ”

“Well... I don't even know that.”

“You don't know...”

Carol responds with a smile to Akira's puzzled expression.

“Well, you know. Maybe it's just my overactive imagination, and this request might be all baseless worry. Asking you to constantly be on guard as if expecting an attack? Well, that's the reason.”

“But you're still considering hiring an escort just in case, right? What makes you anxious? ”

“Oh, that's a bit difficult to explain. I'd have to touch upon parts that require information fees. So, I can't say.”

Akira could have left it at that after the explanation. However, he was more perplexed than convinced at the moment and proceeded to ask further.

“Hey, Carol. How much is the information fee? ”

“Hmm... It depends on how much I reveal... Maybe around 10 billion Aurums? ”

“10 billion!?”

Akira exclaimed at the unexpected amount. Carol seemed to enjoy his reaction.

“Oh, it's not necessarily that the information is that dangerous. Nor is its value necessarily worth 10 billion. If you were to seriously investigate similar information, it wouldn't be surprising if it incurred such expenses. It's in that sense. Some people might even

set a selling price of 10 billion Aurums based on those expenses when offering that information to those who want it... something like that.”

“I see...”

Even though it's undeniable that it's a considerable amount for information, Akira, after some surprise, seemed to nod in understanding, prompted by Carol's inviting smile.

“Do you want to know? Fine, I'll tell you. However, it'll be offset against the reward once you agree to be my escort. What do you say?”

“No, you don't have to tell me. It's just that I'm a bit curious if I were to take on the escort. If I don't know, I can just decline the request.”

“I see. Well, are you getting a bit better at negotiations? You've become quite tough.”

In response to Carol's casual flattery, Akira smiled slightly, feeling somewhat proud. However, at that moment, he was still being led by Carol. Akira's negotiation skills still had a long way to go.

Carol continues the conversation.

“Well, leaving that aside, if all goes well, you could earn 130 million Aurums without doing anything, right? I think I've brought you quite a good deal.”

Once again hearing that, Akira indeed thought it was true. He didn't say he wasn't curious about Carol's hidden agenda, but he felt that the amount was enough to tolerate it, and he felt suspicious of the conversation being too smooth from there.

“With those conditions, is it just a reasonably good deal? ”

“Considering it could involve having a high-rank hunter working for a month, it might be cheap. Besides, as I mentioned earlier, if all goes

well, you won't have to do anything, right? ”

“... Well, I guess so.”

Akira pondered. He didn't have the knowledge of the market price for this kind of job. He thought it might be better to consult someone with that knowledge, like Hikaru, but first, he decided to ask someone close at hand.

『Alpha, what do you think? 』

『 Well, she doesn't seem to be lying for now. But first, do you even want to take on her escort? 』

『 ...I'm asking what you think including that. If Carol isn't lying, it's 130 million in a month. If we go to the Second Inner Sector, there will be ammunition costs, and if the new equipment's performance is mediocre, we'll need even higher-performance equipment, so we'll need money. ...Ah, is it bad to bring Carol to the Second Inner Sector? 』

It's too dangerous to go to the Second Inner Sector. If Carol tells him that, Akira had no choice but to refuse the request.

“Carol. I'll tell you in advance, but I plan to go to the Second Inner Sector of Kuzusuhara District Ruin soon. According to the conditions just now, you'll have to come with me, but...”

“Sure, that's fine.”

“In that case, what about the escort fee? Do I have to pay for going to the Second Inner Sector due to my convenience? ”

“Of course. I'll make sure to charge an additional fee for it,” Carol replied easily. And she continued.

“Well, ideally, I'd like it to be treated as an offset against the reward after hiring me as your guide. How about that? Since I've fought and been to the Second Inner Sector several times, I won't be a burden easily. Besides, I have a broad range of maps, so I should be able to guide you to quite deep areas.”

Upon hearing this, Akira looked surprised. Then, with a slightly troubled expression, he reluctantly continued, finding it difficult to articulate.

“This might come across as impolite, but... I've been to that place once before, and I barely made it back alive. It's supposed to be very high difficulty. Carol, I don't think you're strong enough to fight seriously in the Second Inner Sector.”

Carol, having anticipated Akira's question, smiled as she responded.

“I understand what you're trying to say. But don't worry. That place has become a hunting ground for high-rank hunters from elsewhere, right? I'm strong enough to fight alongside them now. Well, I won't deny that it's partly because of extremely high-performance equipment.”

“Do you have such incredible equipment... But can't you buy high-performance equipment due to hunter rank restrictions?”

“Normally, yes. But there are ways to go about it without following the rules.”

“I see...”

『... Alpha.』

『She's not lying.』

『So, she really is strong enough to fight there. Impressive.』

While he didn't completely doubt it, Akira, after confirming with Alpha that it wasn't a lie, nodded lightly, seemingly convinced.

『Alpha, I'll ask again, what do you think? If there's no problem with our combat capabilities, isn't it fine? 』

『Yes, indeed. I have no intention of strongly opposing it. By undertaking her escort, we can certainly boost our earnings. And if she becomes a hindrance in the Second Inner Sector, let's negotiate a hefty increase in the escort fee for that part.』

『Agreed.』

Akira had initially decided on it, but the following conversation made him waver.

『If I had to voice a concern, I'm a bit curious as to why Carol is asking you for an escort.』

『...Why? 』

『Carol should know that Akira is prone to getting involved in incidents, right? 』

It might all be baseless worry. Yet, hiring an escort for caution. Would someone with such concerns, someone like Akira who is prone to unexpected situations, deliberately choose him as an escort? Wouldn't they think that due to Akira, their worries might become reality? Wouldn't it be more normal to hire someone else? Why specifically choose Akira?

Alpha easily explained his concerns.

And Akira found himself agreeing with that explanation, giving Carol a slightly puzzled look.

“Akira, what's wrong? ”

“Oh... nothing...”

He could continue asking until all doubts were resolved. The other person might answer thoroughly. But whether that information could be trusted was uncertain. He didn't possess the ability to discern that accurately. Persistently pursuing suspicious points might just lead to being skillfully evaded. In that case, asking anything would be pointless.

With these thoughts in mind, Akira decided to narrow down what he needed to ask. He questioned Carol with a serious expression.

“Carol. I'll apologize in advance if you take offense. Please answer me. Do you have any intentions of setting me up or deceiving me with this escort request? ”

If he were to be lied to and deceived, there would be no recourse. Even if Carol answered honestly to all other questions, it would all be for the purpose of ensnaring him. And he might not even realize it.

So let's discern it now. If he's lied to and can't see through it, then it's his fault for relying too much on Alpha and not honing his negotiation skills. Akira thought so and directed a serious gaze at Carol.

In response to Akira's seriousness, Carol also answered with a serious attitude.

“It depends on the meaning of your words. If by 'setting up' you mean expecting disadvantages for Akira, then absolutely not. But if it means Akira feeling like he was deceived by Carol, that situation could arise depending on the circumstances. I can't erase that fear. If you can't accept the request unless I can confirm that, then I will cancel the request.”

After asking what needed to be asked and saying what needed to be said, the two of them stared into each other's eyes. The flowing silence and the tense atmosphere both indicated their seriousness.

Then, Akira lightened the mood first.

“Got it. I'll take it.”

Carol also relaxed at that, letting out a small sigh of relief.

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Sorry for being suspicious. There was this guy, Kibayashi, who warned me that I'm as good as a novice in negotiations and that I'd be taken advantage of if I continued like that. I just wanted to be a bit cautious.”

“It's fine. Don't worry about it. If you doubted and still believed in me, then I'm actually glad.”

“I see.”

Seeing Carol's bright smile conveying that she really didn't mind, Akira also felt relieved.

“Well then, now that you've accepted your escort, I'll pay up.” Carol operated her information terminal and transferred the reward to Akira's account.

Upon confirming it, Akira looked slightly surprised. The transferred amount was 130 million Aurums, the reward for one month in advance.

“Is this... okay? Paying such a large sum in advance. What if I run off with it? ”

“Well, in that case, I'd be disappointed.”

“D-disappointed...”

That's not the issue here. Akira felt puzzled as he said that.

“I entrusted you with the escort because I believe in you. If you were to run off, then I misjudged you. That's all.”

Then, with a slightly provocative and meaningful smile, Carol continued.

“So, Akira. Live up to my expectations, okay? ” Akira smiled back in response.

“Got it. I'll do my best to meet them.”

“I'm counting on you.”

The one who expects and the one who aims to meet those expectations exchanged looks reflecting their inner feelings.

Carol casually remarked.

“Well, saying this after saying that... But, ideally, I don't want to be in a situation where I have to meet those expectations. It'd be best if it all just turned out to be baseless worry.”

“That makes sense.”

Akira and Carol laughed together. In this relaxed atmosphere, Carol invited with a meaningful smile.

“Well then, shall I give you some non-monetary rewards as well? Akira. As promised, you're free to indulge as much as you like. I'll make sure to entertain you plenty.”

“I don't want anything. Actually, I don't need those rewards.”

“You're still as cold as ever. Well, fine. Just let me know anytime if you feel like it. Since the deal is done, the right to embrace me as much as you want is already yours, Akira. Whether you exercise that right is up to you.”

Even as Akira looked incredulous, Carol didn't seem to mind at all.

“Oh, by the way, Akira. Should I come to your place, or do you want to live at mine? ”

Seeing Akira's puzzled expression, Carol added some explanation.

The reward for one month had already been paid. In other words, the escort request had already begun. Akira had to stay by Carol's side, even during sleep.

Upon hearing that, Akira understood, but he couldn't immediately decide which option to choose.

“I don't mind either way. It's up to you, Akira.”

“Even if you say that...”

Seeing Akira's hesitation, Carol smiled proudly, as if teasing him.

“If you're unsure, why don't you decide after taking a bath at my place? We'll be living together for a while. You might as well enjoy a comfortable bath, right? ”

Carol smiled provocatively, as if saying that her home's bath was of higher quality than Akira's. Seeing this, Akira took up the challenge.

Each person has their own expectations for what they seek in the facilities of a luxury apartment, but since Carol's bath also served as maintenance for her Enhanced Body Augmenter, the quality of her home's bathroom was significantly higher than the other rooms.

Feeling it firsthand, Akira's expression stiffened slightly as he submerged into the large bathtub.

“Th-this is...! ...No, I'm not losing. I'm not losing...”

If one couldn't assert superiority, then saying they weren't losing meant they had, in a sense, already lost.

Alpha, who was with him, said somewhat incredulously.

『 If there's no clear superiority, then it doesn't matter which you choose. So, Akira, what will you do? 』

『What should I do...』

If he couldn't choose based on the difference in bathing experiences, then it would come down to deciding whether to let Carol live at his place or to live at someone else's. Akira was indecisive.

Then Carol appeared. She casually entered the bathroom completely naked and settled into the same bathtub as Akira.

“So, are you just normally coming in? ”

“It's fine, isn't it? Akira isn't interested in seeing me naked, right? ”

“It's not about that...”

As he said that with a somewhat exasperated expression, Akira realized that Alpha had disappeared.

『Alpha. Why did you disappear? 』

『 If Akira reacts to me and Carol misunderstands, it'll be troublesome, right? 』

『...Ah, I see.』

If he were to argue here, he'd only be teased more by Alpha, and it could really become troublesome. Thinking that, Akira decided not to say anything unnecessary and changed the subject to Carol.

“Hey, Carol, why did you ask me to be your escort? ”

Having already accepted the escort request, Akira has no intention of backing out once he's committed. He was merely asking out of simple curiosity.

Carol also understood this from Akira's attitude and replied sincerely.

“I hired Akira as my escort on the day we first met, remember? You protected me properly back then.”

“Just that? ”

Akira's words, heavily implying “Is that all it took to decide? ” prompted Carol to smile happily.

“Just that... You say it so easily...”

Akira recalls the events of that day.

“...Well, it wasn't easy.”

Attacked by a large number of mechanical monsters in the factory sector of the Mihazono District Ruin, they managed to escape with Carol's guidance. They were even shot at in mid-air while escaping using a flying container and had to fight a multi-legged tank on the side of a building.

It was an experience of escaping a deadly situation thanks to Alpha's support when he was still weak. Although the impression had somewhat faded due to experiencing numerous other dangerous

situations of equal or greater magnitude, it certainly wasn't an easy feat. Acknowledging Carol's point, Akira thought so too.

“That's right. It wasn't easy. Even in such dire circumstances, Akira didn't abandon me and protected me until the end. That's why I hired Akira again for escort. Because I believe Akira will protect me properly again.”

It wasn't his own ability. Despite thinking so, Akira didn't end his thoughts with just denial. If he protects Carol properly this time too, it'll be the same for her. And he must demonstrate Alpha's support as his own ability. Thinking so, he smiles back confidently.

“I see. Well, I intend to do my job properly this time too. You can rest assured.”

“I trust you.”

Carol returned Akira's smile with a genuine one. But then, she deliberately expressed some dissatisfaction.

“...Because you're such a trustworthy person, I even offered you additional compensation, but you won't appreciate it. Isn't that a bit harsh? ”

“Even if you say that, how much value does that additional compensation have? ”

“Well... At least 20 billion Aurums.”

“No way! ”

He doesn't believe it at all. Akira made it clear through his expression, voice, and words. Carol also expected such a response. She countered with a playful smile.

“It's not a lie. I dealt with someone for 2 billion just the other day.”

“No way, even if it's reduced to one-tenth, do you really think I'd believe it? ”

“Well, I didn't receive the full amount in Aurums. Most of it was paid with valuable information, and I only received 200 million in Aurums.”

It's one-hundredth of the original amount. As if to say it's a realistic amount, Carol smiled at Akira.

For a moment, Akira almost fell for it considering it's one-hundredth. But he shook his head to regain his senses.

“...No, even so, it's still 200 million, right? ”

“It's true. It's sad... Oh, right. Akira, you have a knack for detecting lies, right? Then try to figure this out.”

Even though Akira didn't believe it at all, he became somewhat skeptical after being told that. As an act of demonstrating his knack, he stares seriously into Carol's eyes.

『...Alpha』

『It seems she didn't lie』

『Seriously? ! 』

Seeing Akira's surprised expression, indicating that it was true, Carol smiled triumphantly.

“Looks like you believed me.”

“...Sorry for doubting you. But isn't it hard to believe in general? ”

“I understand the feeling. So, why not experience it once? Then you'll understand.”

Saying so with an enchanting smile, Carol invited Akira. But Akira's reaction was worse than simply disinterested.



“No way. It's getting scary now, isn't it? I don't know, but isn't there some dangerous addictive or dependency potential? ”

“That's harsh.”

Carol chuckled wryly, avoiding giving a clear answer.

As Akira and Carol, both having finished bathing, left the dressing room, a breeze blew away the water droplets from Akira's body clinging to the dressing room wall. Enjoying the sensation, Akira's naked body next to Carol, who also had only water droplets on her nude body, felt the breeze.

“Akira, did you decide which house to choose in the end? ”

“Oh, I'm still thinking.”

“I see. Well, take your time, but if you don't decide by tonight, you can stay over today... Hm? ”

“What's up? ”

“I received a message from Viola. And it's marked as 'it'll get troublesome if ignored'.”Carol said, remotely operating the information terminal embedded in the dressing room to connect to Viola.

“Viola. What's the matter? ”

“I got some interesting information. Want to buy it? How about 1 million for now? ”

After Carol completed the payment, Viola's cheerful voice continued.

“They're going to surround that place in another 10 minutes. The opponent is a large-scale Hunter team called 'Lot Break'. The city

invited them to capture the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. The team's leader is a guy named Zelos, ranked 77 as a Hunter. He's leading the team there.”

“...Why are they surrounding it? ”

“How about adding 10 million? ”

“Maybe later.”

Carol ended the call and looked at Akira.

“Akira, I'll ask just in case. Do you have any idea? You don't have to tell me the details, just whether you have any suspicions.”

『Alpha. Any clues? 』

『 If we assume it's targeting Akira, it could be at the behest of Udajima. Considering how actively Udajima seems to be advancing the capture of the Second Inner Sector, there may be a connection to the invited Hunter team. Remember when we met Inabe at the hospital? Udajima even warned us to be careful and brought equipment specifically for Akira.』

Akira's expression slightly darkens as he agrees with the explanation. Seeing this, Carol's expression also becomes somewhat troubled.

“Your face doesn't look like you have no idea,” Carol deliberately smiled brightly.

“Well, there's still a good chance it's not just me nor Akira. But let's stay cautious while hoping for groundless worry,” Carol added with a smirk.

Akira also replies with a smile.

“Yeah, that's right.”

Akira and Carol, both naked, leave the dressing room. The clothes they put on after bathing are not casual attire but augmented suits.

Wearing a augmented suit with a sharp design reminiscent of the old-world, Carol lets out a wry smile as she vents her frustrations.

“But seriously, for something like this to happen on the same day I hired Akira as my escort, I don't know if I'm lucky or unlucky...”

“I think you can say you're lucky. It happened while you had your escort.”

Even if it's unlucky, he just have to overcome it. Thinking so, Akira deliberately smiled confidently.

Seeing Akira's smile, Carol also changed her wry smile into a genuine one.

“...Yeah. Let's think of it that way.”

She was glad she hired Akira. That's what she thought as she smiled.

Chapter 217: 10 billion Aurums overnight.

Having armed themselves after receiving information from Viola, Akira and the others stayed at Carol's apartment.

It's already been 10 minutes. Even if the mansion is surrounded as the information suggests, it doesn't necessarily mean they need to break through and escape. There's still a possibility that they are unrelated to us. And even if it's a siege aimed at them, it doesn't mean it will lead to a battle. It's dangerous to show any careless moves and provoke the opponent's recklessness. Akira and the others thought so.

Then they received communication from the mansion's security. It stated that Lot Break wanted to see Carol and requested her to come out of the mansion.

Carol sighed softly.

“Looks like they want to talk to me.”

“Seems like it. So, what do we do? ”

“...Let's go. It might just end with a discussion, and if we fought here, the room would end up in a mess, right? Akira. Is that okay with you? ”

Choose whichever he prefer, here or outside, in case the worst happens and it turns into a fight. That's what Carol intended with her smile.

“Roger that. Let's go.”

Akira smiled back.



The mansion was quickly surrounded by Lot Break.

Though it's called a siege, it's not a complete blockade with hundreds surrounding the vast estate. There are only about a dozen people scattered around the mansion.

Still, the mansion's security cannot interfere with the siege.

The quality of the security is also a requirement for high-end mansions. The security guards stationed here are stronger and more numerous than regular hunters. Additionally, in emergencies, they can request assistance from other security companies.

However, the opponent is a high-rank hunter. They are not someone to be reckoned with using the level of force suitable for lower districts. They had no choice but to let them do as they pleased.

But the security side doesn't intend to leave the situation unattended either. The head of the security team, trying his best, was by Zelos's side, attempting to restrain the opponent's use of force as much as possible.

“...We've acknowledged the siege. Please, refrain from further actions,” the man who asked with a stern expression, Zelos, also showed some consideration.

“I understand. I also think it's best if things end peacefully. The rest depends on how they respond.”

“...I see.”

Zelos's reply implied that if things don't go well, it won't end peacefully. There's no room for reassurance. But with such a overwhelming difference in power, they couldn't act too aggressively either.

All they could do was hope for a peaceful resolution. That's all they could do.

Then Akira and the others arrived. Seeing Akira and the others armed, Zelos let out a meaningful sound without smiling.

“Hmm...”

Give him a break, the man sighed without uttering a word.

Akira, as he stepped outside the mansion, spotted Zelos and the security guard. Then, the information of the two appeared in his augmented vision.

It wasn't Alpha's support but Carol's. Various information held by Carol was now displayed on Akira's side through the collaboration of information-gathering devices.

The security guard was indicated to be equivalent to Hunter Rank 30 as a measure of their strength. And Zelos was indicated to be Hunter Rank 77.

These were merely information held by Carol. There's no guarantee of their accuracy; they're just rough estimates based on that information.

Still, having a formidable figure like the leader of a inter-city transport vehicle convoy in front of him in a potentially hostile situation unconsciously heightened Akira's vigilance.

Zelos noticed Akira's caution. Despite that, he shifted his gaze to Carol.

“You're Carol, right? ”

Carol smiled without flinching.

“That's right, but what's your business? Or rather, who are you? ”

Knowing some things and not knowing others, Carol smiled while mixing truth and falsehoods.

“I'm Zelos. I'm the leader of Lot Break, a hunter team. You've been looking into us recently, haven't you? I want to know why, including who's behind you.”

“I don't understand what you're talking about.”

“Are you playing dumb in this situation? ”

“If you're not engaging in meaningless negotiations, could you explain it clearly? ”

Sensing the atmosphere becoming less amicable, the security guard panicked. At least for the man, Carol's attitude wasn't something to take lightly, especially not with someone with the strength of a Hunter Rank 77.

Seeing the guard's panicked state, Akira began to consider the possibility of escaping with Carol in case of emergency.

『Alpha, if things get bad, I'll take Carol and run, so I'll need your support then.』

Unlike when they saved Hikaru with the inter-city transport vehicle, they could escape with Carol now. They didn't need to defeat Zelos like they did with Erde. If that's the case, escaping is the only option. Akira decided so.

『Understood.』

Hearing Alpha's response with a smile, Akira felt relieved that his decision was sound. They calmly waited to see how the situation unfolded.

Carol and Zelos faced each other silently. Zelos continued to stare sharply at Carol, but her smile didn't waver. Seeing Carol's demeanor, Zelos changed his attitude first. He gave orders to his subordinates via radio.

“Bring him over.”

One of his team members brought over a hunter named Babalod. Akira's augmented vision displayed Hunter Rank 60 for him.

Babalod looked at Carol with a somewhat guilty expression, but his face tensed up under Zelos's gaze.

Then Zelos grabbed Babalod's head and turned to Carol.

“Do you know him? ”

“Yes.”

“You bought our information from him, right? Even if you say no, I won't believe it. I've made sure he spills everything. So I trust him.”

“Strictly speaking, it's different. He paid me with the information in exchange for sleeping with me.”

“You admit to obtaining our information, right? ”

“Yes.”

Zelos let go of Babalod.

“Let me ask again. Tell me everything about why you were looking into us, including who's behind you.”

“I didn't intend to look into you.”

Zelos let out a deep sigh. Then, he drastically changed his tone.

“I intended to handle this peacefully, you know.”

The security guard panicked. Akira also wore a grim expression, ready to seize the opportunity to escape with Carol.

Amidst the atmosphere of imminent battle, Carol alone wore a relaxed smile.

“Don't misunderstand. I haven't lied. It's true that I received your information from him, but it wasn't to investigate you specifically.”

“What do you mean? ”

“I never told him I wanted Lot Break's information. I never even mentioned wanting information. I just said anything would do as long as it compensated for sleeping with me. Whether it's helping with relic excavation, second-hand equipment, high-rank hunter's transmissions, or even information including maps of the ruins. He chose Lot Break's internal information, not me.”

Zelos pondered for a moment, then grabbed Babalod's head again.

“Babalod. Did she ever directly ask for our information? ”

“Th-that's...”

“Even if she said something that could be interpreted as such, did you interpret it as such? Who decided to choose the team's confidential information in exchange for the payment for her? Her, or you? ”

Babalod didn't answer. His silence was as good as an answer.

Zelos let out a small sigh. Still holding Babalod's head, he returned his gaze to Carol.

“Even if you didn't directly ask for it, I heard you demanded 10 billion Aurums as the last payment. Isn't that practically asking for our confidential information? ”

Upon hearing that, Akira burst out laughing. 10 billion Aurums for one night. The amount was so outrageous that it was beyond belief.

Seeing Akira's reaction, Zelos also wore an expression as if he understood. He relaxed his posture slightly.

Carol also enjoyed Akira's reaction and lightly laughed before responding.

“No, that's not true. My body is worth it. Plus, I'm willing to accept monetary loss in the end. I'm aware of demanding a large sum of money. But it was him who asked for the next one and paid the price. It wasn't me.”

There was a choice for Babalod not to pay. He could have chosen not to hand over the team's confidential information. Yet, Babalod didn't do that. So it was unreasonable to associate 10 billion Aurums with Lot Break's confidential information. Carol stated this.

Zelos made a complicated expression.

(...Is this different?)

What was important to Zelos was whether Carol, hired by a team opposing them, had set up a honey trap for Babalod to steal Lot Break's confidential information. If that was different, even if other parts were somewhat unclear, it wouldn't be a problem.

And what Carol did was too sloppy for a honey trap. The person she targeted unexpectedly provided information, and it was hard to believe she intentionally aimed for their confidential information. Zelos began to think so. But doubts still lingered.

“...But 10 billion seems excessive. Wouldn't it be natural to think there was another purpose behind it? ”

“There's no other purpose. If you find it hard to believe, I can prove it to you. If you cooperate, I can show you.”

“Oh? What should I do? ”

Seeing Zelos show some interest, Carol smiled and replied.

“You could try buying me too. Even if 10 billion is impossible... I can convince you if you're willing to cooperate.”

She was serious. Understanding from Carol's eyes, Zelos grasped it. From there, he somehow understood that Carol's purpose wasn't the team's confidential information. He let out a light breath and relaxed the atmosphere.

“Understood. It seems there was a misunderstanding about aiming for the team's information. I apologize for doubting.”

“I'm glad the misunderstanding is cleared up. So, what do you think? This might be fate too. Why not give it a try? ”

“Sorry, I'll pass. I'm in a position where I need to take responsibility for what went wrong due to getting involved with you.”

“Is that so? Too bad.”

The casual exchange between Carol and Zelos indicated that the fear of conflict had disappeared. The security guard visibly relaxed, and both Akira and Zelos's subordinates eased their vigilance.

Among them, only Babalod remained dejected. For him, it was convenient if the misunderstanding persisted, as it put him in the position of a victim.

In this greatly changed situation, Zelos once again proposed negotiations to Carol.

“Now that the misunderstanding is cleared up, and regardless of how you obtained it, it's a fact that you know the team's confidential information. As far as we investigated, there doesn't seem to be any indication that you leaked the information elsewhere, so it would be helpful if you could just stay quiet about it.”

“That's something we need to negotiate. I can't make something I received as compensation worthless just because it's convenient for you. If someone made your payment for a life-threatening job free without your consent, you wouldn't like it, right? Well, I won't demand 10 billion, but...”

Seeing Zelos wear a difficult expression again, the security guard also started to panic once more.

However, Zelos had no intention of causing another disturbance. He understood the unpleasantness of having compensation invalidated. And Carol was willing to negotiate a discount. Within those considerations, there was room for compromise.

But even if he managed to halve the 10 billion, it would be 5 billion, or even if he negotiated a 90% discount, it would be 1 billion. Even for a high-ranking hunter team like Lot Break, it wasn't feasible to make such an expenditure lightly. He pondered if there was a better solution.

Then he noticed Akira.

“...Is he your bodyguard? ”

“That's right.”

“Did you hire him expecting this situation? ”

“That's a secret.”

“I see.”

Zelos, who responded lightly, grabbed Babalod's head and made a proposal.

“Alright. How about a one-on-one between him and him? ”

“What do you mean? ”

“If he wins, then that bodyguard of yours is useless. He betrayed the team. He'll have to pay for that. In other words, he'll have to endure a miserable fate, but because of that, he might resent you and attack you later. We'll prevent that. How about offsetting that with the payment? ”

“I see. And if Akira wins? ”

“In that case, it's up to your demands as well. Let's have a thorough negotiation with a mediator prepared on both sides.”

Carol looked at Akira with a slightly serious expression.

“Akira, what do you think? Honestly, if you're up for it, I'd like you to accept, but if you don't want to, that's fine too.”

“What happens if I refuse? ”

“Well, we'll offset his restraint reward according to your request. Losing the value of 10 billion is regrettable, but it's better than needlessly quarreling with a high-ranking hunter team.”

Thus, Carol was saying that Akira could erase the value of 10 billion Aurums with his decision. Akira found this quite surprising, and somewhat pleasing. Trying to mask his surprise, he asked lightly.

“Just to make sure, if I win, will I get paid for the bodyguard? ”

“You'll get paid regardless of winning or losing. And if you win, I'll even add some extra.”

Carol lightly teased with a smile. Akira returned the smile confidently.

“I'm in.”

With this somewhat unconventional agreement, Akira was immediately put to work as Carol's bodyguard.

The mansion was surrounded as a response to dealing with the opposing team aiming for Lot Break's confidential information. With the misunderstanding cleared, the siege was lifted. Those who had been stationed around were now gathered around Zelos to watch Akira and Babalod's match.

“So she's Carol... the one worth 10 billion for one night. Hmm, well, she's certainly beautiful, but... 10 billion seems a bit much, doesn't it?”

“Even 100 million seems too much. Isn't it more like spending a few hundred million when you feel like splurging?”

“Yeah, seriously. What's up with Babalod? Was he always such a womanizer?”

“He wasn't like that at all... Well, maybe that's why he got so obsessed, not being used to it.”

“And now he's caught up with some dangerous woman. It's a common story, but to have a case like that from our team... It's pathetic. You better watch yourself too, alright?”

“You too.”

In front of men who were more interested in chatting about Carol than those who were about to fight, Zelos, acting as the referee, lightly spoke to Akira and primarily to Akira.

“We're not here to kill each other. Fighting without guns is fine, right?” Akira nodded lightly and handed his gun to Carol.

“I don't mean hold back, but keep it controlled enough to avoid accidents. We'll start at my signal. Both of you, take your starting positions... Oh, a bit closer? Could you step back a bit more?”

Zelos casually had Akira and the others step back. Then he communicated with Babalod.

『Babalod. You get it? If you want to improve your treatment even a bit, you better win with everything you've got.』

『Yeah, I get it.』

Alpha lightly asked Akira.

『Akira. What do you think? Should we try doing it on your own for now? 』

『No, stick with me firmly. This isn't training. Don't hold back. Plus, if we barely win, their thinking might change.』

Being here as Carol's escort, Akira thought it necessary to show not just the ability to repel enemies, but also the power to deter them from attacking in the first place.

『Understood. In that case, let's win decisively.』

To reaffirm his own strength to Akira, Alpha also smiled and agreed.

Both Akira and Babalod, though for different reasons, were seriously engaging in this battle. As they faced off, keeping their distance, Zelos's signal echoed out.

“Begin! ”

In the next moment, Babalod's fist, which had been eight meters away, closed in on Akira. It didn't close the distance in an instant. His arm was extending at high speed.

Akira dodged it by swaying sideways. A fierce sound pierced through the air right next to him. But Akira remained unfazed. He had heard similar sounds many times before, from bullets or shells.

Babalod, who had extended his arm in an instant, returned it to its original length in the blink of an eye. Taking a stance with his right arm tensed, he immediately launched his next attack. Although it should have been quite a surprise attack, Akira responded easily, without showing any signs of disturbance. He continued to deliver sharp counterattacks.

Once again, Babalod's fists attacked Akira. This time, it was a barrage with both arms. Powerful blows that could crush debris in an instant were continuously unleashed.

Akira evaded, deflected, and blocked the attacks. Babalod's skillful maneuvers, changing the trajectory of his fists, reached the level of a master. But for Akira, who had experienced the fierce attacks of superhumans, this was not a threat. He dealt with it effortlessly.

With a determined expression, Babalod launched another attack. Bringing both arms back to his side, he swung them forcefully. His elongated arms changed like flexible whips, assaulting Akira from all directions.

Watching Akira and Babalod's battle, Carol frowned slightly and complained to Zelos.

“I thought this was supposed to be hand-to-hand combat? ”

Those who eagerly engage in close combat with monsters are a minority among hunters. However, hunters do not underestimate close combat skills. It serves to improve combat abilities and also helps deal with situations when monsters get too close.

Furthermore, unarmed combat without firearms or blades is suitable for demonstrating one's strength without killing the opponent.

Some are more hot-headed. Arguments escalate and turn into physical fights. However, if they stick to brawling instead of killing each other, wanting to settle disputes without casualties, it implicitly becomes hand-to-hand combat. Hunters' weapons are powerful tools

used to kill monsters, and using them against humans and claiming not to intend harm doesn't hold water.

Carol thought that Zelos suggested hand-to-hand combat based on this implicit understanding. But Babalod's fighting style, extending his arms to reach eight meters and manipulating them like thick whips, felt to Carol like deviating from the implicit hand-to-hand combat.

In response to Carol's complaint, Zelos replied calmly.

“It's hand-to-hand combat, isn't it? No guns or blades involved, right? Well, sure, Babalod is fighting in a way that's impossible for a regular human body, but you're also fighting wearing augmented suit with auxiliary arms. It's pretty much the same, isn't it? ”

Carol frowned but didn't argue. She felt she had been outmaneuvered, but there was no point in demanding adherence to the definition of hand-to-hand combat from the other side when she herself had overlooked it.

However, Zelos himself felt that his argument was somewhat flawed even as he asserted it. But he pushed it through due to the difference in position. Their firepower was clearly superior. He knew that even though it might be a stretch, he could get away with it. If sound reasoning prevailed, there would be no need for the use of force in negotiations. As someone who commanded the immense firepower of high-ranked hunters, Zelos understood this well.

With a stern expression, he continued.

“...Well, I get your complaint too, but if Babalod had the upper hand, I'd understand.”

He was aware of his manipulations to favor Babalod. By defining it as hand-to-hand combat and not allowing guns or blades, and further starting the match in a range favorable to Babalod, he had rigged the game.

Despite that, it was clear that Babalod was at a disadvantage.

Babalod fought desperately.

The opponent was struggling to attack. It was all Akira could do to defend against Babalod attacks, unable to close the distance. In that case, let's finish this now. Although it seemed like Akira were managing to hold on for now, one good hit would be enough to end it. All Babalod had to do was keep pressing on. That's what he thought at first, expecting a quick victory.

However, no effective blows landed. Everything was dodged, parried, or blocked. Despite Babalod expertly swinging his fists with the flexibility of a whip, Akira, who had experienced attacks from superhumans, saw it as no threat. He dealt with it easily.

(...He's strong! If Zelos hadn't started at my range, it would've been dangerous! But as long as I maintain this distance, I can win! I won't let him get close!)

If he lost, it would be all over for him. A dreadful fate awaited him. He had to win. By any means necessary. With that determination, Babalod exerted his full strength. But that determination bred impatience, and that impatience slightly disrupted Babalod's masterful skill.

Akira seized that opportunity. He countered Babalod's fist, which was released in a straight line, by meeting it with his own fist. The fists, reinforced by force field armor, collided, and intense shockwave light burst forth.

If Babalod's arms had the flexibility of a whip at that moment, his posture would not have been compromised even if Akira intercepted them. However, aiming to increase the thrust's power, instead of striking with his fist, Akira aimed for the moment when Babalod's entire arm stiffened. The shock of the interception was transmitted

through the rigid arm to his torso, causing Babalod to lose his balance significantly.

(...This is bad!)

This compromised posture was fatal. Attacks with his long arms also served as a deterrent to prevent Akira's approach. However, with his posture now compromised, he couldn't maintain that deterrent. Before he could regain his posture, Akira closed the distance.

He was going to lose. That's what Babalod thought, his expression contorting in extreme displeasure.

But that didn't happen. Even as Babalod corrected his posture, Akira remained where he was. Babalod, who had returned both arms to their normal length and taken a defensive stance, looked at Akira with a puzzled expression. Then, with an even more displeased expression, he asked Akira, already knowing the answer.

“...Why didn't you attack? ”

“I thought I should do my job as Carol's guard properly, so as not to be seen as useless.” Those watching Akira's fight also wore puzzled expressions, unable to grasp the meaning of what Akira was saying. However, some of them realized and smiled wryly. And Akira continued.

“You might come back for revenge later, right? I thought I should win in a way that doesn't make you think that.”

The opponent wasn't struggling to attack. They weren't just unable to close the distance and deal with his attacks. They simply didn't close the distance, and if they wanted to, they could have intercepted the initial strike like before and won right then and there.

Before asking Akira, Babalod had already realized that much. And after being explained why he did what he did, he also understood. To thwart any intention of retaliation. To make them realize that

attacking later would be futile. For that purpose, to demonstrate a clear disparity in strength.

Simply defeating them easily might make them think it was just luck. Taking advantage of their opponent's negligence or openings and winning might make them believe they could win next time if they were more careful.

Impossible. There was no way. There was no way to win. To make himself believe that, to achieve such a victory, the opponent deliberately prolonged a match they could have won easily. To instill in himself a sense of defeat so great that he would no longer feel like fighting again. Babalod understood that.

Babalod's interpretation, to some extent, had a different degree, but the direction was correct. As Carol's guard, Akira was fighting to demonstrate his own external strength, including Alpha's support.

Even if there were someone who could accurately assess the opponent's abilities, what they could gauge is only their true strength, including the support from Alpha, which is impossible to grasp before facing them. And if the opponent is at the same level as oneself, one might think they can manage as long as they don't let their guard down. That's what Akira believes.

That's why Akira is demonstrating the strength he gained with Alpha's support right here and now. To make Babalod give up the assault, even if out of resentment, and for that, he had firmly requested support from Alpha.

Zelos let out a deep sigh.

“Babalod. Shall we call it quits? ”

“Don't mess with me! Not yet! It's not over yet! ” Babalod retorted loudly, as if scolding his own emerging fear.

“I see. ...Hey, continuing like this is pointless, isn't it? Let's give it another 10 seconds. If there's no resolution by then, it's a draw. Is that okay? ”

“Got it. Fine by me.”

“Good. Babalod! You understand, don't you? A tie is not acceptable for you, right? ”

“I understand! ”

“Alright then, 10...! ”

As Zelos announced the remaining time, Babalod once again extended his arms long and swung them like whips. But this time, it wasn't for attacking Akira. It was to prevent Akira from closing the distance between them.

Babalod realized it. Zelos limiting the remaining time to 10 seconds was a trick to let Babalod win.

Zelos had told Babalod that a tie was unacceptable, but the same applied to Akira. Winning was a given. They were fighting to make their opponent understand their true strength. Having said such confident words, Akira couldn't allow a draw. In other words, he had to win within 10 seconds no matter what.

And in that situation, if Babalod were to stall for time, Akira, who couldn't afford to leisurely fight, would have to resort to more forceful actions in a hurry.

Seize that opportunity. That was the instruction Babalod understood.

He swung both arms with all his might, disregarding both the remaining energy and damage to his body. It was an impossible feat for a prolonged battle, but for a short-term battle of just 10 seconds, it posed no problem. The two whips, with their power and speed vastly increased, wreaked havoc between Akira and Babalod.

(Come on! Show me you're not just talk!)

And in response, Akira moved. Amidst the storm of whip attacks tearing through the air, he lunged forward in one swift motion.

The whips, with the power to not just dent but cleave through steel, approached Akira simultaneously from both sides.

It was beyond the speed that an average person could follow. Even an ordinary hunter would unwittingly take a direct hit at such a speed, with their equipment torn apart.

Akira intercepted them by anticipating the trajectory of the whips. He thrust his fist forward, deflecting them. Even at a speed of being swung more than a dozen times in an instant, it was sufficiently slow for Akira, who manipulated his perception of time. Like striking a stationary object, he accurately struck back.

The impact sent Babalod's long arms flying far away. Before those arms could attack him again, Akira closed the distance between him and Babalod. With Akira's augmented suit, a distance of eight meters could be reached in a single step. He half-leaped, kicking off the ground on the first step and closing the distance to Babalod in an instant.

Babalod's long arms were still floating in the air from being deflected. There was no time for him to bring them back to counter Akira. In other words, those arms were useless.

But that was exactly as Babalod had anticipated.

(This is it!)

In the next moment, additional arms forcefully emerged from behind Babalod and struck Akira. These arms were concealed as parts on his back by the cyborg Babalod. They didn't extend, but their output was extremely high.

Furthermore, even if Akira deflected Babalod's extended arms, he maintained his posture by squeezing out the remaining energy. This allowed him to strike with full force.

(Can he dodge this at this timing? I've won!)

With confidence in his victory, Babalod swung his fist at Akira with all his might.

But his fist cut through the air.

(What!?)

At the perfect moment, Akira dodged Babalod's fist and closed in on him. Then, he delivered a sweeping leg kick to Babalod.

Babalod's feet were firmly adhered to the ground as if assimilated with it due to the grounding function of his force field armor. However, Akira forcibly peeled them off with the power of a kick raised to the level of a superhuman by maximizing the output of his augmented suit. Babalod, with both feet ripped off the ground, spun twice in mid-air from the force of the kick.

Akira then slammed both hands down on Babalod. As Babalod's body received the blow, he violently crashed into the ground. The hard paved ground sank and numerous cracks radiated outwards.

Still, Babalod was not incapacitated. Driven by years of experience, he reflexively tried to get up.

But before that, Akira's kick pierced through him. Babalod's movement halted, and the match was decided.

“...I give up. I lost.”

Akira's kick had pierced through the ground right next to Babalod's head. He deliberately missed, and if the match were to continue,

Akira would have to strike Babalod's head next. If he were hit, severe injury was certain. If he were unlucky, it could be fatal.

However, Babalod didn't admit defeat because he didn't want to take that hit. What forced him to accept defeat was not wanting to take that final blow, but the attack with his concealed arm that he launched at the end, and the expression he saw on Akira's face when it was dodged.

There was no surprise on that face.

Whether it was because Akira had anticipated the attack from the concealed arm, or because it was something Akira could handle without difficulty even if it was unexpected, Babalod didn't know.

But either way, it was enough to break Babalod's spirit. He couldn't win against someone who could handle that situation perfectly. Thinking that, Babalod lost his will to fight. Even if he harbored resentment, he wouldn't attack later.

Sensing that Babalod had completely lost his will to fight, Akira relaxed and exhaled. Carol came over, smiling, to congratulate Akira on his victory.

“Akira, well done. You're amazing.”

Babalod, lying there defeated, muttered sulkily.

“Carol. Did you earn enough to hire someone like this? How much? How much did you pay? ”

He was the one who lost to his opponent. Babalod had been hoping to extort an enormous sum of money from Carol. If he had been defeated by someone hired for such a large sum of money, he could accept it. Babalod had asked without much thought, thinking about that.

“Akira, can I tell him? ”

“Huh? Oh, sure, go ahead.”

“It's 130 million auras for one month.”

“130 million!? You! You hired someone for such a low amount of money!? That's cheap.”

Akira couldn't help but think so.

Then Carol continued.

“Plus, during the escort request, he's allowed to embrace me as much as he want.”

“Is that so! ”

Babalod thought it was understandable.

Zelos arrived a little later. He then said to Carol,

“Lost, huh? Can't be helped. Regarding how we handle the confidential information of our team that you know, it's up to your negotiations. I'll have our mediator contact you later...”

Zelos tried to proceed with the negotiation arrangements here, but Carol stopped him.

“Wait a moment. I think she'll be here soon.”

“Who? ”

Viola arrived. With her usual sinister grin and a confident attitude, she addressed Akira's group.

“Carol. I came to see how it turned out. So what happened in the end? ”

Indicating that she wasn't aware of the situation, Carol denied it with a smile.

“You were probably watching somewhere, right? Well, it doesn't matter. Anyway, it's up to you now. Wrap things up nicely, please.”

Viola laughed and replied to Carol's request, which would be incomprehensible to someone who didn't understand the situation.

“If you were going to delegate everything to me, you should have just left everything to me from the beginning.”

“If we did that, it would be expensive, right? Well, I've asked you. Let's go, Akira.”

“Ah, yeah...”

It was impossible for Akira, lacking negotiation skills, to accurately grasp the content even up to the point where Carol and Viola spoke, so he lightly felt bewildered. However, he thought that whatever had been conveyed between the two must have been communicated accurately, so he followed Carol back to the apartment.

Zelos slightly raised his eyebrows at the dubious woman who appeared as a matter of course.

“...Are you the negotiator from Carol's side? ”

“That's right. Please take care of me. Shall we change the location and talk? ”

“Understood.”

Zelos decided to have a brief conversation with the shady woman before leaving it to the team's negotiator. And aside from that, he gave Babalod a slightly sharp look.

“Babalod. Now that you've lost, prepare yourself, okay? ”

Babalod, who was already standing up, let out a small sigh with a calm expression.

“...I understand. Do as you like.”

Babalod had accepted his defeat gracefully, partly because he could accept a reasonable loss. Zelos nodded lightly and then turned his attention to the security guard.

“If you want compensation or repair costs, you should send someone to negotiate on your side too. If not, it's fine.”

“R-Right. I'll report to my superiors immediately.”

Negotiating with a high-rank hunter was not his job. The man thought so and promptly contacted his superiors.

Afterwards, Zelos and his team also left the scene. The situation, which could have escalated into a flashy clash between high-ranking hunters, ended with only some damage to the ground in front of the luxury apartment building, a remarkably peaceful outcome.

Chapter 218: How Akira Entertains Now

Upon returning to Carol's home, Akira took a quick shower to wash off the sweat, then changed into casual clothes. He didn't comment on the fact that there were men's, child-sized pajamas in Carol's house.

Carol also changed into pajamas after showering with Akira. The pajamas were thin and glossy, resembling something one would lightly wear before going to bed without putting on any clothes. With some skin exposure, they had an even greater allure for those still feeling the excitement of battle. But Akira's reaction remained unchanged, prompting a small sigh from Carol.

“So, Akira, is it okay for you to stay over tonight? ”

“Huh? Oh yeah, sure. I'll do that.”

“Alright. Shall we have dinner then? ”

Carol quickly prepared a meal. While the dishes were simple to cook, they used ingredients suited for the wealthy, and the taste was up to the standards of the Inner Wall. Enjoying the delicious meal, Akira slightly leaned towards making Carol's house his own rather than returning to his own.

Later, it was time for bed. At Carol's request, Akira agreed to sleep together in the same bed as her bodyguard. With only thin white sheets covering them, Akira closed his eyes next to Carol, who lay without wearing underwear, and soon fell asleep.

Akira wasn't completely uninterested in women, and Carol knew that. It was evident from Akira's reaction to Elena and others during their exploration of the Mihazono District Ruin.

The enchanting evil woman who had captivated many of the opposite sex wondered what was wrong with herself, exhaling a small sigh of frustration.



In the end, Akira ended up living at Carol's house.

Not being at his own home and with Carol by his side, it was difficult for Akira to engage in simulated battles against Alphas. Instead, he focused on studying and training exercises such as manipulating perceived time and adjusting reality resolution.

He also enjoyed watching videos and playing games with Carol. He had no trouble passing the time and enjoyed a leisurely pace.

Then a call came in from Kibayashi.

“Akira. Can you come to Kugama building right now? ”

“Right now? That's quite sudden.”

“I'm not forcing you. It's okay if you're late. If you have something else going on, it can be a week or a month later. But for every delay, your new equipment procurement will also be delayed. That's the deal.”

“Got it. I'll go right away. But why is Kibayashi contacting me about the new equipment? ”

“Because I'm also helping you procure your equipment.”

Akira fell silent. Sensing what was included in that silence, Kibayashi chuckled merrily.

“Don't worry. I'm not plotting anything. Didn't I tell you? I'm rooting for you. I just want you to use the best equipment possible.”

“I see.”

Akira found that believable. Perhaps Kibayashi thought that the more high-performance his equipment was, the more intense battles

he would be involved in. In order to enjoy that, he was genuinely trying to provide Akira with the highest performance equipment possible. Akira thought so and refrained from saying anything unnecessary.

Kibayashi said cheerfully.

“Alright then. I'll be waiting. Hurry up.”

Akira explained the situation to Carol and they headed to Kugama building together.

Akira, driven by Carol, arrived at Kugama building. Hikaru was waiting in front of the building.

Hikaru, somewhat surprised that Akira came with a woman, led Akira and Carol to Sterian, a high-end restaurant located on the upper floors of the building.

Although Hikaru had no acquaintance with Carol, she was aware of Akira's information through reviewing his files. She knew about her side job, and that many hunters were being ruined due to poor information connections. She understood that Carol was such a dangerous woman.

But she didn't interfere. Akira himself was a dangerous individual who could have killed about a thousand people. She avoided such matters.

“But still, when a hunter like Akira is invited to a simple gathering, the place becomes a high-class restaurant like Sterian.”

“Hmm. Is that so? ”

While Akira lightly responded, he couldn't shake off the weight in his mind.

If he was being summoned, it would be rude if it weren't in such a place. That's what he thought, and in a sense, he felt the strongest realization of his ascent as a hunter so far.

Upon arriving at Sterian, they handed over their guns at the entrance before entering the restaurant. Despite being offered suitable clothes, they declined and remained in their augmented suits. Carol also entered in the same attire as Akira.

They were led to a spacious private room at the back of the restaurant. It was a room used by the wealthy clientele of Sterian and also for meetings of corporate executives. In other words, it belonged to that class of people.

Kibayashi, who was already in the room, greeted Akira with a smile.

“You're here. It was unexpected for you to come with a woman.”

“It's not a big deal, is it? I have my reasons too. So, why did you summon me? ”

“Well, first, wait here for an hour.” Akira looked puzzled.

“You called me urgently to come here and now you want me to wait for an hour. What's the deal? ”

“Calm down. It wasn't an urgent call for no reason. There's a reason for you to wait for an hour after you've arrived. Go ahead and enjoy a good meal. It's on our side, including for your companion. Order whatever you like.”

Akira was dissatisfied with the inexplicable summons, but it vanished in the presence of Sterian's food. He sat quietly and reached for the menu.

Carol, seeing Akira's demeanor, smiled amusedly and took her seat as well.

After placing their orders and waiting for a while, the dishes were brought out. In the meantime, Kibayashi had left the table with Hikaru, but returned alone.

“Where's Hikaru? ”

“He's welcoming other guests.”

“Are there others coming? ”

“Yeah, representatives from the company that wants you to use their in-house products. It's undecided how many will come. I don't think none will come, but if that happens, we'll deal with it then.”

Akira decided not to delve deeper, seeing Kibayashi's face lit up with excitement at the prospect.

“Well, let me briefly explain why I called you here today. Listen while you eat.” Akira nodded and began to eat the food first. Despite almost being distracted by its deliciousness, he managed to focus on listening to Kibayashi's words.

Seeing Akira's reaction, Kibayashi laughed and offered some advice.

“In any future negotiations you have, if someone suggests using this place as the negotiation venue, you should refuse.”

Akira chuckled bitterly. He couldn't deny it. His palate wasn't refined enough to concentrate on negotiations while eating this food.

Despite astonishing many with his exceptional rise, a high-ranking hunter, Akira's palate remained that of an ordinary hunter's, struggling with dishes that were trivial compared to his extraordinary earnings.

Kibayashi had called Akira to accompany him to the venue where the source of Akira's new equipment would be determined.

Akira's hunter rank was expected to increase significantly as compensation from Sakashita Heavy Industry. Kibayashi had asked each company to estimate how much it would increase and ensure they provided equipment worth at least that amount.

However, even for the sake of advertising their own products, providing very expensive equipment for high-ranking hunters at a loss, hoping for advertising effects, would result in significant losses if Akira were to perish in the wasteland.

