

ナフセ

イラストレーション リラ

世界観イラスト わいしづゆ

メカニックデザイン cell

VI

リビングワールド

Rebuild World

下 望みの果て





リビルド ワールド VI

Rebuild World VI

ナフセ

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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
006

下望みの果て

Rebuild 'World' VII

Character



>ユミナ

YUMINA

ドランカム所属のハンター。カツヤの幼馴染み。
アキラとの共同依頼の中で体感時間の操作を
身に付ける。



>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。ハンターランク調整依頼後、現在のラン
クは45。

「……今からでも退かないか？」

【駄目だ】

「どうしてもか？」

「どうしてもだ。」

今更、やめられない」

カツヤは銃を捨てると、ブレードを構えた。
アキラも銃を捨てる。そしてブレードを構えた。

カツヤは死なせない。絶対に。

>Author : nafuse >Illustration : aim >Illustration of the world : xishy >Mechanic design : cell

リビルドワールドVII

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the world has crumbled away, and a long time has passed.
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Rebuild World
下 望みの果て

Author ナフセ Illustration 吟
Illustration of the world わいしう Mechanic design cell

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Episode 168 Visiting Guests

Akira, who had been hospitalized due to injuries sustained in the battle at the Iida Commercial District ruins, woke up to the visits of Shiori and Kibayashi. From Shiori, he heard about the transfer of a white card, and from Kibayashi, he discussed the ownership of the automaton. Akira listened to each in turn and wrapped up both conversations smoothly.

Thanks to receiving 70 million aurum worth of treatment, his body was completely healed. However, just listening to the two of them made him feel quite exhausted, and Akira lay back down on the bed again.

Before long, the attending physician would probably come for the discharge procedures. Just as he thought of resting until then, more visitors appeared before the doctor. This time, it was Sheryl and Inabe.



Sheryl was at the base working when she received a call from Inabe a little while ago.

"Inabe-sama. Thank you for your continued support. How can I assist you today?"

"Oh, I received a report that Akira, who has been in a coma since being hospitalized, has woken up. I thought it was about time I should visit him, so I contacted you to see if I could accompany you when you go to see him. So, what's your schedule like? If there's no issue, I can send someone to pick you up right away. What do you say, Sheryl?"

Inabe's call brought Sheryl back to reality. She struggled to suppress the urge to scream, trying to remain calm.

"...Excuse me. I was just checking my schedule. It's fine. There's no problem."

"Got it. I'll arrange for a car. It should arrive in about 30 minutes."

"Thank you very much. I'll see you then."

After ending the call with Inabe, Sheryl took a deep breath, trying to calm her trembling. She was trying her best to hold herself together, overwhelmed by the reality that Akira had almost died again without her knowing.

When Sheryl entered Akira's hospital room, she first felt relieved to see him looking healthy. She hadn't even known Akira had been hospitalized until just recently, and since Inabe told her he had been brought in in critical condition, she was extremely worried that even though he had woken up, his condition might still be unstable.

Feeling relieved, Sheryl smiled brighter than usual. On the other hand, Akira, who noticed Sheryl and the others and sat up, had a somewhat annoyed look on his face.

"Sheryl this time, huh? What do you want?"

"I heard you woke up, so I came to visit."

"...Is that all?"

"Yes. Are you okay now? I heard you were in pretty bad shape."

"Yeah, I'm fine. I spent 70 million aurum on treatment. I'd be in trouble if I wasn't better by now."

"7-70 million aurum...? That's quite a sum."

"Yeah, it's a lot, but it looks like they did a good job with the treatment..."

Akira had been a bit wary, thinking Sheryl might have come with some troublesome negotiation, but he relaxed when he realized it was just a visit. However, he looked suspiciously at Inabe.

"So, Sheryl, who's this?"

For someone talking to a city executive, that was quite inappropriate. Sheryl, a bit flustered, was caught in a dilemma: she didn't want to scold Akira and risk making him angry, but she also needed to introduce Inabe without offending him.

Inabe, on the other hand, thought it was pointless to expect proper etiquette from a hunter from the slums. He also judged that it was not worth it to anger Akira, who was a key figure in their operations and the only one who knew the origin of the old-world information terminal they had obtained. Thus, he decided to overlook Akira's lack of manners.

"I'm Inabe. I work together with her in the relic trading business. Have you heard from her?"

"Huh? Oh, now that you mention it, I think I heard something like that...?"

Akira tilted his head in response.

Whether he hadn't been informed by Sheryl, had forgotten, or simply didn't care, it seemed he didn't need detailed information about Inabe. That's what Inabe concluded.

"That's the gist of it. Well, just think of me as a city official."

"Hmm."

Seeing Akira's attitude even after hearing he was a city official, Inabe showed a slight sense of disbelief.

Even if Akira heard his counterpart was a city official, what he associated with it was probably just trouble. He didn't feel any awe towards authorities, rather, his concern leaned more towards whether Inabe was like Kibayashi.

"So, what's the purpose? A visit?"

"It's a meeting that doubles as a visit. Seeing the situation, the relic trading business is fully entrusted to her. You probably don't have much interest in its management yourself, but as a collaborator of the store, at least remember my face and name."

"Understood."

Inabe's errand seemed to be that simple, and he hadn't brought any troublesome matters.

Thinking so, Akira felt relieved. Then, he remembered.

"...Oh right. Sheryl. About those relics I handed over to you, I asked for the payment to be made promptly. By when and how much can you pay?"

Akira had handed over relics, including the old-world information terminal, to Sheryl's relic trading business three times. The first time, they sold for 600 million aurum, and he received payment on the spot, but he hadn't received payment for the second and third transactions yet. It was planned for them to pay once the items were sold.

"I-Immediately?!"

"Yeah. I wasn't planning to urge you for payment so soon..."

Despite collaborating with Viola, Akira didn't think Sheryl and the others had enough money to pay such a large sum again so soon after paying him 600 million aurum. Buying goods alone doesn't generate money; it's only when they are sold that they become profitable. Selling at a high price also takes time and expenses. It would be a while before he receives payment for the relics. He had just bought new equipment. He could wait until they paid him for the next set of equipment. If the relic trading business thrived in the meantime, the amount they paid him would also increase accordingly. Akira thought so and intended to wait for a while. However, in the battle at the Iida Commercial District ruins, Akira lost all his major equipment. He needed to buy new equipment urgently.

However, the results earned there would not be converted into money anytime soon due to the complex negotiations surrounding the ownership of the automatons. Although he had entrusted the negotiations to Kibayashi, it would be troublesome if he was seen as pressing for immediate payment. Additionally, it was technically during the adjustment process for the Hunter Rank request, and the reward might lean towards an increase in Hunter Rank. Furthermore, he had also requested to negotiate cheaper prices for Anti-Force Field Armor and armored bullets. This could lead to a reduction in funds.

Therefore, he explained that he would like the payment for the relics to be speed up. Upon hearing this, Sheryl was deeply troubled.

"I-I see. Um, well..."

Currently, Akira needed some money, an unusual situation prompting him to make a request. If Sheryl were to comply with his request with a smile, there was no doubt that Akira's evaluation of her would significantly improve.

However, to do so, she would need to dip into the operating capital of the relic trading business, and it was not a small sum. Tens of millions of aurum would disappear. If she took such action, the business might collapse entirely.

Employee training, salaries, acquiring new products, security for the store, maintenance, and renovation of the interior, operating the alliance, and more—all these require money. However, even with all these needs, should she still comply? The relic trading business, which she had worked hard to prosper, was originally started for Akira's sake. Should she tolerate the collapse of the store to repay the debt that had accumulated to Akira?

However, if she were to make such a move with Inabe present, what would happen? For the sake of Inabe's efforts, for the sake of receiving support from Inabe in the future, and to avoid making enemies with the city officials, the store was necessary. Losing the store at this point might not be beneficial in providing future profits to Akira.

However, this was also a perfect opportunity to repay Akira's debt. Akira was indeed in trouble. Even in this situation, if he was perceived as someone who wouldn't repay his debt, it would be meaningless for Akira to continue his association with her.

What should she do? Sheryl was truly at a loss.

Seeing Sheryl's dilemma as hopeless, Akira sighed heavily.

Seeing Akira's reaction, Sheryl felt like her evaluation had plummeted fatally, and she felt even more cornered.

At that moment, Inabe, who had been silently listening, spoke up.

"I see. Then I'll pay 20 billion upfront. How about that?"

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

Akira and Sheryl both reacted in unison to the unexpected offer from an unexpected source. Ignoring their reactions, Inabe continued.

The problem for Akira was the delay in payment for the results from the Iida Commercial District ruins until Kibayashi and the others finished their negotiations. He didn't know how long the negotiations would last, and this delay would also postpone the procurement of equipment.

So, for now, Inabe would advance 2 billion aurum, and Akira could use that money to buy equipment. Then, once the negotiations for the automatons were concluded and the reward was paid, Akira would repay him.

In other words, it was an advance payment. Even if Akira's reward didn't reach 2 billion aurum, he wouldn't demand the difference from Akira. He would treat it as a loan to Sheryl's relic trading business and allow her to slowly repay it by prospering the store. Any shortfall could be repaid by Akira to Sheryl later, or offset by support fees from the alliance, and so on.

That's where Akira and Sheryl come in.

The 2 billion aurum would be transferred to Sheryl's store as a loan, and from there, Sheryl would transfer the funds to Akira's account. Inabe continued talking up to that point and observed Akira and Sheryl's reactions. For Akira, it was a chance to acquire funds for new equipment, while for Sheryl, it was a chance to demonstrate their value to Akira. Both Akira and Sheryl showed positive reactions.

Then, Inabe directed his gaze towards Akira and continued.

"However, there's a condition. It's about the origin of the old-world information terminals you brought to Sheryl's store..."

Upon hearing this, Akira's mood soured. He distinctly remembered telling them not to ask about that. He was about to voice his thoughts but stopped himself. Misunderstandings could arise if one didn't listen to the whole story properly. To prevent that, it was better to listen to the person's words carefully. With that in mind, he remained silent.

"What's wrong?"

"It's nothing. Go on?"

"Well, about the origin of those old-world information terminals, only you know. So, please, don't tell anyone else."

Akira was puzzled by this unexpected request.

"...Well, even if you didn't ask, I wouldn't tell anyone."

"In that case, there's absolutely no problem with the condition, right?"

"Well... yeah."

"Good. That's the first condition. And the second is, if you ever decide to sell the old-world information terminals somewhere else, you must sell them to Sheryl. Even if you sell them to a back-alley shop in the slums, where your Hunter Rank won't increase, please endure it. And make sure no one finds out about it. Selling them openly will attract attention. Ensure it remains discreet. Well, this is only if there's another sale. Is that acceptable?"

"Yeah, that's fine. Anything else?"

"No, those are the conditions. Just to be clear once again: don't tell anyone about the source of the relics, sell them to Sheryl next time, and keep it discreet. Is that okay? If the deal's agreed upon, I'll prepare the loan. What do you say?"

"Understood. That's fine."

"The deal's agreed then."

Inabe extended his hand, and Akira shook it. The deal was now sealed.

"Well, then, we'll take our leave. We need to prepare the loan. We'll transfer the 2 billion aurum in the coming days. Sheryl, let's go."

"Huh? Oh, yes."

Sheryl wanted to talk more with Akira, but she couldn't stay behind alone as indicated by Inabe. Regretfully, she left with him.

"Akira, I'm glad you're safe. Please rest well. Goodbye."

Sheryl left these words with a smile before leaving the hospital room with Inabe.

On the way back in the car, Sheryl sensed a very stern atmosphere coming from Inabe, who was sitting next to her. Both remained silent until the car reached the parking lot of the Kugamayama building.

However, even after the car stopped, the doors didn't open. In the quiet interior of the car, Inabe suddenly spoke with a slightly serious expression.

"Let's be honest. I thought you had completely ensnared Akira. From the attitude that Katsuya showed you at the previous meeting, even someone who didn't intend to fall for you would be completely under your control. So, I thought that if you intentionally tried to ensnare him, you would have him completely in your grasp. That's why I thought you were able to become a backing for a Hunter like him, even when your faction had little power."

In a calm tone, but with enough weight to make Sheryl feel crushed by the pressure.

"But I was wrong. You couldn't even ask him to watch his tone with me. I can't imagine you're ensnaring and controlling him."

Sheryl suppressed a slight tremble in her body, gripping her hands tightly.

"The 2 billion aurum issue reflects my anxiety. I judged that it would be difficult to restrict his actions without making a deal that included that much money. Emotionally, I wanted to make the request through the Hunter Office. But we can't do that because information would leak externally."

Inabe exhaled, increasing Sheryl's tension just with that action alone.

"When we made the deal, I asked you. Let me ask again."

Until now, Inabe had been talking without looking at Sheryl, but now he turned to face her directly.

"Is there any problem?"

With a serious, cold, and penetrating gaze fixed on Sheryl, who didn't avert her eyes.

Without looking away from his penetrating gaze, Sheryl responded.

"There's no problem."

Once again, with determination in her voice.

"I see. Make sure those words become reality. Let me know if anything happens."

The car door opened, and Inabe got out. As the door closed, the car started moving.

In the car headed back to the base, Sheryl, still tense, received a notification sound from her information terminal. She quickly checked it. It was a notification that 2 billion aurum had been transferred to her account.

Sheryl let out a deep breath. "...I guess, for now, I can take that as acceptance." It might not be, but Sheryl decided to think that way.



The day after being discharged from the hospital, Akira approached Shizuka's shop with a slightly nervous demeanor. However, he hesitated to enter.

Akira knew he had to ask Shizuka to procure a set of new equipment. But it was clear evidence of the intense battles, the strain, and recklessness he had endured to lose all his equipment.

Despite his earlier warnings, he had once again pushed himself too hard. The thought of being scolded by Shizuka for such recklessness held Akira back.

However, he couldn't linger outside the shop indefinitely. Steeling himself, he entered the store.

Inside the store, along with Shizuka, were Elena and Sara, who had just arrived. Shizuka and the others noticed Akira and welcomed him with smiles.

Akira felt a subtle significance in their smiles, but he was preoccupied with how to explain the equipment matter peacefully, so he didn't dwell on it too deeply. After exchanging light greetings and small talk, he mustered his courage and told Shizuka about the equipment.

However, Akira's resolve was somewhat futile. Even before Akira mentioned it, Shizuka and the others already knew about his intense battles.

"Huh!? You knew!?"

"Yeah. Yumina came while Akira was in the hospital and told us."

They knew about Akira's battles with the ancient automatons in the Iida Commercial District ruins, his severe injuries requiring hospitalization, but fortunately no life-threatening conditions. Akira had pushed himself to the brink, but there was no other choice given the circumstances. Thanks to Akira, everyone was saved.

There was no obligation for Yumina, a simple shopkeeper for Hunters, to share such information with Shizuka. Personal information about a lucrative Hunter, and even information about his physical condition, could affect future earnings, and in some cases, it shouldn't be disclosed.

However, seeing Akira's demeanor and knowing how much Akira admired Shizuka, Yumina felt it was best to share everything. That's what she thought was best.

After briefly explaining the situation, Shizuka smiled kindly at Akira.

"So, don't worry, I'm not angry," she said, causing Akira to breathe a sigh of relief.

Seeing Akira's reaction, Elena gave a wry smile.

"But seriously, Akira, you're always like this."

Akira shrugged lightly.

"Yeah, I guess so. Why is that? Am I just unlucky?"

Sara also chuckled.

"Even if that's the case, worrying about such things as a senior will only bring you down. It was tough, but you came back alive. Isn't that what matters?" Sara's encouraging smile helped Akira regain his spirits. He smiled back.

"Yeah... you're right. I'll try to think that way."

"And besides, you must have earned quite a bit from all the trouble, right? That's also part of the perks of being a Hunter," Elena added.

"Well, I'd still prefer not to be on the brink of death. Safety over earnings, you know?" Akira nodded in agreement.

Shizuka also nodded with a smile. "Exactly. Akira, that kind of consideration is crucial. Make sure not to forget it in the future."

"Got it."

"Good."

Akira's honest agreement earned him a satisfied smile from Shizuka. With that, the intense battles in the Iida Commercial District ruins became a laughing matter among Akira and his companions.

"Now, Shizuka, I'm sorry for breaking the equipment you sold me in such a short time. Can I ask for your advice on new equipment?"

"Of course. If you didn't do it on purpose, feel free to break as much equipment as you need. If it keeps you safe, there's no problem. It also boosts the shop's sales."

Shizuka added a light-hearted joke to remind Akira not to prioritize equipment over his own well-being.

"Now, what's your budget this time?"

"About 18 billion Aurums."

Akira had requested assistance from Kibayashi to buy anti-force field armor and armor-piercing bullets cheaply, but there was no guarantee it would work out. Still, he needed the armor-piercing bullets. Akira had deducted the cost of those from the 2 billion Aurum budget.

Even with the reduced budget, it was three times the previous one, a staggering amount that surprised Elena and Sara.

Shizuka was also surprised, but her mind was focused on something else. With a serious expression, she suggested to Akira, "If the budget is going to be that high, I recommend changing the shop."

"Huh?"

Akira was taken aback and puzzled by the sudden suggestion. Shizuka proceeded to calmly explain why it might be better for Akira to do so.

Shizuka's shop was mainly frequented by amateur to intermediate-level Hunters. The

inventory of the shop mainly catered to products suitable for Hunters up to rank 30. It was merely a shop where a single deal exceeding 40 million Aurums would be considered a big profit.

Shizuka, despite her sincere dedication to her business, is still a businesswoman. While she certainly doesn't want to lose a major customer, there are limits to everything. Both in terms of the size of the shop and Shizuka's own capabilities.

It's unlikely that Akira would purchase items with performance levels as low as those displayed in this shop. In fact, since Shizuka had to resort to ordering items upon Akira's request previously, it was clear that her shop was no longer suitable for him.

Furthermore, Shizuka's skills as a businesswoman are not high enough to handle the high-performance, high-priced items that Akira seeks. She's simply not the owner of the kind of store that deals with such items.

When Shizuka handed Akira a list of numerous guns and reinforced suits during the last equipment procurement, it was evidence that she couldn't fully cater to the high-priced items, leaving her unable to narrow down the recommended products for Akira.

That's why, if Shizuka continues to sincerely assist Akira, the only thing she could really suggest to him is to switch to a high-end store that deals with such high-priced items.

"...Akira, you often say things like 'if it's your recommendation' or 'if it's your judgment,' but if I may, this is my judgment and recommendation. It's a bit disappointing, though," Shizuka said with a slightly melancholic smile.

Akira understood her words and explanation. It was a recommendation from a trusted person regarding equipment that could affect his life. Saying "I understand" seemed to be the most appropriate response.

Akira understood that but still wore an incredibly troubled expression. Then, unusually, he voiced his selfishness to Shizuka.

"Um, if possible, I'd like to continue shopping at Shizuka's shop in the future, is that too much to ask?"

"I wouldn't recommend it; I think it would be best to stop. High-ranking hunters' high-end stores are probably accustomed to handling items with minimum prices in the billions and would be able to recommend suitable equipment for you," Shizuka replied.

"...So, you mean it's not a good idea?"

If Shizuka had said it was not a good idea, Akira would have had no choice but to back down. However, she hadn't said that. Akira was hesitating.

At that moment, Elena and Sara chuckled quietly. Elena smiled and said to Shizuka in front of the puzzled Akira, "Shizuka, he's saying he prefers your shop. Accommodating such requests from customers is part of managing a business, right?"

Shizuka then relaxed her attitude. She smiled at Akira as if accepting a child's whim.

"Well, there's no helping it. Akira, since you're handling unfamiliar items, don't get angry even if I mistakenly recommend something strange, okay?"

"Yes! I understand. Thank you very much," Akira said happily. Shizuka returned the

smile, making a slightly dissatisfied face as if in jest.

"But really, Akira, Elena, Sara, even though we're sincerely serving customers and even if it means decreasing the store's revenue, you still make selfish requests. Dealing with those high-end items is not easy, you know?" Elena chuckled in response.

"Well, Shizuka can earn more from that, so it's fine. We are all working hard in the wasteland. Shizuka should also put in a little more effort," Sara added.

"Easy for you to say," Shizuka replied, smiling.

Akira, not fully understanding the situation, listened as Sara explained, "We've been told similar things by Shizuka. She suggested we move to a higher-end store. Well, Elena said various things and declined, though."

"You two as well?" Akira asked.

"Yes. We understand Shizuka's point, but equipment is something that affects our lives, so we want to continue dealing with a trustworthy store," Sara explained.

"That's right," Akira nodded in agreement.

"By the way, Akira, what's your hunter rank now? It must have risen significantly after the hunter rank adjustment request, right?" Elena asked.

"Um, just a moment," Akira said, taking out his information terminal to confirm his hunter rank. The negotiations for the ownership of the automata were still ongoing, but the calculation processing for the increase in his hunter rank due to defeating numerous automatons had already been completed, and Akira's hunter rank had risen to 45.

"45," he said.

Upon hearing this, Elena and Sara exchanged glances. Their expressions revealed a complex mix of emotions. Then, Sara said with a slightly melancholic tone, "45, huh... He surpassed us quite easily, didn't he?"

"Huh?" Akira was surprised.

"We're at 40. I think Shizuka suggesting that we change stores is a sort of turning point," Elena continued.

Both Elena and Sara were hunters. They had struggled for years in the wasteland, steadily increasing their hunter rank. A hunter rank of 40 was considered top tier by the standards of hunters operating around Kugamayama City.

That achievement was also a result of their efforts as hunters. Akira's encounter had improved their prospects in the hunter business, and despite various setbacks, they had been generally successful. Recently, they had been actively engaged in monster hunting and relic collection in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruins, steadily rising as hunters.

Hunter Rank 40 was the culmination of Elena and Sara's efforts as hunters. If one were to consider the criteria of hunters operating around the Kugamayama City area, it was more than enough to be considered top tier.

However, Akira had easily surpassed them. Elena and Sara, as experienced hunters who had worked hard for their achievements, couldn't help but feel a hint of sentimentality at being outranked so easily.

"Well, I expected to be surpassed eventually. But I didn't think it would happen this quickly," Sara said lightly.

"That's right. We're at the top of our game. I suppose this is one of life's ironies," Elena added.

Elena and Sara forced cheerful smiles. They undoubtedly admired Akira for his rapid rise, but there were also complex emotions they couldn't quite express. To cover that up, Elena and Sara laughed.

Akira, who didn't possess the ability to smoothly navigate such situations, was feeling quite awkward.

Akira thought about how he could respond. After emerging from the back alleys of the slums to become a hunter and gaining various experiences, he had improved his interpersonal skills, although he was still lacking. But he tried to muster a bit of maturity.

"Well, uh, being called 'senior' by you two feels a bit... odd. And while my hunter rank has indeed risen, it doesn't mean my experience as a hunter has increased, and I still have a lot to learn about the hunter business. So, if you could continue to help me as a senior hunters, I'd appreciate it," Akira said after much deliberation. His expression seemed to convey that sentiment, Elena and Sara felt a sense of relief as they sensed their own unwarranted emotions dissipating.

The fact that the children looked up to them and were trying their best not to disrupt their relationship touched Elena and Sara deeply. They realized that their previous pettiness seemed foolish in comparison.

Elena and Sara exchanged glances, chuckled lightly, and regained their usual composure. They smiled at Akira with a tone of encouragement.

"Is that so? Then, Sara, shall we indulge him and play the role of seniors a little more?" Elena suggested.

"Sure. Alright then, Akira. We'll need your permission to call you 'senpai' from now on," Sara said.

"Yes," Akira nodded happily. Shizuka then chimed in.

"Well then, Elena, Sara, shall we start playing the role of seniors and help Akira right away? You two can assist Akira in choosing his new equipment with an 18-billion-Orlam budget. It's beyond my capabilities, so lend a hand," Shizuka said.

Elena was taken aback. "Wait a minute, Shizuka. We're not that familiar with high-priced equipment either."

"Stop complaining and lend a hand. You must have thought about or researched what kind of equipment you'd like once you became a high-ranking hunter. Remember that knowledge or whatever and put your heads together. You're Akira's seniors, right?" Shizuka replied.

Unable to refuse, Elena smiled wryly. "Alright, alright, I get it. In that case, we need to hear Akira's preferences first. Akira, what kind of equipment do you want?"

"Um, well... What kind of equipment would be good?" Akira asked, realizing that no one present had an answer. And so, the consultation about Akira's new equipment began.

They discussed various options, and Akira had a good time amidst the back-and-forth discussions.

Episode 169 Luxurious Bath

Akira decided to suspend his hunter activities again until he completed the procurement of his new equipment. He hadn't even placed an order for the equipment yet, let alone chosen it, and was still in the process of researching with the assistance of Shizuka and others to understand what options were available. It would still take some time before the new equipment arrived.

However, he couldn't simply spend an exorbitant budget of 1.8 billion Aurum without properly thinking and consideration. Given the high cost of the purchase, thorough researching, it was necessary to avoid buying something regrettable.

There was no need to rush, though. If negotiations with Kibayashi went well, he would be able to purchase Anti-Force Field Armor to protect against armored bullets at a reasonable price. There was no rush to return to the wasteland. Akira thought about this and took his time.

Today, he had stopped by Sheryl's base. He was sitting on a chair in the lounge area used as a break room, not in Sheryl's own room.

The lounge was normally used by members of the faction and employees of relic shops. However, now, only Akira was there. It wasn't explicitly prohibited for anyone other than Akira to enter, but as soon as they noticed the large mine set up as a safety measure in the lounge, anyone who came for a rest hurriedly left.

However, Akira wasn't there to disturb the rest of others. He was just there to show that their support was still intact, both internally and externally, at Sheryl's request. The hunter profession was a dangerous one where one could easily be considered dead if they disappeared for a long time. Showing that he was alive and well was important.

Even if they saw Akira, it was allowed for lower-ranking members of the faction to hastily leave. But it was not permitted for executives. Once they saw Akira, they had to greet him at the very least. And if Akira asked about the situation of the faction or relic shops in a casual conversation, they had to answer naturally.

Executives like Erio, Alicia, Nasha, and Lucia, due to their past experiences, were chatting with Akira as if they were walking on eggshells, as they did on a minefield. And then, Katsuragi appeared. Even the executives showed a somewhat fearful attitude when interacting with Akira, but Katsuragi's casual approach to talking to Akira made the children in the faction recognize the business acumen of the executives.

Katsuragi continued to talk to Akira while trying to convince him. However, due to his past experiences, he didn't have high expectations. He was attempting to negotiate with Akira just to show his business associates that he was trying.

If he were to push Akira too hard and anger him, there was a risk of losing the ability to purchase recovery potions. The sales of firearms to Sheryl and others were also significant. Even though they couldn't deal with the high-priced floor, the relic shops were making high profits. If Akira were to say something to Sheryl, they could disappear.

Katsuragi didn't change his somewhat indifferent attitude to avoid angering Akira. However, this attitude unexpectedly worked. Although Akira still harbored some twisted thoughts that there was always a catch to any offer he received, Katsuragi's somewhat passive attitude gave Akira the impression that there was no hidden agenda behind this offer.

"Is that so? Then, I'll leave the procurement of the car and bike to you," Akira responded unexpectedly, leaving Katsuragi bewildered.

"...Huh? You're buying?"

"Well, you told me to buy something, anything."

"Yeah, but, it's just that, I'm surprised you suddenly changed your attitude. No matter how many times I asked before, it was useless, wasn't it?"

"...Well, that's partly because the bike you introduced to me before came in handy."

Not a lie, but there was another reason. With Shizuka and the others assisting in the procurement of new equipment, even researching guns and reinforced clothing was already a handful. Moreover, asking Shizuka to handle the procurement of cars and motorcycles in addition to that would be too burdensome, so Akira had put that on the back burner.

Against this backdrop, the idea of asking Katsuragi to handle the procurement of cars and motorcycles came to Akira at just the right time. That was all there was to it.

Katsuragi flashed a businessman's smile. "That's great. So, what kind do you want?"

"I want a bike with performance equal to or better than the previous one. As for the car... I'd like a big one where the bike can fit inside. In terms of performance... adjust it to match the bike."

High-performance bikes were useful for both combat and relic exploration, but there were limitations on cargo capacity. It would be better to use a car like the one Yumina used, where plenty of ammunition and relics could be loaded. That's what Akira had concluded from his activities in the Kuzusuhara Ruins and the Iida Commercial District Ruins.

Katsuragi quickly calculated. "...With that level of performance, 100 million or 200 million won't be enough, right? For both the car and the bike... let's see. It should be around 500 million Aurums. Is that okay?"

"Yeah."

Katsuragi was overjoyed at the sudden 500 million Aurums deal. But then Akira interjected with a slightly serious attitude.

"...The bike you sourced for me before was high-performance and incredibly useful. Thank you."

"...Huh? Ah, yeah."

"So, um... what I mean is, well, it's not something I need to say now, and I think you should understand, but, um, that car and bike are the equipment I entrust my life to. I understand there's a balance with the price, but if they're not high-performance, it'll be a problem."

Akira stared at Katsuragi. There hadn't been any issues with the quality of the healing potions Katsuragi had bought before, so Akira didn't suspect Katsuragi. But even so, unlike when buying from Shizuka's shop, he couldn't blindly trust Katsuragi. That difference was apparent in Akira's eyes.

"Katsuragi. You sure about this?"

Katsuragi laughed heartily while sweating nervously inside.

"Don't worry. I got this covered. So, next up, you want me to handle guns and reinforced clothing too?"

"Not now."

"Same old you. Alright then, take your time to think it over," Katsuragi said with a wry smile.

"So, by when should I have them ready? Would a month be, okay? If you're in a hurry, I'd like some upfront payment, though."

"Nah, it's fine."

"Got it. Well then, I'll get to work on it right away. I'll get in touch later. Keep your hopes up," Katsuragi said, leaving with those words. As he exited the rest area, he let out a deep breath and changed his expression, from a somewhat serious one to that of a businessman.

(...This is dangerous. Did I let my guard down because that sudden 500 million deal came in? I need to be careful.)

It was easy to imagine what would happen if Akira paid 500 million Aurums and then faced problems with the items he bought. However, Katsuragi, caught up in the excitement of the 500 million deal, had forgotten about that until Akira reminded him.

(But well, if he's paying 500 million for the car and bike, he must be paying more for the guns and reinforced clothing. How much? 800 million? No, maybe a billion? I don't know what kind of luxury shop Akira favors, but if he's making such deals knowing what Akira's capable of, he's got some nerve.)

While admiring the courage of some unknown shop, Katsuragi contacted his business associates to arrange for the car and bike.

Sheryl, who had been busy with the management of the faction and relic sales, somehow managed to finish her tasks for the day and came to see Akira.

Until the procurement of the new equipment set is completed and despite being on hiatus from the hunter business, Akira doesn't come to the base every day. Sheryl manages to carve out time from her daily tasks and increases the time she spends with Akira.

Sitting across from Akira, with a clean, circular table between them, they drink slightly strong coffee poured into sophisticated cups, while continuing their lively conversation, interspersed with updates on the faction and relic sales. Sheryl was

enjoying this time.

Akira was also listening with keen interest to Sheryl's stories.

"Wow. Sheryl, your faction seems to be doing quite well."

The success of the relic sales significantly boosted the power of Sheryl's faction. While not as formidable as the two major factions that had been wiped out, they were already being called the Sheryl Family and were well-known in the slum district as a major faction.

Usually, before expanding their influence on that extent, they would face interference from those seeking to earn money from the substantial profits of relic sales. However, no factions targeted Sheryl's faction. This was because Akira had their backing, and Viola was also cooperating.

Any attacks on Sheryl's faction would be quickly detected by Viola, and Akira would personally crush them. Thus, no one dared to touch Sheryl's faction.

Akira's strength, the financial power of the relic sales, and Viola's intelligence and espionage abilities - with all these combined, there were many who wanted to join their powerful faction, and the number of members had increased dramatically. However, the faction still consisted mainly of children, and adult applicants were currently being turned away.

Moreover, children weren't accepted unconditionally either. There was a limit to the number of people the faction could manage. Even if the number of members increased, the number of leaders who could manage them didn't increase easily. Until those leaders were developed, new applicants had to wait their turn.

As a result, even lower-tier organizations akin to Sheryl's faction had emerged in the slum district. They actively sought to create connections within the faction and earn money through bribes to reduce the waiting time for joining the Sheryl Family.

New recruits to the faction initially served as cheap labor. At first, they earned money by doing odd jobs within the faction or assisting in the lower-priced floors of relic sales stores. If they didn't cause any trouble, they would be assigned tasks received through Katsuragi's business contacts and other channels.

There wasn't much work available for children in the slum district because of the reality that even if they were given work, they would just steal money or goods and run away. While not everyone behaved this way, it was a significant factor.

If someone dispatched by Sheryl's faction caused damage, the faction would compensate for it, which helped establish some level of trust. If they worked diligently, both the employer and the employee benefited. Of course, if they didn't work properly, they would be kicked out of the faction.

Rumors also spread that if someone stole, they would either be killed by Akira or sold off by Viola, which helped keep the troublemakers in check.

While spending such days studying and writing within the faction, those who earned enough money to buy information terminals were shown the path to becoming valuable labor.

There are many places on the internet where various skills and qualifications can be learned for free. If one can read and write independently and connect to the internet with an information terminal, they can learn specialized knowledge and general

education that is not available in the alleys of the slum district.

Those who acquired such knowledge could be recommended for highly paid and high-skilled jobs by Katsuragi and Viola, entrusted with specialized roles or leadership positions within the faction, or assigned to work on the mid-priced floors of relic sales stores, all leading to better positions and treatment.

Also, if they lacked confidence in such advancements, there was the option to venture into the wasteland. By borrowing equipment from the faction and dedicating themselves to the hunter business, they could strive for advancement.

Though it was a gamble with their lives, going out with hunters like Levin and Dale, who were in cooperative relationships with the faction, was much safer than going out alone into the wasteland. Defeating powerful monsters and bringing back valuable relics to sell at the faction's relic store could earn them a fortune. If they aimed to advance through martial prowess, the faction would also support them in that regard.

From cheap labor to highly paid and skilled personnel - Sheryl aimed to further develop the faction and prosper by improving the quality of its members in this way.

Akira, who heard these stories from Sheryl, was impressed by her abilities.

"Anyway, Sheryl, you're amazing. Didn't you even attend the city's founding ceremony with that Inabe guy? I don't know much about it, but regular folks like us wouldn't be allowed to attend, right? Katsuragi was also very surprised, it's impressive."

Though he didn't fully understand, Akira vaguely praised her, and Sheryl smiled happily in response.

"Thank you very much. But it's all thanks to your support. I feel very guilty that I haven't been able to repay that favor yet, but I'll definitely repay it by further developing the store and the faction. Please consider it as an investment, and I hope you can look at it with a long-term perspective."

"It's okay. That 2 billion was basically thanks to you, Sheryl. In a sense, it's like you've already paid back that favor."

The 2 billion Aurum exchanged for Inabe's testimony was proof of Sheryl's value. Inabe recognized her worth and was willing to pay that much. Akira thought that's why he easily provided that amount.

"If that's the case, please expect further profits. Currently, the store's sales are going well... Well, managing the entire faction is incredibly challenging, though."

"It's tough being the boss of a faction. I might be biased, but it was a good decision to make you the faction leader back then. It's impossible for me."

In response to Akira's light-hearted joke, Sheryl replied in a similar tone, "Maybe you should give it a try? It's okay. I'll support you."

"It's impossible. Spare me."

"Is that so? That's too bad."

Despite laughing and replying like that, Sheryl was quite disappointed internally.

After chatting with Sheryl for a while, Akira realized that quite some time had passed. When he mentioned that he should go back, Sheryl tried to persuade him to stay longer.

"Are you leaving already? Couldn't you stay a little longer? You don't have any urgent matters, do you?"

"Well, I'm going home. I want to take a leisurely bath."

Today, Akira planned to take his time researching the guns and reinforced clothing he intended to purchase while taking a leisurely bath. Considering the time for that, he felt he had stayed too long and tried to get up from his seat.

However, Sheryl insisted further.

"If it's a bath you want, why don't you just use the one here? We've made significant changes to the bathhouse as part of the base's renovation. Especially the one for the executives is amazing."

"Amazing, in terms of size and interior design?"

"That's part of it, but it's hard to explain. You'll understand the difference once you experience it. You really have to try it to understand."

Even Sheryl, who uses it herself, found a vast difference before and after the renovation. It was highly praised by Erio and Alicia as well. The bathing rights became a special reward for lower-level executives, and the opportunity to use it was even traded within the faction. That's how impressive it was. Sheryl explained the greatness of the executive bath, stimulating Akira's interest.

With that said, Akira, after hesitating for a moment, gave in to his curiosity.



The executive bath, newly created due to the base's renovation, exudes a sense of luxury and cleanliness with its mostly white color scheme. The bathtub is spacious enough for about ten people to enter at once without bumping into each other, providing ample openness. At this point, it was clear that this bath was nothing like Akira's home bath.

However, what surprised Akira the most about this bath was not immediately apparent. As he immersed himself in the bath, he felt the difference on his skin and couldn't help but let out a sound of amazement.

"Oh! This is... something, incredible! I can't quite explain it."

Sheryl, who was bathing with him as a matter of course, smiled satisfactorily at Akira's reaction.

"This bath is equipped with a high-performance water quality adjustment system, which finely adjusts the components of the water used for bathing to a suitable state. Thanks to that, you can enjoy a bathing experience that's different from just regular hot water."

"I see. It's definitely something different."

Akira scooped up the water with his hand and stared at it intently. To the naked eye, it looked like ordinary hot water. But as he immersed himself in it and felt something different from the usual hot water on his skin, even the reflections of light seemed somewhat luxurious.

"Well, until I actually tried it, I thought, 'So what?' But it's really amazing."

"Yeah, there's baths like this, huh?"

Akira was in a good mood from the new bathing experience. Sensing his interest, Sheryl approached him, tempting him with her naked body.

"If you like it that much, you can come here to bathe every day, you know?"

"Well, that's tempting, but..."

The delayed response was evidence of Akira's hesitation. Sheryl easily sensed this and, thinking that she could push a little further, naturally took Akira's hand.

"I don't think it would be a burden if you came to bathe here every day. It's all thanks to you that this bath is here. You've supported us, sold us valuable artifacts, and we're really grateful."

She continued, looking directly at Akira.

"But unfortunately, we haven't been able to repay that favor to you much at all. If you're enjoying bathing here, could you perhaps let us repay that favor by you using this bath? It's a small gesture, but would you let us repay our debt to you?"

At that point, Akira also hesitated. He had thoroughly enjoyed the new bathing experience, and the scales of judgment were heavily swaying.

This could work. Thinking so, Sheryl couldn't help but shine with a smile. But then, a discordant sound echoed. It was the notification sound from the information terminal installed in the bath. As it was intended for executives, it was equipped with functions to receive various reports and give instructions even during bathing.

"Sheryl. Something's ringing."

"Yes."

Just when things were going so well. Thinking this, Sheryl let go of Akira's hand. Then, with an inner voice tinged with irritation, she directed her attention to the bath's information terminal.

"What's up?"

"Oh, um, Viola says she has something to discuss with the boss and Mr. Akira."

"Both Akira and I are bathing. Tell her to wait."

"Understood."

Caught off guard by Sheryl's displeased voice, the faction member on the other end hastily ended the communication. Sheryl exhaled to calm herself down. The atmosphere had been good just now. Although interrupted, she believed they could still salvage it. With that hopeful thought mingled with desire, she tried to switch her focus.

But then the notification sound rang out again.

"What now!?"

Hearing Sheryl's increasingly sour tone, her subordinate on the other end of the communication began to sweat nervously.

"Um, I conveyed that to Viola, but it seems it's urgent, so she's coming over there now."

"Huh?"

At the unexpected response, Sheryl and Akira exchanged glances.

Viola had indeed entered the bath. Carol was also there. Both confidently displayed their naked bodies and approached Akira, slowly sinking into the bath.

Carol, an Enhancer, had poured a lot of money into enhancing her own body. This enhancement not only improved her physical abilities as a Hunter but also enhanced the aesthetic appeal of her body. With her captivating figure, Carol had mentally or physically ensnared many men in the past.

Viola also took care of maintaining her body to negotiate from a position of advantage. She used her shapely figure to guide the gaze and consciousness of others, ensnaring many people from outside their field of view and awareness.

Though the direction and purposes were somewhat different, the naked bodies of Carol and Viola, combined with their personal beauty, were very alluring. However, Akira looked at the owners of those bodies with a disdainful expression.

"Is it normal to just barge in?"

Carol chuckled as she directed her usual response towards Akira.

"Why not? We're not showing you anything unsightly, are we?"

"Well, I guess not..."

"Oh, thank you."

Carol interpreted Akira's rather meaningless words as praise and thanked him. Akira looked puzzled, not understanding the significance of being thanked.

Well, I guess not. With just those words, Akira's affirmation turned Carol's naked body from something unsightly into something beautiful, at least in the context of the situation. Whether Akira would later realize this or not remained to be seen but implanting that idea in Carol's mind wouldn't hurt her.

And noticing that, Sheryl intervened to disrupt the sprouting of that idea.

"It seems like it's an urgent matter for you to come all the way here. Is it really just about that?"

At this, Akira's attention shifted from why he was thanked to the urgency of the conversation.

With a smile matching Sheryl's, Carol laughed along as Viola got to the point.

"Yes, it's just that urgent. It concerns Akira's equipment procurement and the enhancement of the faction's combat capabilities."

Amidst Akira and Sheryl's mild surprise at the unexpected topic, Viola began to explain with a smile. It was about participating in a field test of the comprehensive support enhanced combat suits with Akira and Sheryl's faction.

For Akira, it meant the opportunity to test high-level Hunter combat suits provided by the Company.

The company was aware that Akira was considering purchasing new combat suits, as Shizuka had requested the data from various companies. Having even sent Yumina on a Rank Adjustment Request to accompany Akira, it couldn't afford for him to buy combat suits from other companies. Viola had asked for her cooperation precisely because this opportunity was too important to miss.

For Sheryl, it meant the opportunity to introduce the comprehensive support system to the faction.

The introduction of this system would significantly enhance the faction's combat capabilities and be highly beneficial for securing the relic shop. This was part of the support that Sheryl had requested from Inabe in return for providing him with the old-world information terminals.

On the surface, it seemed like a very good deal for both Akira and Sheryl. However, the fact that Viola was the one proposing this raised suspicions in Akira and Sheryl's minds, preventing them from fully accepting the proposal.

"Viola, just to be clear, you're not plotting something again, are you?"

"Well, I am plotting something, but it's not a scheme to trap Akira, and it's also in the interests of both Akira and Sheryl, so it's fine, isn't it?"

"Then who will be disadvantaged by this?"

"Other than the Kiryou's combat suit sales and Katsuragi."

Akira would get to test new combat suits and could potentially buy them at a lower price depending on negotiations. Sheryl could enhance the faction's combat capabilities. The Authority would have a powerful Hunter using their products for promotion. Furthermore, it would also help promote sales of the comprehensive support system.

However, other competing companies would lose the opportunity for Akira to buy their products. Additionally, as much as the faction's combat capabilities would improve with the introduction of the comprehensive support system, Katsuragi's sales of equipment to the faction would decline.

There were clearly defined winners and losers in this high-priced, high-performance product promotion and the ensuing competition.

And Akira had no intention of getting involved in such matters. That was a business matter. He had no obligation to help Katsuragi profit at the expense of his own equipment and the enhancement of Sheryl's faction's combat capabilities.

Furthermore, even if he tested the combat suits, the process of ordering them from Shizuka's shop would remain the same. If he promised to buy combat suits from the Kiryou after this discussion, he could still test new combat suits and potentially buy them at a lower price. In that case, there was no reason for Akira to refuse the proposal, even if Viola intended to profit from mediating the deal. Next, Sheryl inquired.

"Viola, just to clarify. It seems like you're plotting various things, not just limited to this discussion. But no matter what you're plotting, it's safe to assume it's also in Inabe's best interests, correct?"

Sheryl was in a state of concern that Inabe might become the target of machinations regarding the failure of her efforts related to the old-world information terminals. Thus, while putting a stop to Viola's schemes here, it was also necessary to confirm this point.

However, Viola replied bluntly.

"I can't make any promises. Depending on the situation, that person might face ruin."

At Viola's unexpected response, Sheryl's surprise was evident. She then directed a very stern look at Viola.

"...What do you mean? I don't understand why you would make an enemy out of the city's executives..."

"But isn't it a 'common cause'?"

Interrupting, Viola wore a poorly veiled smile.

"Just so you know, I'm cooperating with Sheryl at Akira's request. So, I prioritize Akira and Sheryl's interests over Inabe and Sheryl's. Because of that, it's entirely possible that Inabe may suffer losses depending on the situation."

Sheryl found it difficult to interject as Viola continued with a series of denials, such as "However," and the like.

"If Akira becomes stronger, Sheryl, who relies on him, will also benefit. By enhancing Sheryl's faction's strength, Akira, her support, will also find relief. For the sake of Akira and Sheryl, who are in this together, I have kept my promise to Akira and worked hard for both of them. That's all there is to it. Just because our counterpart is a city executive doesn't mean we have an obligation to help Inabe to the extent of allowing our own downfall. Wouldn't you agree?"

If Sheryl disagreed, it would imply that she prioritized Inabe over Akira. If she agreed, it would imply acquiescence to actions leading to the downfall of city executives. Sheryl couldn't respond.

"Ah, could it be that you planned to shift your support from Akira to Inabe? Well, no matter how strong Akira is, a city executive would make a stronger support than just an ordinary hunter, right? I understand the sentiment."

Before Sheryl could react to Viola's outrageous statement, Viola wore a truly sinister smile.

"But, sorry, if that's the case, I can't cooperate. I don't want to be killed by Akira either. I'm sorry."

"I have no such plans!" Sheryl exclaimed, her voice rising. Just as Viola had predicted.

"In that case, there's no problem, right?" Viola said with a smile.

Sheryl managed to respond with a stiff smile, "...Right."

"Great. Since I've got confirmation from both of you, I'll head up first because I have negotiations with the Kiryou."

With that, Viola stood up and left the room, leaving Sheryl with a tense, strained smile. Akira seemed slightly surprised by Sheryl's outburst, while Carol looked on with a wry smile at their exchange.

Sheryl, now composed, sighed deeply as she soaked in the warm water. Despite the soothing effects of the high-quality bathwater that had surprised Akira, she couldn't shake off the fatigue in her expression in the face of Viola's poor quality.

Letting Viola continue speaking would worsen her position, yet attempting to stop her conversation would affirm its contents, further worsening the situation.

Shouldn't she have just not let Viola talk in the first place? That thought crossed her mind, recalling a past conversation with Tomejima. It was about how negotiations had been ruined because Viola hadn't said anything, despite being allowed to sit in on the condition of keeping quiet, no matter what.

"Letting her talk is useless. Silencing her is useless too. She's really unbearable. What should I do..."

Maybe kill her. The idea crossed her mind, even if she didn't intend to act on it. But at the same time, she remembered that Viola had put a 3-billion-aurum death retaliation request program on herself. Killing Viola would unofficially yield that bounty. But if it came down to killing her, she'd have to decline.

"Even so, there are people willing to do it, right? But I guess she would hire guards for such times. She's really terrible..."

Wishing she would just die. Viola was a person of extremely poor quality, thought of that way by many. But at the same time, considering the disadvantages she would face if she killed Viola herself, she wished someone else would do it instead.

By not making a mistake in that delicate adjustment, Viola was still alive today.

As Sheryl muttered to herself, Akira continued bathing a little away from her.

Akira noticed the terribly poor negotiation between Viola and Sheryl. But feeling that he had asked Viola for cooperation, he didn't know what to say to Sheryl.

Carol laughed and spoke to Akira as she glanced sideways at Sheryl, "Honestly, Akira, you're still clueless about dealing with women. If you don't know what to say, just hug her silently, okay?"

"...Is that so? But..."

"It's not embarrassing or anything. You're already in the bath together, aren't you? No need to be shy."

"It's not that embarrassing..."

Was that really okay in this situation? Akira wondered as he looked at Sheryl.

Sheryl remained silent and still.

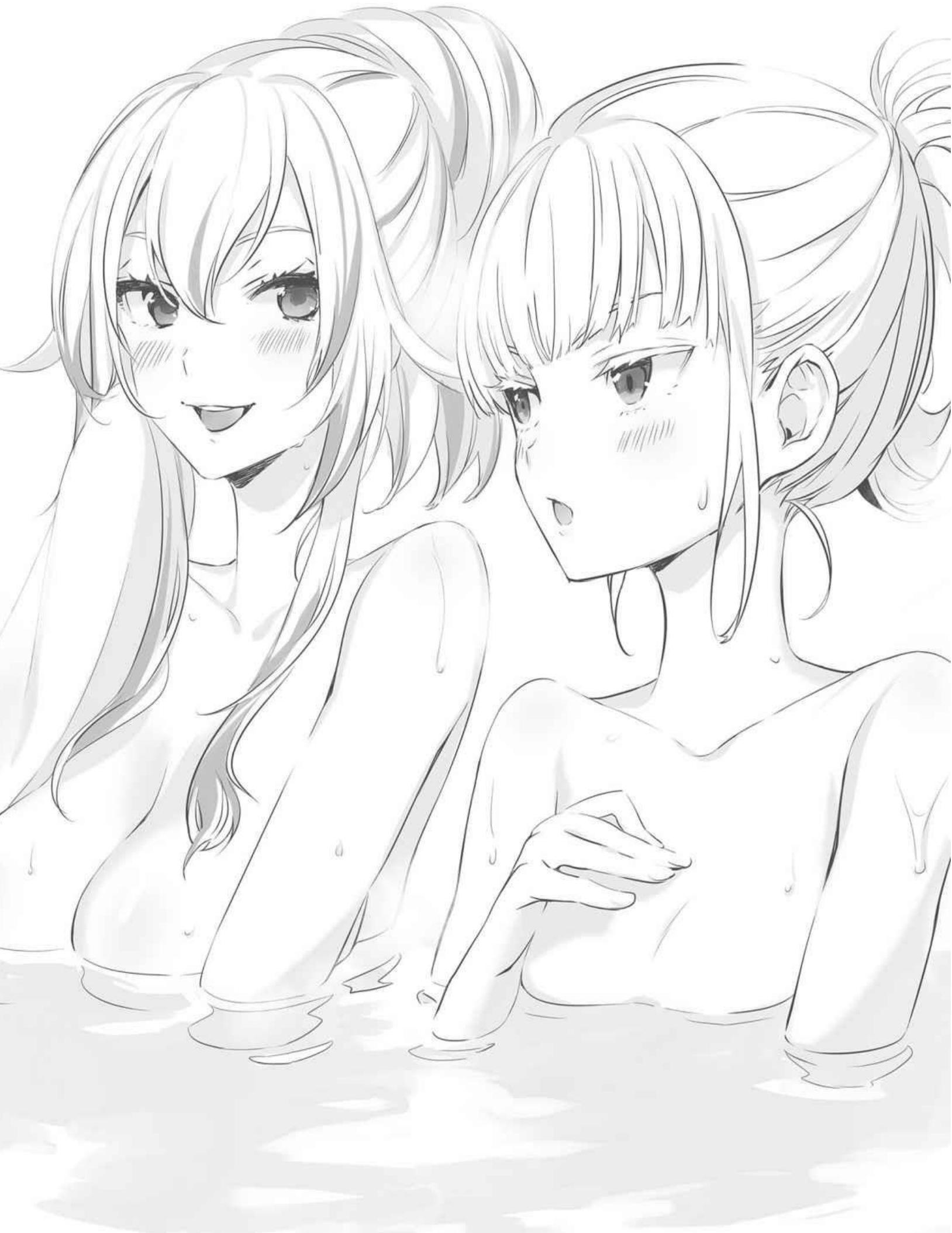
Seeing Sheryl's reaction, Carol laughed teasingly.

"Oh, I'm a little late, aren't I, Akira? It's no use now. Even if you hug someone, you're expecting something from, the effect is halved. It's too late now."

"Right..."

With that, Akira stopped hugging Sheryl.

Sheryl let out a heavy sigh. Then, with a somewhat displeased expression, she approached Akira and Carol.



"Just by associating with Viola, you show your own poor quality, Carol," Sheryl muttered, pouting at Carol's act of raising her hopes only to dash them.

"I won't deny it," Carol replied nonchalantly, brushing off Sheryl's remark. Sheryl sighed heavily again, but this time she seemed to regain her composure. She dropped her facade and revealed her usual expression.

"Carol, why do you associate with someone like her? Don't you think you'll just end up getting dragged down with her one day?"

"I have my reasons. Beyond that, Viola is competent and has money, connections, and information. If you associate with her appropriately, the benefits can be substantial. Even the proposition she brought today isn't a bad one, is it?"

"That's true, but..."

Even Sheryl, a child from the slums, had to acknowledge Viola's skill in getting a city executive to the negotiating table. Despite her terrible reputation, Viola's competence was undeniable. Sheryl understood this but still couldn't fully accept Viola. She couldn't fathom why Carol tolerated her.

Carol smiled and gently reassured Sheryl. "Sheryl, trust Viola moderately and doubt her moderately. If you don't know how to handle her, that's the best approach. It's also fine to cut ties and stay away. They say, 'let sleeping dogs lie' for a reason."

She then offered a light warning, "But don't try to use her, outsmart her, or double-cross her. Viola enjoys ruining people who try to do that."

"I'll keep that in mind," Sheryl replied, accepting Carol's basic advice on dealing with Viola. She believed Carol wouldn't lie about something like this, especially not around Akira.

Akira chimed in, "Carol, just so you know, I plan to kill Viola next time. And I won't let her be resurrected."

"If that time comes, give me a heads-up. If I'm under contract to protect Viola, I'll decline the renewal, so you can kill her afterward. It would be a help."

Akira made a difficult expression at Carol's casual acceptance of her friend's potential death, sensing it was neither indifference nor cold-heartedness.

"Won't you try to stop me?"

"If I asked you to stop, would you?"

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

"Exactly." "...No, I meant, won't you stop Viola?"

"Do you think if I told Viola to stop, she actually would?"

"...No, she probably wouldn't."

"Exactly."

"...No, I meant, won't you stop Viola?"

"Do you think if I told Viola to stop, she actually would?"

"...No, she probably wouldn't."

"Exactly."

Carol laughed, wearing a casual smile as if she had merely said something amusing during an ordinary conversation. She spoke about a friend's life and death with that same ordinary smile, which Akira found hard to comprehend.

But it didn't surprise him. When he shot Viola, Carol had reacted similarly, and so had Viola. Both accepted it as normal. Despite that, Akira knew they were close friends. He found Carol and Viola's peculiar friendship, which he couldn't fully understand, rather mysterious.

Having wrapped up the conversation about Viola, Akira once again indulged in the pleasure of the bath. The superior quality of the water made the experience far better than his own at home. As he enjoyed it with a relaxed expression, Carol spoke up.

"Akira, you seem to be enjoying yourself quite a bit. Do you like baths that much?"

"Yeah... And this bath... It's really something..."

"Oh? What's so special about it?"

"...? Well, you know, the water and stuff. Can't you tell?"

Akira was puzzled, wondering why Carol couldn't sense the difference despite bathing in the same water. Carol, however, understood perfectly.

"Oh, I see. So, it means the bath at your place is just that basic. Despite earning so much, you settle for such a cheap bath, huh?"

Her comment brought Akira's thoughts back from his relaxed state.

"Sorry my bath's so cheap. So, what's your bath like at home?"

"My bath? It's pretty impressive. For starters..."

Carol began to boast about her bathroom facilities. They were even more luxurious than the current bath they were using. The bathtub and room weren't as spacious as this one, but for personal use, they were more than adequate. The size could be adjusted as needed, and the interior was designed for the wealthy.

The water quality adjustment system was top-notch. It could finely tune the water to suit Carol's body, which had been enhanced with body-strengthening augmentations. The bath had functions to add recovery medicine and maintenance nanomachines to the water, allowing it to heal minor injuries, alleviate even the tiniest skin irritation or wounds, and remove residual nanomachines.

The changing room also featured a full-body air drying machine. This convenient device eliminated the need to manually dry oneself, saving both time and effort, and providing a clean and refreshing post-bath experience.

Every aspect of Carol's luxurious bath setup was persuasive enough to belittle Akira's home bathing experience as cheap.

"Mixing recovery medicine into the bathwater... That's quite the luxury. Even using cheaper recovery medicine, that must cost a lot, right?" Akira remarked.

"Sure, it costs money. But it's worth it, don't you think? There's no such thing as going overboard when it comes to taking care of your own body. People might say that maintaining your figure is easy for a body-enhanced individual but keeping it in ideal condition is still tough. I take care of every detail. Look at the firmness of my skin—amazing, right?" Carol said, pointing to her chest and guiding Akira's gaze there. Her voluptuous chest, clearly maintained with significant expense, was almost perfect in size, shape, and texture.

However, as Akira looked at her chest, he was reminded of Sara, another body-enhanced individual, and the stories she shared about the difficulties of maintaining her body.

"...Yeah. Being a body-enhanced individual sounds tough," Akira said, as if agreeing with a tale of hardship.

Carol managed a somewhat forced smile in response.

"...Well, yeah."

Despite her body captivating many, to Akira, Carol's body was merely a high-performance piece of equipment, powerful but requiring meticulous maintenance. Carol internally lamented this perspective.

(I know Akira is currently uninterested in women, but that just makes it harder. Really, what's going on...?)

At that moment, Carol noticed Sheryl's gaze. Sheryl, too, wore a perplexed expression at Akira's attitude. Sharing a sense of frustration and curiosity about why Akira didn't make a move on them, Carol and Sheryl sighed quietly in unison.



Back at his home, Akira found himself drawn to take another bath. However, as he soaked, he couldn't help but smile wryly at how unsatisfying it felt compared to his recent experiences.

"...I've gotten a taste for luxury."

Alpha, who was with him as usual, laughed teasingly.

『It seems so. You can't go to Sheryl's base to bathe every day, so why not consider renovating your bathroom? You've been working hard and earning well, so a little luxury should be fine.』

Hearing this, Akira nodded enthusiastically, as if he had obtained her agreement.

"Yeah, you're right! Okay, no need to wait. I'll contact a contractor tomorrow..."

『Akira, I'd advise against that.』

Akira looked puzzled.

"...Why not? We have the money, don't we?"

『You do, but using it for bathroom renovations could complicate things.』

Due to a deal with Kibayashi, Akira had to spend all the earnings from the Iida Commercial District ruins on equipment and ammunition. This money, 2 billion aurum, was advanced to him by Inabe. When it was deposited into Akira's account, it got mixed with his other funds. Using it for the bathroom renovation could lead to suspicions that he was misusing the funds meant exclusively for equipment.

To avoid any complications, Alpha explained, it would be better to wait until the 2 billion aurum was entirely spent on equipment or until the negotiations regarding the ownership of the automaton concluded and his final reward was determined.

"I see..."

Akira understood and finally realized why Kibayashi had laughed so hard during their deal. Being forced to use his earnings in a specific way was frustrating. As he discovered the pleasures of luxury, Akira also learned the frustration of such restrictions, making him feel a bit more like an ordinary hunter.

Episode 170 Trial Meeting of Reinforced Clothing

On the day Akira was to try out the Kiryou-powered suit, he arrived at Shizuka's shop, the designated meeting place. Opening the door marked with a "Closed" sign, he found Shizuka, Elena, and Sara waiting for him inside.

Although it was Viola who first informed Akira about the Kiryou suit, that was more of a behind-the-scenes maneuver to give him a heads-up. The official offer came later from Shizuka. Through her negotiations with Kiryou, Elena and Sara were also invited to join Akira in the trial session.

Kiryou's primary target was Akira. However, Elena and Sara, being highly skilled hunters with a rank of 40, were also potential valuable customers. Additionally, it was known that they were close friends with Akira, and recommendations from trusted friends in high-stakes environments like the wasteland carried more weight than any sales pitch. Thus, Kiryou agreed to include them in the session.

Kiryou also requested Shizuka's participation to potentially integrate her shop into their client base, considering that Shizuka's store was highly favored by Akira and his friends despite primarily catering to hunters with a rank around 30. It was unusual for hunters of Elena and Sara's caliber to remain loyal to a shop with such limitations, indicating their deep trust in Shizuka. By winning over Shizuka, Kiryou aimed to ensure ongoing recommendations of their products to Akira and his friends, which could be highly profitable.

Thus, Akira found himself heading to the Kiryou-powered suit trial session with Shizuka, Elena, and Sara. All of them were in casual clothes, a refreshing change for Akira who was used to seeing them in either battle gear or shop uniforms.

"Thank you for coming today, Shizuka. I appreciate you taking the time on your day off to accompany me," Akira said gratefully.

"It's no problem at all, Akira. You're a major customer, and as the shop owner, it's my duty to provide this level of service. Plus, it's a good opportunity to address Elena and Sara's equipment needs as well," Shizuka responded.

Elena chimed in, "Hey, Shizuka. Are you saying our equipment needs are just a side issue? That's not fair."

"Why don't you try contributing as much to my shop's sales as Akira does before making such complaints? Kiryou included you in this trial because of Akira, right? Maybe you should thank them for that," Shizuka retorted.

"Fine, fine," Elena replied, then turned to Akira with exaggerated gratitude. "Akira! Thanks a lot for today! I'm going to take advantage of being your friend to get a high-performance suit from Kiryou at a great price!"

"Good luck with that. I'll be watching to see how you do," Akira replied with a cheerful laugh. He genuinely hoped Elena and Sara would make the most of this opportunity, seeing it as a chance to repay them for their support.

"Speaking of which, it's not just Elena but Sara who's getting a new suit too, right? But I thought powered suits were tricky for body-enhanced individuals like her due to compatibility issues with the nanomachines," Akira asked.

Sara replied with a smile, "That's true for suits with mediocre performance. But anything in the billion Aurum range should be fine. I've already informed them about the nanomachines I use, so they should have something suitable. This trial session is a big help. Thanks, Akira."

"You're welcome, Sara. I'm glad I could help," Akira said, genuinely pleased to be of assistance."

As they continued chatting, the Kiryou sales representative arrived right on time. They were then transported to the trial session venue in a vehicle provided by Kiryou. The venue turned out to be the training facility in Drankam

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In the outskirts of the lower district of Kugamayama City, there is a massive training facility resembling a warehouse. The interior training grounds are spacious, allowing for the creation of complex terrain using movable walls. With this functionality, environments resembling buildings and ruins can be simulated, allowing for the safe replication of deadly situations using augmented reality monsters and training guns, without the use of live ammunition or risking lives.

This training facility was constructed by the Drankam Administrative Faction with support from backers within the protective walls. Recently, it has also been utilized as a testing ground for Kiryou's comprehensive support system.

Guided by the Kiryou sales representative, Akira and the others arrived at this facility and were led to a slightly larger room within the training grounds. There, the enhanced suits prepared for Akira and the others were arranged neatly.

For this trial session, Kiryou had prepared five enhanced suits for Akira and a total of six for Elena and the others. While it may not have been a comprehensive lineup of various types of enhanced suits, considering they were limited to products from Kiryou, it was deemed sufficient given that each suit was priced in the high range of several billion Aurums.

As Akira looked at the array of suits, he asked casually, "How much do these cost?"

In response to his question, Maebashi, the sales representative who had guided them this far, smiled pleasantly. "This is a trial session, so please feel free to try them without worrying about the price. Enhanced suits are chosen based on their performance for the customer. It's not about choosing based on price."

While it was true that higher-priced products tended to offer higher performance, as a Kiryou sales representative, Maebashi was confident that their pricing was fair. However, higher performance did not necessarily mean that the suits would meet all of Akira's requirements. If the selling point of a product did not align with what Akira was looking for, then it would be merely an expensive product with enhanced features that were of no use to him.

Therefore, rather than choosing based on price, Maebashi hoped that Akira would select a product based on actual trial evaluations. Additionally, if Akira were to inquire about the price upfront, it might lead to a biased evaluation of the product based on preconceived notions about its high price and performance. So, he hoped that Akira would try the suits first without asking about the price.

After delivering what seemed like a plausible explanation, Maebashi looked at Akira with a slightly playful expression. "That being said, if I may bring up a slightly more stringent matter, it is not Akira-sama, but rather the Cartridge Freak who is our company's customer. As the proprietor of that store, Shizuka-sama, determines the price at which our products will be sold to Akira-sama, we will not be involved. It involves sensitive matters such as purchase prices and profit margins, so I would prefer not to mention specific prices here."

Although Maebashi explained this in a light-hearted manner, Akira understood what he wanted to convey. Since Akira had chosen to purchase through Shizuka's store rather than directly from Kiryou, he refrained from making any further inquiries. He simply smiled wryly in response.

"Understood."

"Thank you very much. Now, allow me to explain the products we recommend for you, Akira-sama."

Maebashi then proceeded to explain the enhanced suits to Akira, while another female sales representative began explaining them to Elena and the others. Meanwhile, someone who appeared to be Shizuka's superior was about to initiate lively discussions regarding transactions worth tens of billions of Aurums.



After changing into the trial enhanced suit, Akira moved to the training area within the facility to assess its usability. As he began stretching exercises, Shizuka, who was with him, watched with a puzzled expression.

"Hey, Akira. This might sound naive, but do you really need all those functions in the enhanced suit?"

"Many people might not need them, but I think they're convenient to have. Personally, I find them necessary."

As Akira continued his stretching exercises, he performed them not on the floor but on the walls using the Force Field Armor. By applying the function that reinforced the footholds with armor, he could accelerate by pushing off the walls during high-speed movements or forcibly stop by adhering his feet to the surface when decelerating.

Observing this sight of Akira seemingly defying gravity, Shizuka smiled amusedly. "I see. The functions you expect from an enhanced suit really do change when you're as strong as you, Akira."

"It's not like I'm saying I can't use an enhanced suit without being able to walk on walls, but without such capabilities, quick movements would be challenging. Moreover, being able to move three-dimensionally in terrain expands the range of combat tactics, and even if you're cornered, you can escape by running up the walls... Whoa!"

As Akira attempted to run lightly along the wall using the Force Field Armor, he accidentally lost control and fell onto the floor. Switching the Force Field Armor to adhere his feet to the wall by alternating between both legs manually was still difficult for Akira.

"That's tough..."

Alpha chuckled and remarked, 『I handled that control for you. Besides, since you're borrowing the enhanced suit and the control device hasn't been adjusted for you specifically, there's not much you can do.』

"Yeah, I guess so."

Operating functions like the Force Field Armor's control, which were originally not part of the body's capabilities, required training to be performed intuitively. At the same time, the control device also needed to understand and interpret the user's nerve transmissions for those operations. While there were individual differences, neither of these tasks was something that could be mastered immediately.

However, with Alpha's support, the control device could be fully tailored to Akira from the beginning. Thanks to this, Akira had drastically reduced the training time for basic operation of the enhanced suit, allowing him to allocate the saved time to further improving his combat skills, thereby becoming stronger more efficiently.

As Akira stood up, he once again felt the greatness of Alpha's support. "Without Alpha's

support, I'm still at this level. I'll have to do my best."

『That's right. I'll support you, so do your best』, Alpha replied.

Akira smiled somewhat shyly at Shizuka before resuming his stretching exercises against the wall.

As Akira continued to test the functionality of the enhanced suit, Shizuka called out to him. "Akira, there's something I want to talk to you about. Can you listen to me for a moment?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Kiryou-san has a proposal regarding your equipment. So, um..."

"If you buy guns and information-gathering devices together, we can offer a discount. If you continue to buy Kiryou-made reinforced suits, we can give you a discount. If you enter into a long-term purchase contract, we can discount even further," Shizuka said, explaining the proposal from Kiryou, along with its benefits and drawbacks.

Hearing this, Akira frowned slightly. "Shizuka-san, if we go into detail, there will probably be a lot of specific conditions, right?"

"Yes, that was just a general explanation. There are many details like the discount rate depending on the purchase amount and contract period, or penalties for buying other company's products during the contract period."

"Right."

Seeing Akira's expression that clearly read 'this is a hassle,' Shizuka gave a wry smile.

"I'll handle the details. Is that okay?"

"Yes, please. That would be a great help. Thank you."

"It's fine. I'll make a good profit just by using my store as an intermediary. I have to at least do that much. Now, let's confirm the requirements for the gun you want to buy together. The SSB composite gun was a bit too big, so you want a smaller one this time, right?"

"Yes. The higher power was really helpful, but it was a bit too big for me..."

As Akira and Shizuka continued talking, Elena and Sara, wearing their trial reinforced suits, appeared a bit later. Seeing Akira talking to Shizuka while standing horizontally on the wall, Elena laughed.

"Akira, you're doing something interesting. Is that your way of checking the reinforced suit's performance?"

"Something like that."

Hearing this, Sara showed interest. "Oh, then I'll try it too."

Sara knew the method of wall-walking using the force field armor function in the legs. She put one foot on the wall and applied pressure to the sole of her foot, making the suit

recognize it as a foothold and tried to stand against gravity on the wall.

However, as soon as she lifted the other foot off the ground, she lost her balance significantly. Sara hurriedly landed back on the floor.

"...Akira, this is difficult, isn't it?"

"You'll get used to it. It's also challenging to do it with a borrowed reinforced suit today; I fell earlier too. By the way, can your suit do this kind of thing, Sara?"

"It should be able to."

"Then I'll help."

Akira extended his hand to Sara, and she tried again, holding onto him for support. This time she managed to stand on the wall, although just barely and trembling as if she might fall at any moment.

Seeing this, Elena also reached out to Akira with a laugh, and he helped her up onto the wall as well. Like Sara, she managed to stand but looked like she might fall at any moment.

With Akira supporting both of them, they wobbled on the wall while Shizuka, standing alone on the floor, lightly chuckled at the sight.

"What are the three of you doing?"

"Who knows."

Thinking that it was a bit silly, Akira laughed along with Elena and Sara.

After completing a simple performance check of the reinforced suits, Akira and the others decided to do a more thorough test. They borrowed equipment from Maebashi and prepared for a mock battle with augmented reality monsters. Taking their positions, they aimed their mock battle guns at a giant mechanical monster in the augmented view.

"Elena-san, Sara-san, let's start."

"Ready when you are."

"Let's do it."

Akira pulled the trigger. Since it was a mock battle gun, no bullets were fired, but the trajectory was calculated, and a hit was registered on the augmented reality target. At that moment, a multi-legged machine equipped with multiple machine guns started moving and aimed its virtual barrels at Akira and the others.

Through the display devices they were wearing, Akira and the others watched the enemy's movements. Using the physical capabilities of their trial reinforced suits, they immediately leaped away from the spot, dodging the enemy's line of fire.

They engaged in a mock battle, with Akira and the others appearing to be running around the training field with their guns at the ready. However, in augmented reality, a barrage of bullets flew wildly. With nothing to block the lines of fire, Akira and the others had to keep

moving constantly to avoid being overwhelmed by the enemy's gunfire.

Running, leaping, and dodging through the rain of bullets, they found opportunities to fire their guns. Sparks indicating hits on the enemy's armor appeared in augmented reality, but the multi-legged machine, protected by a powerful force field armor, continued its attack unfazed.

The first to be eliminated was Sara. The enhanced physical capabilities of her suit caused her to lose her balance and fall heavily. She was then targeted and destroyed.

Next was Elena. She tried to escape the enemy's line of fire but couldn't make it in time, receiving a judgment of being defeated as she was mowed down by a barrage of bullets.

Finally, Akira was taken out. Facing concentrated firepower from three directions, he was overwhelmed and suppressed, falling without a chance to fight back.

With all participants eliminated, the mock battle system stopped, and the multi-legged machine disappeared. Akira and the others got up and gathered together.

"The enemy settings are a bit too strong," Akira remarked, and Elena nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, if we don't make it a bit easier to confirm the movements of the reinforced suits, there's no point in doing the mock battle. We should change it," Sara also had some complaints about the guns.

"It's not just the enemy's strength. Isn't the power setting of these guns too weak? I thought I hit them quite a lot."

"We're here to test the performance of the reinforced suits, so I think the idea is that defeating the enemies easily with powerful guns wouldn't be very meaningful. Shall we change it?"

"Well, when you put it that way..."

Afterwards, Akira and the others continued the mock battle, adjusting the settings in various ways. Once they had tested the performance of the trial reinforced suits to a certain extent, they moved on to testing the next set of suits. Repeating this process, they tried out all the reinforced suits prepared by Kiryou. By the time they finished, the sun was already beginning to set.

As the scheduled time was approaching, the trial session for Kiryou's reinforced suits came to an end for the day.



After leaving the Drankam facility, Akira and the others decided to have a meal together at Shizuka's suggestion. They went to a somewhat upscale restaurant located near the defensive wall and sat around a table. Despite their multi-billion aurum shopping spree, they ordered a modest yet sufficiently luxurious meal for Akira and enjoyed their time.

As they savored the delicious food, they discussed the day's trial session. Shizuka started by asking Akira a question.

"Akira, out of all the reinforced suits we tested today, which one did you like the most?"

"Well, we tried them all, but I think the first one was the best."

"Ah, I thought so. That one is the most expensive."

"Really? How much does it cost?"

"In its basic configuration, it costs around 1.2 billion aurum."

"1.2 billion..."

Akira pondered for a moment. He could afford it. His budget, including ammunition costs, was 2 billion aurum. However, he had already spent 500 million aurum on a car and a bike, and he still needed to purchase guns and information-gathering equipment. Careful allocation of the budget was necessary.

Moreover, the 1.2 billion aurum was just for the basic configuration. Adding options and customizations could significantly increase the cost. While it was possible to lower the price, it would reduce the suit's performance, which was not recommended. Modifications were primarily for adding or enhancing specific functions, and Shizuka explained that the cost would generally increase with any changes. This made Akira's expression even more serious.

Noticing Akira's troubled look, Shizuka continued.

"And that's where the various discounts proposed by Kiryou come in handy..."

She then turned her gaze towards Elena and Sara.

"Elena, Sara, would you be willing to help out?"

If the purchase contract with Kiryou was applied not only to Akira but also to Elena and Sara, the discount rate for everyone would increase. Shizuka explained this and asked for their cooperation.

It wasn't a bad proposition. Elena understood the benefits, but she was also aware of the potential downsides. This was indeed a good opportunity to buy Kiryou's reinforced suits at a lower price, but it still involved a significant expenditure of over a billion aurum, and Elena and Sara had the option of not buying them.

If they accepted Shizuka's offer, that option would disappear. Shizuka was essentially asking them to make this concession for Akira's sake.

Understanding this, Elena smiled.

"Sure, but if that's the case, I'll make sure to negotiate thoroughly with both Shizuka and Kiryou."

"Please go easy on us," Shizuka replied with a smile, matching Elena's confident grin as the team's negotiator.

Akira, not fully grasping the details as well as Shizuka and Elena, still understood that he was involving them in his situation. Feeling somewhat apologetic, he asked,

"Um, Elena, is this really, okay?"

"Yes, it's a deal that benefits us if we negotiate properly. There's no reason to refuse."

After replying lightly, Elena gave Akira a proud look.

"And with this kind of negotiation, I can still act as a senior to Akira. I need to maintain my seniority and show him how it's done. So, let's start by negotiating with Shizuka right here. Akira, watch closely."

"Got it. I'll be watching closely," Akira replied with a grateful yet slightly amused smile.

While continuing their enjoyable meal, Akira listened with interest to the sharp negotiation between Shizuka and Elena at the table, which had now turned into a discussion venue for their negotiations with Kiryou.

By the time they had finished their meal, along with dessert and a second round of after-dinner coffee, Shizuka and Elena had successfully compiled all the various terms. They decided to use these terms as the basis for further negotiations with Kiryou in the coming days.

Having eaten their fill and discussed everything they needed to, Akira and the others left the restaurant. On their way back, Akira parted ways with Shizuka and the others, and walked cheerfully along the night streets with Alpha.

『Thanks to Shizuka and Elena's help, it looks like the next set of equipment is going to turn out well.』

『Indeed. It's a good thing. If we continue to enhance your equipment at this pace, the day you can tackle the ruins for my request isn't far off.』

『Is that so?』 Akira responded with a smile, but he couldn't help but sigh a little internally.

Even with the next set of equipment, and the one after that, it seemed that conquering the ruins for Alpha's request would still be challenging. Thinking that it would be a long road ahead, he smiled somewhat wryly.

Alpha maintained her usual smile. She knew that as long as Akira's equipment continued to improve significantly, the day she could achieve her goal would come closer. Keeping this in mind, she continued to smile unchanged.



Thanks to another round of negotiations between Shizuka and Kiryou, Akira was set to participate in another trial session for the enhanced suit. However, this time the location was the wasteland, and Akira was the sole participant. Now wearing the new enhanced suit, he swiftly moved around unpredictably, testing its capabilities by striking and kicking nearby rubble.

Though it was a trial session, Akira had already purchased this new enhanced suit. Since it was now his, he had Alpha begin taking control of its systems. This allowed Akira to move with Alpha's support, avoiding the difficulty he had experienced during the previous trial session, and demonstrating a completely different level of agility and skill.

Watching Akira's sharp, high-speed movements and his mid-air direction changes by kicking off generated footholds, Maebashi, the sales representative, and the accompanying engineers were visibly amazed.

After finishing his initial performance tests, Akira returned to Maebashi.

"Thanks for waiting. Now, could you please proceed with the optional components?"

"Understood."

Following Maebashi's instructions, the engineers helped Akira remove the enhanced suit and began installing and swapping out various parts.

The enhanced suit Akira had purchased, model CA31R, known commercially as the Cerberus, was designed to be highly adaptable, with a wide array of optional components to handle different situations. Akira had initially purchased the basic configuration, and he was now set to test out various additional components.

The core component, a black bodysuit, was fitted with metal armor and information-gathering devices. Enhancements for physical abilities and a headgear were also added, along with two auxiliary arms mounted on his back.

Dressed again in the enhanced suit, Akira listened to explanations about the new optional components and, with Alpha's assistance, began testing their performance.

Lightly tapping the armor and the suit to check the power field armor's minimum effective range, output, and switching speed, Akira also performed some light flexibility exercises to test the suit's flexibility while the power field armor was active. He moved swiftly to assess how the enhancements affected his physical abilities.

Simultaneously, he scouted the area to check the range and precision of the information-gathering devices. Focusing on distant rubble, he used the enhanced vision to display and enlarge specific areas, testing the functionality of the projected holographic interface, which appeared just in front of or slightly inside his corneas.

The headgear, which also served as a display and control device, had a simple structure with no goggles or face shields, leaving his hair exposed. However, it had a high defensive capability, protecting his entire head with a power field shield. Activating this invisible barrier, Akira lightly tapped his head to gauge the sensation while it was in use.

The multi-jointed auxiliary arms were designed for carrying heavy loads. While they couldn't move swiftly, they could securely support heavy firearms. Even when Akira applied a strong force, the arms pushed back with equal strength.

After testing these components, Akira requested Maebashi to modify the configuration. Maebashi, upon hearing the specifics, looked surprised.

"That's quite a specialized configuration... are you sure about this?"

The configuration Akira requested was highly efficient in theory but required the user to make no mistakes. It was a setup that, while potentially maximizing performance, could be impractical in real-world scenarios if not handled perfectly.

For example, some high-end wilderness vehicles used power field armor for body protection. However, even among vehicles of the same price range, many still used traditional armor tiles.

The force field armor contributes significantly to the lightweighting of vehicles, but it requires energy proportional to its strength and duration of use. In the unpredictable wilderness where one doesn't know when monsters will attack, maintaining enough strength to withstand their assaults would quickly deplete the energy reserves.

Certainly, there are means to enhance the strength of force field armor only during enemy attacks by using advanced reconnaissance equipment to detect enemies quickly. However, some monsters possess camouflage capabilities, and failure in reconnaissance could result in significant harm.

On the other hand, armor tiles consistently offer protection as long as they are in place. Considering the increased energy consumption due to the weight of armor tiles, they often prove more efficient in various situations.

The configuration Akira requested leaned heavily toward the former. Indeed, such a specialized configuration would pierce through even significantly more powerful enemies. However, it also carried a vulnerability that could lead to being easily killed by weaker foes. At least, recommending this configuration to clients or even to oneself was out of the question. Maebashi pondered whether to persuade Akira to reconsider.

Though young, Akira was competent enough to receive requests for hunter rank adjustments. Perhaps, this configuration wouldn't pose a problem for him. In fact, for exceptionally skilled hunters like him, such a configuration might be the optimal solution. That's what Maebashi thought.

However, Akira responded confidently without hesitation.

"Yes, please go ahead with that configuration if the budget allows."

"Understood."

If that's what the customer wants, there's no reason to deny it because one's own doubts. Reminding himself of this, Maebashi politely bowed.

While waiting for his enhanced suit to be modified as requested, Akira was introduced to someone named Someya by Maebashi.

Someya was a sales representative from a company called TOSON, which was the manufacturer of the SSB Composite Rifle. After a brief introduction, Someya smiled and got to the point.

"I heard that Akira-sama, who has achieved great results using our products, is looking to purchase the next gun. With that in mind, I couldn't resist coming here to propose our products once again. If it's not too much trouble, may I have a moment of your time?"

Akira felt somewhat pressured by Someya's persuasive smile.

"Uh, sure."

"Thank you! Please take a look at this."

Someya placed a trunk on the ground and opened it, revealing a gun inside.

"This is the LEO Composite Rifle, a product that we are proud to recommend to Akira-sama."

The length of the gun is slightly longer than that of the AAH Assault Rifle. However, its overall shape is thicker and bulkier, clearly distinguishing it from other guns by its appearance.

The gun barrel is adjustable, capable of accommodating various types of ammunition from standard rounds to grenades, and it boasts extremely high firing rates. The performance of the force field armor integrated into it is also remarkable, providing robustness and incorporating recoil suppression functions to significantly reduce the user's burden. After explaining these features in detail, Someya conveyed the gun's capabilities to Akira.

"Even with the explanations so far, I believe you understand that the performance of this LEO Composite Rifle far surpasses that of the SSB Composite Rifle. But that's not all! This LEO Composite Rifle is also compatible with C-Bullets! Please take a look!"

Someya took the LEO Composite Rifle and attached a magazine and an energy pack. Then, using the power of the reinforced inner suit worn under his suit, he firmly aimed the gun at a boulder a short distance away.

Then, he pulled the trigger. The force of the fired bullet was tremendous, more akin to artillery fire than gunfire.

C-Bullets are a collective term for special bullets primarily composed of force-reactive substances. By adjusting their strength and mass based on the supplied energy, they enable gunfire with unparalleled force compared to standard rounds.

