
リビルドワールド
Rebuild World IX
下 不可能な攻防
著 ナフセ
イラストレーション 吟
世界観イラスト わいっしゅ
メカニックデザイン cell


リビルドワールド
IX
Rebuild World
下 不可能な攻防
Author ナフセ
Illustration 吟
Illustration of the world わいっしゅ
Mechanic design cell
The advanced civilization that once dominated
the world has crumbled away, and a long time has passed.
People rallied the fragments of wisdom and glory scattered
all over the world and spent a long time rebuilding human society.


〈どっちだ……!? 分からない!〉
左と右のどちらかが偽物。それはアキラにも分かる。
問題は、どちらが偽物なのか分からないこと。
立体映像なら無いはずの気配を、
アキラは両方のオリビアから感じていた。
Rebuild World RVII

>Episode 009

下 不可能な攻防

Character



>ローレンス LAWRENCE

現代のリオンズテイル社の名目上のトップ。



>アリス ALICE

現代のリオンズテイル社の事実上のトップ。

1

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『ログアウトしますか？』

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

リビルドワールドIX

Rebuild World

The advanced civilization that once dominated
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下 不可能な攻防

Author ナフセ　Illustration 吟
Illustration of the world わいっしゅ　Mechanic design cell

Contents

> 第296話　不可能な攻防
> 第297話　有線の旧領域接続者
> 第298話　巨人と超人
> 第299話　制御室の攻防
> 第300話　主と従者
> 第301話　順当な決着
> 第302話　大失態
> 第303話　大怪獣
> 第304話　死地という鍛錬
> 第305話　再びの交渉
> 第306話　強敵と強敵
> 第307話　禁忌
> 第308話　次の何か
> 閑話 色褪せた夢

Contents

Chapter 296: An Impossible Battle

Chapter 297: The Wired Old Domain User

Chapter 298: The Giant and the Superhuman

Chapter 299: Battle for the Control Room

Chapter 300: Master and Servant

Chapter 301: The Expected Outcome

Chapter 302: A Grave Blunder

Chapter 303: The Colossal Kaiju

Chapter 304: Training on the Brink of Death

Chapter 305: Renewed Negotiations

Chapter 306: Formidable Foe Against Formidable Foe

Chapter 307: Taboo

Chapter 308: Something Next

Interlude: A Faded Dream



01

アキラ

スラム街出身の、クガマヤマ都市のハンター。



02

アルファ

アキラを対象にして試行を続けている存在。現在はアキラとの通信が切れており、消息不明。

03

エイリアス

以前はカツヤを対象にして試行を続けていた存在。キューブの力で実体化している。



04

シロウ

坂下重工工作員。ハルカを助ける為に、アキラに協力する。



05

ハルカ

「ハルカ・エンチェイント」。ミハゾノ街の管理人格である7人の「ハルカ」の一人。



06

オリビア

旧世界のリオンズテイル社の自動人形。ローレンスとの契約でアキラを護衛する。



07

レイナ

ローレンスの孫。ローレンスの指示でアキラに協力している。



08

シオリ

レイナに心酔する忠義のメイド。強化ブレードを用いた抜刀術を得意とする。



09

カナエ

レイナの世話役兼護衛。拳で敵を殴りつける戦闘に特化したメイド。



10

エレナ

クガマヤマ都市のハンター。ブルージャケットをキャロル達に貸して都市に帰還。



11

サラ

エレナの相棒。エレナが情報収集や指揮を担当し、サラが火力を担当する。



12

キャロル

アキラの頼みでシロウ達に協力。ミハゾノ街の市民権が付与されている。



13

クロエ

ローレンスの孫。リオンズテイル社のトップになる為に画策している。



14

ローレンス

現代のリオンズテイル社の名目上のトップ。元ハンター。



15

アリス

現代のリオンズテイル社の事実上のトップ。

18


キバヤシ

ヒカルの上司。無理無茶無謀を好む悪評高いエージェント。

17


ネリア

ヤナギサワの指示でアキラ達に協力している。

16


ヤナギサワ

クガマヤマ都市の幹部。シロウとある裏取引をしている。

21


ハーマーズ

坂下重工の社員でシロウの護衛を任されている。超人。

20


スガドメ

坂下重工の重役。ハーマーズに指示してシロウの護衛をさせている。

19


ヒカル

クガマヤマ都市の職員。アキラの担当。

24


マルオ

対再構築機関（アンチリビルド）の者で、現地を調査中。

23


メルシア

ドラゴンリバーの副隊長で、タツカワの恋人。

22


タツカワ

ドラゴンリバーの隊長で、メルシアの恋人。

27

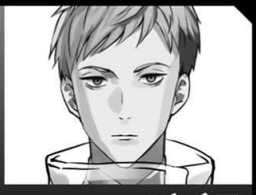

バルバ

ミハゾノ街の管理人格である7人の「ハルカ」の一人。成人男性の人格。

26


オーティブ

ミハゾノ街の管理人格である7人の「ハルカ」の一人。壮年男性の人格。

25


ベイス

「ハルカ・ベイス」。ミハゾノ街の管理人格である7人の「ハルカ」の一人でリーダー格。

30


テメタ

ミハゾノ街の管理人格である7人の「ハルカ」の一人。少年の人格。

29

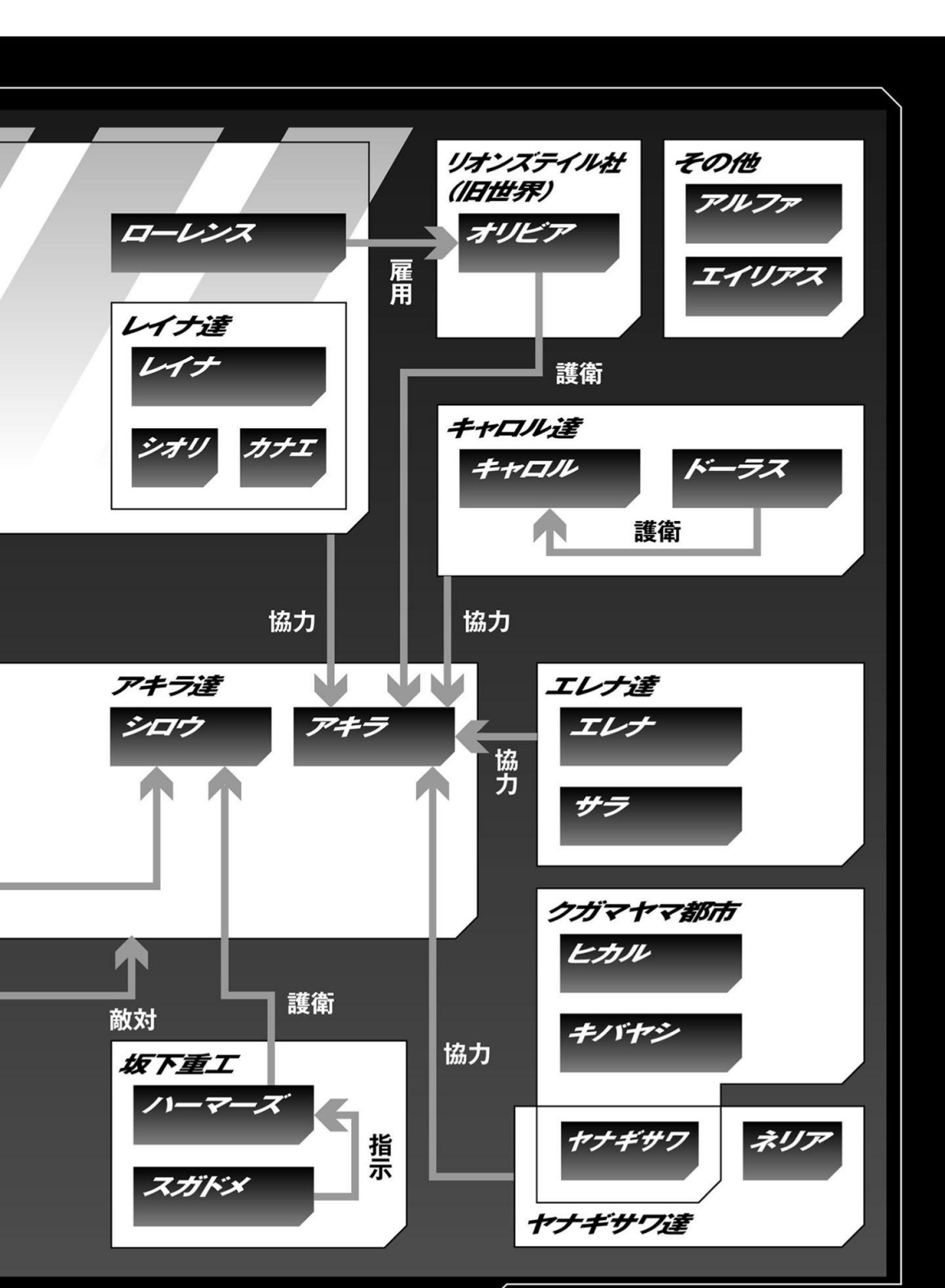

ミロロ

ミハゾノ街の管理人格である7人の「ハルカ」の一人。少女の人格。

28


ララントラ

ミハゾノ街の管理人格である7人の「ハルカ」の一人。成人女性の人格。


ローレンス
雇用
リオンズテイル社
(旧世界)
オリビア
その他
アルファ
エイリアス
レイナ達
レイナ
シオリ
カナエ
護衛
キャロル達
キャロル
ドーラス
護衛
協力
協力
アキラ達
シロウ
アキラ
協力
エレナ達
エレナ
サラ
クガマヤマ都市
ヒカル
キバヤシ
敵対
護衛
協力
坂下重工
ハーマーズ
スガドメ
指示
ヤナギサワ
ネリア
ヤナギサワ達

現状の相関図


リオンズテイル社(現代)
アリス
クロエ達
クロエ
ラティス
パメラ
資金提供
積極的な護衛
護衛を依頼
ミハゾノ街
静観
オーティブ
ベイス
ハルカ
静観
助けたい
ベイス達
バルバ
ラランドラ
裏切り者
ミロロ
テメタ
裏切り
対再構築機関(アンチリビルド)
マルオ
ドラゴンリバー
メルシア
タツカワ
調査

Chapter 296: An Impossible Battle

In the rebuilt Mihazono Town, one unexpected event followed another. It was a chain of developments that no one—not Akira, not Shirou, not Haruka, not anyone—could have foreseen in the slightest.

The truth about Haruka, revealed by Ortive when she appeared before Akira's group, shook Shirou to his core and crushed Haruka. That Shirou and Haruka's meeting had been no coincidence. That Haruka had been an operative working inside Beis's organization. The one who learned the truth and the one whose truth was exposed were both on the verge of falling to their knees before that reality.

But Akira's words brought Shirou back first. "What, that's all?" Those words alone.

Even if Haruka and Shirou's meeting had been arranged, it didn't change the fact that Haruka had betrayed Beis and the others for Shirou's sake, even to the point of being ready to die. That was what Akira said.

Hearing Akira, and seeing Haruka grieve that he had learned the truth, Shirou realized that her feelings for him were real too. And he told her that his own feelings for her had not changed.

That brought Haruka's spirit back as well. Even knowing the truth, Shirou still thought of her as his friend, and that made her glad.

Yet the surprises did not end there. Ortive went on to share her own thinking: that even Mihazono Town coming under Sakashita Heavy Industries' control was worth considering. It was a suggestion that astonished even Hammers, who was traveling with Akira's group.

And what Chloe, who had accompanied Ortive, revealed about the relationship between Beis's group and the modern-day Lion's Tail was enough to leave Reina and the others stunned.

The unexpected kept coming. Next, she came to Akira. She, a reproduced persona of Yumina.

She told him she had been created by Beis. That she was, in other words, a fake. And that she had come to kill him anyway.

Kill Akira, and Katsuya would be brought back to life. That was what Beis had told her, and so she had come.

I want to save Katsuya. Even if this feeling is nothing but a reproduction of Yumina's. With those words, she sought a fight with Akira.

Akira fought her alone. And he killed her.

Never knowing that being killed by him had been her true wish.

I'm only a fake. But even so, at least my ending can be the same as the real one's. That was her wish, and it was granted.

Then, at the very last, she asked Akira for one thing: to make sure no one like her was ever born again.

Akira accepted her request.

To fulfill it, Haruka had to become Mihazono Town's new administrative persona. Beis held the data that made her, and only the town's administrative persona could touch it.

5

To make Haruka the town's new administrative persona, the authority held by Beis's group had to be erased. And so Akira and the others set out. By making Haruka the new administrative persona, Shirou would save Haruka, and Haruka would save Shirou. And Akira would fulfill her request.

Each with their own role to carry out, Akira split off from Shirou's group. He fought Miroro and Temeta, Beis's allies, and survived a concentrated barrage of annihilation warheads.

Next came the battle against Atlas, the intercity transport vehicle. To defeat Beis inside it, Akira opened fire on the enormous vehicle alongside two blue humanoid weapons.

In the rebuilt Mihazono Town, a battle on an entirely different scale raged on.

◆

Carol had come to Mihazono Town at Shirou's request. Now, from the control room of the high-rise Beis's group had used as their base, Shirou and Haruka had connected her to Mihazono Town's virtual space.

Before Carol spread a scene almost identical to reality. To her, at least, it was indistinguishable from the real room she had been in moments ago. The only difference she could make out was the absence of Doras, Reina, and the others who had not come over to this side.

Looking around with interest, Carol asked Shirou a question.

"...This is virtual space, right? What's happening to the real me right now?"

"This."

Shirou displayed the real-world Carol in the virtual space. That Carol was still standing, holding hands with the real-world Shirou and the others.

The virtual Carol reached out to her real self. Her hand passed straight through.

Shirou added an explanation.

"You can move both bodies at once, the one here and the one in reality, but I figured you haven't trained for that, so I've set it up so your consciousness is fully over on this side. Your real body is sort of asleep, but your powered suit is holding it up, so you won't fall over."

Moving two bodies with a single will is extremely hard for anyone used to the normal experience of having one body. Even two fields of vision are enough to confuse an ordinary person. Add a second body on top of that, and most people either make both bodies move exactly alike or can't properly move either one. It was beyond Carol.

Akira, for his part, could do it if he wanted to. In training, with Alpha's support, he had once controlled a second self within his augmented vision and sparred with Alpha. The training was meant to improve the quality of his movement by letting him see it both subjectively and objectively, but either way, he had been handling two sets of senses and two bodies with a single consciousness.

7

Once Shirou cleared away the image of the real Carol, she turned to him and Haruka.

"So, what should I do?"

Haruka answered.

"For now, just stay here until we're done. Basically, you've submitted an application to the town's system, and I'll use my authority as administrative persona to do a whole bunch of things with it. We'll handle all the details."

"Got it. Well, good luck."

Shirou and Haruka got to work at once. While Carol killed time gazing outside, the subject of dispatching the Blue Jackets came up, since Akira had lost Olivia. Shirou and Haruka wanted to send both units, and Carol agreed, as long as it would help Akira.

A little later, Shirou displayed Akira in the augmented space. Akira seemed hesitant about stripping Carol and the others of such major firepower as two frontline-grade humanoid weapons. Reading his feelings from his expression, Carol deliberately flashed him a villainess's smile.

"Akira. You owe me, okay?"

At that, Akira smiled back at her.

"Fine. Geez, my debts just keep piling up."

"And I'll be collecting every bit of it later, okay?"

"I know, I know. Good luck on your end too."

"Sure. Leave it to me."

Carol and Akira laughed and cheered each other on. Then Akira cut the connection, and his image vanished from the augmented space.

"Not that there's really anything for me to do, even if I said I'd do my best."

Haruka answered Carol's quip.

"Just being in the augmented space is plenty. So don't go back to the real side on your own, okay? We're doing all this on the assumption that you're here, so if you leave, it's all ruined."

Shirou and Haruka's work required the active consent of someone who held citizenship in Mihazono Town. That was why Carol needed to stay in the augmented space.

"I don't even know how I'd go back in the first place."

"You know those VR games where you can log out just by thinking about it? It's like that. To be precise, Mihazono Town's system picks up on that thought and logs you out. If you're just thinking, 'Maybe I'll step out for a bit,' it won't cut you off out of nowhere, and it'll check with you first. But if you want out badly enough, it'll cut you off on the spot without asking, so be careful."

"Got it."

Haruka had skipped the finer points, but Carol still understood how important it was for her to be there, and she gave a firm nod.

Shirou and Haruka kept at their painstaking work. And at last it paid off. Haruka grinned, full of confidence.

"All right! It went through!"

Carol asked for an explanation with a look, and Haruka answered, looking proud of herself.

"My request to restrict use of the Mihazono Town built inside the virtual space was accepted. Normally I wouldn't have the authority for that right now, but I framed it as a demand from every citizen and just barely squeezed it through."

"And what happens now that it's gone through?"

"If all goes well, in ten minutes everyone gets kicked out of the virtual Mihazono Town. Us and Beis's group too. After that, all we have to do is destroy Beis's bodies, and we can nullify their authority."

Hearing that, Carol smiled too.

"I see. Good. So Akira's hard work will pay off."

Even if Akira destroyed every one of Beis's bodies, if Beis's group fled into the virtual Mihazono Town, there would be no stripping them of their authority as administrative persona. Then all of Akira's efforts, even fighting an intercity transport vehicle, would be for nothing. Dealing with the virtual side was Haruka and Shirou's job, and Carol had come here to help them. Coming all this way despite the danger had been worth it, she thought, and her mood brightened.

Shirou smiled happily too.

"Yeah. Sending both Blue Jackets was worth it. Akira can handle wrecking Beis's bodies out in reality, and we'll keep dealing with the virtual side. Carol, I'll say it again: whatever you do, don't go back to reality on your own. Not if we don't want Akira's hard work to go to waste."

"I know, I know. Don't worry."

Akira and the others hadn't won yet. Even with the administrative persona's body inside Atlas destroyed, two of Beis's bodies still remained. They couldn't afford to let their guard down. Still, things had taken a big step forward, and Shirou and Haruka's expressions relaxed.

But then Shirou and Haruka looked sharply upward, their faces tense. Carol followed their gaze, but all she could see was the ceiling. Shirou and Haruka, however, could see beyond it, to the sky above the very high-rise they were in.

There, another high-rise was falling toward them. An enormous mass had suddenly appeared out of thin air and slammed into the building below. The impact brought both towers down, reducing them to a mountain of rubble.

From the air, Miroro and Temeta looked down on the rubble of two high-rises that had sprung up in the virtual space. It was they who had made the falling building appear.

Miroro wore a smile, while Temeta looked serious. Both expressions were tinged with hostility toward Haruka and the others.

Miroro and Temeta raised their eyes. There were Haruka and the others, who had escaped from the collapsing building. Haruka and Shirou were flying through the air, with Carol in Shirou's arms.

Shirou turned a grim face toward Miroro and Temeta as he spoke.

"Carol, can you fly? If not, I'll bring out a flying bike."

"Please do..."

A flying bike suddenly appeared in midair. Carol climbed onto it without surprise. The moment the words "VR games" had come up in the explanation of the augmented space, she had figured something like this was possible. She looked at the mountain of rubble spread out below, then asked Shirou a question.

"...So, what just happened?"

"They attacked us. They're in the same boat as us: they can't just deal with the real side, they have to do something about the virtual side too. That's what they came here to do. Probably in a different way from us."

"So that's it..."

Carol eyed Miroro and Temeta grimly. Even without knowing exactly how they'd done it, she could tell they had brought down the building she'd been in moments ago with ease. That was reason enough to see them as a threat.

Then Miroro spoke. In reality, her voice would never have carried as far as Haruka's group, but this was virtual space. Everything here existed within the system. Her voice reached them clearly.

"Enchaint-san! You've really done it now! Betraying us is one thing, but filing a request using an illegally registered citizen? Have you sunk that low?!"

Temeta followed up by berating Haruka.

"Once you cross the line, there's no stopping, huh? Did you throw away your shame along with your good sense?!"

Haruka's face twisted in pain at their words. Shirou mattered more to her than anything, but that was all; her values themselves were still those of the Old World. She knew she was doing something that deserved their condemnation.

Even so, her resolve did not change. For Shirou's sake, she faced Miroro and Temeta once more.

"Say whatever you like... Shirou, let's do this. What Miroro and the others are after is..."

"I know. Carol, we'll buy time. Just keep running until the restriction on this virtual space takes effect."

"Got it. You be careful too."

With that serious parting word, Carol shot away on the flying bike at high speed, accelerating to put as much distance between herself and Miroro as she could.

At the same moment, Temeta raised his arm. Part of the sky warped, and a huge hole opened, as if connected to another dimension. Then he swung his arm down. A high-rise emerged from the hole and plunged toward Carol at high speed.

Carol looked up in spite of herself, and, astonished as she was, instinctively tried to dodge the building. But faster than that, Shirou, ignoring all perspective, punched the building away. The impact shattered it, and it scattered as countless pieces of rubble.

Shirou moved again. He made several large guns appear in front of him and fired them at Temeta in rapid succession. An ultra-dense barrage that seemed to fill all of space swallowed Temeta in an instant.

But it had no effect on him. The flood of bullets that should have hit Temeta passed right through his body, as if they had been fired at a hologram.

Next, Miroro thrust her arm forward. This time the air ahead of Carol warped and a hole opened. Out of it shot an enormous sword with a blade at least ten meters wide.

Seeing its point bearing down on her, Carol's face filled with shock. She tried to change the flying bike's course to dodge it. But before she could, the space in front of her warped, and the sword was swallowed into the hole that opened there.

The sword then burst from a hole opened in front of Miroro, hurtling straight at Miroro, who had created it. But its point never reached her. It was stopped by a wall of light, like a force field shield.

Haruka had protected Carol from the giant sword and tried a counterattack on Miroro while she was at it. She frowned at the failed attack. But there was no surprise in her expression. The same went for Shirou, Miroro, and Temeta. Carol was the only one surprised by that exchange.

The other side can do this much too. Both Shirou's group and Miroro's took that for granted.

Shirou and Haruka broke away to follow Carol as she raced off on the flying bike, and Miroro and Temeta gave chase. With Carol at its center, a battle impossible in reality raged on.

This time it was an intercity transport vehicle, not a high-rise, that fell from the hole in the sky. Shirou again tried to punch it away, ignoring perspective. But the vehicle didn't budge. Even Shirou was surprised. He'd thought that even if he couldn't destroy it, he could at least knock it well off its path.

Temeta was the reason. Ignoring perspective just as Shirou had, he had gripped the vehicle firmly, keeping his blow from sending it flying. But in grabbing it, he had also stopped it in midair as it fell toward Carol.

Then the vehicle fired its main gun. A colossal, brilliant beam erupted from the transport's enormous cannon toward Carol. Get hit, and she would be blown away without a trace. Her face stiffened at a glow that made that so plain.

But the beam never reached her. A hole suddenly opened in its path and swallowed it, and it shot out of another hole somewhere else. Haruka's defense.

That was not the end of it, though. Another hole opened where the beam emerged, swallowed it, and spat it out of yet another, sending it at Carol again. Miroro's attack.

It happened again and again. As a result, the beam pierced the space around Carol over and over. Watching lethal light race all around her, Carol's face filled with the fear of death.

Then Miroro's voice rang out.

"Don't go thinking a hit won't kill you just because this is virtual space! That attack can kill you for real! That's why Enchaint and the others are working so hard to protect you!"

Hearing that, Shirou's face hardened, and he called out to Carol.

"It's true! Don't think of attacks in this virtual space as just images! What's really going on is a contest of forcing load onto each other! Your real body might not get a single scratch, but if the load from perceiving an attack goes past your limit, the overload will leave you brain-dead!"

Carol's expression grew grimmer at that, but at the same time, a question came to her.

Why had Miroro gone out of her way to tell her? If they'd kept quiet, wouldn't she be more likely to assume a hit couldn't kill her and carelessly take one? Miroro wasn't the kind of opponent who would miss something that obvious.

Carol was puzzled, but the reason soon became clear. The town's system asked her for confirmation.

'Do you want to log out?'

Then Carol understood. They were trying to make her log out of the virtual space by reflex, to escape the lethal attacks.

Just thinking she was in danger had been enough to trigger the confirmation. If she were exposed to an intense fear of death, if she thought she didn't want to die, if she strongly wished to leave the virtual space, the logout would be carried out without any confirmation. That was why Miroro had told her. That even in virtual space, a hit would kill her. To make her choose logging out as a way to escape.

Understanding that, Carol answered the system.

'I don't!'

Then she deliberately flashed Shirou and Haruka a daring smile.

"Relax! Hunting has been about staking my life from the start! I'm not backing down over something like this now!"

Was hunting a means of making big money, or a way of life? The Carol who had believed the former would already have been logged out by the system without confirmation. But Carol had chosen the latter. And that was exactly why, right now, Carol was here.

Shirou and Haruka knew the system had asked Carol to confirm a logout. They knew why, too. Even so, seeing Carol smile with her spirits high, they smiled as well.

Miroro and Temeta, on the other hand, scowled in displeasure. Then they stretched their hands out around them.

Instantly, Carol's smile froze. Without the slightest warning, a horde of kaiju had surrounded them. From several hundred meters away, they opened their huge maws, ready to fire beams all at once.

And they fired. A shining tidal wave of destruction closed in on Carol from every direction. At the sheer sight of it, she couldn't help thinking, There's no dodging this. The system reacted to the thought and asked her again.

'Do you want to log out?'

'No!'

Carol answered instantly, though her face twisted grimly. Then she tried to think of how to get through this.

An order came from Shirou.

"Dive in there!"

At the same time, a destination appeared in Carol's augmented vision. But it was right in front of the oncoming wave of light. Even so, Carol answered with spirit.

"Got it!"

She accelerated the flying bike and flew straight at the shining tidal wave as instructed. Shirou and Haruka would handle it. Telling herself that, her face twitching at the oncoming light of destruction, she dove into the wave of her own accord.

Light fired from every direction engulfed the area. Carol's figure vanished into it. Shirou and Haruka, Miroro and Temeta, the countless buildings there, even the kaiju that had fired it, all were swallowed by the light alike.

When the light cleared, Carol was there, unharmed. So were Shirou and Haruka, Miroro and Temeta, and the countless buildings. Only the horde of kaiju had vanished.

Carol had been frowning in puzzlement, and after a moment she understood.

"...Was that just an image?"

Shirou nodded.

"Yeah. Just because it's virtual space doesn't mean they can do anything they want either."

Haruka explained further.

"A single building is one thing, but reproducing that many kaiju at the physical level is too much even for Miroro and Temeta. Putting up an image of them, though, is easy."

The image had been meant to frighten her into logging out of the virtual space by reflex. Realizing that, Carol let out a small sigh of relief.

"So, wait, maybe I didn't even need to dodge?"

Shirou shook his head.

"No. Mixed in with the fake beams were properly reproduced ones. If one of those had hit you, you'd be dead. There's no way you could tell them apart, so I just gave you a route to dodge them."

"So that's it..."

Just then, everything around Carol went dark. Noticing, she looked up at the sky, and her smile stiffened.

"...So, where do I run this time?"

Above her, a high-rise so huge it covered the sky was just beginning to fall.

Shirou's face twisted grimly. Even Miroro and Temeta shouldn't be able to fully reproduce a mass that big. With that thought, he gave his order.

"...Get out of here as fast as you can! That's no image!"

Carol pushed the flying bike to its limit. But there was no avoiding a building so enormous it was like the sky itself falling. So she dove down to race along the ground, hoping the falling building would catch on the structures around her.

But when the building struck the buildings on the ground, it simply shattered into a mass of rubble. A downpour of debris rained onto the ground.

Even if this were happening in reality, being buried under rubble wouldn't be enough to kill Carol. Her equipment was good enough for that. But she'd be pinned. And if the intercity transport vehicle fired its main gun again then, she'd be blown away. In other words, it should have been checkmate.

But then Shirou noticed something. He raised his arm.

"There!"

Once more ignoring perspective, Shirou's arm punched away the falling rubble. Part of the debris filling the sky was blasted away, opening a hole in the encirclement. And not only that: Miroro and Temeta, who had been there, were blasted away with it.

Their faces twisted grimly as they recovered their footing. In that opening, Carol flew back up into the sky through the hole Shirou had made. Strictly speaking, she had followed Shirou's directions through the air and plunged into the image of the raining rubble.

"Shirou, so that was an image after all?"

"Just the inside. They fully reproduced only the building's surface. They fooled me."

Fully reproducing a building that huge, inside and all, was beyond even Miroro and Temeta working together. So they had reproduced only its outer walls and made the inside an image.

"Shirou, good job noticing that."

Haruka sounded surprised, and Shirou answered with a slightly proud grin.

"I trained hard for that kind of thing."

As he said it, Shirou remembered the days when he and Haruka used to play together in the augmented space. How he had sloppily reproduced a handheld game console and Haruka had run circles around him because of it.

Afterward, Shirou had trained hard so that he could at least reproduce the surface of a game console properly. That experience was paying off here.

They had blocked the attack that was like the sky falling, but the battle wasn't over. Next, Miroro and Temeta fired a beam together. Seeing its realistic glow, Haruka raised a wall of light to deflect it. She couldn't open a hole in space and send it back at them.

The beam didn't end in an instant; it kept pouring out as if to crush the wall of light. While Haruka held out against it, Shirou counterattacked. Once again he summoned countless guns, more and bigger than before, and fired them all at once. A dense barrage struck Miroro and Temeta again.

But just like before, the bullets passed through their bodies as if he had fired at a hologram. Seeing that, Shirou's face twisted grimly.

"Damn it! Shooting doesn't work in this situation either?!"

Shirou understood exactly how they had blocked his bullets. It wasn't Miroro and Temeta who had been treated as holograms. It was the bullets.

Everything in virtual space was nothing more than data. It was only reproduced so it would feel the same as reality. But the precision of that reproduction varied. And the more precisely something was reproduced, the more processing power it took to interfere with it.

To Miroro and Temeta, the bullets Shirou had fired were only low-fidelity reproductions, and they had simply been rewritten into mere images.

The same reason explained why Haruka was blocking the beam they were firing with something like a force field shield. The beam was reproduced so precisely that she couldn't interfere with it enough to block it by opening a hole in space.

Watching Haruka struggle desperately against the beam, Miroro and Temeta laughed. The pressure of the beam grew stronger, and Haruka was steadily driven into a corner. The authority of Mihazono Town's administrative persona was also the authority to wield processing power in the virtual space. She was holding back a beam generated with two-sevenths of that authority with only one-seventh. Raw processing power alone didn't decide the fight, but its effect was huge. If this went on, Haruka's defeat was only a matter of time.

Shirou understood that too. Right now, he was holding Haruka back. Miroro and Temeta were both attacking Haruka because they had judged they could handle his attacks even after shifting the system's processing power toward her. And they were right; they were in fact handling them.

Even though he had come here to save Haruka.

With that thought, Shirou steeled his resolve even further.

"Don't underestimate me!"

Shirou opened fire again. Just like before, countless bullets flew toward Miroro and Temeta.

This time, though, the result was different. Their faces filled with surprise, and they stopped the beam to raise a wall of light. Every bullet that swarmed them was easily deflected by the wall. None passed through.

Miroro and Temeta glared at Shirou. To them, it meant he had changed from someone not worth bothering with into an obstacle to their goal.

Understanding that, Shirou gave them a provocative grin.

"Sakashita didn't favor me for nothing. I can do this much even without an administrative persona's authority."

The ability that let Shirou interfere even with the systems of ruins. Ability enough to earn the recognition and special treatment of Sakashita Heavy Industries. Here, Shirou put that power on full display.

But the price was high. The harder the task, the heavier the load. And unlike Haruka, Miroro, and Temeta, Shirou was taking part in this data-processing battle from reality, with his flesh-and-blood brain. The load on him was extraordinary. The Shirou reproduced in the virtual space was unharmed, but the real Shirou, under that overwhelming load, was bleeding from his eyes, nose, and mouth.

Haruka cried out in anguish.

"Shirou...!"

Haruka could perceive the real-world scene as well. She was right beside him, watching him covered in blood.

Shirou smiled at her reassuringly, in the virtual space and in reality both. With a clean face, and with a face stained red.

"I'm fine. I don't have the slightest intention of dying. If I die, I can't save you."

He meant it. Shirou had no intention of dying at all. But whether he would get out of this alive was another matter. If will and resolve alone could settle everything, neither Akira nor Shirou would ever have struggled. Shirou and Haruka both knew that all too well.

"Haruka... Let's do this!"

"...Yeah!"

Even so, Haruka smiled back at him. Even if it was bravado, so that she wouldn't flinch and wouldn't give up. And above all, to answer Shirou's feelings.

Miroro and Temeta resumed their attack, and Shirou and Haruka matched them. Giant multi-legged machines emerged one after another from a hole in front of Temeta, and a sword at least a hundred meters wide fell from the sky above Miroro. A mass of guns built for humanoid weapons appeared before Shirou, and countless orbs of light formed before Haruka. The battle impossible in reality grew even fiercer.

24

Not two against one, but two against two.

Chapter 297: The Wired Old Domain User

Ever since Shirou and Haruka had connected Carol's consciousness to the virtual space, Doras had stayed by her side, watching over her with a worried look.

Doras had no way of knowing what was happening on the virtual side. But he could tell at least that it wasn't going well. Carol's face was tense, as if she were having a nightmare.

Then Shirou even started bleeding. Doras raised his voice without thinking.

"Hey?! What's going on?! Carol! Are you okay?!"

He reached to shake Carol by the shoulders, as if to force someone awake from sleep.

But Shirou glared at him.

"Shut up. We're busy here. Stay out of it."

His barbed tone showed how little room he had to spare. From that, Doras grasped roughly what was happening on the virtual side. That it was a dangerous situation. Deadly dangerous.

"...It's bad over there, isn't it?"

Shirou didn't dodge the question.

"Yeah. It could kill us. Me and Carol both."

His gaze grew even sharper.

"And Carol is still helping us. 'Hunting has been about staking my life from the start,' she said. She's holding on without backing down. Someone who can do nothing but stand around next to her had better not get in her way."

Told that, Doras had nothing to say.

Doras had once told Carol that she probably had no intention of staking her life on hunting. That for her, being a hunter probably wasn't a way of life. Something along those lines. And back then, Carol had probably been exactly as he'd said. That was what Doras thought.

Now that same Carol was staking her life. As a hunter. Once he understood that, Doras couldn't interfere. He couldn't put his own selfish wish for her to live first.

