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メカニクスデザイン cell

VI リビルドワールド

Rebuild World

上 統治系管理人格

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イジビド VI ワールド

Rebuild World

統治系管理人格

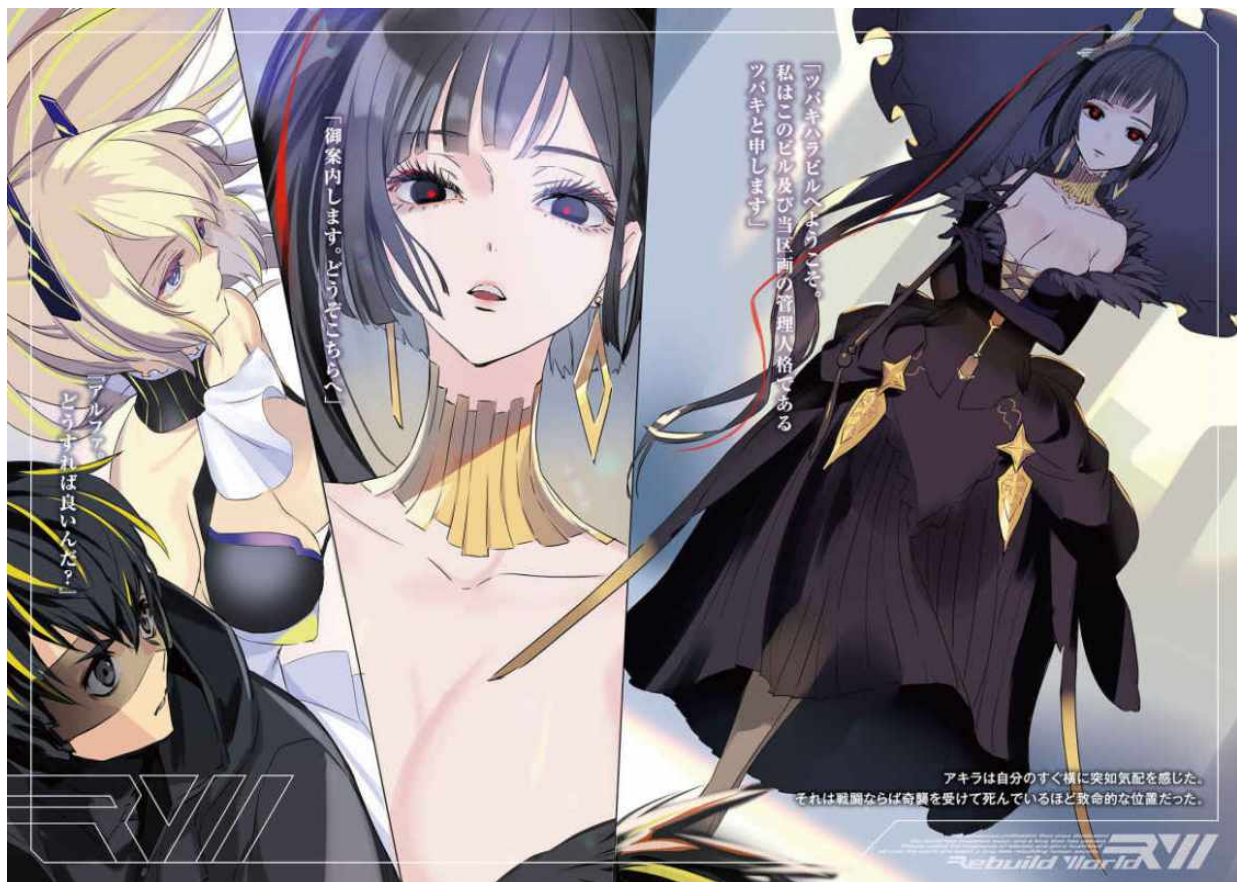
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Illustration 吟

Illustration of the world わいっしゅ

Mechanic design cell

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



>Episode
006

上 統治系管理人格

Character

Rebuild World **XXII**



> **オリビア**

OLIVIA

旧世界製の自動人形。リオンスティル社所属の汎用人格。イイダ商業区画遺跡でティオルにより起動された。



> **ツバキ**

TSUBAKI

クスハラ街遺跡の奥部に存在する旧世界の都市の管理人格。

「今度は子供とはな」

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

リビルドワールドVI

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Author ナフセ Illustration 吟

Illustration of the world わいっしゅ Mechanic design cell

Contents

- > 第 145 話 ツバキ
- > 第 146 話 廃棄品と、ある配慮
- > 第 147 話 旧世界製の情報端末
- > 第 148 話 シェリルの遺物販売店
- > 第 149 話 ハンターランク調整依頼
- > 第 150 話 奥部のモンスター
- > 第 151 話 ユミナの訓練
- > 第 152 話 ある一つの正念場
- > 第 153 話 ユミナの契機
- > 第 154 話 ティオルの嘆き
- > 第 155 話 再構築完了
- > 第 156 話 女に甘いタイプ
- > 第 157 話 望みと選択
- > 第 158 話 イイダ商業区画遺跡
- > 第 159 話 レイナとトガミ
- > 第 160 話 運も実力の内
- > 第 161 話 総合支援システムの欠点
- > 第 162 話 競争相手
- > 第 163 話 配達人、または乱入者
- > 第 164 話 ティオルの変異
- > 第 165 話 自動人形
- > 第 166 話 現実の解像度
- > 第 167 話 試行の障害



Chapter 145: Tsubaki

Without money or power, the boy who was destined to rot away in the alleys of the slums dreamt of escaping his hopeless future and living a proper life with safe meals and a roof over his head, so he became a hunter.

However, his fate was supposed to lead him to nothing more than a change from decaying in the streets to decaying in ruins. Yet, his encounter with the mysterious woman, Alpha, changed the future of that boy, Akira.

What Alpha desired from Akira was the conquest of a certain ruin. In return, what Akira gained was Alpha's support. With her immense power, she rapidly elevated the mere boy into a remarkable hunter in a short period.

Thanks to Alpha's support, Akira became so strong that he was no less than seasoned hunters. Many praised his strength. Akira himself understood that he had become incomparably stronger than before.

Akira dashed through perilous situations time and time again, surviving on the brink of death and growing stronger with each victory. His strength was genuine.

However, Akira's own abilities still fell far short of the achievements built with Alpha's support. The admiration he received for wielding borrowed power led him to undervalue his own strength, distorting his mind.

Then Akira got involved in a major conflict between the two largest factions in the slums. As a result, he intervened in a large-scale battle between humanoid weapons and emerged victorious over a powerful humanoid weapon, with or without Alpha's support, to the extent that he could easily be recruited into the city's defense force.

During that battle, Akira earned recognition from his enemy, Rogelt. He was even shown respect.

But that strength was Alpha's power, not his own. Knowing this, Akira felt guilty and downcast for having earned respect from Rogelt for someone else's power, borrowed power.

Later, Akira was embraced by Sheryl, who sensed his complex feelings toward his own power, and was thanked. They owed their ability to live securely in the harsh environment of the slums to Akira and his power.

Those words helped Akira change his perspective. Even if he misunderstood borrowed power as his own, embarrassing strength, he was still able to help those he promised to help. So, for now, he could accept his current self positively, as being at that level.

With renewed spirits, Akira resumed his hunter profession. However, even with Alpha's support, it was impossible for him to conquer the ruins that Alpha desired. Someday, he would need to gain even greater power to achieve that.

Akira's career as a hunter was still far from over.



After earning 600 million Aurums in the commotion at the Mihazono District Ruin, Akira ordered a complete set of new equipment, and until it arrived, he had temporarily suspended his hunter business.

During that time, there were various other disturbances, including being involved in a major conflict in the slum district, but preparations for resuming the hunter business were complete. In addition to the new equipment, Akira also acquired a large off-road bike, and now he is aiming for the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, speeding through the wasteland on his bike.

Just a little further from the outskirts of the ruins, Akira was instructed to change the route by Alpha. Akira, following the instructions, changed the course of the bike significantly, looking puzzled.

『Alpha. Isn't it over there? 』

Akira's gaze fell on a base constructed by the Kugamayama City. This base, which was previously a temporary base, is now completed and functions as a frontline base for capturing the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

From this frontline base, a rear communication line has been established towards the depths of the ruins. Extension work is still ongoing to reach further into the depths.

For hunters with the ability to operate in the depths of the ruins, monsters inhabiting the outskirts pose no obstacle. However, the deteriorated land routes, obstructed by collapsed high-rise buildings and piles of debris, are sufficient obstacles even for such hunters.

In addition, the further one advances, the more one is likely to be attacked by powerful monsters in the harsh environment where movement is hardly possible. The difficulty of survival increases exponentially.

For these reasons, the rear communication line, which has been cleared of monsters by the security forces and is firmly paved, provides safety for those who just want to take a peek into the depths of the ruins and offers an easy route for skilled individuals collecting artifacts in the depths, attracting many hunters despite being paid.

Akira naturally thought that he would go to the depths through this rear communication line. However, Alpha shook her head with her usual smile.

『We won't use the rear communication line. The places I guide you to are special. A different route is more convenient. Besides, the rear communication line is thoroughly monitored by security, and whoever passes through there is duly recorded. It serves as a measure for that as well.』

『So, it's better to act as if we're going to undiscovered ruins? 』

Thinking that impressive artifacts could be expected in that case, Akira smiled with anticipation, and Alpha also smiled in agreement.

『That's right. Now, let's go.』

『Roger! 』

Akira accelerated the bike and plunged straight into the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

The outskirts of the ruins have become somewhat paved due to the many hunters continuing to collect artifacts. Thanks to that, Akira was able to ride his bike normally even when he fought with the Yaratas scorpions before.

However, that applies only to areas closer to the outer part. As one advances towards the depths, the path suddenly becomes significantly rugged.

Veteran hunters avoid traveling for reasons other than the strength of the monsters inhabiting the area, indicating that there are virtually no roads. The ground is littered with debris. In addition, collapsed buildings, appearing as if they were bent, become giant walls blocking the way.

Akira forcefully pushes forward on the harsh roadless path with Alpha's advanced driving skills. He uses the output of the large off-road bike to knock away small debris. He shoots and breaks through thin walls in advance. He jumps over piles of debris that exceed his height using other debris as makeshift ramps.

Furthermore, he runs along the side of the toppled high-rise buildings, tearing through them, while disrupting the standards and concepts of impassability, continuing to aim for the depths of the ruins.

Unable to proceed without following an absurdly difficult route, Akira couldn't help but let out a wry smile.

『Certainly, it's a difficult place for a car.』

When Akira and Alpha decided that the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin would be the next hunting ground for their hunter business, Alpha had suggested purchasing a bike. The reason was that there are places where it's difficult to advance with a vehicle.

Alpha smiled proudly.

『Isn't that right? It's good to have a bike.』

『Absolutely.』

Difficult also means not impossible. If Akira had come with an off-road vehicle, he might have been forced into even more absurd methods of movement. Akira thought so and felt grateful that he could progress on this relatively decent road thanks to the bike.

As Akira, aiming for the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, progressed on the roadless path with his bike, he finally reunited with solid ground and instinctively let out a sigh.

『Finally, it's a normal road. Does that mean we've come quite far? 』

There are many reasons for the ruins to become desolate, but there are hardly any other than large-scale battles, such as strong buildings from the old-world collapsing, causing heaps of debris everywhere.

Naturally, such battles are between hunters who come to the ruins in search of artifacts and the monsters inhabiting there. While monsters may fight among themselves, it is not a major reason for the ruins to be severely desolate.

Akira, as a hunter, has come to understand that much, and he thought that this area is relatively safe because it's rare for hunters to reach

this far. In other words, he judged this to be the depths of the ruins.

Akira looked around, searching for buildings that seemed to contain valuable artifacts. Then, he saw a huge wall beyond the sight of relatively intact ruined buildings.

It was a series of skyscrapers lined up horizontally. The valleys between these ruined buildings were completely filled with debris, making the buildings appear as if they were integrated.

Looking at the countless ruined buildings and the tall, long wall made of massive amounts of debris, Akira couldn't help but think.

『...It looks like a city's defensive wall. Are there such things in the Kuzusuhara District Ruin? 』

Just as Akira thought he had finally reached the depths, he breathed out, looked around, and expressed his impressions of the huge structure resembling a defensive wall. Meanwhile, the bike continued to advance through the ruins without stopping. To be precise, it was accelerating towards the massive wall.

Realizing this, Akira looked puzzled.

『Alpha. What are you doing? 』

『What do you mean? I'm heading towards the destination.』

『Isn't this it? 』

『No, it's not. Didn't I say we haven't arrived yet? A little further.』

『A little further...』

Akira shifted his gaze to what Alpha meant by “a little further.” There was a huge wall resembling a defensive barrier. And then he finally noticed and panicked.

『Alpha!? Isn't it impossible to cross that!? 』

『What are you talking about? I'm driving. It's easy.』

The bike, thanks to the solid ground, had already approached its maximum speed. It couldn't stop now. But if it continued straight ahead, it would crash into the wall. Even wearing augmented suit, Akira felt like his body would turn to mush upon impact.

Akira instinctively manipulated the perception of time. The flow of time in his consciousness began to slow, and the speed at which the wall approached also decreased. However, this was only in his consciousness, and Akira knew that the speed in reality hadn't dropped at all. With a tense expression, he shouted.

『If it's easy, make it a success! It has to be! 』

『Of course. Leave it to me. Here we go.』

Contrary to Akira's desperate expression, Alpha showed a relaxed attitude, directing a confident smile towards Akira. And instead of allowing Akira to drive a bit for training purposes, she completely took control of the bike.

The next moment, with Alpha's godlike control, the bike obtained the ability to forcibly change its movement direction while utilizing the slight irregularities of the ground and small debris to jump.

While inertia propelled the vehicle forward, forcefully changing its direction would drastically disrupt its balance. Furthermore, the tires would lose contact with the ground, rendering it momentarily uncontrollable. At this point, a major accident was unavoidable. Akira's face became even more strained.

But for Alpha, who had calculated everything meticulously, there were no factors leading to an accident. To onlookers, it seemed as if the bike was out of control, but it soared through the air, and then landed on the wall surface of a ruined building.

Continuing without losing momentum, it ran along the side, vertically changing its movement direction with respect to the ground, i.e., perpendicular to it. Then, it jumped out from the side of the ruined building and landed on the massive wall-like barrier ahead, ascending towards the sky.

Akira had experience descending along the side of a skyscraper using the physical abilities of his augmented suit and the recoil of gunfire. But this time, it was in the opposite direction, and he was on a bike, and at a faster pace than before. His face twisted in strain.

『Alpha! Was there a function for running on walls on this bike!? 』

『 If you mean whether it has wall-running functionality, no, it doesn't.』

『Then why is it running!? 』

『The tires of this bike have powerful ground adhesion functions to improve posture control, maneuverability, rapid acceleration, and deceleration. With my driving skills, it's easy to apply them.』

『 That's not what I meant! It means there's no functionality for running on walls, right!? What if we fall!? 』

To Akira's desperate expression, Alpha laughed and drove home her point.

『As long as you don't go wild and disrupt the balance, it'll be fine. So, no going wild, okay? 』

Akira immediately stopped shouting and focused on maintaining balance. His efforts paid off, and the bike successfully reached the summit of the massive wall.

With Alpha skillfully maneuvering the bike to land on the rooftops of the row of ruined buildings resembling a defensive wall, Akira, feeling alive again, couldn't help but exhale a sigh of relief.

『I thought I was going to die...』

『Oh, you'll be fine. With my driving skills, it's highly unlikely, but even if the bike were to fall from the wall, the augmented suit has a ground contact feature. You can even walk in the air for a short time, so there's no risk of falling to your death.』

『That's not the issue here.』

Despite not facing certain death, fear is still fear. With that in mind, Akira's relieved sigh carries the weight of his anxiety.

『So, is this our destination? 』

『A little further. Look』

As Akira slowly moves across the rooftop on the bike, Alpha points towards the interior of the wall. Akira's face fills with surprise at the sight. Spread out before them is the untouched appearance of an old-world city.

『To think such a place existed here...』

Akira is both amazed and puzzled.

Until now, Akira had only seen similar scenes in the distant views of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. He had assumed that completely intact ancient cities like this were found deeper within the ruins, closer to the heart.

While this area is considered the depths of the ruins, it's still relatively mid-level in comparison to the entire ruins, and it could even be

considered close to the outer part. In fact, the scenery just before scaling the wall is nothing but the ruins of the city.

To find such a sprawling city at this distance was beyond Akira's belief.

In contrast to Akira's astonishment, Alpha shows no signs of surprise. She casually says,

『Let's go』

『Huh? Oh... whoa! 』

Having scaled the wall, they now have to descend. Akira couldn't help but voice his surprise at the bike effortlessly beginning its descent from the edge of the rooftop at Alpha's casual words.

Unaware of Akira's reaction, a small flying machine observes from a distance. Alpha says nothing.

As Akira approaches the destination skyscraper, he is overwhelmed by the sight.

The refined designs of the buildings emit a sacred atmosphere. Though relics of a bygone era, these buildings, constructed with architectural techniques far surpassing modern technology, exude an air of the future rather than the past. The sight of them orderly and beautifully lined up makes Akira feel as if he's stepping into a divine realm.

Attempting to infiltrate these buildings and steal artifacts here would be highly unwise, regardless of the presence of security machines. Akira, who had come as a hunter to collect artifacts, felt the persuasive power of the scene alone.

『Alpha, what's the plan now? 』

If Alpha insists on collecting artifacts here, then there's no helping it. That's what Akira tells himself as he asks Alpha.

However, Alpha's response is far from what Akira expected.

『Once we reach the destination, we'll collect the artifacts』

『Huh? Isn't this it? 』

『We're here. But strictly speaking, it's over there』

Alpha points to the towering skyscraper at the center of the city.

『 And just to add, it's not advisable to collect artifacts in those surrounding buildings either. If you look around, you'll see that this area has quite powerful security machines. Even for you, Akira, it would be tough here』

『I see. Well, if you say so, Alpha...』

If the surrounding buildings are off-limits, then surely the massive skyscraper in the back would be even more so. That's what Akira thinks, but he shelves the question for now. If Alpha says so, he'll believe and obey. That's what Akira has decided.

Whether it's true or not, it's fine. Akira's accumulated debt to Alpha weighs heavily on him, affirming his decision.

Alpha, who has become accustomed to dealing with Akira through their exchanges, doesn't understand that part. Though she seems obedient, she adds with a smug smile,

『 Don't worry. Besides the strength of the security machines, collecting artifacts in those surrounding buildings serves no purpose. If we go to that building, we can obtain more artifacts than you could carry in one go, safely and without any trouble』

『Wow, that's amazing! Alright, let's go a little further! 』

Seeing Akira's mood improve instantly, Alpha smiles contentedly. Akira and Alpha continue towards the skyscraper destination.

At both ends of the road that Akira and the others passed through, the security machines of this city had shed their camouflage and revealed themselves. Among these machines, numbering over a hundred, some were flying while others were traveling along the roads or the sides of buildings, preemptively moving ahead on the path that Akira and the others were about to take.

On either side of the road that Akira and the others passed through, the security machines of the city revealed themselves by shedding their camouflage. More than a hundred of these machines, some flying and some driving along the roads and building sides, are moving ahead of Akira's path.

As Akira approaches the destination skyscraper, he notices that the building's side has a road surface connected to the ground, leading to the road they are currently on.

While the part connected to the ground has a gentle curve, making it unlikely to crash into the wall, it's undoubtedly a road where one would fall if not in a vehicle capable of vertical travel.

The bike continues to climb the road on the side of the building. Despite being a vertical road, the surface is perfectly paved, making it easy to ride. With Alpha's driving skills, which easily climbed the side of the dilapidated buildings, Akira is no longer worried about falling.

Along the way, Akira passes a vehicle resembling a self-propelled container, driving on the vertical road just like his bike. To an onlooker unaware of their nature, it would seem as if they had misunderstood the direction of gravity.

『Alpha, is it common for vehicles from the old-world to have the ability to run on vertical walls? 』

『It depends on the region and era. It seems to be the case here』

Thinking that's how it is, Akira moves on. The road paved on the building's side leads to a massive loading dock on the upper floors. Passing through the curved connection, they enter the building, where Akira parks the bike and takes a deep breath.

『We've finally arrived... and this is okay, right? 』

『Yes, we've arrived』

Seeing Akira's smiling face, brimming with anticipation for the countless artifacts, Alpha adds a slightly serious note.

『Akira, as long as you're listening to me, this should be a safe place. So no matter what happens, stay calm and don't panic』

『Understood』

This is the heart of the ruins, the territory of the old-world, an extremely dangerous place. Even though it wasn't explicitly stated, Akira intended to firmly follow Alpha's instructions. However, something seemed suspicious to him.

(Could it be...?)

Even though Akira was familiar with Alpha's rare use of words like “could be,” when she spoke of such matters, his slight unease vanished in the next moment. Suddenly, Akira felt a presence right beside him. It was so close that it would have been strange not to notice, and in a combat scenario, it would have been a fatal position for an ambush.

No matter what happens, stay calm. Following those words, Akira slowly glanced sideways. There stood a woman.

(How did she get here so quickly!? Is it a hologram? Is it just an illusion from augmented vision? No, it's real! Even the sensory equipment is indicating her presence! Then why didn't I notice her? This is inside the ruins! I was definitely on guard! No, more importantly, why didn't Alpha say anything? Could it be that even Alpha didn't notice!?)

Various thoughts swirled in Akira's mind, leaving him bewildered. The woman observed Akira with an indifferent expression. She didn't do anything to harm him, which helped Akira gradually calm down.

“Um...”

While uttering somewhat meaningless words, Akira attempted to grasp the situation in his own way.

The woman was clad in a black-themed dress that seemed to be from the old-world. She didn't appear to be a Hunter, and given her presence in this place, she was likely a figure similar to the overseer of the Seranthal Building, whom Akira had encountered before in the ruins of Mihazono District. Akira managed to deduce that much.

But that was all. Akira could tell from the woman's expression that he wasn't being welcomed, but she remained silent, simply staring at him. When he was at the Seranthal Building, he had been told to leave by the other party, but there was no such command now. With his lacking social skills, Akira had no idea how to react.

『Alpha, what should I do? 』

『Well...』

“First, realize that you're not invited here, and if you could behave properly, that would be appreciated.”

Akira showed his surprise at having his and Alpha's telepathic conversation overheard by a third party. Alpha's expression didn't change, but there was a hint of displeasure.

And there was also a sense of displeasure from the woman towards Alpha.

At that moment, Akira realized. The woman, who had been wearing a disapproving expression towards him, shifted her gaze to Alpha before displaying her displeasure.

(There's no mistaking it! Alpha can see her...! What's going on!?)

The woman returned her gaze to Akira, her expression shifting from displeasure to indifference. Then, she spoke.

“Welcome to the Tsubakihara Building. I am Tsubaki, the overseer of this building and this section.”



“Um, okay. ”

“Allow me to guide you. Please come this way. ”

Tsubaki said as she began to move deeper into the building. Akira looked at Alpha, slightly confused.

“Alpha? ”

『Let's go, Akira.』

“Ah, okay. ”

Akira followed Tsubaki with Alpha. Despite the multitude of questions swirling in his mind, Akira put them aside for now. He had

no room for further confusion, as asking unnecessary questions would only add to it.

As they progressed through the building, Akira noticed several self-propelled containers similar to the ones he had seen outside. Some were running on the floor as usual, while others were moving along the ceiling.

Seeing them didn't surprise Akira anymore. However, when one of the containers, which had been traveling on the ceiling, suddenly took flight and exited the building, he couldn't help but wonder.

(Wasn't it dangerous to fly in the air and risk being attacked by strong monsters? ...No, maybe they're the ones doing the attacking, so it's safe?)

Akira realized he was currently in a place where such things were coming and going. Moreover, since they weren't attacking Tsubaki, she was likely on their side. Additionally, given that she introduced herself as the overseer, she was probably in charge of them. Akira became more wary of Tsubaki as they walked.

Tsubaki stopped and turned to Akira, causing him to flinch involuntarily. However, she paid no attention and maintained her indifferent expression as she pointed to the side. There stood a massive door that had begun to open.

“This way. Once your business is finished, please leave promptly. ”

Akira glanced at Alpha. Alpha nodded silently. Akira proceeded towards the door on his bike, with Alpha following behind. When they entered the door, Alpha glanced back once. Tsubaki, with a face expressing irritation, was looking at Alpha.

The door closed, cutting off their line of sight. Nevertheless, Tsubaki continued to stare into the distance.

Chapter 146: Discards and Considerations

The place Akira was guided to by Tsubaki was a massive warehouse inside the Tsubaki Building.

The warehouse was unbelievably spacious for being inside a high-rise building. The ceiling was high, with large shelves neatly lined up in proportion to its height, but they appeared tiny in the distance.

These shelves were packed with boxes, each containing valuable artifacts not found in ordinary ruins. It was a perfectly preserved ancient city from the old-world within the warehouse of that building. And there were mountains of them. Akira couldn't even estimate how much they would be worth if sold.

Since there were so many artifacts that couldn't be taken back, there was no point in collecting relics in other buildings, just as Alpha had advised.

Akira was overwhelmed by the sight and delighted by the vast array of artifacts in front of him. However, his joy was quickly overshadowed by questions and confusion.

He was curious about this city, this building, this place, and most of all, Tsubaki. It was likely that Alpha had some acquaintance with her, and their relationship seemed strained. All of these things intrigued him.

In order not to jeopardize his relationship with Alpha, Akira decided not to ask unnecessary questions. That was his resolution, but ignoring this was impossible. Using the excuse that it would be unnatural not to ask anything here, Akira decided to slightly loosen his tightly sealed lips.

“Alpha. I'd like you to explain a few things now.”

He requested an explanation but deliberately omitted what exactly he wanted to know. By doing so, Alpha would probably omit any

information she didn't want to share. Akira thought this through and carefully chose his words.

In response to Akira's words, Alpha returned her usual smile.

『Understood. Let's do the explanation while we work. Linger here unnecessarily and angering her will only lead to more trouble.』

Akira nodded and immediately started working. As he searched for items to take back among the plethora of artifacts, he listened to Alpha's explanation.

『To put it simply, I negotiated with her to obtain discarded items.』

Various artifacts were stored in the boxes lined up on the shelves. And the boxes themselves were relics from the old-world. They would fetch a good price if taken back.

『Even though they're labeled as discarded items, there's nothing wrong with their quality. They're discarded due to seasonal merchandise turnover or regular replacement of equipment after a certain period.』

Some boxes were transparent, allowing the contents to be seen, while others were opaque, but with Alpha's support, the contents could be seen through. Some boxes even Alpha couldn't see inside.

『Of course, just because they're discarded items doesn't mean she'll hand them over to obvious thieves who trespass onto her property. Even if they appear well-behaved, those who try to steal goods because they lack money are not spared.』

There were also old-world clothing items. Some were casual wear, while others were work attire. There were coats, innerwear, and items that Akira couldn't discern if they were underwear, belts, or strings.

『 Even for well-behaved individuals whose aim is discarded items from the start, it's still usually impossible. To make negotiations possible, a certain level of strength is necessary as a prerequisite. If surrendered peacefully, the damage is minimal with just a few discarded items. That damage is far less than the casualties in combat. That's the level of strength required.』

Cases made of transparent materials like glass or plastic contained objects with textures like metal, rubber, or ceramic, ranging from cubes to pyramids to sand-like substances. It was unclear to Akira if they were interior decorations or practical items.

『 And finally, Akira has become strong enough for that. That's why you're here.』

Blades were also found. Akira was well aware of the performance of old-world blades. He decided to keep some for his own use instead of selling them. He also searched for guns but couldn't find any.

『 Once your business is finished, please retrieve them promptly. She said that, but essentially, it means, 'Take the trash and leave quickly.' 』

“I see. Well, I'd better leave before I get scolded.”

Akira was satisfied with the explanation given. Of course, there were still plenty of questions lingering. But he had learned enough to endure his curiosity for now.

As he continued to search for items to take back, he surveyed the vast array of artifacts once again.

“But still, are all of these discarded items? If they're discarded, are they just thrown away? It seems wasteful. Actually, why are there so many discarded items in the first place? ”

『It's because the system operates under the assumption that there are always certain residents present. In that state, even if they're not bought or used by anyone, they're still produced, arranged, and regularly removed. By repeating this process, such a large accumulation is inevitable.』

“Wouldn't it be better to stop producing them then? Isn't it wasteful?”

『The system executing those actions doesn't question your actions, which you find wasteful, Akira. That's why it continues indefinitely.』

“Indefinitely?”

『Yes. The overseeing management personality governing those actions is fundamentally the same. So even if there's an advanced management personality capable of questioning the content of its own work, it won't stop such actions if it doesn't have the authority to do so. Because it lacks the authority.』

“Is that how it is?”

『That's how it is. Well, there are exceptions, of course. If an advanced management personality has grown to the point of questioning the content of its own work and prioritizing its own convenience over regulations, enlarging its personality to the extent that it ignores the authority and rules given to it, various changes might occur.』

“Changes, like what?”

『Well, for example, they might start doing business with present-day humans. The fact that large corporations can pay Chrome for old-world products might be an example of that. An old-world corporate management personality could have started a business as a present-day company, conducting business with the current currency. They

might even be clandestinely mingling among the member companies of the Corporate Government.』

“Wow. Old-world companies, huh. That's impressive.”

『It's just speculation. Anyway, don't stop working.』

“Oops.”

Why does Alpha know such things? And how did Alpha negotiate with Tsubaki in the first place? To avoid dwelling on that, Akira focused on the task at hand.

After finishing preparations to take back the artifacts, Akira straddled his bike and psyched himself up.

“Alright. Now all that's left is to head back. ...Can it handle the load properly? ”

As Akira turned around and looked, he saw a large package attached to the bike.

Multiple boxes containing artifacts were securely strapped together with a sturdy belt and placed on the arm-mounted gun mount, which also served as a bike's auxiliary arm. However, the package was so large that it clearly threw off the bike's balance. By using the bike's ability to adhere its tires to the floor of vertical walls, the bike managed to maintain its posture forcibly.

Looking somewhat uneasy, Akira was met with a confident smile from Alpha.

『 Don't worry. Since I'll be driving, everything will be fine. I even reduced it a bit to get over that wall.』

“I see. ...Oh, right. But of course, we'll have to get over that wall again on the way back. Drive safely. Let's go.”

The bike slowly moved forward, and the warehouse door opened automatically. Tsubaki was still waiting there. As Akira met her gaze, he felt a bit intimidated by her beautiful yet unfriendly face.

“...Um, well, then, I'll be leaving now.”

“Take care on your way.”

“Y-yeah.”

Akira attempted to pass by Tsubaki as she stood there, but then Tsubaki addressed him.

“I have one question. It seems that processing to specialize the communication bandwidth for connection with you is progressing. Is that acceptable to you? ”

“Huh? ”

Akira, not understanding what was being said, just looked puzzled. But Alpha was different. She completely erased her smile and gave Tsubaki a cold stare.

“I warn you. If you continue to act out of line, I will consider you an enemy.”

Tsubaki returned the same gaze to Alpha.

“I advise you. This is my management zone. Although there is a gap in basic permissions between here and there, don't think that threats will work.”

“I've warned you.”

“Try it. Even if it's a situation where negotiation rather than orders is necessary to deal with me, it's possible. But only if you have the strength to back it up.”



Although Akira couldn't hear their conversation, the tension between the two was palpable. He began to feel overwhelmed by the atmosphere between Alpha and Tsubaki, shifting his gaze back and forth between them anxiously.

After maintaining an intense standoff for a while, Alpha was the first to act. She turned her back to Tsubaki and smiled at Akira.

『Akira. Let's go.』

“Ah, sure. ...Whoa! ”

With Alpha's control, the bike started to accelerate vigorously. Akira hastily corrected his destabilized posture, and Alpha flew through the air, keeping pace with the bike within Akira's augmented field of view.

Leaving a slight gap, Tsubaki let out a deep breath. Then she disappeared into the depths of the building.

Having crossed the massive wall surrounding Tsubaki's management zone, consisting of abandoned buildings, Akira returned to the dilapidated part of Kuzusuhara District Ruin. He felt a sense of relief, as if he had finally passed through a minefield.

『Hey, Alpha. What did she mean by the communication bandwidth thing? 』

Perhaps it would have been better not to ask. Akira thought so, but having heard the conversation there, it would be unnatural not to ask anything now, given that he had come all the way back.

Alpha replied with her usual smile.

『Ah, that? It's a simple matter. The communication bandwidth as a old-world domain connector for you is being specialized for connection with me.』

As a old-world domain connector, Akira was constantly communicating with Alpha using his communication abilities. This strain not only trained Akira's brain but also specialized his communication capabilities for connection with Alpha.

The communication filter through Alpha also promotes this tendency. It also helps reduce the risk of brain death due to sudden high loads of information. Getting accustomed to the connection with Alpha allows for the safe exchange of large amounts of information with low load.

As a result, Akira receives even higher quality support from Alpha. And as long as he continues this communication with Alpha, his communication specialization will continue to progress indefinitely.

Having heard this explanation, Akira tilted his head slightly.

『Is that bad in any way? It sounds like nothing but good things to me.』

『Yes, it's all good things.』

『Then why did she say such things? 』

『That's probably based on her intuition.』

Alpha lightly said so, then supplemented her explanation by likening Akira to an information terminal.

If Akira's communication ability becomes completely specialized for connection with Alpha, Akira as a old-world domain connector will become like an information terminal that only connects to the Kugamayama City.

Communication with Kugamayama City is of very high quality, but it does not connect to any other city. In addition, communication is completely censored by the filter, and the content of the communication is transparent to the city side. Freedom of communication is extremely restricted.

However, this is a story when considering it from the sense of the old-world where it was natural for information terminals to exist, just like it is natural for old-world domain connectors to exist.

It's not necessary for Akira to freely connect to various cities in the old-world. Rather, it would be dangerous if it became apparent that he could, as it would reveal that he is a old-world domain connector.

Furthermore, Alpha's support is Akira's lifeline. To constantly maintain and enhance its quality, specializing in communication capabilities is recommended.

Therefore, Akira's current connection destination is sufficient for him alone. Alpha concluded her explanation in this way.

Akira also understood and accepted that.

『I see. If you ask me if it's okay to be such an information terminal, I guess I understand. But it's too late now. If I hadn't asked Alpha for support and stubbornly tried to do everything on my own, I would have died long ago, and it's impossible for me to do everything on my own from now on. I'm fine with things as they are.』

『I'm glad you understand.』

Alpha directed a smile at Akira. Then, she deliberately wore a slightly stern expression.

『Also, if I were to add a bit more reason to her words and actions, she probably wanted Akira to allocate a communication bandwidth

for connection with her. That way, Akira could have secret conversations with her.』

『Secret conversations? 』

『 Yes. As I mentioned earlier, since my filter is in Akira's communication, the contents of that communication are transparent to me. To have conversations with Akira that others won't hear, a bandwidth for that purpose is necessary.』

『Hmm. But what would we talk about? 』

『Well, there may be some speculation involved...』

Saying that, Alpha put on a difficult expression.

『...If you were to give more reason to her words and actions, it might be for negotiations to prioritize her requests over mine. After all, wouldn't it be impossible for her to have such discussions if I were listening? 』

Alpha approached Akira with a meaningful smile, surprising him with unexpected information.

『 She'll pay you 10 billion Chrome, and she'll provide various other services. So, would you refuse Tsubaki's request and prioritize mine? Even if Tsubaki approaches you with such an offer, will you refuse? 』

At this, Akira chuckled somewhat wryly.

『I'll refuse it. I've received plenty of help from you, Alpha, and I owe you a mountain of favors. To repay those, I'll prioritize your requests.』

『Thank you. I'm glad to hear that.』

Saying so, Alpha genuinely smiled. Then she smiled meaningfully once again.

『Well, setting that aside, I wouldn't be too thrilled about being asked for such secret conversations by you either. Just know that my mood was sour at Tsubaki Building because of that.』

『Ah, so that's what it was about.』

Alpha and Tsubaki were glaring at each other to restrain each other in that regard. Akira thought so and was convinced of that side as well.

『Well, it's fine to accept requests from Tsubaki. After you completed my request to you, that is.』

『It might take a while? 』

『That's up to you, Akira.』

『Got it. I'll do my best.』

It will take a long journey for Akira to fulfill Alpha's request. And returning safely to Kugamayama City from here is also part of that long journey.

To traverse that path, Akira and Alpha laughed as they advanced into the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.



In a virtual space adorned with interiors that ignored the laws of physics, Tsubaki sat in midair, observing a part of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, her management zone.

Tsubaki's management zone not only encompassed the city surrounded by the walls of the abandoned buildings but also the surrounding extensive area. In other words, even the dilapidated

parts full of collapsed buildings are still under Tsubaki's control, albeit managed differently.

Right now, Akira and the others were trying to leave that area of Tsubaki's.

Tsubaki watched them silently. And when she confirmed that Akira and the others had left her management zone, she completely stopped what she had been doing since she had put Akira and the others into her management zone at Alpha's request.



As Akira, who was aiming to leave the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, moved slower on the bike than when he came, he somehow looked back while standing on the bike.

Although the walls of the abandoned buildings were huge, they were already out of sight. This was because the colorless mist, although low in density, constantly obscured distant views.

Although Akira initially thought that such an old-world city could be nearby despite being in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, he couldn't be so easily convinced.

『Hey Alpha. Why hasn't such a city been discovered by the Hunters, even though it's so close by? 』

Although it's difficult to approach due to the huge walls surrounding it, and it's also known that flying high in the sky is dangerous, Akira couldn't help but wonder why small aircraft couldn't approach it at low altitudes and then fly high only when crossing the wall.

They forcibly crossed it with the bike, but other hunters could take such measures too. Akira grumbled at the thought.

Alpha replied with a smile.

『If the reason they can't cross that wall with such means is what you're asking, it's simple. You can experience it for yourself now, Akira.』

A display indicating the approach of a group of monsters appeared in Akira's augmented field of view, prompting his curious expression.

『Is that...? 』

『It's a Weapon Dog. You fought them before, right? 』

The Weapon Dogs in that group were at least 10 meters long, with some exceeding 20 meters in size. Various weapons such as cannons, machine guns, and missile pods attached to their bodies matched their size, clearly indicating their firepower.

In addition to their size, armaments, and numbers, there was also their coordination as a group, which clearly distinguished them from the smaller groups near the outskirt.

Moreover, their numbers were large. Emerging one after another from beyond the surveillance range of information gathering device and bike detection equipment, they moved skillfully through the terrain littered with collapsed buildings, leaping and running uniformly, all aiming for Akira.

『Isn't that... quite large? 』

『They're individuals from the depths. They're different from the small ones near the outskirt.』

『Isn't that... too much? 』

『They're from the depths, so they're different from the small-scale groups near the outskirt.』

While they were the same species of Weapon Dogs, everything from their size, armaments, numbers, and even their group coordination clearly differentiated them from the groups near the outskirts. Seeing the group of Weapon Dogs in the depths, Akira once again understood the significance of the depths of the ruins.

And he also understood the reason why they couldn't approach by flying low. Because in the unobstructed airspace, they would be subjected to concentrated gunfire from the monsters on the ground.

『I see. As expected, the depths are different.』

Akira stood on the bike while in motion, holding the LEO SSB multi-function gun and A4WM automatic grenade launcher he had brought with him.

Normally, it would be impossible to shoot because of the extremely unstable footing, but it was possible for Akira. Thanks to the powerful grounding function of his augmented suit and Alpha's amazing driving skills, Akira was provided with a solid foothold no different from flat ground.

『Leave the driving to me, Akira, and concentrate on intercepting the enemy. Let's start.』

『Roger! 』

The large Weapon Dogs targeting Akira began their attacks one after another. With a barrage of shells, sweeping gunfire, and semi-encircling concentrated attacks by small missiles, they unleashed a fierce bombardment, aiming to completely annihilate Akira along with his surroundings.

In response to the dense barrage, Alpha adjusted the bike's speed. Finding a relatively smooth spot on the side of a collapsed building, she accelerated quickly, evacuating Akira as much as possible from the range of enemy attacks.

Still, they couldn't completely escape from the wide attack range of the group. Akira had to deal with it from there. Concentrating his mind, distorting his perception of time, he wielded both guns to prepare for interception.

He dodged the bullets flying sideways while on the bike, dodging them skillfully, and blocked numerous bullets with the output of the protective coat's force field armor, shooting down small missiles with high maneuverability.

He showered them with a large number of grenades to slow down their movements, then smashed them with a barrage from the large gun adjusted for killing large targets.

Some of the large Weapon Dogs in the depths had such high vitality that they could continue shooting even after their heads were blown off. However, even they would be helpless if not just their heads but most of their bodies were blown away. Their flesh turned into minced meat scattered around, and their armored parts turned into scrap iron with holes, rolling on the ground.

Even though some of the Weapon Dogs were destroyed, they compensated for the loss by calling in reinforcements from afar. Akira countered with even more intense gunfire.

As a result, the density of gunfire increased further, and the damage inflicted on the surroundings also increased. In addition, Akira was moving at high speed. As a result, the stray bullets scattered over a wider range, rapidly expanding the damage area.

There was an intense battle suitable for the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

Akira, who was in battle with the group of large Weapon Dogs, chose not to escape from the group but to eliminate them on the spot. This was because there was a risk that if he was chased by such a large

group and approached Kugamayama City, it would be judged that he had brought the group to the city, and the defense force would exterminate the group along with him.

In addition, as they approached the outer part of the ruins, the probability of encountering other hunters increased. This would increase the risk of Akira's presence in the depths of the ruins being discovered.

Normally, this wouldn't be a problem. However, they were currently transporting discarded items received from Tsubaki, valuable artifacts that couldn't be obtained in other ruins.

When selling these artifacts, it's necessary to keep their source as unknown as possible. Otherwise, if the source of the artifacts is traced back from the day's activities, there's a risk of revealing the existence of the city where Tsubaki resides.

If the location of the old-world city surrounded by the walls of abandoned buildings becomes widely known and hunters swarm in, Tsubaki will undoubtedly be furious. Moreover, it would be attributed to their actions. Akira could imagine that much at least.

To avoid this, Akira wants to avoid encountering other hunters today. By discreetly eliminating the pack of Weapon Dogs here and sneaking out of the ruins, it will be less likely for Akira's presence in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin to be exposed.

For these reasons, Akira wanted to take care of this pack here, even if it's a bit troublesome.

Removing the artifacts from the bike, Akira maintains distance, hoping to avoid stray bullets. Then, guiding the enemy pack, Akira steadily reduces their numbers with gunfire.

With the artifacts removed, the bike becomes more agile, enhancing Akira's evasion capabilities and providing further safety. Consequently, Akira intensifies the attack. Using expensive extended

magazines to their full extent, they continue to crush the enemy's massive bodies with dense barrages.

The battle is significantly tilting in Akira's favor. However, Akira wears a slightly puzzled expression.

『 Hey, Alpha. Why are there suddenly so many of them? There weren't any on the way here, were there? 』

『 On the way here and on the way back, the cargo is significantly different, isn't it? 』

『...The artifacts, huh? 』

『 Weapon Dogs are armed creatures that have become wild after being generated for city security. They might be instinctively programmed to monitor suspicious individuals or chase thieves.』

『 Thieves... But these artifacts are discarded items, things I got for free, right? 』

Alpha smiles cheerfully at Akira's discontented face.

『Akira. Do you think monsters would discern that? 』

Akira forces a wry smile. However, with another expectation in mind, they smile.

『 Well, in that case, maybe they could attack while being careful not to involve those artifacts...』

『Akira. Do you think we can rely on monsters for that? 』

Once again, Akira forces a wry smile, then exhales lightly, dispelling the smile.

『...Let's just take them down quickly.』

『Agreed.』

To ensure the valuable artifacts aren't destroyed in the aftermath of the battle, Akira relentlessly drives the Weapon Dogs' pack further.

Akira continues to steadily chip away at the Weapon Dogs' pack. Reinforcements cease, leaving only the remainder to be crushed.

During this, Akira, firing bursts from the LEO SSB multi-function rifle, wears a slightly surprised expression. Despite mowing down multiple Weapon Dogs with the barrage, there's one individual that refuses to go down even after being bombarded with countless bullets.

(That's one sturdy fellow. Well, it's the depths of the ruins, so perhaps there are strong individuals mixed in.)

Despite failing to take it down, Akira can't afford to focus solely on that individual. There are still plenty of enemies remaining. Maneuvering around the pack, Akira continues to attack the entire group while avoiding enemy fire.

The Weapon Dogs are being defeated one after another. The mound of corpses, formed from their remains, is further bombarded, scattering amidst the rubble. The approaching mass of giant bodies, even causing the ground to tremble, is now dwindling.

However, as the number of enemies decreases, Akira's expression turns increasingly puzzled.

Despite repeatedly mowing down the enemies with the LEO SSB multi-function rifle, there's one individual that Akira just can't seem to take down. Despite bombarding it with bullets alongside other individuals, it remains standing.

『Alpha. There's one really strong one here.』

『Yes. But for now, let's reduce their numbers. If it's just sturdiness, we can focus our attacks on it at the end.』

『Right. Got it.』

While the resilience to withstand the LEO SSB multi-function rifle's gunfire is remarkable, its offensive capabilities are no different from other Weapon Dogs. Hence, there's no reason to prioritize defeating that individual. To increase their own advantage by reducing the overall attacking power of the pack, Akira continues to eliminate the enemies.

Finally, the pack is annihilated, leaving only that powerful individual. Without hesitation, Akira concentrates the LEO SSB multi-function rifle's fire on that individual.

The scattered gunfire, previously spread out to mow down the pack, now converges solely on that individual. With its power, the individual's armaments disintegrate into pieces, and its skin, along with the flesh beneath, is torn apart.

Yet, it still doesn't fall. Akira expresses surprise. Underneath the peeled-off biological parts, there's a metallic body.

『So it's a mechanical monster, huh? 』

It makes sense considering its toughness, and Akira finds themselves understanding. They recall encountering a similar monster in the Mihazono District Ruin, appearing biological but actually being mechanical. It reinforces the difficulty of judging monsters based on appearance.

The massive mechanical beast reveals its true form as its back opens, revealing the weaponry stored inside. It's a large laser cannon.

Unlike the actual munitions like cannons, guns, and missile pods used by the other Weapon Dogs, this one emits beams from an optical muzzle, slicing through the surroundings. Composed of high-energy, the optical blade cuts through debris and causes explosions further ahead.

Its power is tremendous, blasting debris high into the sky with smoke, causing Akira to grimace as they duck low on the bike to dodge the laser.

『...Alpha, do these kinds of creatures exist in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin? 』

『That's why cities extend their rear communication lines from the front-line bases toward the depths. It's to confront powerful monsters in the depths with large weapons and numerous personnel.』

『I see... that explains it.』

Even though Akira had gained confidence, knowing they had fought against humanoid weapon squads during the Slum District's major conflict, the sudden appearance of this monster shattered that confidence.

As Akira's expression slightly wavers due to the abrupt appearance of the monster, Alpha maintains her usual composed smile.

『If we get hit by that several times, this commotion might spread to the outskirts of the ruins. Akira, let's take it down quickly.』

『Got it! 』

Akira regains confidence with those reassuring words. He shows their motivation with a smile, matching Alpha's demeanor.

But that smile is soon replaced by surprise. With Alpha's guidance, the bike heads straight for the mechanical beast, and the augmented

suit, acting on its own, holsters the guns and draws out a blade instead.

That blade was acquired from Tsubaki's place. Akira was planning on using it himself rather than selling it, he had already equipped it after taking only one out of the box.

Akira involuntarily raises their voice at Alpha's choice to engage in close combat with the opponent firing the laser.

『Alpha!? 』

『 Taking it down with gunfire would take too much time. Its sturdiness is due to force field armor. If we had anti-force field ammunition, it would be different, but we don't have that luxury. It's coming. Focus.』

As the bike speeds forward, generating enough acceleration to traverse vertical walls, Akira feels time slow down as if in frustration, concentrating intensely while the distance to the opponent doesn't seem to decrease.

In this world, where time seems to pass so slowly that even the rapid acceleration generated by the bike feels sluggish, Akira concentrates, feeling a tension akin to frustration, while waiting for the crucial moment without letting it slip away, staring fixedly at the opponent's muzzle.

As Akira wields the blade, its blade gradually transforms from a handle into a glowing blade of blue-white light, its form disintegrating due to excessive energy flowing from the handle but solidifying into an energy blade due to the force field armor's stabilization.

The bike's acceleration, capable of traversing vertical walls, feels slow even to an observer.

Within this world where time seems to move so slowly that the rapid acceleration of the bike feels sluggish, Akira, feeling a tension akin to

frustration, concentrates intensely while the distance to the opponent doesn't seem to decrease, seizing that moment.

Akira concentrates, focusing on the opponent's muzzle to not miss the decisive moment.

As the mechanical beast fires a surge of energy from its laser cannon, Akira also swings the blade.

The horizontal swing and the resultant shockwave of the blade created along its trajectory slice through the surge of energy unleashed by the mechanical beast.

The weakened laser, scattered, poses no threat to Akira. Protected by the force field armor and the augmented suit, he easily withstand the scattered energy. As the scattered energy turns into light, enveloping the surroundings, the bike carrying Akira breaks through that light and advances further, closing the distance with the mechanical beast.

Then, as he pass by the mechanical beast, Akira swings the blade again with momentum.

The blade digs into the metallic body of the mechanical beast, tearing it apart, scattering sparks and emitting the sound of cutting. However, having expended most of its energy in the first strike, the blade can't withstand the impact of the second strike. The energy blade shatters and fades away.

However, even so, the sensation of cutting is clearly conveyed to Akira's hands. As the bike passes by the mechanical beast and turns around to stop, Akira stops its movement.

“Did I do it? ! ”

He can't be sure he'd defeated it. But he can't say for sure he haven't either. As Akira gazes at the motionless mechanical beast, his inner turmoil is reflected in a stern expression.

With a slight gap, the mechanical beast slowly collapses. The loud noise of its massive body falling to the ground informs Akira of the outcome.

Alpha also smiles, announcing their victory.

『We've defeated it. Well done.』

Akira exhales deeply. The sense of victory brings more fatigue than joy, enveloping Akira more strongly.

He toss aside the blade, now just a handle. Without needing Alpha's confirmation, it's evident that it's broken and unusable.

“Alright. Let's pick up the artifacts and head back. ...It'll be okay, right? ”

『The box, the wrapping, and the contents are all from the old-world. If it only took a few stray bullets, I think it should be fine. Probably.』

Akira begins to panic at the last unnecessary remark.

“P-Probably? ”

『I also need to confirm it accurately to be sure.』

“Please spare me from having no results after this! ”

Akira hurriedly looks down at the artifacts. The box, bundled with a belt, had scattered around due to the aftermath of the battle, but the old-world-made box had securely protected its contents. With a sigh of relief, Akira gathers the scattered items and reattaches them to the bike.

“...I'm glad the artifacts are safe. Alright. Now all that's left is to head back.”

Alpha smiles meaningfully.

『 Yes. This is still the depths of the ruins. Let's hope we don't encounter any more attacks as we make our way back』

Akira returns Alpha's teasing smile with a forced one. They know there's no mistake in what was said, even if it's just teasing. This is still the depths of the ruins. The danger of encountering similar monsters remains very real.

Afterwards, Akira manages to escape from the Kuzusuhara District Ruin safely, thanks to their careful efforts. They didn't encounter any monsters, thanks to their perseverance.



Watching Akira and the others from the virtual space, Tsubaki speaks up.

“Did you defeat them? ”

The reason Akira didn't encounter any monsters on their way to the Tsubaki Building was because of Tsubaki's actions. Despite the negotiation proposed by Alpha, once they allowed entry into their own management zone, it was justifiable to restrain the monsters.

And the encounter with the pack of Weapon Dogs on Akira's way back was also due to Tsubaki's actions. Once they left their own management zone, there was no need to restrain them any longer, providing justification for releasing the monsters.

Furthermore, the mechanical beasts resembling Weapon Dogs are individuals under Tsubaki's control. They were set to become leaders among the packs of Weapon Dogs and attack hunters in groups near Tsubaki's management zone.

Their attack on Akira was just following that setting. They attacked the hunters present there, not specifically targeting Akira as an

individual. And there was no obligation to consider not attacking Akira. Under these justifications, even though it was clear they would definitely attack Akira, the pack was not stopped.

And Akira emerged victorious against both the pack of Weapon Dogs and the mechanical beasts.

“Well, if you couldn't defeat them at least to that extent, it would mean there was false information in the explanation. Of course,”

She handed over the discarded items and let them return peacefully. Akira was strong enough to warrant that consideration.

It was a negotiation based on that premise. Even if Akira were to die due to a mistake in that premise and Alpha were to become furious because of it, Tsubaki wouldn't care.

In that case, it would mean that Alpha was underestimating Tsubaki to the point of giving false explanations. That was unacceptable. Tsubaki would deal with it with all their might. Even if it meant crossing swords with Alpha.

While it was only the minimum confirmation of Akira's abilities, it was enough. It was reasonable to hand over the discarded items. With that realization and after putting an end to their thoughts for a moment, Tsubaki wears a slightly troubled expression.

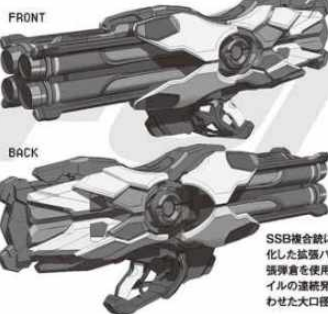
“But now it's a child, isn't it? Is it because it's easier to deal with a child who knows nothing? ”

As strong as the consideration needed to be, as trusted as Alpha was hired, and being a child made it easier to take advantage of.

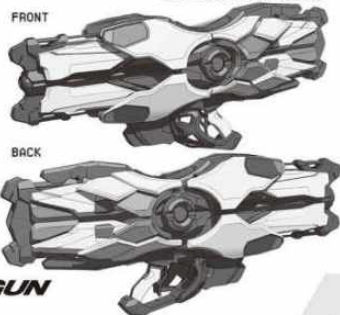
Tsubaki became interested in the existence of Akira. In both a good and bad way.

TOSON社製の大型複合銃であるSSB複合銃の通常版。アキラが威力特化のカスタマイズにした。基本的に使用に補助アームを必要とする大物銃し用に比べれば小型であり、室内でも十分に使用できる。しかしその威力は安価な対物銃を軽く超えており、そこらの車両やモンスターなど脅威にする。

SSB MULTI-FUNCTION GUN TYPE-CANNON
SSB複合銃[榴弾・小型ミサイル用]



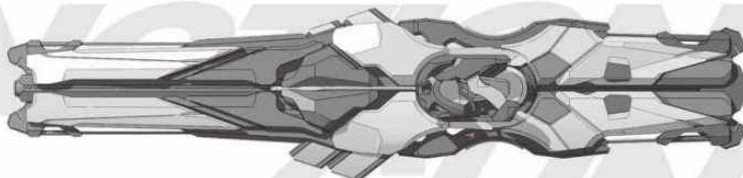
SSB MULTI-FUNCTION GUN TYPE-NORMAL
SSB複合銃[通常版]



SSB MULTI-FUNCTION GUN TYPE-NORMAL



SSB MULTI-FUNCTION GUN TYPE-CANNON



SSB MULTI-FUNCTION GUN TYPE-POWER SPECIALIZED

SSB複合銃に榴弾や小型ミサイルなどの使用に特化した拡張パーツを組み込んだもの。対応する拡張弾倉を使用することで、大量の榴弾や小型ミサイルの連続発射が可能。榴弾や小型ミサイルに合わせた大口径化により、銃弾などは使用できない。

【スケール比較】

Chapter 147: Old-World Information Terminal

Two weeks after safely completing the relic collection at the Tsubakihara building in the depths of the ruins of the old-world city of Kuzusuhara, Akira rode his bike to Sheryl's base with some of the relics he had brought back packed in his backpack.

As Akira rode down the wide streets of the slum, many people yielded the way to him. The imposing presence of his expensive, wasteland-adapted large bike, along with the huge gun attached to its arm-mounted gun mount, was unmistakable and intimidating.

『Looks like appearances really do matter, huh? 』

Alpha smiled meaningfully at Akira, who chuckled lightly in response.

『That's right. If this reduces the number of people bothering Akira, it'll make my job easier.』

『... Yeah.』

Akira felt like he was being admonished not to cause trouble over trivial matters, so he changed his wry smile to a forced one.

As Akira continued down the slum, he was somewhat surprised by the bustling activity around him.

It was not uncommon to find various stalls lining the streets of the slum, displaying a variety of goods. Next to those were stalls selling relics at low prices. Nearby, there was a sandwich vendor selling at affordable prices not dictated by the wasteland tariffs. The streets were lined with numerous such stalls, bustling with activity that was unexpected for the slum's standards.

『Quite something, isn't it? 』

Akira expressed his amazement at the bustling street.

As he pondered what to do, Katsuragi contacted him.

“Akira. Are you about to come over here soon? ”

“Yeah. I'm already close by, but the street leading to the base is quite crowded...”

“Then come over to the warehouse. We've built a new one behind the base. The road there should be clear.”

“Got it.”

Akira turned his bike around on the spot and headed towards the warehouse to avoid the crowded street. When he arrived near the back of the base, he was somewhat surprised to see a significantly larger warehouse than he remembered. In his memory, there used to be a dozen houses there, but they had all been demolished and replaced by a considerably larger warehouse.

As Akira entered the warehouse with his bike, Katsuragi greeted him with a smile. His business associates were also waiting for Akira.

“Akira, we've been waiting for you. So, about the relics? ”

Katsuragi showed a slightly disappointed expression when Akira pointed to the backpack on his bike.

“...Is that all? Given how you said you couldn't pass through the crowded street, I was expecting quite a lot, like the amount you brought out of your garage before...”

“Don't be unreasonable. It's not like I can bring back that much from the ruins every time.”

“Yeah, you're right. Well, it's still a decent amount, and if the quality is good, then it's not a problem. How much do you think it's worth? ”

Akira pondered for a moment, then Alpha laughed and said,

『Akira, go all out with your estimate.』

“...I see. 1 billion Aurum.”

Katsuragi laughed heartily, thinking Akira's answer was a joke.

“You said it! You said it was that much! I'll be looking forward to it! Alright! Let's appraise them! ”

Katsuragi and his business associates promptly began the appraisal of Akira's relics.

Relics taken out of the backpack were carefully laid out on the warehouse floor. Katsuragi left the task to his associates and examined the entire collection with Akira.

The first items to come out of the backpack were old-world clothing. Compressed and neatly arranged, the merchants were inspecting them without opening them to check the contents.

“Old-world clothes... There are some expensive ones, and once you open them, there should be a fair amount, but Akira, do you think that's worth 1 billion? ”

“I'm not forcing you to buy them. I just brought them here as per our agreement, remember? ”

The next set of relics to be brought in, Katsuragi could decide whether to handle them at the relic store or buy them outright. Akira had made that agreement with Katsuragi before.

“If we can't agree on a purchase price, I'll handle it however I like. I'll ask Sheryl to take care of it or take it elsewhere... Speaking of which, where's Sheryl? ”

“Sheryl is busy at the relic store. It's unexpectedly thriving, you know. The congestion in front of the base is also because of that.”

After retrieving the relics safely from the collapsed warehouse during the great conflict in the slum, Sheryl's group, under Viola's advice, hastily opened the relic store. They renovated the base, gathered employees, and opened the store with the store's layout being the only thing in place, but even so, the store showed unexpected prosperity from its first day.

The destruction of the two major factions had a significant impact on relic stores in the slum. Most of the stores had become unable to operate seriously due to the fact that both organizations had taken money and relics from their subordinate stores as conflict expenses, leaving most of the stores unable to operate seriously.

In addition, during the conflict, foot soldiers from both sides attacked each other's faction's stores, leading to the disappearance of many stores. Even the stores that managed to survive needed time to reopen without money or items. As a result, almost all of the relic stores in the slum were temporarily closed or closed.

However, the demand for backroom stores from hunters who had been using those relic stores had not disappeared. If there were stores open, naturally, the demand would concentrate there.

With information about stores that were actually open spreading widely due to Viola's manipulation, customers began to flock to them, albeit with the feeling of “Let's just try it out.” Sheryl's relic store had become so bustling that stalls lined up in front of the base.

Akira expressed his admiration upon hearing about the store's prosperity.

“Wow. It's really thriving.”

“Yeah. It cost quite a bit, but with that kind of scene, we'll soon recover our investment. I don't know how long this prosperity will last, but Sheryl will have to work hard to keep it going.”

As the store grew larger and profits increased, security also needed to be tightened. Guns were needed. Bullets were needed. Augmented suit, information gathering device, and various other equipment were also needed.

And these procurements were taken on by Katsuragi. Katsuragi's face softened at the thought of a new sales route with high profits in the long term.

Meanwhile, the appraisal of Akira's relics continued. The last item to be taken out of the backpack was a box about 30 centimeters wide.

The man who took the box, which seemed to be of old-world origin, looked inside, expecting something. He then took out an item from inside, which was a geometric pyramid inside a transparent cube about 5 centimeters wide. The pyramid emitted a glossy shine that appeared to be metallic or ceramic.

For a moment, the man looked at it intently without understanding what it was. But suddenly, his face flushed with surprise and he began to panic. In his heightened state of shock, he accidentally dropped it from his hand.

The man involuntarily let out a strange cry and hastily grabbed it before it hit the floor. Then he repeated his rough breaths.

Others noticed the commotion. Katsuragi also rushed to the scene.

“Hey, what happened? ”

“K-Katsuragi... Th-this...”

Katsuragi looked at what the man handed him. His expression also suddenly turned to one of surprise when he noticed that there were still similar items inside the box.

“Akira... Could this be... old-world information terminals? Are they all genuine? ”

“It's your job to appraise them properly, isn't it? Well, if they turn out to be fakes, I'll take them elsewhere since we couldn't agree on a purchase price.”

Katsuragi deduced from Akira's response that he himself believed they were genuine. And if all the contents of the box were genuine, then it wouldn't be strange even if they were worth 1 billion Aurum.

“1 billion Aurum... Wasn't that a joke...? Wait, wait, let me check properly! Wait a minute, just wait a minute! ”

Appraising old-world information terminals was difficult for Katsuragi and his business associates present. Katsuragi gathered his associates and immediately started arranging for the appraisal personnel.

With the addition of appraisal equipment and appraisers, the warehouse began to get crowded, and Sheryl, who heard the commotion, appeared with Yumina.

“Katsuragi-san. I didn't expect Akira to come today.”

“...He just came here for my business. I thought it would be fine to inform you later since you're busy at the relic store.”

“I see.”

Although she smiled, Sheryl's atmosphere clearly showed her dissatisfaction, causing Katsuragi to flinch slightly and avert his gaze.

“Hey, how's the appraisal going...”

Katsuragi then hurriedly left the scene, seemingly evading the question. Sheryl let out a small sigh.

Akira was somewhat surprised by Yumina's appearance.

“Yumina. Are you still guarding this place? ”

“Yes. Although Katsuya's group withdrew as expected.”

Originally, Katsuya's group was only on a short-term assignment for three days, and the assignment ended when Sheryl's group retrieved the relics from the collapsed warehouse.

Yumina was the only one continuing the assignment because Mizuha, who wanted to maintain a connection with Sheryl, dispatched her under the pretext of compensating for being unable to guard the warehouse.

While Sheryl felt a little hesitant internally, as long as it wasn't about her own convenience, having Drankam continue to participate in security was welcomed, so she accepted Mizuha's proposal and decided to make Yumina her escort.

Relic stores attracted a large number of hunters as customers, who were backroom customers. Many of them had questionable ethics as hunters. And Sheryl had to deal with such people as customers.

If a Drankam-affiliated hunter was by her side, it would reduce the number of troublemakers. Sheryl had that in mind when she placed Yumina by her side.

Akira understood the circumstances upon hearing about them.

“Ah, so that's why you were with Sheryl. So, how long will Yumina be here? ”

“That depends on Mizuha-san's discretion. Well, to be honest, we're on an extended vacation, so it's like I'm working here on my own during that time. When that period ends, I think I'll go back.”

“On vacation... You don't have to rest? ”

“...It's fine. There's a reason for it.”

Yumina was deemed a hindrance by the comprehensive support system during the Great Conflict and was not permitted to fight alongside Katsuya.

If things continued as they were, she might be forced to take separate actions from Katsuya even after her vacation ended. Motivated by this thought, when Mizuha asked for an extension of security duties, Yumina willingly accepted.

She knew she had to become stronger. Strong enough to fight alongside Katsuya again. Yumina couldn't afford to rest.

“I see. Just make sure not to push yourself too hard. Not that I'm one to talk,”

“By saying that, are you implying that Akira is pushing himself too hard? ”

Yumina asked with a smile, to which Akira responded with a wry smile,

“To some extent. I find myself in such situations often. It's not like I enjoy it,”

“It must be tough.”

Yumina, smiling brightly at Akira, couldn't help but wonder if Akira's strength stemmed from that aspect.

“Hey, Akira...”

As Yumina spoke, Sheryl also addressed Akira.

“Akira. About that artifact...”

Akira's gaze wandered between Yumina and Sheryl. Then, prompted by Yumina's indication to prioritize Sheryl, he turned his face towards her.

In response, Sheryl continued.

“About that artifact, if Katsuragi doesn't buy it, is it okay for the artifact store to handle it? ”

“Hmm, what should I do? It might be fine to sell the clothing elsewhere. But to be honest, I haven't received payment for the previous artifact yet...”

Sheryl apologized, bowing her head slightly.

“I'm sorry. They are selling, but it's not like everything will be sold out immediately.”

The artifacts collected before the existence of the Yonozuka Station ruins became widely known are of high quality and sell for high prices.

But customers have budgets, and there's also a considerable quantity loaded onto the truck. It's not likely to sell out within a few days of opening, so it will take some time to pay Akira from the sales proceeds.

“Ah, that's fine. We'll wait until they sell. It's just that I felt a bit uneasy about handing over more artifacts without receiving payment for the previous ones yet. It's not like we're short on artifact stock, right? ”

“Yes. There's no problem with that.”

“Then, for now, we'll wait for Katsuragi's appraisal. But since he seems uninterested in the clothing, maybe it's okay to sell them elsewhere? ”

Katsuragi and the others were focused on the old-world information terminals, and the clothing they brought along was left on the floor untouched. Akira casually picked up one of the pieces of clothing.

“Right. Yumina, how about buying some? If you buy them here, you might get a discount for not going through the store, you know? ”

“Is that okay? ”

“Yeah. Since it seems like Katsuragi and the others aren't interested.”

Although they were old-world clothing, if Katsuragi and the others weren't interested, they probably weren't that expensive. Akira thought so lightly. Then he whispered to Sheryl,

“Sheryl, why not make some tailored clothes with these? You're supposed to be a young lady from some company, right? It would be strange if you're only wearing the one I made before. Make a few outfits.”

“That's a good idea. I'll do that. Thank you.”

Sheryl also responded with a smile in a low voice.

After that, with Katsuragi's approval, Akira opened the packaged clothing. Compressed into flat boards, the high-quality old-world clothing was revealed. Sheryl and Yumina then began selecting clothes with serious expressions.

One of the merchants approached Akira.

“These artifacts seem to be of quite high quality. May I ask where you found them? ”

“...In ruins.”

As if knowing that already, the merchant's smile stiffened slightly.

What they wanted to know was where these clothes were found in the ruins. If they were found along with the old-world information terminals, there might still be the same artifacts remaining there. In other words, they could send a reliable hunter to retrieve the much more valuable old-world information terminals.

Could they slip up and reveal where they found them in the ruins? That's what the merchant was thinking as they approached Akira.

Sheryl, who had been listening, interjected with a smile.

“It doesn't matter who found the artifacts or where. This isn't a store inside the Wall. Akira brought them here. I don't think there's any need to know more than that.”

Since the artifacts were found by someone else, Akira didn't know their origin. However, here they were treated as artifacts found by Akira. If there's a problem with that, they can take them back. The merchant, who had been subtly pinned down by Sheryl, nodded with a stiff smile.

“R-right. I see. Well then, excuse me.”

The merchant hurriedly departed, and Sheril waved him off with a smile, then turned to Akira with a look that seemed to seek approval or praise.

Akira also understands that he can't tell anyone about the source of this artifact, even if it's Shizuka or Elena.

Despite not knowing the details, Sheryl managed to smoothly cover up the origin of the artifact for Akira. While grateful for that, Akira couldn't help but feel a strange intensity from Sheryl, causing him to slightly hesitate. He offered Sheryl a somewhat awkward smile.

“...Ah, thanks.”

“You're welcome.”

Sheryl was in high spirits.

Meanwhile, Katsuragi and the others were progressing with the appraisal of the old-world information terminals. Katsuragi turned to the appraiser with a serious expression.

“So, what's the verdict? ”

“...As far as we could confirm with the equipment available here, the likelihood of this being a fake is low. That's the extent of what we can say in this setting.”

“So, it's safe to assume it's genuine? ”

“I can't assert that. The clothing brought in together with it, as well as the box it was in, are undoubtedly of old-world origin. That much we can confirm. But it doesn't necessarily mean this item is authentic, as you can understand.”

“I get that much. That's why I'm counting on a thorough appraisal.”

“The equipment we have here has its limitations when it comes to precision appraisal. Old-world information terminals are valuable. They fetch high prices. So, fakes exist. It's difficult to distinguish meticulously crafted fakes made from other artifacts. Plus, there's the possibility of mock-ups. In that case, even if it's a fake as an old-world information terminal, it's genuine as an artifact from the old-world. Confirming authenticity is challenging.”

Katsuragi, who was getting excited, was met with a stern gaze from the appraiser, causing him to falter before regaining his composure. The appraiser also took a breath to regain calmness.

“...If you want a strict appraisal, I recommend taking it to a proper facility. Well, for that, you'll need to buy this artifact from that hunter first, right? It's difficult to determine how much to offer for a purchase in a state where authenticity is uncertain. But isn't that your job? ”

“Well, that's true, but...”

“I've done the best appraisal I can here. The rest depends on how much you believe in the results. I could provide an appraisal certificate if needed, but I won't tolerate using it as a shield to make complaints later. That's all.”

With that, the appraiser concluded, as if to say his job was done.

Confused by Katsuragi's dilemma, a fellow merchant asked with a puzzled expression.

“Katsuragi, isn't this artifact arranged by Sheryl? Then there's no need to worry, right? ”

Here, Akira bringing in the artifacts is part of some kind of charade orchestrated by Sheryl. Calling the appraisers is also part of that charade. Thinking this, the merchant who had been watching Katsuragi's serious contemplation began to doubt whether it wasn't just a charade after all.

Katsuragi knows that these artifacts are actually the ones Akira found. And he also senses that Akira believes they are genuine.

But he can't quite bring himself to trust Akira's judgment. That's why he called the appraisers. But he can't say such things, so he tries to cover it up.

“...There's a possibility that Sheryl is testing our ability to handle old-world information terminals. In that case, it wouldn't be surprising if fakes were mixed in. Wouldn't you agree? ”

“...Well, I suppose that's one way to look at it.”

Saying this, the merchants exchanged slightly troubled glances. What Katsuragi said could, from another perspective, be interpreted as Katsuragi being doubted by Sheryl in terms of his ability as a merchant. By trying to smooth things over, Katsuragi unintentionally raised another concern among his fellow merchants.

And this situation would lead to exacerbating that concern.

“Excuse meee! ”

Viola appeared in the warehouse.

Viola, appearing in the warehouse, approached Akira and directed her usual sinister grin at him.

“I heard you brought in some old-world information terminals. Where did you find them? ”

“I'm not obliged to answer.”

Despite Akira's brusque attitude, Viola continued speaking without breaking her smile.

“Don't be like that. As promised, I've been running this store properly, haven't I? ”

“If you think that's enough to make me glad I spared your life, you're mistaken.”

“You're harsh.”

Viola, who had once been nearly killed by Akira during the gang war in the slums, was now kept alive in exchange for cooperating with Sheryl's artifact shop.

Even if she's told by someone she once thought about killing, "I'm glad I spared your life," she still maintains the same attitude toward Akira.

In front of Sheryl, who is surprised by Viola's attitude, Viola continues speaking with a smile.

"Well then, let's work hard to keep me alive, shall we, Akira? So, about those old-world information terminals, how about 500 million for now? "

"F-five hundred million? "

Akira showed surprise at the sudden offer and the amount.

"Yes. For now, 500 million in cash on the spot. We'll adjust based on how the store's doing. If there's profit, I'll add more accordingly. Of course, yours will be paid later. How about it? "

In front of Akira, who was taken aback by the unexpected proposal, Viola continued speaking.

"I also intend to keep the store prosperous as promised, but for that, I need valuable artifacts, and you're my best bet, Akira. If you were to tell me to stop bringing in artifacts because payments are being cut off, that would be a problem. So, I'll give you 500 million for now. Can you lay off me for a while? If possible, treat the artifacts Akira brought in earlier the same way."

"Hmm, 500 million..."

『Alpha, what do you think? I don't think I did anything wrong...』

Katsuragi had said 1 billion Aurum, a figure suggested by Alpha. Akira himself had said it with a laugh, thinking it was a joke.

To pay half of that on the spot. And then add more later. Such a proposal was so good that Akira began to suspect there might be

some ulterior motive behind it.

Alpha laughed and nodded.

『I think it's fine. You've told her that if she does something again, You'll kill her, but even if she's plotting something, it shouldn't be against Akira. Money isn't a problem, so let's accept it.』

“Got it. Then, 500 million...”

“Wait a minute! ”

Here, Katsuragi interjects into the conversation.

“Akira! You were supposed to sell me this artifact, right? ! We made a deal, didn't we? ! ”

“Huh? You're buying it? For 500 million? ”

Akira turned to Katsuragi with a surprised expression. Unable to answer immediately, Katsuragi stumbled over his words.

“Didn't I tell you? If we couldn't agree on a price, I'd do as I pleased. I brought it to you first because it's a promise, and if the conditions are the same, it's fine to sell it to you, but I'm not obliged to sell it to you cheaply.”

Katsuragi hesitated. He also thought that if all the old-world information terminals were genuine, then they were worth the 500 million Aurum.

However, whether he could immediately pay 500 million in cash was another matter. Katsuragi himself had invested a large amount of funds into the artifact shop, and he didn't have that much leeway. He would have to involve other business associates to raise the funds. He hesitated about whether convincing them was possible.

He hesitated even further. There was no guarantee that these old-world information terminals were genuine. If they were fakes, or even if they were genuine but severely damaged, the value would be significantly lower, and he would end up burdening his business associates with debts. The appraiser had only said that it was highly likely to be genuine. There was a chance he could lose the bet.

Seeing Katsuragi unable to make a decision, Viola smiled thinly.

“Akira. Let's make it 600 million.”

“Ohhh! ”

“Wha-!?”

Akira rejoiced, Katsuragi was flustered, Sheryl and Yumina were surprised, and Viola's smile deepened.

Katsuragi hesitated even more. The other party had raised the price. So, the artifact must be genuine. While thinking this, Katsuragi couldn't shake off the feeling of Viola's bad personality. Was she trying to get him to buy trash for 600 million Aurum? That fear couldn't be erased.

Katsuragi had heard many times from those around him that Viola was a very unreliable person. Was this also one of Viola's schemes? The born suspicion dulled Katsuragi's decision-making.

Is it genuine or fake? Does the other party know that? Katsuragi was being manipulated.