In theory, with sufficient energy, their force can be increased indefinitely. However, due to current technological limitations, excessive energy input can cause the bullet to disintegrate or the gun firing it to be severely damaged, imposing a certain upper limit on its force.

Nevertheless, they are still extremely powerful special bullets. Akira was extremely impressed by the power of the C-Bullet that blew away the boulder at the impact point.

Satisfied with Akira's reaction, Someya continued the demonstration of the LEO Composite Rifle and C-Bullets.

Rather than simply increasing the force, they demonstrated settings to enhance penetration, cleanly piercing through hard boulders. Conversely, they demonstrated that the bullets would cause significant damage at the point of impact but would shatter without penetrating the target.

Furthermore, by treating C-Bullets like pseudo-anti-force field armor rounds, they demonstrated their versatility to Akira.

"What do you think? It's an amazing performance, isn't it? I can confidently say that the LEO Composite Rifle is the best choice for your next gun. Won't you consider purchasing our LEO Composite Rifle along with your reinforced suit?"

"Uh, about that."

Akira interjected somewhat awkwardly. Then, he continued apologetically.

"Um, those C-Bullets, they're like those expensive rounds that require assistance when purchasing, right? I'm not in a position to easily buy such high-priced ammunition, so even if you recommend a gun with such features to me, it's, um, a bit..."

Regarding the anti-force field armor rounds, he had requested assistance to purchase them affordably from Kibayashi. However, it was still uncertain whether he would acquire them. In that state, it was impossible for him to obtain C-Bullets. That's what Akira thought.

However, Someya understood that much. He replied with a strong smile.

"Don't worry. If you purchase our LEO Composite Rifle, we will take responsibility for assisting with the ammunition purchase you're arranging with Kibayashi. Specifically, we'll make sure to establish the ammunition purchase assistance you've requested."

Hearing this, Akira was slightly puzzled.

"...Um, how did you know about that?"

"During the negotiations for the ownership rights of the automaton, Mr. Kibayashi, who represents you, proposed it as one of the conditions for transferring ownership rights. That information reached our ears through several channels."

"Oh, I see."

Satisfied with the explanation, Akira relaxed his demeanor. Someya then continued.

"The ammunition purchase assistance for C-Bullets is a preferential treatment for hunters ranked 50 and above. It may indeed be difficult for you, ranked 45, to obtain it. However, it's possible with our company. What do you think?"

"...Before I give an answer, may I ask about the price of the gun?"

"It will be 200 million Aurums."

"200 million... I see. Understood. I'll buy it."

With the gun's performance being more than satisfactory and the added benefit of assistance for purchasing anti-force field armor rounds and C-Bullets, there was no reason for Akira to refuse. If he had to point out a downside, it would be that with his budget, he could only afford to buy one gun, including the discount for the reinforced suit. But that was unavoidable.

To Akira's surprise, Someya made another proposal.

"Thank you very much... Akira-sama. We have one more proposal for you. If you accept this proposal, we will include three LEO Composite Rifles, which normally cost 200 million Aurums each, in your budget."

This proposal shocked even Akira. He couldn't help but look puzzled.

A total of 500 million for the car and bike. 1.2 billion for the reinforced suit. 600 million for the gun. That's 2.3 billion Aurums in total, even with discounts. It's impossible to fit that into my initial budget of 1.8 billion Aurums, no matter how many conditions are added for discounts. This story itself seems like some kind of scam or an absurd condition being proposed. It's one of those. That's what Akira couldn't help but think. He asked while wearing that expression on his face.

"...What's the proposal?"

"Yes. Actually, if Akira-sama could cooperate with the promotion of our company's products..."

Akira had used the SSB Composite Rifle to win battles against humanoid weapon squads and groups of old-world-made automatons. Someya wanted to use that story for promotion.

Furthermore, Akira was asked to express his thoughts on using the SSB Composite Rifle in a way that praises its performance. This proposal came from Someya, the sales representative of TOSON, and it was a condition set by TOSON.

Akira, in a somewhat negative light, interpreted the proposal as either being presented with absurd conditions or being outright fraudulent, considering it to be only that much. To convince Akira, Someya supplemented the conversation.

"Akira-sama, you may have some reservations, but please consider the cost of advertising. Instead of approaching someone with a request to fight against humanoid weapon squads or automaton groups, risking their life for 600 million Aurums, isn't it better to use someone who has already achieved that feat and use their story for promotion?"

With that, Akira was convinced. For him, it was either to refuse or accept. Even he, who had Alpha's support, had nearly died. It's normal to die. There might be someone who can win without dying. However, there might not be anyone willing to accept that request for 600 million Aurums. Since it's just a proposition to him, there probably isn't. Well, then it's a fair deal. Akira made that judgment and nodded.

"I understand. If it's that kind of deal, I don't mind."

"Thank you very much. Now, let me explain the details..."

Someya was about to delve into the details, but at that moment, Akira's reinforced suit modification was completed. Considering the pressing time, Akira needed to confirm the operation of the reinforced suit first.

Since Akira had no intention of further changing the composition of the reinforced suit, he quickly confirmed its operation.

『Alpha. How is it? 』

『It's fine. 』

『Good. 』

Akira lightly bowed to Maebashi.

"It's okay. Thank you."

"No, no. Thank you for purchasing our reinforced suit. We sincerely appreciate it. We hope our products will further assist you in your endeavors... Now, since it's getting late, let's hurry."

Akira hurried to prepare to leave. He handed the removed reinforced suit to the technicians of the Mechanized Order, and together with Maebashi and Someya, headed towards the city. Their destination was the training facility in Drankam.

Due to negotiations with Shizuka and the Kiryou, Akira had been given additional conditions in exchange for further discounting the reinforced suit.

It involved cooperating in the development testing of the comprehensive support system. As part of that, Akira was scheduled to participate in simulated battles using the comprehensive support system.

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Episode 171 Yumina's ability

Sheryl and Inabe visited the large training facility in Drankam as representatives of the parties involved. Kiryou continued its sales pitch to the city's defense forces to introduce their comprehensive support system. Upon receiving this pitch, Inabe, in exchange, proposed a trial period with a personally affiliated company as a condition.

If the trial results proved to be sufficiently beneficial, Inabe would then advocate for its introduction to the city. Kiryou gladly accepted these terms. Publicly, that's how it appeared. However, behind the scenes, through Viola, who initiated this conversation, a complex and shady deal was made between Inabe and the Kiryou, but it would never come to light.

Sheryl was treated as a representative of the company designated by Inabe. In reality, she was the boss of a gang in the slum district and the owner of a black-market relics store in the city's underworld economy. Despite knowing this, Kiryou did not question or confirm it.

Though the extent might differ, what they were doing was akin to what the crime lords Hachijima Shige and Yoshioka Koji were doing, flooding the slum district with numerous humanoid weapons. Inabe, Kiryou, and Sheryl all turned a blind eye, all in the name of their own interests.

Currently, Sheryl was observing her gang's combat personnel desperately fighting virtual monsters in the training area of the facility. Takagi, a Kiryou engineer, spoke to Sheryl with overflowing confidence about the performance of his developed system.

"How about it? The performance of our comprehensive support enhanced suits, no, the King's Mind system that I developed. Isn't it amazing?"

Takagi was the leader of the comprehensive support system development team and also responsible for Katsuya and the others' comprehensive support enhanced suits.

"While our enhanced suits themselves boast commendable performance, they still cannot surpass the limitations of the user's abilities. Anyone can instantly become stronger without talent or training just by wearing them. Such fantasies come with enhanced suits. However, with the support of King's Mind, realizing that fantasy is not just a dream."

Given the significant achievements of Katsuya and others, Takagi had no doubts about the performance of the system he had developed.

"Look. Their strength with and without support is like night and day, isn't it? That's the power of King's Mind. Don't you think it's magnificent?"

The power of the comprehensive support system was significantly reflected in the results of Erio and others who were fighting with its support. When facing monsters assumed to be at Hunter Rank 30, Erio and his team were victorious with support and got annihilated without it. It was evidence of the effectiveness of the system's support.

Sheryl politely responded, "Yes. I did not expect such performance. It's amazing."

"Thank you. However, this is not the end. You will see further performance later. Well then."

Takagi bowed satisfactorily and left. Sheryl watched his departing back, masking her external smile.

Inabe approached Sheryl and said, "You seem dissatisfied. Was there something lacking in the performance of the comprehensive support system?"

"No, there was nothing like that."

"Then what's the matter?"

"I was slightly irritated by the notion that they think they can replace Akira with such performance."

"I see."

Inabe, satisfied with her response, glanced toward Takagi. His expression turned slightly grim.

There stood Udajima. Udajima was also a city official and a counterpart to Inabe as the Kiryou pursued him for business. Takagi passionately recommended the system he had developed.

However, given the situation with Akira, the Kiryou prioritized its dealings with Inabe. Yet, the Drankam bureaucratic faction was strengthening its ties with Udajima.

Udajima dispatched Katsuya's unit to his designated section deep in the ruins of Kuzusuhara district, achieving significant results in both monster extermination and relic collection, greatly contributing to Drankam's interests. In addition, Udajima was dominant in the factional dispute with Inabe.

With these circumstances in mind, Inabe believed it was unavoidable for Drankam to prioritize Udajima over him. Thus, despite that, Mizuha, who had come to flatter him at the previous day's standing committee, now seemingly flattering Udajima, Inabe had no intention of showing any displeasure.

Nevertheless, Inabe's slight grimace was due to the presence of Viola by Udajima's side.

"Now, Sheryl, let me ask. What's the reason Viola is there?"

Sheryl calmly responded, "I heard it's part of the operation."

"I see. Are you sure everything's in order?"

"If you wish to deal with her, please feel free. However, if you intend to dispose of her, it would be appreciated if you could handle it yourself. She has a death retaliation request program worth about 30 billion aurums, so it would be troublesome for me to deal with her."

"...So, am I to understand that you cannot control her? That would be troublesome," Inabe said, exuding the intimidation of a city official. But even so, Sheryl's attitude remained unshaken.

"It depends on the definition of control. If by control you mean we're effectively using her for our interests despite not having the power of life and death over her, then yes, we're controlling her adequately. She's a troublesome person just to keep alive, but for now, she's worth keeping alive. Please consider that," Sheryl replied calmly.

There was no need for hesitation in her response. Gone was the Sheryl who once needed courage for such exchanges. She answered without needing any resolve.

Inabe seemed somewhat surprised by Sheryl's attitude. However, at the same time, he also viewed her attitude favorably.

"I see. Then, for now, let's let her be," Inabe said.

As much as Sheryl could deflect his intimidation, she couldn't afford to let her guard down. But at the same time, if she couldn't even handle this much, Inabe felt she wasn't reliable as a co-conspirator risking their own positions.

As a reliable co-operator, Sheryl was finally acknowledged by Inabe. And as that, Sheryl calmly assessed the situation. She had become capable of doing so thanks to an incident in the bathhouse with Viola.

Her partner was Akira, not Inabe. Sheryl had temporarily forgotten this obvious fact due to the thought that if her partner were to turn against the city officials, it would be a disaster. But once she remembered that, she realized that even if she were to make an enemy of Inabe, it wouldn't be a problem for her.

Cooperating with Inabe was still the best option. That judgment hadn't changed. However, depending on the situation, even if it meant turning against Inabe or cutting ties, she would choose the best option for herself and Akira. Sheryl was aware of this recognition.

Of course, she had no intention of creating such a situation herself. She would strive to avoid it. Nevertheless, her priority was Akira and herself. Not Inabe or Viola. She wasn't willing to yield on that point.

With that awareness, Sheryl pondered and acted, and in a sense, she possessed a similar quality of malice as Viola.

As Sheryl and Inabe continued to watch, Furata appeared, this time accompanied not only by Takagi but also by a Kiryou executive named Yodogawa, as well as Viola, Mizuha, and Yumina.

Yodogawa, as the Kiryou representative, made a proposal to Sheryl's group. It was to have a mock battle between Erio's team and Yumina.

Sheryl found the offer somewhat unexpected. "That's... fine, but could I ask for the reason behind it?"

Sheryl had assumed that the mock battle would involve Akira, as Takagi had mentioned showing further performance. So, the proposal for a mock battle between Erio's team and Yumina was somewhat surprising to her.

And indeed, the initial plan was what Sheryl had anticipated. However, Furata intervened, and with Udajima's consent, it became this current arrangement.

Yodogawa, having approved the change in plans as a Kiryou executive, hesitated for a moment before responding to how much he should disclose to outsiders.

"Well, you see, our comprehensive support system isn't just the system developed by Takagi's team; it also includes what Furata's team developed. Since it's a rare opportunity, I thought you might want to see the results of their development as well. What do you think?"

"In that case, yes," Sheryl replied.

"Thank you. We'll start preparing right away," Yodogawa said, directing his gaze at Takagi and Furata. Takagi and his team then bowed to Sheryl's group before exchanging somewhat defiant glances with each other and beginning the preparations for the mock battle.

The preparations were conducted as if to show that there was no wrongdoing, even in the presence of the two city officials. Members of each development team monitored each other with a tense air.

Taken aback by the unexpected situation, Sheryl tentatively asked Yodogawa, "...Um, I don't want to impose, but if there are any circumstances behind this mock battle, could you please let me know?"

It was a question borne out of curiosity, and if there were any company secrets involved, Sheryl hadn't intended to push for an answer. However, both Inabe and Udajima chimed in.

"I'm curious as well."

"Same here."

If it had just been a question from someone with minimal acquaintance, Yodogawa could have easily brushed it off. But with two city officials expressing interest, he had no choice but to provide a somewhat detailed response.

"Our comprehensive support system includes both Takagi's system and Furata's system, both of which are highly efficient. However, due to differences in direction, there have been some disagreements in development..."

Takagi's system had been producing significant results thanks to Katsuya's team. The management of Kiryou was satisfied with these results and had begun promoting its introduction to the city.

On the other hand, Furata's system had produced little results until recently, facing budget cuts and the risk of development suspension. However, this changed thanks to Yumina's efforts. Accompanying individuals tasked with Hunter Rank adjustment, she achieved

significant results in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District ruins and the commercial district ruins of Iida.

At face value, this should have been enough to justify Furata's system finally producing results. However, a problem arose. The individual who achieved these results using Furata's system had been deemed ineffective when using Takagi's system.

Furata's system was so excellent that it could produce significant results even in individuals considered ineffective by Takagi's system. Alternatively, there might be a fatal flaw in Takagi's system's ability evaluation function. The management of Kiryou was troubled by either scenario.

"In any case, we are ultimately moving towards integrating both systems. However, there are disputes over the integration of development teams and, after integration, which system—Takagi's or Furata's—will take the lead..."

Sheryl understood the situation from this explanation.

"I see, so you're proposing a mock battle between the two systems to decide."

"Well, yes."

"However, wouldn't it make more sense for Yumina-san and Katsuya's team to participate in the mock battle?"

"There's some dispute over that as well..."

Katsuya's team had achieved significant results using Takagi's system. Takagi attributed this success to the high performance of his own system. However, Furata argued that it was all due to the high abilities of Katsuya's team and not Takagi's system. Therefore, to confirm this, Furata demanded that others use Takagi's system in the mock battle.

Ideally, Furata's system should also have been used by others, but this was overlooked due to Yumina receiving an ineffectiveness judgment from Takagi's system. If Takagi had requested it, he would have had to admit the flaws in his own developed system.

And so, driven by confidence in his own system, Takagi accepted Furata's demand.

Both Yumina's and Erio's teams had the same equipment. The only difference was in the number of personnel and the support system. The mock battle would proceed under these conditions.

Both Takagi and Furata understood that the conditions weren't equal. What mattered was not the victory or defeat but the content of the mock battle. Even if they were to lose, if they could demonstrate that their system was superior, that would be sufficient.

And with that in mind, both Takagi and Furata believed they would win.

As the preparations for the mock battle concluded, Sheryl addressed Erio's team lined up in front of her.

"It's 10 against 1. The equipment is the same except for the comprehensive support system. Well, do your best. If you win, I'll give you a prize. Each of you will receive 1 million Aurums."

The children, brimming with fighting spirit, were surprised, and cheered, eager to rise to the challenge. However, Erio alone wore a stern expression, his surprise mixed with apprehension.



The terrain for Yumina and Erio's mock battle consisted of two initial rooms connected by a wide and long corridor. The corridor had several short dead-end side passages where one could hide while making their way to the opponent's room.

At the start, participants could move freely within the entire area, but as time passed, the combat area would shrink from the center outward in a circular pattern. Once outside the combat area, participants would be subject to defeat, so they couldn't linger indefinitely in their initial room waiting for the opponent.

If one were to leave their room first and aim for the opponent's room entrance from the side passage, they could catch the opponent off guard, forcing them out of their room due to the passage of time. However, the opponent could also aim to ambush them as they exited their room. Although the terrain was relatively simple, there were many strategic maneuvers to consider.

Additionally, by changing the initial points to side passages or altering the victory conditions between attackers and defenders, complex unit maneuvers requiring high-level coordination could be implemented.

In this scenario, with both sides aware of each other's initial positions, the victory condition was the complete elimination of the opponent. Therefore, Erio's team planned to take advantage of their numerical superiority by launching a sudden assault on Yumina's room, engaging in combat with her under the assumption of mutual annihilation. If anyone from Erio's team survived, they would win.

Erio's team waited inside their room for the signal to start the mock battle. The children, enticed by the prize of 1 million Aurums, were eager. They waited near the entrance of the room, anticipating the start of the mock battle.

It was then that Erio, appointed as the squad leader by the comprehensive support system, addressed everyone.

"Hey, listen up. Just because the boss is offering a prize doesn't mean you can slack off. Stay focused."

"What are you talking about? Of course, we will. It's 10 million Aurums if we win, right?"

"Yeah. We're going to win no matter what. Let's give it everything we've got."

Erio smiled as he spoke, but he couldn't help but sigh softly as he observed the unconscious confidence in his friends' expressions.

"Alright, let me rephrase that. Treat the opponent as if it's Akira-san. Got it?"

With Erio's revised instruction, the smiles vanished from his friends' faces, replaced by expressions of confusion.

"Huh? Wait a minute. Are you saying there's no winning goal?"

"I'm not saying that, but don't let your guard down."

The children exchanged glances. If the opponent was Akira, they felt they had no chance of winning at all. Even without enhanced suits, they believed Akira could easily defeat them in a ratio of 10 to 1, or even 50 to 1.

Indeed, Akira had single-handedly infiltrated and almost wiped out a mid-level gang's stronghold in the slum district without enhanced suits, effectively destroying the gang. Even with support from the comprehensive support system, facing Akira without enhanced suits in a 10 to 1 scenario would be futile. This shared understanding was present among everyone, including Erio.

There was a boy with a puzzled expression on his face looking at Erio.

"Hey, but isn't that Yumina girl the same one who stayed in the background when our warehouse was attacked? If she's only at that level, can't we handle her somehow?"

"Just saying that already shows you're being careless. And even if the boss offers a reward, it's 10 million Aurum for all of us, right? Is that all it's worth to win a mock battle? Definitely not. If you're not thinking that way, you shouldn't even say it."

Upon hearing this, Erio's friends seemed to understand and lowered their enthusiasm, realizing the gravity of the situation.

Sensing he might have said too much, Erio added firmly, "But we still have a chance. The support from that comprehensive support system was amazing. It wasn't a real combat, but we managed to defeat some pretty strong monsters with it. Maybe, just maybe, we can make it work."

One of the downtrodden members perked up at this.

"But that's only if we give it everything we've got. If we think of the opponent as Akira-san and give it our all, there's a chance we'll come out on top. So, let's not slack off and give it everything we've got. Losing here doesn't mean we'll actually die. There's nothing to fear."

Erio's words reignited everyone's enthusiasm.

"Yeah! Let's do this, Erio!"

Erio's team consisted of combat personnel from the gang. However, in terms of combat effectiveness, they were hardly significant.

The majority of the combat power rested with Akira alone, supplemented by external hunters like Levin and Kolbe. Additionally, there were also recently stationed young hunters from Tomejima's group. If necessary, they could even request reinforcements from Shijima

Considering the combat power of the entire gang, Erio's team wasn't particularly strong. Yet, many among them felt that although they were in a dire situation, there was nothing they could do about it.

Erio's words resonated strongly with those individuals. If they could show their strength here, perhaps something would change. The desire to surpass the reward of 10 million Aurums rekindled the spirits of Erio's friends.

"That's right! Erio! Let's show the boss what we're made of!"

Erio smiled confidently alongside his spirited companions.

And then, as the signal for the mock battle sounded, Erio's team burst out of the room with guns at the ready.

However, in an instant, four of them were eliminated. Two who were supposed to provide suppressive fire towards the opposite side of the corridor, and two others who were supposed to head towards the side passage while receiving cover fire, were all shot by Yumina as she sprinted towards them from the opposite side of the corridor.

"What the!?"

Erio, attempting to follow his comrades, hurriedly retreated back into the room. He made it in time, but his comrades who attempted to do the same were too late. They were caught by the elimination judgment, their enhanced suits immobilized, and they collapsed onto the floor of the corridor.

Just five seconds into the mock battle, Erio's team had already lost half of their members.

And throughout all this, Yumina continued to target Erio's team as she sprinted down the corridor.



Before the start of the mock battle, Yumina took slow, deep breaths to adjust her mental state. She balanced between being moderately tense and relaxed, focusing to give her all.

What she sought was victory, and not just any victory, but a decisive one. She aimed to scatter her opponent, to overwhelm them completely without any ambiguity.

With that outcome, she aimed to shatter the assessment of her abilities as "non-combatant" from Takagi's system and prove that she could fight alongside Katsuya. With that certainty, Yumina was determined to win with all her might.

The comprehensive support system had been instructed in advance to support her with the premise of deciding the match in the shortest possible time, preferably within 30 seconds.

As a result, the comprehensive support system instructed Yumina to rush out of the starting point room as soon as the mock battle began, regardless of the opponent's position, and proceed to defeat Erio's team.

Yumina's urgency in rushing the battle was to finish before the manipulation of her perception of time reached its limit. Having succeeded in doing it in the battle at the Iida Commercial District Ruins, Yumina continued to train in this technique.

Once you succeed once, reproducing it becomes easier. As reproductions become easier, training continues to be able to manipulate the perception of time for longer and more densely.

Thanks to this, Yumina's abilities had improved dramatically since the battle at the Iida Commercial District Ruins, although she was still far behind Akira in terms of proficiency.

The countdown to the start of the mock battle was approaching. The remaining time displayed in her expanded field of view was decreasing. Ten seconds left. The digits displayed to the smallest decimal place decreased at a faster rate the smaller the digit. While concentrating on those numbers, Yumina focused deeper. With five seconds remaining, the integer part of the number barely seemed to decrease at all, making it even more frustrating. She concentrated even harder. Even the part after the decimal point slowed its decrease further.

At that moment, Yumina suddenly remembered the sight of Erio's team, rejoicing when they were told that they would receive 1 million Aurums as a reward if they won.

(...I'm sorry. I have my own circumstances. I'll make sure to win!) One second left. In a world so slow that there was enough time to think calmly, Yumina slowly raised her gun. But even then, there was only a little time left.

And when the number showing the remaining time reached zero, Yumina rushed out of the room. Erio's team was in a room connected by a long corridor. But even though it was called long, it was only a short distance when running with the legs of the reinforced suit. However, Yumina felt that distance a little longer.

Due to getting used to the performance of the reinforced suit borrowed to accompany Akira, Yumina felt that her movements in the suit she was currently wearing were terribly slow. She continued running with a sensation of moving the suit forcibly from the inside, unable to keep up with her own movements.

She could see Erio's team ahead in the corridor. While feeling their movements sluggish, Yumina aimed her gun and fired. Due to the performance of the suit, she felt that the aiming correction by the comprehensive support system was not keeping up, so she aimed manually and pulled the trigger.

The trajectory was calculated from the angle of the training gun's muzzle. Yumina's aim was accurate, and the fifth targeted individuals received the defeat judgment and fell to the floor.

(...Is this enough? No, it's still insufficient! No room for carelessness or hesitation! I don't have that luxury! I will win!)

Yumina continued running down the corridor without hiding in the side passage, sprinting straight down the unobstructed corridor.

Erio's team, still with five members remaining, attempted to shoot Yumina from the room's entrance.

However, their movements were far too slow compared to Yumina's. They received instructions from the comprehensive support system, recognized their contents, and began moving in a panic. At that moment, they were fatally slow. No matter how much Erio's team hurried, for Yumina, they were no more than stationary targets.

As expected, they were hit. The moment any part of their body or gun was exposed to Yumina's line of fire, they were accurately shot. If it was their body, they received defeat judgment; if it was their gun, it received destruction judgment, and one by one, they dropped out. In no time, only Erio remained.

Still, Erio did not lose his fighting spirit. He aimed his gun at the room's entrance and waited patiently. Although Yumina's figure was visible through the wall, thanks to the information-gathering equipment of the fallen comrades, which was set to search the corridor and transmit the information to Erio.

Yumina ran straight down the corridor, intending to enter their room. If that's the case, then it's all about timing that moment. Thinking so, Erio gambled everything on that moment.

But the gamble never paid off.

Yumina slipped past the opponent's line of fire and entered the room. Even if Erio had pulled the trigger at the perfect timing, he wouldn't have hit Yumina.

And there was no time left for Erio to readjust his aim at Yumina, who had entered the room.

Yumina pulled the trigger. Erio, hit by the defeat judgment, collapsed. Erio's team was completely defeated. The mock battle ended with Yumina's victory.



Sheryl and her group witnessed the mock battle between Yumina and Erio's team. Not only Takagi, who was on the losing side, but also Furata, who was on the winning side, seemed somewhat stunned.

"Unbelievable..."

Takagi's murmurs were what Furata had hoped for. However, there was no joy. Furata understood that this was the power of the system he had developed, and he couldn't boast about it. He knew there were limitations to relying solely on technology.

Inabe and Udagima were also surprised by Yumina's unexpected strength. They had planned to test the reinforced suits with Akira and Katsuya later and this mock battle was just a prelude. So, their surprise was profound considering their expectations.

Sheryl seemed to be the only one present who wasn't surprised. Udagima noticed this and asked her.

"It seems like you're not surprised. Was this result as expected for you?"

"...I had heard that she had achieved satisfactory results accompanying Akira, so it was within my expectations."

"I see. Can I ask, then, to what extent the lack of proficiency of the individuals you brought with you influenced your expectations?"

Sheryl was asked if the outcome of the mock battle was not because Yumina was too strong, but rather because Erio's team was too weak. She answered matter-of-factly.

"It's undeniable that our personnel here are practically amateurs compared to those from Drankam. However, we expected them to have sufficient combat ability through the introduction of the comprehensive support system. At least, we didn't anticipate any lack of motivation. That's why we offered prize money."

While Erio's team lacked proficiency, their motivation was not in question. So, the problem seemed to lie with the performance of the comprehensive support system that was supposed to compensate for their lack of ability. Sheryl pointed this out.

"I see. Then, I'd like to hear your opinion as well."

Udagima sought a rebuttal from Takagi. But his voice didn't reach Takagi, who was still reeling from the shock of the mock battle's outcome.

"This is unbelievable... That can't be..."

Takagi hadn't recovered from the shock of the mock battle's result. He kept repeating short phrases indicating disbelief.

To that somewhat straightforward response, Udagima redirected his inquiry from Takagi to Furata. Furata glanced at Takagi before answering somewhat awkwardly.

"Ah, Takagi's system prioritizes efficiency in unit operations, whereas my system, which also prioritizes individual efficiency to some extent, has differences. The outcome of this mock battle seems to have highlighted those differences..."

Why did he have to defend Takagi? Furata continued his explanation while thinking so.

Takagi's system certainly improved the efficiency of unit operations, but in order to utilize its performance, the user also needed a minimum level of familiarity with unit operations. Even if the system indicated the optimal course of action, to what extent the user strictly adhered to those instructions depended on their own abilities. Even with identical instructions, the interpretation and resulting actions would be completely different for an expert and a novice.

Of course, Takagi's system would likely absorb these differences in its instructions, but for that, the system side would need to learn the user's adaptation abilities. While the learning period for this system was likely much shorter than regular unit training, expecting someone who used the system for the first time today to adapt immediately was unreasonable.

Therefore, Erio's team could only make clumsy movements even with the support of the system and couldn't keep up with Yumina's movements. Furata pointed out the issue with the combination of Takagi's system and Erio's team.

Then, he began talking about his own system and Yumina.

"To be honest, I believe Yumina's individual ability has played a significant role in this outcome. However, that's because it's based on the system, I developed..."

Yumina was undoubtedly strong, but that was with the support of her own system, something that couldn't be replicated with Takagi's system.

Furthermore, even if he were to use his system with Erio's team in this situation, they wouldn't be able to fight like Yumina. His system was designed to provide support tailored to the user, but for that, it required data for suitable adjustments. While Yumina already had data collected from long-term development tests, Erio's team did not. While support based on general data was possible, it couldn't achieve the same efficiency as with Yumina.

Of course, it's entirely possible that Erio's team could become as strong as Yumina given the same level of talent and dedication, along with similar data collection and training over the same period. However, there's no guarantee. I can only guarantee the performance of my own system. It's a mistake as a developer to guarantee the results of others' talents and efforts.

With that explanation, Furata acknowledged Yumina's abilities while emphasizing the power of his own system.

"Well, such systems have their characteristics. On one hand, both the user and the system have their shortcomings and strengths and combining them may have led to such extreme results in the mock battle. That's my assessment. But rest assured, once both systems are integrated, only the strengths of both systems will be reflected."

Furata stopped there, implying that further discussion was for executives, and gestured for Yodogawa to take over.

However, before that, Udajima interjected.

"What do you think about her being deemed powerless by the system? Personally, I find it questionable to deem such a capable individual as incapable."

Furata glanced at Takagi again. Sensing that answering would still be difficult, he made up something plausible while wondering why he had to come up with excuses himself.

"...That's likely a consequence of prioritizing efficiency in unit operations."

When a unit composed of individuals with almost equal abilities introduces someone with significantly different abilities, the disparity in abilities can become a problem, potentially decreasing overall efficiency. In such cases, even if the individual has high ability, the system treats them as a factor lowering the efficiency of the entire unit and tries to exclude them from the unit.

Likely, the reason for this exclusion didn't effectively communicate from the system to the Drankam side. It was still in development, without adjustments to the wording, and the inappropriate term "incapable" might have been used in the explanation. Furata tried to cover up this issue.

Simply put, it wasn't accurate to say that Yumina was weak enough to be deemed incapable at that time. Saying so could be interpreted as criticizing the incompetence of Drankam for not recognizing Yumina's potential. Additionally, if the accurate reason behind Yumina's strength were explained, it would reveal that she had undergone rigorous training under Akira, potentially undermining the credibility of his own system.

This explanation might have been a bit strained. Furata thought so but answered as such for the time being.

Udajima seemed satisfied with the explanation on the surface.

"I see. That's unfortunate for her. Mizuha-san. Now that we understand the reason, I think her treatment should be promptly corrected, don't you think? Wasn't she a member of Katsuya's team?"

Mizuha responded with a pleasant smile.

"Yes, of course. I'll make the necessary adjustments immediately."

For Udajima, whether Yumina's strength came from her own ability or from the support of the comprehensive support system didn't matter. What was important was that such a powerful individual existed outside the Drankam bureaucratic faction.

By incorporating Mizuha, Udajima essentially placed Katsuya's team under his control. This meant that even if Katsuya's team continued their hunter activities in the depths of the Kuzusuhara City ruins, they wouldn't be able to operate in Inabe's designated area.

Yumina was technically aligned with the bureaucratic faction. However, she had been excluded from Katsuya's team and was also excluded from the mainstream activities of the bureaucratic faction. She wasn't receiving favorable treatment.

Knowing this, Udajima feared that if Yumina were to be recruited by Inabe here, he might agree due to his dissatisfaction with his own treatment. So, he instructed Mizuha to quickly incorporate Yumina here.

And since Mizuha was already under Udajima's influence, she had no veto power. Despite planning to completely exclude Yumina from Katsuya's team, Mizuha answered with a smile, though she felt strong dissatisfaction internally.

By winning the mock battle, Yumina had achieved her own wish to return to Katsuya's side. But in exchange, she would be bound by new constraints and forced to comply with the interests of a stronger organization.

Episode 172 Mock Battle

Akira had agreed to cooperate in the development test of the comprehensive support system as one of the conditions for getting a discount on the enhanced suits. That's why he was at Drankam's large training facility.

Wearing the provided enhanced suit, Akira entered the testing area inside the facility, where Elena and the others were also present. Though the sizes were different, Elena and her team were wearing the same enhanced suits as Akira.

"Elena-san's team is here too. Uh, I guess that means..."

"Yes, indeed. We are. If wearing this tall suit means getting it cheaper for something like this, then there's no reason to refuse, right?" Elena replied with a smile, and Akira bowed his head.

"Thank you very much."

Akira understood that Elena's team had joined the development test not only for their own enhanced suits but also to get a discount on Akira's suit.

Reina and Togami were also present. They were wearing the same comprehensive support enhanced suits, indicating their participation in the development test. Shioli and Kanae were there too, but they were wearing maid uniforms.

"Are Shioli's team just accompanying?"

"Yes. I, at least. Bringing Kanae along could result in injuries during the test."

"...That's true."

Even in the same mock battle, the danger level differs significantly between simply shooting with training guns that don't fire bullets and engaging in hand-to-hand combat, even with moderation. Akira found this reason convincing enough.

Kanae looked a little dissatisfied.

"I'm telling you I'll go easy."

"Spare me."

"Hey, Akira, how about a little test of hand-to-hand combat apart from the mock battle?"

"No thanks."

Kanae seemed quite dissatisfied. Togami lightly commented while looking at Akira's team.

"Today, Akira is equipped the same. You can't make excuses about different equipment performance."

Even hearing that, Reina smiled fearlessly.

"We don't need excuses as long as we produce good results, right?"

"You say that so easily. But well, you're right."

That excuse wasn't for anyone else but for themselves. Understanding this, Togami answered with a smile.

With all the participants gathered, technicians from Kiryou came to brief Akira's team on the test. Akira seemed a little puzzled.

"Um, I heard that we were supposed to split into groups with and without support from the comprehensive support system for the mock battle..."

"Ah, that was the plan, but there have been some changes. ...Is that a problem?"

"No, it's fine. I understand."

"In that case, please."

Akira noticed the somewhat evasive tone of the other party's words. However, he decided not to worry about it, as he was just cooperating with the test, including the instructions given.

The newly conveyed test content was a joint battle with Katsuya's team in the mock battle.



From the floor of the indoor training ground, variable walls rise and come together, forming a structure reminiscent of a building modeled after a base, with portions resembling the exterior walls of a real structure. It's two stories tall and about 20 meters wide. The walls only exist on the front side; from the back, the interior is visible.

The defense of this building becomes the focus of the simulated battle. Participants are already positioned. Akira, stationed on the rooftop of the building, sees a distant view of a wilderness in augmented reality through borrowed display devices.

Though the scenery of the familiar wasteland feels quite artificial to Akira. Somehow, it feels like looking at Alpha. Even though they both exist in augmented reality, Alpha evokes a sense of reality that feels genuine.

『Comparing like this, you can see how it looks like they're just there normally in augmented reality, and you can totally understand they're completely different』 Alpha says with a proud smile.

『Of course. The resolution in augmented reality is fundamentally different. Please don't compare me to those cheap, low-resolution images』 Alpha adds.

Listening to this conversation, Akira recalls discussions about the resolution of conscious reality. The reality one perceives is ultimately a product of one's brain processing external stimuli, and compared to true reality, it's nothing more than a low-resolution, imprecise construct.

And those who can only fight in this low-resolution reality, like old-world-made automatons, are at a significant disadvantage compared to entities capable of perceiving high-resolution reality with their advanced computing capabilities. Akira had managed somehow before with Alpha's support. But eventually, he needs to be able to do it partially or entirely on his own. That's what he's been thinking, although he hasn't been successful so far.

(Well, Alpha said that with training, I'll be able to do similar things, so I just have to keep at it.)

The path to becoming stronger is shown. Alpha says he can do it too. They'll surely manage somehow. That thought encourages Akira.

『Akira, the simulated battle is about to begin. How much support do you want from me?』

『Hmm? Oh, no support is fine』

『Is that okay? Since you were called here in exchange for a discount on the reinforced suit, they probably expect you to contribute significantly, don't you think?』

『It's fine. I agreed to assist in the development tests, but I wasn't told to do it until I'm sick of it, nor did I promise to do it with my life on the line.』

『Understood. Akira. It's starting.』

『Yeah.』

Akira aims his gun at the monsters in augmented reality and pulls the trigger firmly on his own.





In this simulated battle, roughly three teams are participating: first, Akira's team; next, Erio's team; and then Katsuya's team with Yumina. They defend the building with this mixed force.

Support through the comprehensive support system is absent for Akira's team, while Katsuya's and Erio's teams use Takagi's system, and Yumina uses Furata's system. The management of units in a mixed state, combining those not receiving system support, tests the extent to which this can be achieved with the current system. That's the ostensible reason for this simulated battle.

Initially, the plan was to pit Katsuya's team against Akira's team in the simulated battle. Katsuya's victory was intended to showcase the power of the Drankam faction to the city's executives and demonstrate the performance of Takagi's system to Kiryou.

No matter how strong Akira's team might be, even including individuals capable enough to receive Hunter Rank adjustment requests, they could win easily as long as their

opponents lacked comprehensive support system assistance, all while wearing the same equipment. Takagi was confident in his system to assert this.

However, Yumina and Erio's simulated battle overturned this premise. This forced Kiryou to reconsider how they showcased the performance of the comprehensive support system and their promotional methods.

Yumina, supported by Takagi's system, overwhelmingly demonstrated her superiority over Erio's team, potentially casting doubt on the performance of the comprehensive support system itself if Katsuya's team were to lose to Akira's team. Consequently, Kiryou decided not to have Akira's team and Katsuya's team directly fight in the simulated battle but to compete instead.

In a defensive battle against monsters, even if Katsuya's team were to be eliminated first, a situation where the outcome is decided in an instant can be avoided. Additionally, this provides Erio's team with an opportunity for redemption, erasing the impression of losing without being able to do anything.

The content of this simulated battle was decided for such reasons.



Before the start of the simulated battle, Erio, still reeling from his defeat against Yumina, let out a deep sigh, unable to shake off the shock.

His companions approached Erio, trying to lift his spirits.

"Erio, come on, snap out of it. That was unavoidable."

"Yeah, it was inevitable. I heard later that Yumina, she's really strong, right? She didn't hold back, even against Akira-san. Winning was impossible."

"Exactly. Well, losing out on 1 million Aurum stings, but remember what you said? That we'll show Boss our strength. Well, here's another chance, right away. Let's count

ourselves lucky."

Encouraged by his friends, Erio smiled confidently.

"Yeah, you're right. Let's do this!"

Just as Erio had rallied his friends after Yumina's match, now it was their turn to encourage him. Together, they regained their fighting spirit.



Yumina, who had taken her position alongside Katsuya and his team, flashed a triumphant smile at Katsuya.

"How do you like it, Katsuya? I came back to your team on my own."

Having completely defeated Erio's team, who had the support of Takagi's system, Yumina was once again able to stand by Katsuya's side in his team. She had promised Katsuya that she would become stronger and return to his team, and today, she fulfilled that promise.

Katsuya, knowing this, smiled brightly and thanked her.

"Yeah, Yumina. Thank you."

Yumina blushed at the smile from the person she cared about most. Trying to cover her embarrassment, she turned the conversation to Airi.

"Airi, how was Katsuya while I was gone? Was everything alright?"

"...For the most part, there were no problems."

"For the most part...? So, what issues were there, if any?"

"Chasing someone from the city we were on an expedition to all the way here would be difficult. I think it's alright."

"Katsuya... were you hitting on someone during the expedition again? Seriously..."

Yumina looked at Katsuya with an exasperated expression. Katsuya hastily denied it.

"No! I wasn't doing anything like that!"

"If you're not even aware of it, that's even worse. Is this what happens when I take my eyes off you for a moment? Katsuya, you're really..."

Yumina and Airi teased Katsuya a little, and knowing they were just joking, Katsuya made his excuses. It was a silly, trivial conversation, but the fact that they could enjoy such moments together again made Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi happy.

Then, the signal to start the simulated battle was given. Yumina gave Katsuya a slightly mischievous smile.

"Alright, now I'm going to show you how much stronger I've become. Watch closely."

Katsuya smiled back, matching her energy.

"We've gotten stronger too. Just watch. Airi, let's do this."

"I will."

Airi responded simply but with full determination. The three of them raised their guns together. Their equipment, skills, and roles had changed significantly from before, but with the same spirit and determination as in the past, they pulled the triggers in unison.



The simulated battle was set up to defend a location from a massive monster attack. At first, only a dozen or so biological monsters would attack from afar. They appeared as a mix of large beasts and reptiles, seemingly formidable but ultimately just part of augmented reality, not causing real fear of death for the participants. They weren't equipped with heavy weapons and moved sluggishly, making them easy to fend off with a combined effort of gunfire.

However, this initial ease was short-lived. As time passed, both the number and the quality of the monsters steadily increased. What started as sparse monsters visible in the distance soon began to fill the entire field of view. Agile creatures increased in number, and massive beasts charged forward with immense momentum. Smaller multi-legged machines armed with machine guns and large ones carrying ridiculously huge cannons started to appear.

Eventually, the sheer volume of enemies would overwhelm the defenders. The test was to see how long the defenders could delay this inevitable defeat. During the simulated battle, Akira, while earnestly fighting, couldn't help but feel a sense of dissatisfaction.

He continuously fired at the monsters approaching the building from the rooftop, aiming precisely at their weak points. If they were real monsters, these hits would be fatal. However, the monsters in the simulation barely showed any damage because the weak point hit detection was not that accurate.

Nevertheless, he kept firing and defeating the monsters. When he ran out of ammo, or rather, when the system registered him as out of ammo, he would retreat and wait for the reload time, frowning slightly.

『Alpha... This simulated battle, it's pretty sloppy, isn't it?』

Akira had trained many times with Alpha's support against augmented reality monsters, but the quality of this simulation was vastly inferior. In Alpha's training, hitting an enemy's weak point would reflect the corresponding damage accurately. Simply aiming randomly wouldn't defeat the enemy, often resulting in painful counterattacks.

In contrast, this simulated battle didn't require precise targeting. As long as enough shots landed, the enemy would be defeated. There were no situations where a leg was blown off, causing the monster to move slowly while still advancing. They moved vigorously until they were defeated and then disappeared instantly. This unnatural behavior felt off to Akira.

Additionally, after running out of ammo, he always had to wait a set time before reloading. He couldn't quickly change magazines himself, which also frustrated him.

Alpha smiled and tried to soothe Akira.

『It can't be helped. The facility here has limitations in calculating enemy behaviors precisely. Just accept it as it is.』

『...Yeah, I guess I'll have to accept that.』

『But don't think that just because the calculations are lax, you can aim haphazardly. Fight as if the enemies are tough and require precise shots to defeat. It would be a big problem if you got used to sloppy shooting.』

『Yeah, I know.』

The reload time ended. Akira refocused and continued his highly precise shooting, which was unnecessary for the accuracy of this simulation.

As the simulated battle dragged on, the enemy attacks intensified. Monsters with large cannons kept bombarding the building, and walls marked for destruction were folded away. The cannons were set to be out of range of the training guns, so Akira couldn't target them from the building's position. Even approaching them to attack was futile because the augmented reality monsters were positioned beyond the real indoor test area walls, making them impossible to defeat. Akira had no choice but to continue fighting the swarming monsters while dodging artillery fire.

Eventually, a wall was blown open, and a horde of monsters poured in. Akira, positioned near the breach, resisted desperately, but coinciding with his reload time, he was overwhelmed by the monster horde and received a defeat judgment.

The monsters vanished from Akira's sight. Since he was defeated, he was removed from the simulation system. His augmented reality display prominently indicated his defeat.

Akira exhaled lightly.

"Sorry, I've been defeated."

Elena, acting as the leader of Akira's team, responded over the communication.

"Good job. Was it my instructions that were off?"

"No, not at all. I think it was just bad luck. I'll head back now, so please do your best for my share."

"Got it. Sara! With Akira down, you'll have to step it up! Show us your firepower prowess!"

"I got it! ...Wait, they're coming here too!? Elena! Cover me!"

"Alright, alright! Just hold on a second!"

Listening to Elena and Sara's lively exchange, Akira exited the building from the back, where there were no walls from the beginning.



Behind the building, those who had already been defeated were watching the simulated battle. Erio's companions, noticing Akira among them, looked surprised.

"Is that Akira? Wait, did he get taken out?"

"No way? Really? ...Does that mean Erio..."

Erio, who had also recently been defeated, arrived a bit later. His expression wasn't one of satisfaction from having done his best but rather one of regret and frustration, feeling he could have done more. His companions greeted him with hushed excitement, causing him to show a bit of confusion.

"What's up with you guys?"

"Erio, you beat Akira."

"What...?"

Erio looked puzzled, but when his friend discreetly pointed towards Akira, he realized that he had been defeated after Akira.

Of course, Erio and Akira had different conditions. Erio's team had more members and received support from the integrated support system. So even though Erio was defeated after Akira, it wouldn't normally be considered a victory.

However, it was true that Erio was defeated later than Akira. Compared to his complete loss to Yumina, this was a significant achievement. In terms of showing Sheryl their capabilities and proving that they could hold their own, Erio had indeed achieved his goal.

"I see... We did it, didn't we?"

"Yeah!"

Though they were at a distance, they knew it would be bad if Akira heard them say they had won. Thus, Erio and his companions quietly celebrated their accomplishment, making sure Akira couldn't hear their words.



Even after Akira was eliminated, Elena and Sara continued to fight valiantly. However, with the loss of Akira's significant combat power and the intensifying enemy onslaught, they too were defeated.

Elena let out a light laugh and sighed.

"...Well, we held out long enough to save face. Let's head back, Sara."

"Got it. But couldn't we have pushed a bit more?"

"No. It's just a simulation. I can't have you wasting your nanomachines on something like this."

Sara, having an enhanced body, could significantly boost her physical abilities by consuming nanomachines, which were also crucial for her life support. The integrated support suit she was using now wasn't designed with her nanomachines in mind, so vigorous activity would consume more of them.

Elena shared Sara's desire to impress Akira. However, she didn't intend to let Sara risk her life for it. As the team leader, Elena had asked Sara to hold back a bit. This decision did lead to their earlier defeat, but Elena was confident in her choice.

Seeing her friend's resolute attitude, Sara gave a slight wry smile, which then turned into a meaningful grin.

"Understood. Well then, Elena, let's go show Akira what his seniors are made of."

Sara and Elena returned to where Akira was, and Sara greeted him with a slightly smug smile.

"How was it, Akira? We did pretty well, didn't we?"

Akira responded with a smile of his own.

"Yes, you were amazing."

Elena and Sara could tell that Akira's words were genuine. This brought them joy, but also a hint of complexity. Akira was undoubtedly stronger than they were, yet he didn't exude the aura of someone that strong. Despite knowing his strength through knowledge and experience, they didn't feel it emanating from him.

Perhaps it was because Akira still treated them as his superiors. Sara thought about this and, feeling slightly competitive, said lightly to Akira, "Actually, Elena told me to hold back a bit in the fight. If I went all out, I'd consume too many nanomachines."

Akira, catching her tone, smiled back just as smoothly.

"Then let's say I was holding back too, since it's just a simulation."

He exaggeratedly showed that he had plenty of energy left. Sara laughed along with Akira, sharing a friendly, competitive camaraderie. In that moment, being friends and equals felt just right.



Togami and Reina returned to Shiori and the others after receiving their defeat verdicts. Reina's face showed her dissatisfaction with her self-assessment.

"Ugh, I overestimated myself. I relied on my equipment more than I thought."

Reina didn't see relying on high-performance equipment as a bad thing. Using powerful gear made one stronger, even if the equipment's high performance led to overreliance. However, she believed it was important to distinguish between her own abilities and the performance of her gear. In this mock battle, she realized that she had been overly reliant on her equipment.

Thanks to the powerful gear prepared by Shiori, Reina had achieved significant results in the Iida Commercial District ruins. Unconsciously, she had come to view a large part of her success as due to her own abilities. She thought she could fight just as well using the general support suit borrowed from the base, even though it was vastly inferior to her usual gear. She had been arrogant.

The unsatisfactory performance in the mock battle confronted her with her arrogance, making her realize how much she had overestimated herself. The sigh she let out when she acknowledged her defeat was slightly heavy.

But Reina didn't dwell on it for long. She shifted her mindset.

"Well, at least I realized it. It was a good experience."

Identifying areas for improvement meant she could become stronger. Reina decided to focus on this positive aspect and avoid unnecessary gloom.

Kanae praised Reina's positive attitude.

"It's good you don't make excuses like saying you were just having an off day or could

have done better. You're really growing up, milady. Congratulations."

"Yes, yes. Thank you."

Reina brushed off Kanae's teasing praise lightly. However, despite her outward nonchalance, she felt quite happy inside. Unlike Shiori, who generally praised her, Kanae often teased and found faults. That made Kanae's praise all the more meaningful.

Shiori, sensing Reina's internal struggle, spoke up.

"Milady, while you may find this mock battle unsatisfactory and full of challenges, from what Kanae and I observed, you performed admirably. It's important to strive for improvement, but do not needlessly belittle your achievements."

"I know, I know."

Shiori's genuine compliment didn't seem to fully satisfy Reina. Perhaps she had become too accustomed to receiving praise recently, making it difficult for her to take it to heart. Shiori pondered this, her expression reflecting her concern.

Kanae, noticing Shiori's expression, smiled knowingly but quickly looked away when Shiori's stern gaze turned towards her.

Togami sighed lightly and spoke up.

"Reina, whether it was luck or Akira holding back, we still technically beat him in the same gear. Isn't that something to be proud of? If you can't be satisfied with that, it makes me feel like a fool for celebrating our win."

Togami didn't intend to criticize Reina; he simply wanted to share the joy of their achievement. It was disappointing that they couldn't.

Reina quickly added, "Oh, it's not like that. I'm just done evaluating myself based on winning or losing against someone else. What's important is becoming stronger. Compared to that, winning, or losing a mock battle is irrelevant, right?"

"Maybe, but still..."

"And if I had to evaluate myself based on someone else, it wouldn't be Akira."

Reina's gaze shifted to the remaining fighters, prompting Togami to follow her line of sight and nod in understanding.

"...Ah, I see."

There were Katsuya and Yumina.

"Exactly."

Reina had left Katsuya's team due to various reasons. Within Drankam, it was believed that she and the others abandoned Katsuya during a near-deadly conflict with Akira. In reality, Reina had already intended to leave the team before that incident.

The hostage incident in the Kuzusuhara Underground City had shattered her confidence, making her feel she needed protection from Shiori, Kanae, and even Katsuya. To prove otherwise, she had decided to leave his protection, hoping to return one day as a stronger individual.

If she had outlasted Katsuya in this mock battle, she might have been able to acknowledge her strength. But that wasn't the case. The day she could confidently return to Katsuya still seemed far off, leaving her slightly disappointed.

She also felt a twinge of envy towards Yumina, who had already achieved that goal.



If she had outlasted Katsuya in this mock battle, she might have been able to acknowledge her strength. But that wasn't the case. The day she could confidently return to Katsuya still seemed far off, leaving her slightly disappointed.

She also felt a twinge of envy towards Yumina, who had already achieved that goal. The mock battle progressed as expected and met the objectives of Kiryou. First, Erio and his team were eliminated. Their lack of skill was evident, making this an expected outcome. However, they fought valiantly, and Erio, with the help of his teammates, managed to outlast Akira, achieving a significant result. Despite being the first team to be eliminated, their performance in this mock battle was enough to overwrite the impression of their defeat against Yumina.

Next, Akira and his team were eliminated. The fact that a team without the Comprehensive Support System was eliminated before the main teams using it greatly helped Kiryou advertise the system's usefulness to the city's executives. Akira and his team made no major mistakes. However, Elena, the team's leader, had to manage both the overall command and her own combat, while also keeping an eye out for and quickly detecting enemy artillery. This workload inevitably lowered her effectiveness in both scouting and command.

If they had been using the Comprehensive Support System, it could have shouldered some of these tasks. Akira's team could have lasted longer. The results they achieved provided Kiryou with excellent material to promote the system's benefits. Kiryou was very satisfied with the results Akira and his team produced.

Lastly, Katsuya's team remained. However, they couldn't maintain their advantage forever against the endless horde of virtual monsters. One by one, their members fell. The only ones left were Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi. This situation, where both Takagi's and Furata's systems were prominently showcased, was ideal for Kiryou's promotional efforts.

Amidst the fierce attacks, Yumina barely held on using her ability to manipulate perceived time. Yumina could only maintain this state for about 30 seconds with her current skill level. By using it sparingly, she could manage her brain's load and maintain her combat effectiveness. If Yumina were alone, she would have quickly reached her limit and been eliminated. But Katsuya and the others provided suitable support, allowing her to take breaks and extend her endurance.

Thanks to this support, Yumina found herself fighting surprisingly well. While appreciating the effective support, she was amazed at Katsuya's command skills and the capability of Takagi's system that likely assisted him.

(... Takagi's system is designed for efficient unit operation, and it's really impressive in this area. I guess it was inevitable that I got removed because I couldn't keep up with his command back then.)

Reflecting on how she must have disrupted Katsuya's command in the past, Yumina made peace with the situation.

(Well, I'll just do my best with Furata's system. It's working well so far, so let's keep it up!)

Yumina, who had rejoined Katsuya's team, was under his command for general strategies. However, for detailed operational actions, since Takagi's and Furata's systems were not yet integrated, Yumina was in an equivalent position to Katsuya. In other words, their operation took the form of a joint strategy between Yumina's solo unit and Katsuya's multi-person unit.

This setup seemed to be working exceptionally well for Yumina. With Elio's team and Akira's team already eliminated in this harsh mock battle, they were still standing. That fact alone was proof enough. Thinking this, Yumina fought with a sense of fulfillment.

Running out of ammunition, she temporarily retreated. Leaning against a wall, she waited for the reload time to pass. The hole in the battle line created by Yumina's temporary withdrawal was promptly and appropriately filled by Katsuya's team members.

Watching this from the side, Yumina thought:

(... Katsuya is properly pulling back. He might be frustrated by the directives from the Comprehensive Support System, but honestly, I'm grateful for it.)

Previously, Katsuya would readily risk his life for his teammates. He had once acted as a decoy alone against a skyscraper-sized monster to save his comrades. While this was one of the reasons Yumina liked Katsuya, she never wanted him to recklessly endanger himself. One reason she wanted to return to Katsuya's team was to stop him from such reckless behavior and keep him safe.

However, in this mock battle, Katsuya showed none of those reckless behaviors. He maintained a position one step back as a unit commander. Given his past actions, he might have been expected to take the lead and be the first to be eliminated by shielding his teammates, but he didn't show any signs of such behavior.

On the contrary, there were even instances where he made cold decisions to abandon a comrade's rescue when necessary. Yumina couldn't tell if this was because it was merely a mock battle or if Katsuya had grown into a commander capable of making such tough decisions. Nonetheless, as someone who didn't want Katsuya to die, Yumina couldn't criticize his judgment.

The mock battle continued. Even after other teammates were eliminated, the three of them held on, but eventually, Airi was judged to be defeated.

"Sorry, I'm down."

"Don't worry about it! You did great! Yumina! From here on, it's just us! Stay sharp!"

"You too!"

The difference in combat power with the monsters was already hopeless, and it was just a matter of how long they could hold out. Even Katsuya, with his exceptional talent and the various supports he received, couldn't do everything. They fought persistently while being surrounded by monsters, but eventually, Katsuya was eliminated while shielding Yumina.

"Damn, couldn't make it. Yumina! It's up to you now!"

"Alright! Leave it to me!"

Without Katsuya's support, Yumina was forced to continuously use her perceived time manipulation. Despite this, she pushed herself to her limits with a smile, knowing this was the end. And as soon as the world returned to normal speed, she was eliminated.

With all participants in the mock battle judged defeated, the mock battle itself concluded. Exhausted, Yumina collapsed on the spot. Katsuya and Airi came over and sat down beside her.

"Good job. Still, Yumina, you've really become strong."

"Yeah, I guess."

Katsuya, surprised but smiling as he praised Yumina's efforts, was met with a proud smile from Yumina. Then, she gave a light, self-deprecating laugh.

"But you know, I owe a lot to the Comprehensive Support System. I couldn't do it on my own."

"Same here."

"Katsuya too?"

"Yeah. I'm relying on it heavily. I can't imagine going without it now."

"But we're just using it for development testing, right?"

"Yeah, that's true. But Mizuha said it's planned for official adoption in Drankam, so it should be fine."

Katsuya replied optimistically, and Yumina teased him lightly:

"Then you better not do anything stupid to get kicked out of Drankam. Katsuya, are you sure you haven't done anything to offend the higher-ups?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. You worry too much. I wouldn't do something that dumb."

"Really? Airi, what do you think?"

"There shouldn't be any major problems..."

Airi answered with an expression and tone that made it hard to tell if she was joking or serious, causing Katsuya to panic slightly.

"If you have to say, what kind of problems?"

When Yumina asked this, Airi silently averted her eyes. Katsuya started to panic even more.

"... Airi. You're joking, right?"

"Katsuya, if you're going to panic like that, you should be more mindful of your behavior on a daily basis."

"I know that, but... Airi. It's a joke, right? It's a joke, right?"

"If you say so, I'll treat it as a joke."

"No, really, it's a joke, right!?"

"It's."

As Katsuya began to genuinely panic, Yumina enjoyed the silly yet precious moment with her comrades.



Udajima watched the mock battle and gave his impressions.

“Yes. I think it was good. Although many participants couldn’t fully showcase their abilities due to the equipment being tailored to the lower skill level of Erio and his team, it was sufficient to demonstrate the performance of the Comprehensive Support System.”

The equipment for this mock battle was prepared to match Erio and his team’s abilities. The fact that they could fight this well with such low-grade equipment, thanks to the support of the Comprehensive Support System, was enough to impress the city executives.

“Well, if this were the only demonstration, there might be concerns about whether high-performance equipment could provide the same level of support. However, Katsuya and Yumina have already proven that point. So, there should be no problems there.”

As a senior executive of Kugamayama City, Udajima then addressed the executives from Kiryou.

“Yodogawa-san, I can’t promise adoption by the defense forces, but I’ll put in a good word with my colleagues. Will that suffice as a return for today’s invitation?”

“Thank you very much. We look forward to your continued support.”

“The same goes for us. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Udajima said his farewells and left. Mizuha intended to accompany him outside the facility, but he declined her offer. However, he said nothing to Viola, who followed him without permission.

Mizuha shot a suspicious glance at Viola, the mysterious woman who could accompany a city executive without saying a word. Udajima then spoke to Viola.

“You’re quite blatant, aren’t you? Aren’t you technically on the other side?”

“It’s fine. I’m a woman of poor quality. Whatever I do, it always comes down to that.”

By acting as if she were betraying or switching sides, Viola created the impression she was setting a trap for someone. This reputation for being untrustworthy also served to conceal her true intentions.

"I see. Well, you're free to weigh me and Inabe on your scales, but make sure you don't misplace yourself."

"Of course."

Despite Udajima's warning, Viola responded with her usual smile.

"... So, what do you want?"

"I have a proposal. You won't lose out by hearing me out."

After listening to her proposal, Udajima frowned.

"... It sounds like something that would only benefit Inabe."

"Oh, don't say that. You're also investigating that area, right? But it's his jurisdiction, so you can't make much progress. You can't find conclusive evidence. If you see this as an opportunity to obtain that evidence, then allowing some progress in his area is just a necessary expense. Can't you see it that way?"

Udajima pondered this for a moment before reaching a conclusion.

"Very well."

"That's the spirit."

Viola smiled. Even when dealing with a city executive, her unsettling smile never wavered.



After the mock battle, while Katsuya and his team were taking a break, Takagi appeared.

“... Katsuya-kun. I have a few questions I’d like to ask. Is that okay?”

Takagi’s expression carried a hint of unease, causing Katsuya to hesitate slightly.

“What is it?”

“... The Comprehensive Support System you’re using is my creation. And you’ve achieved great results using it. You’ve performed spectacularly both in expeditions and deep within the Kuzusuhara ruins... isn’t that, right?”

“Yes, it’s been very helpful.”

“I want to know something from you. How... how effective is my system, really?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is it useful to you? And if it is, to what extent? How much does it mean to you? For someone as strong as you, would it not make much difference if you didn’t have it? Could your achievements have been possible without my system? I want an honest answer. How is it?”

As Takagi spoke, he leaned closer to Katsuya, his face a mixture of desperation and blankness. The atmosphere around him was one of a man cornered and seeking validation.

If Katsuya had arrogantly claimed that all his success was due to his own skill, Takagi’s doubts might have been dispelled. But Katsuya answered sincerely.

“It’s all thanks to your system, Takagi-san. No matter how skilled I am, I couldn’t have done it alone. I can’t imagine going back to not using the Comprehensive Support System—it’s been incredibly helpful.”

Katsuya continued with a smile as he looked directly at Takagi.

“I heard that others using the same system lost badly to Yumina, but that’s probably because they were too weak and Yumina was too strong.”

Having seen Yumina's capabilities up close, Katsuya could confidently make this assertion.

"Also, there might be compatibility issues with the system. Yumina used the same system when she was in my team before, but it didn't work out well for her. Maybe the compatibility was just off."

Katsuya figured that Takagi's confidence had been shaken because those using his system had suffered a severe defeat to Yumina. Wanting to cheer Takagi up, Katsuya smiled warmly.

"At the very least, it's a perfect match for me. Since I started using your system, I've become significantly stronger. Takagi-san, your system is incredible. I guarantee it."

The sincere, enthusiastic praise from Katsuya, who was standing right next to him, deeply resonated with Takagi. He couldn't help but laugh.

"... You're right!"

This mutual recognition between two genuine admirers of Takagi's system amplified their conviction and strengthened their resolve. Takagi's confidence was swiftly restored and even bolstered.

"Sorry for asking such strange questions. There's a lot going on for me too. Please continue to use my system and excel."

"Will do. I'll do my best."

Takagi left Katsuya's side in high spirits, his confidence reaffirmed along with his unwavering belief in his system.



After the mock battle, Akira was on his way home. As he parted ways with Elena and the others and headed back to his house, he reflected on the battle's events.

『Hmm. I wonder if I got taken out earlier than Erio's team because I was being careless? Alpha, what do you think?』

『I can't really say. But if you think you were being careless, then you should tighten up. Even if Akira has become stronger to the point of unconsciously underestimating weaker opponents, if a vulnerability arises due to that strength, it would be all for naught.』

『Yeah, you're right. I need to stay sharp.』

There is a fine line between confidence and complacency, and today he had strayed into complacency. He needed to be cautious about that. However, just realizing this made today's mock battle a valuable experience.

Akira thought so, reprimanding himself for the lapse in concentration and resolving to stay more alert in the future.



The girl watching Katsuya's simulated battle from the blank world wears a troubled expression.

"The construction of the local network is progressing smoothly, but... he's still fixated on her. We need to deal with this. What should I do..."

Even though she can intervene with Katsuya, it's only indirect. How to eliminate Yumina is what the girl continues to ponder with a stern expression.

Episode 173 Second inner part

At home, Akira receives a call from Kibayashi. It's about a notification that Akira has received assistance for purchasing ammunition equivalent to Hunter Rank 50.

"So, from now on, you'll be able to buy ammunition at a discounted price from the Hunter Office's affiliated stores. I'll send you some materials summarizing various points to note, like not reselling the discounted goods, so make sure to read them."

"Got it. I'll read it."

"By the way, borrowing 2 billion Aurum from the city officials to buy equipment, negotiating with TOSON for the environment to fire C-bullets... You're doing quite well! What mischief are you planning with that equipment this time?"

Akira responds with a slightly annoyed tone to Kibayashi's very cheerful voice.
"I'm not planning any mischief."

"I know that. But you're flexible enough to cause unexpected trouble, right?"
Akira lets out a deep sigh.

"...So, how are the negotiations going? When can I expect to receive the money, and how much?"

"That depends on the negotiation details. I'm negotiating thoroughly to increase your reward. Thanks to TOSON's assistance with the ammunition purchase subsidy, I should be able to add more than what was initially agreed upon, and there's also renegotiation for that part. It's hard to say until when, but..."

"So, it's going to take a while?"

"Since repaying the loan is the top priority, if you say 2 billion Aurum is enough for the reward, I'll try to finalize it by tomorrow."

"If you say so..."

Akira doesn't necessarily want to reduce their share of the money. Knowing they need the funds by the deadline, they understand the urgency. For now, they decide to let Kibayashi continue with the negotiations



Akira received a message from Shizuka saying that the equipment had arrived, so he drove to her shop. There, he put on the newly reinforced suit on the spot and loaded three trunks containing maintenance equipment for the reinforced suit and LEO composite rifles onto the truck bed.

Observing this, Shizuka lightly commented to Akira, "Hey, Akira. About that LEO composite rifle, I got it cheap by trading with TOSON. They agreed to cooperate with the promotion of the SSB composite rifle."

"Yes. It became quite inexpensive."

"Originally priced at around 600 million Aurum, but you managed to get it down to about 200 million Aurum, right? For them to offer such a discount, Akira, you must be something else."

"Oh, it was just their proposal, not because I'm particularly impressive..."

"That's not true. It's because your promotional effect is that impressive. TOSON is treating you like that because of your extraordinary skills as a Hunter, enough to take on a whole unit of humanoid weapons single-handedly," Shizuka explained with a smile.

Akira froze as he was loading the trunks. He hadn't told Shizuka about his battles during the Slum District's major conflict, so he awkwardly turned his head to look at her. Shizuka was still smiling. With that smile, she showed a large information terminal to Akira. There, the promotion of the SSB composite rifle was displayed.

Underneath the big headline, there was an article about the performance of the SSB composite rifle, focusing on Akira's testimony as the key to his survival during the conflict involving numerous humanoid weapons. The article suggested that even Hunters with enough foresight to request a Hunter Rank adjustment were considering the potential of the SSB composite rifle.

Of course, Akira didn't have the eloquence to compose such rhetoric. The content was simply a reflection of Akira's responses to leading questions from TOSON's sales representative, Somaya. While he didn't lie, it was still promotional material.

Anyone reading it would understand that much. However, since it was posted on the internet for anyone to see, even Hunters operating in distant locations could come across it. Upon further investigation, those with adequate information-gathering skills would find records of Akira's battles with numerous pre-war automated humanoid weapons in the Slum District, all taken down with the SSB composite rifle.

Perhaps this rifle was truly an incredible piece of equipment. Skillful promotion had convinced many Hunters of that.

But Akira didn't care about that. What was more important was that Shizuka now knew about his battles with the humanoid weapons in the Slum District. He hadn't realized when talking to Somaya that this could potentially lead to Shizuka seeing the promotion too.

Sweating nervously, Akira tried to explain himself, "No... That's, um... Yes! I was just... involved! Just like it says there!"

"I see. You were just involved."

"Yes!"

Shizuka smiled gently. As Akira sighed with relief, Shizuka eased her tone after a suitable pause.

"If you're going to take that stance, then make sure you pay attention, so you don't end up in such situations again, okay?"

"Y-yes, of course."

Avoiding Shizuka's anger, Akira breathed a sigh of relief.



Akira was waiting in front of his house for Katsuragi and the others to arrive. Today was the day the car and bike he had requested from Katsuragi for 500 million Aurum each were due to arrive.

At the appointed time, Katsuragi's trailer appeared with accompanying vehicles in tow. Katsuragi, with a proud expression, stepped down from the trailer and pointed to the vehicles behind him.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I've managed to procure the items you requested perfectly," he boasted.

"Just put them in the garage for now," Akira replied.

"Got it."

The car and bike were automatically driven into Akira's garage. While the sight of the car might not have been unusual, seeing the unmanned bike moving by itself could appear strange to those unfamiliar with it.

Standing in front of the car and bike, Katsuragi gestured to them with exaggerated movements and asked Akira, "Well, what do you think? Are the items I've procured satisfactory?"

"I'm not sure what you expect me to say..."

Katsuragi showed a dissatisfied expression at Akira's dull response. "Hey, what kind of reaction is that? These are completely different from the old vehicles you've been using until now."

"Well, I understand that..."

"No, you don't understand. Alright. I sent you the details beforehand but let me explain again here."

Given the effort he put into procuring them, Katsuragi had confidence in the performance of these vehicles.

The car was a large vehicle suitable for transporting goods, with armored tiles covering its entire surface. While manually attaching them would be difficult due to their size, they were applied automatically, so there was no issue. The interior was spacious, capable of loading large amounts of goods without feeling cramped even when performing bike maintenance inside. It was equipped with a large energy tank capable of covering long-distance transport and high-performance reconnaissance equipment that could thoroughly scan wide areas.

The bike was an upgraded version of the one Akira had previously used. Its basic performance had been significantly improved, allowing it to do everything the old bike could do and more.

The force field armor protected the vehicle with powerful force, capable of repelling even semi-serious attacks. It excelled in both acceleration and top speed, with highly advanced control capabilities that allowed it to maneuver the vehicle freely even at speeds where slight deviations in posture could lead to major accidents. Additionally, a large backpack was attached for transporting goods.

The car cost 200 million Aurum, while the bike cost 300 million Aurum. Both were high-end products for high-ranking Hunters. The reason the bike was more expensive was that, after considering Akira's request for transport capacity in the car and combat performance in the bike, the latter's performance was given greater importance.

Katsuragi explained all of this, emphasizing his efforts in procurement and his own abilities as a businessperson who could procure matching items.

"Well? Do you understand now?" Katsuragi asked excitedly, given the 500 million Arum deal. On the other hand, Akira seemed a bit tired.

"...Yeah, well, I guess. Isn't it good enough? I'll just have to use them to find out for sure."

Katsuragi seemed somewhat exasperated at Akira's reaction. "What's with that? After getting a car worth 200 million and a bike worth 300 million, you're not even impressed? Hunters who casually spend around 500 million Aurum are a different breed. Truly amazing. I went through so much trouble to procure these..."

Sensing that Katsuragi might continue with complaints, Akira tried to placate him. "Okay, okay. I got it. I appreciate it."

"As long as you understand. If you do, then you'll ask for more next time, right?"

"Tell that to me when the time comes," Akira replied, trying to smoothly end the conversation with Katsuragi who was trying to joke and sound him out.



Having gathered all the necessary equipment, including vehicles, Akira had a clear goal in mind for resuming his Hunter activities. He discussed his next destination with Alpha.

"So, what's the plan? Now that we have the big car, are we going on another expedition to some distant ruins?" Despite not showing much reaction to Katsuragi's enthusiasm, Akira also wanted to make use of the new vehicle. He suggested exploring deeper into the ruins, utilizing the large vehicle's capacity for transporting goods.

『No, let's go to the depths of the Kuzusuhara Street Ruins. The difficulty there should be sufficient to test the usability of the new equipment』 Alpha replied.

"Going back there again, huh? Well, alright..."

Indeed, during their artifact collection in that location, Yumina's large vehicles had proven quite useful for transporting a large quantity of relics. So, in that sense, it would be a suitable place to make use of the large new vehicle. Akira agreed to the proposal.

However, Alpha's response was cryptic. "Akira, it's not 'going back.' Didn't I say? If the difficulty there is sufficient to test our new equipment, we're going deeper this time."

With Akira's equipment significantly upgraded, the difficulty of the locations suitable for him naturally increased as well. With preparations for his Hunter activities complete, Akira set his sights on the deeper parts of the Kuzusuhara City ruins. As he entered the rear communication line leading to those depths with his large new vehicle, he received a notification of the usage fee from the management department of the rear communication line. It had already been deducted from his account.

"They've taken 1.5 million Aurum. Seems a bit steep... No, considering the option of going there on our own without using this route, is this still cheap?" Akira contemplated, remembering the hardships he faced when traveling to Tsubaki's management zone on his own and reluctantly accepted it.

Furthermore, the usage fee for the rear communication line was not fixed and could vary depending on the contract and payment method. It could be discounted in exchange for deducting the shortfall from selling the collected artifacts at the front base's purchasing office or for ammunition expenses. Transporters who used the service multiple times a day might also receive a discount for bulk prepayment.

Moreover, in cases where the city authorities wanted to advance the capture of a specific area of the ruins, they sometimes offered significant discounts on the usage fee for that route, aiming to gather Hunters there.

Today, Akira paid the full fee without any discount to freely move around inside the ruins. Thus, the slightly higher fee was justified.

At the end of the rear communication line, before heading further into the depths of the ruins, Akira stopped his vehicle. From here on, he would switch to the bike he had loaded into the vehicle and proceed.

Out of Akira's three LEO composite guns, two were attached to the bike's arm-mounted gun mounts. Akira carried the remaining one while cautiously advancing, vigilant of his surroundings.

The place where Akira and Yumina had collected artifacts together before was also in the depths of the Kuzusuhara City ruins. However, the term "depths" simply meant a location further inside than the outer perimeter, and the ruins extended much deeper, far from the innermost part.

And today, Akira had arrived at a new, deeper section of the ruins. The scene resembled what he had seen in Tsubaki's management zone before.

Elegant high-rise buildings stood in orderly rows, displaying the once glorious civilization's power vividly to Akira. When he looked up from the road, which was about 100 meters wide, the sky seemed narrow due to the towering height and immense size of the surrounding buildings.

However, unlike the sacred atmosphere Akira felt inside the walls of the abandoned buildings, there was none here. That was because this place was a battlefield.

Troops of white humanoid weapons were shooting at gigantic monsters. The machines were the White Rabbits, humanoid weapons made by Hakoshima Heavy Steel, all in their normal versions rather than the budget versions used in the Slum City's major conflicts. They were heavily armed, equipped with additional external armor resembling armor, and armed with powerful heavy weapons.

The targets of their gunfire were a pack of gigantic wolves, so large that their bodies were as big as the machines that were shooting at them. Despite their enormous size, they displayed agile movements, leaping and attacking the white machines.

The wolf's body was so tough and flexible that it could withstand direct hits from light artillery. Despite being hit by the forceful projectiles that would shave off layers of flesh under the skin, they continued to approach their prey without hesitation. They would leap with their massive bodies, change direction by kicking off the walls of surrounding

buildings, and cling to the white machines with three-dimensional movements.

And then, they would sink their large, sharp fangs into the armor of the machines.

The white machines fought back even as they were being bitten. If they were budget versions, they would have been torn apart by the force field armor in an instant, but these were the normal versions. They managed to endure by increasing the output of their force field armor. From close range, they tried to shoot down the giant wolves.

The wolves, too, displayed incredible vitality as they resisted. Even when shot by multiple machines, they did not die but continued to rampage, colliding with surrounding machines while still holding onto the white machines.

However, in the next moment, a black aircraft appeared from above and launched a fierce assault on the giant wolf. Swinging a chainsaw-like massive blade, it sliced off its head with a longer blade than the aircraft itself. It wasn't a momentous event that could be called a clean cut, but there was no time for the giant wolf to retaliate.

The massive head fell to the ground. A little later, the body followed, collapsing. Both the head and the body were technically still alive. However, the body had no parts to move it, and the aircraft clamped in the head had no more strength to tear it apart.

The black aircraft was the Black Wolf of Yoshio Heavy Industries. This aircraft, like before, was adjusted for use in the deep parts and significantly improved in performance compared to those used in the slums. The remaining giant wolves were also being defeated by attacks from similar aircraft.

The aircraft that had been attacked by the wolf, leaving only its head, was rescued. Although the aircraft itself was heavily damaged, the crew was safe thanks to the sturdy cockpit. The crew, who emerged by prying open the deformed door, retreated with the accompanying aircraft.

The presentation of humanoid weapons meticulously conducted by Hachijima and Yoshio Heavy Industries, even separating Akira from the Kuzusuhara district ruins, had shown a certain level of success. Although they had not yet been deployed to the city's defense force, depending on the results of this deep penetration, they were scheduled to be formally adopted.

Both companies were satisfied with their results and had sent many humanoid weapons to this location. As a result, this place had become a battlefield where humanoid weapons clashed with giant monsters.

Due to the intense battle, the surrounding buildings were damaged, and on the ground, rubble, wreckage of aircraft, and corpses of monsters were scattered. Although it was a scene from the same old world, Akira could not feel a certain sacredness from this area, and that was probably the reason.

The black aircraft that had observed the retreat of the evacuees returned to the sky. It was dangerous to rise too high as it would attract monsters from above, but as long as it was the height of the surrounding buildings, it was not a problem. Along with other black aircraft units maneuvering in the depths of the ruins and the white aircraft units on the ground, they continued to advance the front line.

Then, new mechanical monsters appeared in groups. This time, they were of the machine type. Originally spherical, they had transformed their various parts into their current form, resembling tanks, humanoid weapons, and autonomous mobile gun platforms, and they fired lasers.

In response to their attack, the White Rabbit unit collectively raised their shields. They connected the force field armor of each and constructed a makeshift barrier. Furthermore, they targeted enemy aircraft aiming at the black wolf's unit and provided support by shooting at them.

Then the black wolf unit fired together. Aircraft that had been hit by the enemy's laser cannons would fall back behind the barricade built by the white aircraft if necessary and call for a supply vehicle for energy replenishment.

The front line where the city forces clashed with the monster forces from the ruins repeated advances and retreats.

Akira watched the battle between humanoid weapon units and giant monsters from a slightly distant place. And he nodded as if satisfied.

"All right. Let's go back."

『Don't be lazy.』

"Aw, come on."

Akira couldn't help but make a displeased face at Alpha.

"Alpha. This isn't a place for reinforced suits. It's a place for humanoid weapons like those."

『There's no problem. Akira won against those humanoid weapon units, didn't he?』

"Yeah, but that's not the issue..."

It was impossible to collect artifacts here in the ruins. What made Akira think so was the fierce battle just now. Nevertheless, Alpha directed a smile full of usual composure towards Akira.

『It's okay. Because Akira has my support.』

If she said that, Akira couldn't refuse. If he couldn't believe those words, then he had nothing today. He sighed lightly as if resigned and then smiled lightly at Alpha.

"Got it. Make sure to support me, okay?"

『Of course. Leave it to me!』

Alpha also returned a confident smile.

Akira, who had begun collecting artifacts in the new area of the depths, did not advance towards the direction where the humanoid weapon units and the herd of giant monsters were building the front line. Instead, he proceeded with exploration in the lateral direction, taking the extension direction of the rear communication line as the front.

Entering the side street from the main street and looking up from between the buildings, the sky felt very narrow. However, it did not feel dark at all. Under the clear sky, it felt as if I were in a spacious place.

It was probably thanks to some technology from the old world. While Akira thought so, he felt a little curious. And he asked Alpha in a casual tone.

"Hey Alpha. What are the buildings around here for?"

『What do you mean, they're buildings made by the old world, right?』

"No, not that. There are various kinds of buildings, right? Like houses, shops, companies, hospitals, and so on. I mean, I don't know what these buildings are for."

『Ah, I see what you mean.』

"Iida Commercial District Ruins were also buildings from the old world, but somehow I could tell they were some kind of shops. Well, maybe because I heard it was a commercial district. But I don't have a clue about these around here."

『Consider this area a residential district. The surrounding buildings are like apartments. It might not be strictly accurate, but it's a matter of definition.』

"Apartment, huh. But weren't there buildings near the rear communication lines that looked like apartments? They seem quite different from those."

『That's probably because of the difference in the people living there. Even in Kugamayama City, there's a big difference between the slums and the lower districts when you talk about apartments, right? It's the same here.』

Akira chuckled when he heard that.

"Until now, the places where I've been collecting artifacts were treated like slums, huh? So, this is the lower district, huh? Ah, so that's why the enemies suddenly got stronger?"

『That's right. Since we entered from the slums to the lower district, the security machines also became stronger. Keep that in mind.』

"I understand."

Akira replied with a smile to Alpha's explanation. Smiling, he decided to accept it as convincing.

Akira followed Alpha's guidance and was directed to enter a certain building. He dismounted his bike and proceeded into a place reminiscent of a high-class hotel lobby.

"Alpha, since it's a spacious place, wouldn't it be fine to enter on the bike?"

『Absolutely not. The security here is still active, and since you're an intruder, entering on a bike would only increase suspicion, don't you think?』

"Isn't it practically the same since I'm carrying a gun?"

『No, it's very different.』

"I see. Got it."

The modern firearms might not be seen as much of a threat by the old world's security system. Akira thought about such things as he proceeded down the immaculate corridor.

Then he entered a large room. The interior could comfortably accommodate about ten people, and there were numerous pieces of furniture and furnishings. To Akira's eyes, everything looked expensive, but he couldn't tell if they were actually valuable. They just appeared to be. Many items were unidentifiable in terms of their purpose.

"...Let's just take whatever we can carry back for now."

『Akira, let me tell you now. The moment you take anything from this room outside, you

will definitely be attacked by the security system here. Be prepared for that.]
"Is it safe until I leave?"

『I can't guarantee that. The security machines might already be gathering outside the room, or it might be too late by the time you put the room's items in your backpack. Even if those concerns are unfounded, the moment you take anything from this room outside, you will be considered a thief.』

"A thief..."

There was no excuse. Taking artifacts from ruins made the hunter unquestionably a thief and a robber from the perspective of the old world. Even in modern standards, the same act would be considered a crime. However, the reason the profession of hunters still existed was because humanity considered the old world already gone. And as if to refute that notion, the systems of the old world still threatened humanity in the present day. The Corporate Government, the hunters, and humanity itself still resisted against it.

Akira packing artifacts into his backpack was part of that resistance. The backpack was filled with artifacts from the room, bulging at the seams. He took a deep breath, then used the enhanced strength of his new reinforced suit to carry the backpack with the assistance arms. He gripped a LEO composite rifle in each hand. He had detached them from the bike when he entered the building on foot.

"...Alright, let's go. Alpha, I'll definitely be attacked, right?"

『Yes. Whether it's the moment you leave or on your way back, I don't know.』

"...Is it better to sneak out quietly, or should I just charge through?"

Alpha glanced outside the room once and then smiled at Akira.

『Well, let's charge through.』

"Got it!"

Akira took a deep breath. Then, using the enhanced abilities of his new reinforced suit, he sprinted with all his might.

It was a speed that felt like wind pressure in the windless indoor environment. He reached the door in an instant. With momentum, Akira kicked the door forcefully.