Doras no longer had any intention of getting in Shirou's way. But Shirou had no room to spare for reading Doras's feelings. And so he kept going, to make sure Doras wouldn't interfere.

"Or are you going to come over here and help? You can, if we ignore the load on you. You'll definitely die, though."

If you get it, keep quiet. Don't get in the way again. That was what Shirou meant by it.

But then Doras said something Shirou didn't expect.

"Fine. I'll help. What do I do?"

Even Shirou was surprised. He gave Doras a dubious look.

"...You'll really die, you know? I'd be forcing someone who isn't an Old Domain user into the connection. The load will definitely be lethal. You've heard about hunters dropping dead out of nowhere in ruins, right? It'd be like that."

People half-awakened as Old Domain users in the ruins would unconsciously connect to a ruin's system and, unable to bear the sheer volume of information, end up brain-dead. Doras knew those stories too.

Even so, Doras gave a light laugh, looked at Carol, and told Shirou plainly.

"I'm going to die shielding her. That's the deal I made with Akira."

Doras was prepared to die for Carol. Shirou understood that too.

Shirou was used to seeing people prepared to die. Orders from a superior. Loyalty to the company. Dedication to the job. At Sakashita Heavy Industries, people who risked their lives for reasons like those were nothing unusual.

But that was a different kind of resolve from the one made by someone who would die for another person. Of course, it wasn't that one was superior to the other. Still, they were different.

Doras had the same resolve he did. Just as he was risking his life for Haruka. With that thought, Shirou let respect show on his face and thanked Doras from the heart.

"...I see. Got it. Thanks."

Then he went on, his face serious.

"Get between me and Carol."

Haruka, Shirou, and Carol had been holding hands, and now Doras joined them. Everything was ready.

Before they began, Haruka spoke to Doras.

"Let me thank you too. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. I'm doing this for my own reasons."

"...Is that what hunters are like?"

To Haruka, who thought like the Old World, hunters were nothing but armed gangs of robbers who ravaged her people's domain by force. Objects of contempt.

But after meeting Akira, seeing Carol's resolve, and now witnessing Doras's devotion, Haruka was no longer quite sure what hunters were.

Were Akira and the others just the exceptions? Or were there many people like that among those who made hunting a way of life? Haruka found herself asking without really meaning to.

"...Who knows."

Doras didn't really know himself, and that was all he said.

"Here we go."

At Shirou's declaration, Doras's consciousness was connected to the Old Domain. The pain of the load told him once more that this was a one-way trip with no coming back.

Even so, his resolve didn't waver.

In the virtual space, the fierce battle raged on.

Countless multi-legged machines kept shelling Carol, and she dodged the shells with deft handling of the flying bike. Shirou destroyed the machines with gunfire, but more kept pouring out of the holes Temeta had opened all over the sky.

An orb of light Haruka fired struck Miroro and exploded. It created a sphere of destruction as if an annihilation warhead had gone off, but Miroro sliced through the orb, explosion and all, with her giant sword. Then the aftermath of the blast, which in reality should have scattered everywhere, suddenly vanished. It hadn't been drastically weakened in an instant. The entire process after the explosion had simply ceased to exist.

Miroro swung her arm again, and the giant sword swung with it. A blade reaching several kilometers sought Shirou, Carol, and Haruka. They kept dodging it with nimble movements, but Shirou, racing through the air at high speed, suddenly stopped. Temeta, ignoring perspective, had grabbed him and pinned him in place.

The enormous blade bore down on Shirou. He couldn't dodge it. Realizing that, Shirou swung his arm as if punching empty air. In that instant, the greatsword's path shifted. A blade longer than a high-rise passed right beside him. By punching the sword across the distance, Shirou had knocked himself out of its path.

Haruka's orbs of light now swarmed Temeta. Temeta blocked them by raising a wall of light in front of himself. But that left him no room to keep holding Shirou. Freed, Shirou flew through the air, let out a breath with a grim face, and rejoined Haruka.

"Haruka! Thanks, you saved me!"

"I'm glad you're okay! Let's keep buying time somehow!"

"Yeah! They're getting desperate! Just a little longer!"

At the moment, Miroro and Temeta had no bodies for administrative personas. If the virtual space's use restriction took effect in that state, they would lose their authority as administrative personas. Shirou and Haruka had seen through the desperation that caused them.

Still racing along on the flying bike, Carol cut in remotely.

"Haruka, how much longer do we need to stall? It's got to be ten minutes by now."

"I think Miroro and Temeta are interfering with the system to delay it. But they can't stop it from happening, and there has to be a limit to how long they can delay it. Hang in there a little longer."

"So that's it. Can't be helped, then."

Since she had been told "in ten minutes, if all goes well," Carol accepted Haruka's explanation. She decided to take Miroro and Temeta's onslaught in a positive light for now, as proof of how desperate they were.

(Still, this is rough...!)

The battle was clearly beyond Carol's ability. Without Shirou and Haruka's support, she would already be dead. Even the smile she wore to keep her spirits up had an edge of strain to it, because she knew she was somewhere far beyond her station.

And then the severity of the situation was driven home again. Miroro and Temeta were indeed desperate. But that desperation pushed them toward a decision: that they could no longer afford to care how they won.

Kaiju appeared all around, one after another. Unlike the earlier image, a huge horde didn't suddenly surround them, but they kept multiplying as if teleporting in from somewhere. And they moved to attack everyone there.

Seeing that, Carol concluded that Miroro and Temeta had again summoned an image of a kaiju horde, and that this time too they would attack in step with the image.

"Shirou! Those are images too, right?! Show me a route to dodge!"

But Shirou answered with a look of shock.

"No! Those aren't images! Every one of them is reproduced at high precision!"

"What?!"

"What's going on?! Even they shouldn't be able to do something like this..."

If they could, he and Haruka would already have been beaten. They would have made the whole kaiju horde, which had been a mere image earlier, into high-fidelity reproductions. So it shouldn't be possible. That thought only deepened his shock.

But then Haruka realized.

"...So that's it! Shirou! Miroro and Temeta are interfering with the town's defense system!"

At that, Shirou understood. But Carol didn't, from that explanation alone, so Haruka filled her in.

Virtual or not, this was Mihazono Town. It naturally had a system for dealing with outside enemies. But both Haruka and Beis's group had temporarily shut it down so that they wouldn't become its targets.

Now, though, Miroro and Temeta had reactivated it. With that, the system had begun eliminating everyone who was destroying the town.

Naturally, Miroro and Temeta were attacked as well. After running wild so flashily, they were the first targets. Several kaiju fired beams at them. Others charged in, swinging enormous arms and leaping at them with gaping jaws. Miroro and Temeta desperately blocked and dodged the onslaught, and struck back, destroying countless kaiju. But more kept appearing.

Shirou and Haruka were attacked too. Bent on taking down the four who had done so much damage to the town, the kaiju horde fought on, trampling and blasting away the large multi-legged machines Temeta had reproduced. With attacks reproduced at high precision by the defense system's processing power, they meant to drive their targets out of the virtual space through overload.

Haruka tried to shut the defense system down again, but Miroro and Temeta blocked her. In terms of raw authority, it was two against one. Haruka couldn't stop it alone.

But Miroro and Temeta had their hands full fending off the kaiju onslaught. They had no room to attack Haruka and Shirou. And the same went for Haruka and Shirou. Shirou's face twisted grimly as he thought.

(...Are they trying to drag us down with them? Damn it! It's a good move! If the town's defense system just kicks them out of the virtual space, they're the only ones who lose their administrative persona authority! But if the use restriction on the virtual space goes into effect, the ones out in reality will lose their authority too, the moment their administrative persona bodies are destroyed!)

Beis had not yet lost his authority despite having his body destroyed in reality, because at that point he could keep it by moving his persona into the virtual Mihazono Town. Unless the use restriction took effect, even if Akira destroyed Beis's body in reality again, Beis would escape the same way. Shirou and Haruka were risking their lives right now to prevent that.

(But they don't have room to attack us either! And more of the kaiju horde is gathering on them than on us! Probably because they wrecked the town more flashily! Looks like they miscalculated there! If this keeps up...!)

Shirou had no room to spare either. Even if he ranked lower than Miroro and Temeta, he was still a target of the defense system. To resist it, he kept re-producing things in the virtual space. Because of that, the near-brain-death load was still going on. He wasn't so much standing on the line between life and death as clinging to the side of life by a few fingers.

Still, if this kept up, they would win. Thinking that, hoping that, holding on to that chance of victory, Shirou fought desperately.

But that was wishful thinking. The situation changed. One kaiju from the horde, just one, began attacking Carol. Compared with those who had been destroying the town in flashy battles, Carol, who had only been running around, was certainly a very low priority for elimination. But that didn't mean she wasn't a target at all.

The kaiju opened its huge maw toward Carol. The light leaking from its mouth spoke of a vast release of energy. Seeing it, Shirou and Haruka moved at once to protect her. But they were blocked. In shock, they turned toward the cause. There, Miroro and Temeta were looking at them with triumphant faces.

Miroro and Temeta were using all of their processing power to stop Shirou and Haruka from a distance. Naturally, that left them nothing to fend off the kaiju with. They would be taken down in the next instant.

But to Miroro and Temeta, who were already aiming to take their enemies down with them, that hardly mattered. As long as they eliminated Carol, they could stop the use restriction on the virtual space.

Shirou and Haruka finally realized this had been the goal all along. But it was too late. The kaiju's beam would reach Carol before the brief moment it would take for Miroro and Temeta to be destroyed by the kaiju and purged from the virtual space, setting Shirou and Haruka free.

Shirou shouted.

"Carol! Dodge it!"

Pinned in place, it was all Shirou could do.

The focus that comes with death staring you in the face stretched out Carol's awareness. In a world where time flowed terribly slowly, the glow leaking from the kaiju's mouth, and how real it looked, made her imagine the unavoidable result a few moments from now.

Sensing her alarm, Mihazono Town's system asked her again.

'Do you want to log out?'

If she logged out now, the use restriction on the virtual space could not take effect. But the same was true if she were killed. In that case... The thought slipped into Carol's mind in spite of herself.

But even so, Carol answered.

'...No!'

What they were doing was buying time. In the tiny sliver of time before the beam about to fire struck her, there was still a chance they would make it. She couldn't throw that chance away.

Hunting meant staking your life. And right now, she was a hunter. Then she couldn't run from that bet. With that thought, Carol made her wager.

And on top of that, she did everything she could. She swung the flying bike's heading as far as it would go, trying to dodge the beam. She didn't think it would be enough, but she refused to choose doing nothing.

(Make it in time...!)

And she prayed.

But nothing comes true just by praying. In the end, the stalling didn't make it in time. Before the use restriction took effect, before it could forcibly remove Carol from the virtual space, the kaiju fired its beam. A torrent of immense energy reproduced in the virtual space pierced the air, as if to obliterate everything in its path.

The air right beside Carol.

The beam didn't hit her. The reason was a kick from someone who had suddenly appeared there. A flying kick to the kaiju's head, delivered at the speed of a bullet, had thrown off the beam's line of fire.

It was Doras who had kicked. Carried through the air by the recoil, he landed on Carol's flying bike as it raced past the kaiju. Then he grinned proudly at Carol, whose face was full of surprise.

"Yo. That was close."

"Doras...!"

"...Actually, what the hell is this? I was told it was bad, but I didn't think it'd be this bad, you know?"

Looking at a scene that would be hopeless in reality, being attacked by a horde of kaiju, Doras laughed breezily, as if to laugh the whole thing off.

Carol laughed back at him the same way.

"Yeah. It's a bit of a bad situation. Sorry, but mind helping out?"

"Can't be helped. Geez, I really got hooked by one nasty woman."

Doras made large guns appear in both hands. Carol was a little surprised.

"You could do that?"

"Hm? I tried, and it worked. It's like a game, I guess."

Doras was the one who tried, but it was Shirou's support that made it happen. Doras started shooting the kaiju around them with the guns.

"I'll leave the driving to you. Run like your life depends on it!"

"Roger! Don't get thrown off!"

Dodging the beam didn't mean she was out of danger. The kaiju horde around them hadn't gone anywhere. The deadly situation was still going on.

Even so, Carol laughed in high spirits as she raced through that deadly ground with Doras.

Doras's rescue had made it in time, but that alone wasn't what had saved Carol. His kick had changed the angle of the kaiju's beam, but only slightly. If she had only prayed and done nothing, the beam would have hit her and blown her away.

Even with death before her eyes, never giving up and doing everything she could. That vital mindset of a hunter had kept Carol alive, by the narrowest of margins.

Never giving up, just like Akira.

Doras's appearance had been unexpected for Miroro and Temeta too. Their certain victory overturned, their faces filled with shock. And they could do nothing more. The kaiju horde fell on them.

"N-No way...!"

"Damn it...!"

Miroro was smashed to dust by a blow from a kaiju's giant arm, and Temeta was blown away by a direct hit from a beam. The overload from those attacks forcibly disconnected them from the Mihazono Town reproduced in this virtual space.

With Miroro and Temeta defeated, Shirou and Haruka were free again. But it was too soon to celebrate. The kaiju that had been attacking Miroro and Temeta all turned their heads toward Shirou and Haruka. With Miroro and Temeta gone, Shirou and Haruka had moved up the list of targets.

"Haruka! Shut down the defense system!"

With Miroro and Temeta gone, she should be able to stop the defense system again. That was Shirou's thinking as he shouted, but Haruka answered grimly.

"I already gave the shutdown order!"

"Then why are they still coming?!"

"The order isn't reaching the ones already generated and acting on their own! The reinforcements have stopped! We just have to hold out somehow!"

Just as Haruka said, no new kaiju were being added to the virtual space. But there were still a lot of them. On top of that, the ones that had been attacking Miroro and Temeta now came at Shirou and Haruka too.

"...Got it! Just a little longer, then!"

"Yes! Just a little longer!"

The use restriction would take effect any moment now. They had eliminated Miroro and Temeta, who had been interfering with it. All that was left was to weather this. With that thought, Shirou and Haruka fought on with their spirits high. Back to back, Shirou fired giant guns and Haruka fired bolts of light, flashily attacking the kaiju around them. There were many, but they weren't unbeatable. The kaiju fell one after another.

It was the same for Carol and Doras. Shirou's support gave Doras power like a frontline hunter's. The bullets from his large guns pulverized the kaiju's enormous bodies.

Then Doras noticed.

"...Hm? The enemy reinforcements stopped."

Carol answered with a smile.

"Looks like it. Shirou and Haruka must have pulled it off."

Kaiju horde or not, once the seemingly endless reinforcements stopped, buying time was easy even for Carol and Doras. Shirou and Haruka were drawing most of the horde, and in this virtual space Doras's strength was nothing like what it was in reality. Certain of victory, Carol relaxed, her expression softening as she thanked him.

"Doras, you saved me. That was really close back there. Thanks."

"Falling for me all over again?"

Doras grinned breezily, and Carol laughed back.

"I never fell for you in the first place."

"So cold. After I worked so hard to save you."

"Well, I really am grateful. When we get back, I'll keep you company for free for a while, so hang in there a bit longer. Normally the next one would've been five billion, then ten billion, twenty, forty. Not a bad deal, is it?"

"...I see. Then I've got even more reason to get you home alive. Can't be helped. Guess I'll do my best."

"Yes. Do your best."

Doras was grinning breezily, and Carol deliberately answered with a smile straight from her side job.

Ordinarily, Carol would have noticed. But now, relieved to have escaped a tight spot and with her guard slightly down, she couldn't catch the meaning of the slight delay in Doras's reply.

Keeping his face turned away from her, Doras thought.

(Next time, huh...)

Then, still fighting, he asked Shirou.

'Shirou, how much longer do I have?'

Connect someone who wasn't an Old Domain user to the virtual space, and the load would certainly leave them brain-dead. Doras didn't doubt Shirou's explanation.

He felt no pain, but he could drop dead at any moment. He had accepted that. He wasn't afraid of it now. But if he suddenly died right now, Carol would be in danger. So Doras asked Shirou how much time he had left.

A slightly sad look came over Shirou's face as he answered.

'...Is your mind clear right now?'

'Yeah. No headache or anything. So I figure I'm fine for a while yet...'

'I see...'

Should he explain properly? Shirou hesitated briefly, but decided to tell him straight.

'I'm the one who sent you over here, but the actual process was done by interfering with the ruin's system. So I can't say for sure. You might last longer than expected. Even so, you probably won't make it back alive to the real side. With systems like this, the biggest load comes when you enter and when you leave. I don't think you can survive it twice.'

While Doras's arrival had been delayed, Shirou had even feared he might already be dead. The load was that heavy.

'I see. Well, if I last a while, that's enough.'

Doras had already resigned himself to death. Something like that wasn't going to shake him. But that wasn't the part Shirou had hesitated to say.

'...If things went badly, the real you might already be dead, and the one here might be a copy made during the transfer. Your mind could be clear because your persona data is running on the ruin's system. ...Even in that case, the moment the use restriction kicks in and you're forced out of here, you'll disappear.'

In that case, was the Doras here the real one? To Shirou's sense of things, he was within the bounds of the same person. It was precisely because Shirou felt that way that he was trying to save not only the Haruka with an administrative persona body, but also the Haruka who existed as persona data.

But whether Doras would see it the same way was another matter. All the more so when it was about himself, not someone else. That was exactly why Shirou had hesitated over whether to go that far.

Even Doras couldn't claim to be completely unshaken. Still, he answered with a small laugh.

'...I see. Well, if I last a while, it's the same either way.'

He's strong, Shirou thought. Haruka, who had been listening too, thought the same, and showed her respect for that strength.

'If there's anything you want, tell me. It's your reward for helping us. I'll grant it if I can.'

'Yeah? I'm doing this for my own reasons, so I don't really need anything, but since you're offering, I'll take you up on it. Let's see... Look after Carol for me. Help her out if she's ever in trouble. This is as far as I go.'

Doras asked her to help Carol in his place, since he couldn't make it back alive. In him, Haruka saw Shirou, who was trying to save her.

'...All right. I promise.'

'Thanks.'

He had no idea what came after death. Still, he had done what he could while he was alive. With that thought, Doras looked a little satisfied.

Just then, a message reached everyone from the virtual space's system.

'The use restriction on this space will take effect shortly. Ten, nine...'

Hearing that, Carol let out a big breath with a wry smile.

"Finally. That was a long ten minutes."

Time's up, Doras thought as he spoke.

"So this is the end..."

Ordinarily, Carol's instincts, honed by her side job and more, would have caught the meaning of his words. But now, feeling deep relief at having escaped death, she didn't notice that much. She let it pass lightly.

"Yes. It's finally over."

"Carol. Take care of yourself."

"Huh?"

Why was he saying goodbye now? Puzzled, Carol turned to him. Doras was giving her a gentle, slightly lonely smile.

'...One, zero.'

The use restriction on the Mihazono Town reproduced in the virtual space took effect. Shirou's, Haruka's, and Carol's consciousnesses were expelled from the virtual space.

And Doras's consciousness, too, vanished from that world.

When he came to, Doras was lying on the floor, looking up at the ceiling.

(.....?)

His hazy mind slowly woke, but he still couldn't grasp the situation. In a muddled state different from mere drowsiness, he heard Shirou speak to him.

"You're awake."

Doras tried to answer, but no voice came out. He couldn't even move a finger. As for Shirou's words, he knew only that he'd been spoken to, not what had been said. Only then did Doras realize just how extremely exhausted he was.

Seeing his condition, Shirou placed a hand on Doras's forehead.

'Just stay down. I used recovery medicine on you, but you were on the brink of death. You won't recover right away.'

Because the words reached him telepathically, Doras could clearly understand them.

"....."

'...I'm alive?'

Doras's lips barely moved, and no voice came out. But the words reached Shirou clearly as telepathy.

'Yeah. Barely.'

'Wasn't I supposed to die for sure?'

Had that explanation been nothing but a threat? Doras's dubious thought reached Shirou too. Shirou answered it.

'I was sure you'd die too. ...Hmm. Well, I guess I can tell you. You risked your life for Carol, so you've earned that much.'

Properly, he ought to check with Carol first whether it was okay to explain. Shirou knew that much. Even so, out of respect for Doras's devotion to Carol, he decided it was fine.

'Like I said back then, forcing someone who isn't an Old Domain user into the connection puts a huge load on them. Normally, they'd die for sure. So why aren't you dead? Well, you got hooked on Carol's side job and slept with her a bunch of times, right? That's why.'

'...What do you mean?'

'Carol is a wired Old Domain user. Because of her influence, you'd partly become an Old Domain user yourself.'

Doras was a little bewildered by the unfamiliar phrase "wired Old Domain user," and Shirou went on explaining.

The term "Old Domain user" came from the fact that such people could connect to the Old World network called the Old Domain using biological communication technology.

That communication was basically wireless, but some people had an extremely short range. So short that they had to physically touch whatever they were connecting to. "Wired Old Domain user" referred to people like that.

That didn't necessarily mean they couldn't connect wirelessly. In fact, Carol was communicating wirelessly with Mihazono Town's system just fine.

So why single them out as "wired" Old Domain users? Because when they connected by direct touch, there was a clear difference from wireless.

'Carol makes a killing with her side job, right? That's because she links up with her partner while they're at it. There are some sketchy adult VR things that crank the precision of the five senses way up, and once you've experienced one, doing it in reality just doesn't cut it anymore. The information your senses take in is too little, so you can't feel the stimulation.'

Doras knew such things existed, at least in theory. That was why he could follow the rest of the explanation.

'And Carol is doing something like that. Except with far more information. At that point it doesn't matter whether her partner is flesh and blood or a cyborg. With communication tech from the Old World, she sends sensory information and makes them feel it, even if they don't have the sense organs for it. Even a body without those functions, even something like a brain transplanted into a humanoid weapon, she could probably bring to climax with ease. In that case it'd all be in the mind, but it's like a VR experience: to the brain's perception, it's the same.'

If things went badly, even the AI in a modern-made automaton wouldn't be safe. By learning from the information sent to it, it could be seduced. In fact, even the control unit in a car could be at the same risk if its system modeled the structure of the human mind to handle sophisticated conversation. Shirou added that as if it were a joke.

Doras listened, half dumbfounded.

'...How much of that is true?'

'All of it. To a degree, anyway. Also, even if Carol slept with me, it wouldn't work on me. I was trained in countermeasures for that kind of thing at Sakashita. It probably wouldn't work on hunters active on the front lines either. People at that level would have countermeasures.'

'I-I see...'

Shirou went on explaining with a laugh.

'So does that mean any ordinary guy falls in one go? Not really, surprisingly. Even with a wired connection, communication ability varies from person to person. The first time, you'd just feel like, "We've got pretty good chemistry." And because of that, you don't get suspicious, and the more times you sleep with her, the more the connection gets optimized. The more someone earns, the more times they can pay her steep fee, the further the optimization goes, and the deeper they sink into the trap.'

Shirou was laughing as he told it, but for Doras it was no laughing matter. At the same time, it rang very true; it matched far too much of his own experience.

Doras let out a heavy sigh, and Shirou went on as if to console him.

'I get how you feel, but don't let it get you down too much. That's what kept you alive. I don't know how many times you slept with Carol, but the optimization had gone that much further, so the load during communication was lower too. I connected you to that virtual space through Carol. Even so, it was close. If you'd slept with her even one time fewer, you might have died.'

Doras let out another big sigh. Then he asked.

'Does... Carol know about this?'

'No, I don't think so. She seemed to be hiding the fact that she's an Old Domain user, so if she knew about that part, she wouldn't have a side job like that. It'd only raise the odds of getting found out. And it's because she didn't know that you went for her in the first place, I bet. Since she's unaware of it, it didn't show in how she acted. If it had shown even a little, you'd have gotten wary and kept your hands off her, right?'

That was certainly possible. Thinking so, Doras consoled himself.

Shirou said one last thing.

'By the way, this conversation is going over a wired connection too, so Carol can't hear it. It's a bit rich coming from the guy who told you, but if you want to pretend you don't know she's a wired Old Domain user, I'll keep quiet. If you'd rather I told her, I'll tell her properly. Including how you tried to die for her and luckily survived. I think she'd be more grateful if she knew how far you went to save her. What do you want to do?'

'.....Keep quiet.'

Doras's answer came a little late because he had wavered enough that he couldn't answer immediately. Even so, his answer was the same as it would have been if he'd been forced to answer on the spot.

'Oh, but do let Carol know she's a wired Old Domain user later. Subtly.'

'Got it. Anyway, I doubt you got hooked on Carol just because of that kind of chemistry. It was only one of the things that started it. Don't worry about it too much.'

Shirou answered with a laugh and took his hand off Doras.

"Well, stay lying down. You really saved us. Thank you."

After Shirou left, Carol, who had been told Doras was awake, came over.

"Doras. Are you okay? How are you feeling?"

"No problems. Aside from being dead tired."

"I see. I'm glad. Get some proper rest for now."

Doras was grinning breezily, and Carol smiled back.

"Let me say it again. Doras, thank you. You saved me. Like I promised over there, I'll keep you company for free for a while. As many times as you like. You can look forward to it, okay?"

Carol deliberately gave him a bewitching smile. But Doras's grin stiffened slightly. Carol found that odd.

"What's wrong?"

"...Nothing. Yeah. I'm looking forward to it."

At that, Carol smiled back at him. Not the smile she gave the clients of her side job.

I really did get hooked by a truly, thoroughly nasty woman. With that thought, Doras smiled wryly.

Chapter 298: The Giant and the Superhuman

Leaving Doras's care to Carol, Shirou went over the situation with Haruka.

"Haruka, that means those two, Miroro and Temeta, have lost their authority, right?"

"Yes. I confirmed it's been revoked. The use restriction on the virtual space is still in effect too. Now, if Akira takes down Beis, all that's left is to destroy Barba's and Lalantra's bodies, and we win."

Shirou let out a long breath. It was partly relief at the turn for the better, but even more, it showed his exhaustion.

"...Shirou, you rest too for now. In that state, you won't be able to move properly if something else happens. I can handle things on my own for now. Okay?"

Simply telling Shirou to rest wouldn't make him rest. Knowing that, Haruka urged him on with a reason he had to.

Shirou smiled a little and nodded.

"...Yeah. Let me rest a bit."

His exhaustion really was severe. He had fought holders of administrative persona authority on their own turf, the virtual space. His brain had been under a load heavy enough that it would have been no surprise if he had died.

Shirou lay down on a table Haruka had made, trying to sleep.

"Wake me if anything happens..."

"I will. So rest properly, okay?"

Watching Haruka smile as she said it, Shirou closed his eyes.

He knew. Even if something happened, Haruka intended to let him keep resting without waking him.

Still, even if he stayed awake, he'd be useless in this state of terrible exhaustion if that something did happen. In that case, he should sleep now. Recover as much as he could. So that he could help Haruka next time too. With that thought, Shirou obeyed his brain's demand for rest.

Near-lethal exhaustion quickly drew him into a deep sleep.

Seeing that Shirou was resting properly, Haruka let out a sigh of relief. She wished he could keep resting like this forever. But she understood that would be difficult.

Just then, Hammers came over with Nelia.

"Situation?"

Hammers asked bluntly, and Haruka explained. Hammers looked at the sleeping Shirou.

"I see... Then just let him sleep."

If Haruka's plan failed, Hammers intended to at least bring Shirou back. To that end, he couldn't let Shirou push himself again and die.

"...I'd like to do that too."

Hammers could tell Haruka meant it. At the same time, he understood what it meant that she hadn't answered, "I will."

A heavy impact struck the building Haruka and the others were in. It was more powerful than a kaiju's body slam. But protected by extremely strong force field armor, the building didn't budge under an attack like that. It easily withstood the impacts that followed.

Hammers's face hardened all the same.

"It won't hold for long, will it?"

Haruka answered with an equally grim look.

"No. Unfortunately."

"...Can't be helped. I'll go out."

Hammers let out a deep sigh as he said it, then told Nelia.

"I'll take the man. You take the woman."

"Got it."

Nelia answered with a smile. There was no tension in her face, not because she didn't understand the situation but simply because of her personality. Nelia was enjoying this.

Hammers moved at once. He ran off with Nelia, left the room, and followed the guide Haruka displayed in his augmented vision. Then he leapt out of the building through an exit temporarily created in the outer wall of an upper floor.

The instant they did, they came under attack. A fist bigger than a large vehicle came at Hammers, and a giant claw at Nelia.

Hammers met the oncoming fist with his own. The two fists, with their overwhelming difference in mass, both bounced back. At that result, surprise showed on Hammers's face.

Nelia countered the claw with her blade. Those, too, both bounced back, but there was no surprise on her face.

Then Hammers and Nelia landed in midair. Taking their stances on footholds generated in the air by an applied use of their force field armor, they turned their gaze on their attackers.

There stood Barba and Lalantra, transformed into grotesque giants. Their bodies were as huge as high-rises, with six arms sprouting from them. They wore no clothes. But parts of their skin had hardened like scales or an exoskeleton.

The impact on the building had been from Barba, in his giant form. Barba spoke to Hammers.

"So you've come. I know we attacked first, but if you're going to run, we won't chase you. We're after Enchaint. If you don't get in our way, we won't treat you as an enemy."

Lalantra went on.

"You can take that Shirou boy with you too, you know? He seems to have gotten in our way plenty, but we'll let him go along with you. How about it?"

Hammers straightened his posture and answered.

"Then allow me to make a proposal of my own. Would you consider joining our side? If you would accept Mihazono Town coming under our company's control, then our company would have no reason to limit its negotiations to that Enchaint. What do you say?"



"That's not possible."

"A pity."

Both Barba and Hammers had expected the other's answer. They had asked only for form's sake. Still, with that confirmed, any chance of avoiding a fight was gone. After a slight pause, both sides moved at once.

Hammers kicked off the air and charged like a bullet. The dense colorless mist drifting all around sharply slowed that bullet, but with the physical abilities of a superhuman like Hammers, he still moved too fast for the eye to follow.

Barba's fist shot out at him. Piercing the resistance of the colorless mist, it struck at its target at high speed. The power of that giant fist exceeded a kaiju's charge, enough to easily crush any ordinary superhuman. Even Hammers, no ordinary superhuman but a high-ranking one belonging to Sakashita Heavy Industries, would be done for if he took it head-on.

Fists flew one after another from six stretching arms. Straight from the front, curving in from the left and right, from above and below, even whipping around extremely to strike from behind, all in a ceaseless barrage.

Hammers dodged them by kicking off the air at high speed, and met those he couldn't dodge with his own fists. Colliding fists bounced apart. This time, Hammers wasn't surprised. But his face was grim.

And Barba hadn't missed the surprise on Hammers's face at their first clash. He spoke as he kept attacking.

"As you've probably noticed, this body was generated from Liquid T, just like the kaiju horde you defeated yesterday."

Hammers knew that already from Haruka. From that knowledge, he had estimated Barba's strength as equal to those kaiju, or ten times greater at most. He had been surprised at their first clash because Barba's strength far exceeded that estimate.

"But don't think its performance is the same. Those were shoddy goods, their quality lowered for mass production. Little liquid was used for each. On top of that, the equipment at that production facility could only put a small amount of energy into each individual."

Dodging a giant fist, Hammers delivered a brutal kick to the arm. The blow, stronger than artillery fire, didn't just knock the giant's arm aside; it tore it off. The arm, stretched long like a snake, flew through the air and crashed to the ground with a roar.

With one arm fewer, Barba's barrage weakened by that much. But only briefly. The torn arm regenerated, sprouting a new arm from its end. It wasn't restored in an instant, of course. But the fierce attacks of the remaining five arms more than made up for the time it took.

Of course, Barba's body couldn't regenerate forever. Each regeneration consumed the green liquid, or strictly speaking the nanomachines that made it up. It also used a great deal of energy.

Hammers knew that much. If the fight went on, his opponent would run out of one or the other, or both. Then he would win. As if reading his mind, Barba went on.

"This body holds a large store of high-concentration Liquid T. On top of that, through the administrative persona body that forms its core, it receives a remote energy supply from the town's system. We won't lose a war of attrition."

Even Hammers grimaced at that. Barba and Lalantra were probably hiding their administrative persona bodies inside those giant forms. Haruka had told him as much beforehand, but things were worse than he'd assumed.

Barba continued.

"And that's not all. Even now, we're continuing to interfere with the building's system. Enchaint is resisting, but she won't last long. Once we disable the building's force field armor, all that's left is to crush it, building and all."

Hammers grimaced further. Haruka alone couldn't hold out against Barba and Lalantra for long. In other words, to stop them from disabling the building's force field armor, Shirou would have to be pushed hard again so the two of them could fight back together. Haruka would hang on alone as long as she could, but there was no telling how long that would last. That was part of why Hammers, Shirou's bodyguard, had gone out to fight even if it meant leaving Shirou's side.

"To interfere with the building's system, we have to stay within a certain range of it, but you lack the strength to pull us away from here. It doesn't matter if we can't finish you off. Time is on our side."

Administrative persona bodies weren't especially powerful. When Beis had shown up chasing Haruka, Akira had destroyed his body with ease, though with Olivia's help. Those grotesque giant forms were there to make up for that lack of strength. Hammers understood that. And then he made a decision. It couldn't be helped.

Was Hammers not strong enough to properly guard Shirou on his own? Sugadome had asked him that when, at Shirou's request, he had asked Sugadome to send more fighters.

He had answered no, and that had been naive of him. That judgment had been tainted by his own pride, which had no place in carrying out his duty. Admitting that, Hammers now tried to ask Sugadome again to send reinforcements.

But he was confronted with the fact that even that thought had been naive. He couldn't get through to Sugadome, which meant he couldn't reach Sakashita Heavy Industries. The shock showed on his face before he could stop it.

Barba didn't miss it. He went on, as if to drive the point home.

"It's no use. You can't call for reinforcements. We're jamming communications across the whole area. You can't contact Akira. And you can't call back those humanoid weapons either."

Hammers's face hardened sharply. It wasn't Akira he had tried to reach, but that changed nothing. They would have to deal with Barba and Lalantra with only the people here.

But that settled Hammers's resolve. He turned a face that showed it toward Barba and declared:

"Then I'll simply finish you myself."

Even as they talked, the exchange of blows had continued, and their fists collided once more. Until now, their fists had both bounced back. But this time was different. Hammers's fist smashed Barba's fist outright. Not only that, the shock of the blow sent Barba's upper body reeling back.

Naturally, there was a reason Hammers had suddenly become so much stronger. A temporary boost to his biological force field armor, using the energy produced by cellular autophagy. It was the same trump card that Erde, a superhuman Akira had once defeated, had used.