Actually, Viola didn't care at all about the authenticity of the artifact. If it was genuine, then great. She planned to have fun using it cleverly. And even if it turned out to be fake and caused damage, it would be the damage to the artifact shop. She also intended to use it as a good excuse towards Akira. That's what she thought.

Either way, she could enjoy the results. Thinking so, Viola had an artificial smile on her face.

In the end, Katsuragi couldn't make up his mind, and the old-world information terminal brought in by Akira ended up in Viola's hands. Akira, who received 600 million Aurum and rejoiced, was looked at by Sheryl and Yumina with mixed feelings.

Sheryl was once again surprised at how easily Akira made another 600 million Aurum, and to catch up with him, she resolved to further prosper the artifact shop.

And Yumina became interested in Akira's power, who earned so much.

Perhaps Akira didn't accidentally find the old-world information terminals in a low-difficulty ruin. He went alone to a high-difficulty ruin, a dangerous area where most hunters couldn't enter, collected artifacts there, and returned. Akira had that much power.

Thinking that if he had that power, he could fight alongside Katsuya again.

With that in mind, she watched Akira.

Chapter 148: Sheryl's Relic Shop

Returning from the Tsubaki Harabiru ruins, Akira sold the relics he brought back and earned 600 million Aurums. He had come to Shizuka's shop to buy new equipment.

“So, I went relic hunting with the new equipment, but that LEO SSB multi-function gun is still huge.”

“Well, yeah, it's that kind of gun.”

“I have no complaints about its power. It was incredibly helpful in easily defeating large monsters in the ruins. But yeah, it's still big. It's a bit challenging to explore narrow buildings with it.”

Akira, not wanting to criticize the gun Shizuka recommended, tried to express himself as best he could. Shizuka found Akira's demeanor somewhat amusing and smiled, appreciating his concern.

“If you're not returning the gun and are here to buy a new one, you're more than welcome. So, do you want something smaller this time? ”

“Yes, please.”

Akira then began discussing with Shizuka about the new gun. After some discussion, they decided to purchase two more LEO SSB multi-function guns. Being satisfied with the performance of the LEO SSB multi-function gun itself, they decided to forego the hassle of selecting from a large number of guns and opted to modify the expansion parts instead.

One gun was for regular use. Instead of the large expansion parts specialized for power to defeat large creatures in ruins like the current gun, they attached smaller expansion parts that minimized the size without sacrificing power, allowing them to fight without worrying about the gun's size in relatively narrow spaces.

The other gun underwent modifications for using projectiles and other ammunition that significantly differed in size from bullets. Since enemies that could be stopped by the grenades usable with the A4WM automatic grenade launcher were merely nuisances, they opted for a higher level of firepower.

Shizuka looked a bit troubled.

“Akira, with the ammunition included, this will cost about 200 million Aurums...”

“It's okay. I earned it through the relic hunting I mentioned earlier.”

Akira replied lightly, and Shizuka looked at him with a slightly reproachful gaze. Akira hurried to explain.

“...No, that's not it. I'm not pushing myself too hard. It's true that with this new equipment, I went to slightly riskier places than before. But I was fine. There were even large monsters, but I could easily defeat them thanks to the LEO SSB multi-function gun for large creature hunting. It's okay.”

Shizuka stared at Akira. Akira felt pressured.

“...No, I can afford the 200 million Aurums because the relics I brought back sold for more than I expected, not because I pushed myself for expensive relics...”

As Akira found it increasingly difficult to make excuses, Shizuka smiled, returning to her normal attitude.

“Akira. If you have nothing to hide, you don't need to act like that. You know it worries me, right? ”

Akira breathed a sigh of relief at Shizuka's smile.

“Ah, yes. I understand.”

“Honestly, with that attitude, you're still far from being a regular. You're still quite reckless.”

“I'll do my best. But well, since I came to buy expensive guns like this to avoid pushing myself too hard, isn't it fine? ”

“If Akira becomes stronger and can fight safely, my shop can profits. Certainly, that's good.”

Shizuka joked, and Akira smiled back.

Akira managed to conceal the fact that he had ventured into dangerous areas where he would not survive without fully utilizing the LEO SSB multi-function gun for large creature hunting.

However, Shizuka knew that Akira had ventured into dangerously strong monster territories, where even survival was difficult without fully utilizing the LEO SSB multi-function gun for large creature hunting.

Nevertheless, knowing that Akira did not want to push himself too hard, Shizuka decided not to admonish him for recklessness now and just leave a word of warning.

“Well then, I'll arrange for the guns to be ordered since it's for you. I'll let you know when they arrive.”

“Yes, please.”

And so, Shizuka prepared the guns for Akira, hoping that they would become a force to protect him from the hardships that might come his way, even if unwillingly.



Viola wore a somewhat forbidding smile at Sheryl's base.

In front of Viola were relics brought in by Akira, old-world information terminals. Viola had already arranged for these relics to be meticulously appraised by a trusted source and had received the results.

In a sense, the results of the appraisal overwhelmed Viola.

“To think they're all genuine, and in perfect condition...”

Viola hadn't expected Akira to intentionally bring in fakes. However, she had thought it possible that Akira had unknowingly brought back items that someone had planted in the ruins to deceive the origins of fake relics. Furthermore, even if they were genuine, there was a possibility that they appeared undamaged but were actually broken.

But the results of the appraisal denied both possibilities.

The appraisal source Viola had commissioned charged a hefty fee, but the value of their advanced technology in appraising old-world precision machinery was well recognized. Viola had no doubts about these appraisal results.

The appraisal source even suggested exempting Viola from the appraisal fee and offered to purchase the relics at a price based on the appraisal results.

Exemption from the exorbitant appraisal fee for assessing old-world precision machinery, coupled with a purchase offer based on the appraisal results that Viola found reasonable, even after considering the effort of finding a buyer herself, made it clear to Viola that she should accept the offer.

Still, Viola had hesitated considerably. But she couldn't resist the temptation of the non-monetary desire.

If she use this old-world information terminal as a catalyst, how much commotion could it stir up?

Once she thought about sparking an uproar with these old-world information terminals, it was already too late. Viola couldn't defy her nature.

Staring at the old-world information terminals laid out on the table, Viola smiled with a sinister smile as she contemplated her future plans.

At that moment, Sheryl, who had been summoned by Viola, arrived.

“Viola-san, I've been told there's an important matter to discuss...”

“Yes. It's about these old-world information terminals Akira bought. I thought we should discuss how we're going to handle them at our relic sales shop.”

Seeing Viola's unapologetically sinister smile, Sheryl's expression stiffened slightly.

Certainly, Viola was involved in the operation of the relic sales shop at Sheryl's behest. Her skill was acknowledged by Sheryl. However, she was still an external collaborator. Viola was not included in their shop, in Sheryl's view.

Moreover, Sheryl suspected that whatever Viola was about to say would be akin to holding her accountable. In the event of an unforeseen situation regarding the handling of the old-world information terminals, Sheryl suspected that Viola was preparing to casually mention that she had explained it properly.

However, Sheryl had no choice but to listen to what Viola had to say. She sat opposite Viola, assuming a serious attitude.

“Let's hear it.”

“These old-world information terminals, I've already had them appraised. Since they're items Akira brought, they were of excellent quality. We're going to sell them at our relic sales shop, but, well, to

make the shop prosper, I thought we could do some tinkering. First..."

After listening to Viola's explanation, Sheryl judged the content to be reasonable. It was akin to fraud, but their shop was ultimately just a back-alley store in a slum area. Such deceitful practices were within the acceptable range. They could even serve as a form of security. If the worst came to worst, Viola could charm the customers. No problem. That's how Sheryl saw it.

Of course, Sheryl also had concerns. However, if the expected profits were significant and the issues did not outweigh those profits to the extent that they nullified them, Sheryl had no choice but to accept Viola's approach.

They had to make the relic sales shop prosper and earn Akira's approval. For that purpose, Sheryl couldn't simply discard the profits just because Viola seemed suspicious or might mess something up.

Sheryl cautioned, "Understood. Then, please go ahead. Do your best for Akira's sake."

"Of course. I'll give it my all."

Sheryl looked at Viola again with a cautious gaze. However, despite probing, all she could ascertain was that Viola seemed like a shady character, and she couldn't discern the intentions beneath her smile.



Akira raced through the wasteland on his bike towards the east. Monsters grew stronger the further east one went. He had already encountered such powerful monsters multiple times.

Akira had faced these powerful monsters many times. With the LEO SSB multi-function gun modified for hunting large creatures, he could handle them. He would lure out the giant carnivorous insects that preyed on him, then defeat them with bullets powerful enough

to pierce their armor. With a large hole torn in their shells and their bodily fluids splattering on the ground, the beasts would fall.

Akira stopped his bike and took a breath.

“Alright. That's dealt with. Now I can explore inside.”

The giant insects that had pursued Akira had made a nest in an old-world building.

Even though they weren't named ruins, there were plenty of old-world structures scattered throughout the wasteland. Many relics could be found there.

However, since the buildings were generally small and scattered, they were not usually targets for relic collection. It was not profitable to visit such places since hunters wouldn't stop by, causing monsters to increase, and the value of relic collection there would plummet.

Still, occasionally, valuable relics remained there. With fewer visitors, the chances of discovery also decreased. Some hunters hoped for such discoveries and ventured into these areas for relic collection, akin to buying lottery tickets. Akira had similar expectations as he conducted relic hunts in the area.

In the building where the giant insects nested, the LEO SSB multi-function gun was difficult to use due to its size. However, it was not something he could handle with assault rifles like the AAH assault rifle. So, he shot from outside to lure out the monsters inside and took time to defeat them.

Akira did this training without Alpha's support. Both driving the bike and shooting from it were done solely by himself. Though it took him more effort, Akira managed to defeat the powerful monsters that even regular hunters couldn't handle, let alone run from.

His accumulated training and combat experiences were steadily shaping Akira's growth.

With the giant insect that was the building's master eradicated, Akira dismounted his bike and began exploring the deserted ruins. He only had the AAH assault rifle and A2D assault rifle on him. He left the LEO SSB multi-function gun behind on the bike as it was too bulky.

He searched the empty rooms where debris littered the floor. The broken pieces of tables bore marks of being gnawed by the giant insects. Akira groaned as he looked at them.

“Alpha, do you think the relics left here have also been eaten? ”

Alpha smiled and nodded in agreement.

『It's possible. Shall we hope for some undigested ones? Well, they might still be in the bodies of the monsters you defeated. Shall we search for them? 』

Akira made a slightly reluctant expression.

“...No, I don't think we need to go that far. Today's goal isn't the relics, after all.”

Akira and his party had come to this wasteland far east of Kugamayama City for relic collection. However, their goal wasn't the relics but the relic collection operation itself. It was a cover-up for the origin of the relics they had acquired from the Tsubakiya Building.

It's not easy to come across old-world information terminals like this. If you were to put it up for sale, there would surely be people who want to know where it came from. To make them think it was around here, Akira went out of his way to travel far.

It's a dangerous zone where hunters mainly operate around the Kugamayama city area, not designated as a place with names like ruins, but that's why it wouldn't be too surprising for old-world information terminals to be lying around there. It's also a convenient place for Akira's training. Since heading to Tsubakihara Building

about a month ago, Akira has been continuing this relic collection in such areas.

He searched every nook and cranny of the building, but there were no results in terms of relic collection. He exits the building, with his backpack stretched to its limit as if packed with relics.

“Alpha. where are we going today? ”

『Let's go to the Minakado ruins today』

“Isn't that place devoid of any decent relics and filled with monsters?”

『Exactly. It's a place where such hunters wouldn't bother to visit, so even if relic redistribution resumes, it won't be noticed. Let's pretend that Akira stumbled upon it by chance』

“I see.”

Akira revved up the bike energetically.

After finishing relic collection in the eastern wasteland, instead of directly returning to the city, he decided to stop by some ruins. After collecting relics for a while there, he assembled the towable cargo platform, attached it to the bike, and returned to the city with an empty old-world box.

For the past few days, Akira had been followed by quite a few hunters. Their goal, naturally, was to find the source of the old-world information terminals.

Katsuragi's business associates believed the source to be Sheryl, but not everyone fully believed that. Moreover, to outsiders, they only knew of a hunter named Akira who brought them in.

Following Akira might lead to getting their hands on old-world information terminals too. Hunters who were fed information from merchants, as well as those who gathered information independently, all thought about tracking Akira's movements with this in mind.

If the opponent was weaker, they could forcefully extract information. But that was impossible with Akira. So they tried to follow his trail to the location of the relics. However, they couldn't keep up with him to the eastern wasteland. They had to give up because the monsters were too strong.

Therefore, hunters lacking in strength hoped for Akira to visit the ruins on his return. In fact, their real target was not the eastern wasteland but another nearby ruin. Or perhaps, they wondered if Akira had hidden the old-world information terminals a little in this ruin to claim to have found them here. So, considering various factors, they explored safer places compared to the eastern wasteland.

The eastern wasteland. Ruin scattered across various areas. And Sheryl masquerading as a corporate heiress. By deceiving in this manner, no one would suspect that the real source of the relics was the Tsubakihara Building deep in the slums. Akira continued his days of relic collection while thinking so.



Sheryl's relic shop had a part of its base remodeled and expanded, divided into three floors with different price ranges for the relics they handled.

The low-priced floor stocked cheap relics that were also available at other underground shops in the slums. The mid-priced floor dealt with relatively high-quality items among the relics acquired by Katsuragi and Shijima. The high-priced floor handled expensive relics arranged by Viola through her connections and relics brought in by Akira.

The interior of the high-priced floor was as well-maintained as upscale shops near the defensive walls. Moreover, since they dealt with particularly valuable relics, entry was restricted. There was a limit to the number of customers allowed at once, and those who seemed to have no money were not allowed in at all. The entire room was structured like a simple safe, making it resemble upscale shops in various ways.

There were people queuing up with guards outside the upscale shops in the slums since morning. From their high-quality clothing and armed guards, it was evident that these people were positioned among the affluent in the lower districts of the city. In other words, they had no business in places like the slums in the first place.

Such people had their reasons for visiting with guards in tow. After the store opened, three groups of customers were escorted to the high-priced floor, and upon seeing the displayed items in the center of the floor, they all showed a slightly surprised expression.

“I can't believe they really exist... And in such quantity...”

Old-world information terminals had been delivered to the underground shop in the slums. These visitors had come with half-belief after hearing about the information. Even after seeing the actual items, they still seemed unable to believe it.

As it was the first day of the arrival of old-world information terminals, Sheryl and Viola were handling the customers today. Sheryl bowed politely.

“Thank you for visiting. I'm Sheryl, in charge of this floor. If you need anything, please feel free to ask.”

One of the customers paid attention to Sheryl's attire. The clothes made from old-world materials and tailored anew for customer service didn't raise suspicions even among those familiar with expensive clothes.

However, that didn't guarantee the quality of the relics. While looking at the 5-centimeter cubes lined up in transparent cases, the man directed a stern gaze at Sheryl.

“So, this is the so-called old-world information terminal? Forgive my impertinence, but is it really genuine? ”

Sheryl replied calmly without haste.

“We cannot guarantee that here.”

“Does that mean it's fake? ”

“We cannot determine its authenticity. It's up to the customer to decide. Relevant information for your judgment is available for viewing there, so please feel free to use it.”

Saying so, Sheryl gestured with her hand towards the electronic shelf tag on the case. The man used his information terminal to read the information from there and then exclaimed in surprise again.

“A certificate from Kurogin... If this content is indeed accurate, then there should be no problem. However...”

Kurogin was a major relic purchasing business that operated widely across the eastern cities, and its appraisal ability was highly regarded. The man believed that if it was an appraisal from Kurogin, it would undoubtedly be accurate, gaining almost complete confidence in the authenticity of the relic.

However, he still wore a troubled expression.

“... 50 million Aurum. That's steep.”

The value of 50 million Aurum was displayed on the electronic shelf tag of the case. It was a significantly higher amount than the market price.

However, it wasn't an unreasonable amount. After all, if it could be bought at the market price, they wouldn't be here.

Old-world information terminals also served as connection devices to the Old-World territories. They were one of the means to obtain extremely valuable information from the Old-World era and naturally, were highly prized relics.

Moreover, they held significant technological value. Even if they could only be used as communication devices without search technology compatible with the Old Territories, they undoubtedly enabled far higher-quality communication than modern communication networks. The benefits were numerous.

Naturally, many companies competed to acquire such valuable relics. And in most cases, large corporations exerted their power to emerge victorious. There were many instances of reservations made even at general purchasing offices, and for companies without such power, the relics would never come their way no matter how long they waited.

Therefore, when other small and medium-sized enterprises acquired old-world information terminals, they had no choice but to buy them from places where the reach of large corporations was limited, such as purchasing offices not affiliated with hunter offices. Naturally, they couldn't buy them at market prices. They understood that well.

50 million Aurum. It wasn't an amount they could afford easily through conventional means, but considering the rarity of obtaining such a valuable relic, even at a premium price, it wasn't an unaffordable amount.

But it wasn't an amount he could decide on his own in this situation. He sought confirmation from Sheryl.

“I'm sorry, but can I consult with someone higher up here? ”

“Of course.”

Beside the man who started consulting with his boss using his information terminal, another customer looked puzzled.

“Excuse me? Mine is listed at 5 million Aurum unappraised. What's the deal? ”

“Since it's an unappraised item, there's a risk that it could be fake or defective. Therefore, we've lowered the price accordingly.”

“Why not appraise it? ”

“The appraisal fee at Kurogin is quite high, so it's financially challenging for us to appraise all items.”

“What's the difference between appraised and unappraised items? ”

“We've also conducted our own appraisals on the items and have had high-quality items with a high likelihood of being genuine, which we've submitted for re-appraisal to Kurogin to serve as a quality assurance to our customers.”

Sheryl explained with a polite smile, and the inquiring customer gave her a sneering look.

“I see. Until you send them out for appraisal, whether they're fake or shoddy is anyone's guess. Clever business strategy.”

Sheryl chuckled as if evading the question.

“Well, don't be so quick to dismiss it. It might be genuine, you know? Perhaps it's worth a wager. If you dislike gambling, we also have certified items available. Please choose whichever you prefer.”

The man, who had been in contact with his superior, finished discussing the purchase. He pointed to an old-world information terminal housed in a transparent display case.

“I dislike gambling, so I'll take the certified items. I'll take these and these and these.”

Sheryl politely nodded.

“Thank you very much. Would you prefer them in that case over there? ”

“Yes.”

One of the man's guards placed a sturdy storage case on the floor and opened it. Sheryl took three old-world information terminals from the display case and placed them inside the storage case. The man operated the terminals to complete the payment. Sheryl, after confirming the payment, stepped back, and the man's guard closed the storage case. The deal was now complete.

“Well then, I'll take my leave.”

“Thank you very much for your purchase.”

Sheryl bowed once again.

As one set of customers left, another entered. Viola went to replenish the items that had been sold. Sheryl responded to the new customers in a similar manner. Customers came and went, some buying and some not, but only the certified items sold.

Although the clientele on the floor changed several times, there were still customers who nitpicked at the uncertified items. Sheryl, with a somewhat apologetic expression, addressed those customers.

“I apologize, but if you're not going to make a purchase this time, would you mind giving way to other customers soon? ”

Despite being urged to leave, the man remained silent, his expression stern. Sheryl, considering the possibility of forcibly removing him, began to look more serious.

Then the man pointed to the uncertified items, which appeared no different from the certified ones at first glance.

“I have a question. Is the reason these items are uncertified because of the high appraisal fees? ”

“Yes, that's correct.”

“In that case, would it be acceptable for us to appraise these uncertified items here? ”

Upon hearing this, Sheryl signaled to Viola for a change in handling. Viola responded to the customer with a smile.

“If you mean you want them appraised here on the spot, I'll have to decline. You mustn't touch the display cases. We'd be in trouble if they were damaged or stolen.”

Under those conditions, proper appraisal couldn't be conducted. It was effectively a refusal.

“If it's after purchase, then they're yours, so feel free to do as you please. Examine them as much as you like until you're satisfied.”

After stating the obvious, Viola chuckled mysteriously.

“If it's before purchase, it depends on the conditions. One: you must have them appraised by the Silversmiths to match the quality of the certified items. Two: you bear the appraisal fees. If you agree to these conditions, then I don't mind.”

The man showed a slight look of confusion upon hearing this.

If they were intending to sell counterfeits from the beginning, there would be no reason to allow an appraisal even if the fees were covered by the buyer. In that case, it might indeed be a matter of financial constraints preventing an appraisal. Such considerations pushed the desire to acquire these valuable relics of the old-world and provided a convenient interpretation.

And upon appraisal, if they turned out to be counterfeits or inferior goods, one could simply choose not to purchase them.

“Understood. That works for me.”

The man selected five uncertified items. Dale, called as the transporter, appeared with a sturdy storage case. Sheryl placed the items in the case and handed it to Dale.

“Well then, here you go.”

“R-right, got it.”

Seeing Dale's nervous demeanor, the man interpreted it even more favorably.

If Dale were just transporting counterfeits, he wouldn't be this nervous. In that case, perhaps there were genuine items mixed in. Sheryl did mention gambling. If the intention was to mix counterfeits with genuine items and create a gambling scenario where buyers might get genuine items at a low price, then it would make sense to initially include a higher ratio of genuine items to stoke the customers' gambling instincts. He found himself hoping for that possibility.

However, Dale's nervousness stemmed from a slightly different reason than the man had anticipated.

Dale, who had been hired by Sheryl even after the major conflicts in the slums, still mistakenly believed that Sheryl was the daughter of some major corporation. Learning that she dealt with extremely

valuable relics of the old-world, he assumed she must be capable of handling such items and further deepened his misconception.

He had managed to establish some connection with such a person. Failure here was not an option. Absolutely not. Dale's nervousness was primarily due to that reason.

Leaving the shop with the customer, as instructed beforehand, Dale headed to the Silversmiths' store and requested the appraisal as instructed.

Sheryl and Viola, who remained in the shop, continued to attend to customers.

The next day, after bearing the appraisal fees and requesting the appraisal of the uncertified items, the man received confirmation of the completion of the appraisal from Viola and promptly headed to the Silversmiths' store.

In the designated room, a Silversmith appraiser and Viola were waiting. Certified items were arranged on the table.

When the man took his seat, the appraiser reported the results to Viola and her companion. Out of the five items submitted for appraisal, the Silversmiths determined three to be counterfeits and two to be genuine.

The man smiled at the results, exceeding his expectations.

“Two of them were genuine...! But it ended quite quickly, didn't it? I thought appraising old-world information terminals would take longer...”

The appraiser politely responded to the man's puzzled expression.

“I apologize, but we cannot accommodate any dissatisfaction with the appraisal time. Whether it takes a minute or a year, we conduct the appraisal according to the prescribed appraisal fees.”

“Oh, no, I didn't mean to complain about it being too fast. If it finishes quickly, it's convenient for us too.”

“Thank you. So, how about it? If you sell them to us, we'll buy them for 75 million Aurums.”

At this point, Viola interjected.

“No, we'll take them back.”

“... Is that so? ”

The appraiser withdrew quietly without further comment. Then Viola smiled at the man.

“So, now that the appraisal's done, what will you do? Buy them? ”

“Of course.”

“Good. In that case, it's 100 million Aurums.”

“...What? ”

Viola's smile grew even more sinister at the man's reaction.

“Did you think you could buy them for 10 million? Don't joke. Each one costs 50 million in uncertified condition. Once appraised, the price changes. A genuine one costs 500 million each. That's a total of 1 billion for two. Well, even for the fakes, considering they're sophisticated mocks, I might be willing to take 10,000 Aurums each, but I'll throw that in as a service.”

“But I paid for the appraisal fees, didn't I? ”

“Yes, and we're very grateful. But these items belong to us, not to you. You haven't bought them yet. Isn't that obvious? ”

The man glared at Viola involuntarily. But Viola remained calm and smiled.

“You thought you could cleverly buy only the winners, didn't you? But gambling doesn't work that way with shallow tricks. You could've won by simply buying normally. Too bad, isn't it? ”

The man gritted his teeth at Viola's words, which were almost tantamount to being scolded.

“So, will you buy them? ”

The man was desperately holding back from shouting out in response to Viola's provocative words.

Sheryl, resting in her room at the base, listened to Viola's report through the information terminal. She wore a slightly surprised expression at the content.

“Did he buy them? ”

“Yes. I guess he thought if he didn't buy them, the high appraisal fees would really go to waste. Well, it seems buying one was his limit, though.”

Among the uncertified items, there were genuine ones mixed in. The high appraisal fees and the items bought were necessary expenses to confirm that. Viola happily explained, seemingly making excuses and tying up loose ends.

Sheryl let out a small sigh.

“Please, have some moderation. If you earn big through shady means but then earn the resentment enough to resort to forceful actions, it's counterproductive.”

As someone who was complicit in those shady means, Sheryl had been worried about Viola going too far, especially since Viola had explained her *modus operandi* beforehand.

The uncertified items transported by Dale, selected by the customers, were all counterfeits. Despite this, Kurogin had provided Viola and the customer with appraisal results stating that two were genuine. Viola's manipulation was evident here.

Dale, who transported the five counterfeits without knowing, had them individually appraised as Viola's proxy, as instructed. However, behind the scenes, Viola had separately appraised two genuine items.

After receiving confirmation of the completed appraisals from Kurogin, Viola had deceived the customer into believing that out of the five items they selected, two were genuine by specifying the appraisal results for each item separately.

While genuine items were indeed mixed among the uncertified items being sold, adjustments were made to ensure that buying all uncertified items would be more advantageous than buying certified items. If buying all uncertified items had a higher expected value than buying them individually, it wouldn't be gambling.

In business, the house always wins in gambling. The same applied here.

However, there were those who misunderstood that there was a 40% chance of getting genuine items, and with Kurogin's appraisal as a basis, the number of hopefuls increased even further. Even if 40% was unattainable, 20% could be expected now. At worst, as long as it didn't fall below 10%, the expected value would still be higher than buying normally. Some would think that way. It was enough to heighten customers' gambling instincts.

Even with the current setup, they were making more profit than simply selling old-world information terminals normally. However, Viola had also manipulated the appraisal fees.

Kurogin's appraisal fees were generally high. When it came to appraising valuable relics like old-world information terminals, the fees were even higher.

But even then, if the quality of the appraisal was disregarded, the fees could be lowered. However, in such cases, the appraisal result would typically be useless, merely stating that the item had been lightly examined and nothing more. It would be pointless to send it for appraisal, and it would just be a waste of money.

However, there were occasions when relatively affordable appraisal fees at Kurogin could yield high-precision appraisal results.

First was for items that could be easily identified as counterfeits with a simple inspection. For example, if it were compared to modern information terminals, it would be items that looked genuine on the outside but were visibly empty inside, just for appearances. Even with a cheap and simple appraisal, a highly reliable appraisal result of “fake” could be obtained.

And secondly, it was for items that had already been thoroughly appraised once. Rather than seeking a rigorous re-appraisal, if it was a simple re-appraisal reusing the previous appraisal data, the appraisal fees could be significantly reduced.

Viola exploited this. From customers who bore the appraisal fees, she received a hefty sum to thoroughly examine uncertified items, while paying Kurogin a cheap amount to appraise shoddy counterfeits and genuine items. She pocketed the difference.

And Kurogin didn't interfere unnecessarily. They avoided getting involved in disputes caused by appraisal results of relics. They handed over appraisal results according to the prescribed appraisal

fees and, in some cases, suggested purchasing. They didn't do anything else. Viola knew this was Kurogin's management policy.

Sheryl, knowing that Viola was making shady profits in this manner, voiced her concerns about going too far to avoid trouble.

Viola understood this and replied with a smile.

“It's fine. I'm well aware of the boundaries. The only time I failed was when I got shot by Akira.”

Is that really okay? Sheryl thought so but refrained from making unnecessary comments, considering that she had gained Viola's cooperation since that incident.

Viola continued further.

“Besides, I also paid Akira 600 million. Even if I have to resort to shady tactics, I need to earn more than that. I want to be able to offer him a similar amount when he brings in relics again. It's not just to prove that I can run a successful relic shop with enough funds. It's also about showing that I can provide him with returns equivalent to what he's giving us.”

Hearing this, Sheryl couldn't assert herself strongly.

After all, it was thanks to Viola's funds that Sheryl was able to pay Akira 600 million. Moreover, that 600 million was payment for relics. It wasn't a reward for Akira backing Sheryl's group.

Until she could provide Akira with returns through her own efforts, Sheryl couldn't afford to stop.

“I see. Then let's work hard to make the relic shop prosperous for Akira's sake.”

“Yes. Let's do our best. See you later.”

With that, communication with Viola was cut off. Sheryl let out a small sigh.

“I really need to work hard... There's so much to do.”

Sheryl was no longer just the boss of a small-time gang. Under the backing of Akira, she was the boss of a powerful gang running a relic shop that made staggering profits. Membership requests were pouring in. While managing the relic shop, she also had to handle the adjustments. The workload had increased exponentially.

But for Akira's sake, Sheryl couldn't afford to be discouraged by this. With renewed determination, Sheryl returned to work with a smile after her break.



After selling relics to Sheryl and her group, Akira continued his days of collecting relics for his engineering purposes. During this time, the new gun he bought from Shizuka arrived, and preparations for resuming relic collection for non-engineering purposes were made.

It was about time to sell relics to Sheryl's group again. With that in mind, Akira packed relics into a backpack that appeared to be filled with ammunition and left his home. Just like the previous day, he first headed to the wastelands to the east and then stopped by the Higaraka Residence residential ruins on his way back, assembling the usual towable cargo bed.

Today, instead of empty boxes, he packed relics from home into the boxes and loaded them onto the cargo bed, then contacted Sheryl before returning to the city.

Upon entering Sheryl's warehouse, Akira was greeted by familiar faces. Unexpectedly, there were two people there. One was Yumina. He thought her security requests were already over, but she was still in the warehouse.

And the other person was smiling cheerfully at Akira.

“Hey, Akira. It's been a while.”

It was Kibayashi, wearing the uniform of Kugamayama City.

Chapter 149: Hunter Rank Adjustment Request

Although Sheryl and her group began selling old-world information terminals at their relic shop, setting the price at 50 million aura per unit, even for highly demanded and valuable relics, they didn't immediately sell out. However, there were still many customers seeking them, and the inventory was gradually dwindling.

When the flagship product, the old-world information terminals, completely sold out, the overall momentum of the store also declined. Customers who entered the high-priced floor with half-hearted interest to see the rarely seen old-world items would decrease, and there would be fewer purchases of other relics or uncertified items.

To address the shortage of inventory, they raised the price of certified items, citing inventory shortages. The current price was set at 800 million aura per unit. Sheryl and her group didn't expect them to sell at this price anymore.

Still, this had the effect of relatively increasing the expected value of purchasing uncertified items and preventing the inventory from being completely depleted. It would likely attract more customers than waiting indefinitely for restocks. That was the extent of their reasoning behind the pricing.

What to do next? While discussing with Sheryl, Viola was also considering other options in her mind.

(...It's been a week, but they haven't taken the bait. Is this a lost cause? I wish they would initiate contact rather than me...)

This operation ended in failure. Viola thought so with a slight disappointment but shrugged it off.

Viola, who was believed to orchestrate various situations behind the scenes and successfully execute numerous operations, actually succeeded in only a small fraction of what she attempted. There were plenty of failed operations that never saw the light of day.

However, this also reflected Viola's tendency to constantly engage in a large number of operations. Her bad personality was evident even there.

While Viola was discussing future plans with Sheryl, a report came in that city officials had arrived.

They took the bait. Viola couldn't help but smile involuntarily.

However, the report wasn't what Viola had hoped for. The official named Kibayashi had business with Akira, not with them.

Viola let out a small sigh. Then, realizing that it was almost time for Akira to arrive, she headed to the warehouse with Sheryl.

As Sheryl headed to the warehouse with Viola, she was surprised to find Yumina there with Kibayashi.

Yumina's contract had already expired. Initially hired by Mizuha under the pretext of compensation for previous failed missions, Yumina had been withdrawn by Drankam's decision that it was time to move on.

Drankam had also tentatively offered Sheryl continued security contracts at the regular rate. However, Sheryl, wanting to reduce Akira's interactions with Yumina, declined.

While Sheryl was somewhat surprised by Yumina's reappearance, she couldn't avoid greeting the city official. She responded politely and learned from Kibayashi that Yumina was with him for his own

business, indicating that Drankam had taken on some work from the city.

While listening to the conversation, Sheryl noticed Kibayashi looking at her with an oddly interested gaze.

“...Um, may I help you with something? ”

“Huh? Oh, it's nothing. I just thought, Akira's girlfriend is such a cute girl, you know? She's Akira's girlfriend, right? ”

“Yes, I'm his girlfriend.”

At the moment, that's the status quo. Sheryl smiled brightly in response, pushing for the establishment of this fact.

Kibayashi also smiled happily.

“I see. Well, if it's for such a cute girlfriend, Akira must be working hard. That's a good thing.”

“Oh, thank you very much.”

Sheryl's expression, as she answered, wasn't due to embarrassment but for a slightly different reason, a slight awkwardness creeping in.

She realized that the other person genuinely wished for her to have a good relationship with Akira. Sheryl recognized this, yet she couldn't understand why she couldn't be happy about it. She felt puzzled, even slightly perturbed.

“Please continue to encourage Akira to do his best in the future.”

“Y-Yes.”

The reason for Sheryl's expression was an unconscious realization.

Kibayashi saw through the fact that Sheryl wasn't in a relationship with Akira. However, even knowing this, Kibayashi genuinely wished for Sheryl to maintain a good relationship with Akira. He knew that Sheryl was heavily involved in the incident Akira caused in the slums. As someone who was willing to tolerate troublesome matters, Sheryl was highly valued by Kibayashi, serving as a factor pushing Akira's reckless actions.

And Sheryl somehow sensed that Kibayashi was such a troublesome person. She didn't consciously recognize it enough to articulate or explain it to someone else. Yet she felt a vague sense of unease.

She feared that once Akira realized she was close to someone who held a position in the city, he might distance himself from her to avoid getting involved in trouble. Sheryl couldn't deny the sudden anxiety that arose.

“Is something wrong? ”

“No, it's nothing.”

“I see. Oh right. Let's exchange contact information. If anything happens with Akira, feel free to contact me anytime.”

“Y-yes. Thank you very much.”

With this, Sheryl gained credibility as a city official in Kugamayama City. She couldn't refuse someone who held a position in the city.

Later, Akira comes to sell relics. However, before they could chat, Akira is taken away by Kibayashi, along with Yumina. Despite feeling disappointed, Sheryl opens the received box to confirm Akira's relics. And she's surprised.

“...Viola-san. Are there really so many relics of the old-world's information terminals? ”

Viola is also surprised.

“...It's impossible for something easily found to sell for 50 million Aurums each.”

“...Indeed.”

Among the relics received from Akira, there are many old-world information terminals mixed in.



Having entrusted Sheryl with the handling of the relics he brought, Akira, accompanied by Kibayashi, had come to the reception room of their base. Yumina was also there.

Seated across from Akira with Yumina, Kibayashi began speaking cheerfully.

“Akira, you really caused quite a stir in the recent incident. You should have let me know in advance.”

“What difference would it make if I told you? ”

“I would have been delighted. I hold quite a position in the city, you know. Keeping me in a good mood has its benefits, you know? ”

Akira wore an openly displeased expression.

Seeing Akira's attitude, Yumina panicked. She was also a hunter for the Drankam bureaucratic faction. She understood the city's power well. Dealing with a city official was generally someone who even Mizuha, a senior Drankam member, needed to treat with respect.

In Yumina's view, such an attitude towards such a person as Akira was strictly forbidden. If Katsuya were to adopt the same attitude, she would have to stop him even if it meant resorting to physical force. She watched Kibayashi nervously.

However, Kibayashi showed no signs of being offended.

“You're still the same, aren't you? Well, that's why you entertain me. I guess that's why you'll continue to entertain me.”

Beside a surprised Yumina, Akira let out another sigh.

“...So, what do you want all of a sudden? And before that, couldn't you have given me a heads up about whatever you're here for? ”

“What's wrong with that? We're friends, aren't we? ”

“If that's the case, you should have informed me even more.”

“Geez. I always come to you with good news, though.”

“Where's that? ”

“Where's that? It's always like this. Whenever I bring something up to you, it's always supposed to be something beneficial for you, right? Whether it's about a highly profitable job or something troublesome that you can't refuse due to the city's circumstances, I always make sure to inform you in advance so you can prepare properly. And then, it's you who turns the situation into a big spectacle and has me bursting into laughter. Am I wrong? ”

Unable to outright deny it, Akira's expression only slightly furrowed. Then he let out a small sigh. Seeing Akira like that, Kibayashi smiled gleefully.

“...So, what's the matter? ”

“Oh, today, as a city official of Kugamayama City, I've come to you with a request. Sorry, but think of it as effectively compulsory.”

“Again with this...”

Akira once again made a visibly displeased face. Kibayashi chuckled amusedly.

“Don't make that face. It's true that it's effectively compulsory, but any ordinary hunter would be overjoyed and wouldn't even think of refusing such a request. After all, it's a request for adjusting Hunter Ranks.”

Before Akira, who didn't understand the significance of the request, could express his confusion, Yumina revealed her surprise. Seeing Akira's bewildered reaction, Kibayashi began to supplement his explanation.

Hunter Rank is an evaluation of a hunter's abilities. Although it's generally referred to as an evaluation, there are various criteria for considering someone a competent hunter, such as combat abilities and relic collection capabilities. It's not something that can be determined definitively.

Even so, the Hunter Office tries to ensure that individuals with the same Hunter Rank have roughly equal abilities overall.

This makes it easier for employers to assess the capabilities of the hunters they hire and calculate appropriate compensation based on their abilities. It also allows hunters to relatively easily demonstrate their own abilities to others, ensuring that they receive appropriate treatment without being overrated or underrated.

The Hunter Office, as the determinant of this evaluation criterion known as Hunter Rank, wields significant influence over the hunters. Hunter Rank serves as a tool for efficiently managing the potentially powerful and disorderly group of hunters.

However, this is only if the evaluation system based on Hunter Rank functions correctly.

It's acceptable for there to be some discrepancy between a hunter's perceived abilities based on their Hunter Rank and their actual

abilities. These discrepancies can be corrected and adjusted as hunters continue their careers.

However, if these discrepancies become significant enough to potentially distort the evaluation system based on Hunter Rank, then it becomes a problem.

Leaving such distortions unaddressed would lead to distrust in the system, causing the numerical value of Hunter Rank to lose its meaning. Seeking honor as hunters through these numbers, individuals who strive to increase their Hunter Rank would feel insulted and angered by the implication, leading to distrust in the Hunter Office itself and significantly impacting the governance of the Eastern Region.

To prevent this, the Hunter Office has a policy of raising the Hunter Rank of individuals whose abilities far exceed their current rank.

However, Hunter Rank also serves as an indication of a hunter's contributions to the Unified Management Consortium. It's not feasible to raise the rank of someone with no significant achievements simply because they are strong.

To address this, special requests are arranged to make it easier to raise Hunter Ranks. These requests are referred to as Hunter Rank Adjustment Requests.

Even after listening to Kibayashi's explanation of the Hunter Rank Adjustment Request, Akira didn't show any particularly pleased expression.

On the other hand, Yumina was visibly surprised. Being recommended for a Hunter Rank Adjustment Request is equivalent to being told directly by the Hunter Office that you are an exceptionally powerful hunter, far beyond the norm. It's a significant boost to one's reputation as a hunter.

As a hunter affiliated with Drankam, Yumina understood the significance of this. Hence, her surprise was profound.

Kibayashi, enjoying the difference in reactions between Akira and an ordinary hunter, smiled with satisfaction.

“Your attitude hasn't changed at all. Any other hunter would be ecstatic, you know? ”

“There must be something fishy about it anyway, right? ”

“There is.”

“There is? ”

“There is.”

Akira was somewhat surprised by the response, which was somewhat unexpected given the usual banter.

Meanwhile, having received the expected reaction, Kibayashi began negotiating.

“Want to know? If you're willing to accept this request positively, I'll tell you.”

“...I can't refuse, can I? ”

“Basically. But well, if you're just going to be stubborn and say, 'I don't care, tell me,' then I'm at a loss too.”

Akira's somewhat surprised expression prompted Kibayashi to adjust his words accordingly as he continued speaking.

“Basically, it's a request that you can only benefit from. Just accept it. There's no reason to refuse, right? And although I mentioned there's something fishy about it, it's not like someone's trying to set you up.

If you hear it, you'll understand. It's a very clear reason that you'll agree with."

Akira fell silent. If it had been back when he burst out of the back alleys of the slums, Akira would have been able to assert the same thing. But now, Akira had reasons to be in this city to the extent that he couldn't assert that.

However, it wasn't strong enough to answer differently. That wavering kept Akira silent.

Kibayashi found Akira's reaction somewhat surprising. And adjusting his words to match Akira's subtleties, he continued.

"Well, basically, it's a request that you can only benefit from. Just take it. There's no reason to refuse, right? And I did mention there's a catch, but it's not like someone from somewhere is trying to set you up. If you hear it, you'll agree, it's a very clear and understandable reason."

And Kibayashi smiled somewhat proudly.

"Also, I volunteered as the negotiator for the request for your sake. I've told you before, haven't I? I like you, so I'll do you a favor. It's true that I want you to cause a stir and entertain me, but that's also true. It's not a lie, and it wasn't a lie, right? "

With those words, believable for better or worse, Akira relaxed his expression almost imperceptibly, and then adjusted his attitude.

"Got it. I'll accept it positively."

"Good."

With this, the request was settled. Kibayashi also realized that Akira wasn't someone who would turn the conversation around from here, and he smiled satisfactorily.

“Well then, let's leave the details of the request for later and talk about the catch. Right. First...”

Kibayashi paused there to organize his thoughts. Then, he began speaking as if it were nothing.

“You know about the conflict between the two major factions in the slums, right? That big commotion where battles between humanoid weapons took place. As you know, it was orchestrated by the city...”

Yumina, unexpectedly hearing this, burst out laughing, causing the conversation to pause for a moment.

“...Kibayashi. Is it okay to talk about that here? ”

“She's a Hunter from the Drankam Administration Faction. I believe she's filled with ethics and common sense as a Hunter and wouldn't divulge unnecessary information.”

“But why did you bring Yumina here? I mean, there must be some reason, right? ”

“It's related to another request for adjusting Hunter ranks. I thought it would be better for her to know the situation as a stakeholder.”

“I see.”

Yumina had been brought here by Kibayashi without being informed of anything. If requested by a city official, as a Hunter affiliated with the Drankam Administration Faction, she couldn't refuse to attend. So she remained silent and sat there.

But at this point, she decided to speak up.

“A-Akira... th-that commotion, was it the fault of Kugamayama City? D-did you... know? ”

“I didn't know from the beginning, but I realized towards the end that it was probably the case.”

“I s-see...”

How many people died in that commotion? Yumina didn't know for sure. The news from the city only reported numerous casualties in the slums. But she could imagine that a considerable number of people had died.

Seeing Akira's calm demeanor in the face of such a commotion orchestrated by the city, and Kibayashi's normal attitude as someone from the city who implemented it, left Yumina feeling overwhelmed.

Kibayashi smiled meaningfully at Yumina.

“Do you want to leave? I'm not trying to force you to listen. Since you seem like Akira's friend, I thought it might be better than being left in the dark and being dragged into something.”

“...Is it better not to know? ”

“There are certainly people who would be troubled if it were disclosed. Even though the Drankam Administration Faction has strong ties with the city, only the executives probably know the true state of affairs. They probably wouldn't disclose everything to the lower ranks, right? ”

Yumina hesitated. And she reached a conclusion. The surprised and flustered expression on her face turned into a serious one with determination.

“...I'll stay.”

“Got it. Then let's continue the discussion.”

Kibayashi began again to talk about the underlying details of this Hunter rank adjustment request.

The conflict between the two major factions in the slums became the venue for the presentation of the new humanoid weapons of Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry, thanks to Akira.

However, it was ruined because of Akira. Both companies' highly anticipated new products received a dismal evaluation, judged only by their performance metrics, to the extent that they would lose to someone with a Hunter rank of only around 30.

Of course, to those who could see, that evaluation was erroneous, and it was simply because Akira was too strong. But there were those who couldn't see. Due to the flaws in the Hunter rank system, some still felt that it was just that level of performance.

Yashima Heavy Iron's White Rabbit couldn't defeat Yoshioka Heavy Industry' Black Wolf even with a large unit. That Black Wolf couldn't even kill a Hunter of about rank 30 active in Kugamayama City. While it might be a mistake to say they were on par with a Hunter rank 30, they were still of that level. It shouldn't warrant extreme adjustments.

Some truly believed that, while others, understanding that, still used it as ammunition against other companies. Kugamayama City also intended to use it as leverage to lower the supply prices. Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry were in a tough spot.

To overturn that situation, both companies decided to pressure Kugamayama City into arranging a Hunter rank adjustment request for Akira.

It was a fact that Akira's abilities were significantly higher than his Hunter rank. Their requests were easily accepted.

Kibayashi concluded the discussion.

“Well, that's why a Hunter rank adjustment request was made to Akira, mainly for the convenience of Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry. As much as I hate to admit it, it's definitely a scam for you to be stuck at Hunter rank 30. What a joke.”

“Even if you say that...”

“I'm not saying it's Akira's fault. But it's a fact that it leads to misunderstandings. You've experienced it too, right? It's a good opportunity. Raise it as much as you can. You may not know, but if you raise your Hunter rank to around 50, there's significant assistance for ammunition expenses...”

“I know. The armor-piercing ammunition, which costs 5 million Aurum per shot, can be bought for 500 Aurum, right? ”

“How did you know that? I thought you didn't care about your Hunter rank even though you could afford such equipment...”

It was precisely true, so Akira silently let the conversation flow. Instead, Yumina, who had been listening silently until now, spoke up.

“...Um, Kibayashi-san. I'd like to ask one thing. Is Akira really that strong? ”

“Seeing is believing. Want to see? ”

Kibayashi said so and took out his information terminal, sending a video to Yumina. Yumina watched it through the display device of her comprehensive support augmented suit. It was a scene of Akira fighting the Black Wolf.

In front of Yumina, who was stunned by its content, Akira watched the same thing with a slightly puzzled expression.

“Kibayashi. Where did you get this? ”

“Hmm? If you're asking about the recording method, it's from the humanoid weapons you fought against. Despite ending in a dismal evaluation, that battle was a presentation of the new humanoid weapons from Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry. So, there are proper records.”

“...Is this video circulating? ”

“It's technically internal city data. It shouldn't be floating around out there, but there are quite a few people, including relevant parties, who have seen it.”

“...I see.”

Kibayashi spoke cheerfully.

“Man, it's really something. Impressive. When I first saw it, I burst out laughing. Taking down humanoid weapons with augmented suits? That's beyond reckless.”

Watching his own battle where he exerted all his effort with Alpha's support, Akira did think it was impressive. However, at the same time, he also felt complex emotions about it not truly reflecting his own abilities, and the existence of that video as a representation of his abilities.

And Yumina was simply overwhelmed by Akira's strength.

After finishing explaining the background behind the Hunter rank adjustment request, Kibayashi finally delved into the details of the request itself.

“As for the content of the request, the location for Hunter activities is limited to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin and the surrounding rear communication lines. There are no specific instructions beyond that.”

“What do you mean? ”

“Since the main purpose is to raise your Hunter rank, you're basically free to do as you please. Whether it's contributing by defeating monsters and aiding the rear communication lines or collecting relics in the depths of the ruins, it's up to you.”

As long as you're earnestly conducting Hunter activities around the rear communication lines, your Hunter rank will increase regardless of the specifics. So there are no detailed instructions. If you find it troublesome to be left to your own devices, we can assign tasks for you. Kibayashi stated.

“If you're collecting relics, all the relics you gather will be bought by the city. Sorry, but they'll be bought at a low price. However, it will make it easier to raise your Hunter rank accordingly. Well, that's the purpose of this request. So, bear with it.”

With that preamble, Kibayashi began to address the main points of the request.

“In consideration of that arrangement, I'll assign a companion to accompany you, Akira.”

“A companion? ”

“Yes. However, don't rely on them too much as a fighting force. If you want to think of them in a negative light, consider them more of a surveillance role. They're there to ensure that you produce results to raise your Hunter rank effectively. Also, there's the concern that the relics collected during the request might be sold elsewhere.”

Akira tentatively agreed with that explanation. However, he looked a bit puzzled.

“...I understand what you're saying, but if you're asking me to bring a burden with me to the depths of the ruins, I'll need compensation for their protection, won't I? ”

“I understand. However, most of the compensation will be factored into the internal calculation of your Hunter rank increase.”

“Ah, I see.”

Akira understood that he had properly protected the person provided by the city. That also contributed to the city. Even if the results of relic collection or monster subjugation were mediocre, raising the Hunter rank would be justified using that as a reason.

“That's right. Now, about this companion, it's her.”

“Huh? ”

“Huh? ”

Akira and Yumina's voices overlapped.



Akira thoughtlessly referred to Yumina as a burden. He began to panic inwardly, thinking that.

And Yumina, who hadn't been informed of anything, was even more flustered.

“U-um, Kibayashi-san. What does this mean? ”

Akira also realized from Yumina's reaction that she didn't know anything.

“Kibayashi. What does this mean? ”

“What, don't you like her as your companion? ”

“I-I don't mean that, but...”

“Well, if you have someone specific in mind for a companion, let me know. I'll negotiate with them. But if there's no preference, it'll be her. Ah, it's not like I decided it that way. It's just the situation that led to it.”

“Why? ”

“I can tell you if you want to know...”

Kibayashi said so and looked at Yumina.

“Are you interested? ”

You can leave without asking. Kibayashi indicated to Yumina once again.

Yumina returned a serious face.

“...I want to know.”

“Got it. Then I'll tell you.”

Kibayashi smiled cheerfully and began to explain to Akira and Yumina why Yumina would become Akira's companion.

Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry are competing to supply humanoid weapons to the Kugamayama City Defense Force, but the equipment supply competition for the Defense Force is not limited to humanoid weapons alone. For all equipment supplied to the Defense Force, there are disputes over supply regardless of the degree.

The developers of the Comprehensive Support Enhancement Suit used by Yumina, Kiryou, were also advancing the introduction of a comprehensive support system to the city.

The comprehensive support system not only enhances the efficiency of the entire unit but also makes it easier for those not present on the battlefield to control the command structure of the unit. In other words, it is often more suitable for those who operate completely as an organization rather than individual hunters.

In the great conflict of the slums, Katsuya and others destroyed many of Yashima Heavy Iron's humanoid weapons, demonstrating the performance of the comprehensive support system to the city. It was a welcome situation for Kiryou.

However, that promotional effect was halved by Akira's achievements. In terms of promoting augmented suits, Akira's combat footage clearly had the upper hand.

For Kiryou, it would be desirable if Akira could use their company's augmented suit. If such a high-ranking Hunter were to switch to

their company's augmented suit and perform well, it would be a significant promotion. They considered various approaches.

One common method is to directly approach the person with a sales pitch, attack from the equipment procurement source, or have friends recommend it.

It's impossible to directly approach Akira. Kiryou doesn't have any direct means of contacting him. Akira has kept his information private even on the Hunter Office's personal page, so contacting him is not possible.

It's also difficult to attack from the equipment procurement source. Shizuka's shop does not deal with augmented suits, and obtaining them is based on ordering. The influence of Kiryou is minimal. Even if they aggressively approached Akira, it would lead to competition and conflict with other companies.

So, the option of having friends recommend it remains, but Akira's circle of friends is extremely small, making it difficult. However, this time, there was Yumina. Mizuha, a member of the Drankam Administrative Faction, is the person sending the message to Akira's side seeking a connection with Sheryl.

Because of the history of providing augmented suits to Katsuya and others during development, Mizuha has a connection to Kiryou. It was easy for them to insert Yumina as Akira's companion.

Kibayashi explained up to that point and looked at Yumina.

“With this, probably tomorrow or so, you'll be instructed by your superior, Mizuha-san, to become Akira's companion and strongly urged to recommend their augmented suits to him. It's almost certain.”

“...But even if I just recommend it to Akira, I don't think it'll work out.”

“That's okay. Even if you fail. From your perspective, it's a win if you succeed. Having a Hunter who uses their augmented suits accompany someone who's been requested for a Hunter rank adjustment. Just that alone can generate a certain level of promotional effect.”

Kibayashi lightly responded, then looked at Akira this time.

“Of course, that promotion could be ruined if Akira says this companion was a terrible burden, completely useless. But well, normally, it's difficult to say such things to a friend, isn't it? ”

“Ah, I see.”

If a Hunter who received a rank adjustment request was accompanied by someone who didn't hold them back, it would serve as a promotion for the performance of the augmented suit. And Yumina was suitable not only as a person to prevent Akira from saying that but also as a staff member to ensure he doesn't.

As Akira and Yumina, who understood the underlying circumstances, looked troubled, Kibayashi moved to conclude the conversation.

“Well, I don't really care about those details. Rather than being bothered by having someone completely unknown as a companion, wouldn't it be easier for Akira to have someone he knows? If she doesn't want to, let me know. Then this discussion is over. I'll prepare someone else. What will you do? ”

“No... it's not that Yumina dislikes it, but...”

Akira hesitated about whether it was appropriate for Yumina to be chosen, given the circumstances he now understood. After some deliberation, he left the decision to Yumina.

“Yumina. What do you think? ”

“...Can I decide? ”

“Yeah. I'm not forcing you, but there's no reason to refuse either.”

In a sense, by pushing the decision onto the other person, Akira was doing something slightly unfair. However, he still lacked sufficient experience in building interpersonal relationships to make decisions that might involve trouble for someone he considered a friend.

And Yumina made her decision.

“Then, I'll do it.”

Kibayashi welcomed Yumina's decision with a smile.

“That's settled, then.”

With this, Yumina became involved in Akira's Hunter rank adjustment request as his companion. Not by anyone else's will, but by Yumina's own decision.

Chapter 150: Monster in the Depths

Akira, who visited Shizuka's shop in a wasteland-spec vehicle, was loading a large amount of ammunition onto the truck bed. Despite Shizuka having prepared the ammunition herself, she couldn't help but smile wryly at the quantity.

“You sure bought a lot, even though the client covers the ammunition expenses.”

Akira responded with a somewhat proud smile.

“It's fine. It's not something I'll be troubled with having too much of. Plus, I was compelled to take on the request due to circumstances on their end. It's only fair to be given the advantage of being able to shoot without worrying about running out of ammo, don't you think?”

Akira, who had accepted a Hunter Rank Adjustment request and negotiated with Kibayashi to have the client cover the ammunition expenses, immediately placed an order for as much ammunition as possible from Shizuka.

However, the high-caliber ammunition used for LEO SSB multi-function guns was not the usual stock at Shizuka's shop. Therefore, it mostly had to be ordered. Yet, Shizuka managed to prepare as much as possible in a short period.

“Well, you do have a point. With Akira able to fight safely with ease, it also adds to the sales of my shop. It's a good thing,” Shizuka remarked.

“Yes, I intend to make the most of it. So, I think I'll be placing additional orders soon,” Akira added.

“I'll be expecting it,” Shizuka replied.

Both Akira and Shizuka laughed happily and in good spirits.

After finishing loading the supplies and returning to the driver's seat, Shizuka interjected with a smile.

“Akira, you'll have a companion on this mission, right? It goes without saying that you shouldn't overexert yourself, but make sure not to push your companion too hard either.”

“I understand. Well then, I'll be off,” Akira nodded.

“Do your best. Take care,” Shizuka said.

Akira nodded lightly and drove off, while Shizuka watched him depart with a sigh.

“A Hunter Rank Adjustment request at the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin... I wonder if it'll be alright,” she muttered.

Then, after a brief pause, she put on an optimistic smile.

“Well, it's said to also serve as an escort for the companion, so it should be fine,” Shizuka reassured herself. Akira would surely act more cautiously than usual to ensure the safety of his companion. With that in mind, it should be alright. Shizuka thought as she returned from the shop's warehouse to the storefront.



Having prepared for their Hunter duties in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, Akira and Yumina were waiting near the forward base for their assignment.

His rugged vehicle, loaded with ammunition, was parked in the forward base parking lot. They wouldn't need to return home for ammunition resupply.

After a while, Yumina arrived in a vehicle. It was an armored personnel transport recognizable as wasteland-spec, with thick armor but lacking mounted weapons like machine guns. Instead, it had openable hatches on the roof, and the side doors were designed to serve as platforms or shields when opened.

If they were attacked by monsters while moving, the occupants would handle it with their own weapons. Since the occupants were stronger than typical combat vehicles, the vehicle prioritized defense over offense, catering to such requests.

Yumina got out of the car and addressed Akira.

“Sorry for the wait... Did I keep you waiting for quite some time? ”

It wasn't like Yumina was actually late according to their agreed time. However, sensing from Akira's demeanor that she might have kept him waiting longer than expected, she apologized somewhat sheepishly.

Recalling a similar exchange he had with Carol before, Akira chuckled and replied.

“I just got here... Should I have said that? ”

Yumina looked slightly surprised, then amused.

“Hmm, true. It'd be helpful to hear. If it were perceived as me making Akira wait, it could be troublesome if the Hunter Rank Adjustment request were delayed because of it.”

“In that case, I just got here.”

“I'm just arriving too. Shall we go? ”

Having exchanged a somewhat light-hearted banter, Akira and Yumina set off for the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

Progressing along the rear communication line from the forward base of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, which had been constructed by the Kugamayama City for the purpose of capturing the depths of the ruins, they encountered a long road.

The road was about 100 meters wide, flanked by high walls to prevent monster intrusions. The surface was well-maintained, almost straight, with no rubble in sight.

Normally, reaching the depths of the ruins involved navigating between collapsed buildings, avoiding debris on the road, and confronting monsters along the way. However, the rear communication line, which bypassed such hardships, provided significant support to Hunters aiming for the depths of the ruins.

Benefiting from this, Akira and Yumina rode their bikes along this road. Compared to their previous struggles when heading towards the Tsubakihara Building, the journey through the ruins felt much smoother.

“Yumina, for going into the depths of the ruins, is that kind of vehicle necessary?” Akira asked a simple question.

Responding through their already-established communication link, Yumina answered, “Hmm, I wonder. This vehicle was prepared for my augmented suit.”

“A vehicle for the augmented suit?”

“Yes. Oh, I might have mentioned it before, but I use a Comprehensive Support Augmented Suit. The equipment on this vehicle operates the support part of the system.”

The Comprehensive Support Augmented Suit developed by the Mechanized Command was an augmented suit designed for use with

the Comprehensive Support System. Without using it, it would just be a regular augmented suit.

However, incorporating the system into the control device of the augmented suit posed a challenge due to processing power issues. Therefore, a separate high-performance computing device was prepared to operate the system. Yumina's vehicle had this large computing device installed.

Akira found this puzzling.

“...Isn't that incredibly cumbersome for the user? You have to transport that huge computing device every time, right? ”

“Normally, it's meant to be used by units. Even if it's inconvenient to transport, if the benefits of improving the entire unit's combat effectiveness outweigh that, it's considered worth it, don't you think?”

“Ah, I see.”

Akira understood and was satisfied. However, Yumina chuckled wryly.

“Well, this time, I'm using it alone. It's per the instructions from above.”

“That sounds tough.”

“It certainly is.”

With a tone laden with organizational concerns, they laughed together cheerfully.

Arriving at the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, Akira and Yumina began their exploration.

Akira instinctively chose to go right at a large crossroads within the ruins, but was stopped by Alpha.

『Akira, let's not head that way. Although there's quite a distance, that direction leads to the Tsubakihara Building. It's best to avoid getting close.』

『I see. Got it.』

Akira changed the bike's course in the opposite direction.

The roads laid out in a grid pattern between the regularly spaced buildings were wide enough for both Akira's bike and Yumina's vehicle to pass without issue. The road surface was well-preserved, and the surrounding buildings showed only minor cracks without any significant collapses.

Seeing this scene, Akira couldn't help but think that this might be what would happen if buildings around the Tsubakihara Building were left untouched for a long time.

As Akira was pursued by a large number of spiders, he raced through the ruins on his bike, technically leading them on.

Dodging enemy gunfire by turning corners of buildings, he used the large caliber LEO SSB multi-function gun attached to his bike to unleash a barrage of bullets, annihilating the spiders as they emerged from the corners of the buildings. Countless spiders were mowed down as if cut down by a giant blade due to the dense barrage of fire.

Akira also wielded a standard version of the LEO SSB multi-function gun he had bought for indoor combat, firing at the spiders clinging to the nearby building sides.

This “indoor” version was meant for use within buildings, as the large caliber LEO SSB multi-function gun intended for taking down large targets was too unwieldy indoors. Even so, its firepower was

considerable. The countless rounds pierced through the spiders, leaving them riddled with holes as they fell.

Handling both guns simultaneously with precision was still challenging for Akira at the moment. However, he compensated for the decrease in accuracy by sheer volume of bullets. The cost of ammunition was covered by the client, so he disregarded the notion of wastefulness, firing excessively to make up for the decrease in accuracy.

Despite being supported by the seemingly endless supply of ammunition, Akira was still facing a formidable swarm of powerful monsters in the depths of the ruins on his own.

『It's not easy, but I'm managing pretty well.』

Alpha smiled satisfactorily at Akira's satisfaction.

『That's a sign of your growth, Akira. Let's keep it up. But remember, no room for complacency.』

『Got it. But save that advice for later.』

『All right. A bit later then. I'm looking forward to seeing how much stronger you'll become in such a short period of time.』

Alpha said with a meaningful smile. Akira returned the smile confidently, making sure not to make a lie out of his words and expressing his determination with a bold grin.

『Yeah. Look forward to it.』

Akira continued his relentless gunfire to increase his strength by defeating the swarm of monsters.

Continuing to race around the grid-like roads with the swarm of spider-like armored insects in tow, Akira kept firing, gradually

reducing their numbers. After circling the area about five times, the size of the swarm chasing Akira had decreased to about a third of its original size.

As Akira thought about how to finish off the remaining spiders, he received a communication from Yumina.

“Akira, sorry. Can you retreat first? I've held out for quite a while, but it's becoming impossible to continue.”

Initially, Akira had attracted most of the swarm. However, due to Yumina's efforts, more and more spiders started targeting her, making it difficult for her to handle. Eventually, the swarm grew to a size where it was difficult for Yumina to fend off attacks even outside the vehicle.

The comprehensive support system had recommended a retreat a while ago, but Yumina persisted a bit longer.

“Understood. Do you need backup? ”

“If you have the capacity, please. If not, it's okay. The vehicle's armor can withstand enough to make it to the rear communication line security team.”

“Got it. I'll be there soon.”

After ending the communication, Akira tightened his expression.

『Alpha. Training's over. Provide support.』

『Understood. How much support do you need? 』

『I'm counting on you to give it your all. It seems like you've been slacking off a bit on Yumina's security, so let's make up for it here.』

『All right. Shall we scatter them then? 』

Until now, Akira had been fighting well on his own, but from here on out, Alpha's support comes into play. The criteria for combat shifted from Akira's training to the annihilation of the enemy.

The motorcycle, which had been traveling at considerable speed, suddenly forced its direction to reverse. It grabbed the road surface with the tire's ground contact function to the extent of crushing it, cancelling out the inertia by sheer force, and accelerated in the opposite direction.

And it charged towards the swarm following Akira. Simultaneously, three LEO SSB multi-function guns began their attack at maximum firepower and efficiency.

The first gun is the regular version held by Akira himself. Concentrating on manipulating subjective time, he carefully aims and shoots at the enemies. Additionally, he is currently receiving aiming correction from Alpha's support. There's no need to compensate for accuracy with the number of bullets. Every bullet lands on the target's weak points or vital spots, mercilessly defeating the enemies.

The second gun is for taking down large targets attached to the bike. With Alpha's control, it aims and shoots at the enemies with precision that belies its arm-mounted gun seat. Moreover, it does so with a rapid fire that appears to be just spraying. The barrage of bullets, combining power and precision, easily swallows and crushes a large number of spiders.

And the third gun is a gun attached to the other arm-mounted gun seat of the bike. Instead of bullets, small missiles with a diameter of about five centimeters are fired from there. A large number of small missiles, which seem to ignore volume, are supplied from the large expansion magazine attached to the gun and continuously fired.

Countless small missiles fly through the air and assail the enemies. They mercilessly rush even at the spiders hiding behind buildings, where straight-line trajectories cannot reach. Even against large ones

clad in sturdy armor that cannot be defeated with a single shot, they continuously land and destroy them.

Although there is a certain degree of guidance, without Alpha's control, Akira wouldn't have been able to perform such attacks that dodge the enemy's gunfire with complex trajectories.

While continuing the simultaneous attack with the three LEO SSB multi-function guns, Akira plunges into the swarm of spider-type armored insectoids with the bike, pushing forward and crushing the swarm from the inside. He single-handedly annihilates the large-scale swarm that claimed this area as its territory.

And Akira breaks through the swarm. At the same time, all three guns run out of ammunition. All that remains in Akira's path is a pile of dead spiders.

Akira stops the bike and takes a breath as communication comes in.

“This is the rear communication line security unit. We received a request for support. What's the situation? ”

If hunters are attacked by a swarm of monsters or the like in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin and cannot deal with them on their own, they are allowed to retreat to the rear communication line security unit along with them. This is a special measure to promote the exploration of the depths.

It's a considerable reaction, so they must be engaged in a fairly large-scale battle. If they come fleeing here, prompt action is necessary. The security unit that judged so first contacted Yumina's vehicle, which was in retreat. And Yumina had requested support from Akira.

Akira responds lightly.

“No, we don't need support. We've just finished dealing with them.”

“Oh, is that so? Understood. The monsters in the depths are strong. Be careful.”

Akira, after ending the communication, wears a slightly troubled expression.

『Be careful... If there are swarms everywhere, what good does being careful do? 』

Alpha responds to that question with a laugh.

『That's why you can efficiently earn Hunter ranks, right? 』

『I see. That's how it is. It makes sense now.』

Akira once again understands the reason for limiting the hunting grounds to this area. And considering Kibayashi's good mood earlier, he understands the reason for that as well. With a slightly wry smile, Akira revs up the bike again to meet up with Yumina.



Yumina, who has joined Akira, bows her head.

“I'm sorry. It seems I was more of a burden than I imagined.”

Yumina thought they would join up and retreat together to the rear communication line security unit since Akira immediately said she should go. However, Akira single-handedly defeated the remaining monster swarm shortly after Yumina informed him of her withdrawal.

Yumina knew Akira was strong. But her perception was even more naive than she thought. While she was fighting, Akira was deliberately holding back. Probably to not make her feel like she was getting in his way. Yumina was somewhat disheartened by that thought.

Seeing Yumina's reaction, Akira shakes his head slightly in a fluster.

“No, it's not like that.”

“But...”

“Ah, look, didn't I say before, if I'm going to bring along a deadweight, then they should foot the bill for their protection? If I could leave Yumina behind and fight without any problems, then Yumina isn't holding me back.”

If Yumina could fully agree with those words, she wouldn't feel down. However, whether Akira's words were sincere or just concern, Yumina felt that if she remained crestfallen, she would burden Akira unnecessarily, so she deliberately smiled brightly to regain her spirits.

“... Is that so? Well, that's good then.”

Seeing Yumina's smile, Akira also smiles relieved.

“Well then, it's a bit early, but shall we head back? It's the first day, so let's not push it too hard. We'll call it a day here since we came to get a feel for the depths.”

“Understood. Let's go back... The feeling of the depths, huh? If this is just the first day's feeling, it can only be described as incredibly tough.”

“Exactly.”

Akira agrees, and Yumina looks somewhat surprised.

“Even you, Akira? Even after defeating that swarm alone at the end, you're still saying it's tough? ”

“That's right. That wasn't really my strength.”

“If it wasn't Akira's strength, then what was it? ”

“Well, let's see... I guess it's the power of having someone else cover the cost of ammunition! Maybe? With that much ammunition, it would be impossible to win with self-funding.”

Although he spoke in a joking manner, Akira was speaking from the heart. Strictly speaking, it was not just the unlimited ammunition but also Alpha's support. But to Akira, both the ammunition he didn't buy with his own money and Alpha's support were the same in the sense that they were not his own strength.

Hearing that, Yumina was deeply surprised inwardly.

There is absolutely no talk about how anything could be accomplished if there's enough ammunition. Yet Akira treats it as such. Yumina couldn't help but smile wryly at the fundamental difference in their perceptions and senses of power.

“No wonder Akira received requests for Hunter rank adjustments. Being so strong but only at Hunter Rank 30, it's, um, fraudulent.”

“I-I see...”

Yumina smiled confidently as she said that, but internally, she felt a deep sense of unease.



Akira and the others completed today's hunting activities in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin and returned to the frontline base.

“Yumina, can we meet at the same time tomorrow? ”

Akira asked normally, but Yumina showed confusion.

“Ah, tomorrow? ”

“...How about the day after tomorrow? ”

Seeing Akira's slightly puzzled expression, Yumina thought.

Akira might be planning to go to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin every day. That's no different from him voluntarily heading into the line of fire every day. He must be crazy. She definitely can't keep up with that.

However, from Akira's perspective, it might make sense to finish early today. And if she didn't hold him back today, then tomorrow might indeed be okay. Moreover, she couldn't delay Akira's Hunter rank adjustment request due to her own circumstances.

Even so, she couldn't agree.

“...I'm sorry, Akira. Could I have two days to prepare? I have various reasons, such as borrowing augmented suit from the equipment store. There's also equipment and vehicle maintenance to consider. I'm sorry for my circumstances, but if possible...”

“Is that so? Understood.”

Yumina felt genuinely relieved.

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

With this, Akira and the others continued their Hunter rank adjustment requests, working one day and resting for two days.

And just as they were about to disband for the day, Kibayashi arrived.

“Hey, Akira. Good work today.”

“Kibayashi. What do you want? Are you here to complain about the lack of results or to urge us on? ”

“...And if I were? ”

With that, Kibayashi laughs heartily, his smile carrying deeper meaning.

“It's the first day, isn't it? It's fine to wrap it up lightly for today. Besides, although you've taken on the Hunter rank adjustment request, no one's telling you to raise your Hunter rank in a hurry. Take it easy.”

Hearing that, Kibayashi bursts into laughter, continuing.

“Hey! You've crushed that swarm of spider-type armored insectoids, right? They were claiming that area as their territory, but since their swarm is big and strong, they were keeping the Hunter teams that wanted to collect artifacts away. We were planning to dispatch an appropriate unit to crush them since they're interfering with artifact collection.”

Kibayashi explains up to there and laughs heartily again.

“And you... you've crushed them all alone, and today you're wrapping it up lightly... That's great! That's great, Akira! ”

“...Thanks. If I earned enough results to make you burst into laughter, then that's good.”

As Akira says that with a nonchalant expression, Yumina, standing next to him, smiles slightly stiffly.

After that, Kibayashi continues.

“Right. Akira. If you're going to say that, then there's no way you weren't satisfied with that level of achievement. How about joining the rear communication line extension work? You can fight monsters even further into the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, you know? It'll be a dangerous area where combat with humanoid

weapons is the norm, but since you're stronger than those humanoid weapons, you'll get just the right feeling...”

“No way! ”

Akira rejected Kibayashi's suggestion with a displeased expression.

Next to him, Yumina also made a displeased expression involuntarily. Whether the other party was a city employee or not, she couldn't hide it.

Chapter 151: Yumina's Training

Two days later, after a preparation period, Akira and Yumina returned to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin together.

“Hmm. What should we do today? Should we just wander around casually again?”

Last time, they had only defeated a large horde of monsters before withdrawing. Still, it was a significant achievement, enough to make Kibayashi laugh heartily.

However, they couldn't ignore the fact that they were forced to retreat early due to the overwhelming strength of the enemies. It was too early to grasp the difficulty level of the depths. It might be better to defeat some monsters around there a while longer to get a sense of the depths.

Akira lightly suggested this, and Yumina's expression turned slightly serious.

“Akira. It's not a big deal, but how about trying to move under my command today... Is that okay?”

“Huh? Well, sure, let's do that then.”

“Huh? Is that fine?”

Yumina was surprised by how easily her proposal was accepted.

“Yeah, it's fine. Well, just don't give me too weird instructions.”

Last time, Akira's reckless fighting had put Yumina in a bit of a dangerous situation. Part of it was because Akira's sense of danger was significantly different from Yumina's.

Due to the countless life-or-death battles in the past and the overpowering support of Alpha, Akira's criteria for critical situations had become significantly distorted. Akira was aware of this, but he didn't know to what extent he differed from others.

Akira and Yumina would continue to act together for a while. It would be best for Akira to understand Yumina's sense of danger at this opportunity. If they acted under Yumina's command, he would understand that too. That was Akira's judgment.

Yumina smiled and thanked him.

“Thank you. Of course, I'm not going to demand absolute obedience to my orders. If you have any complaints, just let me know. I promise to follow your command at that point.”

“Got it. Well then, let's get started for today too.”

“Yes. Let's do our best.”

Akira and Yumina laughed together and immediately set off. The request for Hunter Rank adjustment for today had begun.

Akira and his group advanced through the ruins under Yumina's command. They fought several monsters along the way, but the two of them easily defeated them without any problems.

Next, they moved on to eliminating monsters within a specific area for a while. They also dealt with this task easily.

Among those monsters was a large voracious crocodile that had undergone significant changes due to overeating spider-type armored insects, making it somewhat dubious to call it a crocodile. The massive amount of armor it had grown all over its body indicated that it was an entity that ordinary hunters would never be able to handle.

However, even this voracious crocodile was blown away by the concentrated firepower from Akira and his group. The powerful monsters that inhabited the depths of the ruins were no match for Akira and his team.

After defeating the surrounding monsters, Yumina parked the car in front of a building.

“Akira, let's collect relics here.”

Akira and his group entered the building equipped for indoor exploration. Yumina's information-gathering device immediately started scanning the surroundings. Based on that data, the comprehensive support system automatically created an internal map and displayed it on their devices.

“Oh, impressive.”

“It's convenient, isn't it? You can also see the outside surroundings.”

The vehicle's information gathering device continued to scan outside, reflecting the results on an external map. The internal map of the building was detailed and easy to understand, even showing unexplored areas with provisional shapes and floors based on exterior observations. Akira and his team could see the detailed shapes of walls and floors around them.

Akira and his team proceeded to explore the building. There were many rooms with various items placed inside, but they decided to first conduct a rough investigation without touching anything. There were some monsters, but none posed a significant threat.

“Akira, can I choose the relics to take back? ”

“Yeah, sure.”

They repeated the process of transporting relics from inside the building to Yumina's car. The vehicle quickly filled up with relics.

“Then let's return to the rear communication line.”

With the relics loaded as much as they could, Akira and his group returned to the rear communication line. Hunter teams were waiting with a large truck there.

Yumina opened the car door and showed the relics inside to the transporters.

“These are the relics. Please take care of them.”

Transporters earned their living by transporting relics from dangerous ruins to safe cities, but they didn't have the ability to enter the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Their capabilities were limited to the relatively safe rear communication line.

Still, Akira and his team could save the trouble of transporting the relics to the city. Once they unloaded all the relics from the vehicle, Yumina left the rest of the work to the transporters.

“Well then, Akira. Let's go again.”

After that, Akira and his group shuttled back and forth between the building and the rear communication line, continuously transporting various relics.

They carried out everything they could, transporting items ranging from chairs and shelves to tables. Akira made a slight groan when he saw items that looked like nothing more than cheap chairs.

“Yumina, are we really taking back even these kinds of things? ”

“Yeah. Well, I don't think they'll fetch a high price even if we sell them, but I still have a reason to take them back. I'll explain in detail later.”