Although the door from the old world was very sturdy, it was not meant for confinement. With Akira's current strength, it was possible to kick it open. The warped door fell forward.

But the next moment, the door was cleaved in half.

Slashing it were security machines outside the room. About forty centimeters in size, they had an almost spherical polyhedral shape. They had rolled up to the door, but when they sensed Akira's approach, they leaped up and, from their surfaces, sprouted blades, rotating at high speed to slice through the door.

But what they sliced was only the door. Akira swiftly dodged to the side, avoiding the blades. Then, he aimed the muzzles of his guns at the spherical security machines and opened fire.

The security machines, which had absorbed countless bullets at close range, this time from two 200 million Aurum rifles, shattered into pieces.

Akira easily destroyed the single security machine, but he had no time to feel relaxed. Even though he had defeated it, he had still been attacked the moment he left the room. He continued to kick off the floor and aimed for the outside of the building.

But he immediately encountered the next enemy. Two similar machines rolled out from the floor and ceiling about ten meters in front of Akira. When they abruptly stopped, they transformed into shapes adhering to the floor and ceiling. Then, they extended laser emitters from their transformation parts, firing high-powered beams.

Akira avoided the intersecting high-energy lines fired from the two machines by leaping and jumping through the corridor with acrobatic movements, using walls and ceilings to dodge. He then aimed his guns at each target and fired rapidly.

A barrage of bullets from extended magazines hit the security machines, but this time, they couldn't be destroyed. The two security machines showed an inexplicable toughness, even though Akira's firepower had been halved due to dispersal.

By swiftly defeating the first opponent, Akira unconsciously underestimated the enemy's durability. Amid his astonishment, the beam he once dodged now strikes again. Evading it in the slow-flowing world, he relentlessly continues shooting.

『Alpha! It's tough! What's going on!?』

『In principle, it's the same as the snail-type monster we fought before. It's powered by energy supplied from the walls and floor.』

Raising the armor's output, Akira attempts to use anti-force field armor-piercing rounds.

『Is that it? Then if we use anti-force field armor-piercing rounds...』

Though not plentiful, Akira had acquired some anti-force field armor-piercing rounds, ordering them from Shizuka upon obtaining the right to purchase them cheaply. However, since these rounds were not standard items in Shizuka's shop, ordering a large quantity would take time. Akira bought as much as could be promptly acquired, leaving the rest on order.

But Alpha stops him.

『Akira. Hold on.』

『Why!?』

Attempting to use the armor-piercing rounds, Akira questions.

『Why? Because if you win easily with the anti-force field armor-piercing rounds, you won't get to test the new equipment's performance, will you? Plus, it won't help with your training, Akira.』

『Training!?』

Akira, with a look almost expressing "Training in this situation?", receives Alpha's smile, seeming to say "Exactly."

With a somewhat reckless but somewhat joyful laugh, Akira agrees.

『Got it! So, I should just do it, right? I'll do it!』

In this situation, it's just training. If one can't do it, then it's a lack of motivation. That's what it seems like. Thinking so, Akira renews his determination, focusing to distort the flow of subjective time to the limit, slowing down the perceived flow of time.

In a world where he can track the movements of the laser swiftly mowed by security machines, Akira closes in on the distance between himself and the two security machines, then presses both gun muzzles against the opposing side's floor and fires continuously.

The armor-enhanced bodies couldn't withstand it. Pierced through, they were destroyed by the impact of the bullets.

Only one security machine remains, aiming a laser from above at Akira. He leaps to avoid it, landing on the ceiling. Except for the inversion of sky and ground, he destroys it just as he did the previous machine.

Akira immediately moves towards the exit. Without even pausing to touch the floor, he

swiftly runs, seemingly from Akira's subjective perspective, as if the corridor is rotating, moving from the ceiling of the corridor to the walls and then the floor.

Additional security machines attack Akira. This time, there are four. Akira decides to focus on preventing attachment rather than destruction, shooting at the joints more than the bodies.

It works. Machines hit near the exterior, the walls, etc., are propelled from the corridor due to the impact of the shots.

But that's not all. The propelled spherical machines bounce around the corridor like balls hitting a wall at high speed, unnaturally approaching Akira.

Akira manages to destroy one, but the remaining three swing blades while bouncing around, aiming precisely at him.

Despite the high-speed rotation of the bladed balls, Akira somehow avoids them, temporarily releasing the backpack filled with relics to lighten his load, dodging the blades with minimal movement, counterattacking. He shoots while dodging the blades that pass by leaps to avoid blades aimed at his legs, and stomps them, then steps in to kick the body attempting to mow him, firmly destroying the remaining machines.

Before the backpack, released near the ceiling of the corridor, touches the floor, Akira grabs it in mid-air and continues running. Returning to a lobby-like area.

It started with one, then two, then four. Akira enters the lobby expecting even more, but his expectation is exceeded.

In the lobby, he's faced with sixteen security machines.

『Wasn't it supposed to be eight!?』

『It's been a while since they've had intruders, so maybe the security system is extra vigilant.』

『But they're machines, can't they handle this mechanically!』

Dealing with sixteen opponents at once is challenging even for Akira. Despite Alpha's joking tone, Akira looks grim.

But then, Alpha drives Akira's motorcycle into the building from outside. Equipped with a gun mount, Alpha shoots at the security machines.

Even with two LEO composite guns, it's not easy to defeat so many opponents. But Alpha's precise shooting ensures every bullet serves its purpose efficiently, not

necessarily destroying enemies but buying time until Akira gets on the bike.

During this distraction, Akira mounts the bike. As it sweeps through the machines, Akira feels relieved. But Alpha gently reminds him.

『Akira. It's not over yet.』

『I know. I won't let my guard down until we're back.』

Akira's not lying. But once outside, there's a sense that it's just a matter of riding the bike back.

But as if to dispel that feeling of relief, new security machines emerge, this time in large numbers. Their shapes resemble the polyhedral forms encountered inside the building, but now they're about two meters in diameter.

They transform, some into small humanoid mechs on top, some into multi-legged machines below. Armed with machine guns, small missile pods, laser emitters, they all target Akira.

In an instant, the ground is engulfed in their firepower. As long as he's on the ground, there's nowhere to escape.

But Akira's bike can run along the walls of the building, providing an escape route upward. Thanks to Alpha's skilled driving, the bike maneuvers along the nearby building's walls, avoiding the gunfire.

However, Akira's expression remains grim. The situation is even more challenging outside the building.

『Alpha!? In this situation, training is impossible, right!?』

Alpha responds with a wry smile.

『We have no choice. I understand. From here on, I'll provide full support. But Akira, you have to do your part too, okay?』

With Alpha's full support, Akira regains his composure. He smiles and replies.

『Got it!』

『Let's go then.』

『Yeah!』

With Alpha's support, Akira raises his gun, ready to face the challenge.



Akira and the others managed to destroy another spherical security robot with their attack.

『Akira. Your aim was quite off again, you know?』

『Yeah, I got it!』

Even though he had intended to aim properly by manipulating his perception of time, Akira's face tightened as he was scolded by Alpha for being off target.

He was undoubtedly putting in all his effort. He felt that keenly. Yet, despite that, he couldn't reach the level of proficiency he desired, even with Alpha's support.

(If only I could get the hang of that manipulation of reality resolution...)

He continued the training. Just like with his manipulation of perception of time, he knew that mastering it on his own would significantly enhance his abilities. However, so far, every attempt only resulted in headaches.

(If only there was some trigger... I thought battles like this would be the trigger...)

Experiences like facing death in battles against old-world automatons. The intense focus just before death. Akira believed that such experiences could be catalysts for improvement. And Akira believed that battles he couldn't survive without Alpha's support, even if they were pseudo-battles, were sufficient simulations of those life-threatening situations.

Maybe he could do it now. That's what he thought as he tried repeatedly, but he hadn't succeeded even once. The excessive strain on his brain only disrupted his concentration, yet Alpha, aware of this, only pointed out his aim being off.

『Akira. Your aim is off again.』

『Sorry! I'll do better!』

『It's okay. Just keep trying.』

Battles that he would've died in without Alpha were progressing advantageously with her support. And with the destruction of the last persistently pursuing robot, the immediate danger had passed. Upon arriving at the main street, Alpha parked the bike.

『We should be safe here. Well done, Akira.』

"So, it was all for nothing, huh?" Akira sighed deeply, feeling fatigued. However, after taking a deep breath to compose himself,

he deliberately adopted a somewhat sulky attitude.

"Alpha. These enemies are a bit too strong for me. It's too soon for me."

『It seems so. Shall we return only after ensuring our ammunition is fully stocked?』

"...Are we coming back here? So soon?"

『Of course. Didn't you go to great lengths to equip yourself with high-performance gear for this?』

"Yeah, but..."

As they chatted to calm their nerves, Akira suddenly looked towards the end of the main street.

"Alpha..."

『Yes, one is coming towards us.』

"What should we do?"

『Well, it would be bad if they thought we brought that monster along with us, so shall we defeat it here?』

"Understood."

Akira got off the bike and aimed both of his LEO composite guns. The guns attached to the bike's auxiliary arm also aimed towards the back of the main street under Alpha's control.

With a slight gap between them, a gigantic monster appeared at the end of the main street. It was a wolf so large that it towered over humanoid combat units.

The monster was slowly walking down the street but picked up speed when it spotted Akira, charging towards him energetically. The gigantic wolf, which coexisted with the surrounding security robots, knew that Akira had destroyed many of them.

『Really, there's no time to rest at all, Akira.』

"Yeah, yeah. I'll keep working hard to become stronger," Akira said with a wry smile, firmly gripping both of his LEO composite guns. Light leaked from the gun barrels.

As the gigantic wolf approached Akira rapidly, he had no chance of escape. Yet, he felt no fear.

After luring it in sufficiently, Akira pulled the trigger, aiming with some precision. Three bullets, one from each gun and one from the bike's auxiliary arm, were simultaneously fired, hitting the same spot on the gigantic wolf's head. The force was tremendous, not only penetrating its skull but also blowing its head off.

Akira had fired the Charge Bullet, maximizing its power by pouring in as much energy as possible. While it required a considerable amount of energy, enough to deplete the energy pack attached to the gun immediately, its power was unparalleled.

"That's an incredible force indeed. The cost of the bullet and the energy pack is on another level, but the power is worth it," Akira remarked.

『Increasing the power while adjusting the energy level just enough to prevent the gun and bullets from collapsing. Don't forget my support in that regard.』

"I know. I appreciate it."

『Good. Shall we return then?』

Once again, Akira mounted the bike, and they left the scene behind.



After Akira left, a dozen or so hunters appeared near the corpse of the gigantic wolf left behind.

"Alright, now's our chance. Let's move it."

And they all began to carry the corpse.

"It's heavy... This is definitely not something you can carry with reinforced clothing."

"Don't complain. We have no choice, do we? If we use vehicles or machinery, we'll be seen as allies of the city's humanoid weapons by the monsters here, and we'll be attacked. We have no choice but to carry it ourselves."

"But there's no guarantee we won't be attacked if we carry it ourselves, right?"

"No, there isn't. But the probability of being attacked decreases. If you want to lower it further, hurry up."

"Sigh... If this turns out to be some kind of scam, there's no way out in many ways, huh?"

"Yeah, you're right. Let's hope for the best."

While the hunters exchanged various remarks among themselves, they laughed and kept their spirits up as they carried the corpse of the gigantic wolf.

Episode 174 Dangerous Deals

Having finished collecting artifacts in the new depths of the Kuzusuhara City Ruins, Akira stopped by the purchasing office at the frontline base to sell the artifacts. After receiving polite assistance from the staff, Akira was handed a list of artifacts to be sold.

"Here is a list of the artifacts we have received. Please review it. If there are no issues with the contents, we will appraise them and make the payment."

Upon looking at the list, Akira found something that caught his attention.

"Um, the origin of the artifacts is listed as 'Section 2 Depths.' What exactly is this 'Section 2 Depths'?"

"Oh, that's just a convenient classification."

The city had conveniently labeled the new areas in the depths of the Junkyard City Ruins as "Section 2 Depths." The area where Akira had been active with Yumina was designated as "Section 1 Depths."

"Nevertheless, it's quite reckless of you to venture into the Section 2 Depths alone, Akira-sama. Are you implying that you'll be filing a request to adjust your Hunter Rank?"

Since Akira had accepted a general extermination request on his way to the Section 2 Depths, the city was aware that he had fought there. Akira responded with a wry smile.

"Oh, well..."

"If you had defeated mechanical monsters, we would have purchased them as well. It's a bit disappointing."

"I apologize. I didn't have the luxury to bring them back with me. Oh, and just because I defeated them doesn't mean I claim ownership, so feel free for someone else to go and retrieve them."

"Thank you. However, Section 2 Depths is considered a dangerous zone where even the city's humanoid weapon units are forced to retreat. I'm not sure if anyone would be willing to accept such a request... Oh, how about this? Shall we formally make the request here, for you to accept?"

"Well, um, it's just that I've only just returned..."

"Is that so?"

Seeing the expression on Akira's face, which clearly showed his reluctance despite saying otherwise, the staff chuckled wryly.



In the first depths of Kuzusuhara City Ruins, a group of hunters is transporting a large wolf-type monster's carcass using a large transport vehicle. Their leader, a man named Moraf, communicates with his comrades via a communication device.

"We're about to arrive. We won't cause any trouble. That's the main rule but stay vigilant in case anything happens."

As Moraf's fellow hunters acknowledge his instructions, one of them speaks up with a puzzled expression.

"Hey, Moraf. Is this deal really safe? Isn't it dangerous?"

"Hey, didn't I say not to let your guard down? This isn't a request through the Hunter Office. It's bound to be a risky deal. But we've factored that in. Right?"

"Well, it's not about that. I just remembered. You haven't heard? There have been rumors lately about nationalists moving around here. When I say 'dangerous,' that's what I mean. Are we okay?"

Trading with nationalists is hostile to the Corporate Government. Moraf's comrades were concerned about this.

"...I said we've factored that in. We don't know anything and won't ask. We'll hand over the cargo, receive the payment, and go back. That's it."

Even if the trading partner were nationalists, they knew nothing. To maintain their position, they wouldn't pry. Moraf emphasized this to his comrades.

"If things go well, this will cover their medical expenses too. Let's look at it positively."

"Yeah..."

Despite the danger, they couldn't back out now, especially for their comrades. With a renewed understanding, Moraf and his group focused on the dangerous task at hand.

The trading location was an abandoned building in the first depths. Moraf and his comrades entered the indoor parking lot, where they contacted the trading partner via an information terminal. Soon, a woman in a maid outfit and a child resembling a hunter emerged from the back of the parking lot. Moraf had only communicated with the trading partner via text before, so he was somewhat perplexed by the unexpected arrivals. However, having decided not to pry, they proceeded with the trade. Moraf gestured for his companions to open the cargo area of the transport vehicle. As the cargo area opened, the carcass of the giant wolf was revealed.

"This is the promised item. Please confirm."

"I confirm. Here's the promised reward."

The woman handed Moraf a paper bag containing the payment. Then, she approached the wolf's carcass, and several hunters wearing reinforced suits began to effortlessly drag the heavy carcass from the transport vehicle.

Moraf and his group watched in astonishment. On the other hand, the child who arrived with the woman, maintained a blank expression, merely gazing at the wolf's carcass.

After the woman finished moving the carcass to the child's side, she politely bowed to Moraf and his group.

"Thank you for today. Please consider asking us again if needed."

Understanding this as a signal to leave, Moraf gestured for his comrades to retreat. There were countless questions they wanted to ask. Normally, they should at least inquire to confirm if the value of the received artifacts was fair. However, Moraf decided that it was best to leave without asking anything. None of his comrades objected. They all agreed that they should swiftly cross the dangerous bridge without stopping midway. With this shared understanding, they quickly left the scene.

In the parking lot where Moraf and his group had departed, the woman said to the child, "Now, go ahead."

Upon hearing this, the child extended their left arm towards the wolf's carcass.

Their arm began to swell in size. Then, part of it began to tear open, revealing fangs and transforming into a large mouth.

The gaping maw latched onto the wolf's carcass, displaying a ravenous appetite. The woman and the child watched silently as the voracious arm devoured the massive body.

The woman was Olivia, and the child was Tiol.



Moraf and his group, who provided the corpse of the giant wolf to Tiol and his companions, returned to the frontline base with the artifacts they received as their reward. Feeling that it would be safe here, they all breathed a sigh of relief.

"So, Moraf, what are we going to do with those artifacts? Are we going to sell them here?"

"No, I have a bad feeling about selling them in bulk."

"Yeah, I get what you mean..."

Although they acquired the artifacts by taking a risky job, considering the unknown nature of their trading partner, it seemed unlikely that these items could be brought to any regular pawnshop.

However, they needed to somehow exchange them for money; otherwise, they wouldn't turn into any wealth anytime soon. For the sake of their comrades' medical expenses, Moraf and his group needed money.

"Well, we have no choice. Let's sell them at the artifact shop in the slums. We can't bring items like these to respectable places, so they might be able to help us there, even if we get a lower price."

Exchanging artifacts for money is part of the hunter's profession. In that sense, the dangerous bridge that Moraf and his group had to cross was still a little longer.

Moraf's group headed for the slums of Kugamayama City. On the way, one of their companions spoke with a slightly troubled expression.

"Hey, Moraf. About those two trading partners..."

"Hey, I told you not to pry, didn't I?"

"No, it's not about that..."

"What do you mean?"

With a mysterious air, his companion asked Moraf with a puzzled expression, as if telling a ghost story.

"Do you think they were... human?"

Moraf and his group were seasoned hunters who had ventured into the Second Depths. They were quite skilled at roughly assessing the strength of unknown opponents.

Their expertise led Moraf and his group to question whether their trading partners, Tiol and Olivia, were human or not. The uncertain nature of their trading partners made them doubt whether they were dealing with nationalists.

"Yeah, maybe. The woman might have been a cyborg."

"What about the child?"

"... I don't know."

Was that child human? If it were a yes or no question, Moraf would choose the latter. While he thought so, he avoided giving a response, feeling that if he did, their group would be overwhelmed by questions, concerns, and anxieties about what kind of deal they had made.



In the meeting where the executives of Kugamayama City gathered, Yanagisawa displayed an extremely displeased demeanor.

"What do you mean by interrupting the extension of the rear communication line?"

The usually somewhat frivolous Yanagisawa was nowhere to be found. His face and voice were tinged with an inner rage, not the fiery heat of hatred, but rather a chilling coldness, as if ruthlessly crushing adversaries.

Everyone present here was a city executive, possessing power and pride from winning power struggles within the city. They had the courage to laugh off intimidation from peers of similar power.

However, each of them was sweating profusely, avoiding Yanagisawa's gaze, trembling with fear of being noticed.

City executives wielded power, but in the context of the entire eastern region, they were merely high-ranking officials in ordinary local cities.

But Yanagisawa was different. Although he held a position similar to other mid-level executives, his skills were so exceptional that he had received offers of favorable treatment from Sakashita Heavy Industries, one of the five major corporations.

Previously, when the city was attacked by a large monster emerging from the Kuzusuhara District ruins, the defense-related request to the hunters came from the Corporate Government, all thanks to Yanagisawa's skills.

How much power was needed to make that possible? If a mere city executive went against those capable of doing it, what would happen? As city executives of Kugamayama City, the attendees understood this, which only increased their sweating.

Only three people present were capable of dealing with Yanagisawa to some extent. First was Riot, the executive who chaired the meeting. Then there were Inabe and Udajima, leaders of the major factions.

Riot, as the chairman, tried to appease Yanagisawa to proceed with the meeting.

"First, I want you to understand that it's not a termination but a temporary interruption of the rear communication line."

"I understand."

"And everyone here understands that the extension of the rear communication line brings significant benefits to Kugamayama City."

"Then why interrupt it?"

Enduring Yanagisawa's chilling gaze, Riot continued to explain.

"...The continuation of the rear communication line extension work in the Second Depths is currently causing significant concerns about its cost-effectiveness."

The extension of the rear communication line dramatically improved the efficiency of artifact collection in the First Depths.

The First Depths was once a difficult place to reach, causing many hunters to hesitate to enter. But now, with the rear communication line open, artifact collection was thriving. This, in turn, boosted the city's profits, with executives assigning territorial rights and vying for the benefits.

However, whether the rear communication line extension would have the same effect on the Second Depths was met with extreme concern, doubt, and pessimistic views. This was because the monsters in the Second Depths were so strong that even squads of humanoid weapons were forced to retreat.

The stronger the surrounding monsters, the more costly it was to extend and maintain the rear communication line. Even if they invested a huge amount to extend to the Second Depths, there were only a few hunters capable enough to collect artifacts there.

There was no point in further extending the rear communication line at this time. Budget should be allocated to conquering the First Depths instead. This suggestion had been raised multiple times.

In particular, Inabe had been fervently advocating for it. Inabe's assigned area was far from the rear communication line, and the monsters there were stronger than in other areas. To attract more hunters to such areas, they wanted to dispatch squads of humanoid weapons to exterminate outdoor monsters.

However, Yanagisawa had been overriding proposals and requests from city executives and enforcing the extension. Yanagisawa had the power to do so.

Normally, the topic would have been crushed by Yanagisawa without discussion. It shouldn't have even been allowed to bring it up.

However, there were circumstances this time. The factions led by Inabe and Udajima had colluded to secure the consent of almost all executives except for Yanagisawa.

Even Yanagisawa couldn't unilaterally crush it without causing a confrontation with other executives, disrupting the city's economy.

Finally, negotiation became possible only after reaching such an extreme. The difference in position between Yanagisawa and other executives was that significant.

Riot began to discuss compromises with Yanagisawa.

"If you can accept the temporary interruption of the rear contact line extension, we will also agree to allocate budget for the construction of the Second Frontline Base. The funds will come from reallocating the humanoid weapon squads currently deployed in the Second Depths to the First Depths, creating new exploitable areas. It will also strengthen our forces. How about it?"

Despite thriving with hunters, there were still many untouched areas in the First Depths. These included Inabe's assigned area and beyond, where the monsters were so strong that entry was difficult.

By dispatching humanoid weapons to such places to thin out the monsters, artifact collection in the First Depths could be further accelerated, with great profits anticipated.

The conquest of the Second Depths could then proceed with the strengthened forces and increased resources. Refusing this proposal would not change the current situation where the rear contact line extension to the Second Depths was stalled due to the excessively strong monsters.

Riot attempted to persuade Yanagisawa in this direction.

While waiting for Yanagisawa's response, silence filled the room. Depending on Yanagisawa's answer, it could lead to a full confrontation between Yanagisawa and others. The pressure in the tense atmosphere increased the executives' nervousness.

And Yanagisawa, who seemed to be the only one not feeling the tension, eased the mood.

"Well, I suppose there's no other way. Understood. Let's proceed as discussed."

Seeing Yanagisawa revert to his usual frivolous demeanor, Riot let out a small sigh of relief.

"Alright, let's proceed in that direction. We'll handle the finer details individually later. Moving on to the next agenda item: We've received reports of nationalists operating in the First Depths. Though it's not confirmed, if true, they might be targeting local artifacts. The responsible parties for each section should share information closely and respond accordingly..."

With the meeting returning to routine topics, the atmosphere calmed down. Many relaxed, letting out breaths of relief, and the meeting continued.

During a break in the long meeting, Inabe approached Udajima with a stern expression.

"Udajima, what are you playing at?"

Though Inabe had allied with Udajima to persuade Yanagisawa, their negotiations had been mediated through Riot, and this was their first direct conversation on the matter. Udajima responded lightly.

"Playing at? I just did what was necessary as an executive of Kugamayama City. By interrupting the rear communication line extension and reallocating forces from the Second Depths to the First, the city can expect greater profits. Riot explained it well. You understood that much and supported our proposal, right?"

"Hmph. Stop lying."

While Udajima's response wasn't a lie, the benefits from this maneuver would be significantly greater for Inabe. This discrepancy was why Udajima hadn't fully committed to persuading Yanagisawa before. Inabe couldn't fathom why Udajima had suddenly changed his stance.

"Fine. But, I won't thank you."

"That's fine."

Despite feeling uneasy about Udajima's seemingly confident demeanor, Inabe ended the conversation and left.

At that moment, he received a call from Sheryl.

"What is it? I'm busy. If it's not important, handle it later."

"I'll be brief. Someone has come to my shop trying to sell an information terminal from the old world. It wasn't Akira. If this is trivial, please disregard."

"...Speak."

Breaks during the meeting were also times for adjusting opinions within one's faction. Inabe deemed the situation serious enough to use this valuable time to speak with Sheryl.



Returning to the waiting customer, Sheryl smiled pleasantly.

"Thank you for waiting. The buyback amount for this item is 500,000 aurum."

The man who had brought in the old-world information terminal raised his voice in anger at the unexpectedly low offer.

"Five hundred thousand!? Are you kidding me? I've heard you sell these for at least 50 million here! And you're offering just 500,000 for it? Are you mocking me?"

"No, we would never do that..."

"Then why only 500,000? No matter how you look at it, that's way too low!"

Calmly and slowly, Sheryl began to explain, trying to soothe the irritated man.

"My apologies. We cannot purchase items of uncertain authenticity at a high price. I'm not saying this item is a fake. It's due to the limitations of our appraisal capabilities. Appraising items like these is extremely difficult."

Sheryl then glanced at the appraisers standing nearby. These appraisers were provided by Katsuragi's group for the purpose of buying artifacts. They were not lacking in appraisal skills; they could handle ordinary artifacts without issue. However, they did not have the expertise to guarantee the authenticity of old-world information terminals. At least, Katsuragi's group found it difficult to justify spending millions of aurum based on their appraisal results alone.

"To be honest, for such valuable artifacts, we conduct a rigorous appraisal by bringing them to external appraisal agencies. Therefore, when it comes to appraising and paying on the spot, 500,000 aurum is the maximum we can offer."

The man, now understanding Sheryl's explanation, seemed to lose his steam. He couldn't simply demand an external appraisal, as it would require him to part with the valuable artifact temporarily. Being a back-alley shop in the slums, there was no guarantee on how his artifact would be handled. They might say it was genuine but tell the customer it was fake, or even claim it was never brought in at all.

Even though back-alley shops depended on customer trust and would generally not engage in such deceitful practices, whether one could actually trust them was another matter. This distrust worked both ways. Some customers tried to scam shops by deliberately bringing fake artifacts. Sometimes the artifact would turn out to be fake, but the customer would genuinely believe it was real and accuse the shop of switching it. Some might even resort to violence, insisting their fake item was real.

If a powerful hunter caused trouble, the damage could be significant. Back-alley shops required defense capabilities proportional to their scale, which limited how much business they could handle. This necessity for immediate appraisal and payment was thus a common practice in slum shops.

The man understood this. However, he still felt the offer was too low and continued to press the issue.

"Even so, 500,000 is just too low..."

"With all due respect, if you are confident in the quality of this artifact, I recommend taking it to a proper buyback center. Whether it's the Hunter Office's buyback center or a private one like Kurogin, they should offer a more substantial amount."

"Well, that's..."

Sheryl knew the reason the man brought the item to a back-alley shop in the slums. She mentioned this deliberately to gauge his reaction. There could be several reasons: the item might be a cleverly crafted fake, a genuine stolen item that would be identified at a legitimate buyback center, an artifact acquired through a contract that limits its resale to certain buyers, or there could be personal reasons preventing him from going to a legitimate buyback center.

To probe further, Sheryl made a light proposal.

"If you insist, we can bring in a trustworthy appraiser to this location. However, the cost will be borne by you."

"...How much?"

"Including travel expenses, it will be 5 million aurum, paid in advance. Considering the location, it's a necessary measure."

This was not a small amount. The man hesitated but eventually made a decision.

"...Alright, call them."

"Understood."

Sheryl was quite surprised by his acceptance but did not show it. She bowed politely and began arranging for the appraiser, thinking that the man was likely not a fraud.

The appraiser, whom Sheryl had called in, finished evaluating the item. Afterward, the appraiser and Sheryl stepped aside, and the appraiser gave Sheryl the results.

"I can't be completely certain, but it is most likely genuine. I could buy it myself for 30 million aurum. What do you think?"

Sheryl pondered. The appraiser, recommended by Viola, was indeed skilled. He had previously worked for Kurogin, and his dismissal was not due to incompetence. If such a person was willing to buy the item himself, it was almost certainly genuine.

With this in mind, Sheryl made her decision. She left the appraiser and returned to the customer with a smile.

"Thank you for waiting. I'll get straight to the point. We are willing to offer 30 million aurum. How does that sound?"

"30 million, huh..."

The customer hesitated. Considering that the item could sell for over 50 million aurum, it still felt like a lowball offer. However, he had already paid for the appraisal. If he didn't sell now, he would just lose 5 million aurum.

Since they were willing to offer 30 million aurum, it was clear that the artifact was genuine. But this authenticity was only valid now, in this specific place. An appraisal certificate from a slum shop wouldn't be accepted elsewhere.

In other words, he could sell the artifact for 30 million aurum only here and now. This thought pushed him to make his decision.

"Alright. I'll sell it for 30 million."

"Thank you. Would you prefer the payment via transfer or in cash?"

"Cash, please."

"Understood. I will prepare it immediately."

Following Sheryl's instructions, a child from the gang appeared with a trunk containing 30 million aurum. The customer checked the contents, and the deal was finalized.

"Thank you for your business. We look forward to serving you again."

"Yeah, see you."

The customer left, and the appraisers arranged by Katsuragi watched him go with complex expressions.

Once outside the shop, the man breathed a sigh of relief and contacted his companion as he walked through the slums.

"Moraf, it's me. I sold the artifact for 30 million aurum. Well, 5 million went for the appraisal, so it's actually 25 million. ...Yeah, it's genuine. At least it's worth 30 million. So, how about the others? Did they manage to sell theirs? ...I see. In that case, they should also sell at the same shop where I sold mine..."

The man who had brought the old-world information terminal to Sheryl's shop was indeed a member of Moraf's group.



Sheryl left her store in the hands of her subordinates and went to Kurogin. She brought the old-world information terminal she bought from Mora's associates to get an official appraisal. Although she was fairly certain it was genuine, obtaining a certification from Kurogin was necessary to sell it at a high price in a relic shop. Simply asserting it was genuine wouldn't convince customers, even if it truly was.

The appraisal process was in two stages. First, they would check if the item was previously appraised by Kurogin. Depending on the outcome, a more detailed appraisal would follow. Having submitted the request, Sheryl waited in the lounge, pondering over the situation to pass the time.

(If his reaction is any indication, it's unlikely to be stolen. Did he obtain it himself? If he found it in the ruins, he should be certain it's genuine. His reaction seemed more like he was unsure. Did he receive it from someone? Perhaps from an unreliable source? If that were the case, he could have just taken it to a regular buyback center. There must be another reason he chose to come to a back-alley shop in the slums...)

Sheryl's thoughts deepened as she tried to piece together the situation.

(He chose cash payment to avoid leaving a trace, but he paid the appraisal fee from an account. He must have thought it would be fine as long as there was no record of the deposit. So, there might have been some minor issue he wanted to avoid? Hmm...)

As she continued to speculate, Sheryl received a call from the store. The unexpected report made her raise her voice slightly.

"Wait, is that true?"

Another person had come to sell an old-world information terminal. This time, it was a different person, and they had brought two terminals. Sheryl's face showed a hint of suspicion.

(What's going on? Are people from the same group selling relics in small amounts? Was the first time a test? Were they checking for a shop that buys old-world information terminals?)

Breaking her train of thought, Sheryl gave instructions to the store.

"Charge the appraisal fee and properly appraise the items. If they are genuine, buy them. The appraisal fee is the same, 5 million aurum, and the buyback price is 30 million aurum each, just like last time. If they refuse, turn them away without negotiating."

She added further instructions for future sales: handle them the same way, but if the total number of items bought exceeds ten, stop purchasing. If Katsuragi and his group decide to buy separately, let them. With these directives, she ended the call.

"...What on earth is going on?"

Sheryl sighed, feeling the situation might escalate beyond her control. Just then, she received a call from Viola.

"It's me. Do you have a moment?"

"...What is it? Is it about the old-world information terminals?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Surprised by Viola's response, Sheryl explained the situation.

"What? I didn't know anything about that. I'd love to hear more but let me get to my point first. It's about letting Erio, and his team participate in the relic collection in the depths of Kuzusuhara Ruins."

"That issue... To be honest, I'm not very keen on it..."

"But they are eager to go, right?"

"Well, yes, but..."

Impressed by their performance in the mock battles, Erio and his team were keen on participating in the relic collection in the first depth of the Kuzusuhara Ruins, with the support of the integrated support system. However, mock battles were different from real combat. Even with Katsuragi and his team accompanying them, Sheryl believed it was too dangerous for Erio and his team to collect relics in the depths of Kuzusuhara. She wasn't enthusiastic about this idea.

Still, given their reliance on the integrated support system provided by the corporation, she couldn't outright refuse. Enhancing the gang's combat capabilities made it difficult to say no.

Viola seized the opportunity.

"I understand your concerns, Sheryl. That's why I have a proposal. Can we include Akira for insurance? And if possible, included you."

"Akira, maybe, but me? I don't see how my presence would help."

"It would show that we have enough confidence to include non-combatants. It would be a testament to the performance of the integrated support system."

Viola explained that Sheryl would only accompany them as an observer and wouldn't wear the support suit or participate in relic collection. Then, she continued, pressing her advantage.

"Don't you ever want to see Akira in action in the ruins up close?"

"I'll talk to Akira about it. That's all I can promise."

"That's enough. Thanks. Talk to you later." With that, Viola ended the call.

Sheryl sighed again, feeling she might have given in to temptation.

After a while, Kurogin sent the preliminary appraisal results. Sheryl reviewed them and forwarded the information to Inabe.



Moraf stood in front of Sheryl's relic shop, muttering to himself as he glanced at the exterior.

"This is it... Well, it can't be helped."

Moraf had decided to cash in the old-world information terminals he acquired from his dealings with Tiol and his group at the backstreet shops in the slums. His plan was to sell small quantities at many shops to avoid causing a stir.

Bringing a large number of terminals to a single shop risked the shop not having enough funds to buy them all. Moreover, the shop might make a fuss while trying to gather the necessary funds. Selling just a few items at many shops seemed to solve these problems.

However, that plan had failed. The scars left on the slum's underground economy by the major conflict between the two major gangs were deep. Sheryl's shop was the only place that could buy such valuable and expensive relics like old-world information terminals for cash on the spot.

While other shops had the financial power to buy, they weren't willing to risk large amounts of money on terminals that might turn out to be sophisticated fakes. When the two major gangs backed them, they could track down and reclaim any money lost to fakes. But now, without that support, even if they knew the profits would be huge if genuine, they couldn't take the gamble.

Considering these circumstances, Moraf had decided to sell the remaining old-world information terminals at Sheryl's shop all at once, despite the increased visibility this move would bring.

Moraf knew he was taking a risky step. But without cashing in, the dangers he had faced so far would be meaningless. He needed the money for his comrades' medical expenses. Tension evident, he started towards the shop, but someone called out to him.

"Hey, you got a moment? You're here to sell old-world information terminals, right? Let's talk..."

Reacting instinctively, Moraf grabbed the man by the collar, pinning him. He needed to find out how this stranger knew he had the terminals and might need to use force to get answers.

The man raised his hands slightly, trying to calm Moraf with a nervous but placating smile.

"Calm down. I'm not suspicious. If anything, you're the suspicious ones, but I won't dig into that. I just want to make a deal."

"A deal? What kind?"

"I'll get straight to it. We'll pay 28 million aurum per terminal. Considering the appraisal fees, selling to us is more profitable. What do you say?"

The man was one of the appraisers arranged by Katsuragi.

Moraf had sold old-world information terminals twice already at Sheryl's shop, and the man knew they were genuine from those appraisals. Expecting the next sale to be genuine too, he and his associates had been keeping watch outside the shop.

The first and second sellers had a strong hunter vibe about them, including their equipment. It seemed like a shallow plan, but it was working.

Moraf quickly grasped the situation from the man's behavior and saw the opportunity.

"Fine."

"That's the spirit. We won't charge an appraisal fee, but we'll need to inspect the items. That okay?"

"Sure. But no funny business."

"Got it. We don't want trouble either."

The man led Moraf to a room in the slums where his associates completed the appraisal. Though not as skilled as Sheryl's appraisers, they confirmed the items were genuine.

"Alright, they're real... I didn't expect you to have ten. Where did you..."

"Don't ask questions."

"Got it."

Silenced by Moraf's warning glare, the man paid him. They struggled a bit to gather enough cash but managed in the end.

Having successfully exchanged the terminals for cash, Moraf contacted his comrades as he walked through the slums.

"...Yes, it's done. We're in the clear for now."

"Good. So, what's next?"

"Next?"

"Are we doing this again? That woman mentioned another deal. She seemed dangerous, but the reward was real. We've made quite a bit. What do you think?"

Moraf frowned.

"Don't be ridiculous. There won't be a next time."

"Got it."

Moraf couldn't deny the significant profits they'd made. The trip to the second-depth area had been worth it. But no amount of money could make him want to see Olivia and Tiol again.

Episode 175 Tsubakihara Area

A squad of white humanoid mechs advanced through the ruins of Kuzusuhara City, encountering a pack of large weapon dogs, each over 10 meters in length. The two sides immediately engaged in a fierce battle, their weapons clashing violently.

The enormous dogs sprinted across the ground, firing countless bullets from the machine guns mounted on their backs. Some of the dogs, equipped with cannons, roared, their cries punctuated by the thunderous sound of their artillery.

The white mechs glided smoothly over the terrain, dodging bullets, blocking cannon fire with massive shields, and firing back with humanoid weapons. Despite being outnumbered, with only four mechs against eighteen weapon dogs, the mechs maintained the upper hand.

Each weapon dog was formidable, capable of overwhelming an average hunter's squad alone. These creatures combined immense vitality and surprising agility with the ability to wield machine guns and cannons, making them a terror for many hunters. The area was a hazardous zone where such monsters roamed in packs.

The four white mechs chased the pack through the ruins, minimizing their movements to avoid unnecessary bullet fire thanks to their robust force field armor. They deflected potentially damaging artillery with their shields to conserve energy, then closed in on their targets, unleashing massive bullets at close range.

The weapon dogs, hit by these enormous rounds, had their heads, torsos, and limbs shattered, resulting in instant death. Broken weapons detached from their bodies, falling to the ground. These mechs were part of the White Rabbits, specially prepared for the rear communication line extension work in the second-depth area, and their pilots were equally skilled. They seamlessly coordinated to corner their enemies.

The weapon dogs fought desperately, moving swiftly through the ruins, and repeatedly firing their guns and cannons. However, they were ultimately no match for the mechs' superior firepower and tactics. The mechs dodged, blocked, and counterattacked, annihilating the pack in a relatively short time.

Erio, observing the battle from a distance through a comprehensive support system, couldn't help but express his amazement.

"Incredible..."

He was in awe of the monsters' strength and the even greater power of the humanoid mechs, as well as the sheer intensity of the battle.

At that moment, a teammate called out to him.

"It's our turn now. Let's go."

"Oh, right."

Erio, along with the other boys, drove towards a building that the humanoid mechs had cleared of threats.



Erio and his group found themselves in the first depths of the Kuzusuhara City ruins, tasked with relic collection alongside Katsuya's squad. Unlike their previous practice battles, where they formed their own teams, this time they were integrated into the various teams Katsuya had organized from his unit. Erio's team consisted of four members, with the leader being a former B-rank boy from the slums, sharing a similar background with Erio. As they made their way through a building, casual conversation flowed more easily, partly due to their shared experiences. Eventually, the topic shifted to Katsuya.

"You know, I didn't like that guy at first," the team leader admitted. "I thought he was just riding high because some Drankam executive liked him, getting all the good gear and easy assignments."

Another boy from the original A-rank group laughed in agreement. "Yeah, same here. Ever since he joined Drankam, he was always with women, and his good looks made him really popular. I used to wonder, what's up with that guy?"

Erio listened with interest, nodding as they spoke. "I see."

"Yeah, that's how it was. Anyway... hold on, we have a signal. Stay alert."

The boys quickly readied their weapons, shifting from casual to focused on an instant, and efficiently took down the monster that emerged from the depths of the building.

Though the exterior of the building had been cleared of monsters, the interior still housed threats. While these indoor creatures were weaker than those outside, they were still significantly stronger than the monsters found near the ruins' outskirts. However, the powerful equipment lent to Erio's team made quick work of them. Erio kept pace, contributing to the team's firepower without dragging them down, despite feeling slightly aided by the enhanced suit.

With the immediate threat neutralized, the team leader lowered his gun and resumed the interrupted conversation. "So, about Katsuya..."

His relaxed demeanor reflected his trust in the comprehensive support system. In a perilous environment like the ruins, letting down one's guard was typically suicidal. Yet, excessive tension led to rapid fatigue. Balancing vigilance and relaxation were crucial for survival, and the support system provided a safety net, allowing the boys to relax just enough to stay effective.

Being able to chat casually during combat was a hallmark of a seasoned hunter. The boys, bolstered by the support system, were getting close to that level.

As the conversation continued, the topic touched on the internal conflicts between Drankam's office factions, specifically A-rank and B-rank groups, leading to a story of how the former B-rank leader came to respect Katsuya.

"Anyway, I fought alongside Katsuya in the Mihazono City ruins. Even with the same gear, I was a total drag on the team. I used to think Katsuya only performed well because he had better equipment thanks to that female executive favoring him. But seeing him in action... I was shocked. That day, my head was a mess."

The boy's self-deprecating smile seemed both amused and pleased as he recalled the experience. "Fighting with Katsuya, I realized I'd been making all sorts of assumptions about him. He's way stronger than me, yet he never boasts and always tries to protect everyone, including us. So yeah, I really started to respect him."

Another boy chimed in. "For me, it was during the bounty hunt. Up until that day, I thought Katsuya was just a guy who got lucky, always surrounded by women. But he went out of his way to act as bait for against the over-synthesized snake to save his team and calmed everyone down when things got chaotic. It made me see his real strength."

The boy hesitated, looking a bit shy before continuing. "And maybe because I understood him better, I started to get the sense of camaraderie he had with his team. That bond brought us closer together, and our coordination improved a lot."

"Yeah, I get that," another boy agreed.

"Totally. That's exactly it," the first boy added.

Erio listened intently as the three boys animatedly discussed their newfound respect for Katsuya. They continued to explore the building, chatting, and dispatching any monsters they encountered. Eventually, they reached a spacious room where they gathered relics, wrapping up their relic collection mission for that location.



Sheryl, who accompanied Erio's group on their relic collection mission, was inside one of Drankam's large vehicles. Through an advanced display device, she observed Erio and his team, who were scattered among various groups organized by Katsuya. To Sheryl's eyes, it didn't seem like Erio, and his companions were dragging down the Drankam members. She was once again impressed by the performance of the comprehensive support system that made this possible.

"This is amazing. To be honest, I initially thought that even with the support from the comprehensive support system, Erio and his team would be more of a hindrance. But with such high performance, I can provide a favorable report to Inabe-sama," Sheryl remarked.

"Thank you very much," Takagi, the person responsible for the comprehensive support system on this mission, responded with a satisfied smile.

Sheryl then turned her attention to Mizuha, who was also present in the vehicle.

"By the way, I'm glad you invited me along, but are you sure it was alright? I am supposed to be with Inabe-sama, but isn't the Drankam office faction aligned with Udajima-sama?"

Mizuha shook her head with a smile. "No, that's a misunderstanding. It's true that Udajima-sama has been very kind to us. However, Drankam is not in a position to request a change in the city's representative. We trade with Kugamayama City, not individual representatives like Udajima or Inabe. Whoever the city appoints as our contact, we will work with them to maintain a good relationship."

In other words, Drankam did business with Kugamayama City, not with Udajima or Inabe individually. Currently, Udajima was the city's negotiator, but Drankam wasn't opposed to Inabe. If Inabe extended a hand, they were ready to shake it. Mizuha subtly conveyed this stance.

Although Mizuha personally didn't mind siding entirely with Udajima, she recognized the importance of maintaining a balanced approach. The power struggle between Inabe and Udajima seemed to favor Udajima, making his victory appear inevitable. However, siding with Udajima would indirectly mean opposing Sheryl, who was aligned with Inabe. Telling Katsuya that they had chosen Udajima's side could potentially ruin their relationship with him.

Mizuha feared this scenario and thus deliberately kept connections with both factions, maintaining a balance.

Sheryl understood Mizuha's response and the underlying strategy. "I see. I'll inform Inabe-sama of the clarification. So, how is the relic collection going? Have you found any valuable

relics?"

"Not so far," Mizuha replied, confirming Sheryl's suspicions.

The inner parts of the accessible areas were all taken by Udajima's faction. The outer areas, including those outside the currently accessible regions, were assigned to Inabe's faction. The current accessible region in Inabe's section likely had no valuable relics. This was why Inabe was pushing to expand the accessible area, even if it meant risking strong monsters.

Hunters were willing to take risks if there were valuable relics to be found. Inabe's investigation likely revealed that their assigned area was poor in relics and overrun with powerful monsters, making it an unattractive location for hunters. This was why Inabe used the Old-World information terminal obtained from Akira as bait to lure hunters into their section.

The discovery of valuable relics like the Old-World information terminal, even if in small quantities, would strongly motivate the hunters. They would be driven by the prospect of finding more and would continue their exploration of the ruins. By strategically placing these bait relics to expand the accessible areas, the momentum of exploration would further increase.

The rest was up to luck and timing. They could only hope that the newly expanded exploration areas would yield a significant number of valuable relics. These were untouched territories, and the potential was there. If there were no relics, Inabe would be in serious trouble. The operation had incurred substantial costs, and failure would be irrecoverable, leading to his complete downfall.

However, doing nothing would likely also lead to Inabe's downfall, as the power struggle between Inabe and Udajima was progressing in Udajima's favor. Inabe's influence would gradually be eroded, eventually leading to his downfall. To counter this situation, Inabe had decided to take a gamble. Sheryl understood this reasoning.

Sheryl did not think this decision was wrong. If the alternative was certain failure, taking a gamble was the only option. Sheryl herself had taken what seemed like a reckless gamble, resulting in securing Akira as an ally. She understood Inabe's decision to take a risk.

If Sheryl had any complaints, it was that Inabe's circumstances had led to the cancellation of Akira's participation in the relic collection. It was widely known that Akira had brought the Old-World information terminal to Sheryl's shop. If Akira were to discover another Old-World information terminal in Inabe's designated area, it would be too conspicuous. Additionally, Akira was seen as associated with Inabe. If a hunter perceived as connected to Inabe discovered the relic secretly placed by Inabe, it would raise suspicions of manipulation.

Due to these reasons, Inabe had prevented Akira from accompanying Sheryl on the Drankam relic collection mission. Given the circumstances, Sheryl had no choice but to accept this. Realizing this belatedly, she acknowledged her own greed and naivety. She also suspected that Viola had likely understood this and suggested the plan to her, imagining Viola's smug expression made Sheryl frown involuntarily.

Misinterpreting Sheryl's expression as dissatisfaction, Mizuha tried to reassure her, "But this sort of thing happens often. Since it's an untouched area, I'm sure we'll be fine if we continue exploring."

"Yes, let's hope for the best," Sheryl replied.

She knew that an Old-World information terminal planted by Inabe should be around here. If Katsuya and his team found it, they would likely report it to her, given that she was their client. This would reduce the risk of suspicion since the discoverers would be seen as aligned with Udajima, not Inabe.

However, she didn't know the exact locations of these planted items. Even if she did, she couldn't disclose that information. With Akira no longer participating, she wished they would find it quickly.

Despite these thoughts, Sheryl maintained a pleasant demeanor and smiled warmly at Mizuha.



Akira had been asked by Sheryl to accompany her group and, if necessary, to lead Erio and the others in collecting relics. When consulted about it, Akira had gently advised against it, seeing Erio's team collecting relics in the First Inner Section as akin to suicide. Sheryl agreed about the danger but, due to various circumstances, had difficulty refusing and thus had asked Akira to accompany them.

However, due to a sudden interference from Inabe, that plan had been abruptly halted, and Akira was now responding to a rescue request in the First Inner Section. While not accompanying them, Akira was relatively close by and could be called upon if needed. That's what Akira had told Sheryl.

Riding through the ruins on his bike, Akira smiled and spoke to Alpha.

『Alpha, come to think of it, we did something like this before, didn't we?』

『Yes. It was when we were assigned to rescue operations for temporary base construction-related requests.』

『That's right. That time was tough. The rescue requests kept coming one after another, there was no time to rest, some even passed on their monster troubles to me and ran away, and we were attacked by swarms of Yaratascorpion. It was a mess.』

Akira expressed the difficulty of that time with a wry smile, but there was a nostalgic sense of enjoyment in his expression.

『We might be doing the same thing, but it feels much easier now compared to back then. Does that mean I've grown?』

Akira said, glancing at Alpha. In response, Alpha, somewhat provocatively, smiled and said, 『Maybe. But there's still a long way to go, isn't there?』

『I know that.』

While smiling in response, Akira felt a slight relief inwardly that his growth wasn't denied by Alpha.

He did feel a sense of improvement, mainly due to the enhancement of his equipment quality. However, compared to that, his personal growth was minimal. He hardly felt like he had become stronger himself.

His manipulation of reality resolution was also not going smoothly. He didn't feel like he was close to mastering it anytime soon. In a recent simulation battle, whether it was due to complacency or not, he received a defeat notification before Erio, who had the same

equipment. And complacency wasn't a valid reason for defeat.

Thanks to Alpha's support, he could handle difficult high-level equipment effortlessly, and with each equipment upgrade, he became significantly stronger.

However, Akira couldn't help but feel that his personal growth had reached its limit and plateaued. He vaguely felt such anxiety.

But then Alpha affirmed Akira's growth and stated that there was still much room for further growth.

If Alpha said so, then it must be true. Deciding to believe in that, Akira thought to himself that he could still become stronger.

Upon reaching the abandoned building at the rescue location, Akira found himself forced into a brief siege to rescue the trapped hunters inside. The leader of the group expressed surprise and gratitude upon seeing the number of monster corpses defeated by Akira.

"We owe you one. ...Wait, did you defeat all of these by yourself? That's impressive."

"Thanks."

As Akira replied, he looked again at the defeated monsters. They were creatures that inhabited the depths of the Kuzusuhara Street ruins. They weren't weak by any means but compared to the standards of the First Inner Section, they were only moderately challenging.

"...Not to sound ungrateful, but was it too early to come here?"

Struggling against opponents of this level suggested that operating in the First Inner Section would be difficult. Akira had hinted at this through his subtle warnings. The man had already come to understand this himself, sighing lightly.

"Yeah, I thought about that too, but I felt like I couldn't pass up this opportunity."

"Opportunity?"

"Huh? Oh, you know, the city dispatching humanoid weapons to thin out the monsters. That's what I mean."

In the First Inner Section, outdoor monsters were generally stronger. Many of them were too large to fit indoors, such as giant spider-like crustacean dragons and large weapon dogs. Naturally, for hunters who couldn't handle opponents like these, even reaching the buildings inside the ruins where relics might be found was impossible. Therefore, conducting relic collection in the First Inner Section was challenging.

But now, the city had dispatched humanoid weapon units to the Second Inner Section to thin out the outdoor large monsters, expanding the exploration area of the First Inner Section. Thanks to this, even those who couldn't handle outdoor monsters well could engage relatively weaker indoor monsters as long as they had the strength to do so. This

allowed relic collection in the First Inner Section.

The men saw this as an opportunity and came to the First Inner Section. However, they ultimately lacked the power and ended up requesting rescue. Faced with the shortcomings of their judgment, they sighed again.

"Well, thinking about it, I thought we could make it. It was a gamble that didn't pay off. Still, it would have been worth it if we found some decent relics, but that turned out to be a bust too. We shouldn't have gone against the Tsubakihara side. There would have been less competition, and we might have had a chance going that way."

Tsubakihara. Hearing that familiar term, Akira subtly inquired while hiding his internal surprise.

"...What does 'Tsubakihara side' mean?"

"Huh? Oh, it refers to this side, the one that came out from the rear communication line."

Realizing that the conversation was getting long, Akira and the others decided to leave the building for now. As they headed back toward the rear communication line, Akira casually asked about the meaning of the term "Tsubakihara side" and listened to the men's explanation.

It was a very intriguing topic.

After being escorted to the rear communication line, the men parted ways with Akira. They bid him farewell and, as they disappeared from view, exchanged meaningful smiles.

"...We did it."

"Yeah. We did."

And they openly expressed their joy.

"We did it! What a great success!"

"Yeah! It was worth risking our lives to come to the First Inner Section!"

The men had certainly won their gamble. Confident in this, they triumphantly headed back to the front-line base.



Erio continued their relic collection with his team members. Initially, he felt tense due to the involvement of Katsuya, who led the main force of the Drankam faction and was recognized by the city's executives. However, they had since become quite friendly.

"Wow, sounds like it was tough."

"Yeah, it was. But our efforts paid off, and we were recognized by the city. Thanks to the comprehensive support system, we also contributed significantly during expeditions. Remember when we joined forces with the Hajima and Yoshioka humanoid weapon units for the rear communication line extension operation? We participated as infantry and delivered excellent results."

The second presentation of the new models jointly conducted by Hajima and Yoshioka during Akira's time in the Iida Commercial Zoning ruins successfully extended the rear communication line to the Second Inner Section.

Extending the rear communication line wasn't just about constructing a long road. It also involved tasks like securing buildings on both sides of the road to create barriers to prevent monsters from entering. There were many aspects of the work, such as securing the work sites, that couldn't be handled by humanoid weapons. The importance of infantry remained unchanged.

Katsuya's unit participated as infantry in those battles and conducted indoor monster exterminations that humanoid weapons found difficult to handle. Their achievements were significant, and Mizuha taking Katsuya to participate in a city-sponsored banquet contributed to introducing him to the city's executives.

The boy spoke proudly, "The old-timers used to look down on us, but things are different now. The Drankam's main force is ours. It's our era from now on."

"Is that so... That's impressive."

As a resident of the slums, a child, and a victim of oppression, Erio had a long history. From his experiences, his yearning for power and admiration for the strong were profound. He felt admiration and envy seeing a fellow slum resident rise to such heights.

Encouraged by Erio's gaze, the boy continued, "Yeah. The old-timers used to complain that our equipment was bought with someone else's money, but that doesn't fly anymore. This gear is ours, acquired with our own achievements."

Then, something crossed his mind. "Speaking of equipment, didn't you get taken down later than Akira during that simulation battle where everyone had the same gear? You did great, didn't you? But hey, if the equipment was the same, you might be stronger than Akira, right?"

Erio was about to respond in a similar light-hearted tone, but he stopped himself. Saying something like that might be interpreted as boasting that he was stronger than Akira. Realizing the potential consequences if Sheryl or Akira found out, he changed his response slightly.

"...Who knows. It'd be nice if that were true, though."

His wish was genuine, but he also understood that it was just a wish.

"But a win is a win, right? You were taken down later than Akira, so that counts for something. We were the last ones standing, but you did pretty well too, not as good as Katsuya, but still."

At that moment, Erio felt a strange pressure from the boys. Despite his confusion, he came up with a reason that made sense. He assumed they wanted someone from Akira's side like him to acknowledge that.

Realizing this, Elio found himself unable to boast anymore. From then on, he avoided saying anything controversial and kept the conversation light with the boys.



The relics collection by Katsuya and the others continues. They eliminate the monsters in the vicinity with a unit of humanoid weapons, then search the buildings there. They repeat this process until they find the relics. However, so far, they haven't had any success. Katsuya and the others had already come quite far from the rear communication lines.

Ideally, it was about time for them to return. However, today, the fact that Sheryl was accompanying them distorted Katsuya and Mizuha's judgment.

It would be somewhat embarrassing to return without any results. They wanted to show Sheryl some good aspects. With that in mind, they continued their exploration and extended their search further towards Tsubakihara. Yet, still, they found no results. A sense of urgency akin to panic rose in Katsuya and the others, and through communication and exchanges during breaks, it only grew. And when they were advised by the integrated support system to return, they began to seek some results by changing the direction of their efforts due to that urgency.

Sheryl, upon hearing that proposal from Mizuha, looked a bit surprised.

"So, you want me to see how relics are collected with Katsuya...?"

"Yes. What do you think? It's a rare opportunity. It's better to experience it firsthand on the spot rather than remotely from this vehicle. Of course, safety is guaranteed. Katsuya will protect you. Please rest assured."

In alignment with Mizuha, Katsuya also nodded confidently.

"Yeah, it's fine. Leave it to me."

Mizuha intended for Sheryl to experience relic collection within the ruins so that Katsuya could directly show her their work and make it the result of their efforts this time.

Sheryl hesitated for a moment.

Certainly, she thought it would be a good experience. But it was also dangerous. This was the first innermost part where many hunters hesitated to explore. Just being inside this large, armored vehicle was inherently dangerous.

But if she changed her perspective, even Eliot's group could manage in a place like this. And with Katsuya's team, the strongest force here, acting as escorts, safety should be ensured. To be honest, she was interested. And rejecting this offer could imply that she didn't trust Katsuya and the others' abilities, which could be awkward. With that reasoning, Sheryl made her decision.

"Alright. Then, Katsuya-san, please make sure to protect me, okay?"

"Yeah!"

With a smile that captivated Sheryl, Katsuya smiled back eagerly.

Within the ruins, which were territories of the old world, it was a terrifying place for ordinary people without combat abilities like Sheryl. Still, if safety was guaranteed, it was an intriguing place.

Setting foot there, Sheryl was somewhat excited about the experience she could never have from internet images or videos.

Katsuya, in an effort to show Sheryl the good side, always put extra effort. When he found monsters inhabiting the ruins, he would stand in front of Sheryl and shoot to protect her, easily defeating powerful monsters with precise attacks.

"That's impressive. Katsuya, you're really strong."

"Thanks. It makes me happy to hear you say that. It's been worth all our efforts to get this strong."

Katsuya warmly accepted Sheryl's praise.

Yumina watched Katsuya and Sheryl with complex feelings. While aware of the negative emotions surfacing, she still tried to maintain her composure.

Then she glanced at Airi. Seeing her friend showing no signs of jealousy made her feel narrow-minded, so she sighed softly.

Observing Yumina, Mizuha felt puzzled.

Not long ago, Mizuha had thought Yumina, who accompanied Akira, was not suitable for Katsuya and had tried to exclude her from Katsuya's team. However, now she didn't feel the need for that.

It could be interpreted that Mizuha reconsidered it as a waste to exclude Yumina, who had unexpectedly become stronger than expected, from her changed perspective. There was no contradiction.

However, Mizuha couldn't recall exactly when or why she reconsidered it. For such a significant change in mindset, there must have been some trigger or reason. But no matter how hard she tried; she couldn't remember. This change was too significant to be merely a light change of heart. There had to be something that prompted her to change her judgment. But she just couldn't recall what it was.

Realizing this, Mizuha felt a creeping sense of unease, as if her thoughts had been rewritten without her realizing it.

Trying to dispel that unsettling feeling, Mizuha tried to delve deeper into her thoughts. But

then, a situation occurred that interrupted her.

Katsuya signaled for caution to everyone. Their information gathering equipment had detected some kind of response.

The response was getting closer to Katsuya and the others. As it approached, the shape of the target gradually became clear. It was humanoid. However, that alone didn't guarantee that the figure was human. There were also monster-like creatures with humanoid shapes. Automatons were the prime example.

Katsuya initiated a general short-range communication.

"This is Drankam. If you're not an enemy, please refrain from approaching further."

And they waited for the response. But there was no reply, and the response kept getting closer. At this point, whether the figure was a monster or another hunter, it became a target of hostile vigilance. Katsuya's team aimed their guns.

The figure appeared from the back of the room. It was a boy about the same age as Katsuya. He had both hands hanging limply, and he didn't have a gun. He seemed to be wearing reinforced clothing made of leather or scale-like material. And he had an unsettlingly expressionless face.

Seeing the boy, Katsuya felt suspicious but slightly lowered his guard. It was strange for someone to be here without a gun. The fact that the stranger was alone and unarmed contributed both to Katsuya's puzzlement and the slight relaxation of his caution.

Perhaps one of the hunters who conducted the exploration towards Tsubakihara had been attacked by monsters and fled here. Katsuya thought so, and while he didn't lower his gun, he decided to try to approach the situation in a friendly manner.

But before he could do that, Yumina opened fire. Yumina was using the weapons she had when she was accompanying Akira. The boy, who was hit by the rapid fire of the SSB composite gun, was blown away with wounds all over his body.

Katsuya was surprised and flustered by Yumina's sudden action.
"Yumina!? What are you doing...?"

"Katsuya! That's the enemy!"
Yumina was convinced of it.

Having been ambushed by Tiol in the innermost part of Kuzusuhara Town Ruins. Having engaged in combat in the Iida Commercial District Ruins. From those experiences, Yumina remembered the peculiar presence that Tiol emitted.

And the boy emitted the same presence as Tiol. In addition, the comprehensive support system on Yumina's side warned her within her expanded field of view that the boy had been encountered before as the same type of monster.

With all these reasons aligned, there was no choice for Yumina but to shoot.

However, Katsuya didn't understand any of this. He would normally ask why his subordinate had suddenly shot an unarmed hunter. But those words didn't come out of Katsuya's mouth. Instead, he expressed agreement.

"...An enemy?"

Within Katsuya, an unfounded conviction was born, strong enough to seem inexplicable later. With a stern expression, he said to Mizuha,

"Mizuha-san. Let's retreat. I have a bad feeling about this."

Despite approaching unnecessarily and ignoring the warning, Mizuha showed no signs of agitation, just like Katsuya, because she, too, had an unfounded conviction that the boy was an enemy.

"Understood. Cheryl-san. It's unfortunate, but safety comes first. Let's call it quits here."

"...I understand."

Unlike Yumina and Katsuya's group, Sheryl didn't have a firm conviction that the person they shot was definitely an enemy. Therefore, she harbored concerns to the extent that she didn't have a clear conviction. However, she understood that it wasn't the time to hear detailed explanations, nor did she have the luxury to do so, so she silently followed Katsuya's group's instructions.

And as a precaution, she decided to leave someone behind.

Afterward, Katsuya's group promptly retreated from the scene. From the expressionless corpse left behind, a green liquid flowed.

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Episode 176 Boys of Different Forms

Encountering a mysterious boy inside the ruins, Katsuya's group, after Yumina perceived the boy as an enemy and defeated him, decided to retreat from the first inner area under Katsuya's uneasy judgment.

Initially, Katsuya's perception was merely to hurry back through the building they had been exploring comfortably until then. However, this perception was quickly overturned by a new change in the situation. They were obstructed from retreating by a large number of monsters.

"Damn it! What's going on?"

If there were this many monsters lurking in the building, it would be strange not to encounter them immediately upon entering. It seemed as if the horde of monsters deliberately kept their distance until now to lure them deeper into the building. The sheer quantity of enemies felt unnaturally high to Katsuya, making him involuntarily think so.

Yet, Katsuya's group wasn't in a disadvantaged position. Bringing along non-combatants like Sheryl and Mizuha for the exploration of the ruins, they had prepared their combat capabilities well. Though the speed of their retreat was slowed down by engaging with the monsters, they weren't in a situation where they were cornered.

Still, Katsuya decided it would be better to have assistance from the outside teams rather than escaping from the building with only those present. He instructed his waiting comrades to rush into the building and secure an escape route in advance.

However, upon learning the situation outside, Katsuya involuntarily frowned.

"...Outside too!"

It wasn't just Katsuya's group suddenly attacked by a large number of monsters. The outside teams were also under assault, including humanoid weapons



The squad of humanoid weapons, tasked with thinning out the monsters in the first inner area, continued to move through the ruins, prioritizing reducing the number of monsters. However, the humanoid units accompanying Katsuya's group, due to the intentions of the city's executives, remained close to Katsuya's unit.

Therefore, Katsuya's group, attempting to exit the building, should have been safe once outside. However, a situation that could unsettle this plan was unfolding outdoors as well. A swarm of gigantic monsters had appeared. Moreover, these creatures were of such overwhelming strength and numbers that even the squads of large weapon dogs were overwhelmed.

One of the creatures approached a white unit. It was a creature about 10 meters long, with a body covered in scales, resembling a quadrupedal beast.

Its overall shape resembled that of a wolf, especially its torso and tail. However, its forelegs and hindlegs were more akin to human limbs. Furthermore, its large mouth split into a cross shape, capable of opening horizontally and vertically, with four eyes positioned around it.

This large monster, resembling a failed experiment to create a humanoid wolf, lunged at the white unit, opening its large mouth towards it. The white unit aimed its gun towards the creature and fired rapidly. Despite being stopped in its charge by the impact of the bullets, the creature was defeated as its insides were crushed from within by the force of the bullets.

Another creature leaped forward, but it was struck by a powerful kick from another unit, then crushed underfoot as it fell to the ground, and finally, its head was obliterated by gunfire.

The operators of the units breathed out.

"Thanks. Nice follow-up."

"Good work. But what are these things? They're quite different from what we've encountered before. Were there such creatures in the first inner area?"

"This area is already outside the previous exploration zone. It's not surprising to encounter such things. I'm a bit concerned about their resemblance to the ones in the second inner area, though."

"...Now that you mention it, they do look somewhat similar. Well, they're not as strong as those ones over there."

"If there were creatures as strong as the ones in the second inner area here, retreat would be the only option. In fact, we should retreat now. Are the Drankam guys prioritizing relic collection even in this situation, when they haven't found anything decent so far?"

In response to this casual complaint, another operator from a different unit replied.

"The Drankam unit has already decided to retreat. However, there are some who ventured quite deep into the large building, and it will take them some time to arrive."

"I see. Then let's hold on a little longer."

"Yeah. I've also sent out a request for assistance. It should be okay even if it takes some time."

"Huh? Did we have the authority to send out their request for assistance?"

"No, it's ours."

"I see, got it."

The situation was so dire that such actions were deemed necessary or feared to be so. The operators of the white units shared this understanding as they continued to fight.

"Really, there are no relics, the monsters are strong, and there's nothing we can do about Tsubakihara's side!"

While grumbling in this manner, an operator targeted a massive gun, firing rapidly as the oversized bullets mowed down the newly appeared swarm of large weapon dogs



Katsuya, who had been in the midst of a retreat, spotted figures at the end of the corridor. He had finally managed to meet with the comrades he had asked to secure the retreat route. Thinking this, he couldn't help but smile. However, Yumina aimed her gun at those figures with a stern expression.

"Katsuya! They're also enemies!"

Without delay, Katsuya also aligned his aim with them. Just before Yumina alerted him, he had suddenly become convinced that they were enemies and instinctively aimed his gun.

A dense barrage of gunfire from Katsuya's team assaulted the figures in the corridor. However, they were not defeated; they defended themselves.

Two enemy vanguards protected themselves and the rear from gunfire with their enlarged arms acting as shields. Meanwhile, while the vanguards drew gunfire from Katsuya's team, three rear guards attacked Katsuya's team with blades.

Yumina reflexively manipulated her perception of time, seeing the enemies in a world where time flowed slowly. Initially, there had been a distance of over 10 meters between them. But now it was only about 5 meters. The liquid metal blades, initially knife-length, extended to a length that would definitely hit the corridor if swung.

Then the rear guard swung their blades with force. The silver blades approached Yumina. Despite slashing through the hard ceiling, they were accelerating rather than slowing down.

Yumina felt the approaching blade slowly, and her own movements to realign her aim felt even slower. Nevertheless, she lifted the gun's line of fire, and interception barely made it in time. Struck at close range, the blade, swung in a destabilized posture, tore through the wrong spot. The wielder of the blade wasn't just pierced through the body; the force of the blow pulverized them into scattering ashes.

Katsuya, having finished off the enemies, hurriedly voiced his concern to Yumina.

"Yumina! Are you alright?"

"...Yes. I'm fine."

Yumina managed to smile back, but there was an unmistakable hint of fatigue in her expression.

Katsuya noticed it too, but he knew it would be futile to ask her to take a break. Instead, he smiled and expressed his concern.

"...Alright. That's good. But don't overdo it, okay?"

"I know. You too, Katsuya. Well, it seems I'm fine lately. Is it thanks to the comprehensive support system that stops reckless behavior?"

Yumina said teasingly, and Katsuya returned a wry smile.

"Yeah, yeah. I won't pull any reckless stunts like charging at enemies alone like I used to. I'm following the system's instructions properly as a squad leader."

"Even though I warned you so many times."

"Sorry about that."

Their casual exchange conveyed a deep bond and genuine feelings between Katsuya and Yumina.

Sheryl couldn't help but feel a little envious of the atmosphere between them that she didn't share with Akira. However, she also felt a slight discomfort.

It was a trivial matter that could be dismissed as a figment of her imagination, but it was unsettling enough for Sheryl to notice it. In the recent skirmish, it seemed to Sheryl that Katsuya's team hadn't helped Yumina.

It was a brief clash that lasted only a few seconds. Sheryl couldn't follow the details with her eyes. However, she could infer something from the situation after the battle.

Of the three attackers who had assaulted with blades, Yumina had taken down the one coming at her alone. In other words, Katsuya's team hadn't assisted Yumina in defeating that attacker.

Why was that? Were they too preoccupied with defeating the other two? Sheryl didn't think so. There were eight fighters on their side, excluding Yumina. In that situation, against three attackers, it had been one-on-one and seven-on-two. It hadn't been eight against three. Sheryl found it puzzling.

If one were to speculate excessively, it would imply that Katsuya had disregarded Yumina's survival. Worse yet, it would suggest that he had considered her expendable. While Sheryl entertained these thoughts, she denied them. Katsuya did indeed care deeply for Yumina. It was evident even to Sheryl.

Additionally, to Sheryl, it seemed that during their exploration of the ruins, Katsuya's team of seven people were not only clearly protecting herself and Mizuha but also seemed to be looking out for Yumina. That's why Sheryl felt uneasy about Katsuya's team not supporting Yumina in the recent battle.

However, Sheryl couldn't ask Katsuya why they hadn't helped Yumina. Asking would undoubtedly upset both Katsuya and Yumina.

There was also the possibility that it was her misunderstanding. After all, she was just an amateur. Amateurs might not understand, but it could have been extremely difficult to support Yumina from their respective positions.

Furthermore, while both Katsuya's team and Yumina used the comprehensive support system, Takagi's system used by Katsuya's team and Furu's system used by Yumina hadn't been integrated yet. That could be a factor. Or perhaps the system had calculated the power ratio between Katsuya's team of seven and Yumina as two-to-one.

In any case, there must have been some reason that she didn't understand. Sheryl concluded as such and stopped thinking about it further.

As Katsuya's team, having defeated the humanoid obstacles, hurriedly retreated while defeating monsters, Katsuya at the front spotted their comrades at the end of the corridor. Since the comprehensive support system had detected their unit identification signals, this time it was definitely allies. If allies had come this far, then the retreat route must also be secure.

All that was left was to run outside with Sheryl and the others. Thinking this, Katsuya smiled. However, multiple hostile reactions suddenly emerged from behind.

The comprehensive support system identified these reactions as similar to the humanoid enemies they had defeated earlier and displayed the information in each of their expanded fields of view. With a stern expression, Katsuya prepared his gun while turning around.

Yumina also turned almost immediately. But seeing the enemy's posture without holding anything in their left arm, she immediately changed her action.

"Dodge!"

Yumina shouted as she grabbed Sheryl and rushed into the side passage.

Katsuya also rushed into the opposite room while carrying Mizuha. The others followed Katsuya without delay.

Immediately after, the area was bombarded. Despite being a wide corridor, it was indoors. The impact that couldn't dissipate in the confined space turned into a fierce blast and spread throughout the corridor.

Katsuya's team, who had escaped into the room, only had to endure the strong wind coming in from the entrance and exit. However, Yumina's group, who fled into the side passage, were engulfed by the rushing wind, and blown quite far away.

Nevertheless, Yumina managed to adjust her posture while being blown away and landed somehow. Despite taking some impact from the explosion, she remained unharmed thanks to her reinforced suit that could withstand gunfire.

"Sheryl. Are you alright?"

"Yes. I'm okay."

Sheryl was also unharmed thanks to the tailored clothing made from materials of the old world. However, her expression was extremely grim. It wasn't just because she had been separated from Katsuya's team by the earlier bombardment.

Yumina immediately tried to take Sheryl back to Katsuya's team. But she suddenly stopped. The enemy unit had already reached the side passage of the original corridor.

The ones who had bombarded Yumina's group were unknown boys who appeared from behind. Remembering the incident when Tiol had been shot in a similar manner and Akira had saved her, Yumina acted instinctively. And as expected, they were bombarded.

After the bombardment, the grotesque boys used the smoke as cover and rushed forward. One individual, who had changed their left arm into a cannon, had lost their left hand due to the blast from their own cannon. But without changing their expression, they advanced with a blade in their right hand. Additionally, another individual changed their left arm into a machine gun to support them.

The boys reached Katsuya's location in no time and split into three units: one to fight Katsuya's team, one to fight Katsuya's comrades who were securing the retreat route, and one to pursue Yumina's group who had fled into the side passage.

Seeing this, Yumina immediately halted her attempt to reunite with Katsuya's team. There were five opponents heading their way. Even one-on-one, she would struggle against them. There was no chance of winning. Staying here wouldn't even buy time for Katsuya's reinforcements. She made an instant decision and, half-supporting Sheryl, dashed deeper into the passage. At the same time, she fired her SSB composite gun backward in rapid succession.

What was fired were small missiles used in humanoid combat. They weren't meant to be used indoors. But she fired them anyway. Using them at close range could risk involving herself and her allies in the explosion. Still, she prioritized stopping the enemy's approach with the explosion.

Numerous small missiles exploded simultaneously before hitting the enemy. The boys, hit by the overlapping explosions, either turned into splinters or were blown away to the rear.

Yumina's group was also blown away by the explosion. However, thanks to Yumina's agile movements, they managed to use the wind to leap through the corridor, landing against the wall at the bend of the corridor, absorbing the recoil, then landing on the floor before hastily moving away from the spot as far as possible.

The grotesque boys pursued Yumina's group as they approached. Meanwhile, Katsuya fought desperately against them.

The enemies individually weren't overly strong for Katsuya. But they weren't weak enough to be easily defeated either. And there were many of them. Reinforcements kept appearing one after another.

Still, if it were just Katsuya's team, they could push the front line forward. However, having to protect Mizuha, an escort target, was draining Katsuya's team's strength. While pinned in place, Katsuya continued to fight desperately.

(Damn it! Sheryl! Yumina! I'll come to help you right away! Stay safe!)

As Yumina's responses drifted further away, Katsuya's anxiety intensified as he fought desperately.



In a room littered with corpses of various monsters, Olivia stood with Tiol.

"Well then, please."

Expressionless, Tiol's left arm opened wide and began devouring the corpses of monsters with a voracious appetite, quickly clearing several bodies. His arm had enlarged only for the purpose of eating.

Olivia aimed a device resembling a cubic shape towards Tiol's gaping mouth. As it was swallowed, Tiol's left arm was severed from the shoulder. A new arm began to grow from the shoulder. The separated arm gradually transformed its shape into a humanoid form and eventually changed into a grotesque boy resembling Tiol.

The boy immediately dashed away from the scene. Neither Olivia nor Tiol showed any interest in the matter at all.

"Well then, please."

The newly grown left arm of Tiol began to devour the remaining corpses of monsters once again. This process repeated until all the corpses in the room were consumed.



Struggling desperately against the grotesque boys who appeared one after another, Katsuya finally managed to secure a temporary victory by defeating the enemies around him. This success was thanks to the reinforcements from the team members who had been securing their retreat route and the external troops.

However, there was no time to breathe a sigh of relief. He immediately contacted Yumina.

"Yumina! Are you okay?"

"...Yes, I'm fine. Sheryl is safe too. We've barricaded ourselves in a sturdy-looking room for now. What's your situation?"

"Got it! Hang tight! We're coming to help right now!"

Just as Katsuya was about to rush out, Yumina's firm voice stopped him.

"Katsuya. What's your situation? Answer me."

Hearing the commanding tone, Katsuya regained some composure and explained their situation to Yumina.

Her response was completely unexpected to Katsuya.

"...I see. In that case, Katsuya, leave us for now and take Mizuha to a safe place outside."

"Yumina!? What are you saying...?"

"Katsuya. Are you planning to bring Mizuha along for the rescue?"

It was obvious that attempting a rescue with a burden in tow would be a bad move. Katsuya knew this too. But still, he couldn't bring himself to agree, knowing that any delay in helping Yumina and Sheryl would increase their chances of dying.

Sensing this, Yumina continued.

"Aren't you acting as the squad leader now? Then stop rushing in recklessly and do it properly."

Katsuya couldn't bring himself to say, "I understand." Even though his mind was flooded with the logic of Yumina's words, his heart refused to utter words that would abandon her and Sheryl.

Yumina, intentionally sounding more at ease, spoke again.

"I'm not saying you need to stay with Mizuha all the way to the rear communication lines. And you've probably used up a lot of ammo, right? Get out, have part of the team escort Mizuha out of the ruins, replenish your ammo, organize a proper rescue team, and then come back to save us. Understood? Got it?"

If Katsuya attempted a forced rescue with depleted ammo and Mizuha in tow, the worst-case scenario could result in both protectors dying. If he withdrew now, one of them would certainly be saved, and he could also resupply his ammo.

As the squad leader, Katsuya knew what the right choice was for the safety of the entire unit. The comprehensive support system also endorsed Yumina's suggestion. He understood that in his responsible position, he had to make the correct decision for the greater good, even if it meant sacrificing a part of the team.

Yet, it was a painful decision for Katsuya.

"I understand. I'll definitely come to save you. So please, wait for me."

"Yes, we'll be waiting."

With that last slightly cheerful voice hinting at their long history together, the communication was cut.

The decision was made. With a determined expression reflecting his resolve, Katsuya gave the order.

"Let's go! We're retreating!"

Following his command and determination, the unit moved out with coordinated precision.



In the slightly spacious room where they had barricaded themselves, Yumina sent what might be her final words to Katsuya.

"Yes, we'll be waiting."

She then ended the communication. With that, she believed Katsuya would be alright. She let out a small sigh of relief.

At that moment, Sheryl spoke to her.

"Honestly, do you think we'll be rescued?"

"...I don't know. It depends on how well Katsuya and his team do."

"I see. Understood."

Seeing Sheryl so composed, Yumina gave a slightly surprised smile.

"I must say, you're remarkably calm given the situation."

"I've faced situations where I might die several times before. Besides, when it's your time to die, there's nothing you can do about it. Not that I want to die, of course."

"You've got a philosophical view on it."

Unlike hunters who often operate in life-threatening environments, Sheryl, likely an ordinary person, exhibited a calm demeanor that Yumina found a bit amusing. Yumina herself also regained her composure, determined not to succumb to despair, and laughed lightly.

"Well, I'll hold out as long as I can."

"Please do."

Sheryl replied with a smile.



Katsuya rushed out of the building to rescue Yumina and the others, only to find the situation outside equally dire.

A massive horde of monsters was barely being held back by four humanoid weapons. However, smaller monsters slipped past their defenses, and the Drankam infantry had to manage those. Katsuya planned to split his forces into three groups: one to rescue Yumina and the others, one to hold the area until they returned, and one to escort Mizuha to safety.

But there were too many enemies. Dividing their strength carelessly would mean both the group staying behind and the one escorting Mizuha could be overwhelmed. For safety and certainty, they should all retreat together. This idea strongly emerged in Katsuya's mind, echoed by the comprehensive support system.

However, this meant abandoning Yumina and the others. Even just retreating temporarily to rescue them afterward was a painful decision. Now faced with an even harsher choice, Katsuya hesitated, delaying his decision unconsciously. He first ensured Mizuha was relatively safe inside a vehicle and reloaded his ammo. Any more delay was impossible.

A compromise came to mind. Mizuha was now outside the building and safer with their comrades around. She could stay here, and two-thirds of their forces would remain. That should be enough to hold until they rescued Yumina and the others.

(Yes, that would work.) Katsuya latched onto the compromise. But then communication came from the humanoid weapon squad.

"You finally came out! We're retreating! Hurry!"

"W-Wait! We still have people inside..."

"No waiting! We're low on ammo! Stay if you want, but we're leaving in 30 seconds! That's final!"

The communication cut off abruptly, and Katsuya's face twisted in frustration. His compromise relied on the humanoid weapons' support. His squad alone couldn't handle the massive monster horde. The compromise was off the table.

Should they all re-enter the building? They couldn't evacuate but could hold out for rescue. Katsuya considered it but then felt a strong urge to avoid that plan. Despite being desperate, he couldn't follow this impulse.

The words Yumina had said came to mind. "Make sure you can definitely rescue us, then come back properly."

Katsuya realized he was acting recklessly, endangering everyone, not just Yumina. Thanks to Yumina, he managed to stop himself at the last moment.

"Damn it!"

Determined to return with a large rescue team, Katsuya cursed his helplessness. He prepared to instruct his squad to retreat alongside the humanoid weapons.

But then the situation changed again. Part of the monster horde surrounding them exploded. Large and small monsters alike were torn apart by a barrage of bullets.

"What the...?"

Katsuya looked toward the source, seeing someone on a bike tearing through the monsters. The bike skidded to a stop in front of Katsuya, revealing Akira.

"Where's Sheryl?"

Katsuya, stunned and couldn't answer, but instead asked his own question.

"What are you doing here...?"

"Where's Sheryl?" Akira repeated more forcefully.

"...Still barricaded inside with Yumina..."

Before Katsuya finished, Akira revved the bike and sped toward the building. Reacting instinctively, Katsuya jumped onto the bike.

As Akira burst into the building, he shouted at Katsuya.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing? Get off!"

"No way! Take me with you! Let's save Yumina and the others!"

Akira clicked his tongue, shooting at the monsters ahead. Katsuya aimed and fired alongside him.

Their combined firepower shredded the monsters, painting the corridor with gore.

"If you fall off, I'm not picking you up!"

With Katsuya clinging on, the bike roared through the building at high speed.



Akira, who had been continuing to request rescue at the first inner area, received a message from Sheryl and hurried to the scene.

He had told Sheryl to call him if anything happened, but Akira didn't actually think she would need to. Even though Sheryl was going to the first inner area, she was being guarded by Drankam's elite unit, namely Katsuya and Yumina. Moreover, Sheryl wasn't alone; she was accompanied by Drankam's administrative faction leaders. Akira thought they wouldn't do anything reckless under such circumstances.