He himself aside, there was no telling how long Nelia would last. Before she was defeated or fled and two-on-two became two-on-one, he would destroy Barba first. Then, with the numbers in his favor, he would finish off Lalantra too. With that decision, Hammers played his trump card. To overturn, by himself, the situation his own naive judgment had brought about.

Barba's remaining fists closed in on Hammers. A blow from the side. But Hammers kicked the fist back and smashed it, arm and all. The giant's arm rained onto the ground as countless chunks of green flesh and blood. Next, a blow from above. Hammers dodged sideways and struck with a knife-hand. The long arm was severed and rolled across the ground.

That left Barba with half his fists. Even so, he kept swinging. This time, a blow from the front. The huge fist bored through the air straight at Hammers. Hammers met it with his own. Fists of vastly different sizes clashed head-on once again.

And both bounced back. This time, Hammers was the one sent flying. Even he couldn't hide his surprise at being overpowered despite his autophagy boost. Still, he dug in, leaving marks in the air like skid marks, and recovered his stance. Then, taking his stance in midair, he turned a grim face toward Barba.

Barba had forcibly halted the momentum of Hammers's trump card with even greater power. Its source was Mihazono Town's energy, supplied remotely through his administrative persona body. As a superhuman, Hammers also held an extraordinary amount of energy, but in the end it was only one person's energy. The difference in their total energy was hopelessly vast.

Had his estimate really been that naive? Teeth clenched, Hammers fixed a sharp glare on Barba.

But Barba wore a look just as grim as Hammers's.

To stand up to Hammers after he'd played his trump card, Barba had to pay a price too.

Even if the energy the town supplied were infinite, there was a cap on how much the receiving side could take. Energy beyond that cap was doing serious damage to Barba's body as well.

On top of that, even if the total remote supply were infinite, there was a limit per unit of time. Lost energy couldn't be fully restored in an instant. Right now, Barba's body had lost a great deal of energy. The proof was that his destroyed arms were regenerating much more slowly.

And there was one more thing Barba had lost: victory by running out the clock. If Hammers hadn't played his trump card, Barba could have won simply by trading blows with him evenly. Given time, he could have broken into the building's system, disabled its force field armor, and used the giant's strength to crush Haruka along with the building.

But once Hammers played his trump card, that victory was gone. At this rate, Barba would be taken down before he could disable the building's force field armor. His administrative persona body would be destroyed too. That was exactly why he had raised the giant's output, even at the cost of damaging its huge body.

Each revised their view of the other: a threat beyond what they'd imagined. Acknowledging that strength, both thought the same thing: this would not be an easy win.

And on top of that, they pitted the same will against each other. Even so, I'm the one who'll win.

As if perfectly in sync, Hammers and Barba moved again at the same moment. The extraordinary battle between transcendent beings, superhuman against giant, resumed.

While Hammers and Barba fought, Nelia and Lalantra's battle raged on as well.

The female grotesque giant kept swinging her many arms with force. The long claws extending from her fingertips slashed out like giant blades.

Nelia kept weathering the barrage in midair. She dodged by kicking off the air at high speed, blocked and deflected with the blades in both hands, and held her own.

She didn't land. The giant's long, whiplike arms could easily reach the ground even while she stood upright. And in a ground battle, Nelia would lose half her room to dodge, since with the ground beneath her she couldn't escape downward. Fighting on in the air, where she could escape in any direction, was what kept her alive.

The huge, razor-sharp claws came at her. Front and back, left and right, above and below, from every direction. With technical sharpness too, one after another. With the precision of sniper fire, in succession.

Nelia dodged those ceaseless, accurate, rapid strikes by a hair and struck back, swinging her twin blades. Her cyborg body was a frontline model on loan from Yanagisawa. The blades she swung with its power were frontline-grade as well. Their sharpness was at the Old World's level, the realm of magic. The shining blades cut through the giant's arm in an instant. The severed arm hit the ground with a roar.

But that arm regenerated too. A new arm grew from the cut, and claws extended from its fingertips. Then it immediately came at Nelia. The ferocity of Lalantra's attacks didn't weaken in the slightest.

Cutting off arms over and over wouldn't improve the situation. Judging so, Nelia stepped even deeper into mortal danger. She temporarily abandoned blocking by letting herself be thrown back to shed the impact of blade against claw, and dodging in ways that made it easier to stay put and cut. She also limited her dodges to forward, trying to get inside Lalantra's guard.

Doing that naturally made it that much more dangerous. The long, sharp, giant claws traced countless lines of death around Nelia. Lines that would easily carve her up at the slightest touch, even with a frontline cyborg body.

But with her exceptional skill, Nelia slipped through the gaps. She evaded every one of the countless lines that all but painted over the space around her and got inside Lalantra's guard. Then, smiling, she swung both blades.

The crossing, shining blades cut into the grotesque giant's torso. Ignoring the blades' actual length, they split the huge body long and deep. A moment later, green liquid sprayed violently from the wound. There was so much of it that the nearby ground sank beneath a green pool.

But Lalantra wasn't about to take it lying down. Seizing on the moment Nelia's posture slipped during her attack, that split-second opening, she struck back. Six arms swarmed Nelia, right in front of her.

Even Nelia couldn't dodge that. But she blocked in time. She caught the oncoming giant claws with both blades, rode the impact backward to put distance between them, then stood in midair and took her stance.

By then, the liquid gushing from Lalantra's torso had stopped. Despite how deeply Nelia had cut her, the wound had already healed.

Seeing that, Nelia laughed with delight.

(I thought I'd at least wounded her badly...)

In the east, there were monsters that couldn't be killed just by cutting them, even into pieces. But Nelia's blades were frontline-grade. They had the performance to cut down even opponents like that. That was why she'd been sure she had at least dealt a serious wound.

Even so, she was delighted that she hadn't done Lalantra much harm. Delighted that her opponent was that astonishing.

Lalantra, too, wore a relaxed smile as she spoke to her.

"If you think you can't win, you're free to run, even now."

Nelia answered with a smile.

"I won't run."

Was that answer because she thought she could win? Asked that, she would have said no. If it came down to a choice between winning and not winning, her odds were so low she could only choose the latter. She would very likely be killed. Nelia understood that correctly.

Even so, she had no intention whatsoever of backing down. Nelia lived not because she didn't want to die, but because she wanted to have fun.

A dull, dry, tedious life was boring. She needed something to color the one life she had, some enjoyment worth living for. That was how Nelia lived.

And to Nelia, this situation was color enough.

Her current body was a frontline cyborg body with performance on an entirely different level. On top of that, she had frontline-grade blades. Even the powerful monsters living far to the east, the kind even high-ranked hunters could only retreat from, she could cut down now, even a whole horde of them.

And even with that much power, she could fight someone she had little chance of beating. There was no way she could waste that kind of fun by letting it slip away.

"So you don't run either, okay?"

So don't you back down either. Don't ruin this golden opportunity. With that thought, Nelia said it from the heart, with a completely genuine smile.

But Lalantra had no way of knowing what Nelia was thinking. So she concluded that Nelia was smiling because she believed she had a good chance of winning even against her.

Lalantra's smile vanished, and she sighed.

"...I see. Then it can't be helped. I'm busy too, you know? I have to dispose of you quickly and go help Barba."

Lalantra had noticed that Barba had raised his body's output, ready to destroy himself, to counter Hammers's trump card.

And Lalantra could do the same.

"So, sorry, but I'll finish this quickly."

Lalantra played her trump card too. If Nelia was strong enough to beat her as she had been, she would kill her with strength beyond that. She judged so, and did it.

Sensing the overwhelming power pouring from the grotesque giant, Nelia's delight grew.

An opponent she had little chance against to begin with had gotten even stronger. How much fun. With that thought, she smiled.

The battle resumed. Lalantra swung her giant arms at Nelia even faster and sharper. Against the strengthened Lalantra, Nelia no longer had anything left for counterattacks. She poured everything she had into dodging and defending.

Even so, Nelia kept smiling. She fought on, without giving up in the slightest.

So she could enjoy her own strange life to the very end.

With their hands full against Barba and Lalantra, neither Hammers nor Nelia noticed. Around the building where Haruka and the others were, many arms severed from the grotesque giants lay scattered, and a great deal of green liquid that had poured from their bodies had pooled there.

Hammers and Nelia didn't notice what was welling up out of it.

Chapter 299: Battle for the Control Room

Reina and the others were watching the fight between Hammers's pair and the grotesque giants. They watched that fierce battle outside from inside the building, which was safe, relatively speaking.

"...Man, that's intense."

Kanae said it with a smile, her tone at least light. But there was a stiffness in her smile she couldn't hide, and she was even breaking into a slight cold sweat.

"...Yeah."

That was all Reina said. Kanae was deliberately talking as usual out of consideration for her. Reina knew that, but right now she didn't have the composure to play along.

It wasn't that Reina was in a bad mood. She was just a little down. She was feeling, once again, a touch of the helplessness she had felt before.

When Hammers left with Nelia, he hadn't said anything to Reina and the others because he judged they would be no help if they came along. To Hammers, they were nothing more than amateurs with high-end gear. Unlike Nelia, who had at least fought him once and shown her real skill.

And Reina had no objection to his judgment. She didn't think she would be any use even if she joined the fight outside.

Kanae shot Shiori a look that said, Do something. The message got through, but Shiori was at a loss too. Needless comfort would do little or backfire. In fact, it would be more dangerous if it worked too well. If Reina got her spirits back the wrong way and said something like, "Let's go help Hammers and the others now," that would be a problem. Thinking that, Shiori couldn't risk saying anything careless and kept her mouth shut.

Even so, Reina clearly felt how worried Shiori and Kanae were about her. That made her glad, and as mistress of her precious attendants, she switched gears.

"Shiori, Kanae, I'm fine. I'm not going to get desperate and run off to help."

Shiori and Kanae looked a little surprised, and Reina went on with a smile.

"Just as Lawrence-sama instructed, we're here to be useful to Akira. I'm not going to panic and drag him down on my own."

She understood the situation correctly, including her own position. Reina said it as if to make that clear.

"Even if we tried to help the two outside, we'd just get swatted aside. We wouldn't be any use to Akira. We just need to work hard when we can actually be useful. Until then, let's wait calmly."

Seeing Reina pull herself together on her own, Shiori and Kanae regained their composure too. They smiled at their mistress, Shiori politely and Kanae breezily.

"Understood."

"Roger that."

There they were, three people supporting each other, mistress and attendants.

Then Reina went on, half joking.

"Well, I say all that, but it'd be best if that time never came. I'd like to take it easy too."

"Quite so."

"No kidding."

If nothing had happened after that, it would have ended as a funny story. Reina and the others could have laughed together later about how they'd turned out to be useless after all.

But that wasn't how it went. Haruka spoke to them with a serious face.

"Sorry, but I can't let you take it easy. I need you to be useful."

Seeing how grim Haruka looked, Reina and the others tensed up at once.

"What happened?"

When Reina asked, Haruka displayed footage from inside the building in midair. It showed countless Miroros and Temetas. In numbers that filled the wide corridors, they were running toward Haruka and the others.

As Reina and the others stared in surprise, Haruka added footage of where these Miroros were coming from. It was what had been the arms and bodily fluids of the grotesque giants fighting outside: green liquid that had pooled in huge amounts around the building and seeped in as far as the first floor. From it, new Miroros and Temetas were being generated, one after another.

Haruka filled them in.

"That green liquid is what we call Liquid T. Yesterday's kaiju horde was generated from Liquid T too. Miroro and Temeta are heading here in bodies made from it."

"...How strong are they?"

"I don't know. They're small, so they have less energy, and they shouldn't be anywhere near as strong as the ones fighting outside. They're rush jobs, so there's a good chance they're weak enough for even you to beat easily. But there are so many of them."

Overturning brute force of numbers was hard. Even if each one was weak, together they were a serious threat. And judging from the first floor, their numbers might even keep growing without limit.

Understanding how serious things were, Shiori made a proposal to Haruka with a grim face.

"In that case, could we not call Akira-sama back for now? Even if Akira-sama wins over there, it means nothing if we lose here."

"That's impossible. There's heavy communication interference, and I can't reach Akira, or even the two outside the building. It's probably the work of Barba and Lalantra, who they're fighting now."

The communication interference Barba and Lalantra had created across the area was also meant to keep Hammers and Nelia from noticing what was happening inside the building. And Barba and Lalantra had come here in their administrative persona bodies partly as decoys: by getting Hammers and Nelia to aim for those bodies, they drew that extraordinary firepower away from Haruka and the others. The plan worked just as they had hoped.

They couldn't call for help. At that, Kanae let out a heavy sigh.

"So we've got to handle this ourselves, huh."

This'll be interesting. This'll be fun. The situation was too bad even for Kanae to think that and smile.

Haruka surrounded Shirou and the others with walls, making a room. She was sheltering Shirou, still asleep from extreme exhaustion, Carol, whose gear and skill weren't at frontline level, and Doras, who was in no state to fight.

Haruka stayed outside. Her administrative persona body wasn't made for combat, but that didn't mean she couldn't fight. She had no intention of leaving Miroro and the others entirely to Reina's group.

But then Reina spoke.

"You go in too."

"...Are you sure?"

Haruka looked surprised, and Reina told her with a smile.

"If you're taken down, all of Akira's hard work goes to waste, right?"

"...Thank you. I'm counting on you."

Haruka thanked her sincerely, then made a door in the wall and went inside. When it closed, the door itself vanished, leaving only wall again. Then Haruka's voice reached Reina and the others over comms. Barba and Lalantra were causing heavy interference, but at this distance the connection was fine.

'Basically, fight without worrying about us. The force field armor on these walls is strong, so they won't be destroyed easily.'

"That's a relief."

'But if you can, keep Miroro and the others as far away as possible. Destroying the walls is hard, but making a door in them is possible. This building is our base, Beis's base. Miroro and the others have that kind of control authority too. Of course I'll interfere as much as I can, but there's a limit.'

Barba and Lalantra were still breaking into the building's system. If they broke in completely, they could disable the building's force field armor, and the grotesque giants would blow it away with everyone inside. Dealing with that while also obstructing Miroro and the others' system operations at the same time was hard even for Haruka.

Shiori checked.

"Specifically, how close can they get before it becomes dangerous?"

'Unless they touch the walls directly, I won't let them make a door. And even if they do make one, I'll keep it from opening. After that, it depends on how well I can hold out against Miroro and the others.'

"Understood. Please do everything you can."

'I will.'

Reina looked at the door leading out of the room. Miroro and the others had already swarmed the other side of that large door. They weren't trying to force open the door, protected as it was by force field armor, but they kept interfering with its opening system.

"Just to ask: can't you use that wall-and-door trick to block that door with another wall, or make the door itself disappear?"

'There's no time, so in short: if that worked against Miroro and the others, I'd already be doing it. Like I said, they have control authority over the building too.'

"Figured... Got it. Leave this side to us."

'Please.'

Reina walked toward the door with a confident smile. Shiori and Kanae followed her.

"Reina-sama, Kanae and I will take the front. Please stay in the rear with Lawrence-sama's powered suit, provide support, and deal with any that slip past us."

"Ojou, you'd better get fired up for this, okay?"

"Of course."

Shiori readied her katana, Kanae her fists, Reina her gun, and they took their positions. Lawrence's powered suit had also turned the fingers of both hands into large-caliber muzzles. In the silence, the stillness, their tension seeped into the air.

Then the stillness broke. The door began to open. At a normal speed, yet very slowly to Reina and the others, it slid apart. Through the gap of the half-open door, barely wide enough for a small person, a Temeta tried to slip into the room at high speed. The sound of a fist slamming into it, the sound of that body bursting apart, became the signal for battle.

Kanae had struck with all the output her powered suit allowed. The blow had enough force to send even a kaiju flying. As it turned out, that was far more than needed to beat Miroro and the others. But since their strength was unknown and even that blow might not have been enough, it had been necessary.

The trade-off for that excessive output was an opening, and the next Miroro struck at Kanae through it. Drenched in the previous body as it splattered into green liquid, she aimed a knife-hand at Kanae's head.

Kanae dodged it by a hair. Then, off balance, she kicked. She had already confirmed with her first blow how much force it took to beat them. Adjusting her output, she aimed the kick more at driving her opponent out of the room than at destroying it.

But the one she kicked was destroyed even more easily and spectacularly than the first. It had deliberately slashed its own body's durability. Because of that, Kanae's kick felt as if it had hit nothing at all, and she lost her balance.

The next ones swarmed Kanae in that opening. Even during this brief exchange, the door kept opening. More and more Miroros poured in through the widening passage.

But Shiori covered Kanae's opening. A single horizontal sweep of her katana. Everything within her reach, everyone within about three times the blade's length, was cut in two.

Shiori's katana also had frontline-grade performance. Normally, it could cut in two even a monster more than a hundred meters wide. Considering that, cutting down only opponents within that range was far too narrow.

Then again, the same went for Kanae's earlier punch. It had the power to take down even a kaiju. It would have been no surprise if the shock from her fist had blown away the Miroros along with everyone behind them.

That this didn't happen was due to the special colorless mist filling the area. Even bullets from Akira's HBTN composite gun, equally frontline gear, had their range absurdly shortened in this environment and couldn't reach the walls. With a katana and fists, whose effective range was shorter than a gun's, this short reach was the limit.

Of course, Miroro and the others were affected too. It didn't put Reina's group at a one-sided disadvantage. In fact, with Shiori and Kanae, both excellent at close combat, on their side, forcing the enemy into close combat worked in their favor.

The door opened further. Through the widening gap, more Miroros came at Shiori and Kanae. They kept driving them back. In less time than it took a normally operating door to finish opening, they had already taken down dozens.

But those were only a tiny fraction of all the bodies generated from the green liquid. The sheer weight of numbers gradually pushed Shiori and Kanae back. And at last they hit their limit. First, four of them leapt over the heads of Shiori and Kanae, who had their hands full with others, and got into the room.

But those four were taken down instantly, pulverized by bullets from four large guns: two gripped in Reina's hands and two floating at her back.

Range and power were drastically reduced, but that didn't mean she couldn't shoot. Fired at close-combat range, the bullets still had plenty of power. Reina kicked off the floor, closed the distance as if to press her muzzles against them, and killed all four in an instant.

Not only that, she took down the ones that followed. Kicking off the air and moving nimbly, Reina hammered the horde with a barrage.

Lawrence's powered suit fired in step with her. Under the swarm of bullets, countless bodies instantly lost their shape, turning first into pulverized green flesh and blood, then back into their original liquid.

Feeling a solid sense of success, Reina couldn't help smiling.

(...All right! It's working! I can beat them!)

Shiori and Kanae aside, how much use could she be in this situation? Would she end up just dragging the two of them down? That worry had now been swept away by her own results.

Worry or no worry, Reina had meant to give it her all from the start, and she was doing exactly that. But the meaning, the direction, of that all had wavered between "drag Shiori and Kanae down as little as possible" and "help them as much as possible." Now it had firmly become the latter.

With that to lean on, Reina put her talent to full use. Making the most of her frontline gear, she kept taking down Miroro after Miroro. Shiori and Kanae, too, wrung out every bit of their own talent, as if to answer her efforts.

The amateurs with nothing but high-end gear, as Hammers had judged them, weren't there. Reina and the others were showing real strength.

But that strength wasn't enough to keep the balance. In a contradictory sense of time, in a world where free fall was all but frozen, the door finally finished opening.

At the same time, Shiori and Kanae fell back. Every Miroro was aiming for mutual destruction, with output tuned to self-destruct completely from overload the moment it landed a blow on Shiori or Kanae. Against the pressure of that group, suicidal in both intent and design, even Shiori and Kanae could no longer hold the line at the door.

With both the control room's door and the door that was Shiori and Kanae thrown open, the Miroros flooded into the room. The first few self-destructed right after and turned instantly to dust, but those behind them readjusted their output and kept advancing intact.

Shiori and Kanae had only fallen back, not fled. They fought back alongside Reina. A melee broke out inside the room.

The Miroros had broken past Reina's group into the control room, but they were still far from victory. Their goal was, after all, to take down Haruka. Reina and the others were merely obstacles in the way.

And they hadn't beaten Reina's group either. Whatever their own skill, there were four of them with astonishing frontline-grade armaments, counting Lawrence's powered suit. That was not a force to be taken down easily.

Still, now that they could fight in an open space, Miroro and the others could make even better use of their numbers. They surrounded each of Reina's group and attacked. From front and back, left and right, from above if the target was standing, from below if it was high in the air, or from above and below at once, relentlessly.

And they were shot down one after another. Cut, punched, shot, pulverized, and blown away. But there were reinforcements without end. Bodies still being generated on the building's first floor were racing nimbly through the building toward the control room. Sheer numbers against a few. By keeping it that way, Miroro and Temeta held the upper hand for now.

Fighting, being destroyed, appearing anew, Temeta turned a slightly grim face to Miroro over how strong Reina's group was.

"Damn it! These ones are pretty strong too!"

Miroro acknowledged their skill as well.

"They did stay here instead of running! They just can't take on Barba and Lalantra; that doesn't mean they're weak!"

"This isn't virtual space! Even with Enchaint's lot backing them up, there's a limit! On the real side, as long as Hammers and that Nelia weren't around, it'd be easy! That's what I figured, anyway!"

"It can't be helped! Let's do our best!"

"Yeah!"

No matter how many of themselves were destroyed, their will to fight didn't weaken at all. For Mihazono Town's sake, Miroro and Temeta had made a firm resolve of their own.

That said, there was something else on their minds.

"Geez, if only that Pamela had run the troops here like she did at Atlas, we could fight way more efficiently!"

Miroro and Temeta weren't used to moving themselves as a group. Even when they first fought Akira, each had moved only one body, just their own.

When masses of Miroros had emerged from inside Atlas, it was Pamela who had controlled them. The ones that fired annihilation warheads at Olivia in particular had each been carefully operated by Pamela.

Lion's Tail maids and butlers staked their lives on their duties. When guarding a client, they sometimes really did die as human shields. They carried out their duties even in death. Until death, and after it too. Even if they died, someone would take over the operation of their powered suit, so their corpse kept on working.

Partly for that reason, maids and butlers who led many subordinates, such as personal attendants to the Lawrence family, also learned techniques for operating multiple bodies. Pamela was one of them. And she was skilled enough at it to catch Chloe's eye.

Miroro and Temeta had defeated Olivia with a concentrated barrage of annihilation warheads, and Pamela's exceptional skill at running units was part of what made that possible.

Olivia was a high-performance Old World automaton who could fight Hammers on even terms. Akira, without Alpha's support, was one thing, but the reason even Olivia hadn't sensed the annihilation-warhead barrage until the last moment was that Pamela had operated the bodies so skillfully.

Knowing that, Miroro and Temeta had asked Pamela, through Chloe, to help with this attack too. But she had refused. Temeta grumbled about it, and Miroro answered with a slightly sour look.

"Apparently that private company is only cooperating with us as proactive bodyguards."

Beis, at Atlas, was the one being attacked by Akira's group. Miroro and Temeta, here, were the ones attacking. Proactive or not, as long as they were acting as bodyguards, they couldn't help the attacking side. That was Chloe's argument.

"But Miroro, they may have set up shop locally, but that administrative persona Alice is a Shiaraz company, right? As something from the same country, doesn't it make her angry to see her own country picked clean?"

"People who only care about making money are like that. They're not like us. That's exactly why we have to do our best! We can't forgive Enchaint for trying to sell Mihazono Town out to people like that!"

"Damn right! We'll protect our town no matter what!"

Before their eyes, other Temetas, other Miroros, and themselves were being destroyed. Killed. Even seeing that, Miroro and Temeta's will to fight didn't falter. Every one of them fought without fear of death.

Every Miroro and Temeta generated from the green liquid was the real Miroro or Temeta. Without Pamela's help, they had loaded their own persona data into those combat bodies. So within the concept of what counted as the same person, every one of them was unquestionably the real thing.

For Mihazono Town's sake, they feared neither death nor the existence of multiple copies of themselves. With that much resolve, they gave it everything they had.

The melee in the control room continued. Reina's group had already taken down more Miroros and Temetas than they could count. Even so, before the endless stream of new ones, they were forced onto the back foot.

That disadvantage, however, wasn't an immediate threat to their lives. The enemy's basic policy was to take down Haruka while keeping Reina's group pinned. In the large control room, they had overwhelming numbers. Using that advantage, any body Reina's group couldn't hold off would touch the wall protecting Haruka and the others, make a door, go in, and take Haruka down. That was their plan.

Of course, they were also trying to kill Reina's group if they could. Beating Reina's group would make Haruka that much easier to take down. They weren't holding back there. Still, they weren't trying to take down Reina's group with everyone first. They knew that would be difficult.

The exchange repeated itself. Reina's group kept whittling down their numbers. On top of that, they gave priority to destroying any body that approached the wall to touch it.

Reina gunned down another one that had touched the wall with the guns in both hands. The wall's force field armor was strong enough. Without worrying about damaging it, she fired freely at point-blank range. Showered in a storm of bullets, the body burst apart into green liquid.

Aiming at the opening that attack created, others came at Reina in a group. First she met the ones closing in from left and right with the two large guns she kept floating under remote control. Several took high-power rounds at point-blank range and burst spectacularly.

Next she landed a brutal roundhouse kick on one coming from behind. The blow wasn't meant to pulverize it, but to strike it while leaving it intact. Her leg traced a clean arc and sent the target flying as a solid rather than turning it back into liquid, slamming it into those behind and knocking them away together.

Then she kicked up her supporting leg. The slight loss of balance from the roundhouse was forcibly corrected by her powered suit, which could walk on air. She kicked straight up, blowing away one attacking from above in a single blow.

Flying into the air on the recoil of that kick, she shot other Miroros with both guns. The bodies trying to touch the wall went down. Aiming at the opening from that gunfire, still more Miroros came at her. They didn't wait for her to land. The fight shifted into an aerial battle inside the room, making use of the high ceiling. Reina kept up with it.

On the floor, in the air, on the ceiling, Reina fought on and on. Against individuals and against groups, she was winning. As far as she herself went, she even had the upper hand against enemies coming from nearly every direction.

Even so, her face was grim.

(So many! There are so many of them! There's no end!)

No matter how many she beat, more kept coming. And although each was the kind Reina could now beat in one blow, every one attacked intending to trade its life for hers. She couldn't let her guard down for a moment.

And if she was only roughly even in that state, her group as a whole was losing. The bodies not attacking them were interfering with the wall protecting Shirou and the others, trying to make a door. That put a load on Haruka, who was trying to stop them.

But if Reina tried to cut their numbers further and stepped past the line where she was barely holding even, she herself would be in danger. She might be killed outright.

Then their fighting strength would drop by that much. Naturally, they couldn't hold off Miroro and Temeta anymore either. Haruka would be taken down, and they would lose.

So she mustn't get impatient. Not fearing death and dying for nothing were different things. She had to value her own life properly. Reina told herself that, holding back the part of her that might charge recklessly out of impatience.

And as she was steadily driven into a corner, she deliberately smiled. To drive out her faintheartedness and raise her spirits. To rouse herself.

(...Well, it beats fighting a kaiju horde!)

Stay near Akira and a kaiju horde might show up. Reina remembered the joke Kanae had once made, and, telling herself this was far better than that, she laughed off the impatience and faintheartedness the predicament had stirred in her.

Even so, Reina's situation didn't change. The fight went on. Miroro and Temeta's onslaught didn't stop. The only thing that had changed was her expression. That alone couldn't turn things around.

Put another way, things weren't getting worse either. Losing ground little by little, in a situation where the slightest surrender would end everything at once, Reina held the line by not giving up even a little.

Chapter 300: Master and Servant

In the battle against the seemingly endless Miroros and Temetas, Kanae was also fighting a certain feeling of her own.

The feeling of fun.

Kanae had a bad habit of enjoying combat. It was very strong, very bad, and very twisted.

Putting her own enjoyment first, she would hope the person she was guarding got attacked. And when they were, even though her job was to protect them, she would enjoy the fight so much she hated to end it and would drag it out on purpose. That had happened many times.

Kanae knew her bad habit caused trouble for others. She understood it didn't just burden her coworkers but could cost lives. She understood correctly that it could get someone killed, and could even get herself killed.

Even so, Kanae couldn't stop. If anything, she accepted her nature without a second thought: this was just the kind of person she was.

Even Lion's Tail's training, which turned so many people into the company's high-performance, high-quality products, couldn't change that core of hers. Even with a mindset ready to die for the company drilled into her, her bad habit didn't change. Because of it, Lion's Tail rated her fourth-class, unfit as a maid, and dropped her to treatment befitting that rating, but Kanae didn't care in the least.

She accepted death. Sudden death, senseless death, even dying for nothing. That was how the world was to begin with. Living side by side with death was normal. She didn't reject it.

But she rejected a life without fun. What was a life you couldn't enjoy worth? Thinking that, Kanae had lived a fun life until now.

To Kanae, this battle against Miroro and Temeta was the most fun she could ask for.

She was fighting with everything she had right now. Fun. Her opponents were strong enough to demand it. Fun.

Her current gear belonged to a first-class maid, with frontline-level performance she could never have gotten as a fourth-class maid. She could fight with it. Fun.

Every enemy was trying to kill her in exchange for its own life. They fought with that much resolve. Their eyes shone with real will. Not like monsters: will that only people have. Fun.

There were tons of worthy opponents like that. No matter how many she beat, more appeared. It was the first time in her life she'd had a fight this much fun. Please let it go on forever and ever. As if granting that very wish.

Fun. Fun. Fun.

With that feeling, that joy, welling up inside her, Kanae couldn't stop smiling.

And right now, Kanae was fighting that feeling.

The old Kanae wouldn't have resisted it at all. She would have embraced it, savored it, and let her bad habit loose to her heart's content. But now Kanae had something that stopped her.

In the middle of the fight, Kanae turned her eyes to that something. To Reina.

(She's really grown up, huh...)

When Kanae first met Reina, Reina was just an ordinary kid to her. A hopelessly spoiled girl raised inside the wall. And on top of that, an incompetent who had lost the power struggle within the Lawrence family. Someone who didn't matter.

If that airheaded girl did something stupid, maybe the fighting it caused would be a little fun. That was about all Kanae had expected from Reina as a person.

But after that, Reina changed. She admitted her own lack of skill, accepted it, and worked hard. And after overcoming one ordeal after another, she grew into someone admirable. Enough that Kanae acknowledged her as her mistress.

But even the admirably grown Reina wasn't enough to keep Kanae's bad habit in check.

Her bad habit kept telling her: Fun. Enjoy it. More, more, more. Just as it said, Kanae swung her fists. Threw kicks. A Miroro was blown away, a Temeta sent flying. With each one she beat, the voice grew louder, demanding even more joy from her.

This fight was unbearably fun. That was undoubtedly how Kanae truly felt.

But that wasn't all.

Kanae looked at Reina. Reina was fighting desperately. Smiling and giving it everything she had.

Even Kanae could tell. The smile on Reina's face was different from her own. It was a smile to rouse herself. A smile so as not to yield to the situation. A smile so as never to give up, no matter what. A reflection of Reina's strength of heart.

(She really... has grown up, huh!)

Kanae swung her fists. Threw kicks. A Miroro was blown away, a Temeta sent flying. Her bad habit loudly demanded even more joy from her.

But Kanae rejected that voice.

(Reina-sama's working that hard over there! Then even I can't go on having fun any more than this!)

Kanae's smile vanished. In its place came an utterly serious expression, without a trace of enjoyment.

At the same time, the way she moved changed.

Until now, part of Kanae's movement had been her getting thrown around by the performance of her first-class maid uniform. First, that disappeared. Her movements became quicker, more accurate, more precise.

On top of that, every movement was stripped of all waste. Efficiency pushed to the limit, so much so that it felt almost mechanical.

Kanae had fought like this once before. At the Iida Commercial District Ruins, against a group of Old World automatons dressed in maid and butler uniforms.

They looked completely human, but they were so expressionless that it felt like punching will-less sandbags that only moved automatically, and Kanae hadn't enjoyed that fight at all.

Boring. Cooled off by that thought, Kanae, her face as cold as her mood, displayed overwhelming strength and trampled the group of automatons. A crowd of targets that weren't even enemies anymore. She had kept at the terribly boring work of disposing of them at maximum efficiency.

Kanae's bad habit was also a shackle on her rare talent for combat. With the shackle of wanting to enjoy combat removed, Kanae was that strong.

And now Kanae was fighting with that shackle off again. But it was different from last time. At the Iida Commercial District Ruins, it had come off on its own because the fight was so boring. This time was different. Kanae had removed the shackle by her own will.

Not for herself, but for Reina.

For the first time in her life, Kanae rejected her own bad habit, which she had always accepted; her own core, which she'd thought was fine as it was; her own nature, which couldn't be changed and which she had no intention of changing.

She swung her fists. Threw kicks. With blows honed purely for efficiency, she killed Miroro after Miroro in an instant. Against an enemy with overwhelming numbers, she trampled them with that extraordinary efficiency.

Countless Miroros and Temetas fell in the blink of an eye. Because they were supplied without pause, their total inside the control room had never gone down no matter how many were beaten. Now it was clearly dropping.

Kanae didn't enjoy that fight. She didn't smile, but her face wasn't cold either; she fought on with a serious expression.

Until now, for herself. But now, for Reina.

Seeing Kanae show strength enough to improve their situation, which had been losing overall, Shiori thought:

(For Kanae to give up her own fun...)

Even after Kanae acknowledged Reina as her mistress, she hadn't been able to give up her bad habit. Shiori understood that Kanae had now given it up here, and was surprised.

And in the sight of Kanae, she sensed an attendant's pride.

Selflessness. Purely for the sake of one's mistress.

That loyalty Shiori surely had too, or at least believed she had, she now sensed in Kanae, and using it as a mirror, she took a fresh look at herself.

And she noticed the stray thoughts within her. Her hesitation.

Because of that hesitation, Shiori hadn't been fully focused on the fight. It was so small that even she hadn't been aware of it, but in this razor-thin situation, it was enough to tip the final balance between winning and losing.

Shiori didn't want Reina to die. She wanted her to live, even if Reina hated her for it.

And in this situation, if she thought about how to make sure Reina's life was saved, one way was to deliberately hold back in this fight.

Miroro and Temeta's target was Haruka, not Reina. If they failed to stop them and Haruka was taken down, even Reina would have no choice but to flee. The moment Haruka fell, Akira's plan would collapse. In that situation, there would be no reason for Reina to stay. At the very least, if Shiori advised her to retreat, Reina would have no reason to refuse.