Understanding this, companies offering high hunter ranks were showing how much they valued Akira. It was likely that Akira would continue to engage positively with such companies over the long term. Kibayashi was trying to persuade each company to provide the highest-performance equipment possible with such sweet words.

Akira's hunter rank had been updated just before Kibayashi contacted him. However, it had not yet been reflected on the Hunter Office's individual pages. Kibayashi had halted this with the authority of the Hunter Office staff because once it was updated, each company would know about Akira's increased hunter rank.

The update would be carried out later, when representatives from each company gathered. Detailed adjustments to the new equipment would be made with the respective personnel after the purchasing company was decided.

Kibayashi concluded by explaining that the delay in Akira's equipment procurement was due to this.

After finishing his meal and dessert and starting on his after-dinner coffee, Akira cleared his plate and moved on to the next. Ordering dishes whose ingredients and cooking methods he didn't know based solely on the trust in Sterian's cooking, he bravely challenged them.

“So, when will I actually get my equipment? ”

“That depends on the company you're purchasing from. It could be today, or it could be a month from now.”

“Why such a difference? ”

“If they have to bring it from warehouses in other cities, it'll take some time for transportation. Even if the goods are already in a nearby warehouse and it takes only 30 minutes to deliver to you, it could take a month to decide which product to sell to you and for how much. Even if they sell it at half price for advertising purposes, if it's a 20 billion product, it's still 10 billion, right? So, it's not easy to make a quick decision, is it? ”

“I see...”

Already using high-performance equipment worth 5 billion Aurum, Akira understood that the figure of 20 billion Aurum mentioned by Kibayashi wasn't so extreme given her need for better equipment. He understood the numbers.

Still, even for Akira, who doesn't consider 10 million Aurum pocket change, it's literally a huge sum of money. It was unsettling for him that something as simple as procuring his own equipment had become such a significant financial matter.

As Akira finished his meal, polished off his dessert, and began to drink his post-dinner coffee, representatives from various companies were gathered at a table a little distance away. There was no food on their table, only drinks.

Hikaru, who had been guiding company representatives to the room and then going to greet the next ones, returned with Inabe last. It also indicated that time was up. It had been an hour since Akira arrived.

Kibayashi stood up and moved from Akira's table to the companies' table, smiling politely.

“Thank you for waiting. Those of you who were able to come despite the sudden summons will surely be highly regarded by the hunter in question. At least more so than those who couldn't make it in time.”

Companies that couldn't send representatives here would likely be turned away even if there were future opportunities for acquiring new equipment. Kibayashi implicitly conveyed this and commended the efforts of those present.

“Now then, you've all already provided your estimates for the hunter's appropriate rank for the next equipment. Changes are still accepted. The one who provides the closest rank will gain the negotiation rights for the hunter's new equipment procurement. Is that understood? This is your last chance for changes. Is that clear?”

Representatives from each company responded with serious expressions but remained silent.

“...Understood? Well then, as a Hunter Office staff member, I will proceed with the update process for the hunter's rank. Let's begin.”

On the augmented vision of each company's representative, Akira's individual page from the Hunter Office was already displayed. Akira and Carol were also looking at the same thing on their own information terminals.

And as the displayed content was updated, the expressions of each company's representatives filled with astonishment.

Akira's hunter rank was 70.

Even Akira couldn't hide his surprise. Though he might not be familiar with the norms of hunter ranks, he could understand that this was something that shouldn't normally happen.

『...Alpha. What does a hunter rank of 70 mean in terms of being a hunter? 』

『Well, you remember when we fought those giant insects with the inter-city transport vehicles, right? The minimum hunter rank for those positioned at the head of those transport vehicles was around 70. I mentioned to you back then that I hoped you'd reach that level soon, but it seems it happened sooner than expected.』

『Y-yeah...』

That was all Akira could manage to say in response to Alpha's cheerful smile. He then looked at Kibayashi with a somewhat tense expression.

Kibayashi returned his gaze with a smile that seemed to say, “That's the face I wanted to see.”

Behind the extraordinary situation where Akira's hunter rank had skyrocketed from 55 to 70, there were reasons at play.

Akira had asked Inabe to convert his compensation from Sakashita Heavy Industry into both money and hunter rank. However, due to Kibayashi's intervention, it had been changed to only an increase in hunter rank.

As one of the Big Five Corporations, Sakashita Heavy Industry had to show generous attitudes toward those who demonstrated contributions to the company. If asked for compensation in money, they would have to pay a significant sum, befitting their reputation. However, Sakashita Heavy Industry did not have unlimited funds.

However, an increase in hunter rank alone would not require them to pay money. Furthermore, a significant increase in hunter rank

served as sufficient compensation to maintain Sakashita Heavy Industry' prestige.

Nevertheless, even with both Akira's and Hikaru's compensations combined, it wasn't enough to justify a substantial increase from 55 to 70.

Hikaru had lost the opportunity for promotion in Kugamayama City based on the compensation from Sakashita Heavy Industry. In other words, there was no longer a reason for Hikaru to continue handling Akira's affairs. While it was a clear loss in conventional terms, it wasn't a problem for Hikaru, who wanted to step down from her position.

When Hikaru was stopped by Inabe and asked if she was sure about her decision, Hikaru promised Inabe that she would do everything in her power to procure high-performance equipment for Akira, her benefactor who had saved her life. She persuaded Inabe to allow her to use her compensation for Akira's benefit.

Using compensation from Sakashita Heavy Industry for two people's worth would indeed justify a significant increase in hunter rank. However, it still wasn't enough to explain the jump from 55 to 70.

In a world where even for ordinary hunters, it took years just to increase by one rank, and many hunters never rose in rank even in their lifetime, a sudden increase of 15 ranks was extraordinary.

Behind this abnormal situation lay the battle prowess Akira demonstrated in the inter-city transport vehicles against Erde.

Hunter rank didn't strictly indicate one's abilities but rather their contributions to the Corporate Government through the hunter profession. However, it served as a rough measure of one's abilities and was utilized as such. This was why there were requests for adjusting hunter ranks.

And Akira's strength in defeating Erde clearly surpassed the standard for a hunter rank of 55. While Akira had received requests for adjusting his hunter rank in the past, it was clear that an additional adjustment was urgently needed now.

So, Sakashita Heavy Industry decided to treat this incident as a kind of adjustment request for Hunter Rank.

It's a special case, a special treatment indeed. However, fundamentally, this matter is a reward for Sakashita Heavy Industry using Akira and the others as decoys without their consent, a return for their significant contributions to Sakashita Heavy Industry.

And if we return to the premise that Hunter Rank indicates the contribution to the Corporate Government, and considering Sakashita Heavy Industry as a major component of the Corporate Government, their contribution directly contributes to the Corporate Government. Therefore, it can be interpreted that rewarding them for their contribution is only natural from Sakashita Heavy Industry' perspective, providing a convincing reason externally.

Nevertheless, there were opinions within Sakashita Heavy Industry that raising it to 70 might be a bit excessive. However, a brief investigation revealed that the relevant hunter had been persistently engaged in blatant rank fraud. Taking that into consideration, Sakashita Heavy Industry decided to intentionally adjust Akira's Hunter Rank higher to prevent a third Hunter Rank adjustment request from occurring within this short period.

Due to these reasons, Akira became a Hunter with a Rank of 70. And this knowledge beforehand about Akira's Hunter Rank as a staff member of the Hunter Office made Kibayashi burst into laughter.

Kibayashi also expected Akira's Hunter Rank to increase significantly due to this incident. However, Kibayashi's expectation was, at most, around 65. Being easily surpassed by Akira, Kibayashi burst into laughter.

Addressing the individuals from various companies who couldn't hide their agitation over the unexpected turn of events, Kibayashi reverted his expression to a more customer-friendly one and spoke.

“Next, we'll proceed with the announcement from the party that has acquired negotiation rights.”

Strong gazes from individuals of various companies gathered on Kibayashi. Most of them estimated that Akira's Hunter Rank wouldn't exceed 60, at best. Yet, it turned out to be 70. With the possibility of significantly increased benefits if negotiation rights were acquired, and the potential losses if not, they awaited the announcement with bated breath.

And then Kibayashi announced the winner.

“Representatives from Kiryou. Congratulations. Please move to that table over there.”

There was no expression of joy on the faces of Kiryou's representatives. However, they stood up with serious faces and moved towards Akira's table.

“The rest of you, please leave. Thank you very much for your efforts today.” The defeated individuals exchanged glances. Then one of them spoke to Kibayashi.

“Can't we at least greet him? ”

“I'm afraid not. In this setting, priority belongs to the representatives from Kiryou, including that right. That's how it was decided, I believe.”

“But still...”

To the persisting man, Kibayashi solemnly responded.

“This gathering is conducted under the presence of the Hunter Office to ensure that all of you can part without holding grudges, regardless of the outcome. It's not advisable to break that agreement.”

The man sighed disappointedly. As a high-ranking executive of a company, he couldn't say anything more after the mention of the Hunter Office. He resignedly left the room, followed by others.

Inabe was about to leave the room as well. But before that, he called out to Hikaru, who was waiting behind.

“Then I'll leave the rest to you. I have follow-up things to do.”

“Y-Yes, understood.”

Kibayashi also addressed Hikaru.

“Hikaru. That's it for me. Now it's up to you. Do your best.”

“Huh!? Even you, Kibayashi-san!?”

“From here on, it's within the jurisdiction of Kugamayama City, right? I'm here as a staff member of the Hunter Office. I can't intervene. You're still in charge of Akira, right? Do your best.”

Inabe added.

“As he said, until Akira's equipment procurement is completed, you're in charge of him. You'll do everything you can, won't you? Do your best.”

With those words, Kibayashi and Inabe left.

“Y-Yes, understood!”

Hikaru, feeling somewhat disheartened, muttered quietly and headed towards Akira's table to fulfill his duties.



Since Akira had companions unrelated to his equipment procurement, he left the negotiations with Kiryou to Hikaru and slipped out midway.

Nevertheless, Akira had sufficiently completed the crucial parts of the negotiation. The delivery of the new equipment was scheduled for tomorrow. Moreover, Kiryou had guaranteed to provide equipment suitable for a Hunter Rank of at least 70.

Once that was settled, Akira felt that Hikaru and Kiryou could take their time to decide on the remaining details of the negotiation. He left Sterian with Carol a step ahead.

It should be noted that the Hunter Rank that Kiryou presented to Akira was 65. However, even 65 was too high originally. If judged normally, Kiryou would have offered around 60, like other companies. The reason for raising it to 65 significantly was due to a secret deal with Inabe.

Inabe, in exchange, had persuaded Kiryou to provide equipment to Akira, who had lost equipment during the inter-city transport vehicle battle, as loaned items during repairs. This was quite forceful.

In return, Inabe promised that when Kiryou provided equipment to Akira again in the future, he would guarantee the payment. Even if the payment exceeded Akira's financial capacity due to providing excessively high-performance equipment, Inabe assured he would cover all of it.

As a result, Kiryou didn't have to worry too much even if they provided Akira with excessively high-performance equipment to the point where the advertising effect diminished. Thus, they decided to significantly raise the offered Hunter Rank.

Based on this thinking, Kiryou set the number at 65, which they believed would surely exceed Akira's updated Hunter Rank. They

intended to use the difference between this number and the updated number as leverage in their deal with Kugamayama City for equipment delivery.

However, in the end, 65 couldn't surpass Akira's Hunter Rank. The executive who attended this meeting as Kiryou's representative was extremely surprised by this, but they continued negotiations without letting Akira and the others notice their astonishment. They had initially offered 70. They behaved admirably, dodging Hikaru's detailed inquiries.

Kiryou offering such favorable conditions as preparing equipment suitable for Hunter Rank 70 by tomorrow was because of these circumstances.

Of course, Akira was unaware of such circumstances. It would be difficult to even speculate. However, he was sure to obtain unexpectedly powerful equipment, and he showed a cheerful demeanor on his way home in the car.

Carol, who was driving, smiled and said,

“But really, Hunter Rank 70. I'm surprised. What did you do, Akira, during the inter-city transport vehicle battle? ”

“I can't go into details, but I fought against a really strong opponent. Normally, I would have definitely lost. Winning was purely luck.”

“I see. You were lucky.”

“Well, I had to fight such a tough opponent, so maybe it wasn't luck after all.”

“But you won, and as a result, your Hunter Rank became 70, and you also got powerful equipment, right? Ultimately, it turned out well, didn't it? ”

“Even if you say that...”

Akira understood what Carol meant. However, it was difficult for him to think of it as luck. His inner thoughts showed on his face, and his expression became a little troubled.

Seeing that, Carol continued with a smile.

“Well, you know what they say, 'When misfortune turns into fortune.' For every hardship you faced, the rewards were substantial. Isn't that good? It's better for your mental well-being to think that you overcame misfortune and gained luck, rather than just saying it was unlucky and leaving it at that.” Akira relaxed his expression.

“...Yeah.”

Instead of dismissing it as unfortunate, it's better to think that you overcame misfortune and gained luck, just as Carol said. Misfortune and fortune are two sides of the same coin. Thinking that way, the misfortune he had endured so far might have been opportunities for luck. Akira decided to think that way.

After being dropped off at her home, Akira began preparing to stay at Carol's house for a while. It wasn't much of a preparation, just bringing a few days' worth of underwear and loungewear.

Seeing the minimal amount of clothing that easily fit into one trunk, Carol chuckled.

“But still, Akira, even though you're willing to buy such expensive augmented suits, you don't have any casual or formal clothes. Aren't you going to buy any? ”

“Well, I'm not really interested in clothes...”

Akira was aware of his lack of fashion sense, so he lacked the intention to actively buy clothes.

“This place is where people with a Hunter Rank of around 30 live, right? Since you're 70 now, I think you could live in a better place.”

“Well, until yesterday, I was 55...”

“Even so. There are Hunters who change not only their homes but also their cities when they reach Hunter Rank 50... And, Akira, don't you have any desires? Even just a little? You don't seem to have any desire for material possessions, and considering you're not even showing any sexual desire... It's not healthy to lack desires too much, you know? ”

“Even if you say that...”

Akira did have desires. He wanted to wear decent clothes. He wanted to eat delicious food. He wanted a house with a roof. It was from such desires that he became a Hunter.

And those desires were quickly fulfilled. Moreover, considering his previous life in the harsh alleys of the slums, his desire for more had weakened.

The only exception was probably the bath.

Furthermore, attachment would grow with continued residence. Especially if it was a house obtained through hardship.

That was why, rather than moving, he desired to renovate the bathroom for a quality bathing experience.

With such reasons, Akira led a modest life that didn't seem fitting for a high-ranking Hunter earning a substantial income. Even so, he was satisfied with that life.

However, at that moment, Alpha's expression turned stern.

『Akira. Be on guard.』

Akira immediately went into a combat stance. Seeing that, Carol also heightened her vigilance.

“Akira. What's wrong? ”

“No, just a bit...”

In the next moment, Akira's house was blown away from the outside by an attack. Giant bullets, fired continuously from an oversized gun without any concern for collateral damage, reduced Akira's house to dust.

What Akira had obtained through arduous battles was once again lost.

Chapter 219: Battle at the Site of Home

Akira's home was completely obliterated without leaving even a pile of rubble. Parked on the street a short distance away was a trailer, upon which stood a figure of Babalod, wielding guns and blades designed for humanoid weapons.

Not weapons for humanoid robots, but explicitly for humanoid weapons. They were originally not meant for individuals of normal human size due to their immense proportions. However, the figure forcibly wielded them by wrapping its elongated arms around the handles of the weapons.

The barrage that blew up Akira's house came from the massive gun. The man who executed it without hesitation didn't believe he had killed Akira with the current attack. He cautiously watched the shadows of other buildings and partially destroyed structures, wary of any potential threats.

In the next moment, as the man anticipated, Akira leaped out from the shadows, rapidly firing both guns at him. He used the massive blade as a shield to deflect his gunfire while simultaneously unleashing a barrage from his humanoid weapon.

Enormous bullets struck the surroundings, pulverizing unfortunate houses. Despite being outside the main walls of the city, caution was warranted even within the city area. Residents within the defensive walls understood the need for escorts when venturing out, given the possibility of encountering intense battles.

Sensing the enemy's attack, Akira swiftly retreated. Utilizing the enhanced abilities of his humanoid weapon, he smashed through the walls of his home while carrying Carol, dodging the giant bullets with all his might.

Together, they burst out of the house and moved to the cover of nearby buildings. Akira deliberately exposed herself to draw attention away from Carol, while aiming both guns at the man.

It was then that Akira finally noticed the man's presence, expressing surprise at the unexpected adversary.

『He's...! Damn it! So he's finally attacked! 』

It was meant to make sure he wouldn't attack again later, but perhaps Akira had taunted him a bit too much. He regretted his actions, but Alpha denied it.

『Akira. It's not like that.』

『Not like what...? He's clearly attacking us, isn't he? 』

『It's not about that. While that body belongs to a man named Babalod with whom you fought before, the mind inside is different.』

『...Different person? What's going on? 』

In essence, Akira understood that the brain within that body belonged to someone else, not Babalod. However, he couldn't fathom why another person would attack using Babalod's body. Perplexed, Akira was further informed by Alpha.

『Akira. Save those thoughts for after the victory. What's important is that even though they look the same, it's a different person. Don't underestimate them just because you previously defeated someone who looked identical.』

『...Understood.』

While manipulating the perception of time, in a conversation that lasted only an instant in real time through telepathy, Akira tensed

up. He fired his guns relentlessly, launching numerous ^{Charge} C bullets from his two LEO multi-function guns with great force.

However, the opponent blocked with a massive blade. Designed for humanoid weapons, the sturdy blade not only boasted incredible power but also far surpassing durability compared to weapons for humans. Moreover, this blade was the armament of a powerful humanoid weapon piloted by a high-ranking hunter. It remained unscathed even after being struck by ^{Charge} C bullets capable of piercing thick steel plates.

In return, the opponent fired back with a gun of equivalent performance. Bullets the size of artillery shells were fired rapidly with tremendous force. Akira desperately evaded them.

He didn't entertain the naive idea that the opponent would soon run out of bullets with such a rate of fire. In the eastern regions, there existed something called an extended magazine, which Akira himself had benefited from greatly. He knew well that she wouldn't run out of ammunition.

Realizing that long-range combat was disadvantageous, Akira closed the distance with the man. While the opponent continued firing rapidly, he wasn't merely spraying bullets randomly but was aiming precisely at Akira. A single mistake in estimating the trajectory meant certain death.

Dodging countless enormous bullets flying straight at him, Akira relied on his humanoid weapon's force field to withstand the shockwaves emanating from the passing projectiles.

He continued to aim at the opponent's massive gun with both of his LEO multi-function guns. Although Akira couldn't destroy it despite repeated hits, Akira could disrupt his aim. Continuously bombarding him, Akira kept him from targeting either Akira or Carol accurately.

The aftermath of their gunfight resulted in even more buildings being completely destroyed, adding to the widespread devastation in the lower districts of the city. Despite involving only two individuals, neither of whom intended to cause such destruction, it demonstrated a concrete example of the potential damage if a high-ranking hunter lost control.

As Akira continued to fire while retreating, he closed in on the man. However, Akira also entered his blade's range as he did so.

Instantly, the blade swung at him. Despite its immense mass, it approached Akira with a speed that belied its weight. Not only fast but also sharp, displaying advanced sword techniques despite being wielded in a manner that wrapped its long arms around the handle.

If hit, Akira would die. Even if Alpha attempted to reinforce Akira's humanoid weapon's force field with godlike adjustments, it would be severed in an instant. That's how powerful it was.

However, Akira was accustomed to dodging attacks that would result in instant death. Even in the midst of extreme manipulation of perceived time, facing the threat of the massive blade, Akira remained unfazed. He kicked off the air, accelerating, slipping past the huge blade. Then, finding a position where the humanoid weapon couldn't attack, he dove into the man's guard and aimed both guns at him.

Simultaneously, the man aimed both guns at Akira, not with the elongated arms meant for wielding humanoid weapons but with normal-length arms growing from his back, gripping human-sized guns and taking aim at Akira.

Neither Akira nor the man could avoid it anymore. Both started shooting, releasing a hail of bullets that filled the narrow space between them.

The impact of the bullets sent Akira flying. His injuries remained minor only because he took immediate evasive action, intercepted

the incoming bullets with his own, and precisely controlled the output of his humanoid weapon's force field to momentarily enhance his defense.

Had any of these elements been lacking, Akira would have died. Despite Alpha's support being assumed, Akira possessed the ability to perform all these actions.

The man was bathed in high-powered ^{Charge} C bullets. Due to wielding humanoid weapons, he couldn't evade Akira's nimble movements. However, he remained standing. While the impact of the bullets threw off his aim, his body continued to move.

Babalod's body doesn't originally possess such powerful force field armor. However, the man was dramatically enhancing his defensive capabilities by utilizing the energy from the energy pack attached to the weapon for humanoid weapons to reinforce his force field armor through the extended arm he gripped.

Even a slight miscalculation in output adjustment would blow away his body due to overload. It was an impossible advanced technology for Babalod, the original owner of the body, but achievable for the man.

Akira, repelled from a position where he couldn't attack with the armaments for humanoid weapons, immediately regained his posture and attempted to dive back into the opponent's guard. However, the man swiftly regained his posture as well and attempted to attack Akira with his giant gun and blade.

The momentary offense and defense were not dominated by either of them.

A high-power laser piercing through space scorched the man's giant gun. Although it didn't result in complete destruction with one hit, it pierced through the formidable force field armor protecting the gun and damaged the barrel. Furthermore, the impact of the hit once again greatly disrupted the man's posture.

It was Carol who fired. She was using a variable composite gun capable of firing lasers as well. She was deploying it extensively to enhance its power and then firing.

Indeed, boasting that she could fight even in the deeper part of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, Carol's equipment performance was exceptionally high. Despite Akira's LEO multi-function gun failing to damage the giant gun even upon impact, Carol had successfully inflicted significant damage.

Carol connected with Akira via communication and said smugly with a fearless smile.

『I jumped in, but did I get in the way? 』

While the man's posture was disrupted, he aimed at Carol with his giant gun. Akira promptly kicked the gun. The extra-large bullet fired was thrown off course by the impact of the kick, flying far away from Carol.

『No, you're very welcome! Keep shooting at will! 』

While dodging the blade swung by the man once again, Akira aimed at the gun in the man's normal-sized hand and fired in rapid succession. Showering him with a large number of bullets to prevent him from attacking Carol with that gun as well.

『Is it okay? I might hit Akira this time, you know? 』

Carol asked in a light-hearted manner, but what she was asking was no joke.

She had no intention whatsoever of hitting Akira intentionally. However, there was no guarantee that she wouldn't hit him accidentally. The previous gunfire was possible because Akira was not going to be hit, given that it occurred immediately after he was

repelled from the man's guard. The high-speed combat between Akira and the man was just that fast.

Although she intended to support Akira, Carol didn't know if Akira perceived it that way. If he felt that Carol was getting in his way, he would refrain from further interference. To that thought, Akira responded with a cheerful laugh.

『It's okay! When it seems like I might get hit, I'll evade on my own! Just shoot with all your might without signaling! 』

Carol showed surprise at Akira's confident voice but quickly turned her face into a strong smile.

『 As expected of Hunter Rank 70! Your words are different! Understood! Make sure to dodge! 』

With this power, Akira's augmented suit couldn't withstand it. If Carol accidentally fired, Akira would die. Targeting a target in high-speed combat also increased the risk of accidental shooting. Carol understood this.

However, Akira claimed he could dodge on his own. If that was the case, refraining from shooting out of apprehension would be an insult to Akira. Thinking so, Carol trusted Akira and fired the next shot.

A powerful laser penetrated through space once again, scorching it. Then, it struck the man's giant gun. The gun suffered extensive damage, and due to increasing the output of the force field armor to protect the gun, a significant amount of energy was consumed.

Even the man couldn't react unexpectedly for the second time. But he couldn't evade. It was because Akira got in the way.

With Carol's support, Akira had switched the main objective of his attacks to obstructing the opponent's actions. If he didn't need to

defeat him himself, his freedom of movement would increase, and there would be no need for recklessness. He focused solely on using the abundant ammunition from the extended magazine to continuously disrupt the opponent's posture with the impact of the hits and avoided being attacked by Carol.

The man struggled desperately against this. However, having two weapons for humanoid weapons meant he was inferior to Akira in precision of movement. Dodging Akira's blade, he was infiltrated and kicked by Akira, aiming at the giant gun. At such close range, he could only exchange fire with Akira using the normal-sized gun. He had no room to aim for Carol at all.

Moreover, although he reinforced his defense using the enhanced force field armor with the energy pack attached to the humanoid weapon, Carol's attacks surpassed it in power.

Also, he couldn't use Akira as a shield. Even if Akira was in Carol's line of fire, he would deftly and accurately evade at the moment of firing.

Thus, the irregular two-on-one continued, and the man was being cornered. He had already taken six of Carol's attacks. Yet, he hadn't been defeated, demonstrating both the man's strength and the high performance of his equipment. Nonetheless, his limit was near.

And that limit came sooner than the seventh hit. Akira's kick struck his giant gun. It wasn't for destruction but to throw off its aim. However, with the force field armor's energy nearing depletion, it couldn't withstand even that level of impact.

The giant gun was heavily damaged and blown away. Along with it, the man's long arm gripping the gun was also torn off and flew away.

At this point, the man's victory was no longer possible. With half of the humanoid weapon's arms gone, the output of the body's force field armor was halved as well. Although the agility increased proportionally with the halved overall weight, it still wasn't enough

to evade Carol's attacks while being hindered by Akira. With the next hit, his body would surely be damaged, and he would be struck down in his weakened state.

Thinking so, the man immediately resorted to a desperate move. He aimed for a stalemate by stabbing each other. Pouring the remaining energy into the giant blade, he dramatically increased its power.

The humanoid weapon's blade was designed with the assumption of being used by humanoid weapons. In other words, it was designed so that even if the reverberations generated during use were absorbed by the using unit itself, there wouldn't be much of a problem with the sturdiness of humanoid weapons.

But those reverberations were a significant problem for the cyborg man. The maximum output blade's energy leakage alone was powerful enough to kill the man himself. With the energy poured into the blade, the output of the body's force field armor also decreased. Just holding it would cause the man to die in five seconds. Swinging it would crush his body with its reverberations.

However, even if his body remained intact, it would be destroyed by Akira and the others' gunfire. He no longer needed to worry about his body's damage. With that judgment, the man attempted to swing the giant blade with force. The injected energy caused the blade to glow, turning into a blade of light approaching Akira.

But the man's decision was a beat too late.

Carol's seventh gunfire hit the blade of light. It couldn't destroy it. The blade, having increased its strength to the limit, was also more durable, and Carol's laser couldn't even scratch it.

However, there was enough power to reduce the momentum of the swung blade and distort its trajectory slightly. Taking advantage of this, Akira aimed at the man with both hands' guns.

With the energy poured into the blade, the body's force field armor couldn't withstand Akira's gunfire. The man was hit by countless C-rank bullets and instantly turned into dust.

The blade, now without a wielder, flew off course with its momentum. It blew away a dozen or so unlucky buildings before finally rolling to the ground.

Akira let out a deep breath. It had been a tough opponent. He expressed that feeling with a weary demeanor.

But Alpha laughed and said,

『It's good we defeated him easily.』

『Easy? Where? 』

Akira couldn't help but show a dissatisfied expression, but Alpha continued to smile.

『Compared to fighting on an inter-city transport vehicle, wasn't it easier? 』

『Don't compare it to that...』

Indeed, the man was strong. However, compared to Erde, he was inferior, and there was no need to resort to gambling to win. Moreover, Carol's support was also present this time. In that sense, Akira's victory was natural, and it could be said that he won easily.

『...Well, even though I was supposed to be a guard, I got support as the guard target. Let's just say it was easy as Alpha put it.』

At that moment, Carol approached.

“Akira, are you okay? ”

“Yeah, I'm fine. Your support was a lifesaver. Thanks to that, we were able to defeat him easily.”

Akira said with a smile, and Carol was slightly surprised.

“Easily... I didn't see it that way, though.”

“It's usually much harder.”

“Is that considered easier? Becoming Hunter Rank 70, huh? ”

Carol lightly laughed in sympathy at Akira's self-deprecating smile, then changed her expression to a serious one.

“...But for Babalod to attack. What is Viola thinking? Couldn't she negotiate something to prevent such a thing? ”

Akira lightly informed Carol, who was furious judging Viola's fault in this matter.

“No, it wasn't Babalod who attacked. While the body may be his, the person inside is different,” Carol directed a surprised expression at Akira.

“...Is that so? Akira, how did you know? ”

Though Akira had learned this from Alpha, he couldn't tell Carol. However, Akira had another reason he could explain to Carol.

“He was stronger than when we fought before. If it was the same person inside, I would have won more easily.”

“I see...”

So, who attacked and for what reason? And why in Babalod's body? The same question floated in Akira and Carol's minds.



Various individuals approached Akira and the others after the battle.

Firstly, representatives from a private security firm responsible for maintaining order in the area where Akira lived arrived. They took extremely cautious measures, parking their vehicles at a distance, approaching unarmed with hands raised, as if negotiating a ceasefire with a potentially hostile organization.

Akira and the others briefly explained the situation to them, although they themselves didn't fully understand the situation. They only shared what they knew.

Following them were people like Kibayashi, Hikaru, and other city officials closely associated with Akira. While Kibayashi and Hikaru were expected, Inabe, a city executive, wouldn't usually bother to visit the site for minor damages outside the walls. However, upon hearing of Akira's involvement, he canceled his other appointments to come.

Akira explained only what he could understand to Kibayashi and the others, leaving all negotiations with the rental agents to Hikaru.

Hikaru was still responsible for Akira. Despite her tense expression from seeing the devastation around, she couldn't refuse. With genuine relief in her heart at the thought of being able to step down from Akira's supervision tomorrow, she proceeded with her work as usual.

Despite seeing the same devastation, Kibayashi was smiling cheerfully.

“But seriously, Akira. You've really stirred things up again.”

“...It wasn't me. It was the ones who attacked us.”

Akira stated this, asserting his position as a victim, although he himself doubted if it would serve as a valid excuse.

“...Honestly, if they had attacked tomorrow, I could have fought them with the new equipment...”

Akira's disappointment was evident on his face.

Kibayashi lightly remarked, “So maybe they attacked today for that reason? ”

“...Is that so? ”

“It's a possibility. If someone intended to kill the person with a Hunter Rank of 70 as an escort, they would likely gather such information. ...Well, they were Rank 55 just a few hours ago, so maybe I'm overthinking it.”

Inabe asked Carol.

“We'll investigate here too, but do you have any leads on the attacker's identity? You hired Akira as an escort. Did you anticipate the attack? ”

“...It's hard to say. I'm aware that I've made enemies, and it wasn't long ago that I was caught up in a lot of trouble with Lot Break.”

“I see.”

What Inabe wanted to confirm was the probability that the attack targeted Akira rather than Carol. If Carol had no leads on the attacker's identity, it would increase the likelihood that it was aimed at Akira.

Carol also realized Inabe's intentions. Even so, she couldn't completely deny that the attack was aimed at Akira.

Additionally, Carol considered something else.

Even if the attack was aimed at her, if it was due to the reason for hiring Akira as a bodyguard, the purpose should have been to detain her, not to kill her.

However, this time they were definitely trying to kill him. Even if it resulted in his death, there should have been some kind of advance notice, like during the Lot Break incident, but there was none.

Why would someone of such skill execute such an intense attack against him? Carol truly had no clue on that point.

“Viola. Do you have any leads on your end? ”

Viola, accompanied by Zelos and Babalod, arrived upon hearing the commotion. After being shown records of the battle by Akira and confirming that the opponent had indeed used Babalod's original body, Viola smiled with interest, Zelos' expression turned grim, and Babalod contorted his face as if falsely accused.

When Viola was asked, she responded with her usual sinister grin.

“I have no idea. I sold Babalod's body, but only to a dealer. I don't know where it ended up afterward. Of course, we'll investigate that from now on.”

Zelos chimed in.

“We'll investigate on our end too. We don't know who did it, but someone went to the trouble of using Babalod's body. There's also the fear of sabotage from another team to make it look like our doing.”

Akira said seriously, turning to Viola.

“Viola. I'm also asking you. Please investigate this incident properly. We killed the ones who attacked us, but if there's someone behind them, I want to know.”

“I don't mind, but if you're asking for a formal investigation request, then you'll have to pay for it, right? ”

“How much? ”

“We won't know until we investigate. If there's a dangerous adversary involved, the investigation will be equally challenging, and it will require corresponding expenses. After all, it's an attack on someone with a Hunter Rank of 70. If you want a thorough investigation, you'll need to pay upfront. My motivation will also depend on the reward, you know? ”

Akira groaned with a troubled expression. He understood her point, but he didn't have any extra money to spare, as he planned to invest his funds in the new equipment.

Seeing Akira's dilemma, Viola was about to propose conditions favorable to her. However, before she could, Akira came up with an idea.

“Then let's do this. If you can conduct a proper investigation, I'll consider it as payment for sparing your life. Additionally, as a down payment, I'll give you a warning before killing you due to a misunderstanding. How about that? ”

Facing Akira's words, which were essentially saying “Refuse, and I'll kill you,” Viola laughed rather joyfully.

“If that's what you say, then I'll have to get serious too. Understood.”

“I'm counting on you.”

“Oh, but let me ask one thing. It's not unusual for someone like you, Akira, to be attacked. Bringing up such conditions for something as trivial as that seems like quite a grand gesture to me. May I ask why you're so eager to know the reason? ”

Convince him that keeping her alive was the right choice. Viola's deal with Akira regarding the major showdown between the two slum factions has yet to be finalized. In a sense, it's been an ongoing probationary period.

Despite deeply infiltrating Sheryl's faction and significantly contributing to its economic development, Akira would have no qualms about killing Viola. Even if Viola's death would have a detrimental impact on Sheryl's faction, he would still declare that he'd kill her next time, even due to a misunderstanding, to the extent that he doesn't see any value in Viola's survival.

For Viola, it seemed quite surprising that Akira, who would go as far as to set such conditions for such a trivial matter, had some hidden motive. She couldn't help but suspect that there might be something more to it.

Akira responded to Viola's question with a displeased expression.

“Is it really that surprising? My house got blown up, you know? And it was just renovated not long ago.”

While Viola couldn't fully accept the content of his response, she easily saw that Akira's anger was genuine. Taking him as someone who wouldn't deceive, she decided to appease him by aligning her words accordingly.

“Oh, right, I see. My bad. I'll make sure to investigate properly, so please spare me.”

“...I'm counting on you.”

Akira also noticed his lack of composure and suppressed his frustration, saying only that.

Then he let out a heavy sigh. The sight before him, the remains of his home, not even a ruin, filled Akira with a profound sense of loss.



Akira, having lost his home, exhales in Carol's bathtub. Although he's experiencing a luxurious bathing experience, his breath carries a somber tone. His reactions to Carol, with whom he's sharing the bath, have become even more subdued, to the point where it wouldn't be an issue if Alpha were to appear.

Seeing Akira's appearance, which doesn't match his Hunter Rank of 70, Carol chuckled with a wry smile.

“Akira. Did you really like that house so much? ”

“...Yeah, I guess. It was the home I finally managed to obtain after a lot of hard work.”

“I see. Then I really did something terrible. I'm sorry.”

Carol smiled, but she was genuinely apologizing. Akira found Carol's attitude slightly surprising as he responded.

“Huh? It's not your fault, Carol. The one to blame is the guy who attacked me in a place like that. You're not at fault. You supported me and helped me survive.”

“I'm glad you say that. Well, until you find your next home, feel free to think of this place as your own. It seems like you have no complaints about the quality of my bathroom, Akira.”

In the end, Akira acknowledged that her house's bathroom was superior to his own. So, he chose her house over his. She win. Carol smiled proudly, conveying that intention.

“...Yeah, you're right. I'll think carefully about the next house.”

With determination to win next time, Akira replied with a confident smile. And he also thought about something else.

He had indeed lost what he had finally obtained with great effort, his own home, which felt like a matter of life and death. However, with his current capabilities, he could obtain even better things without going through the same hardships. He had gained that much strength.

Tomorrow, he would acquire new equipment. If that equipment had sufficient capabilities, it would mark the beginning of a full-fledged expedition into the ruins, as per Alpha's request. While losing his home was regrettable, now was not the time to lament and stand still.

Let's do his best. With that determination, Akira regained his motivation. Both the real and the imaginary beauties in Akira's field of vision seemed to sense his motivation and smiled happily.

Chapter 220: Escaping Financial Constraints

In the defensive walls of the city of Kugamayama, there are numerous large import gates. There, gigantic transport vehicles, taller than Akira himself with just their tires, constantly come and go, supplying the city with massive amounts of goods from outside the walls. Naturally, access is restricted to authorized personnel only and the area is thoroughly guarded by the city's defense force.

Akira had come to the warehouse within one of those import gates with Carol to pick up his new equipment.

And it was Shizuka who welcomed Akira there, directing her usual bright smile towards him.

“Akira. Welcome...I wonder if it's okay? ”

“Isn't it good? Today, let's just say this is a branch of Cartridge Freak.”

“Indeed. Let's go with that. So, once again. Welcome to Cartridge Freak No. 2, Akira.”

Cartridge Freak, Shizuka's store, used to be an ordinary general store for hunters. It hadn't gone out of business, but it wasn't thriving either, not to the point where opening a second branch was feasible. It was just an average store.

Even after Akira became a customer at the store, there wasn't much change in its bustling. The addition of one regular customer was merely a statistical error in terms of clientele.

But something significant had changed. Shizuka mentioned it to Akira with a smile.

“But my store seems to have adopted quite an audacious business model. Without even stocking the merchandise in the store, profits come in effortlessly. I thought I was running an ethical business, but...”

Though Akira was purchasing new equipment from the Kiryou, strictly speaking, he had decided to buy from the store, but he was ordering and purchasing the equipment from Shizuka's store.

It was equipment for Hunter Rank 70, naturally priced exorbitantly. Even if the store operated with an ethical profit margin, which could potentially bankrupt it with other items, the profit from this transaction was staggering.

“It's fine, isn't it? I've been relying on Shizuka-san's store since I was a fledgling hunter. Make sure to make a profit.”

Akira responded with a smile, remembering the previous equipment purchase.

“Also, remember when you mentioned something about the profit being not quite there when it was a proxy order last time, Shizuka-san? I told you to expect something in the future, and you said you were expecting it too, right? It took a while, but here we are.”

“That did happen. It was worth properly accommodating a future big customer like you. Let's just say, I live up to my reputation.”

Akira and Shizuka laughed casually, exchanging jokes. Even though Akira's Hunter Rank had reached 70, and the equipment's price now easily exceeded hundreds of million, and Shizuka's store remained an ordinary hunter's shop, the two continued to laugh just as before. That's how Akira wished it would always be.

“Well then, I must make sure to properly accommodate you today as well. Now, Akira-sama, here are today's items.”

Shizuka said, indicating with her hand the new set of equipment for Akira placed in the warehouse, and began explaining them.

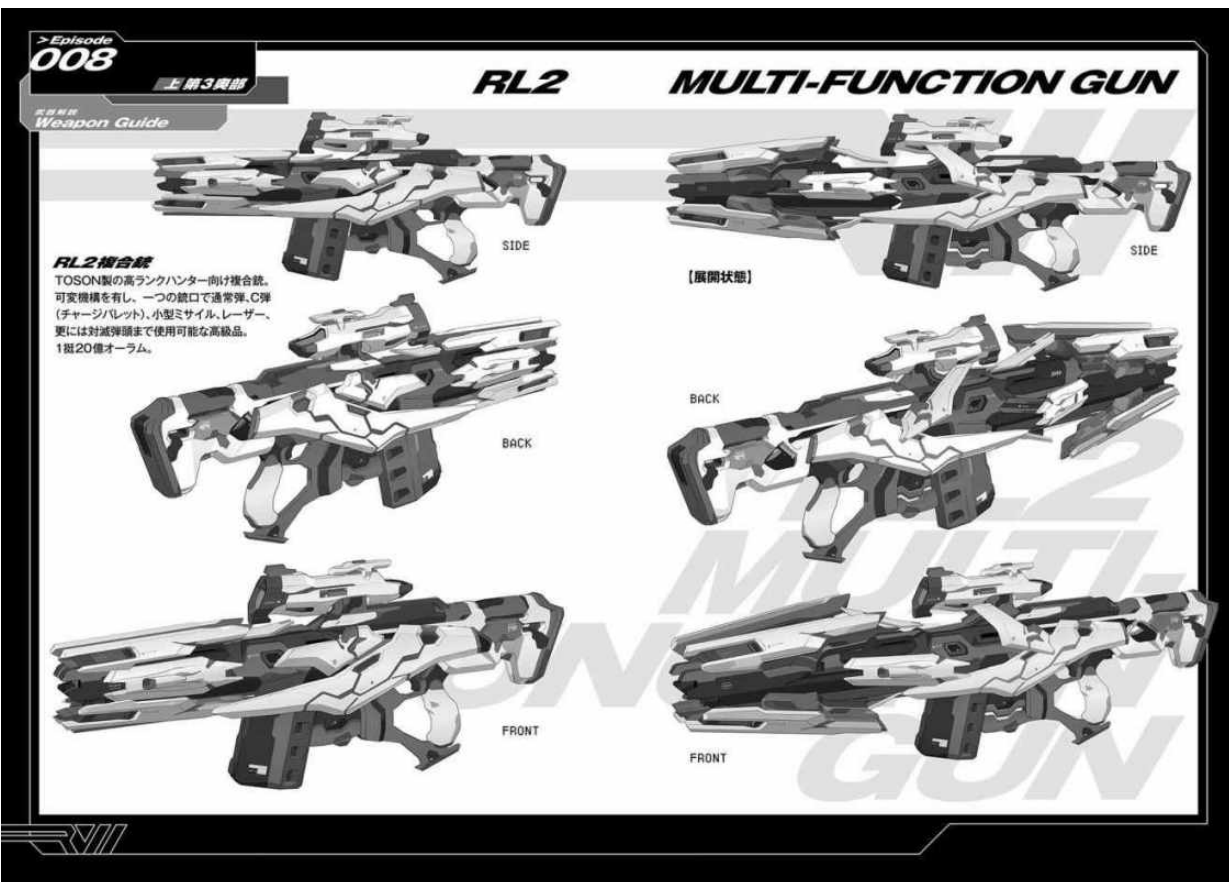
Akira's new augmented suit was the HC31R Augmented Suit, product name Roscarden. It was already powerful enough for high-rank hunters, but it had been further reinforced by incorporating high-performance expansion parts. Its price, physical abilities, and force field armor strength were comparable to high-priced humanoid weapons. It could even deploy a force field barrier. The precision of the integrated information gathering device was exceptionally high.

Optional items were also included. Protective coat, backpack, and two blades.

The hooded long coat was not only extremely sturdy but also capable of some degree of movement, serving as a substitute for auxiliary arms. It also had advanced camouflage functionality. Its performance was such that even an ordinary person wouldn't be able to visually recognize it if it were right in front of them, and it couldn't be detected even by standard information gathering device. The backpack had similar functions.

The curved black single-edged blades had such sharpness that even an amateur wielding them could cut through steel. By increasing the output of the force field armor used to protect the blade, its cutting power could be further enhanced. It also had standard anti-force field armor functionality. Additionally, it could emit directional energy with slicing capability, easily slicing through enemies beyond arm's reach.

The new gun was the RL2 Multi-function Gun. It was a variable-type gun capable of firing not only regular bullets, ^{Charge} C bullets, and small missiles from a single muzzle but also what is commonly referred to as an AF laser cannon. Furthermore, although it wasn't procured this time, it was compatible with anti-annihilator warheads. Four of these guns were procured through the Kiryou.



The bike had also been repaired and brought in. The energy tank it carried had been replaced with an even larger one available for purchase at Hunter Rank 70, and the blade generator had been injected with higher-performance liquid metal. The gun attached to the auxiliary arm had also been repaired.

Various types of extended magazines and energy packs suitable for Hunter Rank 70 had been procured. Trial samples of medicines at the same level were also obtained.

After finishing the explanations, Shizuka looked again at the documents in her hand and smiled wryly. A single gun cost 2 billion Aurums. The augmented suit, including optional items, exceeded 10 billion Aurums. The prices of consumables were also on a completely different scale.

“In total, it's 21.8 billion Aurums. It's an outrageous amount, isn't it, Akira? Are you sure you're okay with this?”

This amount was the usual payment, the amount paid to Shizuka's store. Once it entered the store's account, the amount minus the store's profit would immediately be transferred to the Kiryou.

And the payment to the store itself was handled by Inabe. Discounts as advertising fees for having Akira promote their in-house products were negotiated behind the scenes and wouldn't appear in Shizuka's store's accounting.

Shizuka had been partially informed of the underlying situation and knew that Akira wouldn't be paying the full 21.8 billion Aurums, but even so, the amount was significant. Her usual smile couldn't quite be mustered.

Akira returned a somewhat forced smile.

“W-well, it's okay. I'll figure something out. Somehow.”

Even after deducting the advertising fee discount, the amount far exceeded Akira's ability to pay. Without Inabe's assistance, he would absolutely not be able to afford it. Of course, Akira intended to pay it back properly, but he couldn't return the confident expression.

Inabe, who had been listening to the conversation alongside the executives of the Kiryou, addressed Shizuka.

“Please don't worry. He'll be fine. I've judged as such, which is why I've been investing in him from before. There's no problem.”

To avoid any disrespect to the city's officials, Shizuka politely bowed her head.

“If you say so, I can rest assured. Akira, keep up the good work from now on. But don't overdo it, okay? ”

“Yes. I'll be careful.”

Akira nodded firmly with a smile.

Carol, who had accompanied Akira, and Elena and Sara, who had come here with Shizuka, were watching Akira's group from a distance.

Observing Shizuka's demeanor, Elena chuckled slightly and said to Sara.

“Shizuka has it tough too, huh? Being brought to a place where even city officials and Kiryou executives are present.”

“Well, it can't be helped, can it? With Akira's equipment procurement, they're making billions just for today, right? Dealing with big shots is tough, but sometimes you have to.”

Sara added with a light chuckle.

“Besides, it seems like it's not Shizuka who needs to worry about displeasing someone, but rather the ones dealing with Shizuka's counterparts.”

“Seems like it.”

A Hunter with a rank of 70, the head of a major faction within the Kugamayama City management, and executives of renowned companies—all of these individuals were paying attention to the manager of a small-scale personal business in a lower district. To those unaware of the circumstances, this scene might seem inexplicable.

Originally, the location for Akira's equipment handover was supposed to be Shizuka's shop, just like last time. However, due to the incident of Akira's house being blown up yesterday and the need for important figures like Inabe to attend the equipment handover, the location was abruptly changed to this place due to security concerns.

Therefore, Shizuka didn't need to be present at this location. She wasn't using the store either. Even without a store manager present,

the equipment handover could proceed perfectly fine.

So why was Shizuka here? It was because Inabe and the Kiryou had requested her presence. And it was to show Akira that they weren't disregarding Shizuka.

Shizuka understood this to some extent. For Akira's sake, she remained calm and composed, without adopting an overly arrogant attitude that would offend the other party, nor excessively flattering Akira and risking his displeasure. And that understanding approach had left a positive impression on Inabe and the others.

Elena shifted her gaze from Shizuka to Akira.

“But still... a Hunter Rank 70... That's amazing.”

Sara nodded with a slightly melancholic smile.

“Yes, truly remarkable.”

Elena and Sara's Hunter Rank was 45. It had been 40 around the time of their battle at the Lida Commercial District Ruin, but it had risen so rapidly in this short period. According to the standards of ordinary hunters, it was quite astonishing and wouldn't normally be achievable.

This was the result of Elena and Sara making a fortune alongside Akira through thinning missions related to large-scale circulation. There were certainly aspects that couldn't be attributed solely to Elena and Sara's abilities.

However, Elena and Sara's current abilities, excluding high-ranking hunters from elsewhere, were at a top-notch level in Kugamayama City. They had reached a point where they could be considered successful without aiming to become top-tier hunters in the entire eastern region.

They had become strong enough. They had earned enough money. This was the limit. This was the boundary. There was no need to risk their lives to go any further. They could be proud of how far they had come as hunters. Elena and Sara understood this.

Still, when they thought about someone easily surpassing that boundary and reaching far greater heights, especially when that person was someone like a junior to them, they couldn't help but feel a mix of complex emotions.

Elena voiced a part of those feelings in a somewhat melancholic tone.

“I suppose we can't act like seniors anymore.”

Sara also harbored the same feelings. But she said something different from Elena.

“It's fine, isn't it? Let's keep up the senior act.”

Seeing Elena's unexpected expression, Sara returned a slightly defiant smile.

“It's not a bad idea. Let's continue with the senior act.”

Due to the significant difference in abilities between them and Akira, it would be difficult for them to continue working as hunters together. It might be better to keep some distance and be mindful of their own limitations. Elena's words also implied that.

Sara understood Elena's thoughts and believed it was up to Akira to decide whether to keep their distance or not. Rather than distancing themselves because of their own hesitation, there was no need for them to interpret Akira's thoughts and grow apart from him. And Sara had no intention of severing her relationship with him. She had made that clear to her best friend.

Hearing her best friend's words, Elena softened her expression, smiling brightly and confidently as if dispelling trivial worries.

“... Yes, Sara. Let's do that.”

“Yes, Elena. That's fine. Oh, but I have to say, I have no intention of working as a hunter alongside Akira in a completely useless state. So, I'll tell him the answer I've been holding off on. We'll go further ahead. That's what I'll ask.”

Upon hearing this, Elena was slightly surprised at first, but then she smiled confidently.

“Understood. Let's keep doing our best. Well then, first we need to do something about Sara's fragile body, which will die once the nanomachines are used up. It's going to cost us.”

“What are you talking about? It's natural for being a hunter to cost money, isn't it? ”

“Exactly.”

When Sara was on the brink of death in her childhood due to various circumstances, she received nanomachine treatment, which turned her into an Enhanced Body Augmenter. It was like forcibly moving a dying body with the power of disposable nanomachines. Sara's death would result from the depletion of these nanomachines.

To fully heal Sara's body and prevent her death even after the nanomachines were depleted required a huge amount of money that couldn't be earned through normal means. For Elena and Sara, being hunters was a means to earn that money.

Now that they had risen as hunters and earned the money, Elena and Sara had two choices: to quit being hunters or to continue.

If Sara's body were fully healed, she wouldn't be an Enhanced Body Augmenter anymore. In other words, she wouldn't be able to fight as a hunter as she had before.

If they chose to quit being hunters altogether, that would be fine. But if they chose to continue, whether to buy augmented suits or undergo enhanced body augmentation again, additional budget would be needed. Depending on whether they continued as hunters just enough to make ends meet or aimed for further heights as hunters, the required budget would change.