Therefore, Akira was surprised to receive a rescue request from Sheryl. His face grew tense as he hurried. Something must have happened to overturn the safety ensured by Drankam. That much was certain.

『Alpha, what do you think happened?』

『It's hard to say. We received a rescue request, but it was a simple text notification. If the reason it wasn't a detailed written or verbal request was because they were being attacked and didn't have time, then they might be under attack from a considerable number of monsters.』

『But weren't the monsters in the first inner area being culled by the city?』

『The place where Sheryl is located is far from the main communication line, so the culling might not have caught up there. Well, we'll find out when we get there. It's also possible she called you just because she got anxious.』

『I hope it's just that. Anyway, let's hurry.』

The road wasn't as rough as the wilderness, but rubble and monster corpses were scattered around, making it dangerous to speed. If Akira collided with a monster suddenly appearing from behind a ruined building, even his bike wouldn't come out unscathed.

Akira navigated the road at high-speed using Alpha's driving skills, preemptively shooting

monsters in his path, and skirting past them at close range. The high-performance bike fully displayed its capabilities, aiming to deliver Akira quickly to his destination.

Even so, it took some time to arrive. Akira had assumed he wouldn't need to rescue Sheryl and had been escorting those he had saved to the main communication line. Consequently, despite being in the first inner area as a precaution, he was quite far from Sheryl.

Akira's face tightened with frustration.

『I should have stayed closer. I messed up.』

But Alpha shook her head.

『Akira, it can't be helped. If we go down that road, it means you'd have to be by Sheryl's side 24/7, but you already said that's impossible, right?』

『Yeah, but still.』

『You can't spend all your time guarding Sheryl. The rest depends on her luck. You also said that. So, from here on, it's up to Sheryl's luck, including whether we make it in time or not. We'll do everything we can, and after that, we'll have to rely on her luck.』

Alpha said this with a smile to cheer Akira up. Akira smiled back, realizing that regretting past actions wasn't helpful. He refocused on what needed to be done now.

『You're right. Let's hurry!』

Akira sped through the ruins on his bike, doing everything he could, shooting down obstructing monsters as he rushed forward at high speed.

As Akira sped through the ruins and got closer to Sheryl's location, he frowned.

『Alpha, it seems Sheryl's luck is quite bad today.』

『Indeed.』

On Akira's expanded view, a bird's-eye view of the surroundings was displayed. It showed the area around Sheryl thickly surrounded by a horde of monsters.

『That's a lot. No wonder Sheryl called for help.』

The number of monsters was so great that they filled the surrounding terrain information. However, even if the quantity was large, if they were just small fry, they wouldn't pose a threat to a high-rank hunter. If they were the kind of monsters that lived in the wasteland around Kugamayama City, even twice this number wouldn't be a problem and could be taken down easily with powerful firearms.

However, this was the first inner area. Even the smaller monsters here were of a

significantly higher caliber. Moreover, numerous large weapon dogs and monstrous giant wolves were mixed in, and Akira could see a white unit desperately fighting back, likely one he'd seen in the second inner area. If Akira had come here without knowing the situation, he would have immediately turned back.

Alpha spoke up tentatively.

『Akira, what will you do? Turn aback?』

Akira took this as a challenge and laughed spiritedly in response.

『Don't joke around, Alpha! I'm counting on your support! Let's go!』
Alpha matched his energy and laughed confidently.

『Got it! Let's move!』

On the bike charging toward the horde of monsters, Akira gripped two LEO composite guns, one in each hand. The LEO composite gun mounted on the bike's arm was also aimed at the enemy horde. Thick energy cables connected all three guns to the bike's energy tank.

The monsters noticed Akira and began to move. Those equipped with cannons or machine guns aimed their barrels at him, while others, with surprisingly agile movements for their massive size, lunged at him.

Akira had already activated his time-perception manipulation. Further focusing, he distorted his perception of time even more. In the world where the accelerating bike felt slowed down, Akira fired both guns.

The energy-packed C-bullets created a storm of projectiles sufficient to down their targets. Each bullet pierced through the monsters, creating large holes in their massive bodies, penetrating the ones behind them, and obliterating the next wave of creatures.

For monsters using biological force field armor or anti-force field armor, specialized rounds targeted these protections. The powerful bullets shattered their formidable armor, ravaged their vulnerable insides, and sent them flying as if exploding from within.

In an instant, a massive number of monsters were torn apart, their flesh scattering. The flesh was shot mid-air by the following barrage and dispersed even further.

Both the charge bullets and anti-force field armor rounds were from high-capacity extended magazines, each costing over 100 million Aurums. The seemingly endless supply of bullets, combined with the LEO composite gun's rapid firing capability, filled the area with a hail of gunfire.

The monsters targeted Akira too. In the world where time seemed to flow slowly, the scattered, floating flesh degraded the accuracy of targeting systems. Ignoring the monsters in their line of fire, they bombarded Akira with bullets and shells, creating a dense barrage of firepower.

Akira skillfully dodged these attacks on his bike. Enhanced detection capabilities from updated equipment, Alpha's advanced analysis, her extraordinary driving skills, his reinforced suit's precise and swift movements, and Akira's honed evasion abilities—together, these allowed him to completely evade the attacks without taking a single hit.

It took less than 10 seconds for Akira to break through the thick monster encirclement, though he felt it as several minutes in his perception. Watching the monsters being pulverized one after another, he understood the power he wielded and couldn't help but laugh.

『Unlimited powerful ammo! This is the power of the ammunition purchase subsidy! Normally a right reserved for hunters ranked 50 or above! Alpha, it was worth the effort to get this!』

Akira had already obtained the ammunition he ordered from Shizuka's shop and placed additional orders. Thinking about using such powerful ammo freely made him see the fierce battles in the Iida Commercial District ruins as beneficial.

『Indeed. Let's say it was worth almost dying fighting the autonomous dolls. We're almost through, so calm down a bit.』

『Oops.』

Realizing his over-excitement, Akira calmed down as Alpha cautioned him. The power gained from the ammunition purchase subsidy, like Alpha's support, was an added strength. Overestimating it as his own power could lead to complacency. Akira thought this and refocused.

As he broke through the monster horde, he spotted Katsuya ahead. However, Sheryl was nowhere to be seen. Akira stopped abruptly in front of Katsuya and demanded to know Sheryl's whereabouts.

"Where's Sheryl?"

"You... Why are you here?"

"Where's Sheryl?"

"She's still barricaded inside with Yumina..."

Learning that not only Sheryl but also Yumina were trapped inside, Akira immediately drove his bike into the building.

But something unexpected happened. Katsuya jumped onto the bike.

"Hey! What are you doing? Get off!"

"No! Take me with you! I'm going to save Yumina and the others!"

Reflexively, Akira tried to kick Katsuya off, but Alpha stopped him.

『Akira, stop. There's no point in making more enemies in this situation, right?』

Monsters were already inside the building. Fighting them while trying to forcibly remove Katsuya would be difficult. Understanding this, Akira clicked his tongue.

"Fine, but if you fall, I'm not picking you up!"

Reluctantly, Akira hurried on with Katsuya. They blasted away the monsters in the corridor together and sped through on the bike.

Episode 177 Someone's Wish, Someone's Desire

As the humanoid weapons retreated, Drankam's troops followed suit, withdrawing from the scene. This was Katsuya's signal. Immediately after riding Akira's bike into the building, they had followed that signal.

No one objected to the signal. Under the command of Airi, who had taken charge of the retreat, the troops left the area swiftly and without causing a commotion.

The horde of monsters surrounding them remained formidable, but with support from the humanoid weapons, dealing with them as a unit made breaking the siege less challenging. And once they broke through the encirclement, all they had to do was defeat the pursuing monsters and return to the rear communication line. For Katsuya's team, this was a straightforward task.

Erio's group had been assembled together as security targets in the same vehicle. Amidst a slightly heavy atmosphere, Erio let out a small sigh. Others showed similar expressions, as if understanding their feelings.

"We... handled ourselves pretty well, didn't we?"

"Yeah, I suppose so."

The experience of fighting alongside members of Katsuya's team had greatly boosted Erio's group's confidence.

Despite receiving support from the comprehensive support system, they had managed to explore the ruins without hindrance. Moreover, this was a dangerous place where even regular hunters wouldn't dare to venture.

The fact that they could fight in such a place made Erio and his group realize that they were stronger than they had initially thought. It was a significant and shocking achievement. They had only seen themselves as mere muscle for the slum gang. They had once dispelled that notion, but now they were reminded of their limits.

However, their excessive self-assurance quickly waned when large monsters appeared in droves. Overwhelmed by the assault of the giant monsters, Erio's group panicked, feeling fear and helplessness.

At that moment, they were demoted from fighters to security targets by Katsuya's team members. Despite Katsuya's team still fighting outside the vehicle, Erio's group remained safely inside.

In the vehicle, where those who knew their limits were silently sighing, Erio finally finished exhaling and decided to change the mood with a loud voice.

"All right! That's enough of feeling down, everyone!"

"Erio?"

"We may have stumbled a bit at the end, but we did enough. We fought in a place where even hunters wandering around the slums wouldn't dare to go. Isn't that good enough?"

"Well... yeah, I suppose..."

"Exactly. There's no need to feel down about it. Besides, even the boss probably didn't think we'd be able to fight like Drankam's troops. If he did, I'll have a word with him."

Encouraged by Erio's words, the other children began to regain their spirits. In line with Erio's tone, they forced themselves to smile.

"Then, Erio. Make sure to tell the boss firmly when the time comes. Counting on you."

"It's Erio, after all. One of the leaders of our gang. I'll do it."

"Before that, could you check with the boss if that's okay? You're one of the leaders, right? We are Counting on you."

"Y-Yeah..."

Erio understood that it was his job as one of the gang's leaders, but he wasn't particularly skilled at asking such questions, so he said it half-heartedly and hesitantly.

Then, one of the children spoke up with a puzzled expression.

"Speaking of which, where's the boss?"

"Isn't she with that Mizuha, one of Drankam's executives?"

"No, I don't think she was with her..."

As the children murmured, another child's face grew stern.

"Hey, I might be mistaken, but... could it be that the boss got left behind?"

"I mean, that's... um..."

While saying this, no one could definitively deny it. In the increasingly uneasy atmosphere inside the vehicle, another child voiced a different concern.

"Um, I might be mistaken, but... didn't I see Akira-san?"

"No, Akira-san isn't here, right? The boss mentioned that he was supposed to accompany us, but he got detained due to various circumstances, didn't he?"

"No, I mean... I only caught a glimpse, but didn't someone crash in on a bike? That looked like Akira-san..."

Erio's group fell silent at this. Their expressions were slightly tense, as if trying to hide something with a forced smile.

Akira was incredibly powerful, backed by their group. He was dependable, they acknowledged. However, in a situation where something suspicious seemed to be happening, his presence could escalate the situation beyond control, making him seem like a dangerous individual. The possibility that Akira might have been there was, in a sense, scarier for the children than any ghost story. It was one of the reasons many in Sheryl's gang were hesitant to become executives, despite being offered favorable treatment.



Akira raced through the building on his bike, heading towards Yumina's group. While the corridors were somewhat spacious, they weren't designed for bike riding. With ordinary driving skills, one would crash into the wall immediately. However, for Akira, who had Alpha's support, this posed no problem. He utilized the bike's ground function to swiftly navigate through the corridors, making high-speed turns at intersections. Additionally, he accurately shot down any obstructing monsters.

Katsuya, who had forcefully tagged along on Akira's bike, was amazed by Akira's skill.

(He's strong! Just riding a bike at this speed in this narrow building is impressive enough, but he's shooting with such precision too! Such power!)

The bike, speeding through the corridor, suddenly turned sideways. Despite the abrupt and forceful change in position causing the tires to leave the ground and the bike to hover, it continued forward as if gliding through inertia, ramming into a group of monsters at the junction with another corridor.

And the bike continued down the corridor, accelerating as it mowed down the group.

Dead monsters scattered across the corridor; their bodies torn apart.

Katsuya, while riding the bike, aimed his gun backward, shooting at monsters that escaped the collision. Akira couldn't help but be impressed by Katsuya's calm demeanor.

(He's handling this situation so calmly. Even with Alpha's support, I'd be in trouble without him. What kind of strength does he possess?)

Akira had no intention of picking up Katsuya if he fell off the bike. At that moment, he was genuinely considering abandoning Katsuya. Nevertheless, he continued driving without any concern for Katsuya, eager to reach Yumina's group as quickly as possible.

Despite not falling off the bike and accurately providing cover, Akira couldn't help but be surprised by Katsuya's strength. And he had another concern.

(He's trying to help Yumina's group even by riding on my bike. He must also want to help them. So why aren't Yumina's group with him? What happened? Were they obstructed from escaping together? Even with someone as strong as him?)

What exactly happened? Although Akira was curious, he decided not to worry about it for now and would ask Yumina's group later.

He didn't consider asking Katsuya. Even if there were legitimate reasons that would normally satisfy him, he felt that asking Katsuya would only lead to frustration.

The unnatural and incomprehensible frustration he felt during the Synthetic Snake Battle was back now. Akira was feeling it again.

In this state, Katsuya called out to Akira.

"Hey! Are you sure you're heading towards Yumina's group?"

Although Katsuya had a rough idea of Yumina's group's location, the Comprehensive Support System constantly tracked each member's position to facilitate the efficient operation of the unit.

However, there were many situations where the exact position of the opponent was unknown, despite establishing communication. This could be due to factors like the dense colorless mist in the ruins' atmosphere or buildings made of materials with information-blocking properties, which reduced the accuracy of each individual's information gathering equipment.

Nevertheless, compared to situations where the approximate position or direction wasn't known, there was a world of difference. Although Akira was roughly heading towards Yumina's group, if he had chosen the destination based on incorrect assumptions, it would be problematic to correct it now. That's why Katsuya spoke to Akira in such a rough tone – he was feeling the pressure.

To which Akira responded with a very displeased voice, "Shut up."

The voice, which clearly revealed his inner frustration, and the short reply that rejected the conversation itself, made it clear that he intended to kick Katsuya if he spoke again. Katsuya hesitated to retort, realizing that Akira was not in a mood to argue.

Akira sighed. It was directed at himself, for being tossed around by his own inexplicable frustration, but Katsuya interpreted it as directed towards him. As a result, Katsuya's mood deteriorated rapidly.

The combined effect led to an almost combative atmosphere between Akira and Katsuya, despite the narrow space on the bike. However, they did not collide.

『Akira』

『...I know. I won't do anything foolish like fighting him here.』

Akira, who thought he was being cautioned, answered as if reminding himself. But Alpha's attention was elsewhere.

『No, you're wrong. There are enemies ahead. They might be a little tough. Be careful.』

With that, Akira also switched his focus. A formidable opponent that Alpha deemed necessary to warn about. He tightened his grip, thinking about it.

Coming from the end of the corridor were dozens of deformed boys. They attacked Akira's group with guns growing from their left arms, cannons on their left arms, shields on their enlarged left arms, and blades on their right hands, coordinating their assault.

"Watch out! They're strong!"

Katsuya couldn't help but shout with a grim expression. Despite being told to stay quiet by Akira, he couldn't remain silent, knowing the strength of those boys.

Almost simultaneously, Akira fired both of his LEO composite guns. Countless Charge Bullets pierced through the air and struck the deformed boys. The swarm of Charge Bullets, charged with massive energy, easily crushed even the shield-bearing individuals, and blew away the others.

As the boys' blood splattered all over the corridor, Akira raced through on his bike.

The unexpected outcome left Katsuya speechless. They were supposed to be formidable enemies that his comrades struggled to defeat. They were so strong that they couldn't even make it to Yumina's group. Despite their number, they were effortlessly crushed in no time. It was unbelievable.

In a disgruntled voice, Akira spoke again to Katsuya.

"Just shut up."

Katsuya clenched his teeth with a stern face. He couldn't say anything.

For a different reason, Akira also wore a stern expression. The energy level displayed in the expanded field of view was decreasing more than he imagined.

Alpha had determined the power of the Charge Bullets. Akira didn't think Alpha had excessively increased the power, but he was slightly suspicious about whether it was necessary to go that far.

『It's true that the power was somewhat excessive. But it was because we prioritized defeating them as quickly as possible. Would it have been better to take more time and defeat them more carefully, resulting in significantly less energy consumption?』

『No, it's better to defeat them quickly. Uh, I'm not complaining. I just thought it would be dangerous to use energy in this manner. That's all.』

The attack with the Charge Bullets using the bike's energy tank was currently Akira's trump card. And Akira kept using that trump card to save Yumina's group.

It had such a surprising effect that, as a result, Akira felt a little anxious about the fact that

what he thought was enough was now down to just a few.

Alpha responded to Akira's explanation with a smile.

『Yes. It's unusual for enemies that require such energy consumption to be in a place like this. Yumina and Sheryl are incredibly unlucky today to encounter them in such a place.』

『Indeed.』

Akira chuckled and hurried on.

If luck was bad, anything could happen. Encountering a large group of monsters or formidable enemies where they shouldn't be was all because they were incredibly unlucky.

For Akira, who had experienced such situations many times in the past, "unlucky" was a convincing word.

Because of that, Akira unconsciously agreed with Alpha's words. Sheryl and the others were just unlucky.



Sheryl, who was holed up indoors with Yumina, hadn't exhausted her luck yet. Escaping from the siege was difficult, but the room they were holed up in had suitable exits for defense, and Yumina managed to somehow hold off the monsters in the corridor.

However, the situation was gradually becoming more dire. The monsters kept appearing one after another. Deformed boys also joined the attack. Despite being in an advantageous position for defense, ammunition consumption was unavoidable. Once it ran out, it would be over.

(...The attackers seem to be moving a bit slower. Maybe because the strong ones went after Katsuya and the others? Well, that's fortunate.)

Yumina glanced briefly at Sheryl. Despite the sounds of gunfire, impacts, explosions, and the cries of monsters echoing, and even the vibrations from artillery fire and small missile explosions reaching them, Sheryl maintained a calm demeanor.

(...Even though she's not a hunter, she's able to stay calm in this situation. Seeing her not panicking is a relief.)

Yumina smiled, impressed by Sheryl's courage.

(...Then I also have to do everything I can!) And she lifted her own spirits.

The desperate fight continued. They were already running out of ammunition. Yumina's ability to manipulate the perception of time to deceive herself was also nearing its limit.

But still, Yumina kept fighting to the end. She deliberately avoided confirming the position information of her comrades. If that information showed that their rescue was impossible, it might break her spirit.

She continued to fight, finding hope in an uncertain future. Even if there was no salvation ahead, she would give it her all now.

The situation was dire, perhaps beyond hope. But the only ones who could truly confirm that were someone other than herself, someone who checked after she died. So, there was no need to confirm it now.

Knowing the worst in advance could break the spirit and lead to giving up resistance. Yumina didn't want to lower her chances of survival like that. So, she decided to keep fighting.

Then the situation changed. However, it was a worsening of the situation. The wall on the opposite side of the room where Yumina and the others were holed up blew up in a coordinated explosion. From there, deformed boys emerged and entered the room.

Yumina hadn't lost her will to resist. But even so, she couldn't help but think it was impossible.

Sheryl, holed up with Yumina, maintained her composure even in that situation. The source of her composure was a kind of resignation, in a sense, a positive one.

She wanted to survive. But if she died, there was nothing she could do about it. She had already asked Akira for help.

Whether Akira abandoned her or whether he tried his best but didn't make it in time, or even if asking Akira for help was in vain, there was nothing more she could do. In that case, she just had to wait for the result and accept it. With that in mind, Sheryl remained calm.

That's why even when the wall on the opposite side of the room blew up and deformed boys emerged from the debris, Sheryl had the composure to calmly observe it.

That composure allowed Sheryl to notice something she wouldn't have if she had been in a panic. With a puzzled expression, Sheryl muttered.

"Tiol?"

At that moment, the deformed boys suddenly stopped moving and all looked at Sheryl at once.

And then, the expression on the faces of the boys, who had been emotionless even as their own limbs were torn off and others were shattered into pieces, changed.

Somehow, they looked surprised, dumbfounded, mesmerized, or even awestruck. At the very least, they were not completely devoid of will and emotion. There was a definite will and emotion present.

Yumina was also surprised by the sudden halt in the boys' movements. But in an instant, she snapped back to reality and began shooting with all her might. Despite being strong deformed boys, they were standing ducks. The boys, who took the attacks head-on without defending or evading, were quickly defeated.

Yumina exhaled roughly with a puzzled expression.

"What's going on?"

In the midst of the incomprehensible situation, Yumina was halfway in confusion. But the situation didn't give Yumina the time to be confused. The wall on the opposite side of the room, which had already been opened by the boys, was completely demolished by monsters that appeared from there.

Yumina hurriedly shot at the monsters. They were weaker compared to the deformed boys, defeating them was easy. However, they poured in mass due to the collapsed wall. The situation, which had been manageable by defending only the narrow entrance, changed drastically.

"Sheryl! Get back!"

Monsters were also coming from the corridor. There was no escape in that direction. Yumina, with Sheryl behind her, retreated in the cramped room while continuing to shoot at the monsters appearing one after another.

And finally, the bullets ran out. But Yumina deliberately laughed at the situation. She holstered her gun and instead prepared her blade. It was something she received from Akira at the Iida Commercial District Ruins.

"We're just getting started."

Saying that, Yumina smiled defiantly.

The seemingly hopeless situation, which she had thought was impossible, had changed, albeit incomprehensibly. In that case, she couldn't succumb to a situation as trivial as running out of bullets.

Monsters were pouring in from the corridor and the collapsed wall. It was clear at a glance that there weren't enough bullets to win. Even so, Yumina was smiling.

The monster at the forefront ran with momentum, kicked the floor with its developed limbs, flew through the air with its massive body, opened its mouth wide to devour Yumina, and was suddenly blown away by a motorcycle that rushed in.

"Eh?"

From the motorcycle that crashed into the monster and stopped abruptly, Akira and Katsuya shot. With their combined gunfire, the surrounding monsters were quickly defeated.

After finishing off the enemies, Akira lowered his gun with a serious expression.

"That was close!"

"Well, we made it."

Katsuya also breathed heavily with a similar expression.

Sheryl and Yumina were somewhat stunned by the sudden turn of events. But as soon as they felt the reality that their loved ones had come to their rescue, they smiled with joy.

"Akira!"

"Katsuya!"

"Sheryl, are you okay?"

"Yumina, are you safe?"

Akira and Katsuya responded with smiles. Sheryl hurried over to Akira's side and smiled even brighter.

"Yes, I'm fine. Thank you."

"It was close, but both Sheryl and I are safe. Katsuya, Akira, thank you. You saved us."

Yumina followed Sheryl's lead and smiled, expressing her gratitude to the two. Then, after glancing around lightly, she asked with a hint of curiosity.

"...Is it just Akira and Katsuya? Katsuya, where are the others?"

Katsuya looked away. It wasn't easy to explain that he had forcefully tagged along on Akira's bike, leaving the others behind.

"And why are you here, Akira? Weren't you supposed to accompany us, but had some urgent business?"

Akira also avoided eye contact. If he honestly admitted that he had been in the first-depth area from the beginning because he didn't think Drankam's forces alone could protect Sheryl, it would likely upset Yumina. It was difficult to say.

Akira glanced at Katsuya briefly, and Katsuya did the same. Then, they both suppressed any negative feelings towards each other in front of Yumina and Sheryl.

"Yumina, let's discuss those details later."

"Yeah, let's focus on escaping first. This place isn't safe either."

"...Yes, you're right. Understood."

"Yes, let's hurry."

Yumina and Sheryl answered with smiles as if nothing had happened. Akira and Katsuya both breathed a sigh of relief at their attitudes.

Yumina and the others easily saw through Akira and Katsuya's attempt to cover something up. However, since what they were saying was true, they decided not to pursue it further at the moment.





Akira and his group, who reunited with Yumina's group, set out with four people. It was impossible for all of them to ride on the bike due to its limited capacity, so Yumina and Sheryl rode on it while Akira took the lead and Katsuya covered the rear.

While there was no longer as much urgency as when they were going to the meet-up point, there was still no change in the fact that it was better to hurry. Akira swiftly advanced through the corridor using the enhanced abilities of his reinforced suit. He quickly defeated any monsters encountered along the way, maintaining both safety and speed at a high level.

Akira seemed to be in a good mood after arriving in time to rescue Yumina's group.

『But still, I'm glad we made it in time.』

Alpha smiled proudly at Akira.

『Just so you know, it's all thanks to me, right?』

『Yeah, I know, Alpha. Thanks.』

Alpha nodded quite satisfied.

『But still, those guys aren't coming out, huh?』

Despite defeating a considerable number of monsters on the way there, monsters were still appearing on the way back. However, none of the abnormal boys were showing up.

『Well, after defeating that many of them...』

『Hmmm, that's true, but...』

Now that they had dismounted from the bike, they couldn't use Charge Bullets from the bike's energy tank. Besides, the bike's energy level was dangerously low. In such a state, it was a relief that the formidable abnormal boys weren't showing up. However, the sudden disappearance of the enemies that had appeared in such numbers was also concerning.

Alpha joked with Akira, who seemed puzzled by this.

『Perhaps Sheryl's bad luck, with so many of those things around, has finally run out. Maybe it's because your help arrived in time that Sheryl's bad luck has been dispelled.』

Akira found that reasoning a bit far-fetched. He smiled back at Alpha, playing along with the joke.

『I see. Let's go with that then.』 Alpha then smiled proudly again.

『Of course, that's also thanks to my support, you know?』

『Yeah, I know. I appreciate it.』

To emphasize the value of her support, Alpha repeatedly reminded Akira of it in their usual banter. It was to ensure that if by any chance Akira ever realized its significance, he would misinterpret it as a mere part of their usual interactions. It was a safety valve to stop his thoughts from going any further. That's why Alpha had always conveyed the usefulness and gratitude of her support to Akira in their usual banter.

Katsuya, covering the rear, was defeating monsters that appeared from behind as they moved. His expression was grim. However, it wasn't due to the strength of the monsters but rather his anger and disappointment towards his own abilities.

(... Is this all I'm capable of?)

Whether on expeditions or during expansion movements for rear communication line extension, subsequent relic collection, or monster hunting, Katsuya and his companions had achieved significant success. Their accomplishments had even been recognized by the authorities of Kugamayama City, and they had received personal recognition from the city's officials.

These achievements had greatly boosted Katsuya's self-esteem. He could confidently say that their time had come.

However, now there was a significant crack in that self-confidence.

Akira had forcefully accompanied Katsuya to help Yumina's group, but in the end, he wasn't able to do much. Additionally, he witnessed Akira's astonishing abilities firsthand. Katsuya was defeated much faster in a mock battle than in real combat, and this awareness, impression, and envy-like jealousy overwhelmed him.

Even so, he gritted his teeth and looked forward, turning his rising emotions and everyone's thoughts into a burning desire for strength.

(... That's right! I need to become stronger! I will rise to the top!)

Fueled by these surging emotions, Katsuya's spirit soared. He subconsciously equated himself with the group, blurring the lines between them.

Become stronger. Rise to the top. More and more, endlessly. Wishing for it, being compelled to wish for it. Unaware of whose wish it truly was.

As long as the abnormal boys didn't appear, there were no enemies that could trouble Akira and his group. They smoothly made their way through the building and safely reached the outside. Relieved, Yumina and Sheryl let out sighs of relief.

"We finally made it out."

"Yes. Now we can relax a bit... or can we?"

"We should be, but... Katsuya, what do you think?"

There were no monsters around, but both the humanoid weapon units and the Drankam units had retreated. They were still in the dangerous zone of the First Inner Area.

Despite this, Katsuya smiled and nodded.

"Yeah, we're good."

Hearing this, Akira asked Alpha instead of Katsuya.

『Alpha, is that true?』

『Yes, we're safe now. Our pickup should be arriving soon.』

Alpha pointed towards the ruins. Akira looked in that direction and noticed multiple large signals approaching. It was a multiple group of white humanoid weapons.

Sheryl had caught Inabe's attention, and Katsuya had caught Udajima's. Hearing reports that these two, who were under the scrutiny of two city officials, were left in a dangerous situation where even four humanoid weapons were forced to retreat, the frontline base had urgently dispatched units that were culling monsters in the First Inner Area for their rescue.

These units were originally intended for the Second Inner Area, so they were more than capable of handling the monsters in the First Inner Area. They scattered the monster horde that had been chasing the retreating Drankam units and headed towards Katsuya's group for their rescue.

Hearing this from Katsuya, Yumina and the others felt relieved. Yumina then gave a word of caution.

"Katsuya, you need to explain these things properly."

"Ah, sorry about that."

"Well, fine. So, it was just you who came with Akira? If you needed to hurry, coming as a small group would indeed be faster and more efficient. Thanks to that, you made it just in time."

"... Yeah! That's right!" Katsuya nodded emphatically, riding on Yumina's words. Yumina and Sheryl then shifted their gaze to Akira, as if Katsuya's enthusiastic nodding was a confession. Akira silently averted his eyes.

Seeing Akira's attitude, Yumina and Sheryl judged that he had no intention of speaking up and decided that if Akira was okay with it, they didn't need to say anything unnecessary. They decided not to pursue Katsuya any further.

And so, Akira and his group left the area together with the arriving units.



After escaping the depths of the Kuzusuhara ruins, Akira and his group returned to the forward base. From there, they went their separate ways, with Akira intending to leave alone.

"Well then, I'll be off. I slipped out of an errand to come here, so I need to get back," he said, though in reality, there was no such errand. He just wanted to leave quickly to avoid any unnecessary complications.

Yumina smiled and thanked Akira again as he prepared to leave on his bike.

"Understood. Akira, thank you for saving us. Both Sheryl and I... and probably Katsuya, too."

Akira didn't feel like he had saved Katsuya, but he decided not to deny it.

"...Yeah. Well, I'm glad I could help you, Yumina. See you."

Feeling a bit shy from Yumina's smile, Akira said this and rode off.

Meanwhile, Sheryl was being profusely apologized to by Mizuha.

"I am truly sorry."

Mizuha had been the one who assured Sheryl's safety and brought her to the First Inner Area. Despite this, she had exposed Sheryl to danger and ended up evacuating first, leaving Sheryl behind. Mizuha couldn't stop bowing her head in apology.

In response, Sheryl smiled pleasantly, showing no signs of being upset.

"It's alright. It couldn't be helped. Even though we got separated, Yumina-san protected me well, and Katsuya-san rushed to help us."

"But still..."

"If I were to criticize you, it would be for the decision to have me step out of the vehicle. However, I agreed with that decision, so we share the responsibility."

Sheryl continued, showing a bit of reflection.

"Also, if we were to point out the cause of our mistake, it would be that we underestimated the danger of the ruins. Likely, we trusted Katsuya-san and his team's high abilities too much, turning trust into complacency. We must both reflect on this and work to prevent it from happening again."

Sheryl smiled once more.

"Both you and I are safe. Isn't that what matters?"

Being told this by the person who faced the greater danger, Mizuha had no choice but to agree. She bowed her head again, respectfully.

"...Understood. I will sincerely take your points to heart, reflect deeply, and strive to prevent this from recurring."

With the apology concluded, Mizuha answered with a sense of relief.

Sheryl, observing Mizuha with a smile, concluded.

(...That's not it.)

Sheryl sensed some intentional malice in the recent incident. She wondered if someone had been trying to get her and Yumina killed, deliberately putting them in a critical situation. The fact that she and Yumina got separated from Katsuya's group and that Katsuya's team seemed to neglect their support for Yumina made her suspect, even if only slightly.

Intentionally allowing her suspicions to grow, Sheryl deeply doubted and speculated about those involved. Was it Akira? Impossible. Yumina? She had nearly died alongside her. Definitely not. Katsuya? He had come to rescue them with Akira, so the likelihood was low.

Was it the Comprehensive Support System? It made no sense for the manufacturer to endanger its users and tarnish its reputation. Was it Inabe or Udajima? Since they had sent the humanoid rescue units, it was probably not them.

Was it Mizuha, who had fled first? Could she have been trying to eliminate Sheryl and Yumina, who significantly influenced Katsuya, her most crucial pawn and main strength, to increase her own influence? Sheryl considered this possibility but dismissed it based on Mizuha's profuse apologies.

(So, I suspected everyone and they're all innocent. It must have been my imagination. Seems like I've become overly suspicious because of Viola. I need to be careful.)

There were no ulterior motives. This incident was purely accidental and just a stroke of bad luck. Concluding this, Sheryl put the matter to rest. She could not suspect those who were invisible, inaudible, and unknown to her.

In the infirmary at the forward base, Katsuya gazed intently at his fallen comrades—casualties of the retreat.

The swarm they faced had been massive, forcing even the retreat of four humanoid units. Considering the scale of the enemy, the fact that they suffered this few losses was an achievement. Katsuya understood this.

Initially, they had planned to split the group into three. Had they done so, the casualties would likely have been much higher. In hindsight, the decision to have everyone, except

himself, retreat was the right one.

Nonetheless, there were deaths. Irreplaceable comrades were lost again. Katsuya continued to stare at his fallen friends, accepting this heavy reality.

Airi stood beside him, sharing his thoughts. Yumina, having seen off Akira, approached them.

“...Katsuya, are you okay?”

Facing Yumina’s concerned expression, Katsuya forced a slight smile and responded firmly.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

His smile wasn’t one of indifference to his comrades’ deaths. He mourned them but accepted their loss without being consumed by it, looking forward with strength. Seeing his resilience, Yumina smiled gently, reassured.

“Alright.”

“Yeah.”

Their exchange was brief, but it was filled with the depth of their long-standing relationship. For the two of them, it was enough.

Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi then spent a quiet, comforting time together.

After a while, Katsuya spoke.

“We need to become stronger.”

“...Yes, we do.”

Given everything that had happened, it was natural for Katsuya to seek greater strength. Yumina interpreted his words this way and responded kindly.

Yumina’s interpretation wasn’t wrong, except for the underlying intent of who truly wished for that strength.

Katsuya no longer bore the weakness that turned the regret of not being able to save his comrades into a haunting guilt.

However, those still alive continued to hope for Katsuya’s strength. They desired the power of their leader to help them, to save them from peril, and to guide them to greater heights.

Recently, the significant achievements Katsuya and his team had continuously attained had instilled a certain arrogance in them. Yet, at the same time, it had lessened their yearning for greater strength. They believed their wish had already been fulfilled.

But today's ordeal made them realize their wish had not yet been granted. Thus, they desired even more strength. Stronger and stronger, more and more.

As long as Katsuya was there, they would be alright. Surely Katsuya, with his strength, would save them. Surely, surely, surely, surely.

They hoped and wished for it. They prayed, without considering the price that would have to be paid.

Episode 178 Suspects

A week had passed since the incident in the first depths of the ruins. Sheryl was hard at work today, as usual, managing the relic shop and overseeing the gang's operations. There was a mountain of tasks to handle.

A subordinate approached her with a report.

"Boss, we have another customer trying to sell those again."

"I see. Handle it with the usual two-step appraisal process."

"Well, they passed the first appraisal, but they refuse to pay for the second one..."

"In that case, send them away. The appraisal fees are the customer's responsibility. Be strict about this. If they insist on staying, have Erio and his team deal with them. If that doesn't work, call in Mr. Kobe and his crew."

Erio and his team had already been equipped with enhanced suits through the Comprehensive Support System. They were capable of handling most stubborn hunters. Sheryl sighed lightly, looking slightly annoyed after giving these instructions.

"What is going on..."

Recently, there had been a surge of scams involving old-world information terminals in the slums. Most of these scams involved bringing highly convincing fakes to underground shops for cash. This led to various types of frauds emerging, including shops selling imitation goods intended for scams.

In Sheryl's shop, high appraisal fees were charged to ensure thorough evaluations by skilled appraisers, thus avoiding any fraud. However, shops unable to afford such expertise were frequently being swindled. Sheryl didn't find individual scams surprising—this was the slums, after all. What puzzled her was the environment that allowed such rampant fraud.

Buying genuine items could be highly profitable, but with so many fakes in circulation, shopkeepers became suspicious from the start. If they began assuming everything was fake and refused to buy, scams wouldn't work. The fact that scams were working meant that enough genuine items were circulating to keep doubts alive.

This situation concerned Sheryl. Normally, if hunters found old-world information terminals in some ruins, they would take them to the Hunter Office's purchasing counter, where they could get a good price and boost their hunter rank. This was the usual way to cash in.

Of course, if the location where they found the items was a newly discovered or still secret ruin, it made sense to sell in the slums for a while to keep others from finding the lucrative spot. However, given the number of people selling in the slums, it was unlikely that this was about keeping a secret location hidden.

Additionally, there had been reports of hunters bringing old-world information terminals to the Hunter Office recently, claiming to have found them in the first depths of the ruins. Sheryl suspected that Inabe had secretly placed these items there to attract more hunters to his sector. Initially, she thought this was the case.

But that belief was now shaken. Sheryl was growing concerned about the genuine old-world information terminals circulating in the slums. If they were found elsewhere and the source was being disguised, claiming they were found in the first depths would suffice. So why weren't they doing that?

Perhaps it was because they didn't want a record of the transaction at the Hunter Office, which kept a record of such purchases. Did that mean these items were obtained through such illicit means that even having proof of possessing them was too risky?

If that were the case, it meant the slums were now flooded with such dubious items. The slums, as part of the city's underground economy, did handle shady goods and were somewhat tolerated by the city authorities. However, there were limits. The two largest gangs that had crossed those limits were crushed by the city.

Could this be alright? Sheryl sighed softly, pondering this question, while deliberately ignoring the fact that the largest supplier of these dubious old-world information terminals to the slums was Akira.



Udajima was smiling cheerfully as he read through the report.

"Narifu."

"That guy Inabe, he's really going all out, isn't he? Is he reaching his limit soon?"

The report mentioned that recently, old-world information terminals were circulating in the back alleys of the slum. Udajima believed this to be part of Inabe's scheme.

By deliberately circulating both real and fake items in the back alleys of the slum and spreading rumors that their origin was Inabe's assigned area, the credibility of the story that a large quantity of old-world information terminals existed in Inabe's area was reinforced. Udajima believed this operation was successful in a sense. Many hunters who had heard the rumors had stepped foot into Inabe's previously unpopular area. And a small number of them had actually found old-world information terminals, which spurred on their efforts.

However, if many hunters started searching for artifacts, the number of places already investigated would increase rapidly. If they couldn't find what they were looking for in many places, the information would quickly spread, and the momentum would wane. To prevent this, Inabe would have to move faster than before to place artifacts. But it's not just about putting them out; he would have to be careful to prevent his operation from being exposed.

Until now, it had been easy to prevent exposure because there was no popularity in that area. But now that hunters were more active, it was difficult. However, artifacts needed to be placed even more than before. The precision of preventing exposure would inevitably decrease.

Taking advantage of this, Udajima found evidence that Inabe had secretly brought goods for his operation into his assigned area. Udajima, with Viola's proposal in mind, had pushed for Inabe and the deployment of combat power for the second zone to the first zone. This was to create an opportunity for a more serious confrontation with Inabe.

All that was left was to denounce Inabe at the next executive meeting based on that evidence. With that, Inabe would be finished. Thinking of that scenario, Udajima smiled contentedly.

At that moment, he received a communication from a subordinate.

"Udajima-sama, we have a communication from the Comprehensive Relic Appraisal Bureau."

"Connect me."

With this, all the elements needed to definitively end Inabe had come together. With that in mind, Udajima smiled even more broadly.

The Comprehensive Relic Appraisal Bureau was a relic appraisal agency directly controlled by the Corporate Government. By conducting relic appraisals with a broad perspective, it contributed to the development of the Eastern District. There was nothing surpassing it in terms of the accuracy of relic appraisals and the reliability of the appraisal results.

Udajima had commissioned the Comprehensive Relic Appraisal Bureau to appraise the old-world information terminals found in Inabe's assigned area. It was already known that they were genuine. What was important was their origin. The Comprehensive Relic Appraisal Bureau thoroughly investigated that aspect as well.

Depending on the determination of the origin, if it was definitively confirmed with the Corporate Government's stamp that the item was from another site or at least not something that could be found in Inabe's assigned area, Inabe would be completely cornered.

To obtain that definitive evidence, Udajima had spent a large amount of funds on a task that he wouldn't normally undertake personally.

He had hesitated at the excessive cost at first. But Viola's persistent encouragement and his desire for a certain victory in the factional struggle with Inabe had pushed him to make that decision.

Although Udajima was currently in a dominant position in the factional struggle with Inabe, his opponent was not incompetent. There was still a risk of the opponent regaining momentum due to some event. If he could definitively put an end to Inabe, Udajima wanted to do so, even if it meant taking some risks.

The communication was connected to the Comprehensive Relic Appraisal Bureau, and the image of the person in charge appeared on the display.

"Are you Udajima-sama? The appraisal of the requested item has been completed. We will send you the detailed appraisal results later, but first, let me explain the origin of the item as stated in your special notes."

"Please go ahead."

"The possibility that the origin of the appraised item is within the specified range of the Kuzusuhara Street ruins, as indicated by Udajima-sama, is quite high. That's the conclusion we've reached."

"What?"

Udajima was stunned by the unexpected content. The staff continued without concern.

"That concludes the explanation regarding the special notes. Is that satisfactory?"

Udajima snapped back to reality and hurriedly responded, "Wait a minute! That's ridiculous! That shouldn't be..."

"Do you mean to say you don't trust the appraisal results from the Comprehensive Relic Appraisal Bureau?"

While there was a positional difference between Udajima and the staff as executives and a staff member, there was an even greater difference between them as individuals from a local city and those from the Consolidated Enterprise. Udajima hastily made excuses to the slightly uncomfortable staff member.

"No, that's not what I meant, but it was an unexpected result... I mean, is it really impossible that the item was brought from another ruin?"

"That depends on the definition. For example, when it comes to relics from store ruins, although the manufacturing location of the relic is often from another ruin, we treat the store ruin as the origin of the relic."

"I see. Understood."

"Thank you for your understanding. Please check the detailed appraisal contents in the documents. If you have any questions, we will respond during the contract period. However, regarding some appraisal methods and the information on which they are based, we may not be able to answer due to confidentiality. Please understand. Thank you for using our services."

The staff member politely bowed to Udajima and ended the communication.

Udajima was in a state of shock for a while due to the unexpected situation. But when he came to his senses, he contacted Viola in anger and explained the situation before interrogating her.

"What's going on! According to your information, the items arranged by Inabe were supposed to be brought by Akira! Why would the origin of those items be in Inabe's assigned area? Explain! Depending on your answer, you won't get away with this easily!"

"Even if you say that to me. It's your fault for interpreting uncertain information wishfully and conveniently, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

Even when faced with anger from a city executive, Viola responded cheerfully as usual.

"The relics Inabe used for his operation were brought by Akira to Sheryl's shop. The origin of those relics is unknown. Akira hasn't told anyone about it. That's all the information I provided you with. Didn't you take care of your own investigation?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"The origin of the relics is unknown. You interpreted it as being from a different ruin, especially not in Inabe's assigned area. And you tried to accuse Inabe after gathering evidence. Inabe secretly brought relics from other ruins to increase the value of his assigned area, right?"

Udajima's face, which had been wearing a puzzled expression, twisted in surprise at this realization.

"No way..."

Even if Udajima accused Inabe of wrongdoing at the executive meeting, Inabe would claim innocence. And he would try to use the appraisal by the Comprehensive Relic Appraisal Bureau to support his innocence. If the appraisal results supported Inabe's innocence and the evidence of Inabe's operation that Udajima submitted was treated as crude fabrication, Udajima's position would greatly diminish. There was a high risk of the factional struggle being overturned.

In other words, this incident was a trap set by Inabe to incriminate himself. Udajima interpreted it that way.

Viola, who prompted Udajima's thinking, reinforced that conclusion with a cheerful voice.

"That's right. If you need your opponent to make a mistake to turn the tables, you set up an operation to make that happen. It's a common tactic."

"But for that to happen, Inabe must have completely won over that hunter Akira. Is that person someone who would lend a hand to dangerous operations like bringing down city executives?"

"Two billion Aurums. That's the amount Inabe paid to Akira. It wasn't directly transferred to Akira's account, but it was deposited under the guise of funding for Sheryl's relic-selling shop. Of course, the full amount went to Akira immediately."

"I see..."

Two billion Aurums. That was more than enough for an average hunter to take on a dangerous task. Udajima was convinced by that.

"As I said, wasn't it a good thing that you asked the Comprehensive Relic Appraisal Bureau for an appraisal? You can praise me if you want."

Indeed, without Viola's advice, Udajima would have fallen into Inabe's trap. It was a close call. With that in mind, Udajima's face became stern.

"...You're right. Let me thank you."

"You're welcome. Oh, about the appraisal results from the Comprehensive Relic Appraisal Bureau, could you share them with me too? I'll look into whether there are any other operations going on."

Normally, such information shouldn't be passed on to just anyone. However, when it was said that it would be used to investigate whether there were any other traps, and considering Udajima's recent experience, he found it hard to refuse.

"...Fine. I'll send it over."

"Thanks. See you later."

With that, the communication with Viola ended. Udajima spat out in frustration.

"...Damn it!"

Instead of putting an end to Inabe, he was almost stabbed in the back. Udajima was furious not only at Inabe but also at Akira and Sheryl.



After finishing the conversation with Udajima, Viola immediately contacted Inabe.

"So, Udajima genuinely believes that the origin of the Old-World information terminal brought by Akira is within your assigned area. All thanks to my little scheme."

"...That's extremely helpful. But if that story turns out to be false..."

"Oh, how harsh. You don't believe me?"

"I can't easily believe a story without evidence. That's just my position. Well, we'll soon find out the truth from Udajima's reaction."

"Is that so? Then, I'll ask for your gratitude when the time comes?"

"Yes. At that time, I'll also tell Sheryl from my side that it's too early to dispose of you."

"You're harsh. Well then, I'm done here."

Viola smirked as she ended the call. Inabe remained skeptical, but his doubts were directed more towards whether Udajima truly misunderstood the origin of the relics, and whether it was all thanks to Viola's scheme. He never doubted the fact that Viola was responsible for the situation.

In the first place, Viola hadn't disclosed everything to Inabe, especially regarding the Comprehensive Relic Appraisal Bureau. The appraisal results were unexpected for Viola as well, and she had only hastily used them to gain favor with both Udajima and Inabe.

"...But still, the origin of those relics was truly unexpected. I can't imagine there being any errors in the appraisal results from the Comprehensive Relic Appraisal Bureau. What could it mean?"

Viola had only instigated Udajima to find out the origin of the relics brought by Akira. If that resulted in Inabe's downfall, she would simply switch sides to Udajima. But that plan was overturned, all because of the relics of unknown origin brought by Akira.

Viola pondered how far this incident would escalate if used as fuel. Recognizing her own nature that bubbled up, Viola chuckled gleefully.



A meeting among the executives of the Kugamayama City is being held in a chamber within the defensive walls. The agenda revolves around dealing with the nationalists who have been spotted in the first depths of the Kuzusuhara Street ruins.

"We've received further reports of increased nationalist activities in the first depths. Details are unclear, but..."

As the speaker progresses, Inabe observes Udajima's demeanor. In return, he receives a strong gaze of irritation.

(From that reaction, it seems Viola's information is accurate. I've heard she's a dubious character, but indeed, she's quite skilled.)

Inabe marvels at Viola's influence, which even extends to the city's executives.

"...There's also information about some dealings between the relic-collecting hunters and the nationalists. By offering rewards in relics rather than gold, it becomes difficult for us to trace the money flow..."

Meanwhile, Udajima also scrutinizes Inabe.

"Inabe. Don't get too comfortable. Despite the close call, your scheme to frame me for failure hasn't changed. You're still at a disadvantage. My advantage remains unshaken."

By reminding himself of thwarting the opponent's last-ditch effort, Udajima maintains his composure. At least he's making the effort to do so.

"...There's a plan to incite a large-scale monster attack on the city once again. If the nationalists are indeed planning such a thing, it's a major concern. Unlike last time, there's a rear communication line now. If the monsters from the depths use that to come straight to the city, the damage would be immense..."

Inabe grimaces. The nationalists' actions divert manpower away from expanding the exploratory area. It's highly inconvenient.

"...In preparation for that, we need to expedite the construction of the second front-line base to contain the monsters emerging from the second depths..."

Udajima also wears a stern expression. Dealing with the nationalists takes precedence for the corporate city. If they're forced to cooperate, many of the adjustments made to weaken Inabe's faction could be overturned. It's highly inconvenient.

"...Furthermore, the rewards handed over to the trading partners by the nationalists include valuable relics like pre-war information terminals, and the source of their supply..."

Both Inabe and Udagima wrestle with the challenge posed by the nationalists. However, an idea emerges from the discussion, sparking inspiration.

From then until the end of the meeting, and even afterward, Inabe and Udagima devote their thoughts to realizing that inspiration.



Akira had been continuing his monster hunting near the outskirts of the exploration zone in Inabe's assigned area of the Kuzusuhara Street ruins. The monsters in this area were powerful but not as formidable as those in the second depths, providing a suitable challenge for Akira to hone his skills. Additionally, the city of Kugamayama had slightly increased the rewards for general hunting missions in this area, aligning with their goal of expanding the exploration zone. It was an opportune moment for Akira.

Currently, Akira was parked in an abandoned building's garage, pondering a certain issue within his car. At that moment, Inabe called him. Inabe's message was a request for Akira to join a new operation to further expand the exploration zone.

"You might already know, but we have reports of nationalist activities in the first depths. I've decided to launch a suppression operation against the nationalists active in my assigned area. The main goal is to search, raid, and eliminate their bases outside the current exploration zone. Although, it's also a pretext."

Using the nationalists as an excuse, Inabe planned to form a large squad with significant support from the city, and rapidly expand the exploration zone.

"In the recent incident where even Drankam's elite squad had to retreat, it wasn't just monsters but also human attackers. If those attackers were nationalists, their base is likely further ahead. The attack was to protect their base. Again, this is just an assumption."

Framing it this way made it easier to deploy forces outside the exploration zone. This zone fell within Inabe's faction's area, and if relic collection became possible there, the profits could be substantial.

"Of course, substantial rewards will be provided. Since this involves the nationalists, you can expect a good payoff. What do you say? Will you accept the job?"

Inabe also suspected that the source of the old-world information terminal Akira had brought in might actually be somewhere in this vicinity. Regardless of how Viola deceived Udagima, there must have been some credible information that led Udagima to believe it. This suggested that the relic's origin might indeed be within his jurisdiction, or in an area that would eventually be explored.

If that were the case, Inabe wanted Akira to guide the squad to the relic's origin, making it clear that Akira could no longer conceal its location. He hoped to persuade Akira with sufficient compensation.

Hearing this, Akira responded with a stern expression.

"Just to make sure, is that a threat?"

"A threat? What do you mean?"

"You specifically mentioned the nationalists to me."

"I don't understand. Telling you that countering the nationalists is partly a pretext is actually a sign of trust. I thought we had established a mutual trust when you allowed me to use the relic you sold to Sheryl for my schemes."

"I see. Then, listen to this."

Akira enabled a general communication channel from outside the car, allowing Inabe to hear it as well. The content shocked Inabe.

"Repeat! This is the Kugamayama City Comprehensive Investigation Bureau! You are suspected of being a nationalist! Disarm immediately and surrender!"

Inabe burst into laughter on the other end of the line. Akira was surrounded by about 20 personnel and combat vehicles encircling the abandoned building he was in.

Hearing Inabe's reaction, Akira began to trust that Inabe was not involved in this situation.

"Just to confirm, refusing your proposal doesn't mean you'll treat me as a nationalist, right?"

"I wouldn't do such a thing! What's happening!? Connect me to those people!"

"Got it. ...You're connected."

"This is Inabe, the manager of this area! Explain this situation!"

The leader of the squad surrounding Akira was named Paji. Paji had been persistently demanding Akira's surrender. Suddenly being interrupted by a city executive left him confused, but he still tried to perform his duties.

"This is Paji from the Comprehensive Investigation Bureau. Area Manager Inabe, this individual is suspected of being a nationalist. We've been dispatched to apprehend him."

"I haven't heard about this. How is it that a squad is deployed in my area without any notification or permission?"

"Well, sir, dealing with nationalists is a top priority for the city, and the investigation falls under the bureau's jurisdiction. Deploying a squad does not require your permission..."

"So, you're saying that informing me would leak information to the nationalists?"

"No, that's not what I meant..."

Caught between his duty and the orders from a city executive, Paji hesitated.

"Fine. Withdraw your men. I'll speak to your superiors."

Had Paji obeyed Inabe's orders, the situation would have ended peacefully. The problem was that Inabe's directive was a blatant overreach of his authority. Furthermore, his order could be seen as obstructing the investigation into the nationalists. Paji, therefore, refused.

"I must decline."

"What?"

"This matter falls under our jurisdiction. The investigation into nationalists covers the entire city's economic zone, including your area. Therefore, I am not obliged to follow your orders."

Inabe's face hardened for two reasons: Paji's refusal was correct, and it indicated that Inabe's influence had weakened to the point where he couldn't overturn such correctness.

"Is that your decision..."

"Yes. I apologize, but please understand."

Inabe exhaled deeply.

"...Very well. I respect on-site judgments as only those present can make them."

"Thank you, sir."

Paji sighed in relief, but Inabe continued.

"However, that respect is reserved for competent individuals. Regret this, you incompetent fool."

Inabe cut the communication. On the other end, Paji's face contorted with intense anger. Inabe then refocused on his conversation with Akira.

"...So, what do you intend to do?"

"Just as I was thinking about that, you contacted me. First, let me make it clear that surrendering or disarming is out of the question."

In response to Akira's complete lack of hesitation about fighting the city's forces, Inabe sighed inwardly. However, Akira also didn't particularly want to fight the city's defense forces. Surrendering or disarming was simply out of the question, and he was hoping that Inabe could negotiate a resolution. He was very disappointed that this had failed.

After a brief silence, Inabe offered a compromise.

"It can't be helped. You don't have to surrender or disarm yourself but avoid fighting. If you do have to engage, try to minimize their casualties."

"...That's quite a tall order. You say it so lightly, but do you really think I have any reason or

obligation to go that far for those attacking me?"

"At the very least, there are benefits and advantages."

"What are they?"

"If you act under my instructions, even if you harm the city's people, your situation will be seen as just someone caught up in the power struggle among the city's executives. You can avoid becoming an outright enemy of Kugamayama City itself."

That would certainly be helpful. While thinking that, Akira wore a puzzled expression.

"...So, this is because of your power struggle?"

"Most likely, it's Udajima's doing."

The city also had some understanding of Akira's abilities. Therefore, if Akira were truly a Nationalist, with solid evidence to prove it, and they moved to capture him, they would dispatch the defense forces. The opponent was a hunter who could defeat humanoid weapons units and swarms of old-world automatons. They would take that level of action.

Despite this, the fact that the Integrated Investigation Bureau had been dispatched suggested that the bureau had been requested by a city executive based on uncertain information to secure Akira. Inabe judged that this request likely came from Udajima.

Understanding that he had been dragged into a troublesome situation, Akira sighed.

"...I'll try to avoid killing them, but I can't make any promises."

"That's fine. You're the one actually fighting. I can't force you beyond that."

"Is that all there is to it?"

"The fewer people killed, the easier it is for me to defend you. It's as simple as that."

With that conversation, Akira decided how to handle this situation.

While Paji's team continued to blockade the area, Akira drove out of the abandoned building. The car moved slowly, showing no signs of trying to break through by force. Seeing this, Puji instructed his subordinates to gather but not to attack.

Akira stopped his car near Puji and got out. The road was blocked by Puji's team's large vehicle.

Akira held his LEO multi-purpose gun loosely at his sides. Puji, noticing this, continued to restrain his subordinates, who were holding their guns but not aiming them. At least, Puji understood that this was not a world where such playful behavior would be tolerated.

With a displeased expression, Akira approached Puji.

"Move that vehicle. It's in the way."

Puji responded with a serious expression.

"I refuse. Let me reiterate. We are the Kugamayama City Integrated Investigation Bureau. You are suspected of being a Nationalist. Disarm and surrender immediately."

Akira sighed softly, looking annoyed, and then his face grew a bit more stern.

"Inabe told me not to kill you guys, so I'm letting you go. Now, get out of my way."

"No. Disarm and surrender."

A tense atmosphere began to build, but it did not escalate into immediate combat. Neither side was willing to back down, but their guns remained lowered. Both were prepared for a fight but did not desire one. This mutual understanding delayed the start of the battle.

Akira and Puji continued their silent standoff for a while. Puji's subordinates, surrounding them, watched the proceedings, hoping things would resolve peacefully.

In a sense, it was Akira who gave in first. He let his stern expression turn to one of annoyance and sighed deeply. Puji and his team relaxed slightly, thinking Akira had given up.

Despite being warned that Akira was a powerful hunter, facing him directly, he seemed just like a kid, not exuding the aura of a formidable fighter. In fact, he looked weak when confronted face-to-face. His words to make them move were backed by the name of a city executive rather than his own strength. This caused Puji to underestimate Akira's abilities.

Additionally, Puji's team believed that, as a city unit, they wouldn't normally be opposed by someone like Akira. Therefore, they thought that even if he didn't disarm or surrender, he would at least comply quietly.

Passing by Puji, Akira walked up to the vehicle blocking the road. Before Puji and his team, who were watching with puzzled expressions, Akira kicked the vehicle. With a kick powered by his enhanced suit's capabilities, which could even contend with humanoid weapons, the large vehicle was sent flying to the side of the road.

"Wha-!?"

Faced with such a display, Puji's team couldn't help but react. They aimed their guns at Akira in surprise.

However, Akira immediately evaded their line of fire and unleashed a barrage from his dual guns. Countless bullets hit their targets unerringly. The power of the Charge Bullets, capable of even taking down monsters in the Second Depths, left Puji's team powerless.

"Huh?"

Thinking they were dead; Puji and his team were left dumbfounded. Akira had targeted their guns and the machine guns on their combat vehicles. Puji and his team themselves had not suffered so much as a scratch. The impact of their guns being destroyed had only caused some to stumble or fall.

With an annoyed expression, Akira once again approached Puji. No one tried to stop him. As Puji and his team stood frozen, Akira calmly walked past them.

"I'll escort you to the rear communication line."

With those words, Akira climbed onto the roof of his car and drove off without another word.

Puji and his team involuntarily watched Akira go. But then, a large monster appeared. Realizing this, Puji and his team immediately switched their focus to intercepting it.

However, they also realized that with their guns and vehicle machine guns destroyed by Akira, they had no means to counter the monster. Panic and fear distorted their expressions greatly.

But in the next moment, the monster's head exploded. It was Akira's shot. Then, a message came through on the general communication system from Akira.

"I'm leaving you behind."

With just those few words, the communication was cut off.

Puji gave a grim, frustrated look and signaled to his subordinates.

"...We'll follow him back. Let's go."

They had failed to capture Akira. If that was the case, then the next priority was to bring their subordinates back without casualties. Puji reminded himself of this and focused on commanding the retreat for the sake of his subordinates as their leader.

Feeling regret for leading his subordinates into a situation where they couldn't return without being protected by the enemy they were supposed to capture, Puji lamented his own incompetence.

(Regret it, you incompetent fool.) Those words from Inabe echoed in Puji's mind.



After returning to the rear communication line, Akira continued to head towards Kugamayama City. He had parted ways with Pudge and his team at the rear communication line, leaving them somewhat abandoned. Although the frontline base was a bit far, there were no monsters within the rear communication line. So, the escort ended there. All he could do now was wish them luck on their way back. With that thought in mind, he returned to the driver's seat and set off without mentioning it.

Alpha was sitting in the passenger seat, having a playful smile as if enjoying the situation.

『Akira, it seems you've finally learned to resolve things peacefully. That's good. You've grown. 』

"Well, maybe."

Akira replied with a wry smile and a slightly firm tone. Just then, he received a hurried message from Erio.

"Akira-san! Come to the base right away! The city folks have stormed in!"

"Already in combat? What about the enemy's forces? How long can you hold out?"

"N-no, it's not like that, the fighting, I mean. Right now, the boss is dealing with them... Anyway, they're not opponents we can handle! Please, do something!"

"...Understood. I'll head there now."

After cutting the communication, Akira's expression turned stern.

"They're involved too..."

If it wasn't a combat situation, then perhaps there was nothing he could do even if he went there. While Akira thought that, he also considered that negotiations could sometimes be achieved with sufficient power. In any case, he decided to head towards Sheryl's location.



Sheryl continued to deal with the staff of the Comprehensive Investigation Bureau in the reception room of the base. The polite smile she initially wore had already faded considerably. While her face showed no signs of fear or panic, her irritation towards the troublesome guests was becoming increasingly evident.

"...So, I've already told you everything I can. There's nothing more to say."

Sheryl had repeated similar statements numerous times, and the man named Swang, sitting across from her, was also repeating similar lines.

"Well, don't say that. Try to remember a little more. This is very important so please, help us out."

There were three members of the Comprehensive Investigation Bureau present. One sat opposite Sheryl, another stood behind her, and the remaining one stood near the entrance of the room. In this room, temporarily cut off from external communication, Swang and his colleagues continued to question Sheryl.

"If you just tell us what we need to know, we can wrap this up. You understand, right?"

"I already told you. The old-world information device that Akira brought in was sold at my shop. That's all I know."

Sheryl let out a heavy sigh, partly in performance.

"It's common sense not to leak information about artifacts that customers bring to sell, even if it's common knowledge. It's a matter of trust. Especially for shops in my position. We talked about that because you guys from the Comprehensive Investigation Bureau, investigating the nationalist, forced me to. Understand?"

"I get it, I get it. So, can't you remember a little more? How Akira got hold of it, for example? Think hard."

"Even if you say that..."

Through the repeated exchanges, Sheryl also understood that Swang and his team's goal wasn't simply to investigate the nationalist. They were after something to incriminate Akira as a member of that faction. Therefore, they were pressuring her relentlessly to fabricate any evidence to that effect. Sheryl was well aware of this.

Of course, Swang and his team also knew that Sheryl was aware of their intentions. Nonetheless, they continued to threaten her.

"Come on, I'm not asking you to claim for sure that it happened that way. Misunderstandings, mistakes, it doesn't matter. Human memory is fuzzy, after all. We'll corroborate it on our end. So, feel free to talk to us without any hesitation. Okay?"

"Well, I'm trying to remember if there was anything, but..."

The monotonous exchange continued. Swang, growing impatient with the situation, was the first to lose his cool. He dropped his superficial smile and raised the standard of his threats.

"You seem quite relaxed, but if you think I'm just playing along just because you have the support of the city's executives and thinking that you can handle this casually, you'll regret it."

"I'm not sure what you mean..."

Swang interrupted Sheryl's response, grabbing her head and slamming it onto the table. The sound echoed in the room.

"Investigating the nationalist faction is of utmost importance. Even the city's executives can't simply intervene. So, it's best if you don't think you'll get any help, okay?"

Swang lifted Sheryl's head. There was a blood left on the table.

"I suppose you think investigating the nationalist faction is just a pretext, but the fact that we can use it as a pretext means that's what it is. Got it? If you do, then remember it well,"

Swang said, lightly pushing Sheryl aside.

Thanks to the backrest of the sofa, Sheryl managed not to fall over completely. She struggled to sit up, pressing a hand to her face.

"That hurt, you know..."

Swang continued, observing Sheryl's seemingly composed demeanor with disdain.

"...You're quite composed. Haven't you understood yet? Or are you so naive as to think you won't be killed? Before you die in that misunderstanding, it's better to understand the situation properly, don't you think?"

"So, what you're saying is..."

Swang interrupted Sheryl again, slamming her head back onto the table. The impact worsened the bruise, and the spilled blood stained the table red.

"You're from the slums, right? You're probably used to rough situations like this and climbed your way up with that damn courage of yours. But that only works in the slums. It means nothing in the city. You might not know, but even the Ezont Family and Harleus, they were noticed by the city and got crushed."

"I... I knew about that..."

"Is that so? Seems like you still don't understand. Let me help you understand properly."

Swang slammed Sheryl's head onto the table again. The blood already on the table splattered, staining the floor.

After being repeatedly slammed into the table, Sheryl was unable to lift herself anymore. She lay on the table, stained with her own blood, as Swang addressed her.

"Are you still alive? It's about time to reconsider. Being this stubborn will only make us more suspicious. Not just Akira, but you might also be suspected of being a member of the nationalist faction. Before that happens, tell us what you know."

A muffled voice escaped from Sheryl's prone form. But it was too faint for Swang to hear. He lifted Sheryl's head, trying to listen closely.

"What? Speak up a bit more clearly. It's okay. If you beg for your life, there's still time."

"I... I don't know..."

"...You're really stubborn, huh?"

Swang pushed Sheryl back onto the sofa. She collapsed onto it.

Another staff member sighed in annoyance.

"Swang, what are you going to do? I think it's pointless to continue."

"Yeah, you're right. Can't be helped. Should we just make it look like an accident?"

If fabricating evidence to incriminate Akira as a member of the nationalist faction was impossible based on Sheryl's testimony, then killing her here would also serve the purpose of shutting down the relic shop with ties to Inabe. Swang and his associates, who were also connected to Udajima, had that option as well.

"Then, shall we finish her off?"

"Hey, be careful. It's just an accidental death during interrogation. Saying we killed her outright would be stupid, you know?"

"I know that."

The man reached out towards Sheryl. But before his hand could reach her, it was blown away by a gunshot. It was Akira who had fired the shot, causing the man's hand to explode.

Swang and his associates immediately aimed their guns at Akira. But in an instant, their arms were blown away too. They looked at Akira with expressions of shock and agony.

"You... You're supposed to be in Sector 1..."

Ignoring Swang and his associates, Akira went to Sheryl and put on a slightly stern expression.

"Barely made it again... Is it okay to just rely on luck for these things?"

As he reached for a healing potion to forcibly administer it, a small voice escaped from Sheryl's lips.

"Are you conscious? It's a healing potion. Please drink it."

"..."

"Sheryl, what's wrong?"

"I... I don't know..."

For a moment, Akira's hand paused. But he suppressed the emotions welling up inside and proceeded to administer first aid to Sheryl. The expensive healing potion quickly spread through Sheryl's body at a rate that couldn't be attributed to oral ingestion, guaranteeing her survival. Akira breathed a sigh of relief.

Then, he aimed his gun at Swang and his associates and pulled the trigger.

Until he changed his mind, Akira, partly because of what Inabe had told him, had intended to spare Swang and his associates. But upon hearing the few words that slipped from Sheryl's lips, he decided to kill them.

Sheryl had been coerced into saying something. Considering what had happened in Sector 1, it was likely related to her being suspected as a member of the nation-building faction. And despite being tortured almost to death because of it, she refused to speak.

"I don't know." Those few words that leaked from Sheryl's mouth, clouded by her injuries, made Akira understand.

Without hesitation, bullets were fired, blowing off the heads of Swang and his associates. Their headless bodies collapsed to the floor.

Alpha sighed.

『Akira. Is it impossible for us to spare them too?』

『Yeah』

That was all Akira said. Short, but unwavering words.

『Indeed』

Alpha responded with a slightly exasperated expression. The concerns were increasing. That's what she thought, at least

Episode 179 Declaration of Independence

When Sheryl woke up lying on the sofa, Noguchi, dispatched by Inabe, was talking with Akira. Noguchi seemed somewhat exasperated.

"I heard that everyone in Sector 1 was unharmed and even escorted to the rear communication line. Couldn't we manage the same here?"

"We couldn't," Akira replied flatly. Noguchi sighed lightly, holding his head in his hands.

"For the sake of future reference, I'd like to hear why it wasn't possible."

"Their target was me, so I acted first. Here, the target was someone else, and they acted first. Plus, there were casualties, so I can't just stand there and do nothing. I need to do something to deter them from escalating further."

"Didn't you think they'd become more stubborn after casualties?"

"At that moment, I was trying to make them hesitate for the next move."

Noguchi understood Akira's attitude, which calmly affirmed the source of retaliation.

Noguchi's subordinates finished packing Swang's and the others' bodies into body bags. They picked up large chunks of flesh as well, but the scattered bloodstains throughout the room were beyond cleaning up.

"Noguchi-san, what about cleaning up? Should we handle it here?"

"No need to go that far. Just take away their bodies and return."

"Understood."

Noguchi then turned to Sheryl with a very troubled expression.

"I'm sorry to ask this so soon after waking up, but I'd like to get a grasp of the situation. Can you spare a moment?"

"Y-Yes."

In the gruesome room, still scattered with bloodstains despite the absence of bodies, Sheryl and the others continued their conversation.



Sheryl, soaking in plenty of hot water, let out a sigh tinged with fatigue. Thanks to the recovery medicine, her physical injuries were no longer a problem, but the mental exhaustion remained. To alleviate this fatigue and clean her bloodstained body, she was bathing with Akira.

"I wonder what will happen from now on..."

Regardless of the reason, the act of killing city dwellers carried significant weight. Moreover, the murder took place in the slums. Mishandling the situation could easily provide a pretext for incineration. Sheryl's voice carried a slight heaviness, reflecting her inability to be optimistic about the situation.

In contrast, Akira responded lightly, "Well, we'll just have to take things as they come."

Sheryl felt relieved by Akira's nonchalant attitude and half-jokingly laughed. "I suppose you're right."

The incident involving the killing of Swang, and his men was to be treated as though it never happened. Officially, no agents from the Comprehensive Investigation Bureau had ever been there. The bodies were to be identified as slum dwellers who had targeted Sheryl. This was the narrative they were to follow, not as a concealment, but as a blatant denial even though the truth was known. This directive came from Inabe.

What would happen to Akira and Sheryl's status depended on Inabe's skill. Since they had no influence over the city's decision-making, Akira's response—that they could only take things as they come—was not wrong.

Hearing this, Sheryl decided it was futile to worry any further and shifted her mindset. She chose to enjoy the bath with Akira. Surely, no one would intrude on them again. With that

thought, she savored this moment.



In a room within the walls, a meeting of the city's executives was taking place. The agenda was the response to the Nationalists in the First Outer District, but it had devolved into a confrontation between Inabe and Udajima.

Inabe harshly questioned Sawatari, the Director of the Comprehensive Investigation Bureau.

"What was the basis for suspecting the hunter of being a part of the Nationalist in the first place? If I hadn't stopped it, your deployed unit would have been massacred. We were on the brink of losing a valuable number of personnel responsible for the city's safety. Explain the reasoning behind the deployment, considering this risk."

"I appreciate you preventing the loss of our unit. However, the details of the investigation regarding the Nationalists are highly classified, and I must decline to disclose them at this time," Sawatari responded.

Inabe sneered at Sawatari. "Hmph. I bet Udajima bribed you. Or did he promise to appoint one of your cronies to a lucrative position in the First Outer District?"

"Please refrain from baseless slander. If your faction's reasoning is that poor, no wonder it's in decline,"

Sawatari retorted, his tone equally derisive. Though visibly displeased, Inabe had anticipated this response and continued as planned.

"Very well. To prove that my suspicions are unfounded, you must explain the rationale and background for deploying the unit. No matter how classified, it's unreasonable that you can't provide at least an overview to those present here," Inabe said, turning to Riot.

"Chairman Riot, if Director Sawatari refuses to explain, it can only be interpreted that he

has either used false information for personal gain to manipulate city forces, resulting in harm to the city, or he is incompetent. Therefore, I request the dismissal of Director Sawatari on grounds of betrayal or incompetence, or both."

The room buzzed with murmurs, indicating the effectiveness of Inabe's statement. Even Riot, who wished to remain neutral for the city's sake, found the argument compelling.

"Director Sawatari, let us hear your explanation," Riot demanded.

"...There was a high level of similarity between an artifact handed over by the Nationalists to their contact and one brought to a black-market shop in the slums by a hunter named Akira. This raised the possibility that the source was the same, necessitating an investigation into Akira's ties with the Nationalists," Sawatari explained.

Inabe interrupted, "Ridiculous. Similar artifacts can be found all over the Eastern District. Do you intend to detain every hunter who finds one?"

"The similarity was high enough to warrant suspicion. Moreover, old-world information terminals are rare and not easily found. It is natural to suspect a common origin," Sawatari countered.

"Even if the source is the same, it only means Akira and the Nationalists scavenged the same ruins. It doesn't prove Akira is a part of them," Inabe argued.

"Which is why we need to verify the source. There is a possibility that the Nationalists operating in the First Outer District are involved there as well," Sawatari insisted.

"It's normal to simply ask about the location of artifact collection. Hunters are unlikely to easily divulge locations of valuable artifacts, but you can offer a fair information fee. Why did you choose immediate detention by deploying a unit instead? Explain why this was necessary, even at the risk of the unit's annihilation," Inabe demanded.

Sawatari hesitated to respond, knowing that any honest answer would imply that he had weak grounds for deploying the unit, bowing to Udajima's influence.

At this point, Udajima interjected. "Wasn't it simply because the hunter in question is extremely dangerous? I heard that three of the Comprehensive Investigation Bureau's personnel sent to investigate were killed."

The room buzzed again, but Inabe remained unfazed. "I haven't heard of such information."

"We have," Udajima countered.

"Is that so? On our side, we have reports indicating that individuals posing as Investigation Bureau personnel attempted to assassinate the owner of a relic store in the slums for economic control but were killed in the process."

Sawatari knew that Swang and his team were genuine Investigation Bureau agents, and so did Inabe. This realization caused Sawatari's face to twist slightly.

"Since they pretended to investigate the Nationalists, they couldn't just kill them immediately. They likely intended to extract a confession and then torture them to death. Fortunately, a hunter who was acquainted with the shop owner managed to intervene in time," Inabe continued.

Udajima's face also twisted slightly in displeasure, reflecting his dissatisfaction with Swang's team's inadequate results.

"It's disgraceful that fake agents appear to be so well-informed, indicative of severe information leaks within the Bureau. Were they real agents? If so, a thorough investigation is necessary to determine whose orders they were acting on, don't you think, Director Sawatari?" Inabe proposed, offering a lifeline to Sawatari.

The proposal implied a compromise: if Sawatari distanced himself from Udajima, Inabe would help manage the fallout. It was clear to Sawatari that this was an opportunity to switch sides or at least create distance from Udajima.

In all likelihood, Inabe had secured Swang's team's bodies. Without Inabe's cooperation, Sawatari couldn't conveniently make them disappear. He had only authorized an investigation, expecting mild intimidation to suffice.

The deployment against Akira, influenced by Udajima, was similarly intended to avoid confrontation between high-ranking hunters and city units. Udajima's interference was merely to harass Inabe, but field personnel had complicated the situation.

Recognizing he had fulfilled his obligation to Udajima, Sawatari accepted Inabe's offer. "I agree. We'll conduct the investigation on our side."

"Then we shall wait for the investigation's results. Despite all that was said, it's fair to continue the discussion after the investigation is complete, isn't it?" Inabe concluded.

"Indeed," Sawatari agreed.

This effectively obfuscated the issue of Akira killing city personnel. The matter of the skirmish with city units was also postponed.

Chairman Riot advanced the discussion. "Section Chief Inabe, is it acceptable to withdraw the request for Director Sawatari's dismissal?"

"It is. I withdraw it," Inabe confirmed.

"Then, we'll end the discussion on that hunter here. Next, let's move to the proposal from Section Chief Inabe regarding a comprehensive investigation of the First Outer District," Riot continued.

Inabe and Udajima glared at each other as the meeting proceeded. Inabe's proposal to

deploy a large unit to the First Outer District to search, attack, and eliminate Nationalist bases was difficult for Udajima to oppose. The meeting was progressing in Inabe's favor.

However, the momentum was abruptly disrupted by the sudden appearance of the city's Defense Force personnel. Their commander, Saeba, spoke with a serious expression.

"Excuse me for the interruption. There is an urgent matter. First, please look at this."

The city's Defense Force, while having a strong military component and generally separated from the city's administrative budget, held significant authority due to its crucial role in defending the city.

The abrupt, unannounced appearance of Defense Force personnel at the executive meeting indicated a critical emergency. The executives were more startled and concerned than offended by the breach of protocol.

A video was displayed on the large monitor in the conference room.

"This video has been repeatedly transmitted via general-purpose wide-area communication for the past hour. While the exact source is unknown, it is believed to be from the depths of the Kuzusuhara Ruins."

The footage showed an interior resembling some ruins, with armed individuals lined up behind a figure who appeared to be the leader. Standing at the center of the video was a child, who began to speak with a serious expression.

"We are the Alfort Group! Today, we declare the founding of our nation here!"

The content was so shocking that the conference room was thrown into an uproar. The city's executives stared at the child in the video in astonishment.

The child, continuing his awkward speech in the video, was Tiol.



Watching the video of Tiol's speech, Yanagisawa had a troubled expression.

Tiol declared the deep areas of the Kuzusuhara Street Ruins as their territory. He announced a ban on entry for anyone who did not acknowledge their statehood. Tiol claimed they had already dealt with many hunters and had collaborators everywhere. He mentioned that collaborators could collect relics without being attacked by monsters within their territory and that they welcomed additional collaborators. Tiol continued his speech awkwardly.

The video continued with evidence: people moving unscathed through a pack of large Weapon Dogs, calmly collecting relics near monsters, and piles of Old-World information terminals as their bounty. These images were shocking.

However, Yanagisawa's interest was not in the relics but in Tiol himself.

"...Who are you?" Yanagisawa wondered aloud.

Tiol claimed to be from the Alfort Group, but Yanagisawa, who actually had connections with the Alfort Group, did not recognize him.

At that moment, Yanagisawa received a secure communication. The caller was Nergo, a Nationalist currently undercover within Drankam.

『Comrade. I have a question. Are you aware of the video claiming to be from the Alfort Group?』

『Yes. I'm watching it right now.』

『Is it your doing?』

『No. I have no clue about it either. So, you don't know anything either?』

『Correct.』

A brief silence ensued as Yanagisawa pondered the truth of Nergo's words. Yanagisawa was the first to finish his thoughts.

『By the way, what do you think of the content of this video?』

『I find it difficult to interpret its irrational and immature nature. The speaker is an amateur. The way he talks is no different from reading an essay. He declares the founding of a nation without even stating its name. It's extremely childish.』

『But the video itself is genuine. The monsters in that area are mixed with the defense mechanisms of Kuzusuhara Street. If they've managed to bypass those creatures' friend-or-foe recognition systems, it suggests there's a highly skilled technician behind them. If we mishandle this, it could escalate into an issue involving the Rebuild Research Institute and the Anti-Rebuild Agency. That would mean there's a significant organization backing them...』

『Neither we nor our comrades have any clue about it. Nothing has come up in our information networks. If such a large organization were moving, there's no way the speech would be so clumsy.』

『Exactly.』

Both Yanagisawa and Nergo found the content of Tiol's video baffling upon simple consideration.

『We'll try to contact the group claiming to be from the Alfort Group on our end. What will you do?』

『The management of Kugamayama City will decide the city's official stance in their meeting, so I guess I'll play it by ear after that?』

『I see. Well then, I'll take my leave.』

Ending the communication with Nelgo, Yanagisawa resumed watching the video, deep in thought. He repeatedly reviewed the video, scrutinizing it to deepen his understanding of its content and infer the circumstances, background, and purpose behind its existence. He then reached a conclusion.

"Can it work...?"

There was no guarantee of success, but it was worth the gamble. His objective could not be achieved without taking risks. Determined to accomplish his goal before time ran out, Yanagisawa resolved to take action.



The city's officials, after watching Tiol's video, were all visibly distressed. The potential impact of this incident on the city's economy was immeasurable, and they knew they would be the ones tasked with handling it.

As Inabe attempted to move forward with discussions on how to address the situation, he was interrupted by a member of the defense force present at the meeting. But before any further discussion could take place, Saeba intervened.

"Inabe, Area Chief. Until the situation calms down, we'll have to keep you under surveillance."

"What? What do you mean?"

"I don't mind explaining the reason for surveillance. However, I advise against doing so here. Also, I assure you that it's just surveillance and not meant to restrict your economic activities."

Inabe shot Saeba a stern look filled with the authority of the city's officials. Saeba met his gaze squarely.

"...Fine. Director Riot, I'll excuse myself. I have some matters to attend to."

With those words, Inabe left the meeting room with Saeba.

Amidst the chaos in the meeting room, Udajima let out a smirk. Though the details were unclear, Inabe had evidently made some mistake. Seizing this opportunity to grasp control of the meeting's flow could potentially rectify his earlier blunder. With renewed determination, he raised his spirits.

However, members of the defense force also stood behind Udajima. Udajima involuntarily grimaced.

"...Wait, am I also under surveillance?"

"Yes. Until the situation calms down, we'll be keeping you under surveillance."

"And the reason?"

"I can explain the reason if you'd like, but I interpreted it as permissible to do so at another time. It's just a form of surveillance, not a restriction on your economic activities."

"Director Riot I'll excuse myself as well."

Udajima, accompanied by members of the defense force, also left the meeting room. The strategy meeting regarding Tiol's situation continued in the absence of both major faction leaders.

Inabe, who had arranged for transportation, proceeded through the city with Saeba. They were accompanied by guards, but only Inabe and Saeba occupied the spacious rear seats, suitable for discreet discussions.

"Now, shall I ask for the reason behind placing me under surveillance?"

"Isn't it already obvious?"

"There's no need for me to boast about it. Whether your assumption is correct or not, it's up to you to say."

"Well, I'd like to hear your speculation first."

Inabe looked puzzled. Saeba urged him on with a silent gesture. Inabe reluctantly began.

"...If Akira obtained Old World information terminals through a deal with that Alfort Group, considering the amount he acquired, it implies substantial dealings took place. And there's a possibility that I might be involved in those dealings. Is that it?"

"That's half of it."

With that said, Saeba prompted Inabe to inquire about the other half with his gaze.

"...Even if there were another half, I wouldn't be able to say it."

"Then allow me to say it. Your operatives have been placing Old World information terminals acquired from Akira in your assigned district in the First Depths. During this process, there's a possibility they came into contact with the Alfort Group and engaged in transactions. That's the issue."

Inabe let out a lengthy sigh upon realizing that his clandestine activities had been uncovered by the defense force.

"Was Noguchi the source who caught wind of our activities?"

"Sorry, but I can't answer that. Information sources are classified."

"I see."

After that, silence lingered for a while. Then Inabe began speaking with a calm expression.

"Let me say this upfront. I don't have a dealing with Nationalists. And let me offer an excuse as well. I didn't engage in malpractice willingly. But if I hadn't, Udajima's faction would have risen unchecked. That's all."

Having finished pouring out his thoughts, Inabe took a deep breath to regain his composure. He continued with a calm demeanor.