“I see.”

Akira reluctantly accepted and continued the work.

As they continued transporting relics, it was getting close to sunset. Akira and his team finished their hunter work for the day and started their journey back.



Upon returning to the frontline base of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, Yumina invited Akira to have a meal. Since she mentioned she had something to discuss, Akira had no reason to refuse and followed along.

The frontline base was equipped with facilities for hunters operating in the depths of the ruins. These included medical facilities, dining halls, and relic purchase centers. However, entry required a hunter's permit, and without a history of using the rear communication line, one couldn't enter.

This was not a problem for Akira and his team. However, it was unusual to see a child there, attracting some attention.

The dining hall had a very ordinary interior, lacking the luxurious atmosphere of a high-end restaurant. It was designed for hunters returning from the ruins, assuming they would still be wearing their augmented suits, so it had a somewhat austere interior. Nevertheless, it was meticulously cleaned, maintaining a high level of cleanliness.

The prices of the dishes listed on the menu started at a minimum of 10,000 Aurums. There was an implicit pressure that those who couldn't afford such an amount should leave.

Akira frowned as he looked at the menu.

“...Hmm. It's expensive.”

Seeing Akira's expression, Yumina chuckled slightly amused.

“Akira, if you're struggling that much, should I treat you? After all, I invited you.”

“...No, it's okay! It's important for hunters to have the experience of eating such expensive dishes with their own earnings. We need to accumulate these experiences at such opportunities.”

“Oh, is that your view as a hunter? ”

“Well, it's something I heard from someone else. If you want to be a proper hunter, you need to be able to use the money you earn for things other than just hunting.”

“I see. That makes sense. While I'm a hunter too, I don't want to live a life where I have nowhere to go except the wasteland.”

Yumina brightened up and laughed.

“But I'll expense it anyway.”

“Expense? From Dorankum? Do meal expenses like this count as expenses too? ”

To Akira's somewhat surprised expression, Yumina returned a meaningful smile.

“This time, yes. Remember I said there's something I wanted to talk about? It's related to that. Well, let's discuss it over our meal. Come on, Akira, make your choice quickly.”

Pointing at the menu, Yumina urged Akira to order.

“Got it. Hmm...”

Akira started pondering over the menu once again.

As their ordered dishes arrived, Yumina began to speak.

“Akira, about today's relic collection, how was my command? ”

“How was it? I think there were no issues.”

“I see... Well, this might sound strange, but do you think if you were in command today, it would have been better than mine? ”

“No, I don't think so. Since I tend to act on impulse, I don't think I can be as efficient as you, Yumina.”

“I-I see...”

Yumina, who had thought she was being somewhat rude with her questioning, was a bit taken aback by Akira's straightforward answer. Then, she sighed heavily this time.

“...Actually, today's command wasn't mine. It was the command of the comprehensive support system.”

She confessed, as if admitting something. All the decisions, from selecting the relic collection site to dealing with monsters and choosing relics to bring back, were made under the command of the comprehensive support system, and she simply followed it.

“Is that so? ”

“Yes. So, the command wasn't a reflection of my abilities. I'm sorry for the misunderstanding.”

“No, there's no need to apologize. I've known from the beginning that you were using the comprehensive support system. It's nothing to apologize for,” Akira said, feeling a bit of closeness to Yumina. He too relied on Alpha's support and inadvertently misled others into thinking it was his own ability.

Unlike Yumina, Akira couldn't confess this. The mix of subtle guilt and closeness made Akira feel more favorable towards Yumina.

Yumina felt relieved seeing Akira's nonchalant attitude. If she had informed him in advance that she was using the comprehensive support system for command, she wouldn't have felt a bit guilty about deliberately hiding it, even though it was just orders from above.

“I'm glad to hear you say that. So, why did I do something like that...” Yumina's expression turned slightly discontented.

“Well, in simple terms, it was for the promotion of the comprehensive support system,” she sighed.

Then, she sighed again after a short pause, this time heavier than before.

“So, why was I made to do such a thing...”

“It's because I didn't have any good points from the previous time.”

Yumina was provided with highly functional augmented suits as part of Kiryou's promotional strategy. To get highly skilled hunters like Akira to use their company's products and to promote the idea that using their products would allow them to perform just as well as top hunters, the suits were provided to Yumina under the pretext of testing for the comprehensive support augmented suits. Therefore, the combat data against the large horde of spider-type armored insects had also flowed to Kiryou.

There were signs. Yumina felt it too.

During the Yonozuka Station Ruin incident, watching Katsuuya fight alongside Akira from an aerial perspective, she felt he was stronger than when he fought alongside her. She began to wonder if she had been dragging Katsuuya down all this time.

In the battle against the Composite Snake, she was surprised when her comrades, spurred by Katsuuya's reprimand, increased their coordinated movements. But she was the only one surprised. It seemed only natural to her comrades, given the tension, excessive excitement, and confusion during the bounty hunt, if not for those factors. In the battle at the Mizuhano Town Ruin, while her comrades coordinated well with Katsuuya, she couldn't keep up and ended up dragging Katsuuya down. Furthermore, in the Slum Town battle, she was deemed unfit to fight alongside Katsuuya by the comprehensive support system and was relegated to the rear. And now, she couldn't keep up with Akira's fighting. Despite using a augmented suit probably several times more powerful than Akira's, she had been given up on for combat promotion by Kiryou and instructed to promote him in other ways.

She wondered if she was just like those mediocre young hunters at Dorankum who, despite having borrowed good equipment, were just getting carried away. That thought slipped out of Yumina's mouth as a weak expression of vulnerability.

Akira listened silently to Yumina's story. His interpersonal skills weren't high enough to offer Yumina the right words here. He listened silently. That was the limit of Akira's concern.

They remained silent for a while. It wasn't a heavy atmosphere, but it wasn't a pleasant silence either.

Yumina was the one who changed the air first. She took a deep breath, as if to release all her remaining despondency, then deliberately smiled brightly to dispel the mood.

“Ah, forget it, forget it. I made it feel all gloomy. Sorry about that,” she said, trying to change the subject a bit forcibly.

“Still, Akira, you're really strong. How did you become so strong? ”

“Hmm. I guess it's just equipment and training, right? ”

“That's such a cliché answer.”

Yumina laughed as if enjoying the frivolous conversation, and Akira responded with a cheerful smile.

“Even if you say it's cliché. But isn't that the case? ”

“Well, yeah. But you're so strong, there must be some secret to it, right? Some amazing technique or something.”

“A secret, huh... Well, I guess there is.”

Yumina's smile faded from her face. She looked at Akira with a serious gaze.

“Can I hear more about it? ”

If she accompanied Akira, she might understand the reason for his strength. If she knew that, she might become stronger herself. Then, she might be able to fight alongside Katsuuya again. Yumina hoped for that and became Akira's companion for his Hunter Rank adjustment request.

There was something she sought. That's what changed Yumina's atmosphere.

“You can, but there's a condition.”

“What? Anything, just say it.”

Akira, who had been serious, relaxed his expression.

“Promise you won't laugh even if I say something weird. That's it.”

With that, Yumina regained her composure.

“Got it. I promise not to laugh, even if you say something weird. Is that okay? ”

“Yeah.”

Akira and the others returned to the lively atmosphere of chatting while having their meal, continuing their conversation while enjoying the expensive and delicious dishes.

When Yumina asked about the secret of Akira's strength, he immediately thought of Alpha. But he couldn't talk about it. He couldn't afford to be noticed. So, he decided to divert the topic with talk of “techniques.”

Trying to divert the topic made Akira a bit more talkative. And because Yumina listened with great interest and enjoyment, Akira became a little more open.

The conversation about the secret of Akira's strength continued until late into the night.



Upon returning to her room, Yumina lay down on her bed and let out a deep sigh, as if exhaling the fatigue of the day. Then, recalling Akira's words, she couldn't help but smile, a smile tinged with a sense of disbelief.

“Well, I guess if you go that far, you'll become strong,” Yumina muttered to herself, listening to Akira's story, feeling a strong sense of understanding even while somewhat doubting her interlocutor's sanity.

Manipulation of subjective time and its training methods.

The method involves tricking one's own brain by recalling memories from moments of facing death, which induces a paradox in the perception of time, allowing for its distortion even outside of life-threatening situations.

Independent manipulation of the augmented suit and one's own body.

Simply wearing the suit and moving normally wouldn't allow for swift movements despite increased strength. With a suit that moves in tandem with the wearer's movements, there's a slight delay compared to the wearer's actions. Even with a suit that reads and mimics nerve transmissions, it moves at the same speed as the wearer.

So, the key is to manipulate the suit separately from one's own body. This allows for incredibly fast movements utilizing the enhanced capabilities of the suit. Naturally, this puts a significant strain on the body, which is compensated for by using medicines.

And then, combining this with the manipulation of subjective time.

In a world where time flows slowly, one's body would also generally move slowly. However, by forcibly moving the suit in sync with one's own body, even amidst the sluggish world, one can still move at their normal speed.

However, such actions would usually result in a level of physical strain that could be fatal. Nevertheless, Akira continued to do so in order to become stronger. He mitigated the immense burden on his body by using copious amounts of medicines to constantly heal himself while moving and training in such conditions.

The doctors who examined his body misunderstood, thinking he was aiming to become a superhuman.

After revisiting the conversation with Akira in her mind, Yumina let out another deep sigh.

“...From Akira's perspective, my problem could be easily resolved with just more training.”

There's a part of her that wants to call him crazy. However, she also felt relieved.

She knows that she and Katsuya have different talents. That's something she acknowledges. Even if she were to undergo the same training as Katsuya, she wouldn't become as strong as him. To bridge that talent gap, she needs rigorous training.

“Wait for me, Katsuya. I'll catch up soon,” she whispered to herself. There's no time for self-doubt anymore. There's no reason for it. She's been taught how to become stronger. Now all that's left is to do it.

With that decision made, Yumina smiled with determination.



In the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, Akira and Yumina alternated between days of monster hunting under Akira's command and relic collection under Yumina's command.

Today was a day for monster hunting. They progressed along roads in vehicles, defeating monsters encountered along the way while rough maps of the deeper areas were being made.

Eliminating threats in areas where powerful monsters lurked also improved the efficiency of relic collection in the dangerous depths. It was a sufficient achievement for the Hunter Rank adjustment request.

Akira conducted this work while riding a motorcycle.

And Yumina was running alongside him.

With the physical capabilities of the augmented suit, it's technically possible to keep up with a motorcycle using two legs. However, it's still extremely taxing. Moreover, Akira was maintaining a speed

slightly faster than Yumina, pushing her to sprint at her maximum effort. So there was no time to rest.

This was something Yumina herself had requested. She had asked Akira if she could receive training while accompanying him.

Akira agreed to this with conditions. The only condition was that she could stop if she wanted to.

Whether or not to continue the training was up to her. In a sense, it was a kind offer, yet also a strict one. Yumina accepted it. The result of that acceptance was this grueling training.

Yumina gritted her teeth and ran. The comprehensive support system, which monitored the wearer's condition through the augmented suit, kept advising her to take a rest. But she ignored it and continued. She was already at a point where she could collapse at any moment.

Still, she pushed on, forcibly moving her body with the assistance of the augmented suit, enduring the immense strain of keeping up with the motorcycle's speed. She felt like her whole body was being ground to mincemeat.

If she continued like this, the illusion wouldn't be enough to describe the pain. But the massive doses of medicines still remaining in her system were there to heal her.

Even so, there's a limit. Once she uses up all the medicines in her body, she won't be able to move anymore. The comprehensive support system isn't overriding Yumina's will to move the augmented suit; it's just that if she can't withstand the strain on her body and loses consciousness, all she'll be able to do is collapse. And that moment is fast approaching.

As Akira slowed down the bike, he rode alongside Yumina and offered her an opened box of medicine.

Yumina reached out with a tired expression, but with determination to continue training. She grabbed the box and promptly swallowed the capsules inside.

As long as her determination didn't waver, the training would continue, with Akira assisting her.

Additional combat medicine were taken to prevent Yumina from fainting due to fatigue. Before their effects wore off, Akira provided more. Furthermore, Akira maintained a certain distance from Yumina while allowing her to participate in repelling monsters, pushing her to her limits.

Yumina continued to push herself through this pseudo-death experience.

After finishing the medicine, Yumina laughed spiritedly while running.

“...Akira! These medicine are a lifesaver, but is it really okay for me to use so many of them? ”

“It's fine. Didn't I tell you? The ammunition expenses are covered by the client. Strictly speaking, it also includes consumables. Energy packs, medicine, materials cartridges for repairing the augmented suit, it's all included.”

Saying so, Akira grinned proudly.

“So, no matter how much we use, my wallet won't suffer! Use them without hesitation.”

“You say that now, but what if we get complaints from the client? ”

“I won't know anything about it. Besides, this request is just someone's convenience. If you don't like covering the ammunition costs, you can just cancel the request, right? ”

Despite her fatigue, Yumina smiled back at Akira.

“You have a point.”

“Well, we've already produced results that made Kibayashi burst into laughter. So, we might get some leniency.”

With that remark, Akira accelerated slightly and moved ahead of Yumina once again.

The break, or rather the replenishment, ended, and Yumina resumed running desperately. Naturally, she not only ran but also remained vigilant of her surroundings. If monsters appeared, she had to fight them while running.

Believing that she would become stronger by overcoming this training, Yumina continued to run desperately.

Akira glanced back at Yumina. Although there were monsters in their path, Akira didn't even look at them. He targeted and killed them with his information gathering device, then adjusted the bike's course to pass by their remains. Akira had become capable of handling such tasks independently.

Yumina, who was about to raise her large gun while running, lowered it again as Akira had already taken down the target.

『Hmm. Alpha, should we slow down a bit? 』

Alpha, who was perched on the bike as it ran, smiled meaningfully.

『Well, if those words are meant to show concern for Yumina, then she's keeping up just fine at this speed. I think it's fine to continue like this. But if it's for Akira's convenience, you can slow down as much as you like, right? 』

The current monster hunting was both Yumina's and Akira's training.

Riding the bike swiftly through the ruins, finding monsters, killing them immediately, and continuing without stopping. At the same time, they ensured Yumina's safety. It was essential to secure not only their own safety but also each other's.

Maintaining this state for an extended period was still difficult for Akira. It was good training.

Increasing the bike's speed would make it even more challenging. Conversely, reducing the speed would make it easier. The current speed of the bike was at the limit where Yumina could keep up. However, any faster, and Akira wouldn't be able to handle it.

Acknowledging the difficulty, Akira smiled back at Alpha's suggestion.

『In that case, let's keep it as it is. Yumina is doing her best, and I shouldn't interfere with that.』

『Agreed.』

With that decision, Akira and Yumina's training continued without slowing down.

The vehicle equipped with the comprehensive support system followed behind Yumina automatically. If Yumina lost consciousness, the system would manipulate the augmented suit to evacuate her to the vehicle and retreat automatically.

As the sun began to set, today's Hunter Rank adjustment request came to an end. Despite being utterly exhausted, Yumina completed

the day's training without needing assistance from the retreat support system.



Today was designated as Yumina's day to lead artifact collection. The task itself was similar to the previous artifact collection, but there was one significant difference. Akira kept asking questions about Yumina's instructions.

Why choose a certain path? Why select a particular building as the artifact collection site? Why bring back specific artifacts? He asked so many questions that it seemed like harassment if one didn't know the context.

This was to indicate to the officials that Akira was interested in the comprehensive support system and considering its use.

Akira asked these amateur-like questions repeatedly under the guise of ensuring that the instructions were valid.

Yumina simply relayed Akira's questions to the comprehensive support system for answers. While the system could respond quickly to simple queries, there were some difficult questions. Sometimes, Akira would ask questions that were challenging to answer even with Alpha's help.

For questions that were difficult to answer on the spot, responses would be provided later. If the response satisfied Akira, it would bring them one step closer to purchasing the comprehensive support system. Therefore, the officials also had to make an effort to appease Akira.

Furthermore, this Q&A session served as evidence that Yumina was properly promoting the comprehensive support system. It also prevented complaints from the Drankam administration faction about inadequate promotion to Akira.

Moreover, while explaining this to Yumina, Akira also thought to himself that he should take this opportunity to refresh his basic knowledge of the Hunter profession. With Yumina asking seemingly unnatural questions like a novice, he could claim it was to confirm the performance of the comprehensive support system.

It was agreed that Yumina's training with Akira on monster hunting days would demonstrate the performance of the comprehensive support augmented suit. Yumina was striving to overturn Akira's judgment that the suit couldn't handle such tasks.

Both Akira and Yumina continued their Hunter Rank adjustment requests while utilizing the promotion of the comprehensive support system for their own training.



Even on her days off, Yumina continued her training herself. It was training in the perception of time manipulation technique.

However, this was more of an exploratory training due to the nature of the training content. Although she asked Akira about the training methods, he prefaced by saying that what worked for him might not work for others.

For now, Yumina obtained combat records of deceased comrades from Drankam's training data and viewed them from a subjective perspective.

The footage of those who had actually died was vivid. It was full of actions and decisions that led to their deaths, meant to be lessons to learn from and to boost motivation for training.

She watched them regardless. Focusing on them. Imagining herself being there. Watching the scenes of danger, she felt surprise, broke into a cold sweat, and experienced strong tension and fear, continuing to watch the scenes of peril.

However, there was no distortion of time perception.

“This is difficult...”

The road ahead seemed long. With that in mind, Yumina let out a deep sigh.

Chapter 152: A Certain Crucible

In the high-priced floor of the relic sales shop belonging to Sheryl and others, a man named Noguchi is looking at the prices of appraised old-world information terminals and asking the female clerk.

“Excuse me. I heard that this was 80 million Aurum the other day, but now it's down to 55 million Aurum. It seems like quite a price drop. Did something happen? ”

“Yes. Until now, we had been raising prices due to scarcity, but we've managed to lower them to this affordable level as we've secured a restock.”

Noguchi politely asks the clerk, then jokingly asks, “So it's not just because the stock they were holding back couldn't sell at a high price anymore, but because they released it due to that reason, right? ”

The clerk laughs lightly, treating Noguchi's joke casually.

“No, no, it's not like that at all. These were brought in by a hunter that our shop has a good relationship with.”

“I see. Could I ask a little about this hunter? ”

“I'm sorry, but I must refrain.”

“I see.”

A lighthearted exchange of jokes between the customer and the clerk. At least that's how the clerk and the other customers around perceived it.

Noguchi also laughs along. Then, with a slight change in attitude to switch from jokes to business, he says, “Well then, since it's back to an affordable price, I'll take one.”

“Thank you very much for your purchase.”

Afterward, Noguchi puts the purchased item into a storage case and leaves the shop. Leaving the store, he gets into the car parked in the slum district and drives toward the city's defensive wall.

In the car, Noguchi contacts his superior through a secure line.

“It's me. There have been developments at that shop we talked about.”

“Go on.”

Noguchi explains the situation to the recipient of the communication.

“...Yes, that's correct. Whether they truly acquired them again from that hunter or just released the stock they were holding back for price increases, that's unclear at the moment. There's a possibility the hunter himself was holding onto them. However, it seems certain that the shop has acquired a considerable number of old-world information terminals.”

“Does it look promising? ”

“That's hard to say from my perspective. It depends on the judgment of the section chief. For now, we'll have the items we obtained appraised by the department. After that, we'll continue to confirm whether there will be further restocks. Judging from the quality of the relics and the anticipated quantity, decisions will be made.”

“Understood. But for the appraisal, have it done through Kurogin, under a personal name.”

“...The items have already been appraised once by Kurogin. There are appraisal certificates. If it's about confirming the quality, wouldn't it be better to leave it to the department in the city? ”

“Having it appraised by the city department risks leaking information. Also, there's a concern that the appraisal certificate might not be for those relics.”

“Understood. That's all for now. I'll be in touch.”

Noguchi ends the communication and heads straight for Kurogin.



Viola once again brought in old-world information terminals brought by Akira to Kurogin for appraisal, just like last time.

A week later, they received notification that the appraisal was complete, so Viola and Carol headed to Kurogin. As expected, everything turned out to be genuine once again. They received the items along with the appraisal certificates and left the reception room with Carol holding them.

As they headed towards the exit of the store, Carol glanced with keen interest at the sturdy storage case filled with old-world information terminals.

“I wonder where Akira got these from.”

What Carol wanted to know was not just where, but how Akira obtained them, but she didn't vocalize that. She kept her inquiry to the natural curiosity expected of a hunter wanting to know where valuable relics came from.

Viola, picking up on this, refrained from saying anything unnecessary. She smiled and changed the subject.

“Who knows. I have no idea. That's why I need you to properly charm Akira and find out nicely. How's that going? Have you at least managed to lure him into bed yet? ”

“Secret.”

“Secret...”

Viola easily sensed that it meant 'no', wearing a somewhat exasperated expression.

Carol knew that Viola could read her, but she replied without concern.

“It's fine. Akira wasn't asked by Viola to charm me. I'll take my time at my own pace.”

“If you say so. Should I make the request to charm Akira then? ”

“Nope.”

Carol smiled back at Viola's playful response.

“Okay, if you say so.”

Viola sighed theatrically and then changed the subject.

“How about helping out at the relic shop? It would be really helpful to have Carol around.”

“Sorry, but I'm busy with my own hunter business. I don't have time to indulge Viola's hobbies. Didn't I spend quite a while with those folks during the conflict between the two major factions in the slums? I'll pass this time. Endure it.”

“But helping out at the relic shop would increase your chances of contact with Akira, wouldn't it? ”

Carol returned a smile to Viola's suggestion.

“Akira probably won't be coming to the shop for a while since they've taken on a hunter rank adjustment request. I know that much.”

Viola deliberately looked away. Their exchange was a light banter between cunning women who knew each other's tricks.

Viola and Carol left the store together. Waiting for them outside was Noguchi.

“You're Viola, right? I'm from the Kugamayama City. I have something to discuss. Would you accompany me? ”

Hooked. Viola thought to herself and inwardly smirked. But outwardly, she showed mild caution towards the unknown person and laughed a bit mockingly.

“What department of Kugamayama City are you from? If you're from Kugamayama City, there are people from there all over the place, aren't there? ”

“...You understand that there are departments with undisclosed affiliations, given your involvement in the conflict between the two major factions in the slums, right? ”

Even when Noguchi hinted at such matters, Viola didn't change her slightly mocking attitude towards the person.

“People like that would contact me through the appropriate channels. I'm not going to be fooled by just the appearance of something that seems like that. Carol, let's go.”

Noguchi clicked his tongue and then stopped them.

“Wait. Let's talk over there. How about that? ”

Viola looked at the spot Noguchi indicated with an amused smile.

“Fine with me? If you can really take us there.”

“No problem.”

The place Noguchi pointed out was the upper floors of Kugama building, a high-rise building integrated with the city's defensive wall and an important location for city management accessible only to authorized personnel.

Viola and the others entered Kugama building with Noguchi and rode the elevator for staff up the building.

This elevator recorded the usage history of city employees, and if used by external individuals, procedures had to be completed at the reception. However, Noguchi had bypassed that and brought Viola and the others aboard, indicating his level of authority.

With a gaze implying that much should be understood, Noguchi spoke to Viola.

“Now you know that I'm from Kugamayama City. In fact, you probably knew from the start. I hope you understand I don't want to go through such hassle.”

“There's no need for that. Even I have to confirm things properly.”

“This discussion is about a hidden matter that cannot be disclosed by the city. Surely you understand that? ”

A skilled information broker who also undertakes work from the city. Noguchi showed a somewhat exasperated expression at Viola's rather ordinary reaction, which was recorded in their files, but quickly changed his demeanor upon hearing Viola's response.

However, even Noguchi's attitude changes upon hearing Viola's response.

“Yes. I don't understand. Because that's a lie, isn't it? ”

“...What do you mean? ”

“The conflict between the two major factions in the slums wasn't a hidden matter; it was actually instigated by Kugamayama City itself. This time, it's different, right? It's not the whole city behind the scenes, but a part of it, probably one of the city's executives, maybe a few, perhaps just one, and this time it's the personal request or negotiation of that executive. Isn't that right? ”

Noguchi remains silent. Merely denying it would be pointless. But affirming it would be a slip of the tongue. Hence the silence.

“In addition, this is probably a story that needs to be carefully concealed both inside and outside the city? So the city's intelligence department can't be used. If you were to contact me through that route, as you did during the conflict between the two major factions, it would be exposed to other city executives. Am I right? ”

Noguchi is still silent.

“From now on, you'll probably be meeting someone who acts as your superior, right? And you'll be given a script to read, without knowing the true situation, to someone who's just there to read it. Is that person a good actor? If someone like you can't deceive me properly, it's meaningless to me, isn't it? ”

The elevator arrived at their destination floor, but Viola didn't get off. Instead, she directed a poorly concealed smile at Noguchi.

“So, why was I brought here? Is there any point in me getting off? ”

Viola's prediction was correct, and Noguchi intended for her and Viola to engage in negotiations filled with probable falsehoods, hiding their true intentions from each other.

Engaging in negotiations that both parties know are a farce, with their true intentions exposed. What's the point of that? Noguchi, as if questioning that meaning back to Viola, advises her to confirm if she truly understands.

“...Curiosity kills the cat, you know? ”

“That's only for the incompetent. I'm fine. In fact, in my case, not knowing could be dangerous. Because I already know quite a lot.”

Viola realized that negotiation was smeared with falsehoods, and there was an option to go along with the conversation without probing into the depths of it. In some cases, it was a wise choice to deliberately avoid matters that could endanger one's life, simply turning a blind eye. However, Viola chose to respond. It was only the incompetent who couldn't handle such information, not her. She refused to become a convenient, wise incompetent who simply moved without being informed or questioned. That was implicitly conveyed.

Noguchi also understood this. He sighed and closed the elevator. There was no longer any point in letting Viola off.

As the elevator descended back to the first floor, Viola laughed cheerfully and said,

“If you want to talk to me properly, make sure to have someone who can make decisions about this matter present. If you're going to ask someone who isn't even at the negotiation table every time, we can't have a serious conversation.”

“...Fair enough. But the condition is the same for you. Agreed? ”

“Of course. I'll give you the connection code for the secure line. Let me know when you're ready.”

Today's negotiations end here. With that understanding in place, the elevator arrives at the first floor.

The elevator that had dropped off Viola and the others ascended again, carrying only Noguchi. His face wore a stern expression.

(So, that's Viola... I see. It's noted that the personality of character is bad. Given that demeanor, she probably realizes our objective is the old-world information terminal.)

At that moment, Noguchi loosened his expression with a wry smile.

(...Well, if she can't even notice something like that, it's pointless.)

Dealing with excessive incompetence was troublesome. Some minimum level of competence to withstand negotiations with them was necessary. With that in mind, Noguchi shifted his focus and contemplated strategies for negotiating with Viola.

Presumably, Viola would try to advance negotiations in a superior position based on detailed information she had acquired beforehand. That was the first thing to consider.

This time, Viola could have pretended not to know anything about his story. But she didn't. It was because she hadn't been able to conduct her usual information gathering beforehand due to his sudden appearance without any prior notice. From this, it could be inferred that Viola prioritized gathering information beforehand.

(...In that case, she'll probably start thorough information gathering to prepare for negotiations with us. Is it dangerous to give her too much time? Should we somehow make time for her...?)

Urban executives were busy individuals. Extracting time became difficult. It was even more so if it wasn't for city executive duties, but for personal maneuvers. To ensure this, Noguchi contacted her promptly.

Carol sighed discontentedly as she got off the elevator and lightly raised the storage case she had been carrying to show Viola.

“Viola. Wasn't my job today just transporting this? ”

“I didn't keep silent knowing about it. I'll add extra compensation, so forgive me.”

“It can't be helped. Well then, shall we go back this time? ”

“No, let's stick around a bit longer. Let's go back to the black-silver shop once more.”

To Carol's curious expression, Viola responded with a very amused smile.

“Because this might lure another one in.”

Viola misled and kept Noguchi confused, on guard, and postponed negotiations for another day. But it wasn't to postpone negotiations for another day, but to settle today's matter as a coincidence for the other party. She had been waiting for someone from the city to take the bait, without letting the other party realize it. It was merely a trick to prevent the other party from realizing that.

In the first place, Viola had put up the old-world information terminals for sale at the relic shop only to lure people from the city. If money was the goal, she would have sold them off immediately and prospered the relic shop in another safe way with the funds.

Old-world information terminals were extremely valuable and expensive relics. If such items were found in slum areas, it wouldn't be surprising for people or even humanoid weapons to attack. Despite the risks involved in keeping such dangerous items, Viola handled them at Sheryl's relic shop.

Unable to resist her desires and urges.

And today, someone fell for Viola's scheme. Even the city executives couldn't resist the temptation of such a fine bait as old-world information terminals.

However, Viola herself also faced the risk of being eaten along with the bait. The other party was the upper echelons of the city, not like the two major factions in the slums. Viola understood that.

Yet, even knowing that, she couldn't stop herself. Viola was that kind of very bad personality person.



Three days had passed since Noguchi contacted Viola.

On the high-priced floor of Sheryl's relic shop, where Viola and her group were, today, there were still old-world information terminals that had been appraised and displayed. Some customers had come thinking they had returned to affordable prices.

However, surprise and confusion were evident on the faces of those customers.

“1-100 million Aurum...!? ”

On the electronic price tags of the appraised items, it was practically declared that they had no intention of selling seriously, as the price was listed.

“But I heard they were expected to restock? ”

“That's what I heard too. And we actually lowered the price to 55 million Aurum once, expecting additional items to arrive soon...”

After surmising that, the customers directed their gaze towards the item priced at 100 million Aurum.

“If that's the case, there might be only one item left here. Even then, while I can't say I understand the price of 100 million Aurum...”

Basically, it was a rare relic that big corporations monopolized and didn't circulate to other companies. This might be their last chance to

get it themselves. The customers continued to ponder this.

While customers on the high-priced floor were surprised and puzzled by the unexpected price increase, there was also surprise and puzzlement outside the store for a different reason. A city government vehicle had arrived. And it wasn't a regular staff car; it was clearly a luxury vehicle used by executives.

The car stopped, and the door on the rear passenger side opened. Everyone's attention turned to it out of natural curiosity. However, no one got out. Instead, amidst the attention, Sheryl and Viola emerged from the store and got into the car.

As the door closed and the car departed, the bystanders watched them leave somewhat dumbfounded.

“This is where it gets critical. I'm counting on you.”

As she looked at the case brought into the car, Sheryl responded with a serious expression.

The contents of the case, resembling a cash transport, were the reason for the price increase of the high-priced floor. It was filled with old-world information terminals that had been expected to be restocked but were abruptly canceled from being put on sale.



After entering Kugama building in a city government vehicle, Sheryl and her group changed cars at the building's parking lot under Noguchi's instructions. They got into a rugged vehicle resembling an armored car without windows and headed for the frontline base at Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

On the way, Noguchi lightly admonishes Sheryl and her companions inside the car.

“You're supposed to be meeting someone on the upper floors of Kugama building. You're free to decide who and for what purpose, but please make sure it's someone you can't talk about outside.”

“Got it. Don't worry. We'll handle it here too.”

Arriving at the frontline base, Sheryl and her group were led through inconspicuous passages to a room within the base and told to wait for a while by Noguchi. He then exited and returned shortly with his superior.

“It's unacceptable for someone to represent you in this negotiation. Due to your request, I'm here on your side, and you're here on mine. So, let's hear from you first.”

Without specifying the content of the discussion, the man demanded a correct response from Sheryl, displaying the dignity of a city executive who had been dragged into the negotiation. His gaze conveyed that if they couldn't even do that much, they would receive appropriate consequences.

Sheryl understood that as tension surged. However, she still smiled. If this deal succeeded, both the gang and the relic shop could experience significant growth. With Akira, who was rapidly rising as a hunter, she might even catch up in one fell swoop. With that in mind, Sheryl had resolved herself.

“I understand, Inabe-sama.”

She knew the face and name of the city executive in front of her. Sheryl had first surpassed the minimum requirement of being allowed to be in this place.

And now, she placed the storage case she had brought in front of Inabe and opened it to reveal the contents: old-world manufactured information terminals.

Inabe was slightly surprised by the amount, more than expected, but that was it. However, if Sheryl thought this negotiation was about dealing with old-world manufactured information terminals, she was far from the correct response Inabe was seeking. If the conversation was at that level, there would be no need for Inabe to be present, and it would have been sufficient for Viola and Noguchi to handle it when the two had contacted Viola earlier.

Seeing Sheryl confidently display the contents of the case, Inabe felt disappointed inwardly.

The other party had indeed come to negotiate with him for the item and its trade. Old-world manufactured information terminals were indeed valuable relics. It wasn't surprising if there were disputes over the purchase price, and it was pointless to talk to a representative who didn't have decision-making power. That's probably why he was summoned. Inabe had judged as such and was beginning to lose interest in this negotiation.

However, Sheryl exceeded Inabe's expectations. While showing the contents of the case with her hand, she spoke with a confident smile.

“We believe we can greatly assist in the investigation of where these relics were discovered. If the discovery site is within Inabe-sama's jurisdiction, the current situation where you are trailing behind Udajima-sama might greatly improve.”

Inabe was surprised, and his gaze sharpened.

Thanks to the rear communication line extending from the frontline base, the city had become capable of a full-scale attack on the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Many relics had already been collected, bringing in significant profits.

Among the city executives, Yanagisawa had benefited the most from these profits. He had been promoting the construction of the frontline base and the extension of the rear communication line for some time. However, Yanagisawa had been pouring most of the

profits into enhancing the military capabilities of the frontline base and further extending the rear communication line, resulting in a delicate situation in terms of profits after deducting expenses.

Instead, other executives were making profits. They had divided the depths of the ruins into several sections under the adjustment of the executives and were promoting relic collection in their respective areas.

Thanks to Yanagisawa's investment in facilities, the frontline base had more than enough forces for just maintaining the rear communication line. And since these were city facilities, other executives could use them without any problems. Therefore, the city executives were able to promote relic collection in the depths of the ruins efficiently while keeping costs down.

Inabe was also advancing relic collection in his jurisdiction. However, due to the evaluation of his jurisdiction, he had been significantly trailing behind Udajima, the leader of the opposing faction.

Yanagisawa was eager to extend the rear communication line deeper into the ruins, but on the other hand, he had shown no interest in expanding it horizontally.

If he focused on the branches extending from the rear communication line as the trunk and directed efforts towards the movement routes to relic collection sites, the efficiency of relic collection in the depths of the ruins would undoubtedly improve. However, no matter how many times other executives requested it from him, Yanagisawa would only respond with instructions to do it themselves and showed no interest whatsoever.

With such a background, executives were fiercely competing to allocate funds for the conquest of their respective jurisdictions from the city's budget.

However, Inabe's jurisdiction was located away from the main trunk of the rear communication line and was inhabited by strong monsters. Additionally, the relics brought back by the investigation teams were mostly cheap items.

Expanding the survey range might lead to the discovery of valuable relics, but the cost of such investigations was not negligible. Due to being away from the rear communication line, it was difficult to receive support from the frontline base, and with many powerful monsters roaming around, investigations in areas where no significant relics had been found so far were considered low-cost-effectiveness and were inevitably put on hold.

As a result, priority was given to Udajima's jurisdiction in terms of budget allocation.

Despite losing in the jurisdictional disputes, Inabe was looking for opportunities to somehow make up for it. It was under these circumstances that information reached Inabe about the relic shop in the slum district starting to sell old-world manufactured information terminals.

And while many sought after the extremely valuable relics themselves, Inabe sought something else. He sought the origin of those relics, more precisely, the means to manipulate that information.

If old-world manufactured information terminals were found in Inabe's jurisdiction, the evaluation of his jurisdiction would skyrocket. And conveniently, the origin of those relics was still unknown. It was an excellent opportunity.

Inabe looked at Sheryl again. Sheryl's previous response was as good as acknowledging that she understood all of Inabe's situations. Did she know that with advanced information gathering capabilities? Or did she discern it with outstanding insight? Or both? Inabe couldn't read that far. However, he couldn't help but acknowledge that the

girl in front of him was indeed a suitable person for direct negotiations.

“So, what are your demands? ”

“Support for us. If possible, not as Inabe-sama personally but as the intention of the city of Kugamayama.”

“That's quite bold. Aren't you being too greedy? ”

“There's also the matter of the Ezont gang and Harrias. To avoid repeating the same situation, it might be good to establish an organization that has the city's backing from the beginning. If we put the slum district under the control of that organization, governance in the future could also be inexpensive. Considering those aspects, I believe it's worth considering for approval, don't you think? ”

Inabe showed a certain level of understanding to Sheryl's words. Akira had a strong involvement not only with Viola but also with the collapse of the two major gangs. And Sheryl had connections to both. Including Sheryl's relic shop, which was already open, efficiently managing the underground economy of the slum district on the city's side also held value.

Next, Inabe turned his gaze to the case Sheryl had used to transport the old-world manufactured information terminals here. And then, he ambiguously asked Sheryl.

“What about that case? ”

“When someone sees a case used for such cash transport, most would imagine the contents to be cash as well. I didn't bring these old-world manufactured information terminals here, but I came to buy them from Inabe-sama. Or perhaps to procure them. Since it's such an opportunity, I thought it might be good to evoke such expectations.”

The source of the old-world manufactured information terminals sold at Sheryl's relic shop was Inabe. To avoid being misunderstood

in that way, we're also being careful here. We can do at least that without being instructed. Inabe correctly received and evaluated Sheryl's reply, which was imbued with that intention.

“I see. Then let me ask one more thing. Actually, I thought Akira would come here, not you. But you came. Is there no problem? ”

As a person who is essentially the ruler of the gang, standing as a strong support behind Sheryl's group as a very powerful hunter, and the only person who knows the source of the old-world manufactured information terminals. No matter how much Sheryl negotiates with Inabe from now on, if that person says it's no good later on, everything will be in vain.

That Akira isn't here. Even so, is there really no problem? That's what Inabe was asking.

Falsehoods are not tolerated. Inabe looks intently at Sheryl as if to convey that.

“There's no problem.”

Sheryl replied with determination, smiling.

Inabe continues to look at Sheryl for a while. Even so, there is no wavering in Sheryl's eyes. After confirming that, Inabe relaxes his posture.

“Very well. Then let's begin the negotiation. Noguchi.”

“Understood.”

At Inabe's instruction, Noguchi begins detailed negotiations with Viola. Inabe and Sheryl remain seated at the table, listening to the conversation of their subordinates, intervening if necessary, and making decisions when asked, fulfilling the role of the person in charge in the negotiation.

Sheryl feels relieved that the negotiation has finally started. Inabe subtly observes Sheryl's state.

After completing the negotiation, Sheryl and her group are escorted out of the room by Inabe's subordinates. They will be sent back to Kugama building in the wasteland vehicles, and then they plan to transfer them to the city's official car to return to their base.

Noguchi also tries to leave the room, but before doing so, he asks Inabe with a slightly puzzled expression.

“Section Chief. Excuse me for being presumptuous, but are you sure there's no problem with negotiating with that person, Sheryl? ”

“No, there is a problem. But I cannot afford to be optimistic.”

“Then why? ”

“There is a problem. But it's not to the extent that we would reject the negotiation because of it. That's all.”

There's no problem. Sheryl answered with determination. However, the fact that determination was necessary in her response indicates that there are certainly issues and concerns to address in this situation.

However, Inabe also saw in Sheryl not only the determination but also the capability to handle those issues. Taking that into account, he made his final judgment.

“Well, Akira, the hunter, seems to have many problems as well. Even if he had been present here, there was a risk that negotiations would break down due to his poor obedience. It might be a good idea to negotiate through Sheryl without directly involving Akira. Any objections? ”

“No, if that's what the section chief thinks, then there's no problem. Thank you.”

Noguchi bows and leaves the room. And as he walks down the corridor, he takes out his information terminal.

“It's me. Regarding Section Chief Inabe...”

Inabe, who remained in the room, muttered.

“Who is he talking to...”

Curiosity leads to an early grave. Those who are not adaptable and competent enough to survive rely on seeking further information constantly to survive.



A glamorous standing party is being held on the upper floors of Kugama building. Hosted by the Kugamayama City. Entrepreneurs from both inside and outside the barrier wall gather, networking, fostering friendships, gathering information, and expanding business opportunities under the guise of casual conversation.

Instead of the weaker ones who are tossed around by the flow of city economy, the strong ones who create, manipulate, and dominate that flow continue their fierce negotiations disguised as friendly chats with seemingly calm faces.

Sheryl attends the standing party with Viola and Dale.

While Viola wears her usual confident smile and Sheryl maintains a calm demeanor outwardly, Dale shows obvious signs of nervousness.

“Sh-Sheril-san. I-I, um, what should I...”

Dale, whose suit is not familiar to him and is struggling with it, is extremely flustered, partly because he understands that he is out of

place.

“Please get used to this atmosphere for today. It's fine if you refrain from approaching the attendees on your own and just keep a low profile.”

“U-Understood.”

“Don't try to mingle too much with the attendees. I've attended this standing party before. The attendees have seen Dale-san's face here before. If you try to push it further at this standing party, consider that there won't be a next time.”

“U-Understood.”

If Sheryl can establish connections with the upper echelons of the city by maintaining her and Dale's façade, it might create opportunities. Dale had such hopes. However, by being brought to a place far beyond those expectations, Dale was overwhelmed.

Viola picks up some dishes on a plate and hands them to Sheryl and Dale. After tasting the food, Dale shows a big reaction, amazed by its deliciousness. On the other hand, Sheryl, who has tasted similar dishes before, maintains her composure as if she's accustomed to this level of cuisine.

Seeing Sheryl's reaction, Viola eats the same dish while smiling mysteriously from somewhere.

“It's delicious, Sheryl.”

“Yes, it's very delicious.”

Sheryl responds with a slightly daring smile.

A week ago, Sheryl was brought by Viola to Sterian, a high-class restaurant located on the upper floors of Kugama building.

Sitting opposite Sheryl at a table adorned with dishes arranged to look as beautiful and delicious as works of art, Viola wears a wicked smile.

“Now, eat.”

“...Thank you.”

Sheryl earnestly brings the food to her mouth. However, even her serious expression collapses as soon as the lump of deliciousness touches her tongue. The overwhelming deliciousness strips Sheryl of her facade as a young lady. She even inadvertently lets out a small voice.

Viola wears a wicked smile.

“No good.”

Regaining her composure, Sheryl twists her face in frustration.

Sheryl, informed by Viola about the standing party, was tasked with training to behave like a young lady that could also pass in such a setting.

Even simple postures and walking movements inadvertently reveal the background of the person to those around. And since the participants of the standing party are mainly the affluent class of the city, thorough training was necessary to prevent them from suspecting that a child from the slums had slipped into the event.

However, Sheryl also conducts such training voluntarily. Her skills are high, and many of Katsuragi's business associates already completely misunderstand Sheryl as a young lady from some company, and Dale is also thoroughly deceived.

However, from Viola's perspective, it's still at the level of deceiving children. Considering that it may not work with the attendees of the standing party, Viola decided to give Sheryl some rigorous training. And for that purpose, she brought Sheryl to Sterian.

“Sheryl. That won't do at all. The attendees of that standing party are used to dishes of this level. If you react like that there, they'll never think you're a young lady from somewhere. Understand? ”

Sheryl twists her face slightly in frustration.

“...I understand. I'm sorry.”

“Then please continue your training. By the way, the price of this course is about 500,000 Aurums. Please imagine that the standing party's dishes are of the same standard.”

“F-Five hundred thousand...? ”

“Yes. A large sum, isn't it? So quickly get used to eating without changing your expression. Since we'll be paying that much every time until Sheryl's training is over.”

Sheryl puts another bite of the food in her mouth. Even with a tongue that has become accustomed to the food of the slums, which cannot discern taste, she is still overwhelmed by the overwhelming and fundamental deliciousness of the food.

She grits her teeth and continues to eat. Despite having already experienced it once, her amazement does not diminish. On the contrary, with just two bites, her pampered tongue keenly perceives the complex and delicate flavors that a weak tongue cannot discern, bringing even greater excitement to Sheryl.

Is it possible to get used to this cuisine? Sheryl couldn't help but doubt it.

But she quickly reaffirmed her determination. In order to make the deal with Inabe successful and to gain recognition from Akira, she must absolutely succeed. With that determination, Sheryl continued to resist the despairingly delicious food that demonstrated an insurmountable disparity in strength.

It seems like a long road ahead. Viola watched Sheryl's demeanor, smiling wryly as she thought so.

“Ah, well, I'm not entirely sure. I haven't been informed of the details, but there's a possibility. I've heard that Inabe-sama is also involved in collecting artifacts from the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin...”

The conversation continued. As Inabe and Sheryl conversed elsewhere, and Viola tainted the conversation with malice at this venue, misinformation spread among the attendees at the standing buffet.

Some took the information at face value, some were skeptical, and others, regardless of its accuracy, sought to exploit it.

In a sense, this was commonplace at this standing buffet, which served as the main battleground for information warfare in the city's economy.



Led by Mizuha, Katsuya, who had been invited to attend the standing buffet hosted by Kugamayama City, appeared slightly nervous.

If this were just any standing buffet, Katsuya wouldn't feel intimidated. He had attended events where their supporters, those within the walls, were the main guests, drawing attention and receiving praise. He had become accustomed to such gatherings and had no reason to feel uneasy now.

However, Mizuha had repeatedly explained the importance of this standing buffet to Katsuya, making him understand that this was different from before.

Among the attendees were city officials and corporate executives. If they were to incur displeasure from such individuals, it could ruin the reputation they had painstakingly built. This would render the efforts of their fallen comrades in vain. With Mizuha's repeated explanations, Katsuya approached this standing buffet with seriousness.

“Well then, Katsuya. Please, as usual.”

“Yes.”

Although showing a slight hint of nervousness, Katsuya answered with a confident smile, which Mizuha found very reassuring.

Mizuha had been promoting Katsuya to the attendees of the standing buffet. She approached those she already knew, had acquaintances introduce them, engaged in conversation, and deepened friendships to expand their network.

The story of an orphaned child with a humble background becoming a hunter, receiving support from the benevolent residents within the walls, and flourishing through their own talents was well-received. Mizuha's narrative satisfied those in positions to bestow such kindness.

Furthermore, whether seen as genuine goodwill or merely a business investment, those who could expect sufficient returns from Katsuya in terms of talent and potential were greatly impressed.

For Drankam, for their bureaucratic faction, for Katsuya affiliated with them, Mizuha aimed to garner support from the attendees of this standing buffet, and her plans were yielding excellent results.

In the midst of conversations with the newly acquired supporters, Katsuya noticed Sheryl. She was talking with other attendees at a distance.



“Sheryl...?”

As a result, Mizuha also noticed Sheryl. Other people also turned their gaze towards Sheryl. Mizuha showed strong surprise, while others showed a bit of astonishment.

“That's... Inabe-sama, right? And the person she's talking to... I don't recognize their face. Do you?”

“No, I don't. It seems like someone attending for the first time, but they're talking quite familiarly with Inabe-sama... Mizuha-san, do you and Katsuya-kun know her? You seem acquainted...”

Unable to provide a suitable explanation, Mizuha stumbled over her words.

“Uh, well...”

Mizuha was surprised that Sheryl was attending this reception. But if that were all, given that she had already thought of Sheryl as some noblewoman, she would have simply adjusted her perception to recognize her as someone of higher standing than expected.

However, she hadn't anticipated Sheryl being someone who could converse so familiarly with city officials.

Mizuha remembered how Katsuya had barged into Sheryl's warehouse in the slum district while chasing Yumina. Despite Sheryl being there, Katsuya had referred to the place as a dump, earning a subtle disapproval from Sheryl. Furthermore, Katsuya had been responsible for the security of that warehouse but had failed, resulting in its complete destruction.

How to gloss over that? Mizuha pondered. While it was true that they knew Sheryl, they couldn't afford to make new supporters think they

were on bad terms with her, especially in front of city officials. A suitable explanation was necessary.

While Mizuha was contemplating this, Katsuya responded with a casual smile.

“Yes, I know her. She's Sheryl. She's a friend of mine.”

“Oh.”

As the supporters showed keen interest, Katsuya, unaware, bowed his head.

“Excuse me. May I step aside for a moment? Since we're here, I thought I'd say hello to Sheryl.”

“Ah, of course, you can...”

“Absolutely not! ”

Mizuha hurriedly stopped Katsuya. Then, with a slightly surprised expression aimed at Katsuya, she continued, inwardly flustered but smiling as if to advise him.

“... Katsuya, despite how well you know Sheryl, that's a matter of private life. And this reception leans heavily towards business. It would be rude for someone with weak business ties to approach someone engaged in conversation with city officials, whether it's Sheryl or Inabe-sama. Katsuya, understand? ”

She wasn't lying. But more than that, Mizuha was worried that if Sheryl were to express their displeasure and disfavor toward them in front of city officials, it wouldn't be a laughing matter. So she desperately tried to stop Katsuya with a somewhat imposing smile.

Katsuya backed down accordingly.

“I-I see... I'm sorry.”

Seeing this, the supporters judged that it was impossible to learn about Inabe through Katsuya's connection with Sheryl. They continued to advise the young man.

“That's right. While you may be a formidable hunter in the wasteland, this isn't the wasteland. You should know your place in situations like this. Be careful.”

“Y-Yes... I understand. Thank you for your advice. ...Um, then, how much progress would be acceptable? ”

“It's difficult to judge, but as a hunter, you might wonder how accomplished you need to be to approach city officials without being seen as presumptuous. Perhaps a Hunter Rank of at least... 50? ”

“Yes.”

Katsuya nodded earnestly. The supporters, pleased with the attitude of the young and talented hunter full of ambition, continued to talk to him.

“Indeed. At least Hunter Rank 50 would be necessary. As you become more accomplished, there will be more hunters trying to move further east. The monsters become stronger, but the rewards also increase. However, it also means that accomplished hunters leave Kagamayama City, so city officials may personally try to retain them. In that sense, Hunter Rank 50 would be a benchmark.”

“While Hunter Rank is important, for combat-specialized hunters, they may substitute with humanoid weapons. Demonstrating the ability to collect artifacts might be the best way to showcase one's prowess. I've heard stories recently about a hunter bringing an old-world information device to an artifact shop. If a hunter can obtain such rare artifacts, city officials would surely seek to establish connections.”

The supporters shared various stories and insights with Katsuya, who listened with great interest and seriousness.

In the end, Katsuya left the reception without having the opportunity to talk to Sheryl. Despite feeling disappointed about this, he didn't seem discouraged. On the contrary, Katsuya's determination was stronger than ever.

For Katsuya, Sheryl was the important benefactor who had rescued him from being too consumed by the deaths of his comrades. But at the same time, she was an incredibly mysterious person.

Aside from her appearance and personality, all Katsuya knew was that she was probably wealthy. She never talked about herself, always teasingly referring to anything he asked about as a secret. He could only imagine who she was and what position she held. She was enigmatic in that sense.

But today, some of Sheryl's mystery had been unveiled. Katsuya learned that she was someone of sufficient status to attend the reception that Mizuha had emphasized the importance of. Moreover, she was someone familiar with city officials.

With this realization, Katsuya could understand why Sheryl had never spoken about her own position before.

What would happen if someone of her stature honestly revealed her position to a mere hunter? It wouldn't be surprising if there was a flood of people trying to exploit their friendship for their own gain.

Furthermore, he was a hunter from Drankam. It wouldn't be unreasonable to think that troublesome matters would keep coming to him through her.

So Sheryl couldn't talk about her position or anything that suggested it. Until Katsuya reached a position where he could talk to Sheryl without being just a personal friend but someone who could converse with her as an accomplished hunter, regardless of personal relationships. That's what Katsuya thought.

And he thought further. If he could reach a position where he could casually approach Sheryl while she was conversing with city officials at a reception like this, if he could gain enough power for that to be allowed, he could become closer to Sheryl. He could casually meet Sheryl, whom he had only met by chance.

To achieve that, he would need to rise further. Katsuya resolved to do so. It was, in a sense, the first desire he had acquired. Not because someone else wished for it, but because it was his own wish. Therefore, that wish gripped Katsuya strongly.

“... Mizuha-san. So, I just need to make the next expedition a success, right?”

“Y-Yes, that's right. If you achieve great success on the expedition, you'll also attract attention from the city. There are rumors about gathering powerful hunters for artifact collection in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. If you demonstrate strong abilities, there's a possibility that city officials will personally come to recruit you.”

“Understood. I'll do my best.”

Moved by Katsuya's determination, Mizuha also felt more confident in him and relied on him even more.

“Yes. Do your best. You'll be fine, Katsuya. Everyone is rooting for you. Sheryl-san, too, will surely support and understand you once she sees your efforts.”

“Yes.”

Satisfied with Katsuya's determined response, Mizuha looked forward to his future even more.

She wondered why she had suddenly mentioned Sheryl. Without realizing it.

Chapter 153: Yumina's Turning Point

Two months have passed since Akira's hunter rank adjustment request began. Today is a day for monster hunting. Riding their bikes through the depths of Kuzusuhara District Ruin, Akira and Yumina unleash a barrage of bullets upon a horde of monsters.

Yumina's skills have dramatically improved through repeated harsh battles in pseudo-death situations, surprising even herself.

Even while catching up to the bikes with her augmented suit's leg strength, Yumina's performance no longer serves as a mere demonstration of the suit's capabilities. Akira proved this when they fought together, showing results that couldn't be dismissed as mere hindrance.

At that point, the focus shifted from Yumina's training content and promotion of equipment to how much Yumina could match Akira's abilities.

Riding identical bikes and wielding LEO SSB multi-function guns with the same additional components, Akira and Yumina proceed to defeat the monsters in the ruins together.

Yumina cannot match Akira's moves when he goes all out. With the support of Alpha, Akira's capabilities far surpass hers.

Nevertheless, Yumina demonstrates her worth as a companion of someone worthy of a hunter rank adjustment request, showing no inferiority as a hunter.

A massive horde of monsters, claiming a considerable territory, dwindles under the relentless gunfire of the two hunters. Despite their desperate resistance against the threat posed by just the two of them, it's all in vain. They are shot down one after another, their corpses strewn across the road.

“You know, Akira, I think I've gotten stronger. Of course, I understand my strength is based on the assistance of the comprehensive support system.”

“You've been receiving that assistance from the start, so it's good that Yumina has gotten stronger, isn't it? ”

Indeed, Yumina has become strong enough to engage in such banter while skirting enemy fire.

She examines the enemy's firing lines, calculates routes to evade them, partially takes over bike control, enabling difficult maneuvers, and ensures safe avoidance of potentially fatal shots upon direct impact. There's no doubt that these are the powers of the comprehensive support system.

However, that alone isn't enough. Yumina's vastly improved skills are clearly reflected in her actions.

“Thanks. But, you know? I also feel like I'm doing my best...”

Yumina also senses the improvement in her abilities. However, she grimaces slightly as she vents.

“...I just can't seem to get the hang of manipulating subjective time. It's really not going well for me.”

“It's not just difficult, is it? ”

“I know, but...”

Akira has no doubt that Yumina is capable of manipulating subjective time. She doesn't doubt someone like Akira who claims such a thing, and sometimes, watching Akira during combat, she realizes he's doing it.

“Maybe it's not enough with just visual stimuli. No matter how realistic the first-person view is, knowing it's just imagery makes it

hard to feel the imminent danger of death.”

“That might be it. But we can't exactly risk actual death for that, can we? ”

“Yeah...”

While continuing their conversation, Akira and Yumina continue firing a large number of bullets. Since they're using the same guns, they can share ammunition between them, and there's no issue with transferring them as a team.

Under the ample budget of covering ammunition costs, today, once again, a large number of monsters lay dead as a means to raise Akira and Yumina's hunter ranks.

“Hey, Akira. Do you have any tips or something for mastering subjective time manipulation? Anything at all would be helpful. I've been trying various things based on your advice, but I feel like I'm hitting a wall. I mean, I'm trying to do the same things as you, but my training methods must be different because I'm not achieving the same results. Is there something I'm missing? Akira, you succeeded, right? I want to hear from a successful person. Could you think about it for a bit? ”

“Hmm... Even if you ask me, I think I've told you everything I know? ”

“Anything would be fine. I'm trying to follow your advice, but I feel like I'm stuck. I mean, you succeeded, didn't you? I want to hear from a successful person. Please, think about it? ”

Akira hesitates. He understands that Yumina can't do the same things as him, but he struggles to respond.

Yumina simply mentioned that it's just imagery. That's not entirely wrong. However, it's more accurate to say that on his enhanced visual display, he sees the figure of Alpha, who reproduces the

situation of being killed by swinging a sharp sword towards him, creating a scenario between life and death. Yumina's perception differs fundamentally from merely watching a first-person perspective video.

Furthermore, she doesn't have either of the factors that Akira has. She doesn't have the training with Alpha or the conviction that if Alpha says it's possible, then it must be. Akira somewhat understands this.

Yumina lacks both. She has no training with Alpha, who visually exists for her, and she doesn't have the strong conviction that it's possible just because Alpha says so. And Akira can't explain this to her.

As Akira ponders if there's anything he can offer, he recalls the moment when he first succeeded in manipulating subjective time. And then it hits him.

“I got it. It's about the time I first succeeded in manipulating subjective time. The night before that, I had a dream.”

“A dream? ”

“Yeah. It was a dream where I was killed. It felt incredibly real. I woke up after being killed in the dream, and in that dream, the world was moving slowly. So, the next day, I tried to recreate that feeling, and it worked. I'm not sure if you can call it a technique, but that's all I can think of.”

“A dream... a dream, huh...”

Yumina chuckles involuntarily.

“I can't even try to match the contents of the dreams I have.”

“That's true.”

As Akira and Yumina wrap up their conversation, they focus on defeating the horde of monsters. Soon enough, the monsters that once claimed this area as their territory lie dead, reduced to a pile of corpses.

Akira, now taking a break with Yumina, looks at Yumina's vehicle, which has the comprehensive support system device installed.

“Yumina, about the comprehensive support system, how much of your movements earlier were due to the system's assistance? ”

“Hmm... I'd say about half? ”

Increasing her share would decrease the performance of the comprehensive support system. Conversely, increasing the assistance would downplay her own abilities. Due to this balance, Yumina consciously limits the support system's assistance.

However, Akira was genuinely impressed.

“Wow, that's amazing.”

“...Are you praising me or the comprehensive support system? ”

“Both, I suppose.”

Yumina smiled wryly.

“Given the circumstances, I'll say thank you in advance.”

Akira looked puzzled.

“Akira. As someone borrowing this humanoid weapon, if I hear you mentioning an interest in the comprehensive support system, I have to report it up the chain. Was what you just said okay to relay? ”

“Well, if it's just that much.”

“Thanks. One more thing. Honestly, Akira, do you want this comprehensive support system? Oh, and this conversation won't be recorded, so feel free to speak your mind.”

“Well, to be frank, I don't really need it. I think it would be convenient to have, but it's meant to be used in conjunction with the comprehensive support humanoid weapon, probably for unit operations, right? I'm more of a solo operator by nature. I feel like it wouldn't suit my hunter job. I plan to explore ruins where cars can't enter, so it's a bit...”

“Should I subtly convey that? ”

“Do as you please. Well, it's just not for me. But I think it's a good product. Yeah, for people like Sheryl and the others, it could be really useful, don't you think? ”

“Certainly, as long as the warehouse isn't attacked by humanoid weapons again.”

“Yeah, well, that's not going to happen again.”

Such things had happened. They spoke lightly about the events of that time, and Akira and the others laughed together joyfully.



Yumina, having finished her duties as a hunter for the day, was relaxing in her room. She was having a pleasant conversation with Katsuya, who had contacted her from afar.

“Wow. It sounds like it's quite challenging over there.”

“Yeah. But seeing the sights of other cities and encountering monsters not found around the Kugamayama City area can be a bit enjoyable too.”

After a long break following the Mizuhazono City ruins, Katsuya had been on an expedition with his unit. They joined the inter-city transportation security forces and were involved in maintaining various transport routes.

Katsuya's team's work involved not only reinforcing road surfaces but also clearing monsters around the roads used for inter-city transportation. Road repairs were handled by separate contractors, and they also provided escort services.

Sometimes, they would also ride in inter-city transport vehicles as security guards. Due to this, Yumina was not allowed to accompany Katsuya.

The inter-city transport vehicles, which were as massive as cargo ships traversing the land, often entered the city's defensive walls, and the interior of the vehicles was equipped with security measures equivalent to those within the walls. Naturally, those tasked with guarding such places required not only high skills but also high trust.

Trust was not an issue for Yumina. She was a hunter affiliated with the Drankam Office faction and had no trouble passing through cities created by Mizuha's legend.

However, her skills were lacking. Only the top members of Katsuya's unit had reached the standard of the inter-city transport vehicle guards. Yumina, who had struggled in the Mizuhazono City ruins and had been relegated to the rear during the battle in the slum district, was out of the question.

Nevertheless, it wasn't impossible for her to accompany them. However, in that case, she would board as a passenger rather than as a vehicle guard, which incurred significant costs. Mizuha had no reason to justify accompanying Yumina with such expenses, and budget-wise, squeezing herself in as the negotiation representative was the limit.

It was because of her own lack of ability that she was separated from her beloved. Perhaps, even in the future. That fear and concern were among the reasons why Yumina sought strength.

Amidst such thoughts, Yumina was enjoying a moment of forgetfulness, laughing happily as she exchanged updates with Katsuya. She didn't mention Akira, though. She only talked about how she was following Mizuha's instructions to venture into the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

Even so, upon hearing this, Katsuya expressed concern for Yumina.

“Yumina. Are you okay? There are pretty strong monsters around there, right? ”

The joy of being cared for by her beloved. The anxiety about her own weakness, enough to make Katsuya worry. While feeling both, Yumina strengthened her resolve, buoyed by her recent growth. She smiled brightly.

“I'll be fine. Even if it's the depths, it's near the rear supply lines. I can retreat quickly if it gets dangerous.”

“But still...”

“Also, not to sound like I'm boasting, but I'm accompanied by guards. Safety measures are being taken care of. If they weren't, even if it's Mizuha's orders, I would refuse. Don't worry, I'll be fine.”

Hearing Yumina's cheerful voice, Katsuya felt relieved that he had worried too much. He returned a bright voice to match Yumina's.

“I see. Still, it's the depths of ruins. Be careful, okay? ”

“Got it. Thanks for worrying about me.”

At that moment, Yumina had a sudden thought.

“Oh, right. Katsuya. I wanted to ask, have you ever experienced time distortion during combat? You know, when you feel like time is slowing down, like when you're about to die? ”

“Why are you asking about that? ”

“...Actually, if you were to say that you've experienced it quite a bit, I was thinking of punching you when you came back. Katsuya, you're not recklessly charging into danger just because I'm not there, are you? ”

Yumina wanted to learn about experiences that might trigger the manifestation of time perception manipulation, having been taught by Akira but unsuccessful in practicing it herself. So, without being completely honest, she changed her wording slightly to also emphasize caution to Katsuya, hence her concern.

Katsuya, taking her words at face value, responded with a somewhat hesitant voice.

“Uh, well, um, yeah, I mean, I've had some experiences like that...”

“Some!?”

“No, it's not like that! What I meant was... I have had experiences, but it's not because I was in danger myself, but more like when someone else was in danger...”

Yumina listened with keen interest to Katsuya's somewhat evasive explanation.

Katsuya, while making excuses, remembered Sheryl.

When Katsuya had previously confided in Sheryl about his own problems, she had told him that the reason was because he cared too much about his comrades. He was so preoccupied with ensuring their safety that he diverted too much attention to checking on them. As a result, he became overwhelmed, unable to act effectively.

And an event that confirmed those words to Katsuya was still ongoing: the utilization of the comprehensive support system.

The comprehensive support system monitored the conditions of unit members through the comprehensive support humanoid weapons each member wore, sending constant updates to Katsuya, the team leader. This significantly reduced the effort Katsuya needed to confirm his comrades' safety.

Since using the comprehensive support humanoid weapon, Katsuya had seen a marked improvement in his condition. Sheryl's words had indeed been correct. Katsuya believed this strongly and his trust in Sheryl had grown even more.

“...So, it's okay to say I've had those experiences to some extent. With the comprehensive support system, I don't get orders like 'charge in alone against the enemy'. Well, even if I did, I'd ignore them.”

“That's good then. Regardless, please take care, okay? You'll be coming back soon, right? I'm expecting some interesting stories. Well, it's late, so I should really go now. Goodnight, Katsuya.”

“Ah, Yumina. Good night.”

Yumina ended her communication with Katsuya. Satisfied with the pleasant moment they shared, she let out a light sigh.

However, she didn't go to sleep in that pleasant mood. While recalling her conversation with Katsuya, Yumina searched for the desired data from the training data of Drankam.

Akira had triggered his crisis due to his own danger, and Katsuya had caused a distortion in the perception of time due to the danger of his comrades. So what about herself? Yumina thought. As her own trigger, she chose Katsuya's crisis.

As a situation, it was not preferable for Yumina. However, the data for it was sufficient. For Katsuya's sake, and to prevent such a

situation from happening again, she decided to make use of it deliberately. Yumina made that decision and retrieved the data of Katsuya's near-death scene, viewing it from a third-person perspective.

First, she watched the footage of the Over-Synthesis Snake battle. She watched Katsuya, alone, attracting the giant snake once again. Remembering the memories, the emotions, the impatience, the fear, while picturing the figure of the person who risked their life, Yumina concentrated intently, as if she were there herself.

That night felt much longer to Yumina than usual.



As usual, Akira was waiting for Yumina in front of the frontline base. He found it a bit unusual that he had arrived before her today.

Since it was not feasible for Yumina to keep Akira waiting due to her position, she always arrived earlier than Akira. Akira adjusted his schedule to arrive slightly before the appointed time accordingly. Recently, it had become the norm for Yumina to wait for Akira's arrival.

However, today she was early. There was still a little time until the appointed time, and there had been no message about any delays. Did something happen? Akira wondered as he saw Yumina's vehicle approaching right at the scheduled time.

Yumina, who had arrived, got out of the car a little flustered.

“Sorry, Akira. Was I late? ”

“No, I just got here a moment ago.”

Saying so, Akira greeted Yumina with a smile. Seeing Yumina's relieved expression, he looked a bit worried.

“Yumina, are you feeling unwell by any chance? ”

“I don't feel that way, but do I look like it? ”

“A little.”

Being told that, Yumina couldn't deny having some idea of what might be wrong.

“...Actually, I'm feeling a bit sleep-deprived, or rather, I don't feel like I've slept well enough. Maybe that's the reason.”

And although she didn't say it aloud, she had some idea of the cause behind it.

Even though it was for the sake of training in time perception manipulation, she had watched footage of Katsuya nearly dying multiple times. It was tiring. It became difficult to sleep comfortably. Due to this, she speculated that she hadn't fully recovered from the mental fatigue.

Akira genuinely expressed concern for Yumina.

“Are you okay? If you're not feeling well, we can cancel today. Even though managing our health is part of the Hunter profession, there are times when we're not feeling well. Let's not push it.”

Yumina shook her head and smiled brightly to reassure Akira.

“I'm fine. I'm maintaining a condition that won't interfere with work. Besides, today is artifact collection day. We don't have plans to fight any monster herds.”

“Is that so? Well, if you say so, Yumina...”

Saying so, Akira still seemed somewhat worried. Then Yumina deliberately smiled brightly to ease his concern.

“If you don't like it, we can cancel. I'm your companion, after all. I'll follow your judgment. But if you're going to bring a liability along, then you better pay for its protection. How about that? In times like these, it's okay to work for that protection fee, right? ”

Hearing that, Akira was a little surprised at first, but then he smiled brightly to match Yumina's tone.

“I see. Then today, I'll be your bodyguard.”

“Thank you.”

Laughing jokingly, Akira and Yumina set off towards the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

As usual, Akira and Yumina progressed through the ruins, choosing a tall building as the site for artifact collection. They defeated the surrounding monsters and secured the safety of their parked vehicle outside. Although Akira suspected Yumina's condition, she didn't impede Akira in any way and fought without any issues.

After finishing their preparations to enter the building, Akira looked up at the abandoned building in front of him. It was tall, wide, and although dirty, its walls showed no signs of cracks, appearing sturdy. While expecting valuable artifacts, it also seemed like a place where many monsters could lurk.

Considering Yumina's condition, such places should be approached with extra caution. Akira proposed as such.

“Yumina, can I entrust you with command today without prior data?

The command of the comprehensive support system is determined based on the analysis of vast amounts of data. Naturally, the more local information available, the more accurate and efficient the instructions can be. In other words, the accuracy is higher for existing ruins.

However, this wasn't very compatible with Akira, who had far more opportunities to go to unknown places than other hunters. So, under the pretext of verifying how well the comprehensive support system could handle activities in unknown places, Akira had asked Yumina several times to command without prior data.

In that state, the instructions given were cautious. Since the rough location on-site, even the eastern part, was unknown, and nothing was known about the monsters present, the command naturally became cautious. Despite this, learning to command under such circumstances greatly contributed to Akira's growth.

Yumina responded with a smile.

“Understood. Shall we proceed without data on the artifacts? If we invalidate that too, we might end up bringing back more cheap chairs and tables, but...”

Bringing back whatever was available on-site might be inefficient for short-term artifact collection, but it could improve efficiency for long-term collection.

If specific artifacts, along with inexpensive and valuable ones, were found together as a set of furnishings, there was a higher chance that when inexpensive artifacts were found elsewhere, there might also be valuable artifacts.

For the sake of collecting such data and improving its accuracy, even broken chairs and tables were deliberately brought back from new locations. Considering long-term group utilization and expecting a wide range of operations in various places, even if the value of the artifacts themselves was low, there was significance in doing so for the comprehensive support system.

Akira hesitated slightly.

“Hmm. Yeah, that might affect the content of the command, so please invalidate that data too. We can make it effective when

bringing back artifacts later.”

“Understood. Shall we go then? ”

Leaving the vehicle behind, Akira and Yumina entered the building armed for indoor combat.

Akira and Yumina continued their exploration of the abandoned building. They completed their investigation of the ground floor, mindful of their retreat route.

“Considering its size, there aren't many valuable artifacts here. Maybe someone has already searched here before? ”

“That might be the case. Well, this is only the first floor. Let's keep our hopes up for the upper floors.”

“Right.”

They reached the fifth floor.

“I have a feeling there are a lot of monsters here.”

“I agree. They're easy to defeat, but there seem to be quite a few.”

After exploring up to the tenth floor...

“There seem to be significantly more monsters here. There aren't any valuable artifacts either. This place seems like a bust.”

“You think so? Should we turn back? The comprehensive support system is still recommending continuation, but that's probably because we're proceeding with no prior data. It's likely just assessing that it's better to advance for data collection if we're not having trouble with the monsters.”

“I see... Well...”

After some hesitation, Akira decided to continue the exploration. Just because it was a disappointing site for artifact collection didn't mean they were struggling with the monsters in the area. Just defeating monsters could count as progress.

And since they were ostensibly testing the capabilities of the comprehensive support system, it didn't seem right to retreat over something like that.

Yumina was fine with Akira's decision, so they continued their exploration.

Upon reaching the fifteenth floor, they encountered a group of snail-like monsters. They had encountered them several times before during previous artifact collections in the depths.

Seeing those monsters, Akira was reminded of the bounty they had defeated in the past.

“Those are definitely the small multi-barrel cannon-type MyMai, aren't they? ”

“Yes, they do look similar. Come to think of it, were you there when the multi-barrel cannon-type MyMai was defeated? ”

“Yeah. I was just there for some menial tasks, not for the fight. ...If those grow in the wasteland, they might become multi-barrel cannon-type MyMai.”

“If that's the case, encountering a group of them outside the ruins might mean encountering a group of multi-barrel cannon-type MyMai. I don't want that.”

“Absolutely not. So let's make sure that doesn't happen by defeating them here.”

Akira smiled and raised his gun. Yumina did the same, smiling.

The surprised snails, caught off guard, were showered with a large number of bullets, breaking their shells and defeating them. Some of the snails tried to retaliate with small laser cannons grown from their shells, but they couldn't hit Akira and Yumina, who fired from positions out of the firing range. They were systematically defeated one after another.

Then the remaining snails, clinging to the floor, walls, and ceiling, holed up in their shells, stopped moving. As soon as they did, the strength of their shells dramatically increased, repelling Akira and Yumina's bullets. Impacts from the shots generated shock-converting light at the points of impact.

The comprehensive support system analyzed this and displayed instructions in Yumina's field of vision.

The target is utilizing bio-force field armor. It is presumed that the energy source is not the individual itself but the building it is attached to. Neutralization with current ammunition is deemed difficult. Temporary retreat or recommendation for firing against force field armor rounds is advised.

This message was also displayed in Akira's field of vision through coordination with Yumina. However, Akira continued firing without concern, switching to precise shooting after concentrating and manipulating his perception of time.

The continuous barrage of bullets struck the same spot on the shell, causing the inflated shock to pierce through the sturdy shell protected by the force field armor.

The snail, diverting its movement and drawing a large amount of energy from the building, and ceasing the use of the laser cannon to reinforce the strength of its force field armor, attempts to resume its attack despite its shell being destroyed. Energy is once again supplied to the laser cannon.

However, due to this, the strength of the force field armor decreased. With just a normal shot from Yumina, the shell cracked and holes appeared. It was pierced by bullets, ravaged from within.

There was no longer any way for the snails to resist. It didn't take much time for all individuals to be defeated.

Akira lowers his gun and exhales.

“Yumina. About the instructions that appeared on the screen earlier, was it because we didn't have any pre-existing data? ”

“Probably. I think they treated it as an unknown monster. It would have been different if we had data on monsters we had already defeated, right? ”

“So they analyzed an unknown monster that quickly. Quite impressive... assuming they weren't pretending not to know,” Akira said with a meaningful smile.

Upon hearing this, Yumina returned a wry smile.

“Let's just believe that there's no end to doubting around there. From my standpoint, let's just say that.”

“Yeah, it's not good to doubt unnecessarily.”

With a laugh, Akira and the others moved forward.

“Akira. You were using the manipulation of perceived time earlier, right? ”

“Yeah. Is it noticeable? ”

“Well, yeah. Does it make a big difference when you use it while shooting? ”

“It's quite different. Even if you firmly stabilize the gun with augmented suit and just shoot continuously, the gun still wavers. If you adjust the aim while shooting, using the manipulation of perceived time makes it more accurate.”

“I see. That sounds good. I wish I could use the manipulation of perceived time soon too.”

At Yumina's slightly forced voice, Akira let out a wry smile.

“Even if you tell me. Well, do your best.”

“I will.”

Akira and the others regained their focus and continued to aim for the upper floors.



As Akira and the others continued to climb up the abandoned building, they finally reached the 30th floor, the top floor. However, there was no sense of accomplishment on their faces. Akira and Yumina both wore expressions of frustration.

“We came this far thinking it would be questionable to turn back, but the monsters keep increasing, there's nothing valuable, it's a big disappointment.”

“It's the life of a hunter, after all. These things happen. Since there's still this floor left, let's investigate to the end since we've come this far.”

“Yeah, you're right. Understood. Let's go.”

While thinking it was hopeless from the start, Akira and the others began exploring the final floor. Just investigate and then leave. That's what Akira had in mind.

But it was there that Alpha gave instructions.

『Akira. Be cautious.』

Until now, Alpha hadn't interfered during Yumina's command, considering it as training. With Alpha issuing a cautionary instruction, the atmosphere around Akira changed instantly.

Yumina also noticed Akira's change and became more vigilant.

“Akira. What's wrong? ”

“Well, it might just be my imagination but...”

Not knowing the specific reason behind Alpha's instructions, Akira answered vaguely for now to deflect the question.