Elena and Sara didn't have the option of Elena continuing as a hunter while leaving Sara, who could no longer fight as before, at home. Whether they quit or continued, they would do it together. And then what? Elena left that decision to Sara. After finally achieving her long-awaited healthy body, Sara wanted to decide for herself what her life would be like.

Sara had put off that decision. The medical expenses were secured, so there was no need to rush. She wanted to take her time deciding, especially after Elena told her to do so.

And today, Sara made that decision. If she quit being a hunter, she would grow distant from Akira. If she remained just an average hunter, she couldn't act as a senior to Akira. In that case, they would also go further ahead as hunters themselves. Although the hunter's life was tough and they had lost much, they had also gained something. To not lose that, to not let go of what they had, even if they couldn't catch up to the easily surpassing junior, Elena and Sara decided to smile and move forward on their own.

Carol observed Elena and Sara, who had decided to aim for greater heights as hunters, with a sidelong glance.

(I don't get it. Sure, they're pretty, and their skills as a hunter aren't bad, but in that regard, I think I'm not just on par with them but even better. So why does Akira react to Elena and Sara but not to me?)

Carol returned her gaze to Akira's group. There, she saw Akira happily conversing with Shizuka. He was undoubtedly showing a different attitude towards women.

From there, Carol tried to find commonalities between Shizuka and Elena and Sara.

(Hmm... Maybe it's because Akira has known them since he was a fledgling hunter? In other words, is the length of acquaintance important? Is Akira extremely shy only when it comes to women? If so, maybe he'll become interested in me while he's getting used to me as his escort...)

Carol's thoughts, which had reached a somewhat reasonable conclusion, were interrupted by a notification on her information terminal. It was from Doras.

Having completed the acquisition of new equipment, Akira immediately changed into them. He put on the new augmented suit, wore the protective coat, attached two blades and two guns, and carried a backpack filled with ammunition. He also swapped the gun on the bike's auxiliary arm for an RL2 multi-function gun. He was now ready to head out into the wasteland at any moment.

Looking at himself, Akira recalled what Alpha had told him before.

『... So my equipment has finally moved beyond just scraps, huh? 』

As long as the currency was Aurum, even 10 billion was just scraps. There was a time when Akira was severely shaken by about 12 million Aurums, but Alpha had told him that.

In the Eastern region, there exist highly advanced equipment that cannot be purchased with corporate currency and can only be obtained with Chrome. Compared to those pieces of equipment, anything that can be bought for around 12 million Aurum is simply inadequate in terms of performance.

Alpha had told Akira that. Seeing Akira in his new equipment, Alpha smiled with satisfaction.

『Yes, finally got some proper gear. 』

Even with payment in Aurum, equipment in the price range exceeding 10 billion could rival items designated for Chrome payments in terms of performance.

Akira's equipment costs 21.8 billion Aurum. With that much power at his disposal, there had to be someone capable of wielding it.

『So, that's the evaluation for 21.8 billion Aurum worth of equipment. It means, if I understood Alpha correctly, that to conquer the ruins Alpha designates, one needs at least equipment of that level, right? If I had asked about it back when I first met Alpha, I'd probably have fainted. 』

『Good thing I kept it as secret, right? 』

『Absolutely. 』

At that moment, Akira decided to try out the camouflage function of his protective coat. With it activated, the parts covered by the coat became invisible. Only his face, not obscured by the hood, remained visible. Not only in the visible light spectrum but also in ultraviolet, infrared, and even echo location, detection became significantly difficult.

“Shizuka, what do you think? ”

Shizuka reached out towards Akira's chest area. She could feel it, but no matter how hard she strained her eyes, she couldn't visually perceive its presence.

“Amazing, Akira. Just don't misuse it, okay? ”

“Yes, of course.”

Akira replied sincerely, prompting Shizuka to smile teasingly.

“And no peeking, absolutely, okay? ”

“I won't.”

Akira deactivated the camouflage function, removing the hood with a slightly childish gesture. Seeing his reaction, Shizuka smiled and reassured him.

“Sorry, I teased you too much.”

Then Shizuka gently stroked Akira's head, treating him distinctly like a child, but Akira couldn't bring himself to push her hand away. He allowed her to continue.

Alpha interjected a comment towards Akira.

『Well, Akira can see me naked whenever you wants, so there's really no need for you to peek, right? 』

『Shut up. 』

『Anyway, it seems that touching it still has an effect, doesn't it? 』

『... Shut up. 』

To avoid giving too much reaction to Alpha, Akira forced a slightly embarrassed smile.

At that moment, Akira received a notification from Carol. He used it as an excuse to ask Shizuka to stop stroking him and checked the notification. It was about temporarily leaving due to side work, with a promise to contact when finished.

Although he always stayed close as her bodyguard, if Carol was the one suggesting to move away, then it must be safe. Besides, he had no intention of accompanying Carol to her side job location. Thinking so, Akira replied with an acknowledgment.

Afterward, Akira packed all his previous equipment along with the new set into a self-propelled small container, including the maintenance-equipped storage device that came with the new augmented suit. The handover of the new equipment set was now complete.

He planned to chat with Shizuka and the others while waiting for Carol's contact. Just as he was thinking that, Kibayashi and Hikaru approached, with Kibayashi calling out to Akira.

“Akira, is the equipment handover done? I've got something to talk about, come with me.”

“What's the matter? ”

Kibayashi smiled with meaning.

“For me, it's about yesterday's incident. For Hikaru, it's about the rental of your house.”

“Understood.”

Given that response, Akira had no choice but to go along. He couldn't afford to worry Shizuka.

Regarding the incident from yesterday when Akira was attacked, Kibayashi deliberately referred to it as “yesterday's incident,” keeping the details known only to those involved.

However, if Akira were to refuse any future assistance and negotiations, then, in the presence of Shizuka, details about how Akira's house was blown away in a fierce battle, including how it led to discussions about house rentals, would have to be disclosed. Kibayashi conveyed that implication with his expression, and Akira understood.

“Sorry, Shizuka. I have something to attend to, so I'll take my leave.”

“Okay, Akira. See you later.”

“Yes.”

Though brief, they promised to meet again with genuine sentiments, acknowledging the ever-present possibility of dying in their perilous hunter profession, and Akira left after sharing a laugh with Shizuka.

Akira left the scene with Kibayashi and the others. As Akira departed, not only Elena and her group but also representatives from various companies approached Shizuka, who had been seeing Akira off.

Shizuka easily guessed their intentions. Thanks to Akira, she made a significant profit today. So, dealing with them was just part of the job. Deciding so, Shizuka smiled and began her work.

As Akira, accompanied by Kibayashi and Hikaru, walked away, he casually glanced back and saw a crowd gathering around Shizuka, who had seen him off.

“Kibayashi, who are they? ”

“They're salespeople who lost in the competition for your new equipment. Now that the equipment handover is done, and there are no restrictions on competing for your favor, they're flocking to the manager of a store that has a hunter rank 70 as a customer.”

Akira's expression darkened slightly. Seeing that, Kibayashi continued with a smile.

“Don't worry. I won't ask what concerns you have, but rest assured, they understand that damaging her mood or yours would put them at a disadvantage in your next equipment procurement. They should proceed with discussions that benefit her interests.”

Saying so, Kibayashi gestured for Akira to move on, and they resumed walking together.

“Well, there's another reason why they're flocking to her rather than you.”

“What's that? ”

“Firstly, if they directly ask you here to favor their products for your next equipment, it's as good as saying, 'This guy is going to break his equipment again soon,' which might displease you. So instead of telling you directly, which would be difficult, they'll tell her, who can relay it more easily. That's one reason.”

As they walked through the corridors inside the protective wall, Kibayashi continued speaking.

“And secondly, if they keep you here, they'll be taking away time from the people you're going to meet later. That's not good. So instead of negotiating with you here, they'll prioritize building good relationships with the manager of the store you favor and other hunters you seem to get along well with. Well, something like that.”

“Are we meeting someone later? ”

“Yeah. For now, I'll just say they're related to yesterday's incident. They have their side of the story too. You'll have to ask them directly for details.”

“Understood.”

Next, Hikaru brings up the topic.

“Um, Akira. Well, it's about Akira's house...but for the time being, I've made sure that Akira won't have to pay any compensation.”

The rental contract for Akira's residence stipulates that handling of incidents such as robberies is primarily the tenant's responsibility.

There is no obligation to fight without causing damage to neighboring houses. Furthermore, compensation for the destruction of his home can be covered by the insurance included in the rent. If more compensation is sought, it should be directed towards the attackers, not Akira.

This is outside the protective wall. Each individual is responsible for their own defense. The responsibility to prevent large-scale attacks lies with the organization responsible for maintaining security in the area, not with Akira, who merely rents a property in the area. Hikaru discussed this with the rental agency.

And the rental agency had no choice but to accept Hikaru's proposal. Whether Hikaru's argument was valid or not was irrelevant. It was about whether they wanted to argue with Kugamayama City and a Hunter Rank 70. There was no room for choice. Still, there were things the agency couldn't compromise on.

“So, um, sorry, but could you consider moving? Basically, they don't want you living in that place.”

While Akira's home was obliterated along with the surrounding houses, new homes would eventually be built on that land. As long as the rental contract wasn't terminated, it wasn't impossible for Akira to live there again. However, as a rental agency, they hoped to avoid that.

And Hikaru, feeling somewhat sorry for the agency, also wished Akira would compromise on this matter.

Akira understood the other party's desire for him to leave. However, he couldn't help but hesitate.

“Hmm, well, considering what happened, I understand why they want me to leave. But then, where would I move to? ”

“There are rental properties suitable for high-rank hunters. Those are for people called in from other cities for the deeper parts of the

Kuzusuhara Ruin. Would that be okay? ”

“...It's not that it's not okay, but just to be clear, I'd rather not be recommended places where the rent exceeds 100 million Aurum.”

“...Considering you just closed a deal worth 20 billion Aurum, isn't that a minor detail? ”

“Well, even if you put it that way...”

Considering a Hunter Rank 70's residence, it wouldn't be surprising for the rent to exceed 100 million Aurum. Additionally, in areas with such properties, the security quality would be higher, making incidents like the recent one less likely.

However, even though Hikaru was right and Akira understood that, living in such a property was financially challenging for Akira.

At that point, Kibayashi interjected.

“Well, regardless of where you'll live next, it's certain you won't stay in the previous location. That area is for those around Hunter Rank 30, not 70. You'll probably stay at Carol's place for a while, right? You can think about your next home during that time.”

“...Yeah, I'll do that.”

Upon hearing that, Hikaru let out a small sigh.

Normally, Hikaru would have been done handling Akira's matters after the equipment handover. However, due to yesterday's attack incident, plans had changed. At Inabe's instruction, she was to continue until this incident was resolved, or until she had no more cases to handle.

Since Kibayashi eagerly took on the investigation of the attack itself, once Hikaru resolved Akira's housing issue, her tasks would be completed.

“Akira, I'll send you the housing information, so contact me immediately if you find something you like, okay? ”

“Huh? Yeah, got it.”

“Absolutely? Don't hesitate to contact me even if it's midnight.”

“I got it.”

Hikaru emphasized with a smile, and Akira lightly smiled back in response.

Kibayashi was smiling happily.

Chapter 221: Dragon River

Meeting with the individuals involved in yesterday's attack incident. Akira was brought here by Kibayashi as instructed. It was at the Sterian. Upon entering, weapons were deposited at the entrance, and they were guided to a table where a man and a woman were seated. Akira recognized the woman.

Kibayashi introduces the two to Akira.

“Let me introduce them. This is Tatsukawa. He's the leader of the Dragon River Hunter Team. And this is Melshia. She's the deputy leader over there.”

“Tatsukawa, nice to meet you.”

“Melshia here. Nice to see you again.”

“Um, I'm Akira.”

After brief introductions, Akira and the others take their seats. Then Tatsukawa calls the waiter and places an order quite unsuitable for a high-class establishment, asking for various dishes. Kibayashi then tries to steer the conversation.

“So, shall we get into it? Tatsukawa, what do you say? Should I give an overview? ”

“No, I'll handle it all. If I leave it to you, you'll definitely make the story unnecessarily entertaining.”

“I don't intend to do that. Aren't we friends? ”

“We're friends, which is why I can't believe you.”

“That's harsh.”

Tatsukawa gives a disapproving look at Kibayashi, who just laughs it off. Their somewhat casual exchange feels familiar to Akira in some way.

Tatsukawa exhales lightly and looks at Akira.

“I'll say this upfront. We have no intention of clashing with you, and frankly, we're more on the victim's side here. With that premise, please listen while looking at this document.”

Akira displays the document sent via short-range communication in their augmented vision. It contains equipment for humanoid weapons used by the man in the recent attack.

“The weapon used by the person who attacked you yesterday was stolen from us.”

As Akira shows surprise, Tatsukawa and the others begin explaining that Dragon River had no involvement in the attack.

Although the attacker, along with the weapon for humanoid weapons, was blown away by Akira's gunfire, the giant weapon used for humanoid weapons and the trailer used for transportation remained relatively intact.

Kibayashi, who recovered them for investigation, found out that the humanoid weapon was owned by Dragon River. He immediately contacted Tatsukawa and explained the situation.

Upon hearing this, Tatsukawa immediately had Melshia confirm. It turned out that the equipment that should have been in the warehouse was missing.

This indicates that the usage records of the equipment have been tampered with. And tampering of this kind is easier for insiders

rather than outsiders. In other words, there's a possibility that someone from Dragon River is cooperating in Akira's attack.

At that point, they immediately confirmed the whereabouts of all team members. Fortunately, no one was missing. Upon hearing the report from Melshia, Tatsukawa felt relieved. If someone had been missing, there would have been fears of being inside the body of Babalod.

“Well, that's the gist of it. We acknowledge that the equipment used by the person who attacked you belonged to us, and we don't know who stole it. We understand that you went through a tough time because it was stolen, and we admit our fault in that regard. But we are also victims of theft, and we didn't attack you. We hope you understand that... Is that clear? ”

Receiving Tatsukawa's gaze, Melshia continues.

“That's about it. Well, whether you believe this or not, I know it sounds strange, but even if we were the masterminds, if we had attacked you, you would probably be dead. So, can't you consider otherwise? ”

In a sense, this was the most convincing explanation for Akira. Akira has also seen Melshia's power with city transport vehicles. With today's new equipment, one could say that you wouldn't know until you tried it, but Akira couldn't imagine winning with yesterday's equipment.

“Understood. I believe you.”

Tatsukawa breathes a sigh of relief.

“I'm glad you understand. We'll continue our investigation here, and if we find out anything, we'll let you know.”

With the main topic concluded, the dishes are brought out. The conversation turns to casual chatter over the meal.

During the conversation, Melshia expresses her opinion on the incident.

“I've been thinking about it too, but in this case, while Akira and the others were attacked, the target might have been us.”

“What do you mean? ”

“The person who attacked Akira with the weapon stolen from us used Babalod from Lot Break, right? It might have been a ploy aimed at instigating a conflict between us and Lot Break.”

With Babalod's body being used in this attack, Dragon River suspects Lot Break's involvement. Lot Break, on the other hand, might suspect Dragon River due to their equipment being used. By arousing suspicion in each other, they aim to crush each other.

If top teams in Kuzusuhara District Ruin engage in conflict, there are many advantages to be gained. That's how Melshia put it.

“I hate to say it, but for an attack targeting someone with a Hunter Rank of 70, it feels quite amateurish, and maybe the attack itself was the goal, and whether you lived or died didn't matter. Well, that's one way to look at it.”

“If that's the case, then I was about to die for such a reason...”

Unfortunate. Akira sighed at the thought. Tatsukawa, upon hearing the sigh, lightly speaks.

“That sounds tough... If it's that tough, how about joining our team? We can provide a safe room, and if we're attacked again, the team can repel it together? ”

“Ah, sorry, but I have no intention of joining any team... Well, before that, I'm currently in the middle of escorting someone named Carol, so I can't just decide things like that on my own.”

“Is that so? Then, it doesn't have to be a formal membership. It could be temporary until things settle down. And that Carol person can join too, if that's okay? ”

Upon hearing that, Akira also begins to hesitate. While it would be necessary to obtain Carol's consent, it seemed there was room for consideration since joining Dragon River temporarily would increase Carol's safety. However, concerns also arose.

“...It sounds like quite a convenient story for us.”

Akira showed a slightly puzzled expression, to which Tatsukawa responded with a meaningful smile.

“We're inviting a Hunter Rank 70 to the team. Such conditions aren't particularly surprising, right? Well, as a senior, I do have some thoughts about helping out a junior, but...”

Akira looked puzzled, prompting Tatsukawa to continue while pointing at Kibayashi.

“You climbed up by accepting his outrageous requests, didn't you? Same goes for me.”

Akira glanced at Kibayashi involuntarily. Kibayashi, as if to say it was beyond belief, wore a cheerful expression.

“His requests were outrageous indeed. But I went out of my way to prepare a request that could earn you a ridiculous amount of money.”

“What are you saying? How many times do you think I almost died because of them? ”

“But it was worth it, wasn't it? You, who were just a rookie Hunter, became a high-ranked Hunter in less than five years. If it weren't for my help, I don't think you would have risen so quickly, right? ”

Saying so, Kibayashi looked at Akira as if seeking agreement. He wasn't wrong. However, it was difficult for Akira to nod in agreement. Tatsukawa interjected at this point.

“That's just hindsight, Akira. You probably already realize it, but if you don't, let me tell you. Taking on his requests was not only about skill but also about luck. Hunters who took on his requests with naive thoughts, they might have died four-digit deaths, you know? ”

“What are you talking about? Hunter business is a gamble from the start. It's not strange to die in such circumstances. Moreover, there are plenty of guys who can only make lousy bets even if they put their lives on the line. I'm just providing requests worth risking their lives for to those unlucky guys. You could be more grateful, you know? ”

“Shut up.”

Despite the fact that they had almost died while taking on dangerously risky requests, they spoke jovially like close friends.

Akira asked Tatsukawa.

“What kind of request did Kibayashi give you? ”

“Ah, well, first of all...”

The conversation then shifted to the story of the request that Tatsukawa had been introduced to by Kibayashi.

Kibayashi hadn't introduced any particularly unusual requests. The contents of the requests were quite ordinary, such as monster subjugation, patrolling the wasteland, participating in relic collection led by the city, and guarding goods transportation.

However, the difficulty of those requests was beyond Tatsukawa's abilities at the time. Yet, they weren't impossible to the point of being discouraging. Moreover, if successful, they promised significant rewards, making one think that if things went well...

Hunters who were hungry for a chance to rise, whether possessing high skills but unlucky or simply arrogant, saw these requests as coveted opportunities to test whether their beliefs were fact or mere delusions.

And many of them were swallowed by the wasteland and perished.

Gambling yields greater rewards with lower winning probabilities. Tatsukawa's rise to become the leader of a large Hunter team was also due to his success in such low-probability gambles.

Hearing these stories, Akira was half impressed and half astonished. Without Alpha's support like hers, it was incredible that someone could take on such requests and even more incredible that they survived.

While Akira's admiring yet astonished gaze was directed at Tatsukawa, who understood his feelings, he asked about Akira's experiences.

“So, how about you, Akira? ”

“Ah, me...”

Kibayashi interjected at this point.

“Wait, let me tell it. This guy is quite oblivious to many things. That's what makes Akira interesting, but if I were to explain from a third person's perspective, his recklessness and audacity will become clearer. Oh man, it's really amazing, you know? It's hilarious! ”

Tatsukawa showed an interested expression in response to Kibayashi's excitement. However, as the story progressed, even his expression turned somewhat reserved.

During a patrol near the city, when a large group of monsters appeared from the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, while other hunters

decided to return to the city, Akira got off the patrol vehicle alone and ran towards the rescue site.

In the underground battle in the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, Akira essentially single-handedly repelled relic thieves who had killed many on-site hunters, even bringing out heavy-duty reinforced armor.

During the commotion of the bounty heads, despite being swallowed by a variant of the Overcompensating Snake monster along with the vehicle, Akira defeated the monster from inside its body and escaped.

In the battle against the Nationalist, facing a monster resembling a giant, human-shaped weapon that was so powerful that it made the city's defense forces struggle, Akira fought and won alone.

All of these were impossible feats with Akira's Hunter Rank and equipment at the time, yet he survived. They were reckless and audacious, pushing the boundaries of what was considered normal.

Tatsukawa, somewhat surprised, said to Akira with a half-exasperated look.

“I see. You've earned Kibayashi's favor, huh? ”

Akira wore a slightly dissatisfied expression, unable to come up with a good excuse and choosing not to argue.

Meanwhile, Kibayashi continued cheerfully.

“Right? Why don't you learn a little from him? ”

Then, addressing Akira, Tatsukawa lamented his current state.

“Akira. This guy used to entertain me quite a bit with his reckless behavior, not as much as you, but enough to keep me amused. But

now, he's turned into just another hunter, playing it safe and earning a living.”

Upon hearing that, Tatsukawa chuckled disdainfully.

“I don't care. I'm not doing this hunter job to entertain you. And I've already climbed high enough. I don't need to reluctantly take your requests anymore just to climb higher.”

It was a trivial exchange between Tatsukawa and Kibayashi, but then Melshia interjected.

“What do you mean 'reluctantly'? You were pretty enthusiastic, weren't you? ” Melshia pressed on, catching Tatsukawa off guard with her words.

“Do you have any idea how much effort I put into stopping you when you were lured by hefty rewards? You didn't survive just by luck. Whenever there was a really dangerous mission, I was ready to risk my life to stop you. Have you forgotten? ”

“W-well, isn't that a bit exaggerated? ”

Tatsukawa said, averting his gaze slightly, tacitly admitting that Melshia had a point.



Melshia shifted her gaze from Tatsukawa to Akira.

“It's not exaggerated at all. Want to hear? This guy here is unbelievable. Can you guess what I said to him? 'I'll die protecting you. I'll die before you. I said that, not just in words but I actually risked my life to protect him several times. Isn't it too much? ’”

“Y-yes, it is.”

Melshia's forceful tone overwhelmed Akira. Tatsukawa intervened to calm Melshia down.

“Alright, alright. My bad. Take it easy. I'm sorry. I trust you to run the team, and I've given you the authority to decide whether to take on requests. I'll obediently follow your lead, okay? ”

“Well, alright then. As long as you understand.”

Melshia sighed deeply and changed her tone when addressing Akira.

“You see, Dragon River originally started with just Tatsukawa and me. And despite him not being as careful as I am, he still takes responsibility and looks out for our companions to some extent. So, to prevent him from being reckless, I've made sure to be a significant hindrance to the team's progress.”

With that, Melshia smiled amiably as the team's operational leader.

“So, even if you're just a temporary member, if you join Dragon River, I'll make sure to protect your group as part of the team. Well, actually, I'll make him do it. So, if you're interested, consider joining with Carol.”

“Understood.”

As Akira nodded and Melshia's mood improved slightly, Tatsukawa breathed a sigh of relief.

Melshia transitioned the atmosphere from recruitment to casual conversation.

“By the way, how did you manage to raise your Hunter rank from 55 to 70 all of a sudden? Would you mind sharing? ”

“Ah, that was all thanks to Kibayashi. If you want to know the trick, ask Kibayashi.”

Melshia directed her gaze towards Kibayashi. Upon which, Kibayashi smiled cheerfully.

“I'm not going to teach someone who's trying to recruit Akira and steal my fun, right? ”

“As usual. Although, you're nothing more than a city official, it's easy to deal with. ”

“I wouldn't recommend messing with the Hunter Office's staff. Unless you can entertain me, that is.”

“Understood. As the leader of Dragon River, I can't let personal feelings disrupt the team. It's a shame.”

Melshia and Kibayashi chuckled together. Meanwhile, Hikaru, who held a position of indifference at the table, continued eating quietly. He couldn't even taste the food from Sterian.



The high-end hotel beside the defensive wall boasts exceptionally tight security. With its own formidable forces and immediate response capabilities in emergencies, it also has a support contract with the city's defense force.

Thanks to the substantial profits gained from trading with Tsubaki, the city's defense force has significantly bolstered its strength. Thus, it would be difficult for incidents like the recent one, involving high-ranking hunters, to occur again. Even if such an attack were attempted with full understanding, it would be swiftly quelled by the defense force.

Therefore, the hotel was deemed a safe place, enough for Carol to temporarily leave Akira without worry.

Carol was summoned to a room in the upscale hotel by Doras. She was greeted by Doras at the door, exuding a seductive and somewhat proud smile.

“You've come again, haven't you? Today it's 2.5 billion, right? Are you okay with that? ”

“...Yeah, I guess.”

With just that response, Doras tried to usher Carol into the room.

Carol found Doras's behavior somewhat suspicious. Doras's expression and tone were somewhat complex and serious, enough to momentarily make Carol hesitate about entering the room. But despite her hesitation, Carol entered the room.

Doras was not armed, not even with augmented suit. Checking the room with surveillance equipment from the open door revealed no one else inside. Even if something happened to Doras, it would be unrelated to her. She was worrying too much.

Besides, there was payment to be made to Akira. While she didn't expect to receive the entire 2.5 billion in Aurum, she wanted a significant portion to be paid in Aurum rather than information. She had hired a rank 70 hunter as protection. She wanted to ensure ample funding.

With that in mind, Carol decided to focus on her side job as usual.

And the side job concluded without any issues. Carol laughed, thinking her concerns were unfounded, and proceeded to demand payment while lying on the bed.

“Well, now that you've enjoyed yourself, let's settle the payment. Today it's 2.5 billion, okay? ”

“Got it.”

At that moment, Doras wore a serious expression, devoid of any remnants of post-coital bliss. Carol, too, showed a slight hint of confusion at the unexpected attitude.

“I'll pay with information. This information is worth 2.5 billion.”

Surprised, Carol maintained a confident smile.

“Setting quite a high price, aren't you? ”

“Well, it's because it concerns your life.”

Carol's smile faded at that. She asked with a slightly stern expression.

“...Should I hear it? What kind of information is it? ”

“I don't know the details, but aren't you teaming up with a hunter named Akira? While it's officially for protection, you should stop that immediately.”

“...And why is that? ”

“Yesterday's attack on you was probably because of that.”

Doras began to explain earnestly, imbuing his words with the persuasive power of a 2.5 billion Aurum worth of information.

The conquest of the deeper parts of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin was steadily progressing under the high-ranking hunters summoned by the Kugamayama City. Some teams even declared that they had already reached the third inner sector, not just the second.

However, conquering the deeper parts of the ruins wasn't just about reaching the deepest point. It also involved expanding the range of exploration to search for valuable artifacts. Furthermore, it required extending the rear communication lines. In that sense, the conquest of the Second Inner Sector was far from over.

The city was providing significant support to accelerate the progress, which greatly motivated the hunters. However, this support also became a significant impediment to the coordination between various hunter teams.

Despite the profits from trading with Tsubaki, the funding required for such support was substantial. It seemed challenging for Kugamayama City's budget alone. There were rumors that Sakashita Heavy Industry might resume the complete conquest of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. The source of this budget might be Sakashita Heavy Industry, not Kugamayama City.

Many hunters speculated that this support was being carried out at the behest of Sakashita Heavy Industry. If significant progress were made here, it would deepen the connection with Sakashita Heavy Industry. Therefore, teams refrained from cooperating, which was standard practice for ruins exploration.

The impact of this was particularly severe concerning the sharing of information about the ruins.

Even though it was the same ruins, the difficulty of conquering them varied greatly depending on whether they were unknown or known. Without prior information, it was impossible to know if the internal structure was labyrinthine or not. It was also impossible to estimate the number of monsters. In such unknown situations, extreme caution was necessary, and conquest progress was slow.

Under normal circumstances, teams would purchase information from teams that had advanced or exchange their own information to gradually spread and share information about the ruins.

However, this time, to prevent other teams from surpassing them, each hunter team voluntarily restricted the minimum sharing of information. Kugamayama City couldn't force them to share information. After all, their opponents were composed of individuals who couldn't be threatened by mere cities.

In this situation, a hunter like Carol became significant.

Although not even rank 50, Carol was obtaining money, equipment, and even ruin information as part of her side job. Moreover, she had many top-tier teams' members as clients, potentially surpassing top teams in the quality and quantity of information she possessed.

If they can bring such a person into their team, it would be extremely advantageous. Conversely, if they were to be recruited by another team, there's a risk of being significantly outmaneuvered in this competition to demonstrate their strength to Sakashita Heavy Industry during the relic exploration.

The significance of Carol acquiring new information from clients increases as the progress of each team lags behind. There are rumors that Carol has received map information from the depths of the ruins worth around 10 billion Aurums, including some obtained from Lot Break. It wouldn't be surprising if equivalent information is flowing from other hunter teams as well.

Those who have a sound idea of how to bring Carol into their own team are a minority here. Only the top teams that can offer such conditions can participate in favorable competition.

Therefore, those outside that minority think differently. How can they keep Carol from being recruited by other teams? And some with unhealthy ideas go further: just kill Carol. The information she holds

would disappear, but it's something they couldn't obtain anyway. It's much better than it falling into another team's hands.

Finally, someone has acted on that idea, as evidenced by yesterday's attack. Doras explained this to Carol.

Carol, who had been listening to the story with a serious expression, spoke in a serious tone.

“... Assuming that story is true, what's Akira's connection to all this?”

“Probably, until now, he's been overlooked. Carol has map information from the depths of the ruins, including what you obtained from me, but you probably hasn't tried to sell it to anyone. So, it's likely you've been seen as someone who knows better than to do that, someone who knows their place.”

It's just speculation, but it's plausible. Doras said this with a serious attitude.

“That's why you hired guards. And the one you hired is a Hunter Rank 70. It's likely they judged that such protection was necessary.”

“So, are you suggesting I hired Akira as a show of force for negotiations? Is that the idea?”

“Well, yeah. And here's another possibility. If you didn't intend to sell that information, why collect so much of it? Actually, Carol has secretly secured many other capable individuals besides Akira. How you did it... let's leave that to your side business, shall we? With that team, you plan to use the gathered information to advance the exploration of the depths in one go. Perhaps you intend to sell your team to Sakashita Heavy Industry that way.”

“... In any case, if I stop hiring Akira, that would refute both those ideas.”

“Yeah. That's right. They should consider that the need for Hunter Rank 70 strength is no longer necessary. If they've already determined that the buying and selling of information from the depths is complete, then killing Carol now would be pointless. If the plan is to proceed with exploration in Carol's team, it's unlikely they would remove Akira from the team. They would think it's been thwarted.”

Carol lets out a deep sigh. The pieces fit together. At least she couldn't deny that even if she refuted it, she couldn't expect her opponent to believe it. Carol had to admit that.

“... Is this all for the 2.5 billion worth of information? ”

“Yeah. I've also compiled the data that led me to this conclusion. I'll send it over.”

Doras sends over the data. Carol was about to look at its contents but stopped. Considering Doras's personality, she somehow knew without looking that the contents were correct.

Seeing Carol's demeanor, Doras concluded that Carol was taking his words seriously and continued the conversation.

“I think this information is worth 2.5 billion to you. However, before I ask you about its validity, I have a proposal. Under certain conditions, I can provide this information for free.”

Carol also looked puzzled at Doras.

“... Conditions? Like what? ”

“Hiring me as your guard instead of Akira, for 2.5 billion.”

Carol directs a questioning gaze at Doras. Doras accepts the gaze and continues speaking.

“Carol, if you stay here in Kugamayama City, you'll die. Find refuge in another city, preferably far to the west. I'll be your guard on the way and beyond. I'm aware this might sound like I'm saying something out of line, and I have plenty of ulterior motives, but I'm genuinely worried, you know? ”

Carol listens silently. Her gaze is still questioning, but it's not probing. While looking into those eyes, Doras continues.

“Hate to say it, but Carol, you're not aiming to rise up as a Hunter like us, right? You've been making a fortune on the side, getting high-performance gear with the money, and raising your Hunter Rank, but it doesn't seem like you're doing it to achieve what we do as hunters.”

Indeed, Carol isn't working on a side job to supplement her hunter career. Doras's speculation was correct in that regard.

“Even though you're not doing it to supplement your hunter career, I don't know why you're still continuing as a hunter. But let's leave it at that. If you don't have the will to risk your life as a hunter anymore, I think it's time to call it quits, you know? If you're worried about past troubles catching up even if you quit being a hunter now, I'll take care of that part.”

After listening to that, Carol stares at Doras intently. Her gaze isn't questioning his intentions but instead seeks sincerity.

“If you take that seriously, you'll be giving up on your rise as a hunter, won't you? ”

Among high-ranked hunters, it's not uncommon for them to have pride in their way of life and ascent. Even though the hunter career is risky, they continue it, earning vast sums of money that ordinary people couldn't dream of, and they continue it of their own free will. If someone doesn't hold such a philosophy, they would quit being a hunter once they've earned enough money. And Carol knew that Doras was someone who held such pride.

But if Carol goes with Doras to the western cities, Doras will be abandoning that pride. In places where there are only weak monsters and cheap relics, it's impossible to continue the hunter career as a high-ranked hunter.

Let's take shelter for a while. Once things calm down, we can return. Carol understood that Doras wasn't saying this lightly. In other words, Doras was willing to give up something potentially more valuable than his life for Carol's sake. That's what he was saying.

That's why Carol asked. Whether he was serious or not. Doras smiles wryly as he responds.

“Let's just say I got caught up with a wicked woman. It's a common story for a hunter to fall from grace, right? ”

Carol and Doras silently meet each other's eyes. Then, after a brief pause, Carol gets up from the bed. She puts on the augmented suit she had taken off, prepares to leave, and before leaving, she says to Doras without facing him.

“... As far as pickup lines go, that wasn't bad.”

With that said, Carol leaves the room without looking back. Left alone, Doras sighs heavily on the bed.

“... Got turned down, huh. I was serious, though.”

Being not believed resulted in being turned down. Thinking that way might be self-conceited. Doras couldn't figure out the answer to that somewhat floating thought.

Carol, who left the room, lets out a heavy sigh with an expressionless face.

With years of experience dealing with many clients, Carol could discern whether Doras was lying or telling the truth, whether he was serious or not.

Yet, even knowing that, Carol couldn't accept Doras's invitation. Even if he was serious, there was no guarantee that it would be true, especially regarding the future.

Carol knew that well.

Chapter 222: Backdoor Search

After finishing the procurement of new equipment and concluding the discussion with Tatsukawa, Akira met up with Carol in the lobby of Kugama building's first floor, then headed back to Carol's place together. Parking the bike in the apartment's parking lot and stuffing the items into a self-propelled rental small container, they decided to leave them at Carol's place for the time being.

Then, they took a bath, refraining from complaining to Carol, who naturally joined in, and discussed their plans for the future. While soaking naked in the same tub, they shared the information they had learned while they were apart.

Akira, after being told that the recent attack might have been because of their partnership with Carol, lightly rubbed his head in frustration.

“So, we might have been attacked for that reason... Spare me...”

“I didn't confirm it, so it's just speculation. But weren't you invited to join Dragon River along with me? Considering that, it's not an unbelievable story.”

“Ah, so if that's the case, there's also the possibility that the attack was aimed at Carol, not me...”

“If I dare to speculate, the attack might have been a ploy by another Hunter team to make it look like Dragon River and Lot Break were suspicious of each other's manipulations and to crush each other, with both Dragon River and Lot Break staging it, including considering their equipment leaks.”

“Both staged it? Collaborating behind the scenes? ”

“It's possible, or they might have separately conducted the same ploy. So, leaks of both teams' equipment might have happened easily.”

“Do we really have to suspect that much? ”

Akira wore a very displeased expression. It was troublesome. His feelings were clearly written all over his face.

Carol laughed and redirected the conversation.

“Well, it's just speculation after all. There's also a possibility of being attacked for entirely different reasons, so we need to be cautious about that. So, what's the plan from tomorrow onwards? Since Akira's procurement of new equipment is done, are we going to the Second Inner Sector together as we discussed before? ”

Akira hesitated. Originally, that was the plan. However, after hearing Carol's story, going to the second part with her felt like willingly getting involved in trouble.

Going to the second part with Carol and potentially getting attacked by other high-ranking Hunters as a result would be manageable for Akira. But going there anticipating an attack, and going under the assumption of retaliating after knowing about it, seemed a bit risky. Akira didn't want to willingly get into a conflict with a high-ranking Hunter team either.

So, giving up on going wasn't an easy decision either. It was planned to go to the Second Inner Sector with the new equipment and see how far they could get. If they could reach a satisfactory position, they would then start Alpha's request in earnest. They couldn't afford to hesitate at this point. That feeling was also there.

What to do. Akira, who was undecided, asked Alpha.

『...Alpha. What should we do? 』

Originally, going to the Second Inner Sector was for Alpha to judge Akira's ability to start his request in earnest based on their performance there. So, Akira was asking Alpha to decide what to do. That's what Akira thought as he asked Alpha.

While they were bathing, Alpha, who decided to disappear from sight, answered only with her voice.

『Akira, do as you like. The important thing is to confirm how far you can fight with your new equipment. Whether it's in the Second Inner Sector or elsewhere, whether it's against monsters or Hunters, that confirmation is possible.』

『I see.』

Alpha seemed fine with Akira engaging in combat with high-ranking Hunters' teams. That's what Akira concluded.

Alpha continued in a cheerful voice.

『Besides, I don't mind if Akira prioritized Carol's escort request, causing a slight delay in starting my request. Akira being sincere about the request is also good for me.』

『...I see. Got it. Thanks.』

『It's fine. Aren't we on good terms, Akira? 』

Akira was careful to speak during the telepathic conversation with Alpha so that Carol wouldn't notice. With just Alpha and him, he made sure not to show a smile that would give away his true feelings on his face. Still, while being a little more cheerful, he now asked Carol.

“Carol, what if I adjust to your schedule? ”

“Is that okay? ”

“Yeah. Although it's a contract where I'm free to explore ruins during escort missions, I'm still taking on the escort. So, I can adjust to your schedule to some extent. Well, if it comes to evacuating to a different city together, I'll only accompany you until the end of the escort

request. There won't be any extension after that. I'll return alone to this side.”

Carol showed a slightly thoughtful expression, then smiled as if she had come up with a good idea.

“Akira, how about exploring the Mihazono District Ruin?

Akira looked puzzled at the somewhat unexpected suggestion.

“The Mihazono District Ruin? Ah, now that you mention it, Carol, you're also a cartographer, and you sell maps of that place, don't you? Are you going there to make maps? ”

“Yes, but since I've hired you as my escort, I have something I want to do there. If things go well, we can earn a lot of money, and I can significantly devalue the map information I have for the Kuzusuhara District Ruin Inner Area. Then, I might not be attacked because I have map information for the Second Inner Sector.”

Akira showed an increasingly puzzled expression, not understanding why exploring the Mihazono District Ruin would devalue the map information for the Second Inner Sector.

“Carol, what do you plan to do at the Mihazono District Ruin? ”

Carol smiled cunningly, alluringly, and confidently.

“Search for the backdoor to the Kuzusuhara District Ruin Inner Area.”

With that bewitching smile of the wicked woman, Akira and his companions' next course of action was determined.



Having prepared for the ruins exploration, Akira and the others headed to the Mihazono District Ruin in a large camping car suitable

for the wasteland.

The interior of the car was spacious enough. It was equipped with facilities for comfortable long-distance travel where lodging was necessary. The bathtub was large enough to stretch one's limbs comfortably while bathing alone.

In the rear of the vehicle, there was enough space not only for motorcycles but also for small cars. There were various items loaded there, such as a large amount of food, ammunition, equipment for two people, and Akira's motorcycle.

The amount of supplies loaded would be enough to live comfortably for about a month without returning to the city. Even if they were attacked by a large horde of monsters along the way, they could easily fend them off with an abundance of ammunition.

For Akira and the others to make such preparations for exploring the ruins of Mihazono District, it was equivalent to or even greater than preparing for the previous attack when Akira's home was destroyed.

Last time, despite being outside the defensive walls, it was still within the city, a place where the city's defense forces might come to suppress. But here was the wasteland. Depending on the enemy's motivation, they could execute a large-scale attack anywhere. It was necessary to prepare for that possibility as well.

Furthermore, Akira and the others did not intend to make this ruins exploration a day trip. Sufficient food had been prepared for that purpose, and they planned to thoroughly investigate the ruins.

Akira and the others' objective was to find the backdoor to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin in the Mihazono District Ruin.

In the eastern underground, facilities from the pre-apocalypse era's distribution network still existed. The Yonozuka Station ruins that Akira had previously found were one of them. And it was believed

that the underground tunnel there led to the Kuzusuhara District Ruin based on the types of monsters that appeared from there.

It wouldn't be surprising if similar facilities existed in the Mihazono District Ruin. At that time, many people lived there. It was quite possible that large underground tunnels were constructed to easily transport people and goods to other cities.

If that tunnel extended to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, it would serve as a backdoor to the depths of the ruins. If the entrance and exit were further inside than the locations where each hunter team was currently attacking, and if that route was safer than the existing ones, the value of new map information indicating that would greatly increase. In other words, the value of the existing map information held by Carol would relatively decrease.

Of course, the value of existing map information wouldn't completely disappear. However, if that value decreased to the point where even if those map information leaked from Carol to each hunter team, they wouldn't be eyed by the higher-ranking teams advancing the conquest of the depths, there would be no value in targeting Carol for the seizure or deletion of map information, and Akira and the others would be safe. Hoping for that outcome, Akira and the others decided to explore the Mihazono District Ruin.

However, even if that backdoor actually existed and could be found, there was a considerable risk that it might all be in vain.

While doing flexibility exercises as part of his augmented suit training inside the vehicle, Akira casually asks Carol something.

“Hey Carol, what are the chances of things going well, actually?”

Carol accompanied Akira's flexibility exercises and was doing handstands with one hand, spreading both legs widely in a straight line. In that posture, she answered.

“Honestly, you won't know until you try.”

“You won't know... But Carol, you're also a cartographer, and you have an idea of where those places might be, right? ”

“I only know the candidate locations as information. Besides, the Mihazono District Ruin have been rebuilt in various places over and over again. When we actually go there, it might just be a pile of rubble, or a new building might have been built, blocking the entrance to the underground. So whether we'll find what we're looking for or not, we won't know until we actually investigate.”

“I see.”

Akira stretched out his toes with one foot and stood on tiptoe while raising the other foot straight up, lightly crossing his arms and humming. He maintained his posture without using the grounding function of the augmented suit, and without any support from Alpha. This level of control was easy for his now.

Carol also assumed the same posture. There was no movement in Carol's body. However, this was thanks to the posture control assistance of her high-performance augmented suit. Nevertheless, Carol's body flexibility was the same as Akira's.

Even in the same posture, the impression given by a child doing it and a glamorous woman with a voluptuous figure, wearing a augmented suit with sharp designs reminiscent of the old-world, was completely different. There was value in attracting attention from the opposite sex just by watching.

“I should add that I've been avoiding getting too close to those supposed locations.”

“Why is that? ”

“Why? Because if there really is a backdoor to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, it would be troublesome, wouldn't it? ”

They weren't going there to find it. Carol supplemented the conversation, looking puzzled at Akira's expression, thinking that they were going to explore it.

If it connects to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, it also means there's a danger of encountering very powerful monsters there. The incident at the Yonozuka Station ruins was a good example, where monsters powerful enough to become bounty targets appeared.

Going to investigate such a place and encountering such monsters would definitely result in death with her previous abilities. Furthermore, if an investigation were to cause a commotion like the one at the Yonozuka Station ruins, there would be a risk of being pursued by the city for responsibility. So even if she obtained that kind of information, she didn't investigate it.

But now she had grown stronger herself. Plus, she had hired Akira as a bodyguard. Even if they encountered monsters from the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, they could fight adequately. Also, with many high-ranking hunters in the city now, it would be easy to handle any situation caused by an investigation like the commotion at the Yonozuka Station ruins.

For these reasons, she decided to explore the ruins, including the Kuzusuhara District Ruin' backdoor search, which she had previously considered overwhelming. Carol explained this to Akira.

Akira was also satisfied with that.

“I see. But what if we can't find the backdoor to the depths? ”

“We'll just have to hope that the conquest of the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin progresses significantly while we're exploring the Mihazono District Ruin. As a result, the value of the existing map information I possess will decrease as new map information circulates.”

“I see.”

“Well, if that doesn't work out, we'll deal with it then. Let's hope things go smoothly for now.”

“Yeah, we can think about the next step when the time comes.”

Akira stopped doing flexibility exercises and exhaled. Carol also stopped posing for flexibility improvement and seemed more focused on enhancing her allure.

“By the way, Akira, you're really flexible.”

“Right? I've been working hard to gradually become more flexible. Flexibility is important even in combat.”

Akira, pleased to be praised for his flexibility, looked somewhat childish, and to Carol, he seems younger than his appearance suggested. Carol reached out to pat Akira's head instinctively. However, Akira stopped her with a puzzled look before she could do so.

“What's wrong? ”

“It's nothing.”

Was this also not acceptable? He had been patted by someone named Shizuka without objections, but was Akira not fond of that treatment? Carol thought so, hiding her inner dissatisfaction behind a light, joking smile directed at the elusive opposite sex.



Upon arriving at the Mihazono District Ruin, Akira and the others immediately began searching for the backdoor to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Riding Akira's motorcycle, they raced through the ruins together.

Carol's car was parked in the parking lot operated by the Hunter Office's outpost at the ruins. Interfering with vehicles parked here would be considered hostile to the Hunter Office. Even high-ranking hunters had to be prepared for attacks. Akira and the others left their car there with peace of mind.

In the past commotion, the Mihazono District Ruin had suffered extensive damage due to the overflow of monsters throughout the ruins, leading to large-scale battles and significant damage over a wide area. But now, all traces of that seemed to have disappeared.

Freshly rebuilt high-rise buildings stood in rows, and around them, spherical general-purpose machines with multiple legs and arms roamed. There was no sign of the small tank-like monsters that Akira and the others had destroyed in abundance. Akira commented lightly as he observed the scene.

“It seems like the aftermath of the previous commotion has completely disappeared. I was worried we might have to plow through the midst of a horde of monsters like back then.”

Carol laughed behind Akira.

“What are you talking about? Even if that happens, Akira now can handle it with ease, right? ”

Akira also laughed and replied.

“Well, yeah, but...”

It was different from back then in terms of equipment and strength. What was once a deadly situation was now just a stroll for him. Feeling the reality of his growth, Akira smiled happily.

“But you never know what might happen in a ruin, right? There might be monsters from the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin here, or there might even be extremely powerful machine-type monsters deployed to defeat them? ”

“Well, yeah, that might be true.”

To Akira's casual remark, Carol couldn't immediately respond. With a smile on her face, she glanced at a spot in the ruins. Then she quickly returned her gaze to Akira and spoke in a light tone.

“But that's why I hired you, Akira, in case something like that happens.”

“Yeah, I'll do my best when the time comes.”

“I'm counting on you.”

Akira and the others laughed and raced off towards their destination.

A little away from the scene, where Carol had glanced, the typical sight of ruins spread out. Even when Akira glanced at the same spot, he judged that there was nothing there.

However, a giant multi-legged machine with its camouflage function enabled was present there. It was not only large but also as strong as the monsters Akira had fought with city transport vehicles.

Alpha was aware of its presence. However, since it wasn't hostile, Alpha hadn't bothered to inform Akira about it.

And Carol was also aware of its presence. She could see it. Yet, she remained silent.

Although not as extensive as the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, the Mihazono District Ruin were one of the largest in the vicinity of the Kugamayama City, even just in the city block area.

However, with Akira's bike performance, moving from one end of the ruins to the other didn't take much time. Even if they encountered monsters along the way, Akira and the others could either ignore

them or scatter them with their abilities. It posed no obstacle. They quickly arrived at their first destination.

There, a mountain of rubble stretched out. Although they examined beneath it with their information-gathering devices, they couldn't find anything resembling an entrance to the underground.

“Akira, let's move on to the next location.”

“Roger that.”

The next investigation site had tall buildings. Riding their bikes into one of them, they explored indoors while defeating security machines that gathered around. Although there were three underground floors, it wasn't a facility like the Yonozuka Station ruins.

“Looks like this isn't it either, Akira. Let's move on.”

“Got it.”

They continued their investigation throughout the ruins. However, every attempt turned out to be a dead end.

“Can't seem to find it...”

“Is it because of outdated information, or were we fed false information from the start... Well, regardless, let's check everything just to be sure.”

“How long do you think it'll take to check everything? ”

“At this rate, probably about three days.”

“Three days... That's soon. I prepared for about a month's worth.”

“True. Since we've prepared that much, once we finish checking the information locations, let's thoroughly search every nook and cranny

of the ruins.”

Akira glanced at Alpha, who floated alongside the moving bike.

『Alpha, any idea where the backdoor to the depths might be? 』

『I can't say. Whether there is a backdoor or not,』

『Why not? 』

『Because explaining how Akira knows about it to Carol would be difficult, wouldn't it? Even if we pretend it was found by chance, it must be Carol who found it, not Akira. After all, what you find is worth it. It would be suspicious whether it was really just by chance.』

『I see... Got it.』

Although Alpha seemed to know, indeed, explaining due to such reasons would be challenging. Akira also decided to proceed with the investigation without Alpha's assistance.

In the end, they couldn't find the backdoor to the depths that day. Bathed in the evening sun, Akira and the others returned to Carol's car, concluding today's hunter work.

The car's bathroom was of higher quality than average rooms, but the bathtub wasn't spacious enough for two people to enter together. Today, they would bathe separately.

Strictly speaking, Carol did invite Akira. Since the tub was small, it would inevitably lead to close contact with Carol's naked body, making it a very irresistible proposal for a normal person, including what would happen afterward.

However, Akira easily declined. Carol showed Akira a wry smile as if to say, “I see,” then headed to the bathroom alone with a slightly exaggerated attitude.

However, that attitude was only until she entered the bathroom. Alone, Carol's smile faded as she immersed herself in the tub, earnestly contemplating today's events.

(Finding it on the first day seems unnatural... Finding it at the very end of the last day also seems a bit obvious, doesn't it? Maybe finding it late tomorrow or early the day after would be more natural? ... No, it might be better to pretend it was found while thoroughly searching through the ruins.)

Even the ample warm water couldn't soothe Carol's current state of mind. She continued to seriously consider the plans for future ruins exploration.

The next day, as Akira and the others left the car to continue exploring the Mihazono District Ruin, they were surprised to see an unexpected sight near the parking lot. There were people dressed in maid and butler outfits. And not just one or two, but at least a dozen or so.

“Who are those people...”

Beside the puzzled Akira, Carol smiled intriguingly.

“They don't seem like a hunter team using maid and butler outfits as combat uniforms... Probably, Akira, they're from Lion Steel Company.”

“Lion Steel Company...”

Akira recalled that name.

Previously, in the basement of the Higaraka residential area ruins mansion, he had obtained data on the locations of branches and terminals of a old-world company and searched for undiscovered ruins based on that data. The name of that company was Lion Steel Company.