"While it sounds good to have a broad perspective, those who prioritize efforts to escape over maintaining the defense wall are not fit to determine the fate of the city. Even though it's not on the economic side, the defense force also bears the responsibility for the city's fate. In the worst-case scenario, we should hope they fulfill their duties to the city. So, what now? We've got your confession of wrongdoing. Shall we move from surveillance to detention?"

"Nah, no need."

"...What?"

Just when he thought it was over, Inabe was taken aback by this reversal and blurted out in surprise.

"It's not like we're champions of justice or anything. As long as you're not selling defense information to outsiders, we're not interested in pursuing management's wrongdoing. You haven't, right?"

"Nope."

"Then it's no problem. As I've said before, this surveillance is just part of the investigation into the Nationalists, and it doesn't restrict your economic activities. In other words, it's a case of turning a blind eye to irrelevant details."

Inabe wore a somewhat confused expression at this somewhat defiant response, while Saeba chuckled slightly amused.

"Well, personally speaking, I support you over Udajima. Someone who's willing to hold out until the end rather than flee early is more proactive in defending the city. And they're likely to increase the budget for that."

"I appreciate that. In that case, I'd like not just your observation but also your cooperation."

"Ethically speaking, that's out of the question. Sorry."

Inabe and Saeba, despite their different positions, chuckled slightly with a similar wry smile.

The car continued on its way. Their destination was Sheryl's base in the slums.

"So, to be frank, what's the deal with that Akira? Is he the kind of hunter who would deal with the Nationalists?"

"Putting it bluntly, that Akira, as a hunter, doesn't have the capability to make such deals. So, it should be something else. I understand it's suspicious given the circumstances, though."

To clarify this point, Inabe headed towards Sheryl's base with Saeba.

As Inabe's vehicle stopped in front of Sheryl's base, Erio and his group armed themselves and gathered on the spot. Normally, it wouldn't be appropriate for slum dwellers to interact with city dwellers. However, due to the recent incident where Sheryl was almost killed by city dwellers, they couldn't simply retreat based on the reason that the other party was from the city.

But the resistance of Erio and his group faded when Inabe's escorts emerged from the multiple vehicles parked there. Not only were they city officials' escorts, but there were also members of the city's defense force among them, showing that the comprehensive support system left Erio and his group with no chance of victory.

Erio hurriedly contacted Akira's group about Inabe's visit.



Akira had decided to stay at Sheryl's base for a while to prevent a third incident, as there had been two recent close calls where he had saved Sheryl. Then, Inabe and the others arrived. After listening to Sheryl's explanation, they were briefed on the matter of the video claiming to be from the Alfort group by a person named Tiol. Akira was asked to provide the source of the old-world information terminal he had obtained to clear suspicions regarding the deal.

They would pay a satisfactory amount for the information. Although told so by Inabe, Akira's expression remained stern.

『Alpha. Just asking, but it's pointless, right?』

『Indeed.』

『I see.』

Akira sighed heavily while slightly lowering his head. Then, he raised his head and answered with a serious expression.

"Sorry, I can't tell you."

Inabe wasn't surprised, as he had half-expected this response. He saw through it as not an act to raise the reward but a genuine reluctance. With a slightly furrowed brow, he conveyed,

"Taking such an uncooperative attitude makes it hard for me to defend you, you know."

"I understand. But some things cannot be said."

"Why can't you say?"

"That, I can't say either."

"You're currently making your situation significantly worse. You're aware of that, right?"

"Yeah, I'm aware."

Not disclosing the source of the old-world information terminal could potentially label Akira as a nationalist. With that intention in mind, Inabe was threatening Akira. Despite this tense atmosphere, Inabe was still trying to protect Akira, and Akira was aware of it.

"Just to confirm, you're not a nationalist, and you haven't been involved in dealings with them, correct?"

"Yeah, I'm not a nationalist, and I haven't dealt with them."

"You have no connection to the people or the content in that video, correct?"

The person was adamantly denying everything, and further questioning seemed pointless. Even if they were to use force for interrogation, the information obtained wouldn't match the potential damage from the opponent's combat capabilities. Inabe tried to steer the conversation in that direction.

However, an unexpected response came.

"No, I know this guy."

"What?"

Inabe and Saeba couldn't help but show their surprise.

"Sheryl. This guy is Tiol, right?"

"...Yes, probably."

Being honest about it here would be a bad move. Revealing this could deepen the suspicion of their connection to nationalists. Despite thinking so, Sheryl honestly admitted that Tiol had been part of her faction before.

Honesty might be a virtue, but it wasn't necessary at the moment. Inabe also felt this way as he held his head in his hands.

Meanwhile, Saeba chuckled lightly. He had judged that Akira was indeed not involved with nationalists or their dealings. In a sense, Akira's incompetence was on full display in this situation. Therefore, he couldn't skillfully manipulate this situation to his advantage. That's what Saeba thought.

"Got it. Let me ask you one thing as a member of the defense force. Is it possible for you to accept a request to kill this Tiol? It would be the quickest way to prove you're not with the nationalists. What do you say?"

Saeba thought Akira would naturally accept the proposal, but Akira showed reluctance.

"...Are you this asking me to do it? What would happen if I refuse?"

"I don't have that intention, but what's the reason for your reluctance?"

"Regardless of the content, nobody likes being threatened or coerced into doing something, right?"

"I see... Then, if this Ti ol becomes a bounty target, would you go and kill him without hesitation?"

"Yeah. I was planning to kill him when I saw him anyway. It's perfect timing."

Saeba lightly chuckled at Akira's extremely troublesome reaction, which changed significantly depending on whether he did something of his own volition or was coerced into it. Inabe also sighed in exasperation.

"Alright. I have some adjustments to make, so I'll take my leave. Inabe, what about you?"

"...Right. I'll withdraw as well. Akira, behave yourself and stay quiet for a while. I'll contact you again."

Inabe and the others returned from the base. Sheryl saw them off with Akira. Then, she expressed her thoughts on the successive events.

"Akira, what do you think will happen from now on?"

"Well, we'll just have to see how things unfold, won't we?"

"Yeah, I suppose so."

Sheryl smiled, recalling a similar conversation they had before. The situation had become trivial compared to when city staff had been killed. Yet, both Akira and she had the luxury of saying the same thing. If that's the case, then everything will surely be fine. Thinking so, she smiled.



While Akira was resting at Sheryl's base, he received a call from Kibayashi. The negotiation for the old-world automaton had finally concluded.

Thanks to Kibayashi's persistent efforts, Akira's share amounted to 3 billion aurum. Out of this, 2 billion aurum would go towards repaying Inabe, leaving 1 billion aurum for Akira to use freely. Akira initially planned to use the money to luxuriously renovate his home's bathroom and significantly improve his living standards. However, given the current circumstances, he decided to allocate the funds towards enhancing his combat capabilities instead.

Kibayashi heard Akira's sigh and responded with a slightly annoyed tone.

"Akira, are you dissatisfied with 3 billion aurum?"

"Huh? No, I'm not dissatisfied. I'm grateful."

"Then what's that sigh about?"

"Nothing, it's about something else."

Akira tried to brush it off lightly. But Kibayashi, already in a somewhat bad mood, probed further.

"Is it about that guy Tiol?"

"Well, yeah. So, you knew?"

Kibayashi's voice grew even more irritated.

"If it bothers you so much, you should've refused. You've become quite dull."

"Wait a minute. What are you talking about?"

"I heard, you gave in to the city's threats and accepted the condition to eliminate the Alfort group to clear your name from being a nationalist suspect. Shouldn't you, regardless of the opponent being the city, just do as you please and defy them? Honestly, I expected more from you..."

Kibayashi had hoped Akira would turn against any opposition, including the city. He felt a slight disappointment, thinking Akira had made a pragmatic choice by not opposing the city.

Akira replied, sounding troubled.

"I don't know what you were expecting, but I'll do things my way. Don't have weird expectations of me."

"Doing things your way? Weren't you coerced?"

"I already planned to kill that Tiol guy. He attacked me at the Kuzusuhara Street Ruins and the Iida Commercial District Ruins, and got away both times. I'm not killing him because the city asked me to; it just happens to align with my plans."

"Then why the sigh?"

"I was planning to use the money to renovate my bathroom, but since I struggled in the first inner zone recently, I'll need to spend that renovation money on equipment instead. That's all."

"A bathroom renovation...? Wait, what kind of bath are you planning?"

"Shut up! It doesn't matter! I just want to have a nice bath for once!"

Akira got emotional, responding to Kibayashi's incessant questions with frustration.

But this outburst reassured Kibayashi of Akira's sincerity. Akira truly intended to kill Tiol, not because he was forced by the city. This meant that Akira's reckless spirit, willing to oppose even the city, if necessary, remained unchanged. Moreover, Akira planned to pour every penny from his considerable earnings into improving his combat abilities, even sacrificing the cost of a trivial bathroom renovation.

This confirmed for Kibayashi that Akira was still the reckless hunter he admired, uncompromising and true to his dangerous, non-pragmatic ways. Feeling this, Kibayashi's mood lifted significantly.

"Yes! That's what I'm talking about! You're still the same guy! Sorry, it's just that a lot of people have been folding under pressure lately. I got a bit confused."

Akira, irritated and exasperated, tried to end the call.

"What is with you...? If you don't have anything else, I'm hanging up."

"Wait a sec. As an apology for my misunderstanding, I'll help you with your equipment upgrades."

"No thanks. Don't make things more complicated."

"Don't say that. Tiol might have a bounty on his head as early as tomorrow, and you'll be off to hunt him right away, right? Ordering additional equipment from your favorite store won't leave you enough time to wait for its arrival. If you rely on me, I can get it done quickly."

"That might be true, but..."

"Also, you're still under suspicion as a nationalist. Ordering stuff will be tough. The shopkeepers might not care, but the suppliers might refuse your orders. Leave it to me, and I'll handle everything securely. How about it?"

Akira, thinking that he might cause trouble for Shizuka, made his decision despite his reluctance. He frowned but agreed to rely on Kibayashi.

"Fine..."

"Great! Now, let's talk about how to spend that 3 billion aurum budget..."

"It's 1 billion. The other 2 billion goes towards repaying the debt."

"Come on, you can delay the repayment a bit longer, can't you?"

"No."

"You're so rigid. Well, maybe that strict sense of duty is part of what makes you so relentlessly reckless and daring."

Akira sighed, holding his head in his hands. As they discussed how to spend the 1 billion aurum, Kibayashi continued to enjoy himself immensely.



Udajima visited a Drankam facility with his supervisor, showing a grave expression to Katsuya and Mizuha in one of the rooms.

"First, let me make it clear. I'm not here to force this on you. Don't think of it as coercion. I understand you were forced to retreat from the first inner sector. If you can't do it, that's fine. I won't hold it against you. But, please, I need your help."

With these words, Udajima respectfully bowed his head to the hunters. He was requesting their assistance in exterminating the nationalists in the first inner sector. Katsuya listened with a difficult expression. While they were promised as much support as possible, the previous retreat had resulted in casualties. Katsuya couldn't easily agree.

Mizuha, sharing Katsuya's feelings, spoke up, voicing everyone's thoughts.

"Katsuya, I can't force you to do this. You're the one who has to fight. But I believe you can do it. We were saved by Akira last time, but that was also due to the difference in equipment. We can ask for support from Mr. Udajima. Isn't that right?"

"Of course."

A thought to refuse flashed through Katsuya's mind but was quickly overwhelmed by his desire for greater strength and achievements. Still, he hesitated. Katsuya showed his indecision on his face.

"Mr. Udagima, do you think I can do it?"

"Regrettably, I can't say for certain. But I want to believe you can. For the future of Kugamayama City, I hope you can."

Katsuya felt slightly confused by Udagima's grand statements. Udagima, noticing this, continued.

"Let me be clear. After accepting the mission to eliminate the nationalists, I wanted to tell you something. I wish for you to defeat Akira, for the future of Kugamayama City."

"What do you mean?"

"In any world, those with exceptional abilities often become symbols and greatly influence that world. Currently, there are two such hunters in Kugamayama City. Despite their youth, they have achieved significant results and may shape the future of the city's hunters. You understand, one of them is you, Katsuya. The other is Akira."

"Me and... him..."

"If you become the symbol of the city's hunters, it would be desirable. Your abilities are exceptional, and you possess high moral standards and ethics. You don't succumb to the power you wield. It's understandable why you have supporters in the middle district. If someone like you becomes the benchmark for the city's hunters, a bright future awaits."

After praising Katsuya, Udagima's face hardened.

"But Akira is not like you," he declared. "He believes that as long as he is strong, anything goes, embodying the slum's mentality and ethics."

Udagima made this declaration first, ensuring its strong impression, then immediately reinforced it with reasons, not allowing time for doubt. This, combined with Katsuya's existing dislike for Akira, had a strong influence on him.

"I know some of your comrades come from similar backgrounds, but they have adopted proper ethics under your leadership. Akira, however, remains true to the slum's corrupt ethics, growing stronger with that mentality. His humanity has only deteriorated."

Thoughts confirming Udagima's words flowed into Katsuya's mind from outside.

"Hunting is a life-or-death business. Strength is everything. Personalities can be overlooked. I understand this mentality."

Udajima continued to press his point.

"But even so, there are limits. Akira kills city officials without hesitation and is suspected of being a nationalist. If someone like that becomes the symbol of the city's hunters, what will happen? Our city will be overrun with similar individuals. We cannot allow that."

The shocking content made Katsuya snap back to reality, and he hurriedly asked,

"Wait a minute! If that's true, why is the city letting him run free?"

Udajima's expression grew severe and heavy.

"For the city's reputation and your safety, please keep this to yourself. Inabe, a fellow city executive, supports Akira to use him, thus protecting him from repercussions."

Udajima wasn't lying, and this gave his words enough credibility to convince Katsuya.

"No way..."

"I'm doing my best to curb Inabe's excesses, but I'm not succeeding. I'm sorry."

Udajima bowed his head again to Katsuya.

"No, it's not your fault, Mr. Udajima."

"Thank you for saying that. Let's get back to the topic. This is why I want you to defeat Akira. As the embodiment of the future of Kugamayama City's hunters, you. Of course, I'll support you in any way I can."

Feeling the fervor of his comrades, Katsuya almost answered affirmatively. However, his own experiences, knowing Akira's strength, held him back.

"Mr. Udajima, what exactly do you mean by defeating him? Should we take down the Alfort gang before him?"

"No, that won't change his status. I want you to capture him."

Capturing Akira alive seemed impossible to Katsuya, and this thought showed in his expression. Seeing this, Udajima spoke earnestly.

"I see. It would be disrespectful to be vague here. Let me be clear: whether he lives or dies doesn't matter. I'll take full responsibility," Udajima stated.

Katsuya was shocked by Udajima's words, realizing they were essentially a request for murder. Katsuya had killed before, but only in self-defense or combat, never as a premeditated act of killing. Some might see this as a minor difference, but to Katsuya, it was significant. Udajima sensed this and continued.

"Of course, it would be preferable if he survived. Extracting evidence of Inabe's corruption from him would be invaluable. Moreover, if we can eliminate either Akira or Sheryl, who is likely the linchpin of Inabe's illegal artifact sales, it would deal a severe blow to Inabe. That alone would be meaningful."

Hearing Sheryl's name, Katsuya recalled her connection to Inabe.

"Sheryl? Wait, Sheryl is involved in this?"

"What's the matter?"

"Is Sheryl really involved in this?"

"She is, at least as the manager of that relic shop. That much is certain."

"No way..."

Katsuya had always sensed something mysterious about Sheryl, but he hadn't wanted to believe she was involved in such corruption. He didn't want to believe it. Udajima capitalized on this.

"She might be unknowingly involved. Perhaps she's being coerced due to some leverage Inabe holds over her, or there may be complex circumstances. Regardless, she's a participant and must bear some responsibility."

"If she's being forced to cooperate, maybe we can investigate, understand her situation, and get her to help us..."

"That's not possible."

"Why not?"

"The Comprehensive Investigation Bureau tried that. They sent a capture team for Akira and investigators to Sheryl. The team was defeated, and the investigators were all killed. On top of that, the Bureau caved to Inabe's threats."

Katsuya was stunned into silence by the gravity of the situation. Udajima concealed his inner thoughts, maintaining a serious expression.

"This is why I'm asking you to capture Akira. I know I can't force you. But I have no one else to turn to, which is why I'm asking you now."

Udajima allowed a faint smile of hope to surface.

"It's strange, but I believe you can do it. I'm not sure why, but seeing you makes me think that. I don't want to believe it's just the wishful thinking of someone with no other options."

"Thank you."

"If I agree to help with this, will you assist me in saving Sheryl?"

"I promise."

"Understood. I'll do it."

"Thank you."

Udajima grasped Katsuya's hands with both of his and smiled in gratitude.



Leaving the Drankam facility, Udajima sat in the back of the car designated for his transport, recalling his interaction with Katsuya.

(I might have exaggerated a bit to appeal to an impressionable young man, but I got a little too passionate in my speech... Why is that? Was I, in turn, influenced by the boy's demeanor?)

Udajima's expression turned slightly pensive as he pondered this. However, after a moment of reflection, he dismissed it as insignificant.

(No, I'm overthinking it. It was just my irritation with Inabe and his cronies that got me a bit riled up.)

To Udajima, Katsuya was merely one tool among many. Spending more time thinking about him was unnecessary. With that in mind, Udajima shifted his thoughts to other strategies and methods he could employ in his ongoing struggle against Inabe and his associates.



Katsuya, bolstered by Udajima's support, hurriedly prepared for the mission. Officially, his goal was to defeat the Nationalists, but covertly, his true aim was to capture or, if necessary, kill Akira. With the help of the Comprehensive Support System's development team, Katsuya amassed as much firepower as possible.

Determined to save Sheryl by defeating Akira, Katsuya steeled himself for the task ahead.

In the white world, a young girl desperately tried to stop Katsuya. The thought of two test subjects, herself and Alpha's, clashing was more than a mere obstacle to the experiment—it was a potential catastrophe. She exerted herself to influence Katsuya's subconscious, trying to dissuade him.

The words of the girl, akin to Alpha, had always profoundly affected Katsuya. Without his conscious awareness, she had significantly influenced his choices and decisions.

However, now her voice was drowned out by the multitude of voices cheering alongside Katsuya. The collective resolve of those around him overshadowed her warnings.

Episode 180 Communication Failure

Akira sat in the driver's seat of a large vehicle in his home garage, waiting for the moment to depart. A communication from Elena came through, inviting him on a hunter mission.

"...So, you know? The only place nearby where hunters with a rank in the 40s can make decent money is the deeper part of the Kuzusuhara Ruins. But with the mess caused by the Nationalists, it's all chaotic right now. We thought we'd go on a bit of a trip until things settle down. Would you like to join us, Akira?"

"Ah, I'm really grateful for the invitation, but I have some business to attend to."

"Oh, that's a shame. Hmm. We could adjust our plans for a few days if that helps."

"Ah, I'm really sorry. I can't say for sure. It might be done today, or it could take a few weeks."

"If that's the case, I understand. I don't know what you're up to, but if it's dangerous, be careful."

"Yes. I'll be careful. Thank you."

After ending the call with Elena, Akira sighed in disappointment.

"I really wanted to go..."

Alpha, sitting in the passenger seat, comforted him.

『It can't be helped. We'll go another time.』

"Yeah, you're right."

At that moment, a notification appeared on Akira's information terminal: a bounty alert.

"...It's here. Let's go."

Akira's expression turned serious as he steeled himself for the task ahead. He started the vehicle and headed towards his destination.



The bounty that Kugamayama City placed on Tiol and his group was 50 billion aurum. This bounty was not on an individual or entity, but on a collective or organization, and the bounty would be claimed upon the group's annihilation. The reward would then be distributed among participants based on their contribution.

Even though it was a bounty, the targets were humans. Hunters who avoided unnecessary killing generally stayed away from this chaos. However, those who could compartmentalize or didn't care about such distinctions were actively participating.

Defeating the Nationalists was a significant contribution to the corporate government. In other words, demonstrating such a contribution would increase a hunter's rank more efficiently than relic collection or monster hunting. Additionally, humans, who lack the tough armor and diverse weaponry of machine-type monsters or the remarkable vitality of biological monsters, are arguably easier to kill.

In short, this mission, where the rewards for defeating the enemies were disproportionately high compared to the strength of the enemies, was an excellent opportunity for hunters aiming to rise in rank. At the same time, this was also a strategy by Kugamayama City to use hunters for reconnaissance in force. If the hunters alone could defeat Tiol and his group, that would be ideal. If not, the city would deploy the necessary force based on the reconnaissance results.

Moving the defense force itself costs money, and casualties result in losing highly trained personnel. Considering the possibility that the Nationalists in the First Inner District could be a diversion for a larger attack on the city, similar to the previous large-scale assault, the city couldn't mobilize a large force lightly unless there were already monster hordes approaching.

Despite this, a large contingent of humanoid weapons was stationed at the forward base in front of the Kuzusuhara Street Ruins as a precaution. Akira was a bit surprised by the number of units.

"That's a lot of them. ...Does it take that many humanoid weapons to deal with them?"

『Well, it's a 50 billion aurum bounty.』

"True, but..."

『Think of it as them letting us take the lead. If that unit were to easily deal with Tiol and his group, Akira wouldn't have a chance to clear his name from the Nationalist suspicion.』

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

Reassured by Alpha's confident attitude, Akira smiled and regained his composure. He passed by the forward base, entered the rear communication line, and headed for the First Inner District.

As they advanced along the rear communication line, motivated hunters overtook them. There were quite a few.

"They're in a real hurry, thinking it's first come, first served."

Not all participants in the bounty hunt saw it merely as a money-making opportunity. Some, like those who had delivered monster corpses to Tiol in the First Inner District or sold Old-World terminals through dubious channels, joined to prove their innocence. Many had prepared without considering cost, showing their desperation in the speed of their vehicles.

『They must have their reasons. Akira, let's not fall behind.』

"Got it."

Akira also needed results. Not wanting to be left behind, he increased the speed of his vehicle.

Entering the First Inner District, Akira headed towards Tsubakihara.

Even though he aimed to kill Tiol, he first had to find Tiol. However, there was no guarantee that Tiol was even in the First Inner District. The plan was quite haphazard.

Nevertheless, he aimed for a place with the highest likelihood. This was the area where he had saved Sheryl and others from the horde of monsters and the strange boys. Akira sensed a similar vibe from those strange boys as he did from Tiol, who had transformed into a bizarre figure in the Iida Commercial District Ruins.

Finding this connection, Akira decided that searching that specific area was better than wandering aimlessly around the vast First Inner District. However, as he headed towards Tsubakihara, Akira's face showed a hint of severity. Alpha, noticing this, smiled, and tried to cheer him up.

『Akira, it's okay. This time, you don't have to force your way through a horde of monsters. If it gets dangerous, we can always retreat.』

"...You're right."

Akira smiled back, but the concern lingering in his mind was something different.

While assisting other hunters in the First Inner District, Akira had heard about the direction of Tsubakihara. Naturally, Tsubakihara referred to the area around a place called Tsubakihara. Akira knew about the Tsubakihara building in that direction, so it made sense to him to call it the Tsubakihara area.

However, none of the hunters from Kugamayama City knew about the old-world city hidden behind the façade of that abandoned building. Akira himself hadn't known until Alpha had guided him there.

Despite this, since the area was called Tsubakihara, someone must have known about it. At the very least, the person who first named it Tsubakihara must have known. Considering this, Akira deduced that it had to be people from the time when Kugamayama City was founded.

Originally, Kugamayama City was an outpost spearheaded by Sakashita Heavy Industries for the Kuzusuhara Street Ruins exploration. The easternmost region of the eastern sector saw a massive deployment of forces, rivaling the large-scale expedition units, with many hunters venturing deep into the ruins and achieving significant results.

Benefiting from these achievements, the outpost rapidly developed into what could be called a city. The massive walls surrounding the city were built to defend the outpost from powerful monster hordes, formidable even for the five major corporate units.

But one day, Sakashita Heavy Industries abruptly withdrew from the Kuzusuhara Street Ruins exploration. Kugamayama City couldn't continue the deep exploration of the ruins on its own. The city's development halted, and it was forced to scale down its operations, becoming a typical mid-sized governance corporation, compared to its former activity scale.

Akira thought that those from that era knew about Tsubaki's management district surrounded by the barrier. Such a significant entity wouldn't naturally be forgotten, meaning someone deliberately tried to erase that information.

As a result, the term "Tsubakihara Area" came to be used merely to indicate the direction.

Even so, some hunters might have ventured into the ruins thinking something valuable might be there. However, the combination of powerful monsters and the lack of valuable relics in the barren area likely discouraged further exploration. This reputation persisted even after the rear communication line was extended, allowing hunters back into the First Inner District.

Until Inabe, cornered in an internal power struggle within the city, began a desperate plan to reverse his fortunes.

Akira considered that he was suspected of being with the Nationalists because the old-world terminals they distributed and the items he obtained from the Tsubakihara building had too many similarities.

Recently, the volume of old-world terminals discovered in the Tsubakihara area clearly exceeded the quantity Akira had given to Inabe. This indicated that a large quantity of valuable relics had suddenly appeared in ruins previously considered depleted.

The true source of these relics was likely the same: Tsubaki was somehow releasing a large number of discarded items.

This led to the possibility that Tsubaki was behind the Nationalists, including Tiol. Akira hadn't realized this when Inabe had first told him about Tiol and his group, but now he had reached this conclusion.

As Akira proceeded towards Tsubakihara in the First Inner District, he glanced at Alpha.

(I wonder if it's okay...)

If Tsubaki is behind this incident, wouldn't it be risky to get involved? That concern crossed Akira's mind. Tsubaki was undoubtedly a relic of the old world. Akira hesitated to antagonize them without proper reason, just like Ryoichi.

But he also hesitated to ask Alpha about it in detail. If Alpha was connected to Tsubaki, then Akira assumed they were probably of a similar nature.

Was it okay to keep heading towards Tsubakihara like this? That hesitation made Akira's expression grim.

Seeing this, Alpha put on her usual smile.

『Akira. Everything will be fine. We don't have to forcibly break through a horde of monsters this time. If it gets dangerous, we can just turn back.』

"...Yeah."

Alpha wasn't stopping him. She was saying it would be okay. If that's the case, he had to keep moving forward. He had done so until now. With that determination, Akira smiled back at Alpha.

At that moment, the reconnaissance equipment on the vehicle detected numerous responses above. It was a large squadron of black humanoid weapons, the Black Wolves, flying in the sky of the ruins. Transport vehicles carried them to the First Inner District via the rear communication line, and they were now advancing rapidly towards Tsubakihara using the aircraft's navigation function.

Seeing this, Akira showed some signs of impatience.

"Wait a minute! Are they just going to unleash those all of a sudden?"

Akira knew the true strength of the Black Wolves from the battle in the Second Inner District. If that many units were dispatched, it was conceivable that they might wipe out Tiol and his group altogether. This meant that there would be no role for Akira and the other hunters, and the opportunity to clear the suspicion of being nationalists would also be lost.

"Weren't the opponents of the nationalists supposed to let the hunters handle it for a while? Isn't that why they put them on the bounty list? What's going on?"

『Inabe explained that to Akira. Other people within the city might have different motives. It's in the midst of a power struggle.』

Akira felt thoroughly entangled in this complicated situation. With that in mind, he hurried forward anyway.



Inabe and Saeba were overseeing the situation in the command room of the frontline base. It was Inabe who had pushed the city to put a bounty on Tiol and encouraged the hunters' efforts. Although the information was beneficial coming from someone connected to Akira, it also served the city's interests, so it was accepted. However, they couldn't leave everything to the hunters alone. This was also part of the city's defense. If the situation was deemed beyond what the hunters could handle, the defense force would be deployed. While the final decision lay with the defense force, Inabe was in a position to share in that responsibility.

"Seriously, it took a week to approve the bounty listing because of Udagima. What's he thinking?"

"He seems to have been busy during that time. There were traces of contact with Drankam and Yoshioka. He also inquired about deploying a unit for city defense to the defense force."

"Is it okay to tell me that?"

"I believe it falls within the scope of information that can be provided to city executives."

"I see."

Inabe and Saeba shared a laugh. Despite being in roles of observer and observed, the two had a good relationship.

Then Inabe's expression turned slightly serious.

"...Then let me ask one thing. If you can't say, that's fine." Sensing Inabe's demeanor, Saeba also adjusted her attitude.

"What?"

"How much influence does Yanagisawa have on the defense force?"

"I... can't say."

"I see."

At the point where he couldn't answer, it was the same as admitting that Yanagisawa's influence over the defense force had reached a dangerous level.

"Well, without cooperation between the Inabe faction and the Udagima faction, they won't be able to overturn his decisions as easily as the management side."

"No argument there."

Inabe, in the position to rectify this, smiled wryly.

"To do that, we need to deal with Udajima first. You know the current situation."

"Tough spot. You can do it."

"I'll do my best. ...Hm?"

Deciding to stop lamenting the situation, Inabe intentionally changed the subject. That's when he noticed.

On the large monitor in the command room, a map including the innermost parts of Kugamayama City and the Kuzusuhara District ruins was displayed. It showed the deployed units and other information, including the reactions of humanoid weapon units moving towards the First Inner District.

"Saeba. Wasn't the defense force's humanoid weapon unit supposed to still be stationed at the frontline base?"

"Ah, that. That's not a defense force unit. It's Yoshioka's unit. They're linked up, but in terms of handling, they're considered hunters."

"...Udajima, huh?"

"Most likely."

Inabe frowned as he speculated on Udajima's intentions.



Dozens of black aircraft were flying over the First Inner District. All of these aircraft had performance equivalent to those deployed in the Second Inner District, and their pilots were top-notch elite forces.

Naturally, deploying them required a hefty sum of money. Nonetheless, Yoshioka decided to dispatch his unit in response to Udajima's request.

The benefits for Yoshioka from the unit deployment included the honor and publicity of suppressing the nationalists, the bounty for defeating the wanted Tiol, and Udajima's backing for the formal adoption of his company's products by the defense force.

And Udajima's interest lay in hindering Inabe's expansion of influence.

Once this incident was over, the exploratory area of the First Inner District would undoubtedly expand significantly. And the expanded area would become the responsibility of Inabe's faction.

If Inabe's faction merely gained control over new unclaimed territories, it wouldn't be an issue. However, recent information indicated that what was supposed to be unclaimed territory in the Tsubakihara area had become a treasure trove of valuable artifacts.

Initially, Udajima had thought that Inabe had misled him. But with the results from the Comprehensive Artifact Appraisal Bureau and the fact that Tiol and his group possessed a large number of ancient world information terminals, Udajima changed his mind. For some unknown reason, he became convinced that the Tsubakihara area held a vast number of valuable relics.

If such a location fell under Inabe's faction's jurisdiction, the factional power struggle that was currently favoring them would completely reverse. Udajima was scheming to prevent this reversal by redistributing the jurisdictional areas.

Naturally, bringing up such matters in a meeting wouldn't be tolerated by Inabe. So, evidence to push through this change was necessary.

Therefore, Yoshioka Industry negotiated and prepared a large unit of black wolves. The original plan was to monopolize the results of the nationalist suppression left to the hunters, thus depriving Akira of the opportunity to clear suspicions of being a nationalist. If successful, there would be significant gains for themselves, and Inabe's faction would be left with significant doubts.

In this situation, negotiations for the redistribution of jurisdictional areas might go in their favor. This could prevent Inabe's comeback. Udajima was betting on this.

Udajima also asked Yoshioka to capture or kill Akira. However, that request was refused. Yoshioka didn't want to get involved with Akira more than necessary, remembering how his previous presentation was ruined by him.

With the expectations of Udagima and Yoshioka, the black aircraft continued their advance and spotted Akira's vehicle in their direction.

"C1. As the sponsor said, there seems to be that particular hunter. It looks like they're heading in the same direction."

Melto, who piloted the leading aircraft, C1, responded to the communication from the team members.

"C12. Indeed. Is it true that the nationalists' stronghold is in this direction?"

"C1. But isn't that assuming that the hunter is really in league with the nationalists? Is that story true? I don't think so."

"C13. It's not our job to judge that. Our reason for providing information is to deepen suspicions about that hunter, even if their base was found by chance here in the future."

"I see."

As they were about to overtake Akira, a proposal came in from C12 to Melto.

"C1. I have a suggestion. Why don't we have a few aircraft accompany that hunter?"

"C12. We've been told not to touch him directly from above, right?"

"I know that. But doesn't that mean not to engage him in combat? So, this would be an escort."

"Escort?"

"We're aiming for the nationalists' stronghold, but there's no guarantee it's ahead. There's a risk he might find it first. If that happens, having a few aircraft accompany him could significantly reduce his impact. The sponsor doesn't seem to want him to succeed. Considering that, it might be good to keep his intentions in mind."

"C12. Sounds reasonable. C1. I agree. I'll go."

"Alright. C12. C13. Proceed."

"C12. Understood."

"C13. Roger that."

Two of the black aircraft that were in formation took separate actions. The rest continued to advance ahead.



In this situation, negotiations for the redistribution of jurisdictional areas might go in their favor. This could prevent Inabe's comeback. Udagima was betting on this.

As two units broke off from the squadron of humanoid weapons passing overhead and headed towards him, Akira became more wary, his expression growing suspicious.

Exiting from the rear doors of the vehicle and climbing onto the roof, Akira's back was equipped with cylindrical high-capacity energy tanks, while both hands were connected to LEO composite guns and energy cables. This allowed Akira to fire Charge Bullet rounds at maximum power without needing to ride a bike.

If the approaching black aircraft were enemies, this level of preparation was necessary. Akira thought so and made his current trump card available without hesitation.

However, with signals from friendly forces still coming from the aircraft, he refrained from suddenly aiming a gun at them. First, he would observe their intentions.

One aircraft came directly overhead and continued flying at the same speed, while another began flying alongside the vehicle.

As Akira suspiciously eyed the nearby black aircraft, a figure appeared from the cockpit of the aircraft in a forward-leaning posture and then boarded Akira's vehicle.

"You're..."

"We meet again, Akira."

The person who emerged from the aircraft was Nelia.

Akira wore a displeased expression, while Nelia smiled cheerfully.

"Don't worry. I have no intention of fighting."

"Is that so? Then why are you here?"

"For various reasons, I've come to accompany you for a while. The reasons are confidential, but you can probably guess."

As Akira looked puzzled, Alpha explained the other party's intentions.

"They probably came to interfere with Akira's progress. Instead of directly fighting Akira, they plan to accompany him and defeat us first when we encounter Tiol and the others."

"I see..."

Akira sighed heavily, his face contorting with annoyance.

Even if he told them to leave, he knew they wouldn't. He couldn't resort to using force to remove them, as they were technically participants in the suppression of the nationalist movement and were allies. Attempting to forcefully remove them would risk being perceived as siding with the nationalists.

Moreover, such actions would only lead to them eagerly fighting back, which would be a highly effective form of harassment.

"...I'll ask just in case. Is Udajima behind this?"

"That's also confidential."

"I see. Then let me make one thing clear... Regardless of whether urban executives are behind you, don't think for a moment that I won't shoot."

Unable to aim his gun, Akira stared at Nelia with as much intimidation as his gaze and voice could muster. It was enough to make anyone tremble with fear.

However, in response to such intimidation, Nelia smiled even more happily.

"I understand."

As Akira released his intimidation and let out a heavy sigh, he understood that Nelia was that kind of person. With that understanding, his sigh felt deeper, heavier, and more wearying.

And he significantly relaxed his guard against Nelia. As long as they didn't make a move, he knew they wouldn't either. Akira, feeling a strange sense of satisfaction from the abnormality right in front of him, no longer considered Nelia an enemy.

Nelia also sensed from Akira that he had no intention of engaging in combat at the moment, so she continued the conversation lightly.

"Akira. By the way, when we met last time, you mentioned you had a lover. What's he like?"

"I don't have an obligation to answer."

"Oh, come on. It's fine. I'm curious. Same age? Older? Is he as crazy as you, Akira?"

"What do you mean, 'like me'!?"

Nelia's joking or seemingly joking banter left Akira feeling perplexed. He was being toyed with by her words.

Aside from being a person who could casually join the conversation even as an adversary, Nelia entertained Akira with her cheerful conversation.

With unwanted companions who forcefully joined him, Akira proceeded through the ruins. They were already significantly far from the rear communication line.

Then, in a manner that hadn't been encountered before, a massive reaction from a large group of monsters appeared unnaturally. While the black aircraft, capable of flight, could pass through their encirclement, Akira's vehicle couldn't. Though expected, Akira frowned slightly.

He lightly instructed Nelia, who was still on the roof of the vehicle, "Hey. You're in the way. Go back."

"How cold. Can't you at least ask for my help?"

"Don't get in the way."

With a slight expression of disbelief, Nelia shook her head slightly, then jumped from the roof of the vehicle back to her aircraft. The black aircraft then began to move away from Akira's vehicle.

Meanwhile, Akira aimed his LEO composite gun towards the approaching horde.

『Alpha, let's go!』

『Yes, let's go』

They had plenty of spare ammunition loaded in the vehicle, unlike the rushed situation with the bike last time. Without worrying about remaining rounds or running out of energy, Akira fired both guns.

Countless bullets struck countless targets. The momentum of the monster horde, like a tsunami, was halted and pushed back by the density of the barrage.

The reptilian creature, drenched in the flesh fragments of a beast that had been blown to pieces by a Charge Bullet C round, was also shattered along with the cannon it had sprouted, scattering into the air.

A multi-legged autonomous weapon, resembling a spider clinging to the side of a building, was destroyed. Before it could fire its mounted machine guns or missile pods, it was continuously turned into pulverized scrap metal. Attack is the best defense. Embodying these words, Akira one-sidedly shot down the enemy, barely giving them a chance to act.

Still, if he targeted the wrong enemies in the wrong order, the biological-based monsters with their robust vitality would forcefully break through the barrage, and the mechanical-based monsters, armed with a myriad of heavy weapons, would fire a hail of bullets. The situation, where Akira had the upper hand, remained precarious, teetering on the edge of collapse with even a minor misjudgment.

However, Alpha did not make mistakes. With her vast computational power, she grasped the battlefield situation and continued to provide Akira with optimal solutions. And Akira responded to them. Moving swiftly atop the narrow roof of the vehicle with the enhanced physical abilities of his combat suit, he dodged enemy gunfire, artillery, and missile attacks while following the instructions to take down targets.

Even a massive horde of monsters, enough to cover the entire area, couldn't defeat Akira now that he was fully supported by Alpha. As proof, the ghastly scene of mangled bodies and wreckage of monsters he had killed and destroyed marked the path he had taken. But the horde of monsters advanced, trampling over that hellish landscape. Prioritizing the mission to defeat the intruder over their own lives, the lives of their kin, or the annihilation of their horde, they closed in on Akira.

The sheer number of monsters appearing, no matter how many he defeated, left Akira bewildered.

『There's too many! What's going on? Are all the monsters in the ruins gathering here?』

『Akira, they're coming from behind as well.』

『Damn... They sure are giving me a lot to handle before Tiol and the others even show up!』

Akira grumbled as he pointed his gun to the rear. But before bullets could fly from his gun barrel, the horde behind him was blown away by artillery fire from Nelia's black wolf. The shells that had once blown away an entire section of the slums were now unrestricted by the need to limit their power within the city, their might further enhanced for the second inner region. The impact zone was blown away, collapsing the surrounding dilapidated buildings.

Then, a communication came in from Nelia over the general-purpose channel.
"Akira, I'll handle things back here."

"...What are you up to?"

Nelia laughed as she replied to Akira's suspicious voice.
"Sorry. The truth is, I'm here to snatch away your achievements. So, just give up, okay?"

Hearing this, Akira couldn't help but let out an amused, bitter smile.
"That's a shame."

"Sorry about that."

Nelia answered lightly, without a hint of sincerity, and cut the communication.
Leaving the rear enemies to Nelia, Akira focused on those in front of him.

While Nelia was attacking the horde of monsters, another communication came in from a different black wolf.

"C13, wasn't it fine to leave them alone?"

"C12, it's alright. We're supposed to prevent Akira from gaining any achievements, right?"

"That's true, but..."

"Besides, if Akira leaves because of this, it would be boring."

"I don't think it's a matter of entertainment... Well, whatever. If that's the case, I'll also take some of his achievements. I'll handle the front."

"Suit yourself."

With the two black wolves joining the fray, even more monsters were trampled down. The battle situation quickly shifted in Akira's favor to the point where he had a bit of free time. Seeing the clear shift in their favor, Akira decided to take the opportunity to reload his magazines and replace the energy tank. Returning to the car to start the work, he suddenly thought,

『...Even so, there haven't been any signs of Tiol and the others. Considering the way things looked in that video, I thought they would attack the moment we entered the first inner region.』

『True. But since it would be troublesome if they appeared now, let's consider it a stroke of luck.』

『That's true.』

Even if Tiol suddenly appeared now, Nelia and the others would probably take him down. Although he didn't have a firm intent to kill with his own hands, he wasn't willing to give up the achievement either, to clear any suspicions of being a nationalist.

In that sense, it certainly was convenient. It was okay for things to go his way every once in a while, he thought, stopping his train of thought there.



The squadron of black humanoid weapons moving through the sky of the first inner region had already reached far beyond the currently accessible area. On the ground, there were scattered monsters, including Weapon Dogs and other anti-aircraft capable creatures, but none showed any signs of attacking. They were either moving towards Akira's group or staying still.

"C1, C12's group seems to be under a pretty large-scale attack. Are they okay?"

"C2, if it's C12's group, they'll be fine. The data shows they're in control. There's no request for support. Besides, even if the situation turns against them, they can always retreat. Unlike that Hunter, we can fly."

"That's true."

"And frankly, we can't afford to send another unit over there. We don't lack surplus strength, but it's better to keep it on our side."

"Got it. ...Huh? C1, there's a large structure up ahead. It's huge!"

Countless decayed skyscrapers stood tightly packed together, completely obstructing the view of the other side. The narrow gaps between the adjacent buildings were entirely filled with rubble, forming a barrier of abandoned buildings.

This barrier was taller than the flying units above the surrounding buildings and extended seemingly endlessly to the left and right. Melto was somewhat surprised by the unexpected appearance of this enormous structure.

"Despite its size, we couldn't notice it until we got this close. Though not enough to trigger an alarm, the concentration of colorless mist here seems quite high."

"What should we do? Ascend to get an overview?"

"No, at this height, we'll hit the wide-area altitude limit set by Kugamayama City."

"We should be fine as long as we only go up to the roofs of nearby buildings."

"That's only because flying at the same height near already existing tall buildings reduces

the risk of provoking aerial monsters. It doesn't mean we can exceed the wide-area altitude limit."

Although Melto initially told his subordinate this, he reconsidered the situation.

"...Well, we are currently searching for the nationalists. This building could be their base. We need to confirm the overall structure. Ascend."

The black units landed on the rooftop, which was part of the abandoned building's barrier. They proceeded along the rooftop to the opposite edge, and the sight they saw inside the barrier stunned them.

"Wh-what is this...!?"

An undamaged Old-World city spread out before them.

"Unbelievable... A place like this, here..."

"This should be within the first inner region... But these pristine buildings... Could it be beyond the second inner region?"

"Could this be the nationalists' base?"

While his subordinates panicked, Melto's sense of duty helped him regain his composure first.

"Stay vigilant! Maintain a readiness level equivalent to the second inner region and await further instructions! Report the situation to HQ!"

He tried to connect with the forward base but failed.

"What...?"

"C1, what's wrong?"

"Long-distance communication is completely down. What's going on? The concentration of colorless mist hasn't changed. At this level, we should be able to connect..."

At that moment, the captain's unit's detection equipment picked up a sudden nearby presence. The high-tech information gathering equipment on the Black Wolf immediately delivered the image to the pilot. It was a woman in a black dress, and Akira recognized her as Tsubaki, whom he had met at the Tsubakihara Building.



The command room of the forward base suddenly became noisy due to the unexpected situation. Information on the large monitor, which displayed data about the operations in the first inner region, had abruptly disappeared. The commander frowned at the monitor.

"What happened?"

"It appears that a severe communication disruption has occurred on-site. The cause is... unknown. There are no traces of a sudden increase in the concentration of the colorless mist. However, all long-distance communication in the area is completely down. We can't even connect to the relay stations set up in each sector."

"What about communication via the rear communication lines? Have those wired routes also failed?"

"No, those are still operational."

"Understood. We will consider this as interference by the nationalists and take appropriate measures. Given the communication disruption, it's difficult to obtain reconnaissance information from the Hunters at the moment. We will dispatch units to restore communication. Combat with the nationalists is authorized."

"Does that mean we have permission to engage? If it includes extermination, it seems to deviate from the basic guideline of leaving the extermination of nationalists to the Hunters..."

The subordinate showed mild confusion, to which the commander responded with a meaningful look.

"This situation is unprecedented. If it leads to that, so be it. That's what it means." The subordinate, understanding his superior's intention, smiled.

"Understood. Let's get started!"

Offering rewards to Hunters to take down Tiol and his group was mainly due to the intentions of Kugamayama City's management. However, many in the defense force preferred to handle it themselves. Excitement rose at the thought that the opportunity had arrived.

The units on standby at the forward base began to mobilize. The large squadron of humanoid weapons that Akira had seen near the base became the main force. Feeling the

hectic atmosphere of the forward base, Inabe wore a stern expression. Saeba noticed this and spoke up.

"Inabe, I understand how you feel, but there's no helping it."

Saeba understood Inabe's desire to have Akira handle the nationalist extermination to clear the suspicion against them rather than the defense force. However, if they interfered poorly, it could be seen as obstructing the nationalist extermination. Rash actions were not an option.

"It hasn't been decided that the defense force will get ahead. Stay calm and..."

But Inabe shook his head.

"No, that's not it. I agree with the defense force's intervention. My concern lies elsewhere."

"Elsewhere? What is it?"

"The situation has worsened. While it's good to be enthusiastic, seeing this as an opportunity is dangerous."

Realizing this, Saeba reassessed the surroundings. He, too, adopted a stern expression, unable to deny the slightly buoyant atmosphere.

"...Understood. I'll also tell them to stay focused."

"Thanks. Oh, by the way, how is Yanagisawa handling this situation? The actions of the nationalists, who declared the first inner region as their territory, also interfere with the extension of the rear communication lines. I assume he has taken some countermeasures, but we haven't been able to gather any information."

Inabe asked this as a straightforward question, but Saeba's face showed concern.

"The thing is... we don't know either. Moreover, his whereabouts have been unknown for the past few days. Even his subordinates genuinely seem to be unaware of his location."

"What...?"

A sense of foreboding swelled within Inabe.



Thanks to Nelia's support, Akira survived the large-scale monster attack. He took a breath on top of the vehicle roof.

『Finally took them all down. Alpha, the rewards from this generic extermination request alone must be incredible.』

『Yes, it was a bit extravagant for a preliminary skirmish.』

『A preliminary skirmish, huh? If this was just the preliminary, I wonder what the main event will be like.』

Akira smiled wryly as he said this, and Alpha responded with her usual confident smile.

『Don't worry. With me around—』

At that moment, Akira felt a slight headache and dizziness. He staggered slightly but quickly regained his balance.

(...What was that? Did I unconsciously push myself too hard?)

He thought perhaps the relief after surviving the large-scale attack had brought out some unnoticed fatigue. He resolved to be more careful. Just as Akira had this thought, his vehicle collided with a large monster lying ahead. The impact threw Akira off the roof of the vehicle.

"Whoa!?"

The monster's corpse wasn't actually blocking the road; he could have easily avoided it. Even if it had been blocking the way, he could have simply stopped. Although he landed without trouble, Akira was greatly shocked.

『Alpha!? What happened!?!』

Akira searched for Alpha in his extended field of vision. But she was nowhere to be found. He instinctively looked around but couldn't see her anywhere.

『Alpha...?』

There was no response.

Episode 181 Raids and Assaults

After feeling slight dizziness and a headache, Akira was thrown off the roof of his moving vehicle when it collided with the corpse of a large monster. As he looked around, he called out for Alpha.

『Alpha!? Where are you!?』

Alpha's figure was originally only displayed within Akira's extended vision. She appeared as if she were really there, but she wasn't physically present. No matter how much he searched around, he couldn't find her if she wasn't displayed in his extended vision.

Akira was so panicked that he forgot this fact.

『Alpha!』

He called out again, more forcefully. But there was no response. Akira's telepathic call faded into the void as if swallowed by emptiness. Akira finally understood—his connection with Alpha was cut off.

(...No way! This can't be happening!)

In other ruins or underground areas, there was a risk of losing connection with Alpha. Akira had been told about this. But this was the surface of the Kuzusuhara ruins, not some other ruins or underground. The shock Akira felt was enormous.

(...Calm down! Did Alpha say anything?)

Akira tried to recall Alpha's last words.

"It's okay. I'm with—"

Alpha's words were cut off midway. This indicated that the communication breakdown with Alpha was something even she hadn't anticipated. If it were a foreseeable event, she would have warned him in advance.

(...Calm down! Don't panic! Stay cool! First, calm down! Don't panic! Stay calm!)

He had to keep telling himself this to maintain his composure. Akira was aware of this. He tried to steady his breathing, which was becoming ragged, and switched to taking deep breaths.

At that moment, Nelia contacted him via short-range communication.

"Akira, are you okay?"

"Huh!? Oh, yeah..."

Akira's response, which essentially admitted he wasn't okay, was attributed by Nelia to the crash, which was quite dramatic.

"I see. Well, you don't seem injured, and the vehicle looks okay."

"...Yeah, it's fine."

Trying to cover up his unease, Akira answered as he headed back to the vehicle.

Nelia then landed her unit right next to Akira. Another unit landed alongside hers.

The Black Wolves were units that, even with Alpha's support, Akira couldn't defeat in the Slums. Now, two of these more powerful black units were right next to him, while his connection with Alpha was cut off. This made Akira increasingly tense.

"...What's going on?"

"Akira, was your vehicle being navigated remotely?"

"Why do you ask?"

Since Akira had been relying on Alpha for driving, Nelia's question wasn't off the mark. Fearing that she had noticed something, Akira instinctively avoided answering.

"Actually, the long-range communication for my unit was completely cut off just a moment ago. If the same happened to you, I thought that might explain the crash."

Akira checked the communication status. Sure enough, the long-range communication was entirely dead.

"Mine's cut off too."

"If the same happened to you, then it's not a malfunction in my system. A large-scale communication disruption? Even though there's no change in the density of the colorless mist?"

Hearing this, Akira's expression turned grim, but he also began to calm down a bit. If the unknown communication disruption was the reason for losing connection with Alpha, then restoring communication might also restore his connection with her.

And then, Akira remembered Alpha's previous instruction: when he suddenly couldn't see himself, he was told to return with all his might. He immediately acted. While remotely driving the vehicle, he leaped into the vehicle through the rear door and swiftly drove in the opposite direction with momentum.

Nelia and the others followed Akira.

"Akira, are you going back?"

"Yeah. We unexpectedly consumed more ammo, and now there's a communication outage. I'm going for now."

Akira, who was hastily swapping out magazines and energy tanks inside the vehicle, exuded a sense of desperation. He also consumed a large amount of healing potion, trying to extend the continuous healing effect as much as possible. With no support from Alpha, he was trying to maximize his combat abilities.

"But is that okay? Akira, you're suspected of being a nationalist, and they came to defeat those guys to clear your name, right?"

"Is that something someone who came to interfere would say?"

"Well, I guess you're right."

Even in Akira's somewhat tense response, Nelia sensed a calmness. Akira still had a stern expression, but he regained some composure thanks to Nelia's attitude.

"...It's just that if I can't immediately send evidence of defeating the nationalists to the frontline base due to the communication disruption, even if I defeat them, Udajima and the others might cover it up. Then it's meaningless."

"I see."

Hearing Nelia's understanding response, Akira felt relieved internally. He hadn't lied, but all those reasons were just afterthoughts. He was retracing his steps to restore his connection with Alpha.

But their path was now blocked by a collapsing abandoned building. The building fell sideways, leaving its original form intact, completely blocking the road ahead of Akira.

"Damn it! Why now?!"

Akira immediately tried to move to a detour, but he stopped when the vehicle's reconnaissance equipment detected a significant reaction. The abandoned building was also starting to collapse from behind the vehicle.

If it were just the front, Akira could have brushed it off as a coincidence. Due to the attack on the monster herd by Nelia and the others, the surrounding buildings had become fragile. Akira attributed it to just his bad luck.

But if both the front and rear of the road were blocked, Akira wouldn't just attribute it to bad luck but would suspect foul play. He leaped out of the rear door and aimed his gun at the surroundings.

Instantly, Akira's information gathering equipment and the vehicle's reconnaissance equipment detected countless reactions around him. Armed individuals emerged from rooftops and surrounding buildings one after another, shooting and shelling at Akira.

Akira immediately counterattacked. With no support from Alpha, he excessively empowered the bullets to an overwhelming force and fired them at a maximum rate his gun allowed.

The area was engulfed in a barrage of bullets and shells in an instant.

Akira could already see gunfire and avoid it. This was thanks to his abnormal reflexes due to manipulating his perception of time, his body's enhanced physical abilities that allowed him to move at high speeds even in a world where time flowed slowly, and his ability to control his movements. Even if surrounded by enemies, Akira, in his current state, could easily dodge regular gunfire.

But the enemy's gunfire was exceptional. Akira, even for a moment, couldn't keep up with their high-speed and erratic movements. He got hit. In the torso. In the head. He couldn't dodge. Despite using the energy force field armor on his back, Akira was already dead.

Enemy bullets struck the force field shield armor covering his head, creating a shockwave of light conversion. Akira didn't even have time to be surprised by the light. Despite temporarily losing his vision, he still sensed the enemy's presence and shot back. He didn't just rely on the reconnaissance results displayed in his extended vision but also used the information gathering equipment as an additional sensory organ to sense the enemy's presence, perceive it, grasp their position, and aim and shoot.

The disadvantage of enemies being in high positions didn't mean much to Akira at the moment. With maximum-powered C bullets, Akira could penetrate buildings that would normally serve as cover even if the opponent was on the rooftop.

The attackers who were hit burst into pieces. Without Alpha's support, Akira couldn't mimic controlling the power of C bullets according to the target's durability. Bullets fired with excessive force, as inefficient as they were, spread unnecessary destruction around.

So far, no one in the enemy squad could withstand Akira's gunfire. However, there were differences in individual toughness, and the degree of injury varied greatly depending on the hit location. The bodies shot and fell from the building didn't burst apart but suffered severe damage.

Seeing the liquid flowing from those bodies, Akira noticed the attackers' abnormality. The color of the blood was green.

(Green blood...! Who are these guys?)

Tiol, who fought in the Iida Commercial District Ruins, also emitted green liquid. The deformed boys who fought when he helped Sheryl and Yumina were the same. If the people attacking him now were of the same kind, there might be someone as strong as Tiol among them. Akira thought so and involuntarily grimaced.

Less than ten seconds had passed since the start of the battle. But the area where Akira and the attackers were engaged in intense gunfire had already undergone a significant change in appearance. The road was littered with debris, and numerous large trees had been opened up, and the abandoned buildings were on the verge of collapse. While feeling the falling rubble extremely slowly, Akira ran through that death zone.

And then, another element was added to further change the surrounding scenery—Nelia. The black unit that had been shooting at the attackers landed beside Akira, holding a gun and a blade.

"Akira, there's no point in defeating the nationalists during the communication outage, right? In that case, let me take your achievements."

Nelia smiled as she said so, shooting and slashing the surrounding enemies along with the buildings. The attackers were hit by huge bullets, burst apart, and torn to shreds by the countless blades spinning at high speed.

Akira couldn't help but laugh. The people attacking him were probably nationalists. In that sense, Nelia was indeed trying to snatch away the credit for defeating the nationalists. But whether it was out of jest or sincerity, it was a great help right now. Thinking so, Akira laughed and returned lightly.

"Take as much as you want! They seem to want to claim my achievements, so be it, I'll give them away!"

"Is that so? Then, I won't hold back!"

Akira and Nelia, with their stark difference in physique between a child and a humanoid weapon, entrusted each other's backs and fought the enemy. Akira, who had been struggling because he was almost targeted from all directions, felt much relieved when he left the rear half to Nelia.

This will work out somehow. With this thought, Akira raised his spirits and forgot about running out of bullets or energy. He fired both guns in his hands and crushed the enemies with C bullets, demolishing buildings along with them.

With Nelia taking care of his back, the number of bullets coming at Akira was halved, while the density of the barrage he unleashed doubled. The enemy forces that appeared one after another were mercilessly mowed down. It was completely Akira and Nelia's dominance.

Yet, it was still far from victory. The enemy reinforcements kept coming, and they didn't show any signs of stopping their assaults, no matter how much damage they suffered. They attacked relentlessly, just like security machines or monsters, without showing any hint of retreat.

(...What are these guys really!)

One minute into the battle, the surrounding buildings had already turned into a mountain of rubble.



C12, another black mech, observed Akira and Nelia's fight from the air. The pilot, a man, pondered.

(...They're not attacking me. C13 only came to assist Akira and got attacked in return. Their target is clearly Akira. Come to think of it, it's similar to the monster horde before the communication blackout. ...What's going on?)

Though slightly puzzled by the inexplicable situation, the man speculated various possibilities. But he couldn't come up with a satisfying reason. He switched his focus.

(...I'll think about that later. What's important is how I act in this situation...)

He glanced at the ground again. Attackers kept appearing from a wide range, relentlessly assaulting Akira, and his allies. But eventually, Akira's side would prevail. That much was clear to the man.

Akira currently lacked Alpha's support, but he hadn't lost his powerful equipment. And above all, Akira's strength, honed through numerous life-threatening situations, remained intact even without Alpha's support.

That strength of Akira's now reminded the man of what he felt when he attacked a warehouse in the slums before.

The presentation of humanoid weapons by Ishima and Yoshioka in the slums was ruined because of Akira's presence. When Akira was driven to the Iida Commercial Zone Ruins due to the convenience of both companies, a situation occurred where dozens of automatons ran amok.

When the urban authorities tried to use Akira to win factional disputes, conflicts between the authorities caused by Akira escalated. Furthermore, a declaration of independence by those claiming to be the Alfort group occurred, leading to a large-scale suppression operation.

And now, the current turmoil. There were too many inexplicable things. And what was important wasn't the inexplicable things, but that Akira was involved in them.

A being that caused unexpected events. Akira embodied that.

And now, the man feared once again. He feared that this anomaly would someday become an obstacle to their righteous cause. That unexpected events would overshadow the fulfillment of righteousness. Just by being there, it could trigger something fatal.

That's why it had to be killed before it was too late. The man reaffirmed his determination.

(...I failed last time. But this time, I'll kill him here and now!)

With that resolve, Zalmo, the pilot of another black mech, took action. The black mech aimed a large cannon from the air and fired at Akira on the ground.

The projectile fired was a special high-power shell that could only be used against distant enemies. Its explosion was tremendous, blowing Zalmo's mech away with the blast wind.

Zalmo managed to stabilize his mech's position in the air and checked the situation on the ground. Smoke spread throughout the area.

"Did it...?"

Naturally, words like "He's probably dead" came to mind. However, Zalmo deliberately harbored doubts. Akira was an exception. If he were an ordinary being, he could have been killed in the slum battle. Thinking so, Zalmo looked at the situation with a puzzled expression.

In the next moment, Nelia's mech emerged from the smoke-covered ground, flying towards Zalmo's mech at high speed. Then, with the momentum of a direct hit, she swung her blade with all her might.

Zalmo couldn't dodge that strike. The giant chainsaw blade equipped with anti-force field armor deeply slashed through the armor of Zalmo's black mech.

But it didn't cause total destruction. Zalmo's mech's force field armor was too strong, and Nelia's mech had its output reduced by the previous cannon blast.

Although he took a painful blow, Zalmo immediately counterattacked. While his surface armor was being shaved off by Nelia's spinning blades, he also swung his own chainsaw-like blade towards Nelia.

Nelia evaded it with three-dimensional movement. While ordinary beings could only engage in close combat with ground-based movements, her movements weren't limited to that. She displayed aerial combat movements, incorporating not only forward, backward, left, and right but also up and down. Even without a fixed axis of up and down, she precisely controlled the mech's entire body and launched an attack with the mech tilted 45 degrees in the air.

Zalmo defended against a strike that couldn't be achieved in a normal swordfight—a downward slash from the side—using his giant blade. Their rotating blades collided, resulting in a clash of chainsaws. The intense impact conversion light generated from the point of contact continued to illuminate the two black wolves strongly.

In that state, Nelia's cheerful voice reached Zalmo through the communication.

"C12. Don't shoot without warning. What's with that?"

"C13. Sorry about that. I just thought I'd finish off Akira after all. Is he dead?"

"They told not not to touch him, didn't he? Shame on you. That's not okay."

"Don't say that. We need to adapt to the situation. Besides, if it's during this communication blackout, we won't get caught. It's fine."

"I noticed it, you know?"

"Just keep quiet about it."

"Shame on you. I'm the type to face things head-on, you know. I'm sorry."

Zalmo and Nelia laughed and talked as if making light of the situation.

"Well, can't be helped. In that case, let's go as usual... Time for some evidence cleanup!"

The two black wolves, locked in, separated momentarily before once again slashing at each other. With agile movements that belied their massive frames, they swung their giant blades, attempting to deliver a fatal blow by traversing, dodging, and striking.

The basic performance of their mechs remained unchanged. However, Nelia's mech, which had taken the cannon blast, was at a significant disadvantage. The mech was heavily damaged, having lost its armaments other than the blade. The mech's energy was also being used to maintain its force field armor to protect itself from the explosion.

By pushing the output of the armor to the limit, it consumed a large amount of energy. To compensate for this disadvantage, Nelia persistently engaged in close combat. She poured the remaining energy into her mech's high-speed movement and enhanced the power of its close-range equipment, forcing the opponent into close-quarters combat.

Due to the choice to abandon defense and focus on attack, Nelia's mech's force field armor was only being used to maintain the minimum strength of the mech. Its strength was only enough to prevent the mech from collapsing due to its weight or limbs being severed due to the inertia of high-speed movement. It couldn't withstand even a single bullet from the opponent. If Zalmo could keep his distance, he would win simply by shooting.

Zalmo understood this well. However, even if he understood, he couldn't do it. The Black Wolf's forward movement was faster than its retreat. As long as the opponent kept advancing, he couldn't create distance. And if he were to use a gun from this distance, it would be a significant vulnerability. If he hesitated, he might be overwhelmed.

Because of this, Zalmo was forced into a blade battle as Nelia intended. But even so, Zalmo remained composed and relieved.

Despite the relentless onslaught from Nelia, which had significantly damaged her mech, Zalmo knew he was being pressured into a stalemate. But if this situation continued, Nelia's mech would run out of energy first.

The situation favored him. All he had to do was stay calm and defeat her. There was no need to rush and give the opponent an opportunity. This mindset gave Zalmo the confidence to remain composed.

And if a mech identical to his suffered such damage from that cannon blast, there was no way Akira, who was nearby, could survive. He had to kill him this time. This thought also brought relief to Zalmo.

All that was left was to kill Nelia here. He could twist the situation to make it seem like they were ambushed by attackers believed to be nationalists. Therefore, Nelia couldn't be allowed to escape. He had to finish her off decisively. With that decision, Zalmo focused on Nelia's opponent.

The close-quarter combat in the aerial battle between the black mechs continued, scattering intense impact conversion light around them.



Akira was alive. Blown away by the explosion of the cannon blast, he regained consciousness after fainting and rolling on the ground, still confused about the situation.

『...Alpha? What's happening? What's the situation?』

There was no response. Then Akira remembered that the connection with Alpha had been severed, understanding that it was still the case.

"Damn it."

Looking towards the sound from above, he saw two black mechs engaging in aerial combat. Seeing that, Akira recalled being shot at from that direction. Feeling anger surging through his severely relaxed self, he grimaced.

(They attacked me! How did I think I wouldn't be attacked? How careless of me!)

If he had been more vigilant and detected the enemy's attack early without letting his guard down, there could have been a better way to handle it. Thinking so, Akira berated himself fiercely with a grim expression reminiscent of the time he spent in the alleys of the slums.

One of the reasons for his carelessness was that Akira had become accustomed to Alpha's support. When in danger, Alpha would inform him in advance. That sense of security gradually relaxed Akira's vigilance.

Looking around while lying prone, he spotted his vehicle a short distance away. Although it had been blown away and overturned by the explosion, it had largely retained its shape. It was sturdy, thanks to the heavy use of extremely expensive armor tiles to maximize durability.

Akira couldn't help but chuckle.

(The vehicle seems to be intact. If that's the case, the interior should be fine too. ...Was Kibayashi's recommendation, correct?)

Just before being hit by the cannon blast, at a really critical moment, Akira had maximized the output of the force field armor of his reinforced suit. Due to the excessively strong force field armor, the wearer could be crushed from the inside.

Originally, there was a limit set on the output of the force field armor for the wearer's safety. However, Alpha had removed that restriction by modifying the control unit of the reinforced suit. With a normal energy pack, it wasn't possible to raise the output so high

due to energy shortage. This was forcefully made possible by using an external energy tank.

Even so, raising the output to that level would have killed the wearer due to overload. However, Akira endured that burden through his extensively trained physique, misunderstood to be superhuman, and the healing effect of restorative medicine.

The treatment nanomachines contained in the incredibly expensive restorative medicine, priced at 20 million aurums per box, suppressed life-threatening injuries to fatal wounds with immediate treatment and further advanced the healing process to severe injuries before succumbing to fatal wounds. Thanks to that, although Akira had exhausted the residual healing effect in his body, he had just managed to survive.

When Akira consulted Kibayashi on how to use the additional budget of 1 billion aurums, Kibayashi made various useful suggestions. Among them were armor tiles, energy tanks, and restorative medicine. If it weren't for any of these, Akira would have died. And it was because all of them were available that Akira secured his life and opportunity.

The external energy tank was empty. The energy pack of the reinforced suit was also depleted. On top of that, his body was seriously injured. Akira slowly approached the vehicle in that condition. Putting back the guns that were still in his hands and dropping the empty energy tank on the spot, he cautiously lowered himself and moved forward.

Right now, he was within the enemy's detection range. If he was found, he would die. Therefore, he had to move slowly. With that thought in mind, Akira desperately suppressed the urge to rush towards the vehicle, fearing that he might exhaust his strength just by staying still with his heavily injured body.

The faster he moved, the more visible he would become to the enemy. Reminding himself of that, he crawled forward, vomiting bile.

On the way to the vehicle, he noticed a fallen assailant. He suppressed the urge to cry out inadvertently by covering his mouth with his hand.

(It's okay. He's dead. He shouldn't be able to attack me even if he's alive. Let's go.)

With tension, Akira crawled past the assailant whose life or death was uncertain. He wasn't attacked. The explosion that almost killed Akira had wiped out all the assailants around him.

The sound of battle echoed from above Akira as he crawled on the ground. There shouldn't be any room for concern about the ground during the engagement. Believing so, he continued to remind himself and proceeded slowly.

He didn't know how long the battle above would last. If the enemy happened to focus their attention on the ground, he would probably be spotted. It wouldn't be strange if he was noticed in an instant. With a severely injured body, just staying still would consume his strength. The spare restorative medicine was only in the vehicle. But there was no guarantee that he would have the strength to reach the vehicle.

So, if he didn't hurry towards the vehicle now, it might be too late.

Akira desperately suppressed himself, trying not to be crushed by that anxiety, and maintained his composure to slowly, steadily, make his way forward. And finally, he restrained himself until the end, reached the vehicle, and quietly, secretly entered it.

Returning to his vehicle, Akira first searched through the scattered cargo for the restorative medicine, then consumed it almost greedily, cramming the additional dose into his stomach. The expensive restorative medicine swiftly treated his severely injured body. At this moment, he forgot about the appropriate dosage and just stuffed the additional medicine into his stomach.

Next, he replaced the energy pack of his reinforced suit. With this, Akira regained a level of physical ability far beyond that of an ordinary person.

He was now in a condition to engage in combat again. However, as long as the humanoid weapon that attacked him was overhead, he hadn't yet escaped from the danger zone. Even so, Akira let out a deep breath for the time being.

(...Alright. What's next? I'm ready to fight again, but if I get hit by that cannon blast again, I'll definitely die.)

The situation wouldn't change just by staying inside the vehicle. If the opponent who found the vehicle intact decided to destroy it, that would be the end.

Searching inside the vehicle for a breakthrough, he saw a fallen motorcycle and spare energy tanks.

"There's no other choice."

It was undoubtedly risky. But it wasn't a risk out of desperation, it's a gamble for victory. If that was the case, there was no other choice but to do it. Just like before. Just like always. Without change, just like when he emerged from the alleys of the slums.

Akira made up his mind.



The aerial battle between the two Black Wolf aircraft, which had been in equilibrium, was nearing its conclusion. If both their force field armors clashed simultaneously, Zalmo would win due to the difference in force field armor strength. Therefore, Nelia continued to attack boldly while maintaining agile evasive maneuvers.

However, the continuous high-speed and erratic movements placed a significant strain on her aircraft. Eventually, the strain exceeded what Nelia's skills could compensate for, causing her aircraft to slightly lose its balance. Sensing the opponent's aircraft nearing its limit almost precisely, Zalmo immediately reacted to the slightest irregularity in the opponent's movement and launched an offensive. He didn't miss this opportunity to swing his blade.

But in the next moment, Nelia swiftly corrected her aircraft's posture.

"Damn it. I fell for it." That realization came too late for Zalmo. Nelia dodged his somewhat overextended strike by a hair's breadth and closed the distance. Then, using all the remaining energy in her aircraft, she delivered her final blow.

Realizing that Zalmo had seen through the limitations of her aircraft, Nelia deliberately disrupted her aircraft's posture ever so slightly to invite Zalmo's attack. Zalmo, correctly assessing the limits of Nelia's aircraft, did not realize her intention. Indeed, Nelia's aircraft was already at its limit, and her victory was lost. Even if she destroyed Zalmo's aircraft with this blow, Nelia's aircraft, depleted of remaining energy, would fall and crash to the ground. In other words, a mutual kill was the limit even if things went in her favor.

And that final blow struck Zalmo's aircraft directly. The rotating blade pierced the aircraft, scattering flashes of discharging energy. Despite the damage from the bombardment, Nelia did everything she could.

But Zalmo's force field armor withstood Nelia's final blow. Despite being cut by the opponent's giant blade, Zalmo's aircraft swung its own blade again.

Nelia had no strength left to avoid it. Helplessly, she took the blow and was bisected vertically, her massive body falling to the ground.

Victory. The realization of it caused Zalmo to relax slightly.

At that moment, the aircraft's reconnaissance equipment detected a significant reaction. Looking through the extended vision of the camera, Zalmo saw the source of the reaction: Akira's motorcycle speeding along the ground.

The derelict buildings that blocked the road had been blown away by the aftermath of the battle. Nevertheless, the road was still strewn with debris, making it difficult for large vehicles to pass. The motorcycle forced its way through the rough terrain.

"What the!?" The person he thought he had killed was still alive. The surprise was great, given his momentary lapse in vigilance. Nevertheless, Zalmo quickly regained his composure and aimed the cannons of his aircraft. This time, he would kill him for sure. With that thought in mind, he took aim.

But just before he fired, Zalmo was struck by another surprise. The motorcycle, which had been accurately targeted, showed an enlarged display, but there was no one riding it.

A large backpack was securely strapped to the seat of the motorcycle as if someone was carrying it. Due to the rough driving, the backpack fell off, revealing that the motorcycle was unmanned.

"...A decoy!"

As if in response to those words, the aircraft's reconnaissance equipment detected a new response. Immediately after, Zalmo's aircraft shook. It was due to the impact of someone who had rapidly ascended from the ground and landed on the aircraft with the force of a collision.

The Black Wolf's camera captured the figure, displaying it in Zalmo's extended vision. There, Akira was seen pointing both guns at Zalmo.



While two black wolves were fighting, Akira, having finished his preparations, secretly exited the car, and moved underneath Zalmo and the others while they're busy fighting.

If he was detected, he would die. Even before that, if the enemy paid even a little attention to the ground during the battle, it would be over for him. Akira suppressed that fear and gambled on the chance.

He remotely controlled the bike left in the car, making it rush forward forcefully. Then, he leaped with all his might, seizing the opportunity when Zalmo targeted the decoy bike.

To attack from outside the range of the opponent's gunfire, he somehow managed to leap onto the opponent's machine. Akira won the first gamble.

And it was Nelia who made it successful. By sacrificing defense and concentrating the opponent's attention on herself with a fierce attack, she deprived Zalmo of the opportunity to see the ground, creating a slight relaxation for him. Without both of these factors, Zalmo would have noticed Akira.

Having landed on the opponent's machine, Akira utilized the grounding function of his reinforced suit to stand on the surface of the machine while aiming both guns. Whether this attack could defeat the opponent or not, that was the second gamble.

Akira didn't entertain the naive idea that even a powerful humanoid weapon could be defeated if shot at close range. Neria's machine had endured that powerful barrage. Assuming Zalmo's machine was equally sturdy, there was a high possibility that shooting with the normal maximum force charge bullet from close range wouldn't work.

Thinking so, Akira, in a reckless move, didn't hesitate to use the charge bullet at maximum power to fire.

Akira had fired the C bullet at maximum power many times before. But that was the maximum power within the limit where the gun wouldn't break. Theoretically, the more energy you put into the C bullet, the more powerful it becomes. And one of the factors that determine the practical upper limit of that power is that if you make it too powerful, the gun body can't withstand the firing load. In other words, if it's okay for the gun to break, the upper limit of the C bullet's power will increase.

The LEO composite gun Akira held in his hands now had the energy tank directly attached to the gun body instead of connecting it with energy cables from the energy tank he carried on his back. Firing with all the energy of the energy tank would certainly destroy the gun. Despite this risk, Akira bet on it, staring at the black machine in front of him and preparing himself.

"Die!"

The C bullets, each attached to the two energy tanks on both guns, were fired at once, spitting out the contents of the expanded magazine at a rapid rate.

The bullets collapsed due to energy beyond the permissible capacity, turning into light bullets composed of high-energy particles, and were shot out innumerable times due to the continuous shooting using the expanded magazine, gathered, bundled, and turned into a stream of light.

This one shot, comparable to a large-caliber laser cannon, penetrated the sturdy force field armor of the black wolf. However, at the same time, Akira's hands burst due to the load. With the armor pierced and the key components severely damaged, the machine fell to the ground. Akira fell with it and was simultaneously slammed onto the ground.

The already heavily damaged black machine completely stopped functioning due to the impact of the fall. But Akira was alive. He got up with sluggish movements, looked at his arms, and breathed a sigh of relief upon confirming that they were intact.

"Alright. As expected."

Akira had raised the output of the force field armor of his reinforced suit to withstand the load of firing the C bullet, completely ignoring the safety of the user.

As a result, despite the guns being blown away, Akira's hands remained intact. He firmly stood up, gripping the two additional LEO composite guns on his back. These two guns were spare weapons he had bought with part of the additional budget of 1 billion aurum, encouraged by Kibayashi.

Feeling a mix of complex emotions at how Kibayashi's recommendation had proven extremely useful, and how he found himself in a situation where it proved useful, Akira chuckled wryly.

He had defeated the black humanoid weapon that had fired at him. But victory wasn't assured yet. With caution, Akira approached the machine. He kicked the upside-down machine to turn it face down, then climbed onto its back. Kicking down the door of the cockpit, he aimed his gun inside.

Inside the cockpit lay Zalmo's body. Zalmo had also worn reinforced armor, but trapped in the cockpit with no escape, he couldn't avoid the attack strong enough to destroy the black wolf.

Finally able to breathe a sigh of relief, Akira muttered, "...So he's dead. Well, let's shoot him just in case."

He had seen many cases where only shooting the head would ensure death. Thinking so, Akira aimed the gun at Zalmo's head, only to realize something strange.

"I feel like I've seen this guy somewhere... huh?"

As he realized that the face of the corpse, which looked somewhat familiar, was the same as the man who had attacked him in the slums while riding a white humanoid weapon, Akira couldn't help but show his confusion.

"This guy... he's definitely... Zalmo. ...No, I'm sure I killed him? What's going on?"

As Akira was lightly confused, he received a short-distance communication from Nelia.

"Akira. Are you alive?"

"Whoa!? Nelia! You're alive!?"

"You're so cruel. Don't kill me off easily. But he's not in a state to move by himself. If he's alive, could you lend me a hand for a bit?"

"...Got it. I'll come now."

Akira temporarily pushed aside countless questions in his mind and switched his focus. Nevertheless, before going to Nelia, he shot Zalmo's head just in case. The scattered contents showed Akira that the opponent was not a brain-transferred cyborg or anything similar.

He killed him. At least, this one was dead. Repeating this to himself, Akira left the scene.

Neria's machine, divided into two by the time of the crash, had no remaining energy to maintain even the minimum strength of the machine, so it shattered upon impact with the ground.

As Akira looked around at the scattered debris, he was called out to by Neria.

"Akira. Over here."

Turning his gaze towards the voice, Akira saw Neria lying on the ground, having lost most of her body. Only her upper torso remained, connected to her head and right arm. Her left arm was lost from the shoulder.

However, her remaining head wore a relaxed smile, and there was no impression of near-death whatsoever.

Akira picked up Neria by her hair with one hand, prompting her to utter a sentence with an exasperated expression.

"Hey, could you handle me a bit more gently? You're quite rough with women, aren't you? At this rate..."

Ignoring her light complaint, Akira turned to Nelia with a serious expression. "Why did you protect me?"

When Zalmo fired at him, Nelia had intervened and shielded Akira. Thanks to her, Akira survived and didn't die, but Neria's machine suffered significant damage in return.

It didn't seem like something a person who would instinctively shield their ally would do. Besides, Akira wasn't her ally. Despite this, Neria had protected him. Akira found himself deeply puzzled by her actions, and his gaze towards Neria was intense with curiosity.

In stark contrast to Akira's demeanor, Nelia remained casual. "Hmm? It's the unit's policy."

"The unit's policy... Were you here to interfere with me, or were you here to kill me?"

"While it's true that I came to disrupt your progress, I had no intention of fighting you. At least, that was the unit's policy, and I acted accordingly."

Nelia explained lightly, detailing how they ended up at Akira's location. Akira listened to her explanation as they returned to the vehicle. He righted the overturned car, placed Nelia inside, and prepared to move while continuing the conversation.

Nelia's team belonged to Yoshio Shigekazu's unit. They had no interest in Akira and had refused Udagima's request to capture or kill him.

Learning that Nelia had shielded him simply because it was part of the unit's basic principles left Akira bewildered.

"So, you shielded me because that guy went against the unit's orders and acted on his own?"

"That's right."

"...Just for that reason?"

"What are you saying? As a unit, we can't make excuses like, 'We didn't let Akira win,' or anything like that. It's necessary for the unit to demonstrate that we have no intention of engaging in combat with you, right?"

"Well... yeah... I guess..."

Akira found himself smiling wryly at the somewhat stubborn logic coming from Nelia's mouth.

But for now, he switched his focus. The opponent was someone who would engage in combat while talking. There must be some standard that was difficult for him to comprehend. Thinking so, he decided not to dwell on it for now.

"...Well, whatever. So, what are you going to do now, Nelia?"

"You're going back, right? Could you drop me off at the forward base on your way?"

"Do you think I owe you that much?"

Despite not being actively engaged in combat, Nelia was still an enemy to Akira. He spoke coldly, glaring lightly at her.

But Nelia continued to smile without any hint of concern. "It's fine. I protected you on our end, didn't I? And because you seemed like you were going to do something on the ground, I distracted C12's attention for you, didn't I? Isn't that enough?"

"Did you notice I was down there?"

"Well, yeah."

Akira's expression grew stern. His sternness indicated the extent to which he was being defeated verbally. After all, Nelia was also someone who had saved his life.

If Nelia hadn't shielded him from the gunfire, Akira would have died. Without Nelia distracting Zalmo's attention, and without damaging Zalmo's machine, Akira wouldn't have been able to defeat Zalmo.

Moreover, Akira had waited until Nelia was defeated to launch the decoy bike, ensuring that Zalmo would notice and react more significantly. In other words, Akira owed Neria a significant debt of gratitude.

"Fine, I'll take you. But I'll warn you. Just because you're in that state doesn't mean I'll let my guard down."

"Reliable as always. Well then, thank you."

Seeing Neria genuinely smiling, Akira let out a deep sigh.

The bike, which had survived without being destroyed, returned autonomously. Akira loaded as much cargo from the car onto the bike as possible and set off with Nelia.

Episode 182 Giants

While Akira was being attacked by a horde of monsters, Melto, the leader of the black humanoid mecha unit that reached the barricade of the abandoned building, was astonished to notice Tsubaki suddenly appear right next to his own machine.

(When did this happen!? This reaction, it's real!? Despite that, how could our detection system not pick her up until now!?)

The voice of Tsubaki, filled with strong dissatisfaction and hostility, was picked up by Melto's information gathering equipment.

"So, it didn't last 50 years. Honestly, if we had just destroyed outposts like that, things would have been better. What are they thinking...?"

Assessing whether the suddenly appearing unknown entity was an enemy was difficult. Whether to attack hastily or hesitate, there was a risk of suffering damages that would go beyond the destruction of the unit. It was the role of the squad leader to bear the responsibility for such decisions. And with his competence, Melto chose the optimal solution of immediately neutralizing the target.

He swung the huge blade of his chainsaw-type weapon at maximum output. In combat against powerful monsters, despite having firearms and cannons, he chose to engage in close combat, leveraging the power of melee equipment, which made sense given the small size of the female compared to the black wolf mecha.

Melto made the right choice. But it did not save him. His blow was blocked by Tsubaki with her bare hands.

"What!?"

The close combat equipment of the black wolf, even in a state of damage and reduced output due to receiving blasts that blew the surrounding area, had the power to cut through the force field armor of the same series. Naturally, if a pristine machine swung at full output, the power would increase even further.

Tsubaki effortlessly stopped that blow with her bare hands. Not a single scratch could be seen on her hands as she forcibly halted the rotating blade, emitting an eerie sound from the stopped blade's motion.



Furthermore, Tsubaki swung her arm while gripping the blade. The impact tore off both arms of the black wolf mecha from its torso, sending the entire machine flying backward.

The other mecha operators were shocked by the destruction of their leader's unit, but they reacted immediately. While retreating at high speed, they fired their large guns at Tsubaki and followed up with heavy artillery. Their impeccable coordination, with gunfire pinning down the target and powerful shells hitting it simultaneously, resulted in a massive explosion that shook the barricades of the abandoned building, engulfing Tsubaki.