And Miroro and Temeta should have no reason to desperately chase them as they fled. In that case... Somewhere in her heart, Shiori had been thinking that.

Seeing Kanae fight for Reina, Shiori became aware of that hesitation. And she also realized why she had noticed it: Kanae wasn't fighting as Reina's bodyguard.

Naturally, fighting that way made it that much more likely that Reina would die. Kanae was fighting that way knowing that. And Shiori was not one to miss why Kanae, who was fighting for Reina, fought that way anyway.

Kanae was putting Reina's will ahead of Reina's life. If she was going to die, would she die for Reina's life, or for Reina's will? Given that choice, Kanae had chosen the latter.

And through Kanae, Shiori realized that she herself had leaned toward the former. She couldn't help a self-mocking smile.

(How unlike me... If I choose the former, that is no different from denying the Reina-sama of today.)

Over the white card Akira owned, the matter of the card and the Old World Lion's Tail, when Shiori had tried to proceed without telling Reina, Reina had told her plainly.

Even if it made her happy, if what it brought was something Shiori left behind in exchange for her own life, she would not accept it.

(I should have seen it with a moment's thought. Putting Reina-sama's life ahead of Reina-sama's will here would trample the resolve she showed back then. How unlike me, to have Kanae make me realize it...)

Reina's life, or Reina's will. Which would she, as Reina's attendant, put first?

There was no need to hesitate now. She had already made her choice. With that thought, Shiori steeled her resolve anew.

(...It seems I cannot afford to lose either!)

Her hesitation gone, Shiori brimmed with resolve and determination. In a sense, Kanae had shown greater loyalty to Reina than she had. With that thought, as if to compete with Kanae, Shiori tightened her grip on her katana. For now, purely for Reina. With that feeling, she raised her own limits.

Honed strokes cut Miroros in two. Faster, more precisely, she swept away her mistress's enemies and their advantage with them.

Shiori's change wasn't as dramatic as Kanae's. Still, it was enough to turn the tide.

Faced with the sudden ferocity of Shiori and Kanae, Miroro and Temeta's faces hardened. But they weren't surprised. They judged that the two had used some trump card or secret technique.

On top of that, they revised their view of Reina's group. They hadn't stayed here because Hammers's pair had left them behind for lack of skill. They had been deliberately left here to protect Shirou and the others. Seeing the strength Reina's group was showing now, that was how Miroro and Temeta reconsidered it.

And that judgment pushed them toward a new way of dealing with Reina's group.

"So they were this strong... Can't be helped. Miroro! I wanted to save it for taking down Enchaint, but I'm using it now!"

"Got it! Here we go!"

Haruka's current body was meant for Mihazono Town's administrative persona. It wasn't made for combat, but it was sturdy. And the Miroros and Temetas generated from the green liquid, whatever they were as a whole, weren't that strong individually. That was exactly why even someone of Reina's group's strength could kill the bodies attacking from every direction in an instant.

In other words, destroying Haruka's body would be fairly hard for Miroro and Temeta. If things went badly, even surrounding her with everyone, she might hold out indefinitely.

Miroro and Temeta didn't think Barba and Lalantra would lose to Hammers's pair. But they did think Hammers's pair might get away.

If Haruka held out and bought time, and Hammers's pair fled back and joined her, taking her down would become difficult. To avoid that, Miroro and Temeta had prepared a means of destroying Haruka quickly.

Naturally, they couldn't use it as much as they liked. If there were no limit on how many times they could use it, they would have used it long ago. And the number of uses was small enough that they had judged it a waste to spend on Reina's group.

But Reina's group's unexpected strength had made them reverse that judgment.

Kanae was targeted first. Countless Miroros charged at Kanae, who was trampling them indiscriminately, without the slightest flinch or fear, just as before.

Mixed in among them were bodies they had held back until now, which moved differently than before.

Kanae was scattering Miroros with the strength she'd gained by giving up her fun. With a serious face, a honed spirit, and a cool head, she checked her surroundings.

(Their numbers are way down... At this point, maybe it'd be okay to have Reina-sama fall back for a bit?)

Thanks to Reina's group's efforts, the number of Miroros and Temetas in the control room had dropped sharply.

Even if they could generate any number of bodies from the green liquid, there was a limit to how many could be generated per unit of time. Even if each took less than a second to make, if they kept getting destroyed faster than that, the total number of active bodies would keep falling.

On top of that, the bodies they had stockpiled before storming the control room, to keep their numerical advantage, had already been largely used up. Enough that noticeably fewer were coming into the control room.

Kanae didn't want to expose Reina to danger for no reason either. With the enemy's numbers cut down this far, there might be room to have Reina go back to supporting from the rear. That was Kanae's optimistic read of the situation.

But in the next instant, Kanae had a bad feeling. She reflexively looked in the direction her instinct pointed. A moment later, the frontline-grade sensors built into her first-class maid uniform told her what was behind that bad feeling.

(...This reading, is that an annihilation warhead?!)

Miroro and Temeta carried neither guns nor blades. They fought with punches, knife-hands, and kicks from bodies reinforced with high-output force field armor. Blows strong enough to pierce and tear through steel as easily as paper.

But even bodies reinforced that heavily weren't built to fire annihilation warheads. Even Kanae was confused for a moment.

It was only for a moment because the answer was soon laid bare.

The body Kanae was watching drove a knife-hand deep into its own torso. Then it pulled the hand out. Gripped in that hand was a gun. The body had been hiding a gun inside itself.

The annihilation warhead was already primed. All that remained was to aim the muzzle at the target and fire.

An ordinary person would never fire an annihilation warhead at someone at point-blank range. At that distance, they'd be caught in it too. But Miroro and Temeta had been aiming for mutual destruction from the start, assuming they'd take their enemies down with them. They had no reason to hesitate. The body pointed the muzzle at Kanae without a care and fired.

But Kanae had no intention of just taking it. The moment the enemy pulled the gun from its body, she judged it impossible to dodge, and closed the distance herself toward the muzzle leaking that vicious light. Then, before it could fire, she kicked the gun.

The kick forcibly changed the line of fire, and the annihilation warhead shot out of the gun. At close range, the round exploded before hitting anything. Overwhelming light lit up the control room. Kanae, Shiori, and Reina were all swallowed by it.

But none of Reina's group had died. When the flash from the explosion cleared in an instant, an orb of light about two meters across floated there. The sphere of destruction created by the annihilation warhead. But instead of bursting, the orb shrank rapidly. When it was about five centimeters across, it became a physical, glowing sphere, fell to the floor, and rolled.

As Reina's group stared at that unexpected sight, Miroro and Temeta, unsurprised, kept attacking. Shiori was targeted next. After another annihilation-warhead reading, a different body pulled a gun from inside itself the same way and tried to shoot her.

Shiori, surprised as she was, hadn't stopped moving or thinking. She reacted instantly. Closing the distance in a flash, she swung her katana aiming not to cut the gun but to knock it aside.

The impact threw the gun's aim far off, and the annihilation warhead fired in a wild direction. It exploded, lighting the control room with a flash again, then formed an orb of light. That orb, too, quickly shrank, turned solid, fell, and rolled across the floor.

Reina was targeted next. Still inexperienced, she couldn't react as instantly as Shiori and Kanae. But the two of them, targeted first, had bought her time to come to her senses. And since they had shown her how to deal with it, she handled it calmly. She shot the enemy's gun and succeeded in making it fire the annihilation warhead in another direction.

If all three had been targeted at once, it was doubtful whether Reina would have survived. But Miroro and Temeta wanted to save as many annihilation warheads as possible for Haruka, so they tried to conserve rounds. Take down even one of Reina's group, and numbers would handle the rest. No need to force it and take them all down at once. Judging so, they aimed in order of threat level, and that kept Reina alive.

But the next target failed to deal with it the same way. It took a direct hit from an annihilation warhead, was swallowed by the sphere of destruction, and vanished.

The target was Lawrence's powered suit. Shiori had been operating it, but in this situation she couldn't control it in detail; apart from rough instructions like where to position it, it had been running almost entirely on autopilot. That was not enough to fend off Miroro and Temeta's annihilation warheads.

Reina's group had been holding off Miroro and Temeta with three people and that one suit. But with the suit lost, a hole opened in their defense. They tried to deal with it at once, but they were too late. Miroro and Temeta swarmed through the hole and reached the wall protecting Haruka and the others.

With several Miroros touching the wall directly at once, the takeover of the wall's system was completed in an instant. A door formed in the wall, which could block even annihilation warheads, and opened immediately. Miroro and Temeta tried to pour inside.

But gunfire from inside stopped them. Carol and Doras were firing nonstop. Their gear wasn't frontline-grade, though, so it fell far short of the power needed to beat Miroro and Temeta. Even firing a storm with everything they had, they hadn't taken down a single one. Still, the impact of their shots managed to hold the enemy back for a brief moment.

But from behind the ones being held back, another body fired an annihilation warhead. Fired at point-blank range, the round pierced several bodies in its path and drove on toward Carol and Doras beyond them, and toward Haruka further back.

But the round slammed into the door, which had shut just then. The annihilation warhead exploded on impact, scattering a flash all around. It created a sphere of destruction, but the door, reinforced by force field armor of extraordinary strength, fully protected the inside from that destruction. An orb of light formed with a chunk missing where it had touched the door, then shrank and rolled away.

The door vanished, becoming wall again. The Miroros around it were taken down by Reina's group. That didn't plug the hole left by the loss of Lawrence's powered suit, but it stopped Miroro and Temeta from making another door right away.

It was Shirou who had shut the door. Still holding one hand out toward where the door had been, he wore a strained grin.

"Th-That was close...!"

Carol and Doras, who had stopped firing, wore similar expressions.

"I-I thought I was going to die..."

"Geez... Even back in reality it's like this?"

It had missed, but having an annihilation warhead fired at them from point-blank range was too much of a shock for Carol and Doras.

Shirou lowered his hand, and Carol and Doras their guns, and they let out a breath. The battle was far from over, but they felt strong relief at escaping death, and the breath they let out was that much deeper.

Haruka looked at Shirou with concern.

"Shirou, are you okay?"

Shirou answered with a smile, to reassure her.

"I'm fine. I can handle this much load even now. It's rough, honestly, and I'm nowhere near full strength, but I don't want to die either. No way I can keep sleeping through this."

Haruka played along and answered with a joking smile.

"Well, of course."

Shirou had woken up on his own right after the battle started, without Haruka waking him. But even awake, he had deliberately not helped her, focusing on recovering instead.

Exhausted as he was, rather than spend his last scraps of strength half-helping Haruka, Shirou had decided to save himself for when things got truly desperate. This was dividing up the roles too. That was how he saw it.

Shirou had shut the door because Haruka didn't have even the strength left to do it herself.

Miroro and Temeta had control authority over the building too. In other words, like Haruka, they had the authority to make walls inside the control room. If they weren't making walls to box in Reina's group, if they couldn't, it was because Haruka kept blocking them.

That load was still pushing Haruka to her limit. So much so that Haruka, who cherished Shirou more than anyone, had to make him overexert himself.

Shirou and Haruka. Two people who'd disregard themselves for the other's sake were giving it everything together, so that both of them could make it.

To extend how long he could keep fighting overall, Doras used this relatively safe moment to grumble, deliberately letting his mind relax.

"Still, what monsters those guys are. My gun's one of the more powerful models even among gear for high-ranked hunters, you know? And after all I poured into them, I couldn't take down a single one."

Carol agreed with a wry smile.

"Really. They went down so easily against Reina and the others that I got the wrong idea too. Frontline gear really is on a whole other level. No wonder they can fight kaiju."

Thanks to Shirou and Haruka's support, Carol and Doras could watch Reina's group fighting even from inside the walls. And because Reina's group was, in a sense, too strong, they had underestimated Miroro and Temeta until they actually fought them.

"But what was that, with the orbs of light shrinking?"

Shirou answered Carol's question.

"Simply put, that was energy being turned into matter. The colorless mist converted the energy from the annihilation warhead's explosion into matter and contained it."

"Huh. I didn't know the colorless mist could do that."

"To be precise, 'colorless mist' is just what modern people, who didn't know any of this, started calling a gaseous mixture of all kinds of Old World augmented particles, including ones that can do that, plus scattered nanomachines. Maybe it had a different official name in the Old World."

"Ah, I see."

"So no matter how dense the colorless mist is, the same thing won't happen if it doesn't contain the augmented particles that turn energy into matter. It happened here because the building is loaded with them for defense. So it won't get blown away even if someone uses an annihilation bomb or something."

That was why the annihilation-warhead barrage at Atlas hadn't turned any energy into matter. And it was why Akira, outside the building, could see the distant cityscape clearly with his naked eyes even in colorless mist of extraordinary density: the mist there contained few augmented particles that affected optics.

Shirou's explanation also reached Reina's group over comms. As they realized that was what had happened, Shirou added something.

"Turning energy into matter uses up a lot of those augmented particles. The building's system replenishes them, but until the density gets back to normal, the conversion will be less efficient. If they use an annihilation warhead again, don't assume you've got its blast radius figured out from earlier. Give it a wide berth."

'Got it!'

'Understood.'

'Roger that.'

Outside the walls, Reina's group was still fighting. Losing Lawrence's powered suit had added to their burden. But with the number of Miroros and Temetas in the control room greatly reduced, the situation had turned in their favor.

At this rate, we can win. Shirou thought so, taking an optimistic view of things in a sense. But that was immediately overturned.

Annihilation warheads weren't the only thing Miroro and Temeta had held in reserve to take Haruka down. And now it burst into the control room.

Two grotesque creatures. Fusions of beasts, much like the Baoregire Akira had fought before. The multi-legged beasts were just barely small enough to fit inside the large control room. And humanoid figures sprouted not from their backs but from their heads.

Those figures were the size of ordinary people. When Akira fought them at the underground production facility, the figures had worn Yumina's face. This time they wore Miroro's and Temeta's. The Yumina figures had had somehow hollow eyes, but Miroro's and Temeta's eyes clearly showed will. Killing intent.

The stronger the body, the longer it took to generate. Every body that had attacked Reina's group until now had been made in a short time. But these two grotesque creatures had been generated taking as much time as possible.

Miroro and Temeta had planned to spend even more time generating them, so they would be strong enough to surely take down Haruka in her administrative persona body. But seeing how strong Reina's group was, they had decided to send them in early. In that sense, these creatures were considerably weaker than originally planned.

On top of that, the strength of anything generated from the green liquid was basically proportional to its size. The bigger the body, the more energy it could hold. That was also why Barba and Lalantra, as the grotesque giants outside, showed such strength.

Put the other way, reaching that strength required growing that enormous. In the control room, cramped compared with outside, they couldn't be made that big. Even with bodies reaching the ceiling, they couldn't match Barba and Lalantra's strength.

Even so, they were far stronger than the other bodies. The creatures charged at Reina's group, losing no momentum even as they plowed through other bodies. Then they swung the legs supporting their massive bodies. Those legs had a speed out of proportion to their size, and power in proportion to it.

Shiori and Kanae, surrounded by other bodies, couldn't fully dodge. A blow that made their bodies creak even in first-class maid uniforms slammed into them, and the impact sent them flying.

Of course, that wasn't enough to kill them. They were far from fatally wounded. But reflexively jumping with the blow to shed the impact had added to the distance they flew. They dug in midair and forced themselves to a stop, leaving trails of friction in the air, but they had been pulled away from the wall protecting Shirou and the others.

Damn it. Their faces hardened. Exploiting the hole they had left, Miroro and Temeta closed in on the wall again. Reina tried with all her might to stop them, but plugging that hole alone was too much even for her. A door formed in the wall again and immediately opened.

But Shirou's group held out again. Carol and Doras blocked the Miroros from charging in with gunfire, and in that opening Shirou closed the door and turned it back into wall. This time, no annihilation warhead was used. Reina had made a point of taking out any bodies that looked likely to use one first.

But another door was made right away. Reina couldn't plug the hole Shiori and Kanae had left on her own. In fact, if their earlier onslaught hadn't drastically cut the number of bodies in the control room, it would have been no surprise if Reina were already dead.

Shiori and Kanae hadn't simply watched, though. The instant they stopped in midair, they kicked off it and closed the distance to the creatures at high speed. Then they unleashed an all-out kick and an all-out sword stroke. Kanae's kick, without a trace of play in it, sank into a creature, not just rippling its huge body but deforming it. Shiori's katana, with an otherworldly edge, cut deep into the other and tried to split it in two.

But they couldn't finish them. The creatures endured the attacks with astonishing vitality and counterattacked at once. They swung their legs nimbly and tried to bite Shiori and Kanae with their huge heads. The two dodged and struck back.

Technically, the creatures moved clumsily. But they had simple, pure, biological strength more than enough to make up for it.

Shiori and Kanae answered that strength with honed technique. The giant legs, the claws swung too fast for the eye to follow, the fangs that tore through anything: they read every movement with experience built through training and real combat, and kept dodging by a hair. At the same time, they landed punch after kick and swung the katana again and again.

The fight between Shiori and Kanae and the creatures was even. That meant the two had no room to support Reina. In that situation, even moving almost perfectly, Reina still couldn't keep Miroro and Temeta from making doors. And that steadily wore down Shirou, who had to close them.

Growing impatient, Shirou turned his attention outside the building with a grim look. If only Hammers and Nelia would beat Barba and Lalantra and come back. He couldn't help hoping.

Then his face twisted even more.

Smashed by a blow from Lalantra, Nelia was flying through the air.

Chapter 301: The Expected Outcome

Nelia's cyborg body was an extremely high-performance frontline model. And Nelia drew out its full performance. Her strength had reached the realm of picking a fight with the laws of physics.

Even so, it was in the end something Yanagisawa could procure, and he didn't even belong to the Big Five. Meanwhile, Barba and Lalantra in their grotesque giant forms were strong enough to make Hammers, a superhuman of Sakashita Heavy Industries, use his trump card. Nelia's body wasn't powerful enough to fight such an opponent on even terms.

But Nelia hadn't given up on the fight. She kept blocking and dodging Lalantra's onslaught with everything she had: the storm of blows from the giant's many arms, the unbroken string of killing strikes from enormous, razor-sharp claws.

And she kept probing. For the female giant's weak point.

Before Lalantra powered up, Nelia had leapt inside her guard and cut deep into her torso once. In that moment, Nelia hadn't missed the faintest trace of alarm Lalantra showed.

Barba's and Lalantra's administrative persona bodies, their true bodies in effect, were inside the grotesque giants. When Nelia cut Lalantra, her blade had, by chance, passed close to that true body.

In other words, if Nelia had been lucky enough, or Lalantra unlucky enough, the fight would already have been over.

Of course, Lalantra had no intention of allowing that kind of chance twice. From then on, she fought while carefully guarding her true body. But that was exactly what tipped Nelia off: this opponent, who seemed to just regenerate endlessly no matter how often she was cut, had a weak point she had to protect.

And as she fought, Nelia kept searching for that weak point's location and size.

From the giant's stance, the movement of its many arms, its reactions to her attacks, she inferred how they differed from what they'd be if there were no weak point, and worked out where it was guarding and how much.

Dodging giant arms, she predicted; blocking razor claws, she tested; swinging her blades at the slightest opening, she refined her estimate from the reaction. As a result, she learned that the weak point was about the size of a person, and that it moved around inside the giant's body.

But she finished that analysis only after Lalantra had powered up. Now Nelia had nothing left for counterattacks. She was pouring everything into dodging and defending, barely staying upright on a thin, unsteady tightrope between life and death. Cutting her opponent was out of the question.

Besides, even if she managed to cut Lalantra's weak point, that didn't guarantee victory. It was only a guess that it was probably a weak point because Lalantra was guarding it. Cutting there would likely be more effective than slashing anywhere else, but it wouldn't necessarily bring her down.

Nelia knew that much. Even so, she was smiling. Betting on a chance of victory that was her own wishful thinking, that might not really exist, that she didn't know was there at all, she was enjoying this fight.

Color for her life that she could never experience living normally.

To Lalantra, Nelia's enjoyment looked like composure. She had raised her strength even at the cost of letting this giant body destroy itself. Thanks to that, her opponent was on the defensive, true. But she couldn't finish her. Her opponent was stubborn, still fighting, still buying time against her. That was what Lalantra thought.

That thought made Lalantra impatient. At this rate, might Nelia just keep buying time forever? For Lalantra, who meant to beat Nelia quickly and go help Barba, that thought was poison.

Impatient, Lalantra rushed to finish it. Her opponent was purely on the defensive. Since she had powered up, Nelia had only dodged and blocked. No counterattacks. From that judgment, Lalantra tilted her focus toward attack.

And Nelia had been waiting for that. With her focus tilted toward attack, Lalantra's blows became even faster and sharper, but her defense grew that much sloppier, and the opening if a blow was dodged grew larger.

Of course, dodging it was close to impossible, like an amateur reading the moment a gun already pointed at them would fire and dodging the bullet. But Nelia did it, with extreme focus and movements that pushed her cyborg body's performance to the same extreme. The giant arm bored through the air and passed right beside her.

And Nelia stepped over the line of death and slipped inside Lalantra's guard. Now she couldn't block Lalantra's next attack; she was in that kind of position. She had to take Lalantra down for certain with her next blow. Her target was Lalantra's true body and weak point, the administrative persona body inside the grotesque giant. She swung her blades at it.

Of course, there was no guarantee the true body was there. Even the sensors in Nelia's frontline cyborg body couldn't probe the inside of the giant. She was only aiming at a position inferred from her opponent's movements. If that guess was wrong, all she'd have done was close the distance for nothing and deliver a fairly pointless slash.

That Lalantra would rush to finish it. That the attack she unleashed then would create an opening to strike her weak point. That Nelia could dodge that attack. Not just dodge it, but close the distance and reach a position to strike the weak point. That her guess about where the true body was would be right. And that it was really a weak point in the first place.

A slim chance of victory that required clearing every one of those hurdles. Nelia bet on it. And she won the bet. The blow, delivered with her frontline blades charged with energy to their limit, was precisely aimed at Lalantra's true body and weak point, the administrative persona body. The shining blades tore into the giant's body.

But the blades never reached Lalantra's true body. The powered-up giant's body had grown even tougher, and its resilience stopped the blades partway.

Even so, Nelia was smiling. Not because she still had a chance to win. She was simply enjoying the fight, even if the outcome was her own death.

A giant arm, and the claws at its end, took precise aim at her. Nelia had no way to dodge or block it. She took it head-on, was smashed, and flew through the air in pieces.

Lalantra and Nelia's fight, a small individual's resistance against a grotesque giant, ended in Nelia's defeat, as expected. What Shirou had seen from inside the building was that outcome.

But the overall outcome was another matter.

In the next instant, a string of rounds slammed into Lalantra's huge body. Every one was an annihilation warhead. And they exploded. Outside the building, no energy was turned into matter. The orbs of light born at once inside the grotesque giant held for about a second, then burst. They released an extraordinary amount of energy and blew Lalantra away, true body and all.

It was Yanagisawa who had fired the annihilation warheads. He caught the falling Nelia by the head, keeping her from dropping into the green liquid spread across the ground. Then he grinned breezily.

"Well, well, that was a close one. Glad I made it in time."

Nelia gave Yanagisawa a sullen look.

"Hey... You used me as bait, didn't you?"

"No, no, no, nothing like that. A lot was going on on my end too, and I came here as fast as I could, you know? See, I've got a position to think about. As someone from Kugamayama City, barging into a place Lion's Tail has sealed off is a huge problem, and I really, really worked hard to smooth that over..."

Standing in midair, Yanagisawa said this without the slightest sign that he expected to be believed, and aimed the large gun he had just used on Lalantra at the other grotesque giant, Barba. Then he fired another string of rounds. All annihilation warheads again.

But they were blocked. Barba had frozen in shock at Lalantra's defeat, but the moment he detected the annihilation warheads, he stretched several arms toward Yanagisawa and created walls of light, force field shields, in front of his hands. Generated from the dense colorless mist around them, those shields were strong enough to stop even annihilation warheads.

The warheads struck the walls of light and formed orbs there. But they didn't explode right away. Force fields from Barba's hands enveloped the orbs and held back the blasts.

Akira had once done something similar with Alpha's support. He had wrapped an orb in a force field generated by force bullets, temporarily held back its blast, then adjusted the field to give direction to the energy released when the orb burst.

Barba did the same. He blocked every one of the annihilation warheads, then reflected all their energy back at Yanagisawa. A vast surge of energy scorched the air and flew at him, untroubled by the dense colorless mist.

But Yanagisawa had seen that much coming. He dodged it easily in his frontline powered suit and switched his rounds to force bullets.

"Figured just shooting normally would only get blocked. Well, it probably won't do much, but I'll give some covering fire anyway."

At Yanagisawa's utterly unapologetic manner, Nelia, reduced to just a head, sighed in exasperation. She thought it lucky that she hadn't died, but more than that, she looked sullen at having her fight spoiled.

Barba had been surprised at Lalantra's defeat, but he also understood it to an extent. Most of the green liquid that Miroro and Temeta were being generated from had come from Lalantra.

Unlike Barba, who faced Hammers in hand-to-hand combat, Lalantra faced Nelia, who fought with blades, so she could naturally spill large amounts of that liquid by having her body cut.

Because it looked natural, Hammers and Nelia never noticed what Miroro and Temeta were up to, but losing so much Liquid T had greatly weakened Lalantra. To put it unkindly, that was also why someone of Nelia's strength had been able to stand up to a grotesque giant.

Barba, on the other hand, hadn't weakened much. Enough that he still had the upper hand even after making a Sakashita Heavy Industries superhuman play his trump card. Even while blocking Yanagisawa's annihilation warheads, he had room to keep up a fierce attack on Hammers.

(Lalantra... So she's been taken down. Well, it can't be helped. She'd lost that much strength. Even so, she did beat the woman she was fighting. And the man who just showed up doesn't seem to want to fight me properly.)

Barba didn't take Yanagisawa lightly. Having slipped annihilation warheads into Lalantra without her noticing, he was clearly a formidable fighter.

But after his annihilation warheads were blocked, that formidable fighter did nothing more than fire force bullets from long range. To Barba, he was no threat.

(All that's left is to crush my own opponent. He bought more time than I expected, but this is the end.)

Both Barba and Hammers had used time-limited trump cards that only worked if they accepted damage to their own bodies. And partly because of the difference in how much energy a giant and a human could hold, Hammers's time ran out first.

The grotesque giant swung a fist at Hammers, whose movements had clearly slowed. This time, Hammers couldn't dodge what he had barely been dodging until now.

Taking a brutal blow, Hammers was sent flying. Just keeping his shape after an impact like that would normally be a miracle, proof of a superhuman's astonishing toughness. That he was still alive on top of that showed the strength of a Sakashita Heavy Industries superhuman.

But the fight was decided. Hammers had no strength left. Unable to recover his stance in midair, he slammed into the building. Bounced off by the wall's force field armor, which could stop even annihilation warheads, he flew through the air again.

The finishing blow came at him. The grotesque giant swung its long arm hard and threw a punch. In the contradictory sense of time that comes with death close at hand, Hammers watched the giant fist approach, watched his death approach, and with a cool head regretted his own blunder.

(I misjudged...)

Hammers had not only a trump card but also a last resort. If he had used it, he could have beaten Barba. But he had held it in reserve.

There were several reasons. First, it was the kind of measure that would very likely kill him if he used it. He accepted his own death in the line of duty, but he had no intention of dying for nothing.

Even so, he would use it without hesitation if ordered to from above. But with communication to Sakashita Heavy Industries cut off, he had to judge for himself whether this fight was worth dying for.

Even if it was, beating the giant before him with his last resort wouldn't necessarily settle things. Barba's side might have spare giant bodies ready. That they hadn't sent spares in yet might just be because operating a giant required an administrative persona body, limiting how many they could move at once.

His last resort lasted only a short time. If that guess was right, then even if he beat the opponent in front of him, if they sent in a spare after the effect wore off, he'd have spent his last resort for nothing. Then there'd be no point using something so precious.

There was also the question of whether he should use it to defeat Barba's side at all. If Shirou's plan succeeded, Sakashita Heavy Industries might gain rights to Mihazono Town, but success wasn't guaranteed. Failure was entirely possible.

Wouldn't it be better to use a last resort that worked only once to escape with Shirou if that happened? Shouldn't he save it for now? That, too, made Hammers hesitate.

Hammers was one of Sakashita Heavy Industries' more valuable people. But that value, that competence, came from his combat ability as a superhuman. Not the competence in judgment held by someone like Sugadome, who made important decisions as a company executive.

On top of that, the situation was baffling to him. He had asked for Sakashita Heavy Industries to send troops, so that Shirou's plan to make Haruka Mihazono Town's new administrative persona could win the company rights to the town. By any normal reckoning, that was a request it was obviously better to grant, and Sugadome had refused it. It was happening in the middle of that incomprehensible situation, and that fed his hesitation too.

Was this fight worth his dying for, for Sakashita Heavy Industries' sake? Hammers wavered. If ordered to die, he would die, but there was no such order. He couldn't decide.

And in the end, still holding his last resort unused, he was about to receive the finishing blow. It was too late to use it now. It only worked if he had a certain amount of strength left.

(If I was going to die without using it, I should have used it... I failed...)

He had no regrets about dying. But because he had misjudged, he hadn't been able to make full use of his life for the company. A pity. So Hammers thought, regretting it. Even if it was all hindsight.

And as it turned out, Hammers's judgment hadn't been wrong.

A shining blade swung. It split the grotesque giant's arm from fist to shoulder. Cut in two, the halves of the arm parted left and right and passed right by Hammers without touching him. And Hammers, half dumbfounded, found himself held under one arm by the one who had swung that blade.

"You..."

It was Olivia.

"Hammers-sama. Are you in a condition where retreating on your own would be difficult?"

The question brought Hammers back to himself. He let out a small sigh before answering.

"...No, I can manage that much."

"Then please retreat."

"Understood."

Hammers stood in midair on his own and leapt backward. Olivia, in turn, kicked off the air toward Barba and began fighting him.

Watching her, Hammers thought:

(Why is she here? She should have been destroyed in the first place... Even if there was a spare unit, if it's Mr. Lawrence's will, she'd go to Akira... With the communication interference I can't tell how things stand with Akira, but has it already been settled over there? But then it would be odd for her not to be with Akira...)

Hammers stopped thinking about it there. Thinking further wouldn't get him past speculation. He put plenty of distance between them so as not to get in Olivia's way.

Just then, Yanagisawa came over. With a breezy smile, he held out recovery medicine.

"So glad you're safe! Here you go! Please use this!"

".....I'll take it."

Swallowing what he wanted to say, Hammers accepted the recovery medicine and used it without hesitation.

The frontline-grade medicine began healing Hammers's body with its extraordinary performance. But he was far from fully healed.

Fully treating a superhuman's injuries, countering a load that could injure even a superhuman, required matching quality and quantity. In an ordinary person, the medicine would regrow even a lost arm and heal them completely, but for Hammers, who had pushed his body to the brink of destruction by playing his trump card, it fell short in both quality and quantity.

Still, it restored him about as far as emergency treatment pulling someone back from the brink of death. Hammers let out a breath.

"...So, shouldn't you be supporting Olivia-san?"

"Of course I will. It's just a bit hard to fight while carrying Nelia, so, sorry, but would you mind holding on to her?"

With that, Yanagisawa held out Nelia, now just a severed head, in front of Hammers. Hammers sighed again and took Nelia by the hair.

"Thank you very much. Well then."

With that parting smile, Yanagisawa left to back up Olivia. Not with the token support of shooting from long range as before; this time he closed in to take Barba down.

At that point, Hammers was sure they had won. He had been fighting Barba until moments ago. He knew how strong he was. With Olivia and Yanagisawa together, they could beat him without trouble, he judged.

Even so, there was no smile on his face.

(That man... He was going to wait until I was dead, wasn't he?)

Yanagisawa had in fact meant to.

If Hammers died, winning Shirou over would be easy. And if Barba was worn down from fighting Hammers, Yanagisawa could beat him alone. But if Hammers didn't die, it would be better to fight properly and put Shirou in his debt. Following that line of thought, Yanagisawa had at first given only token support. Then Olivia appeared, so he decided to fight in earnest.

Hammers didn't condemn that way of thinking, though. Yanagisawa wasn't a Sakashita Heavy Industries man. He had neither duty nor obligation to save Hammers. All he had was whatever profit he stood to gain by saving him. That was how Hammers saw it.

And none of those calculations would have mattered if he had simply beaten Barba in the first place. It was his own fault for losing. Hammers thought that too. That was exactly why he didn't blame Yanagisawa.

But he didn't feel good about it either. Hammers let that show, his face twisted.

Then Nelia spoke.

"I know how you feel."

Hammers didn't answer.

In hindsight, by not using his last resort, Hammers had avoided dying. And they looked set to achieve the original goal of destroying Barba and Lalantra.

His own life came second. Completing the mission was victory. In that sense, Hammers had won.

Even so, his face was twisted.

Under Olivia and Yanagisawa's onslaught, Barba was being driven into a corner.

Olivia's sword cut off one of his giant arms. Temporarily losing one of his many arms had happened many times in the fight with Hammers. He could just attack with the rest and regenerate while his opponent fended them off. Easy.

But this time it was hard, because Yanagisawa was backing her up. Having to deal with him meant he could deal with Olivia that much less. As a result, another arm was cut off before the first finished regenerating.

Then Yanagisawa fired a string of annihilation warheads. Barba tried to reflect them with force field shields as before.

But this time Yanagisawa was supporting her in earnest. After firing the warheads, he fired a string of force bullets and used them to generate force fields, trying to control the direction of the orbs' blasts himself. As a result, the orbs, squeezed between force fields from both sides, stayed contained.

If this went on, Yanagisawa would lose. In a contest of force field shield output, Barba, the grotesque giant, was stronger. Even firing force bullets nonstop, Yanagisawa could only hold out for a short time.

But then Olivia swung her sword and cut off the arm generating Barba's force field shield. In the instant the field's control faltered, the balance of force fields holding back the orbs' blasts collapsed. A vast amount of energy poured out at Barba. Its force was tremendous; if the area hadn't been filled with dense colorless mist, it would have been no surprise if it had blasted all the way past the horizon.

But even after taking that, the grotesque giant didn't fall. If that were enough to bring him down, Hammers would already have done it. Still, he didn't come through unscathed; even with his whole body protected by high-output force field armor, he took heavy damage.