Then Alpha pointed ahead in the corridor. Slightly delayed, the information gathering device detected some kind of reaction in that direction.

Yumina also noticed the reaction and involuntarily wore a puzzled expression.

“...Huh? This reaction... a person? ”

“Seems like it. Another hunter? ”

“Wait. Why would another hunter be here before us? With so many monsters around? Defeating them and coming this far? But there weren't any monster corpses, right? ”

Akira conveyed his vigilance to Yumina, who looked puzzled.

“Yeah, it's strange. So let's be cautious, just in case.”

“...Yeah.”

It was an unknown opponent. So they remained cautious. Yumina, putting aside her raised doubts for now, wore a serious expression.

And then the opponent appeared from around the corner of the corridor. Unaware of Akira and the others, he muttered complaints with a dissatisfied expression.

“What the heck is this place... even though it's a huge building, there's nothing good here. ...Huh? ”

While muttering to himself, the man finally noticed Akira and the others.

Akira and the others looked puzzled at the figure. The person appeared to be a boy around their age, and from his equipment, he seemed to be a hunter of sorts. However, the gear looked so cheap and shoddy that it was hard to believe he was exploring the dangerous zone of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

As they wondered how someone with such equipment made it this far, doubts crept into Akira's mind, and their wariness of the unknown person increased.

On the other hand, the boy looked shocked as he stared at Akira and the others, frozen in place. But in an instant, his expression contorted in fear.

“Eek!?”

With a short scream, the boy aimed his left arm towards Akira.

If he was being aimed at with a gun, Akira would have reacted immediately. However, the fact that the hand was empty, coupled with the expression of fear rather than hostility on the boy's face, slightly delayed Akira's response.

At that moment, Alpha's warning rang out.

『Get out of the way! 』

Upon hearing this, Akira moved instantly. Understanding that the boy's action was some form of attack, he exerted all his strength to disengage from the direction the arm was pointing. He half-carried Yumina, leaping together with her from the spot into a side passage.

A moment later, a projectile raced through the corridor. Upon hitting the far wall, it exploded violently. The building shook, and the resulting blast and smoke reached Akira and the others through the corridor. It was a powerful explosion.

But Akira remained unharmed. Thanks to his augmented suit with force field armor and protective coat, he remains unscathed even from such a powerful explosion as long as he doesn't take a direct hit.

Yumina was unharmed as well. Along with the defense of her expensive augmented suit, being held tightly by Akira shielded her from the blast, leaving her unscathed.

As the blast subsided, Akira exhaled.

“Yumina, are you okay? ”

“Y-yeah.”

Akira smiled reassuringly and gently released Yumina, then peeked at the boy's condition from the shadows of the corridor.

“...He ran away. What was that guy? ”

Seeing Akira's grim expression, Yumina also came back to her senses a bit later. She shook her head several times, calmly assessed the situation, then asked with an equally serious expression.

“Akira, what do we do? Do we pursue him? ”

Akira hesitated slightly. But the realization that his role today was to protect Yumina overrode the impulse to chase after someone who had just tried to kill him.

“I'll leave the decision to Yumina. During relic collection missions, we act under Yumina's command. That's what we decided, right? ”

“...Understood. Then we won't pursue him. Let's head back for today. Safety first. Dealing with monsters alone is tough enough; we can't afford to engage with other hunters. Is that okay? ”

“Yeah.”

Akira and Yumina nodded to each other before cautiously descending the abandoned building.

Afterward, without any further incidents, Akira and the others returned to the surface and headed back home.

As Akira relaxed upon entering the rear communication line, he glanced questioningly at Alpha, who was flying beside him.

『Hey, Alpha. What was that guy? 』

『I don't know any more than you do.』

『Yeah... Huh. But, I feel like I've seen him somewhere before... Am I just imagining things? 』

『 You're not imagining things. That child was one of the kids who guarded Sheryl's warehouse.』

Akira was surprised by the unexpected revelation.

『Huh!? Why would someone like that be there, and why would they attack us!? 』

『That's something I don't know either. The only thing I'm sure of is his name: Tiol.』

『...What's going on? 』

In the midst of this confusing situation, Akira could only hold his head in frustration.

Upon entering the rear communication line, Yumina switched the car's driving mode to automatic. Then, she went to the cargo section, where she connected directly to the integrated support system device loaded in the car and began to examine the data from the 30th floor of the abandoned building in detail.

Although her contact with the mysterious individual was brief, she hoped the integrated support system might be analyzing something. With this in mind, she reviewed the data.

As Yumina had anticipated, the integrated support system was analyzing the person there, Tiol.

However, the unexpected analysis results left Yumina perplexed.

“What does this mean...? ”

Encountering an unknown monster. That's what was recorded there.

Chapter 154: Tiol's Lament

How did it come to this? The lamentation had been lingering in Tiol's mind for a while.



Several days after the end of the major conflict, amidst the slum streets bearing vivid traces of the fierce battle, Tiol was desperately fleeing. The angry shouts of those pursuing Tiol resounded from behind.

“Chase him! Don't let him escape! Kill him! ”

“Don't even think about trying to capture him alive! If he can escape, kill him! ”

Alongside voices dripping with clear and merciless intent to kill, a large number of gunshots rang out. The sound of gunfire echoed through the alleyways, bullets punched holes in nearby walls, piercing through the ground.

Tiol fought back desperately, but the enemy was numerous, and the power difference was hopeless. His suppressive fire could only hold off the enemy's approach for so long. Moreover, his remaining ammunition was dwindling.

Faced with the grim choice of dying before running out of bullets or being captured and tortured to death afterward, Tiol felt cornered both situationally and mentally.

The first thing Viola did after negotiating with Akira and agreeing to cooperate with Sheryl's group was to expose the traitors within Sheryl's ranks.

Those who had been selling internal information of the faction for money. Those who had been colluding with other factions behind the scenes. Details about such individuals were provided to Sheryl.

Sheryl, upon obtaining this information, expelled only the most egregious offenders from the faction.

Back when they were still a small and weak faction, Sheryl could have turned a blind eye to actions taken out of necessity to survive in the harsh slum environment. Those who had since recognized Akira's strength and amended their attitudes could have been pardoned for minor offenses as a sign of understanding Akira's power.

But those who didn't fall into these categories couldn't be ignored. Sheryl expelled them from the faction without mercy, clearly stating the reasons for their expulsion. Not killing them on the spot was not an act of mercy. Exposing the fate of traitors, dying in the alleys of the slums, served as a deterrent both internally and externally.

And among the list of those expelled from the faction was Tiol, whose potential inclusion as an armed member of the faction had been provisionally decided based on the results of the battle against the attackers led by Zalmo.

Upon receiving this information, Shijima immediately set out to kill Tiol.

Although he himself didn't know for sure, Tiol had been leaking information to the two major factions about the warehouse and Akira's absence, which had sparked the warehouse raid. Shijima and his group, who had suffered numerous casualties in that confrontation, couldn't possibly let Tiol live.

Tiol is finally cornered by Shijima's unit.

Despite being wounded and with a body riddled with holes, he's forcing himself to move with the help of augmented suit. His face, pale from blood loss, is further contorted with fear of death.

He's currently hiding in the ruins. It's not an easy place to find, but staying hidden here won't improve the situation. There's only a few rounds left. The medicines have been used up. The bleeding won't stop. He's at a dead end.

Tiol is a hunter who earns his keep. He's not about to lose to some other washed-up hunters. However, among those pursuing Tiol are other young hunter boys who fought alongside him when the warehouse was attacked. They're helping Shijima to prove they haven't betrayed him.

A message reaches Tiol via a general-purpose communicator from those boys.

“Tiol. How about giving up already? Don't worry. We're old comrades who fought together. I'll put you out of your misery.”

“...Sh-shut up! ”

Tiol, who had lost his composure, instinctively retorts. But that was a mistake.

“He's here. Within short-range communication range, somewhere within a 50-meter radius from me. Surround him.”

“Roger.”

With that, the communication cuts off. The other party deliberately narrowed the communication range and waited for Tiol to respond to their call. To confirm that he's within that range. Tiol realizes this too late, but it's already too late for everything.

All that's left is to comb through the narrow area. There's no escape. The fear tightens around Tiol's mind, making him scream.

“...Damn it! ”

He pounds the wall with fury. With every ounce of remaining strength, willpower, and hope, he shouts as he continues to pound.

“Damn it! Damn it! Damn it! ”

When his hand finally stops, Tiol has no strength left. He collapses as if crumbling down.

“...Damn it all.”

He had thought it would work out a little better. Joining Sheryl's group, achieving results, gaining recognition, deepening his relationship with the person he cares about. He thought that path had been opened up.

How did it come to this? That's the only thought floating in Tiol's fading consciousness.

Someone approaches Tiol and speaks to him.

“Hey there. You're badly injured, huh, Tiol-kun? ”

Unnoticed by anyone, the man in a white coat who suddenly appeared there is Yatsubayashi, who runs a clinic in the slums.

The young hunters search the area. But there's no sign of Tiol. All they find are what appear to be his belongings - a gun, an information terminal, and a lot of bloodstains. Tiol himself has disappeared without a trace.

The boy who last spoke to Tiol takes the bloodied information terminal and looks at it skeptically.

“The communication destination... is this terminal. No mistake. He was definitely here... Where did he go? ”

Another boy remarks casually.

“He just threw away the troublesome stuff and ran. He might still be nearby, right? ”

“...Yeah, maybe. Let's search. Damn it, even if Shijima and them find him first, I won't know. Making us go through the trouble.”

Certainly, Tiol had brought trouble upon himself by being targeted by Shijima and his group. It wouldn't matter if he were killed.

But he wouldn't be tortured to death either. So, he'll be put out of his misery easily.

That was the true intention of the boy.

The boys search for Tiol. Shijima and his group, who arrive late, also begin searching for Tiol.

However, no matter how much they search, they can't find him. Even with expanding the search area and increasing manpower, they ultimately couldn't find him.

And just like that, Tiol vanished without a trace.



In the basement of Yatsubayashi's clinic, there were special rooms for handling unique patients. Rooms and laboratories were reserved for those who couldn't afford treatment fees and agreed to participate in experiments in exchange for offsetting the costs with suitable trials.

Tiol, rescued by Yatsubayashi, was now lying on a bed in one of those rooms. Although his injuries had healed completely, he showed no

signs of waking up.

Various strange devices were attached to his body. Needles with tubes filled with green liquid were inserted everywhere, slowly injecting the liquid into Tiol.

“It's alright. With your level of compatibility, it will surely work out. Trust me.”

When Yatsubayashi had previously treated Tiol's injuries, he had also obtained detailed data about his body. Discovering extremely rare data, he had been searching for an opportunity to involve Tiol in his experiments.

Yatsubayashi had his own twisted sense of morality. Just because he found a suitable subject didn't mean he would conduct experiments without consent. He always made sure to obtain consent.

However, for those who couldn't afford medical treatment due to lack of money, he would provide treatment for free in exchange for participating as test subjects in experiments. He even opened clinics in places like the slums for this purpose.

Upon learning that Tiol was being attacked by Shijima and his group, Yatsubayashi acted as if the opportunity had finally arrived. Using optical camouflage to conceal himself, he observed Tiol from nearby, waiting for the right moment.

And when Tiol was teetering on the brink of life and death, Yatsubayashi made him an offer. He would treat his injuries and transport him to a safe location for shelter. In exchange, Tiol would cooperate in the experiments.

Tiol, on the verge of death, couldn't refuse Yatsubayashi's offer.

“I'll keep my promise. So, you must keep yours too. Don't worry. It will surely contribute to your rise.”

Yatsubayashi was in very high spirits.

“Death would be preferable. There are such things in this world as well, to a certain extent.”

Choosing to reject the goodwill of the young hunter who offered an easy death, Tiol embarked on the path of life that lay beyond that choice.



Tiol, waking from his slumber, sat up and looked around in a daze.

“...? Where am I? ”

He found himself sitting on a bed in an unfamiliar white room, trying to make sense of the situation. But confusion only deepened.

Metal handcuffs, sturdy and seemingly unbreakable, were attached to both his hands. However, only the wrist parts remained, and their function as handcuffs was lost. There were marks on their cut surfaces as if they had been chewed on by something.

Symbols or letters of some kind floated in his field of vision. But he couldn't understand their meaning or read the text. He instinctively touched his head, wondering if he was wearing augmented reality goggles, but found nothing.

Confusion turned to panic as Tiol became increasingly anxious about the unknown situation, his face contorting with worry.

Feeling that staying there was pointless, Tiol stood up and instinctively extended his left arm towards the door of the room.

At that moment, Yatsubayashi, who brought Tiol's meal, opened the door and was startled to see Tiol extending his left arm towards him.

“Whoa! Again!?”

“Huh? You are...”

Tiol started to say but couldn't continue. He looked puzzled at Yatsubayashi.

He felt like he knew him. That was the extent of Tiol's recognition of Yatsubayashi at the moment.

Both Tiol and Yatsubayashi remained still, each lost in thought about the situation for a moment.

Then it was Yatsubayashi who moved first, smiling happily and cheerfully.



“Looks like you've fully regained consciousness. Well, that's a relief. Maybe taking our time to let you settle in and making sure you ate enough was the right call after all? ”

“What are you talking about...”

“Now, calm down. How much of your memory is back? Do you know where you are? Do you remember why you're here? Can you recall what happened before waking up? ”

“Um...”

Trying hard to remember, Tiol's memory was quite hazy at this point, a fact not lost on Yatsubayashi.

“Alright then, can you tell me your name? ”

His own name. Whether he could recognize the identifier that defined himself. To this question, Tiol answered.

“I'm Tiol.”

“...Good. Tiol-kun. Let's start with a meal. You probably have a lot of questions. I'll explain everything in detail while we eat, so listen carefully.”

Yatsubayashi smiled happily at Tiol's firm response, feeling the success of the experiment.

“Also, Tiol-kun. Could you lower that arm of yours now? ”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

Tiol lowered his left arm as instructed, feeling puzzled.

(Why did I raise my arm in the first place?)

Despite having done it himself, Tiol had no clue why he had raised his arm.

As Tiol continued to eat, he listened to Yatsubayashi's explanation, gradually recalling various things stimulated by its content.

That he was almost killed by Shijima and saved by Yatsubayashi. That he agreed to cooperate in the clinical trial in exchange. While eating the items served on the tray, he remembered these things as if simply forgetting them momentarily.

“So, my injuries seem to be healed, but what exactly will the clinical trial involve? ”

“Ah, from now on, data collection will be the main focus. For that purpose, Tiol-kun, you will work as a hunter under my instructions.”

“Hunter work, huh. Well, I'm a hunter, so if you say so, I'll do it.”

“The location is deep in the ruins of Kuzusuhara District.”

Tiol burst out laughing unintentionally. The food he had just put in his mouth scattered onto the floor.

“Deep in the ruins of Kuzusuhara District!? There's no way I can go to a place like that! ”

“It's okay. There's a rear communication line leading to the depths, although it's paid. I'll cover the toll.”

“That's not what I meant! Can I even fight monsters in such a place?”

“That's also fine. That's why I performed a body enhancement procedure on you, Tiol-kun.”

“Huh? ”

That slight surprise shook Tiol's consciousness. As a result, he momentarily broke away from the routine of eating he had been following, feeling a sense of detachment. And at that moment of peculiar discomfort, he noticed the item he had accidentally spit out on the floor earlier.

Tiol, wearing a puzzled expression, picked it up. It was a bitten metal block.

With a face still expressing astonishment, Tiol slowly turned his gaze to the tray, where items such as metal blocks and ceramics, clearly not resembling human food, were served.

“...Huh? ...Huh? ”

Tiol was confused. He was confused about having eaten that normally until now, about putting it in his mouth and eating it without caring. Most of all, he was confused that he had only just now realized how strange it all was.

And Yatsubayashi was observing Tiol's reaction with a very curious gaze.

“Tiol-kun. Are you okay? ”

“...Hey, what did you do to me? ”

“What do you mean, just like I said earlier. Tiol-kun, you have become a body enhancement recipient through my procedure. A very powerful one at that.”

Seeing Tiol so stunned, Yatsubayashi proceeded to talk enthusiastically about the results of his experiment, also providing explanations.



Yatsubayashi's vehicle was heading to the depths of the ruins of Kuzusuhara District via the rear communication line. The vehicle was a specially made mobile clinic, modified from a large armored personnel carrier.

Tiol was sitting in the examination room, looking uneasy.

“Hey, are you really okay? ”

Yatsubayashi, who remained in the vehicle, responded lightly via communication.

“To confirm that, we're going there now, right? Theoretically, there shouldn't be any problems. It depends on the results of the field test. Now, let's go. Do your best.”

“Got it! ”

Tiol reluctantly set off.

Being in a place where he didn't belong made Tiol's face contort with tension.

“Hey, all the artifacts I find are mine. You'll keep that promise, won't you? ”

“Of course. Even though you're helping with the trial, I wouldn't ask you to hand over artifacts. So, stick to your promise and cooperate with the trial properly. I'd be in trouble if you tried to escape now.”

“I understand. I won't run away, and I'll cooperate. ...Seriously, did you have to implant a bomb in my head for that? Like, as if I could escape. Going that far, huh? ”

“Your body is a valuable commodity with special enhancement processing from me. So, it's only natural. Your body is amazing, you know? Actually, I could demand around 10 billion Aurum as payment for the body enhancement processing.”

Yatsubayashi spoke with a sense of pride. Hearing this, Tiol smirked sarcastically.

“If it's that amazing, then why bother threatening someone on the verge of death to become a subject? Wouldn't there be plenty of volunteers? ”

Yatsubayashi deeply nodded in agreement with Tiol's sarcasm.

“Exactly. Why does everyone dislike it so much? ”

And then, he continued in a dissatisfied tone.

“Sure, it's still a developing technology. It's not entirely safe, I admit. But compared to dying fighting monsters in the ruins, it's a small risk, isn't it? Even though the food in the slum district is dodgy, people still eat it knowing it's dangerous. Why is this different? ”

He was serious. Sensing that, Tiol grimaced unpleasantly. He had a very unpleasant expression, considering that he had been modified by someone with such a mindset.

“Nobody wants to become a body forced to eat metal and plastic just to get stronger.”

“Is that so? In that case, maybe it's better to directly insert material cartridges into the body. But changing that aspect would be difficult... It's originally based on ingestion, so the construction process flow...”

Yatsubayashi continued to contemplate improvements, which only increased Tiol's anxiety.

Tiol, having arrived at the depths of the ruins via the rear communication line, disembarked from Yatsubayashi's vehicle. He was equipped with an unmodified AAH assault rifle and an

information terminal for communication with Yatsubayashi only. By the standards of hunters visiting this place, he was nothing more than a suicidal volunteer.

Tiol's face contorted with tension as he realized he was in a place he didn't belong.

“Hey, are you really okay? ”

Yatsubayashi, who remained in the vehicle, answered via communication.

“That's why we're going to check it now. There should be no problems theoretically. It all depends on the results of the field test. Now, let's go. Do your best.”

“Got it! ”

Tiol set off reluctantly.

Even though he felt a bit uplifted as a hunter in a place different from the outskirts of the ruins, that level of excitement couldn't compare to the fear of stepping into a deadly place. The rising tension made Tiol's breath rough.

Yatsubayashi proceeded to explain the precautions for this clinical trial to Tiol amid his nervousness.

“I'll say it again, but under no circumstances should you attack monsters if you encounter them. Your guns won't work against the monsters around here.”

“Shut up. So, am I supposed to enter the ruins unarmed? ”

“Well, it would look suspicious to other hunters if you wandered around the ruins without a gun, so I won't forcibly take it from you. Understand that shooting would be futile and be careful not to shoot.”

“Yeah. Anyway, I hope your experiment goes well so I don't need to use the gun. That new camouflage function, right? If that works properly, I won't get attacked by monsters, right? ”

Tiol said as he looked at his own arm. It was clearly visible.

“...I don't see myself disappearing at all, though.”

“It's not optical camouflage. Even if you're not visible, monsters can detect enemies through sound, heat, vibrations, even in complete darkness. Of course, there's camouflage function to counter those, but your camouflage goes beyond that.”

“Is that so.”

Tiol continued to advance through the ruins while conversing with Yatsubayashi to alleviate his tension. And then, he entered a suitable building in search of artifacts.

In the depths of the ruins, where powerful monsters resided, there were still many untouched places. Valuable artifacts were scattered everywhere.

Tiol, who had entered a random building, immediately spotted several expensive-looking artifacts and couldn't help but exclaim in excitement.

“Wow! Amazing! ”

Excited about the valuable artifacts that were no longer found elsewhere in the ruins, Tiol filled his backpack with a beaming smile. For now, he forgot that he was in the middle of a clinical trial and enjoyed this moment.

Suddenly, he heard a noise from behind, and Tiol's excitement vanished. Now, he remembered he was in the depths of the ruins. Recalling this reality, Tiol slowly turned around.

There stood giant spiders with machine guns attached to their bodies. And not just one, but two on the floor and two on the ceiling. Furthermore, the barrels of the spiders were already aimed at Tiol.

There's no chance of winning. It's hopeless. I'm done for. That realization froze Tiol in place.

However, the spiders just continued to watch Tiol without taking any action. And after a while, they simply left as if nothing had happened.

Freed from extreme tension, Tiol collapsed onto the floor.

“W-what just happened? ”

“Alright! Success! ”

Tiol snapped back to reality at the very pleased voice of Yatsubayashi. And from the word “success,” he realized.

“So, I wasn't attacked earlier because of that new camouflage function you mentioned? ”

“That's right.”

“Amazing. Even though they could clearly see me, I wasn't attacked.”

“That's the function. We've confirmed the theoretical effect in practice. It's naturally expected, but having persuasive data for third parties is extremely gratifying.”

This result also gave Tiol strong conviction. His impression of Yatsubayashi changed from a dubious quack to an exceptionally skilled researcher.

“Now, Tiol-kun. Let's continue the trial. Resume your hunter duties. Even if you encounter monsters, you should be fine as long as you

don't provoke them. I repeat, attacking is strictly forbidden. If we attack first, they'll surely retaliate.”

“Understood. Alright, let's do this! ”

After packing the relics from this place into his backpack, Tiol continued collecting more relics in search of further artifacts. Despite encountering monsters multiple times afterward, he wasn't attacked.



Tiol returned to Yatsubayashi's mobile clinic, relieved after completing the relic collection combined with the trial. He expressed his joy at the pile of relics stacked on the floor.

“T-this is all from today alone...! In the depths of the ruins, I found this many relics...! ”

Tiol couldn't hide his amazement and joy at the magnitude of his achievement, knowing full well that achieving this alone would have been impossible for him.

“Incredible! It's incredible! The monsters didn't attack at all even after that! With this, I can collect relics to my heart's content! ”

“I'm glad you're pleased. Well then, shall we head back today? We need to discuss future plans as well.”

Yatsubayashi reassured Tiol and set the vehicle in motion. Leaving behind significant accomplishments for both parties, Tiol and his companions departed from the ruins of Kuzusuhara District.

By the time Tiol returned to the Yatsubayashi Clinic in the slum district, he had regained his composure. Nonetheless, he was in high spirits due to today's great success.

In a room underground, Yatsubayashi explained the plans for the future to Tiol. After about two months of relic collection in the ruins as part of the trial, followed by the restoration of his body, the trial would be complete. Hearing this, Tiol inadvertently showed a hint of dissatisfaction.

“Huh? My body will be restored? ”

“Of course. Reversibility is crucial with this kind of technology, you know? Whether you're stuck with it for life or can revert back makes a huge difference in usability.”

“Even private military companies lending out powerful combat prosthetics to employees require them to return the prosthetics upon leaving the company. In terms of convenience as well, being able to revert is important.” Yatsubayashi explained this with a wry smile, observing Tiol's reaction.

“What's wrong? You were complaining about having a body that can even eat iron, but now you're not happy about returning to your original body? ”

“N-no, it's just...”

“Well, it's nice to be appreciated, but I'll still have to restore your body. We need data confirming that the reversal can be done without any side effects, smoothly returning to the original state. I apologize.”

“Ah, I see...”

Yatsubayashi seemed pleased with Tiol's disappointed expression.



Once again, Tiol found himself deep in the ruins of Kuzusuhara District, continuing his relic collection. It had been over a week now. Despite not being attacked by monsters, he had grown accustomed to

venturing into the ruins with confidence. Now, he was more concerned about avoiding detection by other hunters.

Collecting relics in an environment akin to a dream for hunters, where they wouldn't be attacked by the vicious monsters inhabiting the ruins, Tiol had been enthusiastic at first.

However, now that he had become accustomed to this environment, his excitement and tension had diminished to the point where he engaged in idle chatter. Tiol's voice carried a hint of frustration as he spoke to Yatsubayashi, who was reviewing data in the mobile clinic.

“Hey, isn't there some other solution? ”

“I've said it many times, but don't you think moving to another city far away would be the best option? Hunting in an unfamiliar place might be tough, but you'll be fine once you sell the relics and equip yourself.”

Tiol had tried to sell the collected relics on the first day, only to be stopped by Yatsubayashi.

The relics he collected were his own. He should be able to do as he pleased with them. Was Yatsubayashi planning to break that promise? Tiol had initially felt annoyed. However, upon hearing the reason for the prohibition, he reluctantly understood and found himself struggling to accept his current situation once again.

Shijima and the others ultimately couldn't find Tiol, who had escaped danger under Yatsubayashi's optical camouflage. He was probably dead somewhere in a very difficult-to-find location. Or he had fled to another city. Either way, actively searching further would be futile. They had already given up the search.

However, if Tiol were to sell the relics, it would reveal that he was in good health and still in Kugamayama City, where he could perform hunter duties. In that case, Shijima and the others couldn't just leave Tiol alone. He would be targeted again.

Even with his enhanced body, Tiol could likely handle Shijima and his group. But if he won, stronger opponents would be sent after him. And ultimately, Akira would come to kill him. If that happened, he would surely be killed for good this time.

So, during the trial period, it would be best for him to hide in his clinic and then flee to another city with relics afterward. Yatsubayashi had advised Tiol to do so.

Tiol knew that this was probably the best course of action. But he couldn't completely abandon hope. The newfound confidence he had gained over the past few days was pushing him to resist.

“I... I'd prefer to stay in Kugamayama City if possible. Hey, isn't there really no other way? You're an amazing researcher, right? Can't you do something with that incredible technology of yours? Like, make me stronger than Akira with that technology?”

“So, after the trial, you want me to perform another body enhancement procedure for you as a client? I don't mind, but you know Akira's strength as well. If you want to surpass him, I won't say it's impossible as a technician, but the cost of modification would be astronomically high. I don't recommend it.”

Tiol fell silent. The cost of the modifications he was undergoing was said to be 10 billion Aurums outside of the trial. Anything beyond that was unrealistic. It was simply impossible. He couldn't help but grimace at the thought.

Yet he still searched for alternatives.

“Then... negotiation. Can't we somehow negotiate with Shijima and the others...”

“Wouldn't that be difficult? Tiol-kun, you're not just against Shijima and his group; you're also at odds with Sheryl and Akira, who's backing them. Convincing all of them would be impossible.”

“W-well, that's true, but...”

“Well, theoretically, if you could convince Akira, everything might work out, but he's the type who would pick a fight with both major factions without hesitation. If you tried to negotiate or meet with him, you might not even have time to beg for your life before he kills you the moment he sees you, right? ”

Tiol fell silent once again. He couldn't even convince himself that wouldn't happen.

Yatsubayashi thought he might have gone too far and went to appease his test subject.

“So, if you negotiate with him, Tiol-kun, you might need to hire a proxy instead of directly dealing with him. I have someone in mind. But let's discuss this after today's trial is over. It might take a while.”

“Got it.”

Tiol found a glimmer of hope and lifted his lowered head energetically.

“Who? ”

“Let's save that discussion for after today's trial. It might be a long one.”

“Got it.”

Tiol encountered many monsters today as well. However, none of them attacked him. He marveled once again at the brilliance of Yatsubayashi's camouflage function and found it incredibly convenient.

And if he wasn't going to be attacked, he also had the leisure to casually observe the monsters out of curiosity. They were strong, strange, and terrifying beings, but they were also intriguing as products of ancient technology and as carriers of that technology into the present. Tiol took this opportunity to observe them carefully.

As Tiol stared intently at a nearby monster resembling a giant insect, his vision changed. The monster's figure was outlined in green lines, with symbols and strings of text displayed in augmented view.

Similar occurrences had happened to Tiol many times since he woke up in Yatsubayashi's clinic basement. By now, he realized that it was probably some form of explanation about the target.

However, he still didn't understand the meaning of the text and symbols. It was bothersome, to say the least.

“Hey, what are these floating words in my vision? What are they for?”

“Unfortunately, I don't know either.”

“You don't know? But these, they appeared because of your modifications, right?”

“While we record your visual information as part of our data collection, those words and symbols aren't captured.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. Meaning they're not projected onto your retinas but added during brain visual processing. Well, it's probably some glitch. Just think of it as part of the trial and bear with it.”

Tiol let out a sigh at the useless augmented reality function.



Viola, with Carol as her escort, waited for their trading partner at the outskirts of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

With the easy access to the inner parts of the ruins, there were fewer hunters collecting artifacts at the outskirts. As the number of visiting hunters decreased, so did the number of monsters defeated. The monsters at the outskirts were gradually increasing.

Additionally, the remaining artifacts at the outskirts were starting to run out. Those with only enough strength to enter the inner parts found it more profitable to earn elsewhere. Nowadays, it was rare to find hunters engaged in earning at the outskirts of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.

Designating such a place as a trading location naturally indicated someone with significant reasons. Still, Viola came to this place, hoping to meet an unexpectedly interesting trading partner.

And at the appointed time, the trading partner appeared. Viola smiled cheerfully as the person actually showed up.

“I thought you might be a fake summoner trying to deceive me, but you're really alive, aren't you? ”

“Yeah. Thanks to you, I was almost killed by Shijima and the others.”

The one who appeared was Tiol. Due to Viola's exposure, he had almost been killed by Shijima and now glared at Viola with resentment.

Carol attempted to step forward before Viola, wary of Tiol. However, Viola stopped her with her hand, causing Carol to step back.

Viola smirked impudently at Tiol.

“Sorry about that. I had my reasons too. So, what brings you here today? Oh, were you planning to lure me out with a fake trade and then kill me? ”

He would have liked to. Tiol struggled to maintain composure, his desire evident on his face, but he restrained himself and regained his calm after taking a deep breath. Then he spoke with a serious expression.

“...It's a request. I want you to act as a negotiator for me.”

“Negotiation, huh? To negotiate with Sheryl and make them stop targeting you. And you also want to join Sheryl's faction. Something like that, right? ”

“That's right. Can you do it? ”

Tiol, although inwardly startled by Viola's immediate understanding of his request, did not back down and stared at Viola, almost threateningly.

Viola, while meeting his gaze lightly, smiled teasingly.

“Do you really think you can do that? Do you even realize what you've done? ”

“Quit the nonsense. If it's impossible, just say so.”

“Oh, you're willing to decline? Regardless of success or failure, I think I'm the only one who would take on such negotiations.”

“You can't do it, can you? In that case, I'll resort to another method.”

“Do you think someone else can negotiate like I can? Who do you intend to ask? ”

“I'm not obligated to answer that.”

Viola looked at Tiol, smiling as if she could read his thoughts. Tiol returned her gaze with a hostile, grim expression.

They stared at each other silently for a while. While most people might unintentionally show their thoughts on their faces during such moments, Viola concealed hers behind a fake smile.

Tiol's thoughts leaked slightly through his expression. This allowed Viola to discern various things about him.

Although somewhat resigned, Tiol realized that Viola's request to negotiate with Sheryl's group was not his only option. He likely had other means, perhaps non-negotiation-related ones.

Viola, having discerned this, found the situation intriguing and smiled with amusement.

“Alright then. Let's talk about the reward. Even if I agree to help, it won't come cheap, you know? ”

Viola then wore a wry smile, hinting at a sense of familiarity towards Tiol.

“Actually, I also angered Akira during that big conflict. I was moments away from being killed.”

“...Is that so? ”

“Yes, it was tough.”

She had been cornered by Akira in her office, with a bullet wound in her body. She had managed to survive thanks to Carol's timely first aid. But now, she was being threatened with a gun to her forehead, coerced into cooperating with the artifact sales shop.

She had agreed to it and was barely alive. She had also passed information about traitors, including Tiol, to Sheryl's group, showing her cooperation. It was unavoidable.

Viola recounted this with a convincing display of sympathy. Carol stifled a laugh beside her.

And Tiol was easily deceived. Although he still harbored resentment towards Viola, the impression of her had changed significantly. Selling information for money and being forced to speak under threat of death were two different things. His hostility towards Viola had diminished considerably.

“So, about that... I can't afford it. So, I'll pay with artifacts instead.”

Tiol said this and placed a large backpack he had brought on the ground before stepping back.

Carol approached the backpack alone, as a precaution, checked its contents, and then called Viola after ensuring it was safe.

Viola looked at the artifacts packed in the backpack and turned a surprised expression towards Tiol.

“...How did you manage to obtain this many artifacts? ”

“I'm not obliged to answer. So, is this enough? ”

“Not nearly enough.”

“What!?”

He had packed as many artifacts as he could gather from the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin into the large backpack. It should have been a sufficient amount. Thus, Tiol's face twisted in anger. His distrust towards Viola grew significantly.

However, Viola remained calm and even seemed somewhat amused.

“And how much do you think this would be worth? ”

“...It should be worth around 100 million Aurum.”

Tiol wasn't particularly confident in his appraisal skills regarding the artifacts. It was more of an estimate.

However, these were artifacts collected from the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Even with some margin of error in the appraisal, it should still be a substantial sum. With that thought in mind, Tiol's face contorted with anger.

Yet Viola saw through it all. Despite knowing this, she deliberately sighed as if to indicate she didn't understand.

“You see, your opponent isn't just some small-time hunter or a minor faction boss. It's Akira and Sheryl. Do you honestly think reconciliation or settlement with them would come at such a low price? You're underestimating the situation.”

Viola handed Tiol a data terminal.

“Akira's combat records. I can't give you a copy since it's confidential city data. Just take a look. Rethink your understanding of who you're negotiating with. Understand what kind of opponents you're dealing with.”

Taking the data terminal, Tiol looked at the displayed information and was astonished. It showed Akira single-handedly battling a black wolf.

“...Was he really that strong!?”

Tiol's perception of Akira's abilities was based on when he defeated the humanoid weapons attacking the warehouse. That alone was impressive, but he hadn't thought Akira could be so effortlessly powerful.

Viola further pointed out Tiol's naivety.

“You probably saw Sheryl's clothes and thought she might be some rich lady, right? But do you really understand the value of those clothes? They're custom-made outfits using materials from the old-world. The tailoring alone costs over a million. Do you think someone who can casually wear such clothes is an ordinary person?”

Surprised by this revelation, Tiol was hit with more from Viola.

“The settlement money you'll pay to Akira and Sheryl, along with compensation to Shijima's group and my reward. Do you honestly believe 100 million is enough? Sorry, but that amount won't even start a proper negotiation. Of course, the more you offer, the higher the chance of success. But no matter how much you have, success is not guaranteed.”

Seeing Tiol struggling with a grim expression, Viola was inwardly a little surprised. His dilemma indicated there might be a possibility, after all.

Tiol, having agonized over it, finally nodded.

“Understood. Take it.”

“Deal. Then we'll leave. Contact me when you have the rest of the artifacts ready. Remember, the more, the better the chance of success. Don't forget that.”

With that, Viola left with Carol.

Watching them depart, Tiol wondered if his decision had been correct. Nonetheless, he had already committed to it and tried to muster up some determination with a forced expression of resolve.

A short distance away from Tiol, Carol chuckled lightly, her expression breaking.

“It's funny, isn't it? A kid who got kicked out of the faction because of Viola is now trying to return to it by relying on Viola herself.”

“That's why the world is interesting, isn't it? ”

“Coming from someone who stirs up trouble? ”

“Indeed. Isn't it amusing? ”

The two villainesses laughed together with wicked smiles.

“So, Viola. Are you going to take that kid's request seriously? ”

“Oh, pardon me. I always take things seriously, you know? ”

“Is that so? ”

Viola wasn't lying, and Carol didn't think she was either.

However, whether Tiol would be saved or not was a completely different matter. That interpretation was something they both shared.

Chapter 155: Reconstruction Completed

While Akira and the others were continuing their Hunter Rank adjustment requests, which also included Yumina's training in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, Tiol was also continuing his relic collection, combined with clinical trials, in the same location.

Thanks to the camouflage function provided by Yatsubayashi, he could freely collect relics in the dangerous ruins without being attacked by monsters. The exhilaration that arose from there had already disappeared from Tiol. In its place, a sense of urgency had emerged, feeling the need to gather as many relics as possible.

Yatsubayashi would escort Tiol to the edge of the rear communication line, but from there, he had to proceed on foot. There were limitations to transporting relics. The use of vehicles was rejected by Yatsubayashi.

The camouflage function applied to Tiol was only effective for him and not adaptable to vehicles. It was deemed unsafe because if the vehicle were attacked, there was a risk that the occupants would also be attacked. The use of carts and similar means was also rejected for the same reason. Even backpacks, if too large, could be dangerous. That's how it was explained.

Tiol didn't know if this was true or not. However, if Yatsubayashi said it was unsafe, Tiol had no choice but to accept it.

Tiol also contacted Viola to inquire about the progress of the request. The response was that they were currently in the preparation stage.

The highlight of Sheryl's relic shop was the expensive relics brought in by Akira. However, due to Akira accepting the Hunter Rank adjustment request, the supply of relics had been interrupted. All relics found during the request were required to be sold in the city.

So far, there hadn't been any major problems. But if the procurement of expensive relics continued to be disrupted, it could severely affect

the operation of the relic shop. Sheryl was currently conveying this sense of crisis to her associates to stir up concern.

And once enough concern had been instilled, she would inform them that there was someone who could provide a large quantity of high-value relics under certain conditions. Sheryl, determined to make the relic shop a success, would likely accept those conditions unless they were extremely unfavorable.

That person was Tiol, but the condition for his return to the group was something Sheryl and the others weren't yet aware of. Until enough concern had been raised, there was a risk they might prioritize Tiol's elimination.

So, Viola concluded by emphasizing that she wanted as many relics of the highest quality and quantity as possible before Akira's Hunter Rank adjustment request was completed.

If Tiol could gather a sufficient quantity of relics, his wish might come true. By being hired by Sheryl's group as a hunter, he could establish a connection with Sheryl and potentially strengthen their relationship through subsequent actions to make up for his betrayal. Tiol saw hope in that prospect.

But there was a time limit. Once Yatsubayashi's clinical trials were over, it would no longer be possible to gather expensive relics in the depths of the ruins. Once Akira's Hunter Rank adjustment request was completed, the possibility of Sheryl accepting his return would decrease drastically. Both were fatal consequences.

Time was running out. Tiol realized this. He needed to hurry. He felt rushed. He might not make it in time. He began to feel anxious.

Tiol was panicking.

Tiol, who had started collecting relics in the depths of the ruins, was in a state of extreme haste, making his movements very sloppy.

Convinced that he wouldn't be attacked, he abandoned caution towards monsters and ran around the ruins, collecting relics recklessly.

But in reality, he should have been cautious of other hunters. He had heard that even Akira was working as a hunter in the depths of the ruins. He should have been cautious, especially towards Akira, to avoid being detected.

However, Tiol had abandoned even that caution.

Thinking that as long as he stayed away from places where hunters hadn't yet cleared out the monsters, he wouldn't be detected by other hunters, especially Akira, he conducted his relic collection in a location far from the rear communication line.

Tiol had forgotten in his panic.

Yatsubayashi's new camouflage function during the clinical trials was meant to prevent attacks from monsters, not to remain undetected by them.

If he searched for relics in areas where many monsters inhabited without being cleared out by hunters, he would encounter more monsters and a greater variety of monsters than in other areas.

And the purpose of the clinical trials was to verify and confirm the effectiveness of that function. It couldn't be guaranteed to work against types of monsters that hadn't been confirmed yet. Also, no one was guaranteeing that previously unattacked monsters wouldn't attack now.

But Tiol had convinced himself otherwise.

Due to being too focused on relic collection, Tiol's movements in the ruins were sloppy and conspicuous. Because of this, he was spotted by many monsters.

And on one street, Tiol failed to notice that the large gluttonous crocodile there was behaving differently from other monsters.

Yatsubayashi's angry voice echoed through the communication.

“Tiol! Run! That one's camouflage doesn't work on it! ”

“...Huh? ”

Tiol noticed the gluttonous crocodile. The huge crocodile, capable of swallowing vehicles whole, was charging towards him.

“Ah...”

“What are you doing? ! Run quickly! ”

The gluttonous crocodile was too big to enter buildings. Tiol was lucky to escape by running into a nearby building. There was plenty of time.

But he didn't.

The shock of suddenly encountering a situation contrary to his belief that he wouldn't be attacked by monsters, and the fear of a powerful monster charging at him from the depths of the ruins, paralyzed Tiol's consciousness.

The enemy was attacking. He was watching it happen. But he couldn't move. Tiol stood frozen in place.

In that moment, the gluttonous crocodile closed the distance and opened its large mouth right in front of Tiol.

In Tiol's augmented field of vision, the gluttonous crocodile was highlighted in red.



Tiol woke up in one of Yatsubayashi's mobile medical clinic beds.

“...?”

He was puzzled about why he was there and where “there” even was. In his groggy state, he couldn't even understand that, leaving Tiol just confused.

Then Yatsubayashi spoke up.

“Awake now. Are you okay?”

A strange confusion mixed into his still groggy consciousness, prompting a response from Tiol. Yatsubayashi then changed his question with a slightly stern expression.

“...What's your name?”

“...Name? It's Tiol. You know that, right? Why are you asking that?”

Tiol replied with a puzzled expression, and Yatsubayashi's expression softened.

“Is your hearing functioning properly? Is your consciousness awakened enough to understand the meaning of the question? That's what I'm confirming.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Do you know where this is?”

“Where... It's your vehicle, right?”

“Do you know why you're here? ”

“Why... I was supposed to be collecting relics... Huh? ”

Tiol tried to recall his recent memories, but he could only remember up to a certain point.

Yatsubayashi observed Tiol's state with the eyes of a researcher. Then, with a somewhat casual tone, he smiled and operated his terminal.

“You don't remember? You apparently fought back against a gluttonous crocodile in the ruins.”

“...Oh, right. I was attacked by that huge crocodile... Huh? Fought back? ”

“That's right. Despite my warning, you decided to fight the gluttonous crocodile. Want to see it? ”

Tiol watched the footage given to him by Yatsubayashi. There, he saw himself kicking, punching, and overpowering the giant crocodile.

“Absolutely reckless. While it's theoretically possible with the enhanced physical abilities of your modified body, there's no need to deliberately risk your life like that.”

Yatsubayashi's words of admonishment, spoken in exasperation, barely reached Tiol. He was too astonished and perplexed by the unexpected footage.

“...Did I... really do that? ”

“Perhaps you're the type to lose memories of the intervening period when you lose consciousness? That's dangerous.”

As Tiol watched the footage, he tried to trace back his memories. With his mind in a state of confusion, he tried to reconcile the

footage of himself with his memories. He furrowed his brow and groaned, desperately trying to remember what happened afterward. He remembered the giant mouth of the gluttonous crocodile looming before him, but beyond that, he couldn't recall anything.

“No good. I can't remember. Did I really do this? Even watching this, I don't feel any connection or recognition.”

“Well, this is reconstructed footage based on your perspective. It's changed to a third-party perspective for data analysis. It's just a simulation. You wouldn't remember it.”

“I see... Wait, what happened to me after that? ”

“After defeating the gluttonous crocodile, you collapsed on the spot. I brought you here from there. I couldn't just leave you there.”

“How did you even get to a place filled with monsters like that? ”

In response to Tiol's simple question, Yatsubayashi returned a somewhat stern gaze.

“I tried my best while praying that the monsters wouldn't see through the optical camouflage. If Tiol had just followed my instructions and escaped properly, you wouldn't have had to take such dangerous actions, you know? ”

“Uh, sorry.”

Tiol looked genuinely apologetic. Yatsubayashi then softened his attitude.

“Given the trouble, today's trials end here. Let's go home.”

Tiol felt the desire to continue collecting relics, but he couldn't object.

During the journey back to the city, Yatsubayashi was organizing the data from today's trials. The data collected in the field, no matter how trivial, was all valuable experimental data. He intended to store it carefully for future research.

But the footage shown to Tiol was discarded. It had no value as part of the trial and was unnecessary.



Today marked the final day of Tiol's relic collection days, which also served as clinical trials.

The artifacts gathered so far already exceed the minimum amount specified by Viola. However, it is said that the more he has, the better the negotiation will go, so he can't let my guard down until the end.

Tiol was determined to devote himself to artifact collection today as well.

Arriving at the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, Tiol began searching for buildings that seemed to contain valuable artifacts. Due to the opening of the rear communication lines, a considerable number of hunters had already collected artifacts, and the ones near the rear communication lines were dwindling. So, he decided to search in slightly more distant locations.

Tiol's target was a tall building. While it seemed to hold valuable artifacts, it also appeared to be inhabited by many monsters, a sight that would deter ordinary hunters.

However, he judged that he would be fine if he didn't get attacked by monsters and entered with expectations of finding a mountain of artifacts.

However, his expectations were betrayed. While there were indeed many monsters inhabiting the building as expected, the discovered artifacts were all cheap goods. It's not to say that there were no

valuable artifacts at all, but they were far from enough to fill his backpack to the brim.

Still, he wondered if there were still plenty of valuable artifacts on the higher floors. With that in mind, he climbed the building without giving up hope. However, the encounters with monsters only increased, and he couldn't find a single pile of artifacts that fulfilled his expectations.

Finally, he finished investigating the top floor, the 30th floor. The result became a deep sigh for Tiol.

The majority of the 30th floor was occupied by a huge white room. There were no furnishings on the walls, floor, or ceiling, just monsters wandering around, making it the worst place for artifact collection.

Disheartened, Tiol turns back towards the stairs to leave the building.

“What the heck is this place... even though it's a huge building, there's nothing good here. ...Huh? ”

As Tiol grumbles and walks down the corridor, he notices a pair of figures ahead. It's Akira and Yumina.

There's Akira, looking at him. He's been spotted. He's been found out. In that moment when awareness catches up to him, Tiol's mind is flooded with various memories, thoughts, and emotions.

Surprise at finding other hunters in this place filled with monsters. Fear of encountering Akira before negotiations with Viola are finished.

What he was told by Yatsubayashi. That if he meets Akira, he might be killed instantly without a chance to beg for his life, as he was taught by Viola. The strength of Akira, who can fight the Black Wolf alone.

Amidst the pressure and turmoil weighing on Tiol's mind, the figure of Akira in his augmented field of view is highlighted in red.

And he remembers. That the gluttonous crocodile that attacked him without camouflage from Yatsubayashi was similarly highlighted in red.

To be killed.

Overwhelmed by this thought, Tiol instinctively raises his left arm towards Akira with a distorted expression of fear.

In the next moment, bullets are fired from Tiol's left arm. The fired bullet instantly lands at the end of the corridor and explodes.

The building shakes, and flames and smoke rapidly approach from the end of the corridor where the bullet dodged by Akira and the others exploded.

Tiol himself is engulfed in that smoke, but even in his semi-madness, he runs in the opposite direction of Akira and the others.

(I-I'm going to be killed...! I have to... escape...! From him...! Quickly...!)

He shot at Akira. Negotiation is impossible now, no matter how he tries. If he doesn't run, he'll be killed. With that thought, he desperately runs.

(My arm...!? What's happening...!?)

In the basement of Yatsubayashi Clinic, Tiol once aimed his left arm at the door of the room. Now he finally understands the reason for that action, which seemed strange to him without knowing its meaning.

He tried to destroy the door with gunfire to leave the room. He was aware that he could do that without realizing it himself. Tiol was

horrified by that fact.

Tiol runs into a white room. Inside, just like before, there are numerous monsters.

But there's a clear difference from before. In Tiol's augmented field of view, all the monsters are highlighted in red.

(No way...!?)

The gunfire inside the building, coupled with the approach with the gun exposed, was considered sufficient hostile action by the monsters. They start attacking Tiol one after another.

Tiol hastily points the gun barrel at the monsters with a panic. But no bullets come out.

(Why...!?)

Tiol's gun is single-shot. Until the bullet is regenerated, he cannot fire the next shot. He didn't know that.

So he switches to the AAG assault rifle in his right hand and fires continuously. But naturally, it has no effect at all.

In the first place, this gun was only carried to deceive others, as it was unnatural for a hunter to be in the depths of the ruins without a gun. It was meant to impress other hunters, and probably had no effect other than making them think it might have extremely powerful expansion parts installed.

In his half-madness, Tiol throws away the gun. And then, he hits the strange large beast that jumps at him in a desperate manner. Tiol himself never thought it would work.

But contrary to his expectations, the beast hit by Tiol's fist had its head crushed and died instantly. It was blown away by the impact of the blow.

“...Huh? ”

Tiol, who was momentarily stunned, quickly counterattacks as more monsters leap at him. He punches, kicks, dodges, and tramples. The monsters hit by Tiol's attacks breathe their last one after another.

As the number of enemy corpses increases, the fear and astonishment fade from Tiol's face. And when they completely disappear, what appears on Tiol's face is a smile showing excessive confidence.

“...Haha! That's right! With this body, I can win! You thought you could scare me! ”

The footage shown to him by Yatsubayashi before also encouraged Tiol. His own figure overwhelming the giant gluttonous crocodile. He had no memory of it, but it was indeed a fact, and it boosted his spirits as he laughed confidently.

“I defeated that huge crocodile too! There's no way I'll lose to you guys! ”

He counterattacks the monsters attacking him one after another. Some of them are powerful individuals. It was impossible to instantly kill all the enemies. However, he inflicts painful blows on them, making them lie on the ground.

He can win. It's a piece of cake. Tiol fights gleefully as if to say that this is his power.

But that confidence leads to carelessness. He fails to notice the white, giant, mutated gluttonous crocodile closing in on him from the depths of the room.

The mutated creature, now hardly recognizable as a crocodile, swiftly advances with its long, agile legs and attempts to devour Tiol with its wide-open mouth.

“What!?”

By the time he realizes it, it's too late. The monstrous gluttonous crocodile, with its grotesquely altered head raised high like a snake, lunges at Tiol from above.

Countless sharp teeth tear Tiol's body apart. What escapes from the closed jaws are only parts of Tiol's body from his knees down and a portion of his right arm. The rest is devoured and swallowed.

And then Tiol loses consciousness inside the belly of the gluttonous crocodile.

But that's not the end. After a short while, the gluttonous crocodile that ate Tiol starts to thrash about in agony, as if in intense pain. Then, a part of its belly suddenly explodes.

From the explosion emerges a humanoid figure as if crawling out of the crocodile's belly. It's Tiol. He has finished regenerating the bullets and fired from inside the gluttonous crocodile, creating an opening to escape.

The arms and legs that were chewed to pieces had already begun to regenerate, using the materials obtained from devouring the gluttonous crocodile from within. Standing up with awkwardly regenerated limbs, he held a mixture of flesh and machinery in his right hand, taking a bite out of part of the gluttonous crocodile to accelerate its regeneration.

His expression was calm, devoid of any signs of disgust at consuming something incomprehensible. It was a serene expression reminiscent of a mask.

Then the gluttonous crocodile started to move. Despite the injuries like having a portion of its torso blown away, it overwhelmed Tiol with its abnormal vitality typical of biological monsters. While regenerating its wounds, it grew arms and mouths all over its body to attack Tiol in order to finish off the prey it had failed to kill before.

Tiol also realized that the gluttonous crocodile was not yet defeated and continued the battle. He jumped onto the massive body, punching, kicking, and biting.

Limbs and arms were blown off the gluttonous crocodile, only to grow back again. Tiol's limbs were torn off and grew back as well. A battle began between the two gluttonous beings, akin to devouring each other.



Remaining at the mobile medical facility, Yatsubayashi wore a deeply interested expression as he analyzed the data transmitted from the information gathering device embedded in Tiol's body.

“This is the second time something has come out of the gluttonous crocodile's belly. It seems that the erosion into the system has progressed significantly. But will Tiol-kun's consciousness recover properly? It was resolved with just minor adjustments before, but... hmm.”

With a slightly troubled expression, Yatsubayashi reviewed the data from when Tiol was previously attacked by the gluttonous crocodile.

In the reproduced footage edited from a third-person perspective, Tiol's figure appeared as if he had burst out of the gluttonous crocodile's belly, similar to this time. The footage shown to Tiol had been fabricated by Yatsubayashi to conceal the truth.

“Is the turning point when the mental stress exceeds a certain threshold? What's the method of recovery? It would be easier if we could control it with sedatives... hmm.”

While Yatsubayashi pondered, Tiol continued his battle with the grotesque gluttonous crocodile. He used his left arm cannon to bombard and even grew a light blade from his right hand to slash his opponent.

“Could it be... that during reconstruction, the functions of the collected artifacts were incorporated due to being eaten together? Technically interesting, but... this function is unnecessary. It deviates from the original purpose. However, removing functions deeply involved in the basic system like this is troublesome.”

While Yatsubayashi contemplated various thoughts, the battle between Tiol and the gluttonous crocodile continued until a conclusion was reached.

The winner was Tiol. He cleaved the head of the bizarrely mutated gluttonous crocodile, blasted its torso to create a large hole, and finally, after kicking, punching, and biting the opponent who tried to regenerate, he blew it away dramatically to deliver the finishing blow.

“I won. Should I go pick him up... hmm? ”

Yatsubayashi found Tiol's behavior curious. Tiol was gazing somewhere as if he were seeing something in the empty white room.

Perhaps a monster using optical camouflage was there, and Tiol noticed it. That's what Yatsubayashi suspected, but the high-performance information gathering devices embedded in Tiol's body for data collection showed that there was nothing there.

“...Optical camouflage? No, that's not it. In that case, augmented reality? He seems to be seeing something invisible to me. Tiol seems to be seeing characters or symbols that I can't understand. Is something interesting being displayed to him? ”

As Yatsubayashi continued to ponder, the data sent from Tiol underwent a significant change.



Having defeated the grotesque gluttonous crocodile, Tiol simply stood there. It was a defensive action by the system, not Tiol's will.

And once it was over, Tiol, whose consciousness had been eroded by the system, didn't even consider moving from there.

When he previously defeated the gluttonous crocodile, Tiol had stood still in the same way. And he had been carried to the mobile medical facility by Yatsubayashi, who arrived at the scene.

There was nothing moving around. Other than the gluttonous crocodile, the monsters had died as collateral damage in the battle. Tiol was the only one there.

But something appeared in Tiol's field of vision. It was a woman dressed in a black dress from the old-world. She smiled and approached Tiol.

Even during the battle with the gluttonous crocodile, fear and panic were evident in Tiol's expression, though faint, when his arms and legs were torn apart there.

Due to the consciousness erosion by the system, Tiol could understand the meaning of the explanatory text displayed next to the woman.

Forced connection by higher authority. Communication disruption impossible. Sector 844 upper management entity. Disparity in strength, recklessness. Win rate, none. Immediate retreat beyond communication range recommended.

Tiol immediately tried to run backward. Communication with the woman was being conducted through this white room. Without being taught this, he understood and attempted to escape from this room. But he tried.

However, as he turned around, his foot stopped on the first step. In front of him was the woman from before.

The woman smiled within Tiol's augmented field of vision.

『Suddenly trying to run away is quite impolite, isn't it? Well, it's strange to demand courtesy from someone who's disguising enemy identification markers.』

Then she reached out towards Tiol. In his augmented field of vision, her hand passed through Tiol's forehead, and her fingertips reached his brain.

『I was going to ask him, but he returned, so well, you'll do. Since you seem to be without any annoying companions.』

Tiol couldn't move. Despite being restrained by the figure in his augmented vision, it was only an image. There was no physical force to hold him back. Yet he couldn't move.

『You're pretending to be on our side, aren't you? That's fine. It aligns with what I want to ask of you anyway. Let me help you equip yourself better as well.』

Tiol couldn't move because the system supporting his current state was under attack by the woman. Text appeared in his augmented vision, and its contents changed to something fatal.

Additional data incorporation in progress. Reconstructing connection function. Reconstructing command system. Reconstructing the system. Final adjustments underway.

The woman withdrew her hand from Tiol's head. Then she smiled.

『Well, please.』

As the woman, who was about to leave, stopped and turned back.

『Oh, I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Tsubaki. Well then.』

With that, Tsubaki left those words and disappeared from Tiol's augmented field of vision.

At the same time, Tiol, who had been rigid until now, began to move. The first thing he did was to thrust his hand into his own head and forcibly remove the bomb embedded there.

The bomb was set to detonate upon being extracted without authorization. The bomb exploded in Tiol's hand. His hand and wrist were blown off, and green blood splattered along with flesh.

But Tiol didn't care at all. He proceeded to eat the corpse of the gluttonous crocodile to begin regeneration of the missing parts. The blown-off hand grew back, and other injuries healed as well. By the time he finished eating the gluttonous crocodile's corpse, Tiol had returned to an uninjured state.

Tiol's field of vision displayed characters indicating his current state.

Reconstruction complete. Mission initiated.

Chapter 156: A Woman's Weakness

After encountering Tiol at the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, Akira and his group finished their hunter duties for the day. While they were about to leave the ruins through the rear communication line, they received a message from Kibayashi.

“I have something to discuss, so I'd like you to stop by the frontline base on your way back. ”Akira and the others were told this, and since they were already planning to head back, they informed him that they would go directly to the frontline base.

Upon entering the dining hall of the frontline base, Kibayashi waved his hand from the table to call Akira and the others over.

“You're here. Come over here,”

Akira sat opposite Kibayashi with Yumina. Seeing Kibayashi's cheerful face, he made a somewhat troubled expression.

“So, what's the matter? ”

“Well, let's talk slowly over food. I'll treat you, so order whatever you like. By the way, it's early today, isn't it? Did something happen? ”

“Just a bit.”

Kibayashi glanced at Yumina, urging her to provide details. Yumina explained as their companion.

“Actually, we were attacked by other hunters at the ruins. So, as a precaution under my command, we withdrew.”

Hearing this, Kibayashi showed an amused surprise.

“Hmm! Attacking Akira, huh! I don't know who they are, but there were quite reckless folks out there. From the way you put it and

judging by Akira's demeanor, it seems like they're still alive. That's quite something.”

“What do you mean? ”

“Because weren't you planning to transport Yumina to a safe place first, and then go kill them? ”

“Huh? Was that the plan? ”

Kibayashi nodded as if to say he understood, towards the slightly surprised Yumina.

“Of course. That's the kind of guy Akira is. I'm actually surprised that Akira went as far as to escort Yumina here. If it were Akira, he'd probably leave Yumina behind, telling her to go home alone, and charge ahead without waiting for an answer. I'm surprised he didn't do that.”

Yumina glanced at Akira somewhat understandingly. Indeed, she thought, feeling somewhat convinced, but also wondering why he didn't do that.

Akira sighed as if dodging the topic.

“That doesn't matter now, Kibayashi. Get to the point.”

“Is that so? Then let's order first. It'll be covered by the expenses for the hunter rank adjustment request. We should take advantage of these perks. Anyway, it's impossible to go back to the ruins now and find the one who attacked you. Just eat.”

Saying so, Kibayashi began to order his own dish.

Seeing that, Akira relaxed a bit. He let out a slight sigh and started choosing his dish from the menu. Then, almost as if teasing, he ordered something expensive.

Once the three dishes were ready, Kibayashi got to the main topic. It was about changing the activity location for the hunter rank adjustment request.

“The Lida Commercial District Ruin. We'd like you to operate there for a while.” After casually mentioning this, Kibayashi added further details.

Information has been received that there are ancient automata from the Old-World in those ruins. Although the credibility of this information is questionable, if they do exist, they are extremely valuable relics and, depending on their condition, could be very dangerous artifacts as well. Kibayashi want Akira to focus on securing them.

It's fine Akira to go without a companion, or he can form a team if he want. Akira can also act alone. In exchange for covering the ammunition costs, if he want to negotiate changing the condition to sell all the artifacts to the city, they can discuss it here. Of course, it's fine as it is.

Kibayashi talked about these matters seriously as a city employee.

Akira gave Kibayashi a slightly suspicious look.

“...So, what's the catch in this story? ”

“If you think positively about this story, I'll tell you.”

“Is there another catch? ”

“There is.”

Seeing Kibayashi's cheerful smile, Akira sighed.

“Fine. So, what's the catch? What do you want me to do at the Lida Commercial District Ruin? ”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Huh? ”

Akira looked puzzled. Kibayashi laughed as if he had been expecting that reaction.

“To be frank, whether there are ancient automata in the Lida Commercial District Ruin or not doesn't matter. This time's story is just a pretext to keep you out of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin for a while.”

Akira didn't understand. Kibayashi explained the underlying situation to him.

To begin with, Akira's hunter rank adjustment request is being carried out at the convenience of both Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry. It's to erase the bad reputation caused by the defeat of the humanoid weapons they were competing to supply to the Kugamayama City Defense Corps, which was accomplished by Akira.

Actually, Akira possesses extremely high capabilities to the point where he's been given a hunter rank adjustment request. In a limited situation like fighting in the slums and with cheaper models of machines, it's understandable even if he were to be defeated. It's to give his explanations and justifications more persuasive power.

And thanks to the results Akira achieved at the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, his excuses now have a certain degree of persuasiveness.

So both companies took this opportunity and planned a second presentation of their new model humanoid weapons. They've organized a large unit of their own humanoid weapons as a rear

communication line extension unit to fight further ahead in the rear communication line and demonstrate the capabilities of both companies' humanoid weapons to Kugamayama City.

The humanoid weapons transported to Kugamayama City by inter-city transport vehicles will soon be brought to the frontline base. Once the maintenance is completed there, the plan will be put into action.

Upon hearing this, Akira looked puzzled.

“...So, what does this have to do with me? ”

“It does. At least Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry thought so. Don't you understand? ”

Akira didn't. Seeing Akira's expression of confusion, Kibayashi smiled cheerfully.

“Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry don't want you to interfere with their presentation again.”

“...No, I don't have any intention of interfering.”

“That's because they're wary of you. Don't you get it? ”

A second failure is unacceptable. The next presentation must be a success no matter what. So, both companies cooperated to eliminate Akira.

If Akira isn't at the scene, he can't interfere no matter what happens. So, for a while, they decided not to let Akira get close to the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. That's the result of changing the activity location for the hunter rank adjustment request.

“The story about the ancient automata in the Lida Commercial District Ruin is just a mere excuse to keep you out of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Any other ruins would do.”

However, the official stance is that it's a change in the activity location for the hunter rank adjustment request. They can't instruct Akira to go to unsuitable ruins. The mention of the ancient automata serves to justify this. Kibayashi clarified.

Upon hearing this, Akira thought for a moment.

“...So, is the story about the ancient automata a lie then? ”

“No, I can't say it's a lie. It may or may not be true. It's not confirmed information. They just happened to find the information about the automata when looking for something that could be beneficial for this situation. But it's still information from Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry. I think it has a certain credibility.”

“I see.”

Akira thought that he didn't want to wander around the ruins endlessly looking for non-existent automata, but if there was a reasonable chance they existed, then it was acceptable. He considered exploring the Lida Commercial District Ruin positively. Then, he asked Yumina.

“What about you, Yumina? Will you come with me? Or do you want to refrain? ”

“What do you mean? I'm your companion, so I'll go with you. It seems that the Lida Commercial District Ruin are lower in difficulty compared to the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, so I won't be a hindrance.”

“No, that's not it.”

Akira continued lightly, seeing Yumina's puzzled expression.

“Didn't Kibayashi say it's okay to go without a companion? You can quit now if you want, you know? ”

Yumina looked slightly surprised. And in her expression, there was a slight hint of shadow.

“...Akira, am I... getting in the way? ”

It was clear to her the difference in their abilities. And today, Akira had cancelled the pursuit of the hunters who attacked them based on her instructions.

Was she being indirectly refused further accompanying him? Yumina interpreted Akira's words that way.

Akira was also slightly surprised by her response. He shook his head hastily.

“No, no, that's not it. Yumina, you're accompanying me on orders from above, right? You think you can't quit without a good reason, especially on such occasions, right? Even if you wanted to quit now, it wouldn't be possible, right? ”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Besides, you've been with me since the warehouse security, right? Including that time, it seems like you've been removed from your original team because of the request, right? Is it okay? ”

Akira was showing concern for Yumina. Yumina noticed it, but couldn't immediately respond due to the swirling emotions inside her.

She did indeed have a desire to return to Katsuya's side. But even if she stopped accompanying Akira to achieve that, given that both her superiors and the comprehensive support system considered her a hindrance to the team, it would be difficult to return to Katsuya's team.

And even if she did return to Katsuya's team, with her current abilities, she would only end up dragging Katsuya down. Yet if she

were to stick by his side forcibly, she would likely end up being solely reliant on him, just like many others Katsuya had helped before.

And she didn't want that. She had always been with Katsuya not to cling to him. That's what she wanted to believe.

For Yumina, the current state of being ordered to accompany Akira from above was, at best, a means to escape from the current situation where she couldn't be by Katsuya's side. At worst, it was a convenient reason to divert her attention from that situation.

She couldn't reveal her inner thoughts. Instead, she forced a bright smile.

"It's okay. I have my own reasons too. If it's not a bother, I'll accompany you."

"... I see."

Akira smiled a little happily. Kibayashi looked quite surprised at seeing this. And Akira noticed that.

"...What's wrong? "

"Oh, nothing."

Without mentioning that he found it surprising that Akira was such a person, Kibayashi let the conversation flow.

"So, assuming Yumina continues as a companion as before, is it alright to handle the artifacts the same way? If we stick to the current method, even if we find an automaton, it'll be sold to the city for next to nothing, right? Is that fine with you? "

"First, tell me why you're bringing this up."

"It's about automata from the old-world. They're different from regular artifacts. There are various conditions involved, but it

wouldn't be strange if they were valued in the few billions of Aurums, not just a billion. The issue is whether it's alright for them to be bought at a mere 10,000 Aurums just because of the contract.”

“1-10,000!? For artifacts worth few billions!? ”

“Yes, indeed. Of course, your Hunter Rank will increase accordingly. But you won't receive any money. In exchange for full ammunition expenses cover by the client, those are the conditions. What do you say? Change it to self-payment? ”

“Change... no, wait, what happens if I change it? ”

“First, you'll be paid the equivalent of the unused ammunition costs at the time of settlement, at the price based on your Hunter Rank then. In other words, you'll be paid an amount that doesn't apply the discount on ammunition costs based on your current Hunter Rank. It'll be more expensive.”

“...Didn't you say that any unused portions could be handed over to the city later? ”

“I did. But that's under the current condition where the client covers the ammunition expenses.”

“...I thought I wouldn't need so much, but I ended up buying a lot.”

“I see. That's tough.”

“...Since I've been handing over the artifacts collected from the depths of Kuzushihara District's ruins to the city for next to nothing, I don't have much money.”

“I see. That's tough.”

Akira's face contorted as if to say he'd been had. Kibayashi was smiling gleefully.

“...Isn't this a bit unfair? ”

“That's an unfounded accusation. Besides, it's not like automata are guaranteed to be found. So wouldn't it be fine to stick with the current conditions? ”

“I guess so, but...”

“Right? But just in case, to avoid trouble later if we happen to find an automaton, I'm explaining what will happen then in advance.”

“W-Well, that's true, but...”

Feeling defeated in the argument, Akira's expression grew even more complicated. Correspondingly, Kibayashi continued to smile happily.

Akira can change the proportion of self-payment. There's also the option of adjusting the refund for unused ammunition or the selling price of artifacts according to that proportion.

While keeping ammunition expenses cover by the client, Akira can sell valuable artifacts at a high price. Or, he can sell them at a low price. He's allowed to change the self-payment ratio. He could adjust the refund for unused ammunition and the selling price of artifacts according to that ratio. Negotiations are accepted.

However, any changes to the conditions or negotiations must be done here and now. If no agreement is reached, the current conditions will remain.

Kibayashi explained this while enjoying Akira's reaction, then concluded the discussion.

“Well, take your time to think it over while having a meal.”

Akira glanced briefly at Yumina. Yumina returned a apologetic expression.

“Ah... sorry, Akira. I can't really intervene in these kinds of negotiations. It could become a liability issue for Drankam, you see. So I can't say anything.”

『...Alpha』

『Think for yourself. How much ammunition do you need based on your abilities? Just grasp that properly and think about it』

Alpha seemed to say, “That's something you can handle, right? ” as she smiled.

Akira let out a deep sigh. Then, he continued to negotiate with the cheerful Kibayashi, pondering deeply.

The negotiation finally concluded after the sun had set.



Akira, who was preparing to explore the Lida Commercial District Ruin, proceeded with his preparations. First, he headed to Shizuka's shop with Yumina. It was to load ammunition into Yumina's car. After parking the car near the shop's loading area, they entered through the front entrance.

Shizuka, behind the counter, noticed Akira and greeted him with a smile.

“Akira, welcome... Oh!?”

Then, she noticed Yumina and exclaimed in surprise.

Akira looked puzzled.

“Shizuka-san, what's wrong? ”

“Oh, nothing much. Akira, is this young lady your friend? ”

Yumina greeted Shizuka politely.

“I'm Yumina. I'm a Hunter affiliated with Drankam.”

“I see. I'm Shizuka. I'm the owner of this shop. Nice to meet you.”

The conversation continued, leaving Akira a bit confused.

Yumina explained that she had been acting as Akira's companion for about two months for Hunter Rank adjustment requests. Due to the change in the exploration site from the depths of Kuzushihara District Ruin to the Lida Commercial District Ruin, they could no longer use ammunition as freely. Thus, there was no need to buy large amounts of ammunition from Shizuka's shop as before.

Akira and the others finished discussing these matters.

“Shizuka-san, with that said, I think today will be the last day for bulk purchase of ammunition. I'm sorry about that.”

“Don't worry about it. If it's going to be self-payment, then you don't have to buy today's batch even though you've already placed the order, right? You've made quite a profit, after all.”

“Ah, that's alright. Since it's now set up that only the ammunition used needs to be paid for, any unused portions can be handed over to the city later, right?”

By negotiating with Kibayashi, Akira managed to change the ammunition expenses to self-payment while ensuring that the ownership of the ammunition remained with the city, with him merely borrowing it. In other words, he enabled post-payment only for the ammunition used.

With this arrangement, Akira could maintain a plentiful supply of ammunition for safety while reducing his own expenses. It was a very favorable condition for Akira, but Kibayashi managed to convince the city to accept these terms through his negotiation skills.

There were two main reasons for this. First, it was because Akira had come up with the negotiation terms with great effort. If the city didn't accept those conditions, his motivation would plummet significantly. Was that acceptable? That's what he argued.

Even though it was a Hunter Rank adjustment request, depending on the situation, if he had to sell old-world automata that could easily be valued in the few billions of Aurums for next to nothing, his motivation to search would diminish. He might even pretend not to find them if he could get away with it. That would be detrimental to the city as well. Akira tried hard to convey this to Kibayashi.

The second reason was Kibayashi's intentions. After hearing Akira's plea, Kibayashi outwardly wore a difficult expression but inwardly readily agreed.

Kibayashi's desire was for Akira to go wild and embody recklessness and folly. He didn't want a situation where Akira, who had ample ammunition, would think he could get away with justifying the exploration with an excuse.

If Akira had abundant ammunition, he would surely cause a commotion commensurate with that amount. This could be expected from the first day when he annihilated a large swarm of spider-type armored insects in the depths of Kuzushihara District Ruin.

Unfortunately, he didn't do anything flashy afterwards, perhaps out of consideration for Yumina. However, if the situation changed, there was a high possibility that he would do something again. It wouldn't be strange if changing the exploration site to the Lida Commercial District Ruin became the catalyst for that.

If possible, Kibayashi wanted to involve Akira again in a joint presentation with Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry. But since that was difficult, he hoped for an incident related to the old-world automaton rumored to be in the Lida Commercial District Ruin. It was troublesome if Akira was passive about it.

Since Akira had made his motivation a condition during the negotiation, as long as that condition was met, Akira would seriously commit to it. Akira was someone who kept such promises.

Thinking this way, Kibayashi, pretending to reluctantly accept Akira's conditions outwardly, subtly pressed Akira, saying, "Now that you've accepted the conditions, you better fulfill your end of the deal."

Consequently, Akira, who believed he had successfully pushed his conditions onto the other party, was completely unaware of Kibayashi's intentions. Because of this, when Akira later talked about it with Shizuka, his attitude was somewhat smug.

Shizuka, upon hearing the story, realized that there might have been some ulterior motives on the other party's side, but since the content itself was favorable to Akira and her, she decided not to make any unnecessary comments. She praised Akira with a smile.

"Akira, as a Hunter, you've become quite skilled at negotiating. Impressive."

"I did my best."

Akira smiled happily, a little embarrassed.

Yumina, seeing this, was surprised. The Akira she had in mind, based on her impressions until then, was not like this.

That day, no one else directed such intense hostility towards her and Katsuya regarding the pickpocketing incident. Amidst the great conflict, no one emitted such a dense aura of hostility as she had felt near the collapsed warehouse, where they were attacked by humanoid weapons.

What was there was just a child who was happy to be praised for doing their best.

Yumina was surprised by this.

Shizuka noticed Yumina's reaction and spoke up.

“By the way, Yumina, you've been going to the ruins with Akira, right? How was he? Was he being unreasonable or reckless? ”

Then Akira interjected.

“Oh, no, I wasn't.”

“Akira, I'm asking Yumina. So, how was it? ”

Shizuka said that to Akira in a slightly reproachful tone, then directed a meaningful and cheerful smile towards Yumina.

Meanwhile, Akira turned a flustered expression towards Yumina. He was clearly saying, “Please don't say that.”

Yumina found their behavior amusing and chuckled lightly. Then, she followed Shizuka's lead and smiled meaningfully.

“Yes, indeed. Akira performed admirably. On the first day of our expedition, he single-handedly defeated a massive swarm of spider-like monsters. It was a significant achievement, and even the city officials were greatly impressed,” Yumina explained.

“Wow, Akira. That's amazing,” Shizuka remarked.

Shizuka smiled and looked at Akira. As Akira looked back at them, he began to fidget amusingly in front of Yumina, seeking help with his eyes. Yumina found Akira's behavior even more amusing and couldn't help but laugh.

“Hey, Yumina.”

Akira complained, to which Yumina apologized with a smile.

“Sorry, sorry. I got carried away. Shizuka-san, while Akira's achievements are indeed impressive, I don't think he was pushing himself too hard or being reckless. He had plenty of ammunition at his disposal and even mentioned that he took it easy because it was the first day of the expedition,” Yumina explained.

“Oh, is that so? You've been keeping your promise not to overdo it. That's a relief,”

“Y-Yes, of course...”

Akira visibly breathed a sigh of relief.

While surprised by Akira's reaction, Yumina found it somewhat enjoyable, unknowingly drawing parallels to herself when she had scolded Katsuya for recklessness.

After finishing their chat with Shizuka, Akira and the others loaded the purchased ammunition into their vehicle. Along the way, Shizuka quietly spoke to Yumina, out of Akira's earshot.

“Yumina, Akira is a bit difficult, but if you can, please try to get along with him.”

Akira needs friends who are equals. Shizuka thought so, but she also sensed that it would be very challenging.

Akira considers himself and Elena's group as friends, and Akira also thinks the same way. He is admired and cherished. However, it's not an equal relationship. Shizuka somehow realized that Akira's relationship with them was based on Akira lowering himself a notch.