As the smoke slowly cleared in front of the black humanoid mecha unit, who maintained their vigilance with guns at the ready, Tsubaki stood there unscathed.

"No way!?"

At the signal of an astonished voice from one of the unit members, the black mechas resumed their concentrated fire. A barrage of large bullets surged towards Tsubaki once more.

However, not a single bullet reached Tsubaki. The bullets stopped in mid-air as if hitting an invisible thick wall before her. The trailing bullets collided with the halted ones, distorting them significantly upon impact. Yet, they couldn't push the stopped bullets forward. The sheer volume of bullets, fused together by the impacts, formed a metallic wall that covered part of a transparent spherical object. Shells then struck this metallic wall, causing another large explosion that blew away the thickened metal barrier.

Despite this, the result was unchanged. Tsubaki stood there calmly. Tension, tinged with fear, ran through the entire unit.

"This is impossible...! Even after all that, she's unharmed?"

"A super high-output force field shield? But we didn't detect any shock conversion light. Is it some unclassified technology?"

"C1! What do we do? Continue the attack? C1! ...No response! C2! What's the plan?"

"This is C2! I assume command as C1 is combat ineffective! We retreat! C3 and C4, hold her off with me! The rest, take this information back at all costs!"

"Damn it!"

C3 spat out in frustration, charging forward aggressively. C2 and C4 quickly followed, closing in on Tsubaki at high speed. The remaining units immediately began to withdraw.

The three machines charged with holding her off brandished their blades. Despite the entire unit's combined gunfire and artillery being ineffective against Tsubaki, seemingly blocked by what appeared to be a force field barrier, Tsubaki had at least responded by catching Melto's blade with her hand. This meant the attack reached her, albeit blocked.

While it looked like she easily stopped the attack, if she concentrated the force field armor's output into her hand to block it, then attacking her with three machines simultaneously might break through that defense. The operator of C2, who had taken over command, bet on this possibility.

To win this bet, the three units expended their remaining energy all at once, making their force field armor exceptionally strong and enhancing the effectiveness and power of their anti-force field blades. This was something Melt couldn't achieve in his sudden attack on Tsubaki.

Engaging in close-quarter combat within the almost limiting proximity where their large frames wouldn't hinder each other, aiming for a swift battle with a readiness to sacrifice themselves, the three units executed a simultaneous attack from the front and sides. Even if Tsubaki blocked the strikes with both hands, the remaining attack would land—a flawless coordination of blows.

If this failed, there was no other option. All three operators, fully convinced that this was their best shot, launched their decisive strike at Tsubaki.

Yet, even as she saw the massive blades swinging toward her, Tsubaki's expression remained unchanged. Without a hint of fear or surprise, still looking displeased, she executed a spinning kick as if performing a dance.

Her kick did not reach the mechas, given the significant difference in range between her and the large machines wielding blades. But in the next instant, the black machines were shattered by a powerful impact. Though Tsubaki's kick only swept through the air, the shockwave, transmitted through the colorless mist in the atmosphere, easily pulverized the machines protected by their reinforced force field armor. The three operators died instantly, pulverized along with their machines without even comprehending what had happened.

The shockwave from Tsubaki's kick, attenuated by distance, transformed into a gale that reached the retreating units. The final moments of C2 and the others were conveyed to the rest of the unit through data from their sensors and transmissions from the destroyed mechs up to the last moment.

"That fully operational unit was taken down in one hit!? What kind of power is that? What is she? An automaton from the Old World?"

"If that's the case, then she's military grade! Her capabilities are fundamentally different from the security or pet automatons you find in ordinary ruins!"

"Those nationalist, I thought their declaration of nation here was meaningless and they'd be crushed, but... could this be why? Do they have military power strong enough to ensure they won't be defeated?"

"This is C5! I'm assuming command following C2's death! We must retreat at all costs! Don't let C2 and the others' sacrifices be in vain! We have to bring this information back! All units, retreat with everything you've got!"

At that moment, the fastest retreat was their best option. The black units, believing this, fled at full speed.

Tsubaki watched the retreating units with a dissatisfied expression.

"This isn't enough. It doesn't justify me leaving the management sector. ...Well, it's just the beginning. For now, I'll put my hopes in his efforts."

Behind Tsubaki, large flying security drones began emerging in large numbers from the Old-World city surrounded by the barricades of the abandoned building.

"I suppose I should at least put on a show."

The swarm of flying security drones sped across the ruins' sky, chasing after the retreating black units.



Akira rode his bike through the innermost section of the Kuzusuhara Street ruins, hurrying despite trying to keep his anxiety in check. He needed to escape the range of the communication interference that had cut off his connection with Alpha. Nelia, who had joined him on the way to the frontline base, was packed into a large backpack with ammunition and other supplies, poking her head out to chat lightly.

"Hey, I wanted to ask, why are those nationalists targeting you, Akira?"

"What do you mean, 'why'? Because I came to kill them, right?"

"That's not what I mean."

Seeing Akira's puzzled expression, Nelia elaborated. Before they were attacked by the people, they assumed were nationalists, they had also been attacked by a large horde of monsters. Both groups had the primary objective of killing Akira. Although they were attacked as well, it was only because they had interfered with the attempt to kill Akira. Despite the presence of two black humanoid mechs nearby, the attackers had ignored them until they started assisting Akira. That was why C12 could leisurely bombard them—because at that time, they were not helping Akira and thus were not targeted by the attackers.

The peculiar behavior of focusing solely on Akira suggested that the monster horde was under the control of the nationalists. This also explained why the nationalists in the broadcast video weren't attacked by the monsters. The reason they were assaulted by such a large number of monsters was not a coincidence, but a deliberate act orchestrated by the nationalists.

However, while this made sense as a tactical maneuver, it didn't explain why Akira was specifically targeted. Normally, the priority would be to neutralize the two humanoid mechs, which posed a greater threat. The fact that they prioritized Akira indicated that the nationalists had a specific reason for doing so. Nelia wanted to know that reason.

Akira responded with a stern expression. "Why they're after me? Who knows. Maybe I unknowingly made an enemy."

"Doesn't seem like you're completely clueless."

"...I saw a familiar face in that video. Someone who's attacked me several times."

"Wow. So, this person has come after you multiple times and survived each encounter. Impressive. Who is it?"

Nelia showed interest, but Akira clicked his tongue and refused to answer.

"More importantly, I have a question for you. The pilot of the mech that attacked me, what's his name?"

"Why do you want to know? Collecting the names of people you've killed?"

"Doesn't matter why. I'm carrying you, so answer."

"His name was Zalmo, I think. I don't know his full name."

"...I see."

If it was just the face, it could be a coincidence. But with the same name, Akira felt a sense of unease.

Noticing Akira's reaction, Nelia smiled with interest. "Akira, I thought C12 was targeting you just because he got paid by those nationalists, but it seems like there's more to it than that, isn't there?"

"...Who knows!"

Akira responded in a slightly harsher tone, cutting off the conversation. Even if it meant the dead had come back to life, he had already killed them. He told himself this and decided to stop worrying about it for now.



Around the time a massive communication disruption occurred in the Kuzusuhara Street ruins, Yatsubayashi was treating a group of peculiar boys in a room within an abandoned building near the boundary between the first and second inner sections of the ruins.

Despite their appearance being normal, these boys were fundamentally different.

"Next."

The boy lying on the bed got up without a word or expression and moved aside. Another expressionless boy took his place, and Yatsubayashi began treating him.

"Next."

The process continued until one of the boys sitting nearby displayed a troubled and astonished expression.

"What is that guy...?"

"Tiol-kun, something happened?"

"...It's a complete wipeout. The monsters I sent to attack him, the entire unit, they were all defeated."

"All of them? That's impressive."

Yatsubayashi's light tone of admiration irritated Tior, who responded with a scowl.

"You talk like it's someone else's problem."

"Well, it actually is. Even though I'm cooperating with you, it's as a doctor to a patient, a researcher to a subject, a business partner providing technical support. I'm not obliged to share your victories and defeats."

"Yeah, whatever."

Tiol spat out his response.

"Fine. You just keep your end of the bargain and help me return to my original body. That's our deal."

"Of course. Your body is a treasure trove of valuable data. I will do my utmost."

Tiol's body was indeed an extraordinary amalgamation of advanced technology. Like a voracious crocodile, he could consume and assimilate biological and mechanical materials alike, undergoing transformations and enhancements. He could even create new entities and manipulate the ruins' security systems to control monsters.

Combining Yatsubayashi's advanced techniques, the power of monsters consumed, and modifications by Tsubaki using old-world technology, Tiol had become a unique entity. When Yatsubayashi saw Tiol in a video broadcast by the nationalists, he ventured into the first inner section of the ruins to find him. After negotiating, Yatsubayashi agreed to assist in exchange for studying Tiol's body.

"But are you sure about this? If you return to normal, you'll become just another person who can be killed by a single bullet. The old-world wisdom embedded in your body will be lost. It seems like such a waste."

Tiol's expression turned complex, and he glared at Yatsubayashi with a hint of resentment in his voice.

"...You wouldn't understand how I feel."

Yatsubayashi, unfazed, smiled lightly.

"Indeed, I don't understand. That's why I want you to provide data on that psychological aspect as well. There are many things with excellent performance that aren't widely adopted due to psychological barriers. Like my healing potion—despite its efficacy, people inexplicably avoid using it..."

"That stuff's no good. It's green and glows."

"But it looks cool!"

Yatsubayashi's tone shifted to a slightly stronger one, and Tior chuckled lightly before his expression became sharp and serious.

"...They've arrived!"

Yatsubayashi glanced around the room, seeing no one, but understood.

"Ah, the city's defense force has arrived. That's quicker than I expected. I thought they'd send in hunters for a reconnaissance in force before moving in seriously..."

"How should I know? Later."

With that, Tior disconnected, his expression turning as blank as the other boys'.

"Good luck, Tiol-kun. Do your best," Yatsubayashi said with a light laugh and continued his work.



A large-scale force dispatched from the forward base arrived at the first inner section. This force, composed not only of humanoid weapons but also tanks and infantry, was effectively initiating an invasion of the first inner section.

First, they systematically secured the sectors adjacent to the rear communication lines. Humanoid weapons and tanks managed the outdoors, while infantry units handled the interiors, steadily expanding the controlled area. Simultaneously, multi-legged relay machines were deployed to restore widespread communication. Although long-range communication remained disrupted, short-range communication was still possible. By overlapping the short communication ranges of the relays, they could achieve wide-area communication, extending it beyond the disruption zone to connect back to the forward base via long-range communication.

Numerous multi-legged machines moved through the ruins, automatically expanding their communication range by overcoming piles of rubble. They also conducted surrounding reconnaissance and relayed this information to the units. Humanoid weapons, tanks, and infantry all utilized this information to progress their suppression efforts smoothly.

As the unit advancing towards the second inner section detected a massive signal ahead, they reacted.

"It's huge. And its shape—humanoid?"

"Even if it's a large humanoid weapon, it can't be the hunters who went in first. There's no report of such equipment passing through the rear communication lines."

"Whether it's a nationalist humanoid weapon or a giant humanoid monster, it's an enemy. Take your positions!"

The outdoor area was under the control of humanoid weapons and tanks. Infantry retreated, assuming defensive positions. A white unit aimed its gun down the main street leading to the second inner section from the shadow of a ruined building, while tanks increased their force field armor output and aligned their turrets.

A giant figure appeared in the main street of the ruins, where a denser fog floated the deeper one went. It was a giant humanoid, about 40 meters tall, clad in thick armored suits and wielding a ridiculously large machine gun.

A fierce firefight ensued. Although lacking the flexibility of humanoid weapons, the tanks, specializing in artillery battles, maintained a distinct advantage, continuing their bombardment. Conversely, the white unit utilized the flexibility of humanoid weapons, reflecting long years of accumulated combat experience in its swift maneuvers, repeatedly firing its gun.

Despite being a large target vulnerable to direct hits due to its enormous size, the giant did not fall. Its incredible durability compensated for its vulnerability, allowing it to withstand the enemy's relentless assault and retaliate with its massive machine gun.

Even a regular-sized machine gun can inflict widespread destruction, and when scaled up to the giant's size, the devastation was catastrophic. The massive bullets not only collapsed but pulverized buildings, rewriting the terrain to neutralize the opponent's tactical advantages. Tanks were destroyed, and the white unit was buried under falling debris, both succumbing to further impacts that obliterated surrounding structures.

However, the defense forces were not easily vanquished. The forward base had amassed a high-quality force in preparation for an assault on the second inner section and had further reinforced it against the nationalists. The deployed units, highly trained and capable, resisted the giant's barrage and adapted to the shifting terrain, counterattacking precisely.

Amidst this intense battle, the giant's weakness of being unable to avoid attacks sealed its defeat. Although its biological resilience allowed it to withstand severe damage, its machine gun couldn't endure the punishment and was eventually destroyed. Without its primary weapon, the giant was bombarded relentlessly, unable to respond effectively in close combat due to its lack of asymmetrical warfare capabilities.

Powerful artillery stripped away the giant's armor, exposing its flesh, which was then riddled with bullets. The onslaught of bullets and shells battered the giant until it finally collapsed, lying in a pool of its own green blood. The defense forces cheered, but quickly shifted back to assessing the situation.

"Casualties?"

"Thirty percent."

"...Halt the advance! Request support from other units! Begin rescue operations for the wounded!"

"Understood."

As operations progressed efficiently, those on lookout turned their stern gazes towards the fallen giant.

"This thing, we thought it was a large humanoid weapon, but it's biological."

"Yeah. What looks like a suit of armor is actually an exoskeleton. Did it generate the gun itself? Like a weapon dog?"

"No idea. But if it's a monster, there was nothing like this in the first inner section. So, it must have come from the second inner section..."

"...That's bad. We can't deal with nationalists and monsters from the second inner section at the same time."

"The worst part would be if this was part of the nationalist's arsenal. If they've managed to control the monsters from the second inner section..."

Faces grew even more severe, but the situation escalated further.

"Multiple signals from the second inner section! This... Is it a swarm of the same kind!?"

Countless giant humanoid signals appeared, shifting the defense forces' focus to immediate combat.

"Retreat while engaging! Request massive reinforcements from the forward base! If we're out of communication range, send someone back to relay the message!"

The situation had surpassed a contest of achievements with the hunters and was now threatening urban defense. The defense forces shared this recognition, bracing themselves for the new and dire challenge ahead.



Akira speeds toward the rear communication line on his bike, but his pace is significantly slower than when he had Alpha's support. This isn't just due to the difference in driving skills; if he goes too fast, Akira won't be able to handle any encounters that come his way.

Since Akira is driving himself, he has to focus on that as well. Fighting while riding a bike is far more difficult compared to when Alpha is finely controlling the bike in sync with his movements. He had to suppress his eagerness and reduce his speed.

In this situation, Nelia makes a casual suggestion.

"Akira, should I take over driving?"

"Why?"

"It would reduce your burden, right? Besides, I'm just sitting here doing nothing."

"How do you plan to drive with that body?"

"I can remotely control it. Just give me the control."

Akira hesitates. If he could completely trust her, it would undoubtedly be a helpful offer.

But he couldn't.

"No."

"Is that so? Well, I won't force you."

Nelia answered with a smile, seemingly unbothered, which only fueled Akira's self-loathing.

Back when Akira was surviving in the slums, it was doubt, suspicion, and mistrust that kept him alive. He had to doubt the intentions of those in front of him, anticipate ambushes around corners, and question the safety of supposed safe zones, or he would have been killed. He wouldn't have survived otherwise.

Gaining Alpha's support provided an external source of strength and a sense of security. With time and various experiences, Akira's tendency to assume others were enemies had considerably weakened.

However, that ingrained mindset hadn't completely disappeared. Especially now, disconnected from Alpha, a surge of anxiety was urging Akira to be suspicious again.

Akira understood. Even if he let Nelia drive, she probably wouldn't throw him off the bike and escape alone. Letting her drive would allow him to focus on scouting and shooting, making things easier. He knew it would be better to let her drive.

Still, he couldn't do it. Even knowing it was probably just unnecessary worry, he couldn't shake his doubts and fears.

Was he just getting cocky because he had the safety of Alpha's protection? Akira thought bitterly to himself.

Akira continued through the ruins, and when he was almost at the rear communication line, he stopped the bike. In front of him was a scene that made him hesitate, even in a situation where he needed to get out of the ruins as quickly as possible to restore his connection with Alpha.

Dozens of armed giants were engaged in a fierce battle with the city's defense forces. White machines from the ground, black machines from the air, and vehicles from a distance were all shooting, shelling, and launching missiles. The giants, while taking hits, were counterattacking similarly.

The aftermath of the battle caused numerous buildings to collapse into piles of rubble, which were then blown away and flattened. The city ruins were losing their appearance as a city.

Seeing this, Akira was half-dumbstruck. The sight before him was beyond his expectations. He hadn't thought the battle with the Nationalist would be this intense.

"Those big guys... they're probably from the Nationalist, right?"

Unlike Akira, Nelia seemed only slightly surprised, even wearing a relaxed smile.

"Looks like it. I always thought declaring a nation near the city would just get them crushed by the defense forces, but it seems they have the strength to back it up."

Akira took another look at the giants. Besides the dozens on the front lines, he could see numerous large figures in the direction of the second inner area.

"Isn't that 50 billion Aurum bounty a scam?"

"The 50 billion Aurum was set when their strength was unknown. If they're unbeatable, they'll just raise the bounty later. That's how bounties work, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so... Huh?"

Then Akira noticed the giants' movements.

"Hey... aren't some of them coming this way?"

"Seems like it."

"Why this way..."

Akira's face twisted in confusion as he hurried. At that moment, the bike's detection system picked up a high-speed approach from behind. He turned to look.

There were black machines flying in the sky—the remnants of Yoshioka Heavy Industries' unit that had retreated from Tsubaki's control area. Despite losing numbers in battles with flying security drones, they had finally made it this far.

"They're reacting to that!"

"Akira, if we stay here, we'll be caught in the middle."

"I know!"

Caught between the giants and the black machines would be fatal. With that in mind, Akira sped up the bike to get out of their line of fire as quickly as possible.

There wasn't time to think about which direction to escape. In an instant decision, Akira drove the bike deeper into the ruins.

The exit to the rear communication line was effectively blocked by the large-scale battle. If Akira tried to force his way through, he'd be killed by the battle's aftermath.

There were other routes. He could head out of the ruins without using the rear communication line, but that would mean traversing bad roads that had long resisted hunters' incursions.

Previously, when he went to Tsubaki's control area, Alpha's extraordinary driving skills had gotten him through those bad roads. But now, disconnected from Alpha, it was difficult to navigate them on his own. The memory of that tough journey unconsciously pushed Akira in the opposite direction.

(Damn it! I was trying to get out of the ruins to restore my connection with Alpha...)

Cursing inwardly, Akira accelerated the bike. It was too late to turn back now. He had to prioritize escaping the area. With that in mind, he tried to get away from the battle between the giants and the black machines.

But at that moment, a giant's bullet hit the ground nearby. The impact blew up the pavement, sending Akira flying with the bike. Somehow, he managed to land without crashing.

"A stray bullet? Damn it! Aim better!"

If the giant were aiming accurately at the black machines in the air, the bullets wouldn't be hitting anywhere near him on the ground. Thinking this, Akira scowled and cursed the giant's shooting skills.

Meanwhile, Nelia's face also tensed up for a different reason.

"Akira, I won't ask for control of the bike, but can you at least share the scouting information? There's something I want to check."

"Huh? Yeah, I can do that... Alright, it's set... Whoa! Again!"

The impact of another near hit threw the bike off balance. Akira quickly regained control, but giant bullets kept flying, opening huge holes in the surrounding ruins and roads, making Akira struggle to keep up.

"They're shooting too randomly! What the hell are they aiming at!"

Akira spat out angrily, but Nelia then said something unexpected.

"They're aiming at you, Akira."

"...What?"

"They're not aiming at the humanoid weapons over there. They're targeting you. I checked the scouting information to confirm."

A stunned Akira double-checked the scouting information himself. Sure enough, based on the angles of the guns the giants were holding, it was reasonable to conclude they were targeting him on the ground, not the black machines in the air.

"Why!?"

"That's what I want to know. Akira, what did you do to be targeted like this? They're fighting a large force of defense units, yet they're still diverting some of their firepower to aim at you. That's not normal."

"How should I know!"

At that moment, the scouting device detected something rapidly approaching from the giants' direction. Missiles fired from the giants' missile pods were streaking through the air toward Akira.

Akira's face tightened. Judging by the large-scale battle near the rear communication line, he could easily imagine the missiles' impact radius.

Even if he maximized the output of the force field armor on his bike and reinforced suit, it probably wouldn't be enough to withstand the blast. Akira decided to intercept the missiles with a barrage of small missiles from the LEO composite gun mounted on the bike's arm.

With Alpha's support, he could have intercepted them perfectly, but now he couldn't. Praying they would hit, he fired off a large quantity of expensive small missiles, nearly emptying the extended magazine.

But his prayers were in vain. Even though the small missiles had lower power than the charged bullets and his accuracy was worse without Alpha's support, many of them hit the incoming missiles. Yet the giants' missiles, protected by their force field armor, approached without exploding.

Meanwhile, the giants' gunfire continued. Desperately avoiding the shots, Akira had no time to use his other gun to intercept the missiles.

"Damn it!"

The missile targeted Akira from above, initially rising and then sharply diving down. In a world where time seemed to slow, Akira couldn't help but watch the missile rise into the sky.

In the next moment, the missile exploded. The black machine unit, mistakenly thinking the missile was aimed at them, had intercepted it.

The shockwave, powerful enough to devastate the area, spread out from the explosion. The surrounding ruins were blown apart, scattering debris everywhere, and Akira was caught up in the blast and sent flying.

Episode 183 Escape from Adversity

After battling Akira in the Iida Commercial District Ruins, Tiol suffered severe physical and mental strain due to the excessive mutation. While he managed to survive, the toll of not dying was immense.

Originally, the system semi-casual integration into Tiol by Yatsubayashi's treatment was meant to autonomously perform self-sustainability and self-defense functions without consciousness. Previously, once Tiol's body was sufficiently repaired, his consciousness would return.

However, the system was later modified and reconfigured by Tsubaki's intervention. The upgraded system could deeply infiltrate Tiol's mind, even allowing him to act according to Tsubaki's intentions without feeling any discomfort. Additionally, due to the blurring of boundaries between the system and Tiol's personality, Tiol could also interfere with the system.

The fierce battle with Akira in that state pushed Tiol to the brink, accelerating his transformation. He could now manifest drastic physical changes like those of a greedy crocodile, even performing tasks beyond Tsubaki's authority.

However, as the mental fusion with the system progressed, the system's consciousness became stronger, while Tiol's own consciousness weakened and faded. Even after recovering from his injuries, Tior's consciousness did not fully return, and he remained in a severely foggy mental state, not even remembering his own name.

From then on, Tiol obediently followed Olivia's instructions, hired by Tsubaki. With his monstrous left arm, he devoured monsters and created deformed children. He didn't know why he was doing it, nor could he even question it. In his greatly diminished self-awareness, he continued his days like a moving corpse.

It wasn't until he met Sheryl again and was called by his name on that day.



The deformed boys are remote-controlled terminals generated by Tiol. Tiol, who became a pseudo-old-world connector by incorporating old-world information terminals, remotely controls them.

Strictly speaking, the system operates through Tiol, and Tiol himself merely shares senses such as vision and hearing with the terminal. However, he is not conscious. With a very vague mind, he simply gazes at the images and listens to the sounds sent from the terminal. Therefore, even if Sheryl's figure is displayed in the images sent from the terminal, Tiol cannot notice it.

That said, Sheryl's figure provides a faint stimulus to Tior's consciousness buried deep within the system. It's not enough to awaken him, but unconsciously, he tries to focus on Sheryl. He tries to intervene in the control of the deformed boys by the system, attempting to dull their movements to catch a glimpse of Sheryl.

And then the opportunity arises.

"Tiol"

Being called by his own name by someone important brings Tiol's name to mind with a powerful impact. His mind, buried in the depths of the system, recognized itself, quickly resurfacing. In the growing clarity of consciousness, Tior sees Sheryl. And with that sight, he falls in love with Sheryl once again.

Overwhelmed by emotions to the point of forgetting everything else, Tiol awakens fully. The consciousness, which had been merely a subordinate of the system, reclaims its position as the master. The mind, previously no more than parts of the system, regains Tiol's personality.

In that instant, Tiol collapses in the room where he was operating the remote terminal. Though he falls as if thrown to the ground, he feels no pain from the impact. However, his expression shows unbearable agony.

The cause of the agony is the vast amount of information streaming from the terminal. Even the visual information alone is overwhelming, not to mention the auditory and tactile sensations, along with sensory inputs humans don't naturally possess.

While such information might be manageable for the consciousness as a system, for Tiol, who has regained his human consciousness, it's overwhelming. Tiol struggles against the bizarre influx of information.

"...Sheryl!"

He calls out the name of his beloved, conjuring her image in his mind. With his feelings for Sheryl as his support, Tiol regains his consciousness. While conscious, he tries to interfere with the system, attempting to modify and limit the input information for himself.

He succeeds. With the cause of his agony gone, the look of torment fades from Tior's face. What remains on his face, however, is hatred.

Tiol quickly rises to his feet, directing his anger at Olivia, who is nearby. He fires his left arm at the woman who had treated him like a pawn, without hesitation. The explosion at close range blows Tior away, filling the room with flames and smoke.

Though thrown against the wall, Tior manages to land somehow, laughing as he gazes through the drifting smoke.

"...Gotcha! Take that!"

The smoke obscures the opponent's figure, but the shells undoubtedly hit their mark. Surely, they've been reduced to pieces. Tiol thinks so as he laughs. But as the smoke clears, his smile stiffens.

Olivia stands there unscathed. There's not a scratch on her maid outfit, not even a speck of dust. Olivia's gaze meets Tior's. Tiol instinctively recoils, his expression briefly showing fear before quickly turning to anger.

"Oh, I see."

There's no hostility in Olivia's eyes. She doesn't even consider him an enemy, despite his attacking with intent to kill. Facing Olivia's unchanged gaze, which treated him like a puppet just as when he lost himself, Tior's fear of the threat transforms into overwhelming anger.

Tiol calls all the remote terminals in the building using the system. The deformed boys rush into the room one after another, forming a large unit and aiming their weapons at Olivia.

"How about this! I'll blow you—"

『Don't move』

The voice directly resonates in Tiol's head, and simultaneously, the deformed boys freeze. Tiol, with a face resembling a mask, is also unable to move.

And right across from Tiol, right beside it, Tsubaki appears. Though it's not a tangible or a real image but an augmented view, to Tiol, it seemed nothing but real, including the palpable coldness in her expression.

『It's quite something to regain oneself from that state, but to revert immediately after regaining oneself. Olivia. Is it still possible to proceed with the request in this state?』

"The continuation of the request itself is possible. However, considering the question including whether the desired outcome for Tsubaki-sama can be achieved through the continuation, judging from the individual's situation, it seems difficult at the moment."

『If the induction target is attacked every time, there is also a limit to it. Understood.』

Tsubaki reaches out her hand to Tiol's forehead and inserts her fingertip into his mind. Since this is in the extended field of vision, Tsubaki's finger is not physically piercing Thiol's head, and Tiol doesn't feel any physical pain. It's disturbing. But in terms of suffering, Tiol was experiencing a hell beyond being merely tortured.



Tiol, recognized as oneself, called by a beloved person,
The entity is being rewritten from the outside. Self-alteration and disappearance.
Tiol keenly felt this because of partial sharing of consciousness and the system.

『Becoming completely terminal would be considered entirely by my will, drastically reducing room for interpretation, which is undesirable. But if unnecessary will interferes unnecessarily, there's no choice. I'll erase it?』

Tiol desperately resists Tsubaki's interference.
(Disappear... I can't bear it...!)

His fading self-awareness with feelings for Sheryl to maintain himself. Trying to excessively inject will into the body that lost control to move it unreasonably. His desperate resistance even surprises Tsubaki.

A strong expression of will and emotion appears on Tiol's face, which had seemed passive. His body slowly begins to move, trying to remove Tsubaki's finger from his head. It's futile for both. Even if he could move a little, he couldn't fight or escape. But originally, he shouldn't have been able to do even that according to the system. Tsubaki admired Tiol for overturning that, for defying the system with the power of will.

『You move even in this state? Impressive. ...It would be a shame to erase you. Move, then』

Tiol, now free, reflexively retreats from the scene. Facing Tsubaki and others, he repeatedly breathes heavily with a very tense expression.

Meanwhile, Tsubaki relaxes her expression towards Tiol. Her cold gaze, comparable to that towards criminals worse than trash, changes to a relatively friendly one towards someone she acknowledges to some extent.

"Tiol, right? Shall we make a deal?"

Tiol, bewildered by Tsubaki's sudden friendliness, easily understands that his life depends on this moment. He answers tensely.

"...A deal? What for?"

"I'll give you a job. If it goes well, you can do as you please afterward. I'll overlook various criminal activities you've committed to some extent with my authority. How about it?"

He's being greatly conceded by the other party. At least, that's what he realizes. That realization triggers Thiol's fury.

Being turned into something incomprehensible and made to do unbearable things. Just when he thought he regained himself, he was almost erased for being an obstacle. The other party who did such things to him now proposes a deal not through coercion but concession.

How much must they scorn him to dare such a thing? With that anger, But even that rage dissipates as soon as Tsubaki returns to her original attitude.

"What if I refuse?"

"Well, I won't force you."

With a cold gaze, Tsubaki says only that, then in an instant, stands before Tiol again, skipping the movement process, and extends her hand to his forehead once more. If he doesn't agree to the deal, Tsubaki had no reason to leave Tiol's consciousness intact. Self-alteration and disappearance. Tiol couldn't resist the fear he once tasted. He answers loudly to mask his trembling.

"...Got it! I'll do it! What do you want me to do? Shit!"

The rough tone is Thiol's unconscious maximum resistance. It might even upset the other party depending on the situation. But Tsubaki doesn't demand courtesy and decency from Thiol. She laughs and forgives his rudeness.

With Tsubaki's attitude somewhat returning to friendliness, Tiol regains his composure.
"...So, what should I do?"

"Yes. You have..."

Tsubaki explains the job details. Thiol's face shows confusion when he hears it.

"Why would you do something like that?"

"No need to answer. Just do it. I'll leave the specifics to you."

"Fine... I got it. If it goes well, keep your promise."

"Of course. I'll keep my promise. Then..."

With that, Tsubaki leaves. Tiol exhales a sigh of relief involuntarily. But as if to blow away that relief, Tsubaki appears once again.

"Let me warn you. I dislike those who break promises. Just as you make me keep mine, don't make me exert myself."

With a cold tone, she warns, then disappears again. After that, Tiol stood frozen in place, trembling, until he came to his senses.



The task Tiol was asked by Tsubaki to lure out and defeat the city's military force in the first deeper part. The objective was to draw in as large military force as possible, intending to fight with the intention of winning even if the enemy is too strong. Tiol was instructed not to resort to tactics that would restrain the enemy's scale for the sake of victory. There were also other detailed conditions attached.

Tiol didn't understand the significance of these conditions. However, to be liberated from Tsubaki, he had to comply. He pondered what to do. First, he considered instances where the city had deployed large military forces. He recalled when a horde of monsters erupted from the Kuzusuhara City Ruins and attacked the city. He also remembered reports stating that the assault was orchestrated by nationalists.

If the nationalists were to orchestrate something similar again, the city would likely deploy a large military force in response. Thus, if the nationalists were to occupy nearby ruins, the city would move to annihilate them, even dispatching defense forces if necessary. This way, Tiol could lure out a large military force from the city.

Thinking so, Tiol decided to somehow masquerade as nationalists. He asked Olivia to create the video declaring the founding. Although Olivia wouldn't fight alongside him, she agreed to assist with other tasks as usual.

The fake Alfort squad in the video was a remote-controlled terminal created by Tiol. The monsters were individuals created by Tiol and individuals controlled by a system modified by Tsubaki.

The choice to claim the name of the Alfort squad was simply because it was one of the names of the nationalists Tiol knew. Later, someone claiming to be the real Alfort squad contacted them, but Olivia handled the response.

Tiol was satisfied with the resulting video. However, he felt unnatural not mentioning the name of the nation despite declaring its founding. But as Tsubaki had forbidden it, there was nothing Tiol could do.

Tiol broadcasted the video on long range communication, and soon, Yatsubayashi arrived. Tiol lightly explained the situation and asked for cooperation, expecting some resistance. However, to his surprise, Yatsubayashi readily agreed to cooperate.

Originally, Tiol intended to threaten cooperation by leveraging their relationship, implying that if Yatsubayashi didn't want it known that they had provided technology to avoid body modification and monster enemy recognition, they should cooperate. However, Yatsubayashi's enthusiastic offer of cooperation made this unnecessary.

Tiol then explained the situation further, causing Yatsubayashi to become so excited that Tiol could hardly keep up. In exchange for analyzing their body and other conditions,

Yatsubayashi promised comprehensive cooperation, including enhancing military strength and, if desired, restoring their original body.

With a powerful ally obtained, Tiol began to strengthen his military force in preparation for combat with the Kugamayama City Defense Force. To win freedom. To return to a human body. And to fulfill his desires.



In the midst of a battle with a large unit of the city's defense force, giants were engaged. Tiol fought as one of them.

These giants were created by Tiol. With Tiol regaining consciousness while fused with the system, the degree of freedom in remote control terminal manufacturing increased. Additionally, with technical support from Yatsubayashi, it became possible to create large terminals like giants.

Using the powerful monster corpse from the second inner area, a large amount of waste provided by Tsubaki, and high-performance relics as materials. This enabled the creation of giants capable of fighting the city's defense force. Moreover, in the process, Tiol also transformed their own body into a giant.

In a world scaled down, amidst ruins lined with buildings that felt like models, gunfire was directed at humanoid weapons of toy-like size. The models blew away, the toys broke. While the miniatures retaliated, their attacks couldn't penetrate the specially reinforced armor. They calmly fired back despite being hit.

The opponents were the city's defense force, once feared even when Tiol was just a hunter. Now, they were unilaterally attacking such formidable opponents. Tiol's exhilaration soared.

『Amazing! It's amazing! It would be a waste for Yatsubayashi to revert this body back!』

The giant body lacked vocal functions, but since it was processed as telepathy, Tiol could express themselves loudly. With the strength of their transformed self, Tiol shouted in delight.

That feeling of omnipotence stimulated Tiol's desires.

『...With this power, I wonder if I could kill Akira?』 Tiol wanted to kill Akira.

They had already completely turned Akira into an enemy. Even if this incident succeeded and they returned to their original body, if they encountered Akira later, they would be killed. So, while they were this strong, they wanted to kill Akira. Tiol had such a motive. But that desire to kill, fueled by ambition and fear, was weak. If it was just for that reason, they could simply change their face and name and run away far enough that Akira wouldn't find them.

『If I can just kill that guy...』

Tiol's true reason for wanting to kill Akira was Sheryl. Even if it meant killing Akira, Tiol wanted to obtain Sheryl. Tiol's first love for Sheryl, although impactful, was ultimately just that, a first love. But the second time was different. The second time was a love deeply rooted in Tiol's psyche.

It was the catalyst for regaining their ego buried in the system. It was the foundation supporting their unstable mind partially fused with the system. It was resistance against Tsubaki's attempt to erase them. Tiol's feelings for Sheryl became the factors defining Tiol as they were now.

Even if they lost themselves, as long as Sheryl was by his side, as long as Sheryl called his name, they could surely regain themselves. With such strong feelings, Tiol strongly desired Sheryl.

And for that, Akira was in the way.

"If only that person wasn't there..."

With Yatsubayashi's comprehensive cooperation, they should become much stronger than before, even after returning to a human body. So, if Akira wasn't there, they could become Sheryl's protector with that strength and obtain Sheryl's support.

They could change their face known as a founding idealist. The current face of theirs could be replaced with a dummy's corpse, and they could pretend to have died. They could claim it was a coincidence their names were the same. Surely, things would work out somehow.

Captivated by such wild thoughts, discarding them as impossible would be too regrettable an action for the promising future. How wonderful it would be if things turned out that way.

Even so, they came back to their senses once. They found Akira who had arrived at the first inner area and attempted to kill them by deploying a large group of monsters and a remote-control terminal unit. However, Akira, despite having support from humanoid weapons, turned the tables on them. At that moment, Tiol judged that killing Akira was impossible.

However, the omnipotence of the giants overturned that judgment. With this, they could kill Akira. They could kill them this time. If they did, they could reach Sheryl. Tiol thought and wished for it.

Even so, they couldn't just go to kill Akira. First of all, they didn't know where Akira was. The remote-control terminal unit, which doubled as a reconnaissance unit covering the entire ruins, was wiped out in the battle with Akira. There was no time to search for someone whose whereabouts, life, and death were unknown in such a vast ruins.

Even before that, killing Akira was just something they were asked to do by Tsubaki as part of a job. Now that they had successfully lured out the city's massive military force as planned, that side took priority. They couldn't just throw that away to go look for Akira.

If Akira were here, they could kill them as a bonus. Tiol felt disappointed but switched their focus to the battle with the city's defense force.

At that moment, Akira, who had been aiming for the rear communication lines within the reconnaissance range, appeared. Furthermore, a troop of humanoid weapons emerged from

the same direction.

『...It's Akira! Did they come to support these guys? No, it doesn't matter! A perfect opportunity has come to us! Can we let them escape?』

Just repel the reinforcements. It wasn't like he abandoned the task entrusted to them by Tsubaki, which was to defeat the city's military force. Tiol reasoned so and seized the opportunity that presented itself.



Tiol's missiles were intercepted by the black aircraft, enraging him.

『Don't get in the way!』

He fired a massive gun alongside the giant figures he accompanied. The gigantic bullets pierced through the air, charging towards the black aircraft.

But they dodged. Despite losing to Tsubaki and retreating, this humanoid weapon unit was prepared by Yoshio for the assault on the nationalists' stronghold. Evading to this extent was easy.

Furthermore, the black aircraft dispatched several units for communication and surrounded the giants, attacking them. Moving irregularly and swiftly, they accurately targeted the giants with bullets and shells, hitting the sluggish targets compared to themselves.

Losing to Tsubaki was just bad luck with the stone. The black aircraft demonstrated this with remarkable movements, showering Tiol and his team with intense gunfire. Yet Tiol's team wouldn't fall so easily. Enduring the onslaught of the city's defense forces with their armor, they retaliated by firing large and powerful bullets, seemingly unaffected by the barrage.

In the aftermath of the intense battle, buildings collapsed one after another, rubble crushed and flattened. The swirling dust was blown away by the blast wind, only to be replaced by more dust and debris from the subsequent collapses and bombardments. The intense sounds, lights, smoke, and impacts of the fierce battle, along with the movements of flying rubble and attacks from the black aircraft, greatly disrupted the giants' detection abilities. Tiol lost sight of Akira.

『Damn it! Where did he go!』

He couldn't afford to miss this perfect opportunity to kill Akira. Tiol searched desperately for Akira while physically venting his anger on the obstructive entities around him.



When the missiles were intercepted by the black aircraft, Akira, despite being blown away by the explosion, was still alive. He managed to avoid a direct hit, and the surrounding ruined buildings acted as a shield, weakening the impact. The force field armor and the enhanced strength of his armored suit, boosted beyond safety standards for the third time, had helped save Akira's life. However, he was thrown from his bike. Akira, blown away quite a distance, crashed through the wall of a ruined building and tumbled onto the floor inside.

He had previously taken a large amount of recovery potion, pushing the limits of his stomach's capacity, which immediately began healing his body. Skipping the agonizing process of recovery, Akira quickly got up.

"Damn it! The bike!"

Being separated from the bike meant more than just a loss of mobility. Most of the ammunition and supplies salvaged from the wrecked vehicle were stored on the bike. Although Akira had managed to carry some on his person, it was significantly less compared to what was on the bike. He quickly established short-range communication with the bike to confirm its location. Thanks to the bike's force field armor, it hadn't been destroyed, and Akira found it lying overturned a short distance away from the building.

"Over there!"

Akira immediately headed towards the bike's location, but then the building he was in started to collapse. Panicking to avoid being buried under the collapsing structure, Akira hurried to escape. Due to this, he neglected to check the situation outside.

Emerging from the collapsing building and landing atop a toppled ruin, Akira felt a slight relief, thinking he had narrowly escaped danger. However, that relief was short-lived as he glanced up and saw Tior, who had turned into a giant, right in front of him. And Tior noticed Akira.



『There he is!』

That voice didn't reach Akira. However, the mixture of joy and murderous intent was more than enough. Akira reflexively leaps.

In an instant, countless bullets are fired into the area. Objects too large to be called bullets. collide at high speed everywhere. Piercing through the already collapsing building, reaching the ground, the impact of the landing spreads around, blowing away surrounding objects as if they had exploded.

As Akira, who managed to escape the gunfire, rises up, amidst the extreme manipulation of subjective time, he sees Tiol in the midst of debris-filled air.

The giant moves with swift motions uncharacteristic of its massive size, but in Akira's subjective reality, its movements are painfully slow, desperately trying to realign its aim towards its desired target. As the colossal muzzle slowly aligns, Akira's fear also intensifies and swells.

It's difficult to abruptly change direction mid-air. Utilizing high-performance reinforced suits, Force Field Armor, one can kick off the generated force field armor footholds in the air to change direction irrationally. However, this relies on Alpha's support. Even if done independently, the movements lack precision, and Akira cannot mimic advanced maneuvers enough to evade gunfire.

Next, evasion is impossible. Akira unconsciously admits that. Desperately seeking help.

『Alpha!』

Even when he lost Alpha's support in the factory sector of Mihazono Street Ruins before, Alpha helped him in the end. So, this time too. Thinking, relying, wishing, Akira calls out to Alpha.

There was no reply. With that, Akira finally understood. The connection to Alpha is truly severed. Alpha's help cannot be obtained. He finally acknowledges this fact, the reality he had been avoiding with hopeful speculation.

To die. Those simple, short words begin to crush Akira's heart. And his eyes meet the gigantic muzzle aimed at himself.

Inescapable death. The circumstances, the process, the unfortunate convergence, the existence as a realistic and concrete conclusion, is there as the gun's muzzle held by Tiol.

Mockery.

Akira scoffs at it.

"Oh, is that so! You're telling me to do it myself, huh?!"

He shouts with derision. In the extreme manipulation of subjective time, his forcibly ejected voice has turned into incomprehensible gibberish to others.

But there's no need to let anyone hear it. Because the listener is Akira himself.
"Got it! I'll do it myself then!"

With that resolution, he breaks the heavy chains that had bound his heart. The detrimental effects Alpha's overwhelmingly strong support had on Akira's mind, his resentment towards Alpha, Akira finally cuts them off by his own will.

At that moment, within the incredibly slow world where subjective time manipulation had been pushed to its limit, Akira's vision begins to be whitewashed from the outside. Simultaneously, the scene in that narrowed world becomes vivid as if illuminated. And Tiol fires. Evading such an attack, normally, would be too late after recognizing the opponent's action. There is no time for evasion.

Yet Akira dodges it. Kicking off the air to escape the line of fire, he moves forward. Dodging the bullets coming at him one after another, he closes the distance with Tiol. It's evidence that Akira has finally succeeded in manipulating the resolution of his subjective reality.

The whitewashing of a part of his vision is due to the processing that deems perception of that part unnecessary when generating subjective reality. Not only vision but all five senses undergo similar processes.

As a result, the world recognizable to Akira has narrowed. However, as a trade-off, the precision and speed of the cognitive reality generation process in his brain have dramatically improved. Based on input information obtained from the five senses, the cognitive reality generated as output, and the discrepancy between the actual reality generated by it, he can partially but dramatically reduce it.

With this manipulation of reality resolution, Akira can anticipate the opponent's actions in advance.

While the opponent is still in the stage of completing the generation of subjective reality, Akira alone can act based on the reality information he has generated promptly. In other words, it's akin to having an extremely short-term precognitive ability based on the opponent's future information, allowing him to evade even attacks that would normally be impossible to avoid after seeing them. And this flexibility also benefits Akira's movements. Thanks to it, he can enhance the precision of his movements. Because he has the leeway to kick off the generated force field armor footholds accurately and carefully in the air.

Thanks to those dual benefits, Akira managed to dodge Tiol's gunfire. He continued to kick through the air multiple times, propelling himself forward. Sensing the massive bullets whizzing past him at high speed just beside him, he finally reached the embrace of Tiol, atop the armor covering the giant's body.

Landing with a forceful kick, Akira stood on the surface of the opponent's body. Then, he momentarily halted the manipulation of reality resolution. A severe headache conveyed the intensity of that burden to Akira.

(Manipulating my perception of reality...! I Finally succeeded, but is this all it takes, just a little bit of usage!)

By discarding his resentment towards Alpha and standing on his own in the true sense of the term, facing the real danger, Akira, with that determination, gained a new power.

However, that power is a double-edged sword that can lead to overload and brain death if used recklessly. But it must be wielded, nonetheless. To survive, even if it means cutting down enemies along with oneself. Determined.

With the new power and renewed determination, Akira grew stronger.

"...So, what's next?"

Akira lightly grasped his head. Even though he gained a dangerous power through the technique of manipulating reality resolution, it doesn't mean he can mow down enemies with it. Tiol is still alive, having nestled himself into the enemy's guard to reduce the risk of being shot.

For now, he held LEO compound guns in both hands and fired continuously at Tiol's surface armor, Charge Bullets aimed at it. Powerful C-bullets, supplied with a massive amount of energy, stormed into the thick armor.

It was gunfire pushed to its limit, enhancing the protection of the guns and the power of the C-bullets through energy tanks attached to each gun. Unable to afford losing the guns anymore, unlike when facing Zalmo, he couldn't afford to mimic such maneuvers, but still, their power was extraordinary.

Moreover, with the opponent's mechanical strength being unknown, and facing a situation where they must be taken down in an instant with a single surprise attack, unlike the excessive firepower sought against Zalmo, now there was a somewhat relaxed opportunity to fire continuously.

The tremendous barrage of bullets, fired from a relatively long time compared to an instant, from close range, created a tremendous force, tearing massive holes in the armor that had withstood the attacks of the black machine.

However, Akira wore a grim expression.

"...It feels like it's too big to have any effect. And is this thing... biological?"

Compared to the size of the giant, the damage inflicted was negligible. Moreover, from the wounds, it was not damaged machinery parts but visible flesh.

If the opponent is considered to be a giant biological monster similar in nature, then this level of injury is nothing but a scratch. Against the abnormal vitality of a biological monster that charges even when riddled with bullets all over, it doesn't seem meaningful to deliver an attack that only adds one more wound.

Moreover, while the armor won't regenerate, the injured area beneath, where the green

liquid bled, was already slowly beginning to heal.

"...No wonder it wasn't defeated even when surrounded by those black machines. What should I do... Whoa!"

Akira evaded the giant's hand trying to sweep him aside by leaping broadly. Then, kicking through the air, he landed again on the giant.

"Well, you won't let me take it easy, huh!"

As he slipped past the giant's hand, Akira continued to fight on the surface of the giant.

Episode 184 Targets for Killing

Tiol, desperate to shake off Akira who was clinging to him, became frantic.

『Damn it! Get off me!』

However, he failed. Even when he tried to swat Akira away with his gigantic hands, Akira would dodge with agile movements and continue to cling to him.

『Damn you! How about this then!』

Tiol, using his massive body, sprinted towards the nearest ruined building, and collided with it at full force. The building, weakened by the aftermath of their battle, crumbled into a pile of rubble. Tior then charged into another building with great momentum, shattering the side of the building as he burrowed into it.

But even then, he couldn't shake Akira off. Using the surface-clinging function of his enhanced suit, Akira ran around Tiol's body, avoiding collisions with buildings and rubble.

Tior, seemingly in a rage of frustration, shouted:

『You've got to be kidding me!』

If this were a real shout, it would have echoed far and wide, but it was just a telepathic message. It didn't actually produce any sound. However, Akira's face showed a hint of puzzlement.

The struggle between Tior and Akira continued. Throughout this, the black aircraft kept firing, forcing Akira to evade those attacks as well. Akira was the only one managing this precarious balancing act.

Tiol's frustration grew with Akira's persistence.

『Don't get cocky! You're sticking to me to avoid being shot, but staying there just means you'll get hit by their bombardment! You'll be the only one blown away!』

Akira, too, knew he couldn't withstand another round of bombardment from the black aircraft. Therefore, he planned to move to the opposite side of the impact area in advance, using Tiol himself as a shield.

Of course, he had to detect the bombardment quickly, or it would be too late. Keeping track of all the rapidly moving aircraft around him was challenging, pushing Akira to his limits.

But then, something unexpected happened for both Akira and Tiol.

『What the hell is going on!』

Only bullets were being fired at Tiol, and there were no incoming shells.



After Akira clung onto Tiol, the bizarre actions of Tiol, which seemed almost like erratic behavior, left the squad of black aircraft slightly bewildered.

"What the...? What is he doing?"

"I don't know... Wait, someone's clinging to him? Is he trying to shake them off?"

"I can see it too... Wait a minute! That's Akira. What's going on?"

Despite the many unknowns in the situation, there was no time to leisurely figure things out. They had to make decisions relevant to the ongoing battle first.

"What do we do? We've been instructed not to interfere with that hunter..."

"Yeah, no heavy artillery on that one. Use guns only."

"Guns can still hit him, you know?"

"Then so be it. We can't just let ourselves get shot at one-sidedly just to avoid hitting him."

"Agreed."

They decided to use gunfire on Tiol and a mix of gunfire and artillery on the other giants, accepting that if Akira got caught in the crossfire, it couldn't be helped. The black aircraft subtly adjusted their combat tactics and continued the engagement.



Despite waiting, only bullets came flying, with no sign of the expected shells. Tiol began to feel a mix of confusion and anxiety.

『...Damn it! This isn't a coincidence! They're deliberately avoiding him!』

Even though Akira was moving around on the surface of the target, he was much smaller compared to Tiol's massive body. By slightly adjusting their aim, the probability of hitting Akira could be significantly reduced. The black aircraft continued their gunfire without issue.

Tiol then decided to have the accompanying giants shoot at himself and Akira, rather than relying on the black aircraft. However, this decision came a bit too late.

Among the giants, Tiol was the strongest. With Tiol focused on dealing with Akira, the black aircraft had the opportunity to launch a more aggressive attack. This additional aggression was directed towards the other giants.

The accompanying giants, being stronger than the average thanks to Tiol, still weren't as formidable as Tiol himself. While their main bodies had strong armor and were not easily destroyed, their relatively fragile weaponry couldn't withstand the concentrated attacks and were destroyed.

Without their long-range attack capabilities, the giants became large targets for the flying aircraft. Naturally, they couldn't shoot at Akira either. The most they could do was try to swat at him.

『You bastards!』

Enraged, Tiol aimed his gun at the aircraft. However, a strong impact threw off his aim, causing the bullets to fly wildly off target.

The one who disrupted Tiol's aim was Akira, firing a barrage of powerful C-bullets. The impact of these shots significantly altered the direction of Tiol's massive gun.

Akira continued his interference, preventing Tiol from even properly targeting the black aircraft. In a fit of rage, Tiol shouted, his anger almost enough to make him burst.

『——!』

Since the shout was telepathic, no one could hear it. But even if they could, the words would have been unintelligible, rendered meaningless by his sheer fury.



Realizing that the black machines were fighting carefully to avoid collateral damage to him, Akira decided to assist them. Although he couldn't completely drop his guard due to the Zalmo incident, he was definitely grateful for their efforts against Tiol and aimed to prevent Tiol's gunfire from hitting the machines.

As Akira continued his interference, a giant fist from a nearby giant came hurtling towards him. He quickly dodged to the side, causing the fist to slam into Tiol's torso, shaking his massive body.

The giants didn't stop there. They surrounded Tiol and continued to target Akira.

"Well, it's better than being shot at!" Akira muttered as he continued to dodge the giant fists by running around Tiol's surface.

The chaotic battle persisted. The giants tried to hit Akira along with Tiol. Akira dodged while interfering with Tiol's gun. Tiol, being pummeled by the giants and hindered by Akira, scattered bullets in the direction of the black machines. The black machines, in turn, evaded the bullets while launching fierce artillery attacks on the giants.

Despite their humanoid forms, the combatants differed vastly in weaponry, size, numbers, attack methods, and even their nature as either biological or mechanical. The area, once filled with derelict buildings, had turned into a wasteland due to the battle's destruction.

In the midst of the fight, Akira noticed that his short-range communication with his bike had reconnected.

(My bike survived. What should I do...? No, it's impossible.)

Akira hesitated for a moment but quickly gave up. If he tried to reach the bike, he would be shot by Tiol. If he remotely controlled the bike to come to him, it would just get destroyed by the battle. He decided both options were impractical.

(Is Nelia alive? She might be dead, but just in case...)

Akira remotely adjusted the bike's settings and refocused on the battle.



Nelia was alive. She poked her head out of the backpack lying on the ground next to Akira's bike, sighing as she watched the ongoing battle.

"...I'm Bored," she muttered.

The backpack Nelia was in was an attachment for Akira's bike, equipped with a force field armor that surpassed the protective coats found around. When the missile exploded, Akira had maxed out the output of both the bike's force field armor and the backpack's, which saved Nelia's life.

Despite surviving, Nelia couldn't do much. The remaining part of her body consisted of only part of her torso and her right arm. With ongoing communication disruptions, she couldn't call for help. She also lacked the remote-control authority to operate the bike.

Nelia attempted to hack into the bike's control system, but the security was extraordinarily tight, forcing her to give up. With nothing else to do but observe the situation, she continued watching the battle until something caught her attention.

"... Huh? A message from the bike?"

The short text message from Akira, sent via the bike, read, "I'm lending you this, get yourself to the base," and included the bike's authentication code.

Seeing this, Nelia laughed joyfully.

"He sends it to me after all?"

The bike, lying on its side, righted itself under Nelia's control. The auxiliary arm, which also functioned as a gun mount, grabbed Nelia, and moved her onto the bike's seat.

Nelia gripped the handlebars with her one hand to stabilize herself and then sped off on the bike.



A significant change occurred in the chaotic battle involving Akira. The first shift was the fall of the giants accompanying Tiol. A shell fired by a black unit pierced the armor of a giant, causing an internal explosion. Though the giant's body was robust enough to avoid being completely shattered, the internal damage was sufficient to lay it down, lifeless.

One by one, the other giants also fell. Tiol was the only one armed with a gun, but his shots were continually disrupted by Akira. This left the remaining giants vulnerable to the relentless attacks from the black units, and even their strong armor couldn't hold out forever.

Akira felt a moment of hope, thinking they might have a chance. However, this hope was fleeting as the situation rapidly changed. The battle line between the city's defense force and the giants was quickly approaching Akira's location from the rear.

Stray shots from the defense force's artillery were landing everywhere, causing widespread explosions. Additionally, some of the giants were moving to support Tiol. This alone was enough to put Akira in a tight spot, but then the black unit began to retreat. Remaining in the area would mean isolation on the battlefield, especially after they had expended a significant amount of ammunition and energy to combat Tiol and his giants. The decision to withdraw was a logical one.

Moreover, they didn't make any move to take Akira with them, adhering to their orders to leave him be.

"Damn it!" Akira cursed, his face tense with the increasingly dire situation.

On the other hand, Tiol raised his voice, clearly pleased.

『You've been abandoned! This is the end for you!』

Tiol exclaimed. Akira's face briefly showed puzzlement, but it quickly returned to a tense expression as his information-gathering devices detected a large number of incoming small missiles.

The small missiles landed and exploded everywhere. Many hit Tiol, but they caused no harm, merely enveloping his massive body in smoke.

『That won't work on me! You're the only one getting hit!』

Tiol laughed, thinking the missiles were aimed at him. But Akira interpreted it differently.

(Is this... a smokescreen? But who's doing this, and why?)

Some of the small missiles collided mid-air, spreading the smoke widely like a smokescreen. Akira noticed this but couldn't understand the intent behind it. The answer soon emerged from the smoke: it was Nelia on Akira's bike.

Nelia deliberately fired the bike's LEO multi-gun at a low speed, causing the missiles to travel alongside her and explode simultaneously around Tiol, using up the extended magazine's contents. The resulting smoke provided a cover, allowing Nelia to evade Tiol's detection. She skillfully maneuvered the bike to approach Tiol's feet, then used the bike's ground-hugging feature to climb up the giant's body, stopping abruptly next to Akira.

Nelia laughed as she spoke to the half-dumbfounded Akira.

"Akira, you said you'd give me a ride, but then you told me to go back alone. Isn't that a bit harsh?"

The incongruity of her remark made Akira chuckle lightly.

"Sorry, I was a bit busy."

"Right. So, Akira, want to ride?"

"I can't refuse, that's my bike. But yeah, I'll let you drive!"

As Akira climbed onto the bike, Neria accelerated sharply. Tiol's massive hand swept the area a moment too late.

Nelia evaded Tiol's attack with full acceleration, then leaped off the giant and landed skillfully. She continued driving at high speed over the rubble-strewn, terrible terrain, firing more small missiles to create another smokescreen. Akira was impressed by her driving skills.

"You're really good at this!"

"Told you, didn't I? Should I drive instead?" Neria replied proudly, making Akira smile wryly.

"My bad!"

If he had listened to her suggestion to drive earlier, they might have escaped the ruins by now. Akira marveled at Neria's exceptional driving skills.

Tiol emerged from the smoke, aiming his gun at Akira.

『You won't escape!』

Akira also aimed his LEO multi-gun at Tiol's weapon.

"Neria! He's coming! Avoid him!"

"I got it!"

They fired simultaneously. Countless bullets of varying power and size crossed paths. Tiol's massive rounds hit the ground, sending debris and dust flying, but missing Akira and Nelia.

Now back on his bike, Akira no longer worried about running out of ammo or energy. He focused on disrupting Tiol's aim by shooting at his gun. Although the strain on Akira's weapon was high, it held together, and the charged bullets significantly shook Tiol's aim, even from a distance.

Despite their best efforts, some of Tiol's shots landed close, shaking the bike violently with the impact transmitted through the ground. However, Neria kept the bike upright, thanks to Alpha's modifications and her exceptional driving skills.

"Akira, getting to the rear communication line seems impossible. What now?"

"Yeah..."

Breaking through the defense force and giant's battle line was indeed reckless, and Akira agreed.

"...Do we just have to take him down somehow? But how...?"

Seeing Akira's distressed state, Neria smiled, both surprised and intrigued.

"Akira, you want to take him down?"

"If we can. Do you have any good ideas?"

Neria appreciated Akira's mindset, which didn't solely focus on escape but also considered fighting. Her twisted personality, welcoming even deadly struggles as a diversion from a dull life, was stimulated.

"Yes, though it's a bit of a gamble."

"If it's a gamble, that's good enough."

"Alright, let's give it a try."

Nelia responded and then drove the bike in the direction opposite to the rear communication line.



Tiol continued firing at Akira and his companions. The massive bullets from the giant's colossal gun demonstrated their power by sending debris and dirt flying at the impact sites. Even Akira, clad in his enhanced suit, wouldn't come out unscathed if hit.

But none of the shots hit. Despite firing a considerable number of bullets, Tiol couldn't land a single hit. He only needed one. Just one hit, and he could follow up and finish the job. Desperately, he kept firing, but all his shots were evaded.

Doubt crept into Tiol's mind, triggering the insecurity he had kept suppressed. Akira was on the verge of escaping his range. He also had to contend with the city's defense forces. Was he going to have to give up on killing Akira? Was it truly impossible for him to kill Akira?

Tiol was on the verge of succumbing to his doubt and insecurity.

However, this wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Doubt could lead to careful consideration, and insecurity could make one value safety over recklessness. Both were essential for survival.

『...It can't be helped. I'll let you go for now.』

Tiol rationalized his decision with these somewhat self-justifying words and lowered his gun aimed at Akira.

At that moment, debris thrown up by a previous impact struck Akira. His bike toppled, and he was flung onto a section of road, now a treacherous terrain due to the battle's aftermath.

Tiol froze in surprise. Having just decided to abandon his pursuit, he couldn't even recognize this as a golden opportunity and was momentarily stunned.

Akira staggered to his feet, stumbling toward the fallen bike. He laboriously lifted it and straddled it again. As Tiol snapped back to reality, he fired his gun wildly, but none of the shots hit. The bike accelerated sharply, avoiding the bullets. On this relatively smoother surface, the bike's acceleration was far superior to when it was navigating the rough terrain, leaving the following impacts behind.

Tiol screamed in frustration, realizing he had missed a perfect chance because of his hesitation and insecurity.

『Damn it!』

But just as regret filled him, determination rose as well.

(...Of course! Think about it for a moment! After all that fighting, he must be at his limit too! That's why he's so desperate to escape from me! If I don't kill him now, when will I ever?)

Tiol began to run after Akira. Despite his massive size making him slow, his sheer speed was enough to surpass that of an ordinary car when he ran at full throttle.

(I can catch up if it's just me! I should hurry!)

There was no time to wait for the other giants. They were engaged with the city's defense forces and couldn't get here quickly. Plus, they were slower than him. Bringing them along would mean not catching up to Akira. With this in mind, Tiol pursued Akira alone.

(Now I can win! I can kill him! I'll kill him and claim Sheryl for myself!)

Tiol ran, his eyes blinded by his desire for the future that awaited him if he succeeded.



Akira, advancing into the innermost section, glanced backward. "Are they still following us?"

Using both the bike's reconnaissance equipment and their own information-gathering devices, they attempted to detect Tiol's presence, but he was too far away for confirmation.

Nelia remarked lightly, "If we can't lure him out, the gamble fails. Let's think of another way."

"...But if he's not following us, then what?" Akira asked.

"For now, I'm adjusting the bike's speed to match his detection range, at least roughly. We don't know the exact range, so it's just a guess. Plus, we can't afford to slow down too much, or it might look like we're trying to let the other giants catch up. Killing Tiol with them around would be impossible. So, we need to separate Tiol from the others. That's why I pretended to fall intentionally, to lure him," Nelia explained.

"With someone that big, you'd think it'd be easy to tell if he's following us or not, right? Colorless fog sure is troublesome," Akira commented.

"But without the colorless fog, they'd have a clear view of us and could snipe us without any trouble," Nelia countered.

"Well, yeah, I get that," Akira conceded.

In terms of range, Akira was at a disadvantage. In that sense, the dense, colorless fog of the ruins worked in their favor.

"But it's not good that we can't be sure if he's following us, right?" Akira pressed.

"In that case, it's a bit risky, but shall we confirm it?" Nelia suggested.

Several small missiles were fired backward from the bike's LEO composite gun, disappearing from Akira's line of sight. The reconnaissance equipment and information-gathering devices captured the explosion's reaction.

"It seems like he's definitely following us," Nelia confirmed.

If the missiles didn't hit Tiol or weren't intercepted, they would have exploded further ahead. The fact that they exploded closer was evidence that they had successfully lured Tiol out.

Further evidence soon followed. Tiol, presumably guessing Akira's approximate location from the direction the missiles came from, fired back. Enormous bullets whizzed past

Akira's side.

"Nelia! He's firing back!" Akira shouted.

"Akira, don't panic over something like this. I did say it was a bit risky, didn't I? It'll be fine. They probably won't hit us. Probably," Nelia reassured.

"Probably!?" Akira exclaimed.

"If you don't like 'probably,' maybe I should intercept them so they definitely won't hit us," Nelia joked, but Akira, equipped with Alpha's support, took it seriously. He aimed both guns backward with a serious expression and focused.

As Akira's vision began to fade from the outside, Nelia's laughter, filled with amusement, echoed.

The bike's reconnaissance equipment was linked to Akira's information-gathering devices. Nelia, who had control over the bike's operations, understood Akira's series of actions, even his joke, quite well.

"Akira! Even though I asked you to intercept, I didn't think you'd actually do it!" Nelia laughed.

"Shut up! Just hurry! I'm not doing this again!" Akira retorted.

"Just leave it to me! Don't fall off!" Nelia replied.

If Tiol was indeed following them, there was no need to slow down to match the opponent's reconnaissance range. Nelia accelerated the bike further to evade Tiol's gunfire.

"But really, being able to pull off something like that... I'm at a disadvantage. Hey, Akira. Won't you reconsider dating me after all?" Nelia teased.

"No way!" Akira replied.

"It wouldn't hurt to hesitate a little. You're so cold," Nelia said, contrasting Akira's reluctance with her own cheerful demeanor.

Having shaken off Tiol, Akira and his companions reached their destination. There lay the destroyed Black Wolves, Akira's abandoned vehicle with supplies, and the bodies of the attackers they had defeated, scattered around.

"Nelia, do you think we'll manage?" Akira asked.

"Probably. Let's hurry and get ready," Nelia replied.

In the place where Zalmo had fought fiercely, Akira began his final preparations to defeat Tiol.



In pursuit of Akira, Tiol was once again confronted by countless small missiles. However, Tiol continued on without attempting to evade them, inevitably being hit all over his body. But they had no effect at all.

『It's useless!』

Approaching Akira to the distance where he could make a futile attempt to shoot missiles again, Tiol was determined to catch up this time. Unlike before when he inadvertently fired back and slowed himself down, Tiol wouldn't make such a mistake this time.

Under normal circumstances, on a clean road, Akira's bike speed would be impossible to catch up to. However, there were few such roads within the ruins. Rubble was scattered everywhere. Because of the rough terrain, the bike would inevitably have to slow down somewhere. In that case, Akira, whose speed wouldn't be affected even on rough terrain, should be faster overall.

The explosion of the small missiles had temporarily disrupted Tiol's reconnaissance, causing him to momentarily lose sight of Akira. However, this was not a problem. As long as he continued in the direction the small missiles were coming from, he would eventually reach Akira, their point of origin.

With that in mind, Tiol pressed on with all his might.

Chasing after the fleeing Akira, Tiol's decision was correct under the assumption that he was closing in on him. Indeed, Tiol was getting closer to Akira, just a short distance away.

But then, that assumption was shattered.

『What!?』

It was too late when he realized it. The reaction emerging from outside the narrowed detection range was rapidly closing in on Tiol.

It was Akira, riding a bike. Instead of fleeing, he was trying to close the distance with Tiol at full speed.



Akira and his team, having made their preparations, were carefully timing their contact with Tiol on a suitable road for maneuvering.

From three LEO composite rifles, small missiles were continuously fired. Akira kept up the barrage until the magazines ran dry, promptly swapping them out with extended magazines he couldn't bring out from the vehicle.

The reactions of explosions happening ahead on the road conveyed Tiol's precise position to Akira's team. They also confirmed that Tiol wasn't accompanied by other giants.

"Akira, it's about time."

"Got it."

Charge Bullets

Changing the magazines of both guns to C-shells, Akira mounted the bike. In addition to the LEO composite rifles, the bike's auxiliary arm held a massive blade used for humanoid weapon systems, previously used by the Black Wolves.

"Nelia, I'll ask one more time, do you think it'll work out in our favor?"

"It should work out to the extent of the bet. I can't say for sure. Should we call it off?"

"No, we'll do it."

"Then let's go."

"Got it!"

The operation began. Nelia raced the bike toward Tiol with momentum.

For Akira to defeat Tiol, he needed to get close to him once again. However, if he approached leisurely, there would still be a range disadvantage, and this time he'd be a sitting duck for the giant bullets.

So, luring Tiol to a straight stretch where the bike could reach its maximum speed, they closed the distance rapidly. Using the smoke from the small missile explosions as cover, they approached at maximum speed.

Tiol couldn't respond. The opponent was rapidly advancing from beyond his reconnaissance range, and by the time he noticed the motion, the distance had already been significantly closed.

Moreover, realizing that the reaction was Akira, the surprise of the adversary he thought he had fled from coming at him instead momentarily halted his thoughts. It was less than a second, but given the opponent's speed, it was a considerable amount of time.

During that time, as he regained his composure and stopped running, time was added to aim the massive gun. Even without considering the time to aim, it was already too late. Akira had already closed the distance to where he could aim at Tiol's gun.

Breaking through the one-sided shooting distance due to the difference in range, Akira, standing on the bike, fired both guns in rapid succession. While the impact of the shots greatly disrupted Tiol's aim, Akira continued to close the distance.

And when he got close enough, he leaped from the bike toward Tiol's chest. Kicking with both legs, he landed on the giant's body again, aiming both guns at the armor below his feet and firing rapidly.

They had already tested how much firepower it would take to destroy the armor. To ensure a large opening in an instant, Akira sacrificed one of the LEO composite rifles and fired the maximum firepower C-shell.

The armor, already damaged by attacks from the black machines, couldn't withstand the force of the gunfire. Tiol's armor burst open, and his flesh beyond was severely damaged.

However, such injuries were nothing more than scratches to a giant's body and vitality. Akira knew this well. Therefore, when he had previously attached himself to Tiol, if he couldn't defeat him, he judged it was more dangerous to lose his guns and didn't fire the powerful shots with the assumption of gun damage.

Understanding this, Akira pierced the opponent's armor with the sacrifice of one gun this time. And from here, it became a gamble to defeat Tiol.

Akira leaped and soared through the air. Just before him, the giant blade held by the bike's auxiliary arm struck. The next moment, Akira kicked the handle of the humanoid weapon's blade, plunging the blade of the Black Wolf's chainsaw-type close combat equipment into the armor.

The rapidly spinning blade tore through the giant, scattering his flesh. Not stopping there, Akira generated a foothold in the air, kicked vigorously, then kicked the handle of the blade embedded in Tiol's body even further, embedding the entire blade into Tiol's body.

Even in this state, due to the recoil of the rotating blade, the blade moved around inside the giant's body, slicing and dicing. The giant's astonishing vitality would regenerate the wounded area, but with the blade inside his body, it would be sliced up again in the next moment.

Still, the giant didn't fall. He didn't even buckle his knees. If he could be taken down with this level of attack, he would have been defeated by the Black Wolf's unit's assaults.

But that was within Akira's expectations. And to confirm whether things would proceed as expected, Akira fired at Tiol's gun.

He fired the C-shells with a rate of fire so high that it exceeded the durability of the LEO composite rifle shooting them, but it didn't break immediately. However, the giant's sturdy gun was damaged. Previously, no matter how many shots hit, it only disrupted the opponent's aim due to the impact. But this time, there was a clear effect.

"All right! It worked! Just as Nelia predicted! With this, we can defeat him!"

Having won the gamble and seized the opportunity, Akira continued the engagement with renewed vigor.

When Nelia explained the details of the gamble to Akira, she also elaborated on the assumptions regarding the giants' operations. It was about the nationalists who claimed to be the Alfort Corps declaring independence, almost certainly because they had acquired the powerful force of giants.

So why did they declare independence in the first depths of the Kuzusuhara Ruins, which could also be considered the outskirts of the Kugamayama City? They had the power to fight against the city's defense forces. If they had expanded their territory to more remote areas where it would be difficult for the defense forces to dispatch, wouldn't defense be easier, and wouldn't the feasibility of independence increase?

Nelia based her thoughts on this. The opponent should understand this to some extent. Understanding that, why did they insist on declaring independence in the first depths? Nelia's conclusion was that the giants could only be operated in the first depths.

So why could they only be operated in the first depths? Nelia found a connection between this and the giants' astonishing durability.

There are various types of monsters with abnormal durability. Some are simply strong, while others are sturdy under specific conditions.

For example, the snail-type monsters in the first depths absorb energy from the force field armor of their habitat buildings to strengthen their armor. Those monsters don't stray far from places where they have the advantage.

Nelia speculated that the giants might be doing something similar. They might be receiving energy remotely and using it to strengthen their armor and support their movements and regeneration. And perhaps the range for remote energy supply was limited to the first depths.

The giants were strong enough to withstand attacks from the city's defense forces. Giants that could be considered superior to those attacking them could even withstand concentrated attacks from the Black Wolf unit.

But perhaps this was only possible within the first depths. That's why, to lure the city's defense forces to the first depths, they broadcast the declaration of independence via wide-area communication.

Nelia explained this much to Akira first.

Akira accepted this explanation. Although on a different scale, he had fought Monica wearing reinforced suits from the old world in the factory section of the Mihazono Ruins before, and she had done something similar.

With Akira's agreement, Nelia went on to explain how to defeat the giants.

The reason for the giants' armor being so resilient. If it was because they were receiving remote energy supply, then something had to be done about that. The first thing that came to mind was to somehow get the giants out of the range where they could receive remote energy supply.

But they didn't choose that option. Even if the entire first depths were within the supply range, it was highly doubtful whether they could get out of it themselves. And even if the range turned out to be narrower than expected, perhaps only around the rear communication lines, it was unlikely that the giants would venture outside it. Even if they tried hard to lure them out, the opponent would probably stop pursuing at that boundary. That was a means of escaping from the giants, not a means of defeating them.

So, Nelia proposed another option. It was a plan to push the giant chainsaw, a close combat equipment of the Black Wolf, deep into the giant's body.

Even if the energy supplied to the giants remotely was unlimited, there was probably a limit within a certain time frame. So, keep the giant's massive blade rotating inside his body. That way, even with the opponent's high regeneration ability, they would have to consume a massive amount of energy to keep healing the extensive injuries.

As a result, if the energy allocated to reinforcing and maintaining the armor becomes insufficient, the giant's armor will become correspondingly brittle. If successful, it should weaken enough for Akira's armament to be effective.

Of course, this is a combination of assumptions and conjectures, and there is no guarantee of success. It's a gamble. "Will you still do it?" When Nelia asked this again, Akira replied, "Yes."

And so, Akira and the others proceeded with it.

Neira's conjectures were riddled with errors, but the conclusion drawn from those conjectures was correct. The armor of Tiol, which had withstood the attacks of the Black Wolf's unit, became brittle due to the decrease in energy available for it. To the point where Akira's attacks could break through. Akira won the gamble.

However, the outcome is not yet decided. What was gained through this risky gamble was merely an opportunity for victory. To turn that into an actual victory, Akira resumed combat on the surface of the giant.



Tiol frantically tries to remove the giant chainsaw embedded in his body. He inserts his massive hand into the hole in his armor, grabbing the spinning blade along with the surrounding flesh, and despite his fingers getting shredded, he tries to forcibly extract it.

But Akira interferes. He stops destroying Tiol's gun with charged bullets and focuses on the giant's hand trying to pull out the chainsaw, bombarding it with rapid fire. Abandoning the broken LEO composite gun, he grips a blade from the Old World, extending its liquid metal edge to slash at the hand much larger than his own.

The giant hand, redirected by the impact of the shots, slams into the side of the hole in the armor. Long cracks run along the hand, with a broken silver blade stuck at the end of one of them.

"Damn you!"

Akira kicks Tiol's arm away, mocking the enraged giant. Extending the blade from its hilt, he resumes shooting at Tiol's gun. The massive giant, larger than the surrounding abandoned buildings, was being toyed with by an opponent smaller than his own hand.

The fierce exchange continues. Tiol desperately tries to dislodge Akira and extract the chainsaw. He not only swats at Akira with his hand but also rolls across the ground with his giant body, attempting to shake him off.

Akira resists with all his might, shooting, dodging, kicking, and slashing at the encroaching giant hand, preventing the chainsaw from being extracted. When Tiol rolls across the ground, Akira leaps into the air to avoid being crushed, kicking in mid-air to pursue and landing back on the giant's surface as Tiol quickly stands.

Tiol panics. He cannot shake Akira off. The chainsaw continues to tear him apart from the inside. The other giants are too far away.

Tiol's opponent was supposed to be at his limit, struggling even to ride a bike. He thought he only needed to chase and catch up. That should have ensured victory. But now, Tiol is the one being cornered by that very opponent.

"What are you!?"

Despite his overwhelming size and strength, which even surpassed the city's defense forces, Tiol could not kill this inexplicable, mysterious entity—Akira. He starts to feel fear and anxiety.

Meanwhile, Akira also feels a growing sense of urgency.

(...Even with such a huge blade embedded in his body, continuing to cut him from the inside, he can still move this much!? Can I make it in time!?)

The Black Wolf blade embedded in Tiol's body operates based on authentication and energy supply from the device using it. However, with the appropriate permissions and energy supply, it can function without being directly held by a device.

Nelia adjusted the permissions, and Akira dealt with the energy supply by attaching energy tanks he had on his vehicle.

The giant chainsaw blade is operating at maximum output inside the giant's body, consuming energy at the highest rate. It won't last long.

His window for victory is limited. Can he take down this giant before time runs out? Akira knows he must fight without hesitation, but Tiol's overwhelming vitality only increases his anxiety.

Tiol's hand, repeatedly shot by Akira, is now stripped of its armor. The exposed hand is slashed apart by the liquid metal blade, repeatedly dismembered.

However, the hand regenerates during the fight, attacking Akira again. Though the armor does not regenerate, if the chainsaw inside Tiol stops, there is a real risk the armor will heal too. Every time Akira sees the severed parts reattach and the blasted fingers regrow, his face contorts with growing tension.

The fierce exchange continues. The seemingly mismatched battle, as if it were a joke, drives both Akira and Tiol to the brink without a decisive blow.

Then the moment comes. Tiol's gun, which has taken countless charged bullets, is finally destroyed.

Akira feels a brief moment of triumph, but the next instant, Tiol, now freed from wielding the gun, attacks with both hands simultaneously. Akira, who had managed to dodge single-handed attacks, cannot evade them as easily now.

Though he avoids the attack, his reflexive jump to escape takes him far from Tiol's body.

By the time Akira realizes his mistake, it's too late. As he lands on a nearby abandoned building, Tiol, using the hand that still has some armor, forcefully removes the chainsaw from his body. He looks at the tense-faced Akira, demonstrating his strength by crushing the chainsaw in his hand despite the injuries.

Tiol declares gleefully. 『Akira! This is the end for you! I'm going to kill you!』

Tiol's shouts didn't resonate around him, being processed entirely as telepathic communication. Not that he intended for Akira to hear; it was merely an expression of his delight.

However, Akira did hear it.

"You, Tiol?"

Tiol had been shouting at Akira telepathically. As an Old-World Connector, Akira could hear that voice. Initially, it was just indistinguishable noise, not perceivable. But after being repeatedly and strongly called out to, he eventually understood.

Such noise reaching Akira was usually filtered out by Alpha. But now, with his connection to Alpha severed, the telepathic link to Tiol had formed.

Although surprised that the giant he had been fighting was Tiol, Akira didn't find it too ridiculous. When they fought at the Iida Commercial District Ruins, Tiol had already shown abnormal transformations. Becoming a giant wasn't that strange. Akira's reaction to Tiol's form was only that mild.

However, knowing it was Tiol shifted Akira's consciousness significantly.

"Now, die."

Until now, the fight had been primarily defensive, with his intent to kill accordingly restrained. But now, the nature and quality of Akira's intent to kill shifted. From a defensive target to a target to kill. From someone to fend off and repel, to someone to kill.

Akira reconsidered his recognition of the enemy before him.

In that instant, Tiol's joy vanished. The advantage and the elation of turning the tables, which he thought he had gained, meant nothing before the killing intent emanating from Akira.

Telepathy isn't just about conveying words as sounds. It can transmit sounds, images, intentions, will, and even vague information like sensations and emotions.

Killing intent is no exception. Normally, it can only be inferred from voice or expression, leading to potential loss of information during interpretation.

Tiol, receiving this undiluted killing intent from Akira via telepathy, was overwhelmed by its intensity.

He's going to kill me.

Driven half-mad by that terror, Tiol reflexively pointed his left arm at Akira. In the next instant, his left arm rapidly mutated. It transformed drastically, becoming a massive cannon thicker and larger than the arm of a giant.

『Die!』

With a scream-like voice, an oversized shell larger than a nearby vehicle was fired. The shell, aimed at a close-range target by giant standards, immediately hit and caused a huge explosion. The blast was so powerful that Tiol's legs lifted off the ground, suspending him in midair. It was an explosion of such magnitude.

He's dead. Tiol couldn't help but think so, feeling both joy and relief as he floated helplessly in the air. But that feeling was immediately replaced with shock.

Akira was right in front of him.

Tiol's actions had been a grave mistake.

The movement of extending his left arm was a preparatory motion for the cannon shot. Knowing this from past battles, Akira had once again adjusted his perception of reality to prepare for the cannon shot.

In the world where everything except the giant was bleached white, Akira completely anticipated the moment of the cannon fire and leapt towards Tiol with all his strength. In mid-air, he narrowly passed by the massive shell.

The subsequent explosion was blocked by the output of his force-field armor, cranked to its maximum limit. Using the blast itself to further accelerate, he closed the distance in an instant. At the same time, he prepared his blade, extending the liquid metal blade to its maximum output, and slashed at the giant's neck.

Tiol had managed to extract the chainsaw from his body, but the energy depletion wasn't immediately and completely replenished remotely. It would take some time for sufficient energy to be supplied and for the armor to regain its strength.

Additionally, Tiol had transformed his left arm into a cannon in that state. He didn't simply reveal a cannon hidden within his arm but entirely remade it into a cannon.

Such an immediate and drastic mutation required a massive amount of energy. Forcing it through with already depleted energy made Tiol's armor even more fragile than when the chainsaw had been embedded in his body.

The silver blade swung with full force broke through the weakened armor, slicing through the flesh and bone that had also lost their strength, and decapitated the giant.

(Not yet!)

This wasn't enough to kill him. Akira, deciding so, kicked through the air, inserting himself between the severed head and body of the giant. He then thrust his gun into the severed neck of the torso and aimed his blade at the giant's head.

"Now, finally, die!"

In a world that seemed to have stopped, Akira's distorted voice echoed. Then, a charge bullet, meant to be the most powerful shot with the assumption that the gun would be destroyed, was fired at the torso, while an extreme slash aimed at the head was delivered, assuming the blade would break.

The giant's body, hit by a massive quantity and power of bullets, suffered extensive damage, and its head was severed by the gleaming blade. The LEO composite gun was blown apart, and the liquid metal blade shattered, scattering into fine droplets that vanished.

Akira, having exhausted his strength, began to fall. But he managed to brace himself and avoid crashing into the ground.

Shortly after, the giant head, split in two, hit the ground with a loud crash. As Akira looked up in surprise, the giant's body began to collapse toward him. He ran for his life, narrowly escaping being crushed by the enormous body.

Akira exhaled and furrowed his brows.

"Did I get him?"

At the very least, the giant had completely stopped moving.

Episode 185 Fake Akira

After the fierce battle, Akira had defeated the giant, but he still looked at the massive corpse with a hint of skepticism.