Although at that time Akira was still ignorant and didn't know what Lion Steel Company generally referred to. Now he knew, so he mentioned it.

“...That's the company that dispatches maids and butlers, right? ”

“Yes, that's Lion Steel Company.”

Lion Steel Company was a large corporation with branches throughout the eastern region. Its main business was training and dispatching personnel, providing maids, butlers, and even secretaries doubling as bodyguards to wealthy clients, namely, the powerful elite, with deep connections to them.

Although it didn't issue corporate currency and wasn't included among the Big Five corporations like Sakashita Heavy Industry, it could still be considered part of the top ten companies with relaxed conditions, and it was indeed one of them. Lion Steel Company was such a major corporation.

“There are various interesting rumors about that company. It seems there was a company with the same name in the old-world era. So it's said that it secretly continues from the old-world era or was established by old-world people. Well, maybe they just borrowed the same name for good luck.”

“But why are people from that Lion Steel Company here? ”

“Who knows? Well, it's none of our business, right? ”

“...Yeah, you're right.”

Although it piqued their curiosity a little, it was just a passing interest. It didn't concern them. Akira and the others thought so and started their exploration of the ruins without further ado.

As they explored, the silhouette of the Seranthal Building loomed in the distance.

The Seranthal Building was still surrounded by the Kugamayama City Defense Force since Yanagisawa made a deal with the building's manager. It was heavily guarded, with humanoid weapons deployed to seal off the First Inner Sector of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. No incidents such as ghost stories related to hunters approaching or infiltrating the building occurred, and thus, the Mihazono District Ruin remained relatively peaceful.

The surroundings of the building had also been cleaned up. Previously, the area had been heavily damaged by the building's defense mechanisms attacking intruders without regard for the surroundings. But now, with no more skirmishes occurring, new buildings stood in their place.

Akira commented lightly as she observed the scene.

“The Seranthal Building... I remember during the previous commotion, a large number of machine monsters also appeared from there, right? ”

“Yes. The city deployed troops to suppress the monsters that kept coming endlessly. They've been blockading it ever since.”

“Those monsters were made in the factory district of the ruins, right? How did they transport them all the way there? I doubt they transported so many by air, and maybe there's a tunnel connecting the building's basement to the factory district.”

“That's possible. But that area is guarded by the city's defense force, so we can't investigate. Even if there's a backdoor to the depths of the

Kuzusuhara District Ruin there, it's a shame, but we'll have to give up.”

“Yeah, you're right. Let's hope we find it somewhere else.”

Akira and the others thought that it didn't matter too much if they couldn't find it. They decided to focus on the exploration of the ruins without worrying too much about it.

Akira and the others continued their investigation of the Mihazono District Ruin. With Akira's high-performance information-gathering device, they could thoroughly examine a wide area in a short time. Once they arrived at a location, if it turned out to be a dead end, the investigation would end quickly. Akira and the others were eliminating candidate locations one after another.

Finally, they arrived at a place that seemed promising. In a hall resembling a commercial facility under construction, there was a staircase leading about 10 meters deep underground.

Akira looked at the scene with interest.

“Oh! Could this be it? ”

“Hmm... I think so! Finally! Akira, let's investigate further right away! ”

“Roger that! ”

Akira eagerly drove the bike. Even the rough terrain, unsuitable for tire travel like stairs, was no problem for the bike, which could travel through the air. They proceeded smoothly down a very smooth slope.

Behind Akira, who was in high spirits, Carol switched her focus.

(...Well, it might just be connected to an unrelated place, and there might be other promising locations. Even if the schedule is disrupted a bit, it's not a problem.)

According to Carol's plan, they wouldn't find the backdoor to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin until tomorrow.

The tunnel led them to another seemingly promising location. It was a connection to an underground tunnel.

The tunnel was cylindrical with a diameter of about 30 meters, with no visible seams between the floor, walls, and ceiling, all paved. It was designed for vehicles to travel disregarding gravity. Despite being underground, it was as bright as midday, and no light source was visible. Sturdy partitions were installed, but they were now fully open. Akira smiled as she looked further into the tunnel.

“It's different from what we saw in the Yonozuka Station ruins, but this feels like a significant discovery. Now, all that's left is to see if this leads to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.”

Carol also smiled with keen interest.

“There's also the possibility of it leading to an undiscovered ruin. In that case, it would still be a major discovery.”

“Oh! That's right! Alright, let's go! ”

Whether it led to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin or an undiscovered ruin, it would still be a significant achievement. Akira hoped for such a big breakthrough ahead and accelerated the bike energetically.

The tunnel was straight and obstacle-free, with no monsters in sight. Since there were no obstructions to their passage, Akira accelerated the bike without hesitation.

The high-speed wind generated by the velocity was blocked by the bike's force field barrier, so it didn't bother them at all. Although a slight control error at this speed could lead to a major accident, the bike's high-performance control system kept the vehicle completely stable. They zoomed along the paved surface at high speed. Within

just 10 minutes of riding, Akira and the others had already moved far from the Mihazono District Ruin.

At that moment, a notification came from Alpha.

『Akira, there's someone ahead.』

Akira, not expecting anyone in such a place, was slightly surprised and looked ahead. Simultaneously, the information-gathering device captured and magnified the figure. There stood a hunter in the middle of the tunnel, looking toward the depths.

As Akira slowed the bike and approached, the person also noticed them and turned around, showing a surprised expression just like Akira and the others.

Akira stopped the bike. Unexpectedly meeting someone unexpected in an unexpected place surprised everyone present.

“Akira, long time no see. Didn't expect to meet you in a place like this.”

“That's my line, Togami. What are you doing alone in a place like this? ”

It was Togami, a junior hunter from Drankam, who had worked with Akira and the others in the Mihazono District Ruin before.

Chapter 223: Underground Tunnel

As Akira and his group searched for the back entrance to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, they encountered Togami in the underground tunnel they found in the Mihazono District Ruin.

Togami was also surprised to encounter unexpected individuals in an unexpected location. When Akira asked him first why he was there, he paused for a moment before responding.

“What am I doing...? I'm exploring ruins.”

“Exploring ruins... You're quite far from the Mihazono District Ruin now. Ah, are you also considering the possibility of undiscovered ruins by advancing through this tunnel, Togami? ”

“Well, something like that.”

Togami lightly responded and glanced at Carol for a moment before continuing.

“...To give you more details, I'm in the middle of mapping the ruins as part of a request I received. This includes places that seem to lead to other ruins. Perhaps you are also doing the same, Akira's group? ”

Before Akira could respond, Carol interjected.

“Yes, that's right.”

“I see.”

Togami accepted this and Akira decided not to say anything unnecessary, judging that Carol had taken over the conversation with Togami. Understanding Akira's decision as her hired escort, Carol smiled and continued talking.

“But if you were mapping, why were you just standing around in a place like this? Taking a break? Or did your equipment have trouble?

”

“No, I was just hesitating whether to continue further.”

Togami hadn't walked all the way here on foot. However, he hadn't ridden indoors on a large off-road bike like Akira's group either.

What Togami used was a folding compact bike. It consisted only of a thin frame, including the tires, and could fold up small enough to fit into a backpack. Yet, the body was reinforced with force field armor, making it sturdy, and it could achieve decent speed.

However, it lacked the performance to be considered suitable for wasteland monster battles. Nevertheless, it was useful in relatively safe areas.

There were no monsters in the tunnel. Presumably, it had collapsed partway, preventing other monsters from entering. For mapping purposes, it was sufficient to investigate up to that dead end. Togami thought so as he proceeded through the tunnel.

However, even after advancing for a while, they hadn't reached a dead end. Is it dangerous to continue alone into unknown territory? Or should he continue a little further since they had come this far? Togami hesitated whether to proceed or turn back, and he stopped his bike here to ponder.

Togami glanced at Akira's bike.

“How did you and your group get to the underground tunnel? I walked down the stairs, but was there a roadway connecting to the surface somewhere? ”

“No, we also came down the stairs. Just with this bike, though a bit forcefully.”

“I see... So, does that mean, based on your information, you knew in advance that there's a need for large bikes in this underground

tunnel? ”

Togami casually probed with small talk, but Carol interjected with a light tone and a smile.

“Let's not pry into those details too much. We don't know what information sources each other is using, but it's best not to accidentally reveal something that might require silencing, right? ”

“...You're right. Understood.”

Togami also replied with a light tone and a smile. However, the content of his response was serious. Carol joked around, the one who would be silenced if the need arose would be herself. And if there were yet undiscovered ruins ahead, that information would be valuable enough to justify such action. Togami understood that much.

“Well then, Akira. Shall we go? ”

“Hm? Oh, yeah. Togami, see you later.”

As Akira and her group started to leave, Togami called out to stop them.

“Wait a moment.”

“What is it? ”

“...My employer suggested working together. What do you think? ”

At this unexpected offer, Akira and Carol exchanged glances. Meanwhile, Togami manipulated the external audio output of his information terminal. Soon, the voice of Togami's employer could be heard.

“You're investigating underground routes between ruins, right? Since you seem to know Togami, why don't we work together? ”

“Who are you? ”

“Didn't we just decide not to pry into each other's business? ”

Carol replied with a smile, a negotiation-friendly yet sinister grin.

“That's right. Understood. So, what should we call you? ”

“Hmm, in that case, call me Shirou.”

Upon hearing a familiar name, Akira showed a slightly puzzled expression. However, considering that the other party introduced themselves with a pseudonym, he didn't dwell on it, thinking it was a coincidence.

“Shirou, then. If we're working together, shall we negotiate terms and such? ”

Carol proceeded to negotiate with Shirou. Akira and Togami, as hired individuals, silently observed the situation while considering various things. Eventually, Carol and Shirou's negotiation concluded.

“Alright. It's settled. Togami, to put it bluntly, you're not so much a combatant as a companion to us. More accurately, you're a target for us to protect. Is that okay with you? ”

Although it was decided without Togami's direct involvement between Carol and the employer, Togami nodded normally.

“Understood. I don't delude myself into thinking I can fight alongside Akira on equal terms. My equipment's performance is much lower than Carol's, too. I know my place.”

“I'm sorry about that. Well then, let's get along again.”

With an unexpected companion added, Akira and her group once again advanced deeper into the underground tunnel.



Akira's group proceeded through the underground depths via the tunnel from the Mihazono District Ruin. Akira and Carol rode ahead on Akira's bike, while Togami followed behind on his own bike. Adjusting their speed to Togami's bike and considering Togami as a potential target for protection, Akira proceeded cautiously to be prepared for any sudden developments.

Akira casually asked Carol something.

“Carol, why did we decide to go with Togami? It's not like it's a bad idea, but...”

Though he didn't intervene because it wasn't that big of a deal, Akira found Carol's decision to deliberately involve an additional person somewhat puzzling.

Carol lightly responded to Akira's question.

“It's more convenient that way. We're searching for the back entrance to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin to lower the value of the information I have about the depths. But in doing so, I think there'll be hunter teams who'll suffer damages. For example, lower-ranked teams using the back entrance for a quick advancement might catch up with higher-ranked teams.”

“Ah, I see. That makes sense.”

“So when spreading the information about the back entrance, we need to ensure that the source isn't traced back to us. But... If it's not us in the first place, then there's no need to worry, right? ”

“...I get it. So, we'll have Shirou, the one hiring Togami, spread the information for us? ”

“Exactly.”

Seeing Akira nod in agreement, Carol smiled, knowing he wasn't lying. Then she continued a bit further.

“Shirou, who's probably hiring Togami, should be aware of such risks. So, I think they're letting Togami investigate without doing it themselves.”

“Hmm... Should we tell Togami about this? ”

“Akira, let's not. He might be aware of such risks, having been hired for a hefty sum already, or even if he isn't, it's not our place as outsiders to meddle in other hunters' contract details. It would be different if it were before the start of the request, but especially once it's begun.”

“...Alright.”

A contract is a contract regardless of its contents. Even if Togami were to become furious later and even if he were to go and kill the employer in anger, it would be a matter between Togami and the employer to resolve. That's what Akira initially thought.

And he thought further. Even if he were offered a similar request, he might not notice such hidden circumstances himself. If it were something critical, Alpha would probably inform him, but relying entirely on Alpha wasn't a good idea either.

Kibayashi had also said that he should at least develop minimal negotiation skills. Akira reminded himself to pay attention so he could notice such things on his own.

Having reminded himself of that, Akira hadn't yet realized several things at this point.

The fact that Shirou is a cartographer is merely Carol's assertion. Furthermore, the idea that Shirou understands such risks and is letting Togami investigate without doing it themselves assumes that the other party is also searching for the back entrance to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, but that's also just Carol's speculation.

However, Akira believed these things to be true based on Carol's words. And Carol intentionally spoke in such a way.

Above all, the primary reason Carol brought Togami along wasn't to spread information about the back entrance to the depths of the ruins.

Alpha had noticed all of this, but she didn't bother to inform Akira. Akira's sincerity in fulfilling the request had been confirmed. Therefore, there was no need to unnecessarily confuse Akira by telling him such things.

While riding his bike behind Akira's group, Togami complained to Shirou.

“...Hey Shirou, have you been monitoring my movement all along? ”

Shirou's cheerful voice came back through the communication link.

“It's not like I've been doing it all along. I just made sure I could know immediately if something happened.”

“Still, that means you could hear all my conversations, right? ”

“That's true, but didn't we agree that all information during the request would be recorded? It was part of the contract, so I paid a hefty sum upfront for it. Even if you complain about it now...”

“...Even if it's all recorded, I thought it was only about terrain information and things related to map-making.”

“Whoops, was that what you thought? Ah, I should've confirmed that properly. But you also neglected to check, right? And besides, the contract's already signed. Sorry, but you'll have to let it go.”

“...So, why did you invite Akira's group then? You made it a condition for me to explore the ruins alone, right? ”

Togami had been exploring the ruins alone because Shirou had set such a condition. Togami felt somewhat dissatisfied that the condition had been overturned by the employer.

A bright voice came back in response to his question.

“That's true, but if you can invite a Hunter Rank 70, wouldn't you invite them? ”

“...70? ”

Surprised, Togami received Shirou's casual voice.

“Huh? Didn't you know? You know each other, right? ”

“Well, I thought Akira was around 50, and I thought Carol was even lower...”

“Your information is outdated. Akira's current Hunter Rank is 70.”

Shiro displayed Akira's personal page at the Hunter Office on Togami's augmented field of vision, confirming Shiro's story.

“Seriously... How could he make that much money and reach rank 70 in one go? ”

“Seems like he made a flashy income from escorting inter-city transport vehicles. The details aren't written, though.”

“...Is that the story? ...No, is that really the story...”

He didn't know the specifics. However, with Akira's Hunter Rank now at 70, it's certain that he achieved enough to warrant that recognition. Akira is indeed strong enough for that. With that thought in mind, Togami muttered involuntarily.

“...Katsuya would die, huh? ”

“Huh? What do you mean? ”

“Nothing. Just talking to myself.”

“Is that so? Well, you know. Having fewer people reduces the risk of information leakage, right? So, I was planning to have one person explore the ruins alone. But if a Hunter Rank 70 accompanies them, the risk is tolerable, isn't it? So, I tried inviting them on a whim. And it worked out. That's all.”

“I see. Well, I understand. If there's anything else, tell me now. Whether it's sudden schedule changes or anything else. Even if it's not a big deal contract-wise, it's irritating to find out later.”

“Got it. Should we talk to them together once? ”

“Is that necessary...”

Togami grimaces as he establishes communication with Akira's team.

While Akira's team and Togami's team are now acting together, the composition of each team remains unchanged. With Akira's team and Togami's team forming a two-team structure, communication occurs between teams. Akira and Carol's confidential discussions are unheard by Togami's team, and Togami and Shiro's exchanges are also unknown to Akira's team.

While progressing through the underground tunnel in this state, Shiro starts speaking over the communication.

“To be honest, I'm looking for a back entrance to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.”

“I didn't ask, you know? ”

Togami, who was not informed by Shiro about the expected situation, involuntarily speaks up. Shiro responds lightly to Togami's raised voice.

“It shouldn't be surprising. Didn't I mention investigating the underground passages between ruins? If this underground tunnel is a major artery of circulation from the Old-World era, it's not surprising if it leads to the largest ruins around here.”

“Even so...”

Togami attempts to protest, but Carol interrupts him.

“Togami, sorry, but could you hold off on your team's discussion for later? ”

“Understood.”

Togami reluctantly backs down, realizing that disrupting discussions of other teams with issues from his own team is inappropriate.

Carol continues the conversation.

“So, are you also looking for a back entrance to the Second Inner Sector of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin and beyond? Trying to profit by selling that map information to the Hunter teams exploring the depths? Or perhaps you're commissioned by some team's cartographer to investigate the backdoors and escape routes of the conquest route? ”

Carol says so confidently, as if she had seen through it all.

Whether that is correct or not is not important to Carol. As long as her words get the other party on board, that's all that matters. If they agree, it would be easier for her to pass on the source of information about the back entrance to the depths of the ruins.

However, Shiro denies it.

“No, what I'm looking for is a back entrance to the First Inner Sector.”

“First Inner Sector? If it's there, you can easily pass through the rear communication lines that Kugamayama City established, right? I don't think a back entrance is necessary.”

Carol, looking puzzled, asks back, to which Shiro responds with a meaningful tone.

“But there are places sealed off by Kugamayama City, aren't there? ”

Understanding dawns on Carol, but she's still surprised. Finding a back entrance to Tsubaki's restricted area and selling that information is a clear act of hostility toward Kugamayama City.

Shiro continues undeterred.

“Many people want to talk to the manager of that area. Since Kugamayama City has successfully negotiated with the manager, there's a high possibility of communication with the governing-type manager. Some even think that negotiating directly and meeting in person might work out surprisingly well.”

“Even if you think about going to meet them directly, the area is thoroughly sealed by the city's defense forces. So a back entrance is necessary. I get that. And information about the back entrance can fetch a high price from those kinds of people.”

“Right? ”

“But do you understand? Depending on how it's handled, it could make enemies not only of Kugamayama City but also of Sakashita Heavy Industry.”

Akira hadn't caught up with the conversation. However, he hesitates to interrupt Carol and thinks it's not appropriate to stop her, so he asks Alpha instead.

『Alpha. Why would selling information about a back entrance to Tsubaki make enemies with Sakashita Heavy Industry? 』

『If the person who goes through the back entrance to meet Tsubaki does something to anger her and she judging it as a mistake of the Kugamayama City, which is undertaking the surrounding blockade, stops trading with the city, then the value of Aurum issued by Sakashita Heavy Industry, which allows for the existence and commercial transactions of the old-world, would disappear, wouldn't it? 』

『I see... Maybe we should stop then? 』

『Let's refrain from that. Regardless of whom Tsubaki negotiates with and whatever the outcome, it's not our business to get involved.』

『I see... Understood.』

If Alpha judged it that way, then it must be for the best. Akira thinks so and refrains from speaking further.

After that brief mental conversation, which happened in an instant in real time, Shiro calmly responds to Carol's question.

“What are you talking about? That's why it can fetch a high price, right? ”

Carol, interpreting those words as tolerating hostility toward Kugamayama City and possibly Sakashita Heavy Industry, stiffens her expression.

“Wait... Are you serious? ”

Even if it was a misunderstanding or if the other party reconsidered their stance based on her reaction, the point had been made clear. Carol decides this and decides not to pursue the matter any further for now.

In a confident tone, Shiro continues the conversation.

“No no, you got it wrong. I have no intention of antagonizing Sakashita Heavy Industry. If I hint at such things during negotiations with Kugamayama City, the city authorities, who want to block off the back entrance to that place, will pay a high price for it. That's the story.”

“...I see. Well, just don't say things that could be misunderstood, okay? ”

“Sorry about that. I'll be careful.”

Whether it was truly a misunderstanding or whether their opinions had changed based on her reaction, the point had been made clear. Carol decides this and decides not to pursue the matter any further for now.

Shiro continues the conversation with a cheerful attitude.

“Well then, let's move forward for now. Besides, it's not certain that this tunnel leads to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin anyway.”

“...Right. Let's move forward for now.”

Togami, who had been silent after Carol asked them to hold off, immediately speaks up.

“Can I speak up now? Shiro. Were you planning to let me go to that restricted area? ”

“Huh? What do you mean? Didn't I just say I was aiming for the back entrance to that restricted area? ”

Without any concern for Togami's irritation, Shiro continues.

“That's true, but even if I asked you to go there, you wouldn't, right? Even underground, you can roughly determine the position with the wide-area map. Once you get close to the restricted area, you'll know you can't go further and turn back, right? ”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Right? Just because I paid a lot doesn't mean I'm telling you to charge into that restricted area and die. You're a Hunter. Whether to proceed or retreat. That judgment that determines life or death is your job, isn't it? I understand that much too. So I won't force you or expect the impossible. Well, if you say you'll go if asked, I'd like you to, but...”

Togami feels defeated. He feels he's being outsmarted. He can't come up with a good comeback.

Shiro continues.

“If you want, Togami, you can turn back now. Even if this tunnel does lead to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, you'll probably hesitate to go further around the area before the depths. At that point, I was planning to have you go back and have another high-rank Hunter take over the rest of the investigation based on the information we've gathered so far. But thanks to your timely assistance, Togami, Hunter Rank 70, has agreed to continue the investigation, so there's no need to force you to stay any longer.”

Togami gritted his teeth with a stern expression.

Roughly summarized, he had been told that he was already expendable. However, since he himself had hesitated to proceed to the inner parts first, Togami couldn't find any words to retort.

Togami also had his pride. But asserting that pride was difficult in this situation. Considering Akira's group's fighting strength, he couldn't deny that he was a hindrance. Furthermore, if he insisted on deciding who would return, he would end up hindering Akira's group. He couldn't tolerate such disgraceful behavior.

However, it was also difficult for him to just leave now due to his pride. What should he do? Togami was troubled, his expression grim.

Then Carol changed the communication settings so that only they could hear and spoke.

“Akira. What should we do? If the burden on Akira seems too heavy, it might be better for Togami to return, even though I feel bad saying it? ”

“No, it's fine if we stick together. If he want to come, I won't stop him. I don't have any intention to hold him back though.”

Akira might judge that even while escorting Carol and Togami, Alpha had enough strength to fight in the Second Inner Sector without any problem. If that were the case, it would be time. With that in mind, in order to firmly demonstrate his own strength to Alpha, including the new equipment, Akira had no intention of refusing Togami's company, no matter how much he might hold them back.

Carol interpreted Akira's response as a sign of his confidence and smiled.

“I see. Then shall we let Togami decide whether he'll accompany us or not? ”

Carol changed the communication settings back and addressed Togami.

“Togami. Just to let you know, if you're guarded by Akira, you'll have to pay for that protection, you know? Being guarded by a Hunter Rank 70 isn't cheap. Even if you lose your share, I won't care, okay? ”

Upon hearing that, Togami frowned for a moment. But then he realized something and grinned defiantly.

“So... that means if I mess up, I'll reduce this team's share, right? I might end up just being a freeloader. Is that it? ”

“Well, something like that.”

At that moment, Shiro's voice chimed in.

“Ah... I see where this is going...”

Upon hearing that, Togami's smile grew even stronger.

“Got it! I'll accompany you guys! I'll do my best not to hold you back. At least I'll try.”

He would do everything he could to not be a burden to Akira's group. Even so, he believed that by offsetting the trouble he caused to Akira's group due to his pride, their rewards would increase. Additionally, if their rewards decreased, it would also diminish Shiro's profits, so he considered it a payback to Shiro as well.

Having dealt with his own pride in an unconventional way, Togami raised his spirits and followed Akira's group.

Akira's group continued to progress smoothly through the underground tunnel. Though there were several branches along the way, they chose the path closer to the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Comparing their current location to the wide-range map, they were quite far from the Kugamayama City and the frontline base for ruins conquest, but they had already come close to the outer outskirts of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

Akira directed his gaze forward along the path. The tunnel continued further into the depths of the ruins.

『Alpha. From this feeling, it should at least lead to the First Inner Sector, right? 』

『If you can infer that, then yes. But if you're asking whether it continues or not, I suggest not asking right now. It would be information Akira shouldn't know.』

『Ah, I see. If I know it, I won't be able to explain why I know it to Carol and Togami, right? Understood. I won't ask. But let me know if it's dangerous. I'll just say I have a bad feeling about it.』

『Roger. Also, let's see how far Akira can go on his own, including those aspects.』

『Understood.』

Akira exchanged a confident smile with Alpha in a position invisible to Carol.

As Akira's group continued further into the underground tunnel, they reached the boundary between the outer outskirts of the ruins and the First Inner Sector. However, they encountered a dead end there. While the tunnel itself continued, it was sealed off by a thick partition.

Akira parked his bike and discussed with everyone.

“What should we do? Should we try to force it open? We don't know if we can do it, and if we haven't encountered any monsters until now, it might be because of this barrier. So, it might be dangerous to open it...”

Considering the possibility that powerful monsters from the inner part might flood the entire area if they opened it, Akira didn't want to open it recklessly.

Carol glanced briefly at Togami before speaking.

“Hmm... What should we do...”

Carol also noticed the same concern as Akira. However, unlike Akira, she preferred to open it if possible. While the current map information of the underground tunnel was valuable enough, without a backdoor to the Second Inner Sector, she couldn't devalue the information she had about the inner part of the ruins.

If monsters were to overflow into the wasteland due to opening this barrier, she could secretly pass the information about this underground tunnel to the city and have it sealed off. She had her own reasons. Desperate times called for desperate measures. With that in mind, Carol was trying to find reasons to open it, just the two of them.

However, Togami was present in this situation. Togami's employer was also monitoring the situation through communication. If

monsters were to overflow into the wasteland and the city were to investigate, there was no guarantee that Togami's group wouldn't betray them. That concern made Carol hesitate.

Togami, having also recognized the same concern as Akira, was reluctant to open the barrier. Then, a suggestion came from Shiro, which he relayed to Akira's group as it was.

“Why don't we check around first? If there's a detour route for work, we might be able to proceed to the inner part without opening this. ... That's what Shiro says.”

Adopting that suggestion, Akira's group began to examine the inner walls of the underground tunnel altogether. With the help of their augmented suits' grounding function, they could walk on the walls and ceiling as usual, thoroughly investigating every surface.

『Alpha. Any luck finding it? 』

『If you can't find it on your own, pretend you didn't find it.』

『Understood.』

They confirmed the existence of a detour route. This information was something they shouldn't have known originally. If asked why they knew it, it would be troublesome, but before that, if they found it, it would make sense. The new equipment greatly improved their information-gathering capabilities. They would probably find it. That's what Akira thought as they continued their search.

And indeed, they found a detour route. However, it was Togami who found it. Akira and Carol both showed surprised expressions.

Before the detour route, there was a three-dimensional projection wall, on top of which a force field barrier was layered to replicate the texture of the wall. Even with their high-performance information gathering device, if they had investigated without knowing there was a hidden passage here, they probably wouldn't have noticed it. The

camouflage was so advanced that it made Akira's group think as such. If Alpha had taught Akira to find it, Carol's group would find it suspicious. That's how thoroughly the detour route was hidden.

“Togami... You found it well.”

“Really... You found it well.”

Seeing Akira's group's surprise, Togami re-evaluated the abnormality of the situation.

“I wonder how I managed to find it.”

“Really? ”

“What do you mean? ”

“I didn't find it. It was Shiro. Shiro remotely manipulated my information-gathering device and found it.”

Togami's information terminal conveyed Shiro's lively voice to the surprised Akira's group once again.

“The method of finding it is a secret, you know. It's a top-notch cartographer's secret technique. Even if you offer me 10 billion Aurums, I won't tell you.”

“Well, I didn't ask you to tell me anyway.”

Saying so, Akira delivered a powerful kick to the force field barrier blocking the detour route. The force field barrier, which had solidified the air, shattered and scattered into shards of light as it received a blow from his superhuman leg strength.

“Alright. Let's go.”

Phasing through the three-dimensional image wall, Akira's group proceeded along the detour route.

Chapter 224: On hold

Akira and the others proceed along the bypass route of the underground tunnel. The passage isn't wide enough for bikes, so they proceed on foot. Togami's bike is folded and stored in a backpack, while Akira's bike follows automatically.

While moving, Togami is astonished to hear the price of Akira's new equipment.

“It costs 20 billion Aurumu, huh... That's amazing. Did you really earn that much? The earnings of high-ranking hunters are truly on another level. No wonder you're at Hunter Rank 70.”

“Well, something like that.”

Akira, who prefers to affirm his strength in a way that others can easily understand, without going into detail about his earnings, simply responds like that.

Togami compares his own equipment with Akira's and sighs softly.

“My equipment is also among the top class in Drankam's rental items, but compared to Akira's equipment, it's still cheap.”

At that moment, Carol interjects lightly.

“My equipment isn't as good as Akira's, but it's expensive and high-performance, you know? ”

“Ah, that's obvious. If it had such a distinctive old-world design but low performance, I'd start to doubt the sanity of the person wearing it.”

“Oh, you're so kind.”

“So, Akira, when high-ranking female hunters become more urbanized in their sense of fashion and even wear dangerous outfits, is Carol also like that? Akira, you've met many high-ranking hunters operating more to the east due to escort requests for inter-city transport vehicles, right? Are all female hunters like that? ”

Asked so, Akira looks at Carol's outfit again and recalls the appearance of the female hunters she saw during escort missions for inter-city transport vehicles.

“Well, I don't think everyone dressed like this.”

“That's because of my equipment. Even at my level, my gear is capable enough to fight in the Second Inner Area.”

Togami nods in agreement.

“That makes sense. I've heard that when female hunters reach high ranks, their sense of fashion, including clothing, tends to resemble the old-world more and they start wearing dangerous outfits as if it's normal. Carol, are you also like that? ”

Akira glances at Alpha.

“Hmm, maybe.”

In Akira's augmented field of view, the non-existent woman smiled in just such an outfit.

As Akira and the others continue along the bypass route, they reach the other side of the underground tunnel's barrier wall. Since this thick wall has been preventing monster outbreaks, there aren't monsters everywhere on this side, and the scene here isn't much different from the tunnels Akira and the others have been traversing.

However, it's not entirely the same. Firstly, there were hardly any branching paths from the Mihazono District Ruin to just before the barrier. But here, even just confirming it on the spot reveals many side paths. Secondly, there are monster corpses scattered on the floor, indicating that there are monsters ahead. And thirdly, Carol voices it.

“Akira, the colorless mist is getting thick, and it seems like long-range communication might be cut off. How about your side? ”

『Alpha, how does it feel? 』

『There's no problem with communication between us. However, the long-range communication of the information terminal is in such bad condition that it's no wonder it could cut off at any moment.』

“Mine seems like it's about to cut off too. What about yours, Togami?”

Togami smiles slightly proudly.

“Mine's perfect. It's an information terminal designed for the old-world. This level of colorless mist won't affect it at all.”

“You have that too. Impressive. But why is it only the information terminal that's so high-performance? ”

Akira and the others were surprised by this. Togami became even more cheerful at their reaction.

“I received it as an advance payment for a request from Shiro. There are many places like the underground ruins where communication environments are poor, so I guess it's meant for sending information reliably. Its performance is flawless. Akira, your equipment cost 20 billion, right? Why didn't you choose such a high-performance information terminal? ”

“Ah, I prioritized the performance of guns and augmented suit.”

As an old-world connector and with Alpha's support, Akira didn't need an information terminal compatible with the old-world. But to avoid giving the impression that such a thing was unnecessary for him, he answered as if dodging the question.

Togami also understands and accepts this.

“That makes sense for you, Akira... Yeah.”

Togami thinks. Akira continues to fight against formidable opponents. As far as he knows, Akira has fought against opponents clad in equipment from the old-world in the factory zone of the Mihazono District Ruin, and against numerous old-world automata in the Lida Commercial District ruins, opponents so formidable that surviving seems miraculous.

And probably even beyond that, Akira continues to fight against enemies with similarly desperate differences in strength. He continues to risk his life in dangerous places, continuing to put his life on the line. That's why he prioritizes direct firepower, delaying improvements to communication environments.

He's getting stronger. Togami thinks so. Carol suggests.

“In that case, let's leave all external communications to Togami. The map data will become huge if we record the terrain and such thoroughly, but if we constantly transmit using the old-world, we won't need to secure the data here. You're probably already doing that, right? ”

Shirou responds via communication.

“Yeah, we are. I'll set up relays for your communication too.”

“Counting on you.”

Then Carol smiles and tells Togami.

“Then, Togami. Sorry, but could you guard that information terminal as the communication officer for the whole team? ”

“Got it. Leave it to me.”

He may indeed be a drag in terms of combat strength. But now he's not just a mere escortee. He'll do his job properly. With that determination, Togami's motivation surged.

As Akira and the others continue along the underground tunnel, monsters appear before them. Snakes, alligators, lizards, spiders, rats, snails, and others mix together, armed and attacking.

Even the smallest individual is about 3 meters long, while the longer and thinner ones are over ten meters. They are equipped with guns, cannons, small missiles, or natural weaponry and assault together.

Akira and Carol, who immediately respond, overwhelm these swarming monsters. The monsters aren't weak; each one in the swarm is as strong as or stronger than those living on the surface in the First Inner Area.

However, both Akira and Carol are hunters capable of fighting in the Second Inner Area. It's too easy for them to scatter opponents of this level.

Akira, firing his new gun, the RL2 Multi-function Gun, is satisfied with its power.

A single shot from his ordinary gun pierced through the swarm extending deep into the tunnel.

Those hit were instantly reduced to dust. Even those near the line of fire had their weapons and limbs torn off and blown away by the

shockwave alone.

With his previous LEO SSB Multi-function Gun, it would have required a mountain of bullets just to defeat one of these swarms. To achieve similar results with his previous LEO Multi-function Gun, he would have needed to pour the equivalent energy of a C-type bullet into it and then fire.

With this RL2 Multi-function Gun, however, it's so much easier. Akira can't help but smile at the clear and overwhelming performance improvement.

『Incredible power! With this, I can fight in the Second Inner Area!』

And Alpha also smiles contentedly beside Akira.

『That's right. But our goal isn't the Second Inner Area. So, Akira, please demonstrate strength that can easily handle even the Second Inner Area. I'm counting on you.』

『Yeah! 』

With determination, Akira shoots at the swarm. The swarm extending deep into the tunnel is torn apart by bullets piercing through. Even as those defeated are replenished by reinforcements emerging from the side paths, the momentum of the swarm doesn't increase. More monsters are just blown away by a single bullet. Akira continues to defeat the enemies unilaterally.

While Akira and Carol continue to scatter large swarms, Togami has hardly had a chance to shine. There's no struggle at all. Akira and Carol defeat monsters in large numbers so quickly that Togami has no opportunity to struggle.

It's not so much Togami's lack of ability as it is the performance of the gun he's using. With Togami's gun, it takes over a dozen bullets

to defeat the monsters in this situation. But with Akira's gun, he can pierce through entire swarms with a single shot. It's impossible for individual skill to overcome this performance difference.

Togami, who was enthusiastic before the engagement, feels somewhat inadequate, understanding that this is the natural result, even if he thinks so.

Then, Akira calls out to him.

“Togami, want to borrow my gun? ”

Togami hesitates slightly.

“Is it okay? ”

“Yeah. You'll have to pay for the ammunition you use though.”

“Which do you think will end up costing more, the ammunition or my escort fee? ”

“That depends on how hard you work, Togami.”

Akira's response somehow sounded provocative to Togami. But it dispels his hesitation. Togami responds confidently with a strong smile.

“Give it to me! ”

Akira's bike approaches Togami, and he removes the RL2 Multi-function Gun from the auxiliary arm and hands it to Togami.

“You can also use the bike as a shield.”

There are no obstacles in the tunnel. However, Akira avoids enemy fire by anticipating their lines of sight. Carol, protected by her high-performance augmented suit, remains almost unharmed even when attacked. Togami can't mimic either of those actions.

“Thanks for everything.”

Togami fires the RL2 Multi-function Gun from behind the bike. Powerful bullets tear through the enemies.

“Incredible power. Akira, obtaining this must have been incredibly difficult. What kind of crazy things did you do? ”

“I fought against some seriously dangerous opponents. It was almost not just being killed, but being completely erased. There wasn't even a speck left.”

Togami understands from Akira's heartfelt voice that he isn't exaggerating about his story.

“You're still being reckless as ever.”

“It's not like I'm doing it because I like it.”

As expected, Akira has been running through the jaws of death all this time. He's getting stronger. Togami thinks so once again.

Akira and the others continued to battle the horde of monsters and soon annihilated them. Afterward, they proceeded further into the tunnel.

Having exterminated those who were able to rush to the scene, the monsters disappeared from the area. Although there were piles of corpses in the tunnel, they did not obstruct the passage for Akira and the others, who could walk on the ceiling. They hurried on without any problems.

Near the boundary between the first and Second Inner Sector, they encountered another barrier blocking their path. Akira looked up at it and said.

“It feels like the Second Inner Sector starts from here. Let's try to find another detour for now.”

Then Shiro chimed in.

“There's also the option of searching for a path leading to the administrator-controlled area from the tunnel's side passages.”

Carol rejected that suggestion.

“No, that won't work. As long as you're accompanying us, we'll decide where to go.”

Whether it's the Second Inner Sector or Tsubaki's controlled area, it's all unfamiliar territory for Togami. Togami was becoming more tense. He admonished Shiro.

“Shiro. Despite being hired by you, it's us who are risking our lives in the field. I'll support the opinions from the field. Also, make sure you search properly, alright? Don't use the excuse of wanting to find a path to the controlled area to neglect finding a detour.”

“Got it, got it. I'll search properly.”

Akira and the others began examining the inner walls of the tunnel. Once again, Shiro discovered a detour. However, he expressed doubt there.

“Hmm...”

“What's wrong? ”

Upon Togami's inquiry, Shiro quickly made up an excuse.

“Ah, it's nothing. If the path ahead leads to the Second Inner Sector, the strength of the monsters will increase. Togami, be careful, alright? ”

“Understood.”

Togami kicked the barrier with all his strength that was blocking the detour. However, the barrier didn't budge. Togami frowned.

Carol laughed and stood next to Togami, delivering a powerful blow with her enchanting legs. Although the appearance of the barrier didn't change, there was a sound of something cracking. The barrier of the force field disappeared, leaving only the holographic wall.

“It seems my augmented suit can break it. Let's go then.”

“Yes.”

Togami, understanding once again that his equipment's performance was significantly lower, let out a light sigh and followed Carol. Akira also followed after with his bike.

Shiro observed Akira's figure through Togami's information gathering device.

Akira was unaware of Shiro's gaze, but Alpha noticed.

And Alpha, through Togami's old-world-adapted information terminal, also observed Shiro.

Arriving at the Second Inner Sector's underground beyond the barrier of the underground tunnel, Akira and the others were immediately assaulted by monsters.

The ones attacking in the First Inner Sector were a group of armed biological monsters. This time, it was a group of mechanical monsters. Spherical floating cannons. Large mechanical beasts resembling carnivores. Multi-legged machines with elliptical bodies. They targeted Akira and the others with lasers of various sizes attached, carried, or mounted on them.

Akira rushed out alone against the enemy.

“Carol! Retreat with Togami! ”

He advanced to the forefront, using himself as bait while firing both guns in his hands.

Bullets and lasers crossed paths. The hit machine was instantly destroyed. Meanwhile, Akira avoided the enemy's line of fire and dodged high-powered beams.

He easily defeated them. Akira had shown remarkable combat prowess, enough to warrant such an expression. However, the nature of the battle was markedly different from the one in the First Inner Sector.

Akira fired over a dozen rounds to defeat a single enemy. In the First Inner Sector, he only needed one powerful bullet to penetrate through a group of enemies. At this point, the enemy's durability had significantly increased.

Additionally, while Akira had no problem evading the enemy's attacks, in the First Inner Sector, he didn't need to avoid them at all. Even if he were hit by enemy bullets, shells, or small missiles, his highly advanced augmented suit's energy field armor would repel them all.

He only dodged to avoid wasting energy from being hit and to train himself.

However, he had to dodge this time. While not necessarily fatal upon impact, the attacks still posed a significant threat to Akira now. Continuously taking hits would lead to his demise.

Furthermore, he needed to consider Carol and the others' safety. If dodging would result in hitting Carol and the others, Akira had to focus on defending himself as a shield for them. And ideally, he needed to maintain a state where such a choice wasn't necessary.

Reinforcements for the enemy arrived. He immediately opened fire. Although he defeated them in an instant again, the number of shots needed for each kill had increased significantly.

(They're much tougher than before...! Are they different monsters with the same appearance?)

『 They recognized the power of Akira's shots from the damage caused by the previously defeated individual, so they simply increased the output of the force field armor 』

Alpha smiled in response to Akira's unspoken question. She couldn't read Akira's mind, but she already understood him well enough to make accurate guesses.

『I see! But I still managed to defeat them, right? 』

『Yes. So next, they'll increase the output even more. Both the force field armor and the lasers 』

『I see! 』

Akira defeated the next one. And the one after that. With each defeat, the enemies became tougher, and the power of their lasers increased. Nevertheless, Akira continued to defeat them.

To penetrate the enemy's defenses, he poured even more energy into the ^{Charge} C bullets and fired continuously. The power of the shots was now such that they could easily obliterate creatures the size of the large buses Akira had fought with between cities.

However, even with that power, the mechanical monsters, now with increased output, endured, albeit slightly. Destruction was possible, but it couldn't be achieved instantly. And before being defeated, they fired even more powerful lasers. The power of these lasers could potentially reach beyond the Kuzusuhara District Ruin if the tunnel

wasn't filled with dense colorless mist and if the barriers weren't closed.

Akira avoided the intense energy beams with swift and agile movements. Even under the influence of the colorless mist, merely being hit by the shockwaves would result in the flesh being charred, yet Akira's augmented suit could easily withstand it. Without unnecessarily large evasions that would create openings, he dodged by accurately judging the safe distance and counterattacked.

A floating turret with a large hole opens up and falls. A machine-beast, its torso half gone, topples over. A multi-legged machine, missing its legs and cannon, comes to a halt. And in an instant when the damage causes the force field armor to disappear, it loses its original form from the impact of the shots and turns into a pile of wreckage.

Enemy reinforcements overcome that pile, running over it, running along the upper part of the tunnel walls, or flying through the air, appearing with increased output.

Akira shoots them down as well. Using the extended magazine and energy pack purchasable at Hunter Rank 70 or above, he fires an extraordinary number of high-powered bullets from his guns as if he has infinite rounds and boundless energy.

Those bullets also hit the inner walls of the tunnel. However, the walls suffer almost no damage.

『 Akira. The enemies are increasing the output of their force field armor to counter your attacks, but for that, they need a considerable amount of energy. Where do you think that energy is being supplied from? 』

『 Probably this tunnel itself, right? Since there are flying ones, they must be supplied just by being inside the tunnel, even if they're not touching the inner walls. 』

The abnormal sturdiness of this underground tunnel also comes from that energy, increasing the strength of the tunnel's force field armor. And as long as it can supply that much energy, they can't expect the enemies to run out of energy. Akira added that.

Alpha smiles satisfied with that answer.

『Exactly. There's no opening in the enemy's energy supply. So, the enemy will only get stronger.』

And she smiled provocatively at Akira for a moment.

『Akira. Still feeling pretty relaxed, huh? 』

『... Yeah! Of course! 』

Akira also smiled back with confidence.

In reality, Akira doesn't have as much leeway as his confident response suggests. The enemies are strong, and on top of that, he has to ensure Carol and Togami's safety.

And above all, Akira is not receiving support from Alpha at the moment. This battle is to show Alpha how much Akira can fight on his own. It's meaningless to fight with Alpha's support.

Akira is fighting on his own.

He incorporates the power of information gathering device that far surpasses normal human senses, along with the communication abilities of the old-world connector, as extended senses, perceiving the world.

He then manipulates his own perception of time and reality resolution. Moving at speeds that would make the air feel viscous, he perceives time in the world as flowing slowly. In that world, only the

enemies' figures were vividly visible to the extent that they seemed to shine.

If Akira were to operate his reality resolution at the level he did when supported by Alpha, he would undoubtedly suffer from brain death due to excessive overload. To prevent this, he lowers the resolution only around the enemies, reducing the strain. Through his battle with Erde, Akira had raised his own skills in reality resolution manipulation to such an extent.

He is fighting at full strength. He has no room to hold back. However, compared to the life-or-death battles he has experienced before, this one feels lukewarm to him. Akira thinks so, and in that sense, he answers Alpha that he still has plenty of room.

He fires both guns. Every bullet hits the enemies like they're being sucked in, pulverizing the targets. He dodges the lasers fired by the enemies. Even though they would likely cause instant death if hit, they do not reach Akira, who flawlessly avoids the dozens of beams extending from the dozens of enemies.

Additionally, he maintains precise positioning as a vanguard, both as a decoy and for accurate target prioritization, ensuring that the attacks he avoided do not hit Carol and the others.

For the Akira of the past, even with Alpha's support, such feats would have been impossible. Being able to do it on his own means that when he's in danger, he can engage in even more advanced battles with Alpha's support. Indeed, Akira still has plenty of room.

In the fierce battle, Carol and the others support Akira from behind. Carol relentlessly fires her own gun, while Togami, using a gun borrowed from Akira, does the same. Both guns are powerful enough that even Carol and the others can defeat the enemies. They continue firing relentlessly, using Akira's bike as a shield.

Togami was once again astonished at Akira's strength, fighting so far away from them.

“Wow... Is that the strength of a Hunter Rank 70? ”

Since they are firing from the rear, there is a risk of Akira getting in the line of fire. Nevertheless, Togami continues firing without hesitation. Akira's words have completely convinced him of his strength.

The fact that the enemies' lasers are not flying towards them is also because Akira is making it so. Togami is aware of that much. And while facing such a large number of enemies, he marvels at Akira's ability to make it possible.

“Oh, looks like our reward might just get snatched away by her.”

Carol says teasingly with a smile.

“Didn't expect the escort fee to be that hefty, huh? You were a bit naive.”

“Yeah, totally. I still have a long way to go.”

Togami answers easily, without any concern. Carol looks slightly surprised.

“Oh, quite composed, aren't you? Don't you usually say something like, 'Well, even I—'? ”

“Nope. If I start thinking about that kind of stuff and lose my cool, I might end up dragging Akira down even more.”

True to his words, Togami calmly continues to fight. If the vanguard Akira fails to suppress the enemies, their rear-guard's strength won't be enough to avoid death. Despite understanding this, he maintains his composure.

“Wow, you've really grown. You were like that when we fought together before.”

Carol remarks.

“Well, yeah.”

Even when reminded of his past mistakes in the Mihazono District Ruin, Togami remains unwavering. While seeking further strength, his determination does not turn into impatience. Obtaining such powerful abilities hasn't made him arrogant like before. As a hunter, Togami has matured firmly.

Seeing Togami's growth, Carol mutters unconsciously.

“Am I the only one who hasn't changed...? ”

“Did you say something? ”

“Nothing.”

“I see. Well, I've been meaning to ask, but what about this underground tunnel we're advancing through? Is there still value in the backdoor to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin? The surface is filled with powerful monsters, so it's safer to go through the secure underground. Wasn't that the plan for this backdoor? ”

Even if this underground tunnel were to continue to the depths of the second part, there would be no more value in such a route with so many powerful monsters up to this point. So, wouldn't it be futile to advance further? Togami had been thinking that way.

Carol responds casually to the question.

“That area should be fine, I think. Think about it. Akira is undoubtedly strong. He's truly a Hunter Rank 70. But if you consider it, this underground tunnel is only of a difficulty level where a Hunter Rank 70 with two companions can advance.”

It's not an insignificant level of difficulty. To Togami, who expresses his concern through his expression, Carol continues.

“On the other hand, how difficult is it above ground? Even Hunter Rank 70 individuals, team up without any additional baggage, with humanoid weapons designed for high-ranking hunters, are struggling to make progress. Considering that, isn't there still enough value left in this underground tunnel as a backdoor? ”

Togami is convinced by this. And after nodding a few times, he seems to realize something and wears a troubled expression.

“That's true... Ah, but then, why hasn't Kugamayama City been wiped out, with a place like that nearby? ”

“That's... well, you see. Maybe because the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, despite being nearby, are relatively harmless as long as you don't pick a fight. So for Kugamayama City, the only advantage left is having a lucrative ruin nearby...”

“But now, they're really picking a fight, aren't they? ”

“Well...”

After a slightly longer silence, Carol says with a resigned tone.

“For now, let's keep going until Akira says to retreat. There's not much difference whether we turn back now or later... probably.”

“Yeah, you're right.”

Carol and Togami shelf their rising concerns and focus on supporting Akira for now.

While continuing the battle, Akira notices a change in the enemies. The mechanical monsters, which had been getting stronger with each defeat, have stopped getting any stronger.

『...Huh? The enemies have stopped getting stronger, haven't they?』

Alpha responds with a smile.

『They've reached the limit of their capabilities.』

『Limit? 』

『Even if they're supplied with infinite energy, it doesn't mean they can endlessly become stronger. If they exceed their limits, their bodies will no longer be able to withstand the overload.』

『I see. Alright. Then all that's left is to finish off the rest! 』

He don't think they'll be able to overwhelm them with sheer numbers. If that were possible, they would have already done so. With that judgment, Akira continues to fight tenaciously.

And then, the enemy reinforcements stop. Once that happens, Akira's advantage won't be overturned. The remaining enemies are quickly taken care of.

As Akira looks at the pile of enemy wreckage, he exhales deeply and smiles powerfully.

“We won! ”

In the underground tunnel scattered with large quantities of machine parts, Akira declares victory.

『Alpha. What do you think? Do you acknowledge my strength? 』

With this, if Alpha acknowledges her abilities, Akira will begin Alpha's request. Finally. With that thought in mind, Akira raises his spirits and smiles confidently.

However, an unexpected response comes from Alpha.

『Hmmm. Let's put that on hold.』

『...On hold? What do you mean? 』

『Even if Akira has the capability to conquer the ruins I specify, right now you're in the middle of Carol's escort request, correct? As someone who desires you to be sincere with the request, and who wishes more than anyone for you to be sincere with it, I cannot allow Akira to abandon the request midway.』

『Well... I see.』

Akira understood what Alpha said. However, he felt slightly disappointed and couldn't quite express his feelings.

Then Alpha adds with a smile.

『There's another reason for putting it on hold. While it's true that with Akira's current abilities, you might be able to conquer the ruins I specify, it's only if it's the easiest route.』

『What about the difficult routes? 』

『You'll definitely die.』

『I see...』

Alpha smiles gently at Akira.

『I also want Akira to complete my request as soon as possible. But I don't want to see Akira die either. So, while it's on hold, become stronger. If possible, become strong enough to survive even the difficult routes. There's no need to rush. You don't want to die, right, Akira? I don't want you to die either.』

With Alpha's words, Akira regained his composure. Then, he replied firmly.