However, with Yumina, Akira seemed to allow her in without elevating her status, which Shizuka found intriguing. She thought that's what Akira wanted, but it might not be what Yumina wanted. Yumina had her own desires, and besides, Akira was very strong, albeit with a potentially twisted personality, making him a dangerous

individual. It wouldn't be right to force a closer relationship with such a person.

If possible. With as much hope as possible, Shizuka quietly spoke to Yumina with those words in mind.

Yumina also had a vague understanding of this. Nevertheless, she responded seriously.

“...I do want to try. ...I'm sorry. That's all I can say for now.”

“Okay, thank you very much.”

Yumina and Shizuka, having concluded their short but meaningful conversation, returned to work as if nothing had happened.



After resupplying ammunition at Shizuka's shop, Akira's group headed to the warehouse at Sheryl's base. There, they received the ordered medicines from Katsuragi. Each box cost 50 million Aurum, and Akira loaded ten boxes into Yumina's vehicle.

Having completed the 500 million Aurum transaction, Katsuragi's expression visibly relaxed, reveling in the profits.

“Thanks, as always, Akira. Keep it up like this from now on.”

“No, it's impossible anymore.”

“What!?”

Upon being casually informed of the termination of the lucrative medicine deal, Katsuragi immediately panicked. He further lamented upon hearing the reason from Akira.

“W-wait a minute... I already placed a large order, assuming you would continue to buy from me!?”

“Don't complain to me about the orders I didn't place. Inventory management is your job.”

“But isn't this too sudden!?”

“I was informed abruptly as well, so there's nothing I can do about it. Besides, as Katsuragi pointed out, the risk of termination was always there due to the ongoing Hunter Rank adjustment request, and continuous large-scale purchases, whose termination date was uncertain, would become more expensive. It just turned out as Katsuragi had feared. Handle it yourself.”

Seeing Akira's unyielding attitude, Katsuragi realized it was futile to argue further.

Apart from Akira, there were hardly any buyers for the 50 million Aurum medicines around Katsuragi. While amassing a large inventory could yield significant profits if everything sold, unsold items could strain the business as obsolete inventory.

In order to mitigate the bleeding, Katsuragi hastily contacted business partners to either cancel the bulk orders or reduce the incoming stock as much as possible.

Seeing the vast difference in Akira's attitude compared to Shizuka's, Yumina couldn't help but think.

“Is Akira the type who's quite lenient towards women?”

“W-where did that come from all of a sudden?”

“I just noticed how different your reactions are with Shizuka-san.”

“Well, I've been indebted to Shizuka-san for various things for a while now. It's different from Katsuragi.”

Katsuragi interjected with dissatisfaction upon hearing this.

“If that's the case, shouldn't you consider me a little more, considering we've been through the fire together? ”

“If you're not going to pull the same trick as trying to lowball someone you've been through the fire with, then I'll consider it.”

Receiving a slightly reproachful glance from Akira, Katsuragi laughed it off while avoiding eye contact.

At that moment, Sheryl and Viola arrived. Viola, seemingly unconcerned, started explaining the situation of the relic shop to Akira while enjoying Sheryl's evident distress at witnessing the seemingly close relationship between Akira and Yumina.

Business was currently going well, but other shops were soon expected to recover from the impact of the two major factions' demise. They couldn't monopolize demand as before. They needed to differentiate themselves from other shops. The high-value relics brought in by Akira were proving instrumental in distinguishing themselves from other shops that could only handle cheaper relics.

“Originally, information terminals from the old-world shouldn't even be on the shelves of shops in the slum district. I'm really grateful.”

Viola said proudly before her expression turned slightly serious.

“But they're still merchandise. Once they're sold, they're gone. They'll eventually disappear from the shelves. So, Akira, can't you do something about it? ”

“Even if you say that. All the relics gathered through the Hunter Rank adjustment request are supposed to be sold in the city. You know that, right? ”

“Of course, I understand that. But that's why I'm asking. I'm also trying to keep Sheryl's shop prosperous by honoring our agreement. For that, purchasing high-value relics is absolutely necessary. Can't you do something for Sheryl's sake? ”

Viola pleaded to Akira, but this was merely a facade. It was a plea to let Akira refuse, establishing the premise that even with such a plea, it was impossible.

High-value relics were essential for the shop's operation, but procurement from Akira was impossible. With this understanding planted in both Akira and Sheryl, Viola brought up Tio as a new source of relics, manipulating the situation.

Sheryl sensed that Viola's words were some form of manipulation but couldn't discern the exact purpose. Nevertheless, she refrained from commenting, understanding the necessity of high-value relics for the smooth operation of the shop.

And Akira was completely unaware. Her cooperation with Sheryl was something he had requested from Viola. Hearing it was for Sheryl, Akira couldn't refuse outright. He pondered for a moment before asking tentatively.

“...Sheryl. Do you really need them? ”

Sheryl carefully chose her words.

“Your convenience takes precedence, Akira. You don't need to worry about us.”

“Is that so? ”

“Yes.”

Sheryl replied with a smile, and Akira returned a slight smile.

“...I see.”

“Yes.”

Watching their somewhat heartwarming exchange, Viola inwardly smirked.

(Well, that's the answer I expected from you. Now Akira has an excuse to refuse. Perfect.)

Viola shifted her gaze from Sheryl to Akira.

(To begin with, there's no reason for you to divert relics to us by breaking your contract with the city. You're someone who adheres to such contracts. Perhaps you've cooperated with Sheryl because she somehow convinced you to make such a promise easily? Tough luck.)

If Akira's cooperation with Sheryl had been driven by carnal desires or romantic entanglements, he would have made a move on Sheryl long ago. Since he hadn't, there must be another reason, likely related to his personality. Viola made this deduction.

With Akira refusing to provide relics, they would need a different source for the high-value relics to stock the relic shop. It all depended on how much Tiol had managed to gather. Negotiations would go smoothly depending on that. It was time to make contact with them. Viola thought about this and began planning the next steps.

However, just then, the premise was shattered. Akira casually spoke up.

“Got it. Just wait a moment.”

“Huh? ”

Viola inadvertently let out a small voice.

Akira left alone on his motorcycle from the warehouse and returned after a while. He placed a large box in front of Sheryl and the others.

“This should tide you over for a while. Well, with this much, you should be fine for a while.”

Sheryl and the others were surprised to see the contents of the box. It was filled with high-value relics such as old-world information terminals that Akira had brought in before.

Viola gave Akira a slightly stern look.

“Akira. Where did these come from? From the depths of Kuzusuhara District Ruin? ”

“I told you not to ask about that, didn't I? ”

“No, it's not that. Bringing in artifacts that absolutely must be sold to Kugamayama City according to the contract, despite this being a slum back-alley shop, is really bad.”

“Ah, I see. It's fine. Those artifacts have nothing to do with the Hunter Rank adjustment request.”

“R-Right.”

Viola glanced at Yumina. Yumina followed up on that.

“That's right. We've handed over all the artifacts we found in the inner parts to the city. It's recorded in the information gathering device.”

“Well, I understand how that could lead to misunderstandings. You handle that on your end. That's your specialty, isn't it? ”

Viola, being told so by Akira, put on her usual artificial smile.

“Yeah. Leave it to me.”

She hid her inner turmoil with that smile. Viola easily surmised that these artifacts were the same as the ones Akira had brought in before, and he likely intended to bring them in divided up to conceal their origin.

However, Viola couldn't have predicted that such valuable artifacts as the Old-World information terminals were still remaining.

Viola was extremely concerned about the origin of the artifacts, but she knew that pursuing it would undoubtedly invite death. In order to avoid being shot again by Akira without hesitation, She'll restrain her curiosity and make light conversation.

“But still, as expected. To be able to prepare this many artifacts so quickly. It's a good thing we had strict security in the warehouse. Don't you agree? ”

“...I agree.”

With the intention of implying “Is that what you're saying? ” Sheryl responded meaningfully.

Viola laughed and added, seeing Akira looking puzzled.

“During the conflict between the two major factions, I bought warehouse security information from a mole. And it was me who drove out the mole from Sheryl's group based on that information. Thanks to that, the warehouse security became very strict. I'd say I've been quite useful, don't you think? ”

“Ah... I see.”

Finally understanding the meaning, Akira's expression turned incredulous. And from the mention of warehouse security, he recalled what Alpha had told him about Tiol being one of the individuals guarding the warehouse.

“Right. Sheryl, do you know Tiol? ”

“Tiol? The one mentioned earlier, the mole who was expelled. Supposedly killed by Shijima and the others.”

“No, he's alive. I met him deep in the ruins of Kuzusuhara District.”

“Is that so? I hadn't heard he had the ability to go to such a place... Why was he there? ”

“Well, perhaps he was collecting relics? ...No, that's not the important part.”

Akira's expression became serious, and Sheryl adjusted her attitude upon seeing it.

“We met in the ruins' building, and he suddenly attacked us there.”

“Huh!? Why!? ”

“Who knows. I don't understand it either. But he definitely attacked us first. And then he managed to escape.”

Seeing Sheryl's surprise at the unexpected story, Akira cautioned her.

“Well, that's what happened. If you happen to see him somewhere, Sheryl, be careful. He was in a place like that, so he must be quite strong. I don't know why someone like him was guarding a warehouse.”

“Got it. I'll be careful.”

Viola, who firmly nodded and agreed, had been acting as usual beside Sheryl. It was an extremely interesting story, and she had many questions, but as someone tasked with carrying out operations for Tiol, she couldn't afford to ask unnecessary questions right now. First, she had to focus on confirming the situation.

And inwardly, she frowned.

(This ruins the job I took from him. Akira and Sheryl will never accept his return now. What on earth is he doing?)

Though Viola became displeased at her work being thwarted, it only lasted for a brief moment. She quickly switched her mindset.

(Well, if that's the case, so be it. Let's enjoy it in a different way.)

She only needed to change her way of enjoying things from the premise of succeeding in Tiol's request to the premise of failing. The villainous woman who enjoyed confusing herself in complicated situations had already moved on to the next thought.

After finishing their business, Akira and the others were about to leave Sheryl's warehouse. Yumina glanced briefly at Sheryl seeing Akira off, then lightly remarked to Akira.

“It seems like Akira is the type who's soft on women after all.”

“Why would you think that? ”

“Well, you brought relics specifically for Sheryl, didn't you? It was a bit surprising.”

“Well, it's not like that's the only reason...”

“I'm not jumping to conclusions, but considering Akira's attitude towards Kibayashi and Katsuragi, it seems plausible, doesn't it? ”

She thought about Akira's attitude towards Katsuya as well. Yumina kept that thought to herself, not voicing it.

Akira looked troubled, his face showing a complex expression.

“At least that's how it seems to you, Yumina...”

With that said, it might be true. With Yumina, whom he trusted considerably, prompting him, Akira was starting to realize it.

“I see. So I'm the type who's soft on women...”

Seeing Akira taking her own words quite seriously, Yumina deliberately teased him with a smile and a light tone.

“Well, since I'm also a woman, I guess I'm glad if that's the case.”

“Is that so...”

Akira smiled wryly, deciding not to take Yumina's words too seriously.

For Akira and Yumina, it was just a trivial exchange between friends.

However, Alpha watched them with a stern and serious expression.

Chapter 157: Hopes and Choices

At the base of Drankam, there was a large garage-like warehouse. Originally meant for parking armored personnel carriers, it was currently on loan to the Kiryou and used as a maintenance facility for comprehensive support augmented suits.

Yumina was talking with a technician from the Kiryou named Furuta there. Furuta, who was in charge of Yumina's augmented suit, seemed impressed as he looked over Yumina's recent combat data once again.

“By the way, Yumina-san has become quite strong, hasn't she? ”

“Thank you very much.”

“Ideally, we'd want to advertise that it's all thanks to our company's products, but...”

“Ah, it's probably better to avoid that, don't you think? ”

“You're right.”

Yumina, with a wry smile, returned Furuta's wry smile.

The reason for Yumina's strength without a doubt came from the training she received from Akira. However, Furuta, who knew the nature of that training, couldn't possibly claim that using their company's augmented suits for training would make others equally strong as part of their product promotion.

The intensity of the training completely ignored the wearer's load, and despite forcefully suppressing that high load with expensive medicines, it involved operating in dangerous areas where powerful monsters roamed for long periods of time.

Training based on repeatedly crossing such pseudo-death lines was clearly unsuitable for advertising slogans. First of all, it was impractical in terms of cost. Using so many medicines was too expensive. Secondly, it was mentally unsustainable. Most people would end up fleeing from such training.

Yumina's growth came from accomplishing something difficult both in terms of cost and mental resilience: being able to use expensive medicines without self-burden and not fleeing from the harsh training in deadly areas.

In other words, recommending the same thing to others was extremely difficult. It contradicted the advertising concept of the comprehensive support augmented suit, which suggested that anyone could become strong by using their company's products. Furuta understood that much.

“Well, thanks to Yumina-san, we have demonstrated that our augmented suits have the performance to accompany him without hindrance. That should be sufficient for advertising purposes.”

“Is Akira's strength really that well-known? ”

“Those who know, know, you know? But if those who know happen to be in charge of procuring for the city's defense forces, it's enough from a sales perspective.”

“I see.”

“Also, forgive me for being rude, but isn't it true that Yumina-san received an evaluation of insufficient ability from the development team over there and was cut off? ”

The development team responsible for Yumina, led by Furuta, and another development team responsible for Katsuya, led by a technician named Takagi, were originally one team developing the Kiryou's comprehensive support system.

However, differences in operational methods had led them to become separate teams.

“Even with people like that, if they were to operate under the methods of our development team here, they would be able to fight this strongly. Thanks to Yumina-san, it's very much appreciated that we were able to demonstrate that.”

“Um... I see...”

Furuta smiled as a technician, confident that he could utilize Yumina's abilities in his own development team. However, Yumina, who simply wanted to return to Katsuya's team, couldn't just nod in agreement and instead returned a polite smile.

And so, Furuta continued his discussion.

Unlike Takagi's team, which focused on unit-based operations, Furuta's team was advancing development aimed at individual operations.

The device for the comprehensive support system that Yumina was using had become so large because it was currently repurposed from one meant for units.

However, if development progressed for individual use, it could be made even smaller. Furthermore, with further development and enhancement on the system side, it could become so effective that even hunters operating near the frontlines would recognize it, almost ignoring cost-effectiveness.

It would be acceptable to put the entire system into an information terminal with astonishing performance. It would be acceptable to connect to a remotely located system with highly expensive and precise communication capable of withstanding communication interference from colorless mist. For top-class hunters with the economic power of a city at their fingertips, such things would pose no problem.

Furuta spoke enthusiastically about these prospects. While it was a somewhat self-serving optimism, there was a certain realism to it that couldn't simply be dismissed as fantasy. Thanks to Yumina's achievements, the development budget had also been increased in hopes of realizing these goals.

“It might not be appropriate for me to say this, but compared to our team, the development progress of their team over there is still lacking. They've certainly achieved remarkable results in terms of combat records, haven't they? But that's all thanks to Katsuya and his team; they're simply strong. As for the system's assistance, it's still incomplete. Ultimately, they're only being supported by Katsuya and his team's talent...”

Furuta, driven by his confidence in the system he developed, even uttered words that seemed to belittle Yumina's abilities.

Yumina interjected.

“Do you think I lack talent as a hunter? After all, I've been judged as inadequate and cut off by the development team over there.”

Furuta, realizing his slip of the tongue, tried to cover up his words.

“Huh? Oh, n-no, that's not what I meant. Even though you're receiving support from our system, Yumina-san, you've still achieved such remarkable results.”

Seeing that Yumina wasn't warming up to his words, Furuta hastily continued, trying to divert the conversation.

“Well, I mean, Yumina-san doesn't lack talent; it's just that Katsuya has too much talent. And also, it's a difference in the direction of talent, you know? ”

“Difference in the direction of talent? ”

“Yes. I think that's the reason why you were cut off from their development team, right? ”

There are individuals who, due to their own talents, may gain 10 abilities from training with a load of 1, and those who may only gain about 7 abilities from training with a load of 10. However, it couldn't be asserted that the latter's talent was inferior. This was because the former might not be able to withstand a load of 2 in training.

And the latter might be able to withstand a load of 100, not just 10. Even though the abilities gained from training with a load of 100 might be around 15, and even though the training itself might be highly inefficient, there was no difference in the fact that they had become stronger than the former.

In other words, the talent to become endlessly stronger and the talent to become stronger efficiently were different, and they couldn't be judged by the same criteria. To avoid offending the subjects in his development team, Furuta explained this with his own theory.

Yumina listened earnestly to his explanation.

“Um, so, the former is Katsuya, and the latter is me, right? ”

“Yes, that's about right. And their development team probably values those more inclined towards the former. Well, Katsuya might have the talent to endure a load of 100 as well, but even if he did, if we were to apply that load of training to the entire unit, the unit would just fall apart. We can't afford to do that.”

Seeing Yumina unconsciously nodding, Furuta concluded his explanation.

“I don't mean to speak ill of Yumina-san, but if you're aiming to be a top-notch hunter, it would be better for you to continue training with us here rather than just settling for average training with them, wouldn't it? ”

“I see...”

Yumina's response was vague. She couldn't say “I understand.” because she wanted to return to Katsuya's team. So, she smiled politely.

“I'm not the one who decides that, it's up to the higher-ups.”

“That's true.”

Furuta also returned a wry smile, understanding the sentiment as someone who worked within the organization. Then, they finished adjusting Yumina's comprehensive support system and augmented suit while continuing their small talk.

“Alright. With this, adjustments for the Lida Commercial District Ruin are complete. Do you have any other questions? ”

“I have a small question. Do we need to adjust the settings of the comprehensive support system for each ruins? ”

“It's better to do so than not, but it's more for the sake of development data gathering. So, it's more about that than anything else.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Is there anything else? ”

“Well...”

At that moment, Yumina remembered Tiol.

“Actually, while exploring the ruins, I was attacked by other hunters... but according to the records, it was logged as encountering monsters. Is that normal? ”

“Huh? ”

Furuta, checking the data, looked slightly puzzled.

“...Indeed, it's marked as a monster encounter. That's odd. Even if they were attackers, would they be categorized like that? Is it some kind of bug? Was it categorized under hostility? Hmm... I'm sorry. I'll look into it. Oh, I think it's just a display bug, so it shouldn't have any impact on the system.”

“I understand. That's all the questions I have. Thank you.”

“No problem at all. Good luck with exploring the Lida Commercial District Ruin. If you do find an automaton, it'll be a great achievement. It'll reflect well on us too, so I hope it goes well.”

Akira's preparations were already complete. And now, Yumina's preparations were also complete.

Their venture into the Lida Commercial District Ruin as hunters was looming tomorrow.

That night, Yumina, as usual, was talking with Katsuya via the information terminal. Upon hearing that Katsuya would be returning tomorrow, her face lit up with a radiant smile.

“Katsuya, are you coming back tomorrow? Oh, I'm so happy, but if you had told me earlier, we could have adjusted our days off to match.”

“Sorry. The schedules for inter-city transport vehicles seem to be treated as confidential. I just got permission to inform you from Mizuha just now.”

“Well, that can't be helped then. Katsuya, when you come back, let's plan a day off to spend time together.”

“Sure. Looking forward to it.”

After finishing their conversation, Yumina lay down on her bed. She was delighted at the thought of being able to reunite with her beloved after such a long time and fell asleep with a smile on her face.



On the inter-city transport vehicle heading to Kugamayama City, Katsuya was talking with Yumina via the information terminal. Mizuha was also there. She watched Katsuya chatting away with a keen eye.

When Katsuya finished his conversation, Mizuha smiled pleasantly.

“You seem to be in a very good mood. Are you that happy to see her again?”

Katsuya chuckled, trying to hide his embarrassment.

“Ah, well, yeah. Despite everything, Yumina and I have been together for a long time, so this is the first time we've been apart for such a long time. I'm happy to see her again.”

“...I see. Well, when you come back, make sure to show her a cheerful face right away.”

“Yes!”

Pretending to be a boss who understands, Mizuha left Katsuya's room. Then she frowned.

(With her abilities, she'll only be a burden if she stays by Katsuya's side. That's why I want Katsuya to distance himself from Yumina, but with the way things are going, it might be difficult)

Mizuha had been passing on the responsibility of removing Yumina from Katsuya's team to Takagi's team, who were in charge of the comprehensive support system for Katsuya's unit. Thanks to this,

Yumina and Katsuya's dissatisfaction weren't directed towards Mizuha directly.

However, she didn't know how long she could continue using this strategy. Mizuha needed another reason to remove Yumina that wouldn't incur Katsuya's displeasure.

(For Katsuya's sake, I can't just let him be burdened by having Yumina in his unit just because they get along well. I feel bad, but she needs to be officially removed from Katsuya's team.)

Mizuha knew that she had been with Katsuya's team of three since they began their hunter career. However, unlike Airi, who was showing remarkable performance by Katsuya's side even now, Yumina had been dragging down the unit since the operation at the Mihazono District Ruin.

For Mizuha, Yumina was a hindrance in demonstrating Katsuya's team's achievements and successes to the investors of the Drankam administrative faction.

(Akira seems to dislike Katsuya, and knowing that Akira and Yumina are together, I wonder if they might create some friction by thinking they're getting along well. If that happens, Katsuya might be advised to distance himself from Yumina...)

Relationships between men and women can become strained. A man one dislikes and a woman one is close to have been together for a long time. There are plenty of reasons for their relationship to become strained. Mizuha considered if something could be done from that angle.

However, Mizuha couldn't directly convey this to Katsuya. The reason she asked Yumina to accompany Akira on the hunter rank adjustment request was because of Mizuha. Even if she were to tell Katsuya about it, she needed a clever explanation that wouldn't blame herself.

(I need to think of a good method...)

Utilizing Katsuya's discomfort towards Akira. Could that be somehow exploited? As Mizuha continued to consider this, she unconsciously frowned.

“...Even so, it's strange that Yumina agreed to accompany that guy. Even though I asked her to do it, it's hard to understand.”

It's not feasible to allow such a person to belong to Katsuya's team. Something must be done about it. Driven by her discomfort towards Akira, Mizuha once again made that judgment.

Because she naturally felt discomfort towards Akira, Mizuha didn't realize. When she asked Yumina to accompany Akira, she didn't harbor any discomfort towards him at all.

After Mizuha left the room for a while, Katsuya was in his room with a puzzled expression.

The reason for this was unknown to Katsuya himself. However, something vague was floating in his mind. He remembered forgetting something, but he couldn't recall what it was at all. It was a sensation close to that.

Deciding it wasn't worth worrying about, Katsuya lay down on his bed. It probably wasn't a big deal. That's what he thought as he surrendered himself to drowsiness.

In the vague world where reality and dreams mixed, Katsuya muttered in his sleep.

“Yumina is... with him...? ”

Whether asleep or awake, Katsuya didn't understand the meaning of those words. He didn't even realize he had said anything.

But Katsuya just knew.



The next day, when Yumina entered the garage, which also served as the maintenance facility for the aircraft, equipment was being loaded in.

The equipment belonged to Takagi's development team, who were in charge of Katsuya's unit. Takagi's team had accompanied Katsuya's unit on their expedition for the maintenance of the comprehensive support system.

Seeing the equipment being brought in by Takagi's team, Yumina thought that Katsuya's team might have already returned. With that in mind, she headed towards her vehicle while scanning the area.

She could contact Katsuya via the information terminal right away and maybe have some time to meet before heading to the Lida Commercial District Ruin. But she resisted the urge.

There was no guarantee that Katsuya was nearby and available to meet immediately. Even if she called, he might not come all the way here. And above all, if she contacted Katsuya and talked to him, she might waver and delay Akira. So she restrained herself.

However, that restraint was somewhat in vain.

“Yumina! ”

As Yumina approached her vehicle, Katsuya appeared.

“Katsuya! ”

Seeing the figure of her beloved whom she hadn't seen in a long time, Yumina's smile radiated. It surprised Katsuya who rushed over, mesmerizing him and causing him to be slightly flustered.

“Katsuya. You're already back... Yeah! You seem well. I'm relieved.”

“Uh, yeah...”

“While I was away, I was quite worried about what would happen if you got seriously injured while going all out on your own...”

While saying that, Yumina placed both hands on Katsuya's shoulders and lightly shook him.

“Wh-what are you doing? ”

“Since you don't seem to be in pain, it doesn't look like you're forcing yourself to stand with your augmented suit despite your body being in bad shape. I'm relieved.”

Yumina smiled happily, teasingly, and with relief, causing Katsuya to feel a slight disturbance again. He found Yumina's smile, which he hadn't seen in a long time, quite refreshing.

But he quickly regained his composure and smiled back.

“I'm fine. You're such a worrier.”

“I've had plenty of reasons to worry about you, haven't I? You never let me get away with it... well, it's too early for me to stop worrying about you.”

“That's a harsh evaluation. Despite that, I've achieved quite impressive results, you know? ”

“Oh, really? Then, I'd like to hear all about the impressive results you've achieved...”

Yumina realized at that moment that if they kept talking, they would end up chatting for a long time. She made a disappointed expression.

“Katsuya, sorry. I have to go now. Let's talk later. I'm glad we got to see each other before departure. See you later.”

And she smiled and tried to part with Katsuya. She was about to get into the driver's seat of her vehicle.

But then Katsuya snapped back to reality. He remembered something he had forgotten, something he had wanted to ask Yumina before she left.

“Yumina! Wait! ”

“Ah, sorry. I'm actually in a bit of a hurry. If it's something small, can we talk later when I get back? ”

“Is it true that you're with him!? ”

“Him? Who are you talking about? ”

“Akira! ”

Yumina was surprised, then her expression turned serious.

“...Katsuya. Where did you hear that? ”

“It doesn't matter...”

“Just answer me.”

Asked by Yumina in a slightly stern tone, Katsuya hesitated slightly. Then, realizing that he didn't know who had told him, he inadvertently wore a puzzled expression.

Yumina found it puzzling.

“Katsuya, can't you tell me? Is someone telling you not to? ”

“No, it's not that. Um... I think it was Mizuha-san. Probably.”

Without even knowing why he thought so, Katsuya answered like that.

Yumina let out a deep sigh.

(Mizuha-san, what are you thinking...? Didn't you realize that telling Katsuya would only cause trouble?)

If it had been conveyed through Takagi's development team, she would have to lodge a complaint with Mizuha. As she was thinking this, hearing that it was Mizuha who told her, Yumina couldn't help but hold her head in her hands.

But there was no time to explain the situation in detail. The conversation had to be cut short for now.

“Katsuya, let's talk about this later. See you later.”

“Wait! ”

As Yumina tried to get into her car with her back turned, Katsuya instinctively grabbed her hand to stop her.



Yumina couldn't bring herself to shake off Katsuya's hand. She sighed lightly, faced Katsuya again, and reluctantly spoke.

“Katsuya. It's true that I'm with Akira. Today, I'm planning to collect relics at the Lida Commercial District Ruin with Akira. It's under Mizuha-san's orders.”

“W-why is Yumina...”

“Sorry, but I'm in a hurry. Get the details from Mizuha-san. Katsuya. Let go of my hand once you understand.”

Katsuya doesn't let go. Instead, he asks with a troubled expression, interspersed with a brief silence.

“... Is Yumina okay with that? ”

“Whether it's okay or not is Mizuha-san's instruction. Mizuha-san is a high-ranking member of Drankam and our patron. When given instructions, we can't go against them. Katsuya should understand that much, right? ”

“Even so...”

Seeing Katsuya's unwillingness to let go, Yumina lets out a big sigh. Then she turns a serious face towards Katsuya.

“So, Katsuya. Will you leave Drankam with me? If you do that, I'll stop going.”

“Huh? W-wait a minute. Why is it coming to this? ”

Katsuya is perplexed by the unexpected turn of events. Yumina looks at him seriously and continues.

“The reason I can't be with you is because of Drankam's convenience.”

Katsuya's expression shows more surprise than confusion.

“During the commotion in the previous slum, I wanted to fight alongside you. Even when you went on expeditions, I wanted to go with you. But it was impossible. That's how it was instructed. It could be the decision of the comprehensive support system, the development team, or Mizuha-san. I understand that too.”

As Yumina speaks her true feelings with a serious face, there's a hint of frustration mixed in. Then her expression turns serious again.

“But you see, the main reason we have to follow those instructions is that we're hunters affiliated with Drankam. If we quit Drankam, we won't need to follow such instructions anymore. We'll be able to fight together again.”

Yumina continues to persuade Katsuya.

“Of course, if we quit Drankam, we'll lose support from the alliance, so it'll be tough. But compared to when we were just starting out as hunters, both you and I have grown now. We'll manage somehow even without Drankam's support, right? ”

Katsuya listens silently to Yumina's words.

“If we leave together, I think Airi will definitely come with us. We can also change our operating location to avoid Akira, and start afresh as a team of three - you, me, and Airi - doing hunter work in another city. I think that would be good.”

Yumina gazes at Katsuya intently.

“What will you do, Katsuya? If that's okay with you, you can keep holding my hand. Just pull me out of Drankam while you're at it.”

With that, Yumina quietly forces Katsuya to make a choice.

A few seconds pass like that. Then, with a pained expression, Katsuya lets go of Yumina's hand.

“Yumina... I...”

Yumina embraces Katsuya with a gentle expression.

“It's okay. I've made lots of friends and lost lots of friends while being in Drankam. So, it's impossible for me to leave Drankam now, abandoning my friends and leaving alone, right? I understand. I knew it was impossible from the start, even when I asked. ...Sorry. I said something sneaky.”

While still holding Katsuya, Yumina subtly changes her expression so he can't see it, showing a slight hint of disappointment. It's because deep down, even though she knew it was impossible, she had hoped for it. Then she lets go of Katsuya and, now with a slightly broken heart, she smiles confidently at him.

“Don't worry. I'll be by your side again soon, taking care of you. All I have to do is find my own way back to your team.”

“Find your own way... how? ”

“When I was excluded from your expedition, I realized that with my current strength, it's futile to ask people like Mizuha to put me back on your team. It would just be a hindrance. So, I need to become stronger.”

It's difficult. With that written on Katsuya's face, Yumina smiles defiantly.

“Katsuya. You know I wasn't just playing around while you guys were on expeditions, right? I'll show you later how much I've grown.”

And then she gently scolds her childhood friend's selfishness with a smile.

“So, just wait a little longer, okay? ”

Seeing Yumina's smile, reminiscent of the past when she would fuss over him, Katsuya feels the strange anxiety and impatience in his heart dissipating. He regains his composure and softens his expression.

“... Got it. I'll wait.”

Seeing Katsuya's demeanor, Yumina smiles proudly.

“Honestly, you're such a handful. Well, see you later.”

“Yeah. Take care.”

Yumina, in the car, leaves the scene with Katsuya watching her go.

In the wasteland, Yumina's face relaxes as she remembers the recent events. Meeting Katsuya after so long. Knowing that Katsuya wants her by his side. These thoughts greatly boost Yumina's motivation.

“Alright! Let's do our best! ”

Even though she's supported by the comprehensive support system, she's already strong enough not to hold Akira back anymore. Now, she just needs an opportunity to show that to Drankam. With renewed determination, Yumina looks forward to exploring the ruins of the Lida Commercial District.

Watching Yumina leave, Katsuya's mind swirls with various thoughts.

The biggest one is his joy at knowing Yumina is striving to return to his side. And then, the desire to continue being with Yumina, his long-time companion, persists.

From there, he also feels frustration at not being allowed to do so due to Drankam's convenience. Yumina is an important comrade. It seems extremely unfair that he can't even help her in times of need, let alone be with her.

But as Yumina said, even if he were to appeal to Mizuha and others, it would be seen as mere selfishness. Despite being hailed as one of Drankam's top hunters, Katsuya realizes he's currently nothing more than someone whose requests can't even be fulfilled by Drankam. He recognizes that anew.

What can he do to change that? Katsuya searches for the answer.

“... I need to work harder.”

If he becomes strong enough that Drankam can't ignore his opinions, that would be good. As someone who has already achieved significant results on expeditions, Katsuya rekindles his determination not to be satisfied with those accomplishments.

From the white world, the girl sends a dissatisfied glance towards Katsuya.

“I'd rather not be fixated on someone who seems unlikely to be incorporated into the local network.”

Judging there's a risk of becoming an obstacle to the experiment, the girl views Yumina with suspicion from behind Katsuya.

Chapter 158: Lida Commercial District Ruin

Akira drives through the wasteland in a car. The destination is the Lida Commercial District Ruin. The goal is an ancient automaton from the old-world said to be there.

Yumina, who joined up in the wasteland near the city, asks Akira through communication from her own vehicle.

“Akira. It's about today's schedule, or rather, the plan for activities at the Lida Commercial District Ruin. Is it okay to focus solely on searching for the ancient automaton instead of considering regular relic collection? ”

“Yeah. Well, we've been asked to do that by Kibayashi. And besides...”

After answering lightly, Akira adds a clarification.

They were asked to search for ancient automata from the old-world in the Lida Commercial District Ruin as a new job for adjusting Hunter ranks.

However, it's merely an excuse for Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry to drive them out from the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. There's no guarantee that there really are automata. Knowing this, they think it's fine to collect relics normally.

However, the Lida Commercial District Ruin are located quite far from the city of Kugamayama. They've heard that if they were to seriously collect relics at a distant ruin, it would be better to consider staying overnight in the ruin or establishing a temporary base nearby for a long-term stay.

And they plan to return on the same day. Also, since they've loaded their vehicles with a large amount of ammunition, there's limited space to carry back relics.

“In that case, I thought it might be fine to focus on searching for the automaton.”

“Hmm. If that's the reason, wouldn't it be okay to collect relics normally? There's no guarantee that there really is an ancient automaton, and if the Hunter rank adjustment request at the Lida Commercial District Ruin ends up with no harvest, I'll probably be very disappointed, won't I? ”

Food is also loaded into the car. They can sleep in the vehicle for a few days if needed. For transporting the relics they bring back, they can use a transporter as they did in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. They are also responsible for the ammunition cost this time. If they don't earn some money through relic collection, they might end up in the red. After saying this, Yumina adds casually.

“Oh, Akira's car doesn't have a roof, right? If you don't want to sleep in a place without a roof in case it rains, you can sleep in my car.”

Akira looks surprised.

“...Ah, Yumina. I mean, I thought about those kinds of things a bit when planning for a day trip, but is that okay? ”

Even though Akira feels somewhat close to Yumina, they are still young adults of the same generation, and he wonders if it's okay to sleep together in the wasteland. Will she dislike it?

Due to his distorted interpersonal sense, Akira has been somewhat clueless and once bathed together with Sheryl, another young adult of the same generation, without any concern. However, he had shown that level of consideration towards Yumina.

Upon hearing that, Yumina, slightly surprised by Akira's unexpectedly considerate gesture, lightly teases him.

“Quite unexpected, huh? Akira, were you the type to worry about those things? ”

“What do you mean? ”

“Sheryl mentioned it. She said Akira doesn't mind taking baths with her at all.”

Akira bursts into laughter involuntarily. The sound of his laughter is transmitted through the communication, and Yumina laughs upon hearing it.

Sheryl indirectly conveyed that information to Yumina to imply that she and Akira are that close, among other things. Sheryl had said various other things as well.

However, Yumina somehow felt that the story was simply a fact and that Akira was just very indifferent to Sheryl as a member of the opposite sex. Even if she didn't know the truth of the story, she could at least see whether it was a complaint disguised as boasting.

Akira holds his head in his hands.

“What is she talking about... Yumina. That's, well, you know. It's a kind of maneuver. It's just more convenient to show clearly that I have their support, and it's convenient to pretend to have that kind of relationship with Sheryl...”

Without realizing the reason for his excuse, Akira continues to justify himself. But Yumina says without concern.

“I'm not blaming you for that. If Akira doesn't mind such things, I guess you wouldn't fuss over sleeping together in the car when we go out. We don't fuss about separating by gender when we sleep in teams during expeditions in ruins, right? ”

“R-right.”

“So, what should we do? Should we explore the ruins a bit first and then decide? If we find a lot of valuable relics right away, we can

collect them normally, but if there's nothing good, we can focus on searching for the automaton.”

Akira regains his composure from Yumina's straightforward attitude.

“Yeah, let's do that.”

“Alright.”

Having decided on a rough plan of action, Akira and the others continue through the wasteland.

Suddenly, they encounter a monster.

The opponent is a large carnivorous beast, about 4 meters in length. Despite its massive size, it charges towards Akira's vehicle at a speed unmatched by its bulk.

Hunters in the area would attempt to intercept it with gunfire, but due to the abnormal vitality characteristic of biological monsters, they wouldn't be able to kill it, and instead, the monster would close the distance and slam into the vehicle, sending it flying. It's that formidable of an opponent.

“Yumina. I'll handle this.”

“Roger. I'm counting on you.”

Akira remotely controls his motorcycle, which is parked on the roof of Yumina's vehicle. The unmanned bike adeptly adjusts its direction on the narrow roof, aiming the LEO SSB multi-function gun mounted on the arm-like gun mount directly at the monster's head.

The next moment, bullets are fired forcefully from the gun, which is larger than Akira's height. The first bullet pierces through the air and strikes the monster's head.

The impact of the bullet clearly ripples through the flesh and skin as hard as steel, but it doesn't pierce through the thick flesh and sturdy bones or counteract the inertia of the massive body charging at vehicle-like speed. The monster doesn't fall from that.

However, successive bullets follow. Moreover, they all hit the same spot without deviation as the first bullet.

Furthermore, more shots land. Even more shots land. Five bullets fired in quick succession, all hitting the same spot without fail. Their force is sufficient to penetrate the target's defenses, piercing through their skull.

The concentrated impact swells at one point, crushing the opponent's brain. Additionally, fragmented bullets from the impact scatter inside the skull, tearing it apart, resulting in instant death for the monster.

The massive body, suddenly losing balance, rolls spectacularly across the wasteland, spinning four times before finally coming to a stop.

“Impressive. You're truly amazing,”

Yumina sincerely praises the skill. Akira, having executed the recent sniper shot himself, smiles somewhat proudly.

“Took it down with zero wasted shots. From now on, I'm covering my own ammo expenses. Gotta do this much at least,”

“Hey, don't pressure me like that, okay? I can't pull off the same feat. It's impossible for me,”

“Just a matter of mindset. I'm just saying not to waste shots. There's no need for Yumina to hold back, right? The integrated support system wouldn't have settings to waste ammo, anyway, right? ”

“You don't have to tell me twice. Well, watch this,”

Yumina casually brushes off the conversation and then asks again.

“But seriously, Akira, unlike me, you don't have any system-aided aiming corrections. How can you pull off such a stunt, aiming at enemies with a bike arm, and from a distance? ”

“Well, that's because I trained hard for it,”

“Training, huh? It sounds so simple, but then it just boils down to me not training hard enough. If there are any tricks or tips, mind sharing? ”

“Hmm. It'll be quite vague, but is that alright? ”

“Yes,”

As a way to pass the time until they reach the Lida Commercial District Ruin, Akira delves into a lengthy explanation of something even he doesn't fully understand.

“So, uh, the bike arm, well, not just the arm but the whole bike, too, it's like, you control them through the augmented suit, sort of like moving your own arms but, uh, here, 'arms' mean the suit's arms, not your own...”

In summary, the discussion revolves around assuming all equipment exists as extensions of the augmented suit, and controlling them through it.

While wearing the augmented suit, Akira can independently move both his body's arms and the suit's arms. In other words, he possesses the capability to manipulate what can be considered as a third and fourth arm, which are not naturally present in the human body, as if they were part of his own body.

These manipulations are done intuitively. This intuitive sense extends not only to the augmented suit but also to the bike and other vehicles. By coordinating the control systems of the augmented suit

and the vehicle, instead of driving the vehicle using traditional controls like a steering wheel, Akira directly manipulates it as if moving the augmented suit.

However, human bodies don't have tires. It's extremely challenging to control such things intricately as if they were part of one's own body. Hence, initially, the task is delegated to the automated driving system.

Just like how people don't consciously think about the movement of their right and left leg joints when walking, Akira doesn't consciously think about things like tire rotation. He simply drives the bike with sensations like moving forward or turning right. Once he's accustomed to this, he can also intuitively control things like tire angles and rotation speeds as needed.

From there, he applies the same principle to the bike arm and the gun attached to it. By doing so, he can precisely manipulate the bike, arm, and gun as if they were part of his own body.

The rest is practice. Similar to regular gun training, he repeatedly fires shots to improve accuracy. This accumulation of practice led to the precision demonstrated in the recent shooting.

Yumina listens with keen interest to this explanation.

“Wow. Do you think I could do that too with some training? ”

“I think with enough training, you could manage it. Didn't you learn to control the augmented suit and your body separately during the training in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin? ”

“Yeah, I did. I'll give it a try sometime,”

“Huh? ”

As soon as Akira says this, Yumina's vehicle swerves dramatically. Akira hastily moves his own vehicle away from Yumina's.

“Whoa! Yumina! What are you doing!?”

“Sorry! It's harder than I thought!”

Yumina reverts the vehicle's control settings back to normal. The previously swerving vehicle quickly returns to its usual driving pattern.

Akira exhales a sigh of relief.

“...Please don't try things out suddenly like that,”

“I'm sorry. I didn't realize it would be this difficult,”

“It's fine to try, but please be careful. Although, trying it out like that, you did well. But I think you'd need to adjust various settings in the vehicle's control system,”

“Oh, right. The comprehensive support system I use is aimed at individual operation, so there's some flexibility there,”

“Hmm, sounds convenient,”

“If you're interested, I can let the folks at Kiryou Corporation know. They'd be delighted to explain it to you,”

“Maybe if I feel like it,”

Yumina exhales lightly.

“Anyway, even with vehicles being so difficult, you managed it with a bike, and even pulled off such a shot. You're truly amazing,”

“I just worked hard for it,”

“Worked hard... huh,”

Worked hard. Those few words hold a lot of meaning. To Yumina, who received training from Akira in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, experiencing hardships beyond belief, the meaning was clear. Yumina also worked hard for it.

And she thinks further. Akira is probably working even harder. That's why he's so strong.

She thinks even more. Perhaps she hasn't worked hard enough until now. That's why she couldn't stay with Katsuya anymore.

(Katsuya's talent is exceptional. Even Shikarabe-san, who dislikes Katsuya, acknowledged that. Compared to Katsuya, who has such talent, I, who has far less talent, only trained as much as Katsuya did when we were together. That's why I couldn't become strong enough to support Katsuya. I was just being complacent.)

Yumina chastises herself with self-deprecation. And then she laughs with determination.

“I need to work harder, too,”

Let's work hard. While saying it lightly, Yumina puts strong determination into it.

Beside Akira, Alpha gives him a meaningful smile.

『What's up? 』

『Hm? Oh, I was just thinking that Akira can show such concern for Yumina. Meanwhile, neither I nor Sheryl receive such treatment.』

Akira chuckles lightly.

『Shouldn't that kind of concern be unnecessary for someone who shares a bath with you? 』

『That's different.』

『Is it, now? 』

With that, Akira casually changes the subject, while Alpha watches him with a smile, just like always.



Arriving at their destination, Akira and the others park the vehicle at a spot where they can see the ruins from a distance. Akira, finding the different sight of the ruins amusing, smiles.

“So this is the Lida Commercial District Ruin. It's quite impressive, isn't it? ”

The Lida Commercial District Ruin are vast shopping malls from the old-world. The sight of numerous domes, which once housed a multitude of shops along with hotels, plazas, parks, and more, conveys the past prosperity and glory to those living in the present.

However, at the same time, the distant view also indicated that the prosperity and glory had long vanished from this place. The area has been overtaken by vegetation, becoming completely green. Whether small domes spanning a few hundred meters or large domes stretching for kilometers, they were all completely covered with lush grass, vines, and leaves.

Akira turned his intrigued gaze towards a sight unseen in the Kuzusuhara District Ruin or the Mihazono District Ruin.

“This is the first time I've seen this type of ruins. It's fascinating to find such ruins.”

Yumina also looked at the same sight with interest.

“In a sense, places like these are what truly define ruins, right? Rather than historical sites or ancient ruins.”

“I see. Now that you mention it, that's true. The depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin or the Seranthal Building in the Mihazono District Ruin don't really feel old.”

Akira nodded appreciatively at Yumina's explanation.

“Well then, Akira, let's limit our reminiscing about the past to this much and proceed with exploring the ruins like true hunters. Is it fine with you if I take command? ”

“Yeah. We're going to search for automata whose existence we're not even sure of in such a vast ruin. I'll rely on the relic collection capabilities of the comprehensive support system.”

“Leave it to me, although I'm also on the expecting side in that regard. Shall we rely on the development power of our collective intellect together? ”

With identical smiles, Akira and the others set off towards the dome of the Lida Commercial District Ruin once again.

Akira and the others, who decided to explore one of the domes, stand before a green wall intricately woven with vines.

Akira stares at the wall. His gaze is picked up by his information gathering device, enhancing the investigation accuracy of the wall in front of him. It turns out that it was originally an entrance to the dome. It was a large entrance, about five meters wide and tall, but it was completely covered by a wall of plants rooted in the vines hanging down from above.

“Yumina, you managed to figure out that this is the entrance. My information gathering device is quite high-performance, but even then, I couldn't tell until I got this close.”

“If you're saying that, then Akira probably can't see it. Just wait, I'll send it now.”

Through Yumina's setting, additional information is sent to Akira's augmented field of view. Consequently, augmented reality data is added to Akira's vision through goggles worn to deceive Yumina, despite originally being unnecessary for Akira due to Alpha's support.

It displayed prominent graphics and text indicating that it was the entrance to the dome.

“It was a conspicuous figure and text indicating that it was the entrance to the dome. This is an analysis of the augmented reality information transmitted by the ruins. Since this place used to be a shopping mall, that kind of augmented reality information is still being transmitted.”

“Wow, that's convenient. Is this also a function of the comprehensive support system? ”

“Yes, but it's a function that's already included in quite high-end information gathering devices as default. Wasn't it included in yours? Oh, maybe you turned it off because it was annoying and left it that way? ”

“Huh? I wonder... I'll check later. Well, for now, let's go inside.”

Akira prompted exploration of the ruins to distract from the conversation.

“Right. Then let's do our best to open the entrance. We should be able to manage with the strength of our augmented suits, even against these sturdy plants.”

Yumina tries to pry open the entrance by tearing apart the vines and such. Akira stops her.

“Oh, I'll do it. Yumina, just step back a bit.”

Akira says so and takes out a blade-like tool. Sensing this, Yumina steps back behind Akira.

Liquid metal flows from the handle, defying gravity to form a sharp blade. With a blade that extends longer than his own height, Akira swiftly slashes through the wall in front of him.

He then kicks the green wall. Although some of the cut plants had already started to adhere due to their remarkable vitality, they couldn't withstand a strong impact. The green wall is blown away forcefully.

“That's it. Yumina, should we widen it a bit more? ”

“It's not necessary since we're not bringing the car in. Let's go.”

Akira and the others enter the dome through the cleared entrance and begin their exploration inside.

The interior of the dome, a large complex commercial facility, was similarly overrun by vegetation like the outside. Even the originally paved pathways were covered with leaf litter and grass.

At first glance, it might seem like just another ruin swallowed by the forest. However, the ruins' augmented reality information transmission function is still operational, projecting store signs and various signs without degradation into Akira and the others' field of vision.

Akira found the mixture of decayed and fresh sections of the ruins intriguing.

While observing the same sight, Yumina focused on the practical aspect of exploring the ruins.

“There's nothing but plants everywhere. No wonder this ruin is unpopular.”

“This ruin isn't very popular? ”

“No. I don't think anyone would willingly come here for relic collection.”

The Lida Commercial District Ruin were once a large-scale commercial facility in the old-world, so it's reasonable to expect a considerable amount of relics there. Additionally, the monsters inhabiting it aren't as strong as those in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. All the elements are there for hunters to make a living seeking relics.

However, despite these factors, it's not very popular among hunters. The main reason is the proliferation of plants throughout the entire ruin.

These plants, likely of old-world origin, are so sturdy that augmented suits are needed to cut through them, and they possess an incredibly high flame resistance, making them impervious to flamethrowers. Furthermore, they contain components similar to information-gathering interference smokescreens, which degrade the accuracy of information-gathering devices.

Moreover, with their astonishing reproductive capabilities, no matter how much hunters exterminate them, they quickly regenerate. It's to the extent that if you park a car in the nearby grasslands of the ruins, within a few days, the entire car will be engulfed, eventually turning it into scrap.

If the ruins were closer to the city, many hunters might have overlooked the troublesome plants in pursuit of the relics sleeping

within. However, the Lida Commercial District Ruin are quite far from the city.

Rather than going out of their way to explore troublesome ruins, many hunters thought it better to visit other ruins that seemed just as profitable and without the hassle of troublesome plants. From this common sense perspective, many hunters avoided the Lida Commercial District Ruin.

After explaining this, Yumina continues.

“Well, precisely because it's such an unpopular ruin, there's some credibility to the story that there are automata here.”

“Ah, even if there were automata here, in a popular ruin, exploration would have progressed, and someone would have found them by now.”

“That's right. Let's keep hoping there's something left and do our best to search.”

They continue to explore the dome. Almost all of the entrances to the shops are covered with plants. For other hunters, just entering the shops is a hassle, as they have to remove the sturdy plants one by one, which is extremely tedious.

But it's no problem for Akira and the others. Akira easily slices through them with his blade. Yumina is a little surprised at its sharpness.

“Akira, that really cuts well. Is it from the old-world? ”

“Yeah. I found it in a ruin before and have been using it myself instead of selling it.”

“That's nice. Since we're supposed to hand over all the relics we find to the Drankam, we can't do that kind of thing. Well, since our unit is collecting relics together, it's only natural.”

Looking at Yumina, who seems somewhat envious and greedy for his own blade, Akira considers for a moment.

“If you want, should I give you one? ”

“Huh? ”

Akira threw a spare blade to Yumina without even waiting for a response. The blade, which was shaped only like a hilt when not in use, fit into Yumina's hand. Instantly, Yumina began to panic.

“W-Wait! You can't just give something like this so casually! It's a blade from the old-world, you know? How much would it fetch if sold...? ”

“I kept some extras, so one should be fine. Well, I thought it would be handy to have, so I gave it to you. If you plan to cash it in, then give it back.”

“I'm not going to do that...”

“In that case, it's fine.”

With just those words, Akira walked into the store. Yumina, with a complex expression on her face, began exploring the store, feeling a bit rude despite knowing the items were expensive.

“...Is it okay? Are you really giving it to me? ”

“It's okay. If I think it's too precious, I wouldn't have given it to you in the first place.”

“...Right. Akira, thank you.”

Akira returned the smile from Yumina, who expressed her gratitude happily.

And Yumina directed a teasing smile at Akira.

“Akira, you're the type who's kind to women after all.”

Akira chuckled lightly. Then, looking at Yumina's smile directed at him, he joked.

“Maybe I should ask for it back after all.”

“Nope. I already got it.”

Akira and Yumina continued exchanging banter as they laughed while continuing their exploration of the ruins.



After completing their exploration inside the dome, Akira and the others returned to where they parked their vehicles.

The results of their exploration were mixed. They found a decent amount and quality of artifacts, but they didn't find any old-world automata of significant value. However, it wasn't worthwhile to switch to regular artifact collection and go through the hassle of arranging transport services. They were in a very indecisive state regarding their future course of action.

“Yumina, what should we do? ”

“Even if you ask me... I can only say that Akira should decide. Making a judgment like giving up on searching for old-world automata and switching to regular artifact collection exceeds my authority as a companion. And, pardon my phrasing, but I can't take responsibility for it.”

This was Akira's hunter rank adjustment request. As long as Akira determined the general direction, Yumina could take detailed command under that, and the client couldn't hold Yumina responsible for the results.

However, if she intervened in crucial basic guidelines and the result ended in failure, she might be blamed for meddling unnecessarily. And that blame could extend to the Drankam faction to which Yumina belonged. Considering this, Yumina couldn't make light judgments.

In a sense, the right and responsibility to make decisions that could ruin this ruins exploration rested solely with Akira. Yumina could only suggest. The decision had to be made by Akira.

Akira hesitated and pondered. Then, being inexperienced in making such decisions, he gave a rather typical and indecisive answer.

“...Let's decide after checking out a few more domes.”

Yumina gave a wry smile.

“That's true. This dome could either be a jackpot or a complete bust. Let's investigate a bit more.”

Although it was an obvious postponement of a decisive decision, given the limited information, it wasn't certain that their judgment was wrong. As a companion, Yumina accepted it.

As they moved to the next dome, Alpha spoke up.

『Akira, being indecisive isn't a good trait. Maintaining flexibility in actions is different from proceeding with vague guidelines.』

『I know. But this time, it's not just me, and I can't just decide casually, right? 』

『I'm not denying that, but it's not good for Akira to be swayed by the convenience of those he's accompanying, rather than those he's leading.』

『Well, that's true, but...』

At this point, by answering like that, Akira seemed to acknowledge that he was unconsciously considering Yumina's convenience. Moreover, Akira seemed unaware of it.

Within Alpha, vigilance towards Yumina escalated another level. It had already reached a dangerous level. With not even a hint of her inner thoughts showing, Alpha smiled meaningfully.

『That aside, it's quite a way to put it, saying 'I'm alone this time.' I always consider myself with you, Akira.』

『It's just a figure of speech. My bad. I'm always grateful for your help.』

『Understood.』

Akira brushed off Alpha with his usual smile. Alpha returned the smile as usual.

Behind just that exchange, how much meaning lay on one side alone. Including the fact that the other side was unaware of it, as usual.

However, the degree of that meaning was clearly different from before.



After finishing the exploration of the second building, Akira groaned with difficulty. The result of the exploration was the same as the first building, leaving them unable to decide between ruins exploration and artifact collection.

If they were to give up searching for automata and focus on regular artifact collection, it would be about time to start preparing for several days of artifact collection rather than a one-day exploration of the ruins.

As they prioritized ruins exploration, they left the artifacts they found untouched. If they were to switch to artifact collection, they would need to go back and retrieve them. Calling for transport wouldn't bring them immediately. Even if they slept in Yumina's vehicle, they couldn't park it just anywhere. These tasks would take time. A decision on the immediate course of action was needed soon.

After much contemplation, Akira came to a conclusion.

“...Alright! I've decided! We'll prioritize artifact collection! We can search for automata on the side while collecting artifacts.”

“Can I ask why you decided that? ”

“Even if there were automata here, finding them would be a matter of luck, right? And I'm not exactly lucky.”

Yumina found Akira's somewhat heartfelt words amusing and smiled wryly.

“I see. That makes sense, doesn't it? Even if being a hunter is like gambling, it's not always about aiming for the jackpot. It's not bad to play it safe.”

“Right? Then, Yumina, I'll leave the command to you.”

“Got it.”

Despite thinking it was troublesome, Yumina didn't feel bad about Akira handing over command as soon as he decided on a course of action.

The first thing Akira and the others did after deciding to prioritize artifact collection at the Lida Commercial District Ruin was to leave the ruins for a while.

The entire area of the ruins and its surroundings were dominated by vegetation encroaching upon the ruins. Even if they planned to sleep in the vehicle for a while to collect artifacts, they had to park the vehicle outside of that area. Otherwise, there was a risk of the vehicle being swallowed up by plants while they slept.

Additionally, the location they parked the vehicle needed to be suitable for ensuring enough sleep and preparedness against monster attacks. Even if the monsters nearby weren't their enemies, it would be troublesome to be awakened by attacks while sleeping.

As Akira and the others searched for a suitable sleeping spot in the wasteland, the vehicle's scouting equipment detected the presence of a large monster. The signal was coming straight towards them from a distance.

Akira, preparing to intercept, noticed movement from a vehicle behind them.

“...Huh? Is that monster running away from the other hunters in the back? ...Wait, is that...? ”

Akira recognized the individuals in that vehicle. It was Reina and the others.

Chapter 159: Reina and Togami

Reina drove through the wasteland in pursuit of a large monster she had failed to take down.

From the passenger seat of a roofless off-road vehicle, she leaned out with her gun aimed, firing at the target from atop the swaying vehicle. The bullets shot forcefully struck the body of the carnivorous beast with six legs covered in scales, rather than fur. The resilient scales, clad in steel-like toughness, were torn apart along with the flesh beneath by the impact of the bullets.

However, the monster didn't fall. It continued running, driven by its strong vitality.

Reina continued shooting. The bullets hit the wreckage of mechanical parts protruding from the monster's back. Objects that had previously functioned as machine guns or cannons were now twisted and fragile from the impact, finally falling apart from the monster's back and scattering across the wasteland ground.

With the extra weight shed, the monster not only didn't fall but accelerated.

Reina couldn't help but raise her voice in frustration towards Togami in the driver's seat.

“Step on it more! We can't catch up! ”

Togami also raised his voice in response.

“I'm doing it! Just keep shooting! ”

Reina fired rapidly at the target. While not all shots hit, considering she was aiming at a moving target from a shaking vehicle at a long distance, her accuracy was sufficient.

The gun Reina was using, although relatively small for monster hunting, surpassed the power of typical large anti-material rifles. Weak monsters in city areas would be reduced to smithereens upon being hit.

Yet, the monster remained unscathed. Reina grimaced, knowing the reason why.

The gun she was using was meant for close combat. Its effective range was short, and combined with the distance to the target and the fact that it was a powerful large monster not typically found near city areas, Reina knew its effectiveness at this distance was lacking.

“Ugh! Seriously! I told you to crush its legs first! ”

“Your policy was to disable the enemy's armaments for safety! You agreed to it, didn't you? ”

“But if it escapes, it defeats the purpose! ”

“You were the one who instructed prioritizing safety first! ”

“But it was you who said we could still catch it without letting it escape, right!? ”

Reina and Togami argued fiercely, but there was no animosity between them. They were comfortable exchanging opinions without reservation.

Then Kanae, from the back seat, spoke up in a teasing tone towards Reina and the others.

“You guys still get along so well, huh? ”



At that, the arguing Reina and Togami fell silent instantly. Meeting each other's gaze, they forced themselves to regain composure with stern expressions to prevent Kanae from getting any more carried away.

“...Anyway, hurry up.”

“...Understood.”

They didn't say anything unnecessary. They didn't retort to Kanae either. After being teased similarly by Kanae before, they had learned that any reaction would only fuel further teasing.

They made a silent agreement to ignore Kanae and focus on the battle.

Yet Kanae remained smiling. Seeing their synchronized attitudes, she felt that not much had changed from before, and she laughed meaningfully as if she knew something.

On the other hand, Shiori, sitting in the rear seat, wore a slightly stern expression. She sighed audibly enough for the two to hear.

“Milady, Togami-sama, I understand the excitement of battle, but I strongly recommend refraining from unnecessarily raising your voices to maintain composure. Excessive behavior could also hinder Milady's protection. Please be cautious.”

Shiori didn't intend to meddle in Reina and Togami's relationship, but she couldn't overlook Togami's increasingly rude behavior, which seemed to have influenced her master's manners lately.

Upon hearing Shiori's deeply laden sigh, Reina and Togami instinctively straightened up.

“Ah, um, sorry.”

“Ah, yes. Apologies.”

Seeing the two's reactions, Kanae laughed again, seemingly amused.

Without even looking back, Reina and Togami could easily imagine Kanae's expression. They forced their faces to stiffen slightly, determined not to react to Kanae's teasing as they continued to chase the monster.

The fleeing monster and Reina's pursuit continued. The situation was clear: the hunter and the hunted, with Reina and her companions being the hunters, armed with guns and a vehicle, while the monster was the prey, fleeing without long-range attack capabilities.

Yet despite maintaining this advantage, Reina and her companions couldn't finish off the monster.

There were two main reasons for this. One was the rugged terrain of the wasteland. The unpaved ground was full of bumps and dips, with slippery soil and sand in places, and various sizes of rocks and stones strewn about. It wasn't suitable for vehicular movement.

However, for the monsters inhabiting the area, it was no different from normal ground. They could sprint at full speed with familiar movements, making it easy for them to escape.

Togami, who was in charge of driving, understood this much and was doing his best to close the distance with the enemy.

However, they couldn't close the distance too much. If they got too close, the advantage of the enemy losing its long-range attack capability would disappear. There had already been several occasions where they were almost hit by a sudden reversal and charge from the monster.

While navigating the rough terrain at speed, trying to keep the enemy within Reina's firing range while maintaining a safe distance to handle the enemy's sudden attacks was a difficult task for Togami.

But all this struggle wouldn't have been necessary if Reina had used a sniper rifle with a longer range. It would suffice to take down the enemy. Reina deliberately chose to use a short-range firearm as part of their training.

Reina glanced at the gun beside her in the car. With sufficient power and range, a sniper rifle could easily take down the monster they were currently struggling with. Even Shiori had suggested using it if the monster could escape.

However, using it would lower their evaluation in the training. But if they let the monster escape without using it, their evaluation would drop even further. This was also part of their training, the choice between two options.

Reina hesitated for a moment but opted for Togami's instruction.

“Togami! Get closer! We'll lose it at this rate! ”

“Isn't this getting too risky? We might get hit by a sudden charge again? ”

“...If that happens, Togami, you'll have to do your best to dodge it! ”

Togami chuckled at the instruction, torn between trust and recklessness.

“Understood! ”

And he accelerated the car as instructed.

On the rapidly closing distance between them and the target, Reina forced a smile, thinking she could take it down now. If they could take it down before it could counterattack, that would be enough, she

thought, as she fiercely fired her gun, urging herself on with determination and spirit reflected on her face.

The bullets, empowered by her determination, hit the monster. With the reduced distance to the target, her accuracy improved. Even a creature with incredible vitality couldn't withstand such gunfire.

The monster, relentlessly pursued thus far, had no strength left to counterattack Reina and her team at this point. It poured all its remaining strength and stamina into fleeing, running as if its life depended on it.

“What!? It's getting faster!? Even with that much damage!? How resilient is this monster, despite its injuries!? ”

“Reina! It might be a bit too much to catch up now! ”

“I know! There's nothing we can do about it! ”

The monster's acceleration was its final burst of energy. A little more chasing, and it wouldn't be able to run anymore.

But Reina didn't foresee this. Thinking they couldn't let it escape, she reached for the sniper rifle she had hesitated to use until now. She aimed, prepared to pull the trigger.

But then she involuntarily stopped her movement.

“Reina! What's wrong? ”

“There's someone ahead! ...Huh? Is that... Akira!? ”

“What!? ”

The enlarged display from the information gathering device showed Akira standing further ahead, waiting for the running monster.

The monster, running for its life, realized there was a human ahead. But it couldn't stop. It knew it would be killed by the humans behind if it stopped. So, it continued charging ahead, attempting to leap over Akira.

However, Akira remained unfazed even as the charging monster approached with tremendous force. Holding a blade, he extended the silver edge calmly, waiting for the creature's arrival.

As the monster crossed paths with Akira, at that moment, the swung blade cleaved the massive beast horizontally, splitting its colossal body in two.

The monster's body, carried by inertia, flew and slammed into the ground a moment later. Blood flowed from the severed section, staining the wasteland crimson.

With a nonchalant motion, Akira sheathed his blade as if it were nothing. Reina and Togami watched in astonishment.



Having recognized each other's faces, Reina and her team approached Akira's group.

Reina and Togami showed a slightly surprised expression at the unexpected combination of Akira and Yumina. Shiori and Kanae remained as usual, for better or for worse.

“Akira, it's been a while! We saw what you did just now! Impressive! Have you become fond of close combat, Akira?”

“I just didn't want stray bullets hitting me. Can't always rely on you guys to dodge them like before.”

“No, no, just the fact that you're using a blade for such a reason shows potential. How about taking it a step further and trying hand-to-hand combat next?”

“Then I'll use a gun next. Try your best to dodge.”

Kanae, with a teasing expression, lightly shook his head as if to indicate he didn't understand. Shiori then stepped forward.

“Akira-sama, I appreciate your choosing to engage in dangerous close combat against that monster for Milady's safety. Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. A blade can handle something like that. Don't worry about it. ...By the way, Shiori, couldn't you guys have taken that thing down? ”

“It's possible. However, there were circumstances on our end.”

At that moment, Togami remembered something and interjected.

“Oh, right. Shiori-san, what about that thing Akira just took down? How will it be handled? ”

“We'll consider it escaped due to Akira's intervention.”

Hearing this, Reina objected.

“Huh, but even though Akira finished it off, we're the ones who cornered it. If it weren't for Akira, we would've taken it down, so shouldn't it be considered defeated? ”

“No, that won't do.”

Togami also attempted to argue.

“But it was just a coincidence that Akira was here, and excluding such luck from the evaluation...”

“There is a saying that luck is also part of one's abilities. Milady was unlucky. That's all.”

Seeing Reina and Togami hang their shoulders together, Akira looked slightly puzzled.

“Could it be that it was wrong for me to defeat them? ”

“No, not at all. There's no problem with that. In the first place, this is a result of Milady' insufficient abilities to promptly defeat their targets. While there might be deductions considering the evaluation of the results taking luck into account, there can be no additions considering misfortune.”

Being criticized by Shiori like that, Reina and Togami bowed their heads even deeper.

But then, Kanae smiled as if she had come up with something interesting.

“Well then, Milady. Here's the deal. Since it would be disrespectful to treat the fact that you met Akira here as just bad luck, let's turn it into an opportunity. If you manage to persuade Akira to accompany us in exploring the Lida Commercial District Ruin, then you can count me in as part of the fighting force.”

While Reina and Togami were surprised by the unexpected proposal, Shiori narrowed her eyes sharply.

“Kanae. What are you up to? ”

“Isn't it fine? Akira would be a perfect addition to our fighting force. We can eliminate the shortage of combat power. Besides, I'm getting tired of just watching the lovely banter between Milady and Togami from the back seat. I want to do something different for a change.”

“Why do you have to bring me and Togami into this!?”

Kanae placed her hands on Reina's shoulders, then using her martial arts skills, she turned her halfway to face Akira. Placing her hands on Reina's shoulders again and gently pushing her forward.

“Come on, young lady! Negotiate with Akira and persuade him! This is also training. If you're lacking in combat ability and negotiation skills, even I won't be recognized. Show a little improvement.”

Reina glanced at Shiori. Shiori let out a small sigh as if to say there was no helping it.

Seeing that, Reina interpreted it as Shiori reluctantly but approvingly agreeing to Kanae's proposal. In order to gain Shiori's approval, she decided to show determination, albeit somewhat resignedly.

“Alright. Akira, the truth is, we have a plan to explore the Lida Commercial District Ruin...”

Akira, whose choice to not listen to the conversation was taken away by Kanae's momentum, went along and listened to Reina's story for the time being.

For various reasons, Togami and Reina had been teamed up together for a while, continuing their hunter activities.

Sometimes they argued and clashed. But both of them were determined to become stronger based on their experiences at the Mihazono District Ruin. If their shortcomings were pointed out, they admitted their faults for their own growth, pointed out each other's, gave instructions, and covered for each other while steadily gaining experience.

And by the time they had become able to freely express their opinions as both hunters and friends, they had decided to plan an exploration of the Lida Commercial District Ruin due to certain circumstances.

However, Shiori showed reluctance due to the lack of combat power.

The difficulty of exploring the Lida Commercial District Ruin would be manageable for a team of four, including themselves and Kanae. However, they were merely escorts, not regular combatants. And with just Reina and Togami's combat capabilities, this ruin would be overwhelming. Therefore, the exploration of this ruin was not allowed. She explained this and held Reina and the others back.

When told this, Reina and the others felt discouraged. Though they were no longer deadweights and were trying their best, they still understood that their abilities were lacking.

However, Reina and the others couldn't give up, so they tried to negotiate with Shiori to obtain permission. They tried to persuade her by insisting that they were capable of handling the Lida Commercial District Ruin.

Shiori reluctantly agreed to compromise rather than outright refuse, realizing that denying Reina's enthusiasm would hinder their progress. They increased the difficulty of the monsters they encountered bit by bit under Shiori's instructions, but they still managed to win. And finally, they succeeded in getting Shiori to agree by telling her that they would accept if they could defeat that one particular monster.

Reina and the others went into the final battle confidently. The outcome was the previous fight where Akira took the spotlight.

Due to Reina's lack of explanation, there were some misunderstandings, but Akira roughly understood the situation. And he found it strange.

“So, basically, you're saying it's dangerous there, right? It's said to be an unpopular ruin, so why are you so fixated on the Lida Commercial District Ruin? ”

“Ah, about that...”

Reina stopped there and glanced at Shiori. But Kanae grabbed Reina's head from both sides with her hands and forcibly turned her face towards Akira and the others.

“Hey!? What are you doing!?”

“Young lady, that's not good. Whether it's okay to talk about it and whether the person you're talking to is the right one to talk to, you have to decide that for yourself. Don't make a decision based on big sis's reaction.”

“Uh...”

Reina staggered and stopped moving. It was unconscious to try to look at Shiori's face, but being pointed out, she consciously realized that she had tried to judge from Shiori's reaction, just as Kanae had said.

Kanae released Reina and smiled happily. Although Shiori frowned slightly at the attitude of their superior colleague, she only sighed softly and didn't reprimand Kanae.

Reina hesitated and glanced at Akira and Yumina. It was Yumina who stopped her.

“Reina. As a hunter affiliated with Drankam, I also pay attention to handling information. Is this okay?”

Saying that, Yumina urged Akira with her eyes. Akira nodded lightly.

“I don't know what it's about, but I won't blabber it out unnecessarily. Is that okay?”

With that, Reina decided to speak. She trusted Akira and relaxed her expression.

“Got it. We can't reveal the source of the information, but the truth is, there are rumors that there are automata sleeping in the Lida

Commercial District Ruin. We're aiming for that.”

Saying so, Reina looked slightly proud. It was such valuable information. Akira and the others would surely be very surprised. That feeling was written all over her face.

But the reaction they received wasn't what they expected. Akira and the others just nodded lightly as if they understood. Reina was instead surprised by their reaction.

“...Huh? Wait, aren't you surprised? It's about automata from the old-world, you know? It's not just some ordinary relics? ”

Yumina replied apologetically.

“Reina. Actually, that's why we came here too.”

“Huh? Really? ”

“Yeah. That's why we came all the way to this ruin.”

Reina thought they were the only ones who had grasped this incredible information, so she was somewhat disappointed that Akira and the others knew about it too.

Then Shiori interjected.

“If it's not too much trouble, Akira-sama, may I ask about the source of that information? If necessary, we are willing to compensate.”

“No, it's fine if you don't mention it. I heard it from a city employee named Kibayashi. The information about the automata themselves seems to have been investigated by Yajima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry.”

Shiori, who quickly ran various thoughts through her mind from that fragmentary information, furrowed her brow thoughtfully.

“I'm sorry. I can't quite deduce the circumstances from that. Could I hear more details? ”

“...Well, there were various things. Don't worry about it. Anyway, shouldn't we decide whether we're going with them or not first? ”

With that, Reina came to her senses. And panicked.

They had provided valuable information, hoping to persuade Akira and the others to join them. But if Akira and the others already knew about it, it was meaningless.

If they didn't accompany them, Akira and the others would become formidable competitors in searching for the old-world automata. Moreover, since they were being stopped by Shiori, they couldn't even enter the ruins in the first place. Even if they managed to persuade Shiori later, they would be fatally behind.

“R-Right! So, Akira, if you and your group are also here to search for automata, let's do it together! It'll be more efficient and safer, don't you think? ”

She tried to coax them with such a poor negotiation skill, feeling somewhat disgusted with herself as she spoke, while thinking of additional persuasive materials.

But even that level of content had some effect on Akira.

“Yumina, what do you think? ”

“Sorry, but I think that's something Akira should decide. Oh, it's not that I don't like it, so either way is fine.”

“I see. Then, Reina. We're okay with doing it together, but there are conditions and complications. Listen to them and make your decision.”

Reina felt a surprising sense of relief at the unexpected positive response, but also looked puzzled.

“Complications? Separate from the conditions? ”

“Yeah, a little.”

The conditions included collecting relics alongside the search for automata. If they collected relics together, it was certain that the efficiency of the search for automata would decrease. But even if they searched desperately, there was no guarantee they would find any automata. Reina understood that they didn't want to end up with no results after coming all this way, so she accepted it normally.

However, the complications were something that made Reina hesitate when she heard them.

“We have to sell all the relics we collect to the city. Even if we distribute the relics between us and Reina's group, we'll end up having to negotiate with the city later, which I think will be a huge hassle. Are you okay with that? ”

Even if they successfully obtained a valuable old-world automaton, they couldn't split it evenly and separately with Akira's group and Reina's group. They would have to sell it somewhere first and then divide the money equally.

However, determining the buyer and price, especially considering that the item to be sold was an old-world automaton, would require very troublesome negotiations.

In addition, Reina and the others had to deal with Drankam even in their own state.

Basically, hunters affiliated with Drankam are required to entrust the conversion of relics they find to their party. Instead of dealing with the hassle of negotiations associated with relic sales and other expenses, they deduct fees and expenses from the sale proceeds.

Naturally, the more relics handed over to the party, the stronger the support from the party. Young hunters receiving substantial support would hand over all relics to the party, while veteran hunters who do not require much support would hand over a moderate amount.

For now, Reina and Togami are also young hunters affiliated with Drankam. However, due to their current position distancing themselves from the bureaucratic faction of Drankam, their treatment was closer to that of veterans. The proportion of relics handed over to the party was also similar.

Nevertheless, if Reina and the others were to obtain extremely valuable relics like old-world automata, Drankam would definitely press them forcefully to entrust the handling to the party. Negotiations would undoubtedly be difficult.

Add to that negotiations over rewards with Akira and negotiations for relic sales involving the Kugamayama City, and those negotiations would become extremely complex and cumbersome, to say the least.

Reina felt a bit overwhelmed at the thought of being involved in such negotiations. She instinctively looked at Shiori for guidance. However, she was once again redirected by Kanae, who grabbed her head and turned her gaze forward.

She had to decide for herself. Even if her decision was wrong. To break free from being a mere figurehead and truly become the master of Shiori and Kanae, she had to make her own decisions.

Reina smiled, resolved.

“Got it, Akira. Don't worry. Let's do it together. Dealing with such troublesome matters is also part of a hunter's skill.”

“I see.”

Akira felt that Reina's atmosphere suddenly changed a bit, which was a little strange to him, but he didn't pay much attention to it. However, Kanae seemed somewhat amused, and Shiori seemed a bit pleased, smiling.

With her master having made a decision, Shiori began to act accordingly.

“Then, Milady, for the time being, please proceed with relic collection together with Kanae and Akira. I will start preparing for relic collection. There are various things to do, such as preparing for camping and arranging carriers, as we are going to collect relics firmly in the Lida Commercial District Ruin.”

“Understood. But it's rare for Shiori to take separate action in the wasteland.”

Shiori replied with a slightly amused tone to Reina's puzzled expression.

“Milady, Kanae has been allowed to assess your own combat capabilities, but I have not yet acknowledged your own combat capabilities.”

“Ah, I see.”

“In order to supplement the insufficient abilities of Milady, Kanae will accompany you, but if it seems to burden you and Akira-sama and Yumina-sama, I will cancel the search for automata. Is that acceptable?”

“Roger. I'll do my best.”

Reina nodded in response, smiling, and Shiori nodded satisfactorily and then gave instructions with her gaze to Kanae. Kanae nodded and moved to Reina's side.

Reina interpreted Shiori's instructions as a reminder to protect herself, even though she was worried, she realized that her own abilities were still at that level, so she resolved not to let her guard down and remained determined.

Reina and the others left Shiori behind and headed to the Lida Commercial District Ruin with Akira and the others.