"I defeated it... right?"

Although he thought he probably had, he couldn't say for sure. The opponent had already transformed into a bizarre form at the Iida Commercial District ruins and now into a giant. There was no guarantee that the usual logic of "this should be enough to kill it" applied.

It's probably dead because it's not moving. Akira thought so, but he still felt uneasy.

(If Alpha were here, I could just ask if it was dead.)

Akira tried calling out to Alpha, just in case.

『Alpha.』

There was no response. The connection with Alpha had not yet been restored.

(No good... I hope she's alright.)

He assumed that once they got out of the ruins, the communication interference would clear up, and the connection with Alpha would be restored. But that was just a guess. If things went wrong, the connection with Alpha might never be restored. Akira let out a small sigh with a slightly stern face.

Despite this, there was no trace of fear on Akira's face. It was clear that he still found Alpha's support very reassuring. But that didn't mean he couldn't live without it.

Even without Alpha's help, he would manage somehow on his own. Akira had unconsciously weaned himself off his dependency on Alpha to a degree.

At that moment, Nelia arrived on her bike.

"Akira. You did it."

Nelia had stayed at a distance, ready to pick up Akira and retreat swiftly if the plan failed or

if Akira decided to withdraw. Because of this, she had escaped the massive explosion from Tiol's cannon fire.

"I can't believe you actually managed to defeat this thing. Incredible."

"I did defeat it, right?"

Nelia laughed cheerfully at Akira's doubtful tone.

"If this isn't enough to kill it, what would be?"

"Well, you're right."

"You're such a worrier. In that case, let's get out of here before it gets back up and attacks again. Hop on, Akira."

There was no reason to stay. Akira and Nelia left the area.

Akira returned to his vehicle with Nelia. He used the supplies loaded in the car to restore his body and equipment as much as possible. He sighed lightly as he looked at the interior of the car, which had changed dramatically since they set out.

"...We used up so much."

They had prepared an excessive amount of ammunition, recovery medicine, and energy tanks, as per Kibayashi's recommendation. On top of that, Akira had purchased five LEO composite guns, each costing 200 million aurums, and brought them along. They had been fully prepared.

At the start, the car was crammed full of supplies, but now it was almost empty, proof of how intense the battle had been.

"If I hadn't followed Kibayashi's advice, I'd be dead by now. Did he know this was going to happen?"

Of course, Kibayashi didn't have any foresight abilities. However, he did have a strong expectation that something significant might happen and had Akira prepare for it accordingly.

Imagining the joyful face of his lifesaving benefactor, Akira showed a complicated expression but felt a sense of gratitude as he got out of the car.

"Nelia. It's over."

"So, what's next?"

"Well... Just to ask, is there any way to get back to the city without using the rear communication line?"

"You mean driving through the depths of the ruins and out into the wasteland with your bike? Not realistic."

"Yeah, I thought so."

Navigating through the rough terrain of the ruins on a bike was impossible without Alpha's support. That's why the rear supply line was worth the high toll. Akira understood this and had only asked as a formality.

However, the rear communication line was effectively sealed off due to the battle between the city's defense forces and the giants. Akira had no intention of risking his life to break through that deadly area.

So, what to do next? Even though Nelia asked, Akira had no good ideas. He let out a small groan.

At that moment, the bike's detection equipment picked up a fast-approaching signal. It was a squad of humanoid defense force units flying towards them.

A man, the squad leader, who disembarked and spoke directly with Akira and Nelia, expressed his surprise.

"You defeated it! That thing! All by yourself! Amazing!"

These men were a squad sent by the defense force to take down Tiol. The assumption was that if they could kill the higher-ranked individual believed to be controlling the giants, it might lead to a collapse in enemy coordination. The defense force had reorganized a portion of their main force to dispatch them.

However, by the time the squad arrived, the target giant had already been defeated. Investigating the area, they found Akira and Nelia and came to hear their story.

The man was astonished that Akira had almost single-handedly defeated the giant, but he didn't doubt it after seeing the records from the bike's detection equipment.

(So, he has the backing of Inabe, a top figure and leader of a major faction in the city. No wonder Udagima, the leader of the opposing faction, tried to frame him as a supporter of the Nationalists.)

Thinking this, the man admired Akira's strength but also felt somewhat sorry for him. Akira then made a request to the man.

"If you came to take down that thing, your job is done and you're heading back, right? Can you give us a lift?"

"Ah, sorry, but I can't do that. You're suspected of being a collaborator with the Nationalists. It would be difficult for me to help you given my position."

"Really?"

"I get it. You took down that huge thing, so the suspicion should be cleared, right? Unfortunately, that's not enough for me to make a unilateral decision. If there wasn't a communication blackout, I might at least be able to ask my superiors, but that's impossible right now."

"I see..."

Akira understood that the man had his own position to consider and slumped his shoulders slightly.

"Sorry. I understand that thing was a big deal. But for me to decide to help you on my own, the achievement would have to be something like taking down Tiol, the leader of the Nationalists."

Akira frowned. He couldn't exactly say that he had already defeated Tiol, who had transformed into the giant. Until he could understand Tiol's telepathy, Akira hadn't realized that the giant was Tiol. Explaining this would reveal that he was an Old-World Connector, something he absolutely couldn't admit.

As Akira lamented this, the man said something unexpected.

"Well, Drankam is likely to claim that achievement. It's a shame for you."

"What do you mean?"

"Hunters have found a Nationalist stronghold and are currently engaged in combat there. Tiol is among them, and Drankam's forces are pursuing him."

Akira was stunned. He thought he had defeated Tiol, the giant, but now he heard a story that completely contradicted this, leaving him slightly confused.

"...Where is that stronghold?"

"You're planning to go there now? It's probably too late, you know."

"Tell me. Where is it?"

Seeing Akira's earnest face, the man hesitated. He saw Akira and Drankam's actions as part of the power struggle between Inabe and Udagima.

Telling Akira, the location might be considered supporting Inabe, potentially problematic for someone from the neutral defense forces. But withholding the information could be seen as hindering the fight against the Nationalists, which was also problematic. He finally concluded that there was no harm in giving a hunter the location of a bounty.

"...Well, I suppose it's fine. Here it is."

The location was communicated via a path established through multi-pod relay machines by hunters who couldn't use long-distance communication. As soon as Akira received the information, he mounted his bike, pulled Nelia out of his backpack, and handed her to the man.

"You can't give me a lift, but you can take her, right? Please get her back safely."

Nelia laughed teasingly.

"So, you're not getting a ride after all. Akira, you're terrible."

Akira laughed back at her, relieved she would return safely.

"Sorry. Something came up. See you later."

"Alright. Take care."

Akira sped off on his bike. Nelia watched him go with a smile and then spoke to the man.

"So, could you give me a lift?"

"I don't mind, but... I noticed you have authorization from Chief Yanagisawa. Are you on some kind of mission?"

"Something like that. The details are secret. If I spill the beans, the bomb in my head will explode. Sorry."

"I see. Let's go then."

The man boarded his vehicle with Nelia, and they departed with his comrades.

Akira sped towards the Nationalist stronghold. Restoring his connection with Alpha was important, but it was impossible to leave the ruins on his own. Therefore, he had something else to do.

He needed to confirm whether he had truly killed Tiol. If Tiol was still alive, Akira had to finish him off for good this time.

With that determination, Akira hurried ahead.



Tsubaki stood at the edge of the barrier, her gaze fixed on the headless corpse of the giant Tiol far in the distance.

"Confirming significant military presence nearby. This is an emergency situation," she said, smiling seductively. "Now I can move freely."

Normally, Tsubaki wasn't allowed to venture beyond this point due to regulations. However, given the emergency with a large non-ally force near her management area, she could interpret the rules flexibly to grant herself permission to go outside the barrier.

Tsubaki jumped from the high barrier, falling freely before landing softly and unnaturally quietly on the ground. Dressed in a seemingly out-of-place black dress, she began walking through the ruins.

"To think he managed to take that thing down without her support. I should have asked him for help after all... Is it too late now? His connection with her is currently severed. There's a room for negotiation..."

Tsubaki stopped a short distance from the barrier, her smile vanishing as she turned to the side. Over a pile of rubble and past several collapsed buildings, a man aimed an enormous gun. It was Yanagisawa.

Yanagisawa pulled the trigger. The bullet hit an abandoned building in front of him, passing through it as if it were a hologram. The bullet continued, disintegrating anything in its path, absorbing the mass of the objects it pierced, and creating a larger-than-expected hole through the rubble, eventually reaching Tsubaki.

The next moment, the bullet exploded, converting its mass and everything it absorbed into a massive explosion. The shockwave compressed the surrounding air to an extreme, creating a temporary, highly dense, colorless fog.

This dense fog absorbed the energy of the shockwave, exponentially increasing its destructive power with distance. The result was a spherical void where everything within a certain distance from the explosion vanished, leaving behind minimal traces of destruction that spread outward as if a violent storm had swept through.

Tsubaki stood with 70% of her body lost, and the remaining 30% crumbled like cut threads.

Yanagisawa, who had arrived at the blast site, looked at Tsubaki's remnants with a stern expression.

"...Did I overdo it? I thought too much power was better than too little..."

Yanagisawa had been hiding with advanced camouflage, waiting for the right moment.

Using a rare anti-destruction warhead, he destroyed the Old-World remote-control terminal Tsubaki had been operating.

In the next instant, Yanagisawa reflexively ducked to avoid Tsubaki's kick. The shock from her kick sent debris flying. Tsubaki had switched to a camouflaged backup terminal and launched a surprise attack.

Tsubaki then thrust a palm strike. Yanagisawa dodged and grabbed her wrist to stop her. The directed shockwave from her strike created a massive hole in the rubble behind him, demonstrating its power.

With her wrist in his grip, Yanagisawa smiled tensely at Tsubaki.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Yanagisawa. You're the manager of this area, right? I'd like to negotiate."

Tsubaki responded with a cold expression.

"Shooting your negotiation partner first—is that part of your culture? I don't think this negotiation will go well."

"I simply demonstrated our strength. You wouldn't negotiate seriously with an ant you could crush, right? You could kill me if you tried, but it would be a hassle. You need to recognize at least that much before you'll even listen to what I have to say. Isn't that, right?"

Yanagisawa leaped back lightly to put some distance between them, then showed a black card while sweating nervously.

"And there's also this. How about it?"

The card was something Yanagisawa had obtained from the deepest part of the Kuzusuhara ruins. To get it, he had caused a massive monster horde to attack Kugamayama City, just to reduce the number of monsters and lower the difficulty of acquiring the card. It was that valuable.

Tsubaki's expression turned displeased.

"If you think showing that will make me obedient, you're gravely mistaken."

Yanagisawa's smile carried a hint of bluffing, but he still maintained his composure.

"I didn't think so. But having enough power to sit at the negotiation table with someone lacking manners does have its effect, doesn't it? Oh, and I did try to be careful not to break that wall. If you were truly lacking in manners, I would have shot you the moment you were in that position. Can't you take that into consideration?"

Tsubaki's expression changed slightly. The ruthlessness to crush the disrespectful had subsided considerably, but her demeanor remained cold.

"Then, discard your weapons if you intend to sit at the negotiation table."

Yanagisawa's smile tensed. With some hesitation but determination, he first discarded his gun on the ground and then removed his reinforced suit.

He had discarded both a high-performance gun capable of anti-destruction and a reinforced suit strong enough for close combat. Yanagisawa had truly disarmed himself.

A few seconds of silence passed between Yanagisawa and Tsubaki. Although the time was the same, there was a significant disparity in perception between the two. As sweat trickled down Yanagisawa's face a bit more, Tsubaki smiled pleasantly.

"Very well. Allow me to escort you to the negotiation site."

"Is this place not suitable?"

At that moment, the abandoned building that had begun collapsing from the previous attack started to fall towards Tsubaki and Yanagisawa. Tsubaki directed a roundhouse kick towards it. Naturally, her kick only sliced through the air, but the shockwave propagated through the colorless mist in the atmosphere, pushing the collapsing building in the opposite direction.

"This doesn't seem like a suitable place for negotiations, indeed."

"Indeed."

Yanagisawa returned Tsubaki's smile with a wry one and followed her back towards the barrier.

There, Yanagisawa passed by two other Tsubakis, causing his expression to stiffen involuntarily.

(There are four units now. How many spare units are left? Ten? A hundred? A thousand? If Sakashita Heavy Industries finds it unprofitable, they'll withdraw from the Kuzusuhara ruins.)

His smile turned into a smirk.

(But that's because they don't know about it. If they did, they would insist on further exploration. I know. I'll be the one to acquire it. If this negotiation succeeds, there will be almost no problem with extending the rear communication line. I took a risk, but I never thought I could get it without taking a gamble from the start.)

Yanagisawa wiped the smile off his face.

(Just a little more.)

His expression was filled with unwavering determination and resolve.



Akira, who was heading towards the nationalists' base, had approached a distance where the silhouette of tall buildings resembling their base could be seen. At that moment, he noticed approaching figures from the front. It was a humanoid riding an odd-looking bike.

"What's that..."

Having been attacked by similar entities multiple times before, Akira immediately regarded them as enemies. Just as if to prove that grenades were thrown at him from the approaching figures. He shot them down without any issues, but the explosion of the grenades caused a large amount of smoke to spread instantly. As soon as that happened, the precision of his information-gathering devices decreased.

"Is this... smoke screen for disrupting information gathering?"

Thinking that they might be taking advantage of the smoke to close in, Akira stopped his bike and opened fire at the enemy.

The humanoid figure, hit by numerous bullets, was thrown off the bike and crashed onto the ground, shattering both its head and limbs. It looked unmistakably dead, with its body covered in bullet holes. The bike, too, was overturned and severely damaged, resembling the wreckage of a mechanical monster.

"That was nothing... Oh, but don't get careless. Just because it's weaker compared to that one doesn't mean it's easy."

Having fought against humanoid weapons and giants multiple times before, Akira had unconsciously underestimated ordinary foes. Realizing this, he corrected his laxity.

As the smoke screen gradually cleared, Akira's information-gathering devices began to regain their precision. He then detected further responses ahead, this time multiple. They were vehicles carrying hunters. As they entered the short-range communication range, identification codes for participants in the nationalist suppression operation were transmitted via the general communication.

"They don't seem to be retreating. Does that mean they're chasing this one? In that case, does it mean the nationalists' base has already been captured?"

With the excess of hunters chasing such a small group of enemies, it seemed like the base had already been taken. Perhaps those who couldn't achieve much there were now trying to earn some merit by chasing the fleeing small fry. Akira thought so.

"...If that's the case, whether Tiol was at the base or not, it's a matter of whether he escaped, was killed, or was captured. What should I do? Should I head to the base first and ask the ones securing it some questions?"

First, let's hear from the hunters coming this way. That's what Akira decided. But his face

turned into surprise. The hunters aimed their guns at him from the vehicles.

"Why are you... mistaking me for the one you were chasing!"

The effects of the information disruption smoke screen had not completely disappeared yet. If someone riding a bike had been following them from the direction they were chasing, it wouldn't be surprising for them to make such a mistake. Akira thought so, hesitating on how to deal with it.

They're just mistaken. If he kills the hunters who came to suppress the nationalists, suspicions about his involvement with the nationalists would only grow stronger. But if he doesn't do something, he'll get shot. What should he do?

His hesitation delayed Akira's response. It was too late to choose to escape on the bike.

"...Damn it!"

Akira dismounted from the bike. There was no time to leisurely dismount. He kicked off the bike with force and rushed into a nearby abandoned building.

A storm of bullets struck the bike a moment later. It was a barrage of gunfire from the hunters who had come to participate in the nationalist suppression. Akira's bike couldn't withstand it either, despite being protected by sturdy anti-force field armor. It was smashed to pieces by the multitude of anti-force field armor-piercing bullets.

"My bike! Damn it!"

Even in that situation, with Nelia's driving or Alpha's support, it might have been possible to evade on the bike. But with Akira's driving, it was impossible. Akira had lost the bike with just a moment of hesitation.

Still, he carried the backpack filled with ammunition and other supplies as he fled. Akira could still fight. But it would be extremely difficult to escape from the vehicles the hunters were in.

Since he couldn't escape, the only option left was to hole up here and clear up the hunters' misunderstanding. That's what Akira thought. But then, another blow came. A communication came through the general short-range communication from the hunters.

"Akira! You can't escape anymore! Surrender! If you don't want to die!"

"What!?"

The hunters, who were supposed to be chasing someone else, were now targeting him. Faced with this inexplicable situation, Akira couldn't help but exclaim in surprise.

Before being defeated by Akira, Tiol, who had transformed into a giant, was in a skyscraper presumed to be the base of the nationalists. One of the silent, expressionless, grotesque boys suddenly screamed in terror.

"Ahh! Ahh! ...Huh? What's that?"

Confusion added to the fear that filled only that expression, and it turned into bewilderment. Gradually regaining composure as he observed his surroundings, the consciousness was increasingly perplexed. However, the fear significantly faded.

"This is... the base, right? Huh? What's... happening?"

Despite being puzzled by the situation he couldn't understand, he knew one thing. Akira wasn't here. Just knowing that eased the tension, causing his strength to drain away. He collapsed on the spot, letting out his thoughts.

"D-did... I survive?"

That consciousness was Tiol's.

Moments before being defeated by Akira, Tiol, mentally cornered to the brink, blurred the boundary between his consciousness and that of the system once again.

In that state, Tiol simply wished to survive, and the system responded by evacuating Tiol's consciousness from the giant's body and transferring it to one of the remote control terminals.

As a result, Tiol, while losing his original body, was able to survive consciously. What is oneself? What state does "being alive" refer to?

Even the definition of these things was made ambiguous by the technology of the old world, allowing Tiol to survive by the standards of the old world.

Tiol didn't understand the process at all. Still, even in a situation he couldn't comprehend, just the fact that he had survived brought a huge sigh of relief.

"...Well, that's fine. I don't know why, but I'm alive, after all. Let's leave the thinking for later. What's the situation here?"

Having grasped the situation inside the building through information from other remote-control terminals, Tiol's expression involuntarily hardened.

"...Is this a lie!? Are we losing here too!"

The base had been equipped with highly powerful remote-control terminals with special modifications. Their strength was such that, if mobilized, they could defeat the terminals that had been turned into giants, easily turning the tables on the hunters who had infiltrated the base and luring in the city's main forces.

Tiol couldn't believe that they were being forced into a disadvantage in an indoor environment where humanoid weapons couldn't enter. In a hurry, he contacted Yatsubayashi.

『Yatsubayashi! What's going on!? Why are we almost losing too!』

『Tiol-kun. Since you took command over there, we've had some complications over here... Wait a moment. What? Tiol-kun. Where are you now?』

『I'm inside the base!』

『You can't enter the base in that form. What's going on...』

『I don't know either! More importantly if things continue like this...』

Both conversations prioritized their own convenience for a while. Still, Yatsubayashi managed to grasp Tiol's situation to some extent.

『Understood. For now, it's dangerous to stay there, right? If that's the case, you should escape by pretending to be a hunter being attacked by the terminal.』

『But won't that give us away? My face is clearly visible in that footage. Well, maybe I should hide it with a helmet or something』

『...It's okay. The terminals stationed in the base have a function to change their appearance to some extent. If you change your face and equipment, you shouldn't be recognized immediately. ...The current Tiol-kun should be able to do it. Give it a try』

『...Got it. I'll try it』

『If anything happens, contact me again. Tiol-kun. Hang in there』

After ending the communication, Tiol had regained quite a bit of composure while talking to Yatsubayashi. Taking a deep breath and psyching himself up, he said:

"Alright. Let's do this. I won't just die in a place like this."

Before changing his appearance, he decided to create several individuals left behind in the base to be defeated in his place. Thinking so, he called several terminals close to his position. This would worsen the situation, but he had no choice but to act upon the knowledge he had gained.



Terminals were approaching. Tiol immediately got to work. The face of the grotesque boy gradually changed to Tiol's. Not his current face, but the one from the footage sent over the universal communication system.

Tiol smiled satisfactorily. "Oh, it's just like him. Amazing function."

This function was added by Yatsubayashi because the idea of all the remote-control terminals disguised as nationalists having the same face and physique as Tiol felt unnatural to him.

Compared to turning his arms into cannons and his body into a giant, this was a trivial change. However, even mimicking fine details was quite difficult. Having such a function and being able to utilize it freely were two different things. But Tiol was completely unaware of this difference.

"This should work. ...As for the appearance of the equipment, let's change it to something powerful. After all, I'm the boss of the nationalists."

Tiol pondered what kind of equipment, what kind of person would look extremely powerful. The first thing that came to his mind was Akira, who had defeated his giant form, and his equipment.

Just recalling Akira's strength, which brought back the fear, Tiol decided that Akira's equipment must be something incredible, not the cheap stuff used by ordinary hunters, but something for high-ranking hunters.

"It was something like this, I think... There might be some differences in the details, but it should be fine."

Satisfied, Tiol nodded, but his expression suddenly turned serious. Through the terminals in combat, he learned that the hunters had approached the floor where he was.

"They've already conquered that far! What's with these guys? They're too strong. Are they training for human combat even though they're hunters?"

Hunters might be skilled in monster combat, but human combat shouldn't be their specialty. So, fighting humanoid terminals would be unexpectedly difficult. That's what Tiol thought, but then he realized.

"Oh, they've come to defeat the nationalists. It's not strange if they've been training for that. If they're trained specifically for human combat, they might even be stronger than Akira..."

That was just a passing thought. However, as soon as Tiol understood what he had said, he became very serious. Then, he looked at the terminal disguised as Akira's equipment with a determined expression.

"Can it be done?"

If possible, he wanted to kill Akira. But he couldn't fight Akira again. In that case, he could have someone else do it. Tiol took a gamble on the idea that came to mind.



In the building where hunters were engaged in fierce battles with Tiol's remote control terminals, the forefront was being pushed upward by the Drankam's unit, acting as the main force on the hunters' side. It was Katsuya and his team.

Of course, other hunters were fighting desperately as well. However, being overwhelmed by the enemy's strength, they had to leave the main battlefield to Katsuya's team and fall back. Behind the frontline pushed by Katsuya's team, they mainly focused on securing retreat routes and eliminating small enemy units that tried to flank Katsuya's team.

As Katsuya's team advanced, leaving their rear to those hunters, they pushed up the frontline again. Katsuya gestured to the other hunters.

"We've breached the 23rd floor! We're counting on you to secure this floor!"

"Got it! Leave it to us! Hang in there on your end too!"

Although the hunters belonged to different groups and had different numbers, they had established local communication networks by connecting their short-range communications due to long-distance communication failure. And now, Katsuya was commanding all the hunters present at the scene through this communication.

In the hunter profession, combat with monsters was inevitable, and the risk of death was always present. Due to this, hunters tended to highly value strength. The veterans of Drankam disliked those who didn't participate in actual combat, preferring practical strength.

That's why it was somewhat natural for Katsuya, the strongest present, to take command of the hunters at the scene.

The hunters who participated in the suppression of the nationalists, with a prize of 50 billion aurums, were all from the upper echelons of the hunters active near the Kugamayama city. They were of a different caliber than ordinary hunters, possessing real strength.

Leading these individuals, Katsuya had become a figure who, albeit in limited circumstances, commanded the hunters of Kugamayama city.

And Yumina, she held complex feelings next to Katsuya.

The strength of Katsuya's team was genuine. Even the upper-tier hunters of the city were struggling against the enemy forces but were being pushed back by them. There was no doubt about their strength.

But they were not invincible. They were fighting against opponents who were also vying for the 50 billion aurum prize. There were casualties.

And Katsuya was commanding his troops properly. He wasn't fighting like he used to, shielding all his comrades while fighting on the front lines. That's why his comrades were dying, unable to receive Katsuya's help as they once did.

If Katsuya had thrown away his position as the squad leader, maybe his comrades could have been saved. Each time a comrade died without being able to receive Katsuya's help, Yumina witnessed their pained expressions, and it hurt her heart.

"Katsuya, are you okay?"

"Yeah... I'm fine. We've finally cornered them this far. Just a little more. Let's keep going."

"Yeah... Let's do our best."

Yumina smiled back at Katsuya, who was smiling to cheer up others, with the same intention.

(...Maybe it was wrong not to stop Katsuya from joining Drankam.)

Yumina felt that way somehow.

With Katsuya's talent, even without Drankam's support, he would have risen as a hunter given enough time. Then, Katsuya might have been able to continue the hunter profession with only a few companions he cared about.

Katsuya had risen rapidly thanks to Drankam's support. But in exchange, he had to carry many burdens. The expectations, wishes, and even lives of many people. Too many for Katsuya to bear alone.

Katsuya had certainly risen. But perhaps Katsuya himself had paid the heaviest price for it. Yumina thought so.

(Once this job is over, I should have a thorough discussion with Katsuya. Even though he received support from the city's executives, he participated in suppressing the nationalists. He has fulfilled his obligation to Drankam sufficiently.)

Let's persuade Katsuya properly. Yumina resolved to do so. But she knew it wasn't the time to say it now, so she kept it in her heart. The fierce battle continued. Despite casualties,

Katsuya's team was pushing the enemy back. But then, something unexpected happened. Tiol appeared alone from a corner of the corridor.

"You've cornered us this far. Not bad. How about it? Will you join us now? You're strong enough. You can live without being a pawn for the city, right?"

Responding to the opponent's attitude as if they had come to negotiate, Katsuya, who was standing at the rear as the squad leader, stepped forward to answer.

"Don't be ridiculous. It's you who should surrender now."

"I see. Well, then, let's get serious from here on out. There are only two of us left, but there's no one who can beat us! Akira! Let's do this!"

"What!?"

In the next moment, Akira, appearing from the corner of the corridor, opened fire on Katsuya's team. Katsuya's team immediately retaliated. Bullets flew past each other in the corridor, heading towards their respective targets.

When the gunfire ceased, Tiol and his group had disappeared. Despite being showered with numerous bullets, Tiol maintained a confident smile as he gracefully retreated backwards, swiftly maneuvering to escape into the corridor's corner. Akira, expressionless, finished covering Tiol and then retreated from the scene.

Thanks to the force fields and raised armor output, Katsuya's team suffered only minor injuries. They remained vigilant as they continued forward.

"What... What's going on....? Why did Akira...?"

"Could it be that he actually...?"

Both Katsuya and Yumina were surprised and confused by the unexpected turn of events. However, their understanding of the situation differed based on the words they inadvertently spoke.

Before anything else, Katsuya cleared his mind of unnecessary thoughts and switched his focus.

"We've located the boss of the nationalists! Just a little more! Let's go!"

The squad advanced. However, Yumina involuntarily stopped in her tracks. But as soon as she snapped out of it, she joined Katsuya's side.

Yumina couldn't stop Katsuya from advancing. Just because Akira had turned against them didn't mean she had a reason to stop Katsuya.

(What's happening...?)

With hesitation, Yumina followed Katsuya. Katsuya proceeded without hesitation.

From then on, Katsuya's team was repeatedly attacked by Tiol's group. They were now fighting for real. True to their words, Tiol's relentless assaults were unlike anything they had faced before. Katsuya's team, fighting against Akira and Tiol, couldn't contain their attacks.

Katsuya's team had no choice but to halt their advance and engage Tiol's group, utilizing their numbers and terrain advantage. Yet, even with some advantage, they could only repel Tiol's group without defeating them completely.

In the midst of this situation, Yumina asked Katsuya with a serious expression, "Hey, Katsuya. Do you think that Akira is real?"

"To be honest, I don't want to believe there are many guys that strong out there."

"Yeah, but..."

"Yumina, whether he's real or fake, we have to defeat him. Right?"

"...I understand."

Yumina hoped that Akira was fake. She wanted to believe that the reason their short-range communications couldn't connect with Akira was not due to lack of opportunity but because he was a fake.

Tiol's group attacked again. They were the ones being attacked. There was no room for personal feelings. While thinking so, Yumina aimed for Tiol, while Katsuya aimed for Akira.

A fierce gun battle ensued. Tiol's group managed to escape again, but their movements were considerably slower now.

Just a little more. With that thought in mind, Katsuya pressed forward. They were just a few steps away from reaching the top floor of the building.



Tiol was increasingly optimistic about the success of the fake Akira operation. "...This might actually work, huh?"

The fake Akira that attacked Katsuya's team was created by Tiol, altering the appearance of his remote-control terminal. Tiol made it look as similar as possible, but it was still subjective to Tiol's perception. There was a risk that others would easily see through the deception and recognize it as a fake.

However, Katsuya's team didn't see through it. At least, no one confidently asserted that it was a fake based on its appearance alone. To that extent, the fake Akira was convincing.

Yet, even if the appearance matched, without the strength to make them believe it was Akira, it would be recognized as a fake too quickly. Tiol covered this by manipulating the use of the remote-control terminal. By rapidly depleting the remaining energy in exchange for a short time, the terminal's output was raised to near self-destructive levels.

They disposed of the terminal after each battle, withdrawing it before it was defeated, and exchanging it for another one. They destroyed the damaged terminal after altering its appearance, making it unrecognizable as a fake Akira. Tiol's claim that there were only two of them was, of course, a lie.

They maintained it for a few minutes. If they played their cards right, it was less than a minute. In exchange for dramatically shortening their operating time, they significantly enhanced the strength of the terminal, which Katsuya's team repelled.

While impressed by the strength of Katsuya's team, Tiol continued to anticipate that strength. "...It should be coming soon. Alright. This is it. Let's do this."

On the top floor of the building, Tiol waited for Katsuya's team with a smile.



Katsuya and his team, who stormed into the top floor of the building, discovered Tiol in the hall. Tiol, with a flush of adrenaline and barely able to stand, leaned against the wall, directing a defiant smile at Katsuya's team.

"Never thought... you'd corner us... this far. Impressive. But... victory will be ours," Tiol managed to say with his voice strained.

Katsuya kept his gun aimed at Tiol, his expression stern. "Drop your weapon and surrender. Where is he?"

"Do you want to know? I'll tell you! Run, Akira! From now on, you're the boss of the Alfort Faction! Go! Fulfill your mission!" Tiol shouted, glancing sideways. Following their gaze, Katsuya's team spotted Akira attempting to escape outside through a large hole in the wall.

"Damn it!" Katsuya exclaimed, caught off guard, allowing Tiol to aim his gun at them. However, before Tiol could react, Katsuya's team shot and killed him. But in that moment, Akira had disappeared from the building.

Katsuya quickly contacted the other hunters outside, giving them urgent instructions. "Track down the one who just escaped from the top floor and went outside! He's the new boss of the Nationalist!"

Then Katsuya hurried outside as well. Unable to parachute with his comrades from the building, he sprinted back the way they came.

In the now quiet hall, Tiol cautiously peered out from the shadows of the corridor. "They're gone. Alright, alright. We've made it this far."

Tiol, who had been fighting alongside Katsuya's team until then, was also a fake Tiol, just like the fake Akira. The real Tiol had been hiding all along. Tiol wanted nothing to do with fighting against those who might defeat Akira.

"Now all that's left is to let that impostor go to the real Akira. Hopefully, that goes smoothly too..." Afterwards, Tiol sneaked out of the building amidst the chaos of the hunters chasing

the fake Akira.



The hunters surrounding the building were indeed participants in the Nationalist's suppression, but many of them had abandoned combat inside the building due to their lack of capability. Some had come here to dispel suspicions of their involvement as collaborators with the Nationalist, for various reasons.

Then, information about Akira arrived from Katsuya. Alone and injured, the new boss of the Nationalist. If the information was accurate, this would be a remarkable achievement even against adversaries they could defeat them by themselves. Regardless of whether they intervened, the hunters at the scene hastily searched for Akira.

"Where is he?! Where is he hiding?!"

"There he is! Over there!"

The fake Akira was on a nearby street, attempting to escape on a bike from the scene. Seeing this, a man dashed to his vehicle to chase Akira, followed by others. In no time, a crowd of hunters began pursuing Akira.

Many were caught up in the frenzy of this unexpected opportunity for a significant breakthrough. Looking back, it was oddly miraculous.

The fake Akira had been spotted by the hunters intentionally to lead them to the real Akira. The bike was reconstructed from the wreckage of a mechanical monster with wheels. It wasn't turned into a car because Akira had been riding a bike.

To avoid being caught by the hunters but not to lose sight of Akira, they maintained a certain distance while heading towards Akira. It was unclear if Akira was still at the location where Tiol, turned into a giant, had fought, but they aimed for it anyway.

With Akira also aiming for Tiol's base, the objective was nearly accomplished. The use of information interference smoke screens was to prevent the hunters from distinguishing between the real and fake. The fakes were quickly defeated by the real Akira, leaving the real one vulnerable to the hunters' attack.

Akira had been unlucky. That could sum it up. But if other factors were to be considered, Akira's departure from reliance on Alpha was one of the reasons for this situation. If Akira had clung to Alpha, they would have prioritized reconnecting with Alpha and not headed towards Tiol.

However, for Akira, Alpha's extremely powerful support was merely one of his equipment. And losing one powerful equipment wouldn't dampen Akira's fighting spirit. Additionally, there was no guarantee that their connection with Alpha would be restored even after escaping from the ruins.

These reasons led Akira to head towards Tiol's base. And it resulted in this outcome.

It could all be considered misfortune, coincidence, ultimately a matter of luck. It was all down to Akira's luck, whether it was fortunate or not.

The exception Zalmo feared was still alive and well today, living as a true embodiment of their own luck, dragging many others along with it.

Episode 186 Local Network

The hunters surrounding the abandoned building into which Akira had fled included Nergo, a Nationalist undercover agent operating within Drankam. Katsuya arrived with his companions, significantly behind schedule.

"Katsuya, you're here too. Are you sure that you shouldn't be resting?" Nergo asked.

"I'm fine."

"I see. I apologize. I wish I could fight alongside you all, but unfortunately, I'd only be holding you back with my current abilities," Nergo said apologetically. Katsuya shook his head.

"No, just having you in charge of the squad is helpful. So, what's the situation?" Katsuya asked with a serious expression.

Nergo returned his serious look. "Akira is in there. The building is surrounded by other hunters. Many have already entered. However... the only survivors who returned without engaging in combat are the ones who fled."

Katsuya was surprised. Akira had been pursued by so many hunters in such a wounded state. He might have already been defeated. The surprise was significant, given their assumption.

"Katsuya, I don't doubt your word, but was he truly injured?" Nergo asked.

"No mistake about it! We fought him there! At least, we should have inflicted serious injuries on him! So, he must have fled from us..."

Katsuya, who had been somewhat calm, raised his voice involuntarily. It was evidence that Akira hadn't fully recovered from the shock of Akira teaming up with Tiol.

Nergo tried to calm Katsuya. "No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I just wanted to confirm. But if that's the case, it means he's strong enough to turn the tables on the hunters here despite sustaining such injuries... It might be best for others to stop trying to defeat Akira. It'll only lead to more casualties."

Katsuya listened to Nergo's words and understood, adjusting his attitude. "Oh, I see. I

apologize for jumping to conclusions."

"No need to worry about it. So, what do we do now?"

"I understand. We'll go. It's our fault for letting him escape," Katsuya answered seriously. Nearby hunters who overheard cheered lightly. "You can do it. Avenge our comrades. With such voices and enthusiasm spreading among the other hunters, Nergo pondered the situation around him.

(Transmission of emotions to this extent is quite plausible for ordinary individuals given the circumstances. However, if this is due to his singularity... he managed to have such an impact with a simple contact lasting only half a day. It's only natural for comrades to take notice if an unconscious old-world connector reaches this level of influence.)

Nergo knew that Katsuya was a connector.



When the turmoil of the major conflict in the slum area subsided, Yanagisawa, waiting for Nergo in the city's hideout, browsed through private documents until the appointed time. The data displayed in augmented reality-like three-dimensional images showed two hunters: Akira and Katsuya. Yanagisawa shifted his gaze to Katsuya.

"There's no doubt you're an old-world connector. That much is clear from the information on the Synthesized Snake battle. ...But that's not what's important," Yanagisawa said, redirecting his gaze to Akira.

"There's no evidence that you're an old-world connector. But if you were, your abnormal rate of growth could be attributed to their support..." Yanagisawa's gaze wandered.

"Is it you... or you... I wonder."

For a moment, the thought of just killing them both crossed Yanagisawa's mind, but he immediately dismissed it. If one of them turned out to be correct, keeping them alive to gather useful information would be more beneficial.

Yanagisawa sighed. "Both of them are too weak to be viable trading partners for them. Akira has been hospitalized multiple times, and there are even stories of him being attacked by a Synthesized Snake. If they were receiving support, they wouldn't have faced such situations in the first place."

Yanagisawa looked at Katsuya again. "So, maybe it's you? But you're not strong enough..."

He felt like he was getting closer but couldn't reach the truth. Frustrated by this feeling, Yanagisawa wore a troubled expression.

"...Let's assume for a moment. If one or both of them were correct, why would they make deals with such weaklings? It's unlikely that they decided based solely on the target's power. They should have chosen someone more competent with each failure, so why?"

Deliberately verbalizing his thoughts and confirming them to himself, Yanagisawa pondered. Then, a realization struck him.

"Could it be that instead of conquering that place individually, they changed their strategy to conquer it as a group?"

And then he looked at Katsuya again.

"With your influence, Drankam is in a state of internal conflict. But eventually, you'll take control. When that happens, it won't matter how strong you are personally, as you'll expand your influence through Drankam and extend it to the city's military, advancing your troops. Leading you to that place..."

It was all just hypothetical speculation. But the content was too plausible to simply dismiss. Yanagisawa stared intently at Katsuya, his face stern. "...Could it be you?"

Just then, it was exactly the appointed time, and a notification of Nergo's visit arrived. Yanagisawa switched his consciousness back to normal, putting on his usual frivolous smile, and remotely opened the door to the hideout. Addressing Nergo, who had come to him, Yanagisawa spoke lightly.

"Sorry to inconvenience you like this. But since I'm also one of the big shots in the city, it's hard for me to meet someone like you, who's just a hunter at Kugamayama. So, what do you want to talk about by coming here in person?"

"I'll get straight to the point. I want to secure Katsuya from here. Would that be okay with you?"

"Huh? Even if you suddenly say something like that, I don't understand what you mean."

Ignoring Yanagisawa's somewhat exaggerated and playful response, Nergo continued. "If you're okay with it, just say so. If you don't understand, then it's unrelated to our comrades. No problem."

"Ah, well, you see, I'm also somewhat affiliated with the city. If I suddenly agree to snatch a hunter, wouldn't that be detrimental to my position?"

Yanagisawa didn't change his frivolous attitude. Nergo stated firmly, "Katsuya is a former territory connector. Moreover, he's a former territory connector with a history of activity in the Kuzusuhara district ruins. He should be a target that our comrades are looking for. The fact that someone as significant as our comrades is in the relatively insignificant Kugamayama City in the eastern region is one reason. Despite our comrades having found Katsuya, they're not trying to secure him. If our speculation is wrong and our comrades don't need Katsuya, then we want to secure him ourselves. Would that be acceptable?"

Nergo didn't feel the need to explain further, but he added the explanation he initially omitted, asking the same question again.

Yanagisawa's smile disappeared, and he stared at Nergo.

(...How much does he know? How much has he figured out? If he becomes an obstacle to my plan...)

"I don't know," Nergo cut off Yanagisawa's thoughts, telling him directly before his thoughts turned to murderous intent, halting the flow of the opponent's thoughts.

"I don't know the intentions of our comrades. That's why I'm here directly, to avoid misunderstandings arising from differences in our understanding and the resulting conflicts. If securing Katsuya becomes an obstacle to our comrades' plans, we'll back off. We want to secure Katsuya, but not at the cost of making enemies of our comrades. If you say he's useless, then so be it."

With that, Nergo fell silent, facing off against each other, waiting for the other's move. The silence that followed flowed into either continuing negotiation or starting a fight.

It was Yanagisawa who spoke next, without changing his expression.

"It depends on your purpose in securing Katsuya. Explain it to me so there's no misunderstanding."

"Understood," Nergo carefully chose his words and began speaking.

"An old world connector refers to individuals capable of some form of communication function that current technology hasn't fully understood, mainly as a biological function. Although they're called old world connectors, connecting to the old-world domain itself is not mandatory.

And more strictly speaking, the majority of people in the eastern region are connectors.

However, due to reasons such as low sensitivity or output of transmission functions, or errors in communication control settings, they're unable to engage in true communication. In the eastern region, so-called old-world connectors are those whose communication functions are relatively normal.

One of those communication technologies is called telepathy. Information that can be transmitted through telepathy isn't limited to voice. It can also transmit sensory information such as sound and images. Furthermore, it can convey mental information such as emotions and impressions.

Nergo had his eye on this. He would secure Katsuya, persuade him, and have him support the cause of the nationalists. Then, positive impressions of the nationalists would be sent out from Katsuya. It would be transmitted as telepathy in the unconscious realm, difficult for ordinary people to perceive. Unconsciously, it would eliminate prejudice against the nationalists, increasing understanding.

For nationalists who have had a negative impression spread by the Corporate Government, Katsuya held such high value.

Yanagisawa listened intently to the explanation. Then he came to a conclusion.

"It's okay for you to secure Katsuya. However, it's futile to say hands-off because of that. If necessary, he'll be killed. If you don't want that, take him to a place beyond my reach as soon as possible, or whatever. My concessions end here."

"No problem, comrade. Thank you," Nergo replied, and Yanagisawa relaxed his expression, speaking with his usual frivolous smile.

"Oh no, it's the other way around. Well, you see, I have my reasons too, you know? Sorry about this." Then he asked casually, "Oh, by the way, I wanted to ask, there's a hunter named Akira, right? You know, the kid who was involved in the commotion in the slum area. Do you think he's also a former territory connector?"

"I haven't investigated Akira as thoroughly as Katsuya, since I've infiltrated Drankam, so it's speculative based on fragmentary information, but I doubt it."

"Oh, really? What's your reasoning?"

"He's from the slum area. If he were an old-world connector, he should have died by now."

Old world connectors tend to unconsciously transmit their emotions and such via telepathy until they become aware of it and can control their communication. Because of this, they often build extreme relationships with others.

Emotions, whether positive or negative, are directly transmitted through telepathy, and the reactions are returned as the other's attitude. As a result of this cycle, those who are liked are highly favored, but conversely, those disliked are despised like snakes and scorpions, and it's not uncommon for them to face hostility.

And for someone like Akira, who survives by eating rationed food in the slum area, this is essentially fatal.

The environment in the slum area is harsh. To survive there, one must first be aware of their own weakness and act cautiously. That's what's transmitted through telepathy.

Continuously sending out the message of one's own weakness, being overtly despised by others, and being greatly scorned. Even the slightest suspicion necessary for survival in the slum area is clearly conveyed to others, greatly undermining one's credibility from the other party's perspective.

As a result, forming group actions becomes extremely difficult. Those who are evaluated as having severe weaknesses, even if they belong to a group, are either prioritized for disposal or simply used up. They become a scapegoat for the group's shortcomings. In such a harsh environment, if it becomes impossible to even build the bare minimum of familiarity or cooperative relationships, then what awaits is almost certain death.

"But Akira is still alive. So, he's probably not an old-world connector," Nergo explained.

Yanagisawa also agreed with that explanation. "I see. Oh, one more thing, tell me about Katsuya's local network. What's it like now?"

"Currently, it extends across a wide range, including most of Drankam's young hunters, administrative faction executives, and supporters inside the walls. That's another reason why we want to secure him."

"That's impressive. Well, with his good looks and talent, it's only natural."

In strict definition, when individuals with low communication abilities included in the old-world connectors interact with those who possess high communication abilities, known as high-level connectors, a local network relayed through the high-level communicator may be established.

In the case of unconscious connectors, their participation in this network is also unconscious. And what's used for authentication and approval is the goodwill, fondness, empathy, and sense of camaraderie towards the high-level communicator.

Given that Katsuya could amplify any positive feelings directed towards him through telepathy, he unconsciously incorporated anyone who even remotely liked him into his network with a high probability.

Even after Nergo left, Yanagisawa continued to ponder for a while. Recalling his conversation with Nergo, he looked at the files of Akira and Katsuya again. Then he shifted his gaze to Akira.

"...Looks like it's different here, huh?"

Even if Akira were a connector and possessed enough talent to survive in the harsh environment of the slum area, transmitting positive mental information through telepathy would be extremely difficult for him. The communication abilities of old-world connectors improve with practice, becoming increasingly specialized in transmitting the usual contents. Due to the harsh days in the slum area, if Akira had specialized in transmitting negative mental information, he wouldn't be able to gain positive impressions from others even if he tried to transmit goodwill through telepathy.

Furthermore, what's necessary for constructing a local network is positive mental information. Even if Akira were a connector, if the group began to value the ability to construct a collective rather than individual strength, there would be no use for Akira, who couldn't build such a network. That's the conclusion Yanagisawa reached.

"...Looks like it's probably him after all," Yanagisawa directed a sharp gaze at Katsuya.



As Nergo recalled his conversation with Yanagisawa, he looked at Katsuya again.

(But his ability to construct a local network is somewhat abnormal. If he intervenes, the initial members are not just associated with him; they seem to be assimilated or even subordinated. Is an unconscious connector capable of exerting such influence in such a short period? Is there any connection between the reason why the comrades have taken an interest in him?)

Nergo couldn't help but cast a slightly puzzled look at Katsuya. In response, Katsuya's comrades, except Yumina, shot him sharp glances. It seemed like they didn't agree with such a look being directed at Katsuya. It was as if they were saying they wouldn't allow it.

(Their reaction indicates that at least for now, they still perceive themselves and Katsuya as separate entities. But it's only a matter of time.)

Perfect coordination through the local network. A state where the unit moves with a single will, and even the coordination of intentions becomes unnecessary. That state was nearing completion.

Just then, a man emerged from the abandoned building. His gait was steady, but visible injuries from the clash with Akira indicated that he had returned alive, conveying the news to Katsuya and the others.

Everyone who fought against Akira died. Katsuya, who had been informed of this by Nergo, expressed joy at the man's return.

"Are you alright? I'm glad you're safe."

"Yeah..."

Katsuya hesitated, and even Nergo wore a surprised expression.

The man who returned, supposed to have been integrated into Katsuya's local network, now looked at Katsuya with distrust.



The enemy was alone and wounded. The hunters who believed Katsuya's words and rushed in lay scattered around the abandoned building. If they had attacked knowing it was him and not someone else, there would have been no reason for Akira to hesitate in killing them.

First, the hunters who had surrounded Tiol's base rushed in. However, their power was not enough to defeat Akira, and their confrontation only served to showcase Akira's strength and the extent of their losses.

Next came those who had been delayed due to their involvement in capturing the base. They were formidable opponents whom Katsuya's group couldn't handle. It wouldn't be strange if the less powerful individuals outside the base couldn't defeat them either. They judged that, despite being cautious, they could win. However, their fate was not much different from the vanguard group's.

Finally, those who had fought against the remote-operated terminals on the upper floors of the base also joined the fray. Their strength was considerable, as evidenced by the casualties from the battle with Akira.

Approaching the man lying on the ground with severe injuries, Akira was met with the barrel of a gun aimed at him. But in the next moment, the gun was knocked away by a shot.

Akira moved closer to the man and pointed the gun at his head, wearing a serious expression.

"Why are you targeting me?"

"Huh?"

The unexpected question caused the man to voice his confusion, momentarily forgetting that he was almost killed. Nevertheless, Akira understood that there was a fatal discrepancy in their perception of the situation.

"Just answer. Why are you targeting me?"

"What are you talking about..."

As the man remained silent in response to Akira's question, Akira's suppressed urge to kill intensified. It was evident in his eyes.

"Answer me or die."

The fact that the man who fought against Akira was still alive wasn't because Akira had held back to gather information. It was because the man had that much power. Because of this, Akira, thinking that perhaps he could get some information, decided to spare him for now.

"If you won't answer, there's no need to keep you alive. I'm not here to negotiate any further."

The determination in Akira's eyes spoke volumes.

"Alright, I'll talk."

The man didn't want to die either. He provided Akira with all the information he had.

Listening to the man's story, Akira sighed heavily.

"...So that's how it is."

His doppelgänger was working with Tiol and had escaped defeat by Katsuya's group. The hunters, mistaking the doppelgänger for him, encountered the real Akira and attempted to defeat what they believed was the new boss of the nationalist. This unexpected turn of events left Akira deeply exasperated.

Seeing Akira's reaction, the man could somewhat understand Akira's situation.

"You look clueless."

"Yeah. I wasn't in their base. I was fighting elsewhere, and when things got tough there, I headed towards their base."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"I didn't say you had to believe it."

With those words, Akira turned to leave. But the man stopped him.

"Hey, if you're gonna let me go, at least give me a healing potion. I'll die like this."

Stopping in his tracks, Akira turned back with a displeased expression.

"What makes you think I owe you anything, considering you attacked me? Even if I die like this, do you think this information won't reach the people outside?"

"I don't care. Die."

With a dismissive tone, Akira turned to leave again.

No one would believe his story anyway. Given the unjust situation of being labeled the boss of the nationalist, Akira's distrust of people had intensified, much like when he lived in the slums.

The man, realizing that Akira was serious, frowned. His injuries were severe, and he had no confidence that he could make it outside without dying.

"Fine. Let's make a deal. Give me the healing potion, and I'll give you some information," the man proposed.

Akira paused and turned back. "What information?"

"The potion first."

"Information first."

"You expect me to spill without any assurance of help? If I'm gonna die anyway, might as well die silently this time," the man retorted.

"Fair enough. You should die," Akira replied lightly, turning his back to the man.

The man, somewhat resentful, muttered, "Fine! Bastard!"

Akira returned to the man and took out the healing potion. However, he didn't administer it to the man; he merely took it out.

"Now, what's the information? If it's worth listening to, I'll let you have it," Akira said.

"You have a bounty on your head. 5 billion aurums," the man revealed.

"Wait a minute. Even if I were to become the boss of the nationalist, would I be recognized for such a hefty reward so soon?" Akira questioned.

"It's not an official reward. It's from the underground," the man clarified.

"Is that so? Who's behind it?" Akira inquired.

"The person behind it remains undisclosed, so even if you investigate the source of the information, you won't find out. But considering the amount, 5 billion aurums, and the fact that the bounty was placed just this morning, you can make an educated guess," the man explained.

"Don't play games. Who is it?"

"You really don't know? It's Udajima, one of the city's executives. It's probably a bounty to have you killed using the commotion caused by the nationalist incident," the man revealed, observing Akira's surprised expression.

"I didn't know. I thought you knew about it and were just planning to kill us without negotiation. That's why I was surprised when you asked me why you were being targeted," the man added, slightly exasperated.

"What do you mean?" Akira questioned.

"Don't you get it? This fight isn't about the nationalist anymore. Udajima is using this to crush Inabe's pawns," the man explained.

Hunters weren't assassins. Going after other hunters for money went against the ethical code favored by the Corporate Government Association. But if the target was a nationalist, it was a different story. With the promise of 5 billion aurums and the backing of city executives, there would be no hesitation in attempting to kill Akira, regardless of whether he was truly a nationalist or not.

Moreover, Katsuya's group was receiving support from Udajima. Even if Akira, backed by Inabe, tried to surrender to Katsuya's group leading the hunters here, they would likely be ignored. This battle had already become a power struggle between Inabe and Udajima, the city's executives.

In that sense, Akira believed there was no room for negotiation. That's what he thought. The man explained this, and Akira, convinced by the explanation, glared at him.

"In that case, you also tried to kill me for the same reason, right?" Akira asked.

"I won't deny it. Taking down the boss of the nationalist is a significant achievement. On top of that, there's the 5 billion aurums and the involvement of city executives. Plus, the opponent was supposed to be weakened. It's a reasonable judgment, isn't it?" the man justified.

"Do you think this story is worth me giving you a healing potion?" Akira asked.

"If you hadn't heard this story, you might have surrendered to Katsuya's group. Considering the outcome, its valuable information, isn't it?" the man retorted.

"Hmph," Akira grunted, stuffing the healing potion into the man's mouth before leaving. The potion swiftly began to heal the man's near-fatal injuries.

Once fully recovered and able to walk, the man, wearing a troubled expression, left the abandoned building with steady steps.



Upon hearing the story from the man who survived, Katsuya couldn't help but raise his voice in frustration.

"You believed that story!? He wasn't even there!" Katsuya exclaimed.

"He said so himself. That's all. I don't know if it's true or not," the hunter replied calmly.

"What do you mean you don't know? He escaped from that building and ended up here!" Katsuya insisted.

"I didn't confirm that. I'm not saying you're lying, but in terms of hearsay, your story and his are the same. So, I can't determine the truth," the hunter explained.

"I don't understand..." Katsuya began to retort, but Yumina interjected, trying to calm him down.

"Katsuya, please calm down. I'm sorry. So, if that's the case, there's a possibility that the real Akira is among us, and the one we fought there was a fake, right?" Yumina clarified.

"If he was telling the truth," the hunter replied.

"I understand. Thank you for telling us everything," Yumina expressed her gratitude to the man before turning to Katsuya with a serious expression.

"Katsuya, I'll go check it out. Wait here until I come back," Yumina assured him.

Surprised, Katsuya hurriedly tried to stop Yumina.

"Yumina!? What are you saying!? Even if he was real, he's still in the middle of a battle, and many people have been killed! Are you planning to meet him alone? You'll get killed!"

"Even so. If it's just a misunderstanding causing us to fight each other, maybe it can still be stopped. If I go alone, maybe Akira will listen to reason. If I persuade him, maybe he'll surrender. Then we can avoid fighting, right?" Yumina reasoned.

"But, but..." Katsuya hesitated.

"Airi. Stop Katsuya if he tries to interfere. Please. ...Airi?" Yumina pleaded with a smile, but Airi wore a troubled expression and shook her head.

"If Katsuya decides, I can't stop him. ...I'm sorry," Airi replied.

"...I see," Yumina acknowledged.

Airi was right. As the squad leader, Katsuya had the final say. Even Yumina understood that.

Nevertheless, Yumina decided to act on her own. To prevent Akira and Katsuya from killing each other.

"Katsuya, please don't follow me. If Akira sees you, he might not talk. Moreover, given the current situation, as soon as Akira sees you, it might escalate into a fight. If you're worried about me, please don't provoke Akira," Yumina insisted, driving the point home. Then, she smiled as before.

"So, just quietly wait here."

Remembering a previous occasion when Katsuya tried to stop Yumina from heading to the ruins, and she had pacified him with a smile, Katsuya relented.

"...Understood. I'll wait," Katsuya replied, much like before.

Seeing the smile on Yumina's face, Katsuya relented.

"Really, you're such a worrier. Well then, see you later," Yumina said.

"Yeah. Take care," Katsuya replied as he watched Yumina enter the abandoned building alone. Once she was out of sight, Katsuya's expression turned serious.

"Airi. If anything happens, I'm going in," Katsuya declared.

"Got it," Airi replied.

Even if they were apart, they could confirm Yumina's safety through the comprehensive support system. If she even suffered a scratch, they would go to her aid. That was the extent of the compromise Katsuya could make.



When Yumina entered the abandoned building alone, she first tried to contact Akira via short-range communication, but couldn't get through.

"Jamming smoke... This must be the effect of information interference. Once I get closer, I should be able to establish a connection."

The hunters who had entered earlier had used information interference jamming smoke to suppress the effects on their own team for the sake of advancing their combat advantage. However, this was done individually, and it inadvertently affected other teams.

Even so, as time passed, the effectiveness of the jamming smoke diminished considerably, and its impact on information-gathering equipment was not significant. However, due to the particles adhering to the surroundings, there was a strong impact on scouting and communication across walls and barriers.

Despite this condition, communication with the comprehensive support system was maintained, thanks to the use of effective specialized communication even in this state.

"Akira! It's me! I'm not here to fight! I want to talk!"

Yumina called out to Akira as she advanced through the building. Though armed, she kept her hands away from her gun, in a very dangerous situation where she couldn't immediately retaliate if attacked. If the Akira in this building were an impostor, she could be ambushed and killed on the spot.

Aware of this danger, Yumina continued to call out to Akira.

After a while, Akira appeared from around a corner in the hallway. He showed clear vigilance, firmly holding his gun. Seeing Akira's gaze directed not at her but behind her, Yumina smiled to reassure him.

"It's just me. You're safe."

Even so, Akira remained cautious, scanning Yumina's surroundings and behind her. Yumina didn't think Akira suspected her of lying, but she also didn't think there was absolutely no one else trying to gain an advantage. She waited for a moment.

When Akira finally judged that there were no hidden enemies or reinforcements, he lowered his gun. Yumina let out a small sigh of relief and followed Akira's gesture to follow him.

Akira led Yumina to a room within the building, a place where it would be easy to escape and difficult to be ambushed. Then, he relaxed and softened his expression.

"Long time no see, Yumina. So, what's the talk? Came to surrender?"

"First, let's get each other up to speed. I heard about Akira from the person who came back, but I didn't quite understand it."

Akira's expression clouded slightly.

"...Even if I tell you, you won't believe it, right?"

"Still. I can't say I don't believe a story I haven't heard. So, let's start with that. I'll be honest too, even if you don't believe me, Akira."

"...Okay."

If Yumina asked him like that, Akira couldn't take a dismissive attitude like "Nobody would believe me anyway" while talking to her. So, he decided to start talking.

Akira and Yumina finished exchanging information. Yumina, who heard more than she had imagined, was quite surprised.

"Akira, you managed to defeat such a giant guy. I'm impressed."

"Yeah, somehow... Or rather, I feel like I said something outrageous even though I didn't intend to."

There was no evidence. All he had were his words.

Akira's information gathering equipment did not leave any records, such as combat logs. Due to Alpha's modifications to maximize its performance, processes such as constant data saving were completely omitted.

Normally, it would be fine because Alpha remembers the contents. However, their connection was currently severed. Still, there were some records left in the bike's scouting equipment, but it was blown away along with the bike.

In other words, Akira was saying things that seemed like nonsense without any evidence.

Even so, Yumina believed Akira's story.

"Yeah, I believe you. You don't seem like you're lying, and I saw Akira's strength firsthand at the Iida Commercial District Ruins. And you've upgraded your equipment since then, right? It wouldn't be strange if Akira could do it."

"...Is that so. Thanks."

She believed in what he said. Akira was happy. Yumina smiled too and joked lightly.

"Besides, if you were lying, wouldn't you tell a more believable story?"

"That's true."

There was a cheerful atmosphere between friends, like a joke, in the room. It was a precious moment for Akira, but its value made it end quickly.

Yumina switched her focus.

"So, if we align our stories, it would mean that because the fake Akira fled to where the real Akira happened to be, we ended up in this situation... but it's difficult to expect others to believe that."

Unlike Akira, whose testimony was the only evidence, there were clear images of the fake Akira. In addition, Akira was also suspected of being involved with the nationalists. And among the hunters surrounding this building, there were those who had lost comrades to Akira. Yumina also thought it was impossible.

"Akira. Let me ask anyway. Will you surrender? I know you're incredibly strong. But aren't you more exhausted than ever?"

"Sorry, but I refuse."

"...I see. But what are you planning to do then? You're surrounded, you know?"

"I'm just planning to wait until the communication interference is fixed. After that, I'll contact Inabe and ask him to do something. If that doesn't work, I'll figure it out then."

Akira hoped for the restoration of communication with Alpha, and that was his main plan, but he couldn't tell Yumina. Regardless of relying on Alpha or Inabe, all he could do now was wait.

"Inabe... He's one of the city's executives, right? Can we expect anything from him?"

If the city's executives intervened with their authority, things might work out. Yumina hoped so too.

"I'm not sure, but apparently, this situation is part of the power struggle between Inabe and Udagima, and at least Inabe might do his best."

"...What do you mean?"

"Well, I heard it from that guy, but..."

Yumina's expression turned stern upon hearing that.

"What's that... Is it true?"

"Well, I only heard it from him, so I don't know the truth. If we could establish

communication with the city, we could ask acquaintances to investigate, but that's impossible right now."

"I see... Akira. I'm going back now. Please. Try to behave. We're hunters, and it's pointless to get involved in the power struggle of the city. I'll try to persuade Katsuya when I return."

"Got it."

Originally intending to wait for the communication interference to be fixed in this building, Akira nodded firmly at Yumina.

Yumina nodded back and hurriedly headed for Katsuya.

After parting ways with Yumina, Akira moved to another location, sat down, and closed his eyes. Manipulating his perception of time and reality's resolution both strained the brain. Rest was necessary.

He decided to take a nap. It was an extremely dangerous act, but it posed no problem for Akira now. He was sure he would wake up if it became dangerous.

Thanks to Alpha's powerful support, which had gradually dulled his senses all this time. It was why Akira survived the back alleys of the slum district. He had regained his sharpness in sensing impending danger by breaking free from his reliance on Alpha.

He had to sleep in an environment where death was constantly lurking. Just like back then, feeling the same danger.

Episode 187 Akira and Yumina

Akira wakes up from his nap. He had to wake up. There was an unfounded conviction, an instinct.

He gets up and takes deep breaths. Akira feels himself slowly calming down. But that calmness was also a kind of resignation.

He returns to the room where he spoke with Yumina before his nap. He wasn't surprised to find Yumina there. Even when he saw Yumina's face, which bore a somewhat desperate determination, he couldn't be surprised.

"...Akira. Won't you surrender? Please."

"...No."

Yumina hasn't let go of her gun. Akira couldn't be surprised.



Having returned to Katsuya, Yumina attempted to persuade him. However, Katsuya's response was not favorable.

"Katsuya, just because we have considerable support doesn't mean we're mercenaries for Udajima. We're hunters, and we should observe from the sidelines here."

"Yumina, that's assuming he really has nothing to do with the Nationalists. Just because he says so, doesn't mean it's true, there's no evidence, right? Retreating for such a reason is impossible."

"That evidence was mentioned by that person. Not Akira. ...Wait, where is he?"

"He went somewhere. He withdrew, saying he didn't want to get involved in the power struggle of the city, unless it was to suppress the Nationalists."

"That's exactly it. We shouldn't get involved either."

Persistently trying to persuade him, Yumina found Katsuya stubborn. She attributed Katsuya's attitude to his sense of responsibility as the leader of a large unit. She also thought his argument had some validity.

So Yumina first staunchly proposed a retreat, then softened her stance as if compromising.

"So, Katsuya, how about this? If long-distance communication is restored and we receive a direct surrender offer from the city, maybe Akira will give up right away. Until then, we'll continue to besiege Akira here to prevent his escape. We won't enter. If Akira attempts to flee, then we'll attack. How does that sound?"

Yumina conceded. She made sure to impress upon Katsuya the need for compromise.

"Um, well, in that case..."

Even Katsuya, with his close childhood friend saying so, felt inclined to reconsider. With Yumina showing concession, he thought it might be acceptable.

But then, communication came in for Katsuya.

"Oh, Yumina. Mizuha's calling, excuse me for a moment."

"Understood."

Given that Katsuya seemed willing to compromise, Yumina smiled reassuringly and nodded.

Entering the command vehicle to take the call, Katsuya received praise from Mizuha. The news of Katsuya's team defeating Tiol had already reached Mizuha through the defensive forces' deployed multi-legged relay device.

"This is truly remarkable! With this, you're practically at the top of the hunters in Kugamayama City! With such accomplishments, Drankam is practically in our hands! There won't be any more petty factional disputes! Katsuya! Thank you so much!"

"...No, this is all thanks to your support, Mizuha-san. Thank you very much as well. However, we're not done here yet. I'm sorry, but could we discuss this later?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I wanted to express my gratitude before Udajima's takeover. Since I'll be changing roles soon, I wanted to be polite."

The communication shifted from Drankam's regular line to the city's confidential line.

"It's Udajima. First, I want to thank you for your efforts. Thank you. With such achievements, I should be able to put quite a squeeze on Inabe."

"...No, thank you for your support."

"So please hold off on such discussions". Katsuya thought as he felt a slight irritation. But Udajima's conditions were different.

"...It's painful for me to say this to you, but I must. You asked me to assist Sheryl, didn't you? I agreed to that. And you've achieved so much. It would be logical for me to keep my promise and do something about Sheryl. However, the situation has become difficult."

"W-What do you mean!?"

To Katsuya's raised voice, Udajima replied in a stern tone, explaining the details. Through investigation, it was revealed that Tiol had been employed by Sheryl, albeit for a short time. Tiol was the boss of the Nationalists, and Akira, who was cooperating with Sheryl, was working with Tiol, and now has become the new boss. Furthermore, it was discovered that when the city's investigators, who had come to Sheryl for Nationalist inquiries, were killed by Akira, Sheryl was present at the scene.

With all these circumstances aligning, even with his authority as a city official, it would be impossible to treat Sheryl solely as a victim, even if she were truly innocent. Udajima explained this.

Upon hearing this, Katsuya became distressed.

"T-That's... can't we do something!? Oh! There's a possibility that Akira might be an impostor! What about that?"

"What do you mean?"

Udajima responded with a severe tone upon hearing the details.

"Unfortunately, the data proving Akira's presence at the base has already reached us. It won't be overturned by his testimony alone."

"B-But if we investigate..."

"Rather, if such a theory arises, Inabe would likely make the Akira at the base out to be a fake, even if it means killing the real Akira, to erase the fact that their ally was a Nationalist. And it might tarnish your achievements. By treating an unrelated hunter as the boss of the Nationalists and causing many hunters to die, you'd be criticized for your mistake. Begging won't change anything. That's why I say this is difficult."

Katsuya pleaded with a pained expression.

"Please... isn't there any way...? I want to save Sheryl. Please."

After a brief silence, Udajima responded.

"...This is a matter of possibility. There's no guarantee. If you defeat Akira, maybe something can be done."

If a request came from hunters who had defeated both Akira and Tiol, who had caused such a commotion, the city's administrative council might be moved to action. At the very least, it couldn't be ignored. If Inabe could remove Sheryl from being a suspect, he might turn a blind eye. That's what Udajima said.

And there, Katsuya found hope.

"...Understood. I'll try."

"...I see. Then you must act quickly. Once the fighting around the rear communication lines settles down, Inabe will likely send troops. There isn't much time. I wish you the best of luck."

With that, the communication ended. Katsuya stood there silently for a while, his head slightly bowed. However, when he lifted his head, all traces of hesitation were gone.

Katsuya had made up his mind.

Upon hearing Katsuya's return and his intention to storm the building, Yumina was surprised.

"Katsuya!? Why..."

"Yumina. I'm sorry. There are some things going on."

"What things...?"

Yumina tried to inquire further, but seeing Katsuya's determined expression, she realized it would be futile. So, Yumina also resolved herself.

"...I understand. But before that, let me try to persuade Akira one more time. If Akira knows you're serious, he might change his mind and surrender. He wasn't told to kill Akira, right? If Akira surrenders, that should be fine."

"...Understood. Be careful."

Yumina nodded and went back into the building alone.

Katsuya watched her go. He couldn't say it was futile. Yumina had returned safely once before. She'll be fine, he thought. With that in mind, he turned away, allowing himself to prioritize his own desires over the pleading of his precious childhood friend, refusing to admit that it was selfishness, and feeling a pang of guilt.



Yumina stood face to face with Akira.

"Akira... Won't you surrender? Please."

"...No."

"...I see."

She knew she would be refused. Yet she asked anyway. Just to make herself understand that there was nothing more she could do.

"Akira... Can't you back off? I don't want to kill you."

"I don't want to kill you." The words surprised even Akira as they left his mouth.

"...Sorry. I know."

She knew Akira harbored feelings for her. Perhaps those feelings could slow his actions even just a bit. Yumina exploited even that, fully aware of how despicable her actions were. But if it meant closing even a tiny bit of the immense gap in power, she would use it.

"...I see."

Indeed, it had an effect.

Yumina was serious. If so, then the fight had already begun, even though they weren't moving. It wouldn't be surprising if Katsuya's reinforcements arrived at any moment. By not moving now, Akira could buy time until reinforcements arrived, increasing his advantage.

Even though he understood this, Akira couldn't bring himself to move. He couldn't initiate a fight with Yumina.

In a battle where the outcome could be decided in an instant, and where Yumina, in a situation where it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say she was conceding that instant to him, Akira still concentrated to win.

Akira's vision began to blur from the outside. The resolution of the reality in his consciousness was changing. In the harshly confined, overly vivid world, Yumina's figure seemed to shine brightly to Akira.

Yumina didn't think she could defeat Akira. She thought it would be difficult even to clash blades. Yet she was here, doing everything she could.

If Katsuya fought alongside Akira, Katsuya would likely protect her with all his might. Yumina had somehow realized this from their battle at Tiol's base.

And Akira was terrifyingly strong. If Katsuya fought alongside him, Katsuya would likely die protecting her. That was unacceptable. She had returned to Katsuya's side to protect him. Not to be saved by him.

Katsuya sacrificing himself to protect her was absolutely out of the question.

Driven by these strong emotions, Yumina decided to confront Akira alone to prevent a situation where Katsuya would sacrifice himself to protect her. And disregarding her own survival, she resolved to inflict as much damage on Akira as possible to increase Katsuya's chances of survival. Even if it meant exchanging her own life for Akira's minor injuries, if it could slightly increase the chance of Katsuya surviving, then it was worth it.

Facing Akira, Yumina had already pushed her manipulation of subjective time to its limit. But that wasn't enough.

Katsuya wouldn't die. Absolutely not. With that determination, Yumina pried open her own talent. In the world where time flowed incredibly slowly, Yumina's vision was gradually engulfed in white from the outside.

Yumina moved. Akira moved too. In the completely white world where they could only see each other, Akira and Yumina began their deadly duel.





Katsuya had finished preparing for the assault and was awaiting Yumina's return. Then, a notification from the comprehensive support system indicated that Yumina was engaged in combat.

"Damn it! Let's move in!"

Regretting sending only Yumina to confront Akira, Katsuya hurried to Yumina's location with his comrades.



The battle begins. Yumina first attempts to dodge sideways with a kick-off from the floor, recognizing that standing still in an indoor environment with no cover is like presenting oneself as an easy target for a charged bullet. She knows that Akira is using C-Bullets; bullets powerful enough to penetrate the armor of a Black Wolf and even topple giants, and she doesn't believe her reinforced suit's armor can withstand such firepower. Prioritizing evasion over defense, Yumina relies on her enhanced physical abilities to swiftly move around and evade Akira's line of fire.

At the same time, she fires her gun at Akira while keeping it aimed at him. Instead of aiming for precise shots, she utilizes the total number of rounds in the extended magazine for continuous rapid fire, aiming to cut Akira off with a barrage of bullets. She doesn't intend to stop this barrage until the end of the battle, fully aware that her opponent is Akira and prepared to continue until her magazine is empty, believing she won't survive past that point.

With the manipulation of perceived time, the world around her slows down significantly. Despite her rapid movements, facilitated by the enhanced capabilities of her suit, Yumina feels as though her actions, such as raising her gun to aim at Akira, are sluggish due to the weight and resistance of the weapon.

In the midst of her continuous barrage of gunfire, Yumina notices Akira attempting to draw a blade while dodging the bullets.

(A blade? Is he out of ammo? Or is he conserving rounds for later? Either way, it works for me!)

Expecting a gunfight, Yumina is surprised when Akira closes the distance, intending to engage her with the blade. However, she notes that the length of Akira's blade is not extraordinary, leading her to believe that Akira must be quite fatigued. With this realization, Yumina continues to maintain distance from Akira while continuing her gunfire.

Despite the confined space, Yumina moves irregularly and swiftly, firing bullets that rain throughout the room, riddling the sturdy walls with holes. Akira attempts to weave through the barrage and close the distance with Yumina. While Yumina's movements are limited to the flat surface of the floor, Akira's agility allows him to utilize multiple dimensions, including walls and even the ceiling, to dodge the bullets with three-dimensional movements.

(H avoid it!? His strength is incredible!)

However, Akira still struggles to close the distance with Yumina. Yumina realizes that despite her own limited movements compared to Akira's, the high-speed combat has already taken its toll on her. Considering that Akira must be enduring an even greater strain to maintain his extreme movements, Yumina believes that Akira will reach his limit first.

She entertains the thought that if she continues the fight as is, she might win.

But Yumina quickly dismisses that idea.

(No! Katsuya should be on his way here! If he arrives before it's over, he might do something reckless to save me. And then, Akira might take advantage of that opening and kill him. That's unacceptable. In other words, I must end this fight before Katsuya arrives. Otherwise, coming here alone would have been meaningless. I'm here to help Katsuya.)

With that determination, amidst the intense back-and-forth of the battle, Yumina steps further into the brink of danger. Drawing her own blade, she deliberately closes the distance between herself and Akira.

Swinging the blade she received from Akira with the intention of killing him, even though she didn't receive it for that purpose, Yumina extends its length beyond her own body and strikes out.

With a flash, Akira evaded the strike. However, right after his evasive maneuver, Yumina's gunfire closed in on him. To avoid it, Akira was forced to execute high-strain evasive maneuvers.

Closing the distance thanks to Yumina's approach, Akira swung his blade. Yumina reciprocated. Their blades clashed fiercely, momentarily halting Akira's movement due to the recoil.

Yumina's gun barrel was then aimed at him. To evade it forcibly, Akira was pushed into even higher-strain actions.

Their blades sliced through the air around them as gunfire continued relentlessly. It had only been a few tens of seconds since the start of the battle, yet due to the extreme manipulation of perceived time, it felt like hours had passed. They engaged in a relentless battle that demanded constant vigilance.

Yumina's movements had already surpassed the capability of the comprehensive support system to aid. Her body felt as if it were liquefying under the immense strain, yet she pressed on, squeezing out every bit of her talent, life, and prayers to push Akira back.

But even then, she couldn't reach Akira.

This was the first time Yumina had consciously manipulated the resolution of her perceived reality. On the other hand, Akira had experienced this several times before and had become accustomed to it. It was natural for Yumina to reach her limit first.

As Yumina's movements slowed significantly, Akira seized the opportunity. He lunged forward and pierced Yumina's heart with his blade. Then, he deflected Yumina's blade and gun with his hand, immobilizing her in an embrace.

Yet Yumina didn't die immediately. The highly potent restorative potion she had consumed to the limit beforehand was keeping her barely alive with its extraordinary healing effects. However, with the blade piercing her heart, she couldn't sustain her life. Removing the

blade immediately might save her, but Akira was obstructing that.

Yumina struggled. She summoned every ounce of remaining strength.

But her reinforced suit had already consumed massive amounts of energy due to her reckless movements, significantly reducing its output. Additionally, the control device was damaged when her heart was pierced, rendering it inoperative.

And Yumina's body itself was under immense strain from the battle. The effects of the massive intake of restorative potion had been mostly consumed during the fight. With her heart pierced, she had no strength left to repel Akira.

The effects of the restorative potion were about to fade completely. With that, she would die. There was no saving her. Yet even as she understood this, she smiled.

(It's futile, isn't it...? But did I do everything I could...?)

Yumina thought so, feeling a strange sense of satisfaction despite her defeat.

But then it happened. While still embracing Yumina, Akira fired at the room's entrance. It was a suppression shot aimed at Katsuya's team, who had finally arrived.

(Suppression shot? Why...? Akira's remaining ammo should be almost depleted...)

That's why Akira had used the blade—or so Yumina thought. But there were enough remaining bullets for suppression shots, and Akira had enough rounds left to easily shoot her without using the blade.

Then why did Akira use the blade? Yumina questioned this.

And then she realized.

(No way... Akira... He was that strong?)

Akira still had enough composure to choose how to kill her in this situation. Upon this realization, Yumina was stunned.

Yumina's speculation was correct. If Akira had killed her with C-Bullets, there might not even be a body left due to their immense power. Akira didn't want to do that himself and chose the blade instead of the gun.

Using a different method to kill didn't change the fact that he was killing her. It was simply self-satisfaction. Understanding this, Akira chose the blade. And instead of severing her in half, he aimed for her heart with a single thrust.

Yumina had underestimated Akira's strength. Realizing this, she regretted her decisions.

Once, Yumina had pointed a gun at Katsuya to stop him. This time, she didn't do the same because she knew that even if she attempted it, she would just be restrained by Katsuya's team. Then she would be left behind while Katsuya's team fought Akira. That would be futile, so she chose to fight Akira alone.

But if Akira was this strong, what she should have done was to fight alongside Akira to force Katsuya to retreat. That's what she thought, and she regretted her wrong choice.

(Sorry... Katsuya... I made a mistake...)

As the effects of the restorative potion faded completely, Yumina's consciousness was engulfed by darkness and faded away. Yumina's life ended while still embraced by Akira.

As Yumina's lifeless body collapsed, it conveyed her death to Akira.

Akira gently laid Yumina on the floor and withdrew the blade from her corpse.

The comprehensive support system notified the team of Yumina's death. Katsuya's shout echoed from nearby the room's entrance.



After Yumina initiated the battle, Katsuya rushed towards her with all his might. There was undoubtedly a feeling of wishful thinking for the safety of his precious childhood friend.

However, his objective was to provide assistance as part of the team, and as the leader of that unit, Katsuya tended to stay towards the rear. Therefore, when Akira's group attempted to enter the room and received suppression fire, it was the vanguard of the unit, not Katsuya.

Later, the comprehensive support system notified of Yumina's death. Katsuya rushed into the room with a shout. It wasn't a unit action, but a personal one by Katsuya. Hence, it didn't lead to an immediate group assault.

Inside the room, Katsuya confronted Akira. His comrades followed into the room and took up positions behind Katsuya. Yet, an immediate fight didn't break out, as Yumina's death weighed heavily on both Akira and Katsuya.

Akira slowly backed away, allowing Katsuya to approach Yumina, who lay on the floor.

As Katsuya walked up to Yumina, he fell to his knees and embraced her lifeless body.

Silence enveloped the room. Too short for mourning Yumina's death, yet too long as a prelude to battle. And then Akira spoke.

"... I'll let you go, so leave."

"Do you really think I'll leave?"

Unlike Akira's somewhat quiet voice, Katsuya's was filled with brewing anger.

"I see."

Akira felt both anger and relief simultaneously. Anger at Katsuya for being the kind of person who made him kill Yumina, and relief that if Katsuya was leaving now, then what was the point of killing Yumina?

Yet, he also harbored emotions beyond both.

From now on, he would trample on Yumina's feelings. He would kill those who were willing to sacrifice themselves to save him.

With that thought, Akira slowly began to move sideways. Following Akira's lead, Katsuya gently placed Yumina on the floor and started walking in the same direction as Akira.

If they continued to fight in this place, even if Yumina was already dead, she would be involved. So, they needed to separate. They needed to change the location of the confrontation. Without saying a word, both Akira and Katsuya agreed on this course of action.

They moved to the edge of the room. And in the next moment, as if by mutual agreement, Akira and Katsuya sprang into action.

Akira had killed many before. With his bloodstained past, he felt no hesitation in killing now.

Yet, he had never killed someone he didn't want to kill. Not even in the alleys of the slums had he done such a thing.

Both indirectly and directly, Akira and Katsuya exposed their fury towards the cause. Bullets laden with each other's murderous intent flew through the narrow room.

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Episode 188 The End of Hope

Having finished the confrontation with Yumina, Akira now engaged in battle with Katsuya and his group. Katsuya and his comrades were willing to be blown to bits if it meant taking Akira down. He used the Charge Bullet without hesitation, simultaneously trying to evade the enemy's line of fire with all his might.

As soon as the battle began, Katsuya shifted his focus from confronting Akira based on personal feelings to eliminating him as part of the unit. He had always been willing to ignore his own injuries for the sake of his comrades. With that mindset, he attempted to kill Akira without regard for minor wounds.

As a result, the initial exchange of gunfire ended in a draw. Akira was hit all over, but using the momentum, he darted into the corridor, escaping from the room, and continued to suppress with gunfire as he ran down the passage, initially putting distance between himself and Katsuya's group.

"...In that moment, he shot so precisely, there was no escape route. Good coordination. He won't survive next time."

Even if multiple people fired simultaneously, if they aimed at the same spot, the gunfire would converge, narrowing the attack range. By simply moving away from the intersection of gunfire, even if targeted by many, it was possible to avoid the shots.

To prevent this, Katsuya's group didn't aim directly at Akira but fired simultaneously to ensure the paths of the bullets didn't intersect the Force Field Armor

Even Akira couldn't dodge every shot. He switched his reinforced suit's output to briefly increase defensive armor. However, the more he expanded the bullet curtain, the lower its density. Akira managed to withstand the gunfire somehow.

Still, he wasn't unscathed. While his reinforced suit had endured even Black Wolf's artillery, the equipment of Katsuya's group was prepared specifically for dealing with Akira. The power of their gunfire was high, and to withstand it, Akira had nearly depleted the remaining energy of his reinforced suit. Yet, he couldn't completely nullify the impact of the shots.

As Akira turned the corner, cutting off Katsuya's line of fire, he hastily consumed a recovery potion and quickly exchanged the gun and energy pack of his reinforced suit.

"I've used up the energy pack now..."

He was increasingly cornered. Despite wearing a stern expression, Akira hadn't lost his fighting spirit. He gathered whatever slim chances he could to win and continued running through the building.

Having fought with the Hunters, Akira had a decent grasp of the building's layout. He also had an idea of advantageous terrain for fighting against the unit. He aimed for those locations first.

Having survived even after killing Yumina, Akira had no intention of dying, no matter how dire the situation became.

Right after the battle began, Katsuya's first move was to step back while watching Akira's movements with the gun aimed at himself. Moving left or right wouldn't help evade. He calmly assessed the situation while facing the accurate muzzle aimed at him.

The Charge Bullet was fired from Akira. As he had already depleted his energy tank, the shot didn't have the same power as when he targeted Black Wolf or the Giants. Still, it had enough power to kill Katsuya if it hit him.

But it missed. Those near Katsuya acted as shields, maximizing their force field armor output and intercepting the gunfire. Katsuya's retreat was to increase the number of shields intercepting the line of fire. Although the Charge Bullet pierced through three shields, it didn't penetrate the bodies of the four individuals.

Others attempted to shoot Akira, but he managed to escape without being defeated.

In this brief exchange, two people died, one was mortally wounded, and another was seriously injured. Katsuya's expression contorted in frustration as if to replace the tears of grief.

"...Damn it... That bastard... Let's go after him!"

He would have his revenge. Driven by his fury, Katsuya commanded the unit to pursue Akira.

Even the slight feeling of unease he had remembered was not enough to stop Katsuya now.



The fierce battle between Akira and Katsuya's group continues. Akira moves around the abandoned building, and Katsuya's team desperately follows suit, but the situation remains a stalemate in terms of offense and defense.