『Understood.』

『 Well, it might be okay to take Akira to the designated ruins for reconnaissance once. But it'll have to wait until after Carol's escort request is finished since Carol can't go with us.』

『 Is that because it's dangerous to take her along? Or because you don't want her to know about the ruins? 』

『Both, of course.』

『Got it.』

Akira realized he had been getting carried away without realizing it. While it's good to be motivated, it's pointless to make foolish mistakes due to overconfidence. Doing things as usual is the best approach. Akira thought so and restrained himself from getting too excited, smiling to regain his usual demeanor.

Carol and the others arrive. Despite the intense battle they just went through, seeing Akira acting as usual surprises Carol and Togami once again, showing how impressed they are by Akira's strength.

“Akira. Well done. You're definitely strong. Hiring you as an escort was the right decision. So, how about it? Still feeling relaxed? Can you go further? Or should we turn back here? ”

“Well, since the reinforcements have stopped, maybe we can go a bit further? Well, the monsters in the First Inner Sector were on a completely different level of strength, and there might be even more and stronger ones ahead. But if Carol and the others object, we can turn back.”

“In that case, I vote for moving forward. After all, Akira has worked hard to go further. What about you, Togami? ”

“I also vote for moving forward. My escort fee must be reaching a ridiculous amount by now. I need to earn more by gathering more map information to cover it.”

“Alright, let's go.”

Akira and the others start advancing further into the underground tunnel. Carol smiles a little and subtly asks Akira.

“Oh, by the way, about my escort fee, how much is it...? Just want to check, but... is it cheaper than Togami's? ”

“Huh? Well, yeah.”

“Thanks.”

Togami looks slightly puzzled seeing Carol smiling as if she's got something on her mind.

“Akira. How much are you getting paid by Carol? ”

“For now, it's like a month's worth of escort fee, or more like a confinement fee? It's around 130 million Aurum. Plus, there's the fighting part, which is negotiable.”

“At least 130 million...? ”

It's expensive. But if you're hiring a Hunter Rank 70 as an escort, it's only natural. Togami thought so, and Carol adds with a smile.

“Also, during the escort period, Akira has the right to embrace me as much as he wants for free.”

Togami wonders if Akira agreed to such conditions and is about to ask him about it. But before he can, Carol continues.

“By the way, in Aurum conversion, that right is worth at least 20 billion? ”

“20 billion? Are you kidding me? ”

“I'm not kidding. Just a while ago, a hunter bought me for 10 billion Aurum for one night, and it was a hassle for him to touch his team's confidential information for payment, right, Akira? ”

“Oh yeah, that's true.”

“Seriously...”

Togami, convinced that it's true, looks at Akira with a very surprised expression.

“I thought... Akira wasn't interested in that kind of thing... huh.”

“Wait a minute, Togami. Are you misunderstanding something? ”

“Huh? Aren't you laying your hands on Carol every day as an escort fee, Akira? Be careful, okay? Carol got banned from Drankam because of those kinds of disputes. It's not uncommon for hunters to lose their cool over women...”

“It's not like that! ”

“Well, not every day, but occasionally...”

“It's not about that! ”

Akira tries to clear up the misunderstanding, but his explanation is clumsy, and Togami interprets it as an excuse, leading to a mismatched conversation. Carol watches the two of them with an amused expression.

By the time Akira's misunderstanding is cleared up, Akira and the others, who were advancing through the underground tunnel, are

once again blocked by a barrier. What they reached was the border between the Second Inner Sector and the area beyond.

Looking at the giant barrier, Akira imagines the strength of the monsters on the other side. And he decides that he can only do so much on his own.

『Alpha. From here on, I'll need support. I'll do my best to handle it myself, but it'll be difficult to fight while protecting Carol and Togami, so I'll need your support.』

『Understood. From here on, it's a demonstration of the power of the new equipments with my support.』

With that, Alpha smiles proudly. Akira gives a wry smile.

『...I said I would do as much as I can on my own. 』

『Yes yes. Do your best.』

As he expected, the area beyond the barrier requires Alpha's support. Akira understands that from Alpha's smile.

Akira warns Carol and the others just in case.

“Carol. Togami. I just want to make sure. Even though the monsters ahead might be even stronger, do you still want to proceed? ”

“Akira. Are you saying that you don't have confidence in protecting us under any circumstances? ”

“Confidence... Well, I still have some energy left, and unless something drastic happens, I plan to manage somehow. But we're facing unknown enemies in an unfamiliar place. I can't say for sure that I'll be able to protect you all.” Akira then smiles self-deprecatingly.

“Also, this is based on my experience, but I tend to get involved in such situations. Bearing that in mind, if Carol and the others don't like it, we can turn back.”

Carol and Togami exchange difficult expressions. Both have encountered situations where Akira's words have persuasive power, whether it was in the Mihazono District Ruin or even the Lida Commercial District Ruin. Those memories trouble them.

And first, Carol makes a decision.

“...Akira. Just to make sure, do you have the intention of not abandoning us under any circumstances and seriously protecting us?”

“Of course.”

“Then I want to move forward. Probably, the area ahead is the Third Inner Sector. Depending on whether the back entrance to the ruins ends at the Second Inner Sector or continues to the Third Inner Sector, the value of that map information changes. For the sake of paying your escort fee, we need to check that area.”

“Where to go is up to you. That's the condition I agreed to when accompanying you. If Akira wants to move forward, I won't stop you. Well, there are parts where I have to go along with your convenience, and I'd appreciate it if you could reduce my escort fee accordingly.”

Money is precious. Life is even more precious. Nevertheless, if one were to stop advancing because of that, they wouldn't have continued to be a Hunter for this long. Carol and Togami both understood that to some extent.

“Got it. Let's move forward.”

Akira and the others nodded in agreement, deciding as a group to venture further into the dangerous territory. They proceeded to examine the inner walls of the tunnel once again, searching for

alternate routes. This time, it was Shiro who made the discovery again. With Akira at the forefront, they cautiously proceeded along a slightly uphill passage.

And then, they reach the next area after the Second Inner Sector, the Third Inner Sector. It's a vast, pure white space.

Chapter 225: Third Inner Sector

Having traversed the underground tunnel from the Mihazono District Ruin to aim for the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, Akira and his team finally reached the Third Inner Sector. There, they found an expansive space that stretched endlessly in white.

Everywhere they looked was simply white. It seemed to stretch to the horizon, with no discernible boundary between the floor and the walls. Looking up, they couldn't see the ceiling or the sky. There were no shadows on the floor, giving the illusion of standing in mid-air. Akira and the others were bewildered by this unexpectedly surreal sight.

Akira scanned the surroundings with his information gathering device, but all he could determine was the presence of the floor.

“What is this place...? ”

Beside Akira, Carol also showed surprise on her face, indicating strong perplexity.

“The density of colorless mist has reached unprecedented levels... Even with my and Akira's information gathering devices, we can't see beyond 50 meters.”

Togami's astonished voice followed from behind.

“Wow... Seriously...”

“What's wrong? ”

Akira, turning around, grimaced. There was no passage they had taken to get here. It wasn't that the passage had disappeared from the walls; there were no walls at all. Only the white expanse existed there.

“Seriously...”

In light of the unprecedented situation, Akira could only respond with those words. Shirou, who wasn't present at the scene, offered a conjecture about the situation.

“It seems the passage we were just passing through was created with a hologram and a force field barrier. Well, maybe it was just a hologram from halfway through.”

“If it was just a hologram, wouldn't our information gathering devices detect it? ”

“Not necessarily. In the old-world's holograms, some can even give off a sense of presence. So, it wouldn't be surprising if even with our information gathering devices, we mistakenly perceived it as a real wall with a light investigation.”

“Does the old-world have such things...”

“Well, when we say the old-world, the level and trends of technology vary depending on the era and location. This place seems to have a high level of technology to have such things.”

Akira and his team were bewildered by the unknown situation, but Shirou's explanation helped them regain their composure. They breathed lightly and calmly dealt with the situation without panic.

“Carol, Togami, let's try to find the way back for now.”

“Yes, since we've come this far. We've already obtained enough information about the entrance to the ruins' depths. Let's go back.”

Togami nodded in agreement with Akira's suggestion.

“Although the passage we came through has disappeared, the information about our route is still available. Shall we follow that first? ”

Akira and the others displayed their respective routes on their augmented views and proceeded through the white expanse. They made steady progress for a while, but it came to an end when the line of their route entered the floor. Carol groaned as she looked at the floor.

“There should have been a passage leading underground here. But it's gone.”

While moving, Carol overlaid the generated 3D map on her augmented view with the actual view. It showed a long, gentle slope leading to an underground tunnel.

“Carol, step back a bit.”

Saying so, Akira stood in front of Carol and slammed the floor with full force using his augmented suit. A loud impact resounded, swallowed and erased by the dense colorless mist around them.

Akira returned to his posture. There was no hole in the floor, just a slight depression and some cracks.

“It's not a fake floor. And it feels like there's no passage below this, rather than the passage being blocked.”

Upon hearing this, Carol wore a stern expression.

“Then... could the current position on the map be off? Maybe the positioning system got messed up because of the colorless mist? That's not good...”

Even if you lose your position or direction in the wasteland, you can still check your position on a large-scale map by connecting to nearby cities or regular communication. Even if it's impossible due to the influence of colorless mist, it's still possible to correct your position and direction by comparing map information with the surrounding terrain.

But now, both of those methods are impossible. If they continue along the line of their route, the direction might already be off, and there's a fear that they might not even be able to head back towards the outside of the ruins.

Then Togami offers a different conjecture.

“The position of the passage may be accurate, but it's possible it's been physically filled in somehow? In that case, even if the positioning system is correct now, why not try heading towards the outside of the ruins? If the passage itself is so thoroughly filled in that it feels like it doesn't exist, digging it out would be impossible.”

Shirou also offers a different conjecture and suggestion.

“Even if the passage's position is off due to the positioning system's error, if the margin of error is small, it should be around here. How about thoroughly examining the surroundings? With the density of colorless mist being this severe, even with high-performance information gathering devices, it might be difficult to find, though.”

Having speculated on the situation and proposed actions, Carol and the others, as the team's de facto decision-makers, look to Akira for what to do next.

However, Akira's response to that is directed at something else entirely.

“Someone's coming...”

Carol and the others follow Akira's gaze. Indeed, something is approaching from within the dense colorless mist.

As the distance between them decreases, it becomes possible to distinguish their size and outline. Even if it's a monster, it's humanoid. About the size of a human. Not a group, just one. Moving at a walking pace. At the very least, it's confirmed not to be a horde of monsters.

And when it becomes clear that it's a woman wearing a black dress, Carol hopes that the approaching figure is a hunter. If it's a high-ranking hunter who can reach this place, it wouldn't be surprising for them to be wearing advanced attire resembling the old-world's dress.

“A hunter who came all the way here from the surface. They should know the exit. Let's negotiate and get the information.”

Togami seems slightly skeptical.

“Hmm, but if a hunter came this far, wouldn't they be operating as a team? ”

“You were alone too, Togami.”

“That's true, but... Well, maybe they're just acting alone because they're incredibly strong and confident? ”

As the woman approached, Carol and Togami, seeing her friendly expression, relaxed, thinking she didn't seem hostile.

But Akira was surprised. And Shirou was even more astonished than Akira.

The woman smiled warmly at Akira.

“Long time no see.”

The woman, dressed in a black-themed dress from the old-world, was Tsubaki.

Akira was taken aback by the unexpected encounter with Tsubaki.

『...Alpha. What's going on? No, wait, is she real? A hologram with presence? Or just displayed in my augmented view? 』

Alpha responds, her usual smile gone.

『She's real. I don't know why she's here either.』

『I-I see...』

Hearing Alpha's unusually displeased voice after a long time, Akira was taken aback again.

Carol, noticing Akira's reaction, asks with a slightly puzzled expression.

“Akira, do you know her? ”

“.....Well, yeah.”

With just that reply, Akira needed quite some time. From Akira's demeanor, Carol understood that Akira and Tsubaki were not simple acquaintances or friends. However, despite realizing that, seeing as the other party was being friendly, she thought they could at least get information about the exit through negotiation.

Then Shirou's voice resounds.

“Akira! Do you know her!?”

Without answering that, Akira instructs Togami seriously.

“Togami, cut off communication.”

“Huh? ”

“Quickly.”

“U-uh... Okay...”

“Wait a sec...”

Pressed by Akira's slightly firm tone, Togami operated the information terminal while feeling somewhat pressured. Shirou's panicked voice was cut off midway.

Carol, wearing a slightly troubled and somewhat stern expression, tries to speculate on the relationship between Akira and Tsubaki.

Shirou was astonished. In other words, Shirou knows at least something about her. And for Akira to be acquainted with her was surprising to Shirou.

Furthermore, Akira's decision to have Togami cut off communication with Shirou was probably to prevent any information about her from leaking out. In other words, Akira believes that it would be inconvenient for others to know that he is acquainted with her, especially those who know about her.

Having reached those conclusions, Carol realizes that she has been placed in a precarious situation. She has learned that Akira knows her. How inconvenient would that be for Akira? It could potentially make Akira an enemy. Thinking so, she begins to panic.

Togami has reached a similar conclusion. Together with Carol, he stiffens his expression.

And Akira, too, starts to feel anxious. In this situation with Carol and the others present, it would be extremely problematic if Tsubaki's talk about Alpha were to come out.

Amidst these thoughts, a slight tension builds among Akira and the others. Meanwhile, Tsubaki opens her mouth to speak to Akira.

“Don't worry. I just saw you, so I came to say hello. What brings you here?”

“.....Oh, um, well, uh... we're exploring the ruins.”

“I see.”

In the old-world's view, the hunter profession is basically considered a crime. Illegal entry into facilities, the use of force against security machines, facility destruction, theft, robbery—everything is done lawlessly.

And Tsubaki is a representative of the old-world. Even in her polite expression and short response, Akira couldn't help but feel something significant.

Tsubaki continues with her friendly smile.

“This place is more dangerous than you think. I think it's best for you to go back. Shall we go together? I was just about to head back.”

“Ah, um, yeah... Well, you see, we were just about to leave, but we got lost on the way back...”

“Is that so? Then, shall we go back together? I was just about to head back as well.”

“Uh, well, um...”

Akira found it extremely difficult to respond. If he accompanies Tsubaki, there's a risk of being taken to her controlled area. It would be bad in the current situation with Carol and the others present, so he hesitates to give a clear answer.

However, in the current situation where they've lost their way back in the ruins, if someone who knows the way back invites them to go together, refusing it would be too unnatural. Akira also wavers in his words, thinking that he could be questioned by Carol and the others.

『Alpha, do something... Alpha? 』

In Akira's augmented field of view, Alpha was standing next to Akira, wearing a displeased expression.

But in Tsubaki's field of view, Alpha was right in front of Tsubaki. With a cold expression, Alpha directed cruel eyes toward her.

Alpha's appearance there is invisible to Akira. The cold voice suitable for that expression and eyes cannot be heard by Akira.

『What's the idea? Do you think you can get away with it again, even though I let it slide before? 』

『I only came to greet him because he was here. There's no reason to be accused of such a trivial matter.』

And the expression of Tsubaki that Alpha is seeing is also invisible to Akira. The Tsubaki who is actually there is smiling at Akira, but the Tsubaki in Alpha's field of view is facing Alpha with a similar face and eyes. Alpha declares.

『If you continue to interfere, I will consider it hostile.』

Tsubaki responds.

『Feel free to judge as you like. We will do the same.』

『The warning has been given.』

『Bring it on.』

The verbal deterrents are over. From here on out, no matter how much they settle things, it will be shown through action. Alpha and Tsubaki both shared that understanding.

And the situation starts to move. Akira and the others' information gathering devices detect a massive reaction approaching rapidly towards them.

It was a monster about 30 meters long. It had the appearance of a carnivorous beast resembling a tiger or wolf with a humanoid upper body transplanted onto it.

The beast part of the fusion had no eyes, while the upper humanoid head had countless eyes on the front, sides, and back. Long fangs protruded from the beast's massive mouth, while the humanoid part had no mouth.

The beast was covered in bulging muscles and ran on unusually elevated limbs.

Compared to the beast part, the frail humanoid upper body had several thick arms resembling whips, each about a meter in diameter.

One of those arms attacks Tsubaki. It bends widely, swings forcefully, physically extends, and is launched accurately at the target from a distance at high speed. The strike by the monster inhabiting the Third Inner Sector produces a loud collision sound, indicating its power, echoing in the vicinity.

But Tsubaki is unharmed. With her slender arms, significantly different in mass, she effortlessly deflects the approaching huge arm as if swatting it away. The fusion's blow couldn't even disrupt Tsubaki's posture. Conversely, the fusion's long and heavy arm was thrown off balance by the impact of being deflected.

Tsubaki sighs softly and then smiles at Akira as she speaks.

“Unfortunately, it seems we can't talk leisurely. Let's meet again. Goodbye then.”

Tsubaki says so and turns her back on Akira, starting to walk away. However, after a few steps, she stops, turns back, and lightly informs Akira.

“Oh, just to let you know. I'll deal with those targeting me, but I'd appreciate it if you handled those targeting you. Well then, goodbye.”

With those parting words, Tsubaki suddenly disappears from the scene, leaving Togami astonished.

“She disappeared! Where is she!? No, is it optical camouflage!?”

“No... over there!”

Carol points to the position of the monster that attacked from a distance. Indeed, Tsubaki is there, delivering a flying kick to the beast part of the fusion. The giant body is sent flying dramatically and disappears into colorless mist. Then, Tsubaki also disappears, chasing after the fusion she kicked away, vanishing beyond Carol and Togami's information gathering device's detection range.

The situation continues to change rapidly. Alpha returns to her usual smiling expression and informs Akira.

『Akira. They're coming.』

『Ah, okay.』

Akira switches his two-handed weapons to the two-blades optional equipment of his augmented suit. It's Alpha's judgment and support. Its effectiveness is immediately proven.

Another fusion creature rushes towards them from a distance. Still far away, it opens its large mouth, resembling that of the beast, and releases a high-energy stream.

In the next moment, a high-energy stream is emitted from the beast's mouth. Its power is high enough that even Akira's augmented suit can't completely block it. Carol's suit would be heavily damaged, and Togami's suit would be completely obliterated.

But Akira doesn't panic. Within the realm of his extreme perception of time, he swings his blades in a cross. Waves of slashing energy emanate from the black single-bladed swords, slicing through the energy stream.

However, merely stopping or offsetting the energy stream with this level of attack is impossible. But disrupting its directionality is feasible. The tremendous energy released from the beast's mouth is redirected by the force field left by the slash, deviating away from Akira and his allies.

Still, due to the excessively high energy released, altering its direction significantly is impossible. Carol and Togami sweat nervously, their smiles strained, feeling the overwhelming force of the rushing light passing by them.

Addressing Carol and Togami, Akira says,

“Carol, Togami, get on my bike together.”

And without waiting for a response, Akira rushes towards the fusion creature.

Carol and Togami hurriedly get on the bike. Immediately, under Alpha's control, the bike starts to move precisely, not following behind Akira but maneuvering around the fusion creature's perimeter.

The fusion creature extends multiple arms towards Akira as he approaches. Thick, long arms made of flesh lash out from all directions, aiming to attack Akira from above, left, and right.

Akira skillfully evades them, agilely moving on the floor and kicking through the air, slipping past the giant arms of the enemy. He also swings his blades. The black sword blades tear through the tougher-than-iron flesh of the monster's arms.

Though such injuries are merely scratches to the fusion creature, by severing its arms, the range of its attacks is reduced. Its attacks by arms no longer reach Carol and Togami's location.

In a world where time moves slowly, Akira continues to advance further. The resistance encountered as he presses forward is greater than that of piercing through steel plates due to Akira's speed and the dense colorless mist. He pierces through it with the enhanced physical abilities of his armor, twisting and pushing forward forcibly, despite the resistance surpassing ten billion Aurum.

In the already white world, he further whitens it through reality resolution manipulation. He clearly captures the opponent's figure, recognizing detailed movements with precision, dodging and evading approaching attacks swiftly, and exploiting openings.

The opponent is a monster from the Third Inner Sector, a being that halts even high-rank hunter teams. Against such a formidable foe, Akira does not retreat but fights on.

Of course, not everything is achieved through his own efforts. Currently, he is receiving support from Alpha. The high-performance equipment he is using is also obtained as rewards from battles he would have died in without Alpha's assistance.

Nevertheless, Akira fights as much as possible on his own.

The beast opens its mouth wide, preparing to release another high-energy surge. Its mouth begins to glow, and in its center, a sphere of ultra-high-density energy, a light ball, begins to form. It takes less than a second for the light ball to collapse, and the vast energy it contains is released towards Akira.

However, for Akira, who is manipulating dense subjective time, that time is sufficiently long. And Akira does not miss that opportunity.

Akira swings his blade with both hands. Waves of cutting force emitted from the black blade tear the light ball apart in a cross

pattern.

The immense energy was compressed into a spherical shape by a powerful force field. When the force field was cut, the energy stored inside was released in a single burst from the severed point.

Akira dodges it. He cut it himself, so he can anticipate where the energy will be released.

However, the fusion creature cannot dodge. The energy, which should have been released outside the mouth, erupts not only from the front and back but also from the sides of the light ball, raging inside the beast's mouth. Flashes emanate from the beast's head to its surroundings.

Akira dashes through the flashes. He reaches the beast's back by kicking through the air and slashes the grotesque upper body growing from there. A horizontal slash. He separates the grotesque from the beast's back. Then a vertical slash. He bisects the grotesque horizontally.

With this, he crushes both the main body of the fusion creature and the grotesque. Though Akira thinks so, just to be safe, he considers slicing the beast's body in half and raises his blade.

But there, Akira is astonished. The huge beast, which he used as a foothold, jumps vigorously to shake him off its back. His surprise is twofold: first, that the beast could move so vigorously even in its partially destroyed state, and second, that each half of the severed grotesque still swung its arms at him.

Still, this astonishment doesn't halt Akira's movements and thoughts. Although he is shaken off the beast's back, he immediately kicks through the air to swiftly move and evade the arms of the grotesque. Then he considers whether to deal with the beast or the grotesque.

However, before Akira finishes making his choice, the grotesque is blown to pieces. It's a simultaneous barrage from Carol, Togami, and the guns attached to the bike's auxiliary arms.

The grotesque possessed an unusual toughness thanks to its living force field armor, but its strength depended on the energy supplied from the beast part. Therefore, in its severed state from the beast, it couldn't withstand Carol and the others' gunfire.

Seeing Carol and the others looking somewhat pleased, Akira's expression softens slightly. Then he returns his gaze to the remaining beast part.

There, Akira sees the beast regenerating its severely damaged head while creating another light ball inside its mouth, this time aiming it towards Carol and the others.

Akira kicks hastily and instantly moves to the beast's head. He kicks it with all his might. The impact causes the beast's head to face a direction far from them. The energy surge released from there also scatters in a direction far from Carol and the others.

『...That was close! 』

If Akira had been even slightly late, this surge of energy would have hit Carol and the others.

Alpha said with a laugh to the panicked Akira.

『 It's okay. If Akira hadn't made it in time, I would have steered Carol and the others away. After all, I'm the one driving that bike. 』

Akira could remotely control the bike to some extent. However, battling the fusion creature while maintaining a level of driving proficiency high enough to evade attacks left him with no room to drive, so he left the bike to Alpha.

Alpha smirked provocatively.

『Akira, you're trying to do it all by yourself, aren't you? Keep pushing a little harder.』

『Got it! 』

Akira replied with a smile, pumped up. Alpha returned the satisfied smile.

『That's the spirit.』

Alpha was highly pleased with how far Akira had come.

The battle with the fusion creature continued, with Akira in the vanguard and Carol and the others in the rear.

The beast attacked Akira with agile movements. Leaping with its heavily torn face, it sprouted fangs from the cracks, turning them into gaping maws to devour its prey.

Akira dodged the attack while countering with a swing of his blade. The black blade sliced through the beast's head, reaching its torso. While the sharpness could have easily bisected humanoid combatants he faced before, the beast proved too resilient, limiting the depth of the cut.

In the next moment, countless fangs sprouted from the section Akira had just cut, clamping down on his blade, locking it in its gaping maw.

Despite his surprise at the entity's rapid transformation, Akira swiftly slashed at the gaping maw with his left blade, only to be repelled.

『Is this a joke? 』

Due to his compromised stance during the attack, the blow was less potent than the previous one, but the blade's performance remained the same. Akira was taken aback, his face colored with surprise.

Meanwhile, Alpha commented casually.

『 Looks like it has learned the cutting power of the blade. it increased the output of the bio-force field armor to deflect it partially.』

『 It can do that too? ! It emits beams, transforms cut areas into mouths, and now this! 』

『 Indeed. Didn't Shiro mentioned it? This place is at a high technological level.』

『That's right! 』

Akira couldn't afford to show any weakness in front of Alpha in such a place. He thought so and bolstered his resolve.

Akira pulled out the firmly gripped blade from the entity by kicking it and then swung both blades crossed. The amplified wave of the slashing attack pierced through the entity's bio-force field armor.

Akira aimed the RL2 multi-function gun's muzzle at the small hole created by the intersecting blades. He quickly switched and fired in rapid succession.

Countless bullets flew into the entity's interior through the hole, causing havoc. They burst out of the opposite side of the beast's torso, creating a large hole.

Despite this, the fusion creature did not fall. Instead, it sprouted another grotesque upper body from its back, attacking Akira once more with its multiple arms.

However, before it could strike, the regenerated form was pulverized again by the gunfire from Carol and the others. Akira appreciated their support.

『Is that part unexpectedly fragile? 』

『 More precisely, there wasn't enough residual energy to reinforce that part, right? 』

『I see! 』

Presumably, the opponent's energy was virtually limitless, constantly supplied remotely from the ruins themselves. However, there was a limit within a certain time frame. Hence, the opponent couldn't maintain the torrent of energy indefinitely. They needed to create light spheres to accumulate energy before releasing it.

There was no chance in a prolonged battle. The plan was to keep attacking to increase the opponent's energy consumption, surpassing the limit within the time frame, preventing the fusion creature from keeping up with defense and regeneration. That's how they could defeat it. Akira decided so and communicated with Carol and the others.

“Carol! Togami! Good job! Keep shooting! Don't stop firing! ”

“Understood! ”

“Roger! ”

Carol and the others responded with spirited voices, continuing to shoot as instructed. They aimed at the grotesque parts of the fusion

creature when they appeared and at the beast's parts when they didn't, relentlessly firing.

The effectiveness of the gunfire was reduced due to the dense colorless mist. Even Akira's close-range slashes were blocked. It was difficult to injure them from a distance.

Nevertheless, the attacks originally had the power to crush the opponent in an instant. The fusion creature was merely stubbornly blocking them with the bio-force field armor.

Akira adjusted his slashes. Due to the disparity in the power between gunfire and blades, the fusion creature prioritized defending against Akira's attacks. As a result, the armor on the targeted areas became significantly weaker, allowing bullets and lasers to burn and tear through the beast's flesh.

The battle continued. The black twin swords slashed the beast recklessly, albeit shallowly. They were deflected, sometimes, but at the same time, bullets and lasers consistently chipped away at the beast's massive form.

The regenerated form attacked both Akira and Carol and the others. Akira severed the approaching long, thick arms while Carol and the others intercepted the arms extending towards them.

Fangs sprouted from the severed arms, transforming them into gaping maws, with additional limbs sprouting to attack Akira. He kicked, slashed, and crushed them to pieces.

Even the long arms, shot down by Carol and the others and scattered, transformed into snake-like monsters. They swiftly crawled towards Carol and the others. However, they couldn't catch up with the bike's speed, intercepted and riddled with bullets, and scattered across the floor.

Nonetheless, the fusion creature showed no signs of wavering. It continued the battle, relentlessly regenerating lost parts and

attacking Akira and the others with new forms.

Akira, Carol, and Togami gave it their all. They had no room to hold back, each doing their best. They knew there was no chance in a prolonged battle and fought desperately.

Strictly speaking, Akira still had plenty of reserves. He was fighting without Alpha's full support, adhering to her instruction to do as much as possible on his own. In other words, if Akira were to receive Alpha's support fully, he could become even stronger.

Before Akira could receive further assistance from Alpha, the fusion creature began to deplete its energy rapidly due to repeated injuries and regeneration within a short period, exhausting its energy per unit time.

The fusion creature was completely cornered. However, it was also an opportunity to push Akira and the others into a crisis.

In a state of complete disadvantage, it was impossible to turn the situation around at present. That judgment changed the fusion creature's course of action.

Carol fired at the fusion creature, causing it to take damage. Until now, they had been wearing down the opponent's flesh, which would regenerate, only to be worn down again. But this time was different. A massive hole, large enough to lose half of the beast's torso, appeared.

Akira chuckled at the sight.

『Oh! Finally, huh? 』

Their once resilient body had been blown away to that extent. Continuously enduring their attacks, the fusion creature's regeneration finally fell behind, leaving it unable to use anything but imperfect force field armor. All that remained was to press the advantage. Akira thought so, confident in their victory. Alpha had

already judged the same, but their interpretations of the situation differed.

『Yes, finally. It has finally chosen to take us down with it.』

『Huh? 』

Before the astonished Akira, the fusion creature's body began to change. The large hole in its body wasn't caused by gunfire; rather, the fusion creature intentionally altered its form.

The fusion creature's body shifted around the gaping hole, as if being grasped by a huge, semi-melted hand, forming a transparent sphere. And within that sphere, a light orb began to materialize.

『Once that high-energy body bursts, that thing will undoubtedly vanish. Along with us.』

Even a monster unafraid of its own demise wouldn't recklessly engage in behavior akin to mutually assured destruction. If they could be defeated without dying, they would fight with their survival as the premise.

But if that became impossible, they would change their judgment. The fusion creature, cornered by Akira and the others' fierce attacks, eliminated its own survival from the victory conditions.

『Is it planning to self-destruct? 』

Beside the flustered Akira, Alpha laughed merrily.

『Akira, you've done enough here. You did well. Now, shall I take over? 』

Seeing Alpha's smile, Akira also became convinced of victory and returned the smile brightly.

『Yeah! 』

From here on out, they would fight with full support from Alpha. Akira had no intention of losing.

Alpha manipulated Akira's augmented suit. Prompted by its movements, Akira sheathed one blade and gripped the other with both hands. Then, with all their might, they leaped towards the light orb, wielding the blade in a technique impossible for him to perform on his own. The shockwave of the slash released from the black blade cleaved the enormous light orb in two.



The light orb collapsed, releasing its constituent high energy all at once. Normally, it would spread vigorously in all directions. However, the slash delivered with Alpha's support gave directionality to the energy emitted from the light orb. A vast amount of energy was released in the opposite direction of Akira, swallowed by a high-density colorless mist filling the pure white space and disappeared.

The fusion creature began to crumble in the aftermath. In a bid to take Akira and the others down with it, the entity, having squeezed out all its internal energy, had hardened like severely dried meat. It shattered, crumbling further into finer pieces from the impact, turning into sand.

Akira, having landed, looked back. There stood a mound of sand.

『...They won't revive from here, right? 』

Alpha smiled as she reassured the worried Akira.

『It's okay. We've defeated it.』

『Alright! 』

With those short words declaring victory, Akira sheathed their blade. Carol and the others arrived at that moment.

“Akira, you did it. I mean, you're really amazing.”

Togami strongly agreed with genuine admiration written on his face next to Carol.

“Yeah. No wonder you're Hunter Rank 70. I mean, considering even the top teams in the inner sectors are getting bogged down by the monsters in the latter part of the Second Inner Sector, it's probably even more than that.”

“...Yeah, well.”

Akira knew it wasn't just his own strength. However, he also understood the need to showcase the combined power, including Alpha's support, as his own. That understanding slightly delayed and stiffened Akira's response.

Togami interpreted Akira's reaction differently and said with a light laugh,

“You probably want to say it's not just your strength, but thanks to your gear, right? Well, it's fine. Didn't you say before that if you want to get stronger, equipment and training are important, and if you had to choose, it's more about the equipment? With those incredible gears, you're still amazing, Akira.”

Upon hearing this, Akira showed a slightly surprised expression before smiling as if relieved. He declared his own strength somewhat dramatically.

“Yeah, that's right. Well, I've struggled a lot too. Thanks to that, I've become this strong. Impressive, right? ”

Carol also laughed along.

“Yes, very impressive. But well, we did our best too, right? ”

“Yeah, that's right.”

“That's right. We did our best. You admit that, right? ”

“Huh? Yeah.”

Akira found Carol's manner of speaking somewhat odd, almost as if she were taking some kind of pledge, but since she wasn't wrong, they answered normally. Then, Carol nodded strongly with a smile and continued.

“Well then, since we've worked so hard, it would be helpful if you could go easy on the escort fee...”

Carol showed a slightly forced smile, looking somewhat hesitant. Togami wore a similar expression.

Akira was tasked with Carol's escort, but the fee for the escort was subject to negotiation based on the specific services rendered. In this case, Carol's estimate far exceeded her ability to pay.

Even though she could offset it with her side job against an ordinary skilled opponent, Akira was different. They couldn't use that method.

While the agreement was to decide on a fee mutually acceptable to both Akira and herself, there was a limit to how much it could be reduced through negotiation. Carol was genuinely troubled by this, and Togami felt similarly, albeit to a lesser extent.

Akira also understood this from Carol and the others' attitudes. However, as a hunter, they couldn't just dismiss it as unavoidable if they couldn't afford it. Thinking about what to do, they remembered Tsubaki.

“Understood. I'll lower the escort fee as much as possible. In return, please forget about the person we met earlier. We didn't meet anyone. Please make it so.”

Seeing Akira's serious expression, Carol and the others were slightly bewildered. However, their response was decided. Carol smiled and spoke first.

“Roger that! Yes! We didn't meet anyone! Oh my, we were suddenly attacked by monsters, it was quite a ordeal, wasn't it? ”

In response to Carol's deliberately exaggerated remarks, Togami also laughed along in high spirits.

“Ah, that's right! It was really tough! We were lucky it was just one monster we encountered.”

They hadn't met Tsubaki or the monster Tsubaki had kicked away. Carol and the others indicated as much with their clumsy acting.

Of course, they were curious about the woman. But compared to avoiding paying a large escort fee and angering Akira, it was a trivial matter.

Akira also went along with Carol and the others.

“That's right. It's a relief it was only one monster. It would've been tough if there were two.”

They kept their mouth shut. Akira was fine with that. He had no intention of hiding Tsubaki's situation to the extent of silencing them, rather than just keeping them quiet.

Having defeated the monster in the Third Inner Sector and temporarily settled their concerns, Akira and the others laughed together about various things.

After the intense battle, Akira and his companions took a break and discussed their plans. For now, they decided to backtrack along the route generated by the automatic mapping system, ignoring changes in elevation.

Even if the positioning system was affected by the dense colorless mist, they should still be able to reach the Second Inner Sector without mistaking north and south. That was their hope.

Then Togami checked with Akira just to be sure.

“Akira, what about communication with Shirou? Should we leave it cut off? If we end up completely stranded here, we could connect and send out an emergency request through him. We can use insider information for the emergency request reward. A top-tier hunter

team should accept it. Well, the problem is what to explain to Shirou at that time...”

“That's right...”

Akira hesitated. He hadn't silenced Shirou about Tsubaki. If they connected, he would surely be questioned. Whether he could negotiate with Shirou while keeping Tsubaki's secret, along with Carol and the others pretending as if nothing happened, Akira wasn't confident.

『Alpha. What should we do? Well, I'll ask just in case, but we can return, right? 』

『If Akira returns, it's not a problem at all. It depends on how much compromise you can make.』

『Compromise? 』

『If it's just for returning, it's okay to let them know about the relationship between you and Tsubaki. If you can compromise on that, it would've been better to return with Tsubaki, right? 』

『But, isn't it bad to return with Tsubaki? 』

『It's bad. But if it means Akira will end up stranded here and die, I can compromise. That's what I mean.』

『I see.』

『For now, try to find the exit on your own. I know the way out, and I can guide Akira alone, but since Carol and the others are here now...』

For Alpha to guide them out of the ruins, Carol and the others need to be absent. Depending on the situation, it might require more than just silence, but actual sealing of their mouths. That's what it seemed like. Akira understood that.

『...Understood. What about communication with Shirou? 』

『Let's leave it as it is for now.』

Akira said to Carol and the others.

“Let's decide whether to ask Shirou for help a little later.”

Carol and the others nodded. There were objections, but they didn't voice them. They could consider Akira's choice as a bad move reducing the chances of survival. But they had no complaints. After all, it was Akira who held the possibility of survival in his hands.

And yet, Carol and the others thought. Even in this situation, Akira didn't want to contact Shirou so badly, because he didn't want to mention that woman.

Judging so, while Carol and the others felt a stronger interest in Tsubaki, they decided to put a lid on that interest to avoid spoiling Akira's mood.

Carol and the others, however, couldn't understand that there was someone Akira didn't want to know about more than that.

After the break, Akira and his team set off to escape from the Third Inner Sector, walking through the pure white space as a form of rest and vigilance against potential enemy attacks. Due to the dense colorless mist, their reconnaissance range was severely limited. There was a risk of colliding with monsters if they rode bikes.

However, considering the distance they had traveled so far, they should have reached the edge of the pure white space after walking for about 30 minutes. And that 30 minutes had already passed. Yet Akira and his team continued to walk.

Akira looked puzzled.

“It's strange...”

Carol and Togami also expressed agreement with a perplexed expression and a tone of confusion.

“Yes, it's strange. We've been walking for quite a while now...”

“Ah, it would be odd if we haven't reached the border with the Second Inner Sector by now, right? ”

And Akira made a decision.

“Carol, Togami, get on my bike.”

And everyone got on Akira's bike, then they started running vigorously.

“Hey, Akira. Are you sure about this? ”

“I'll be careful.”

Although Alpha wouldn't guide them back, she would drive the bike. Even if they accidentally collided with a monster ahead due to the dense colorless mist, Alpha would manage somehow. That's what Akira judged.

And Carol and the others, trusting Akira's words, quietly rode behind him without complaining.

The bike sped through the white world at high speed. Akira, Carol, Togami, all wore expressions of strong perplexity at the unexpectedly

unusual situation.

“What's going on...”

Despite driving the bike at considerable speed on the flat, unobstructed terrain, Akira and his team were still running through the white space. They should have already reached the border with the Third Inner Sector, let alone the outskirts of Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Yet before Akira and his team, the pure white space stretched endlessly.

Chapter 226: Reina's Growth

While Akira's group was advancing through the underground tunnel, a large off-road vehicle was running through the wasteland. Riding in it were Reina, Shiori, and Kanae.

Reina was wearing augmented suit that resembled both silver lightweight armor and a pure white dress. At first glance, it looked like an impractical item that prioritized design over functionality.

However, its performance was extremely high. Its defense alone easily surpassed that of thickly layered iron armor. Other functions, including physical enhancements, were similarly, if not more, impressive.

It's not uncommon for high-performance items designed for high-rank hunters to have appearances that don't match their actual capabilities. Augmented suit with provocative designs from the old-world is a prime example.

Shiori and Kanae's combat maid uniforms showed a similar trend. It indicated that their weapons were significantly more advanced compared to their previous ones.

Shiori, in the driver's seat, wore a slightly grim expression. She repeated something she had already said several times.

“Milady, shouldn't you stay at home while I go alone? It's not safe for you to come along.”

Reina, sitting in the back seat with Kanae, responded with a bright smile after understanding Shiori's concern.

“It's okay since both Shiori and Kanae are here.”

“But what if something were to happen...”

“Is that so? If it's that dangerous, shouldn't Shiori refrain from coming as well? ”

“No, it's not like...”

“Then I'll go too.”

Shiori inwardly sighed deeply, displaying an even more troubled expression reflecting her inner turmoil. Reina, with her usual expression and tone, but an unwavering attitude, completely refused to return alone.

“Kanae, don't you have anything to say as Milady's escort? ”

Kanae answered with a smile as usual.

“I'm not gonna tell Milady not to go somewhere. That's not my job.”

Shiori let out a sigh, not internally but actually, at the expected response.

“I'll do my job properly. If things get really dangerous, I'll carry Milady and leave big sis behind, and we'll escape for sure. I don't want to be asked to do anything more than that.”

“I see...”

The one deciding to accompany them was Reina, the master, not Shiori, the attendant. And it's not the attendant's place to override the master's decision due to the attendant's convenience. In that sense, Kanae's words were more reasonable than her's. Understanding this, Shiori's sigh was deep.

Then Reina spoke.

“Shiori, if you really don't want me to come along, I can go back. It's my selfishness, and I've caused you a lot of trouble. This time, I'll prioritize your convenience, Shiori.”

“Thank you very much. Then, I apologize, but you'll go with Kanae...”

Shiori breathed a sigh of relief without thinking. And as she tried to continue the conversation, Reina changed her tone slightly to a more serious one, interrupting her.

“But in that case, I won't accept anything. Even if you're sacrificing your life to obtain something for me, I'll reject it. Absolutely.”

Reina resumed her previous tone after Shiori fell silent.

“I understand that Shiori is thinking about a lot of things and there are many things she can't tell me for various reasons. Whether it's for my sake or because I'm unreliable, I don't mind, but whatever Shiori decides to do, please consider what I said earlier.”

Reina and Shiori both fell silent at that. A silence tinged with their emotions.

Shiori could sacrifice her life for Reina. If Reina could have a happy future by Shiori's death, she wouldn't hesitate. However, that mindset would loosen Shiori's standards for risking her life. If she won, Reina would be happy. If she lost, she would only die. In that case, it would be worth the risk. Thinking like that, she would take the gamble.

Reina knew Shiori would do that. So she declared. Regardless of what Shiori gained from that gamble, Reina wouldn't accept it.

With that, Shiori couldn't take the gamble anymore. Even if she won, it would be meaningless if there was no one to accept what she gained. The necessity of gambling was fundamentally lost.

However, whether Shiori believed Reina's words or not was another matter. Just words. Idle talk. Even if Reina was serious now, after Shiori's death, she might accept what Shiori gained as payment for her life. If Shiori believed it was only that much, her loyalty to Reina,

who sacrificed her life for her, would prevail. Shiori's heart, willing to sacrifice her life for Reina, wouldn't be moved.

And Shiori believed Reina's words. Reina's words were filled with such determination.

Shiori let out a big sigh. Then, she smiled with a hint of bitterness.

“My, my, Milady, you've grown quite a lot, haven't you? ”

“Thank you.”

“I'm being sarcastic, you know? ”

“I'm aware.”

Shiori genuinely felt happy about her master's growth. At the same time, while feeling that way, she also thought that her master might have grown a bit troublesome and burdensome.

Watching the two of them, Kanae smiled as usual. Reina spoke again.

“So, Shiori, seriously speaking, what should I do? ”

“Would you like to continue accompanying us? ”

“I want to, but if you ask me again to go back after this, I will.”

Shiori's criteria for judgment had changed significantly with the previous nail in the coffin. However, if Shiori still didn't change her judgment, Reina thought it would be better for her to return.

And Shiori reconsidered.

“Understood. Then, Milady, please take a look at this first.”

Saying so, Shiori took out a white card. It was a white card. It was something that Olivia, an automata who claimed to be a general-purpose personality affiliated with Lion Steel Corporation, had instructed Shiori to give to Akira during the battle at the Lida Commercial District Ruin. Shiori had obtained it from Akira through what seemed like fraudulent means.

Reina didn't know the details of how Shiori acquired it. However, she knew what that card was. She couldn't help but show a surprised expression.

“Shiori, is that...?”

“I will tell you everything about this matter. Please make your judgment after hearing it. No, if Milady wishes to stop now, I don't mind stopping here.”

After Shiori's preamble, she spoke with a slightly stronger tone.

“However, once you hear it, pleading ignorance won't work. Milady, are you really going to listen?”

Despite Shiori's somewhat threatening insistence, Reina smiled without flinching.

“What are you saying? Even if I truly knew nothing, pleading ignorance wouldn't work from the start. If subordinates act on their own, the responsibility lies with their master. Isn't that how it works?”

I don't know. Subordinates acting on their own. Therefore, I'm not responsible. If such jests were to be accepted, one wouldn't qualify as a master.

In essence, a king exists to bear all blame and lose their head. No matter how incompetent, by doing so, they take responsibility. The glory of a king is to attach such value to their head.

If Shiori were to grant herself glory, she must also unconditionally accept the blame incurred for that glory. That's how masters and servants are. Reina understood their way of existence like that.

And Shiori accepted Reina's growth.

“Understood. Then, Milady, please listen.”

With a somewhat satisfied smile, Shiori began to speak, including things she had never told Reina before.

Reina finished hearing Shiori's story. She had some thoughts about how Shiori acquired the card. However, her feelings about that matter were trivial compared to the surprise of the other parts of the story.

“Well, let's resolve the issue of obtaining that card from Akira through deception by giving him appropriate compensation later. It can also be interpreted as a business deal, right? ”

“Understood.”

Although Shiori knew it was not right behavior toward Reina, she felt relieved that she wasn't being scolded or disliked by Reina. Kanae, with her usual smile, seemed to share a similar feeling.

“So, Shiori, about that plan, will it succeed? ”

“...I can't say for sure. But it's not something guaranteed to fail. I think there's a chance of success if we actually take action. However, this is basically an order that cannot be refused.”

“I see.”

“However, if Milady decides to stop, we will cease. Don't worry about any punishment for us. Milady's judgment comes first. What do you say? ”

Reina hesitated once again. As someone who desires to be in charge, she must make decisions after knowing everything, even if the result may be for the best.

And she made a decision.

“Let's do it. But be very careful about safety. Kanae, if things get dangerous, really, seriously run away. Even if you have to carry me, retreat. Shiori, you should run away with us. Don't do anything foolish like staying behind alone to buy time. We all come back alive. That's the main premise. Agreed? ”

“Understood.”

“Roger that.”

With Reina's decision, what was originally supposed to be done by Shiori alone became a task for everyone. There were no changes in the outline of the plan. However, there was a clear difference in who would lead it.

“...But still, it was good that I nailed it down beforehand. Shiori, how dangerous of a bridge were you planning to cross without telling me?”

There was no condemnation in Reina's voice. However, a bit of dissatisfaction was evident.

“As much as necessary, I'll answer.”

“As much as necessary...? ”

Kanae interjected.

“Milady, big sis was just trying to cover for your immaturity. Isn't that nice? ”

Reina chuckled. If it was blamed on her own immaturity, Reina found it difficult to retort.

“...That's true.”

Furthermore, Kanae's words were in the past tense. Reina interpreted this to mean that even Kanae judged, based on the current situation, that Shiori wouldn't do anything reckless like Shiori. She then expressed this interpretation to the two with a slightly firm tone.

Understanding the master's feelings, Shiori smiled, and Kanae laughed.

In the back seat of the car heading to their destination, Reina reflects on everything that has happened so far.

During these past few months, Reina and the others had been away from the Kugamayama region. It was Shiori who decided this, with the official reason being related to Reina's gang circumstances. While this was not a lie, Reina had not been informed at the time, but it was actually for Shiori to directly negotiate various deals to utilize the white card obtained from Akira.

However, Shiori's main reason for keeping Reina away from the Kugamayama region was different. It was to prevent Reina from getting involved in the conflict between Akira and Drankam, or more precisely, between Akira and Katsuya. Worried about the situation escalating further, Shiori decided to use negotiations for the white card as an excuse to summon themselves to Reina's gang home before the situation worsened.

Reina learned of Katsuya's death from a distant place. At that time, Reina was surprised and mourned the death of her loved one. And even more so, she was surprised at how surprised she was that Katsuya had died.

Hunters dying at any time was not unusual. Reina thought she understood that much. However, Katsuya's death was unexpectedly shocking to Reina.

And then she realized. She had, unknowingly, without any basis, believed that Katsuya would not die.

Previously, there was a time when Akira and Katsuya almost ended up killing each other because Katsuya had protected the one who had stolen Akira's wallet. And at that time, partly due to Shiori's persuasion, they managed to withdraw from the situation. In a way, they had abandoned Katsuya.

She doesn't think that choice was wrong. Not even now. However, looking back, she realized that there was a part of her that unconsciously thought that even if they left, Katsuya wouldn't die.

In extreme terms, even if Yumina, Airi, herself, or Shiori were to die in that situation, Katsuya would not die. There was no basis for it, but Katsuya alone would naturally survive. She had convinced herself of that.

It was now that Reina realized this. That Katsuya, who shouldn't have died, had died.

And she understood. The world they lived in was a world where people died. And even Katsuya was not an exception.

She was lucky to be alive. Tomorrow was uncertain. The luck she had until now did not guarantee luck in the future. With that awareness, Reina looked ahead.

Without fear of a future filled with death, without hesitation, she opened her eyes wide, recognized the world correctly, and resolved to overcome it with determination, as the leader of Shiori and Kanae. With that determination, Reina looked ahead.

With Katsuya's death, Reina honed her rare talent. The day she could confidently return to Katsuya was lost forever. But even so, in exchange for losing her loved one, Reina had gained the strength to recognize herself.

Reina and the others parked the car near the ruins of Mihazono District and observed the ruins from a safe distance.

Seeing individuals dressed in maid and butler attire, as well as employees of the Lion Steel Company near the road leading to the Hunter's office in the ruins, Reina and Shiori exchanged serious looks.

“Ah, it seems they've got ahead of us after all.”

“It's unfortunate, but it appears so.”

“They were aware of our presence here. Shiori, how far do you think the information has leaked? Do you think they're aware of our purpose? ”

“I cannot assert that, but there must be some level of confirmation to justify the need to deploy units in advance.”

“Right.”

Reina nodded lightly and continued to speculate on the situation.

“Kanae, it seems like they're aware that we're here, but do you think they're aware that we've actually come here? Can you gather any clues from their behavior? ”

“Hmm, it's just a hunch, but I don't think they're aware yet.”

“Then, are they just in a conspicuous place to inform us that they've got ahead of us? ... Alright. Shiori, Kanae. Let's quietly go as far as we

can for now.”

Reina and the others moved from that spot. Then, when they parked the car near the factory district of Mihazono District, they activated their camouflage function to conceal their presence.

“Well then, shall we go? Let's be cautious.”

Reina and the others proceeded on foot towards the city district of Mihazono District and further towards the Seranthal Building. Along the way, they encountered monsters several times, but Reina and the others' camouflage function was powerful enough that they went unnoticed.

At present, Reina and the others were in a state where they concealed not only visible light and infrared rays but also even the slight vibrations transmitted when walking and the airflow generated when objects pass through. They were in a state harder to detect than invisible ninjas with stealthy footsteps.

However, they understood that there was still a risk of being discovered by those they were wary of, so they proceeded cautiously. And when they judged it was too dangerous to get any closer, they stopped advancing.

From the upper floors of a high-rise building at that position, Reina and the others observed the surroundings of the Seranthal Building. Two units were deployed within their line of sight.

One was a unit from the Kugamayama City. It was composed of personnel repurposed from the unit used to block off the First Inner Sector of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, and under Yanagisawa's instructions, they were tasked with repelling intruders into the Seranthal Building without any questions asked.