Olivia and Yanagisawa weren't about to let that slip. Before Barba could recover, they pressed the attack. She carved up the huge body with blades of light, he riddled it with countless force bullets, then fired annihilation warheads to hit the giant with tremendous energy again.

Even so, Barba didn't fall. That showed the grotesque giant's strength was on par with the kaiju that lived on the front lines.

But Olivia and Yanagisawa were at that frontline level too. Against the two of them, three counting Hammers who had fought first, the fight was already decided.

Barba gave up on the grotesque giant's body.

(This body is finished...! All that's left is to count on Miroro and Temeta!)

Because of the jamming Barba's side had set up themselves, he couldn't tell how Miroro and Temeta were doing, or Beis either. But through the town's system, he could tell who still held administrative persona authority over Mihazono Town. And as long as Haruka's authority remained, he knew Miroro and Temeta hadn't taken her down yet.

In that situation, what should he do? Barba made his decision.

The grotesque giant began to run wild. Until now, it had raised its output while accepting damage to its body. He pushed that further and removed the limit on the energy boost from autophagy.

Doing that would, naturally, accelerate the body's destruction all at once. And the energy gain wouldn't increase much for it. A poor trade. That was exactly why Barba hadn't used it until now.

The grotesque giant swung its many arms with a body on the verge of collapse. Several of the weakened arms couldn't withstand the force and tore off, flying away. But the rest came at Olivia and Yanagisawa with even greater power.

Olivia and Yanagisawa judged that Barba, realizing he'd lost, had come to trade his life for theirs, intending to destroy himself. They held back their attacks and went on the defensive. That alone was enough to win now. Strictly speaking, careless counterattacks against the giant in this state would have put them in danger too.

But the giant's onslaught lasted only a short time. Even energy gained by rapidly wrecking its body couldn't be used efficiently by a collapsing body. No matter how hard he forced it to move, that body could only raise its output so far, and it burned out fast.

The giant's movements visibly began to slow. The many arms that had swung with a ferocity fit to blow away mountain ranges lost much of their force. The force field shields that had stopped even annihilation warheads weakened drastically.

Seeing that, Olivia and Yanagisawa went on the attack again. And the grotesque giant had no strength left to resist. Olivia swung her sword. A blade of light from it split the giant in two from top to bottom. Yanagisawa delivered the final blow, firing several annihilation warheads into each half of the huge body. Spheres of destruction formed inside it and exploded.

The explosion shook even the air, thick as it was with dense colorless mist. That overwhelming energy blew the grotesque giant away without leaving a single fragment.

Olivia sheathed her sword. That was proof that no threat remained here.

Seeing it, Yanagisawa lowered his gun too and let out a breath.

(Well, that'll do. I saved Hammers, so I should have Sakashita Heavy Industries owing me a fair bit.)

Then he looked toward the building where Shirou and the others were.

(Whether Shirou sees it as a debt to me is another matter, but if Olivia came here because Shirou's group asked for her, I can hope. Even with this interference, it'd be no surprise if someone with Shirou's skill got a message through...)

The communication interference Barba's side had created, which should lift once both Barba and Lalantra were defeated, was still going on.

Chapter 302: A Grave Blunder

Inside the building's control room, Reina's group's fierce battle raged on. The beast fusions with humanoid figures sprouting from their heads kept relentlessly targeting Shiori and Kanae. Leaving them to Shiori and Kanae, Reina was desperately holding off the other bodies.

Strictly speaking, she wasn't holding them all off. Their numbers had dropped, but taking them on alone was too much. A fair number broke through, reached the wall protecting Shirou and the others, and made doors there. And several times they got those doors open.

While Carol and Doras held the Miroros back from inside with gunfire, Shirou, already near his limit, enduring the load of interfering with the system, managed to close the door each time. That razor-thin situation went on.

Seeking a breakthrough, Kanae went for a fusion's humanoid part. It looked like an obvious weak point, which was exactly why it might just be a decoy. But it might also be a weak point. She couldn't ignore it. She went for it, a bit forcefully.

The grotesque beast opened its huge maw and lunged at Kanae to devour her. If that mouth full of sharp fangs closed, she would die. At the very least, she'd lose a large part of her body.

To dodge it for sure, she should have dodged a little early and wide. But Kanae waited until the very last moment and dodged it by a hair's breadth. Then she struck back fast, hammering a brutal blow into the beast's humanoid part.

Compared with the beast part, which looked obviously tough, the humanoid part looked fragile. It really was more fragile than the beast. But it was still part of the body of an extraordinarily powerful fusion. Even Kanae, who had stopped enjoying the fight and was using her rare talent to the limit, couldn't destroy it in one blow.

But dodging the earlier attack by a hair had, for all the risk she'd taken, given her time to land a combo afterward.

The first-class maid uniform Kanae wore gave its wearer astonishing physical ability. Enough that even an untrained amateur could tear thick steel plate like thin, flimsy paper. With no technique at all, by brute force alone.

And this was a combo delivered with that much strength and honed technique besides. Taking it head-on, the humanoid figure was helplessly pulverized.

But losing its humanoid part didn't make the fusion flinch in the slightest. It swung its head hard into Kanae. With the opening right after her combo, she couldn't dodge it.

The beast's huge head slammed into her. The impact sent her flying, and unable to break her fall, she smashed into the ceiling and bounced off. Waiting there was the beast's huge maw; it had leapt after her.

The fang-filled mouth snapped shut at high speed. But all it bit was the colorless mist filling the room. Kanae had kicked off the air and escaped its mouth.

Recovering her stance, Kanae switched gears.

(So that part was just a decoy. I was being naive.)

The humanoid part wasn't the fusion's weak point. She'd fallen for it neatly, but at least that was confirmed now. With that, Kanae let it go and kept fighting the fusion, landing brutal punches and kicks again and again. Meanwhile, the humanoid part slowly regenerated, but she didn't aim for it and concentrated her attacks on the beast.

Shiori had considered the possibility that the humanoid part was a weak point too. But after seeing the result of Kanae trying first, she stopped aiming there as well.

Shirou watched their fight with a grim face. He had been thinking the same thing, seeing a breakthrough there and hoping. His face twisted with impatience in proportion to how much that hope had been dashed.

Then he looked for a breakthrough elsewhere, not inside the control room but outside the building. Hoping Hammers and Nelia would beat Barba and Lalantra and come back, he looked out. It was right then that Nelia was smashed by a blow from Lalantra.

As Shirou grew even more anxious at the sight, things moved. Another annihilation-warhead reading appeared. And countless bodies put their hands on the wall, trying to make a door.

Noticing, Reina decided to leave the wall to Shirou's group. She quickly spotted the body trying to pull a gun from inside itself and shot it.

She had done it many times already. There was no hesitation in her movements. The targeted body was blown away under countless bullets, never getting to aim the gun from inside it at the wall where Shirou's group was.

The problem was that when that method had worked, there had been no fusions.

Before being blown away, the body had thrown the gun from inside it to the fusion Shiori was fighting. The humanoid part caught it and aimed the gun, its annihilation warhead already primed, at Shiori.

With death in front of her, time stretched out for Shiori.

(No...! So that's what the humanoid part was for...!)

A beast's limbs couldn't use a gun. But human hands could. That was why the fusion had gone to the trouble of sprouting a humanoid part. By the time she realized it, it was too late. Shiori wasn't in a position to deal with an annihilation warhead fired from this close.

The fusion's humanoid part was a decoy to lure careless attacks. At least, destroying it wouldn't mean much. Thinking that and focusing her attacks on the beast part had made Shiori neglect her guard against the humanoid part.

She couldn't dodge. Watching the light leak from the muzzle, Shiori understood that.

(Reina-sama, this is as far as I go. May fortune favor you. Kanae, I leave the rest to you.)

And the annihilation warhead was fired, and hit.

A wall that had suddenly appeared in front of Shiori.

The wall's force field armor was the same as on the walls around Shirou's group. Blocked by the wall, the orb from the annihilation warhead took on a warped shape, shrank in that warped shape, and rolled across the floor as energy turned to matter.

Not only Shiori but Reina and Kanae, and even Miroro and Temeta, couldn't hide their surprise at so unexpected a turn. The surprise was strong enough that everyone stopped fighting, if only for an instant.

Haruka's voice brought Reina's group back to their senses.

'That was close! I'll support you from here on!'

It was Haruka who had made the wall that saved Shiori.

Reina's group, recovering first, landed brutal attacks on Miroro and Temeta, who recovered a moment later. In a situation where an instant separated life and death, that slight delay was an enormous opening.

A storm of bullets from Reina blew away many bodies, Shiori's sword cut deep into a fusion's torso, and Kanae's fist blew a beast's head away. Reina's group still hadn't won. But things had taken a big turn for the better.

'Lalantra's been taken down! That's given me room to help you! Just a little longer! Hang in there!'

Haruka had been fending off Barba and Lalantra's combined intrusion into the building's system. That said, with one of them down, the load on her hadn't been halved. Haruka, Barba, and Lalantra all held the same authority.

Holding two of the same kind of authority didn't mean having authority twice as strong as the other side. It wasn't majority rule. If it were, Haruka would never have had a chance in the first place. In the same sense, the load on her hadn't dropped much with Lalantra's defeat.

Even so, it had definitely dropped by Lalantra's share. Haruka had used that spare capacity to help Reina's group.

Haruka also closed the control room's door to cut off Miroro and Temeta's reinforcements. It would be opened again in short order, but that much breathing room was plenty for Reina's group now. While Shiori and Kanae held the fusions, Reina took down the other bodies one after another, fast.

The main reason Reina had been struggling was that no matter how many she beat, more kept appearing without end. Once the reinforcements stopped, finishing them off was easy. Before the control room's door opened again, every body in the room had been destroyed.

Only the two fusions remained. Each, even wounded, had the strength to stand up to Shiori and Kanae. After the two's earlier attacks the fusions were at a slight disadvantage now, but there was no room for carelessness. If Shiori and Kanae relaxed, sure of victory, it would be no surprise if the tables turned that very instant.

But that didn't happen. Shiori and Kanae never let their guard down.

And Reina joined in.

"Shiori! Kanae! Sync up with me!"

An annihilation-warhead reading appeared once more. But this time it wasn't Miroro and Temeta about to use one. It was Reina. Light was leaking from the muzzles of the two large guns she controlled floating in the air.

An annihilation warhead was far too powerful to use on a single body. And using one on a fusion had been impossible while she was dealing with a swarm of bodies. In other words, now that every body in the control room was down, she could use it. Normally you couldn't use annihilation warheads indoors, since you'd be caught in them too, but that was no problem now either.

Even the fusions couldn't afford to take that. They tried with all their might to escape Reina's line of fire.

And Shiori and Kanae weren't going to allow it.

"Leave it to me!"

"Roger that!"

They struck not to damage the fusions but only to pin them in place, forcibly stopping their movement. So forcibly that both were badly thrown off balance; a counterattack afterward could have been fatal.

They struck anyway because they understood there would be no more counter-attacks.

Reina fired annihilation warheads from her two large guns. The rounds hit the fusions, pinned for just an instant, without fail.

The warheads went straight into the fusions' bodies and formed spheres of destruction from within. There was no colorless mist inside the fusions to suppress the warheads, none of the augmented particles that turned energy into matter. The vast energy, which would normally spread out in a sphere, engulfed the targets from the inside, blew them away, and expanded into shapes a size larger than the fusions.

Keeping those shapes, the energy touched the colorless mist drifting in the room and shrank. It turned to matter, fell to the floor, and rolled.

With that, every Miroro and Temeta in the control room, bodies and fusions alike, had been defeated. But Reina's group's fight wasn't over yet. The control room's door opened, and more Miroros and Temetas appeared.

But the outcome itself was decided. Haruka now had the spare capacity to close that door right away. Even if the reinforcements were endless, as long as the door didn't stay open, the number that could get into the control room was sharply limited. And that many were no match for Reina's group now.

Reina fired her guns with a smile. Not a smile she wore on purpose to rouse herself, but one born of the satisfaction of overcoming a predicament and pride in having done it.

Shiori smiled too as she swung her sword. She was glad they had come through a situation where it would have been no surprise if any of them died, or even all of them, without anyone dying. And her face showed unstinting praise for the mistress who had pulled it off.

Kanae also smiled as she swung her fists. That was proof she was enjoying the fight again, but also proof that things had turned enough in their favor to allow it.

Reina's group took down every Miroro and Temeta that came back into the control room. The door was still shut.

"Reina-sama. Splendidly done."

"Thanks, Shiori. Well, Kanae? I'm pretty good, right?"

"Yep. That was splendid. Now if you just don't get cocky about it, it'll be perfect."

"Yes, yes. I'll be careful."

"Okey-dokey. Here they come again."

Miroros and Temetas poured in through the reopened door. Reina's group, in high spirits, met the wave that had built up while it was shut.

Shirou let out a sigh of relief. Reina's group's advantage was no longer in doubt. The grotesque giants outside the building had been defeated too. Judging the immediate crisis over, his expression relaxed.

"All right... We managed somehow."

Hearing that, Carol and Doras relaxed too.

"We managed? I'm taking your word for it, okay?"



"Then I'm going to sleep... Don't wake me unless things get deadly bad again..."

With that, Doras lay down on the floor and actually fell asleep. He really was badly exhausted. He had forced himself to fight with the load from the virtual-space battle still lingering. He had only fought because not fighting meant dying; otherwise he would have stayed lying down the whole time.

Watching him, Carol laughed with amusement. Shirou had no intention of complaining either. He knew full well that all of them, himself included, had been at their very limit.

In that relaxed atmosphere, Haruka wore a slightly troubled expression. Shirou noticed.

"Haruka, what's wrong?"

If she had looked grim, Shirou would have needed to take it seriously. But she didn't, so he asked fairly lightly.

Haruka groaned a little before answering.

"...With both Barba and Lalantra defeated, the intrusion into the building's system has stopped, but..."

Strictly speaking, it hadn't stopped completely, since Miroro and Temeta were still around. But compared with an intrusion by holders of administrative persona authority, the load of blocking it was very low. That was why Shirou and Haruka could afford to look relaxed.

"Right. And?"

"...Lalantra's authority has been revoked. But Barba's hasn't..."

"Huh?"

Shirou instinctively looked outside the building. The grotesque giants that had been Barba and Lalantra were nowhere to be seen. They had definitely been defeated.

"...Is the system just slow to reflect it? Or... did he get away?"

Understanding Haruka's concern, Shirou's face grew a little troubled too, like hers.

A giant arm from the grotesque giant that had been Barba lay on the ground far from the building. It was the part that had torn off and flown away when he went berserk, swung hard with a collapsing body that couldn't take the strain.

Barba came out of that arm.

Because of the jamming his side had set up themselves, Barba couldn't tell how Beis was doing.

If, by some chance, Akira had already beaten Beis and Beis had lost his administrative persona body too, the only administrative persona body their side had left would be the one Barba was using now. Thinking that, Barba had decided to preserve his true body, his administrative persona body.

First he moved through the giant's body to the end of an arm. Then he sent the giant berserk, swung that arm hard so it tore off on purpose, and used the momentum to fling it far away. The berserk giant had doubled as a decoy, drawing Olivia and the others so Barba could escape.

Barba glanced toward the building and let out a breath.

(...Even all that wasn't enough to beat them. Even if I'd gone for mutual destruction, I'd have been the only one taken down. Getting out was the right call.)

Barba could also have chosen to keep fighting near the building to support Miroro and Temeta. To interfere strongly with the building's system, he needed to be as close to it as possible.

But having seen how unexpectedly strong Hammers and the others were, Barba threw that choice away. The chances of Miroro and Temeta pulling off their plan weren't high enough to make staying here worth it. At least not high enough to accept the risk of this administrative persona body being destroyed. That was his thinking.

(For now, I'll get away from here. There's still a chance Miroro and Temeta take down Enchaint...)

Having left the building's vicinity, Barba could no longer interfere with its system, but he kept up the area-wide jamming. So that Haruka's group couldn't call Hammers and the others for help. Because of it, he couldn't contact Miroro and Temeta or Beis. He'd check on things once the situation settled. Thinking that, Barba started to leave.

But in the next instant, a kick from a superhuman pulverized Barba's body.

"Wha...?!"

The last thing Barba saw with his remaining head, flying through the air with everything below his neck gone, was Hammers throwing a punch at him.

Hammers had noticed Barba's true body moving from the giant's torso into its arm. Olivia and Yanagisawa had missed it because they were in the thick of the fight. Hammers had caught it because he had pulled back, out of the fight. Barba had moved through the giant's body that carefully and that covertly.

Leaving the grotesque giant to Olivia and Yanagisawa, Hammers had headed, still holding Nelia, to where the arm hiding Barba's true body had landed. When Barba, his administrative persona body, came out of the arm, Hammers destroyed him on the spot.

The recovery medicine from Yanagisawa, being frontline-grade, had healed Hammers enough to manage that much.

Hammers let out a breath.

".....Well, let's say I've done the bare minimum."

With the administrative persona body that had been Barba's true body destroyed, the area-wide jamming lifted. Noticing, Hammers contacted Shirou.

"Shirou. It's over."

Shirou's reply came back sounding exasperated.

"Don't give me 'it's over.' We almost died over here, you know?"

"What?"

When Shirou told him what had happened, Hammers held his head in his hands inwardly as he spoke.

"...You're safe now?"

"Yeah. The reinforcements for those Miroro and Temeta guys have completely stopped. They can't open the control room door anymore either. Haruka says she checked all that thoroughly, so we should be fine."

Miroro and Temeta had been generated from the green liquid, but the generation process itself had been controlled by Barba and Lalantra through their administrative persona bodies. With those destroyed, the generation had stopped.

The Miroros and Temetas already generated were still moving. But they didn't have the power to open the control room door. With Barba's side no longer interfering with the building's system, Haruka could exert enough power.

"...I see. I'm heading back now."

Hammers said that and cut the connection. Then he let out a deep sigh and held his head. A grave blunder. It was written all over his face.

Seeing him like that, Nelia, just a head, laughed with amusement.

"I know how you feel."

Hearing that from Nelia again, Hammers grimaced. And again, he didn't answer.

Olivia came over to Hammers with Yanagisawa.

"Hammers-sama, I will now go to Akira-sama. Please excuse me."

Olivia bowed politely, and Hammers answered just as politely.

"Understood. Thanks to you, I didn't die. Thank you very much."

"Our company has merely responded to our client's request. Please direct your thanks to Lawrence-sama. Now, if you'll excuse me."

With that, Olivia left. After seeing her off, Hammers silently thrust Nelia's severed head at Yanagisawa. Yanagisawa took it without a word, with a breezy smile.

After that, Hammers and the others rejoined Shirou's group. Yanagisawa and Hammers easily scattered the Miroros and Temetas they met on the way.

When Hammers returned, Shirou checked with him.

"...That unit is strictly a replacement for you. It's not coming to take me back. You're sure?"

With the interference gone, Hammers had contacted Sugadome and requested a unit be sent. And Sugadome had approved it.

"Yes. The unit will operate under my command. The conditions for taking you back haven't changed."

"In that case, can't we send that unit to support Akira?"

"No. It's being dispatched as a replacement for my fighting strength. As long as I stay here, the unit stays here too. It can't support Akira."

Hammers had confirmed that with Sugadome too.

"I see... Well, Olivia-san's on her way to Akira, so maybe Akira can manage with that? We did send both Blue Jackets too..."

Barba's and Lalantra's authority had already been revoked. All that was left was to defeat Beis, and Haruka would become Mihazono Town's new administrative persona. Even with things this far along, why did Sugadome still refuse to send forces to take down Beis? Shirou found it more and more baffling, but optimistically figured Akira would manage somehow.

Then Haruka spoke.

"Shirou, I'm putting up what's happening over there."

With the interference lifted, Shirou's group could finally see what was happening on Akira's side. Through Mihazono Town's system, Haruka displayed it in their augmented vision.

The moment they saw it, shock showed on their faces.

"Wha...?! What is that?!"

There was Akira, fighting all alone against a colossal kaiju as huge as an intercity transport vehicle.

Chapter 303: The Colossal Kaiju

Akira kept up his fierce attack on Atlas, the intercity transport vehicle. Thanks to Haruka, he knew where Beis was inside. And thanks to Shirou, he had two Blue Jackets, frontline humanoid weapons, at his side. He poured their overwhelming firepower into the target without mercy.

Even so, it wouldn't be destroyed that easily. Atlas was protected by extremely strong force field armor that stopped annihilation warheads and withstood even bombardment from the monsters of the upper airspace.

Of course, maintaining force field armor that strong took a correspondingly huge amount of energy. But an intercity transport vehicle, built to travel to distant cities in its enormous body, held an enormous amount of energy too. Running it dry wasn't an option.

But Akira didn't panic. He knew well what the two blue machines could do: they had broken through the hell of a kaiju horde battling a swarm of giant bugs to rescue him.

And a hole did open in Atlas's armor. Extremely tough as an intercity transport vehicle was, withstanding a one-sided attack by two frontline humanoid weapons was too much even for it.

Normally it carried plenty of personnel for defense precisely to avoid this. But Lion's Tail had pulled that force off. On top of that, Akira had already destroyed the swarm of combat bodies generated from the green liquid and the vehicle's powerful main gun. Strong force field armor or not, it was only a matter of time before the outer hull was breached.

Seeing the hole in the vehicle's armor, Akira grinned.

"All right!"

Now he just had to fire annihilation warheads through the hole into the vehicle. That might not destroy Atlas itself, but it could at least wipe out Beis inside, along with everything around him. With that thought, he loaded annihilation warheads into his two HBTN composite guns.

An annihilation-warhead reading appeared from his readied guns and grew stronger. The light of destruction leaked from their muzzles.

"Now, get blown away!"

I've won. Akira let himself think that.

And it was overturned.

"...Wha, what?!"

Green liquid gushed from the hole in the armor. And holes opened besides the one Akira had made, spewing green liquid as well. The force widened the holes further, and more liquid poured out.

While Akira stared in shock, green liquid burst out all over the vehicle, from entrances and loading bays too. Cracks ran across the vehicle's surface as if it had given way to pressure from inside, and liquid flowed from them as well.

All the while, the two Blue Jackets kept up their fierce attack. But even under that barrage, Atlas's transformation didn't stop.

The green waterfalls pouring from the huge holes in the hull hardened into giant legs. The liquid covering the vehicle solidified into green scales. Part of it rose and changed shape into a kaiju's head.

And Atlas transformed into a gigantic grotesque creature. Into Atlas the colossal kaiju, with an intercity transport vehicle inside it.

Coming to his senses, Akira fired the annihilation warheads he had already primed. He carried four six-round magazines of them, twenty-four in all. He fired half, emptying a full magazine from each of his two guns.

Twelve annihilation warheads concentrated on a single point created a huge orb of light. The sphere of destruction burst and engulfed the area in a flash.

Then the flash cleared. Akira's face twitched at what he saw.

"You've gotta be kidding..."

There stood Atlas, hardly wounded. It wasn't unscathed, of course. Akira had aimed at the base of one of the colossal kaiju's giant legs, where the armor of the vehicle inside had a big hole. The leg engulfed by the orb was charred and badly damaged. Some of the scales covering the hull had vanished too, partially exposing the vehicle inside.

But that was all. A wound like that was nowhere near enough to bring Atlas down. The partly destroyed leg was already regenerating, spewing green liquid. The partly exposed hull was likewise being covered in scales again.

Akira inwardly despaired at his opponent's astonishing toughness, but it wasn't really that surprising.

Relagros, the kaiju Akira had once fought in the third deep zone of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, had been strong enough to withstand annihilation warheads. Atlas the colossal kaiju was tougher by far.

It had absorbed an intercity transport vehicle that was tough to begin with, and reinforced its body generated from the green liquid with the vehicle's vast energy. It wasn't fragile like a single kaiju in a horde. The power of a mere twelve annihilation warheads was something Atlas could easily withstand.

Still, if that were all, Akira could get away with just despairing. If his opponent were simply incredibly tough, he could still attack Atlas one-sidedly.

But Atlas, and Beis, weren't going to allow that.

The colossal kaiju sprouted a mass of large cannons from its back. The biological cannons took aim at Akira and opened fire all at once. Not just solid rounds made from congealed bodily fluid, but lasers powered by its stored energy. It even sprouted biological missiles and launched them.

Akira's current powered suit was an HBTN powered suit, a frontline product. Its force field armor and force field shields were extremely strong. He could take not just dozens but hundreds of the rounds Atlas had just fired and not die. He'd withstand them easily.

But thousands, tens of thousands, were another story. Even top-grade gear that cost Chrome to buy had its limits. The barrage fired at Akira had clearly reached that level.

Against that extraordinarily dense, wide barrage, Akira first read its thick and thin spots and moved to a thin part. Then he swung his blade and cut through the barrage. The slashing wave from the blade knocked the solid rounds and lasers off their paths and away from him.

Of course, one swing couldn't stop the barrage. Akira weathered Atlas's fierce fire by swinging his blade again and again.

He also had the two Blue Jackets attack Atlas's cannons. The blue machines' gunfire, which had pierced both the kaiju horde and the swarm of giant bugs in the earlier battle, pierced Atlas's barrage too and destroyed the cannons growing from the colossal kaiju's back.

Losing so many guns weakened the barrage. But only temporarily. No matter how many were destroyed, new cannons sprouted right away.

Cutting through the ceaseless barrage, Akira grimaced.

"There's no end to it... Seriously, what am I supposed to do about this?"

For now, neither Akira nor Atlas had anything close to a decisive blow. In a sense, it was even. But a long fight clearly favored Atlas. Akira would undoubtedly run out of energy first. Against a colossal kaiju with an intercity transport vehicle inside it, he had no chance in a war of attrition.

'Haruka! That green liquid making those kaiju and stuff, your people made it, right? Doesn't it have some kind of weak point?'

He asked telepathically, but there was no answer. He wasn't even connected to Haruka's group.

"Communication interference, now of all times... Come to think of it, Haruka did say she might try causing interference to erase Beis's group's authority."

In fact, it was Barba's side, not Haruka, causing the interference. But Akira had no way of knowing that.

The exchange of fire went on, neither side with a decisive blow. A long war of attrition put Akira at an overwhelming disadvantage, but he couldn't retreat. He had come here to take down Beis.

And he regretted that someone very reliable, someone who might have made that possible, wasn't with him.

"...If Alpha were supporting me, she'd have figured something out, even if it took a method I'd need to brace myself for."

And if even that wasn't enough, well, it couldn't be helped. If there was nothing to be done even with Alpha's support, then there had never been a chance of winning. He could tell himself that, and retreat without complaint. In that sense too, as something to base his decision on, Alpha's support had meant a lot to Akira.

He tried calling out anyway.

'...Alpha.'

No answer.

"No good, huh..."

Akira let out a small sigh. Then he smiled wryly at how much more disappointed he was by this expected result than he'd thought he'd be.

"I really was relying on Alpha, huh."

He didn't think relying on Alpha was bad. But depending on her entirely was different. He'd thought he had been working on that, but it seemed he still had a long way to go. With that thought, Akira steeled himself anew.

Then the situation changed. In the middle of the stalemate, Akira picked up a massive energy reading.

(This is... the vehicle's main gun? I destroyed it...)

Akira turned his attention toward the reading. There was the colossal kaiju's head, neck twisted, its huge maw pointed his way. Then he understood.

Transformed into a colossal kaiju or not, generating huge body parts took a corresponding amount of energy. The enormous legs it had grown were worth it, giving the huge body with a transport vehicle inside the mobility to move nimbly.

But growing a head just to bite at Akira, who moved at high speed in a frontline powered suit, would be far too wasteful. A head that big couldn't move that fast. Still, there was another reason it had spent so much energy generating one.

(That head is a replacement for the main gun!)

Light leaked from the open maw. Then overwhelming energy poured out of it. Its power clearly surpassed the main gun the vehicle had carried.

Akira dodged that great torrent of light, which looked able to blow away anything, with everything he had. Until now he had kept moving to the thinnest part of Atlas's barrage, but now he dove straight into the thickest. Diving into a place like that would hurt him that much more, but compared with being swallowed and blown away by an extraordinarily powerful beam, it was a scratch.

(...Damn it! It was herding me!)

The thick and thin spots in the barrage had been made deliberately, to lure Akira into a position where the beam was hard to dodge. He finally realized it, but the price for realizing it late was high.

The beam Atlas fired could kill Akira without a direct hit. Even the aftershock from just being near its path was something his frontline powered suit's force field armor and shields could barely block. He needed to get as far from its path as possible.

But forcing his way through the thick barrage slowed him down that much. That made it hard to get far enough from the path to avoid a fatal wound.

To survive that situation, Akira lost one of the Blue Jackets.

A humanoid weapon's force field armor was far stronger than a powered suit's. It became the shield for Akira, who couldn't fully dodge the beam, and protected him completely. And it wasn't wrecked doing it. But raising its force field armor to the limit, with no regard for long-term operation, burned through a huge amount of energy. And the machine was damaged.

Then Atlas showered it with a barrage. Concentrated fire that ignored even Akira. That was too much even for a Blue Jacket. The blue machine went down, firing its remaining ammo in a last-ditch struggle.

In that opening, Akira closed in on Atlas with the remaining one. The only thing here that could serve as a shield against Atlas's beam was Atlas itself. Keeping a half-hearted distance would only make the next beam harder to dodge. In that case, Akira chose close combat with the colossal kaiju.

He couldn't run. If he did, Atlas might head for Shirou's group. Even if he chose to retreat, he had to at least wait until communication with Shirou's group was restored and warn them about the colossal kaiju's beam first.

If he retreated without telling them anything and they let Atlas approach unprepared, they could take a beam stronger than an intercity transport vehicle's main gun head-on and be blown away, building and all. To prevent that too, he had to keep Atlas busy for now.

And above all, he had come here to take down Beis. He had no intention of backing off. With that thought, Akira renewed his resolve and pressed forward.

Even Atlas couldn't fire its colossal beam back to back. In the meantime, Akira tried to get inside the colossal kaiju's guard.

But the cannons on the colossal kaiju's back showered him with a barrage again. Those, Atlas could fire continuously. And with one Blue Jacket lost, fewer cannons were being destroyed in the exchange. Countless cannons unleashed a barrage on Akira even denser than before.

Akira forced his way through that hellish barrage. He cut through it with the blades in both hands. He destroyed as many of the countless cannons sprouting from the colossal kaiju as he could with his two remote-controlled guns. He had the blue machine fire nonstop without regard for ammo, making up for the lost machine's firepower as much as possible.

And Akira landed on the colossal kaiju's back. Naturally, the cannons sprouting all over it took aim at him. But Akira spun in place, swinging both blades hard. The slashing waves from the blades mowed down the cannons around him in a circle.

The cannons outside that circle got merciless fire from his two HBTN composite guns and fierce shelling from the Blue Jacket.

The colossal kaiju's cannons were all large, some bigger than the blue machine. That made them powerful, but with Akira standing on its back, the cannons further back were blocked by the ones in front and couldn't aim at him properly.

As a result, the barrage from Akira and the machine pushed back Atlas's barrage. The colossal kaiju's cannons were swallowed by it and pulverized. And once every cannon there was destroyed, new ones stopped growing.

Akira stopped firing for a moment too. A brief silence fell.

It was Beis who broke it.

"Charging in instead of running away, are you!"

The voice came from the colossal kaiju's head. Its neck stretched high and twisted, turning its face toward Akira. That meant it could fire its colossal beam even with Akira where he was.

Of course, aiming at Akira from that angle would catch Atlas itself too. But with its body protected by strong force field armor, and the beam held to just enough power to kill Akira, it would only suffer minor injuries. No problem.

"Did you think I couldn't hit you there? Shallow thinking! Curse your own foolishness and be blown away!"

Beis laughed loudly in triumph. But Akira's voice stopped that laughter.

"I'll kill you."

With those few words, Beis could no longer laugh.

It was a quiet voice. Not raised in the slightest; in a sense, an ordinary voice. But from that mask of a face, painted over with killing intent toward Beis, came killing intent of the utmost density, a perfect reflection of Akira's heart.

Until now, as far as Akira was concerned, he had been fighting Atlas the colossal kaiju. But talking with Beis switched that to Beis.

I'll kill you. I won't forgive the one who desecrated Yumina.

I'll kill you. For her, the one who was Yumina's reproduced persona.

In a sense, Akira said it with the killing intent of two Yuminas.

Beis should have been able to laugh it off. Given the gap in strength between Akira and the colossal kaiju, it was impossible. Killing him in this situation was beyond nonsense. Impossible. Unthinkable. He should have been able to laugh it off like that.

But he couldn't. Beis had looked into Akira's record and knew. That the man before him had pulled off the unthinkable over and over. That he was an exception who made the impossible possible.

Just maybe. Possibly. This man might. That fear silenced Beis.

And as if to shake off that fear, Beis raised his voice.

"...That's my line!"

From the huge maw that roared those words, a great torrent of light poured out. Its overwhelming brilliance swallowed Akira in an instant.

(Pathetic! Is that all? All talk!)

The joy of victory loosened Beis's focus. All the more, then, was he shocked.

Akira burst through the great torrent of light and appeared right before his eyes.

(...What?!)

The moment the colossal kaiju fired its beam, Akira had fired an annihilation warhead. The orb it created blocked and disrupted the torrent of light, opening a space where Akira could survive.

Akira dove into it, swinging his blades at the same time. The slashing wave flying from them interfered with the orb and gave the released energy an unusual direction. It became a huge blade of light that cut through the beam.

Even so, it couldn't cut the beam in two. But it could open an extremely narrow gap, just wide enough for Akira to slip through. He passed through it and broke through the great torrent of light.

In front of the colossal kaiju's head, in front of that face reflecting Beis's shock, Akira used another annihilation warhead. He created an orb right beside him and swung his blades with both hands. The huge blade of light that had cut through the torrent of light now came down on the colossal kaiju's head.

But even that all-out blow was nowhere near powerful enough to bring down Atlas the colossal kaiju. It couldn't split a huge body with an intercity transport vehicle inside it. In fact, as far as defeating Atlas went, the wound it dealt was less than minor.

At that absurd toughness, Akira couldn't help grimacing.

(This is my limit on my own? I wanted to at least split its head!)

If Alpha had been supporting him, the blow would have been far more powerful. Akira thought that, regretting Alpha's absence all over again.

Cut by the blade of light, the colossal kaiju's head hadn't been split in two. But it was wounded. Its huge mouth had been slashed deep and long. Damaged that badly, it couldn't fire its beam.

Akira had only heard from Alpha before that an attack like this, a blade of light using an annihilation warhead, was possible. He had never once trained it. He had done it cold, for real.