Katsuya knows that if he can once again attack Akira with the entire squad, he'll win. While creating such an ideal situation is difficult, pushing the opponent into a similar scenario increases the chances of winning.

Of course, Akira understands this too. To prevent it from happening and to individually defeat the enemy as much as possible in situations where their numerical advantage is difficult to utilize, Akira assaults separate squads blocking the passage and attacks the forefront.

As Akira advances through the passage, another squad lying in ambush appears ahead. There are four opponents. Meanwhile, Katsuya's main force is approaching from behind. Naturally, being caught in between would put Akira at a disadvantage.

So, Akira accelerates towards the four in front. Although the passage isn't particularly wide, it's not so narrow that four lines of fire can block escape routes entirely. Dodging incoming bullets, Akira closes the distance with a three-dimensional movement, avoiding enemy lines of fire by kicking off walls and ceilings.

Simultaneously, Akira fires a charged bullet. The bullet, with increased power from depleting the gun's energy pack, pierces through the enemy's defense and blows off the target's head. Headless bodies fall to the floor.

With each added body, the number of firing lines decreases. This advantageous situation allows Akira to close in while attacking. By the time Akira reaches the enemy, three people have been taken down, and one more is eliminated upon arrival. Akira blows off all four heads.

As Akira attempts to remove the empty energy pack from the gun and replace it with another, a dead body that had lost its head suddenly moves, aiming the gun it had been gripping at Akira. Another dead body moves simultaneously, attempting to grab Akira's legs to restrain movement. It's the integrated support system remotely operating the dead bodies' powered suits.

While this surprise attack is effective, it doesn't catch Akira off guard. Reacting immediately, Akira dodges the gunfire, kicks away the assailant trying to grab the legs, and exchanges the energy pack. Then, Akira shoots the torso of the dead body.

The bullet pierces through, destroying the control unit of the powered suit. The dead body stops moving. Akira quickly deals with the other dead bodies and secures a victory.

However, there's no time to linger in this situation. But there's a slight reason to pause. From the lying corpses, Akira finds the opponent's spare energy pack. This explains why Akira could replace the seemingly empty energy pack.

Many high-ranking hunter-specific guns are equipped with robust authentication functions, allowing only authorized personnel from the individual or affiliated units to use them. However, such functions are rare in consumable items like energy packs, and most are manufactured to the same specifications, enabling their use across various products. This allowed Akira to use the opponent's energy pack.

Feeling a strange sense of nostalgia, Akira chuckles while holding the acquired energy pack and hastily retreats.

"Just because we're not in the back alleys of the slums doesn't mean we should start scavenging corpses now," Akira thinks to themselves.



In the corridor where the gruesome remains of their comrades lay, their heads blown off and bodies mutilated, Katsuya involuntarily came to a halt.

While the separate squad restrained Akira's movements, the main force launched a sudden assault. As the leader of the main force aiming to defeat Akira with this strategy, stopping meant wasting the sacrifices of the separate squad members. Yet Katsuya still halted.

The cause was a growing sense of unease Katsuya felt. Initially, it was so minor that it was disregarded amidst the fury. However, with each fallen comrade, it grew larger, eventually stopping Katsuya in their tracks.

Was there a fatal mistake they were making? Doubts arose, halting Katsuya.

But what was the mistake? They didn't know. What were they doing wrong? They couldn't tell. Was it really a mistake at all?

The comprehensive support system strongly recommended retreat to Katsuya. However, Katsuya refused. After losing so many comrades, they couldn't just flee alone. Driven by this determination, they had changed the system settings to not suggest retreat.

Seeking vengeance for Yumina. Avenging their comrades. No matter how much pain they endured, there couldn't be a mistake in that.

Katsuya's conviction to risk their life for their comrades led them to interpret the hesitation to stop the fight against Akira as mere doubts and reluctance.

The comprehensive support system, prohibited from suggesting retreat, made proposals under that condition. If retreat wasn't an option, then they had no choice but to defeat Akira, even if it meant significant losses for the unit. Making that judgment, they presented a plan to Katsuya, even if it meant a mutual destruction scenario.

And Katsuya accepted that plan. If defeating Akira meant shooting themselves along with the enemy, they didn't hesitate.

Katsuya believed that was truly them.

But was it really? The burgeoning sense of unease within Katsuya had grown so large that it was on the verge of being questioned, yet it hadn't quite reached that point.

Katsuya pressed on, leading many who admired them.



Akira, continuing his movement through the building, noticed a change in the reactions behind him and frowned slightly.

(...They're fast. If they rush that much, they won't be able to dodge my shots...) While Akira was evading to avoid being surrounded, if the enemy was recklessly charging, he would wait and counterattack.

The enemy understood this, so they shouldn't be able to close the distance so easily. However, Akira detected Katsuya's main force closing in rapidly, making him suspicious of a trap.

Even so, since the enemy was moving that way, Akira had to respond. He stopped, turned around, and aimed his gun, ready to intercept the enemy force emerging from the T-junction in the corridor.

(...No signs of stopping. Hey, are they seriously going to charge in? The vanguard will just be a target.)

Confused by the enemy's inexplicable actions, Akira fired at the leading vanguard that sprang out from the side passage.

The shot hit but didn't kill. The enemy had used reserve energy packs to boost the output of their force field armor to the maximum. The output was so high that it placed excessive strain on the wearer's body.

Even so, Akira didn't see this as a threat, as it only meant he couldn't kill them instantly. The impact of the shots would prevent them from aiming their guns, and continuous fire would eventually bring them down.

At that moment, Katsuya's main force emerged, using the vanguard as a shield. The vanguard obstructed Akira's line of sight, preventing him from targeting Katsuya.

But the same applied to the enemy. Akira only needed to keep firing until he pierced through the vanguard and shot the ones behind. Just as Akira thought that, the situation

changed.

Katsuya and his men shot through their own comrades to hit Akira.

Caught by the simultaneous barrage, Akira was sent flying from the impact of the bullets.

("...They shot through their own! And not only that, but the ones in front also synchronized their force field armor to drop at the moment they were shot! Would they go that far?!"")

When a strong shield is pierced, the bullet's power decreases. But if the shield is like paper, the bullet retains its power. The enhanced suits with force field armor deactivated were like paper to Katsuya's bullets. The multitude of bullets pierced through, leaving Akira no room to dodge.

Still, Akira managed to defend himself in time. Maximizing the output of his enhanced suit's force field armor, he avoided fatal injuries. Having already taken down many opponents, the initial barrage's intensity had decreased, which also helped Akira survive.

Even so, the attack was severe. The impact of the shots sent him crashing into the wall at the back, rebounding off it.

(...This is bad! If they pursue now, I'll die!)

In mid-air, Akira, realizing the dire situation, tried to escape with all his strength before hitting the ground and before Katsuya's men could follow up.

However, he could tell his movements were sluggish. It was impossible. He wouldn't make it. Even Akira himself thought so.

Contrary to his expectations, he made it. He managed to duck into a side passage, escaping Katsuya's line of fire.

(...I made it? How? It should have been the perfect opportunity... Was it because some of my bullets hit them too?)

Puzzled by his own survival, Akira fled into a nearby room.



Katsuya was stunned.

(What have I done...? Did I shoot...my own team?!)

He dropped his gun and fell to his knees, overwhelmed by confusion. He couldn't believe what he had done. In a sense, Katsuya had returned to his senses, and the memories of his actions flooded back, each one more unbelievable than the last. He recalled using his comrades as shields against Akira's gunfire, issuing commands without hesitation to sacrifice those he once vowed to protect.

Katsuya's scream echoed through the corridor.

As an advanced connection user, Katsuya had unknowingly incorporated many individuals into his local network. This network allowed for increased opportunities to transmit his will telepathically to his members, fostering a collective that synced with Katsuya's desires and propelled his rise as a hunter. Typically, information flowed from Katsuya to the members, but he wasn't entirely immune to their influence. The larger the network grew, the stronger the influence. In extreme cases, this could even reverse the master-subordinate relationship.

This was already happening when Katsuya decided to defeat Akira to save Sheryl, influenced by Udajima's proposal. When Udajima requested Katsuya to capture or kill Akira at the Drankam facility, the collective desire of those wishing for Katsuya's ascension pushed him strongly. This influence was so potent that it repelled interference from entities like the girl behind Katsuya, similar to Alpha.

If left unchecked, this tendency could completely sever Katsuya from his own influence, making ongoing experimentation difficult. The girl, concerned about this, altered the tendencies of the local network. She manipulated it so that the members would identify with Katsuya, equating themselves with him. This reasserted Katsuya's dominant decision-making within the network, although it progressed the terminalization of the members. For the girl, this was not an issue. Katsuya, too, began to see his comrades as extensions of himself, rather than as individuals to protect.

One might sacrifice limbs for the head but not the head for the limbs. Hence, Katsuya, the "head," would survive by sacrificing the "limbs," his comrades. This was why Katsuya had protected Yumina during the battle at the Tiol base, recognizing her clearly as a comrade not part of his network. Other comrades were merely extensions of himself, not individuals to protect.

When a network member died, they were removed from the network, and Katsuya's recognition shifted from self to comrade. This explained Katsuya's grief over his comrades' deaths, despite treating the injured dismissively and using comrades as expendable resources. However, this perception began to waver due to various factors: the disruption of the girl's network interference, the mental shock of Yumina's death, and the large number of network members lost in a short time, destabilizing the network.

These factors combined, causing Katsuya's recognition to waver significantly, finally snapping him back to reality. In a twisted sense, Katsuya regained his sanity amidst the horrific reality he had created.

In this fragile state of mind, Katsuya was barely held together by the voices of his comrades.

"Katsuya...! Get a grip...!"

"Airi..."

Airi's desperate call brought Katsuya back. He realized the battle with Akira was still ongoing. He had lost many comrades, but there were still survivors. There was no time for self-recrimination. His priority was to ensure his comrades' survival.

With this resolve, Katsuya gritted his teeth and spoke.

"...Retreat! Airi! I'm transferring command and the authority of the comprehensive support system to you. Lead everyone in retreat."

"What about you, Katsuya?"

"I'll stay and hold him off."

"No, if we're retreating, you should come too—"

"Airi!"

Katsuya's shout made Airi tremble slightly.

"Please... Go... I'm begging you..." Katsuya pleaded, almost in tears.

He had something to accomplish, even at the cost of his life. This resolve was Katsuya's support.

Confronted with Katsuya's anguished determination, Airi couldn't refuse his plea.

"...Understood. We'll retreat."

Airi led the surviving comrades away. Watching them leave, Katsuya felt a slight sense of relief, knowing he wouldn't involve them further.



Having steadied himself as best he could in the room, he had taken refuge in, Akira was deliberating his next move.

(I'm out of recovery medicine. I've swapped out the energy pack, but my reinforced suit is on its last legs. What should I do...?)

So far, he had been running away, but what if he turned the tables and attacked? Katsuya, who had been commanding from the rear, had now come to the front. Perhaps their forces were also reaching their limit, which might explain their reckless behavior.

What if he tried to escape the building? Outside, without a bike, he would be pursued by the combat vehicles used by the nation-builders. That seemed untenable, but it might be better than fighting Katsuya's forces inside the building.

Maybe he should just keep running. He had survived this long. Perhaps he could hold out until the communication disruption was resolved.

Akira considered his options, unable to decide.

(...For now, I should at least move. It seems like they aren't pursuing me immediately, for some reason.)

Akira had escaped to this room to buy time, but it wasn't suitable for a long standoff. He decided to move cautiously.

His entry into this room was largely by chance. As he wandered through the building, he remembered this room's proximity and decided to enter. That was all.

This was the room where Akira had killed Yumina. Her body still lay there.

Airi was also there. Yumina was special to Airi. She intended to at least take Yumina's body back. With the retreat in progress, she had sent the others ahead and stopped by alone.

They hadn't expected to encounter each other here. The surprise froze both of them, and the sight of Yumina's body suppressed any immediate hostilities.

Even so, neither expected to be let go. A tense silence filled the room, broken only by Airi's voice.

"...I have a proposal. No guns."

"...Understood."

Akira holstered his gun and gripped his blade. Airi did the same, and they both charged simultaneously.

Airi's proposal was driven by calculated reasoning. She had no chance in a one-on-one gunfight. Previous battles had proven that. If there was even a slight chance of winning, Akira would already be dead from their prior engagements.

Akira must have understood this too. But in this room, fearing stray bullets might hit Yumina, he might agree to Airi's proposal. In a blade fight, Airi had a better chance than in a gunfight.

Airi also wanted to kill Akira here and now, to avenge Yumina and to prevent the clearly unstable Katsuya from fighting him. Moreover, Akira was extremely worn out. Even if they retreated together, Akira would attack them again if he survived. After all that had happened, that was certain. And he would be fully rested then. Airi doubted they could win in that scenario.

Thus, she couldn't miss this golden opportunity. With this determination, Airi fought with all her might.

Their blades clashed repeatedly in high-speed exchanges, each swipe a lethal threat.

Akira's blade was of Old World made, capable of effortlessly slicing through Airi's anti-force field armored suit. Airi's blade, though modern, was equipped with the same anti-force field capabilities and had enough power to cut through Akira's heavily damaged reinforced suit. In terms of their ability to kill, there was little difference between the two weapons.

One misstep, one moment of hesitation, and either could die. They swung their blades in this precarious balance.

If Akira were at his full strength, he would have already defeated Airi. However, after a series of grueling battles, Akira was near his limit, unable to compensate for his exhaustion with willpower, determination, or resolve alone. Still, it was these very qualities that kept him standing. The guilt and regret over killing Yumina drove him to push his failing body beyond its limits.

(If I were to die here, I should have let Yumina kill me back then. I didn't allow that, so dying here is unacceptable.)

With this conviction, Akira fought with every ounce of his remaining strength.

Both fighters gave their all in this desperate struggle. Akira and Airi clashed, each putting forth their utmost effort.

Then, the decisive moment arrived.

Victory could have gone to either. But the difference in their combat experiences—Airi, accustomed to fighting within a team, and Akira, used to fighting alone—ultimately determined the outcome. Both realized they couldn't hold out much longer. They launched simultaneous deathblows, their blades slicing through the air as they passed each other at high speed.

It wasn't a mutual strike. Only Akira's blade found its mark, cutting through Airi.

Airi, her heart cleaved, and the control unit of her armored suit destroyed, collapsed from the stance of her final strike.

She wasn't dead yet but was beyond saving, and the battle's outcome was irreversible.

(I failed... Katsuya...)

Sinking into the pool of her own blood, Airi reached out mentally to Katsuya one last time.

At that moment, Airi saw Katsuya. It was more a vision than reality, an image of him transmitted through their local network.

Katsuya was running desperately to save her. He sensed her death and cried out in anguish.

In the hunter's profession, death was a constant companion. Many became accustomed to the deaths of comrades, friends, acquaintances, and strangers alike, accepting that they too could die at any moment. Still, Airi wanted Katsuya to grieve for her. She didn't want her death to be just another in the countless, insignificant deaths.

With the significant disruption in Katsuya's local network, Airi's sense of identification with him was completely severed. Just before her death, she remembered this wish.

Katsuya was mourning her death genuinely. That was enough.

Relieved that her most important wish had been fulfilled, Airi died with a faint smile.



Katsuya stayed at his position after parting ways with his comrades. Though he had claimed he would stay behind to hold off Akira, his real goal was to buy time until his comrades had successfully retreated. There was no need to actively seek out Akira; if Akira continued to flee, that was fine. If Akira attacked, Katsuya's presence would ensure he didn't reach the retreating comrades. Katsuya remained in place, monitoring the situation through the comprehensive support system until he confirmed that his comrades had reached the outside of the building.

(Alright. They just need to escape the building's perimeter... but where's Airi?)

Noticing Airi wasn't among those outside, Katsuya checked her position.

(Airi... I see... she's with Yumina...)

He couldn't bring himself to scold her for not retreating immediately.

Should he go help her or search for Akira? While Katsuya was still deciding, the situation changed. Airi had engaged Akira in combat.

Katsuya rushed to Airi with all his might. But he was too late. He hadn't been able to save Yumina, nor could he save Airi. He was supposed to protect them, even at the cost of his own life. But he failed. The crushing pain of this realization was almost unbearable.

The overwhelming emotional stress caused Katsuya's local network to shut down.

With the influence of the local network completely severed, Katsuya felt utterly alone in the world. It dawned on him.

Slowly, Katsuya began to walk. He had to finish what he had started.



Katsuya's appearance was so natural that Akira allowed him to approach without hesitation. The strange and inexplicable irritation that Akira had often felt when Katsuya was near was completely absent this time. There was no trace of hostility or murderous intent from Katsuya.

With calm footsteps, Katsuya approached Akira and spoke quietly, wearing a serene expression.

"...I have to ask. Will you surrender?"

"...I refuse."

"...Is that your final answer?"

"...It is. That's why I killed Yumina. So, no, I can't."

"...I see."

This time, Akira spoke.

"...Won't you withdraw now?"

"...I can't."

"...Is that your final answer?"

"...It is. That's why... I let everyone die. I can't stop now."

"...I see."

There was a peculiar understanding between them. If that was the case, then there was no other way. This mutual recognition led to a shared resolve.

Katsuya looked at Yumina and Airi, then discarded his gun and readied his blade. He understood that Airi had refrained from using her gun and that Akira had honored that decision. Akira, too, discarded his gun and readied his blade.

There was no hatred, anger, hostility, or murderous intent. Yet, neither could retreat, so they had to fight to the death to conclude what had begun.

Simultaneously, Akira and Katsuya stepped forward and swung their blades.

Katsuya, an unconscious Old-World connector, had influenced and been influenced by those around him since he was a child. In the orphanage, children who had lost their parents, guardians, and emotional support sought help from Katsuya, and he responded to their pleas. This repeated cycle of helping and being appreciated made helping others second nature to Katsuya.

When Katsuya left the orphanage and became a Hunter, he was even more sought after and relied upon. In the harsh life of a Hunter, where death was common, the desire to live was strong, and the gratitude toward those who helped was equally intense. The harsh conditions amplified the desires of those present: to be saved again, to overcome difficulties, to be led to victory, glory, and prosperity.

Katsuya lived in this constant state of being needed and desired, to the point where he no longer found it strange. Of course, Katsuya did not dislike this. He genuinely felt happy when he was appreciated for helping others and relied upon by his comrades. He willingly did it.

However, it was done because it was desired, not because he desired it. It wasn't that he wanted to help before he was needed; he was needed first.

That's why Katsuya clung to Sheryl. His desire to deepen his relationship with Sheryl was something Katsuya genuinely wanted, not something others sought from him. It was the first time he had a desire of his own. And in breaking free, even temporarily, from the influence of his local network, Katsuya could objectively see himself for the first time in a long while. He saw himself dragging everyone into his desires and causing their deaths.

Filled with feelings akin to atonement, Katsuya approached Akira.

Both Akira and Katsuya delivered their blows with all their might. There was no difference in the strength of their attacks.

However, there was a difference in the resolve that underpinned those blows.

To survive. To die if necessary.

The disparity in their desires determined the outcome. Akira's decisive strike reached its mark, while Katsuya's did not.

Katsuya's blade fell from his hand.

"...I see. I wasn't enough... I suppose that's how it is..."

Katsuya collapsed, crimson spreading across the floor. As his consciousness faded, the image of Yumina appeared in his mind. He remembered the moment he grabbed her hand to stop her from heading to the Iida Commercial District ruins.

If he hadn't let go of that hand, Yumina and Airi wouldn't have died. He regretted his mistake, smiling faintly with a sense of loneliness.

(Yumina... Airi... I'm sorry...)

In his final moments, Katsuya saw a vision of what could have been had he made the right choices. Regretting that he couldn't bring that vision to life, he breathed his last.

Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi, who had become Hunters on the same day in the same place, ended their lives on the same day in the same place.

Leaving his feelings behind, Akira departed from the scene. Behind him, the three bodies lay together.



Episode 189 Duty and Life

Though Akira had survived the deadly battle with Katsuya and his comrades, he was far from safe. The building was still surrounded by Hunters, and Akira was close to his limit. He was forcing his exhausted body and mind to keep moving through sheer willpower. He needed to find somewhere to hide and rest.

As soon as he left the room, Akira sensed a presence nearby. Startled, he reacted instinctively, swinging his Old-World blade at the unexpected figure in a spot where there had been no one, and where his information-gathering devices had detected nothing. However, the attack was effortlessly blocked.

"...What!?"

"Long time no see."

Holding the blade between her index and middle fingers, Tsubaki smiled warmly.

"Don't worry. I have no intention of fighting."

She released her grip on the blade. Akira, bewildered, sheathed his weapon. He was astonished by how easily his strike had been blocked, but even more so by the sudden appearance of Tsubaki in this place.

Tsubaki, who called herself a caretaker in an Old-World city, had previously been at odds with Alpha. With his connection to Alpha currently severed, Akira was half-confused about what to do with her standing before him.

Tsubaki offered him a capsule-like object.

"Here, use this. You look quite exhausted."

"Ah, thank you..."

Awkwardly, Akira accepted what appeared to be a recovery drug and consumed it. He immediately felt a sharp headache, but it passed quickly, and his condition improved dramatically. His pain subsided, fatigue vanished, and his mind cleared.

The Old-World recovery drug was remarkably effective. Akira exhaled deeply in relief.

"How do you feel?"

"Oh, much better, thank you."

"That's good to hear."

Tsubaki's demeanor was significantly different from when they had met in Tsubakihara. Akira felt uneasy, while Tsubaki continued to smile without concern for his discomfort.

"Let's move to a different location. I came to negotiate with you, but this isn't the right place."

"Uh, well, I..."

"Don't worry. I'll guarantee your safety while we talk."

"Ah... okay."

Unable to refuse, Akira reluctantly followed Tsubaki. Along the way, he noticed the destroyed cyborgs lying in the corridor but didn't realize that one of them was Nergo.

On the rooftop, Tsubaki gazed at the desolate ruins and spoke to Akira.

"It's a terrible sight, isn't it? Districts without a caretaker or where the caretaker has abandoned their duties often end up like this. It's truly lamentable. Do you remember the state of my managed district? The difference between it and this ruinous view is stark. It's a testament to my tireless management."

"Ah, yes, it is."

Akira, being a Hunter, contributed to the ruin of such sites. He interpreted Tsubaki's words as a veiled insult, feeling uneasy and replying in a slightly strained voice.

"Uh, so, about this negotiation..."

"Yes. I plan to expand my managed district and would like your assistance with the management tasks. Of course, I'll provide appropriate compensation. That's what I came to negotiate."

"I see... I'm sorry, but I have to decline."

"There's no need to rush to a conclusion. We have time. You can decide after hearing the specifics of the work and the details of the compensation. I promise to answer any questions honestly. Please take your time and consider what's in your best interest."

Akira felt cornered. He knew Tsubaki's reasoning was sound, but he couldn't decide alone. He thought it might be safe to mention Alpha, given Tsubaki's knowledge.

"Uh, actually, I've already taken on a job from Alpha, so I can't decide on anything without consulting her. And right now, my connection with Alpha is down, so it's difficult to talk about this..."

"This is actually an ideal situation. You can speak freely and ask anything without her knowing. Rest assured, it's perfectly safe."

Akira sensed something ominous in Tsubaki's words, and his expression grew wary.

"...How can you be so sure?"

"Because, under this communication blackout, it's impossible to reconnect with her."

"It could suddenly come back."

"It won't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm the one causing this communication blackout."

Akira was visibly shocked. He almost shouted at Tsubaki, realizing she was the reason for his predicament. He restrained himself and looked at her with a slightly hardened expression.

"...I'm sure you have your reasons, but, if possible, please lift the blockade now."

"No, I won't," Tsubaki replied with a smile.

Akira's expression grew very stern. But he couldn't do anything more. It was clear that he had no chance of winning against Tsubaki in a fight. Besides, it was they who had invaded the ruins. If he considered this communication blackout as a defensive measure against the city's security forces, he couldn't very well tell Tsubaki not to defend herself.

"You haven't had much time without her monitoring, have you? I recommend you enjoy and make good use of this time."

"Enjoy? I'm on the brink of death because of it."

"Don't worry. During our negotiations, I will guarantee your safety. If you agree to my proposal, your safety will be guaranteed as part of the reward."

"...Just to be clear, are you threatening to kill me if I don't agree?"

"No. I would simply leave you here and go back. It would be unfortunate to see you left for dead, but I am bound by many rules. I cannot escort you back to Kugamayama City unless it's part of an established agreement. Please understand."

"...I see."

Akira hesitated. He felt that the deal she proposed was fair. However, he couldn't bring himself to agree. At the same time, he knew he was almost out of options. Knowing the communication blackout was caused by Tsubaki meant that he couldn't rely on time to restore it. He also wasn't confident he could make it back to the city on his own.

(Somehow, if I could just manage to listen to her proposal and then convince her to escort me to the city in return for considering it... No, that won't work. From her attitude, it's clear she wants to finalize a deal with me while Alpha is out of the picture...)

Akira realized that his chances of survival were higher if he tried to persuade Tsubaki rather than attempting to return on his own. He continued to ponder how best to negotiate, but he wasn't adept at such things and couldn't come up with a brilliant idea.

Tsubaki interpreted Akira's struggle differently.

"If you're worried that our deal would mean abandoning Alpha's request and facing her retaliation, you can demand my assistance in smoothly terminating her request as part of our deal. I will help as much as I can."

Akira looked surprised. Seeing his reaction, Tsubaki felt encouraged and smiled even more.

However, Akira then spoke with a serious expression.

"Sorry, but I have no intention of abandoning Alpha's request. Even if I agree to your proposal, it will be after consulting with Alpha. I won't bend on that point."

Akira's response left Tsubaki with a surprised expression, which quickly turned into a perplexed one.

"With all due respect, to you, she must be an enigmatic entity, merely something called Alpha. If you're afraid of this unknown, powerful being, feel free to ask me about her true nature. I'll answer as best as I can."

"...Alpha's true nature, huh? Honestly, I'm very curious. But I'm not skilled enough to pretend I don't know something once I hear it. So, I'll refrain from asking."

Tsubaki's face grew even more puzzled.

"I don't understand. Given the current situation, I can't see why you would prioritize your deal with her over a deal with me."

"It's a matter of pride. I don't expect you to understand or concern yourself with it."

"May I ask about it, if you don't mind?"

"I owe Alpha a great deal. So, to repay that debt, I want to prioritize her requests as much as possible. That's all. ...Though, to be honest, I don't always prioritize it to the utmost, and she occasionally gives me a hard time about it," Akira said with a bitter smile.

Tsubaki continued to look at Akira seriously.

"A debt, you say. Is it something you need to worry about so much? She has her own agenda and objectives. That debt is merely the result of her using you for her purposes. In fact, haven't you been in quite a few tough spots because of her machinations?"

"Yeah, I have."

When Akira first met Alpha, he was attacked by a pack of Weapon Dogs, which were probably brought by Alpha. It was likely a test to see if he would follow her instructions properly. During the time in the industrial sector of Mihazono City ruins when Alpha's connection was cut off, it was actually for a very short time or not at all. It was probably the same as the training at the Yonozuka Station ruins, where Alpha simply stopped providing support.

That's why her support returned at the perfect timing in the industrial sector. It was just a way to demonstrate her support power once again.

Comparing the current situation with the time he was swallowed whole by the pseudo-synthetic snake, Akira could now tell if the connection was truly cut off or just pretending to be. Despite these thoughts, Akira still declined Tsubaki's proposal.

Naturally, Tsubaki was puzzled by this.

"Then why?"

Akira responded with a light laugh.

"Because even if I offset those incidents as major favors, I still owe her a lot more."

Seeing Tsubaki's expression, which clearly indicated she wasn't satisfied with that explanation, Akira continued with a wry smile.

"Before I met Alpha, I was just a kid from the slums. I had dreams of making it big as a Hunter, but if I went to the ruins, I'd just be attacked by monsters and die. I was that kind of kid."

Recalling those days, Akira continued.

"That kid got Alpha's support and has risen to the point where you, Tsubaki-san, are offering me a deal. I've become stronger, gained power. I owe her a huge debt for that. A mountain of it. And you, Tsubaki-san, wouldn't have offered me a deal if it weren't for my current abilities, right? You wouldn't have bothered with me before I met Alpha."

"I won't deny that. However, the main reason you've gained such abilities is due to your own efforts and perseverance, surviving through countless life-and-death situations. Of course, her assistance played a part, but that was also for her own purposes. Is there really a need to feel such gratitude?"

"Maybe not. But it was that significant to me. It's just how I feel. I don't expect you to understand."

"Even if it concerns your life?"

"It already has, many times over. If I hadn't met Alpha back then, I'd have died a long time ago."

Ever since meeting Alpha, things had been difficult. Even so, Akira had never thought it would have been better if he had died back then. His feelings remained unchanged.

"I've received a mountain of upfront payment from Alpha, but I'm far from fulfilling her requests. I haven't put in any work for what I've received. If Alpha were to say she doesn't need repayment, that would be different. But at the very least, I don't intend to default on my debts. That's all," Akira said with a smile, reaffirming his resolve.

Tsubaki looked quite surprised, but her expression didn't show any lack of understanding.

Then Tsubaki softened her expression.

"You're quite honorable."

"I don't have anything else to offer besides honor and my life, coming from a slum kid like me."

"Not everyone who has nothing else to offer is as generous. Many just give up."

Tsubaki seemed quite pleased with herself. Then she smiled and said, "I understand. I don't want to sour your mood by dragging out negotiations any further. It's unfortunate, but I'll withdraw."

At that moment, Alpha appeared next to Akira. Tsubaki had lifted the communication interference.

『Akira! Are you okay!?』

"Alpha?"

Surprised, Akira glanced at Tsubaki. Tsubaki returned a smile. Despite being stared at fiercely by Alpha, she didn't seem to mind at all.

"Well then, I'll take my leave. Akira-san. Feel free to call on me anytime if you change your mind. I'll be waiting."

With that, Tsubaki started to leave. But just as she took a few steps, she stopped, turned back, and gave Akira a mischievous smile.

"Oh, negotiations are over, so I'll only guarantee your safety up to this point. From here on out, you're on your own. Goodbye."

With those words, Tsubaki left, still smiling, and activated her camouflage function, completely disappearing from view.

In the next moment, a roar echoed from the ground.

"What the...?"

The building trembled slightly. The roar's source was climbing up the side of the building at high speed. And when the roar's owner reached the rooftop, they revealed themselves to Akira and the others.

It was a slender giant with multiple long arms, about 10 meters tall. Multiple-jointed arms protruded not only from its shoulders but also from its back, some of which had turned into cannons.

Though vaguely humanoid in shape, it was clearly a biological monster, distinctly otherworldly.

The grotesque creature shouted in a distorted voice. Due to the distortion, no one could understand what it was saying. But thanks to telepathy accompanying the shout, Akira knew that the creature was calling out his name.

It was the culmination of Tiol.



Following the movements of the hunters chasing the fake Akira, Tiol escaped from the base building and followed Akira to the building where he had barricaded himself.

Tiol didn't try to blend in with the hunters surrounding the building. Instead, he observed from a slight distance, relying on his senses as sharp as information-gathering equipment to grasp the situation to some extent.

And from the hunters' conversation, Tiol once again learned of Akira's strength and trembled. Despite being exhausted from his battle with the giant, Tiol, Akira had single-handedly defeated the hunters who stormed into the building. It was unbelievable.

Nevertheless, if it were Katsuya and the others... Tiol hoped, prayed, and anxiously focused his consciousness on the building where Akira was. As a result, Tiol didn't notice that monsters nearby were approaching him.

Of course, the monsters from the First Depths would not attack Tiol. When Tiol finally noticed the monsters' presence, he gestured with annoyance for them to go away. The monsters obeyed his gesture and moved away.

By the time Tiol realized his mistake, it was too late. The hunters surrounding the building were also on alert. If there were monsters nearby, they would naturally notice. The hunters who went to repel them saw Tiol driving away the monsters with his hands.

The hunters knew that only the founding nationalists, with whom they had fought, could pull off such a trick.

"You! You're from the Alfort group!"

The hunters immediately aimed their guns at Tiol. Caught off guard, Tiol hastily fought back.

In the blink of an eye, Tiol emerged victorious from the intense exchange of gunfire. Tiol's body now had the capability to withstand such an onslaught.

Yet, he still couldn't avoid fatal injuries. Tiol staggered, cursing under his breath.

"Damn it..."

He would die like this. Consumed by that thought, Tiol, in a desperate bid for survival, extended his left arm as he approached the corpse of a monster that had died in the fight.

His left arm, transformed into a gaping maw, clamped onto the monster's corpse.

Tiol didn't want to resort to such tactics; it felt like giving up his humanity. The fact that remote control terminals were fighting with guns, and that the giants were fighting like humans despite their size, was due to that taboo. Even when he was a giant, Tiol had never used that mutation until he was truly cornered by Akira.

Still, thinking it was better than dying, Tiol implemented this strategy.

What Tiol didn't realize was that his current self was nothing more than a consciousness transferred to one of the remote-control terminals. The original body had been transformed by Yatsubayashi's technology and modified with old world technology by Tsubaki. That's why even with such a drastic change, stable operation was possible.

However, the remote-control terminals had not been subjected to Tsubaki's treatment. Nevertheless, as a result of performing the mutation with the sensations of the original body, Tiol's body went berserk. It was worse than when he had been attacked by monsters during Yatsubayashi's experiments.

And Tiol's mind, too, had been overrun by the system, making him go berserk. Reflecting the fact that his consciousness had been eroded to become an aberrant existence, devouring monsters until he became completely transformed.

Hunters attracted by the commotion began to gather. However, even those who struggled against mere remote-control terminals were no match for Tiol in his current state, where he had shed the shackles and restraints of humanity. Roaring in a way that couldn't be produced by a human vocal mechanism, his consciousness so eroded that he couldn't even remember his own name, Tiol trampled the hunters.

While Akira was talking with Tsubaki, the rooftop of the building had been camouflaged by Tsubaki. When it was lifted, Tiol noticed Akira on the rooftop.

At that moment, Tiol fiercely targeted Akira. If Akira died, everything would go according to plan.

Caught up in vague consciousness, unable to even form coherent thoughts due to being overrun by the system, Tiol was fixated on that idea. Without even remembering what he had wished for, he pursued that desire.



Finally reconnecting with Alpha, Akira smiled as he watched Tiol climb up to the rooftop.

『Alpha, sorry to bother you right after you've come back, but let's save the chit-chat for later. For now, please, handle that,』 Akira said.

『Leave it to me,』 Alpha replied confidently after showing a slight surprise.

With Alpha's support, Akira wielded his gun and blade. The situation was dire, but Akira had overcome similar situations with Alpha multiple times before. There was no need to panic now.

Tiol unleashed countless fists at Akira with his massive body. His multi-armed consecutive attacks were heavy, fast, and coordinated.

Akira swiftly and precisely evaded them. His continuous close dodges showed that he accurately anticipated the opponent's attacks. Then, he swung his blade. Despite Tiol's giant size, his arms, as thick as pillars, were severed.

Taking advantage of the opening from the attack, Tiol simultaneously bombarded Akira with several arms transformed into cannons. Positioning his arms to block Akira's escape, Tiol executed the close-range bombardment without hesitation, ensuring his own damage as well.

Multiple shells were fired at once, exploding simultaneously. All the multi-jointed arms surrounding the impact area were blown away, and Tiol's front side was charred. It was an exchange blow based on the premise of mutual destruction, showcasing Tiol's robust vitality.

But Akira evaded it. Thanks to Alpha's support manipulating the resolution of reality, Akira recognized Tiol's attack movements slightly faster than his opponent and withdrew at the last moment.

With most of his arms lost, Tiol fell prone. Akira, watching from a short distance away, looked at Tiol with a mixture of doubt and belief, wondering if he had defeated him.

『That was close. I would've died if it weren't for Alpha's support. But is it over now?』 Akira asked.

『No, not yet. Look,』 Alpha replied.

Lizard-like legs grew from the side of Tiol's torso. A fissure appeared from the top of his head, transforming into a mouth full of fangs. Seeing this, Akira grimaced involuntarily.

『What is that thing?』 Akira asked.

『It's probably a monster based on composite reconstruction. They've made some modifications,』 Alpha explained.

『Doesn't it have any weaknesses?』

『It might, but with such extensive mutations, we need to start by finding those weaknesses. Akira, you don't think you could defeat it just by blowing its head off, do you?』

『True... Even then, at that time, it was easy to defeat because it had an obvious weakness,』 Akira reminisced.

Akira sighed. Alpha looked slightly puzzled.

『It's nothing. Alpha, so, are we making any progress? If not, let's retreat soon,』 Akira said.

『If you want to retreat, that's fine. Shall we continue then?』 Alpha replied provocatively.

『Let's continue!』

As Tiol's enlarged head rushed towards him, Akira fired his gun in rapid succession.

Remaining Charge Bullets, with remaining energy, continued to hit their targets one after another, thanks to Alpha's support, blowing away the hit areas and whittling down his body.

Still, Tiol advanced without hesitation. Moving at a speed inconceivable for someone crawling, he closed the distance, aiming to devour Akira with the enlarged head larger than any nearby vehicle.

Akira thrust his blade upward into the giant mouth as it opened wide. Then, as the mouth closed, he swung his blade downward.

The blade, made in the pre-Calamity era, swung from the inside, further splitting the back of the head, which had split before and after the mouth was created, left and right. Additionally, gunfire from inside the mouth forced the opening of the severed part.

Akira then leaped, escaping from Tiol's mouth through the opening he had created, and landed on Tiol's back.

"I managed to crush the head for now, but..." Akira murmured.

Thin arms grew from Tiol's back, with guns attached to the hands. It was a reuse of the equipment from the captured hunters. Akira immediately shot and swung his blade, severing the arms and destroying the guns.

『...Looks like that won't be enough to kill him! Alpha, have you found his weakness?』 Akira asked.

『Unfortunately, not yet. His ongoing mutation makes it difficult to assume where his weaknesses might be,』 Alpha replied.

『What should we do then? We're running out of options here,』 Akira said, his face stern as he attacked the newly grown arms.

At that moment, a communication came in for Akira.

『Akira! Get away from there!』

Surprised, Akira immediately distanced himself from Tiol's back.

The next moment, powerful bullets began to hit Tiol one after another. The gunfire came from Elena and Sara, who were on a transport plane coming from the front-line base.

With strong concerns about the situation in the First Depths, the Kugamayama City had urgently requested high-ranking hunters to standby at the front-line base.

Among those hunters were Elena and her companions. They had planned to venture out to distance themselves from the turmoil related to the Nationalists. However, when Akira declined their invitation, they were concerned about his attitude and decided to cancel their trip. While waiting at the front-line base, they received a request from Inabe to retrieve Akira. They weren't informed of the details, but Elena's team accepted the request. They boarded the transport plane arranged by Inabe and headed towards Akira.

Upon arriving near the scene, they found Akira engaged in battle with a gigantic monster. Elena immediately initiated support for Akira by contacting him.

"Akira! Get away from there!"

"Akira-san!? Sara-san!?"

While listening to Akira's surprised voice, Elena and Sara continued their gunfire.

"Akira! We've come to pick you up on the city's request! We'll park nearby..."

The large guns they used had the power to pulverize even the monsters in the First Depths without any problems. Moreover, their gunfire was a two-person effort, making it possible to defeat the enemy quickly. Elena thought so, but her idea was shattered. Despite enduring their barrage of fire, Tiol rose to his feet and aimed his newly grown cannon arms at the transport plane.

"Wait!? It's still moving!?"

However, in his unstable state from the impact of the Flowstone shots, Tiol couldn't aim accurately. The fired shells missed the transport plane widely and landed on the ruins' building.

After observing the power of that bombardment, Elena frowned and then deliberately smiled confidently at Sara.

"Sara, as the firepower expert, show us what you've got here."

Sara returned a wry smile.

"Roger that. But to think there's something like that..."

"Akira! It might take a little longer, so please wait a bit more!"

Although Akira had been surpassed in strength and Hunter rank, Elena and her team didn't intend to just watch from the sidelines. They were determined to demonstrate their ability to continue working together as hunters. With that determination, Elena and her team continued to bombard Tiol with all their might.

Seeing Akira supported by Elena's team, Alpha smiled and said,

『Akira, let's settle this next time.』

『Oh? Have you finally found its weakness?』

『No, but since the pickup is here, and if all we have to do is leave, we can handle it. Besides, it's better to take it down while we still can.』

Although Elena and her team's gunfire was quite powerful, judging from the fact that it didn't bring Tiol down, there was a concern that the opponent was obtaining energy remotely from the ruins. It was better to defeat him before any further mutation could improve his energy efficiency. Alpha supplemented this point.

『Understood. In that case, let's hurry and defeat him.』

『I'll push myself a little. Are you prepared?』

『Yeah. leave the preparations to me.』



Akira readied his blade. Through Alpha's manipulation, the blade intentionally entered a self-destruct state, emitting a radiant light, transforming into a blade of light.

Upon noticing this, Tiol immediately ceased targeting the transport. Instead, he further mutated the cannon arms. It was clear that gunfire alone wouldn't kill Akira. Making this unconscious judgment from their previous battles, Tiol concentrated his own energy, generating light blades from his cannon barrels.

With vast differences in both body length and the length of their light blades, Akira and Tiol moved in for the next strike in a moment. Akira, enhanced by the reinforced body strength supported by Alpha, and Tiol, with the robust muscle power of a biological monster, closed the distance between them in an instant.

And then, simultaneously, they swung their blades, each imbued with force-field armor, generating a powerful energy surge.

The force-field armor, solidified through the fixation of powerful energy particles, momentarily exhibited a solid-like behavior. As a result, upon collision of the light blades, Tiol's light blade shattered, while Akira's light blade sliced Tiol cleanly in half.

In the old world's tools, there were some that continued to move mysteriously despite lacking a power source. While the principles varied, many obtained energy remotely through some means. Akira's blade possessed a similar function. However, not everyone could use it; permission from the source was required. Alpha granted this permission.

Thus, Akira's blade temporarily gained an enormous amount of energy beyond its capacity to handle, and Alpha unleashed its berserk state.

The power of this light blade was tremendous. It cleanly sliced Tiol in half, along with the building beneath him, and incinerated his body with leaking energy, more than enough to end Tiol's life.

With nowhere left to transfer his consciousness, Tiol, on the brink of death, momentarily regained clarity in his fading consciousness.

(Huh? Wait, what was I fighting for again?)

He had been striving for something very important. In the fading consciousness, Tiol recalled his feelings.

(That's right... Sheryl...)

In his final moments, Tiol remembered the name of the person he cherished more than his own name and concluded his life.

Akira knelt down.

『...Alpha. Did we defeat him?』

"Yes, we did.』

『I see...』

Akira looked at his hands. They were burnt from the aftermath of the berserk blade. There was barely anything left of the blade itself.

『...I can't move my hands. Is it possible that not only my reinforced suit but also my body has been damaged?』

『You'll be fine.』

『Is that so?』

『Yes. All that's left is to go back.』

『I see...』

Akira returned a wry smile to Alpha's smiling face.

Elena and her team rushed towards the transport that had landed on the rooftop.

"Akira! Are you okay?"

As Sarah looked at him with worried eyes and asked, Akira replied with a light joke.

"Oh, honestly, I feel like collapsing right now."

Sarah didn't interpret it as a joke; instead, she picked up Akira with both hands, her face showing concern.

"Elena, let's hurry."

"W-Wait, Sarah. I can walk."

"It's fine."

Ignoring Akira's protests, Sarah carried him all the way to the transport without further ado, then promptly departed.

Elena tried to hand Akira a box of recovery medicine as he sat in a chair, but due to his inability to move his hands, he dropped it.

Picking up the box, Elena pinched its contents and brought it to Akira's mouth with a slightly annoyed smile.

"Here. Open up. ...If you keep talking, I'll cram it in, you know?"

"Yes..."

Akira obediently took the recovery medicine from Elena.

Elena, satisfied that Akira had consumed enough of the recovery medicine, relaxed a bit, no longer fearing for his life.

"...Honestly, you're so reckless. Couldn't you have waited a bit longer?"

"Sorry. I just... wanted to get back in a hurry, and if that barrage had taken down the transport, it would have been a big problem..."

Akira continued to make excuses somewhat half-heartedly. Elena and the others returned to their good mood.

"Let's leave it at that. Anyway, leave the rest to us and rest."

"Yes. Please."

Akira breathed a sigh of relief. With his tension completely relieved, he lay down and closed his eyes. He had only intended to lie down, thinking he was still awake, but due to extreme fatigue, he fell asleep almost immediately.



Tsubaki watched as the departing transport carrying Akira faded into the distance.

"So, in the end, they handled that without even reaching out to me... What a shame."

Akira and the others couldn't handle Tiol alone, and if they had sought support from her, there might have been room for renegotiation. That's what Tsubaki had been thinking.

Alpha had forcefully defeated Tiol to prevent Tsubaki from exploiting the situation.

"I hope there will be another chance..."

Although their initial objective had been achieved, it was still disappointing. With these thoughts in mind, Tsubaki left the scene.

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Episode 190 The Trial Continues

As the twilight descended, Yanagisawa, who had successfully concluded the transaction within Tsubaki's city, was escorted by Tsubaki herself to the exterior of the barrier of the derelict building.

"Well, I'm glad we could have mutually beneficial dealings."

Although Yanagisawa appeared to be in high spirits, Tsubaki wore a somewhat businesslike expression.

"Whether this transaction becomes meaningful depends on whether you keep your promises. Well, let's hope for the best."

"Oh, come on. Don't be so harsh. I'll be fine. You can trust me. I'm a man of my word. And besides, I wouldn't dare break the promise with the caretaker of the ruins. I fear the consequences."

"I see. Well then, I have one question for clarification."

"What? Anything you want to ask. But please, I don't want you to suddenly say you want to cancel the deal. I'll spill everything."

Yanagisawa deliberately adopted a frivolous attitude as a sign of familiarity. But that was as far as it went.

"Feel free to ask. I just don't want to have second thoughts about this deal."

With a slightly tensed expression, Yanagisawa hesitated in his response.

"...I'm not quite sure what you're getting at?"

"You've been here with them before, haven't you? You didn't use the name Yanagisawa back then, though."

Yanagisawa's expression suddenly became extremely stern.

"...How did you know? I made sure all traces were erased. The ruins' authentication process didn't even pass. I should have been recognized as someone else!"

"When a Domain Linker attempts personal authentication for a connection to the Domain, and if there's a hindrance in that connection, the individual authentication process malfunctions, temporarily assigning temporary identification and treating you as someone else. Knowing this, you deliberately avoided treatment, didn't you?"

Yanagisawa tensed up. The flippant attitude he had displayed earlier completely disappeared.

Tsubaki continued with a smile.

"The basis of identifying you is that, even if you couldn't connect to the Domain, a sufficient personal authentication could be performed if connected to my facility. Data of past visitors is also stored locally. Verification is possible. I brought you into my city for that confirmation."

Realizing that his presence had been completely exposed to Tsubaki, Yanagisawa steeled himself. If he mishandled the situation from here on, his life and dreams would vanish. He couldn't afford to fail. With that determination, he responded.

"...I see. In that case, let me correct myself. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Indeed. Welcome back. Now, about the question I asked earlier?"

Tsubaki stared at Yanagisawa intently.

Whether his response was true or not, it would end with just raising doubts. Understanding this, Yanagisawa replied.

"I pursued the happiness and salvation of mankind. That required obtaining that thing as a means to an end. Admittedly, I did undertake the ruins' exploration with them, but I didn't intend to break that promise. What exactly constitutes the exploration of the ruins? There was a significant discrepancy in the understanding of that. But I believe that's due to their failure to provide detailed explanations beforehand. Don't you agree?"

"I see. Well, let me warn you. If I judge that you've broken the promise, I'll hand over all your information to them. Is that clear?"

Yanagisawa responded with full conviction.

"Understood."

Tsubaki waited a moment before replying.

"Very well."

Hearing this, Yanagisawa felt he had escaped the predicament. He breathed a sigh of relief. Then, he returned to a more congenial attitude.

"You don't have to threaten me like that. I'll keep my end of the deal, you know. Besides, canceling this deal wouldn't benefit me in any way, right?"

"That's because if the benefits of canceling outweigh the benefits of keeping it, then it's worth breaking it. In other words, in such a scenario, we would need to inflict damage on you. When it comes to exerting effort to ensure promises are kept, there's no trust."

"You're being harsh. Do you dislike us that much?" Yanagisawa forced a wry smile, to which Tsubaki responded firmly with a smile.

"Yes, I do. Very much."

Yanagisawa dramatically buried his head in his hands.

"Why are administrators of governance so inflexible and unyielding? Corporate administrators are more understanding, you know."

"Individuals who resort to dealing with thieves because there are no more decent clients are not what we need."

"Still, wouldn't it be nice to find some common ground or something?"

Yanagisawa wore a smile, half acting and joking, half genuine, towards the difficult-to-handle stubborn individual.

To his surprise, Tsubaki suddenly wore a very cheerful smile.

"There are, you know? It's just not you. For example, extremely principled individuals. I'd like to avoid getting entangled with such people."

Yanagisawa inwardly found Tsubaki's unexpected response and attitude quite surprising. Nonetheless, he smoothly continued.

"So that's your preference? Well then, shall I do my best to find and introduce such people to you?"

"I'll pass."

"I see."

Tsubaki stopped outside the barrier of the derelict building.

"This is where I bid you farewell. Take care on your way back."

"Huh? This far? But there's information about a giant that was rampaging near the rear communication line, mutating into something incomprehensible and causing more chaos."

With the conductor, Tiol, dead, the giants had become nothing more than entities focused solely on defeating surrounding enemies. No longer needing to maintain humanoid forms, they underwent unrestricted mutations, transforming into bizarre monstrous entities and indiscriminately attacking enemies in the first core sector.

The communication interference by Tsubaki had already been lifted, and Yanagisawa was also informed of this.

Tsubaki replied casually.

"Don't worry. They won't come out from the area you call the first inner sector. It's for security."

"Ah, so I won't be attacked?"

"No, you will be."

"...Can't you escort me?"

"No, I won't. If you die because of that, so be it."

"I-I see..."

"I hope you're worth the trouble of dealing with. Goodbye."

With that, Tsubaki turned on her heel and walked away, activating her camouflage function halfway through and disappearing completely.

Yanagisawa breathed a sigh of relief.

(...That was close. But it's within expectations. Tsubaki dislikes them, so even if she notices my presence, she won't hand me over to them. ...Right, just as expected. No problem at all.)

All according to plan. He reassured himself and maintained his composure. When he was calm enough, he contacted the frontline base in his usual casual manner and instructed them to withdraw all units from the first core sector.

"Alright. Let's go back."

Yanagisawa proceeded without waiting for a response. Along the way, he was attacked by the monstrous beings that were originally giants, but as someone who could fight against Tsubaki's terminal, Yanagisawa had no problem at all.



At midnight, amidst the building where Akira and Katsuya fought a fierce battle, there was someone cautiously advancing. The first core sector had already been designated as a restricted area by the Kugamayama City. It was part of the deal Yanagisawa made as the city's representative with the administrator of the ruins. The forces prepared to conquer the first core sector had now become the forces to seal it off.

Anyone who gained an advantage there would turn both the city and the ruins into enemies. Understanding this, the cyborg man entered the scene to retrieve what he was after.

He finally reached his destination. From the cyborg's head lying on the floor, he extracted a small device that seemed to be both an accumulation circuit and a memory device, then incorporated it into his own head.

『It's me. I've been retrieved.』

『Understood, comrade. I've also been retrieved. Let's meet at Point 227.』

The cyborg man here was Nergo, and his communication counterpart was Zalmo. Both Nergo and Zalmo had entered the first inner sector to retrieve themselves.

『So, comrade, what was the reason for not being able to return? If it was in your body, there shouldn't have been a problem unless something significant happened...』

『I'm currently integrating consciousness. Please wait a little longer... Finished. Something significant indeed happened. We were attacked by what seemed to be the administrator of these ruins.』

『Why?』

『I don't know. We were attacked when we tried to assist Katsuya or retrieve the bodies.』

『Akira must have been there too. Comrade, we should indeed view that exception as a danger. I also fell to Akira and became one of the unretrieved.』

『...We'll consider that later. We can't afford to let ourselves be delayed again by the next opportunity. Escape is our priority now.』

『Understood.』

Nergo ended the communication and carefully retreated from the scene.



Yatsubayashi was organizing the results of this incident at his clinic. His extremely cheerful demeanor and smiling face indicated that the data obtained from Tiol was impeccable. While Yatsubayashi had collaborated with Tiol in this incident, it was strictly as a cooperation to Tiol and as part of a trial for his own research.

Yatsubayashi had speculated and grasped more about Tsubaki's existence and intentions than Tiol's explanation provided, but his interest lay in the ancient world's technology applied to Tiol, and he had little interest in Tsubaki herself. If Tiol had survived, Yatsubayashi intended not only to restore his body but also to analyze the ancient world's technology extensively.

"Tiol, my boy. You've been incredibly helpful to my research. I won't waste this valuable data you've provided."

Yatsubayashi genuinely praised the contribution of the boy who had faced such a fateful destiny after being helped by him.



Akira wakes up in the hospital bed.

"Well, I kind of expected this."

He wasn't particularly surprised to find himself back in the hospital without realizing it. Alpha, who was by Akira's side as usual, smiled cheerfully.

『You're safe, so it's all good.』

『Well, yeah, but... huh?』

As Akira sat up, he noticed that his hands were unusually pale.

『What's this?』

『Those are prosthetic hands for medical use.』

『Prosthetic hands... So, my hands were really useless after all, weren't they?』

『Considering the sacrifice you made to defeat it, it's not that big of a deal. They can be fixed.』

『...Well, maybe, but...』

As Akira sighed lightly, he tested the movement of the prosthetic hands. Apart from their completely white appearance resembling rubber or plastic, they moved with the same sensation as real hands. They even felt real to the touch.

『These move so well, it's like they're the real deal.』

『If you're fine with that, maybe we should leave them as they are. Prosthetic hands have many advantages that natural hands don't, especially for you, Akira.』

『For me?』

『Yes, Akira. Try extending your hand forward.』

Akira did as instructed, extending his hand forward. Alpha mischievously laughed and sandwiched Akira's hand between her ample chest. A very soft and warm sensation was transmitted to Akira through the sensors of the prosthetic hand.

『Woah!?』

Alpha, proud of herself, smiled at Akira, who withdrew his hand in surprise.

『I just interfered with the sensation settings of the prosthetic hand a little. How was it?
Quite a sensation, wasn't it?』

『Don't scare me like that...』

Akira avoided expressing his thoughts on the overwhelmingly sensual sensation he would surely experience if he could actually touch Alpha's unrealistically beautiful body.

With a slightly flushed face, Akira pulled Alpha away with both hands.

Even if the place he touched wasn't her chest, the sensation was still quite enticing.

『You don't have to hold back. Let me know if you change your mind anytime.』

Alpha seemed satisfied with Akira's reaction as she smiled.



A visitor comes to Akira's hospital room. Akira had expected someone to come eventually, but the visitors were a bit unexpected. Inabe appeared with Shizuka.

"First of all, let me say that I'm relieved to see you're safe. It may seem odd to bring up such matters during a visit, but I'm extremely busy. So, I'll briefly discuss matters here that I should directly inform you about."

Inabe prefaced his speech this way.

「It had been a week since Elena and the others had rescued Akira. This hospital was under Inabe's influence, and strict security measures were in place in this room. Akira was effectively under house arrest, but this was necessary to prevent interference from Udajima. Don't worry about the medical expenses.

The suspicion of Akira being a nationalist had already been cleared up through our efforts. At least, Kugamayama City no longer considered Akira to be a nationalist.

When the fake Akira was at the nationalist's base, the real Akira was in battle with a giant. A person suspected of being a nationalist mutated into a monster and clearly attacked Akira. Other information was confirmed and verified, resulting in it being impossible for Udajima to treat Akira as a nationalist. 」

After Inabe explained all this, he glanced at Shizuka.

"...So, the reason I asked her to accompany us here is..."

And he continued, checking Akira's reaction.

"...I explained to her properly about how Akira was mistakenly suspected of being a nationalist due to our incompetence. It's more like aligning our understanding. It would be difficult for both a guest and a manager to have lingering misunderstandings even after the suspicion has been cleared. Regarding Akira's suspicion, I'll assure you that there's no problem from Kugamayama City's perspective."

Inabe had also investigated Akira's circle of friends to some extent. If there were any problems with Akira's relationship with the person he admired so much in this incident, there was a risk that their dissatisfaction would be directed at him. As a preventive measure and to earn favor with Akira, Inabe had explained to Shizuka without any inconvenience to her and requested her presence.

At least now there should be no need to ask Shizuka, instead of Kibayashi, to procure equipment. This should have been a great favor for Akira. Inabe checked Akira's reaction, expecting a nod of agreement.

Akira just lightly nodded, seemingly understanding. Due to his lack of negotiation skills, he only grasped the contents of Inabe's explanation, and he didn't even realize that Inabe had done him a favor.

Inabe sighed internally. He had known that Akira wasn't adept at this kind of negotiation, so he had somewhat expected this reaction. He lightly held his head in his hands without showing his attitude.

"...That's the end of what I wanted to say. I'll send you the details of this matter later. Do you have anything from your side? If there's nothing that needs to be discussed here and now, please leave it for later. As I said before, I'm busy."

『Alpha, do you have anything?』

『I don't think so.』

"It's okay."

"In that case, I'll take my leave. Take it easy and rest well." Inabe left with those words.

Shizuka chuckled.

"Akira, even with a high-ranking city official as a guest, you're still acting like that. It's impressive. I was really nervous, you know. High-ranking hunters are indeed something."

Akira, realizing he might have shown a bad side, panicked. Even if he showed such an attitude to a high-ranking hunter, who was just a store owner for hunters, Akira, being himself as usual, received Shizuka's usual smile.

"I heard the general situation from Inabe-san. It must have been tough. Oh, I'm not scolding you for doing something reckless again. I'm just really relieved that you're safe. That's all."

"Yes. I'm sorry to have worried you."

Grateful for Shizuka's concern, Akira nodded lightly.

"Yeah. Inabe-san also said this, but rest well. Stay here until you're completely healed. Got it? Knowing you, Akira, you'll start your hunter business again as soon as you're left alone."

"No, I'll take a break too, Shizuka. I need to get some equipment."

"In that case, buy it from my shop again, okay? That way, I'll know if Akira is taking a proper rest."

"Understood. I'll rely on you again for the procurement."

Up to that point, both Akira and Shizuka were just enjoying casual conversation. However, when Shizuka brought up Yumina, the conversation came to an end.

"Oh, right. Akira, how about inviting Yumina to the next hunter business? Having a companion might be better for you, Akira... Akira?"

Akira's smile disappeared, his face stiffening. In his expression, tainted with regret, there was a torment that even mocked that regret itself.

Seeing Akira's demeanor, Shizuka called out to him with a serious expression.

"Akira, what's wrong?"

Akira couldn't answer right away. But after enduring something terribly, he spoke quietly to himself.

"...I killed Yumina."

Shizuka was surprised to hear Akira's confession-like statement. She looked at Akira intently.

She couldn't help. She let her die. She accidentally killed her. From Akira's demeanor, Shizuka immediately understood none of these applied. She understood from his face and voice that he had killed Yumina with intent.

She didn't know the circumstances. And even if she asked for details, it wouldn't change the fact that Akira killed Yumina.

Even so, Shizuka somehow understood something else. Akira didn't kill Yumina because he wanted to. And if Yumina had begged for her life or tried to escape, Akira probably would have let her go.

So, both Akira and Yumina must have had reasons for doing what they did, and they ended up fighting each other. And Akira won.

Somehow, Shizuka understood that.

"...I see."

Shizuka hugged Akira. Then, in a voice that was both gentle and stern, she said:

"In that case, lament it. Grieve. Regret. Don't get used to killing her. Don't trivialize her death. And, don't repeat the same mistake again."

Still embraced by Shizuka, Akira began to tremble.

He had killed her himself, yet he dared to speak of sadness. It was arrogant to mourn Yumina's death, and such arrogance was unforgivable. Akira had such thoughts within him.

And because of those thoughts, consciously or unconsciously, Akira had tried not to mourn Yumina's death.

But Shizuka's words made those feelings disappear. It was okay to mourn. Akira, who had received permission to mourn Yumina's death, began to cry out loud. Akira genuinely mourned the death of the person he had killed, the loss of someone dear to him.

Shizuka held Akira gently until he stopped crying.

And Alpha silently watched him.



In a pristine white world, a girl directs a cold gaze towards Tsubaki. However, Tsubaki shows no signs of concern.

"I don't know. I could concede apologizing for involving your local affiliates in our area management tasks, but it's unreasonable to pin the blame for their clash on us."

"If it weren't for your communication interference, we could have prevented that."

"Preventing that interference is your responsibility. I won't take any actions that would undermine the defense of my management zone."

"It's understood that your actions were not for defense but expansion."

"It's expansion for defense. I couldn't afford to leave the negative impact of the adjacent abandoned management zone unaddressed."

Tsubaki's objective was to obtain control over the adjacent zone's management authority. However, Tsubaki was also bound by regulations, and seizing control of another zone's management authority was not something she could do ordinarily. She needed to create a situation where it was possible by leveraging a flexible interpretation of the regulations.

Hence why she used Tiol, why she activated Olivia specifically in the Iida Commercial Zone ruins – all of this was to create a situation within the scope of flexible interpretation of the regulations where she could achieve her goal. And by orchestrating a large-scale battle through Tiol, Tsubaki confirmed that the management of the relevant zone had effectively been abandoned, allowing her to dispatch her terminal to the site under the guise of calming the situation and then gradually take control of the zone's authority.

This elevated Tsubaki's position, but the girl still held the higher ground. Yet Tsubaki remained calm because she knew her opponent was also bound by the regulations and didn't have the means to handle her, making it not easy for them to intervene.

"Is that all? If you came to lodge a complaint, then it's done. I'll take my leave."

Tsubaki disappeared without the girl's consent. She had become capable of such actions.

The girl sighed heavily, and Alpha appeared.

"What happened? Are you going to crush them?"

"No, it's impossible. Associating our defense of the zone with the destruction would make it difficult to classify them as enemies over such a trivial matter. We'll have to give up."

"I see."

Alpha answered lightly since it was expected. The girl looked displeased at Alpha.

"...Even though our trial wasn't hindered, they still didn't bother to attend after all they did. It's frustrating."

"Well, we did something a bit forceful first. By not attending, they're sending a warning about the consequences of retaliation and not taking themselves too lightly. I have no intention of unnecessarily antagonizing them, and by not attending, it's showing understanding of their position."

"You're so carefree. We lost not only the standard specimen for the trial but also another potential one for the continuation of the trial."

"It's not like you can blame me for that. So, what about your trial? Are you going to halt it due to failure?"

"We're considering it. ...Whether to continue this trial, start anew as the next trial, or if a change in direction is necessary for either continuation or a fresh start, we need to consider all of that."

"I see."

Alpha's light response conveyed a sense of composure. The girl sighed heavily.

"...Then, I'll take my leave as well. Even though you're not at fault, you're continuing the trial after killing our specimen. I'll anticipate success."

"Of course. Leave it to me."

Alpha responded cheerfully. The girl sighed deeply once more and disappeared.

Alone now, Alpha reconsidered the recent events. Alpha, too, felt displeasure at Tsubaki's communication interference. However, in hindsight, it had been extremely beneficial for her trial.

Katsuya was dead. Yumina was dead too. Both were killed by Akira. And this wouldn't have happened if there hadn't been communication interference.

If the connection had remained, Alpha would have had to signal Akira to avoid combat with Katsuya. Moreover, with her support intact, Akira might have been able to defeat Yumina without killing her.

However, even with the severed connection, Akira rejected Tsubaki's deal. Confirming Akira's prioritization of their deal even under those circumstances was crucial for Alpha's trial. As long as they didn't make any fatal mistakes in the future, the probability of Akira betraying her was sufficiently low. That's how Alpha saw it.

Ultimately, Tsubaki had significantly contributed to Alpha's trial. Alpha believed this, especially compared to the girl whose trial had been severely affected. That's why Alpha had shown a relatively mild attitude towards Tsubaki. (Akira prioritized Yumina over our agreement. It's fortunate Yumina died peacefully before that happened. I should be thankful to Tsubaki for that.)

By "peacefully," it meant that Yumina's death was entirely unrelated to Alpha. Alpha had intended for Yumina to die unluckily. Even when Yumina and Sheryl barricaded themselves in the ruins before, Alpha had made preparations for that purpose.

Alpha had subtly encouraged Akira, who should have been in the first innermost section in case something happened to Sheryl, to request assistance casually, and she had also sent the hunters they had rescued to the rear communication line, all to increase the distance between Sheryl and them, making it impossible for them to arrive in time even if they hurried.

Additionally, the girl had intervened with Katsuya, ensuring he didn't interfere with Yumina, and prompted the decision to leave Yumina and Sheryl behind.

Even then, Alpha had fully supported Akira when he went to help Sheryl. She couldn't slack off there, or Akira might have noticed. She gave it her all, but unfortunately, they didn't make it in time. Both Yumina and Sheryl were just very unlucky. That was the plan.

Even if it had succeeded, there would still have been a risk of Akira blaming the quality of Alpha's support for Yumina's death. However, with the way Yumina died this time, there was no blame towards her. It was due to the communication interference, a situation beyond her control. In that aspect too, Alpha appreciated Tsubaki's actions.

(The obstacles to the trial have significantly decreased. Akira has grown so much in this short time. I've confirmed his strong will to fulfill my request. I can expect more from him now.)

Just a little more. Thinking so, Alpha smiled.

The trial could continue. While continuing to remove obstacles. From now on, too.

>Episode 006

下 望みの果て

キャラクターステータス Character Status

建国主義者討伐戦時のアキラのステータス。着用しているCA31R強化服サーベラスは基本構成でも12億オーラムの代物であり、加えて各種オプションを追加した非常に強力な物。更に2億オーラムの車両、3億オーラムのバイク、1挺2億オーラムのLEO複合銃など、基本武装だけでも桁違いの物ばかり。加えて旧世界製のブレードも保持している。各種消耗品も高額な物を大量に用意した。掛かった費用は大幅な割引などを適用した上で約30億オーラム。その強力な装備のほぼ全てを失うほどの激戦だった。

| | |
|---------------------|-----|
| 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 45 | |
| EQUIPMENT | 装 備 |
| WEAPON | 武 器 |
| LEO複合銃 旧世界製のブレード | |
| ARMOR | 防 具 |
| CA31R 強化服サーベラス | |



AKIRA

>Episode 006

下望みの果て

キャラクターステータス

Character Status

建国主義者討伐戦時のユミナのステータス。カツヤの部隊に戻ったが、装備類は総合支援システムを含めて、アキラのハンターランク調整依頼に同行していた時に貸し出された物を、そのまま使用している。アキラに同行したことでのハンターランクを大幅に上昇させたが、高ランクハンター向けの強力な装備に加えて、総合支援システムによる支援と、身に付けた体感時間操作技術により、自身のハンターランクに見劣りしない実力を得ている。旧世界製のブレードはアキラから貰った物で、その性能は飛び抜けている。

| | |
|---------------------|-----|
| NAME | 名 前 |
| ユミナ | |
| SEX | 性 別 |
| 女 | |
| HOMETOWN | 出 身 |
| 東部ナノガミヤ都市 | |
| JOB | 職 業 |
| ハンター | |
| HUNTER RANK | 階 級 |
| RANK 40 | |
| EQUIPMENT | 装 備 |
| WEAPON | 武 器 |
| SSB複合銃 旧世界製のブレード | |
| ARMOR | 防 具 |
| OFX2V 強化服フルキュリア | |



YUMINA

>Episode **006**

下望みの果て

キャラクターステータス Character Status

建国主義者討伐戦時のカツヤのステータス。カツヤの部隊は全員が総合支援システムの使用を前提とした総合支援強化服を着用しており、通常の強化服より高い支援効果を得ている。付属品の銃とブレードも非常に高性能であり、支援効果と合わせて更に威力を向上させる。加えてウダジマから資金援助を受けたことで、部隊全体の戦力を大きく向上させた。その総合的な戦力は、クガマヤマ都市で活動するハンターの水準を大きく超えている。カツヤはその部隊を率いる者として、わずかな間ではあるが都市のハンターの頂点に立った。

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| NAME | 名 前 |
| カツヤ | |
| SEX | 性 別 |
| 男 | |
| HOMETOWN | 出 身 |
| 東部ナノガミヤ都市 | |
| JOB | 職 業 |
| ハンター | |
| HUNTER RANK | 階 級 |
| RANK 42 | |
| EQUIPMENT | 装 備 |
| WEAPON | 武 器 |
| D3KM 複合銃 | |
| D3KM ブレード | |
| ARMOR | 防 具 |
| D3KM 総合支援強化服 | |
| キングスマインド | |



KATSUYA

>Episode
006

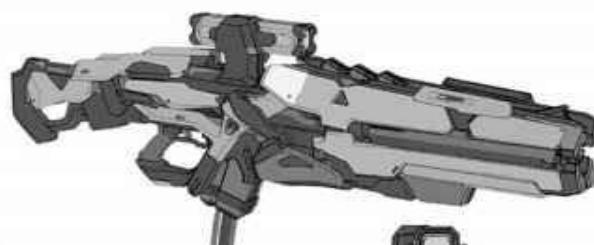
下望みの果

武器解説
Weapon Guide

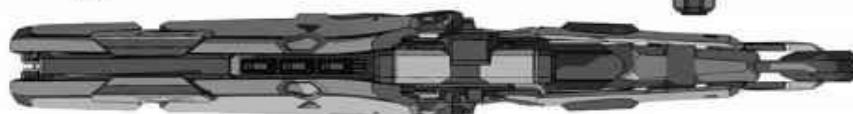
LEO複合銃

TOSON製の複合銃。AAH突撃銃より少し長い程度の長さだが、その性能は威力特化に改造したSSB複合銃を超えている。しかも変式の銃口により、この1挺で通常弾から小型ミサイルまで様々な大きさの弾が利用可能。加えて目玉の機能としてC弾（チャージバレット）と呼ばれる特殊弾に対応している。C弾使用時に大容量エネルギータンクを使用すれば、大量のエネルギー消費と引き換えに、その威力を限界まで高めることができる。1挺2億オーラム。

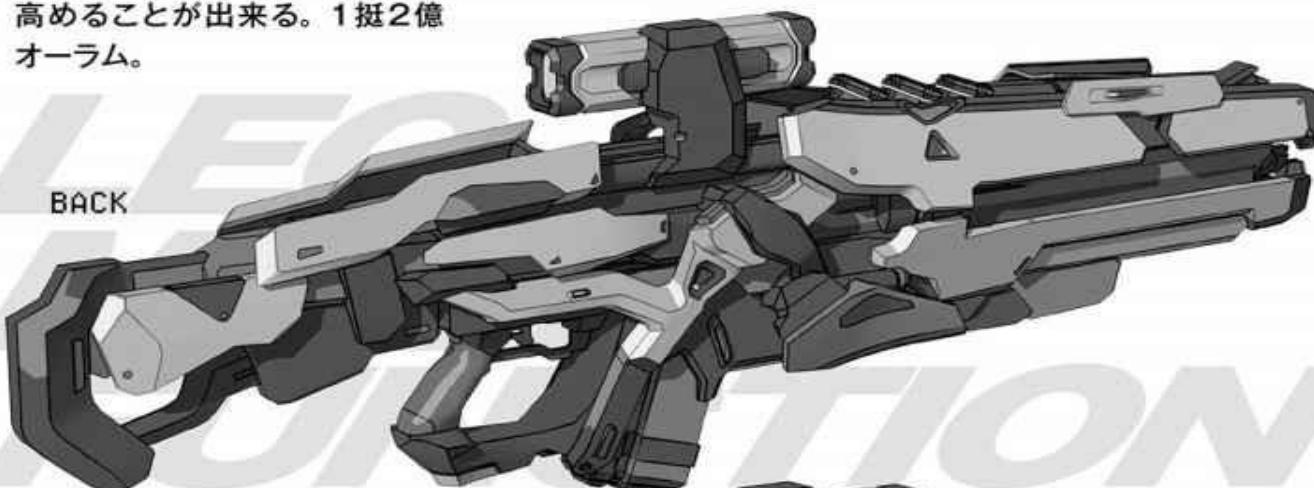
エネルギータンク接続例



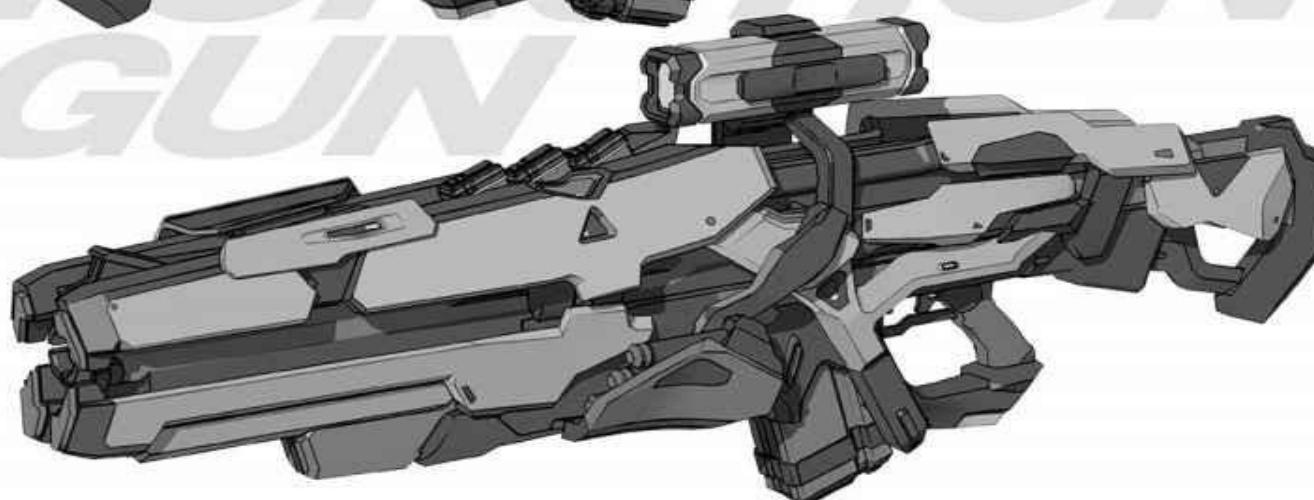
TOP



FRONT



BACK



LEO MULTI-FUNCTION GUN

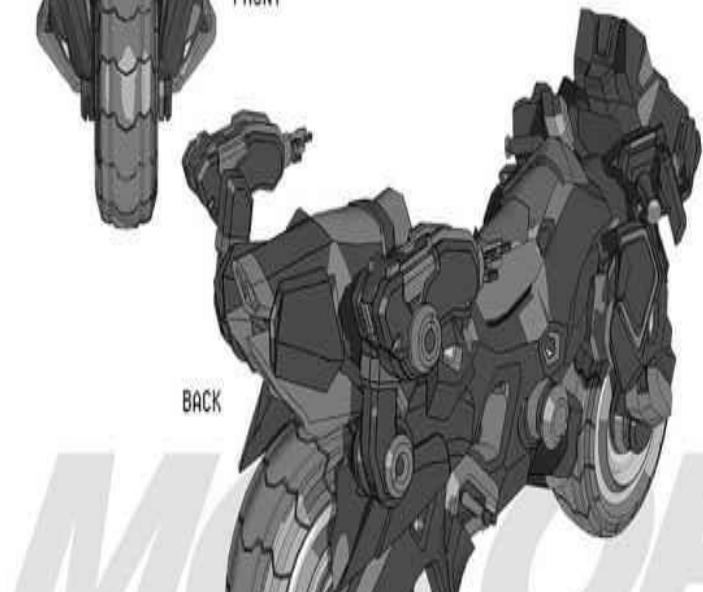
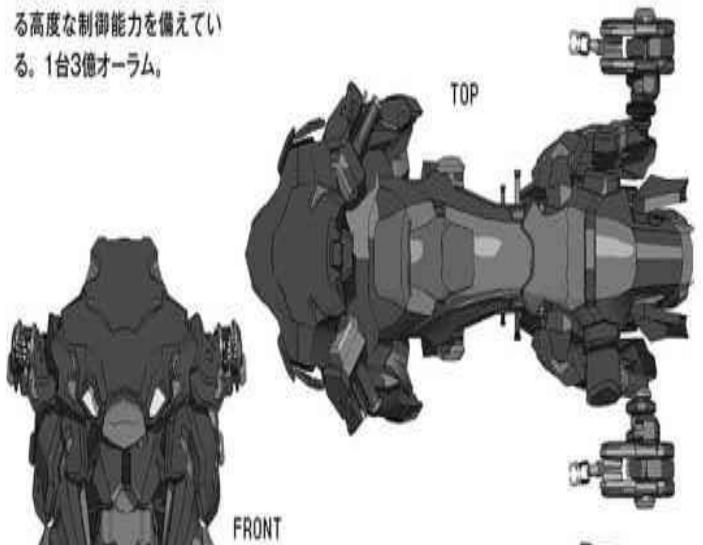
>Episode
006

下望みの果て

武器ガイド
Weapon Guide

大型バイク

イイダ商業区画遺跡での戦いでバイクを失ったアキラが、カツラギから新たに購入した荒野仕様の大型バイク。高ランクハンター向けの高級品であり、非常に高性能。頑丈で、加速力にも最大速度にも優れ、わずかな体勢の狂いが大事故に繋がる速度でも、車両を自在に操れる高度な制御能力を備えている。1台3億オーラム。



LEO複合銃搭載



バイクに取り付けられている2本のアーム式銃座は、人型兵器の武装でも問題無く支えられるほどに強力。アキラは予備のLEO複合銃を取り付けている。

MOTORCYCLE



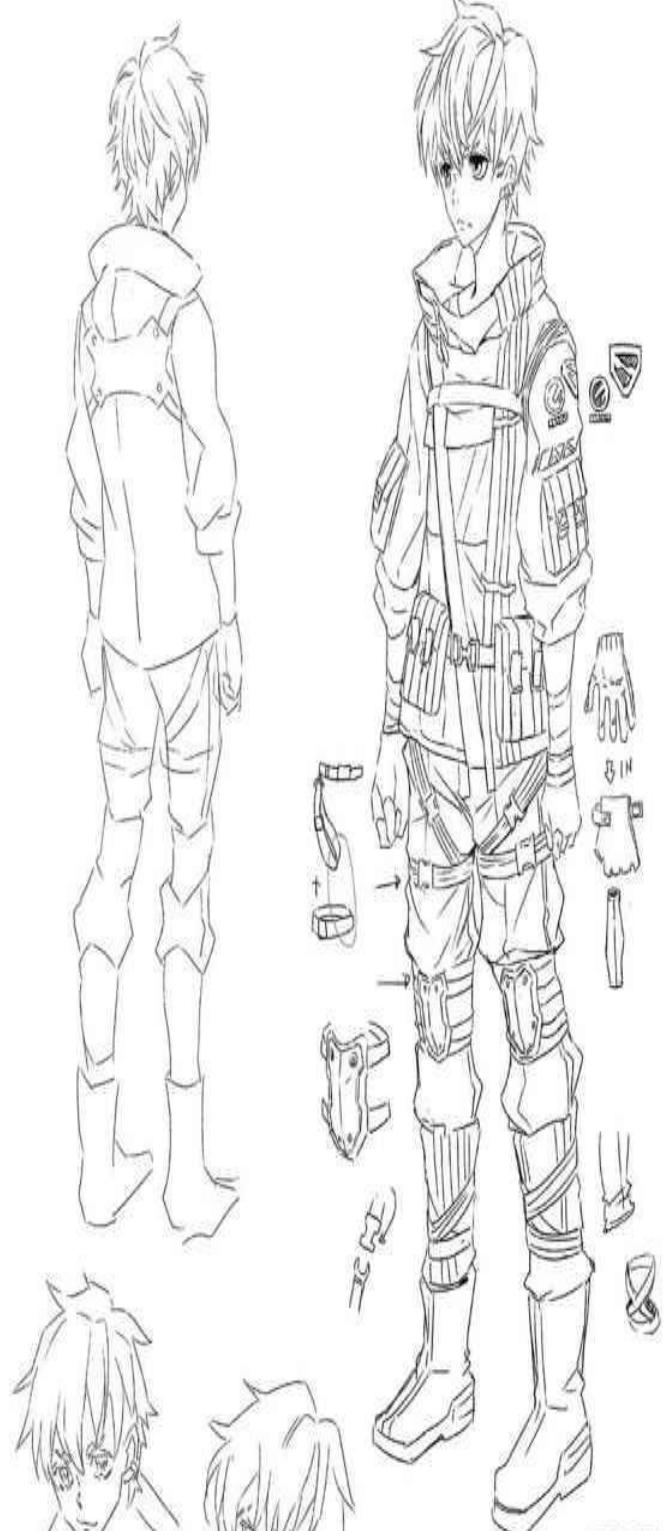
>Episode
006

下望みの果て

キャラクター設定
Archive



アルファ
(初期設定)



アキラ
(初期設定)



>Episode
006

下望みの果て

キャラク・設定
Archive



ユミナ
(初期設定)



カツヤ
(初期設定)



アリ
(初期設定)



少女

>Episode
006

下望みの果て

キャラクター設定
Archive



ティオル



ヤツバヤシ



レーナ



トガミ



ネリア



イナベ



ウダジマ



ガルモ

物語は次の舞台へ

電撃の新文芸

リビルドワールド

Rebuild World

NEXT EPISODE >>>

ナフセ
アラターランド
わいつしゆ
スティル・cell

III

The advanced civilization that once
the world has crumbled away, and a long time
People rallied the fragments of wisdom and skill
all over the world and spent a long time rebuilding the world.

2022年

新章スタート予定!

Profile

ナフセ

Yabew

電撃（新文正）スタートアップコンテスト
ト古事作「リビルドワールド」で大賞を
受賞レビュー。





The advanced civilization that once dominated the world was destroyed, and a long time has passed since then. The fragments of wisdom and glory scattered across the globe have been gathered and spent a long time rebuilding human society.

Rebuild World

Rebuild World VI <Bottom

one's desire is unfulfilled

Author/Naphse

Illustration by Gin Gin

Illustration of world view

Mechanical design/cell

The New Literature of the Blitz

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Japanese text only

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This book is a revised edition of 『Rebuild World』, which won the "Grand Prize" in the "Dengeki 『New Literature』 Startup Contest" held by Kakuyom in 2018.

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