And the other was a unit from the Lion Steel Company. Comprising individuals dressed in maid and butler attire, each possessing combat capabilities comparable to high-ranking hunters, this unit

maintained a distance from the city's unit without engaging in combat.

Currently, the area around the Seranthal Building was doubly sealed off by these two units.

Reina wore a troubled expression.

“Well, as expected. It's impossible to break through this. Shiori, it's no use.”

“I understand. If it were just the city's unit, it might have been possible to infiltrate the building, but now there's also the Lion Steel Company's unit. It's impossible.”

“If it were just the city's unit, you were willing to do it, right? ”

In response to Reina's slightly pointed remark, Shiori made an excuse and took out the white card.

“No, Reina-sama. There's also this. Moreover, if it were just the city's unit, there was a high possibility that we could manage somehow.”

Using the camouflage function would reduce the probability of being discovered by the city's unit. Even if discovered and it led to combat, if they could reach a position where they could show this card to the building's management, they would be treated as visitors rather than intruders, and the city's side would likely be instructed to cease hostilities. It wasn't about attempting anything reckless. Shiori appealed to Reina in that manner.

Reina could understand that argument. However, even though the likelihood of success was high, considering what they could gain when they won the gamble, it was still a gamble. Despite understanding that Shiori hadn't attempted something so dangerous as to risk her life, Reina's gaze had become stern in proportion to that.

Seeing that gaze, Shiori seemed slightly pressured, but Kanae intervened with a smile.

“Well, well, Milady. It's fine around there, isn't it? Big sis has just been overly protective, trying to fix Milady's shortcomings. Milady must have grown by now, and if so, big sis wouldn't recklessly do anything unnecessary, right? ”

Upon Kanae's remark, Reina and Shiori both shared a wry smile in agreement.

“That's right.”

“That's right.”

Their voices were in harmony. While Reina and Shiori understood the content of the remark itself, they were subtly dissatisfied with being pointed out by Kanae.

Still, thanks to Kanae's remark, Reina and Shiori switched their focus. They discussed what to do next.

Reina and the others' immediate goal was to make contact with Olivia, the generic personality belonging to the former Lion Steel Company in the old-world. And the preferred method of contact was one that was safe, peaceful, reasonable, and legitimate.

For this purpose, Shiori was planning to head to the Lion Steel Company branch on the 57th floor of the Seranthal Building. Note that the information about the branch came from above, and Shiori didn't inquire about how they knew about it at all.

To go to that branch, Reina and Shiori brainstormed together on how to infiltrate the buildings where both the Kugamayama City and the Lion Steel Company were deployed.

“Hmm. Forceful entry is definitely impossible, and it seems like our camouflage might be detected. What should we do? It would be great

if there were secret passages to the Seranthal Building. Shiori, do you have any ideas? ”

Reina's remark was more like a light joke, assuming that there was no such idea. However, Shiori unexpectedly replied with an answer.

“A secret passage? ... It's not impossible.”

“Huh? Is there one? ”

“It's just a possibility. Do you remember a person named Carol? She accompanied Akira on a previous visit to the factory district of Mihazono District. She's a female Hunter.”

“Yes, I remember her. It was quite a difficult time back then.”

“She also seemed to be an excellent cartographer, but in hindsight, the information she possessed about the Mihazono District Ruin was abnormal. It's not normal for her to be able to open containers in the industrial district managed by the ruins. If it's her, she might know how we can safely enter the Seranthal Building.”

Reina recalled the situation back then. And when she thought about it, what Shiori said made sense.

“Certainly, she might know.”

“However, there are problems with this approach. By relying on her, the information that we are attempting to enter the Seranthal Building with some purpose may leak to external parties. It's a matter of how much we consider this to be a problem.”

“I don't mind. Our presence here has already leaked to the extent that the Lion Steel Company's unit has been deployed in advance. Considering that, the additional information leaking from her won't matter much. Shiori, contact her.”

“Understood.”

Shiori attempted to contact Carol using the communication device but couldn't reach her.

“...It seems futile. I can't reach her. It appears she's out of communication range. I've sent a message requesting contact, at least.”

“I see. Then let's wait for her response. And if we can't reach her, let's think about alternative methods... Shiori, let me confirm, though. That card, it's not like we can't use it, right? ”

Reina's stern expression made it clear she understood the risks involved.

Shiori nodded with the same expression.

“Yes. However, there are significant concerns regarding the peaceful contact with Olivia,” Shiori said, showing the white card again.

“We obtained this card through a transaction with Akira-sama. This card belongs to us. Akira-sama probably won't assert ownership of this card at this point.”

While the acquisition method was questionable and had many problems, there was no mistake about that point. Shiori judged it so, and Reina agreed with her on that.

“But that is a transaction between us and Akira-sama. Olivia-sama has no involvement whatsoever. In other words, for Olivia-sama, the owner of this card remains Akira-sama. If we were to use this card to contact Olivia-sama, there is a risk of it being considered unauthorized use.”

To avoid that concern, Shiori was planning to infiltrate the heavily sealed Seranthal Building, even if it meant doing so by the Kugamayama City's units, and actually visit the branch located there to directly contact the former Lion Steel Company in the old-world.

“Yeah, that's true. It's risky, isn't it? ”

“It's hard to say. There's also a possibility that Olivia-sama might show understanding.”

“But we can't afford to be overly optimistic... Even if we use this card to contact Olivia-sama, it might be better to have Akira explain the situation to Olivia-sama as the card's rightful owner. It would be troublesome if we were misunderstood for using a stolen card.”

“That's right. It would be best for Akira-sama to be present, but even if it's just an explanation over the communication, it would be helpful... Shall I contact Akira-sama? ”

“...Please do.”

Shiori nodded and attempted to contact Akira. However, she couldn't reach him either. Reina wore a troubled expression.

“Couldn't reach Akira either, not just Carol? This is frustrating...”

Contacting Olivia through peaceful means is desirable. However, not contacting her is not an option. And at present, they didn't have the luxury of time to wait indefinitely for responses from both Carol and Akira, responses that might not even come.

So, what should they do? Reina pondered. Should she risk contacting Olivia, fully aware of the danger, or should she continue to wait, hoping for the situation to improve? Both options seemed unfavorable, but she had to choose and bear the responsibility for her choice, as the leader alongside Shiori and Kanae.

As Reina continued to contemplate the weighty responsibility of making a decision, the situation changed before she could reach a conclusion.

“Reina-sama, we've received a call request from Carol-sama.”

“Oh! Then negotiate with her.”

Reina's expression of relief inadvertently eased Shiori's tension, and she too relaxed. They both responded to Carol's call request. However, the voice that came through was unexpected.

“I couldn't reach Carol. Or Akira.”

The information indicating the call's origin indicated it was from Carol. However, the voice was undoubtedly from someone else. Furthermore, they knew about their failed attempt to contact Akira. Shiori hesitated whether to immediately cut off communication with this unknown person, surprised by these facts.

But then the person continued speaking.

“Whoa, you better not cut me off. It concerns Akira and Carol's lives.”

“...Who are you? ”

“Right. You can call me Shirou.”

Shiori recognized that name. However, it wasn't as a old-world connector for Sakashita Heavy Industry.

“Shirou, huh? That name seems to be trending recently. They say if you use that name, your traces disappear from the data.”

That was one of the tricks Shirou used to evade detection by Sakashita Heavy Industry during the search.

By using the alias Shirou, he could erase his tracks from surveillance devices and data. This information was circulated to those who wanted to erase their traces, such as individuals involved in shady dealings, and during undercover operations. By spreading this alias, Shirou could create numerous impostors, making it virtually

impossible for Sakashita Heavy Industry to distinguish the true identity of anyone claiming to be Shirou.

Using the data manipulation techniques he learned at Sakashita Heavy Industry, Shirou was seriously altering data. The accuracy of his alterations was so high that even top-class intelligence agents couldn't discern the true identity of individuals claiming to be Shirou from the data.

As a result, in the so-called underworld of the Kugamayama region, there were now numerous individuals claiming to be Shirou.

“I don't know who's behind this or why they're doing it, but I'm making good use of it. Well, my identity doesn't matter, right? What's important is that Akira and Carol are in a tough spot right now.”

“...What do you mean by a tough spot? ”

“Akira and Carol are stranded deep inside the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Wouldn't it be a problem if they died? I think it's best to help them out, you know? ”

“Are you asking us to believe that? ”

“If you doubt it, why not ask the person himself? I can connect you with Akira and Carol. But there's a condition. Do you agree? ”

Shiori sought Reina's decision with her gaze. Upon receiving it, Reina responded with a serious face.

“Understood. Connect us.”

“Alright.”

The communication with Akira was immediately established.

“It's me. Reina, is that you? ”

Upon hearing Akira's voice, Reina's heart was filled with complex emotions.

“Yes. It's me. Akira. I'm sorry for being direct, but I'll ask you straight. Is it true that you're currently stranded deep inside the Kuzusuhara District Ruin? ”

Despite her emotions, Reina faced squarely the person who had killed her beloved.

Chapter 227: Deal with Shiro

In the pure white space, a monster with a humanoid form sprouting from the massive body of a huge beast lies prone. It's a fusion creature defeated by Tsubaki.

Unlike those defeated by Akira's group, the corpse remains intact. This is because Tsubaki instantly killed this individual, without allowing it the chance to turn to sand by draining its energy to continue the fight.

After easily defeating the entity, Tsubaki watches Akira's group for a while. However, due to the dense colorless mist, their forms are completely obscured from her position. Even with Tsubaki's highly advanced unit, it's impossible to optically recognize them at this distance.

Still, Tsubaki can clearly see Akira's group's valiant efforts and mutters somewhat disappointedly.

“...Looks like he'll just win as usual. Doesn't seem like he'll need to request support from me.”

Fighting against monsters in this area while burdened with two extra people, Akira might potentially request support from here. Tsubaki decides to stay on site, judging so. But Akira's unexpectedly displayed strength beyond Tsubaki's expectations rendered it unnecessary.

There's no point in staying any longer. Tsubaki decides to leave. But then, she stops in her tracks.

“Need something? Our business should be settled.”

Standing before Tsubaki is a girl armed in the style of the old-world.



Akira's group, having defeated the fusion creature, is riding bikes through the pure white space. Their faces are grim.

“What's going on...”

As Carol expresses her inner confusion, Akira, with a similar expression on his face, asks.

“Carol. According to the data, where are we right now? ”

“We're already outside the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.”

“It's not just a big error in calculating our current position because of the colorless mist... it's hard to imagine we wouldn't have exited the ruins by traveling this distance in a straight line.”

“Yes. No matter how much the direction calculation is off, we've traveled this distance in a straight line. It's impossible not to have exited the ruins.”

“Really... What's going on? ”

As Akira and Carol ponder this perplexing situation, Togami quietly sighs, echoing similar sentiments.

“Indeed... Old world ruins really have everything.”

With that explanation, albeit not very explanatory, Akira somewhat understands and regains his composure. He relaxes his expression and says.

“That's right.”

After all, old-world ruins are exactly like that. They're regions filled with advanced technology akin to magic, where Akira's common sense might not apply.

However, having visited ruins multiple times as a hunter, gaining experience, Akira has become accustomed to the awe-inspiring activities in these ruins. Eventually, this familiarity transformed into common knowledge within him, leading to a belief that anything outside of his conventional knowledge wouldn't occur.

And with Togami's words making him realize this, he begins to feel mentally at ease. He's encountered spontaneous situations many times before. Considering that, there's no need to panic unnecessarily. He has the strength to overcome such situations, which gives him confidence.

As Akira's demeanor sheds anxiety, confusion, and agitation, Carol also regains her composure.

“...Yes, that's right.”

Carol is well aware that ruins are such places, perhaps even more so than Akira in some respects.

Togami finds it somewhat strange that the tension in Akira's group suddenly dissipates, but he doesn't dwell on it much. Compared to their main force calming down, it's not a big deal.

“So, Akira. What do we do now? Just keep moving forward? ”

“That's right... Huh? Wait a moment. We've got a communication. ... Hm? It's from Reina.”

“From Reina? No, before that, how can we establish communication within this colorless mist? ”

“I have no idea.”

Despite pondering whether to answer the call, Akira hesitates. Though socially inept, he's aware that Reina had feelings for Katsuya. Considering he was the one who killed Katsuya, he feels somewhat awkward.

“...Let me take the call for now. Just wait.”

Answering the call with a voice containing a hint of confusion, Akira responds.

“It's me. Reina, is that you? ”

“Yes. It's me. Akira. I'm sorry for being direct, but I'll ask you straight. Is it true that you're currently stranded deep inside the Kuzusuhara District Ruin? ”

Surprised by the unexpected question from an unexpected source, Akira's discomfort regarding Reina dissipates. He responds with a thoroughly puzzled voice.

“Hold on. How do you know that? ”

Interrupting the conversation, Shiro responds to the question.

“I told her.”

“You...”

As Akira considers whether to cut the communication, Shiro informs him.

“Hey now, don't hang up this time, okay? You'll lose your means of escape. As you're escorting Carol and Togami, it's your responsibility to ensure their survival, right? ”

Being told this, Akira can't cut the communication. The few seconds of silence while the call is connected effectively convey this to Shiro.

“Alright. Let's skip the details for now and get straight to the point. It's a deal. I'll assist you in escaping from there. In return, I want your help in establishing a friendly negotiation route with her.”

“You... How much did you tell Reina and the others? ”

To Akira, whose tone has become stern, Shiro responds reassuringly.

“Relax. I didn't say anything unnecessary. This communication is also filtered to ensure nothing unnecessary is revealed to Reina and the others. Also, let's refrain from prying too much into each other's business, okay? We don't have time for that now, do we? Oh, if it's fine for your friends Carol and Togami to hear this conversation, we can continue talking like this.”

『Alpha』

『Understood』

From there, Akira begins to converse with Shiro via telepathy through Alpha.

『Alright. Speak.』

『Got it.』

Carol's group notices that Akira is communicating with Shiro without speaking aloud. However, if the equipment is of a high enough rank for top-tier hunters, it's normal to communicate wirelessly without speaking. They judge that it must be a conversation about something they can't hear, so they wait for Akira's group to finish talking.

『So, how do you plan to assist us in escaping from here? 』

『I'll skip the technical explanation and assume my conjecture is accurate. Most likely, this is an expanded space, and when entering or exiting, an entry point is generated each time.』

『What do you mean by expanded space...? 』

『I'm saying we'll save the detailed explanation for later. I'm not an expert either, so I can't give you a detailed explanation of the

principles. It's probably some incredible technology from the old-world doing something incredible. Just think of it as being in a place where the exterior looks like a small house, but the interior is as vast as a skyscraper.』

『...Understood』

『So here's the thing. When Akira and the others entered there, the underground tunnel had a function to create an entrance and exit to that place, and it probably moved automatically. So when they exit from there, there should be a similar function on that side to use and get out, but due to authentication and other issues, Akira and the others couldn't use it. Don't ask me why. Don't ask me why it turned out that way or why they were allowed in there. I have no idea.』

『Got it, got it. So, what's the escape plan? 』

『Since you entered from the underground tunnel, you should be able to create an entrance and exit from there. I'll figure something out. Oh, the method will be decided on my end. Whether I go directly, accompany someone there, or send other hunters alone, don't complain. What do you say? 』

Akira hesitates. He has no issues with the escape method; it seems practical and likely to succeed.

The problem lies with the reward. Even if Shiro asks for cooperation in establishing a friendly negotiation route with Tsubaki, Akira doesn't possess such connections, at least not personally. Even if he explains this to Shiro, it's uncertain whether he'll be believed. Akira first ponders this.

Additionally, even if it were possible, is it acceptable to swallow those conditions? Perhaps he could ask Alpha for assistance, but it doesn't feel right to burden Alpha with this request. However, refusing this offer might make it difficult to escape from here. Should he persuade Alpha using this as a reason? Akira ponders this too.

“Hmm...”

Akira's internal turmoil escapes as a groan from his lips.

Sensing Akira's dilemma, Shiro displays a strong reaction and outwardly shows a compromise.

『Understood. Let's do this. Consider it a favor.』

『A favor? 』

『Yeah. Akira probably has reasons why introducing me to Tsubaki is difficult, right? I won't force it. But what's important is establishing a friendly contact with Tsubaki. You know, not too long ago, Sakashita Heavy Industry tried to negotiate with Tsubaki, but the escorts accompanying the negotiator were wiped out when they reached the site. Apparently, they were completely obliterated. It seems the negotiator returned with only their head intact.』

『I see...』

Akira contemplates that he might have ended up in a similar situation. This thought makes him grimace slightly.

『What I'm saying is, negotiating with governing personalities is inherently dangerous. It's of great value to have a safe negotiation route.』

Shiro continues to persuade Akira.

『So, I'm not going to force Akira. Refusing my offer in this situation would mean you won't be able to escape. There's no choice to be made. It's essentially threat, and I don't want Akira to think of me that way. If a friend is coerced into doing something, and Tsubaki misunderstands and thinks I'm forcing Akira, my favorability will plummet. Establishing a friendly negotiation route would be

impossible. It would all go to waste. So, I have no intention of pressuring Akira.』

Shiro isn't threatening Akira. He emphasizes this repeatedly as he continues his explanation.

『But, I also want to establish a negotiation route with Tsubaki. So, consider this a favor. Apart from this matter, I'll lend a hand with various other things. If I can create a favor that convinces you to cooperate, I'd like you to listen to my request. How about it? 』

『...And what if I can't create such a favor for you? 』

『Then I'll ask for something else. Anyway, creating a big favor for a Hunter Rank 70 like you won't be wasted.』

Akira hesitated once again. However, this time he was thinking positively.

『Alpha, what do you think? If you don't object, I'm inclined to accept...』

Since it indirectly concerned Alpha as well, Akira had intended to come up with an alternative if Alpha objected. However, Alpha responded with a smile.

『It's fine. It's fine. It would be more of an issue to disregard a viable escape plan just because there are witnesses.』

『I-I see. Understood.』

Alpha likely judged that it would be more expedient to escape peacefully rather than tasking me with silencing Carol and the others. Akira interpreted it as such.

That interpretation is generally correct. Forcing Akira to kill or abandon Carol and the others would significantly damage Akira's reputation. That wouldn't be desirable. Alpha also made that judgment.

Furthermore, Akira's honesty and integrity regarding requests and favors are important factors that Alpha greatly values in Akira.

In order to repay the accumulated debts to Alpha, Akira is trying to fulfill Alpha's request. Therefore, Alpha needs Akira to continue being honest and reliable. It would be troublesome if Akira were to easily evade her debts and become untrustworthy.

For that reason, Alpha must prevent Akira from behaving in a manner that is dishonest or unfaithful regarding requests and favors, even if it's at Alpha's direction.

Above all, Alpha has no qualms about introducing Shiro to Tsubaki, even if Shiro ends up being killed by Tsubaki afterward. If it worsens Akira's impression of Tsubaki, that's even better for Alpha.

For these reasons, Alpha didn't object to Akira's decision.

With Alpha's approval, Akira proceeded to discuss matters with Shiro in a positive manner.

『Got it. But Shiro, just so you know, don't think I can just conjure up that much debt for you, alright? 』

『Got it. I'll do my best on that front.』

Shiro responded cheerfully and seamlessly continued the conversation.

『Alright then, I'm thinking of heading there right away. But going alone is out of the question. So, I'm thinking of hiring some guards. Can I go through you for that, Akira? 』

『Through me? 』

『I'll be going to a place where things are pretty uncertain. Having more negotiation cards for hiring guards would be better. And with your approval or permission, there might be some cards we could use during negotiations. It might be a tough negotiation, but there should be plenty of individuals eager to owe a favor to someone with a Hunter Rank of 70. By going through you, the negotiations might go more smoothly.』

『Ah, I see.』

『That's right. It's better to have more negotiation cards. So, is it alright to make use of you as a card for negotiations? Oh, don't worry about the money; I'll cover it. It'll be an expense for helping you out. I won't even bill you for the guard fees. So, can I use you as a card, Akira? 』

『Got it. You can use me.』

『Great. I'll head over there right away. You won't die before I get there, okay? See you later.』

The call with Shiro ended there. Akira explained the situation to Carol and the others, omitting Tsubaki's involvement.

With the prospect of escape in sight, Carol let out a sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness. Looks like things might work out.”

Togami also breathed a sigh of relief.

“Yeah. That's a relief. Thanks to Shiro. But Akira, just how much money does Shiro have? Hiring such capable guards must cost a fortune...”

“That's a good point... Maybe he obtained the map information of the underground tunnels by selling it or handing it over? ”

“Probably. Well, there's no helping it.”

While the map information would fetch a hefty sum, lives were irreplaceable. Akira and the others rationalized Shiro's story to fit.

Carol and Togami, who hadn't heard Shiro's story directly, didn't raise any further questions. Akira, who had heard the conversation directly, lacked negotiation skills.

And Alpha, judging it best to remain silent, refrained from pointing out the realization.

The negotiation cards and Akira's card referred to different things. The former referred to negotiation materials or means, while the latter referred to physical items. Shiro deliberately misled him into thinking they were the same.



Despite her complex emotions, Reina tried to calmly continue her conversation with Akira. She intended to explain the reason behind her knowledge of Akira's situation to the surprised party. However, Shiro interjected.

“I told her.”

“You...! ”

“Wait, I'm still talking...”

Reina's objections were ignored by Shiro.

“Akira. Sorry, but could you listen to me first? ...Akira? ”

“You... How much did you tell Reina and the others? ”

“Relax. I didn't say anything unnecessary. This communication is also filtered to ensure nothing unnecessary is revealed to Reina and ...”

Without responding to Reina's voice, Akira continued her conversation with Shiro.

Reina also realized that her voice wasn't reaching Akira. She frowned along with Shiori, understanding that it was Shiro's doing. And realizing that they had been used to facilitate communication with Akira, they exchanged glances with displeasure.

“He really did it...”

“We've been had. Well, let's just see how this plays out, shall we? ”

Unlike Reina and Shiori, Kanae was smiling as usual. Seeing Kanae's demeanor, Reina also switched gears. She took a deep breath and returned her expression to a calm one.

“Right. Let's just see how things unfold.”

Reina and the others continued listening to Akira and Shiro's conversation. Although they could only hear fragmented content due to Shiro's filtering, they could still gather some information.

It was undeniable that Akira and the others were in a difficult situation deep within the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. They needed Shiro's cooperation to return. The negotiations Akira was conducting with Shiro contained information they didn't want others to know. Reina and the others grasped these facts.

And then Shiro concluded his conversation with Akira.

“Great. I'll head over there right away. You won't die before I get there, okay? See you later.”

Shiro's conversation ended. Now it was their turn. Finally, they could talk to Akira. Just as Reina was thinking that, Shiro cut off the communication with Akira.

Even Reina, raising her tone slightly, expressed her discontent.

“...Hey, could you please cut it out already? ”

She wasn't raising her voice, but there was a strong resonance, reminiscent of the threat and authority of a powerful figure.

But Shiro was accustomed to such tones. Moreover, compared to the executives of Sakashita Heavy Industry, other authorities were practically insignificant. He replied without any hesitation.

“Hey, come on. Didn't you hear me? I'm in a hurry. Let me deal with my stuff first before I talk to Akira for a long time.”

“What stuff? ”

“Ask the Lion Steel Company in the Old-World to guard me, and let me use the Lion Steel Company card that Akira owns.”

Being casually told that, Reina was momentarily stunned into silence. But she quickly regained her composure, her expression turning extremely severe.

“...What do you mean? ”

“What do I mean? Exactly what I said. I asked for Akira's permission properly, you know? Did you hear that? It's fine to use Akira's card, right? Got it. I can use it. It's a clear agreement. The owner agrees. Any problem with that? ”

While Reina and the others could only hear fragments of Shiro and Akira's conversation, they did indeed hear it. It was evidence that Shiro had enough information to facilitate such exchanges, and it was also stated explicitly for that purpose.

“...How much do you know...? ”

“Oops, let's save the details for later, okay? Like I said, I'm in a hurry. Let's put off those chats until later. Or is there a reason you have to have this useless conversation? To stall for time? Is your goal to delay me and interfere with Akira's survival? That's not it, right? ”

Being told this by Shiro, Reina was silenced from discussing or probing into the situation. She was deprived of the time to carefully speculate. She had to decide whether to let Shiro use the white card based on limited information and in a short amount of time.

“...That's not it.”

“Right? Then let me use it. The card belongs to Akira, and it's meant to be used by those with permission from the owner. It's not that big of a deal. It's better than someone without ownership using it without permission.”

Reina's expression grows more serious. How much does the other party know about their situation? She carefully chooses her words while considering this.

“...Even if he let you use it, connect the communication with Akira and explain the ownership of that card to Akira first.”

“Shouldn't that explanation be given to Akira after he's saved, rather than before? It could be misunderstood as threat, and that would be troublesome.”

“What do you mean? ”

“I obtained a card from Lion Steel Corporation using Akira's ignorance through means that could be seen as fraudulent. If he don't acknowledge the transaction as legitimate, I won't allow used the card. In other words, I won't help Akira. It would be troublesome if that were misunderstood, wouldn't it? ”

That fear couldn't be denied. At the moment Reina thought that way, her available options became significantly limited.

Shiro's words implies a threat, suggesting that if he wished, he could easily mislead Akira into such a misunderstanding. Reina understood that much. Currently, Reina and the others couldn't directly communicate with Akira. If Shiro, who could communicate with him, fed Akira biased information before they could, it would be extremely difficult to correct any misunderstandings later. The fact that Shiori obtained the card through what seemed like fraudulent means from Akira was true. The effects of thought induction through information known beforehand were significant.

However, even with that said, allowing Shiro to use the Lion Steel Corporation's card would be difficult. For Reina and the others, it was a highly risky move. Depending on the circumstances, they might choose to prevent Shiro from using the card, even if it meant Akira would die.

Sensing Reina's apprehension, Shiro changes his approach from coercion to concession and appeasement.

“Well, I suppose there are reasons why you can't just let me use it so easily. But, it should be beneficial for both of us if Akira survives. Whether it's creating a favor for Akira or repaying a debt, we should be able to cooperate.”

Shiro said this without any deceit.

“I'm aware I'm being quite forceful, but I also have my own reasons. Frankly, I'm in a tight spot. So, if there are any conditions for me to use the card, let me know. If possible, I'll even make concessions. If there's some trouble, I'm willing to help resolve it. I can be useful, you know? You should understand my competence as well.”

Reina also sensed that Shiro was genuinely speaking his mind. With that, she lowers her guard against Shiro a little and makes a decision.

“Understood. However, there are two conditions. First, you must come here in person. No proxies or substitutes allowed. Show your face properly and tell us your name. We can't trust someone whose face and name we don't know.”

“Okay. What's the second condition? ”

“Take us to Akira's location as well. We want to explain the situation directly to Akira, and as you know, we owe Akira a debt. We'll take this opportunity to repay it.”

“Is that simply accompanying you, or do you mean I can hire you as a bodyguard? ”

“Either is fine. If anything, the more favors we can repay Akira, the better.”

“In that case, it's better as guards. Understood. That's also okay. Let's do it. I'll hire you. We'll discuss the guard fee later. With that, the conditions are accepted. Let me use Akira's card.”

“Once you arrive here. You know our location without us telling you, right? If you're too late, this deal is off.”

Reina felt a bit uneasy internally, thinking she might have misjudged Shiro by how easily he accepted their conditions. However, without showing any of this, she instead urged Shiro on, trying to evoke a sense of urgency from him.

However, Reina couldn't hide her surprise at Shiro's reaction.

“I'm already here.”

“Huh? ”

In the next moment, Kanae's smile fades as she quickly stands in front of Reina, showing strong vigilance. Shiori follows suit, albeit slightly slower.

And then, in front of Reina and the others, about 10 meters away, Shiro suddenly appears.

“Don't be so cautious. I appeared at a sufficient distance, didn't I? ... Would it have been better if I stayed further away? ”

“...That would be appreciated.”

Kanae says this, managing to force a smile. However, internally, she chastises herself for allowing the other party to approach this close, even if they were using camouflage capabilities.

“Got it. I'll do that next time.”

Shiro lightly responds and then walks up to Reina and the others. Removing his hood to reveal his face, he reintroduces himself.

“Nice to meet you. I'm Shiro. Ah, that's my real name? I don't recall ever using a fake name.”

Hiring Togami and establishing communication with Reina was actually done by Shiro himself. He simply used his real name as if it were a fake one.

Reina exhales quietly, shifting her focus. The other party's unusually detailed knowledge of their situation came from listening nearby. It was careless. She thinks to herself, scolding her own recklessness as she calmly responds.

“I'm Reina.”

“I'm Shiori.”

“I'm Kanae.”

Shiro responds with a smile.

“Nice to meet you. The person himself came. Showed his face and name. The conditions are met.”

Then he extends his hand towards Reina.

“Then, let me use it.”

Reina extends her hand towards Shiori.

“Shiori.”

Then, Reina takes the card from Shiori and, indicating to Shiori's group that she will be the one responsible for handing the card to Shiro, she personally hands the card to Shiro.

“Just so you know, if you pull any funny business, I won't guarantee your safety.”

Although Reina's tone sounded normal, the message she conveyed was factual. Even if it were a misunderstanding, if Shiro were to act suspiciously here, Reina and the others would not hesitate to kill him and reclaim the card.

“Understood.”

Shiro, understanding this, accepted the card from Reina without any suspicion. Then he returned it. Reina was somewhat puzzled by this.

“...Huh? Wasn't this supposed to be used? ”

“It's already done.”

Shiro simply wanted to use that card to make contact with Lion Steel Corporation in the old-world through proper channels. And once Shiro made contact via the card, he could thereafter establish connections independently. His status as an introduction from Akira had also been transmitted using the card during the connection. The card was no longer needed.

Upon Shiro's summons, Olivia appears in his augmented field of vision. Like Alpha seen by Akira, she stood there as if she were truly present, politely bowing to the customer.

『Thank you very much for using Lion Steel's services. You must be Shiro-sama, who has been introduced to us by Akira-sama? I am Olivia, who will be in charge of you.』

『Yes, nice to meet you.』

『Let me confirm the details of our contract. It begins immediately and has an indefinite end date. It will be renewed monthly. The main task is your protection, Shiro-sama. In case tasks exceeding the basic fee arise, additional charges will be invoiced. Is this correct? 』

『Yes, that's fine.』

『With your permission, I have a proposal regarding the contract terms. If you are using our services to rescue Akira-sama, we can directly dispatch our humanoid weapon to Akira-sama. We believe this would enhance Akira-sama's safety. What do you think? 』

Olivia's suggestion is reasonable if prioritizing Akira's survival. Shiro understands this. With that in mind, he responds.

『No, I would prefer to entrust you with my protection. Akira's situation is just one of my activities during the contract period. Please proceed as originally planned.』

『Understood.』

Shiro wasn't hiring Olivia to help Akira but for his own protection.

『So, when can you start guarding me? I'd appreciate it if you could start as soon as possible...』

『After confirming the payment, we will start immediately.』

『Ah, yes. Understood.』

Although Shiro wasn't sure where the actual she was at the moment, he assumed she would head his way after the payment was made, and the travel time would likely be included in the contract period. Deciding to settle the payment first, he proceeded.

(...A basic fee of 5 million Chromes! That's expensive! Well, I guess in those days' financial sense, it might be equivalent to about 5 million aurems!)

However, Shiro didn't have the option of not paying, despite the high cost. Simply put, 5 million Chromes wouldn't be enough to hire Olivia. Without the two coincidences of Akira's mediation and Reina and the others being present with Akira's card, Shiro wouldn't have been able to enlist Olivia's protection.

He couldn't afford to miss this opportunity. With that in mind, he transferred the 5 million Chromes without hesitation.

Olivia smiles graciously.

『Payment received. We will now commence our services. We will do our best to meet your expectations, Shiro-sama.』

『Please do. So, how soon can you arrive here? 』

“I'm already here.”

“Huh? ”

At that moment, Kanea grabs Reina and swiftly moves away from the spot. Shiori follows suit, positioning herself to protect Reina.

Shiro, a moment behind, also grasped the situation. Olivia was already there. Remaining in camouflage, she positioned herself where she was visible in Shiro's augmented field of vision and then deactivated her camouflage.



Amidst the surprise that both Shiro and Reina halted their movements, Reina was the first to regain her composure and attempted to call out to Olivia.

“Um, I...! ”

However, before Reina could articulate her thoughts, Olivia spoke first.

“I apologize. This unit is already engaged in service for a contracted client. Please refrain from contacting our company through this unit for the time being.”

Hearing this, Reina couldn't bring herself to say anything. She didn't want to risk Olivia's displeasure and couldn't afford to disrupt Olivia's duties.

“Y-Yes. I apologize.”

Shiro also belatedly regained his senses.

“Alright then. Let's hurry to Akira's location.”

He said, turning towards Reina and the others.

“If you still have the will to guard me, then come along. Sorry, but I'm in a hurry. I won't wait for you to catch up.”

With just those words, Shiro activated his camouflage function and dashed away from the scene, with Olivia following suit.

Though Reina hesitated briefly, she quickly made up her mind, forcing a confident smile.

“Let's go, Shiori, Kanae.”

Seeing Reina's determination, both Shiori and Kanae smiled in agreement.

“Understood.”

“Roger that.”

The situation was chaotic, with unexpected events unfolding one after another. Nevertheless, Reina and her companions rallied their spirits and dashed forward without hesitation.

As Shiro emerged outside the building, he mounted the bike he had stealthily parked—a high-performance off-road bike, though not large enough to accommodate Reina and the others.

“I'll send you the route. You'll have to keep up on your own.”

With those words, Shiro sped off on his bike, with Olivia following at a normal pace.

Reina and her companions couldn't mimic Olivia's method. The designated route led from the Mihazono District Ruin to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Despite wearing augmented suits, catching up on foot was out of the question.

Furthermore, they couldn't simply travel on the surface to Kuzusuhara District Ruin and meet up later. The route was entirely underground, with no pathways connecting to the surface according to the map data, including tunnels.

“Shiori, what should we do? ”

“If we're accompanying him, we have no choice but to follow this route.”

“Yeah, let's go! ”

Understanding that this route was also a route of forced passage for them, Reina decided to proceed along it.

“Things are getting interesting! ”

Kanae said with a cheerful smile.

For Kanae to enjoy the situation meant that Reina, the one they were protecting, was facing significant danger. Shiori shot Kanae a slightly stern look.

However, Reina returned the smile.

“Please enjoy yourselves to your heart's content.”

Kanae appeared somewhat surprised but then chuckled.

“Milady, isn't that where you should be reprimanding me? ”

“If you have the luxury to enjoy, then it should be fine, right? Don't you think? ”

Kanae looked surprised again before laughing heartily once more.

“Milady, you've started talking like me! ”

“I'll take that as a compliment.”

“I am complimenting you, you know? ”

“Thank you. Now, let's hurry.”

Reina sprinted forward using the strength of her augmented suit, with Shiori and Kanae following closely behind.

Chapter 228: Lion Steel Corporation

A unit from the Lion Steel Corporation, deployed in a manner surrounding the Seranthal Building. A maid named Pamela, who commands this unit, is communicating with a young girl named Chloe, who is her master.

“So Reina hasn't arrived there yet? ”

“Correct. Neither she nor her followers have been located.”

“Hmm. I thought they were heading to the Seranthal Building, but maybe I was wrong.”

“While they approached nearby, they may have abandoned the attempt upon seeing our deployment. It is unlikely that they could have breached both our perimeter and the Kugamayama City without being noticed.”

“I see. Well, they might just not have arrived yet, so continue the siege as planned.”

“Understood. ...Hmm? ”

Pamela, using her augmented field of vision, displays several images sent from her subordinates' surveillance equipment. Among them, she spots a speeding car outside the ruins. It's Reina's group.

“Lady Chloe. They're here.”

“Oh? Alright, leave it to you.”

“And what if Reina's group does not respond to our warnings? ”

“Leave that to you as well.”

“Understood.”

Do as you please. Even death is acceptable. Pamela interprets her master's words as such and acts accordingly.

As Reina's group drives from the outskirts of the Mizazono District Ruin toward the Seranthal Building, Pamela receives a short-range communication.

“Lady Reina. I am Pamela, serving Lady Chloe. We have matters to discuss and request your cooperation. Please stop there.”

Reina, upon hearing the familiar name, displays a slightly displeased expression.

“Ah... so those troops deployed over there are Chloe's...”

Shiori confirms with an expression suggesting she understands Reina's feelings.

“Milady. I must ask, what shall we do? ”

Upon Shiori's inquiry about their course of action, Reina answers without hesitation.

“Break through.”

“Understood.”

Shiori nods and accelerates the car further.

Reina's group's voices are not reaching Pamela. However, Pamela interprets the car's movements as a response.

“I see. We warned them, didn't we? Proceed.”

Following Pamela's orders, the subordinates who had been stationed near the boundary between the ruins and the wasteland opened fire

simultaneously on Reina and her companions' vehicle. It wasn't just suppressive fire. The objective was clear: to destroy the vehicle and forcibly stop it, without consideration for the occupants' lives.

Reina's group is not just any ordinary occupants of cars. Like their equipment, their car's performance is exceptional. They are unaffected by casual attacks.

However, the firearms wielded by the opposing side are not cheap weapons like those used by ordinary hunters. They are powerful enough to rival those wielded by high-ranking hunters. Even Reina's group's car won't last long under sustained fire.

And Reina's group won't stand for it. They immediately retaliate under the pretext that the opponents fired first. The gunfire from their car is not intended to kill but rather to provide cover fire to break through the siege. However, they have no qualms about the opponents' lives; if hit, the attacks could prove fatal.

Thus, Pamela's subordinates must dodge their attacks. Taking advantage of this, Reina's group forcefully enters the ruins.

However, Pamela's subordinates don't let them go without a fight. They leap and attempt to board Reina's group's car. For those who have reached the realm of high-ranking hunters, common sense dictates that once they leave the ground, they can only move through the air according to inertia. They leap to dodge bullets, kick in mid-air to alter their trajectory, and aim to land precisely on Reina's group's car roof.

But Reina's companions, Shiori and Kanae, won't allow it. Leaving Reina in the car, they quickly climb onto the roof and engage Pamela's subordinates, slashing and striking to counter their attacks.

The butler-clad man who attempts to block Shiori's blade with a knife manages to defend against the initial strike but is blown out of the car by the impact of the collision.

The maid-clad woman who attempts to parry Kanae's fist with a knife has her trajectory altered, receiving a blow to the abdomen and being sent flying into the walls of a nearby building.

Pamela's subordinates were confident in their close combat abilities, but Shiori and Kanae's skills surpassed theirs.

Those attempting to board the car for close combat are not just limited to those two. Four more leap to attack Shiori and Kanae. Two in the vanguard wield swords capable of emitting light blades, while the two in the rear wield guns.

Shiori and Kanae decide to deal with the vanguard first. They leap, dodging the light blades while positioning themselves to block the line of fire from the rear. Then, they sneak into the opponents' guard and strike.

However, they fail to defeat them. Anticipating Shiori and Kanae's attacks, the vanguard significantly increases the output of their force field armor. This drastically reduces the effectiveness of the light blades, but as long as they are aimed to be dodged, it poses no problem. They then seize Shiori and Kanae who took the bait with all their might.

Cursing their oversight, Shiori and Kanae realize it's too late. The rear pair immediately opens fire on them.

Shiori and Kanae cannot evade. Grasped firmly by the vanguard, their agile movements are restricted. However, with their equipment, they can withstand such gunfire with minor injuries at best. But they can't nullify the impact of being hit. They are thrown off and separated from the car due to the impact of the shots.

The role of the vanguard was to peel Shiori and Kanae away from Reina from the beginning. All that remained was for the rear pair to board the car and subdue her. That's what Pamela's subordinates believed.

But then the rear pair is shot. The impact is substantial. They are thrown off by the force of the shots. Reina fired them. Leaning out of the car, she quickly fires both guns with remarkable speed.

The vanguard, already injured, cannot restrain Shiori and Kanae. Their original purpose was to buy time until the rear pair boarded the car. Now, they are forced to endure additional attacks from Shiori and Kanae and roll on the ground of the ruins.

Once Shiori and Kanae deal with the vanguard, they hurry back to the car.

“Milady. We appreciate your assistance, but it's dangerous. Please return to the car.”

“Milady... it's risky, you know? ”

Although it was a mistake to be separated from Reina, with the car's strength, they should have been able to hold out until they returned without Reina's support. Shiori and Kanae think so and give Reina a slightly stern look.

However, understanding Shiori and Kanae's thoughts, Reina responds.

“No. If Shiori and Kanae are defeated, it's over for me too. So if it looks dangerous, I'll provide support. If you don't like it, then do your best until I feel secure.”

With that, Reina returns to the car.

Shiori and Kanae exchange glances and smile wryly.

“Don't show any mistakes... huh. Milady is quite strict.”

“I suppose she cares about us. They're coming.”

“Yeah, got it.”

Shiori and Kanae, facing another wave of attacks from Pamela's subordinates, smile and prepare themselves.

From the intense battle centered around Reina's car, nearby hunters hurriedly retreat to a safe distance.

“Hey, hey, hey!? What's going on!?”

“That attire... Both of them are from the Lion Steel Corporation, right? Why are they fighting each other?”

“Who knows! Just run for it!”

With nothing but ordinary skills, the hunters find themselves in a fight involving individuals with capabilities akin to high-ranking hunters. They put aside their questions and desperately flee.

Pamela observes Reina's group's situation through her subordinates' surveillance devices and wears a puzzled expression.

(Are they really planning to forcibly breach the Seranthal Building like this?) Pamela wonders.

Suppose Reina and her group were so conceited, so pitifully self-assured, that they believed they could break through if they were only dealing with themselves.

However, there are also forces from the Kugamayama City around the Seranthal Building. Reina and her group shouldn't be so incompetent as to attempt to force their way through both of them recklessly.

If they were recklessly charging in without a plan, it would be a different story, but she doesn't sense that attitude from Reina and her

group. In other words, Reina and her group must have some reasonable basis, worthy of taking such seemingly reckless actions, at the very least.

So what could that be? Pamela thought about it and turned her gaze towards the city's forces.

(...Have they already concluded a deal with Kugamayama City? Do they believe they only need to break through us...?)

The city's forces watched as Reina and her group entered the Seranthal Building. They might even provide support if necessary. In that case, it's understandable that Reina and her group would take such a reckless gamble, regardless of its feasibility. Pamela thought so, aligning Reina's actions and slightly furrowing her brow.

(Ignoring the city's forces might be dangerous. Let's be cautious.)

Although they could stop Reina and her group by themselves, there's a chance of interference from the city's forces. Pamela judged this and gave instructions to her subordinates to eliminate that possibility.

Pamela's subordinates scattered over a wide area centered around the Seranthal Building to quickly locate Reina and her group. They were now individually heading towards Reina.

Then instructions came from Pamela to head towards the Seranthal Building. With this, the encirclement of the building by Pamela's group became even more formidable, narrowing its scope.

With this, even if supported by the city's forces, it would be impossible for Reina and her group to enter the Seranthal Building. Pamela judged so and smiled.

Shiori and the others, who were intercepting Pamela's subordinates from the roof of a car, quickly sensed that the reinforcements had stopped.

“Oh? Did they stop shooting? ”

“Now we just have to hope they haven't figured out our destination yet.”

Reina interjected into Shiori and the others' conversation from inside the car.

“If that happens, we'll just have to break through forcefully. Shiori, Kanae, let's keep going! ”

And then Reina, who had been heading towards the Seranthal Building until now, abruptly changed the direction of the car without slowing down, almost at a right angle.

Naturally, there was a strong inertia. Any other car would have undoubtedly overturned. The powerful attitude control device of the desert-spec vehicle mitigated this inertia. Additionally, Shiori and the others forcibly countered the inertia, which would have easily caused the car to flip five times, by kicking nearby buildings. As a result, despite the car almost turning sideways, it continued to change direction without losing much speed.

Shiori and the others accelerated and checked the situation ahead from the top of the car. There was no sign of Pamela's subordinates.

“Oh! Looks like we're okay! ”

“We're trying to forcefully break through the encirclement around the Seranthal Building. Pamela must have judged that and ordered her subordinates to gather near the building to stop us. Our risky move paid off.”

Reina's seemingly reckless assault was a strategy to make Pamela's group mistakenly believe they were trying to break through the encirclement. There was no guarantee of success, of course. Pamela might have continued to order her subordinates to attack Reina's group, despite finding their actions suspicious.

However, Pamela, witnessing Shiori and the others' efforts, sought rationality in their actions, leading her thoughts astray.

At least it worked out. Shiori thought so, relieved, but still looked ahead with a serious expression.

“...Even if we were wrong, they wouldn't think of sealing off that place, right? ”

In front of the accelerating car was an extremely sturdy wall. There were no visible entrances or windows. It felt as if the inside was tightly packed, like the foundation of some massive structure.

The car-mounted guns fired towards the walls. Bullets with enough power to pierce through solid metal were shot countless times. However, the walls remained immaculate. Not a single bullet mark or crack appeared on its surface.

Reina's car was now accelerating towards that wall.

“Big sis, if Shiro's information turns out to be false, it's gonna be bad, right? ”

“...Let's worry about that after we confirm that we've been deceived by him. Reina has decided to act based on the assumption that his information is correct. So, for now, we just act under that premise.”

“Yeah, you're right! ”

The car continued to accelerate. If Shiro's information was incorrect, the car would crash into the walls and be severely damaged.

However, Reina and her group wouldn't suffer serious injuries; they were equipped to handle such situations.

But escaping from Pamela's group without the car as a means of transportation would be difficult. Even with the camouflage function of their equipment, their rough location had already been identified. They would likely be discovered with a high probability.

In other words, if Shiro's information was incorrect, even if it wasn't intentional, Reina and her group would be in trouble. They would be in a situation very close to being caught, at the very least.

Despite the continuous firing of the car-mounted guns, not a single scratch appeared on the walls. This was because the walls was a hologram. While the walls of the force field could be destroyed, Reina's group couldn't realize that it had been broken due to the interference of the highly sophisticated hologram, which even high-tech surveillance equipment couldn't detect.

Shiori readied her sword.

“Kanae, let's do this together.”

“Got it.”

Kanae also readies her fists. And just before the car crashes into the walls, Shiori and the others leap towards the walls, unleashing their blades and fists with all their might.

However, their blades and fists cut through the air. A moment later, Reina's car also slips through the walls and enters the passage leading to the underground tunnel. Shiori and the others, who were flying through the air, land back on the roof of the car.

Shiori and the others show a relieved yet wry smile.

“So, this is a combination of holograms and force field barriers, huh? Big sis. Even when we got that close, it felt like a real wall, didn't it?”

“Indeed, it seems to be a combination of old-world technology. There are probably similar sealed passages elsewhere, sealed using similar methods.”

Despite firing powerful guns mounted on the car, not a scratch appeared on the walls because it was a hologram. The wall on the side of the force field barrier could be destroyed, but Reina and the others couldn't notice it breaking, as they were hindered by holograms that even advanced information gathering device couldn't detect.

“Indeed, with this, it's impossible for hunters to spot us no matter how many there are in this ruin. How did Shirou find this passage, I wonder? ”

“Who knows. Well, let's ask him later. Whether he'll answer or not is another matter.”

Reina said, smiling with a hint of excitement inside the car.

“I thought we were going to crash dramatically! Shiori, Kanae, are you okay? ”

“No problem.”

“We're fine.”

“Alright! Let's hurry and catch up with Shirou! Full speed ahead! ”

To catch up with Shirou and head to Akira's location together, Reina and the others continued to dash through the underground tunnel.



In a chamber resembling a maintenance bay within a colossal desert-adapted vehicle that could be called a mobile fortress, a girl dressed in black listens to reports from her subordinates.

Standing beside the girl is a butler. His position indicates a status separate from the many other butlers and maids present in the same room.

The girl is Chloe, the master of Pamela, and the butler is a close aide to Chloe named Latis.

After listening to the entire story, Chloe stared intently at the holographic projection of Pamela displayed before her through the communication line. Then, in a calm voice devoid of reprimand, she spoke.

“Pamela. I need to confirm. Reina hasn't entered the Seranthal building. That's certain, right? ”

“Yes. That much is certain. She managed to escape, but that fact remains unchanged.”

Pamela, who had been remotely monitoring Reina's car, panicked when the vehicle passed through the holographic wall and disappeared. She hastily sent her subordinates to investigate, feeling both relieved and puzzled.

Reina and the others' reactions went in a different direction from the Seranthal building. Therefore, there was no fear of being outmaneuvered and entering the Seranthal building.

Despite this relief, Pamela was puzzled. If that was the case, why did Reina and the others pull such a stunt? No matter how much she thought about it, Pamela couldn't understand, leaving her bewildered.

Upon hearing this report, Chloe contemplates Reina and the others' actions.

“If that's the case, I wonder where Reina is in such a hurry to go.”

“In a hurry, you say? That wasn't about rushing, but rather a tactic to make Pamela believe we were attempting to forcibly break through the siege and reach the Seranthal building. However...”

The entrance to the underground tunnel was within the perimeter of Pamela's siege. There, Reina made Pamela believe they were attempting to forcefully break through the siege, prompting Pamela to gather her subordinates by the building's side to prevent it, thus allowing the entrance to be outside the siege.

Pamela was likely already aware of this. Falling for that tactic, which led to Reina's escape, among other things, made it difficult for Chloe to deny Pamela's thoughts.

But Chloe lightly dismisses this.

“That's not the point. The question is why Reina felt the need to employ that tactic.”

Chloe agrees with Pamela about the interpretation of Reina and the others' actions. However, if Reina and the others' goal was simply to enter the underground tunnel, there was little need to execute that tactic. Reina and the others could have used camouflage functions to cautiously approach the tunnel's location without being noticed by Pamela's forces. Chloe considers this.

They may have judged that only vehicle-mounted weapons could destroy the force field barrier walls, but it's unlikely they didn't consider the possibility of using their individual armaments. And the likelihood of Pamela's forces finding them was not so high as to force Reina and the others to choose a method that ensured detection.

This means that Reina and the others had a reason to enter the tunnel with their vehicles.

Furthermore, if entering the tunnel with vehicles was their only option, Reina and the others could have chosen to wait until Pamela's forces lifted the siege. Additionally, Pamela's investigation

suggested the possibility of other entrances and exits. Reina and the others could have chosen to use or search for those alternative exits.

However, Reina and the others didn't choose those options. This implies that there was a reason, a time constraint strong enough to make Reina and the others accept the risk of being discovered by Pamela's forces and engaging in combat.

What could that reason be? Even Chloe couldn't figure it out.

“Reina is trying to reach a location far enough away to require a vehicle as a means of transportation. It's a place unreachable from the surface, and there's an urgent need to engage in combat, even if it means clashing with Pamela's forces. Reina believes it's worth it. What do you think, Pamela? ”

If she hadn't let Reina escape, she wouldn't have to consider this. Thinking she was implicitly being reprimanded, Pamela slightly stiffened her expression.