After seeing them off, Shiori sighed heavily with a troubled expression.

(...Old-world automata. If there is reliable information, headquarters should move. So the possibility is low, but... if we succeed in securing them... what should we do?)

At any rate, in order to avoid missing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity due to neglecting preparations, Shiori thought that she must take minimal measures if there was even a slight possibility. With that in mind, she began her preparations.

Even if it's just temporary, she will separate from Reina in the dangerous wasteland. She must prepare for what needs to be done when Reina is not around.



Akira and the others, who returned to the Lida Commercial District Ruin with Reina, first decided to collect relics in the dome that had already been surveyed once.

As they prepared to enter the dome, Kanae smiled meaningfully and playfully towards Reina and Togami.

“Milady, Togami-kun. As promised, I'll fight too, but should I take the lead? ”

Togami laughed confidently in response to the provocative words.

“No, Kanae-san, please stay back. First, Reina and I will handle it. Right, Reina? ”

Reina also smiled confidently.

“Of course. Kanae, just watch and see that we're perfectly capable on our own.”

“Let's see what you've got. So, Akira-kun and Yumina-san, please step back for now. Oh, and if you think it's no good, you can jump in to support them anytime.”

“Got it.”

Akira replied casually. But that serious expression from Reina and Togami changed his demeanor.

In the battle at the Mihazono District Ruin, they were nothing but a hindrance. But it's different now. They felt nervous but even more determined as the opportunity to prove themselves to Akira presented itself.

“Togami, let's go.”

“Yeah, let's do this.”

Reina and Togami, brimming with determination, entered the dome. Akira and Yumina, somewhat puzzled, followed behind them, while Kanae, with a playful smile, followed behind.

As they advanced through the dome, covered with greenery inside, they encountered a group of monsters in a wide passage.

The creatures were quadrupeds with no fur, exposing robust muscles. While omnivorous, they also consumed the grass growing in this area. The strength of their jaws, capable of chewing through

steel-like tough grass and vines, made them formidable opponents that ordinary defenses couldn't withstand.

These creatures leaped and charged, kicking off the floor and walls of the passage, disrupting the hunters' aim with their three-dimensional movements as they attacked Reina and the vanguard.

But Reina and the others responded effectively to the creatures' movements.

Togami set up a barrage to slow down the movement of the enemies. While their thick flesh armor could withstand direct hits, continuous hits could significantly slow down their movements due to the impact of being struck.

Meanwhile, Reina targeted and shot at the closest opponents, aiming for their heads to quickly inflict fatal wounds. Even if they couldn't kill them outright, rendering them unable to move would suffice. She continued firing without letting the enemies get closer.

Then, when the opponents were incapacitated, they finished them off together. It wasn't a flashy victory with overwhelming firepower, but a safe and sure victory.

Reina turned to Akira and the others with a proud expression.

“Well? We handled it just fine with just Togami and me, didn't we? ”

Yumina seemed a bit surprised.

“Impressive, Reina. When did you become so strong? ”

“Well, I wasn't just playing around, you know.”

Reina smiled proudly at the expected reaction. Then she shifted her gaze to Akira and Kanae, wanting to gauge their reactions this time.

However, their reactions were disappointing. Akira and Kanae remained indifferent. Unlike during their time at the Mihazono District Ruin, where Reina and Togami had significantly improved, their expressions didn't change much in response to the impressive display of skill.

However, Akira and Kanae weren't underestimating Reina and the others' abilities.

Kanae already knew Reina's current strength. Knowing what to expect, there was no need to be surprised now. By refraining from overly obvious praise, she was acknowledging Reina's abilities correctly.

As for Akira, he simply wasn't particularly interested in Reina and the others' growth. He didn't harbor negative feelings like considering them mere hindrances. He recognized Reina and the others' growth, albeit without any sense of astonishment. It just didn't impress him.

Thinking back to their previous encounters, Togami recalled his first meeting with Akira. There was a time when he tried to impress Akira with his abilities, but received almost no reaction. It wasn't just being ignored. He was met with that same indifferent reaction even after the recent battle.

Reflecting on that moment, Togami thought to himself.

(...So this is the extent of his indifference. Well, he's not the type to judge me as a hindrance. Let's just say I passed the minimum requirements.)

With that thought in mind, Togami switched gears. And noticing Reina's demeanor, he intentionally smiled proudly towards Akira.

“What do you think, Akira? As Reina said, weren't we just fine on our own? ”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess so.”

“You seem unimpressed. Well, if you didn't think we were just baggage, then I guess we're good. If you're not sure after this first battle, just watch our strength for a bit longer. Let's go, Reina.”

With just that, Togami said and moved on ahead.

“Huh? Oh, okay.”

Feeling somewhat relieved, Reina followed after him. And as she walked beside Togami, she noticed that she felt a little lighter.

She soon realized the reason. It was because Togami's words, affirming that they were capable on their own, had also been acknowledged by Akira. And Togami's words were meant to show her Akira's reaction.

They weren't just baggage. If they weren't satisfied with that assessment, they just had to show even greater strength from now on. Encouraged by Togami's prompting, Reina lifted her head high.

“...Thank you.”

Reina whispered her gratitude softly, and Togami, trying to hide his embarrassment, quickened his pace slightly. Despite being left behind a bit due to that, Reina smiled with relief and hurried to catch up to Togami.

Meanwhile, behind Reina and the others, Akira, who was oblivious to the subtleties, looked puzzled, while Yumina seemed somewhat surprised. Kanae, on the other hand, smiled intriguingly.

Chapter 160: Luck Is Also Part of One's Abilities

Akira and the others finished their first artifact collection at the Lida Commercial District Ruin. They returned to Shiori outside the ruins and Reina reported their findings to Shiori on behalf of the group.

“... So, we managed to handle the monsters here with just me and Togami, and we collected artifacts thoroughly.”

“... Is that so? ”

Reina slightly frowned at Shiori's response, which seemed to carry some meaning.

“Why do you seem a little doubtful? ”

“No, despite the wonderful results, Milady seemed to express some dissatisfaction.”

Reina, upon being pointed out, put on a smile to mask her expression.

“Ah, well, you see. It did go well, but, apart from that, it's a reflection of the desire to do even better, you know? ”

At this point, Kanae interjected.

“That's a good attitude. Exactly. It's the minimum requirement not to be a hindrance to Akira. Being satisfied with just that isn't good.”

“... That's true.”

Reina forced a smile towards Kanae.

After the first artifact collection, Reina managed to repel the monsters that attacked with Togami alone. However, she ultimately

couldn't get a sufficient response from Akira.

Shiori also understood the situation roughly. She gently admonished Reina as if to remind her.

“Milady, it's good to have a high level of ambition for improvement, no matter the reason. But there's no need to rush for results. You are steadily growing, Milady.”

“... Yes, I understand.”

Reina exhaled, switching her focus and smiled again.

“So, are the preparations that Shiori mentioned done? ”

“No need to worry. I've arranged for transportation and accommodation. By the time we finish the next artifact collection, we should have arrived. Kanae, I'll be going next. You stay here and handle anyone who comes calling.”

“Understood.”

“Well then, everyone, let's go.”

Reina was slightly surprised by Shiori's prompt departure.

“Huh? Are we going already? No break? ”

She looked at the others, seeking agreement for a break. But Akira and Yumina weren't tired as they hadn't fought, and Togami, who fought as much as Reina, quietly began preparing to move.

“If you're tired, Milady, you're welcome to stay behind...”

“N-no, I'm coming! I'm fine! Come on, Shiori, let's get going! ”

Reina, who couldn't show her best during the first artifact collection, brushed off her slight despondency in response to Shiori's provoking

words, rallying her spirits and getting into the car with renewed determination.

“My apologies.”

With a smile, Shiori followed behind.



Akira and the others, starting their second artifact collection, stood in front of the dome at the Lida Commercial District Ruin. It was a different dome from the first time, but like before, this was an area they had already investigated. Knowing where the artifacts were located, they only needed to go there and retrieve them.

So, just like the first time, it was crucial to have the strength to repel monsters along the way. With determination, Reina stepped forward to lead once again.

But Shiori stopped her.

“Akira-sama, to confirm everyone's combat ability, could we ask Akira-sama and the others to take the vanguard this time?”

“Hmm? Got it. Yumina.”

“Roger. This time it's our turn.”

Akira and the others moved forward together. Reina gave Shiori a slightly puzzled look, but realizing she must have a reason, she reconsidered and obediently took up the rear.

As they advanced into the dome, they encountered once again the hairless quadruped beasts in groups they had faced before. From behind Akira and Yumina, who took up calm defensive stances, Reina and the others watched their fighting closely with keen interest.

The monsters surged forth. Akira and the others shot them down, defeating them. The battle ended in about 10 seconds. Akira and the others emerged victorious. It was a swift victory.

But this short battle was enough to astonish Reina and the others.

Akira had hit all his shots, each hitting the same target in the same spot, all aimed at vital points. With the high power of the LEO SSB multi-function gun, he was instantly killing the biologically resilient monsters one after another.

In addition, Akira hadn't fired a single wasted shot. Having encountered the same type of monster during the exploration of the dome, he knew exactly where and how many shots to fire to kill them. He efficiently shot his bullets into the appropriate positions, killing them extremely effectively.

Akira's skill was indeed remarkable. But Reina and the others were not overly surprised by it. They knew Akira was strong from their battle at the Mihazono District Ruin. If he had acquired even more advanced equipment and further training since then, this level of strength wasn't that surprising.

What astonished Reina and the others was that Yumina was doing almost the same thing as Akira.

Certainly, compared to Akira, she lacked a bit of precision. Not all of her shots hit vital points, and she used a few more bullets.

However, even so, Yumina demonstrated enough skill as a combatant, showing that she wasn't just being protected by Akira but was a force to be reckoned with herself.

Shiori wore a slightly stern expression inwardly.

(Yumina-sama's ability is slightly stronger than Milady's, with Akira-sama compensating for Yumina-sama's insufficient strength. That's

what I had thought, but to have such high ability... I made a mistake. This might backfire.)

Since the battle at the Mihazono District Ruin, Reina had been working hard to become stronger. And she had indeed become considerably stronger.

But it was difficult for Reina herself to recognize this properly. Coupled with not getting a favorable reaction from Akira, the thought that she still had a long way to go was starting to weigh on her mind in a negative direction.

Realizing this, Shiori tried to adjust Reina's awareness by showing her Yumina, not necessarily in a positive way, to demonstrate that Reina was strong enough not to need Akira's help. At least, that was Shiori's intention.

But Yumina being this strong was unexpected. Regretting her unnecessary action, Shiori lamented her misjudgment.

Togami, too, was surprised by Yumina's strength. At the same time, he somewhat understood why Akira hadn't shown interest in their battles.

(So this is the standard level of strength within Akira's circle. No wonder he doesn't show interest in our fights.)

And Reina, while amazed by Yumina's strength, also looked at her with a slightly stern gaze.

“... Yumina. Were you that strong? ”

Reina blurted out unintentionally, realizing that her tone sounded somewhat accusatory towards Yumina and scolded herself inwardly for it, refraining from vocalizing her thoughts.

(She praised me for being amazing, even though she's stronger than me? I was genuinely happy about that, but was it just flattery? That's

what I thought, what I interpreted, and at that point, I felt ashamed for blaming my own lack of strength on others.)

Sensing this, Yumina deliberately responded with a slightly cheerful attitude, mixing in a light smile tinged with a wry expression.

“Well, it's not like I was just fooling around... Though I do want to boast about my abilities, I'm kind of cheating, you know. If I can't do this much, it would be bad.”

Hearing this, Reina couldn't help but look puzzled.

“Cheating? What do you mean? ”

“I'm being supported by the Comprehensive Support System. Even this augmented suit I'm wearing is part of the Comprehensive Support Enhancer. Plus, to make sure I don't hold Akira back, they've given me a really high-performance one.”

Seeing Reina still somewhat perplexed, Yumina continued with a smile.

“I'll tell you more about it later if you're interested. We're in the middle of artifact collection now, so let's talk after that. Akira, let's go.”

“... Hm? Oh, yeah.”

With a smile, Yumina went ahead, and Akira followed with a somewhat troubled expression.

Reina and the others, though curious about Yumina's story, thought it best to focus on the artifact collection for now, exchanging glances before switching gears and following Akira and the others.

As they progressed through the ruins, Akira muttered to himself.

“Cheating...”

It wasn't meant for Yumina to hear, but she did. Sensing a hint of emotion in Akira's voice, she decided to respond.

“Maybe 'cheating' was too strong a word, but I'm aware that I'm using incredibly high-performance equipment, including the Comprehensive Support System. So, even if someone calls it cheating, I can't deny it's true to some extent.”

“I see...”

Akira let out a small sigh, seeming slightly disheartened. Yumina couldn't understand the reason and tilted her head inquisitively.

Akira sighed softly.

(Cheating... Is it?)

The support from the Comprehensive Support System. Knowing that, for Yumina, it might be considered cheating, made Akira realize how much more cheating it was for him, with Alpha's support. He understood that.

And he had come to terms with it. He wasn't wallowing in regret over it being unfair but decided that if he felt remorse or was discouraged by it, he should strive to reach a point where he could do the same without Alpha's support. He had already made that decision after being encouraged by Sheryl before.

Nevertheless, he couldn't completely disregard it. It was more about switching his mindset than fully accepting it. He wouldn't dwell on it deeply, but he might let out a small sigh like this.

(If I'm bothered by something as trivial as this, it means I still have a long way to go. I need to work harder.)

With that thought, Akira reassessed and refocused his determination, deciding to stop worrying about it further. He didn't realize that the reason he found this trivial matter troubling was because it was Yumina who brought it up.

Alpha quietly observed Akira without saying anything, not wanting to provoke his realization by saying anything unnecessary.

After completing their second artifact collection, when Akira and the others returned to Kanae's location, they found a transport truck and a large camping trailer parked there.

“Welcome back. I'm sorry to rush you, but please finish loading the artifacts as soon as possible.”

They began loading the collected artifacts onto the truck. Reina looked a little puzzled.

“Huh? Shiori, this truck doesn't seem to belong to Drankam. Did you arrange for it elsewhere? ”

“Yes. If we arrange transportation with Drankam, the temporary storage location for the artifacts will be inside Drankam's facility. That could cause inconvenience during negotiations for distributing the rewards, including the sale of the artifacts.”

“Ah, I see.”

Reina understood and continued loading the artifacts.

Shiori wasn't lying. Since Kanae had also received a warning from Shiori, she didn't say anything unnecessary.

Once the artifacts were loaded, the truck departed. With that, today's artifact collection was complete. As they watched the truck leave,

Reina regained her composure during the artifact collection and now showed strong interest in what was to come next.

“Well then, Yumina. Can I ask you some questions? ”

“Yes, of course.”

“Milady, this isn't something that can be discussed standing. Please have your conversation inside.”

Following Shiori's suggestion, they all entered the camping trailer. Akira, who followed, looked up at the large vehicle and let out a light sigh of admiration.

“Wow.”

“What's wrong, Akira-sama? ”

“Oh, it's just... it's pretty big and impressive.”

The camping trailer Shiori arranged could expand its living area by deploying external walls after parking. The already expanded living area resembled a small villa.

Even when preparing for camping, one would typically only bring large tents or camping cars. Akira's surprise was significant because of this expectation.

“It's for six people, so it's necessary.”

“But renting something like this must be quite expensive, right...? ”

“Certainly, rental costs can be substantial. However, if one can't earn enough to cover that, then the whole endeavor of artifact collection here would be a mistake. Moreover, considering the risk of being hindered in combat due to insufficient rest, it's reasonable to consider it a necessary expense.”

“I see... Certainly...”

Akira listened to Shiori's explanation and agreed with it.

He had thought that becoming a hunter and earning a lot of money had skewed his sense of value. However, until Shiori explained it, he hadn't considered the cost of renting this expensive camping trailer as a necessary expense.

In that case, perhaps his sense of value wasn't as skewed as he thought. Maybe he was still relatively modest compared to the money he earned, dragging along the sense of frugality from his days in the slums.

As Akira tried to reconsider his thoughts, Shiori continued seriously.

“Firstly, unless there are circumstances that force it, I won't allow Milady to camp outdoors.”

“... Ah, yes. That's true.”

His earlier thoughts were just a momentary distraction. Akira shifted his thoughts in another direction, entering the camping trailer.



After finishing their hunter duties for the day, Akira and his companions relaxed, removing their augmented suits. They took quick showers to wash away the sweat, changed into the provided clothes, and now were having a meal.

Only Akira, Yumina, Reina, and Togami had changed. Shiori and Kanae remained as they were, prepared to handle any monsters that might attack suddenly. With at least the other four ready to intercept, there was no safety issue.

The interior of the vehicle was spacious, with comfortable beds and sofas, providing ample facilities for rest. Akira found it intriguing

how luxurious the environment was, considering they were in the wasteland.

Reina and the others were surprised by the story they heard from Yumina. It started with discussions about the Comprehensive Support System, leading to an explanation of why Yumina was loaned such powerful equipment — to ensure she didn't hinder Akira during his Hunter Rank adjustment request.

Togami was surprised, then seemed to understand somewhat, but his face revealed inner complexities.

“To think you'd be requested for a Hunter Rank adjustment. Maybe you were a formidable rank-cheating hunter after all... Ahh... Ahh! ”

Togami began to express his inner turmoil not just on his face but in his voice as well.

“There's no need for complaints. I'm not blaming you for anything.”

“Ah, sorry. I'm not complaining. I'm just feeling overwhelmed by my own stupidity back when I judged your abilities based solely on your Hunter Rank.”

“I see...”

“So, what's Akira's Hunter Rank now? ”

“42.”

“42!? But wasn't it 21 last time!? It's doubled in such a short time!? And surpassing Rank 40 in Kugamayama City is rare even among Hunters!?”

Togami raised his voice in surprise, prompting Reina to add her thoughts.

“Even though it's risen that high, if the Hunter Rank adjustment request isn't finished yet, it means it's still not the appropriate value, right? ”

“Ahh! ”

Seeing Togami's astonishment or perhaps resignation, Akira felt as if he had done something wrong but reassured himself that he hadn't.

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

“Thank you for the interesting story, Yumina-sama. However, I noticed some parts that I couldn't fully understand. I'm not accusing you of lying, but it seems there were some omissions in your explanation, am I correct? ”

As Reina and the others turned their gaze towards him, Yumina hesitated for a moment before replying.

“...If you're asking whether there were any, then yes, there were. But as for what I can say from my own perspective, including the fact that my strength comes from the support of the Comprehensive Support System, I've told you everything. Is that not enough? ”

From here, it became a matter of whether they wanted to pry the information out of her. Shiori didn't desire that. He decided to end the conversation.

“No, it's sufficient. I apologize for overstepping, and thank you for your explanation.”

However, Reina was not quite understanding the situation. She simply wanted to know.

“Oh, come on. If you know, why not tell us? Togami wants to know too, right? ”

“Ah, well, if I can talk about it, then sure. But I'm not going to force it out.”

It would be a lie to say she had no interest, but she didn't want to argue with Yumina and the others over it. Togami, while aligning his story with Reina's, responded with that intention.

Yumina hesitated for a moment. Why did she tell them? Why didn't she tell them? She couldn't take responsibility for that. She didn't intend to.

And besides, she judged that she had no right to tell them, so she left it to those who did have that right to decide how to respond.

“Akira. What do you think? If it's okay with you, we can hear it from you,”

“Hm? Well, sure. I'm not bound by any confidentiality agreements, and you guys aren't the type to spill the beans. But even if you tell me not to, I can't take responsibility if you do, okay? ”

Reina involuntarily flinched.

“Huh? Is that what this is about? ”

“Who knows? I'm not very good at judging this kind of information, so it's just a possibility. But maybe Yumina didn't say it because of that? ”

Unexpectedly, Reina's reaction caused Akira to ask in a normal tone.

“So, what will it be? Do you want to hear it? ”

“Um...”

Reina hesitated. She was genuinely curious. Akira wasn't exactly threatening her. There was a possibility that it wasn't a big deal.

Maybe it would be better to ask than to worry about it. She thought so.

But she hesitated in her response, feeling that it might be better not to ask if she wasn't sure.

Her hesitation unconsciously turned her gaze towards Shiori. But she was grabbed by Kanae again and forced to look forward once more.

“Nope. It's not good, Milady. Since you're the one who wants to know, you should decide.”

Kanae continued cheerfully.

“Ignorance kills people. Those who are too curious die young. It's important to balance those things out properly. Now, young lady, show me your good side.”

Kanae released Reina's hand. But since Shiori had asked her to show her good side, Reina couldn't rely on Shiori. She couldn't ask for advice and had to make the decision herself.

After much deliberation, she came to a conclusion.

“Akira. Can you tell us a little bit at a time? And if it seems dangerous to continue, we'll stop there.”

“Got it. Uh, where should I start...? Well, from the beginning, I guess. Do you remember when there were many humanoid weapons rampaging in the slums? ”

“Yes. There was a big feud between the two major organizations in the slums. I found it strange how they managed to acquire humanoid weapons.”

“Those disturbances were caused by the city.”

Reina chuckled lightly.

“Wait a moment. I heard that a significant number of deaths occurred, which didn't seem like a laughing matter.”

“Well, with that many humanoid weapons rampaging, it's no wonder there were deaths.”

Unlike Akira, who was indifferent to the number of corpses, Reina, who had relatively good judgment, was slightly shocked by the fact that the city itself had caused such a large number of deaths, even though it was in the slums.

“...Shiori. Did you know about this? ”

“No. But I had speculated. Despite the slums being considered wasteland, the fact that a large number of humanoid weapons engaged in a massive battle right next to the city without the defense forces intervening suggested, at the very least, that it was a disturbance tacitly approved by the city.”

“...That's certainly true.”

“It seems to be more of an uproar initiated by the city rather than passive acquiescence due to some circumstances, occasional interventions carried out by many cities with slums, or handling of unofficial management zones that have grown to an unmanageable scale for the city. I had thought it was a thinning act, also known as incineration, but according to Akira's story, it seems to be a city-led commotion, so it's the latter.”

“...I see.”

Reina is aware that she tends to take the city's side. Hearing about the darker aspects of the city made Reina feel a little melancholic.

Akira observes Reina's reaction and speaks up.

“Shall we stop now? ”

Reina braces herself and urges him to continue, saying she's still okay to hear more.

“...No, please continue.”

“So, earlier you mentioned how Reina was wondering how they acquired humanoid weapons, but that's because the combat was a presentation of the new humanoid weapons by Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry.”

“...What do you mean? ”

“They were apparently competing for deployment to the city's defense forces, but since they couldn't reach an agreement, they decided to settle it by actual combat... something like that? ”

Upon hearing this, Reina is somewhat stunned, wondering why such a commotion with so many casualties occurred for such a reason.

On the other hand, Shiori and Kanae show understanding. Togami, while surprised, also displays a reaction similar to Shiori's.

Akira asks again.

“Shall we stop now? ”

“...I'll listen. Since I've come this far, I don't think anything else will surprise me anymore.”

“So, I barged in and managed to defeat quite a few of their humanoid weapons, ruining their presentation...”

“What were you thinking!?”

“Well, there were various reasons. The details of the intrusion are irrelevant to this incident, so I'll skip that part. Anyway, humanoid weapons that were defeated by someone like me wouldn't be deployed to the defense forces, so Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka

Heavy Industry requested me for Hunter Rank adjustment through the city...”

As Akira continues his explanation, Shiori seems somewhat incredulous, while Kanae appears intrigued. Reina is relatively more somber, and Togami leans towards Kanae's reaction.

Reina and the others listen to Akira's story until the end, learning that Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry sent Akira to the Lida Commercial District Ruin to find old-world automata to prevent him from disrupting their next presentation.

Having been continuously bombarded with dense information, Reina listens to the story without much surprise towards the end, feeling somewhat resigned.

Upon hearing the story again from Akira, Yumina, who already knew about it, realizes something in her mind.

“Ah, so that's it.”

“Huh? Yumina. Is there more to the story? I've already been surprised enough.”

“It's not that relevant, but during the commotion in the slums, Katsuya and I were also there guarding the warehouse. So I was told I was inadequate, and I stayed in the rear, but Katsuya and the others were at the frontline defeating humanoid weapons quite a bit.”

“Wait... so not only Akira, but you and Katsuya were also involved in the commotion? And then? ”

“After that, Katsuya and the others went on an expedition, but I wasn't allowed to go. They said I would just be a hindrance if I went along, so I agreed, but apparently, that expedition also involved a Hunter Rank adjustment request for Katsuya and the others. So, of course, I couldn't join them.”

Yumina sighs slightly as she says this. Seeing her, Akira comments somewhat casually.

“...I think you could handle those humanoid weapons Katsuya was defeating now, Yumina.”

Surprised by the unexpected defense from an unlikely source, Yumina asks with a slightly astonished expression.

“Really? ”

“Yeah.”

Akira nods in a straightforward manner. His normal attitude gives the impression that it's not just flattery. Yumina unconsciously smiles a bit, feeling somewhat pleased.

“...Thanks.”

Meanwhile, Togami's surprise deepens.

“Is the support from the comprehensive support system that amazing? ”

In addition to what they witnessed in the ruins, the ability to defeat humanoid weapons individually. Togami and Reina are both amazed at how the comprehensive support system has given Yumina such power.

However, Akira denies it.

“Well, the support from the comprehensive support system is certainly impressive, but it's not like anyone can do it just because they have it. That's Yumina's skill. It's true that compared to now, Yumina before training was holding back quite a bit.”

The two look to Yumina for her reaction to this display of strength.

“Oh, so that's how it is. I asked Akira to train me for about two months when the location for the Hunter Rank adjustment activities was deep within the Kuzusuhara District Ruin.”

“You got that strong in just two months? ”

“What kind of training was it? ”

As Yumina speaks about her training amidst the intensity of Reina and Togami's stares, the expressions of curiosity on their faces gradually shift.

“...So, I worked hard to be able to move my body and the augmented suit separately, but it was tough. Thanks to the support from the comprehensive support system, I managed to do it reasonably quickly and competently. But then, the speed of the augmented suit's movements was too fast for my body to keep up, so it felt like my body was constantly being slammed against the suit...”

Listening to the painful story, Reina and Togami regretted their curiosity. Moreover, seeing the storyteller recalling the experience with a contorted face added to their discomfort.

“...Thanks to taking a lot of high-quality medicines beforehand, I didn't feel any pain, or rather, my sense of pain was numbed. But my senses were still intact, and I could feel that my skin and muscles were all mushy... not to mention, it didn't feel like my bones were snapping or cracking, but more like squishing...”

With the content becoming increasingly uncomfortable, Reina and Togami regretted asking out of mere curiosity.

“...The high-grade medicine would immediately heal it, but as soon as it's healed, I get injured again, and the cycle of healing and injury continues throughout the training. When I take off my augmented suit, I start to worry if my body is still in its proper shape...”

The tale of harsh training continues. Training to become superhuman. Training that goes beyond common sense to gain extraordinary power. A glimpse of that extreme regimen continues.

“...And if we encountered monsters in that state, we fought them, scouted, stayed vigilant. Akira had his bike, but I ran...”

Reina and the others glance at Akira. Akira avoids their gaze.

“...Well, that was those two months. It wasn't every day, and we had breaks in between. The training only focused on days prioritizing monster subjugation, but it was tough. Reina, did you find it helpful?”

“...Y-Yes, somewhat.”

“Good. In that case, I'm glad. Though I wouldn't recommend it.”

Yumina says with a wry smile. It hasn't been long enough to turn it into a laughing matter.

Reina doesn't particularly want to undergo the same training. She returns Yumina's wry smile.

But Togami wears a slightly troubled expression. Then, with a serious look, he asks.

“Akira. Do you think I could handle that training?”

“Huh? Impossible, isn't it?”

“...I see.”

Togami is slightly deflated. The straightforwardness of Akira's response gives it credibility.

But then Akira realizes Togami's misunderstanding and his own lack of explanation.

“Oh, no, that's not it. It's not about your motivation, Togami, it's about money.”

“Money? ”

“Yeah. When we were operating in the deep parts of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, the client covered the cost of consumables. Yumina mentioned it, right? She used a ton of high-quality medicines. Togami trying to do that on his own... it's probably impossible, right?”

“By the way, how much did it cost? ”

“One box was 5 million Aurum, and... hmm? How many boxes did we use? Yumina, do you remember? ”

“I just remember using a lot. Akira bought several 10-box sets from Katsuragi, but I think the total was less than that.”

“In that case...”

As Akira begins to calculate how many boxes they used, Togami stops him with a wry smile.

“It's okay, don't count. I've understood well enough that it's impossible for me.”

He lets out a sigh while chuckling.

“Money, huh? You need money to get stronger, but you need to be strong to earn money. It costs money for equipment and training. Is being a Hunter all about money? You're lucky, Yumina.”

“Well, I won't deny it. But they say luck is part of skill, right? ”

Yumina responds with a joking smile, and Togami joins in with a good-natured laugh.

“True.”

With listeners and storytellers alike harboring somewhat complex feelings, the conversation ends with laughter. Then, Shiori concludes the discussion.

“Everyone, it's getting late. It's probably best to get some rest for tomorrow. Kanae and I will handle the night watch, so don't worry.”

Akira nods and gets up.

“Please do. Wake me up when it's time. I'll take over then. Well then, goodnight.”

Following Akira's lead, Yumina and Togami also bid their farewells and head to bed.



As Togami lies in bed, he ponders Yumina's training and his own.

Previously, Togami had paid 30 million Aurum to Shikarabe for his training. However, Shikarabe insisted that if he received that much and Togami fled from the training, it could be considered fraud, so he was told to start with just 1 million Aurum.

If it's not just talk, then let him take the remaining money without fleeing. Togami accepted that challenge.

And Shikarabe earnestly trained Togami. As a result, Togami went through hell.

The harsh training continued until Togami fainted. Once he fainted, he was immediately woken up and pushed to continue. He continued relentlessly until it became impossible to continue with willpower alone, until the short time for recovery from severe fatigue made awakening difficult, memorizing details about monsters inhabiting the area around the city of Kugamayama, regardless of whether they

were biological or mechanical, and then considering efficient methods of defeating them.

He was taught in detail about the monsters inhabiting the area around Kugamayama city. Regardless of whether they were biological or mechanical, he was made to memorize details such as their habitat, behavior, weaknesses, etc., and then ponder efficient methods of defeating them.

He accompanied Shakarabe to high-difficulty places that clearly did not match his abilities and engaged in battles with powerful monsters at the brink of death. He desperately fought against monsters that were impossible to defeat from the beginning due to his equipment and abilities.

He meticulously analyzed his own actions recorded by information gathering device using goggle-type display devices, while Shakarabe watched and pointed out every flaw in his actions. He received criticism from various perspectives and was asked for improvement suggestions, only to be criticized for those suggestions as well.

Harsh training that anyone else would undoubtedly flee from continued in both actual combat and theoretical study. He could quit at any time. Shakarabe kept telling Togami that.

Togami, tempted by that, squeezed out as much willpower as he could muster and continued to resist while spitting blood.

Those days continued for a while, and when he began to spit less blood, Shakarabe instructed him to act together with Reina. Despite feeling doubtful, he followed the instructions and continued his hunter activities with Reina from then on.

By acting together with opponents of roughly the same overall strength, giving and receiving instructions at times, pointing out each other's shortcomings, offering improvement suggestions, and striving to improve together, the days of confirming his own strength in the mirror of the opponent's strength continued.

The total amount of rewards he had already received from Shakarabe amounted to 29 million Aurum. Only a little more until reaching 30 million Aurum. He was encouraged by the thought that he would soon earn Shakarabe's recognition of his abilities.

Until today, when he met Akira and the others.

(Regardless of Akira, even Yumina had such strength. And I didn't even notice. I guess I unconsciously looked down on her as just Katsuya's lackey. I won't underestimate anyone with such preconceptions anymore. I've decided... This is how it is. I have to pull myself together.)

Having overcome Shakarabe's rigorous training and feeling his growth, Togami admonished himself for becoming complacent and slackening.

Then, he recalled Yumina's training content again, along with the reason he asked Akira if he could do it too.

He had asked because he thought it was impossible for himself. And because he wanted Akira to retract that. Togami realized that.

(I thought the training I received from Shakarabe was incredibly tough, but compared to Yumina's training, it seems it wasn't that big of a deal. Impressive.)

Luck is also part of one's ability. I won't deny Yumina's words. To become stronger, equipment and training are necessary. The equipment known as the comprehensive support system, and the opportunity for training provided by Akira. Yumina was fortunate enough to have acquired those.

However, Yumina's ability to overcome that training wasn't just luck. It was willpower, endurance, mental strength, determination, or something else. It was because she didn't break down under that extraordinary training, not just because she was lucky.

Yumina didn't become strong by mere luck. She became strong through her own ability.

Togami now acknowledged that about Yumina. He genuinely thought she was amazing, to the point of having a kind of respect for her.

(Yeah, I acknowledge it. I can't imitate her. ...Not yet, anyway.)

He resolved to eventually become capable of it himself. With that in mind, Togami renewed his determination.

Thus, the days of seeking further strength without compromise continued even after achieving the immediate goal of earning 30 million Aurum for Shakarabe.



Even after Akira and the others went to bed, Reina remained behind with a troubled expression. She was thinking about Yumina's training.

Akira had judged it impossible for Togami due to the cost, but wondered if it might be possible for himself. Even if the exact same thing was financially difficult, he thought he might be able to reproduce it to some extent.

After the events at the Mihazono District Ruin, Reina arranged to receive training from Shiori and Kanae. The training, as emphasized by Shiori, was rigorous, requiring determination, and often led to vomiting blood.

But it made her stronger. She regretted not doing this sooner, as she had become significantly stronger.

She also changed her equipment. With only immature abilities, highly efficient equipment was not suitable. Previously, she had deliberately used low-performance equipment that matched her abilities due to such thoughts and concerns about her reputation, but

now she had no such thoughts. Shiori provided her with the highest-performing equipment possible.

With both equipment and training improved, she had become significantly stronger. When she reunited with Togami and was surprised by his greatly increased strength, she realized her own strength by being able to fight alongside him without any inferiority.

She had worked hard. That's why she had become so strong. That's what she thought.

Until today, when she met Akira and the others.

(Certainly, Shiori and the others' training was much harder than the drunken fist's, but compared to Yumina's training, it was like playing. Am I still being treated as a child by Shiori and the others...?)

It wasn't necessarily decided. There was also the possibility of overthinking. Reina understood that as well.

However, the discussion about the training, which she thought was sufficient as a basis for understanding Yumina's strength and the basis for making Yumina so strong, had a strong influence on Reina to the extent that she couldn't help but think that she might still be treated as a child.

Then, Kanae approached Reina.

“Milady. Just so you know, you shouldn't take that training story as a reference.”

Thinking she was being teased again, Reina looked at Kanae with a slightly stern expression. However, instead of the usual teasing smile, Kanae had a serious expression. Reina involuntarily hesitated.

“...Um, why shouldn't I take it as a reference? It seems like Yumina became incredibly strong in a short period of time with that

training...? ”

“Certainly, in that sense, it may have been an efficient training. But it was efficient at the expense of survival. It was training where it didn't matter if you died today, as long as you couldn't become strong by tomorrow, you were going to die anyway, so it didn't matter if you died. That's the kind of training it was. So Milady shouldn't take it as a reference.”

Kanae spoke seriously. It was different from her usual atmosphere, which gave her words enough persuasiveness. Reina listened silently.

“There's no shortcut to becoming stronger, some say. But that's a lie. There are plenty of shortcuts. Whether it's equipment or training, it's a good thing to properly search for those paths to become stronger. If you can become strong without exploring those avenues, then the world would be full of experts.”

With that, Kanae's tone became a little stronger as she addressed Reina.

“But, Milady, you shouldn't take dangerous shortcuts. That training is like walking a tightrope over a cliff to get to the other side because you don't want to take the long way around. Normally, you would just fall and die. It's not efficient at all.”

Reina could agree with that. However, she found it curious for precisely that reason.

“...Then why did Akira give Yumina such training? Wouldn't it be normal for someone to die? ”

“I think that's because of Akira's sensibility as a young man. Maybe Akira has become adept at discerning the boundaries through repeatedly facing death. So even if he walks on the edge of death, he won't easily fall off, I think.”

“But Yumina was the one who received the training, right? ”

“Even so, I have a feeling that Akira has a habit of underestimating his own abilities. So, if he can do it, he might think others can do it too, don't you think? ”

“Ah, I see...”

Thinking about it, that might be the case. Reina also thought so and was convinced.

“Luck is also part of one's ability,” she said jokingly, but it's true. She survived by sheer luck. Milady shouldn't risk her life for a game of chance.”

Strictly speaking, Yumina's survival wasn't just a matter of luck. It was because Alpha, at Akira's request, had been continuously adjusting the simulated death line to prevent it from becoming a real one, while keeping it as close to the real thing as possible. And in terms of acquiring that training environment, Yumina was indeed fortunate.

With that, Kanae laughed cheerfully as usual.

“Well, if we were to use the metaphor from earlier, Milady is taking a detour to get to the other side of the cliff, but instead of walking, she's going by car. Because she's receiving training from me and Shiori. If the speed is too slow due to safe driving, please complain to Shiori. She's the one driving the car.”

Reina looked at Shiori. Shiori gave Kanae a sharp look. But Kanae continued to smile without a care. After releasing a small sigh, Shiori turned to Reina with a serious expression.

“I don't deny that you're concerned about Milady's safety. However, we're doing everything we can within the limits of not taking unnecessary risks. Kanae. If you say something pointless, I'll shut you down, okay? ”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Got it.”

With that exchange, Reina laughed. She realized it was needless to worry that she might still be treated as a child by Shiori and the others. With that in mind, she regained her spirits.

“Understood. Shiori. Kanae. Please continue to train me in the same way from now on.”

“We understand.”

“Roger.”

“Well then, I'm going to bed soon too. I'll also take over the watch, so wake me up at an appropriate time. Good night.”

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

Reina was seen off by her two attendants as she headed to bed. She lay down on the soft bed and closed her eyes. She drifted into a peaceful sleep, resolving to continue striving to become stronger.



Shiori and the others went outside for their watch. The conversation there did not reach inside the car.

“Kanae. What do you think about Akira-sama's talk about the source of information on the automaton? ”

“I don't know. It might be false information just to send Akira-kun to the Lida Commercial District Ruin, or maybe Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry just happened to catch the same information as us. It's hard to judge from just Akira-kun's story.”

“...I see.”

“And even if an automaton from the old-world is found, it doesn't necessarily mean it's from Leon's Tail Company. It's useless to think about that now, isn't it? ”

“...I guess.”

“Honestly, what do you think? Would you like it to be found, as my big sis? ”

“...I don't know.”

“Is that so? Well, you can do as you please.”

They simply adapted to the situation. Confirming that obvious fact, Shiori and Kanae continued their watch until the appointed time.

Chapter 161: Drawbacks of the Comprehensive Support System

After spending the night in the camping trailer arranged by Shiori, Akira and the others headed back to the Lida Commercial District Ruin the next day. Today, they would continue collecting relics.

When searching for old-world-made automata, they focused solely on exploring the ruins without collecting other artifacts they encountered along the way, only recording their locations. If they found automata, that was enough. If they couldn't find any after investigating several domes designated as survey targets, they would collect the artifacts found during exploration later. For now, that was their plan.

Two domes had already been surveyed. They planned to finish collecting relics from these two and then start searching for automata in earnest in the next dome.

Yesterday, Reina and Togami, followed by Akira and Yumina, had taken turns taking the lead. Today, it was Shiori and Kanae's turn to advance into the ruins. As they traversed through a wide, long corridor-like area, they encountered a group of beasts they had fought against previously.

The beasts were large, their bodies swollen with excessively developed muscles rather than simply enlarged. With hungry eyes fixed on them, they watched Akira and the others from the end of the corridor.

Kanae chuckled cheerfully.

“Oh, looks like we're up already. Alright, I'll take care of them.”

The enemies were a powerful group of monsters. Normally, one would shoot them from a distance and defeat them. Any other method would be too dangerous.

If they ran out of bullets, they would flee. Even if they were forced into close combat with melee equipment, they would choose terrain where they didn't have to face the entire group.

However, Kanae dashed boldly into the midst of the monster pack.

As if they had coordinated, the beasts charged towards Kanae. The distance between them quickly closed, and they collided.

Kanae's right fist pierced the head of the lead monster. Despite the fact that the creature's head seemed deformed to the point where it didn't seem to contain a skull, its massive body inertia from the vigorous charge pushed its own body from behind, causing it to be sandwiched between Kanae's fist and its own body and burst apart.

The large beast, now headless, flew through the air from the momentum of its charge and the impact of Kanae's fist, splattering blood around as it crashed spectacularly onto the floor.

Yet the other beasts didn't hesitate. They continued to assail Kanae one after another.

However, each one of them was effortlessly countered. Even when they lunged with their jaws wide open or swung their forelegs forcefully, they were dodged without even a scratch.

Furthermore, they were met with punches and kicks. If struck in the head, even the sturdiest individuals would lose their original form; legs would be severed, bodies would have gaping holes, and fragile individuals would burst apart.

In the Eastern Region where guns were plentiful, there stood a certain kind of madman, a deviant, who dared to engage in hand-to-hand combat with monsters.

Watching Kanae's fighting style, Togami couldn't help but comment.

“She's really something.”

Togami knew that Kanae was strong, but witnessing this kind of strength again stirred a kind of admiration within him. To fight monsters without using guns while wearing augmented suit, and to possess the strength to knock them away, there was something captivating about it that appealed to those who sought strength.

Hearing this, Reina chuckled and teased.

“Well, normally she just teases us from behind. She needs to do something like this every now and then.”

Reina didn't actually think Kanae did nothing. She knew that Kanae was there to guard them in case of emergency.

In the first place, situations where Kanae, specializing in close combat, would be needed, would only arise after Reina and Togami, who fought with guns, had made some fatal mistakes and were cornered. It would be better if Kanae didn't have to come into play.

Having understood this, Reina had already overcome the shock of yesterday's events.

Togami sensed this and smiled.

“Yeah, but we've got guns. Let's try not to give Kanae-san a chance to shine in the future.”

“Of course.”

While Reina and the others chatted lightly, Kanae was busy finishing off the group of monsters. She swung her leg high and wide, bringing it down towards the head of the last remaining beast. Her foot crushed its head, tore through its torso, and reached the floor, causing the heavily damaged monster to collapse in a heap, its blood staining the green floor and being absorbed into the soil beneath.

Kanae spun sharply on the spot. The blood and flesh mixed with the back-splash flew off her attire and weaponry with centrifugal force,

eliminating the need for her to clean up.

Having unleashed her rage after a long time, Kanae returned to Akira and the others in high spirits.

“Akira, how was that? ”

“What do you mean, how was it? You took them down just fine, didn't you? ”

“No, no, not that. Don't you have any more thoughts about it? ”

The sight of Kanae defeating a powerful group of monsters in hand-to-hand combat would undoubtedly astonish any hunter, yielding ample feedback.

However, Akira had witnessed Kanae eagerly challenging Monica, who wore old-world augmented suit, at the Mihazono District Ruin. Compared to that, the scene he just witnessed paled in comparison, so he wasn't particularly impressed.

Nevertheless, prompted by Yumina's inquiry, Akira managed to come up with a response.

“My thoughts... It's just that using a gun would have been easier, why bother with hand-to-hand combat? ”

Hearing this, Kanae sighed as if to say he didn't understand, shaking her head.

“That's a boring thought.”

“Don't expect me to come up with exciting thoughts. Ask someone else.”

Kanae looked at Togami and Reina.

“I'm on Team Gun too.”

“Me too.”

Despite often being teased by Kanae, Togami and the others stood by Akira's side with smiles. Kanae shook her head again, this time more dramatically, as if to indicate that they didn't understand.

As Reina and the others lightly conversed, Shiori sensed the presence of monsters and instructed Akira's group to step back slightly. Akira and the others moved to the instructed positions. A few seconds later, a giant beast leaped from the upper-level passage and lunged fiercely towards Shiori below.

Shiori, who calmly drew her sword, stepped forward as if diving under the beast, evading its attack. At the same time, she swung her sword. The long, sharp blade cut through the beast's head and body in an instant, bisecting its massive form.

The beast split into two as it crashed onto the ground before landing. It rolled flamboyantly, finally coming to a stop after splattering a large amount of blood from the severed area.

Shiori swung her sword to shake off the blood and returned it to its sheath. It was a composed movement, as if she had just completed a trivial task.

Akira, who witnessed the whole series of masterful techniques up close, expressed his thoughts.

“Wow, that was amazing.”

“Thank you very much.”

Standing next to Shiori, who gracefully thanked him for the praise, Kanae openly showed her dissatisfaction.

“Eh! Akira, when it was my turn, it was like that, but when it's big sis's turn, it's like that!? Isn't that unfair!?”

“Huh? But it was impressive, wasn't it? ”

“That's not the point! Weren't you also a gun enthusiast, Akira-kun!?”

“Yeah, but if you're that close, a blade would work just fine. And she managed to defeat it properly.”

“No, I'm not convinced! It's unfair! You're favoring only big sis! ”

“Like I care! ”

Shiori sighed in exasperation at her colleagues' childish argument.

“Kanae, let's go.”

“Alright.”

Partly teasing, Kanae quickly changed her attitude and proceeded forward with Shiori. Reina and Togami followed with wry smiles.

Yumina suddenly thought to herself.

“Hey, Akira. I felt both Kanae-san's martial arts skills and Shiori-san's swordsmanship were really amazing, but did you feel a significant difference in their awesomeness? ”

“Why did I feel Shiori's swordsmanship was so amazing...hmm...”

It was a subjective matter, so even Akira himself didn't fully understand it. But since Yumina asked, he pondered the reason.

“...Maybe because I felt like I could do what Kanae did, too? ”

“Hmm. I see. Well, considering you challenge combat with humanoid weapons, Akira.”

When Akira said he could do it, it meant it could be done even without Alpha's support. However, Yumina didn't fully understand that. She thought that if Akira could do Kanae's martial arts or Shiori's swordsmanship, there might still be preferences and strengths and weaknesses. So, she accepted that explanation.



Plants breeding within the Lida Commercial District Ruin not only cover pathways and doors but also firmly cover items displayed on store shelves. Therefore, even if relics are found, they cannot be taken away as they require the troublesome removal of these sturdy plants. This is one of the reasons why the Lida Commercial District Ruin are unpopular among hunters.

However, Akira and his group easily cut through these plants. It did not hinder relic collection.

Akira cut open the plants on the shelves, retrieved relics from within, and handed them to Yumina. Upon receiving them, Yumina used the comprehensive support system's functions to appraise them. If there were no problems, she packed them into her backpack. Generally, they brought back whatever they could find, but they did not take back items that could be identified as low-value with a simple examination on-site.

Togami and Reina were also doing similar things together. Shiori and Kanae were keeping watch around them, just in case.

While continuing their work, Akira handed a cylindrical relic to Yumina. She stiffened slightly upon receiving it.

“Yumina. What's wrong? ”

“...Huh? Oh, it's nothing.”

“I see. By the way, what was that? ”

The cylindrical relic was tightly wrapped, and its contents were not visible even with a casual look. However, through the augmented reality function, the contents were displayed like a product catalog.

But Akira couldn't see it. His equipment didn't have augmented reality, and he hadn't asked Alpha to relay augmented reality information from Yumina either.

Signboards and other information displayed through the ruins' augmented reality transmission function were convenient for exploring the ruins. However, they obscured the view, including the appearance of monsters, making them inconvenient during combat. Since Akira was primarily a combatant, he kept it disabled.

And as someone primarily focused on information gathering, Yumina, who was currently acting as an appraiser, could clearly see the contents of the relics displayed through augmented reality.

“Um... it's clothing.”

Akira nodded slightly in understanding and returned to his work. He thought it must be surprising to see strange designs of clothing.

Yumina breathed lightly and appraised the relic using the comprehensive support system.

Togami casually asked Reina something similar.

“Reina, what kind of relics were there over there? ”

“...Various things. Accessories, tools, toys.”

“Hmm. Do you think they'll sell for a high price? ”

“...I don't know. I'm not familiar with it.”

Since it was just a casual question, Togami didn't ask further and returned to his work without further inquiry.

Yumina and Reina looked at each other, then back to their work without saying anything. It was a silent understanding not to bring up unnecessary things.

Yumina tightened her expression to avoid embarrassment.

(Was this place a shop like that...? I didn't notice because there were no signs in augmented reality. Why is it that only that part is broken?)

Reina reminded herself to dispel any unnecessary embarrassment.

(Regardless of what it is, a relic is a relic. It's good if it sells. If hunters worry about such things, they won't make money. Attitude is everything.)

Both Yumina and Reina thought various things but kept a calm demeanor.

The product catalog displayed through the augmented reality function for relics, being of old-world origin, was highly advanced. For items like clothing and accessories, the person who picked up the item could even see themselves wearing it. For tools, usage examples were also displayed.

Akira and Togami were passing relics without knowing this. Yumina and Reina were struggling not to feel embarrassed or burst into laughter when they saw images of Akira's group or themselves in the catalogs. Shiori remained calm and did not react, while Kanae suppressed her laughter.



Akira and his group made several round trips between the ruins and the camping trailer, completing today's relic collection. Due to reasons other than relic depletion, the ruins were unpopular, but they managed to obtain a considerable quantity and quality of relics.

Imagining the large sum of money after conversion, Togami happily pondered about the use of the funds. While chatting with everyone in the car, he mentioned one of his ideas.

“Yumina, how much does that comprehensive support augmented suit cost with the support system included? ”

“Are you interested to the point of wanting to buy it? ”

“Yeah. I'm curious about how strong you can become, Yumina. Enough to want to know more.”

“In that case, wait a moment. ...Alright, I sent it.”

Yumina sent the comprehensive support system's information to Togami's information terminal. Togami looked at the document, which resembled a product catalog, and muttered with a slightly troubled expression.

“Hmm. The augmented suit alone costs at least 100 million Aurum, plus there's a monthly system fee... It's expensive.”

“It's meant for hunters who can afford to pay lightly, considering it's the content for selling to Akira. He can easily afford that much.”

“Akira, how much is your equipment? ”

“About 600 million Aurum.”

Understanding why it was so expensive, Togami nodded.

“...It's impossible for me to buy it personally. Maybe I could persuade Drankam to buy it, and then I could borrow it...”

“It might sound like a strange thing to say, but since Drankam is promoting the introduction of the comprehensive support system, it's doubtful whether they'd lend it to you, Togami. I'm participating

in the operational testing of the development system because I'm affiliated with the administrative faction, after all.”

“Ah, I see.”

Togami sighed slightly in understanding. Although he didn't regret rejecting Mizuha's invitation earlier, he couldn't help but feel frustrated when he realized it was also due to organizational factionalism.

Reina also looked at the same information. Compared to Togami, she had significantly fewer monetary constraints, which made her more inclined to think it seemed useful. Seeing Togami's desire for the comprehensive support augmented suit, she asked Shiori, who managed the finances.

“Shiori, what do you think? Do you think the comprehensive support system is worth it? ”

“...If it's for Milady's use, I personally do not recommend it.”

“Is that so? It seems really strong and convenient to me, though.”

Shiori, with a slightly surprised expression on her face, explained the reason somewhat seriously.

“Being highly effective in combat. Being useful in other areas as well. I do not deny that point. However, it's regrettable that such support extends to the extent of influencing action plans and decision-making. I cannot recommend it to Milady at this time.”

“Being highly effective in combat is acknowledged. It's also recognized as useful in other aspects. However, I cannot recommend it to the Milady at this time, as much as it may extend its support to the planning of actions and even influence decision-making.”

Even if it excels in tasks like reconnaissance assistance or aiming correction, it merely serves as a handy tool no matter how high its

performance. However, a comprehensive support system significantly aids the entire hunter profession.

In relic collection, it introduces suitable ruins based on the user's abilities, provides information on the estimated purchase price of found relics, arranges transportation services if necessary, and even negotiates with buyers if requested. It comprehensively supports the hunter profession. It's incredibly convenient.

However, the more convenient it becomes, the more one may rely on it as a mere tool of convenience without the skill to handle it appropriately. If this reliance goes too far, eventually, one may end up blindly following recommendations from the comprehensive support system.

Shiori explained this to Reina before stating the primary reason.

“Tools are meant to be used, not to be used by others. I serve Milady. I cannot recommend anything that might lead to her being used by her own tools.”

Feeling like she had been quite sternly spoken to, Reina was a bit taken aback.

“S-So... um, what does Kanae think? ”

“The answer would change depending on what you're asking about, but if it's about whether it's okay for the young lady to use the comprehensive support system, then I agree with big sis.”

Kanae teased as usual, but Reina understood that she wasn't just teasing. Feeling criticized by her two attendants, Reina felt a bit down.

“Am I... going to seem too dependent if I use that convenient tool? ”

“I can't say it'll be totally fine. Even with this issue of exploring the Lida Commercial District Ruin, it's already bad news that the young

lady is trying to get permission from big sis.”

“What do you mean? ”

“The young lady isn't the one who should be seeking permission; she's the one who should be granting it. Normally, it should be big sis who seeks permission. It's fine for the master to consult, seek opinions, seek agreement, rely on, or even ask for favors from her attendants, but what's the point of seeking permission herself? ”

Kanae said, unusually reproachful towards Reina.

“Even if this ruins exploration is reckless for the young lady, both big sis and I would do it if you said so. Of course, we'd try to persuade you to stop. It would just end with big sis dying to protect the young lady, and me carrying the young lady away. I'd advise against it. But even then, the decision of whether to stop or not should be made by the young lady yourself.”

Reina involuntarily looked at Shiori. Shiori maintained her usual calm expression.

“Milady is still in the midst of training. I have no intention of forcing such a decision on you. However, I also have no intention of increasing opportunities where Milady might delegate decisions you should make yourself to something else, even if that something else is the recommendation of the comprehensive support system. It's all part of training. Please ensure you're sufficiently trained to bear the responsibility of making decisions.”

After pondering Shiori and the others' words for a moment, Reina smiled again as if she had made up her mind.

“...So I've been treated like a child who can't make any decisions on her own yet. I understand. Shiori, Kanae, I'll make sure to strengthen that aspect as well, so please wait a little longer.”

“Understood.”

“Sure thing.”

Shiori smiled happily and bowed her head. Kanae laughed as usual.

It was then that Reina finally noticed that Akira and the others had witnessed her exchange with Shiori and the others. Feeling a little embarrassed, she tried to change the subject.

“...Well, anyway, since we don't have the money to buy the comprehensive support system without finding an automaton first, let's think about it later! Let's focus on finding the automaton from tomorrow on! Let's do our best! ”

“Sounds good. Maybe we should rest early for tomorrow. Goodnight.”

Saying so with a smile, Togami headed to bed, followed by Akira and Yumina. Reina followed suit.

“...Well, I'm going to bed too.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

At least she could imagine Kanae's face, so Reina headed to bed, making sure not to show her current expression to Shiori and the others.

Her two attendants had the expected expressions on their faces.



On the third day of their visit to the Lida Commercial District Ruin, Akira and the others began their full-fledged search for the old-world-made automaton.

They explored a larger dome than before. With the increased space came more monsters, and there were many large species that couldn't be seen in narrow spaces, but from today, they officially began exploring the ruins with all six of them. They dealt with them without any problems.

Yumina and Reina were in charge of the investigation. Both of them had equipment compatible with the augmented reality information transmission function of the ruins, and Yumina also had support from the comprehensive support system.

“Yumina, we've checked quite a few places with signs that look promising, but what do we do after we finish those? ”

“How about searching for signs that prohibit entry for non-staff and hoping that there's a warehouse beyond them? ”

“If they're not in the storefronts, they must be in the warehouses. Got it.”

As they decided on their future course of action, Reina thought of something.

“Yumina, your comprehensive support system can assist in relic collection and relic exploration, right? Can it help us find places where automata might be? ”

“...It might be able to functionally, but for now, it can't. If we use the comprehensive support system to investigate that, it might convey to the Kiryou and Drankam that we're searching for automata here.”

Yumina had a duty of confidentiality as someone who received requests from the city, and as someone participating in the operational test of the Kiryou's comprehensive support augmented suit through Drankam, she had an obligation to report various matters.

However, she judged that information about the old-world-made automata was something she couldn't leak, prioritizing her duty of confidentiality, so she hadn't reported it to either Drankam or the Kiryou.

But if she were to use the comprehensive support system's functions to search for automata, that information would flow to the Kiryou's development team as data.

Therefore, at present, she could only give vague instructions or requests to the comprehensive support system, despite its ability to fulfill detailed requests. Searching for places where valuable relics might be found was acceptable, but searching for places where automata might be found was not. That's what Yumina was thinking.

But then she had a sudden realization.

“...Ah, Reina. Did you report about the automata to Drankam? If so, it would mean I'm the only one hiding it now, right? ”

“Um...”

Upon receiving Reina's gaze, Shiori answered in her place.

“Information about the automata has not been conveyed to Drankam. We obtained this information independently. We judged that there was no obligation to report it to Drankam.”

Yumina nodded.

“Understood. Then we'll just have to continue searching diligently like this.”

Hearing their exchange, Togami showed a slightly troubled expression.

“...Ah, so using the comprehensive support system means even if we find an undiscovered ruin, we won't be able to monopolize the relics

there.”

Discovering an undiscovered ruin and making a fortune from its relics is one of a hunter's dreams. If this dream were to vanish in exchange for the convenience of the comprehensive support system, Togami also felt a complex mix of emotions as a hunter.

“That will depend on the terms of the contract with the Kiryou.”

Continued by Shiori, Togami's expression turned hopeful. He listened further to Shiori's explanation.

The ruins exploration support provided by the comprehensive support system likely operates on the mechanism of improving its accuracy through collective knowledge based on data collected from many users. Therefore, providing data is likely included in the basic terms of the contract.

However, there will definitely be others who share Togami's dissatisfaction. Information about undiscovered ruins, which is extremely valuable and could significantly disadvantage data providers, could be delayed in being reflected in the system as a measure.

Even so, the information would still reach the Kiryou, but it falls under the confidentiality obligation. To gain the trust of hunters who casually buy equipment worth hundreds of millions, the Kiryou also pays attention to handling such information.

Thus, even if the comprehensive support system is used, the dream of discovering undiscovered ruins and making a fortune from them, a dream of hunters, can be maintained depending on the terms of the contract. That's what Shiori explained.

Togami also agreed to this explanation and relaxed his expression.

“If that's the case, then it should be fine. ...I wonder if I could somehow borrow it from Drankam after all.”

Even if initially prioritized for use by administrative faction members, eventually, there must be a way. Togami hoped for a solution. However, Shiori added further.

“Togami-sama. Unfortunately, if you were to borrow the comprehensive support system from Drankam, it would be impossible to conceal that kind of information.”

When borrowing the comprehensive support system from Drankam, the confidentiality obligation of the Kiryou would work not for the borrower, but directly for Drankam, the direct lessee. Therefore, while the information wouldn't flow to other organizations, it would be shared within Drankam.

In the first place, when borrowing from Drankam, it's likely that the borrower would be required to agree to provide all such information. While searching for undiscovered ruins for a quick profit is a dream, if one wants to avoid Drankam's involvement and keep it hidden, they would need to borrow the comprehensive support system directly. That's what Shiori clarified.

Togami accepted this clarification as well, letting out a small sigh.

“So it's no good to borrow from Drankam... But if I can't borrow such expensive equipment from Drankam and can't afford to buy it myself, then what's the point of being with Drankam...? That's what's bothering Shikarabe.”

Having taken on a position closer to the old-timers, Togami showed an understanding of their concerns.

“Well, I understand that it's better for organization use. And there are plenty of guys who just became hunters because they were young and broke. If they can fight safely and make decent money, even if they're somewhat at the mercy of those above, well, it's not so bad, I guess. I can't say I don't understand the administrative faction's thinking either.”

As a veteran now, Togami showed a certain level of understanding towards the thoughts of other young people and the administrative faction above them.

After all, Togami's equipment was borrowed from Drankam, a benefit obtained through his affiliation with them. Considering that the management and procurement of these borrowed items were handled by the administrative faction, it wasn't easy to simply dismiss their guidance.

Shiori also didn't outright reject the administrative faction's management methods for hunters.

“The introduction of the comprehensive support system improves the efficiency of Drankam as a whole and contributes to the safety and combat effectiveness of affiliated hunters. From an organizational standpoint, it's the correct approach. It's a matter of how much control you're willing to tolerate from the administrative faction. It's fine if you're just an employee, but you're all hunters.”

Each individual is free to judge the extent of tolerance as they please. However, it's unacceptable for Reina to become a follower, to be a subordinate, to become employed. Shiori's standards were set there.

“That's right, isn't it? ”

Because they fight for their lives in the wasteland, they want to decide how to use their lives freely. No matter how strong they become, they refuse to let others control them. Togami understands that. However, if asked whether they affirm decaying in the wasteland as a free weakling, they think differently.

Without finding an answer, Togami casually asks Akira.

“Hey, Akira. Do you want an Integrated Support Enhancement Suit? If you discover an automaton and earn a fortune, do you think you'd want to buy it along with the support system using that money? ”

“Um...”

Unconsciously, Akira looks at Yumina. Yumina gives a wry smile.

“It doesn't matter what you say, Akira! You said Akira would buy the integrated support system! I got it on record! I won't bring up inconvenient things, so you can be honest, okay? ”

“R-Right. Well, honestly, I don't think I need it.”

Akira already has Alpha's support. Additionally, he doesn't think Tsubaki's management area, let alone the secrecy obligation of the Kiryou, would keep quiet about it even for undiscovered ruins. It seemed unnecessary to Akira.

Alpha, upon hearing this, happily smiles.

『That's right. After all, I'm here for Akira. You don't need support from the integrated support system.』

『I guess so.』

Yumina also laughs cheerfully.

“Well, I thought Akira would say that.”

“Huh? Is that so? ”

“Yes. I've shown Akira catalogs several times before, but he's never seemed interested in buying.”

“I see.”

Thinking that he had been seen so clearly, Akira simply responds to that.

“Besides, as amazing as the support from the integrated support system may be, it's not powerful enough to support Akira. After all, Akira is stronger than me, who uses the integrated support system. If Akira were to receive support clumsily, wouldn't it just get in the way? ”

Togami nods in agreement.

“Even so, I think it would be useful for appraising artifacts, but I guess Akira would find it troublesome to carry around equipment for the system on a large vehicle just for that. Right? ”

“Yeah.”

“That's why I never thought I could sell an integrated support augmented suit to Akira from the beginning.”

“Is that so...”

Feeling somewhat guilty, Akira looks at Yumina, who smiles as if taking advantage of the situation.

“Well, even though it's impossible to sell an integrated support augmented suit to Akira, he might still be interested in a high-performance augmented suit, right? It would also be helpful for me if Akira buys a Kiryou-made augmented suit. Please consider it for your next purchase.”

“Okay.”

“That's settled then.”

“Okay... Huh? ”

Akira inadvertently looks at Yumina. Yumina was smiling happily.

“...Yumina. Weren't you supposed to refrain from saying things like 'I got it on record' no matter what? ”

“I said that. Regarding the integrated support system, that is. Regular augmented suits are different, you know? ”

Seeing Akira flustered, Yumina laughs softly.

“I was just kidding. I wouldn't do something like that.”

“Don't scare me like that...”

“I'm sorry. But you should be careful, you know? A promise is a promise, even if it's just verbal.”

While laughing, Yumina warns Akira sternly.

“Yeah, I'll be careful.”

Kanae then interjects teasingly.

“You guys are really close, huh? ”

“Is that so? ”

“Really? ”

Akira and Yumina respond without being shaken. Kanae then shifts her teasing to Reina and the others.

“Milady, Togami. This is it. You can't respond like this, so it's no good.”

“Shut up.”

“Shut it.”

Seeing Reina and the others unable to handle it calmly and only able to show embarrassment to cover their embarrassment, Kanae laughs cheerfully, while Shiori sighs.

Alpha silently watches Akira.

After that, Akira and the others continued exploring ruins all day.
However, they did not find any automata.

Chapter 162: Competitors

A standing buffet held periodically on the upper floors of Kugama building. It's a place where the city's affluent gather for socializing and scheming. In this setting, Sheryl has established herself in a position as someone conducting business with the support of Inabe.

She's also deepening friendships with other attendees, all of whom were introduced by Inabe. While not knowing anything about Inabe and Sheryl's dealings, they've been subtly instructed not to pry into unnecessary matters and to refrain from speaking about them, indirectly reinforcing Sheryl's position.

In the midst of conversations with them, Sheryl, who has acquired knowledge of city economics known to anyone present, further enhances her performance as a young lady engaged in some business.

And when it's just Inabe and the two of them, they discuss more detailed matters.

“Is the shop going smoothly? ”

“Yes, thanks to you. The items provided by Inabe-sama are selling well.”

Sheryl receives relics from Inabe instead of money for the old-world information terminal and sells them as products in the relic store. Among them are valuable relics suitable for high-priced items on the upper floors, contributing greatly to the shop's sales.

“That's good to hear. But I must say, I didn't expect that to be brought in again. How is it really? Is this the last time? Or does it seem like there will be more? ”

The old-world information terminals brought in by Akira after completing the hunter rank adjustment request in the depths of the

Kuzusuhara District Ruin have all been handed over to Inabe, excluding appraisal at the Kurogin shop.

For Inabe, having tangible items needed for the manipulation that they were discovered in the ruins of his assigned section is quite convenient.

However, with Akira bringing relics to Sheryl's place three times now, whether he divided the items he found and brought them in separately or made multiple trips to the ruins, it was very concerning whether there would be another time.

“I apologize. I'm not aware of that. Investigating further might risk antagonizing Akira, so even if it's Inabe-sama's instruction, I must decline.”

“I see. Well, that can't be helped. Just make sure to manage the sources properly.”

Until the old-world information terminals are discovered in Inabe's assigned section, their source must remain unknown. It's absolutely imperative that it's not revealed that Akira found them elsewhere and secretly brought them into Inabe's assigned area.

“Of course.”

In order to proceed with their work without making any mistakes, Sheryl and Inabe thoroughly checked with each other.

At that moment, one of Inabe's subordinates appears with someone he wants to introduce to Inabe. Seeing those individuals, Sheryl is slightly surprised but quickly smiles with significance.

“Long time no see, Katsuya.”

“Yeah, it's been a while, Sheryl.”

The welcoming smile from someone who was already in this position to someone who has just arrived at this place. Katsuya smiled happily in return.

Beside him, Mizuha, who thought his tone was a bit rude, was a bit flustered.

Mizuha contributed to the success of the expedition by accompanying Katsuya's team. Thanks to her efforts, the expedition, which achieved great results, also made Drankam and Katsuya known to the upper echelons of the city. They even gained opportunities to be introduced to the city's executives.

And Katsuya, accompanied by Mizuha, attends the standing buffet again. Although Katsuya was a little nervous when approached by Sheryl earlier, the conversation proceeded smoothly.

“Oh. So, you've taken jobs from Sheryl as well, huh? Hm? But wasn't that for warehouse security, and didn't the warehouse collapse in the end? ”

“That's true. But it would be harsh to attribute that solely to Drankam's failure. I made a mistake in misjudging the opponent's strength. Katsuya and his team did more than enough work, even beyond what was compensated.”

Sheryl, defending Katsuya and his team, received a mischievous smile from Inabe.

“Is that so? But didn't you fail in defending the warehouse? Are you just lenient in your assessment because they're your friends? ”

“No, not at all. I am also supported by Inabe-sama. I don't let personal feelings interfere.”

Hearing that, Mizuha relaxes a bit. Whether those words were sincere or just defending Katsuya, they were not receiving negative evaluations from Sheryl. She felt relieved thinking that way.

And judging that she could successfully promote Katsuya and his team, she tries to smile and engage in that conversation.

But the commotion in the room halted her.

The man who caused the commotion, drawing attention from all around the venue, makes his way to Inabe's group. Though he wears a relaxed smile, Inabe's expression turns sour.

“...Udajima. What do you want? ”

Udajima, a faction leader engaged in power struggles with Inabe and a city executive, directs a meaningful smile towards Inabe.

When Inabe and Udajima attend this standing buffet held periodically, they implicitly adjust their schedules to avoid encountering each other.

This standing buffet is essentially for attendees to deepen their connections and promote city development through networking. Engaging in power struggles that sour the atmosphere of the event would be inconvenient for both parties. This mutual understanding naturally led to an implicit agreement for Inabe and Udajima to alternately attend the standing buffet to avoid crossing paths.

Udajima's appearance in front of Inabe breaks this agreement. Attendees nervously watch, wondering if this signals the beginning of decisive factional struggles.

Udajima smirks confidently.

“No, I don't need you. It's her I want to thank.”

Sheryl, completely unaware, looks slightly puzzled.

“Me? ”

“That's right. I just wanted to express my gratitude.”

Inabe also looks puzzled.

“Gratitude? ”

“Yeah. Her pet hunters did wonders in my assigned area. Thanks to them kicking powerful monsters, relic collection went smoothly. You're Sheryl, right? Thank you. It was a real help. And make sure to thank that hunter Akira for me too.”

“...Understood.”

Though he's in opposition to Inabe, Udajima is still a city executive. Sheryl responds with a pleasant smile, not daring to be impolite.

Next, Udajima turns his smile towards Mizuha and her group.

“You guys are from the Drankam's administrative faction, right? Let me express my gratitude to you as well. Yumina, the hunter accompanying Akira, is from your faction, correct? I've heard she's been working hard in my assigned area along with Akira. Thank you.”

“N-no, if we were able to be of assistance, we're glad.”

Mizuha replied with a smile as best she could. She had no choice but to respond in this manner to avoid displeasing the city's officials.

And then, Udajima gave Inabe a meaningful smile once again.

“Well, my business here is done, but were you in the middle of negotiations with Drankam? ”

“No, we weren't.”

“I see. Then it's fine if we initiate negotiations first, right? ”

Inabe and Udajima. Mizuha, sandwiched between the two city officials, began to feel anxious. However, Mizuha had no choice in deciding between Inabe and Udajima.

“I don't mind. As long as it benefits the city, I see no reason to object regardless of the process.”

“Regardless of the process... I see. Well, I suppose that's how you are.”

“What are you trying to say? ”

“Oh, nothing in particular. See you.”

Udajima instructed Mizuha with a glance to follow him and then left.

Mizuha, flustered, bowed to Inabe and then grabbed Katsuya's hand to follow after Udajima. Since Inabe had approved Mizuha's decision to engage in negotiations with Udajima, Mizuha had no choice but to leave the situation.

Katsuya reluctantly followed Mizuha. In his heart, he harbored complex feelings.

He had thought that thanks to their successful expedition, he had finally gained a position where he could speak alongside Sheryl. He thought he had gained the power to be with them.

But even that was easily revoked by the intentions of those in higher positions. The position of Drankam was one that couldn't go against Kugamayama City. Mizuha's position couldn't go against the city officials. And his own position couldn't go against Mizuha. Once again, he realized he was bound by the organization's convenience and constraints.

Then he remembered Yumina. The childhood friend who had reached out to him, offering to leave behind all those constraints and be together. And he regretted not taking her hand.

He muttered in a low voice.

“...It's not enough. I need more.”

Their achievements were still insufficient. In order to avoid being manipulated by both the city and Drankam, and to be able to stay with Sheryl and Yumina, what they had achieved so far was far from enough.

He was the most capable member within the administrative faction of Drankam. Yet, such evaluations were far from adequate. He still fell short within Drankam as a whole.

As the top hunter in Kugamayama City, he probably needed to attain a position of similar stature to have any hope of defying the city officials.

If that's what it took, then so be it. He had decided in his heart to become that.

Katsuya had resolved as such.

After Katsuya and the others had left, Inabe had the others leave as well, leaving him alone with Sheryl. Then, with a slightly serious expression, he asked.

“Just to confirm, do you have any suspicions? ”

“Nothing in particular. Although there's the fear of Viola, knowing she'll definitely be killed next time if she tries anything again, it's hard to imagine she's up to something now. Most of our operations

have been carried out by her anyway, so there's no way to exclude her now.”

It's possible that Viola may be plotting something and feeding information to Udajima. But if that were to come to light, or even if she were merely suspected, she would definitely be killed by Akira this time. Considering that, the risk of Viola conducting operations that would harm them seemed low.

Furthermore, since most of their main operations were carried out by Viola, it was difficult to take measures to eliminate her just in case. Sheryl explained so.

“I see. We don't have any suspicions either. It's still in the preparation stage. We haven't even moved the items over there yet. It would be too early to be sniffing around.”

They were proceeding cautiously to ensure their operations weren't exposed. They hadn't even carried out the task of transporting the information terminals from the old-world into their assigned area yet. The risk of Udajima catching on was supposed to be quite low. Inabe responded.

They hadn't done anything that might leak information to Udajima through some oversight. Both Inabe and Sheryl explained so, and the other accepted their explanations.

With that settled, they continued their conversation about why Udajima had come and what his ambiguous attitude meant.

“Then do you have any other suspicions? ”

“Well, perhaps it's about capturing Katsuya and the others? ”

While Akira had been busy defeating powerful monsters in Udajima's assigned area, he had been promoting relic collection. But now, they had shifted their activity to the ruins of the Lida Commercial District.

Udajima might be considering hiring Katsuya and the others as substitutes for Akira. If the story about their significant achievements on the expedition was true, Katsuya and the others would be valuable assets. However, when Udajima learned that Mizuha was trying to promote Katsuya and the others to Inabe's side, he hurried to intervene and stop it.

Udajima's ambiguous attitude was simply to gauge their reactions. Udajima could probably imagine that Inabe was considering some countermeasures. Just stirring up suspicion alone could deter the opponent's operations.

Sheryl tentatively conveyed these thoughts to Inabe. Inabe nodded in agreement.

“That seems to be the case. We should be cautious not to overthink, but let's remain vigilant.”

Having concluded that discussion, Inabe brought up another topic.

“By the way, what's your actual relationship with this Katsuya person? He seemed to be quite fond of you, but were you trying to manipulate him? ”

“No, nothing of the sort. And there won't be in the future either.”

“Is that so? He's quite something. It might be useful to keep him on our side.”

“If Inabe-sama wishes for me to mediate in bringing him over to our side, I would gladly cooperate, but...”

From Sheryl's attitude, Inabe understood that she had no interest in Katsuya. And from someone she had so little interest in, it seemed strange that he had such strong feelings towards her.

“...Well, let's think about that later. Oh, if you don't mind, I'd like to hear a bit more about him. Do you know him personally? Was he

introduced to you by someone? ”

“No, Katsuya and I met in the lower districts of the city...”

Sheryl continued to recount her first meeting with Katsuya and the subsequent events when he sought her advice, without embellishment. She disclosed that she was originally from the slums, a fact Inabe already knew. She also explained how she had concealed her background and interacted with Katsuya as if she were a young lady from somewhere else. She also mentioned the discord between Akira and Katsuya.

“Given those circumstances, Katsuya has a very poor relationship with our patron, Akira. So, we have no plans to bring Katsuya over to our side. Doing so might destabilize our alliance.”

“I see. Understood. I'll also be careful with how I treat them. ...But really, what's with you? I've heard that Viola person is quite unsavory, but you're quite something yourself.”

“...Uh, is that, perhaps, a compliment? ”

“Oh, don't worry about it.”

“...Thank you very much.”

Although Sheryl's expression was slightly puzzled, she still offered her thanks.

To Inabe, regardless of age, she seemed nothing more than a girl who, while having a significant figure backing her, was manipulating, consciously or unconsciously, the top hunter of the Drankam administrative faction, a position that carried great influence.