To begin with, Akira hadn't yet fully mastered even the HBTN series. His practice fell short in many ways. If he had failed to interfere with the force field, he couldn't have turned the orb into a blade of light, and its energy would have blown Akira himself away.

But imperfect as it was, rough as its precision was, Akira had tried it for the first time and succeeded. He had that much skill now.

That still didn't get him out of the tight spot, though. He had damaged Atlas's head so it couldn't fire its beam, but only temporarily. Once it regenerated, it could fire again. Akira had to keep preventing that.

He fired his HBTN composite guns nonstop into the wound. He also loosed ordinary blades of light from the blades in both hands. He kept up a ceaseless attack that could easily have destroyed any single kaiju from the horde that had welled up from the green lake. Even so, all he could do was delay the regeneration of Atlas's wound. That was how tough the colossal kaiju was.

Then the remaining Blue Jacket rejoined the fight. Atlas's beam had blown it away, but it had escaped destruction. It was only lightly damaged and still fit to fight.

The machine had survived because the beam replacing Atlas's main gun was far weaker than the first time.

Tremendous as Atlas's energy was, firing a beam that powerful took a matching amount of charging. Growing masses of cannons from its back and firing barrages from them took energy too. In other words, it was hard to charge the main gun while firing barrages.

To kill Akira for sure, it should have charged fully and then fired, like the first time. Of course, Beis knew that much. But overawed by Akira, he had fired before he could stop himself.

That was why Akira had survived. If it hadn't been an underpowered beam fired with insufficient energy, Akira would have been blown away whether his annihilation-warhead blade of light succeeded or failed.

Akira's killing intent, which had stopped Beis's laughter. And the countless impossible, reckless, insane feats Akira had pulled off until now, the very grounds for Beis being overawed, once again let Akira make the impossible possible. Let him overturn the unthinkable: surviving this situation.

Even so, Akira hadn't won. Pulling off the miracle of overturning the impossible was still far from turning the tables. He had barely avoided dying and, by wounding its head, kept Atlas from firing its main-gun beam right away. That was all.

Even if his blow had completely destroyed the head beyond regeneration, it wouldn't have defeated Atlas. That head was, after all, only a part the colossal kaiju, with a transport vehicle inside it, had made to fire a beam in place of its main gun.

Akira had no way, as of now, to destroy the vehicle itself, the colossal kaiju's true body, so to speak. He knew that. He kept fighting knowing that.

By continuing to fight, by not giving up, something might happen. Akira was betting on that something, on a chance of victory he didn't know existed.

Akira's actions, reckless by any reckoning, seemingly nothing but desperation, threw Beis into confusion again.

(Does he... intend to win? How...?!)

Beis had no idea how Akira meant to beat him. Akira himself didn't know how, in concrete terms. Beis couldn't possibly know.

But the look on Akira's face as he kept fighting wasn't that of someone who'd given up in despair. It was that of someone trying to win with clear intent and solid grounds.

That made Beis waver. Was Akira planning something again? Would he use that something to make the impossible possible again? Would he overturn the unrealistic odds of winning against this gap in strength once more, and win? He couldn't help thinking that.

That thought pushed Beis to a cautious course.

(I must kill him...! This time I'll blow him away for certain! Firing without enough charged energy is why I failed to kill Akira! He only survived because of my mistake! His insolent mouth was so unbearably offensive that I fired before I could stop myself! I must reflect on that deeply, but that's all! I will never repeat such carelessness! There won't be a next time! My victory is unshakable!)

He wasn't overawed. He wasn't afraid. Beis declared that to himself and justified himself.

That excuse to himself made Beis choose an overly cautious course. To fire the next beam with fully charged energy, he held it back.

Akira's actions, which had driven Beis to make that excuse, kept Akira alive amid that hopeless gap in strength. They let him buy time with no plan, hoping something would happen.

Chapter 304: Training on the Brink of Death

Akira kept fighting Atlas the colossal kaiju like a man possessed. After wounding its head to seal off its beam for the time being, he kept attacking the wound to hold back its regeneration.

But that grew difficult. Even under constant attack from Akira and the Blue Jacket, the head's regeneration crept forward, slowly but surely. On top of that, the colossal kaiju grew masses of biological cannons from its surface again and began attacking Akira and the machine.

Even Akira's face hardened at that. But in terms of keeping Akira alive, the situation had in some ways improved.

Astonishing durability or not, Atlas the colossal kaiju used energy to regenerate wounds. And regenerating while the wound was under attack made that far less efficient.

Add the energy for mass-generating biological cannons and firing barrages from them, and the energy it could spare for charging its beam dropped sharply. In other words, it would take that much longer before the colossal kaiju could fire its beam again with enough energy charged.

Akira's desperate resistance wasn't in vain.

From the two HBTN composite guns floating in the air, Akira unleashed as dense a barrage as their performance allowed. And swinging the two HBTN blades in his hands, he sent blades of light flying from their crimson edges.

The blue machine also fired its onboard weapons without regard for ammo. A huge gun fired shells as big as artillery rounds in a storm. Missiles launched one after another from its missile pods, each scattering countless small missiles packed inside with extended-magazine technology, multiplying the rounds until they seemed to fill the air before raining down on the colossal kaiju.

Akira's gear was the HBTN series, a frontline product line. And the blue machine was a Blue Jacket, a frontline humanoid weapon. Naturally, the attacks of man and machine were both frontline-level. They turned the colossal kaiju's back and head into a scene from hell.

But the colossal kaiju taking that firepower was frontline-level too. And above them. "Frontline" covered a broad range. The colossal kaiju's strength reached the level of the east of that broad region, near the unexplored regions that were hard to conquer even with the power of the Corporate Government Alliance. It withstood their onslaught without batting an eye.

Even so, their attacks meant something. To counter that much firepower, it had to spend a great deal of energy raising its force field armor's output. That much consumption meant that much more time to charge its beam.

Naturally, the longer that took, the better for Akira. But the passing time affected Beis too. His mind, overly cautious from being overawed by Akira, gradually regained its composure. And then a thought occurred to him.

(...Can't I kill him already?)

In fact, he could fire a beam powerful enough to kill Akira without charging it to the limit. How much to charge beyond that was purely Beis's call.

Was blasting Akira away without leaving a speck of dust the caution of making sure he was dead? Or the desire to wield overwhelming power to deny that he'd been overawed, to enjoy the kill? Beis himself didn't know.

Even so, Beis had regained enough composure to think he might not need to charge that much.

And he acted on it. In the time Akira had desperately bought, the colossal kaiju had been slowly regenerating its head. It had also been slowly charging energy. It spat that out, firing a beam from its not-yet-healed maw. Far from maximum power, but more than enough to be fatal to Akira.

A flash filled the area. Even that light, merely the beam's aftershock, could vaporize anyone not wearing a frontline powered suit. The beam itself was stronger still. And it had been fired at Akira.

Then the light enveloping the area faded. Seeing what remained, Beis proclaimed his victory with his expression. He laughed inside Atlas the colossal kaiju.

"I knew there was no need to charge it to the limit! Of course! My victory is unshakable!"

Beis's words showed he held an overwhelming advantage. They also showed he hadn't won yet. An advantage as close to victory as it could get. That was what the scene before him led him to judge.

Akira was alive. He hadn't even been badly hurt; he was perfectly fine. But the blue machine was wrecked. Akira had used it as a shield to block the beam.

Even with incomplete charging, a beam taken at this range couldn't be fully blocked even by a frontline machine's force field armor. One shot would wreck it. And Akira had no more machines to use as shields.

Beis thought: Akira had cut through the previous beam only because he'd fired it too soon after the last one, with hardly any energy charged. If Akira could have cut through this beam the same way, he would have. There'd be no point sacrificing the machine as a shield.

Akira had no moves left. Fire next time with the same power, and it was over. That thought made Beis laugh. He spoke loudly to Akira through the colossal kaiju's mouth.

"That's your shield gone, isn't it? Next time, you'll be blown away. Killing me was nothing but baseless raving after all."

Then he gloated, his voice brimming with composure.

"Rest assured. I won't toy with you to death. I'll kill you instantly."

"I'll kill you."

Once again, that was all Akira said. But this time Beis wasn't overawed.

"I see. I won't ask how. Whatever you say, my answer could only be 'impossible.'"

To Beis, sure of victory, Akira was just a fool clinging to a hope that didn't exist.

"But if you're saying that, you have no intention of running, I take it? That helps. It saves me the trouble of chasing you."

Beis meant it. As he did what came next.

"Well, not that I'd let you escape even if you tried."

Countless grotesque creatures generated from the green liquid appeared on the colossal kaiju's back. Beast fusions resembling the Baoregire, the same kind Reina's group had fought. But the humanoid figures sprouting from their heads had Beis's form.

The beasts kept appearing from beyond the colossal kaiju's back to surround Akira in three dimensions. They had no wings, but they ran through the air without trouble on footholds made with applied force field armor.

The humanoid figures on the fusions spoke to Akira one after another with Beis's face, in Beis's voice.

"Resist if you like."

"If you want to suffer longer, I won't stop you."

"Generating these consumes energy too."

"The beam takes a great deal of energy as well."

"Kill enough of them, and the next beam will be delayed that much."

"Delayed, but the result won't change in the slightest."

Akira knew. The humanoid figures on the fusions only had Beis's form; they weren't him. Beis himself, in his administrative persona body, was still inside the colossal kaiju.

Even so, the form of the one he wanted to kill sharply raised Akira's killing intent. Even if it was Beis's scheme to keep him here, even knowing that, it didn't change his killing intent.

"I'll kill you."

Once again, that was all Akira said.

And Beis said the same as before. Only this time, triumphantly.

"That's my line!"

At those words, the battle resumed. The fusions attacked all at once. Those relatively close to Akira charged and came at him directly with claws and fangs. Those at long range fired bolts and beams of light from their humanoid hands.

Akira fought back. Dodging the charging fusions' attacks, he swung his blades, cut them in two, and destroyed them.

At the same time, he fired his HBTN composite guns nonstop. The rounds traced blatantly unnatural paths, piercing the fusions firing bolts and beams from the air again and again. A feat only force bullets could pull off, achieving astonishing freedom by making the force field itself the bullet.

Right now, force bullets were in a sense more precious to Akira than annihilation warheads. But with both Blue Jackets lost, he couldn't afford to hold back. He kept firing with no thought for later.

Even so, Akira was forced onto the back foot. The reason was simple: not enough firepower. Frontline-level or not, personal weapons for people and weapons for humanoid weapons had completely different firepower. He'd have died otherwise, but the price of using the blue machine as a shield was high.

To make up for the lack of firepower, Akira fired another annihilation warhead and slashed the orb with the blade in his right hand. The huge blade of light it created mowed down a mass of fusions.

But he couldn't break the encirclement. No matter how many he beat, more were added right away. That blow had greatly reduced their numbers too, but only temporarily.

The fusions were mass-produced at a fixed level of performance using the vast energy held by the intercity transport vehicle. They weren't as strong as the kaiju that had welled up from the green lake, and they could only stay active for a few minutes at most. But that pragmatic design let it generate them in extraordinary numbers in a very short time.

Those numbers drove Akira into a corner. The fusion reinforcements didn't stop. The ones he'd mowed down with the huge blade of light had already been replaced. From here on, a bad situation would only get much worse.

Akira unleashed another huge annihilation-warhead blade of light, this time swinging the blade in his left hand. As before, many fusions were blown away. And as before, more fusions were added than he'd blown away.

Akira was being driven into a corner.

Inside the colossal kaiju, Beis laughed as he watched Akira's desperate resistance. But after a while, something dubious crept into his smile.

Beis's overwhelming advantage hadn't changed. Akira was under constant attack by masses of fusions; he could die at any moment.

But he didn't die. In that death trap, Akira kept showing astonishing tenacity. Unnaturally so.

Still, that alone wouldn't break Beis's smile. He had the fusion horde attacking Akira with intent to kill, but it didn't matter if they failed to finish him. It was merely a measure to keep Akira from escaping until the next beam.

There was another reason the composed smile was gradually fading from Beis's face.

Akira had mowed down the fusion horde twice with huge blades of light. Each time, the losses were replaced right away and the numbers returned to normal in a short time, but there was a clear difference in how long that took the first time and the second.

Meanwhile, the fusions' generation speed hadn't changed. The delay before their numbers recovered meant that the number of fusions Akira was killing per unit of time had increased.

(...He's getting stronger?)

Akira was in fact getting stronger in this situation.

Getting the full HBTN series had made Akira far stronger, but it was still unfamiliar gear he'd acquired only a few days ago. He was far from mastering it; its overwhelming performance was still throwing him around. With skill, that would lessen. There was plenty of room for Akira to grow stronger still.

And on top of that, the death trap was forging him. The harsher it was, the more it became training beyond all reason, giving him even more strength. No support from Alpha, both Blue Jackets lost, attacked by a horde of fusions astonishingly strong even individually: the situation more than met those conditions.

Each time he dodged an enemy attack, the next was easier to dodge. Each time he swung his blade, the next cut came easier. Each time he fired, the next shot was easier to land.

Little by little, everything was being honed. Each time the enemy failed to kill him, Akira closed the gap in strength between them, however vast, little by little but surely.

As he always had. And as he was now.

That was what wiped the smile from Beis's face.

(Is this why that man keeps fighting without giving up in this situation? That if he keeps getting stronger, he'll eventually win? Does he seriously believe that?)

If it had been anyone but Akira, Beis could have scoffed at that. Laughed him off as a fool clinging to a hope that didn't exist after all.

But it was Akira.

Just maybe. Possibly. This man might.

That fear welled up in Beis again.

(...Should I fire now?)

The beam had already charged more energy than last time. The colossal kaiju's head had regenerated further, so the wound would weaken it less this time too. The only reasons he hadn't fired yet were his triumphant composure and his plan to blow Akira away without leaving a speck of dust next time.

(Even if Akira, this man, keeps getting stronger just as he hopes, even if he grows strong enough to match that blue machine on his own, no, to surpass it, beating me is impossible.)

That was a fact. If that were enough to beat Atlas the colossal kaiju, he'd have won when he had two Blue Jackets. In other words, Akira getting somewhat stronger wouldn't shake Beis's advantage one bit.

Beis knew that much. Knowing it, he still couldn't wipe away the unease that had welled up.

(...Even so, is it dangerous to give this man any more time?)

By common sense, if he fired now, he could kill Akira. He could erase the "just maybe," the unrealistic odds, the danger that, slight as it was, existed as long as Akira lived.

But charging more energy would kill Akira all the more surely. Besides, even if he fired now and failed to kill Akira, his advantage wouldn't change. Wouldn't changing his decision over such a worry be another careless move?

Beis wavered. He kept wavering over which decision was right. He kept thinking inside the colossal kaiju, watching Akira fight desperately. Staring at him.

Akira sensed it. Beis wasn't watching him through the eyes on the colossal kaiju's head. He was viewing the situation from above, through a third-person perspective generated from data gathered by sensory organs like sensors. So even if Akira sensed Beis's gaze, Beis wasn't at the end of it.

Even so, Akira turned his eyes that way.

As a result, just as Beis, still wavering, was about to choose to keep charging energy, his eyes met Akira's.

Beis's expression froze. In the next instant, the colossal kaiju fired its beam.

A great torrent of energy poured out, as if to blow away everything there. In the brilliance overflowing from it, Akira, the fusion horde, and even the colossal kaiju that had fired it were swallowed, their forms painted over with light.

Then the light cleared. The colossal kaiju's sensory organs, malfunctioning from the glare, returned to normal. The result of the attack was displayed to Beis. Seeing it, his face froze again.

Every last one of the many fusions had been blown away. The colossal kaiju's surface where the beam hit had been blown away with them, partly exposing the intercity transport vehicle inside. That was how powerful the attack had been.

But Akira alone, who should have taken a direct hit, had not been blown away. Still in the pose of having swung both blades, he was looking at Beis.

"Impossible..."

Beis said it aloud without meaning to. It was true that, overawed by Akira, he had fired the beam again, but it had definitely had the power to wreck even a Blue Jacket for certain. There was no way it could fail to kill him. Seeing something so obviously right denied, Beis couldn't hide his shock.

Then his face twisted grimly. Deliberately twisted, but the panic he was trying to hide that way seeped through.

Then Beis came to his senses. And now he showed a panic he had no need to hide.

(This is bad...! He'll escape...!)

Every fusion generated to keep Akira from escaping had been blown away. Mass production hadn't stopped, but it wouldn't re-encircle Akira in time. He could easily picture Akira breaking through a thin encirclement with ease.

But that prediction was overturned too.

"...He's not... running?"

Akira attacked the regathering fusion horde instead of fleeing. His movements weren't those of someone without even the strength to run. They were the movements of someone deliberately staying put.

Beis's face twisted even harder. As he had thought earlier, even if that attack failed to kill Akira, his advantage didn't change. But he could no longer take comfort in that.

If Akira had run, he could have been relieved. He could have raged, lamented, and felt bitter that Akira got away, and then felt relief.

But Akira didn't run. The exception who made the impossible possible was, once again, overturning the unthinkable, alive and still fighting.

Just maybe. Possibly. This man might.

To hide that worry, the unease that had grown deeper, to keep it from showing, Beis twisted his face hard, very hard.

Akira had blocked the colossal kaiju's beam once again with an annihilation-warhead blade of light. But this beam's power was different from last time. Doing the same thing would have gotten him blown away. So Akira had loosed blades of light from the blades in each hand.

Last time, he had gripped one blade with both hands to cut. Back then, Akira hadn't had the skill to cut through the colossal kaiju's beam one-handed, even with an annihilation-warhead blade of light. The two huge blades of light he later loosed at the fusion horde, once with his right hand and once with his left, had doubled as practice for doing it one-handed.

The moment before the colossal kaiju fired, when his eyes met Beis's, Akira had fired an annihilation warhead from each of his two HBTN composite guns and cut the two resulting orbs with the blades in each hand. That way he loosed a huge cross-shaped blade of light and cut through the great torrent of energy.

Strictly speaking, he hadn't cut through it. He had only made a tiny gap at the intersection of the cross-shaped blade of light, just enough for him to barely avoid dying.

Naturally, breaking through the beam and following up like last time was impossible. Akira had frozen in the pose of swinging his blades because he was too drained to do anything more.

If Beis hadn't frozen in shock, if he had come to his senses a little sooner, Akira would have been killed right there.

But in that brief time, Akira barely recovered. He fought back against the fusion horde attacking again.

He swung both blades and cut enemies apart. He fired both guns and shot enemies down. The blades cut as sharply as ever. But the guns were different. The rounds traced no unnatural paths, and it took more of them to kill each fusion.

Akira didn't wonder why. The reason was obvious. He had finally run out of force bullets. He was firing charge bullets and shock bullets now. Those weren't powerful enough to kill fusions easily. That was all.

Akira smiled wryly.

(It took all that shooting to run out! That's frontline extended magazines for you! No wonder you can only buy them with Chrome! In aurum, even ten billion is pocket change!)

Charge and shock bullets or not, fired from HBTN composite guns, frontline weapons, they were powerful. But they couldn't match force bullets. Losing force bullets in this situation drove Akira into even harsher circumstances. Into a deadlier death trap, one that, the harsher it got, forged him all the more.

Akira fought on without giving up. He had resolved long ago never to give up, whatever the situation.

However resolved Akira was, it didn't change the fact that he was out of force bullets. His attack power had dropped. If a fusion horde as big as before attacked him, sheer numbers would kill him.

The reason that didn't happen lay with Beis. Overawed by Akira's astonishing tenacity, Beis had begun diverting more of the colossal kaiju's available energy to charging the beam.

If he fired the beam half-charged again, wouldn't Akira just deal with it again? That worry made Beis raise the next beam's power.

If he didn't kill Akira quickly, wouldn't he be the one killed? That unease fed his urge to fire the next beam sooner.

For those reasons, with available energy taken by the beam, fusion production had slowed sharply.

The fusions had been made to keep Akira from escaping in the first place. If Akira wasn't going to run, there was no need to allocate too much energy to them. Beis told himself that, shoring up the justification for his decision.

As a result, Akira was still alive. In a situation where he could die at any moment, he stubbornly kept living. Kept buying time. Racing through the death trap, he kept betting.

A bet that something would happen to overturn this situation.

And at last, that something happened.

'Akira! Are you okay?!'

Communication with Shirou's group had been restored.

Akira couldn't help smiling.

'Shirou! How'd it go over there? Did it work?'

'Yeah! We handled things here! All that's left is taking down Beis!'

'Great! Then sorry, but handle things over here too! Honestly, I'm about to lose!'

Shirou didn't take that as whining. Through the restored link, he could see Akira's situation. Seeing Akira fighting a colossal kaiju, he could honestly say that things had been deadly hard on their end, but Akira had it even harder.

'Shirou! How do I beat this thing? Doesn't it have some kind of weak point?'

Asked that, all Shirou could think was that beating it was impossible. Run, he was about to say. But before he could, Haruka answered.

'It does!'

Shirou turned to Haruka in surprise. That meant even he hadn't known about this weak point of the colossal kaiju.

Akira was surprised too, though he'd asked. Still, he laughed.

'It does?! Guess it never hurts to ask!'

'Hold out a little longer, somehow! Someone with the means to hit that weak point will reach you very soon!'

'Got it! I'm counting on you!'

Shirou spoke, surprised too.

'Olivia's heading your way! Akira! It's just a little longer! Hang in there!'

'Olivia? Got it!'

Olivia's body should have been destroyed, but there must have been a spare unit. And she was coming as reinforcements with the means to hit the colossal kaiju's weak point. That was how Akira read it. He smiled, his spirits rising.

"Guess it pays to hang in there! All right! Just a little longer!"

If Shirou's group had had no good means to offer, even Akira would have chosen to retreat. But there was one. Now that the something, a fragile hope with nothing concrete behind it, had become a clear way to win, Akira was brimming with motivation. And he kept fighting, without running.

Then Akira's sensors picked up a reading approaching from far off. Akira was glad, thinking Olivia had come, but as the reading drew closer, he looked puzzled.

"...That's not Olivia. Who is it?"

And he was surprised. The one who had come to this place, where Atlas the colossal kaiju was rampaging, to help Akira, was someone he hadn't expected.

Chapter 305: Renewed Negotiations

The slums of Kugamayama City were home to many gangs, and their bosses met to work out conflicts of interest and the like. The Sheryl Family wasn't part of that, though. No gang could defy the Sheryl Family, with Akira backing it and connections to the city. Interests were worked out among the other gangs.

Shijima was the coordinator of that gang coalition. The position brought plenty of profit. On that basis alone, the gangs would have fought over it. And with Shijima gone missing, whether dead or alive unknown, a meeting was called to decide who would take the position, the next coordinator.

In practice, though, the meeting was about pushing the position onto someone else. The coalition's coordinator was also the negotiator whenever another gang got into trouble with the Sheryl Family, or more precisely, with Akira. You could easily die. Nobody wanted it.

In fact, when Akira had a bounty on his head before, Shijima went to convey the coalition's opinion on the matter to Sheryl and then vanished. With that fear made real, the coordinator's position became even more shunned.

But they couldn't go without a coordinator forever. Without one, each gang's boss, meaning themselves, would have to go to Sheryl directly. One sacrifice was enough. They'd give up the perks; let someone else be coordinator. With that attitude, the meeting got nowhere at all, and days of fruitless time went by with no progress.

But today, that changed. Shijima showed up at the meeting.

"You're alive?"

"Don't go killing me off on your own. Well, I did nearly die."

Shijima let out a deep sigh, half acting. The coordinator's position was always next door to death; the profit from it wasn't worth it. He was showing the gang bosses that with his attitude. The other half was genuine.

"So, did you decide on my replacement? I'll hand it over, you know."

"We haven't, but if you're alive, there's no need to."

The others voiced agreement one after another, inwardly relieved that there was no longer any reason to draw the short straw.

But then Shijima spoke.

"But you need a stand-in for when I'm not around. You've all learned that the hard way. Every gang boss is here anyway. Decide it now. Or I'll decide it for you. Sheryl won't complain if I'm the one who picked."

It was Sheryl who had made Shijima coordinator. Someone Shijima chose would more easily win her approval than someone the others chose on their own. No one could deny that logic, and the meeting proceeded under Shijima's lead.

"Well, I'm not going to just decide on my own. Say what you think, don't hold back. Other business is fine too. I'll take it all into careful consideration. Go on, talk."

If you don't want to be named stand-in, hand over perks or whatever else you've got. That was obviously what Shijima meant. But no one could complain. Complaining would raise the odds of being named.

Most likely, whoever handed over the fewest perks would be named. What, and how much, to give Shijima to push the job onto someone else? The gang bosses were about to start feeling each other out.

But a third party's voice stopped that.

"Then I'll say what I like. Sorry, but help me out again."

Everyone turned toward the voice. But there was no one there. Shijima, however, recognized it. Fear seeped into his face, and he panicked.

"Y-You're...?!"

An invisible hand grabbed Shijima by the collar. Then, turning off its camouflage, it revealed itself. An empty powered suit. The same one Haruka's group had once made Shijima wear.

"H-Haruka...!"

"Sorry, but I'm in a hurry. You don't get a say. Let's go."

The powered suit said that in Haruka's voice, then smashed through the room's wall and carried Shijima off, still in its grip.

The others were dumbfounded by the sudden turn, but even after coming to their senses, they didn't try to follow. They could easily tell that powered suit was nothing they could deal with.

More than anything, Shijima's face had said it all. Shijima was about to die. Chase after him, and they'd die too, caught up in the fate of the man who'd become coordinator. Everyone there agreed: no thanks.

And the problem came back. With Shijima gone again, the need to choose his stand-in was back. Realizing it, everyone looked around at the others with strained faces.

No. No way in hell am I being Shijima's stand-in. United in that feeling, they resumed their fruitless game of pass-the-buck.

Told why by the powered suit that had carried him off, Shijima's face twitched.

"...You want me to do that negotiation?"

"Yes. Please."

"Don't screw with me! Why should I have to do something like that..."

Shijima raised his voice to refuse, but one word from the other silenced him.

"Refuse, and I'll kill you."

Shijima could tell it was no bluff; she meant it. Breaking into a cold sweat, he spoke.

"Look, you... knock it off, will you? You think threatening to kill people gets you anything you want? How does your head even work?"

"I don't think it works on just anyone. I only use this kind of threat on people it works on, in all sorts of ways."

"What do you think human life is?"

"We both treat the lives of people we don't care about carelessly, don't we? Even if those values were ground into us by our circumstances."

Shijima couldn't deny that. He was that kind of person too. That was exactly why he understood she wasn't bluffing.

"Kill me and that negotiation fails, you know? You can't do it yourself, right?"

So don't kill me. To Shijima's plea, she answered simply.

"Right. So if you refuse, I'll kill you."

If he wouldn't be the negotiator, there was no reason not to kill him. If he didn't want to die, he should accept quietly. That was the threat.

Even so, Shijima didn't say he'd do it; he glared at her. Refuse, and he'd be killed, but fail, and he'd be killed anyway. If he'd die either way, he'd refuse to be the negotiator and do Haruka as much damage as he could. That thought showed in his eyes and face.

In response, she talked profit.

"If the negotiation goes well, I'll owe you big. And I'll pay it back properly. You know what I can do. There's nothing to lose by having me on your side, right?"

"You think I'll believe that?"

If he really could put Haruka in his debt and win her over, it would mean tremendous power for Shijima. But only if she kept her word. A verbal promise from someone whose only negotiating tactic, in a sense utterly crude, was "refuse and I'll kill you"? Shijima had nothing to make him trust it.

But she knew that much. She added grounds for him to believe.

"I'll skip how it came about, but a lot happened, and right now I'm working with Akira. If everything works out this time, I'll owe Akira an enormous debt. I absolutely have to repay it. So Akira doesn't kill me."

Shijima's expression turned more and more intrigued, and Haruka went on.

"I have to repay that debt and make Akira think it was good he let me live. I've done things to Akira more than once that would justify killing me. The debt's so big it'll be hard to repay; it'll take decades, honestly, but I mean to work at it."

By this point, Shijima understood. And she went on to spell it out.

"So I'll repay my debt to you properly too. If Akira thinks I'm the kind of person who welches on debts, my life's on the line."

Shijima groaned. Failure still meant death, but the payoff for success had grown enormously. And it was guaranteed. And the grounds for it were convincing. He began to waver over what to do. Then he decided.

".....Fine."

"Thank you. You're a big help."

Knowing the thanks were sincere, Shijima went on sarcastically anyway.

"Hmph. Threatening me from somewhere safe and then thanking me, huh?"

The powered suit, with no one inside it, answered lightly.

"Say what you like."

Shijima thought Haruka was operating the suit remotely. In fact, it was acting autonomously. What moved this suit was a general-purpose persona that thought like Haruka.

This general-purpose persona wasn't Haruka. At least, by Haruka's own reckoning, this Haruka didn't fall within the bounds of herself. It was just a handy tool; if it died, so be it. She had only left it behind as some kind of insurance for when Shijima took the suit off.

Haruka hadn't told Shirou about it. If she did, Shirou might try to save this Haruka too. She had generated it set to self-destruct when necessary.

And this Haruka had no doubts or complaints about that treatment either. It was Haruka, after a fashion. It shared the same willingness to die for Shirou.

That Haruka spoke to Shijima.

"Well then, put this on again."

"You think I'll put it on?"

"You're cooperating, so I won't force you, but if the other party just comes to kill you on sight, you'll die without it, you know?"

Looking extremely unhappy about it, Shijima put on the powered suit that had once held his life in its hands. The person Haruka wanted him to negotiate with was that kind of person.

"Haruka, give me all the information on him. Anything even slightly related, no, even unrelated stuff. I'll decide whether it's really unrelated. Just give me everything you can."

Shijima had said something similar to Haruka once before. Back then, it had doubled as a way to buy time to think of a way out, but not this time. Shijima was going all out purely to make the negotiation succeed.

The information appeared in Shijima's augmented vision through the suit. He went through all of it, thought it over again and again, and reached a conclusion. He let out a big breath, steeled himself, and spoke with a serious face.

"...All right. Let's go."

"I'm counting on you."

At their destination, Shijima's life-or-death negotiation was about to begin once more.

The Yatsubayashi Clinic in the slums didn't look like a proper clinic. It had the air of a lab carrying out some shady experiment day after day. The same went for the clinic's doctor, Yatsubayashi himself, who openly called his treatment of patients clinical trials, part of his own experiments.

Still, it wasn't deserted. Slum residents had no money for proper treatment at a real hospital. Those who were badly hurt but survived the slums' disputes, where guns were used as a matter of course, came to this shady clinic, figuring it beat dying.

And they survived. Treatment was cheap too.

That was why slum residents grudgingly accepted Yatsubayashi's openly unsettling explanation that the fees were cheap because the reward for being a trial subject was deducted. Even if the treatment was an injection of glowing green liquid, something they'd absolutely refuse if they had the money for proper care.

Shijima appeared at the Yatsubayashi Clinic. Noticing him, Yatsubayashi laughed, a little surprised.

"I heard you were dead, but you're alive."

Shijima started to toss back a quip, then stopped. Seeing that, Yatsubayashi's attitude shifted slightly too.

"So, what do you want? You look healthy. Doesn't look like you're here for treatment."

"...I'm here to negotiate."

"Negotiate? Raising the security fee?"

The security fee here meant the money slum gangs collected from shops and such in their territory. It was hardly for security; it was money paid so that, as long as you paid, they wouldn't attack you.

Yatsubayashi had long paid the gang that held this area as its territory, if only a small amount. And that territory now belonged to Shijima's gang.

"Even so, I can't. As you know, I've got no money. I treat people with no money for cheap, after all."

Yatsubayashi said it jokingly. But Shijima turned a serious face on him, with a touch of tension in it.

At that, even Yatsubayashi began to look puzzled. Shijima, now boss of a major slum gang, wouldn't come in person over something as small as raising the security fee. That was another reason Yatsubayashi was suspicious of the visit.

"...Uh, so, um, what kind of negotiation is it?"

That attitude was exactly right for a small slum clinic visited by a big shot who didn't belong there.

Shijima himself squeezed money out of the gangs under him by exploiting that kind of attitude. In those situations, he acted the part to match.

But he couldn't do that now. He already knew what the person in front of him really was. Steeling himself, he opened his mouth.

"I'll get straight to the point. I want you to provide a way to neutralize Liquid T."

"..... Huh?"

I have no idea what you're talking about. Yatsubayashi made that clear with his attitude and voice. But Shijima went on as if the other man understood everything.

"There's an internal conflict among Mihazono Town's administrative personas. One group is attacking the other with bioweapons generated from Liquid T. The big kaiju horde the other day was part of that conflict."

"Like I said, what are you talking..."

"You abandoned the underground research facility, but continuing to use the storage on the Old Domain afterward was a big mistake. Old World security. You probably thought no one could break it, but Mihazono Town's administrative personas are Old World beings too. They broke into the system and got the technical data on Liquid T."

"No, really, what is all this..."

"If the method you provide succeeds in neutralizing Liquid T, the leaked technical data will be deleted. That's our payment."

In the next instant, a crack ran across the wall of light in front of Shijima. The wall of light was air locked in place by the powered suit's extremely strong force field shield. Strong enough to easily stop attacks from someone around Hunter Rank 50.

And that crack was proof that the knife-hand thrust Yatsubayashi had launched exceeded the wall's durability. Yatsubayashi had modified and strengthened his own body with his own technology.

His face twisted with fear, Shijima went on.

"K-Killing me won't do you any good!"

(Damn it! Damn it! Damn it! I saw it coming, but he really did just try to kill me on the spot!)

"I'm just the negotiator! One of their options! Even if this negotiation fails, they'll handle it some other way!"

Yatsubayashi struck with another knife-hand. Under the further impact, the wall of light was on the verge of shattering. Panicked, terrified, and twitching at the sight before him, Shijima kept talking, kept negotiating.

"But if this negotiation fails, your reputation hits rock bottom! You'll be branded a third-rate researcher whose tech is incomplete and who can't even keep it under control! You're from the Rebuild Institute, so the Anti-Rebuild Agency is still hunting you, right? The reason will change too! Not to secure a top-class researcher and his excellent tech, but to eliminate an incompetent, harmful washed-up technician and the incomplete, dangerous tech he leaks! As part of keeping the peace in the East!"

Haruka had obtained all this, including that Yatsubayashi had been with the Rebuild Institute, when she and Shirou extracted data from the underground production facility. Beis's group hadn't even told Haruka that their base was inside the Old Domain rather than in reality, and until then she hadn't known that the Liquid T technology came from Yatsubayashi either.