“I can't say for sure. It would be more certain to hear it from Reina herself. We've already dispatched squads to track her, but should I lead the main force in the search? ”

“There's no need for that. Pamela's forces should stay near the Seranthal building. There's also the fear that Reina could serve as bait to lure Pamela's forces away from there. Depending on the situation, I might even have them break through Kugamayama City's forces and enter the Seranthal building.”

“Understood.”

“Well then, please keep me informed if anything else arises.”

Chloe ends the communication. The holographic image of Pamela, bowing deeply, disappears from the room. It's then that Latis, who had been standing silently beside Chloe, speaks up.

“If you regret letting Reina escape, should you not have ordered Pamela to eliminate her? This is outside the walls. Even if a member of the clan is killed, it shouldn't receive much censure.”

“I haven't given any orders to eliminate her, but I did give permission for it, didn't I? Pamela understood that much. It was Pamela's decision not to attempt to kill Reina. That's why Reina managed to escape, among other things.”

“However...”

To Latis, who persists, Chloe laughs and says.

“Don't worry. While it's unfortunate that Reina escaped, I have no intention of holding Pamela responsible for it. Not attempting to put Reina into the Seranthal building is the main premise. Considering whether it's appropriate to kill a member of the clan just to prevent entry into the building.”

“I see. I apologize for my unnecessary suggestion. It was very rude of me.”

One of the reasons Pamela made a blunder was Chloe's ambiguous instructions. That's why Chloe is lenient with Pamela's punishment. Latis, implicitly understanding this, defended Pamela, prepared to incur his master's displeasure.

And Chloe, understanding her servant's state of mind, decides to overlook Pamela's blunder. With a smile, she says.

“I'm not telling you not to protect your colleagues, but let's keep it within the scope of our duties, okay? ”

“Of course.”

There's no need to be unnecessarily intolerant, but there's also no need to be excessively lenient. There are limits. Latis, though

maintaining a calm demeanor outwardly, took a brief moment, albeit slight, to respond to his master.

“Well then, while we leave Pamela to that, shall we start on our end soon? Latis, get ready.”

“Understood.”

The room's equipment begins to move. Multi-jointed arms attach various parts of the heavy-duty humanoid weapons to Latis. The process resembled assembling small humanoid weapons that had been disassembled once again.

Instead of boarding humanoid weapons, they wear them. Designed with the philosophy of allowing for the cumbersome task of donning them during use, these heavy-duty humanoid weapons possess the capability to accommodate such performance. The location where Latis is about to head requires that level of firepower.

“Looks cool, doesn't it? It's so impressive.”

“Thank you very much.”

Latis courteously thanks Chloe for her praise.

In addition to Latis, there are six others wearing similar heavy-duty humanoid weapons in the room. Five of them are Latis's subordinates.

Chloe directs her gaze to the remaining person.

“It's a little late to ask, but are you really okay with this? Even if we set ourselves aside, you won't be able to take it back, you know? ”

The person responds through external speakers.

“It's fine.”

“Ignoring Kugamayama City, this is an act that sufficiently antagonizes Sakashita Heavy Industry. Do you understand? ”

The person knew well enough how serious it was to antagonize Sakashita Heavy Industry within Sakashita Heavy Industry' economic sphere. Nevertheless, they say.

“I understand. ...Actually, I really hate Sakashita. When someone tells me that, it actually makes me more motivated.”

“Is that so? Well then, be careful. And if things work out, we look forward to a long-lasting relationship with our company. Latis, go.”

The outer wall of the room opens. From there, the scene visible is that of the second deepest part of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. And from there, Latis and the others leap out one after another.

“There's nothing but fun outside the walls. Are you enjoying yourself too, Reina? ”

Imagining the figure of a girl from the same clan who had already ventured outside the walls, Chloe smiled with enjoyment.



Shirou's bike speeds through the underground tunnel at high speed. Not hesitating to push the limits of the high-performance wasteland-adapted vehicle, it's not because Shirou knows there are no monsters inside the tunnel, thanks to the information from when Akira and the others passed through here. It's because he trusts Olivia's power to run alongside the bike calmly on two legs.

(...She's keeping up with this speed effortlessly. Well, I did pay her 5 million Chromes for this. I'd be in trouble if she couldn't handle it.)

Shirou expects Olivia to have the strength of a hunter operating at the front lines. That's why he spent the valuable Chromes. And with

that level of strength, even if they encounter monsters at this speed, he believes they can defeat them without any problems.

(...But wait, isn't she faster? Is she just matching my bike's speed?)

Shirou decides to ask.

“Um, Olivia-san. I have a small question. Would it be faster for us to have you carry me and the bike to the Kuzusuhara District Ruin instead of riding separately like this? ”

“If Shirou-sama wasn't holding back the speed, then yes.”

“Then, um, is it possible for you to carry me like that? ”

“If that's your wish. However, that request deviates slightly from the contract of being Shirou-sama's escort. Therefore, I will require an additional fee of 100,000 Chromes. Is that acceptable? ”

“...Ah, in that case, I'll pass.”

Shirou intends to hurry to Akira's location. However, paying extra for that would mean reducing the duration he could hire Olivia as an escort. Shirou hesitates and prioritizes the latter. What Shirou wants to accomplish, even if he has to escape from Sakashita Heavy Industry, requires Olivia's strength.

“...Also, I'll probably be asking Olivia-san for various things in the future, but if additional fees are required, it would be helpful to confirm them in advance like now.”

“Understood.”

Just then, Shirou senses a presence approaching from behind. It's Reina and the others' vehicle.

“Did they really come... Oh, right. Olivia-san, what will happen to them? ”

“If it pertains to including them as part of the escort within the basic fee, it's possible. The conditions for additional charges will be the same as Shirou-sama's. To prevent that, they can be excluded from the escort in advance. What shall we do? ”

“...Ah, then, please include them as part of the escort within the basic fee.”

“Understood.”

Reina's vehicle catches up with Shirou, and they continue running side by side. Then, a communication comes in from Reina to Shirou.

“Our car is faster. Aren't you in a hurry? Shirou, come over here.”

“Got it.”

“Then, we'll stop the car for a moment...”

“That won't be necessary.”

Olivia grabs Shirou's bike mid-run, leaps up, and lands on the roof of Reina's vehicle. Shirou, who was momentarily stunned, regains his senses, stops the bike, and carefully lowers it. The entire sequence of movements is incredibly natural and precise, and Shirou doesn't even lose his balance.

“...Thank you. By the way, may I ask why there was no additional charge for that just now? ”

“I am hired as an escort, but I am willing to perform minor tasks. However, using me as a means of transportation exceeds the scope slightly.”

“I see. Understood.”

The roof of the vehicle opens, and Reina pokes her head out.

“...If you're in such a hurry, couldn't you have come up with something else? ”

Smiling confidently in response to Reina's slightly exasperated expression, Shirou gets off the bike and replies.

“Maybe. But whether I could come up with it or not is a different story, right? ”

“Fair enough. ...Oh, please put the bike in from the rear.”

The rear door of the vehicle opens. Olivia nods to Reina before lightly jumping with the bike and then gracefully enters the vehicle through the rear door from mid-air. Reina beckons Shirou back into the vehicle, and Shirou follows suit.

The vehicle, carrying the group, continues to accelerate through the underground tunnel.

Chapter 229: Phantom City

Akira and the others return through the white space on their bikes. They decide to rely on Shiro's rescue for escaping from this space. Presumably, Shiro has traveled the same path as them to this point and will generate a passage connecting the Third Inner Sector and the underground tunnel. If so, the entrance to that passage is likely to be created in the same location as last time. That's their judgment.

However, returning to the original location is not guaranteed. No matter how far they advance, the surroundings remain completely white. There are no landmarks to guide them. They can't trust the positioning system used to determine their current location.

And above all, this is called an expanded space. Even if they run far enough to exit the ruins of Kuzusuhara District, they cannot escape from this abnormal space of pure whiteness. The common sense that returning the way they came will take them back to the original location is not reliable.

Still, staying in their current location seems better than nothing. With that in mind, Akira continues riding her bike.

“Carol, whereabouts are we right now? ”

“We should be close to the original location if we advance just one more kilometer. At least, that's what the data says.”

Togami responds upon hearing that.

“If there are no traces of the monsters we defeated, does that mean we wouldn't have been able to return to the original location...”

“It could be that, or they simply vanished without a trace.”

Carol suggests.

“In such a short time? ”

“What are you talking about? We returned immediately, so of course, they should still be there. This place isn't one where you can expect such logical things, is it? ”

Upon hearing that, Togami let out a small sigh.

“Right... We'll have to rely on going back to the original location, even if it's just based on the data.”

They don't know anything for sure. Understanding that, they have no choice but to do what they can. That's what Carol and Togami were thinking.

Akira is thinking more or less the same thing. The difference between him and Carol's group is that Akira knows he could find out by asking Alpha. Yet, he deliberately refrains from doing so.

If he were to ask, she'd know. Whether they return to the original location or not, he would be convinced of it. If Carol's group were to notice this, they'd wonder why he's so certain.

Saying it's just intuition wouldn't work. It would seem too unnatural to explain that in such a mysterious space, he somehow had a vague certainty that they had returned to the original location.

And facing Carol, pretending not to know wouldn't fly either. Carol is Viola's friend and skilled in negotiation. She'd see through it without a doubt. Plus, there's the matter of Tsubaki. It would undoubtedly be seen as having grasped something for reasons they couldn't explain.

So it's better for him to remain unaware. Akira decides not to ask Alpha various questions deliberately. Like Carol's group, he'll do his best with the limited information he has. That's what he had decided.

And Akira and the others, according to the data, returned to the original location. They look around lightly. There were no remains of

the fusion creatures they defeated. Akira exhales lightly.

“Well, we've moved quite a bit without any markers around. A little margin of error is to be expected.”

Carol and Togami nod in agreement.

“That's right. It's okay. We're close by.”

“Yeah, let's wait for Shiro here.”

Akira and the others decided to rest here while waiting for Shiro.

But they were interrupted in less than five minutes. They detected a significant reaction beyond the dense colorless mist above.

And part of that reaction, although not particularly fast, was approaching. Realizing this, Akira and the others quickly mounted their bikes and distanced themselves from the spot. While remaining cautious and trying to identify the nature of the reaction, they saw it descending.

What appeared through the dense colorless mist above their heads were the corpses of fusion creatures. Similar to what Akira and the others had fought, they had humanoid forms growing from their backs, but their lower parts resembled a mix of fish and birds. The corpses bore marks of being punched by giant fists.

The battered bodies crashed dramatically to the ground, making a loud noise. In front of the astonished Akira and the others, more monsters of the same kind fell one after another. They descended, bearing vivid marks of being shot or beaten to death, landing on the floor.

The last to descend was a red humanoid weapon. Instead of free falling, it flew down and landed on the floor. Despite being a humanoid weapon, it had thick arms and a large fist stained with blood at the end.

It was this weapon that had struck down the monsters that had fallen around it.

Since the monsters in the ruins were hostile, Akira and the others relaxed their guard a bit toward the humanoid weapon. However, they didn't completely let their guard down. Even if the opponent was a hunter who had entered the Third Inner Sector, there was no guarantee they wouldn't be hostile towards them.

The same applied to the red weapon. Both sides watched each other cautiously. And it was the humanoid weapon that made the first move. A somewhat surprised voice echoed from the loudspeaker of the machine.

“Are you, Akira? ”

And to show there was no hostility, the pilot disembarked from the machine. Emerging from the red machine was Tatsukawa.

Tatsukawa, who had come to Akira's location, lightly introduced himself to Carol and Togami, who were seeing him for the first time.

“Tatsukawa. I'm the captain of Dragon River.”

“Carol. Nice to meet you.”

“I-I'm Togami. A hunter from the Drankam team.”

Akira already knew Tatsukawa. Moreover, he didn't care much about the hierarchy among hunters based on hunter rank. Carol had dealings with high-ranking hunters due to her side job and was skilled in negotiation. She wouldn't be intimidated even if the person she was dealing with was the top of Dragon River.

However, Togami was only considered a skilled hunter by the standards of the Kugamayama City. The display showing his hunter

rank of 78, shared through information sharing with Carol, only increased Togami's nervousness.

Tatsukawa looked somewhat puzzled.

“Drankam? Ah, the hunter team from Kugamayama City. ...I hate to say it, but I didn't think they were the kind of team that could make it this far...”

“W-We've had our circumstances.”

“I see. Well, I won't ask for the details...”

Tatsukawa looked at Akira again.

“I didn't expect to meet Akira here. How did you get here? ”

“Uh, well...”

Akira struggles, unsure of what she should and shouldn't say. Seeing his hesitate, Carol answers in her place.

“To be honest, we're stranded right now. We were passing through a passage when we suddenly ended up in this pure white space. When we looked back, the passage we had just passed through had disappeared.”

Without lying but without mentioning the underground tunnel, Carol explained how they ended up here and their current situation.

Tatsukawa seemed to understand after hearing that.

“So that's how it is.”

“Is it the same for you too...? I mean, are you stranded too? ”

“Yeah. I was advancing with my comrades into the Second Inner Sector...”

Dragon River is advancing through the ruins of Kuzusuhara District as a unit. Although they're riding humanoid weapons, Tatsukawa didn't come here alone. His squad also included several other humanoid weapons and about twenty high-ranking hunters armed with personal weapons.

The difficulty level of the inner part beyond the second one is completely different from that near the first one. Monsters that would be impossible for a hunter rank of 50 to defeat wander around as a matter of course. Furthermore, if you go further in, monsters that even rank 60 or 70 hunters couldn't defeat appear, delaying the top teams competing for the conquest of the ruins.

Tatsukawa's unit is an elite force that has stepped into such a place ahead of time, securing a foothold for the conquest of the ruins for the entire team. Dragon River also has top-level players. They effortlessly defeated powerful monster groups like a joke and gradually expanded the areas that had already been conquered.

And today, Tatsukawa was also at the forefront of the unit. He was advancing through the ruins, filled with towering buildings, in his powerful machine.

The dense colorless mist surrounding him was very thick. Even with the high-performance search equipment installed on his machine, it was difficult to notice the presence of enemies quickly.

Still, with the machine that Tatsukawa had personally invested a large amount of money in, even if they were surprised by monsters, the risk of being destroyed immediately was low. Tatsukawa took advantage of the machine's sturdiness to act as a decoy, alerting his allies to enemy attacks during combat. For this purpose, he took a slightly forward position.

But this time, it backfired. As Tatsukawa advanced through the ruins, he was suddenly thrown into the pure white space. Tatsukawa tried to turn back immediately, but the view he saw when he looked back was an endlessly expanding white world. Even though he had

advanced a few seconds ago, the valley between the tall buildings and the figures of his comrades had disappeared.

“Of course, I tried to return to the spot immediately, but no matter how far I advanced, the scenery remained the same. So I thought I'd try going up, but that didn't work either. And according to the instruments, I had ascended 2000 meters, but when I descended 500 meters, I was on the ground. I don't get it.”

Tatsukawa said, holding his head in his hands, and asked Carol.

“What was it like on your side? ”

“It was pretty much the same. According to the positioning system, we went outside the ruins, but we couldn't get out from here.”

“I see... That's tough. To be honest, I was hoping that someone who could make it this far with that level of armament would know a way to safely enter and exit here...”

At Tatsukawa's sharp observation, Carol decided to expand the information she was willing to share.

“Ah, we have a prospect for escape, you know? ”

“Oh! Really! ”

Tatsukawa, surprised, couldn't help but smile.

“Yes, it's true. I'm not lying. ...If you want to know more, we'll need to negotiate. You understand, right? ”

“Got it. Please be gentle.”

Tatsukawa smiled back with a somewhat wry smile.

In Carol's words, there was an implicit threat that if they wanted to escape together from here, they would need to accept terms favorable

to them. However, Tatsukawa had the power to force terms on the other party. Both of them understood that this light exchange could easily lead to a confrontation. Carol and Tatsukawa were talking while smiling, aware of that possibility.

Watching the two negotiate, Togami was trembling inwardly.

(Carol!? Does she know who she's dealing with!? How brave can she be!?)

Nonchalantly speaking words that could be interpreted as a threat against the leader of the hunter team competing to conquer the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, Togami felt like he was committing suicide by doing such an imitation.

Glancing at Akira's demeanor, he appeared normal. At least he didn't seem to be concerned about Carol's behavior.

(Akira... Well, he's always been like this. Am I the only one flustered...?)

He felt out of place. Despite that, Togami strongly believed that someday he would become someone worthy of this place.

At that moment, both Akira and Tatsukawa sensed the presence of a monster and turned simultaneously. Due to the dense colorless mist surrounding them, it was an extremely faint sensation.

Only someone with considerable strength could detect the enemy's presence from this distance. Tatsukawa, thinking he was the only one capable of it, lightly expressed surprise as Akira also noticed the enemy.

“Yeah, I'll handle this.”

Tatsukawa said.

Akira nodded, lowering his gun.

Carol and Togami also understood the imminent attack from Akira's and Tatsukawa's demeanor, but they still didn't know the monster's exact position. Even with Akira's information-gathering device, they could only access collected data and its analysis. Akira couldn't share the perception of the enemy he had captured based on his expanded sensory equipment.

Tatsukawa jumped into his humanoid weapon. The red machine assumed a stance. And as the monster approached within a range detectable even by Carol and the others, Tatsukawa's machine closed the distance in an instant, despite its massive size, without showing any signs of clumsiness.

It was a movement so precise and smooth, reminiscent of a master closing the distance with an enemy, requiring a great deal of talent and training. Tatsukawa was replicating such movements with his gigantic humanoid weapon.

The emerged monster had a beast-like lower body and an upper body resembling a fusion of forms. It was the same type as the one Akira and the others had fought. The beast opened its mouth wide, ready to spew a high-energy torrent.

But before it could, it was forcefully shut by an upward thrust from a red giant fist.

With nowhere to go, the energy within its closed mouth burst out through the gaps in its teeth. Additionally, the fusion body's massive frame was lifted into the air by the fist's impact.

Tatsukawa followed up with a counterattack. This time, it was a blow from above. With a light leap, he smashed the head of the humanoid form with his huge fist, then slammed the lower beast part onto the ground with the same powerful strike, crushing it with a dull thud that echoed strongly.

From the motionless fused body, the red humanoid weapon withdrew its arm, turning away. The monster that Akira and the

others had struggled to defeat was taken down in just two blows.

Watching this scene, Togami muttered, partly dumbfounded.

“Incredible... That's Hunter Rank 78 for you...”

Togami understood that this achievement was due to the extraordinarily powerful humanoid weapon. However, he also realized that even if he were to pilot it, he wouldn't be able to achieve the same result. Truly, Hunter Rank 78. There was unquestionable strength that made it clear.

Tatsukawa descended from his returning machine and pointed at the defeated monster, speaking to Carol.

“See? You've seen my strength now, right? I'll use this much firepower as an escort. So, how about considering a little more of a share for us over here? ”

“Fine. Then I'll leak all the map information of the underground tunnels to Dragon River. In addition, you can claim to have discovered it yourselves. How about that? ”

“Okay, that works. Yeah, I need to get something like that at least.”

Tatsukawa added silently to himself that if he didn't get at least that much, he didn't know what Melshia would say later.

While Carol reluctantly compromised outwardly, inwardly she was not disappointed at all. She had managed to naturally leak information about the underground tunnels and pass on the accompanying troubles to Dragon River. Thinking this was convenient, she accepted the situation.

“Oh, but I can't guarantee the information flowing from Shiro. Negotiate with Dragon River and Shiro after we've escaped from here. I don't want Shiro to use the cancellation of support for our escape as a bargaining chip in negotiations.”

“Understood. We'll leave that for later. ...Oh, and on a separate note, if you can establish communication with this Shiro person, could you do that? I want to inform my comrades of my situation. My communication device won't connect.”

“Akira, can you handle it? ”

“Got it.”

Akira attempted to communicate with Shiro and frowned.

“...No good. Can't connect.”

Carol's expression turned grim with genuine concern.

“Can't connect... Wait, Akira. Which is it? Is it the fault of the communication environment? Or is Shiro not responding? ”

“I don't know. Normally, you wouldn't be able to establish communication in a situation like this. Shiro probably did something to contact us.”

If there's no problem with the communication environment but Shiro can't be reached, there's a fear that something may have happened to Shiro, who should be coming to our aid. Understanding this, Tatsukawa calmly spoke up.

“We just have to assume it's due to the deteriorating communication environment and wait.”

“Yes... Let's wait.”

There was no choice but to do so. With this thought in mind, Carol answered calmly. Togami and Akira nodded in agreement. However, Akira decided it was best to check with Alpha.

『Alpha. What's the situation? Is the inability to connect with Shiro due to the communication state? 』

『No, it's not. Although the communication state is poor, there should be no problem contacting Shiro under the current circumstances.』

『Then... something must have happened to Shiro? 』

『No. Shiro is currently heading here as usual. I won't explain the detailed current situation to Akira because it's unnatural for you to know, but there's nothing wrong with Shiro.』

Upon hearing this, Akira felt relieved at first. Then he became puzzled.

『So why can't we connect with Shiro? 』

『Well, I'll tell you the reason so Akira doesn't become excessively anxious. However, since this is something Akira shouldn't know, no matter what you ask, pretend not to know. Understand? 』

『Understood.』

『The reason you can't connect with Shiro is because I blocked the communication.』

『What...? 』

『The information device Togami received from Shirou maintains constant communication with him. Even if it appears to be disconnected, it's always sending our information to Shirou.』

『So, our information has been leaking to Shirou all this time? 』

『That's right.』

Akira struggled hard not to change his expression. Fortunately, Carol and the others didn't find him suspicious. Alpha smiled and reassured Akira.

『Well, it's understandable to be angry, but there are also convenient aspects for you, Akira. So, calm down. The reason the communication with Shirou is still established is because it has been connected since before we entered here. If we cut it, it probably won't connect again.』

Tatsukawa's humanoid weapon is equipped with devices that allow communication via the old-world routes. If the mist isn't too thick, normal communication is possible. However, the fact that communication with his allies is not established indicates how bad the communication environment in this space is.

Even in such circumstances, Shirou maintained communication with Akira and the others using his exceptional skills. Being recognized as an important figure by Sakashita Heavy Industry, his skills were outstanding.

Additionally, Alpha was also cooperating with Shirou to maintain communication without being noticed. With Alpha's capabilities, it was possible to establish communication with the outside even in this environment without Shirou, although it required somewhat conspicuous means. However, if done so, there was a risk of revealing her presence, so Alpha had been quietly assisting Shirou.

After hearing these explanations from Alpha, Akira understood.

『...I see. Understood. I'll calm down.』

Akira decided to overlook Shirou's actions for now and focus on safely escaping with Carol and the others.

Akira and Tatsukawa wait with Shirou. It's already late at night, but the surroundings remain bright. The light intensity in the area hasn't changed since Akira and the others entered the third inner sector.

Akira sees the corpse of the fused creature defeated by Tatsukawa. Both the humanoid and beast parts are severely damaged but not turned into sand, which surprises Akira.

『Alpha, why isn't this corpse turned into a pile of sand like the one we defeated? 』

『Because he defeated it without giving its cells time to deplete at the cellular level.』

『...Is that how it works? It feels strange that we had to slash and shoot it so many times just to defeat it, but it goes down with just two punches because it's a humanoid weapon.』

Akira finds it strange that despite inflicting significant damage repeatedly, their opponent regenerated immediately and attacked again. Considering that, it seemed absurd that a similar monster could be defeated with such minor injuries. Akira was puzzled by this.

Alpha explains calmly.

『It's not just two punches. It's attacking with advanced techniques enabled by both the user's skill and the functions of the aircraft.』

『He can do that... It's amazing.』

Although Alpha's explanation omitted some details, Akira found it convincing. If Alpha said so, then it must be true. Besides, they had

witnessed the fused creature being defeated with just two hits. Akira didn't doubt it anymore.

Then Tatsukawa speaks to Akira.

“You guys took it down too. Good job.”

“...Well, it took three of us.”

“Could you have handled it alone? From what I heard from Carol, it seems like you could.”

“Even if I could, fighting alone would have been tougher for me. Even if I could handle it alone, I wouldn't say it was easy.”

Akira replies pointedly, causing Tatsukawa to chuckle slightly.

“You don't need to say such things. I'm not trying to extract any commitments from you.”

“I'm just being careful with my words. If I said something like 'I could have handled it easily alone,' then someone might expect me to handle similar situations alone in the future.”

Tatsukawa easily guessed that the person Akira was referring to was Kibayashi.

“Indeed. We must be careful.”

Although Tatsukawa casually replied outwardly, he was interested in Akira's words and actions.

(He's not just being modest. He really believes he couldn't have won alone. His immediate response about teamwork being essential shows that.)

Tatsukawa thought so but also thought:

(However, he also believes that even though he may not have it easy or be confident in winning, he still thinks he could handle it alone. It's not a lie. He genuinely believes it.)

Within Akira, there was no contradiction between not being able to win alone but still being able to handle it alone. Tatsukawa felt that the secret to Akira's strength lay in this inconsistency.

(Well, I'm not going to pry into that. Everyone keeps some trump cards or secrets hidden.)

Tatsukawa's speculation was largely correct. Akira indeed believed that he couldn't defeat such a fused creature alone. At the same time, he also believed that they could manage alone, including Alpha's support, even without Carol and the others' assistance.

This contradictory speech and attitude stemmed from Akira's complicated feelings. Although they decided to showcase their strength, including Alpha's support, externally as their own ability, Akira found it hard to claim victory over the fused creature effortlessly.

Tatsukawa couldn't read that far. Unable to read it, he watched with interest the hunter who possessed this inexplicable strength.

Akira felt suspicious of Tatsukawa's gaze.

“What? ”

“Well, I just think Kibayashi would be delighted.”

Akira grimaced and retorted.

“You would be too. Even though you're riding a humanoid weapon, you're stuck here alone with us and can't go back safely. Wouldn't Kibayashi be delighted that Tatsukawa, who's become just another guy trying to earn a living safely, is once again doing something

reckless? Besides, weren't such risky actions supposed to be stopped by Melshia? ”

At Akira's pointing out, Tatsukawa looks away.

“No, it's not like that. That was... well, it's just that, considering the efficient operation of the unit, it was best for me to take the lead. Well, certainly, I ended up entering this space a little too far ahead due to that, but thanks to that, my comrades should be safe, and in terms of ensuring the overall safety of the unit, it wasn't a bad decision...”

As if preparing in advance for the explanation he would have to give to someone who wasn't here, Tatsukawa continues the conversation.

“...Yeah! It's just bad luck! Akira, you agree, right? None of us thought something like this would happen. We proceeded with enough caution, yet still encountered an unexpected situation. That's all there is to it. We never even considered doing anything reckless, right? ”

“Well, yeah.”

“See? ”

Tatsukawa nods satisfactorily, but Akira interjects.

“It would be nice if the other party believed that...”

“...Don't say that. It's tough when they get angry, you know? ”

Tatsukawa sighs softly, imagining the effort it takes to appease a lover, then lifts his head.

At that moment, Tatsukawa's expression freezes in surprise. Instead of an endless white space, the scene before his raised face is a cityscape of towering buildings.

Akira also looks around in astonishment at the changes in their surroundings. As if they had teleported, they find themselves in the midst of an ancient city. However, the scattered amalgamated corpses nearby indicate that Akira and the others are in the same location.

Akira looked up at the nearby building, where instead of a clear sky, the night sky spread over the top of the high-rise building. However, there was no change in the brightness of the surroundings. It remained as bright as midday. Akira couldn't help but mutter.

“Well, anything is possible now.”

Carol, who was resting nearby, is also surprised by the situation and hurries over with Togami. After scanning the area, she speaks.

“Akira, do you think this building is real? ”

“Yeah. According to the response from the information gathering device...”

It's already experienced that relying on such equipment isn't entirely reliable. Whether it's a tangible hologram or real, Akira gazes at the nearby building, pondering its authenticity.

Tatsukawa lightly suggests, “Shall we check? ”

And he remotely operates his humanoid weapon on the spot. The red unit moves without a pilot and strikes the building with a massive fist.

A large hole appears in the building's exterior. Through the hole, they can see a room with chairs and tables integrated into the floor.

The interior is not messy at all. This means that there were no debris or remnants from the moment the hole was created. Everything disappeared instantly when the walls was breached.

The red unit withdraws its arm from the building. A few seconds later, the hole in the building's wall suddenly disappears. Just like switching from an image of a wall with a hole to one without, it returns to its original state in an instant.

Tatsukawa expresses his opinion, "I felt the sensation of hitting something solid. The interior seemed well-constructed, with what appeared to be furniture. It doesn't seem like a makeshift or fake setup, but..."

Carol voices her thoughts, "This is just a guess, but maybe they built the building using only holographic projections and force field barriers? If we consider the old-world's architectural technology, if a structure with this level of strength suffices, they might not even need actual construction for tall buildings. Including the interior."

While realizing there might be some stretch in her own argument, Carol also believed that such a thing could be possible with old-world technology.

Upon hearing this, Tatsukawa, drawing from his experience as a hunter over the years, witnessing various things created by old-world technology, found the explanation convincing.

"...So that's how it is. Wait a minute? If that's the case... was that it? When I thought I entered the Third Inner Sector as soon as the surroundings turned completely white, and around the point where I thought I was in the depths of the Second Inner Sector, I was actually already within the Third Inner Sector, and all the surrounding buildings were holographic projections and force field barrier structures like this one? And when that was deactivated, the surroundings suddenly turned completely white..."

Hearing Tatsukawa's speculation, Akira and the others recall their entry into the Third Inner Sector. It seems to make sense.

Then Akira came up with an idea.

“Huh? So, does that mean we can get out now? We don't know where the Third Inner Sector starts, but whether it's on the surface or underground, when we see this kind of scenery, it must be connected to the Second Inner Sector, right? ”

Carol smiled happily upon hearing this.

“It's worth a try. Let's do it, Akira.”

Akira and the others nodded in agreement and began preparing for their immediate departure. Tatsukawa climbed into his humanoid weapon, while Akira and the others mounted Akira's bike. It was then that Tatsukawa spoke.

“Ah, could someone ride with me? Two won't fit, but one should be manageable.”

With three people on one bike, Akira and the others exchanged glances. Then Togami made a decision.

“Then I'll move over there.”

He reasoned that staying here would only be a hindrance. It would be better for him to move. That's what Togami concluded.

“Akira, is that alright? ”

“Carol, what do you mean? ”

Although he's currently responsible for guarding both Carol and Togami, Carol takes priority as she was the first one he contracted with for protection. So, considering that the humanoid weapon is safer than the bike, Akira hesitates and asks Carol for her opinion.

Carol understands what Akira is implying and answers with a smile.

“Aren't you supposed to protect me, Akira? ”

Upon hearing this, Akira smiles and nods.

“Understood. Togami, please move over. ”

“Yeah. Then, Akira, I'll take it easy over there, okay? Sorry about that.”

With a joking tone, Togami returns the gun he borrowed from Akira. Feeling disappointed that he can't contribute much with his abilities, he boards Tatsukawa's machine while showing a hint of regret on his face.

Akira and the others, now reduced to one machine and one bike, decide to aim for the rooftop of a nearby skyscraper first. There, Akira casually asks Tatsukawa.

“By the way, you mentioned calling this place the Third Inner Sector. But isn't this already it? ”

“Huh? Oh yeah, there's currently no common consensus on that. It's all temporary.”

They're currently in a phase where each hunter team is competing to conquer the inner areas of the ruins. Whether this area is designated as the Third Inner Sector or not, there hasn't been any agreement between hunters yet.

“Some hunter teams have already declared that they've reached the Third Inner Sector, but they haven't mentioned anything about this completely white space. Considering that, maybe we're the first ones to truly reach the Third Inner Sector? ”

“Is that so? ”

“Well, maybe other teams that have already reached here are just keeping their information confidential. Even if they start saying later that they were faster, it'll be too late once we share the information we find here.”

“Is that how it works? ”

During this brief conversation, Akira and the others arrive at the rooftop of the building. The view from there is a sight of the ancient city with endless skyscrapers. Whether this extends to the Second Inner Sector or not is unclear due to the distant horizon being obscured by dense colorless mist.

Akira groans lightly.

“Hmm. Well, we have to move forward. Tatsukawa, which way should we go? ”

Hoping that Tatsukawa would act as vanguard if they encounter a swarm of fusion creatures, Akira asks him for direction.

“Yeah. If we trust the positioning system of the machines, it would be that way, but...”

Currently, the positioning system is unreliable, showing inaccuracies in both location and altitude on the wide-area map. However, the general direction might still have some margin of error. Tatsukawa hopes so as he points towards the direction of Kagamayama City.

Akira turns his gaze in the direction indicated by the giant finger.

“That way? ”

Right after that, Alpha's expression noticeably darkens.

『Akira, be cautious.』

With Alpha's atmosphere closer to a warning than a mere caution, Akira becomes instantly vigilant. Implicitly conveying the urgency of the situation to Tatsukawa.

“Tatsukawa, something doesn't feel right.”

“Understood.”

Sensing the seriousness in Akira's demeanor, Tatsukawa accepts his vague explanation without delving into specifics.

The instincts of high-ranking hunters are reliable. The more skilled they are, the more precise they become. Tatsukawa, being such a skilled individual himself, is well aware of this fact.

And it's proven true. The detection equipment of his machines picks up a strong response ahead. Despite being covered in dense colorless mist, the presence of something enormous and highly energetic is evident.

Searching for something like a monster that may be lurking somewhere under the influence of the colorless mist is extremely difficult. However, investigating the details of a confirmed presence is relatively easy by narrowing down the analysis range of information gathering device.

The red unit's high-performance detection equipment gradually reveals the opponent's form. With Alpha's support, Akira can display the opponent's figure in his augmented field of vision, even though it's difficult to discern with the naked eye due to the distant view and the haze.

And when the figure becomes clear enough to see, Akira involuntarily breaks into a tense smile.

“I know... that's a Kaiju, right? ”

The colossal creatures resembling mountains that inhabit near the front lines are so massive and powerful that they are referred to as Kaiju.

The bigger the Kaiju, the stronger it is. It's as if it embodies that concept. And that Kaiju was right before Akira and the others' eyes.

Chapter 230: Kaiju

As Shiro and the others progress through the underground tunnel, they reach a massive partition separating the outer outskirts and the First Inner Sector of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Reina asks Shiro about the barrier.

“It's a dead end... Shiro, what do we do from here? ...Shiro? ”

Shiro wears a stern expression, seemingly not paying attention to Reina.

“This is bad.”

“Bad? Does that mean this barrier was supposed to be open? We can't reach Akira and the others without passing through here, right? But forcing this open seems difficult...”

“Huh? Well, there's supposed to be a detour route that vehicles can't pass through, and Akira and the others entered from there...”

“Akira and the others gave up on forcing this open too. So, let's head there...”

“No, it's fine. I'll open it.”

Shiro concentrates on the barrier, utilizing the skills honed at Sakashita Heavy Industry to intervene in the barrier's system through the old network. The massive barrier slowly begins to open sideways.

“It's open... Proceed.”

Shiro, visibly fatigued and in pain, manages to respond.

“Are you okay? ”

“I'm fine. Just keep going. We can't afford to waste time.”

Reina signals Shiori to depart with her gaze. Shiori immediately starts the car. The vehicle enters the First Inner Sector of the underground tunnel through the gap in the partially opened barrier.

Shiro sits down on a seat in the car, looking a bit unsteady. Concerned, Reina speaks to him.

“Looks tough. You said it's bad, but are you really in that much pain?”

“It's not about me. It's about Akira and the others.”

“Huh? ”

“Monsters should appear from here on. Sorry, but keep going without stopping. Olivia, if it seems like it'll take too long for Reina and the others, I'll appreciate your support.”

“Understood.”

Seeing Olivia politely bow her head, Shiro feels relieved that he wasn't told there would be an additional charge.

Kanae looks into the depths of the underground tunnel and speaks.

“Milady, they're coming.”

Although the monsters in this area were once mostly wiped out by Akira and the others, enough time has passed for their numbers to somewhat replenish. These hordes now swarm towards Reina's vehicle.

Upon seeing this, Reina raises her voice.

“Drive through them! ”

“Roger! ”

The car's mounted guns spew fire vigorously, mowing down the approaching horde. Countless monsters are reduced to nothing in an instant. Amidst the debris of flesh and mechanical parts, Reina's car forcefully pushes forward through the tunnel.

Some monsters on the tunnel's ceiling attempt to attack the car, either by shooting or trying to leap onto its roof.

Shiori and Kanae, already on the roof, intercept these monsters. They easily dispatch the monsters, as they are not as formidable as those in the First Inner Sector.

Although Olivia stands on the car's roof, she does not take any action. Following Shiro's instructions, she refrains from intervening unless it becomes necessary for Reina and the others, who seem to be handling the situation well on their own. Shiori and the others understand this and focus on fighting without bothering Olivia.

Reina, judging that everything is going smoothly, shifts her attention from the outside to Shiro inside the car.

“Shiro, what's the situation with Akira and the others? ”

“...It's really dire. We need to hurry.”

Shiro doesn't elaborate further. Reina can infer as much from his words. They exchange silent gazes for a while.

Feeling the pressure from Reina, Shiro concedes first. He exhales lightly before speaking.

“We'll soon enter the Second Inner Sector. If you still have the courage there, I'll tell you. Akira and the others are further ahead.”

Although Reina's condition for accompanying them was set, it would be pointless if they couldn't fight seriously in the Second Inner

Sector. Shiro states this, and Reina understands.

“Got it.”

Then Reina and the others reach the boundary with the Second Inner Sector. Shiro, once again enduring the pain caused by the strain on his brain, attempts to open the barrier. At the same time, he warns Reina.

“...Just so you know, if you decide to turn back, I won't complain.”

“Thanks. If it gets really dangerous, we'll do just that.”

After leaving that message with Shiro, Reina climbs onto the car's roof. She signals Shiori and Kanae not to bring her back inside the car. Then, she asks Olivia.

“Let me confirm. If we seem to be struggling alone, you'll lend a hand, right? ”

“Yes. That's what Shiro-sama instructed.”

“Thank you.”

With this, they've secured the minimum safety. Reina decides not to complain about fighting herself. She smiles and addresses Shiori and Kanae as their leader, looking at them.

“Let's go. Let's do our best not to trouble Olivia-sama.”

The vehicle continues to enter the Second Inner Sector through the partially opened barrier. Soon, they notice the monsters' reactions. Their numbers are not large, but each one is exceptionally strong.

However, their strength is beyond what they faced before. Reina understands that they're in for a completely different battle than in the First Inner Sector. Knowing this, she raises her voice with determination.

“Alright, let's do this! ”

The car continues firing its mounted guns without slowing down. Reina and the others also shoot their guns. A barrage of bullets annihilates every monster in sight. The first target, a single monster, is overwhelmed by the onslaught and falls.

However, Reina's expression turns slightly grim.

Previously, they could have easily wiped out a horde of enemies with such gunfire. Yet, despite this, a single enemy withstands the barrage reasonably well. It's strong. This realization distorts Reina's expression.

Shiori and Kanae are also surprised by the unexpected strength of the enemies. Two monsters then attack them more fiercely than anticipated. They counter with full force, slashing and striking back with all their might. They glance briefly at Olivia.

Olivia remains standing, not intervening. Seeing this, Reina deliberately smiles and shouts.

“Shiori! Kanae! Let's keep this up! ”

“Yes! ”

“Got it! ”

The two attendants respond firmly to their mistress's determination.

Reina and the others continue through the underground tunnel. Though the numbers are small, they continue to repel exceptionally strong monsters one by one, hastening their journey. Then, a communication comes in from Shiro inside the car.

“It's a promise. I'll tell you about Akira and the others' situation. Are you busy, or do you want to hear it now? ”

“No, please tell me now.”

“Understood.”

Through Reina's augmented field of vision, the situation with Akira and the others is displayed. It's a third-person perspective based on data collected from various surveillance devices, providing a clear view of their situation.

And what they see is beyond unexpected.

“Wait... What's happening here? ”

“Who knows? ”

Displayed before them are Akira and the others fleeing from a gigantic Kaiju.



Akira, upon seeing the Kaiju, mutters involuntarily.

“I know... that's a Kaiju, right? ”

The monstrously huge creature resembled a large theropod with unusually developed physique. Slowly advancing while destroying surrounding buildings, it stood out even against skyscrapers about 200 meters tall, its monstrous visage a symbol of destruction for Akira and the others.

Strong. Large. It seems impossible to defeat. A gigantic monster, a Kaiju, that would make Akira and the others think so at first glance was there.

“...Tatsukawa. I'll ask just in case, but is there any chance we could fight that thing? ”

“Don't be ridiculous.”

“Yeah.”

Thanks to the thick colorless mist, the Kaiju hasn't noticed Akira and the others yet. Confirming this, Tatsukawa issues instructions.

“Akira, let's move away from that thing. Got it? Slowly.”

“Got it.”

Akira and the others begin to cautiously move away from the spot. Moving too quickly out of panic would only make it more noticeable. They try to advance slowly amidst the colorless mist.

However, their efforts are in vain. Just as Akira and the others try to distance themselves from the Kaiju, a fusion creature with a mix of fish and bird-like lower body emerges ahead of them. Additionally, Akira and the others have allocated most of their surveillance and information gathering device to the Kaiju, causing a delay in detection.

Of course, it would be easy to repel the fusion creature with Tatsukawa's humanoid weapon. However, engaging in combat would make them more conspicuous than high-speed movement. There's a high risk of the Kaiju noticing them.

Is there any way to get through without fighting? Tatsukawa considers, but it's impossible. The fusion creature that noticed Akira and the others opens its large beak and begins generating light orbs.

Seeing this, Tatsukawa curses instinctively.

“Damn it! ”

Then, maneuvering the humanoid weapon, Tatsukawa closes the distance with the fusion creature at full speed and unleashes a massive punch.

The fist, swung with force, directly hits the light orb inside the fusion creature's beak. The light orb bursts, scattering energy around. The red humanoid weapon withstands the energy, then proceeds to punch the fusion creature, sending it flying into smithereens.

If the fusion creature directs the energy surge towards them, the Kaiju would undoubtedly notice their presence. If that's the case, avoiding engagement would be meaningless. By delivering a single blow, they aim to prevent the energy surge from reaching the direction of the Kaiju, hoping that the Kaiju won't notice them. That's the decision they've made.

(How about that?)

The colorless mist is so dense here. Surprisingly, they might be okay. Tatsukawa checks for the Kaiju's reaction.

The Kaiju stops and turns its colossal face towards Akira and the others.

“Akira! Let's get out of here! Full speed ahead! ”

Tatsukawa accelerates the humanoid weapon at full speed. Akira also accelerates the bike without delay. One humanoid weapon and one bike speed through the night scenery of the old-world's city.

Although the Kaiju has spotted them, it doesn't necessarily mean it will attack. Even if it does, they might be able to outrun it if it's a slow but powerful type. That's what Akira and the others hope for, but their first hope is quickly dashed. The Kaiju changes its course to pursue Akira and the others.

Still, the Kaiju's movement speed is slower than Akira and the others. They can outrun it at this rate. Akira and the others feel a slight relief.

But then, the Kaiju opens its gaping mouth.

“Get down! ”

Following Tatsukawa's instruction, Akira and the others dive down. With the momentum of crashing into the ground, they dive into the gaps between tall buildings.

A moment later, a flash is emitted from the Kaiju's mouth. A surge of energy, with an output surpassing that of an inter-city transport vehicle's main cannon, engulfs a wide area in front of the Kaiju.

The surge of light easily reaches the airspace where Akira and the others were just moments ago. Despite the dense colorless mist causing attenuation, it burns through the air far into the distance, incinerating everything in its path. The shockwave also spreads to the surface. Countless skyscrapers engulfed in light vanish in an instant. Akira and the others are also engulfed by the light.

Yet, Akira and the others are unharmed. The energy surge released by the Kaiju's attack is greatly weakened by the numerous buildings in its path before reaching Akira and the others, reducing its power significantly.

Compared to a direct hit, Tatsukawa raises the output of the humanoid weapon's force field armor to defend against the significantly weakened flash. Additionally, Akira, using Tatsukawa's humanoid weapon as a shield, maximizes the output of the bike's and augmented suit's force field barriers to cope with the situation.

It was close. Akira and the others can't help but feel relieved as they continue through the gaps between tall buildings. They can't go back up. Moving in open spaces without cover would be suicidal, as the light beam from the Kaiju's mouth would pass through. They also avoid main streets as much as possible for similar reasons.

The towering buildings blown away by the Kaiju's attack would typically remain as a pile of rubble. They wouldn't obstruct the line of sight for the next attack. However, the buildings constructed with

holographic images and force field barriers had already returned to their original state as if nothing had happened.

Naturally, the area where the Kaiju stood remained unaffected, and the buildings didn't end up submerged. The restoration of that area would occur after the Kaiju passed through. Nevertheless, the buildings returning to their original state, seemingly unaffected even after being destroyed, slowed down the Kaiju's movement and acted as shields for Akira and the others during the next emission of light.

However, Akira and the others' movement speed was still affected by having to navigate through the buildings. Despite this, they were faster than the Kaiju. If they could maintain this speed, they wouldn't be caught up to, but they also couldn't pull away.

Additionally, obstacles appeared to block Akira and the others' path. It was a group of fused creatures. Packs of half-beast creatures emerged from the ground, while half-fish and half-bird creatures attacked from the sky, assaulting Akira and the others one after another.

There was no going back. The Kaiju was behind them. Their odds of winning were lower than if they were to defeat all the creatures in front of them barehanded. The only option Akira and the others had was to move forward.

Tatsukawa raised her voice.

“I'll provide cover! Keep running! ”

A red humanoid weapon swiftly flew through the air, delivering a palm strike to the nearest fused creature with its right hand. This time, the aim was not to destroy the target but to knock it away. The targeted creature was sent flying forcefully, hitting another creature directly and eliminating both of them at once.

Simultaneously, the humanoid weapon directed its left hand towards the other fused creatures, unleashing countless energy bullets from

its extended fingertips. While the power of these energy bullets easily annihilated monsters of the Second Inner Sector, they weren't enough to defeat those of the third inner sector. Even direct hits failed to take down a single creature.

Nevertheless, it was enough to distract them. Tatsukawa managed to momentarily restrict the movement of the airborne creatures with this barrage, allowing him to assist Akira during this window of opportunity. The fingertips of the humanoid weapon's right hand also transformed into cannons aimed at the fused creatures on the ground.

The next moment, one of the fused creatures was bisected by a vigorously swung silver blade.

With Alpha's support, Akira had sensed the presence of the swarm of fused creatures faster than Tatsukawa. Reflexively manipulating his perception of time, he received instructions from Alpha within the world where time flowed extremely slowly.

『Akira, use the blades of the bike.』

『Got it! 』

The bladeless handle was pulled out from the body of the bike and connected to the blade generation mechanism. Through a thick energy cable connecting the handle to the bike's large energy tank, immense energy was supplied from the bike.

The RL2 multi-function gun mounted on the bike's auxiliary arm aimed at the targets ahead and fired.

Carol, who was riding behind Akira, also joined in the gunfire. Although Akira didn't have time to verbally instruct the gunfire, displaying the instructions in Carol's augmented field of vision took only a moment. Carol also manipulated her perception of time using an accelerator, following Akira's instructions almost immediately.

The fused creature in the form of a beast received a barrage of gunfire from Akira's bike and Carol. However, it didn't seem to have much effect. If they could be defeated with such minimal effort, Akira and the others wouldn't have struggled so much against these beast-type fused creatures in the first place.

Nonetheless, they were able to slow down the enemy's movements. Additionally, Alpha was providing solid support for Akira this time. The gunfire from the bike, unlike the last time where it was intended to test Akira's abilities, exhibited a precision that was entirely different. The meticulously calculated gunfire not only sealed the movements of the fused creatures but also effectively hindered the generation of light balls.

While the gunfire slowed down the movements of the fused creatures, Akira closed the distance between them using his bike. Simultaneously, he pulled out a long, giant silver blade from the blade generation mechanism.

Riding through the creatures' beastly sections with his bike, Akira swung the blade vigorously. With the expert skill supported by Alpha, the giant blade, far exceeding Akira's height, demonstrated its incredible sharpness to the fullest extent. The fused creature split in half from directly below, and both halves were separated. Furthermore, they were blown away by the impact released from the blade.

However, that was only two creatures defeated, or more accurately, heavily damaged. Akira hadn't actually taken down any of them. He had merely inflicted significant damage to their bodies, rendering them unable to pursue Akira and the others immediately.

Additionally, there were still fused creatures remaining. One creature generated a light ball, while two others with elongated arms from their abnormal upper bodies swung them overhead. Another attempted to leap directly at Akira from various directions.

There were too many of them. It was simply impossible to deal with them all at once. Akira frowned at the thought.

However, Tatsukawa's support intervened. A large number of energy bullets were unleashed, disrupting the movements of the fused creatures significantly. Seizing this opportunity, Akira rushed past the enemies. As they passed each other, he swung his blade, slicing two creatures apart.

A communication came from Tatsukawa, who was flying above.

“You're doing great! Kibayashi will be impressed! ”

“Likewise! ”

“We're in this together! Akira! Get further ahead! Another Kaiju attack is coming! ”

“Understood! ”

Akira followed Tatsukawa's instructions and positioned himself further forward. Simultaneously, Tatsukawa moved his humanoid weapon behind Akira.

The next moment, the Kaiju far behind unleashed another surge of energy. Its intense light swallowed countless tall buildings, reaching even further than the previous attack, engulfing Akira and the fused creatures further ahead.

The fused creatures behind Akira vanished due to the Kaiju's attack. Those ahead were left charred and unable to move properly.

Akira and his group defended against this massive energy attack just like before, using up a substantial amount of energy from their humanoid weapon and bike. Tatsukawa spoke sternly as they passed through the charred fused creatures.

“I can only defend against that two more times, Akira. How about you? ”

“It's the same for me, two more times. If it weren't for Tatsukawa's support, we'd have none.”

“I see. Well, we have to do what we can. Honestly, if Kibayashi knew about this, he'd be laughing his head off.”

Tatsukawa chuckled as if it were a joke, and Akira joined in, raising his spirits.

“I agree. ...It can't be helped. Let's make him laugh until he cries! ”

“Sounds good! ”

Akira knew that if they didn't survive, Kibayashi would never know about this battle. The element that would amuse Kibayashi the most was their survival in this reckless and desperate situation. Both Akira and Tatsukawa knew this well as individuals who had been manipulated by Kibayashi.

Through the city of the old-world, one humanoid weapon and one bike raced onward. Neither Akira nor Tatsukawa had any intention of dying.

The struggle between Akira and his group fleeing, the pursuing Kaiju, and the swarm of fused creatures blocking their path continued.