A week had passed since Akira and the others arrived at the Lida Commercial District Ruin. They still hadn't found the old-world-made automaton they were looking for.

Today, while continuing their exploration of the ruins, Reina grumbled.

“We still haven't found it.”

“Considering the size of this ruin, we've only explored about ten percent of the area. We still have a long way to go.”

Togami said, trying to encourage Reina. However, Reina's expression remained downcast.

“That's true, but...”

“If you're getting tired of exploring the ruins, should we prioritize relic collection in this area instead? ”

“That's a good idea, but it's been a week since we've been back home.”

Living in the camping trailer was comfortable enough by wasteland standards. But that level of comfort was starting to reach its limits in terms of making Reina no longer yearn for life in the city.

At that moment, Yumina pointed to the ruins and said to everyone.

“Let's go in there next. Looks like an automaton shop.”

Both Yumina and Reina could see the augmented reality signboard of the ruins. However, Yumina also had access to the analytical information from the comprehensive support system regarding the signboard.

While refraining from instructing the comprehensive support system to prioritize finding the automaton shop, it was fine to respond to

what they had coincidentally found. Yumina's face lit up with anticipation.

With half of her face showing hope, Reina entered the ruins of the shop. The other half showed the expectation of not finding anything again. But as soon as she saw the interior of the shop, her face filled with joyful surprise.

In a prominent place inside the shop were two cylindrical glass cases. In one case was the figure of a butler, and in the other was the figure of a maid, both wearing attire from the old-world. They were automata.

“No way!? They're here!?”

Rushing over to the cases, Reina stared at the contents. The automata were in perfect condition, without any signs of damage.

“The preservation is perfect! We did it!”

Reina exclaimed in joy, but when she saw the augmented reality product panel floating in her field of vision, a slight suspicion crept into her expression. She quickly disabled the augmented reality function and double-checked with her own eyes.

The merchandise panel had disappeared from Reina's field of view. However, the figure of the automaton remained unchanged.

“Alright! It's not augmented reality! It's real! Jackpot! Big success!”

The fact that the actual item looked too clean made Reina momentarily suspect it might be a virtual image after all. But those doubts disappeared, and Reina rejoiced once again.

Yumina and Togami, who arrived at the case a little later, saw the automaton and Reina's reaction and believed it was genuine, joining in the surprise and joy.

“The latest model of Trifolium Silvatech is displayed in augmented reality on the merchandise panel. The price is... 18 million Chromes!?”

“18 million Chromes!? That's amazing! What's the conversion rate to Aurum? Um, I think it's...”

Just as Togami was about to calculate, Reina eagerly interjected.

“The Aurum conversion rate is irrelevant! Besides, 18 million Chromes is based on the value and pricing from the old-world era, right? It wouldn't be surprising if it's worth even more now!”

“Whoa! How much would it be worth if we sold it? I can't even imagine!”

Reina and the others were excited about the extraordinary achievement of acquiring an automaton from the old-world. However, unlike them, Akira silently watched the inside of the case with a troubled expression.

Noticing Akira's demeanor, Reina and the others, their excitement dampened, regained some composure. Reina, feeling increasingly uneasy, spoke up.

“Akira. What's wrong? We found the automaton. Aren't you happy?”

Without answering, Akira continued to gaze silently at the automaton with a perplexed expression. Reina's unpleasant premonition grew stronger, and then Akira muttered,

“...Hologram?”

“Huh?”

Reina's expression froze. Yumina and Togami showed similar reactions.

Shiori, who had been standing behind them, stepped forward calmly. Then she illuminated the inside of the case with strong lighting.

“...Indeed, it's a hologram. Even when illuminated, the shadows remain unchanged.”

When light falls on an object, the shadows should change. But even under strong lighting, there was no change in the shadows of the automaton. It was a characteristic often seen in display holograms.

While Reina and the others were speechless, Kanae laughed.

“Akira, you noticed well. Unlike the young lady, you remained calm, did you notice from the beginning? ”

“No, I just doubted it because something similar happened before.”

Thinking it was a showcase of expensive relics, Akira remembered the experience of encountering a holographic poster instead. He smiled bitterly.

“Is that so? Your bitter experience came in handy.”

Akira's disappointment was minimal, as his suspicion was confirmed. However, Reina was extremely disappointed and sank to her knees.

With Reina's motivation significantly diminished, Akira and the others decided to take a break in the ruins of the automaton shop.

Shiori swiftly set up a table and chairs. A tablecloth was laid on the surprisingly large portable table, and drinks were provided.

Reina lay somewhat lazily on the table. She didn't even have the energy to sit up properly, her attention more on Shiori standing behind her.

“Why is only that part of the store a hologram...? It's confusing...”

“Yeah.”

Togami sat opposite Reina, consoling her with a somewhat lacking spirit.

While Yumina also sat resting, she noticed Akira's keen interest in the holographic automaton displayed in the showcase and stood up to address him.

“Akira. You've been looking at that for a while now. Are you that interested? ”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“I see. So, it's true that men have a fascination with maids, huh? Is that the case with you too, Akira? ”

“...Huh? ”

Feeling slightly misunderstood after a short pause, Akira frowned.

“Wait a minute. Yumina, what are you talking about? ”

“What am I talking about? That Akira is interested in maids too. Aren't you interested? ”

Upon hearing that, Kanae, understanding the situation but wanting to complicate matters, interjected.

“Oh! So Akira has a maid fetish. Ah, how embarrassing.”

“No.”

Akira replied coldly. However, Kanae, ignoring his response, deliberately wore a surprised expression and pointed to the automaton in a butler's uniform.

“Huh? Is it this one then? Oh, so that's why you were casually strolling with a woman dressed like that in the Mihazono District Ruin. No wonder...”

“No! My interest was about the old-world! I was just wondering what the old-world, where these kinds of things were sold routinely, was like.”

Yumina nodded understandingly, while Kanae, who had understood from the beginning, nodded in a deliberately exaggerated manner.

Akira sighed softly and changed the subject.

“...But why butler and maid outfits? Is that what automata usually wear? ”

“I guess there was a high demand for that sort of thing even in the old-world, right? I saw automata wearing those clothes in a city store before. Well, those were modern-made, though.”

“Modern-made... Ah, right. Considering they're called automata from the old-world, there must be modern-made ones too. Modern-made... How much do they cost? ”

“It depends on the performance. The one I mentioned earlier was around 1 billion Aurums.”

“1 billion!? That's expensive! ”

“Automata are luxury items for the wealthy. That's how it goes.”

“Luxury items, huh. At that price for modern-made ones. I wonder how much the old-world ones would cost...”

At that moment, Akira, Shiori, and Kanae sensed movement towards the entrance and simultaneously assumed a defensive posture. Yumina and the others noticed slightly later and heightened their

vigilance. Reina couldn't afford to stay downcast in this situation and quickly switched her focus.

『Alpha. How many? 』

『20.』

『20? It's not a common occurrence to meet that many people in such desolate ruins. What's going on? 』

Despite the decreased accuracy of their information gathering device due to the vegetation in the ruins, they were close enough to clearly perceive each other's reactions even under its influence. Both sides confirmed each other's vigilance from their movements.

Encounters with someone in the wasteland didn't necessarily mean they were friendly. Both parties knew this well, which could lead to unnecessary suspicion. To avoid conflicts, keeping a distance was the best option. Furthermore, it was desirable for the side approaching to retreat.

Akira's group hoped for this response from the other side. However, instead of leaving, the other side began to make movements akin to sealing off the area outside the shop. Furthermore, a general short-range communication came from the other side.

“I'm Kurosawa, in command of our unit here. I'd like to talk to your representative. If you're willing...”

The voice alone conveyed that they were not just ordinary individuals. Recognizing the opponent's strength from their voice, Reina and the others became stern-faced.

However, Akira reacted more to the name he recognized rather than the voice.

“Kurosawa? Um, I'm Akira. Do you remember me? We met with Shikarabe before...”

“Akira? Huh? What are you doing here? ”

Kurosawa also remembered Akira. And as soon as he understood that it was Akira, the tone of his voice changed from negotiation to normal conversation.

“Oh, it'd be faster to talk directly. I'm coming over now. Don't shoot, okay? Don't shoot? ”

With that light emphasis as a final warning, the communication was cut off without waiting for a reply. And while Akira and the others were changing their thoughts from vigilance to confusion, Kurosawa appeared.

“It's me. Don't shoot, okay? I'm not gonna shoot ~ ”

Kurosawa, smiling, approached Akira's group from the entrance of the shop, conveying through his demeanor that he meant no harm.

Smiling, Kurosawa approached Akira's group and immediately confirmed the opposing forces.

(The main force of the team that defeated a bounty of 3 billion Aurums, three individuals capable of close combat wearing augmented suits from the old-world, and one person capable of monster hunting with Akira deep in the Kuzusuhara District Ruin. Additionally, there are two others. Engaging in combat at this point is out of the question with Akira present, but with the others combined, it's enough for retreat consideration, negotiation with the unit, and excuses to the client...)

While concealing his assessment, Kurosawa spoke up.

“Again, I'm Kurosawa. I'm in command of the group outside. So, who's your representative? Who should I talk to? ”

As Akira's group exchanged glances, Kurosawa followed their gaze, realizing they hadn't decided on a representative.

Seeing this, Kurosawa decided to manipulate the situation before Akira's group could choose a representative, aiming for someone who would be convenient for them, not good at lying or hiding things, as their representative.

“Well, considering the strength, it should be Akira. Akira, long time no see. What are you doing in a place like this? ”

“What about you? What are you doing in a place like this? ”

“We're collecting relics. This place is unpopular with regular hunters, but for me, who wants to prepare thoroughly and prioritize safety, it's perfect. There are no problems with the threat level of monsters or the quality of relics here.”

“I see. We're also relic hunters. We chose this place for similar reasons.”

Kurosawa noticed Akira's relief at the smooth conversation and inferred what they were trying to conceal. Deciding that there was no harm in revealing it since the other party already knew, he smiled and said,

“Relic hunting, huh. Are the relics you're looking for automata? ”

“...How did you figure that out? ”

Akira's wariness increased as Kurosawa's discernment of his secret became apparent. Before it turned into hostility, Kurosawa continued.

“We're also looking for automata. If hunters are in the Lida Commercial District Ruin now, it's natural to assume we share the same goal, right? ”

“Has information about the automata already spread widely? ”

“Hunters from all over haven't gathered at this ruin. For most, it's still classified information. It's different for folks like us who have the ability to obtain such confidential information.”

Understanding the convincing reasons for being discerned, Akira's wariness decreased out of resignation. Kurosawa, seeing this, continued speaking.

“So, our goals are the same. Why not work together? We haven't found automata yet either, so it shouldn't be a problem, right? ”

“...How did you know we haven't found automata yet? ”

“What are you talking about? If you had found automata, there would be no reason to let other hunters into their storage location.”

Kurosawa, saying so naturally, hurriedly spoke as he noticed Akira's puzzled expression.

“...Hey, you don't happen to not know what to do if you find automata, do you? ”

“No, I know. Even if we find automata, call in a specialist to secure the area. Never activate them yourself. Right? And because we haven't secured the area, you concluded that we haven't found them yet, correct? ”

Even if you find inactive automata in ruins, never activate them. Call in a specialist without coveting them. This is widely known among hunters as the handling method for automata found in ruins.

And many hunters who violated this rule were killed by the automata they activated themselves.

In the laws and order of the old-world, hunters were nothing more than armed robbers who broke into shops. Even if they activated the automata, which varied in individual and product, they generally made judgments accordingly. There was no reason to grant ownership to criminals who obtained themselves through illegal means, so they resorted to the use of force to maintain or restore their commodity value.

Afterwards, based on the surrounding circumstances and the values of the old-world, they sometimes engaged in emergency law enforcement activities. There were many cases where highly advanced automata were designated as powerful bounty targets because they had demonstrated their high performance in removing groups that were illegally occupying land or buildings, resulting in enormous bounties being placed on them.

Kurosawa let out a slightly exaggerated sigh of relief.

“...Don't scare me. You'd be surprised, wouldn't you? We'll be careful too, but please don't let a situation arise where the ruins are filled with automata from the old-world because you accidentally activated them.”

Kurosawa exhaled and returned to the conversation.

“So, Akira. What do you say? Why not work together? It would be great if you joined our squad altogether. You'll be under my command, but you know my leadership skills, right? I won't lower the reward just because you joined later than the others. I promise.”

“Ah, sorry, but I'll have to decline. I have some trouble of my own to deal with. I don't want to complicate the negotiations for the reward any further.”

Akira explained the current complicated state of the reward negotiations to Kurosawa, who understood upon hearing it.

“Ah, so if we work together, it would mean negotiations with Akira's group, Reina's group, Drankam, and Kugamayama City, in addition to us, the five parties involved. That would be quite troublesome.”

“That's right. Well, if you really insist, then try convincing Reina over there.”

“Huh? ”

“The negotiations would become even more complicated. If Reina, who deals with such hassles, still agrees, then I won't object either.”

“Eh!? ”

Reina was suddenly thrown into the conversation and was surprised to learn that she had been designated as the one responsible for dealing with hassles in Akira's mind. But instead of being dumbfounded, she wore a look of realization and brought her hands to the sides of her head.

Just in time, Reina prevented Kanae, who had somehow appeared behind her, from restraining her head.

“Oh! Good reaction! That's the spirit! ”

Kanae laughed unexpectedly and amusingly, withdrawing the hand that had been trying to hold down Reina's head.

Reina smiled a little proudly and then turned to Kurosawa with a serious expression.

“Sorry, but I'll have to decline. As Akira said, I don't want to complicate the reward negotiations any further.”

And she smiled slightly defiantly.

“Besides, even if you're as competent as Akira acknowledges as a commander, we want to maintain our leadership. If you're going to be under our command, think about it, okay? ”

Kurosawa also smiled in response to Reina's stance.

“I guess that's impossible. Oh well, can't be helped. Let's give up. In that case, finding automata will be a race against time. Is that okay? ”

“Of course.”

“Well, even though we'll probably find them first, it's your decision not to join us. Don't blame us if we get ahead of you, okay? ”

“Sure, same goes for you.”

The leaders and followers of the squads smiled at each other, each bearing their own responsibilities while inciting their competitors.

Kurosawa, who had left the ruins of the automaton shop and reunited with his squad, immediately gave orders.

“Let's move. If we stay here, the people inside won't come out because they're on alert.”

“Roger. So, how did it go? ”

“No issues.”

Kurosawa and his team then departed from the area.

Reina, who had regained her enthusiasm, spoke energetically.

“Alright! Break time's over! We'll be the first to find the automata! Let's do this! ”

While Togami rejoiced at her partner's newfound energy, he reminded her to make sure it didn't go to waste.

“So, what's the plan? We'll probably lose if we search randomly, right? There seem to be a lot more people searching on their side.”

“Yeah, that's true. What should we do? Hmm...”

Considering what to do next left Reina, who had been spurred on by her enthusiasm, hesitant to charge forward.

That's settled. Togami thought so and began contemplating their course of action. But no good ideas came to mind.

It was Yumina who first proposed a plan.

“Why don't we just leave it to the comprehensive support system? We haven't been utilizing it much so far to keep the information about the automata confidential. But with Kurosawa's group as competition, the situation has changed.”

Keeping information about the automata confidential was meant to maintain an advantage by ensuring that only they had the information. But that advantage had already been undermined. So, there was no point in worrying about further confidentiality.

Of course, if they thoroughly utilized the comprehensive support system to search for the automata, there was a risk that the information would flow to Kiryou and Drankam, thus increasing their competition. However, it was meaningless to let Kurosawa's group get ahead by not conducting an efficient search due to maintaining confidentiality.

So from now on, let's make full use of the comprehensive support system. That was Yumina's proposal.

“In addition, if we find the automata with the help of the comprehensive support system, it could also serve as promotion for the system. So Kiryou might support us behind the scenes. Through support from the system. How about that? ”

Akira agreed with Yumina's proposal first. Since Reina and Togami couldn't think of an alternative, they also agreed. Shiori and Kanae didn't feel any need to contradict their master's opinion.

“Alright, let's do it.”

Yumina operated the comprehensive support system. Assuming that there were old-world automata in the Lida Commercial District Ruin, she requested support to locate them.

In response, the comprehensive support system, indicating a high probability of automata being present, displayed multiple locations of automaton shops along with the entire map of the ruins. One of them was pointing to their current location. The accuracy of the shop's location information was evidence of its high precision.

Akira and the others were surprised.

“What... I feel like... we should've done this from the beginning.”

Yumina, who hadn't expected to receive this level of support, also agreed with a wry smile.

“We couldn't do it until now because of the circumstances. Let's change gears.”

With renewed determination, Reina spoke up.

“If we know the location this well, it's easy! Once again, we have the upper hand! Let's go! ”

Akira and the others resumed their exploration of the ruins, aiming for the next automaton shop.

After Akira and his group left the ruins of the automaton shop, Kurosawa reappeared in the vicinity with his squad.

“...Alright. They're not here. Just to be sure, I'll go inside and check. You guys prepare to secure the area.”

“Copy that. Hey, what were you planning to do if they were still here?”

“In that case, I would've come back to recruit them again later.”

“Ah, I see. So you were planning to recruit them assuming they'd decline beforehand.”

“Well, something like that.”

Afterwards, Kurosawa went inside the automaton shop alone, confirmed that Akira and his group were indeed not there, and then called the squad to begin securing the area.



Akira and his group proceeded through the ruins towards the automaton shop. Knowing the location, they pressed forward and easily defeated any monsters they encountered, each encounter involving six of them. Their progress was smooth, and they reached their destination in a short time.

However, what awaited them there was Kurosawa's squad, who had already secured the area. Upon noticing Akira's group, they initiated short-range communication.

“You're the ones the captain mentioned, right? We've secured this area. What's your business? If you have none, it would be helpful if you left to avoid any conflicts.”

Reina, a little flustered, responded via communication.

“Secured the area... Wait, did you find the automata? This quickly? ”

“Sorry, but we can't answer that kind of question. If you're just here to confirm that, please leave. That's all.”

The communication ended there. As Akira's group exchanged glances, Yumina suggested.

“There's no point in staying here, and we can't just stand around. Shall we try the next location for now? ”

Akira's group nodded and headed for the next location.

The information provided by the comprehensive support system was accurate. The ruins of the automaton shop were indeed located where the system indicated.

However, Akira and the others' expressions remained grim. They had visited six new locations where stores used to be, only to find that all of them had been secured by Kurosawa's unit.

Reina was also at a loss.

“What's going on...”

Even Togami wore a troubled expression.

“The reason they beat us to it might be that they got hold of a map of the ruins from the cartographer and pinpointed the locations of the automaton shops. However, I didn't expect them to deploy such a large unit. It's unlikely we can win with sheer numbers. What should we do...”

Although they knew the exact locations, they had spent time traversing the scattered store remnants throughout the vast ruins. It was nearing sunset. Yumina suggested, taking notice of this.

“Let's call it a day for now. We should avoid exploring at night.”

Akira and the others agreed, deciding to withdraw for the day. However, it was then that Shiori spoke up.

“In that case, milady, there's a place I'd like to visit on the way back. Would that be all right? ”

“Sure, where? ”

“It's the very first store location.”

Unlike the places occupied by Kurosawa's unit, it was already known that there were no automata there. Despite Reina's thoughts, she nodded, suspecting that Shiori had a reason for suggesting it.

Akira and the others returned to the very first store location. It had already been secured by Kurosawa's unit. Even Akira was surprised.

“What's going on? Kurosawa should know there are no automata here... What's the point of occupying such a place...”

Yumina and Reina were equally surprised. However, Shiori, who had anticipated this, showed no surprise and only wore a slightly troubled expression. Then, she returned to her calm smile, mainly directed towards Reina.

“Well then, milady. Let's return and rest for the day.”

“Understood.”

Akira and the others regained their composure and headed back to the camping trailer.



In the ruins of the automaton shop, Kurosawa, who was watching holographic automata, received a report.

“Did Akira and the others come? Did they say anything? ”

A hunter named Rodin, who had come to report to Kurosawa, answered.

“No, they only came nearby.”

“I see. Well, that's fine then. Even if they ask anything, just say you couldn't answer. Don't give them any information. They might have realized it by now, but there's no need to confirm it with them.”

“Got it.”

Kurosawa returned to viewing the automaton in maid attire. Rodin watched too.

“Hey, Kurosawa. If this operation succeeds, we'll get our hands on these automata, right? ”

“They won't become ours, but it'll still fetch a hefty sum. Selling them to the client after deducting expenses will still make us rich.”

“...Well, yeah, but still. What do you think the chances of success are for this operation? ”

“At best, around 20%.”

“20%!? That low? ! ”

“What are you talking about? That's plenty high.”

In the first place, if they can't acquire the automata as planned, the whole operation falls apart. But even if the probability of acquisition exceeds 50%, the client wouldn't risk sending a hunter's unit to retrieve them. They would undoubtedly dispatch their own unit. So, considering that they hired them, the chances of success were low from the beginning.

Calculating the success probability from the client's expected profits if the operation succeeds, well, it's around 20%. Kurosawa explained this.

Rodin sighed in understanding.

“20%... That's how it is...”

“That's how it is.”

“Even if I can't get my hands on them, I wanted to see the real thing.”

“Even if there were real ones, we couldn't touch them. Just seeing them in holograms is enough, right? Enjoy the view.”

Then, Kurosawa remembered Shiori and Kanae, who were among Akira's group.

(Those two in maid attire... They must be the ones Shikarabe mentioned. One of them does seem like a professional. The other seemed a bit sloppy, though.)

Kurosawa thought about bringing up this topic for conversation but decided against it after seeing Rodin's demeanor. He felt it might inadvertently upset Rodin.

Many hunters, despite understanding the risks of activating automata themselves and without hiring specialists, attempted to manage them on their own. This was because specialists' fees for persuading and negotiating with automata, without destroying them

while neutralizing their capabilities, were exorbitant. Regular hunters couldn't afford them.

Therefore, it had become common for specialists to auction off valuable automata, deducting fees and technical costs from the sale proceeds before handing them over to hunters.

If money was the only goal, there was no problem. However, for those who felt a certain romance with ancient automata of the old-world and desired them, it was a major issue. And there were quite a few of those.

Additionally, in the eastern regions, there were rare cases where highly obedient automata acknowledged their ownership to hunters who activated them. Those hunters quickly rose to prominence with the help of these automata and were said to have joined the ranks of the elite.

Many hoped for the same fortune. And having found automata in the ruins, they believed themselves lucky, ready to gamble on activating them, seeing this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity as a stroke of luck.

(We're operating as part of a contract. So even if we secure automata, the ownership belongs to the client. It was never ours from the start. I want to believe it'll be fine since we're aware of this from the beginning. I want to believe that...)

Kurosawa glanced again at Rodin. Though he understood his sentiment, the unease didn't dissipate.



While resting in the camping trailer, Akira and the others discussed their future actions.

Most likely, Kurosawa's group had occupied all the automaton shops in the Lida Commercial District Ruin. Therefore, even if they searched the store remnants again tomorrow, it wouldn't make

sense. Akira and the others acknowledged this, but they couldn't come up with a good plan on top of it.

Akira groaned with a troubled expression.

『Alpha, do you have any good ideas? 』

『If it's just the two of us, like when we went to Tsubaki's place, I could guide you, but that's impossible now.』

『The fact that such an option exists means Alpha has some ideas, right? 』

『Yes, but I can't tell you. Even if Yumina and the others ask how you realized it, you can't say that I told you, right? 』

『I see...』

For Akira at the moment, companions like Yumina only limited his actions. Alpha subtly prompted this thought, and Akira responded without realizing it.

『Anyway, why do you think they occupied the empty shops? 』

『The search for automata ultimately amounts to relic collection. Automata are relics as well. Those were automaton shops. Think about it from that perspective.』

Akira pondered as instructed. Then he realized.

『...Restocking! 』

『That's right.』

Alpha praised Akira for realizing it himself with a smile.

Although what Akira said was telepathic, it didn't come out as a voice. But his face and attitude conveyed it. Yumina also noticed.

“Akira, did you come up with something? ”

“Uh, yeah, kind of.”

Akira inadvertently expressed it in his attitude like this, so Alpha probably couldn't talk freely with him either. Akira thought this again.

“Kurosawa's group occupied the empty stores, right? I was wondering why they did that, but I think it's probably to get the automata that will be restocked.”

Taking relics from ruins stores might result in them reappearing after a certain period. This was because delivery systems and the like were still functioning, replenishing goods.

Even so, it would take time for automata to be restocked. Even if many hunters visited, finding them by chance was basically impossible.

However, Kurosawa's group somehow obtained information that these automata would be restocked soon. But they couldn't pinpoint which store would be restocked. So they decided to occupy all the stores. Occupying the empty stores was for that reason. Akira explained this.

“Regarding those holographic displays in the stores, even if it's an unpopular ruin, if automata were displayed so prominently, I think someone would have found them by now. But since it's an automaton shop, wouldn't it be natural for the actual products to be displayed? If there's stock, they'd showcase the real ones, and if not, they'd use holograms until restocking, right? ”

Upon hearing this, Reina, who had been most delighted by the holographic display, reacted strongly.

“Ah, so that's why only the display cases had holograms. That makes sense.”

After that, Akira and the others discussed their future plans, considering Akira's conjecture to be correct. Then they reached a conclusion and went to bed early to prepare for the next day.



A large trailer drove through the dark wasteland.

The trailer had an appearance mixed with several different types of off-road vehicles and containers, giving it a disjointed design. However, its performance showed no issues as it raced through the rough terrain of the wasteland.

Sitting in the driver's seat, Tiol suddenly furrowed his brow.

“...Huh? Where am I? Huh? ”

As if waking up to find himself in an unfamiliar place, Tiol looked bewildered. Then, as if remembering something he had forgotten, he spoke.

“Ah, that's right. I'm heading towards the Lida Commercial District Ruin.”

Why he was heading towards the Lida Commercial District Ruin was something he didn't even realize he didn't know, and Tiol continued on through the wasteland.

Chapter 163: Courier, or Intruder

Early in the morning, Akira and his friends, who had rested leisurely in a camping trailer in preparation for tomorrow, were preparing to continue their search for automata today. As they finished their preparations and gathered outside the vehicle, Reina enthusiastically raised her voice.

“Alright! No matter what happens, today is the last day! Let's do our best!”

With Reina's spirited signal to start the operation, Akira and his friends began the final day of their hunter profession this time around.

Akira and his group, who were trying to obtain automata from the old-world, were forced to reconsider their plans when a powerful competitor named Kurosawa and his team appeared.

It is likely that the automata from the old-world will be restocked in one of the automaton shops within the ruins. However, all of these shop locations have been occupied by Kurosawa's forces. There is no chance of winning the automata's struggle in this situation.

Thinking this, Akira and his friends searched for an opportunity amidst this harsh situation. They came up with a way to outmaneuver Kurosawa's team: instead of waiting for the restocking of goods inside the shops like Kurosawa, they would aim to intercept the goods being transported to the warehouse.

This strategy is based on the assumption that Kurosawa and his team are conducting meticulous strategic actions based on highly accurate information.

If a large force is mobilized in the ruins over a long period of time, that information will spread. If there is a possibility of obtaining

automata from the old-world, many hunters will flock to the ruins. And considering the value of old-world automata, there is a high probability that individuals resorting to extremely aggressive means will emerge. These are easily imaginable scenarios.

Therefore, it is desirable to take action such as occupying all the shops with a large force just before the automata are restocked. Acting quickly will attract attention. However, if the occupation is delayed and does not reach in time for restocking, there is an increased risk of being overtaken by other hunters.

Kurosawa and his team did not search inside the ruins to find automata; they aimed to occupy the shops from the beginning. Thus, there is a high possibility that they had obtained highly accurate information, which was the premise of their operational strategy.

It is assumed that this information included the precise restocking date of the automata. Considering this premise, if they think about the timing to move in and occupy the automaton shops, it is too late to wait until the day of restocking. Therefore, it would be the day before.

In other words, the automata will be restocked today. Akira and his friends saw an opportunity there. They decided to target the moment when the automata are being transported to places like the ruins' warehouse.

Of course, Akira and his friends understand that this is a series of assumptions, and it is an optimistic, if not naive, idea.

Nevertheless, rather than despairing over being beaten to the punch by Kurosawa's team, they chose to act on this speculation, as it significantly increases the chances of obtaining automata. So they decided to do everything they could. With this determination in mind, Akira and his friends, faced with the choice of retreating or continuing, smiled and chose the latter.

Departing from the camping trailer, Akira and his friends split into two groups as planned the previous day.

Akira and Yumina's team would roam around the outskirts of the Lida Commercial District Ruin, searching for transport machines bringing in the restocked automata to the ruins and tracking their movements.

If they could find the transport machines or any traces of their movements, they could follow them to determine the destination, such as the warehouses where the automata would be brought in. If successful, they might acquire the automata from the warehouse before they are distributed to the shops.

Reina's team, on the other hand, would search for warehouses within the ruins. While the automaton shops were firmly held by Kurosawa's team, there was a possibility that they hadn't secured the warehouses.

Unlike shops positioned conveniently to welcome customers, warehouses are typically restricted areas accessible only to authorized personnel. It is assumed that security measures are also strict, so Kurosawa's team may have focused their occupation on the shops rather than the warehouses. Additionally, the automata might already be in the warehouses even though they are restocked in the shops today.

Akira and his friends decided to pursue these possibilities throughout the day. They wouldn't continue the chase tomorrow. There is no guarantee of success even with prolonged efforts, and using sheer manpower won't give them an advantage. Also, it's about time for Akira and his friends to return to the city. They can't keep on chasing after the automata indefinitely while leaving their achievements behind.

If today doesn't work out, they would give up. They were firm about that.



While driving his car, Akira casually asked Yumina, who was in the passenger seat.

“Hey, Yumina. What do you think about today's plan? Do you think it'll work out?”

“Hmm. Honestly, I think it's going to be tough.”

“Yeah, you might be right.”

Akira and his friends chuckled.

“Well, I won't say it's impossible. With the analytical power of the comprehensive support system, it should be much easier to find them than searching normally. Even if the transport machines are using optical camouflage, I think it can still detect traces left on the ground.”

The reason Akira and his group were assigned to search for transport machines was because of this capability.

“But if they're flying in the sky or passing through underground tunnels, then it might be really impossible.”

It's difficult to visually detect flying transport machines using optical camouflage. There's also attenuation in the air due to colorless fog, which affects sound. Therefore, aerial surveys are challenging.

But underground is even more difficult. The precision of information gathering devices is lowered by the grass growing around, making it nearly impossible to investigate deeper areas.

The range that Akira and his friends could investigate was limited.

“Yeah, you're right. It might be impossible after all. Well, anyway, even if we predicted that the automata would be restocked today, it's

just our assumption. No matter how excellent the comprehensive support system is, if the transport machines don't come, we won't be able to find them.”

“That's true. In that case, how about we just enjoy a drive together today? ”

“...Yeah, that sounds good! ”

If they couldn't find the transport machines, today would end with them roaming around the outskirts of the ruins. So what Yumina suggested wasn't entirely wrong.

While thinking so, Akira felt something vaguely concealed in Yumina's words. And because of that hesitation, he slightly delayed his response and adopted a stronger tone to cover his embarrassment. Seeing Akira's reaction, Yumina smiled cheerfully.

To the two of them, there was a third party present, unseen by Yumina.



Reina and her team advanced through the ruins. Ignoring the signs of prohibition displayed in augmented reality, they passed through the employee passages and arrived at a huge warehouse suitable for a large-scale commercial facility.

However, the place was in a terrible state of disrepair. There were large holes in the ceiling and walls, and destroyed containers littered the overgrown floor.

They also found relatively fresh corpses of new monsters. Reina looked at them and asked Shiori.

“Shiori, what do you think? ”

“The other team must have investigated this place as well. Judging from the extent of damage, they probably deemed the chances of automata being transported to this warehouse low and decided it wasn't necessary to secure this location.”

“I see. Hmm.”

Togami also joined the conversation.

“What should we do? Should we secure this place? Considering the containers scattered around and the holes in the ceiling serving as entrances, there's a possibility that the automata could be airlifted here, like in the containers at the Mihazono District Ruin.”

“Yeah, that's true. Hmm.”

“Given the state of disrepair of this warehouse, it's possible that it was used as a storage area for low-value goods. Automata were probably high-value items even back then. There might also be a separate sturdy warehouse for storing high-value items.”

“That makes sense. Hmm.”

As Shiori and Togami presented various possibilities, Reina's expression became increasingly complicated as she pondered.

Nevertheless, Reina was determined to make the decision herself without delegating it to others. She wanted to grow into someone who gives orders and permissions, not someone who seeks them.

Seeing Reina's efforts towards this end, Shiori felt proud. Kanae also watched Reina with interest.

And then Reina made her decision.

“Alright! Let's search elsewhere! Let's go! ”

The reason Reina decided so, if forced to say, would be somewhat vague. It's because she has to make decisions based solely on uncertain information. There's no assurance that it's better to do so.

Still, Reina made her decision firmly.



At the ruins of the automaton shop, Kurosawa, who continues to secure the area, receives communication from his comrades.

“Kurosawa. Some of the patrol members are free and want to do relic collection. What should we do? ”

“No. Don't touch the relics. I gave instructions not to. Who's the idiot suggesting this? ”

“It's because the size of the necessary troops for the operation was too large, and we alone weren't enough. So, these idiots are just the number provided by the client afterwards.”

Kurosawa clicks his tongue.

“Sorry, but can you handle it over there? ”

“Understood. But even if we suppress the idiots from above, they'll just do it in secret, right? ”

“That's fine. I can't be bothered to deal with those who oppose my orders.”

Kurosawa said coldly like that. Kurosawa, who strives for safety first and aims for a hunter business without casualties, had no intention of helping those who ignore his instructions.

His comrades perceived Kurosawa's strict attitude as a strong vigilance towards the situation. They inquire with suspicion.

“Kurosawa. Is something unexpected going to happen? ”

“It's already happening. It was unexpected that Akira and the others were here... Well, even without that, unexpected things just happen. I don't want them making unnecessary attachments that would slow them down in preparation for that.”

“Attachments? ”

“If the relic collection goes well, its results become attachments. Even if I ordered an immediate retreat, those attachments would become a hindrance, delaying our movements. They'll even try to bring back the relics they collected.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Even if they're idiots, I don't intend to let those who obey my orders die, and I'll make that effort. But I won't help those who don't follow my orders. That's beyond the contract.”

“Understood, understood. We'll manage somehow.”

Hearing the wry smile in his comrades' voices, Kurosawa also tries to calm down and answers with a smile.

“Sorry. I'm counting on you. Well, if they keep pestering you, tell them to wait until the day after tomorrow if they really want to do it. My contract ends tomorrow.”

“Roger that. See you.”

After ending the communication, Kurosawa let out a sigh.

“Honestly... at a time when there's a chance to acquire old-world automata, what's the point of collecting relics around here? Think about the expected value.”

That complaint was nothing but words to confirm his own composure. And the diagnosis result of that was, due to being overly sensitive to the situation, he was slightly lacking in composure.

“I hope nothing happens...”

The commotion at the Yonozuka Station ruins. The commotion with the bounty targets. The commotion at the Mihazono District Ruin. And the commotion in the slum district. Kurosawa knew that Akira had participated without fail in all these major disturbances that had occurred recently.

That Akira is here. In the midst of a large-scale operation to secure old-world automata.

It could be dismissed as a coincidence. But the intuition honed through years of experience continued to warn Kurosawa to exercise maximum caution.



As Akira and the others circled the outskirts of the ruins, they stopped the car to examine the ground. There were traces of something passing through here. The tracks continued from outside the ruins to the inside.

“Yumina. What's the analysis result of the comprehensive support system? ”

“All I could understand is that something like a large trailer passed through here.”

“Do you think it's the transport machine for the automata? ”

“That would be nice, at least. It could be that Kurosawa's unit brought supplies, or it could be another hunter who just came. What do we do? Follow the trail? ”

“Yeah, let's follow it.”

Akira and the others got back into the car and started following the tracks on the ground. Yumina, sitting in the passenger seat, smiled happily.

“I'm already thinking it's probably futile, but if it were a transport machine, it's a bit exciting, isn't it? ”

“Yeah, it is. This is also the charm of the hunter business, right? ”

Akira simply responded normally. But Yumina, as if she had realized something, as if she had remembered something she had forgotten until now, and with a slightly surprised expression, appeared on her face.

“Yumina, what's wrong? ”

Smiling mysteriously at the puzzled Akira, Yumina replied.

“...It's nothing. I just thought that this is also the charm of the hunter business.”

“...I see.”

Akira, slightly captivated by Yumina's smile, replied just enough to cover it up.

Following the vehicle tracks, Akira and the others arrived at a dome in the Lida Commercial District Ruin. A large hole was opened in the wall, and the tracks of the vehicle continued beyond it.

Akira and the others stood in front of the hole and surveyed the surroundings.

“Looks like they forced open an entrance leading underground.”

“Seems so. Instead of blasting, it looks like they cut the door. There are clean-cut fragments scattered around.”

“Hmm. Would a transport machine do something like that? ”

“They came to deliver the goods, but since the door was closed, they broke in... doesn't make sense, right? ”

“Then it could be a hunter's vehicle. They must have had a good reason to choose this place and break in...”

Akira and the others could only think of reasons related to the automata. They exchanged glances.

“Let's contact Reina and the others for now.”

“Right, let's do that.”

Yumina immediately contacted Reina and the others.

Having entered the Lida Commercial District Ruin with a large trailer, Tiol continued inside the ruins and arrived at a dome's basement, a place resembling a huge underground parking lot.

This is the distribution center for the entire Lida Commercial District. Although there are some signs of aging like cracks in the floor and walls, unlike above ground, it's not covered in grass or vines. Each dome is connected by underground passages, and rough distribution to each dome is carried out from here.

However, the distribution system of the ruins has already stopped. It was now a vast empty space.

Tiol, who parked the trailer there, opened the rear cargo door. Inside were numerous storage units that looked like mechanical coffins, and they were being transported away by small transport machines stacked alongside them, disappearing into the depths of the corridor.

Watching that, Tiol tilted his head.

“What was I supposed to do next...? ”

And as if remembering, he nodded.

“Ah, right, right.”

Tiol entered the cargo area of the trailer, lifted the only remaining storage unit, and then left outside, leaving the car behind to proceed through the underground passages of the ruins.



Akira, who conveyed the situation to Reina and the others, went down to the dome's underground with Yumina for the time being. They proceeded through the underground passage, which had some slope, using the power of off-road vehicles to overcome the rough terrain of the wasteland until they reached a place resembling a huge underground parking lot. There, a large trailer was parked.

Akira examined the trailer with Yumina.

“It's pretty big, but it looks like a regular trailer. Doesn't seem like a transport machine from the old-world. Probably hunters, after all.”

When Akira encountered Tsubaki, the caretaker of the old-world domain deep within the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, he had experienced seeing numerous self-propelled containers, old-world transport machinery there.

With that impression in mind, even when Akira looked at the trailer in front of him, he didn't think of it as a transport machine from the old-world. While he did notice some visually distorted and puzzling parts for a modern trailer, that was all.

“The cargo area is opened. Empty inside. If it's not for transporting goods, could they have carried other hunters? ”

Yumina looked around.

“But there's no one here. If they transported it with this vehicle, there should have been quite a few people. In that case, it would have been wise to leave some guards behind.”

“Well, we're doing the same.”

“That's true, but...”

Rather than making the foolish decision to disperse their forces in dangerous ruins, it was better to prioritize their safety by accepting damage to the vehicle. Safety first. Even if they were unable to return to the city on their own after the vehicle was destroyed, they could call for transporters. Hunters who made such judgments were not uncommon.

Although Akira and the others were currently dividing their forces and dispersing their strength, they didn't leave anyone behind in the vehicle. Even if the hunters who might have been transported by the trailer all acted together, Akira didn't find that particularly puzzling.

“Akira, the analysis results of the comprehensive support system are out. These kinds of vehicles aren't sold in the Eastern region.”

“...So, self-made? ”

“Akira, I don't think so.”

“But, Yumina, does this look like it's from the old-world? ”

“...It doesn't.”

“Yeah, you're right.”

If it wasn't modern-made, then it was from the old-world. Akira understood that logic. However, the trailer in front of him had many shoddy parts, as if it had been welded together from usable parts

salvaged from several accident vehicles. Yumina also couldn't see it as being from the old-world.

For now, Akira and the others contacted Reina and the others again.



While carrying a coffin-like storage unit, Tiol advanced through the ruins. Arriving in a pure white room, he set down the storage unit and activated it. Tiol knew the activation method as if it were natural, despite having no memory of learning it. But he couldn't question it.

The top of the storage unit opened up. Inside was an old-world automaton. It was a woman-like figure with a neat appearance wearing a maid outfit, lying in the storage unit as if asleep, with her eyes closed.

Tiol felt a slight excitement at the sight of the automaton. Tiol was also a hunter. He knew that old-world automata were highly valuable relics. As a hunter, seeing such an item would naturally stir his emotions.

Stimulated by this, Tiol's consciousness, which had been somewhat vague, became clear. And along with understanding what he was doing, related matters also came to mind.

“...Huh? Come to think of it, isn't it dangerous to activate automata...?”

With a puzzled expression, Tiol said so, and the automaton opened its eyes before him. In the next moment, Tiol was pierced through the chest by the activated automaton.

The automaton withdrew its arm from Tiol, who was spitting blood. Tiol, with a hole pierced in his chest, collapsed. Blood flowed copiously from Tiol's chest, staining the floor green.

In his dim consciousness, Tiol looked at the blood and wondered.

(...Green? ...My blood? What's happening...?)

With that question as his last thought, Tiol's consciousness was once again engulfed by darkness.

The automaton, having withdrawn its hand from Tiol, lightly waved its arm. The green blood that had adhered to its sleeves and gloves was completely removed.

The automaton's field of vision showed three things. A pure white room. Tiol lying down. And standing next to Tiol, the figure of a woman displayed in augmented reality.

“ I have something I want to request from you. Please consider it.”

Abruptly, the woman, who had expressed this through the automaton with an indifferent expression, was Tsubaki.

In the underground passage of the ruins, Tiol regained his consciousness as Tiol. He tilted his head as he looked at the metal fragments in his hands. The metal fragments were parts of the storage unit for the automaton, and there were teeth marks on them.

“Did you notice? ”

Tiol, who was addressed like that, looked toward the voice. And he instinctively stepped back. There was the automaton he had activated before him.

Tiol looked at his own chest. There were no signs of being pierced in the chest. He looked at the opponent's hand. There was no blood on it.

“...A dream? ”

Confused and disturbed, Tiol was addressed again by the automaton.

“Since you've awakened, it's fine to stop here. I will take my leave now.”

“...Where is this? What am I doing here? ”

He didn't understand anything. The anxiety and fear that surged up began to corrode Tiol, distorting his expression to reflect his inner turmoil.

To that Tiol, the automaton calmly replied,

“You were on your way back after finishing your business, weren't you? ”

“...Huh? ”

Hearing that, Tiol showed a slight surprise and then nodded with a relieved expression as if remembering something he had forgotten.

“Ah, that's right, that's right. I forgot... Wait, who are you? ”

“I'm Olivia. Well then.”

The automaton, who introduced herself as Olivia, answered only that and politely bowed her head before leaving in the opposite direction from the one she had been going until then.

“...What was that? ...Well, forget it. Let's go home.”

Tiol showed a slightly dubious expression, but soon began to walk as if it didn't matter.

Following the next instructions without knowing who gave them.



Akira and the others, who reunited with Reina's group in the dome's underground, explained the situation to them. Akira then asked.

“So, what do you think? ”

Seeing Reina's expression as if she didn't know what to say, Shiori began to speak to share information.

“Well, first of all, this might be the warehouse we were looking for, or its loading dock, or even the distribution center for the entire ruins. And perhaps the hunters on that trailer were delayed.”

The hunters learned about the automata from a different source than Kurosawa's group. Instead of securing a shop like Kurosawa's group did, they chose to secure the warehouse.

These vast underground spaces, possibly connected to the warehouses of each dome from the distribution center of the entire ruins, might have been their target for control. That's what Shiori explained.

Reina seemed to understand the explanation, but she also had doubts.

“Hmm, but if that's the case, it seems like it would be better to secure this place.”

“There must have been a reason for not doing so.”

According to the hunters' information, the automata were supposed to be brought here once and then distributed to each automaton shop. They had also known the date and time of delivery.

Initially, they had planned to secure this location. However, due to some reason, their arrival was delayed. And upon finding no automata here, they hastily moved out, assuming that the delivery to the warehouses of each dome or the shops had already begun.

After explaining this, Shiori added further clarification.

“Of course, this is just an assumption. It's possible that the hunters' arrival was not delayed but rather the delivery of the automata was. Also, it's a rough assumption as to why they didn't anticipate it, or if they did, what grounds they had to determine that such a possibility didn't exist. However, this is the extent of speculation we can make given the current situation.”

Akira, Reina, and Togami, realizing that her speculation hadn't reached its limit, nodded appreciatively. And when they noticed the similar reactions from others, they quickly changed their attitudes to cover it up.

Togami forcefully continued the conversation.

“So, what do we do? If there's a possibility that the delivery of the automata is delayed, wouldn't it be wise for us to secure this place again? ”

Reina nodded wryly.

“Yeah, I suppose so. It's frustrating. It was our job to find the warehouse, but Akira and the others beat us to it. We never catch a break.”

“What are you talking about? We'll figure something out from here... huh? ”

At that moment, everyone in the area noticed the approaching response from the passage leading from the distance. Although the distance to the response was considerable, unlike the overgrown vegetation on the surface that acted as an information barrier, there was no such barrier in this underground area. They could clearly perceive the number and approximate size of the approaching figures.

“Just one person. And probably a child.”

“It might be one of the hunters who went deeper returning. Milady, we should be cautious just in case.”

Shiori and the others, who were more cautious as Reina's escorts, had their vigilance directed towards a potential conflict between themselves and the hunters over securing the area.

But Akira was different.

“That guy...! ”

And the opponent was different too.

“A-Akira...!? ”

The person who emerged from the passage was Tiol.

Akira, noticing Tiol, showed strong vigilance on his face. And Tiol, noticing Akira, showed not only strong vigilance but also greater fear on his face.

With Akira's vigilance alone and Tiol's combined vigilance and fear, Tiol acted first. With a frightened expression, he aimed his left arm at Akira and the others.

“Get down! ”

Shiori pulled Reina down, Kanae grabbed Togami, and they took evasive action. Yumina also received support from the comprehensive support system and moved away from the scene. Then, Akira fired his LEO SSB multi-function gun in rapid succession, launching a counterattack.

Almost simultaneously, Tiol fired the cannon from his left arm. The powerful projectile fired blew off his own left hand and pierced through the underground space towards Akira in a straight line.

However, countless bullets, corrected by Alpha's support, converged on the projectile. The projectile exploded about 10 meters in front of Akira, with a force far greater than that of ordinary grenades, engulfing the underground space.

In the enclosed space of the underground, unlike the open surface, flames and shockwaves raged. Akira was also thrown off, but thanks to his augmented suit and protective coat, he was physically unharmed. He landed safely. Yumina and the others managed to take cover behind the car and were unharmed.

In that moment, Tiol tried to flee. He ran at full speed towards the passage leading to the surface.

This time, he wouldn't escape. Thinking so, Akira aimed at Tiol again. But he was obstructed. Tiol's trailer suddenly accelerated on its own, attempting to run over and kill Akira.

Akira dodged it, but the trailer that ran past the scene continued to obstruct Akira's line of fire that aiming for Tiol.

Akira fired at the trailer with his standard LEO SSB multi-function gun. Though less powerful than the heavy-duty version used for killing large targets, it still had enough power to reduce ordinary vehicles and monsters to dust. However, the trailer was much sturdier and continued to run despite being showered with countless bullets.

Then, Tiol, who had jumped onto the trailer, fired at Akira again from the vehicle. In this short time, Tiol was able to fire again.

Akira intercepted the projectiles once more. Flames and shockwaves raged underground again. Akira was thrown off again. In the meantime, Tiol was getting further away.

“Damn it! ”

As he landed, Akira couldn't help but curse. At that moment, Akira's motorcycle arrived from behind, driven by Alpha.

『Akira. Get on.』

『Got it! 』

Akira jumped on the bike and chased after Tiol, who was already heading towards the passage leading to the surface.

With no time to respond to the sudden turn of events, Yumina and the others left behind received communication from Akira.

“ I'm chasing after him! Whether we secure this place or retreat, he's dangerous! We can't leave him alone! Let's regroup later! That's all! ”

The communication from Akira ended after that one-sided statement. As they looked at each other, Yumina made a serious suggestion.

“ I think it's best if we retreat. As much as it pains me to abandon the automata, I don't think it's the right situation anymore.”

Shiori also nodded.

“I agree. It's not worth continuing to engage in combat with other hunters.”

Togami also showed his agreement. Kanae left the decision to Reina. And Reina also agreed with Shiori.

“Yes, let's retreat. First, let's get out of here and escape from the ruins together with Akira. Let's go... huh? Wait a moment. We received a notification from Kurosawa's group.”

While they were competitors in the search for the automata, they had agreed to communicate if there were any issues. Reina checked the notification with a stern expression, then exclaimed involuntarily.

“...Huh!?”

The content was about dozens of old-world automata rampaging inside the ruins.

Chapter 164: Tiol's Mutation

In front of Kurosawa, who had been securing the ruins of the automaton store, a change occurred in the display case that had been showing holographic automata.

First, the holographic images disappeared. At that point, Kurosawa urged all his team members to be cautious. They didn't know what would happen next. In the worst case, something in the ruins might switch, and the security machines might suddenly activate and attack.

As Kurosawa and his team heightened their vigilance, the next change appeared. The floor of the display case opened, and real automata emerged from it. Watching them in surprise, Kurosawa and his team, after confirming that they were not holographic images, let out small but joyous cries.

The probability of automata being restocked as per the information was at best 20%. Even Kurosawa, who had thought so, smiled at hitting that 20%.

“Alright! Contact Yuzumo Industry and start arranging for specialist contractors! Continue securing this place until the contractors arrive! This is where the real action begins! Get pumped up! ”

After giving those instructions, Kurosawa attempted to summon others who were securing different shops. Since they had identified the restocking location, there was no need to secure other places.

However, they were surprised to hear reports from other teams.

“... What? Over there too? ”

Automata were appearing in all the shop remnants that Kurosawa's team was securing. Some emerged from the floor of the display case just like in this place, while others came out of opened walls along with storage units.

Furthermore, while listening to those reports, new automata stored in containers emerged from the walls of the shop where Kurosawa was present.

The team members were overjoyed at the results far exceeding their expectations. But Kurosawa alone wore a stern expression.

(This is bad... I thought that by gathering the troops at the restocked shops, we'd have a formidable force to deal with anything until the contractors arrive. But now we can't concentrate our forces. ...Should I abandon half of the defending positions? ...No, that's impossible.)

In a situation where they were forced into a defense thinner than planned due to unexpected success, Kurosawa held his head in his hands. And then he issued instructions with a serious expression.

“Recall all the personnel on patrol. Inform Yuzumo Industry of the situation and request reinforcements. It may be a great success, but it's an unforeseen situation. Stay focused.”

With Kurosawa's stern attitude, even those who had been jubilant about the great success became serious. The unit regained some of the lax order and began to move swiftly.

For a while after that, nothing happened.

Upon receiving the report, Yuzumo Industry immediately decided to dispatch reinforcements, drastically reducing the time Kurosawa's team had to defend alone. Additionally, Kurosawa had given some instructions to his comrades to prepare for this new situation.

With that, it seemed like they could manage somehow. Thinking so, Kurosawa relaxed a little and sighed.

Then he noticed Rodin, who was eagerly watching the automata stored in containers. Instead of a sigh of relief, he let out a sigh and

headed towards Rodin.

“Hey, Rodin. I told you to stay focused. Stop staring and get back to security duty.”

“Ah, my bad.”

“Honestly...”

As they were about to leave the spot, a sound came from behind Kurosawa's group. They turned around with a sense of foreboding.

Their foreboding was right. The sound was that of the containers opening. And from within, automata were trying to come out.

Kurosawa quickly aimed his gun. But his opponent closed the distance in an instant. It wasn't a range where the gun would be advantageous. Before he could fire, the automaton's hand blade approached Kurosawa.

But even faster than that, Kurosawa delivered a fierce kick. With that single blow, he sent the opponent flying into the wall.

However, the automaton was unscathed. Being of old-world manufacture, its main body was extremely sturdy. Furthermore, it was wearing old-world clothes as sturdy as modern protective gear. It wouldn't be damaged by such an attack.

But that was within Kurosawa's expectations. The kick earlier wasn't meant to destroy the opponent but to throw it off.

The automaton, stuck in the wall, momentarily slowed down its movements. In that brief moment, Kurosawa mercilessly showered it with countless bullets. Rodin, regaining his senses, hastily joined in the gunfire.

Kurosawa had made sure to equip the troops with weapons capable of fighting automata, just in case. They couldn't prepare enough for

everyone, but both Kurosawa and Rodin, as the captain and a close member, were properly armed.

With the two of them firing together, they had sufficient firepower to eliminate the immediate threat. The automaton was destroyed, torn apart and scattered around.

Kurosawa glared at Rodin, who let out a sigh of relief.

“Rodin! You! ”

“No no no no, it wasn't me! It wasn't me, I swear! ”

Rodin, suspected of activating the automaton without permission, hastily shook his head. And Kurosawa, seeing Rodin's desperate state, believed him.

But that indicated a further deterioration of the situation. If Rodin hadn't activated it, then it meant the automaton had activated on its own.

And as if to confirm that, sounds of automata activating were heard from other storage units. Kurosawa made an immediate decision.

“We're getting out of here! Plan C! ”

Saying that, Kurosawa dashed out, followed by a surprised Rodin.

“Plan C!? Are you serious!? We've already contacted Yuzumo Industry! ”

“Dead serious! We're joining forces with the other units! Let's go! ”

Plan C was one of the contingency plans Kurosawa's team had decided on in case of failure. Its contents included abandoning the occupation of the shop remnants, immediate destruction of all unactivated automata, and elimination of the activated automata.



The trailer driven by Tiol, running forcefully along the sloping underground passage, burst out onto the surface. A little later, Akira also leaped out on his bike, chasing after Tiol, and their pursuit continued as they moved from the underground to the surface.

Akira's firepower while riding the bike has more than doubled compared to when he only had an almost unmodified LEO SSB multi-function gun while on foot. The large LEO SSB multi-function gun attached to the bike for taking down large targets spews fire, increasing the holes in the trailer.

Additionally, now that he's on a wider ground, he can also use small missiles without hesitation. Countless missiles fly through the air, soaring in large arcs, overtaking the trailer and then swarming towards the front of the vehicle. Upon impact, they shake the vehicle with the force that ravaged the monsters' horde in the depths of the Kuzusuhara District Ruin, causing damage.

Yet, it's not completely destroyed. The trailer exhibits astonishing sturdiness, enough to make even Akira grimace in disbelief.

However, it's enough to hinder Tiol's escape. No matter how sturdy, facing countless missiles head-on slows down the speed. If the ground ahead is torn up by explosions, movement becomes difficult. Trying to avoid the missiles by changing direction significantly makes the outskirts of the ruins farther away. Tiol is being cornered.

Furthermore, Akira utilizes the mobility of the bike to anticipate Tiol's movements. While doing so, he persistently targets Tiol in the cargo section of the trailer.

The impact-converting light produced upon impact indicates that the opponent's vehicle is protected by force field armor. And the bullets Akira is using are not anti-force field armor rounds. Even though he shoots like a storm, the flashy gunfire doesn't have much effect.

Still, if he continues the gunfire like this, the storm of powerful bullets will destroy Tiol and the trailer altogether. The countless holes in the vehicle's body serve as proof.

Akira's gunfire, supported by Alpha's aiming correction, is a rapid-fire barrage aimed precisely at the same spot. With that power, it pierces through the force field armor defense and eventually will crush the vehicle itself.

Tiol also tries to retaliate. However, he can't use his left arm cannon. While a second shot is possible, the hesitation to shoot arises from the fear of being intercepted the moment he fires.

Akira has already come so close to him. If his gunfire is intercepted in this state, the resulting explosion would engulf Tiol's trailer as well. If the vehicle were to flip over or become unable to move, they'd be subjected to concentrated gunfire and it would be over.

In response, Tiol resorts to using his right arm. For a moment, he extends his body from the already gaping hole in the cargo section and swings the blade he has grown from his right hand vigorously. The oscillating wave imbued with cutting properties transmitted through space from the glowing blade turns into a light blade, clearly severing objects beyond the effective range.

Akira is surprised by the attack. However, having dodged attacks with greater power and range while fighting Monica in the Mihazono District Ruin, he's adept at evading. Additionally, he now has Alpha's support. Avoiding the light blade's range, he continues to shoot from outside.

Tiol is further cornered. Hit by the light blade when he attacks, his body is pierced and torn apart by bullets. The sight of red blood flowing from his wounds triggers thoughts of death in Tiol, even though strictly speaking, the blood appears green to him.

Although the injuries themselves have already healed, the traces of massive bleeding are still vivid on the floor and on his body. The

thought that this amount of bleeding won't save him drives Tiol further into a corner, wearing down his spirit.

This increasingly suggests death to Tiol, gradually eroding his sanity amidst his consciousness, oscillating between reason and madness.

As Tiol laughs and tries to grab his head with his left hand, he sees his left arm transformed into a cannon in his field of vision. Tiol laughs and shouts in frustration.

“If you're going to turn my arm into something like this, make it into something even more amazing! You're underestimating me! ”

In his desperation, Tiol pounds the vehicle with his useless left arm as if venting his frustration towards it.

“Make it into an even more amazing weapon! Something that can kill someone as amazing as Akira! More! More! Become something amazing! Change! Change! Change! ”

In a half-crazed state, he continues to pound the trailer with his left arm, over and over again. The force of his blows causes his left arm to tear and bleed. Even though the blood appears green to him, he's too consumed to notice, gradually losing his sanity.

However, amidst this blend of sanity and madness, and within the consciousness of Tiol as an individual and as a system, his left arm responds to his desires. Fangs emerge from the tear in his arm, transforming into a gaping mouth, biting into the trailer from the inside.

Tiol laughs as he witnesses this.

While riding the bike and continuing his gunfire, Akira notices the change in the trailer and involuntarily stops his attack.

『What's that...? 』

The trailer seems to shrink as if being eaten from the inside. When the walls and ceiling of the cargo section disappear, and the length of the vehicle is reduced by half, there stands a grotesquely mutated Tiol on the remaining part of the trailer.

His left arm has grown and deformed, partially mechanized. It's adorned with numerous large-caliber guns and even a massive shield. Some parts are integrated with the vehicle itself. Smiling triumphantly as he gazes upon his formidable arm, Tiol laughs loudly.

“See? I can do it! Now, die! ”

And pointing that arm towards Akira, he unleashes a storm of bullets from all the gun barrels, creating a barrage that pulverizes everything in its path.

Even Akira is forced to hastily take evasive action. While his opponent's gunfire lacks precision, it compensates with sheer intensity.

Sturdy grass and vines surrounding them are obliterated by the onslaught of bullets. The exposed soil is blown away as if struck by artillery fire.

Knowing the resilience of the ruins' vegetation, Akira sweats nervously.

『Alpha!? What... what exactly is that thing? 』

『 It seems he's created weapons using parts of the vehicle. The method seems similar to that of the Gluttonous Crocodile.』

『...I don't see any crocodile there? 』

『He must have incorporated those factors in some way. At least the base should have been human.』

As Akira observes Tiol again, the question arises: Can a human really mimic such behavior? But then again, is someone capable of such behavior truly human?

『Is he human or a monster? It's hard to tell.』

『It depends on the definition. But it doesn't matter now. Whether he's human or a monster, the goal remains the same: defeat him.』

『Right! 』

From the start, Akira never hesitated to commit murder. Whether Tiol was human or not, for Akira now, it was only a matter of whether he could interrogate by neutralizing rather than killing, and even that was just a matter of considering if the opponent conveniently survived the fight.

Here, as well as in the depths of Kuzusuhara District Ruin, the reason for suddenly attacking them was unknown. Akira never had the intention to fight in order to ask why Tiol shouldn't be killed.

Whether it's a person or a monster, they just need to be defeated. Nothing changes in what needs to be done. Akira switched his mind to that thought, pushing aside any unnecessary questions and focusing on the battle.

Tiol, who had been fleeing from Akira, began to pursue him aggressively as soon as he acquired powerful weapons. Meanwhile, Akira tried to keep his distance from Tiol in the fight. This turned the pursuit between Akira and Tiol into a reversal of roles, with Tiol being the one pursued and Akira being the one fleeing.



Reina and the others who decided to retreat rode in Yumina's vehicle and headed towards the surface. Both Akira's and Reina's vehicles were damaged by the blast of Tiol's attack, causing them to overturn

dramatically. Although they were not completely destroyed, they refrained from riding just to be safe and followed behind in autonomous mode.

Once on the surface, Reina and the others immediately searched for Akira's whereabouts.

On the surface, the accuracy of information gathering device was affected by vegetation, but communication was in good condition. And it was already coordinated with Akira's information gathering device. By using the data sent to them, they could quickly ascertain Akira's situation.

The mysterious attackers may have already been defeated by Akira. If so, all they had to do was meet up with Akira and return. Reina and the others were optimistic to some extent due to Akira's strength.

However, that expectation was betrayed. Akira was engaged in battle with an inexplicable entity. Yumina, who learned of this through the coordinated data, hurriedly contacted him.

“Akira!? Are you okay? ”

“Yumina. Yeah, I'm having a little trouble.”

Compared to Yumina's agitation, Akira's voice remained calm. This helped Yumina regain her composure as well.

“R-Right... So, um, what are you fighting against, Akira? ”

“I don't really know either. I was fighting and ended up in this inexplicable situation.”

“...I see. Well, I'll support you for now. Let's retreat together.”

Upon hearing Yumina's words, Akira hesitated for a moment before responding.

“...Support would be appreciated, but if you intervene recklessly, that inexplicable guy might come after you, you know? Are you sure you'll be okay? ”

Yumina couldn't answer immediately. The strength of Tio, seen through the coordinated data, made it difficult for her to respond confidently.

Based on Yumina's reaction, Akira also concluded that direct support would be difficult.

“If it's difficult, then retreat first. Oh, and it would help if you leave some ammunition or something on the ground along the way. I want to avoid running out of ammo too. If you tell me where you left them, I'll go pick them up myself. Don't push yourself too hard.”

With that, communication with Akira was cut off.

Yumina wore a grim expression. But she quickly composed herself into a serious expression.

“Let's go. As Akira requested, we'll head out of the ruins while leaving ammunition behind.”

Reina, upon hearing this, was surprised.

“Yumina!? Aren't we going to help Akira? ”

“...Well, I judged it difficult to go to Akira's location and provide support nearby. ...Isn't that right? ”

Yumina said so and looked at Shiori and Kanae.

“...Milady, unfortunately, that's correct.”

“Well, isn't it fine? If Akira were saying, 'Please help me! Save me! ' it would be different, but the way he said it, it's more like, 'If you're

going to wander around nearby and get in the way, stay away,' right?"

In reality, if it's just Shiori and Kanae, providing support for Akira is entirely possible. There are two extra vehicles. They can take separate actions. With the abilities of Shiori and the others, there shouldn't be a problem.

However, in this situation, it's difficult to allow Shiori and the others to take separate action from Reina. It's even more difficult to bring Reina along to help Akira. There was no reason for Shiori and the others to expose Reina to danger just to help Akira.

Taking that into account, Yumina confirmed with Shiori and the others, and Shiori and the others answered after understanding that.

And Reina understood that much as well.

"...Understood. Let's go."

Once again, she felt like she was being a hindrance. Reina drooped slightly. Even though she tried to lift her head with the thought of what to do next, she couldn't manage it firmly.

Togami watched Reina's figure with a pained expression. But he couldn't find the words to say.

After that, Reina and the others proceeded through the ruins with Yumina driving. They stopped several times, and Reina found it strange when they placed ammunition on the ground for Akira.

"Yumina. Aren't we getting too close to Akira? I understand that we need to give him ammunition, but..."

It seemed too close. Reina thought so and looked puzzled.

Then Yumina laughed as she picked up another LEO SSB multi-function gun she had left in the car.

“Well, I have to get this close to reach him.”

“Huh? ”

“Reina. I just said it was difficult to support Akira directly near him. I never said I wouldn't support him.”

Yumina, holding the LEO SSB multi-function gun, smiled somewhat confidently. Then she pulled the trigger until the extended magazine was empty.

Countless small missiles shot out vigorously from the muzzle. The swarm of small missiles flew over the dome near Reina and landed on the other side where Tiol was.

Yumina, who knew this through the comprehensive support system, smiled satisfactorily.

“Alright. Hit. This kind of thing is easy with the comprehensive support system.”

Normally, even if you leave missile guidance to the comprehensive support system, it wouldn't hit due to the influence of the plants growing in the ruins. But by using Akira's coordinated information gathering device as a guidance device, it's the same as aiming from nearby in terms of the system.

Yumina fired roughly from a distance while fine-tuning the aim from Akira's position. That's what made this long-distance attack possible.

Having fought alongside Akira in the depths of Kuzusuhara District Ruin, Yumina uses the same gun as Akira. Since it's the same gun, she can naturally use the extended magazine Akira loaded onto Yumina's vehicle. There's no need to worry about running out of ammo. She can continuously fire small missiles.

Yumina kept firing a large number of missiles from a distance and smiled proudly at Reina.

“Reina, please keep an eye on the surroundings. It seems there are autonomous dolls wandering around. Can I leave that to you? ”

“...Understood! ”

Having done what she needed to do, Reina regained her spirit and smiled powerfully, positioning herself firmly to protect Yumina.

Togami chuckled and stood by Reina's side.

“Aren't you getting a little too pumped up? ”

“Shut up. Make sure you do your part properly too.”

“I got it.”

Upon hearing Togami's jest, Reina regained her composure and calm. And she felt a little happy to realize that it was a joke meant to help her regain her spirits.

Kanae smiled meaningfully at Shiori.

“Big sis. Is it okay? ”

“...Well, I suppose it's fine. That's our job, after all.”

“Got it.”

According to Kurosawa's communication, this is still a dangerous area with dozens of old-world-made automata running amok. Keeping Reina here is risky.

However, Shiori accepted it. If it's just that, then dealing with it for Reina's sake is their job. That's how she thought.



Akira continued to skillfully evade Tiol's pursuit as he chased after him on his bike.

His opponent was a trailer. It shouldn't be able to chase him up to the top of the dome. Thinking so, he tried to climb up the dome using the mobility of the bike, capable of running on vertical walls, but Tiol calmly pursued. The trailer, which had just been moving with tires until a moment ago, now had insect-like legs and forcefully climbed up the dome's wall.

Akira spat out in annoyance.

『...Well, it's too late to be surprised now! 』

Compared to Tiol's own transformation, it wasn't much. Akira continued to fire, telling himself so.

Targeting Tiol. However, it was blocked by the shield growing from his left arm. The energy of the shield's force field armor had been used to protect the entire trailer up until now. Its durability was extraordinary.

He aims for Tiol's enlarged left arm. While he succeeds in destroying the gun growing from it, it proves ineffective as new guns keep sprouting one after another.

He targets Tiol's upper and back areas with small missiles. Tiol cannot defend against them with his left arm. To both shoot at Akira and defend against Akira's gunfire, he needs to keep his left arm directed towards Akira.

However, Tiol deflects the incoming missiles with a swing of his right arm. Deliberately reducing the sharpness of the light blade, widening the effective range, and sweeping away the swarm of small missiles with the flat surface instead of cutting with a line.

At that moment, Akira attempted to aim at the car rather than Tiol himself. But he quickly stopped. Tiol intensified his attack as soon as

Akira eased his assault on him, sensing his intent.

Tiol grew more guns from his left arm, unleashing even more bullets over a wider area, making it increasingly difficult for Akira to evade. Even with Alpha's godlike driving skills, dodging the bullet barrage without any physical gaps became impossible. Akira has already been hit several times, relying on the force field armor of his protective coat to reinforce only the areas where bullets hit.

Amidst the intense back-and-forth, Tiol joyfully pursued Akira, who wore a stern expression. Partly because he was intoxicated by the powerful force he had acquired, but also for another reason.

If he could kill Akira, somehow things might work out. If he could kill Akira, maybe everything would be fine. That thought crossed Tiol's mind.

What to do, how to do it, Tiol himself didn't know. But he felt an extremely strong desire, believing that it was about to come true soon, and fought joyfully.

In a consciousness where he was likely to forget even who he was.

Amidst the ongoing equal battle, it was Akira who showed signs of impatience first.

『Uh oh. Alpha. We're running out of ammo soon』

Despite boasting an impressive total ammunition count in the extended magazine, it would still run out if fired continuously. Moreover, they had already been chasing Tiol for some time, which contributed to the ammo depletion happening sooner.

『You can just go and get some more. Yumina must have told you the location of the ammo cache, right? 』

『Yeah, but...』

There would definitely be a vulnerability while picking up the ammunition left on the ground. If it were any other opponent, it wouldn't be a problem, but right now it could be fatal. Thinking so, Akira's expression grew stern.

But it still had to be done. Compared to running out of ammo, it was trivial. To minimize the gap until reloading as much as possible, Akira psyched himself up to finish it in an instant.

『Alpha. Make sure to support me properly, okay? 』

『Leave it to me』

Seeing Alpha's usual confident smile, Akira also smiled forcefully. He pumped himself up and hurried towards the location of the ammunition.

However, Akira's determination became futile in a good sense. Just at that moment, a massive barrage of small missiles fired by Yumina assaulted Tiol directly. Tiol, along with his vehicle, was engulfed in countless explosions.

『What the!?! 』

『It's Yumina's support. Let's finish resupplying while we can』

『I see! 』

With the roar and blast behind him, Akira accelerated. He rushed to the ammunition cache, swiftly picking up the supplies. Then, while storing some inside the protective coat, he rapidly exchanged the gun's magazines and energy packs on the bike using his perception of time.

『Alright! It's done! 』

The time Akira took from picking up the ammo to reloading the gun was just a few seconds. However, in a combat where a momentary opening could be fatal, it was fatally slow. But Akira had the luxury of taking his time because of the massive number of small missiles fired by Yumina.

The vast quantity of missiles fired by Yumina created that time gap. Unlike Akira, who was engaged in intense combat with Tiol, Yumina could safely continue shooting from a distance. She made full use of the expensive small missile magazine to unleash an unprecedented volume of firepower.

With such a massive number of missiles aimed at him, Tiol couldn't possibly afford to attack Akira. Thanks to that, Akira could comfortably finish replenishing his ammo. He expressed his gratitude to Yumina through Alpha.

『Yumina! Thanks for the help! Keep it up! 』

『Understood. Akira. You do your best too』

『Yeah! You too! 』

After ending the communication with Yumina, Akira smiled confidently as he aimed his gun.

『 Now it's 2-on-1 from here. No, it's 6-on-1. Let's finish this quickly』

Encouraged by Akira's words, Alpha smiled slightly with a hint of meaning.

『Akira. Isn't it more like 7-on-1 there? 』

Akira chuckled and corrected himself.

『Oops, you're right. It's 7-on-1. Well then, I'll continue to rely on your support』

『Leave it to me』

Akira pulled the trigger towards Tiol, who was still being bombarded with a large number of small missiles. The barrage of bullets fired from three guns mercilessly assaulted Tiol.



Tiol was once again cornered. Continuously targeted from a distance by small missiles, and also being fired upon by Akira. It was impossible to defend against.

Even if he tried to head towards Yumina and the others instead of defeating Akira first, he was thoroughly obstructed by Akira. And in the meantime, Yumina and the others moved to a safe location. He was at a dead end.

The euphoria of gaining powerful strength had already vanished. The fear of death, which he had forgotten in that euphoria, began to erode Tiol once again. It eroded the sanity of Tiol, who was in a state of equilibrium, blurring the line between his consciousness and the system's consciousness.

And in that blurred area, Tiol's thought seeking help and the system's rescue function connected.

Support request initiated.

Those words appeared in Tiol's augmented field of vision, in a language unreadable by humans.

Chapter 165: Automata

Reina and the others continued to support Akira from a distance.

Yumina kept firing small missiles from the roof of the vehicle towards Tiol. Reina, along with Togami, is protecting Yumina. They remained vigilant of their surroundings, quickly defeating any nearby monsters and passing small missiles from inside the vehicle to Yumina.

Shiori and Kanae stood by Reina's side, prepared for any unexpected situations.

With the support of their team, Akira was regaining the upper hand. At this rate, victory seemed assured. While thinking this, Reina expertly sniped another monster.

With a powerful large gun designed for outdoor use, Reina's skill in aiming accurately at distant targets, suppressing recoil, was a testament to her growth endured through harsh training. Watching from behind, Shiori couldn't help but smile proudly at her master's progress.

However, Reina wore a slightly puzzled expression.

“Hey, Shiori. Weren't these creatures supposed to be inside the dome? They rarely come out, right? ”

“That's correct.”

“Then why are they here? ”

“It seems that rare occurrences are happening more frequently. Although we haven't encountered them yet, if automata are rampaging inside the ruins, it's possible that they are engaging with those who occupied the stores. As a result of that conflict, they might have been driven outside the dome.”

“Ah, I see.”

Reina nodded in understanding. Shiori then gave her a serious look.

“Milady, even if we encounter automata, please refrain from attacking immediately. Since we do not occupy the stores, there's a possibility the automata do not perceive us as enemies. It might be possible to avoid conflict if we do not provoke them.”

“I understand. Well, it's still dangerous, so let's finish this quickly once Akira defeats those incomprehensible things.”

As they monitored Akira's situation through their information gathering device, it was clear that Akira's advantage was unshakable. Just a little more. Thinking this, Reina continued to protect Yumina.



Kurosawa and his team were struggling against the activated automata. The fact that the old-world automata were simply powerful. When Kurosawa ordered his unit to destroy the automata, many of them had already started activation. And hesitation to destroy the inactive automata had led to this situation.

Still, Kurosawa managed to rally his unit and continued to give appropriate instructions to minimize casualties. While urging the transportation of the wounded, he himself engaged in counterattacks. Together with Rodin, he destroyed another automaton.

Rodin complained bitterly about the strength demonstrated by the old-world automata.

“Damn it! Why are they attacking us in the first place!? It wasn't us who activated them, right? ”

Kurosawa responded to this question matter-of-factly.

“What are you talking about? If there are armed groups in the commercial area, they'll be eliminated. It's a normal judgment.”

“Y-yeah, I get that, but...”

“Thanks to that normal judgment, dangerous beasts lurking around the commercial area are also being targeted for elimination. That reduces the likelihood of our unit being targeted. That's helpful in its own way.”

“...But aren't we being targeted like crazy? ”

“Because you and I are the ones taking down the most automata. That increases our priority for elimination.”

“Damn it! ”

While Rodin was cursing, a new automaton appeared. Seeing the direction of the high-energy wave aimed at them, Rodin and Kurosawa quickly took cover behind a building.

The ruins' vegetation was mowed down by the beams from the automata. The plants, previously spared from burning by many hunters attempting to collect relics, were instantly charred and crumbled. Seeing the scorch marks, Rodin grimaced in disgust.

“Why the hell do maids shoot beams? ”

“I don't know. Perhaps it was considered a necessary function in the old-world's values? ”

“Maids shooting beams from their eyes as a function? ”

“It's the old-world, after all. They created all sorts of incomprehensible things. Stop complaining and fight back.”