Haruka had given Shijima all this information to make the negotiation succeed. The man he'd thought was just a slum doctor with slightly warped ethics was actually from the Rebuild Institute. Learning that had shocked even Shijima.

(Someone from the Rebuild Institute really was hiding in a place like this! The guy looks dangerous just from the outside! I'd heard plenty of jokes like "maybe he's from the Rebuild Institute," but who'd think it was actually true?!)

Yatsubayashi's blow shattered the wall of light protecting Shijima. Even Shijima braced for death. But Yatsubayashi didn't follow up. He stood right in front of Shijima and glared at him.

"That technology is incomplete because it's still being researched."

Killing intent seeped from Yatsubayashi. His technology had been stolen and used without permission, its quality insulted, and now someone was offering to stop further leaks if he cooperated. As a researcher, he was furious.

But that reaction was exactly what Shijima had intended.

"...S-So there should be a countermeasure for unexpected leaks. If you're not an incompetent technician."

There really was such a method. But whether Yatsubayashi would meekly hand it over was another matter. The ones who stole his technology and used it on their own had brought it on themselves. Let them suffer. That thought had crossed Yatsubayashi's mind.

And Shijima had seen that thought coming too.

"...I-If you don't actually deal with it, people will think it's all talk, you know? If you deal with it, it just means the people who stole unfinished tech and used it on their own were incompetent. Your skill as a technician gets proven. If they deal with it some other way, you lose the chance to prove it forever. A-Are you okay with that?"

Yatsubayashi's face twisted grimly. Seeing that, Shijima was sure his read was right.

(Even a guy who sees people as nothing but test subjects, if he's a technician, a researcher, he'd hate having his tech or research unfairly judged. He wouldn't pass up a chance to set that right. Th-This should work... I-It will, right...?)

"S-So, what'll it be...?"

He had negotiated as well as he could. If the man had pride as a technician, as a researcher, the negotiation would succeed. If not, it would fail. The rest was up to Yatsubayashi. With that thought, Shijima waited for his answer.

The silence went on. Then, after a while, Yatsubayashi let out a big sigh.

"...Wait here."

With just that, Yatsubayashi left for a moment and came back carrying a small attaché case.

"Data on a compound that stops Liquid T from functioning, and an actual sample. Inject it, and those bioweapons of yours, or whatever you call them, will collapse. I'm giving you the data. If you need to mass-produce the compound, do it yourselves."

Shijima tried to check what was inside the attaché case he'd been handed. But it wouldn't open. He didn't even know how to open it.

"How do I open this..."

"I wasn't talking to you."

"Huh?"

In place of the puzzled Shijima, Haruka in the powered suit answered.

"Understood. I'll tell you the results later. I'll keep my promise, so don't worry."

With that, Haruka started to leave, but was stopped.

"Wait. Leave that man here."

Shijima's face stiffened.

"...Huh?"

The negotiation had succeeded. He wasn't going to die. He was saved. He had been relieved, but that relief was revoked in an instant.

"If you don't keep your promise, I'll make up for it with him. He'll contribute to completing Liquid T. Not as a trial participant. As an experimental subject."

Shijima was visibly flustered.

"...N-No, I have to take this..."

Shijima tried somehow to escape. But it was no use.

"Understood."

Haruka answered without hesitation and operated the powered suit to take itself off Shijima. Then, standing empty once more, she spoke to him.

"Thank you, truly. You've been a big help. I'll do my best to make it work, so pray that it does."

With only that, Haruka left Shijima behind. Shijima watched her go, dumbfounded. Yatsubayashi grabbed him.

"This way."

Yatsubayashi took Shijima by the collar and dragged him into the back. Not the part of the Yatsubayashi Clinic that served as a clinic, but the part that served as a lab.

(...P-Please! Let it work!)

All Shijima could do was pray.

Leaving the Yatsubayashi Clinic, Haruka immediately tried to send the compound data to Haruka herself in Mihazono Town. But she couldn't connect.

(Communication interference... Is something happening over there?)

This Haruka also knew the situation in Mihazono Town through the link. And since the real Haruka hadn't told her she was about to cause interference, she could guess it was Beis's group.

Since it wasn't Shirou's group doing it, the connection might never come back no matter how long she waited. She couldn't be optimistic.

(Looks like... I'll have to deliver it in person.)

But running to Mihazono Town in a powered suit would take time. Things might be urgent. She couldn't take it easy. She had to get some fast means of transport. Thinking that, Haruka searched for one, and found something just right.

After returning to Kugamayama City, Togami was flying over the wasteland on a flying bike.

The bike was one of the two Akira had once had Kibayashi procure for him, the one Akira hadn't bought. The city had bought it, and now it was on loan to Togami. Part of the support for a project to keep talented hunters settled in the city.

During the kaiju horde incident, Togami hadn't been able to do anything. He couldn't even go with Akira when he set out from the intercity transport vehicle. The reason was simple. He wasn't good enough.

Togami's gear, though on loan, was at least Hunter Rank 70 level. Even in today's Kugamayama region, full of high-ranked hunters, he was among the cream of the crop.

Even so, he wasn't strong enough to help Akira.

At this rate, next time running ammo like an errand boy would be the best I can do. When Togami mocked himself like that, Akira had said that would still help. After all, the place the ammo was delivered to might be somewhere a kaiju horde was running wild.

And Togami had laughed and said, Can't be helped, I'll at least do that much for you.

So that those words wouldn't be a lie, Togami was training to master this new bike first. So that he wouldn't be dead weight next time. To gain the skill to make that possible.

In the middle of that training, Togami frowned. Akira's location data had suddenly been sent to him. And the location was in the slums.

For the moment, Togami tried contacting Akira. But he couldn't get through. More puzzled than ever, he wondered what was going on.

"...Guess I'll go check it out."

Even if Akira wasn't there, someone was definitely calling him. If it was someone pretending to be Akira, he'd take them down himself. Thinking that, Togami headed there without letting his guard down.

The place was the roof of a building in the slums. An autonomously acting powered suit was there, waving at him. Faced with that unexpected party, Togami was too baffled to even ask who it was.

The powered suit, Haruka, spoke to him.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Haruka. I'm working with Shirou to help Akira. Actually, I need to get to Mihazono Town in a hurry. Sorry, but could you take me?"

At Haruka's sudden request, even Togami looked dubious.

"Wait. Who are you?"

"Like I said, I'm Haruka. I'm working with Akira. You're on Akira's side, aren't you?"

"Was it you who sent me fake location data for Akira?"

"Yes. I tricked you into coming here. If I'd contacted you out of nowhere, I wasn't sure you'd take me seriously, so I had no choice. Sorry."

Haruka bowed her head in apology, though she had no head. That eased Togami's guard somewhat, and he stopped his bike in front of her. Then Haruka went on.

"So, sorry, but I really am in a hurry. Could you take me to Mihazono Town? I'll definitely thank you properly later."

"...Hang on. I'll check with Akira, just in case."

Togami knew about Shirou, but not about Haruka. Knowing Shirou's name meant she was connected to some degree, but he couldn't tell more than that. He meant to at least check briefly with Akira. Strictly speaking, he only pretended to. He was trying to draw a reaction out of her.

But Haruka said:

"You can't. You won't get through to Akira. Right now there's interference in Mihazono Town that blocks even communication through the Old Domain. I want to send Akira's group some data this powered suit is carrying, but because of the interference, the only way is to deliver it in person."

Wariness toward Haruka showed on Togami's face. Her explanation added up, but as long as he couldn't confirm it with Akira, she was still a complete unknown to him.

Even so, Togami didn't go so far as to call her a liar. While he was thinking about what to do, Haruka went on.

"I get that you don't want to go to Mihazono Town without knowing exactly what's happening there. You probably know the ruins are sealed off by Lion's Tail too. Just so you know, this is how things looked in Mihazono Town before the interference started."

With that, Haruka sent Togami footage. It was from when Akira was fighting Atlas, the intercity transport vehicle, and took a concentrated barrage of annihilation warheads from Miroro and the others. As Togami stared in shock at that battle on an entirely different scale, Haruka went on.

"'Someone of my skill can't go to a place like that. I don't even want to get near it.' I understand if that's what you want to say. But in that case, could you at least lend me the bike? This time, I'll run the errand for you of dropping off the ammo, well, data this time, somewhere in the wasteland nearby."

If that didn't work, Haruka meant to forcibly seize control of the bike and go to Mihazono Town. That was why she had sent Akira's location to lure Togami here. But there was no need.

"Get on. You can fill me in on the way."

"Thank you."

With Haruka aboard, Togami raced toward Mihazono Town at high speed. So that his words, I'll at least do that much for you, wouldn't be a lie.

And, if he could, to do more than that.

Chapter 306: Formidable Foe Against Formidable Foe

On the way to Mihazono Town by flying bike, with Haruka in her powered suit aboard, Togami heard the whole story of Akira's situation. It was so outrageous that he spoke with mild exasperation.

"...That guy really can do anything, huh. In a good way and a bad way."

"Really. But I'm counting on that, his anything-goes in the good way. If anything goes, there's a chance he'll pull through no matter the situation."

"I see."

Togami could understand that. And he thought that was the reason Akira was strong.

"We're almost at Mihazono Town. Should I just fly straight in?"

Mihazono Town was currently inside augmented space. How it looked from outside told you nothing. Going into a place without knowing what was there was dangerous enough.

That aside, Mihazono Town was sealed off by Lion's Tail. Going in uninvited was also a hostile act against Lion's Tail, but Togami had already made up his mind about that.

"Yes. Please."

"All right. Here we go."

When they plunged into the augmented space, a pure white world spread out before Togami. A sight that would have thrown him if he hadn't known beforehand. Looking back, there was nothing but more white. Without a guide, Togami would have been completely lost.

"So, which way?"

When he asked Haruka, a serious voice came back.

"Change of plans. We're going to help Akira."

"...What happened?"

"Akira's being attacked by a kaiju that absorbed an intercity transport vehicle. What I've brought is the countermeasure for it."

With that, Haruka opened the attaché case from Yatsubayashi and took out the compound inside.

"Let me borrow this for a sec."

Then she took Togami's gun, removed the magazine, squeezed the compound into the shape of a bullet, and loaded it.

"There. This gun can fire it."

By the time she told Togami about the change of plans, the interference had lifted. With that, the suit-Haruka had caught up on the latest situation. She had also already merged with the real Haruka. The suit was now being remotely operated by Haruka herself.

"It's dangerous, so you get off. Don't worry. I'll come pick you up later."

She said it out of concern for Togami, at least. But Togami answered:

"Don't be stupid. It's my bike and my gun, right?"

"...If we're taken down, all I lose is this powered suit, but you'll die, you know?"

"Even so."

He couldn't say he wouldn't die. Even so, Togami chose to stay. So as not to miss a chance to do more for Akira than run errands.

Haruka handed the gun back to Togami.

"All right. Then I'll take the support role."

"I'm counting on you."

He had no intention of dying either. Togami had steeled himself to pull this off and come out alive.

Akira was surprised that it was Togami, not Olivia, who had shown up with the means to defeat Atlas the colossal kaiju.

Then a message came in from Haruka.

'Akira! Togami's going to shoot that huge kaiju now! The bullet's a compound that's the kaiju's weak point! If it works, that should take it down!'

"Got it! I'm counting on you!"

'But there's only one bullet! One chance! Akira, keep Beis from interfering!'

"Understood!"

Beis couldn't hear Haruka's side of the conversation. But from Akira's reaction, it was obvious that Togami's group, newly arrived, were the means to defeat him.

(...So these are the ones Akira was waiting for?! Damn it!)

Akira hadn't been a fool clinging to a nonexistent hope. He had fought instead of running because he had some concrete means, a chance of victory. Beis reconsidered.

He knew how strong Togami was. He knew what the powered suit with him could do too. Neither could possibly defeat him; that much was obvious.

But if Akira had held out this long, there had to be some means that made him do so. By fighting at his leisure, Beis had given Togami's group time to bring it here. He had let Akira buy time for that. Beis regretted it, but quickly switched gears.

(But if this is Akira's trump card, then crush it and I win!)

He gave the order. The fusions that had been attacking Akira ignored him completely and went for Togami's group. Countless bodies charged at them at high speed, firing bolts and beams of light.

But Akira wasn't going to just let that happen.

"Like hell!"

He fired his two HBTN composite guns nonstop, as if to empty them. He also swung his blades and sent blades of light flying. Attacking while no longer targeted himself, his firepower swelled. Masses of fusions were swallowed by the barrage, cut in two, and blown away.

Even so, he couldn't get them all. Bolts of light from the ones that escaped his attack reached Togami's group. Even with the extreme falloff over distance caused by the dense colorless mist, they could easily kill Togami. A direct hit meant instant death.

Haruka blocked them with a force field shield. The wall of light formed in front of the bike was far sturdier than in the slums, drawing on the colorless mist around them. Even so, a big crack ran through it.

"It won't hold long! Judge the limit!"

Even the colossal kaiju's huge body was little more than a dot from long range. To hit it for sure, they had to get as close as possible. But get too close, and the fusion horde's attacks would grow that much fiercer, and they'd be taken down before they could fire.

At what distance, at what moment, to fire? Togami had to judge that razor's edge with his life on the line.

"Yeah! Leave it to me!"

Togami spurred himself on with a bold shout and stepped across that deadly line.

The fight that followed was actually very short. But to Togami it felt very long and intense.

Unconsciously manipulating his sense of time, in a world moving extremely slowly, he advanced while perceiving all of it: Akira cutting down fusion after fusion, the colossal kaiju's huge body drawing gradually closer, the beams and bolts of light fired his way.

I can still go. A little more. Just a bit further. With those thoughts, he drew ever closer, of his own accord, to the death spread out before him.

And he reached it.

"Here!"

He fired the gun he'd readied. Togami's shot, staking his life, wringing out his talent, giving everything he was right now, brought a result to match. The bullet hit Atlas the colossal kaiju squarely.

Friend and foe alike froze. Everyone stared at the point of impact.

But nothing happened right away. Did it fail? Was it no good? Akira and Beis thought the same words with opposite meanings.

The change came after. The colossal kaiju's body began rapidly decaying. As if it skipped even wilting and simply died, then withered away entirely. The phenomenon didn't spread from the point of impact; it started across its whole body at once.

Not only that, the fusions around it decayed in the same way. The slight delay before the effect became visible was Yatsubayashi's doing, to rule out saving itself by severing the hit area. It also gave time for an infection-like effect to spread to the surrounding bodies and wipe them all out.

The countermeasure Yatsubayashi had provided against Liquid T, which could spawn kaiju hordes and even a colossal kaiju, was powerful enough to prove the skill of Liquid T's own developer.

With a decaying body, the colossal kaiju screamed.

"AKIRAAAAAA!"

Then it turned its huge maw on Akira. The energy it had been charging leaked from its mouth.

It would collapse in moments, but the colossal kaiju's vitality was formidable. Every fusion in the horde had already died off, yet the colossal kaiju still lived.

If it fired the beam with a collapsing body, the strain would surely kill it. But it would die either way. Hoping at least to take Akira with it, it was about to use up all its remaining strength.

The last great beam would be fired with energy Beis had charged and charged to dispel his fear that he'd fail to kill Akira again. And it would be fired with no regard for self-destruction from the strain of release. Its power would be tremendous.

Akira knew it too. He couldn't dodge the next beam. And he couldn't block it. If it fired, he'd die.

Even so, Akira didn't flinch. If it would kill him once it fired, he just had to take it down first. With that thought, he unleashed the most powerful attack he could right now.

First he fired his last six annihilation warheads in rapid succession from his two HBTN composite guns, creating a huge orb in front of him. Then he slashed the orb in a cross with the HBTN blades in both hands. A huge cross-shaped blade of light carrying all the energy of six annihilation warheads struck the colossal kaiju's head.

Every time Akira cut an orb to make a blade of light, his technique had improved. Making a blade of light from an orb of six warheads had been beyond him until now. The skill he had built up and honed in this death trap, never giving up and surviving, made it possible.

The blow struck the colossal kaiju's head squarely. But even so, it wasn't enough to bring the colossal kaiju down. If that were enough, Akira wouldn't have struggled this much.

But it did knock its head far aside. The colossal kaiju was already about to fire and couldn't stop now. With its huge maw pointed the wrong way, it released the energy it had charged and charged. The great torrent of light shot straight up and scorched an empty sky.

That was the colossal kaiju's death throe. The strain of firing the beam accelerated its body's collapse all at once. And it literally crumbled. Once its huge body turned to dust, what remained was the intercity transport vehicle it had absorbed. Its hull was ragged, like a vehicle's bleached skeleton.

With help from many people, Akira had defeated Atlas the colossal kaiju. He had overturned the unthinkable once more. Akira stood on the vehicle and let out a breath. There stood one of the rare people in the world who made the impossible possible. An exception.

Having defeated the colossal kaiju, Akira let out a breath atop the decayed intercity transport vehicle.

"Guess we managed somehow."

It was a light tone for someone who had accomplished what could fairly be called impossible. For better or worse, Akira was used to this sort of thing.

Then Togami came over.

"Akira. You did it."

"Somehow. Togami, thanks. You saved me."

Akira thanked him sincerely, and Togami answered with a slightly cocky grin.

"I'm pretty good too, huh?"

Now no one could say he was only good for running errands. He had proven he could do at least this much. That was what Togami was telling Akira, and above all himself.

"Yeah. Thanks to you, I didn't die."

Hearing Akira say that, and feeling that he had truly accomplished that much, Togami was inwardly moved. As if to cover the embarrassment that came with it, he spoke a little sheepishly.

"Still, I can't believe you beat a ridiculously huge kaiju like that. But it makes sense. When you beat Relagros alone before, I was thinking, how the hell do you even beat that, but this is how you did it, huh."

"Pretty much."

Then Haruka spoke through the powered suit.

"Akira, good work. I'd like to say take a good rest, but..."

"I know."

It wasn't over yet. Hearing the two of them say that even after defeating Atlas the colossal kaiju, Togami looked surprised.

"There's more?"

"Yeah. Haruka, look after Togami."

With that, Akira headed alone into the intercity transport vehicle.

Togami didn't say he'd come along. He sensed from Akira that he'd only get in the way, and more than that, that this wasn't something he should follow him into.

"Haruka, what did Akira go to do?"

"Take down Beis."

Defeating the colossal kaiju had only been removing an obstacle to taking down Beis. To achieve his real goal, Akira had gone alone to Beis.

"What about you, Togami? Want to leave Mihazono Town now? Or join up with us? Reina's group is there too, besides Carol and the others."

"...Nah, I'll wait here for Akira to come back. He'll need a ride home anyway."

"I see. All right. ...Hm? Someone's coming."

It was Olivia. Without stopping by Togami's group, she went straight into the intercity transport vehicle.

"Hey, shouldn't we stop her?"

"She acts on Lawrence's instructions, so she wouldn't listen even if we tried. Still, I wish she'd come a little sooner."

Haruka grumbled a little about the major fighting force that had arrived late, but did nothing more.

Inside the decayed intercity transport vehicle, now a huge hunk of scrap, Beis walked, somewhat unsteadily.

"...I-Impossible. How could this be..."

An exception who made the impossible possible. Beis lamented that he had become one more example proving it.

"Barba's and Lalantra's authority has been revoked too...! I'm the only one left...! Useless fools...!"

Through the system, Beis knew that Ortive's authority was set to be conditionally revoked. If Beis lost his authority now, Haruka would become Mihazono Town's new administrative persona. Anger and panic showed on his face at that.

"I will never let that traitor become Mihazono Town's new administrative persona...! I-I have to do something..."

Walking, Beis searched for a way.

"First, contact Chloe for guards... Damn it! It won't connect! Now of all times..."

Then Akira appeared.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Akira's eyes were cold. The eyes of someone with the power to kill the one he wanted to kill, turned on the target of that power.

Beis knew he had no chance. Partly fused with the colossal kaiju, his body had been affected by Yatsubayashi's countermeasure. He was in no state to fight. And resisting someone who had defeated even the colossal kaiju with an administrative persona body, not even made for combat, was impossible in the first place.

"W-Wait...!"

Akira kept walking, unbothered. Beis didn't even have the composure left to be ashamed of having said something so meaningless.

Then a third party appeared.

"Please wait."

It was Olivia who stopped Akira.

Oh right, Olivia was coming too. Thinking that, Akira calmed down a little.

"It's fine. Sorry you came all this way, but it's almost over. Leave the rest to me."

Beis was in no state to fight. There was no need for Olivia's support. That was what Akira meant, but Olivia meant something else.

"No, that is not what I mean."

"Huh?"

As Akira made a puzzled sound, Olivia walked past him. She went straight up to Beis, turned her back on him, and faced Akira.

Even Akira couldn't hide his surprise.

"Akira-sama. I must ask you to leave."

Olivia hadn't come to help Akira. Quite the opposite. She had come to save Beis from Akira.

'Huhhh?!'

Shirou's shocked voice reached Akira. That brought Akira back to his senses.

'Shirou, what's going on?'

'I-I don't know. Why would...'

On the other end of the line, everyone else was just as shocked. Reina's group most of all.

Beis was just as confused, not understanding what was happening. But he settled on a convenient interpretation, his expression changing as if struck by realization, and laughed.

"I see! You've finally judged that I am fit to be Mihazono Town's new administrative persona, haven't you? Of course! At this rate that traitor will become Mihazono Town's new administrative persona! Lion's Tail can't accept that either, so..."

"No, that is not the reason."

His guess rejected, Beis's face went back to confusion.

"I-It isn't? Then why... No, I see! Then it's the other Lion's Tail, the competitor company Representative Alice founded? She's our ally! This is support from her..."

"No. This unit's contract holder is Lawrence-sama."

Beis grew even more confused. By his reckoning, Lawrence was on Haruka's side. Even if he had switched to Beis's side, Beis couldn't see why. Haruka was on the verge of becoming Mihazono Town's new administrative persona. Beis had no idea why anyone would betray Haruka and side with him at this point.

Shirou was just as confused. But shelving that, he spoke to Akira.

'Akira! Cancel your contract with Lion's Tail! Even if Lawrence is the one employing Olivia, if the contract was made through your card, then canceling your own contract should void Lawrence's too!'

"I'm canceling my contract with Lion's Tail!"

Akira declared it as Shirou told him. Then he watched Olivia's reaction.

"Your cancellation of your contract with our company has been received. We sincerely look forward to serving you again."

Olivia bowed politely to Akira as she said it. But she didn't move from in front of Beis.

"...Won't you move?"

"My apologies. I must decline."

'Th-That's not it? I thought Lawrence borrowed that card from Akira because, even in Lawrence's position, he couldn't hire Olivia except through Akira...'

With his guess wrong, Shirou was confused again. Reina's group hurriedly tried to contact Lawrence to ask what was going on, but couldn't get through.

Akira was just as baffled. But he let out a big breath and switched gears.

In the next instant, the two HBTN composite guns floating in the air unleashed a storm of bullets. A great storm, pouring in every round he had left. But even that dense barrage didn't work on Olivia. She deployed a force field shield before her and completely protected herself and Beis.

Then the storm stopped. Out of ammo. With that, Akira had used up not just his force bullets but everything else too.

"...Well, figured that wouldn't work."

Akira wasn't surprised his gunfire hadn't worked. He hadn't expected to beat someone who could deal with even the colossal kaiju's beam using rounds that weren't even force bullets. He'd only been testing, hoping a little that she might back off.

Returning the empty guns to his back, Akira readied the blades in both hands.

"I don't know how much Lawrence is paying you, but I can't hold back. I'm not going to fight thinking you'll back off once I've made you fight past what you're paid for. If you don't like it, back off early."

Olivia readied her sword too.

"Please don't concern yourself. I cannot hold back against you either, Akira-sama. If you withdraw, I will not pursue, so I ask that you decide sooner rather than later."

Then Beis cut in.

"What are you saying?! Kill him! That's what he intends to do!"

"My apologies. This unit is here strictly as your bodyguard, Beis-sama. While I may end up killing Akira-sama in the course of guarding you, I must decline any request whose purpose is the killing itself."

"...Couldn't that count as proactive guarding?"

"Our company does not accept requests for attacks and the like under such broad interpretations."

"Inflexible machine...!"

Beis didn't push it further. He understood it was pointless. Instead, he glared at Akira over Olivia's shoulder. To keep Akira from backing off.

(Not yet...! If Akira dies here, I can still turn this around!)

He had been driven this far into a corner entirely because of Akira. So if Akira died, there was still a good chance of turning things around. That was what Beis thought.

Normally, even Beis would have scoffed at that assumption as baseless wishful thinking. But to Beis now, it was ground enough. Akira overturning situations he was sure to win, over and over, had become that ground.

And because of it, Beis couldn't run from here. To make Olivia kill Akira, he had to keep up a situation where Akira was attacking him. If he ran and succeeded, Olivia would have no reason to fight Akira.

Beis slowly backed away until his back touched the wall, but went no further. Keeping a spot where he wouldn't get caught up in Akira and Olivia's fight, he stayed there, praying for Akira's death.

Akira glanced at Beis once, then looked back at Olivia. Killing Beis by exploiting an opening in Olivia's guard was impossible. He judged that again.

Akira's focus rose. The instant it crossed the threshold for battle, he lunged at Olivia at full speed and swung the blade in his right hand. The crimson blade split the air and closed in on her at high speed.

But just before the crimson blade reached Olivia, Akira followed his instinct. He forced the blade in his left hand around behind him.

In the next instant, Olivia's sword collided with the blade in Akira's left hand. Impact-conversion light flew from both blades like sparks.

Akira had blocked the blow from behind, but his face was filled with shock. Not only at being attacked from behind by the opponent in front of him. When he blocked that blow, Olivia was still standing in front of him.

Akira finished swinging his right blade. The Olivia in front of him leapt back to dodge it. Then she vanished, as if using camouflage.

Akira swung his left blade hard and knocked the Olivia behind him away. Then he turned around. That Olivia kept her distance from him, still there, not vanishing.

(What's going on...?)

There were two Olivias. Akira thought that for a moment, then dismissed it. If there were two, they could just attack together. Since they hadn't, there was only one.

Then was the Olivia in front a hologram? Akira suspected so but couldn't be sure. The Olivia in front had definitely felt present. At least, a stronger presence than the one behind, which he hadn't noticed until just before the attack.

Wary, Akira faced Olivia again. Then she spoke.

"Splendidly blocked. But it seemed a close thing. You may not block the next one. What do you say? Won't you withdraw?"

"...Thanks for the concern. But no. I'm not going home until I kill Beis."

"Is that so. Then."

Olivia leaned right and left. And split completely in two. Divided into two, mirror images of each other, this time Olivia came at Akira.

One of the two, left or right, was fake. Akira knew that much. The problem was not knowing which. He sensed a presence from both Olivias, something a hologram shouldn't have.

Both Olivias closed the distance in a flash. Then they swung their swords from left and right on paths that made it impossible to dodge both at once. If he dodged and guessed wrong, Akira would die.

(Which one...?! I can't tell!)

With no choice, Akira blocked each with one of his blades. The blades collided. The heavy impact came on his left. That was the real one.

The price of covering both was his balance and a delayed reaction to the next attack. Blocking an attack he didn't need to block had left an opening. Olivia exploited it and unleashed a combo.

Akira barely blocked the first strike. His strength, grown even greater in the fight against Atlas the colossal kaiju, got his guard up just in time. Fending off Olivia's onslaught with both blades, he gradually recovered his stance.

And once he had somehow recovered enough to counterattack, he moved to swing his blades in time with Olivia's next diagonal slash.

But then Akira followed his instinct again.

(...Wrong!)

He raised the blades he'd been about to swing at the Olivia in front of him over his own head.

Right after, a blow from Olivia, who had already leapt into the air, came down on his crossed blades from above. A blow that would have killed him if he hadn't blocked it with both hands.

A moment later, the sword of the Olivia in front of Akira passed through his body. That Olivia was an illusion. But even the illusion had given off a clear presence until just before it vanished.

Akira swung both blades hard and knocked Olivia away. Flung upward, she readied her sword in midair. Its glowing blade signaled a slashing wave. It wasn't a range he could dodge from. Akira would have to send a blade of light to cancel it out.

The problem was that there were two glowing blades. Flung into the air, Olivia had split in two again.

But this time Akira didn't hesitate.

(That one, I can tell!)

Akira canceled out the blade of light from the Olivia on the right with precision. The two colliding blades of light scattered slashing waves all around, but short of a direct hit from a blade of light itself, Akira's powered suit could block them easily. It only cost a bit more of his force field armor's energy.

The same went for Olivia. The real one landed behind, unharmed. The illusion had vanished by then.

The real one and the illusion looked completely identical, and both had a presence, but Akira told them apart instantly and accurately. Of the two blades, glowing exactly alike, only the real one was leaking the energy for the blade of light. Even the illusion couldn't reproduce that much.

Akira let out a big breath.

(...All right. From now on, if I watch Olivia's sword, I should be able to tell a bit better.)

This made the fight a little easier. With that thought, Akira steeled himself again and went at Olivia once more.

Olivia met him. As if sensing that Akira had figured out how to spot the illusions, this time she swung her sword without multiplying. Their blades clashed again and again. Scattering impact-conversion light kept the surroundings brightly lit.

Against a formidable foe whose strength ran in a different direction from the colossal kaiju's, Akira fought with everything he had.

Chapter 307: Taboo

Through Akira's sensors, Shirou's group could watch the fight between Akira and Olivia too. While each watched with their own feelings, Hammers watched with a mind tilted toward combat.

(Holograms with presence. That's a nasty trick to have used on you.)

Hammers had received advanced combat training at Sakashita Heavy Industries. From that experience, he understood what Olivia was doing.

Generate a human-shaped force field and overlay a hologram on it. That made an illusion with presence. Meanwhile, the real one disappeared with camouflage and the like, erasing her presence by blending the disturbances in the air from her movement into the colorless mist. Then she attacked her opponent from behind.

The baffling first ambush Akira had suffered, being attacked from behind by the opponent in front of him, had been done that way.

The technique had many applications. Show yourself without camouflage but thoroughly erase your presence, and you could make the opponent mistake the real you for a hologram. The one with presence was fake, the one without was real: a nasty kind of deception.

Being seen through wasn't a big problem either. In that case, next time, just skip the force field and use only the hologram. Now the one with presence was real and the one without was fake. Assume the one without presence was real, and you'd be caught by the reversal.

And the enemy was forced to fight while unsure whether the opponent was real or fake. Attack a fake, and that alone created a big opening. But you couldn't ignore an attack from the real one either. Against an opponent you couldn't tell was real or fake.

The only way to tell real from fake was to examine properly. And that in itself wasn't so hard. The sensors in Akira's HBTN powered suit could do the analysis. It would take only a moment.

The problem was that in a high-speed fight where every instant was contested, even that took too long. Before the analysis of one instant finished, the next instant began. The analysis would never catch up.

That was why Akira was forced to fight mostly on instinct.

Hammers thought further.

(She didn't use it when she fought me, so it's a matter of fees. That illusion is precise enough to fool the HBTN series' sensors. Generating it during high-speed combat must put a considerable load on the unit too. Did Lawrence really pay that much...?)

When Shirou hired Olivia and she fought Hammers, the contract probably hadn't paid that much. So she hadn't used it. That was Hammers's judgment.

On top of that, fighting Akira, Olivia had a real chance of being destroyed. Just fighting someone kitted out in frontline gear made that likely. Considering that, Lawrence's contract with Olivia must be extremely expensive, accepting even the unit's total destruction.

Why had Lawrence suddenly sided with Beis? And paid that much to do it? No matter how much he thought about it, Hammers couldn't figure that out.

Against Olivia's onslaught with holograms that had presence, Akira resisted by honing his instincts.

Both had presence. Neither had presence. The one with presence was real. The one without was real. The one ambushing was real. The one ambushing was fake. It went on with no pattern.

(No good! I can't tell!)

Unable to tell, Akira went on the defensive. He fought as if it were two against one, keeping a state where one wrong move wouldn't kill him, forced into a cautious fight. That made Olivia's onslaught even fiercer.

Still, defense was worth it. Akira had already guessed wrong many times, but thanks to fighting with a focus on blocking and dodging, he was still holding out.

(Who'd have thought I'd ever be this grateful for my instincts, which are only ever good at sensing bad things!)

Akira's instincts reacted keenly to the bad feeling of approaching death.

Akira had already guessed wrong many times. But only that many. Forced into coin flips again and again, he'd only gotten a handful wrong, overwhelmingly few compared with the total number of tries.

Something was clearly there that drastically rewrote the simple odds of one in two, something luck couldn't explain.

Even so, he was still losing. Relying on what he'd learned when Olivia loosed blades of light, Akira tried to tell, even a little, whether his opponent was real or fake.

(The sword! Pay more attention to the sword! A projected sword can't cut me!)

When she loosed blades of light, he'd been able to tell from the energy the blade gave off. But that method had limits. Olivia raised the output of the force field overlaid on the hologram for the sword alone. At the same time, she kept the real sword's output down until just before an attack. So the energy leaking from the blade made it hard to tell real from fake.

Of course, raising the field output in one spot couldn't make the energy exactly the same. A careful check would tell them apart for sure. But doing that in a high-speed fight where every instant was contested was extremely hard. And Olivia swung both the real and holographic swords with a master's skill. To dodge and block them, he couldn't focus on the swords alone.

In the end, telling them apart by the energy leaking from the sword only worked when she used a lot of energy, like sending a slashing wave or delivering a stronger-than-usual blow.

Still, in those cases he could see through it for certain. Unconsciously, Akira began paying closer attention to Olivia's sword.

From a fairly long distance, Olivia lunged at him at high speed, sword raised overhead. Energy visible to the naked eye radiated from her sword.

(That one, I can tell!)

Clearly too fast to dodge and strong enough that he'd have to block with both blades. But a blow that big would leave a big opening if blocked. Block it properly, then counter the real Olivia holding the real sword. Akira judged so and took his stance in an instant.

The shining blade came down at him. The instant he moved to block with both blades, an even stronger bad feeling struck Akira.

Olivia's sword collided with Akira's blades. The impact-conversion light that burst out proved the sword was unmistakably real.

But at the same time, a knife-hand from Olivia came at Akira. Through the Olivia in front of him, from behind her.

The Olivia who had brought down the sword, or strictly speaking had made Akira think so, was a hologram with presence.