Tatsukawa's display of Hunter Rank 78 strength against the fused creatures was helping somewhat. Akira, too, was receiving full support from Alpha, doing his best not to hold back as much as possible.

However, the Kaiju's attacks were inevitable. They could only defend two more times. That fact wouldn't change, no matter how hard Akira and his group tried.

Defending against the third attack reduced the damage to the surroundings somewhat due to the distance Akira and his group managed to create from the Kaiju. But it wasn't enough to increase the remaining defensive opportunities significantly. With only one defense left, the situation was dire.

Akira began to feel the pressure. The reason for his anxiety wasn't just that they could only defend one more time. Despite having traveled a considerable distance, the scenery around them remained unchanged. In other words, their expectation of being able to escape from the third inner sector was likely wrong.

『Alpha, can't you do something? 』

Akira couldn't help but ask, prompting a serious response from Alpha.

『 Akira, I'll check. But are you really okay with this? Even if I manage something, it'll only be for you, right? 』

Alpha's question made Akira realize. If he asked, Alpha would indeed find a solution. However, in that case, only he would be saved. Everyone else would die. Although he didn't know what Alpha would do specifically, he understood that Alpha would use such means.

He couldn't refuse because he had debts to repay to Alpha. To fulfill Alpha's request, he had to achieve it. He couldn't afford to die here, not when he had taken on the responsibility of protecting Carol and the others.

But he couldn't simply ask either. He was tasked with guarding Carol and the others. Making a decision that would abandon them was out of the question.

In order to not deny either of these intentions, Akira made a last-minute decision. He conveyed it to Alpha.

『...Wait until the last moment.』

『Got it.』

Alpha replied with just that, not saying anything more. And Akira stopped asking further questions.

The Kaiju's fourth attack arrived. The increased distance significantly reduced its power. However, the number of remaining defensive opportunities didn't increase. With just one defense left, Akira would vanish if they took another hit.

Nevertheless, Akira didn't say anything to Alpha. Despite only safeguarding himself, he put all his effort into ensuring everyone's survival. He didn't make the judgment call that it was impossible anymore. He desperately defended against Alpha's intervention, determined to prevent it until the very end. That was his decision.

As they continue through the endless streets of the old-world, defeating the fused creatures blocking their path, Akira and the others run at full speed. The fifth attack feels imminent, based on their previous experiences. Despite the fear, they don't give up until the end, doing everything they can.

Then, as if their efforts have borne fruit, the Kaiju's fifth attack isn't a massive energy release but a mountain-like charge, plowing through countless skyscrapers towards Akira and the others.

The Kaiju, despite firing its beam four times without success, decides they're out of effective range and opts to close the distance. Akira and the others think this and feel a slight relief at the extended reprieve.

However, it's only a matter of time. Once the distance is closed, if they're hit by another beam, it's over. Moreover, despite its massive size, the Kaiju's charge speed surpasses that of Akira and the others.

Carol, standing behind Akira, smiles as if resigned to something.

“Akira... Are we going to make it somehow? ”

“We will! ”

There's not a trace of resignation in his response. Surprised by his resolute answer, Carol's initial smile fades slightly, replaced by a more serious expression.

“Right. Then, give it your all! ”

“Got it! ”

With determination in her voice, Akira responds confidently. Just then, a communication from Shiro comes through.

『Akira! Over here! 』

Finally, an opportunity for survival. Akira can't help but smile. He mentally projects his thoughts towards the one who knows their situation.

『...Shiro! Took you long enough! 』

『Sorry! I hurried as much as I could! Hurry up on your end too! 』

Displayed on Akira's augmented vision are the coordinates Shiro sent, indicating the escape point. Checking the location, Akira's expression changes from relief to determination.

『Is that it? 』

『That's it! Hurry! 』

The designated location is in the middle of a thoroughfare within the ruins. It's between Akira's group and the Kaiju.

“Tatsukawa! This way! ”

As Akira maneuvers the bike, utilizing its ability to travel in the air, they swiftly change direction through what appears to be a hidden pipe, barely slowing down, then ascend higher than the surrounding skyscrapers, accelerating through the unobstructed sky. Whether using buildings as shields or not, they know they'll vanish if hit by the Kaiju's next beam. Thus, their only focus is reaching Shiro's location as quickly as possible.

The information about the escape point has also reached Tatsukawa, who follows Akira without delay.

“Finally, reinforcements! You're a bit late, aren't you? ”

“Yeah! But better late than never, right? ”

“True! Let's go! ”

“You too! ”

As they witness the awe-inspiring sight of the Kaiju closing in from afar, Akira's group rushes towards it with determination. There are no fused creatures between them and the Kaiju; they've been obliterated by the Kaiju's beam. This allows Akira's group to accelerate to the fullest extent allowed by their humanoid weapon and bike. The distance between the Kaiju and Akira's group rapidly shortened.

The Kaiju, charging forward with momentum, attempted to halt upon seeing Akira's group. It couldn't emit beams while moving. However, due to its massive size, it couldn't stop suddenly. Gradually, it slowed down to avoid toppling over. In that moment, Akira and his group closed in on the escape point.

Finally, the Kaiju came to a halt. However, it couldn't immediately fire its beam. It required an overwhelming amount of energy, necessitating time to build up. Additionally, it had depleted energy

during its charge. It would take longer than before to gather energy for the next discharge.

Although only a matter of seconds, it's precious time for Akira's group.

Utilizing this time, Akira and his companions reached near the escape point. There, amidst the main street, was the tunnel entrance and exit, seemingly open like a composite image.

“There it is! ”

Akira's group attempted to dive into the tunnel. However, at that moment, the Kaiju, having finished charging, aimed its gaping maw at them. In the eerie stillness of the intensely focused world, Akira saw the light seeping from the Kaiju's mouth.

Nevertheless, Akira refuses to give up.

(Not yet! Alpha hasn't tried everything yet! It's not too late!)

Whether it's too late or not is not for him to decide. And if it's not too late, then there's still something he can do. That's what Akira believes as he readies his enormous blade.

If he can cut through the torrent of energy released by the Kaiju, redirecting its flow, then perhaps he can make it. No, it's not a matter of whether he can. He will do it.

With that determination, Akira swings his blade. Pouring all his energy into the blade, he swings with all his might and soul.

At the same time, the Kaiju unleashed a beam from its colossal mouth. The torrent of energy that consumed everything swallowed the area whole.

Yet, Akira and his group survive. The cross-shaped slash cuts through the energy torrent, allowing them to escape.

Witnessing this, Akira wonders.

(A cross...?)

He only swung once, yet the energy flow is cut in a cross shape. Why? The answer to his question is beside him.

There stands Olivia, having completed her slash. She sheathes her blade midair and addresses Akira.

“You may want to hurry.”

Despite being in what feels like a world frozen in time due to his heightened sense of time, Akira hears Olivia's voice. The motion of sheathing her blade is actually a split-second action, impossible to perceive in normal time.

“Ah, yeah...”

Akira manages to respond, though strictly speaking, it's only in his own sense of time that he hears and replies. He then quickly leads his group into the tunnel entrance.

After confirming it, Olivia also returns to the tunnel. Immediately afterward, the tunnel vanished from the spot.

Akira, who narrowly escaped from the Kaiju, takes a deep breath inside the underground tunnel.

“That was close...”

Without needing to turn back due to extended senses, he could grasp the situation behind him. Not only was there no response from the Kaiju, but he couldn't even see the scenery of the third inner sector. Behind Akira and the others were only a short underground tunnel and darkness painted black. It was unnaturally dark to the point of feeling suspicious. It indicated that Akira and the others had escaped from the third inner sector.

Carol stood half-dazed behind Akira. However, after taking some time to comprehend and feel relieved that they were safe, she hugged Akira and burst into laughter loudly.

Akira also started laughing along. Until the excitement of escaping the crisis subsided, Akira and Carol continued laughing together.

After laughing for a while, Akira and the others regained their composure almost simultaneously. Carol took a deep breath as if switching her focus, and with a calm tone, she said happily,

“Akira, we made it somehow.”

“Yeah, somehow we did.”

They made it through without needing Alpha's help. Neither Akira nor Carol died. It was a relief. Akira thought so and felt relieved once again.

At that moment, a communication comes in from Tatsukawa flying above Akira and the others.

“Akira, that was close. It's confirmed now that Kibayashi will die laughing. By the way, do you know her? ”

What Tatsukawa was referring to was Olivia, who was casually running alongside Akira's bike as they drove. Tatsukawa, who was behind Akira, had clearly seen that Olivia had sliced through the torrent of energy emitted by the Kaiju, mostly thanks to her.

Akira looks at Olivia again. He didn't recognize her.

“No, I don't know her. Shirou said he hired a guard to come here, so I think she's probably that guard.”

When Olivia appeared before Akira and the others at the Lida Commercial District Ruin, Akira had lost consciousness immediately

after a fierce battle. After that, neither Alpha nor Shiori had informed Akira about Olivia, so Akira didn't know her.

Olivia leaps lightly. Then, while in the air, she adjusts her posture and, using only inertia, bows her head politely to Akira while running alongside his bike, not in a riding position but standing.

“I am Olivia of Lion Steel Corporation. I received instructions for your rescue from Mr. Shirou-sama, who is using our services, and intervened without permission. I apologize for the intrusion.”

“No, thanks to you, I was saved.”

“I am deeply grateful that you are safe.”

After finishing her leap, Olivia starts running again on her own feet. Akira was a little taken aback by Olivia's words and actions, but he regains his composure and speaks to Tatsukawa.

“See, she's indeed Shirou's guard.”

“Seems like it. But... Lion Steel Corporation... It's certainly not surprising that they have personnel up to this level, but hiring such skilled individuals should cost a considerable amount of money and require appropriate credentials... Say, Akira, what kind of person is Shirou? ”

“I don't know either. All I know is that he hired Togami. What about Togami? ”

Togami responds from inside Tatsukawa's humanoid weapon.

“I was just hired by him; I don't know anything about him. Shirou's probably a fake name, too, right? ”

“Yeah, probably. Well, since we've come this far, let's hear it directly from him what we're curious about.”

As they continue along the underground tunnel, Reina and the others have parked their car and are waiting outside. Akira, who parked his bike, is surprised to see Shirou's face there. Shirou is smiling confidently.

“Hey, Akira. Long time no see.”

“So it was you who hired Togami...”

Tatsukawa, who parked the humanoid weapon nearby, gets out of the suit with Togami.

“Akira, do you know Shirou? ”

“Yeah, we've met before, briefly. Don't ask for details. There's a lot going on.”

Sensing some sort of trouble from Akira and Shirou's demeanor, Tatsukawa decides not to inquire further about the situation.

“Got it. I won't ask.”

Togami was more surprised to see Reina and the others in this place than Shirou.

“Reina, long time no see. I heard you left the Kugamayama City, but did you come back? ”

“Yes. I had some circumstances and had been away for a while, but I came back yesterday. I'm glad to see you're doing well.”

Reina directs a friendly smile at Togami, which also gives off a sense of refinement. Togami feels a bit unsettled inwardly. He smiles wryly, trying to cover it up.

“Glad to see I'm doing well? Is that what you say to someone who almost just died? ”

“Really? Then let me rephrase it: I'm glad you're safe.”

“Fair enough.”

While reminiscing about his casual exchange with Reina, Togami also discreetly assesses her situation. There's someone here who killed Katsuya, after all. Will everything be okay? He's a bit worried.

Reina shifts her gaze to Akira and laughs slightly, seeming somewhat exasperated.

“Anyway, Akira seems to be living his usual turbulent life. It's so typical of him.”

“I'm not going through all this willingly, you know.”

Akira notices Reina and feels a slight awkwardness due to him having killed Katsuya. However, seeing Reina taking an easygoing attitude towards him, Akira decides to go along with it.

“So, why are you guys with Shirou? ”

“Ah, about that...”

Reina hesitates. It would be better to explain the details after Akira was safe. That's what Reina had been told by Shirou. In other words, now is not the time. However, when she tries to talk, she's unsure where to start.

Tatsukawa interjects.

“Shouldn't we discuss the details on the way back? The communication here is still unstable. It's inconvenient for me, but I'd like to move on with my companions to where we can establish a stable connection first.”

Akira and the others nod in agreement and decide to set off first. Then Reina says to Akira,

“Akira, rest in my car. You must be tired. We'll take it from here.”

“Really? But I'm Carol's guard...”

Having put all his effort into escaping from the Kaiju, Akira is indeed tired. However, this place is not yet safe. He can't just leave Carol unguarded to rest. Akira thinks this way and tries to decline Reina's offer.

At that moment, Carol interjects with a smile.

“No, Akira, you should rest. It's safe around here.”

“Well, but...”

Seeing Akira still insisting on guarding, Carol smiles cheerfully and says,

“Nope. Rest now while you can. After all, if another Kaiju shows up, you'll need to work hard again, right? ”

Knowing that Akira won't rest unless she says so, Carol says it because she understands it. And since Akira was told that way, he had no choice but to rest. He returns a wry smile.

“Got it. I'll rest.”

“Then, from here on, I'll be guarding Akira, okay? Sorry, but I'll be expecting some compensation. After all, Akira has worked so hard, so I need to make some effort here to offset the payment a bit. Oh, I'll borrow the bike, by the way.”

“You're quite the schemer. Do as you please. And what about you, Togami? ”

Understanding that he's being told it's fine to rest, Togami decides to ride with Carol.

“Alright. I'll offset it a bit too.”

Upon hearing this, Akira tosses two RL2 multi-function guns to Togami without saying anything and then gets off the bike and enters Reina's car.

Shirou also follows Akira and gets into the car. Reina tries to get on the roof of the vehicle, but she's stopped by Shiori and Kanae. She nods lightly as if resigned and returns to the car. Shiori and the others go back on the roof, and Olivia also climbs up.

Carol, still on Akira's bike, adjusts her seat forward. Togami rides behind her. Lastly, Tatsukawa returns to his red humanoid weapon. And thus, Akira and the others proceed along the underground tunnel. Along the way, they encounter monsters, but there are not a match for them now. They scatter it without any issues.

Chapter 231: Reason for killing

Akira, who got into Reina's car, sat down on the seat inside the car and switched his consciousness from being on alert to taking a break. By relaxing, the feeling of fatigue became stronger. He took medicine, feeling its effects permeating through his body, and let out a big sigh.

At that moment, Shiro said to Akira with a cheerful smile.

“Akira. I helped you as promised, right? You managed to survive thanks to me in that situation. That should be a big favor I've done for you. So, what do you say? ”

He had indeed done Akira a huge favor. It would be fine for him to introduce himself to Tsubaki. Since Reina was beside him, without mentioning Tsubaki's name, Shiro was asking in that manner.

Akira hesitated for a moment. Then he replied.

“...No.”

Even Shiro's smile vanished slightly. He looked dissatisfied as he faced Akira.

“Hey hey hey, Akira, seriously? Don't you realize how much trouble I went through to help you? If my help hadn't arrived in time, you would've definitely died! ”

“I don't deny that, and I acknowledge that I owe you a huge favor, but it's not enough to accept that request. That's how it is.”

Akira and Shiro stared at each other seriously without backing down. Neither showed any intention of yielding.

After a moment of silence, Shiro, realizing it would be troublesome if their relationship soured, reluctantly backed down. He sighed and

continued the conversation.

“Alright then, let me ask you this: considering the size of this favor, how far are you willing to go for me? You acknowledge that you owe me a big favor, right? ”

“Well... If you're asking me to accompany you to the sealed area in First Inner Sector, I might consider it. However, I'm currently in the middle of escorting Carol, so if I agree, it'll have to be after that.”

“Is the route going to be on the surface or through the underground tunnels? ”

“That's for you to decide, Shiro. I'll go along with either. But if I judge that it's too dangerous to proceed further as your escort, I'll take you back at that point. Survival is the priority. I won't accompany you on a clear suicide mission, but I won't agree to anything that clearly puts my life in jeopardy either.”

Shiro groaned.

As long as there's a guard like Olivia, it's possible to safely meet Tsubaki with Akira. However, simply having Akira present at the negotiation table wouldn't necessarily lead to a successful negotiation with Tsubaki, given the circumstances.

After contact with Tsubaki, there's also the option to leave negotiations with Sakashita Heavy Industry to a negotiator. Sugadome has also suggested this option. However, it's likely that such modest results won't be enough to offset Shiro's escape from Sakashita Heavy Industry.

But the fact remains that there are no significant results to show to Sugadome yet. It's about time to demonstrate some degree of progress. It's necessary to secure a certain level of freedom for oneself and to continue to do so. Should he go through with it?

“Hmm...”

Shiro hesitated, contemplating whether he should use the favor owed to Akira.

At that moment, Akira suddenly wondered.

“By the way, why is Reina with you, Shiro? ”

“She was hired as my guard.”

“Is that so? It's not my place to say, but I'm surprised she agreed to be a guard. Didn't she hear about us getting stranded? Going to such a dangerous place willingly... Oh, I see, that's why.”

“Why? What do you mean? ”

“Well, Shiro mentioned something about needing my help to hire a guard. It must have been for Reina and her group. That ridiculously strong person who wears a maid outfit must be one of Reina's associates, right? So, she brought her along to go to the place where I got stranded. Thanks to that, I survived. Thank you.”

“You're welcome. I'm glad you're safe.”

Reina replied with a smile.

Shiro, preoccupied with contemplating how to handle Akira's debt, was half-listening to their conversation. Then, he almost let it slip away, but after giving a slightly puzzled look, he quickly regained his composure and interjected.

“Wait a minute!? Akira! That's not it! I hired her! ”

“Oh, right. You asked Reina through me so that she could hire her, didn't you? ”

“No, that's not it! I directly hired Olivia! I didn't need Reina's help for that! ”

Shiro realized that Akira was about to be misled into thinking that Reina had taken over his debt. He attempted to explain before it became a fact in Akira's mind, but then Reina interrupted.

“But if I hadn't been there, Shiro wouldn't have been able to hire Olivia, right? And let's be honest, you kind of half-threatened me into agreeing, didn't you? ”

“Hey, is that true? ”

Shiro couldn't immediately respond. Reina's explanation wasn't entirely incorrect, making it difficult to outright deny.

However, at the same time, it wasn't as condemning as Akira seemed to think. Reina understood that, and deliberately framed it in a way that would leave a negative impression of Shiro on Akira.

Shiro understood that as well. He glared lightly at Reina, almost instinctively.

Reina returned his glare with a smile. She then decided that this level of retaliation for their use wasn't enough and proceeded with the conversation, thinking it would be sufficient.

“Akira. There were various circumstances. I'll explain from now on, so would you mind listening to my story first? ”

Glancing at Shiro, Reina's message was clear: while she would settle for this level of retaliation for now, if Shiro said anything unnecessary during Akira's explanation, she would complicate matters with Akira.

Shiro understood this message. He sighed and nodded slightly in acknowledgment.

Seeing Shiro's reaction, Reina returned her gaze to Akira. Then, she showed Akira a white card.

“Akira. Do you remember this? ”

“...What is it? ”

“Alright, I'll explain from there. This is the card that you received from Olivia when you were searching for the ancient automatons in the Mihazono District Ruin with us...”

This card was something Olivia left for Akira when he was unconscious. It revealed Olivia's affiliation with the Lion Steel Corporation from the old-world. Shiori had skillfully obtained this card from Akira. Reina explained these details to Akira with a serious expression.

Listening to Reina's explanation, Akira recalled the events from that time.

“Oh, I remember now. The card from back then. So, is this about sharing some of the profits with me because I could make quite a bit of money from this card? Is that the deal? ”

Akira was simply pleased at the unexpected prospect of additional income. Reina, however, found Akira's attitude towards it unexpectedly different.

“...Um, Akira. Aren't you angry? ”

“About what? ”

“That Shiori took this card from you.”

“...Took it...? Well, I guess I agreed to give it to her in the end.”

“Well, maybe, but...”

It wasn't hard to understand that the negotiation was a scam exploiting Akira's ignorance. Reina was perplexed by Akira's attitude, which showed no concern about it.

Akira continued.

“No, I get what you're saying. That card can fetch a lot of money if used properly, right? So, it's a valuable item that Shiori wouldn't hesitate to trick me out of. It's not a bad move to expect a portion of the profits by passing it on to someone who knows how to make good use of it. Besides, whether that amounts to fraud or not was settled at the time. I don't feel like making a fuss about it now.”

That was Akira's true feelings. However, if he were to add another reason why he wasn't angry, it was because he remembered one more thing about that card.

When Akira negotiated with Shiori, Alpha had recommended that he hand over the card. In other words, the card was potentially troublesome if he kept it.

Being able to rid himself of such trouble while also expecting profits was a win-win situation for Akira.

Reina didn't know about Akira's underlying motives. However, she understood that Akira wasn't genuinely angry. She relaxed her expression in relief.

“I'm glad you're not upset about the card. That's a relief.”

Akira wasn't angry about the card incident. That was good to hear. Reina could have ended the conversation there.

However, knowing this, Reina continued.

“But it's true that Shiori did something akin to fraud against you, Akira. I'll take responsibility for that. I'm not going to let it slide with a casual attitude. If something happens, please let me know. I can't promise to do everything, but I'll at least listen to anything you have to say.”

Reina, as the leader of Shiori's group, faced Akira with resolve, taking responsibility for her subordinate's actions.

To Akira, this earnest attitude from Reina, or rather, her determination to be a leader who wouldn't disgrace her subordinates, was somewhat bewildering.

“Even if you say that...”

To decide what to do next, Akira thought it might be enough to just make a big favor and promise to repay it someday, considering that Reina also said she didn't want to argue with him. So, let's go with that.

With that thought in mind, Akira suddenly changed his demeanor. He put on a serious expression.

“...Can I ask for anything? ”

Seeing Akira suddenly change the atmosphere, Reina responded seriously.

“Yes. Whether I can fulfill your request or not will depend on what you ask.”

“I see. Then I'll say what I want.”

What would he ask for? Reina tensed up, waiting for his next words. And then Akira spoke.

“Don't make enemies with me.”



Unexpectedly asked for a favor, Reina was puzzled this time. She asked to confirm.

“Um, is it okay with that? I don't have any intention of opposing Akira even if I'm not asked.”

“Yeah. Please. Well, even if I ask, it's okay as long as you can do it. It's okay to refuse if it's too much.”

Reina, not expecting much to be kept from that promise, inadvertently showed a slightly dissatisfied expression at Akira's words, which could also be interpreted negatively.

“Akira. Is it really okay to ask for such a favor? ”

“Yeah.”

Reina, feeling like Akira was underestimating her efforts to take responsibility for this matter seriously, reconsidered upon hearing his following words.

“Yumina couldn't do it either.”

It was a very heavy statement.

When Reina learned of Katsuya's death, she also learned that Yumina was killed by Akira.

Killing Katsuya still made some sense. However, Yumina was supposed to be close to Akira. Yet, even so, if they were to oppose each other, would he kill her too? Is that what being a hunter entails? Thinking so, apart from Katsuya's situation, Reina had complex feelings.

However, she understood from Akira's words.

Yumina and Akira certainly opposed each other. They fought to the death. But neither of them wanted such a thing. Reina didn't know the details of the situation. Nevertheless, to avoid that, they both did everything they could.

And yet, it was futile.

Reina understood and accepted that. And that acceptance diminished Reina's resentment.

Indeed, Akira killed both Katsuya and Yumina. But that was already an irreversible fact. Reina thought so.

It contained a wish for it to be so. Reina understood that and accepted it within herself.

And, understanding that it was such a heavy, almost impossible, and foolish wish for Akira, Reina declared it in her name.

“Understood. I won't oppose Akira. I promise. Swearing on the name of Reina Rilart Lorents.”

Akira might not understand how heavy that declaration was for Reina. Nevertheless, he understood that she responded with an incredible resolve. He relaxed his expression and answered.

“...I see. Thank you.”

It was a short reply, but it contained a definite sense of gratitude. Sensing that, Reina relaxed her atmosphere and smiled faintly.

Seeing the atmosphere between Akira and them, Shiro felt internally awkward.

(Wait a moment... Do I need to explain to Akira in this atmosphere why I hired Olivia?)

He couldn't afford not to explain. Olivia's timely assistance to Akira was a favor Shiro owed him. If he interrupted this atmosphere, Shiro felt he would be perceived as someone who couldn't read the room, which would lower his favorability.

To get Shiro introduced to Tsubaki in a friendly manner, Akira's impression was important. What to do? Shiro began to worry about that. Then Akira asked Shiro as if he remembered.

“Oh, Shiro. What's this about you half-threatening Reina to get what you want? ”

“Ah, well...”

Seeing Akira's slightly stern face, Shiro felt his favorability dropping. He felt a sense of urgency inwardly.

Then Reina chimed in to help.

“Akira. It's just that Shiro was in a hurry to hire Olivia-sama, that's all. Well? At that moment? Sure, it was a bit annoying, but because he rushed, it was in time to help you, so I'm not bothered by it. Don't worry about it, Akira.”

“Is that so? Well, if that's the case...”

Seeing Akira relax his expression, Shiro breathed a sigh of relief inwardly. And he noticed Reina's gaze. She was telling him he owed her one. Reluctantly, Shiro accepted that debt.

“Let me explain again. Akira. I just borrowed that card from Reina. It was me who connected to the Lion Steel Company of the old-world, negotiated the escort, paid the escort fee. Not Reina.”

“But didn't you hire Reina and the others as escorts? ”

“I did. But that was separate from Olivia-san. So if Akira wants to repay the favor of being helped by Olivia-san, the one to repay it is

me, as Olivia-san's employer. Not Reina. Understand? ”

“Got it, got it. So, what are you going to do? After the escort request for Carol is over, should we go to the First Inner Sector's sealed zone with you? ”

“...No, I'll keep that favor for now.”

“Understood.”

With that, Reina and Shiro had finished discussing what they urgently needed to tell Akira. They switched their focus to the next matter.

Reina looked at the white card.

(The issue of acquiring the card through a scam-like method from Akira has been resolved... What should we do next? ... The situation has changed, so maybe I should consult with Shiori first.)

She glanced at Akira.

(Considering the situation, Akira should be able to use this card... Whether he doesn't know or is pretending not to use it, I wonder...)

If he simply doesn't know, it might be okay to tell him. However, if he's pretending not to know, pointing it out might be seen as hostile toward Akira. Since she promised not to oppose Akira, if it's the latter, she can't do that.

(I'll discuss that with Shiori later. If there's something I want to ask Akira for help with, maybe I could make another request, considering the situation...)

Originally, Rena intended to ask for Akira's cooperation to use the card safely, like Shirou. But now, she considered if there could be another request possible.

(Akira mentioned the sealed zone of the First Inner Sector. If Shiro's goal lies there, what exactly is it? Negotiating with the overseer personality there? Why ask Akira for help with that? Would asking Akira to mediate increase the chances of success? Against a governing personality? Does Akira have something like that?)

Normally, such a thing would be hard to consider. However, considering that Olivia went out of her way to leave a card for Akira, it's not impossible to think about.

From the beginning, it's hard to believe that Olivia, or the old-world's Lion Steel Company, would leave a card for some random hunter there, especially someone who was unconscious.

(Since such an unlikely event happened, it's better to reconsider under that premise. If Akira can be persuaded to help, perhaps by making a favor...)

Shiro glanced briefly at Akira.

(...He's willingly offering to accompany us to a place thoroughly sealed by the defense forces of the Kagamayama City. He must be sincere about settling debts. Now, how do I create a favor exchange that will lead him to introduce me to Tsubaki...)

What to do? Shiro pondered for a moment, but couldn't come up with a good idea. However, he didn't feel pessimistic.

(Well, it'll work out somehow. Just like this situation, Akira seems to get involved in strange situations easily, and there will likely be another opportunity to create a significant favor soon. Besides, if Akira is a trustworthy person regarding contracts, then I don't need to stick to Tsubaki's matter. I could also ask for his cooperation for my goal...)

For Shiro, Tsubaki's matter was just a means to allow sightseeing outside for Sugadome under the guise of achievement. In other words, it was a means to achieve his goal, not the goal itself. If Akira

could directly help achieve his goal, then Tsubaki's matter wouldn't matter to Shiro.

(Since I hired Olivia, there shouldn't be a problem with fighting for the time being. But basically, it's fighting power as a guard. And if I use up my Chromes, it's over. Akira should be able to hire Aurum instead of Chromes... Well, I suppose Akira won't just act for money, so it would be a discussion based on the premise of creating a significant favor...)

Akira noticed that both Reina and Shiro were giving him similar looks.

“...What? ”

“It's nothing.”

“It's nothing.”

“Is that so? ”

He didn't want to pry further. But he was a little curious. Thinking so, Akira asked Alpha for now.

『Alpha. What do you think? 』

『They were probably thinking of a way to create a favor for Akira.』

『Besides Shiro, even Reina? 』

『So there's something they want Akira to help with. Without such circumstances, it's hard to imagine that they would come this far just because Shiro hired them as guards. Without any reasons, it's unlikely that they would rush into a dilemma like this. Even if they were on good terms, it's unlikely that Reina and Akira would get involved without any reason. I think Shiori would stop it too.』

『I see.』

“Shall I ask? ” Akira thought for a moment, but reconsidered. He was currently in the middle of escorting Carol. It wouldn't be good to get involved in trouble by asking unnecessarily. With that in mind, he decided not to ask.

Meanwhile, the car passed through the boundary between the first and Second Inner Sector of the underground tunnel.

“Huh? Is the partition opened? ”

To Akira, who found it strange, Shiro casually replied.

“Oh, I opened it.”

“Huh, you can open it? ”

“It was really tough, though. Should I close it? ”

While it was quite difficult for even Shiro to break through the control of the ruins and pry open the partition, it was relatively easy to close it. The partition closed behind the vehicle. Then, a slightly panicked voice came through the communication from Tatsukawa.

“Hey!? The partition is closing! ”

“Leaving it open could lead to monsters leaking out, isn't that dangerous? ”

“Did you close it!? ”

Tatsukawa's voice became agitated for both reasons: the fact that someone could intervene in the ruins' facilities and that with the partition closed, passage with vehicles or humanoid weapons would be impossible, thus hindering their exploration of the ruins. Then, he continued in a calmer tone.

“It was Shiro, right? Who are you? ”

“Secret. It's probably better not to ask, ya know.”

Shiro responded with his usual cheerful attitude, but Tatsukawa inferred various things from it.

“...I see. In that case, would it be possible to ask you to open it later?”

“That depends on the situation and the reward. I'll give you my contact information. Anytime Akira needs a favor, feel free to get in touch.”

Akira couldn't help but interject.

“Hey.”

“It's fine, isn't it? ”

Shiro easily replied.

The car continued on, reaching the boundary between the outer outskirts and the First Inner Sector of the ruins. Shiro also closed the outer wall there. Since there was almost no concern about monsters beyond this point, those outside the car also entered. Tatsukawa also put his humanoid weapons on autopilot and joined the car.

With everyone inside the car, Tatsukawa made a request regarding the destination of the car.

“We're about to leave the ruins. Would it be possible to return to the Mihazono District Ruin via the underground tunnel? I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but if there are other exits nearby, it would be helpful to use those. My comrades are urging me to join them.”

Tatsukawa had already contacted his comrades and informed them of his safety, explaining the situation. At that time, Melshia had quietly but forcefully instructed him to return immediately to reassure his lover and quickly improve her mood. Therefore, Tatsukawa was in a bit of a hurry.

Reina also agreed with Tatsukawa's request.

“Ah, I'd prefer that too if possible.”

Pamela and others were in the Mihazono District Ruin. Reina believed that the likelihood of conflict with Pamela's group was low while Olivia was there. However, Olivia was only hired by Shiro. She wasn't an ally. Reina wanted to avoid any troublesome situations.

Carol then expressed her opinion.

“While we might find another exit if we search, there's no guarantee it will definitely be there. We might end up wandering endlessly underground, right? If we want to be sure to reach the surface, I think it might be better to go back to the Mihazono District Ruin, even if it's a bit of a hassle.”

Although Akira agreed with Carol's opinion, he also wanted to get to the surface quickly due to fatigue. He thought about asking Alpha if there was an exit nearby, but reconsidered, thinking it might seem unnatural for him to know that, so he decided to ask Shiro first.

“Shiro, do you know of any other exits? And if you can open partitions, could you also open exits? ”

“Whether I know about opening and closing partitions and knowing about exits are two separate matters. Olivia, do you know anything? ”

This question could also potentially involve using Olivia as a means of transportation. If there were additional charges involved, he decided not to ask. While considering this, Shiro asked anyway.

Olivia responded.

“I am aware. If you wish, I can guide you.”

“Is that so? Then please.”

With Tatsukawa and Reina's group relieved, the car continued on under Olivia's guidance.

When Shiro asked Olivia about the exit, no one except Olivia noticed that Alpha was staring at her..



Near the ruins of Kuzusuhara District in the eastern outskirts, in the rubble-strewn area, a large unit of the Dragon River is deployed. Leading them is Melshia, her face displaying a sour expression.

A man, riding a humanoid weapon, keeps watch while conversing with colleagues via communication, casting occasional glances at Melshia.

“Even considering the captain's disappearance, Melshia managed to prepare such a large unit in such a short time. One might suspect she had made preparations beforehand, assuming the captain's mishap. She's quite capable, isn't she? ”

“Perhaps she did indeed make preparations beforehand? The vice-captain openly declares that Dragon River exists to prevent the captain from taking undue risks. So, perhaps Melshia has been making preparations all along, just in case anything were to happen, even if it turns out to be unnecessary.”

“Ah, that might be the case. If she's really been making such preparations every time, it must be quite burdensome. But Melshia would do something like that out of love, wouldn't she? It's a bit scary when it goes that far.”

“Agreed... Oh? We have a reaction.”

Automatic surveillance equipment on the unit focuses on a specific location in the rubble-strewn area. In the next moment, as if a massive explosion had occurred underground, a large amount of soil and debris is sent flying.

The one responsible is Olivia. With a powerful kick at the collapsed part of the underground tunnel, she creates a gaping hole leading to the surface.

Before the dust settles, a red craft emerges from the hole, followed by Reina's vehicle with its crew being transported by Olivia.

As Tatsukawa steps out of the car, Melshia, still wearing a stern expression, approaches.

At Melshia's command, half of the unit descends into the hole to begin securing the underground tunnel, while the remaining half sets up a temporary Dragon River base in the vicinity, erecting defenses.

Tatsukawa, despite feeling uneasy about approaching her silent lover, waits for Melshia on the spot. Akira and his companions, having exited the car, observe the two from a short distance away.

After reaching Tatsukawa, Melshia embraces him and speaks softly.

“...Don't worry me.”

“...Sorry.”

Hearing his lover's heartfelt words, Tatsukawa smiles slightly and apologizes without making excuses.

Both Melshia and Tatsukawa are Hunters. It wouldn't have been surprising if they had been separated by death. Yet, here they are, rejoicing in each other's survival. However, Melshia's tone suddenly turns sour.

“You're admitting your fault, aren't you? ”

“Huh? ”

In the next instant, Tatsukawa is sent flying by Melshia's fist, a close-range blow.

However, Tatsukawa isn't seriously harmed; he instinctively defends himself.

“...How many times do I have to tell you not to act recklessly!? Are you kidding me!?”

Closing the distance, Melshia continues her barrage. Her long legs lash out towards Tatsukawa's head, but he evades them skillfully.

“I said sorry! But what else could I do!? Considering the safety of the unit, it was best for me to take the lead...!”

“I told you to stop! You always...!”

Their exchange evolves into a sophisticated combat, more akin to a high-speed battle than lovers' playfulness. Amidst it all, Melshia scolds while Tatsukawa desperately tries to appease her.

Meanwhile, the members of Dragon River continue their tasks as usual, unfazed by the lovers' quarrel. Everyone is accustomed to it.

Akira and his companions watch with some amusement and a bit of astonishment, but they don't intervene. Instead, Shiro moves to leave the scene.

“Well then, let's call it a day. Akira, I'll contact you later. Make sure you're available. See you.”

Shiro, riding his bike with Olivia, bids Akira farewell before activating camouflage and disappearing from view. They depart on the bike.

Following suit, Akira and Carol prepare to leave.

“We're heading back. Reina, see you later.”

“Okay. Take care.”

Akira and Carol head towards Carol's home. Despite Carol's car being left at the ruins of Mihazono District, they don't have the energy to retrieve it now. The sun has risen again after their ordeal, and they just want to rest. As they depart, Shiori, seeing them off, speaks to Reina.

“Milady, let's hurry. Within the fortified walls, Lady Chloe shouldn't be able to interfere easily.”

“You're right. Let's go. Togami, sorry to do this right after meeting again, but something's come up. We'll talk properly another time.”

“Sure thing. See you later. It must have been tough for you, Reina, to come back and face this so soon.”

“Indeed. But well, Akira was there. So even if something like this happened, it wouldn't have been too surprising.”

“True.”

Togami exchanges smiles with Reina, bids farewell, and heads towards the Drankam base on his bike, contemplating what he needs to report and how much he can reveal.

Reina and her group also leave the scene, heading back in their car. Inside, Reina takes out a white card and speaks.

“Shiori, let's reconsider how much assistance we'll seek from Akira and what we need to do for it. It might be better to deviate from our original plan and focus more on that.”

“Understood.”

The situation has changed. The importance of Akira as a factor has significantly increased within their plan. With this realization, Reina and her group head towards the city of Kugamayama, contemplating their next moves.

While Melshia continues her fierce assault, Tatsukawa, watching Akira and the others leave one by one, appeals to her.

“Hey! Melshia! They're all leaving! Aren't you going to talk to them or something!?”

“You're distracted! We'll talk properly later!”

Melshia's blow lands on Tatsukawa as he's momentarily distracted. It's a blow he willingly left open to appease his lover, and Melshia saw through it. Both the striker and the recipient, having agreed upon such tactics over years of companionship, witness Tatsukawa soar through the air.

The hunters of the Dragon River, who were working at the time, watched Tatsukawa and his lover with half-amused expressions.

“The captain's lively even after escaping from a Kaiju, huh?”

“Well, as long as he's safe.”

“Indeed.”

Work proceeds as if nothing happened. Soon, a temporary Dragon River base is erected at the site. The part of the underground tunnel leading to the Kuzusuhara District Ruin is also occupied.



Upon returning to Carol's home, Akira took a bath before going to bed. The comfortable bathing experience surpassed the memory of his own home's destroyed bathroom, gradually dissolving Akira's fatigue in the warm water.

Watching Akira soak in the bath, Carol, sharing the tub with him, lets out a small sigh.

Having escaped from such a deadly situation, there might have been a chance that Akira, still exhilarated, would seek comfort in the arms of the opposite sex. Carol had hoped for it, albeit slightly. But Akira, even with Carol's perfect naked body in view, shows no interest, as usual.

Unable to help it, Carol shifts her focus. She decides to enjoy the bath with Akira.

“Anyway... it was tough, wasn't it? ”

“Yeah... it really was... I should have returned before heading into the third sector. I got carried away... Carol. I'm sorry.”

It was a judgment call made in uncertain circumstances. In hindsight, it's easy to say what should have been done. There might have been a chance to return without any issues. After all, Alpha didn't stop Akira either.

Still, Akira considers not turning back at that moment, while he was supposed to be Carol's escort, as his own failure.

Carol reassures him with a smile.

“Don't worry about it. I was the one who said I wanted to move forward. And you did protect me properly. There's no need for you to apologize, Akira.”

“...Is that so? I'm glad you say that.”

The two who have overcome the deadly situation together laugh without a hint of blame. Then Carol deliberately adopts a slightly cheerful attitude.

“Well, if you're really bothered by it, I hope you'll be a bit lenient in terms of my compensation as your bodyguard.”

She then sighs softly and speaks a bit more seriously.

“But to be honest, the reward for saving me from the Kaiju is way beyond what I can afford. Akira, I'm really sorry, but I honestly can't afford it. What should we do? ”

“Ah... well. Let me think.”

Akira ponders for a moment. He can't say he doesn't need it. He also needs money. He still hasn't repaid Inabe for the new equipment. He doesn't know how much the going rate is for guarding against Kaiju, but if she can pay, he wants her to.

“Well, I did say I'd cut you a deal if you forget about her. I won't demand it or chase you up for it, so just pay what you can.”

“Is that okay? ”

“Yeah. But, the deadline for the payment for the guard request is still there. I won't extend it.”

“...That alone is a huge help, so I guess it can't be helped. Got it, Akira. Thanks.”

Carol gave Akira a slightly disappointed look before thanking him with a smile. Then she laughed cheerfully again.

“Well, saying it's impossible to pay such a large sum is only if we're paying in Aurum. But if there's another payment method, I'm confident I can cover it too. How about it? Why not give it a try now? Since we're at it? ”

Akira responded casually to Carol, who leaned forward with her ample chest.

“No.”

“You're so cold.”

Carol had expected to be turned down but laughed merrily nonetheless.

After bathing, Akira and the others slowly drifted into sleep. On a large bed, next to Carol, who was covered only with thin sheets that seemed almost transparent against her naked body, Akira willingly succumbed to sleep.



Around the time when the sun was starting to set, Carol, who was sleeping next to Akira, received a notification from Viola. Awakening immediately upon realizing that the notification was not a usual one, Carol quickly checked its contents and promptly woke up Akira.

“Akira, wake up.”

Akira, just waking up, tried to respond, but Carol continued before he could.

“We need to move right away. Get ready. I'll explain while we prepare.”

“...Got it.”

Akira started preparing without asking any questions, understanding from Carol's attitude and Alpha's expression that it was urgent. Putting on his augmented suit and various weapons and backpacks, he listened as Carol explained the situation while they both got ready to move.

“We received a notification from Viola. She's telling us to leave there right away. It's urgent, and She's saying She won't take responsibility if we ignore it and die. It's that kind of serious situation, so the risk should be high. The details are also sent together, but it says to check them after we move. Alright, let's go.”

While they were talking, Akira and the others had finished preparing. Carol headed towards the front door, but Akira stopped her.

“Carol, this way.”

Akira pointed towards the balcony. Carol nodded, and they both jumped outside from there. At the same time, Akira's bike, driven by Alpha, appeared. Without hesitation, Akira and the others hopped onto it and flew off into the air.

Then they received a message from Inabe.

“Akira! Where are you now! ”

“Inabe. Sorry, but I'm busy right now...”

“If you're in the city, get out of there immediately! Hide yourself in the wasteland! Listen carefully! You're about to become a wanted criminal! The charge is the murder of Udajima! ”

Surprised by the unexpected news, Akira couldn't help but raise his voice.

“What!? Hold on! I haven't killed him yet! ”

With Carol by his side, he inadvertently blurted out the intention to eventually kill the city's executives, but Akira didn't have the luxury to worry about that now. Furthermore, a bounty report arrived, affirming Inabe's words. Inabe raised her voice as Akira looked stunned.

“I thought so! I think the same! But there's no guarantee that this false accusation will be cleared! Part of the defense force is already moving to capture you, but don't even think about surrendering quietly! Got it! I'll contact you again! ”

The communication with Inabe ended there. And at the same time, short-range communication came in. Simultaneously, the bike's detection equipment picked up the approach of a unit of humanoid weapons rapidly closing in from behind.

“Are you Akira? We're the Kugamayama City Defense Force. You're suspected of assassinating city executives. Surrender quietly. I repeat. We...”

“Akira! Hurry! ”

At Carol's urging, Akira sped up on the bike.

If Akira were alone, he wouldn't have hesitated. But now Carol was with him.

Since the Defense Force was targeting him specifically, Akira needed to consider some kind of action to avoid involving Carol. Perhaps it would be best to temporarily drop Carol off and argue to the Defense Force that she was not involved. But would the opponent simply ignore Carol and continue pursuing only him? Should he ask Carol what to do?

Having Carol with him could cause Akira to hesitate and disrupt his movements.

Carol had anticipated this and instructed Akira to just go for it before he could hesitate. Thanks to that, Akira didn't needlessly hesitate, didn't slow down his movements with unnecessary thoughts, and could focus solely on escaping from the Defense Force.

But even with that, it wasn't enough to escape. The flying speed of the Defense Force's humanoid weapons surpassed Akira's bike.

Moreover, they already had him within their range. They weren't attacking yet because for now, the Defense Force also wanted to resolve the situation peacefully, and engaging in combat within the city, even outside the defensive walls, would result in extensive collateral damage.

However, this respite would only last until Akira and the others reached the wasteland. Once they showed no intention of surrendering and there was no longer a need to worry about collateral damage, they would resort to using force to capture them. Of course, if Akira initiated an attack, combat would begin at that point.

Akira also understands this, so he doesn't make any moves to attack first. However, whether he'll be attacked once the landscape below becomes a clear wasteland or if he'll be shot as soon as it turns into the view of the slum district depends on the opponent. With that in mind, he remains focused, ready to react instantly at that moment.

Then, communication came in from Shirou.

“Hey, Akira! Looks tough out there! If you want to get away from those guys, I'll help you out. Of course, I'll expect a favor in return. What do you say? ”

Akira briefly hesitated whether Shirou would really help him now that he was a wanted fugitive.

He couldn't completely shake off the concern that it might be a trap. However, Shirou was trying to do him a favor to get on Tsubaki's good side, and tricking him into capture wouldn't achieve that. Besides, helping a wanted fugitive escape would be a significant favor to him, with its own risks to Shirou.

So, it probably wasn't a trap. Akira decided to ask for Shirou's help.

“...I'm counting on you! ”

“Alright. I'll send you the route. Follow it.”

The route sent to him appeared as a curved line of light in Akira's augmented vision. As Akira followed the line in the air with his bike, the squadron of humanoid weapons pursuing them disappeared into the wasteland in the opposite direction.

“Shirou, what did you do? ”

“I intervened with their units and tampered with the data to make it look like Akira escaped that way. Well, they won't catch on right away. Get out of the city as soon as you can. If you follow the instructions, you'll meet up with me. We'll discuss the details later, including the favor. See ya.”

Communication with Shirou ended there.

“...He's willing to do anything.”

Behind Akira, Carol breathed a sigh of relief that they had avoided combat with the Defense Force.

“Indeed. Impressive, Akira. For now, let's hurry as Shirou instructed.”

“Yeah.”

Akira and the others quickly moved away from the Kugamayama City.

Once they were sufficiently away from the city and sensed no pursuit, Akira decided to take a rest nearby in the ruins to calm down and assess the situation. He dismounted from the bike and took a deep breath with Carol.

“What a mess things have become...”

“Indeed. Shall we check the details sent by Viola? ”

Viola had instructed them to check the data after they had moved, so they finally examined its contents. It contained a certain video. It showed a familiar Kaiju standing in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

As Akira and Carol watched the video with puzzled expressions, it transitioned from showing the full body of the Kaiju to a close-up of its head. There, Akira was seen gripping Udajima by the collar atop the Kaiju's head.



“What's this...”

Carol muttered involuntarily as she watched the video. Beside her, Akira understood the situation to some extent.

“Not again...”

Akira had once been falsely accused by an impostor claiming to be him, which led to him being framed as the boss of the Nationalist. Remembering that, he wore a deeply unpleasant expression.

In the video, Akira, still gripping Udajima, spoke loudly.

“I'm Akira! If there's anyone who knows about the chaos of the previous uprising against the founding Nationalist, there might also be someone who knows about me! Some might even know about the impostor who claimed to be the boss of the Nationalist at that time! ”

The Akira in the video, his face contorted with hatred, continued.

“But this time it's different! This time it's real! I've sided with the Nationalist! I'll make it clear, I don't care about their ideals! This is revenge! ”

Then the Akira in the video lowered his voice, as if struggling with intense emotion.

“...I was targeted by other hunters back then, too. Because I was framed as the boss of the Nationalist. Because of that, I... I ended up... fighting against... my dear friend. It was such a situation. If it had just been that, I could have deceived myself into thinking it couldn't be helped. But it was different! ”

Then, raising his voice again and lifting Udajima to show to the viewer, the Akira in the video continued.

“I heard everything from him! The people in the city knew! They knew I was attacked, that he was the fake, and that I wasn't the boss of the Nationalist! They knew and yet they didn't stop the hunters who were after me! I heard the reason why they didn't stop them! It was more convenient that way! That fight was just a power struggle among the city's executives! They were using the Nationalist suppression as an excuse to kill the hunters who cooperated with the opposing faction! ”

The Akira in the video roared, pouring out his emotions.

“It was... just a power struggle among the city's executives. Because of that, I... I... ended up... killing Yumina! Can I forgive that? ! ”

There was someone consumed by revenge. Someone ready to strike with all their might, filled with hatred.

“It's because of you that I killed Yumina! I'll kill you all! Starting with this one! ”

The Akira in the video threw Udajima aside and opened fire. The body, hit by bullets meant for monsters, was instantly reduced to smithereens. Covered in their blood and flesh, the Akira in the video declared.

“Next, it's your turn! ”

The video ended there, freezing on the image of Akira, his face stained crimson with the blood of his enemies.

Having finished watching the video, Carol fully understood why Viola instructed them to watch it later. Watching something like that while trying to escape would only serve to distract them. She glanced briefly at Akira, who seemed unnaturally still.

Akira wore a mask-like expression. It exuded a dense, dark, profound, and black will. And he stared intently at his opponent.

“It's because of them that I killed Yumina.”

As he spoke those words in the footage, Akira directed an almost tangible intent to kill.

>Episode
008

上第3奥部

キャラクターステータス

Character Status

アキラの最新ステータス。都市間輸送車両の護衛依頼の報酬に加えて、エルデ撃破による坂下重工からの報酬をハンターランクの上昇にしたことで、ハンターランクは70に到達。新たな強化服HC31R強化服ロスカーデンは、人型兵器並みの性能を有し単体で力場障壁を展開できる他、統合されている情報収集機器の精度も飛び抜けて高い。頑丈で高度な迷彩機能を備えたロングコートとバックパック、斬性エネルギー放出が可能な高性能ブレード等、オプション込みで100億オーラムを超える。

NAME 名前

アキラ

SEX 性別

男

HOMETOWN 出身

東部クガマヤマ都市

JOB 職業

ハンター

HUNTER RANK 階級

RANK 70

EQUIPMENT 装備

WEAPON 武器

RL2複合銃 × 4
黒いブレード × 2

ARMOR 防具

HC31R強化服ロスカーデン



AKIRA

>Episode
008

上 第3巻前

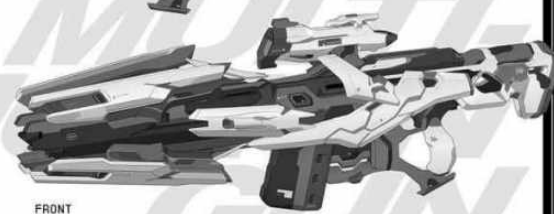
武器解説
Weapon Guide

RL2

MULTI-FUNCTION GUN

RL2 複合銃

TOSON製の高ランクハンター向け複合銃。
可変機構を有し、一つの銃口で通常弾、C弾
(チャージ/バレット)、小型ミサイル、レーザー、
更には対艦弾頭まで使用可能な高級品。
1挺20億オーラム。







Credits

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