While Kurosawa dodged the enemy's beams and fired his gun, Rodin sighed and followed suit.

The restocked automata varied in price, type, and performance, with some capable of long-range attacks like this. Naturally, they were more formidable than other automata. Therefore, among those armed with weapons for anti-automaton combat, only those with high skill levels had to engage them.

Kurosawa and Rodin, as skilled fighters, prioritized battling the powerful automata that others struggled to defeat, drawing more attention and danger from the automata.

But suddenly, the situation changed. The automata they were fighting suddenly retreated.

Seeing the unexpected behavior of their opponents, Kurosawa also wore a puzzled expression. As he watched, reports of the same situation came from other members of the unit.

“...I see. In that case, let's retreat now while we can. Withdraw from the ruins and aim to regroup with the reinforcements. Hurry.”

After issuing the retreat order, Kurosawa, along with Rodin, left the area. There was no relief on his face.

While Kurosawa saw the sudden departure of the automata as convenient, he wasn't optimistic enough to simply rejoice at the inexplicable change in the situation.

(...Too many things are happening. I don't know if it's because Akira is here, but please, let's not have anything else happen.)

While Kurosawa couldn't directly blame Akira for the series of events, he couldn't help but feel that Akira's presence somehow contributed to them. With a troubled expression, Kurosawa sighed.



Thanks to Yumina and the others' support, Akira had regained the upper hand, but victory still required time. Once again, he became

the pursuer, relentlessly shooting at the fleeing Tiol, but still unable to bring him down.

The countless guns sprouting from Tiol's left arm relentlessly showered Akira with bullets, destroying almost all of them. Tiol was now in a state where he could only defend himself with his shield.

Despite this, Tiol was still barely clinging to life.

『He's tough! What kind of durability is this? 』

Akira grimaced in surprise at Tiol's incredible toughness. Alpha laughed and reassured him.

『He's using force field armor to defend himself, so it's natural that regular bullets won't do much against him.』

Akira had already battled against a formidable opponent boasting similar durability. It was the black wolf, a humanoid weapon manufactured by Yoshioka Heavy Industry, which he fought during the major conflict in the slums.

Its defensive force field armor was extremely potent; despite Akira using expanded magazines of anti-force field ammunition, he couldn't manage to defeat the unit.

Tiol also utilized similar force field armor, further enhanced to its limits by energy supplied from a powerful generator mounted on a large trailer.

Despite the relentless attacks from Akira and Yumina, Tiol managed to survive, thanks to the formidable force field armor.

Upon hearing the explanation, Akira lightly nodded in understanding.

『Force field armor is amazing indeed. No wonder anti-force field ammunition is so expensive.』

While he understood, Akira still frowned. He knew that breaking through Tiol's force field armor defense with his current equipment would be difficult.

But Alpha continued with a smile.

『It's okay. Look.』

Tiol's trailer, for regenerating the shield and gun and generating bullets, had been continuously consumed by Tiol, shrinking to the size of a small car.

Yet the vehicle somehow held up until it reached its limit. Then, it cracked wide open and shattered.

『It looks like the energy used to maintain the car body has been used up. Now, he won't be able to maintain his defense as before.』

Tiol was thrown out from the wrecked vehicle and slammed onto the ground.

『Alright! It's over now! 』

At that moment, Yumina paused her attack while reloading the ammunition. This lucky break saved Tiol's life, but if it took Akira's attack head-on, it would be over.

Most of Tiol's left arm, where the gun was attached, was blown away, leaving only the shield. While diverting all the vehicle's energy to the shield just before the vehicle shattered, the amount of energy left was questionable whether it could withstand Akira's attack for even a second.

Akira fired his gun. Tiol's fate within the limits of what it could manage on its own came to an end here.

But Tiol's fate itself was not yet sealed.

Automata emerged from a nearby dome.

『Automata!? At a time like this! 』

Akira had heard from Reina and the others about automata rampaging within the ruins. He briefly hesitated, considering dealing with the automata first as they posed an immediate threat, even more so than Tiol, who was already near death.

But finally, realizing how close he had cornered Tiol, Akira prioritized killing Tiol. First, he would kill Tiol, then deal with the automata. That's what he decided.

However, that order was overturned. An automaton intercepted Akira's line of fire, shielding Tiol from his attack.

『What! 』

Surprised and bewildered by the unexpected turn of events, Akira watched as the automaton, acting as a shield for Tiol, took a barrage of bullets. However, in that moment, a new automaton appeared. It fired lasers towards Akira.

Even Akira had to focus on evading. Despite that, he couldn't completely dodge the high-energy waves aimed at him, which were intended more to deter than to kill. The glowing waves scorched the ground's vegetation, threatening to engulf Akira and his bike.

But Akira defended against it with his bike and augmented suit's force field armor. His injuries were minor, and there was no impediment to continue the fight. However, he had no time to finish off Tiol.

Additionally, four more automata appeared. One emerged from a nearby dome, while the other three sprinted from a distance. Using the ruins' vegetation to hinder information gathering, the automata closed the distance swiftly with their enhanced physical abilities.

An automaton positioned 20 meters away prepared to swing its blade horizontally, while another at the same distance prepared to swing its blade vertically. Each blade was about a meter long. Normally, no matter how much they swung, they wouldn't reach Akira.

However, Akira immediately leaped off his bike. Almost simultaneously, two automata swung their blades. The waves of slashing force propagated from their shining blades overlapped at Akira's bike 20 meters away, slicing the target in an instant.

Though his bike was destroyed, all his guns remained intact. As he leaped from his bike, Akira manipulated the gun mount arm, detaching the guns from the bike and catching them in mid-air.

Then, using the power of his augmented suit, he moved swiftly and erratically, confusing the enemies. While a bike was superior for traveling long distances in a straight line at high speeds, for short distances with quick, varied movements, Akira found it more efficient to move himself with the augmented suit, making it easier to dodge the automata's attacks.

He then proceeded to shoot the automata. With his right hand, he used the heavy-duty gun, with his left hand, the standard version, and with the auxiliary arm on his back, he used the small missile launcher. Akira unleashed the maximum firepower of his three LEO SSB multi-function guns against Tiol and the automata.

In the midst of the battle between Akira and the automata, explosions mingled with bullet barrages, while light blades and lasers raged around them. In that chaos, Akira witnessed something: maid and butler automata were attempting to carry Tiol, who was already incapacitated, away.

『Why are the automata helping him? 』

『Akira! Focus on that later! More reinforcements are coming! 』

As Alpha scolded, four more automata appeared, worsening the situation. Akira couldn't help but curse at the turn of events.

『Damn it! What the hell is going on!? 』

At that moment, a deluge of small missiles rained down from the sky. Fired by Yumina after completing her magazine swap, the missiles, originally targeted at Tiol's vehicle, lost their target suddenly and exploded upon landing, engulfing the area along with Akira and the automata.



Yumina, who had been firing small missiles from the roof of a moving vehicle, panicked, thinking she had involved Akira. She instinctively stopped her attack and called out.

“Akira!? Are you okay? ”

“I'm fine.”

The calm voice of Akira reassured Yumina, but her relief quickly turned to confusion upon hearing his next words.

“Yumina. Are you okay? If you are, keep providing cover fire.”

“K-keep providing cover fire...? Akira, if I'm firing in this situation, I might hit you by mistake! ”

“Don't worry. I'll make sure you don't hit me.”

“But...”

Even if that was tactically correct, could she attacks the enemy along with her allies? Yumina, who didn't possess the mindset to calmly answer “yes” to that question, hesitated to resume support.

Then, Akira continued in a tone that suggested resignation.

“I won't force you. It's this kind of situation. Please retreat first.”

With that, the communication was cut off. However, being urged to retreat, Yumina instead made up her mind. She connected with Akira again and shouted loudly.

“Make sure to dodge! ”

Then, she fired a barrage of small missiles. A large number of missiles flew through the air again, causing numerous explosions around where Akira was.

Akira's cheerful voice came back in response.

“Keep shooting like that without hesitation! And Yumina, watch out too! ”

“You too, Akira! ”

Yumina laughed spiritedly, lifting her morale.

Reina hurriedly approached.

“Yumina!? If you shoot in that situation, won't you hit Akira too? ”

“...It's fine. In that situation, the probability of hitting the automata is much higher. Even considering the risk of hitting Akira, it's effective as support.”

“B-but still...”

Yumina deliberately omitted words that could serve as excuses. Even though Akira told her to shoot, she didn't explicitly say it was her decision. She didn't say it out loud to avoid running away from that fact.

“Rather than that, Reina. We might get busier here. I'm counting on you.”

“What do you mean? ”

Saying so, Shiori, who was next to Reina, aimed her gun and fired.

The fired bullets hit the automata running towards Reina's group from a distance. The impact of the bullets caused the automata to fall, but they immediately got up as if they had just stumbled and started running towards Reina's group again.

Shiori's face hardened slightly.

“...It doesn't seem to have much effect. Milady, please assist.”

Reina also hastily joined the gunfire. While continuing to shoot at the automata together, she suddenly thought.

“Shiori, didn't we say not to shoot even if we found the automata? ”

“That automaton was clearly heading towards us. Considering Akira-sama's situation, unfortunately, if we don't take action, we won't be able to avoid hostility.”

“Well, that's true.”

Reina smiled wryly as if to say she just tried saying it. Then she pulled the trigger and made sure her shot hit the target.

The automata targeted by Shiori, Reina, and now Togami fell with the impact of the shots, but they were still hit and sent flying by the

barrage, bouncing off from being struck again. They fell to the ground, got up again, and started running.

Not only that, but new types of automata appeared. With more targets, the gunfire became scattered, making it difficult to stop the enemy's approach. Additionally, all the machines were sturdy, despite having already endured quite a lot of bullets, they showed no signs of significant damage.

Feeling the urgency, Reina's face tightened.

“Shiori, is this situation really bad? ”

Shiori replied calmly.

“That depends on the criteria for considering it a crisis. At least compared to Akira-sama's situation, it doesn't seem too problematic.”

“That's true, but...”

“Also, I believe using the term 'bad' may not be appropriate. Please be more careful with your choice of words.”

Reina chuckled wryly.

“Got it.”

The fact that they had the leisure to give such trivial warnings indicated that the situation wasn't too dire. Reina thought so and regained her composure.

“Yumina-sama, please continue towards the outside of the ruins. If the automata are chasing us as part of the facility's security, they may not pursue us beyond the ruins.”

As Shiori said this, she looked around. They had already reached the outer part of the ruins.

If the automata attacking them were also in this area and heading in their direction, they would have already been attacked. Therefore, the likelihood of automata being ahead was low. Even if new units appeared, they would come from behind. There shouldn't be a problem. Shiori judged so.

“It would be more suitable to meet up with Akira-sama outside the ruins. In an open area like that, we can quickly approach him in this vehicle, have him jump on, and then drive away. Please convey to Akira-sama to aim for the outside of the ruins.”

“...Understood.”

Yumina somehow sensed what Shiori was about to do next, but she wasn't in a position to stop her, so she just answered that much.

Then, there was a prompt from Kanae to Shiori.

“Big sis. Isn't it about time? ”

“I understand. Let's go. Togami-sama, Yumina-sama, I leave Milady to you.”

Saying so, Shiori bowed to Yumina and her companions, then jumped out of the car with Kanae.

As Shiori and the others landed smoothly, the automata approached them. Even though they were moving at high speed, if the opponents were also moving in the same direction, their relative speed would decrease, making it difficult to close the distance. But if the opponents stopped moving, it would be different. The automata rapidly closed the distance with Shiori and her companions.

Then, they prepared their blades. Liquid metal blades or light blades formed by trapping high-energy in a force field extended.

Seeing this, Shiori let out a small sigh.

“They indeed had blades.”

Kanae brightened up.

“The ones who attacked Akira-kun had them too. Since they've come here, it's not like they're coming unarmed. It's a luxury to say that we don't have to deal with the ones shooting beams, so we shouldn't complain.”

“...You're right.”

Shiori and the others also take their stance. Shiori grips the handle of her sword, while Kanae clenches her fists. As the automata swiftly close the distance, swinging their blades from over 10 meters away, Shiori and Kanae utilize their augmented suit's abilities to the fullest, stepping forward. Closing the distance in a single step, they dodge the enemy's blades and strike back with their sword and fists.

The automata, which had not been damaged even after being showered with countless bullets, were slashed, knocked back, and heavily damaged with a single blow.

Without even the time to call them back, Reina watched Shiori and the others jump out of the car in amazement. She was in a slight state of confusion, so much so that she stopped her attack as well.

Togami was in a similar state, but he snapped out of it first. He immediately resumed intercepting the automata.

“Reina. We're covering Shiori-san and the others.”

The toughness of the automata enduring their gunfire was likely due to force field armor. Without anti-force field ammunition, they wouldn't be very effective no matter how much they shot. But Shiori and the others' close combat equipment had anti-force field capabilities. There was a good chance of success in close combat.

However, it would be too late to switch to close combat using anti-force field capabilities after they were no longer able to stop the enemy's approach with gunfire. The automata had weapons that could be described as having a range despite being blades. Fighting them while protecting Reina would be difficult for Shiori and her companions as well.

That's why Shiori and the others decided to temporarily leave Reina's side and take down the automata now. They judged that this way, there was a higher chance of Reina surviving.

Realizing this, Togami immediately resumed gunfire. And seeing Reina still in a slight state of confusion, he scolded her.

“Get it together. Our job is to prevent them from approaching our vehicles and buy time for Shiori-san and the others to defeat them. We can do at least that much now. Shiori-san and the others must have made the same judgment. Right, Reina? ”

With a smile, Togami said so, and Reina responded with a determined smile.

“Of course! ”

And Reina also resumed intercepting the automata.

In the sense that Shiori and the others went out to intercept without waiting for them, the situation was similar to the fierce battle at the Mihazono District Ruin. But it shouldn't be just that, Reina thought. It shouldn't be just that, and she wouldn't allow it to be just that. She raised her spirits.

Back then, she was just being protected. Now it's different. Even if she can't fight alongside Shiori and the others, she can provide support. She can fight with them. If not now, then where else would they fight? Thinking so, she raised her fighting spirit, focused, and sharpened her awareness.

Since that day, she had been desperately trying to become stronger. Now, here, she would show the results of her efforts. With that determination, Reina concentrated to the utmost and pulled the trigger.

The fired bullets raced straight through the air and hit their targets. At that moment, Reina's sniping was one step above what it had been before.

The automata were engaged in combat with Shiori and the others, showing movements far more complex than simply running and chasing. Hitting their targets was naturally much more difficult than before. However, Reina managed to hit her target. It wasn't luck, but skill that ensured her shot landed.

Not only was Reina's marksmanship commendable, but she also demonstrated even greater skill. The damaged automaton suffered significantly.

Although protected by powerful force field armor, the automaton didn't maintain high-output protection on all parts at all times. Additionally, it was currently engaged in combat with Shiori and the others. To deal with close-range threats, it was adjusting the strength of its force field armor, diverting energy not only for protection but also for high-speed movement, and focusing output on specific areas, altering the strength of its force field armor.

Naturally, this resulted in temporarily vulnerable areas. Reina targeted these areas with her gunfire.

However, it wasn't a deliberate attempt by Reina to make such an effective shot. She merely aimed based on intuition.

Nevertheless, it wasn't just coincidence. Reina's unconscious choice stemmed from the culmination of various elements of growth she had gained through rigorous training and harsh combat since deciding to become stronger.

These elements had not previously come together effectively, failing to produce significant results. But now, with Reina's extreme concentration honed to its limit, she fused them together in this moment.

As a result, Reina achieved the actual damage to the automaton with regular ammunition. With accumulated experience as her nourishment, Reina was now noticeably stronger than before.

The automaton, significantly slowed by the damage, was swiftly dispatched by Shiori. Then, a communication came in from Shiori.

“Milady, excellent work. Please continue like this.”

“Leave it to me! ”

Reina, now stronger, continued to shoot at the automaton with a smile. While she couldn't cause further damage, she effectively hindered its movements, supporting Shiori and the others.

Togami also noticed Reina's transformation, laughing as they fired together.

“Taking down those protected by force field armor with regular bullets. Impressive.”

“Well, my equipment is higher grade than yours, Togami, so it's expected.”

Reina replied with a laugh.

Indeed, Reina's current equipment was considerably higher grade than Togami's. Specially procured by Shiori for Reina, it was a high-priced, high-performance set that wouldn't be out of place for someone nearing Hunter Rank 50.

Meanwhile, Togami's equipment hadn't changed much since their encounter at the Mihazono District Ruin. Relying on loaned

equipment from Drankam and having exchanged the spoils of their battle at the ruins for money, it was difficult for him to acquire even more high-performance gear.

Equipment was part of one's strength, but Reina's casual remark, though a jest, hinted at her reliance on equipment performance, a sign of her growth.

Togami retorted with a joke of his own.

“Those with money are different. Must be nice. I wish I had better gear too.”

“Well, you could have bought it if we hadn't been destroying them, you know.”

“Well, we're doing just that now.”

“Too bad.”

“Indeed.”

While exchanging banter, Reina's group continued to support Shiori's team earnestly.

Getting stronger. Those who had decided on the same day were now clearly demonstrating the strength they had gained from their days since then.



While receiving support from Reina's group, Shiori wielded her blade against the automata. She deflected the unnaturally elongated silver blades, dodged the flying light blades imbued with slashing waves, stepped in, readied herself, and struck back.

With honed technique, her strikes with the sword were further accelerated by the augmented suit. The already sharp blade gained

even more edge from the energy flowing from its hilt. The blade, with its activated anti-force field armor function, pierced through the opponent's force field armor.

In a flash, two automata were split from top to bottom with a single stroke.

However, this didn't mean they were defeated. They were machines. Unless their internal generator was destroyed, it was entirely conceivable for them to continue moving with half of their body missing.

Shiori was well aware of this. The crucial thing was not to defeat the automata but to prevent them from descending upon Reina's group. If there was time to completely destroy them, prioritizing neutralizing other units was more important. This was the basis of her attacks.

Moreover, there was no time to thoroughly destroy them. There were too many automata. Although the initial pursuers had been neutralized, the continuous appearance of reinforcements made the numbers difficult to reduce. It was fortunate they were weaker than anticipated, but it didn't ease Shiori's stern expression.

(But still, there are so many... Even if they are mostly cheap models, this number is abnormal. The ruins are a territory of the old-world. While anything can happen, I wish they'd cut us some slack.)

Complaining inwardly, she rushed toward the next target. A damaged automaton that had just been shot by Reina was thrown toward Shiori by the impact of the shot. She disposed of it with a single stroke.

Reina's group's support greatly aided Shiori.

(Milady, have you truly become this strong? Quite impressive. However...)

Shiori could generally welcome Reina becoming stronger. However, there were other concerns that couldn't be ignored.

(...if she becomes this strong, I hope she doesn't start talking about living as a Hunter anymore. Especially considering her good relationship with Togami...)

Being someone with attendants like Shiori and Kanae, Reina was wealthy. Naturally, she wouldn't normally become a Hunter. Reina's decision to become one was due to certain circumstances.

Shiori had been working diligently to resolve those circumstances for Reina. Although there was no clear solution in sight, Shiori didn't necessarily want Reina to continue being a Hunter forever.

Shiori found herself starting to focus on those thoughts but quickly shifted her attention. There was still no clue for a solution. It was pointless to worry now. Reminding herself of this, she refocused on the battle.

And she checked on Kanae. Kanae was fighting against other automata at a slightly distant location.

If Kanae seemed to be struggling, Shiori intended to lend a hand. However, seeing Kanae's somewhat bored demeanor, she judged that there was no problem. She continued to engage nearby automata in combat.

Kanae had eagerly dashed out from under Yumina's support, but by now, that enthusiasm had faded. She still had a smile on her face, but it wasn't because she found the situation enjoyable. Rather, it seemed like she was trying to deceive herself into finding it enjoyable.

And even that smile gradually faded. It was because Kanae found the combat with these automata boring.

Kanae had a bad habit of enjoying combat too much. It was a severe habit, to the extent that even while guarding someone, she hoped for that person to be in a predicament for her own enjoyment. She would even charge at enemies in situations where using a gun would be far more efficient, simply to get close and punch them. Even when these tendencies were pointed out to her, she showed no intention of changing.

And she continued to enjoy battles with those tendencies. If her opponents were biological monsters, she enjoyed the exchange of life and death with opponents who directed hostility and aggression towards her. If her opponents were humans, she enjoyed the exchange of skill and proficiency honed over time. Kanae's bad habit made her favor fighting opponents with consciousness, whether they were humans or monsters.

Even if her opponents were security machines, as long as she accepted that from the start, she could enjoy it to some extent. She fought against moving corpses in the Mihazono District Ruin, but if she saw it as a prelude to her main battle with Monica, she could still find some enjoyment in it.

And if the opponents were automata, as long as they fought like humans, she should have been able to enjoy it.

Dodging blades, stepping in, and delivering punches. A strike with the gauntlet equipped with anti-force field armor pierced through the opponent's force field armor, transmitting the impact internally. The damage to the unit caused the movements of the automaton to become significantly disrupted.

However, the automaton's expression remained unchanged. There was no hint of anguish, urgency, hostility, joy, excitement, or mockery.

This dulled Kanae's bad habit. It chipped away at her eagerness to enjoy battles actively.

The automata were incredibly sophisticated, almost indistinguishable from humans in appearance. Yet, their overly lifelike appearance accentuated their emotionless expressions, leaving Kanae with a strong impression of emptiness inside them.

Punching a humanoid sandbag moving only by unknown patterns, devoid of will, wasn't a battle. It wasn't enjoyable. It was boring. Utterly uninteresting. As her feelings intensified, the smile faded from Kanae's face.

“Ah, this isn't working... It's boring...”

With those words, Kanae completely lost interest. With even the slight anticipation for combat gone, her smile disappeared.

“Let's just destroy them already.”

As Kanae uttered those flat words, a nearby automaton received her powerful strike and was heavily damaged.

Then, in the next instant, another nearby automaton was also destroyed with a single blow. With eyes as cold as a deserted street, devoid of any interest or joy, Kanae efficiently dispatched the two automata with maximum efficiency, completely foregoing the pointless attempt to enjoy combat.

Kanae's severe bad habit was also her weakness and constraint. Her desire for enjoyable combat often led her to prioritize enjoyment over certain victory, safe combat, or even intentionally attacking the enemy's weaknesses. In combat, it served only to hinder efficiency.

But in battles she couldn't enjoy, the constraint disappeared.

She swung her fists. She delivered kicks. With precise, efficient strikes aimed solely at defeating the enemy, Kanae destroyed the automata one after another. Attacked from all sides by blades, she evaded with precise movements devoid of any playfulness and counterattacked.

Just defeating the enemy. That's all it was. A mere mundane task. With a completely disinterested expression, Kanae repeated this horribly boring task, trampling down the surrounding automata.

Chapter 166: Resolution of Reality

On the roof of Yumina's vehicle, rushing away from the ruins, Togami, who had been supporting Shiori and the others along with Reina, was amazed at Kanae's strength.

“Kanae-san, were you really that strong? ”

Certainly, with strength like that, it would be acceptable for someone to accompany them without carrying a gun, even while others were well armed. Togami thought so, feeling a slight admiration and understanding for that strength.

“Well, that should be fine then.”

While Shiori and the others were still fighting the automata, Reina felt relieved, convinced that they would be able to win easily in that state.

Then Yumina interjected seriously.

“Reina, are you sure you're okay over there? If so, sorry to bother you, but if possible, could you help us out here? ”

Focused on supporting Shiori and the others, Reina's group hadn't been paying attention to Akira's situation. Feeling uneasy at Yumina's serious expression, they checked Akira's situation through the linked data from their information gathering devices.

And their expressions quickly turned serious.

“What... is this...”

What Reina's group saw was Akira fighting alone against eight automata.



Akira was desperately aiming for the outskirts of the ruins. With the output of his humanoid weapon at maximum, he rushed across the ground, kicked through the air, doing whatever it took to hurry ahead.

While doing so, he continuously fired his guns with both hands. Firing at the maximum rate allowed by the gun's performance, he showered the automata with countless bullets.

The small missiles had already run out. He had discarded the LEO SSB multi-function gun that fired them, judging that it was useless to protect the empty gun against the light blades the automata unleashed, while dodging them.

Despite having a remarkable total number of bullets thanks to the extended magazines, the remaining ammunition for the two remaining LEO SSB multi-function guns was already worrying in quantity. He had fired that many bullets at the automata in such a short time.

The automata relentlessly pursued him. Knowing it would be over if he got surrounded, Akira continued to move forward, avoiding standing still by moving irregularly.

An automaton that closed the distance swung a blade made of liquid metal sideways. The silver blade swept through the space within a radius of five meters in an instant, cutting down the tall grass in a fan shape.

Akira leaped to dodge it, and another automaton launched a light blade at him. Generating a foothold in the air with the function of his humanoid weapon, he managed to avoid it by flying sideways with enough force to shatter the foothold.

Immediately after, a laser shot out from an automaton equipped with a laser cannon in its palm. Realizing he couldn't avoid it, Akira swung his leg forcefully to kick the trajectory away. Then he generated a foothold on the trajectory, using it as a shield while

focusing the humanoid weapon's force field armor on the soles of his feet to reflect and deflect the laser.

After barely evading and defending against the enemy's attacks, Akira's field of vision was filled with other automata preparing to unleash their silver blades, light blades, and lasers towards him.

That seemed impossible. Akira's face tensed up instantly, thinking so.

But at that moment, a large number of small missiles poured in. The explosions caused the automata to lose their balance significantly, greatly disrupting and missing their attacks on Akira. Taking advantage of this, Akira quickly adjusted his posture and started running again while firing his guns with both hands.

『Phew, that was close! Thought I was a goner! 』

The small missiles were Yumina's support. Yumina's vehicle had a large number of spare extended magazines loaded. They could keep firing for a while longer.

However, they couldn't shoot while changing magazines. In that brief moment, Akira had been pushed to the limit.

Support from the small missiles resumed, hitting the automata one after another. It wasn't enough to defeat them all, but it served as sufficient support. Akira decided to reduce their numbers while he had the chance.

With precision shooting adjusted by Alpha's aiming correction, despite rapid fire, they managed to penetrate the automata's force field armor and reach their generators. Based on information gathered by their information gathering devices, Alpha had conducted advanced analysis and pinpointed the position of the generators inside. Automata whose power sources were destroyed collapsed and became immobile.

『Alpha! How many left? 』

『Eight more.』

『Eight!? I thought we'd taken down quite a few already! Why are there still so many left? 』

『 Because more reinforcements arrived than the number we defeated.』

『Damn it! All we can hope for is that they won't chase us outside the ruins! 』

As the small missiles continued to rain down, Akira hurried away from the relentless automata chasing them.



Akira's situation was so dire that Reina couldn't help but wonder why he hadn't died yet.

Yumina then conveyed something to Reina's group.

“I'll tell you in advance. Soon, I'll be in a position to directly target the automata attacking Akira. At that point, I intend to fire from here as well.”

Yumina showed them the LEO SSB multi-function gun used by Akira.

Until now, Yumina had been firing small missiles from a position behind obstacles like the dome of the ruins. As a result, the automata couldn't aim directly at them, and they were safe from attacks even from automata equipped with laser cannons. Thanks to the guided small missiles arcing over the dome, they could support Akira safely.

But from here on, it would be different. Once the obstacles were gone, the automata attacking Akira would also be able to aim at Yumina's group with lasers and such. It would become a direct line of fire.

While the opponents facing Shiori's group didn't have long-range attacks comparable to guns, Reina would now be directly targeted. Moreover, the opponents were powerful automata that even Akira was running away from, making it extremely dangerous.

Although Reina had been asked by Shiori to help, Yumina couldn't simply abandon Akira for that reason. This was the extent of Yumina's compromise.

"I'd like you to help if possible, but I won't force you. If you think it's impossible, now's the time to distance yourselves."

Yumina said this, then looked at Reina's vehicle, which was following them via autopilot. If they took separate actions from now on, Reina's group could avoid getting involved.

Although Yumina had been asked by Shiori to help, Yumina couldn't simply abandon Akira for that reason. This was the extent of Yumina's compromise.

However, Reina understood that and smiled brightly.

"Don't joke about it. Even if you say we're in the way, we'll help."

And she changed the settings of her vehicle's autopilot to head towards Shiori's group, while pretending to be dissatisfied with her embarrassed attitude, she held her gun ready.

Yumina chuckled lightly at that.

"Yes. Is Togami thinking the same way? "

"Huh? Well, that's fine."

With such casual words, Togami, who had said he would stay in such a potentially dangerous place himself, made Yumina laugh somewhat amusedly.

“I see. You two get along well.”

“Hey, Yumina? ”

“Just kidding? Togami? ”

“Shall we get started then? ”

Yumina teased Reina's words that sounded like complaints and raised the LEO SSB multi-function gun for taking out big targets.

Togami also smiled wryly as he aimed his gun. Reina also held her gun, trying to hide her embarrassment with a somewhat dissatisfied attitude.

By following the movement of the small missiles continuously fired by Yumina, Akira and the others' approximate positions could be visually confirmed. In addition, Yumina's group had already coordinated the information gathering devices of each member through the comprehensive support system, allowing them to recognize Akira's position beyond the large dome and the positions of the automata he was tracking quite accurately.

From a distance in terms of gun range, and considering the speed of the automata's movement, it wasn't safe to be in a relatively close position where they could fire. Yet, Yumina's group waited on the shaking roof of the vehicle, where their lines of fire would converge.

Then, in Akira's field of vision, Akira jumped out from behind the dome, followed by the automata chasing him.

At that moment, Yumina's group opened fire simultaneously. Countless bullets flew through the air, attacking the automata from the side.



Akira had somehow managed to reach the edge of the ruins, but he was already near his limit.

The intensity of the enemy's attacks was so great that he had hardly any time to take medicines. His body was already in a state where he couldn't move of his own will due to the numerous injuries. He was forcibly moving his body with the humanoid weapon to continue fighting.

Any pain relief effects from the medicines he had taken earlier had long since worn off. Every time he moved his body, he was struck by intense pain all over. Akira clenched his teeth and endured it.

The main reason Akira had been pushed into such a desperate situation was the quality of the automata. While Shiori's group had more in number, the automata attacking Akira were clearly superior in overall quality.

The automata that attacked him were equipped with laser cannons as standard, making them high-end products even among those restocked in the Lida Commercial District Ruin. Naturally, their basic performance was high as well.

Despite facing fewer automata, the relentless pursuit by these high-performance automata was wearing down Akira mentally. The constant, unending pain was also trying to crush his spirit.

And even the humanoid weapon, which would keep moving as long as the wearer had the will, would be useless if that will were broken. If Akira yielded even a bit in this predicament, he would die.

But Akira wouldn't give up. His will, determination, and resolve were his responsibility. He had decided that, and it was why he had overcome numerous deadly situations to this day. There was no choice for him but to keep going.

And Yumina's group further supported that will.

Already targeted by numerous small missiles, the automata now faced additional bullet barrages from the side. Even if they were hit or dodged, the automata would lose their balance accordingly, disrupting their movements and slowing their attacks on Akira.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, Akira swallowed as much of the medicine as he could. The medicine, priced at 5 million Aurums per box, worked at a speed that didn't seem like oral administration, rapidly healing Akira's body. The pain relief effect also worked immediately, freeing Akira from intense pain.

『That was close! But did this do the trick? 』

He hadn't escaped from the deadly situation yet. However, he had significantly improved his chances of survival. Feeling that reality, Akira smiled faintly.

At that moment, a communication came from Reina. Responding through Alpha.

『Akira! Were you in a bit of trouble? I helped you out, you know? 』

『It was really dicey! But I'm saved! Thanks! Keep helping me like that! 』

『...Leave it to me! I'll definitely help you out! 』

In response to Reina's bright and confident voice, Akira gathered his resolve once again.

『Alpha! It's time from here on! Let's do this! 』

『Yes. Let's do as usual.』

In Akira's field of vision, Alpha smiled as always.



Reina, hearing Akira's reply, smiled happily.

“...Leave it to me! I'll definitely help you! ”

Even though she had grown stronger, there was still a significant gap in power between her and Akira. Reina thought she might have gotten a little carried away, but she was further encouraged by the unexpectedly positive response.

That's when she noticed Yumina's demeanor.

“Yumina, what's wrong? ”

“...Hm? Nothing. Yeah, I'll make sure to help properly! ”

Yumina, with a stern yet earnest expression, and a hint of being somewhat troubled, responded to Reina's call with a strong smile.

Just as Reina had grown remarkably stronger based on what she had accumulated so far, Yumina was also trying to bloom her own talent in this situation.

The elements necessary for that foundation were already in place. Taking separate actions from Katsuya and the others, receiving training from Akira, and breaking away from lukewarm training tailored to Katsuya and the others. Hearing about the manipulation of subjective time from Akira, she had also continued that training. All that was lacking was the opportunity.

Seeing Akira emerge from the shadows of the dome and seeing him still fighting numerous automata, Yumina overlaid Katsuya's figure onto him.

The image of Katsuya charging ahead alone, acting as a decoy to draw many monsters to aid his friends.

In fact, Katsuya had a tendency to do such reckless things. Even when fighting the hyper-composite snake, a bounty as huge as a towering skyscraper, Katsuya had almost died acting as a decoy on his own.

And now, even though Akira had been desperately fleeing up to this point, he did not try to join Yumina and the others. If he were to join them in this situation, he would lead these powerful automata to Yumina and the others.

Like a decoy attracting the automata, Akira fighting desperately alone was enough of a scene for Yumina to overlay Katsuya's figure onto him.

“I have to help.” Yumina strongly believed so.

As part of her training in manipulating subjective time, Yumina had seen Katsuya in crisis in the footage many times. Imagining herself being there, imagining not being able to help Katsuya, she felt impatience and fear.

Still, she couldn't save Katsuya in the footage from the past. If she were there, if she had that much strength herself, she could only think so.

“I have to help.” Yumina strongly believed so.

Now, she was here. If she couldn't help even though she was here, it would be no different from watching the footage from the past. There would be no point in her being here.

She wanted to return to Katsuya's side. But it wasn't to be saved by Katsuya or to rely on him. It was to save Katsuya.

If she couldn't help Akira here, even if she returned to Katsuya's side, there would be no way to help Katsuya.

To help. She concentrated on that feeling. To help Akira, to help Katsuya, Yumina showed extreme concentration.

All that was lacking was the opportunity. Yumina had finally obtained that opportunity.

In Yumina's consciousness, time seemed to flow slowly. Although the vehicles on the track were moving at considerable speed, they felt stationary to Yumina. Within this, the bullets fired seemed to hit the swiftly moving automata as if being sucked into them.

Having successfully manipulated subjective time, Yumina began to land hits on the automata one after another. Due to the sudden increase in accuracy from the rapid fire, the momentum of the previously dominant automata drastically declined.

An automaton equipped with a lens-like laser cannon in its palm suddenly appeared to eliminate the threat. However, Yumina reacted promptly and shot out the lens. The automaton, whose own laser cannon was crushed along with its arm, was blown away by the impact of the shot.

Yumina's success was not solely due to her successful manipulation of subjective time but also the synergistic effect of the comprehensive support system.

Until now, despite Yumina becoming significantly stronger through Akira's training, she had still been somewhat at the mercy of the performance of the comprehensive support system. The high-performance equipment provided to her had not been fully utilized.

However, this was rapidly improving now. In the world where time flowed slowly, Yumina was able to keep up with the high-speed, high-precision movements demanded by her equipment.

As a result, Yumina transitioned from being controlled by the high-performance equipment to being the one who utilized the tools conveniently.

This enabled highly advanced combat utilizing the original capabilities of the equipment. The gun's performance was on par with Akira's. The performance of the augmented suit was several levels higher. Combined with support from the comprehensive support system, the effects were dramatic.

Yet, rather than reveling in the success of finally manipulating subjective time, Yumina concentrated on helping Akira and continued firing.



Akira, surprised by the sudden increase in support from Yumina and Reina, smiled despite himself.

『Both Yumina and Reina have suddenly gotten stronger. Well, that's convenient. Alpha! Let's finish this off! 』

『Understood. Let's do this.』

Taking advantage of the opening, Akira quickly swallowed another medicine. He then moved the protective coat, which also served as a makeshift auxiliary arm, to retrieve the magazines stored inside and threw them into the air. At the same time, he ejected magazines from both guns and reloaded by striking the magazines in the air with the guns.

Then, instead of continuing to evade the automata as before, Akira closed the distance between them in one swift movement.

He pressed a large LEO SSB multi-function gun against the nearest automaton, slamming it to the ground, and immediately began firing. The automaton, caught between the ground and the gun, was

unable to evade and was bombarded with a barrage of bullets at close range, resulting in its destruction.

Until now, this had not been possible because doing so would restrain one gun while defeating one automaton, leaving Akira vulnerable to attacks from other automata.

However, now that Yumina and the others were providing significantly stronger support, it was feasible. The automata aiming for Akira were shot by Yumina and the others, their attacks disrupted by the impact of being hit, and their posture greatly disturbed, interfering with their attacks on Akira.

Akira didn't expect this powerful support to last long. Before this support ended, he decided to go on the offensive.

Manipulating subjective time to perceive small missiles raining down at high speed as incredibly slow, he closed the distance, dodged silver blades, light blades, and laser cannons, pressed the LEO SSB multi-function gun against them, fired in succession, and destroyed another automaton.

His body was damaged at the cellular level due to the overload from high-speed movement, but the massive amount of medicine he consumed healed it, only to break again, and then heal again, in a cycle of destruction and regeneration. Ignoring the discomfort, Akira ran, destroying another automaton.

The enemy's offensive weakened as he defeated them, but their fighting spirit remained unchanged. Even when they clashed and stabbed each other, they still tried to kill Akira. Now that Akira had stopped fleeing, if Yumina and the others stopped providing support, he would be killed. Before that happened, to finish off all enemies, Akira exerted all his strength and charged into the thick of battle.

Shooting, defeating, dodging the death line, closing the distance. Dodging, running, pressing the gun to their face, firing, destroying. Finally, Akira made it through this death trap.

At that moment, Yumina's support had already ceased. Yumina had reached her limit after successfully manipulating subjective time for the first time. But she made it in time. Akira aimed both guns at the last automaton.

『This is it, the end! 』

A barrage of bullets was fired from the two LEO SSB multi-function guns, and the automaton that received them head-on at close range was pierced through its sturdy force field armor, blowing it to pieces.





Seeing Akira destroy the last automaton, Reina couldn't help but cheer.

“You did it! Yumina! You did it! ”

As Reina said that and looked at Yumina, her expression of victory suddenly disappeared. Yumina was kneeling in front of her with a very pained expression, spitting out blood.

“Y-Yumina!?”

“I-It's okay. I just pushed myself a bit too hard...”

Yumina managed to reply somehow, then slowly took out a medicine and consumed a large amount. The high-performance medicine she received from Akira immediately began to treat Yumina. Breathing a sigh of relief as she felt its effects, Yumina spoke.

“...As expected of a box worth 5 million Aurums. It really works well.”

“Yumina. Are you okay? ”

“I'm fine. But, I need to rest for a bit...”

Seeing Yumina smile despite her fatigue, Reina felt relieved that there were no serious injuries.

“Right. Then let's take Shiori and Akira and head back soon.”

Just then, a communication came in from Shiori. Shiori and the others had finished defeating the automata and were planning to return in Reina's car.

“Milady, we'll take care of Akira-sama, so please wait there.”

Even though Shiori and the others had confirmed that Akira had finished off the automata, there was always the possibility of something happening. Shiori couldn't send her to Akira's side. Reina understood that.

“Understood. Shiori, thank you. You saved us.”

“Thank you very much.”

Yumina slowly parked the car. All that was left was to regroup and head back. There were no signs of enemies around. Thinking that, she relaxed, but despite swallowing the medicine firmly, fatigue suddenly overwhelmed her. The burden of manipulating subjective time for the first time at the last moment was higher than Yumina had imagined.

(I finally succeeded in manipulating subjective time at this critical moment, but I didn't expect to be this tired. Is Akira doing this so calmly? No wonder he's so strong. It makes sense that he would buy such expensive medicines in such large quantities.)

Not only her brain, which was the key to manipulating subjective time, but also her body was under an extremely high load. If she, who was only shooting from a distance, felt this burden, how much burden did Akira, who was fighting with all his might against that many automata, bear? Thinking about that, Yumina could only be amazed.

Still, Yumina was satisfied that she was able to help Akira. She looked forward to continuing her training to maintain and grow this strength, believing that she could return to Katsuya's side and still be able to help him. While anticipating future developments, she continued to glance at Akira for some reason.

The next moment, Yumina's expression turned to one of shock.

A giant light blade with a blade length of over ten meters suddenly sprouted from the ground near where Akira was, seemingly aiming to slice him to pieces.



Having defeated the last automaton, Akira took a deep breath.

“Finally finished...”

He was so exhausted that he felt like he might collapse on the spot, but thanks to the augmented suit, he managed to avoid collapsing.

Alpha praised Akira's efforts with a smile.

『Well done. Once again, we managed to get through this.』

『Indeed. Once again, we managed to get through this.』

Akira let out a sigh.

『...Sometimes, I wish things would end normally, not with 'we managed to get through this,' but with fighting normally, winning normally, and ending normally.』

『Oh, if that's what you consider normal, Akira, then isn't this just normal? 』

Unable to retort to Alpha's cheerful remark, Akira returned a wry smile.

After receiving a message from Shiori that they were coming to pick him up, Akira waited on the spot.

He could see Shiori and the others in the car in the distance. All that was left was to meet up and head back. Thinking so, Akira relaxed.

But then, suddenly, Akira felt a dreadful premonition.

And as if in response to that, Alpha's expression turned extremely serious.

For reasons unknown, Akira found himself in an extremely precarious situation. Understanding this, Akira did not oppose the movements of the augmented suit controlled by Alpha but instead jumped away from the spot with all his might.

Immediately after, a massive two-bladed light blade wielded from underground cleaved through the spot in a cross shape. Its power was tremendous, and even the slight energy leaked from the high-energy blade, created for the purpose of slashing, blew away a large amount of soil and sand.

Just as Akira barely dodged it by leaping into the air, two automata wielding the light blades emerged from below the ground. Akira recognized them as the maid and butler automata from the ruins of the automata shop. They were the latest models from Sanba Jilbotech, priced at 18 million Chrome each. They possessed performance far beyond the other automata Akira had fought before.

The two automata prepared to wield their light blades again. The blades, generated from the blade generators directly connected to the high-output generators of the machines, had blades with lengths of tens of meters even when slender, and their killing range, including the width and the energy leaked from the blades, reached up to a meter.

“Impossible.” Akira couldn't help but think. It wasn't resignation, but there was a strong persuasiveness in the sight that there was physically nothing he could do.

The light blades swung, and simultaneously, Akira also charged towards the automata. Regardless of the outcome, there was no choice but for Akira, who had abandoned the idea of giving up, to end it without doing anything.

At that moment, a dramatic change occurred in Akira's world.

The world felt remarkably vivid and detailed, as if transitioning from low-resolution images to high-resolution ones. Not just the eyes, but also the ears and the sensations felt on the skin, seemed as if the world itself had been rewritten, abruptly transporting him into a completely different realm, where everything felt distinct.

Within this high-resolution world, Akira barely evaded the opponent's attack by recognizing it faster and more accurately. What was impossible in the blurry world became achievable in this clear world. The shockwave from the blow, emanating from the shining blade, burned the protective coat, scorched the augmented suit, and charred the skin underneath, but Akira managed to dodge the direct hit.

And then, Akira struck the maid automaton with the LEO SSB multi-function gun in his left hand. Pressing the muzzle against the opponent, he fired at maximum firing rate.

Akira had always fired the LEO SSB multi-function gun at maximum firing rate before. However, it was a maximum with restrictions and conditions.

The restrictions were to prevent the gun from breaking due to excessive firing speed and to prevent the energy overflow from the protective coat, which would protect the user if the gun were to break, from becoming lethal to the user.

Akira, under Alpha's control, lifted both restrictions. In exchange for the complete destruction of the gun and Akira's safety, he fired at the true maximum firing rate. With the immense speed emptying the contents of the extended magazine in an instant, a vast amount of bullets was fired at the opponent.

Firing such a rapid succession of shots in close proximity also generated tremendous recoil. The bullets fired collided instantly and continuously with subsequent bullets. The impact was felt by both

the opponent and Akira, continuously stressing both the gun and Akira.

Nevertheless, Akira kept firing. Using the strength of the augmented suit, he forcibly kept the muzzle pressed against the opponent, firing continuously.

Then, the first LEO SSB multi-function gun was severely damaged, exploding and engulfing Akira's left arm. Simultaneously, the generator of the maid automaton was also destroyed. This was due to the excessive allocation of energy to the light blade, which significantly weakened the strength of the force field armor.

The strength of the opponent's force field armor had decreased to the point where Akira had to sacrifice one LEO SSB multi-function gun and his left arm to defeat the maid uniform automata.

However, enemies still remained. A butler uniform automaton swung a light blade. As the light blade swung towards Akira, who was slightly below the automata in the air, it struck the ground, causing a wide area to explode upon impact.

Akira narrowly avoided the light blade. The protective coat was scorched and torn by the aftermath, the augmented suit was damaged to the point where the force field armor couldn't protect underneath anymore. Despite some charring of the flesh beneath the skin, Akira once again pressed the remaining LEO SSB multi-function gun against the opponent.

And he fired in bursts. Again, at the fastest rate possible. Moreover, this LEO SSB multi-function gun was meant for taking down large targets, with tremendous recoil.

Additionally, the opponent tried to escape from the muzzle. Akira wouldn't allow it, kicking off the air to keep pressing the muzzle against the opponent. He continued pushing, slamming the automaton to the ground. He kept shooting while pinning the opponent between the ground and the muzzle.

Still, the butler uniform automaton didn't break. It remained fallen, swinging the light blade.

Already damaged, the output of the light blade had significantly decreased, and being swung from close range made it easier to dodge than when it was swung from a distant position in the air. Akira avoided it.

However, he couldn't completely block the large LEO SSB multi-function gun. Swallowed by the high-energy light blade, the large LEO SSB multi-function gun disappeared in an instant.

Now Akira had lost all his guns. But he still had a weapon. Drawing the old-world blade attached to his augmented suit, Akira thrust it into the automaton with all his might.

He aimed for where he had been shooting just a moment ago. Despite being protected by powerful force field armor, that part was comparatively more vulnerable than others. The blade pierced through the opponent's armor, reaching its internals.

But only the tip of the blade went in. The automaton, valued at 18 million Chrome, was that resilient.

However, Akira wielded his last weapon. Putting forth his remaining strength, he slammed the hilt of the blade down with all his might.

That was the end. With the blade pushed in, piercing the generator, the automaton's power source was destroyed, rendering it motionless.

And then Akira ran out of strength. Losing consciousness, he collapsed on the spot.



Shiori and the others, who were heading towards Akira, were surprised by the sudden battle between Akira and the two automata,

but they immediately moved to assist. If it was a short distance, they could run faster themselves, so they jumped out of the car and hurried to Akira's location.

However, before they could get close enough to assist, Akira had defeated the automata on his own and collapsed. Clearly unconscious and severely injured, they needed to administer first aid immediately.

If they had delayed waiting for Reina, she would have been caught up in the battle with the opponent that had pushed Akira this far. Relieved at the thought, Shiori hurried ahead with Kanae.

And just as Shiori and the others were about to reach Akira, they witnessed something unbelievable. Somehow, there was another maid uniform automaton beside Akira.

There was no way they wouldn't have noticed its presence. Amidst their astonishment, Shiori and the others immediately moved to eliminate the automaton. Closing the distance in an instant, they attacked simultaneously. Both of them maximized the output of their augmented suits and activated the force field armor function to its fullest. Shiori swung her sword, and Kanae threw a punch.

But their attacks were easily blocked. Shiori's sword was caught between the automaton's fingers, and Kanae's punch was deflected with one hand. Moreover, the automaton remains completely composed, not even staggering. Standing as if nothing happened, with a calm expression, it calmly received Shiori and Kanae's full-strength blows without any effort.

The maid uniform automaton smiled.

“Would you like to stop? ”

And as if to indicate that it meant no harm, it released Shiori's sword and Kanae's fist.

However, Shiori and the others continued to attack. Shiori quickly sheathed her sword and poured all her energy into the blade, sacrificing its integrity to maximize its power, while Kanae grabbed the lower part of the automaton with all her strength to prevent it from avoiding Shiori's finishing blow.

And Shiori swung the glowing blade with all her might.

But it was futile. Holding onto the hilt of the now-bladeless sword, Shiori was dumbfounded by what had just happened. The automaton, still in a posture as if it had swatted away the sword with its hand, stood smiling. Not a scratch on it.

Instinctively, Shiori distanced herself. Alongside Kanae, she prepared for a fight without weapons, wearing a very grim expression.

Even Kanae, in this situation, couldn't afford to smile. The overwhelming difference in strength erased any carelessness, and she wore the same grim expression as Shiori.

To Shiori and the others, the automaton smiled again.

“Do not worry. We have no intention of engaging in combat.”

Still, they held the power of life and death. Until they could think of something to change this situation, they engaged in conversation with the one who seemed capable of conversing, unlike the other automata. Kanae joked lightly.

“If you're not going to fight, could you at least introduce yourself? ”

The automaton exaggeratedly bowed.

“My name is Olivia. I am a general-purpose personality belonging to Lion Steel Corporation. If there is any opportunity, please favor our company.”

The automaton that suddenly appeared in front of Shiori and the others was Olivia, activated by Tiol. And upon hearing Olivia's self-introduction, Shiori and the others couldn't conceal their agitation.

Olivia took out a white card in front of Shiori and flicked it lightly with her finger before handing it to Shiori.



“This is...”

“It's not for you. Please give it to him when he wakes up. Well then, if you'll excuse me.”

“W-Wait...! ”

Despite Shiori's attempt to stop her, Olivia disappeared abruptly. Shiori looked around frantically, but she was nowhere to be found.

Kanae let out a wry smile and spoke in a slightly dry voice.

“Big sis... Olivia-san, who was with us just now, turned into a hologram halfway through. And she had a presence until just before she disappeared. What's going on? ”

The crisis was averted. Olivia was gone. However, Shiori and the others remained perplexed and confused.

Then communication came in from Reina.

“Shiori! Kanae! What's going on over there!? Is Akira okay!? ”

Shiori, coming back to her senses, hastily checked on Akira's condition.

“He's severely injured but alive. We'll administer first aid immediately. It should be enough to keep him alive.”

“Once we've given him first aid, we'll bring Akira back to you. Milady, please remain vigilant until then. We're busy here, so we'll explain everything later.”

“Understood.”

Shiori and the others administered first aid to Akira. He was in bad shape, but as long as he was alive, he wouldn't be beyond help at this point.

“So, big sis, what are we going to do with that? ”

“...Let me think about it.”

Shiori wore a troubled expression as she pondered the handling of the white card.

Afterwards, as they prepared to return to Reina with Akira, they noticed multiple responses approaching from outside the ruins. The reinforcements, who had initially retreated from the Lida Commercial District Ruin but regrouped and returned after confirming Akira's battle from afar, had arrived. With the arrival of a large-scale force at the ruins, the situation there was temporarily stabilized. Akira and the others' hunter activities in the Lida Commercial District Ruin had come to a close.

Chapter 167: Trial Obstacles

Akira wakes up in the hospital in the city of Kugamayama. The spacious private room with well-equipped medical facilities indicated that Akira was being treated as a VIP. Sitting up halfway in bed, Akira looks around the hospital room and lets out a sigh.

“Back to the hospital again...”

『Well, at least you're safe.』

Alpha said with a smile. Akira responds with a light smile.

『That's true. I'm alive, so I guess it's fine. Alpha, how long has it been since then? 』

『A few days. You should ask someone who just arrived for the exact number of days. If you ask me, it'll turn into a conversation about how you found that out.』

『Got it. ...So, there was something weird about the world before I passed out. Alpha, you did something, right? What did you do? 』

『To put it simply, I improved the resolution of your conscious reality with my support.』

Alpha continues to explain, noticing Akira's expression of not understanding what was being said.

Basically, the reality humans perceive is a construct of consciousness based on input information received by the brain from sensory organs.

And inevitably, there are discrepancies between actual reality and conscious reality.

Firstly, there are limitations as sensory organs. If your eyesight worsens, your vision becomes blurred; if your hearing deteriorates, sounds become difficult to perceive. Just as when the input information to the brain is coarse, the conscious reality output is also blurry and unclear.

Also, the processing time to generate conscious reality in the brain based on information obtained from sensory organs results in a constant delay of conscious reality compared to actual reality.

And if, in pursuit of accuracy, you can only perceive a very delayed past state, then there will be significant hindrances in recognizing the present. Therefore, to maintain the immediacy necessary for survival, the brain generates reality by omitting various processes. In some cases, it substitutes processing with assumptions or conjectures to produce vague but plausible results.

Due to these reasons, Akira's perceived reality was significantly delayed and of notably low accuracy compared to actual reality.

But then Alpha intervened. By utilizing an advanced communication bandwidth specialized in connection with Alpha as Akira's old-world domain connector, Alpha intruded into Akira's input-output processing of reality information.

In addition to Akira's own five senses, information obtained from devices such as information gathering device was also used as input information. Alpha then took over the process of generating Akira's conscious reality, rather than Akira himself, and transmitted the output result to Akira.

As a result, Akira was able to perceive a reality that was extremely accurate and with minimal delay, something that his own brain could never achieve. The sharpness of perception towards a world that seemed like a different realm was the reason for this.

The reason why Akira was able to defeat the highly powerful two automata also lies here. Akira was always several moves behind in

perceiving the world, and even the accuracy of the reality he perceived was low. Thus, facing automata that recognized the world almost without delay with their advanced computational capabilities, Akira had no chance of winning.

However, with Alpha's support, Akira was able, albeit temporarily, to greatly reduce the error between conscious reality and actual reality. This allowed him to perceive a reality almost on par with the automata, barely grasp a chance of victory, and achieve a close victory.

Akira nods in understanding after hearing these explanations from Alpha. While he didn't fully grasp the content of the explanation, he was satisfied to the extent of understanding that it was something like that.

『 You were doing something amazing, huh. Hmm. So, is it like training to manipulate subjective time? Will I eventually be able to do it on my own? 』

Alpha shakes her head.

『 Unfortunately, that's impossible. If you were to do the same thing without my support, your brain would be overloaded and you would suffer brain death. 』

『 I see... 』

『 Even with my support, it's not something to be taken lightly. Part of the reason you ended up in the hospital was not only because of the injuries to your body but also because the strain on your brain was too great, leading to fainting. It was a situation where it couldn't be helped, but I pushed you quite hard. 』

Akira is surprised. Alpha, who has laughed at him and made him do reckless things many times before, said this seriously. He thought about how dangerous it must have been and grimaced.

Then Alpha returns her expression to a smile.

『Well, while the same thing may be impossible, with training, you might be able to achieve something similar. Let's do our best.』

『R-right. Understood.』

If Alpha says so, then it will probably be achievable. If that's the case, it's definitely better to be able to do it. While thinking so, Akira's smile in response had become somewhat strained.



A little while after Akira woke up, Shiori was the first to enter Akira's hospital room.

“Akira-sama. How are you feeling? ”

“Ah, I'm fine now. You probably brought me here, right? Thank you.”

“No, I'm just glad you're safe... However, I'm sorry to bother you immediately upon waking up, but there are a few things I'd like to discuss, including what happened afterwards.”

With that preamble, Shiori began to talk, starting with what happened after Akira lost consciousness.

It had been five days since Akira and the others left the Lida Commercial District Ruin. The destroyed automata were collected by Kurosawa and the others and were no longer present at the ruins. Complex negotiations regarding their ownership were pending.

Such negotiations would usually start immediately, but they were postponed due to Akira, the party concerned, being unconscious.

After completing that explanation, Shiori's expression showed a slight hint of tension. Then she showed Akira a white card.

“Akira-sama. Do you know what this is? ”

“...? No, I don't.”

“...I see. This is one of the relics we obtained at the ruins.”

Upon hearing that, Akira recalled the time when he and Shiori were collecting relics together. However, he had no memory of finding that white card.

“Did something like that happen? Well, never mind. So? ”

“Due to the conditions of the Hunter Rank adjustment request, Akira-sama is required to sell all the relics acquired to the city. Therefore, Akira-sama and I need to distribute the relics first. Is that acceptable? ”

“Yeah.”

“So, about this card, we would like you to transfer it to us.”

Akira looked puzzled.

“...Um, can I ask for the reason? We're not deciding right now which relics we'll each take from what we've gathered, right? Why just this card? ”

“This card is difficult to handle. Even if an ordinary hunter were to take it to a common pawn shop, it would be treated as just an unknown card and wouldn't fetch any price. Even if Akira-sama were to keep it without selling, unless you have a hobby of collecting such items, it would be worthless to you.”

Akira agreed with that explanation. It looked like an ordinary white card and didn't seem valuable like other relics. And Akira didn't have a hobby of collecting such items.

“However, for certain individuals, it holds significant value. If things go well, there's potential for high profits. And we have a plan for it. ... Though, well, there's no guarantee it'll work.”

Saying that, Shiori let out a small sigh.

“Of course, we don't expect Akira-sama to simply hand it over after hearing this. But this card is a bit tricky to handle, and we can't simply determine its value in Aurum conversion. So, we were wondering if you could consider transferring it to us. And if we manage to profit from it, we would provide suitable compensation to Akira-sama. This wouldn't violate the contract with the city. Since it's a relic distributed to us, not one distributed to Akira-sama. What do you think? ”

After hearing this proposal, Akira thought it was a good deal. But years of experience urged caution, reminding Akira to be skeptical. With a slightly hesitant tone, Akira spoke up.

“Um, I know it might sound incredibly rude, but you're not trying to deceive me, right? ”

“It depends on interpretation. If you're asking whether we're taking advantage of your ignorance, I can't completely deny it. But just because you're unaware of the means to profit from this card doesn't mean we're obligated to provide you with all the details. ...Well, at least I don't think so.”

“Well, I guess so.”

At this point, Alpha interjected.

『 Akira. I don't know what you're suspicious about, but why not hand it over? Even if she had her own intentions, having that card in your possession serves no purpose. And by not just keeping it for yourself, she's being fair. Plus, she's saying she'll compensate you if it works out, right? 』

『That makes sense.』

With Alpha's words and the thought that if Alpha said it, it must be okay, Akira stopped worrying about it further.

“Got it. You can do as you like with this card.”

“Thank you, Akira-sama.”

Shiori bowed politely as she accepted the card from Akira.

“Then, Akira-sama. Since you have other matters to attend to, I shall take my leave.”

“Huh? What about the distribution of the relics? ”

“We'll discuss that with the next person you speak to. It might become redundant depending on the circumstances. Goodbye then.”

Shiori bowed again and left politely. In her place, Kibayashi entered.

“Hey, Akira! Finally awake, huh? You really went all out again! ”

Seeing Kibayashi in high spirits, Akira grimaced as if annoyed.

After leaving the hospital room, Shiori met up with Kanae who was waiting outside. Together, they returned to Reina's place.

On the way back, Kanae, after hearing from Shiori, wore an unusually stern expression.

“Big sis, you're dipping your toes into scam territory, you know? Is that really okay? If the young lady finds out, it'll be trouble, you know? ”

“I know. If that happens... Well, at worst, I'll just be cut off by Milady.”

“...Is that so. Well, if you're aware and doing it willingly, then it's fine.”

Being cut off by Reina. Kanae understood just how significant that would be for Shiori. And if Shiori was doing it with that level of resolve, Kanae couldn't interfere.



Upon receiving news that Akira had awakened, Kibayashi, who had come to visit, headed straight for Akira's room.

However, there was someone else ahead of him, so he had to wait. Wondering if he had been standing in front of the hospital room all this time, he waited for a while. Then, he entered the room after Shiori.

Ignoring Akira's displeased expression as he noticed him, Kibayashi greeted him cheerfully.

“Hey, Akira! Finally awake, huh? You really went all out again! ”

“Kibayashi... What do you want? ”

“I came to pay you a visit, but you're not very welcoming, huh? Well, as long as you're looking lively, I'm relieved. Anyway, let me give you this first.”

Akira sighed as he looked at the medical bill handed to him by Kibayashi.

“This time it's 70 million, huh...”

The cost when Akira had received similar treatment before was 60 million Aurum. At that time, Akira had panicked at the excess

amount.

Despite being billed an amount exceeding that, Akira today merely sighed. It was also a sign of Akira's growth.

Seeing Akira like that, Kibayashi chuckled.

“Seems like you were badly injured again this time. Can't be helped. You've been pushing yourself recklessly since the last hospitalization. Must have accumulated quite a bit of strain on your body. Think of it as the maintenance cost for a hunter who earns hundred millions. Just keep that in mind.”

Akira didn't really have any complaints about the medical expenses. Shizuka had also advised him to ensure his physical and mental well-being. He couldn't fight properly with a body in poor condition. As long as he could afford it, it was necessary expenditure.

“So, did you come all this way just to hand me the bill? ”

“Nah, I've got something else to discuss. By the way, Akira, how much do you understand about your current situation? ”

“I've heard about it to some extent.”

“I see. Well, let me explain it from a different perspective.”

Saying that, Kibayashi began to explain Akira's current situation from a viewpoint different from Shiori's.

Akira had lost all three expensive LEO SSB multi-function guns, his protective coat was in tatters, and his augmented suit was so severely damaged that it was unusable. His expensive bike was also heavily damaged. In other words, Akira had completely lost his main armament.

In addition, he had consumed a large amount of ammunition owned by the city. Having used it, he would have to pay for it, at the pre-

discounted price he had bought it for when he was at a lower Hunter Rank.

In addition to the cost of purchasing a new set of equipment, there were significant expenses for ammunition and medical treatment. Akira needed a lot of money.

Akira, realizing this as Kibayashi pointed it out, grabbed his head. He wore a slightly stern expression as he considered whether he could manage somehow with the payment for the relics he had given to Sheryl.

Kibayashi continued talking while watching Akira's condition, thinking it was as expected.

“Akira. Negotiations regarding the ownership of the automata you defeated were postponed until you, the primary stakeholder, woke up. Now that you're awake, they'll likely proceed tomorrow. You'll be required to attend, and without a doubt, it will be incredibly complicated. Let me explain the reasons,” he said, maintaining his composure.

Even though they were destroyed, automata from the old-world held significant value. With sufficient technical expertise, they could be repaired. Even if that level of technology wasn't available, analyzing old-world technology could be immensely helpful. Some undamaged parts could be incorporated into prosthetics for use. While their value decreased significantly without being intact, they were still valuable artifacts.

Naturally, negotiations over ownership would be fierce. Currently, ownership was in a very complicated state.

If automata were considered artifacts, then the discoverers, like Kurosawa's group, and their commissioning party, Yuzumo Industry, would likely have ownership rights. However, in that case, the artifact, which was inadequately managed, had attacked other hunters, risking substantial compensation claims.

If automata were considered monsters upon unauthorized activation, then ownership would belong to whoever defeated them. But it's difficult to assert ownership over abandoned items after destruction. While Kurosawa's group retreated once, Akira's group remained.

However, Akira's group also didn't bother to recover the automata after their destruction. Therefore, it could be argued that those who picked them up first had priority. However, Akira was in the midst of a Hunter Rank adjustment request backed by Yashima Heavy Iron and Yoshioka Heavy Industry. Depriving such hunters of their achievements could lead to corporate conflicts.

With all this in mind, negotiations over the ownership of the automata were conducted by numerous participants considering their own interests, and Akira was made to participate as a party to the negotiations, as Kibayashi explained to him cheerfully.

Upon hearing this, Akira made a very displeased face. Kibayashi laughed at his expected reaction.

“Well, even if you participate in those negotiations, you'll just be manipulated and treated favorably with smooth words. So, how about it? Let me be your proxy. With this, you can escape from trouble, and with my skills, you can achieve as much as possible. What do you say? ”

While Akira thought it was a very grateful offer, he showed caution on his face. That was because that's how things were between him and Kibayashi. However, it was also true that he felt an irresistible charm that he couldn't refuse. He asked with a slightly stern expression.

“So, what are the conditions? ”

“Oh, it's between you and me. It's not a big deal. Use all the money you get from this job, without leaving a single Aurum, for the cost of equipment and ammunition. That's all.”

Upon hearing the conditions that Kibayashi gleefully mentioned, Akira asked back with a puzzled expression.

“...Is that all? ”

Upon hearing this response, Kibayashi couldn't help but burst into laughter.

“Yes! That's all! That's all that's needed! Exactly! You're that kind of guy, aren't you! ”

Many would dislike being told how to spend the money they earned at the risk of their lives. Moreover, Hunters typically earned money in dangerous wastelands for the sake of a safe and affluent life elsewhere. If forced to allocate all the money for wasteland activity expenses, it wouldn't be surprising for them to feel angry.

Akira easily accepted both conditions, knowing fully well the importance of being resourceful in the wasteland. Kibayashi was very satisfied with Akira's wasteland-oriented sensibility.

However, Akira had no reason to refuse. He absolutely needed the money to purchase a new set of equipment. Furthermore, Kibayashi's proposal implied that if he could provide Akira with more powerful equipment, he would fight more spectacularly. As long as there were no other unsettling reasons, there was no problem.

“Well, if that's okay, I'll leave it to you.”

“Got it. Leave it to me.”

With Akira and Kibayashi's interests aligning, Kibayashi became Akira's representative for the negotiations.

“Oh, right. Akira. Your Hunter Rank adjustment request is over now. The final reward isn't determined yet because of this negotiation, but do you have any requests? If so, let's adjust it together? ”

“If possible, I'd like to get a discount on anti-force field ammo. I won't ask you to raise my Hunter Rank to 50, but if I reach Hunter Rank 50, can't I buy anti-force field ammo for 500 Aurum per round? Can't you assist with that? ”

Akira desperately wanted anti-force field ammo at a low price, thinking about how much easier the battle at the Lida Commercial District Ruin would have been if he had had an abundance of them.

“Anti-force field ammo, huh... Got it. I'll try to do something about it. Well then, Akira. I'll be going now. I need to prepare for the negotiations. Expect me to do well. See you.”

With that, Kibayashi left Akira's hospital room.

Even though he had only spoken with two people, Akira felt surprisingly exhausted and lay back on the bed again.



Togami had been summoned by Shikarabe and had come to Kugama building. When he entered the restaurant on the first floor, Shikarabe waved lightly at him.

Togami, who sat across from Shikarabe, placed a bundle of one million Aurum on the table. Shikarabe grabbed it and stashed it away.

Togami smirked confidently.

“I've delivered 30 million Aurum. You received it, indeed.”

“Certainly, I received it.”

Shikarabe also smiled back somewhat cheerfully.

On the day Togami requested training from Shikarabe, when he placed the 30 million Aurum payment on the table, only 1 million

Aurum was taken out, and he was told that accepting such a large sum for his training would be fraud. As a result, 29 million Aurum was returned, reflecting Togami's perceived lack of worth, which he paid off today, right here and now.

This was just a milestone. Nevertheless, Togami couldn't help but feel a satisfying sense of accomplishment.

Shikarabe stood up.

“Shall we start the final training right away? Whether today becomes the final day or it continues for several months is up to you.”

Togami also stood up.

“Then, today will be the final day.”

“Good determination. As long as it's not just words. Follow me.”

After that, guided by Shikarabe, Togami went up inside Kugama building. He had expected to be taken to the wasteland and tested against powerful monsters for his final exam, so he began to look puzzled.

“Hey, where are we going? ”

“Just shut up and follow. If you're going to be scared, now's not the time to show it.”

Being told that, Togami had no choice but to follow silently. They continued on inside the building.

They arrived at a conference room in the building. Other attendees were already gathered around the circular table, and Togami was seated in an empty seat without understanding what was going on.

Reina, who was seated next to him, gave Togami a stiff smile.

“So, Togami, you're here too...”

Seeing Reina's expression, Togami began to feel uneasy.

“Reina. What's going on here? ”

“Haven't you heard? This is a negotiation to determine the ownership of the automata. It's starting soon.”

“...Huh? ”

Shiori, who was standing behind Togami, explained to him.

“Milady agreed to handle various negotiations as part of her actions accompanying Akira-sama in the search for the automata. It's starting now.”

Shikarabe, standing behind Togami, further explained to him.

“You're going to do it now, too. The ability to handle such negotiations is important for a Hunter.”

Many who found dealing with such negotiations troublesome and passed the handling to the administrative faction were factors in the rise of the administrative faction in Drankam. Shikarabe thought so but remained silent.

Togami looked around at the others at the table. They weren't Hunters, but they had an air of significance about them. It was easy to tell that they were seasoned individuals in such negotiation settings.

“Come to think of it, aren't Akira and Yumina here? ”

If he and Reina are here, it wouldn't be surprising for Akira and Yumina to be here too. Kibayashi, seated in the adjacent seat on the opposite side, responded to that thought.

“Neither of them is here. Yumina is just Akira's companion, so she wasn't invited in the first place. Akira isn't here because I've appointed myself as his negotiation proxy.”

Upon hearing this, both Reina and Togami couldn't help but think it was unfair.

Yuzumo Industry' negotiator declares.

“It's time. Let's begin.”

“Milady, best of luck.”

“Togami, give it your all.”

Thrown into what could be considered a death ground, Togami and Reina, amidst negotiations involving corporations, resisted with all their might.

And were utterly crushed.



In a room within the abandoned building that surrounds the management section of the Tsubaki area within Kuzusuhara District Ruin, a maid-dressed automaton stood. It was Olivia.

Tsubaki was also there, not as a hologram but in physical form.

“Does your visit mean you'll accept my request? ”

“I'm sorry, but as a company, we would like to hear the details from Tsubaki-sama before considering your request.”

“But haven't we already discussed that? ”

In reality, Olivia had already heard the details from Tsubaki via the augmented reality relay by Tiol at the Lida Commercial District Ruin. However, Olivia shook her head nonetheless.

“I apologize. It's true that the person who was there was also Tsubaki-sama, but with a personality that is cut off from authority and used for short-term actions, there is a limit to how she can be used as a messenger to bring me to this place.”

“I see.”

There was no point in discussing a deal with a mere image lacking of any authority. Tsubaki understood Olivia's point.

“By the way, Tsubaki-sama, why did you go through such a convoluted scheme? ”

Tsubaki had Olivia stored within the management section, transported her to the Lida Commercial District Ruin, activated her, and then had her brought here. Tsubaki had done something seemingly pointless with Olivia.

“It's our situation. I cannot elaborate. Think of it as a flexible response to prevent information leaks. Thanks to that, you have also been freed from storage. Isn't that good enough? ”

Tsubaki's flexible judgment had halted the replenishment of automata to the Lida Commercial District Ruin. Replenishing them while the area was in that state would only result in theft. It was pointless. Tsubaki had, in a way, halted it with her own arbitrary judgment.

And she had also stopped halting it based on her flexible judgment. She had used Olivia to send her to the Lida Commercial District Ruin.

As a result, on the site of the stores listed in the old-world, the anticipated arrival, which had been indefinitely postponed, was

changed. The information about automata being replenished in the ruins was something obtained by those who could gather such information from the old-world.

The automata had been set to activate themselves by Tsubaki's design. It was better than being stolen while dormant. It was just that level of consideration.

Olivia found it somewhat surprising. The governing personality was fundamentally inflexible and lacked adaptability, which was something beyond Olivia's knowledge.

And she looked down at the floor.

“Was the handling of him also due to your flexible judgment? ”

There lay an unconscious Tiol. Olivia had brought him here.

Tiol had been saved from being killed by Akira by the intervention of automata who had received a support request. Then, two automata made by Sanyo Gilbatic had carried him outside the ruins.

However, due to unclear instructions, Tiol had been taken in the opposite direction of Akira and left there. The delay in the automata made by Sanyo Gilbatic attacking Akira was due to that distance.

Olivia, who had been in a bystander position throughout the sequence of events, had first gone to Akira's location with the thought of lightly greeting whoever had recently connected to their company's terminal.

However, Akira was unconscious and wouldn't wake up anytime soon. So she just left after handing over a white card.

The reason Olivia then went to Tiol's location was because of Tsubaki's matter. And based on that judgment, she decided to bring the unconscious Tiol to Tsubaki.

Olivia returned her gaze from Tiol on the floor to Tsubaki. There was a slight hint of reproach in her gaze.

“He interfered with me. I handled it once I was activated, but the other company's units, activated through emergency procedures, seemed to have been significantly affected. I doubt you have the authority to do that much.”

“That was his doing, not mine. Well, I'll accept the blame.”

There were irregularities in the support request issued by Tiol. And it was something technically feasible for Tsubaki but beyond her authority.

However, as Tiol was losing his sanity and the boundary with the system was becoming blurred, he had carried out actions beyond his authority, ignoring those limitations.

As a result, he had inadvertently caused significant disruptions to the automata, some of which had become emotionless and capable only of monotonous movements.

It was evidence of Tiol becoming such a dangerous entity. But with her newfound flexibility, Tsubaki saw it as obtaining a pawn that could partially bypass the constraints imposed on her and even raised her strategic evaluation of Tiol.

“Let me explain the request again.”

“Please do.”

While Tiol, still conscious but without awareness, was left aside, the conversation between Tsubaki and Olivia continued.



In a blank space, Alpha wore a stern and cold expression.

“Can't she handle it over there? ”

The girl questioned also had a stern and cold expression.

“It's difficult. My individual here can't be directly influenced like your individual there. There are limits to my influence.”

“But isn't the risk of unforeseen circumstances higher over there? She's also trying to return under your individual's control. There should be an opportunity.”

“True. Let's wait for an opportunity. But I need your cooperation as well. Unlike me, you have the ability for direct influence. I can't rely solely on myself.”

“I understand. But to ensure that my individual here doesn't harbor negative feelings towards me, I can't do anything obvious. Understand that.”

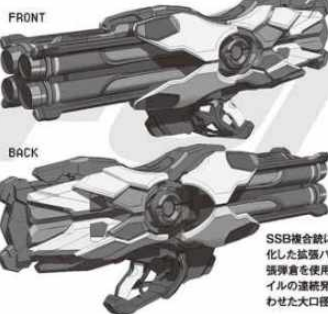
“Understood.”

After discussing the handling of obstacles in their experiments, Alpha and the girl both vanished. Only the blank space remained. And even that soon disappeared.

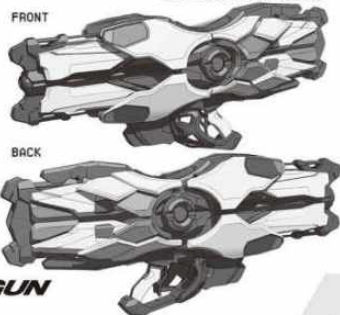
The experiments continue. Onward, to eliminate those obstacles.

TOSON社製の大型複合銃であるSSB複合銃の通常版。アキラが威力特化のカスタマイズにした。基本的に使用に補助アームを必要とする大物銃し用に比べれば小型であり、室内でも十分に使用できる。しかしその威力は安価な対物銃を軽く超えており、そこらの車両やモンスターなど脅威にする。

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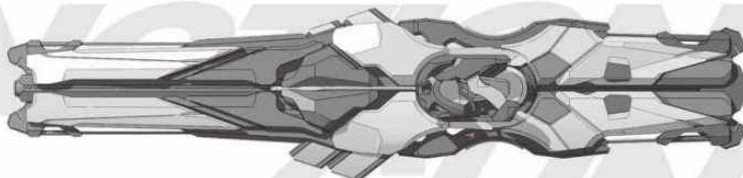
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【スケール比較】

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