The sword had been swung by remote control. Akira could control his HBTN blades floating in the air without holding them. Olivia could do the same. That was how she had her holographic fake swing the real sword.

Olivia's knife-hand closed in on Akira's head. Even without a helmet, Akira's HBTN powered suit protected his head well with force field armor that worked directly on his body to toughen it and a force field shield enveloping it. But against Olivia's knife-hand, that double protection was like paper. Her knife-hand was reinforced with high-output force field armor too.

Akira dodged that killing blow by a hair. The instant he felt the bad feeling, he let go of his blades and bent far back.

To block the obviously powerful blow from Olivia's sword, Akira's blades had also been strengthened with a lot of energy. That had temporarily increased their mass dramatically. Holding blades that heavy, he couldn't move quickly even with the HBTN powered suit's strength. If he hadn't let go of them, he couldn't have dodged Olivia's knife-hand.

Bent far back, watching Olivia's knife-hand pass before his eyes, Akira kicked. A kick thrown off balance normally wouldn't have much power. But with a powered suit capable even of flight, he could force his body to stay fixed in place and make the kick as powerful as if he'd thrown it standing firmly on the ground.

The brutal kick slammed into Olivia. But it was nowhere near enough to beat her. It only knocked her back a little.

Akira had expected that, though. The blow was meant to throw her off balance and stop a follow-up. Riding the kick's recoil, he flew back, put distance between them, and recovered his stance. At the same time, he remotely brought the blades still floating in the air back into his hands.

Olivia brought her sword back to her hand too. That reset things for both. But their faces were very different. Akira's was grim, his breathing ragged. Olivia's expression hadn't changed at all since before the fight.

Catching his breath, Akira scolded himself for his naivety.

(That was close...! She was luring me from the moment she loosed that blade of light!)

Olivia had loosed the blade of light to get him to judge real from fake by the sword's energy. That was the trap from the start, and he had fallen for it neatly, assuming whoever held the real sword was the real one. Because of that, he'd nearly died. He reflected on it hard.

(Idiot! When your opponent hands you such an easy way to tell them apart, a moment's thought should tell you it's some kind of bait, right? Notice that!)

Then he gave a slightly wry smile.

(If Alpha were here, she'd have told me stuff like this. Geez, I've really got a long way to go.)

Regretting once more that someone so reliable wasn't by his side, Akira switched gears.

Olivia couldn't know what Akira was thinking. To her, he was simply a strong opponent who, even driven to the brink of death, regained his composure with a single wry smile. That pushed her judgment one step further.

"To block that as well is truly splendid. But surely you understand full well, Akira-sama, that you came within a hair of dying. Let me ask once more. Won't you withdraw?"

"Sorry to keep making you worry about me. But no."

"Is that so..."

Akira would never back off. Having confirmed this much, Olivia judged so too.

"Then prepare yourself."

That being the case, there was only one thing for Olivia to do.

Akira understood too.

(Here she comes...!)

Until now, Olivia had been trying to drive him off as a bodyguard. Even if he died from it, that would only have been the outcome, not the goal.

But next, she would come to kill. Since driving the enemy off was proving difficult, the only option was to neutralize him with death.

Understanding that, Akira braced for the next attack. An attack from Olivia aimed at killing her target.

Akira raised his focus and tension even further, honing his mind. Before him, Olivia vanished again with her camouflage. She blended her presence into the dense colorless mist too. Even a high-ranked hunter couldn't perceive her now.

But Akira could, in this state. They weren't mid-fight at high speed, so his sensors' analysis kept up. His augmented vision showed Olivia's position correctly. On top of that, Akira himself had a vague grasp of her position on his own.

But only until the fight resumed. Once it began, the analysis would fall behind again. Her position would be hard to grasp.

Still invisible, Olivia slowly closed the distance. Akira didn't move. He kept up extreme focus so he could react even if attacked from directly behind at that very instant.

And the distance closed completely.

In the next instant, eight Olivias attacked Akira at once. A simultaneous attack from eight directions, not just front, back, left, and right, but every gap between.

Of course, only one was real; the rest were illusions. But every illusion had a clear presence and gave off energy from its blade. Olivia had only ever shown one illusion until now to make Akira think that was her limit.

Not one in two, but one in eight. And an ultra-fast slash, delivered after catching her opponent off guard. Olivia's blow cut empty air.

Akira dodged the sword swung by the real Olivia, raced past her side, swung both blades, and cut her open.

Cut in a tilted cross, Olivia praised Akira in her divided state.

"...Splendid."

Then she exploded. The crimson edges of the HBTN blades destroyed Olivia's body from within with the vast energy they released.

Still in the pose of finishing his swings, Akira let out a big breath.

(...If she'd done that first, I'd be dead.)

Akira hadn't beaten Olivia by luckily picking right from eight. He had accurately told real from fake at the very last moment.

But how he'd told them apart, how he'd chosen right, even Akira didn't know. It was a choice made in the realm of instinct.

Akira's sensors couldn't distinguish Olivia's illusions, but they sent the data to him as augmented senses, dramatically sharpening the reality his mind perceived.

And throughout the exchange with Olivia, Akira had kept distinguishing real from fake even on an unconscious level. That way he had gradually raised his accuracy. Just as he had gradually but surely begun dealing with the beams fired at him in the fight against Atlas the colossal kaiju.

Instinct. A clear power, not luck, though even he couldn't follow the reasoning behind why he did what he did. With that power, Akira defeated Olivia.

But it was a narrow victory. As Akira himself had said, if Olivia had used that final attack first, he would have died without understanding anything. It was only because she had used similar attacks many times before that his ability to tell real from fake made it in time at the very last moment.

Put the other way, if she'd done it first, Olivia would have won. Part of why she didn't was cost: if possible, she wanted to win by driving Akira off, keeping wear on her unit down.

But more than that, the management policy of the Old World Lion's Tail weighed heavily. What she had taken on was strictly bodyguard work. The company did not accept attacks on adversaries under the broad interpretation of proactive guarding. That principle, in the end, kept Akira alive.

Akira understood that too. That was exactly why, even though Olivia had gotten in the way of his killing Beis, he felt no ill will toward Olivia.

Toward Olivia, that is.

Akira lowered his hands, lowered his face, and let out one deep breath. Then he raised his face and turned his unchanged killing intent on Beis.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

With only that, Akira started walking toward Beis again.

Beis was cornered.

His optimistic hope that Olivia would kill Akira had been shattered before his eyes with ease. In fact it had been a razor-thin victory, like walking on thin ice, but to Beis, whose colossal kaiju Atlas Akira had defeated, it seemed only natural.

Someone who could beat the colossal kaiju couldn't possibly lose to a mere single automaton. He had hoped foolishly. Lamenting that, Beis watched Akira approach.

He had no way left to counter Akira with force. Beis understood that. But it wasn't as though he had no moves at all. He made one.

"...Wait! A deal!"

Even so, Akira didn't stop. Whatever he was told, he meant to ignore it and kill him.

"I understand your strength now! Join my side! Do that, and I'll bring Yumina back to life!"

Akira didn't stop. One of his reasons for killing Beis was to prevent exactly that. Because he had accepted the last request of her, the one who had been Yumina's reproduced persona.

"True, the Yumina I sent you was a crude reproduction! It was rough, not something you could call Yumina herself! But that's because time and data were limited! With enough time and enough data, regenerating Yumina is entirely possible!"

Akira didn't stop. Not because he judged Beis's words a lie. Even her, the crude reproduction as Beis called it, had been Yumina enough to Akira to fairly call her Yumina. So much so that if he hadn't desperately denied it, he might have rejoiced that Yumina had come back to life.

Akira thought: Old World technology could basically do anything. And proof that someone was truly themselves, however much of it there was, was in the end only observation by others.

In that sense, Yumina really would come back to life. All the more so now that he knew the concept of what counted as the same person. Yumina really had come back. As long as he thought so, Yumina would come back to life.

Even thinking that, Akira didn't stop. Because the one who had killed that Yumina was none other than Akira himself.

But when he heard what came next, Akira stopped walking.

"And that's not all! I'll adjust her too! So that she loves you!"

Seeing Akira stop, Beis smiled. As he'd thought, this deal worked on Akira.

"You killed Yumina in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, and she opposed you that far, because Yumina loved Katsuya. That's why you had no choice but to kill her. No problem. This time, Yumina will love you. As strongly as she loved Katsuya, enough to oppose you."

The old Beis would never have offered Akira a deal like this. Pointless, he would have dismissed it. But not now.

Enchaint had betrayed them, and Mihazono Town, because she loved Shirou. Then it would be no surprise if Akira betrayed Enchaint's side for the same reason. That was how Beis had changed his thinking.

Akira listened to Beis in silence. Beis took that to mean Akira was wavering. He went on, as if to seal it.

"If you think Enchaint can do whatever I can, so you'll just ask her later, you're mistaken. This persona adjustment technology is held only by me, the first being extracted from Mihazono Town's collective mind network data who kept myself intact without mental collapse. Even if Enchaint becomes Mihazono Town's administrative persona, she can't take my place."

Beis waited for Akira's answer. But Akira stayed silent, face lowered as if deep in thought.

Even with conditions this good, Akira was hesitating because he doubted Beis would honor the deal. Judging so, Beis went on with a serious face.

"As one who represents Mihazono Town, I don't lie in a deal. I'll record it in the system as a formal treaty. If you still doubt me, you can formally switch to our side after I've brought Yumina back to life."

How about that? Thinking that, Beis watched Akira. After a slight pause, Akira spoke, face still lowered.

"Looks like you're not lying..."

Hearing that, Beis smiled in spite of himself. But he had read it wrong.

Akira raised his head. His face looked painted over in black, seeping killing intent of the utmost density.

"This is the first time I've ever wanted to kill someone this much..."

To Akira, just making a combat body in Yumina's form had been an insult to Yumina. Making a reproduced persona of Yumina without permission had been a desecration beyond that.

After all that, he'd thought nothing could make him any angrier. And then he'd been confronted with something that made even that trivial. Rewriting Yumina's persona to suit himself was, to Akira, the realm of taboo.

Akira raised his blade. The power to kill the one he wanted to kill, wielded by its owner with startling killing intent.

"Die."

And he brought it down.

"Hiiii...!"

At that overwhelming killing intent, Beis screamed for the first time in his life. Then he was cut in two and blew apart.

Cut down by Akira, his body destroyed, Beis wasn't dead. He had only lost the body he used in reality; his persona had returned to Mihazono Town's system.

But Beis was already checkmated. As he gasped for breath in the virtual space, still unsettled by the terror of moments ago, Haruka appeared before him. Haruka, now Mihazono Town's new administrative persona.

With his administrative persona body destroyed, Beis had lost his authority as an administrative persona. That had fulfilled the conditions for Haruka to become Mihazono Town's new administrative persona.

Beis and Haruka. Their positions not just reversed but now worlds apart, each showed their feelings on their faces. Beis wore the face of the cornered, and Haruka a sad face tinged with guilt.

"I'm sorry..."

Haruka knew better than anyone that the apology was only words. Whatever she said, it wouldn't change what she was about to do.



"I know. You're the one who's right. But even if it's wrong, I want to save Shirou... I'm truly... sorry."

Haruka reached out toward Beis. At that, Beis went pale. He understood what was about to be done to him.

"S-Stop...!"

As Mihazono Town's new administrative persona, Haruka exercised her power. The process of deleting Beis from the town's system began.

Maintaining order in an unmanned town built on the assumption of human activity. Beis resolved that contradiction by identifying himself with Mihazono Town. That was exactly why Beis feared his own erasure more than anything.

"S-Stop! Please stop! I-I'll, I'll, I'll disappear...!"

Tasting that greatest of fears, Beis's persona began to collapse.

"NOOOOOOOO!"

With that final scream, Beis vanished. He disappeared from the system too. Related data was deleted. Regenerating Beis became impossible. Haruka had killed him.

Left alone, Haruka left her sentiment there and exited the virtual space. The space, with Beis dead and Haruka gone, was deleted from the world.

Having taken down Beis, Akira took deep breath after deep breath. When he had regained his composure, Haruka appeared in his augmented vision.

'Akira, it's over. I've completely deleted Beis's data. I erased it along with his persona's directional data, so not even I can regenerate Beis now. Beis is dead. Also, I erased his whole management domain, so the Yumina data that was there is gone too. Now no one can make a reproduced persona of her.'

It's over. As if to breathe out that feeling, Akira let out a big breath once more. Then he smiled at Haruka.

"I see. Thanks."

Haruka smiled back.

'I'm the one who should be thanking you. Thanks to you, I became Mihazono Town's new administrative persona. Now I can save Shirou. Akira, thank you, truly.'

Having thanked each other, Akira and Haruka laughed together. There was a real sense of accomplishment in it.

'Akira, let's meet up for now. Togami's waiting outside, so come back here with him.'

"Got it. We'll talk details later."

After Haruka cut the connection and vanished, Akira stretched hard. Then he said:

"Guess we managed somehow."

Akira had accomplished far too much to sum up in those few words. And without Alpha's support.

That was how strong Akira had become.

Chapter 308: Something Next

When Akira returned to Shirou's group with Togami, Reina greeted him with a smile, though she seemed a little awkward.

"Welcome back, Akira. I'm glad you're safe. That was rough, huh."

"No kidding. I almost died. But sounds like it was rough for you too. I heard on the way back. If it weren't for you guys, Shirou's group would've died, right? Thanks."

Reina smiled proudly.

"We're pretty good too, right? Well, not as good as you, beating that ridiculously huge kaiju. But I think we were a real help to you."

"Yeah. I owe you again."

To show it wasn't flattery, Akira said he owed them. Reina understood that and looked somewhat satisfied. But even so, her awkwardness didn't go away.

Sensing it, Akira spoke.

"If it's about Olivia, don't worry about it. Sure, she got in my way at the end, but before that she saved my life. I'll call it even. Besides, it was Lawrence who hired Olivia, not you. You've kept your promise not to turn against me."

Hearing that, Reina let out a sigh of relief. Her awkwardness disappeared too.

"It really helps to hear you say that."

With that worry gone, Shiori was relieved as well.

"Akira-sama, thank you very much for showing such understanding of Reina-sama's position."

Kanae, too, sounded breezy as usual but meant every word.

"Man, I'm glad you get it. Yep, yep. It's not Ojou's fault, it's Lawrence-sama's."

"Is it okay to say that? He's a big shot to you, isn't he?"

Akira said it jokingly, and Kanae laughed without the slightest concern.

"Couldn't care less. Ojou's my mistress, after all."

So that's how it works? Akira laughed back.

Akira then went off to talk with Carol's group. After seeing him off, Shiori spoke with a serious face.

"...But why would Lawrence-sama do such a thing?"

They still hadn't been able to reach Lawrence. Because of that, Reina's group hadn't been able to ask him why he'd suddenly had Olivia act that way.

Even so, Reina had a guess.

"...This is just a guess, but I think Lawrence-sama's goal was to get Olivia-sama destroyed."

Shiori and Kanae looked surprised, and Reina went on to explain her reasoning.

"If he had her guard Akira, then the next time Akira got attacked by something crazy, she'd end up broken protecting him. Maybe that's what he was thinking. She did get destroyed once already, after all. Maybe Lawrence-sama telling us to cooperate with Akira was also just a pretext for sending Olivia-sama to be Akira's bodyguard."

Shiori showed she understood Reina's thinking.

"If that's correct, then Lawrence-sama originally sent Olivia-sama to protect Akira-sama from that giant kaiju."

Kanae nodded lightly too.

"Ahh, but since young Akira went and beat the kaiju on his own first, this time he tried to get young Akira to destroy Olivia-sama instead... That does add up, huh."

Akira's victory was settled the moment Atlas the colossal kaiju was defeated. Further chances to fight, at least the chance of the enemy adding enough force to destroy Olivia, had all but vanished.

So the plan was hastily changed. Have Olivia protect Beis, and have Akira destroy Olivia. And Olivia really was destroyed.

Reina's group could accept the hypothesis up to that point. Even so, questions remained.

"But why would Olivia-sama need to be destroyed? If she breaks, they'll just send a new unit. And in such a roundabout way, too."

At Kanae's perfectly reasonable question, Reina groaned too.

"That's the thing. I wonder why. Shirou said this whole thing seems to have an internal-conflict side within Lion's Tail, so maybe that's the reason?"

If what Shirou said was true, the Old World Lion's Tail and the modern Lion's Tail were already practically competitors. So Lawrence decided to destroy Olivia to cost his business rival opportunities. But he couldn't very well destroy her directly, so he did it the roundabout way of having her guard Akira.

Reina laid out that guess to Shiori and Kanae, but with a troubled face. It showed that she wasn't convinced by it herself.

Then Kanae spoke in a breezy tone.

"Man, anyway, I'm glad it didn't come to turning young Akira into an enemy. No thanks, even if Lawrence-sama orders it. I'm counting on you, Ojou, okay?"

"Don't worry. If it came to that, I'd refuse even an order from Lawrence-sama."

"Ehh? Really?"

Kanae said it somewhat teasingly, and Reina answered with composure.

"Yes. I won't turn against Akira. I swore it on the name of Reina Liralt Lawrence, after all."

"But if you swore on Lawrence-sama's name, then wouldn't an order from that same Lawrence-sama cancel it out?"

"No."

"Hm?"

"Reina Liralt Lawrence is my name. I swore on my own name."

Kanae looked a little surprised at that. And this time Reina was the one who sounded teasing.

"So, sorry, but if it ever comes to that, you'll be defying Lawrence-sama right along with me, okay, Kanae?"

Kanae burst out laughing and grinned happily. Then she went on in her usual tone.

"Can't be helped. I'll serve you properly. Reina-sama."

"Thanks. That's reassuring. ...Hm?"

Reina felt something slightly off about Kanae's reply. But before she could think about it, her attention was caught by Togami, who had been listening in.

"Akira's got his own insane situation going on, but you've got a messy one of your own too, huh, Reina."

"Right? Won't you help us too, Togami? You helped Akira take down that ridiculously huge kaiju, so helping us should be a breeze, right?"

"Don't be stupid. Haruka's the one who got its weak point. I just shot it in. Besides, my gear isn't frontline-grade like Akira's or yours. And it's on loan from the city. What do you expect me to do?"

"Don't worry. Our gear's on loan too."

"Is that the point? Actually, if your gear's on loan too, that makes things worse. What kind of death trap are you planning to throw me into?"

"Well, the opponent would be Lawrence-sama, and worst case we'd be making enemies of all of Lion's Tail, so it's worse than being thrown into a kaiju horde."

"...Come to think of it, I barged into Mihazono Town on my own, so I've already kind of picked a fight with Lion's Tail."

"That's rough, Togami. Let's do our best together."

"Don't use that as an excuse to drag me in! Haruka asked me to do that, so I should be fine!"

Togami kept bantering with Reina after that, but not once did he say he didn't want to or that he refused. Reina noticed that too and was glad that Togami, whatever he said, was telling her he'd help.

Next to Reina's group, chatting happily, Shiori smiled and looked at Kanae. Shiori understood what it meant that Kanae had called Reina not "Ojou" but "Reina-sama."

Kanae looked away from Shiori, as if to hide her embarrassment.

Akira thanked Carol.

"...Haruka told me what happened to you guys. Thanks. You really saved us. And I'm really sorry for dragging you this deep into it."

Carol had agreed to it herself, but because she'd helped him, things had gotten so bad that Miroro and Temeta nearly killed her, both in the virtual world and back in the real one. Even Akira hadn't seen that coming. His remorse showing on his face, he offered his thanks and apology from the heart.

Carol, on the other hand, laughed brightly.

"Honestly, I thought I was going to die. It was insanely rough. But I went in knowing that, to put you in my debt, right? If you feel bad, then feel plenty indebted. And you came back alive to repay me, just like you were supposed to, so I won't let you say no, okay?"

Come back alive. Akira had kept that promise. That made Carol happy.

Akira knew Carol was saying it to ease his guilt, too. Playing along, he answered with a wry smile.

"Can't be helped. You got me to promise, so go easy on me."

"Akira. Do you think I'm the kind of woman who goes easy at a time like this?"

"No!"

"How cruel. Well, it's true."

Akira and Carol laughed together happily. Then Doras spoke, half joking.

"Akira, I'm taking back what I said before. I said you were dragging Carol into things, but she goes and gets herself dragged in. This time too. So don't think of it as that big a debt to her."

"Hey, Doras. What are you saying all of a sudden? Trying to get in my way?"

"I'm helping out an innocent kid, as an adult, so he doesn't get eaten alive by a nasty woman."

Akira was surprised Doras had come to his rescue, but glad of it all the same. He played along.

"Fair point. So, Carol, that's that."

"Not you too, Akira. No way. I got you to promise properly for exactly this kind of situation."

"So that's what it was. You really are nasty."

"Sorry, okay? Give up. Now, what should I ask for? Let's see. First, maybe I'll have you try my body once? You know very well what happens to people who sleep with me even once, after all."

Akira knew that very well. One example, a hunter named Babarod, had been charged ten billion aurum by Carol for her side job, and still couldn't bring himself to stiff her because he hated the idea of losing his connection to her, and ended up leaking his hunter team's secrets to her.

And another example was standing right next to Carol. He was no longer after her body, but what had started their relationship was the same as with Babarod.

"Uh, I need to talk with Shirou about the Sakashita Heavy Industries job, so, see you."

With that evasive parting line, Akira hurried away.

Akira had escaped her, but Carol smiled with satisfaction.

(...He didn't say no.)

Given Akira's personality, even if he owed her big, he'd refuse: no means no, not happening means not happening. And he hadn't refused. That was huge progress. Thinking that, Carol wore a bewitching smile.

Seeing her like that, Doras spoke.

"You really are a nasty woman."

"Yes? You're only now noticing?"

"Just thinking it all over again."

As one of those hooked by that very nasty woman, Doras felt a little sorry for Akira.

Shirou bowed his head to Akira.

"Akira, thank you. Because of you, I was able to save Haruka. My wish came true."

"I see. ...Then, are we good?"

"Yeah."

Akira glanced around the room. A Sakashita Heavy Industries unit was deployed there. The unit Hammers had requested had already arrived where Shirou's group was.

Then he spoke to Hammers.

"Is it okay to hand Shirou over right here? Or should I take him to Kugamayama City, just to be safe?"

"Here is fine."

Hammers still wasn't in shape to fight at full strength. Before the unit arrived, he had considered having Akira escort Shirou to the city for his safety. But with the unit here, there was no need.

"Okay."

Akira stepped behind Shirou, put both hands on his shoulders, gave him a light push one step toward Hammers, and let go.

Then Hammers put both his hands on Shirou's shoulders.

"Received, without question."

Hammers smiled at Shirou as he said it. At that smile, which let his true feelings seep through, Shirou gave a slightly stiff smile, as if to gloss it over.

The handover of Shirou to Sakashita Heavy Industries was complete. With that, Akira had fulfilled the job he'd taken from Sakashita Heavy Industries.

Taking his hands off Shirou, Hammers spoke to Akira.

"Many unexpected things happened, but let's say your judgment led to an unimpeachable result. We look forward to continued friendly dealings with you."

Akira had secured Shirou and then refused to hand him over to Sakashita Heavy Industries yet, which in a sense was a hostile act toward the company.

But in the end, that choice of his had brought Sakashita Heavy Industries profit. For Shirou's sake, Haruka had betrayed Beis's group and, in a sense, Mihazono Town. And that Shirou had come back to Sakashita Heavy Industries. Now the company held a weakness over the administrative persona of an Old World city. Its value was beyond measure.

So as long as you're good for our business going forward, we'll overlook your problematic behavior this time. That was what Hammers was telling Akira.

Akira more or less understood what Hammers meant.

"Thanks for that. I don't want to pick fights with Sakashita Heavy Industries either."

"Naturally."

That closed the chapter on the job Akira had taken from Sakashita Heavy Industries. But the relationship between Shirou, Haruka, and Sakashita Heavy Industries was only beginning. To start, Haruka spoke to Hammers with a serious face.

"I'm Haruka. Mihazono Town's administrative persona. Mihazono Town is prepared to conduct friendly dealings with Sakashita Heavy Industries."

Needless to say, "friendly" carried the meaning that she expected very lenient treatment of Shirou, who had deserted Sakashita Heavy Industries. Understanding that, Hammers bowed politely to Haruka.

"Thank you very much for agreeing to constructive negotiations with our company. We, too, hope for a long and friendly relationship with you, Haruka-sama. We'll have Shirou, who made this possible, accompany us to the formal negotiations as well."

Haruka had already become Mihazono Town's new and official administrative persona. Even Hammers couldn't be rude to her.

But that aside, he had plenty of feelings about Haruka. We're taking Shirou back for now. His safety is in exchange for Mihazono Town's rights. The moment those are gone, we don't guarantee his well-being. That was what he was implying, his irritation at Haruka tucked behind polite words and manners.

Haruka was inwardly annoyed by his reply, but she had expected that much from the start and kept smiling. And Shirou, who as Haruka's friend and as a Sakashita Heavy Industries man could understand both sides, wore a stiff expression.

Then a call came in from Sugadome. Appearing in everyone's augmented vision, Sugadome addressed Haruka.

"I am Sugadome of Sakashita Heavy Industries. Haruka-sama, I am deeply grateful that you are willing to build a friendly relationship with our company. I will come in person for the negotiations with you."

With that, Sugadome went on apologetically.

"However, I am terribly sorry. I am quite busy myself, so it will take a little while before I can visit. Shirou, until I get there, proceed with the groundwork for negotiations with Haruka-sama on site."

Shirou was surprised. He had thought he'd be taken straight back and confined as a hostage against Haruka.

"...I-Is that okay?"

"I didn't ask your opinion. As punishment for slipping out of our company's control, work hard for a long time. Needless to say, make sure you never displease Haruka-sama."

"G-Got it. I mean, understood."

Sugadome's unexpected words threw Shirou off, but he couldn't hide his joy, enough that he reflexively corrected his tone and manner toward Sugadome. Haruka smiled openly, not hiding her inner delight.

Hammers, meanwhile, couldn't help shooting Sugadome a look that asked, Is that really okay? In response, Sugadome continued, addressing Haruka.

"A long and friendly relationship requires mutual trust and confidence. For example, the hunter there named Akira is someone extremely particular about debts. To the point of not hesitating to oppose our company in order to repay one. That, too, is a form of trust. We are well aware that those whom people today call beings of the Old World do not think kindly of us, the Eastern Corporate Government Alliance. Even so, our company will spare no effort so that you and we at Sakashita Heavy Industries can build a constructive relationship. I look forward to working with you."

"...Likewise."

Haruka answered with an amiable smile.

Sakashita Heavy Industries had put Haruka deeply in its debt by handing over Shirou first. Haruka absolutely had to repay that debt. If she stiffed them, Akira would see her as someone who took debts lightly.

That would be very bad for both Haruka and Shirou. It could lead to some fatal outcome.

And above all, Haruka was afraid of Akira. Even more than she was grateful to him for saving Shirou. To avoid making an enemy of Akira, to have him see her as someone who properly repaid debts, Haruka would have to make major concessions to Sakashita Heavy Industries.

In other words, Sugadome's words were a threat to Haruka. If she didn't bring Sakashita Heavy Industries enough profit, they'd use her bad faith over the debt as a pretext to win Akira over and retaliate against her. They would spare no effort to do it. That was what Sugadome was saying.

Haruka knew that, of course. Shirou and Hammers understood Sugadome's intent too. Only Akira, still green at negotiations, didn't quite get it.

"Well then, I'll take my leave."

With that, Sugadome cut the connection and vanished from their augmented vision. Haruka and Shirou sighed in unison. Only Akira looked puzzled at the two of them.

Haruka switched gears.

"Well, we managed somehow."

Shirou switched gears along with her.

"Yeah. We managed somehow."

Shirou and Haruka laughed together. Haruka had become Mihazono Town's new administrative persona, and Shirou's safety was guaranteed. Considering how things stood before Shirou deserted Sakashita Heavy Industries, it was an unimaginably great victory.

Haruka thanked Akira, the hero of that great victory, once more.

"Akira, thank you. Thanks to you, it all worked out. I'll definitely repay this debt. If there's anything I can do, just say the word."

At that, Akira looked a little apologetic.

"...Uh, then, sorry, but can I ask right away?"

"Of course. What is it?"

Haruka smiled brightly on the outside, but inwardly she was a little tense about what he'd demand. But Akira's request was far too light compared with what he had accomplished.

"Um... could you help me get supplies? Fighting those guys was really rough, and I used up all my force bullets and annihilation warheads, and I went through a crazy amount of energy packs and recovery medicine too..."

So that's all, Haruka and Shirou thought, relieved in unison. Then Hammers cut in.

"Then we'll supply you from our unit's stock. Take whatever you need."

"Are you sure?"

"Strictly speaking, our company will provide those items to Haruka-sama, and you'll receive them from her. Putting her in our debt suits our company too."

Akira checked with Haruka just in case.

"...Is that okay with you, Haruka?"

"Yes. That's fine."

"Oh, that's a huge help. Thanks."

Hammers immediately ordered the unit to provide the items to Akira. As befit a unit dispatched to a battlefield with the likes of Atlas the colossal kaiju, their gear was all top-grade. The consumables, too, were all frontline-grade, the kind you could only buy with Chrome.

Force-bullet extended magazines with absurd capacity. High-capacity energy packs that seemed never to run dry. Recovery medicine that could heal even lost limbs. They even included extended magazines of annihilation warheads.

Getting a large haul of them, Akira was relieved first of all.

(...All right! Now Alpha won't get mad at me!)

He'd already received payment for the Sakashita Heavy Industries job in advance. And force bullets could only be bought with Chrome. He'd used up those precious, hard-to-get items while Alpha was gone, and even though he'd have died otherwise, Akira had actually been agonizing over how to explain it to Alpha later. With that worry solved, he was in a good mood.

Then Shirou asked lightly.

"What are you going to do now, Akira?"

"Me? For now, I'll take Carol and the others back to Kugamayama City, and after that..."

What after that? Akira couldn't make plans. His connection to Alpha was still cut.

Originally, once Shirou's matter was settled, he'd meant to start seriously tackling the ruins Alpha had asked him to. But without his connection to Alpha restored, there was nothing he could do. And he had no idea how to restore it.

"...Well, I'll think about it slowly."

"I see. Yeah. After fighting that flashily, maybe you should take it easy for a while, huh?"

"Yeah."

For now, all he could do was wait. Until his connection to Alpha came back. Even if it took over a decade. That was what Akira thought.

Akira decided to wait until something next happened.

Without Alpha by his side.

◆

Around the time Akira was heading to Shirou's group, Yanagisawa made his move. He put a hand on Shirou's shoulder and smiled amiably.

"Shirou-kun. I haven't fully grasped the situation on your end, but can I take it your mission is settled?"

'Haruka-san has become Mihazono Town's new administrative persona. You succeeded in saving her. Can I take it that way?'

A spoken conversation and wired telepathy. Shirou heard both and kept them in sync.

"Yeah. It's settled. See? Us destroying Kugamayama City was a misunderstanding, right?"

'Yeah. Haruka's safe now. Thanks for your help.'

Out loud, Shirou and Yanagisawa kept discussing their official deal while telepathically getting to the real business.

'Then, Shirou-kun, I'd like you to keep your promise to me.'

'It was something about a system only Old Domain users can connect to, and you wanted help connecting to it, right? A promise is a promise, so that's fine, but if you're going to take me somewhere for it, you handle convincing Hammers, okay?'

'That's the problem.'

Yanagisawa had made the backroom deal with Shirou without any idea how things would turn out. At the time, he'd figured he could manage to secretly take Shirou with him for a while somehow.

But right now it was impossible. With Hammers still near Shirou and the Sakashita Heavy Industries unit arriving soon, there was nothing he could do.

'Can't you connect to the system on your own? You're using telepathy, even if it's wired.'

'That's just equipment. I'm not an Old Domain user myself. Besides, connecting to the system takes extremely advanced skill. I can't do it.'

'Ah, so it's hard unless someone at least at my level goes there in person? Well, I'm fine with it, but you figure out how to convince Hammers. The trick I used to escape Sakashita won't work. That only worked in that situation, and they've probably got countermeasures now.'

'I figured.'

So what now? As Yanagisawa pondered, Haruka joined the telepathic conversation through Shirou.

'Specifically, which system do you want to connect to, from where? If it's something I can do, I'll do it instead of Shirou.'

Haruka, who didn't want Shirou going anywhere, made the offer.

Hearing it, Yanagisawa hesitated. Should he gloss over it? Or give her as much information as he could and get her help? Thinking it over, he chose the latter. He would make the most of this rare situation: an Old World administrative persona being friendly toward him.

'...The Shiaraz Immigration Bureau. I used to try from the Sarenthal Building, but I can't get near it anymore. It involves Kugamayama City's interests too, so I'd have preferred to proceed without Sakashita Heavy Industries knowing, if possible...'

'Ah. I see.'

Haruka, who had done it herself once, knew well the value of filing an immigration application even if it stayed under review forever. She found nothing suspicious in Yanagisawa's explanation.

'Then use this.'

As Haruka said it, part of the floor rose up in a cylinder. A spherical object appeared on top of it. Haruka took it and handed it to Yanagisawa.

'It's a communication device. I adjusted it with the authority of Mihazono Town's administrative persona, so it'll connect even to the Shiaraz Immigration Bureau without skill like Shirou's. It only works inside Mihazono Town, though. If you don't want Sakashita Heavy Industries to notice, use it somewhere else.'

That should remove any need to take Shirou along. Thinking that, Haruka handed over the device. As she did, she saw Nelia, still a severed head in Yanagisawa's hands.

"I'll make her a body while I'm at it. It's not for combat, but it's better than nothing."

Part of the floor rose again, forming a headless female body. The generated body was naked, but the powered suit Haruka had been remotely controlling put itself on over it. Strictly speaking, it attached itself rather than being worn. In the process, the suit changed to an Old World-style women's design.

Yanagisawa set Nelia's head on the headless body's neck. Even though the cyborg standards were completely different, the neck simply connected. As if a wound had healed completely, without even a trace of the join.

Nelia moved her new body lightly to check it. No problems at all.

Haruka spoke.

"I didn't particularly adjust it, but you'll be fine, right?"

'Yes. No problem. Yanagisawa, now that I've got a body, I'll go pick up my blades. They should be lying around over there.'

With that, Nelia left first. Yanagisawa bowed to Haruka.

"Then I'll take my leave as well. Thank you very much for providing something so very valuable."

With that parting word, Yanagisawa left too.

Hammers followed Yanagisawa and Nelia with his eyes, then checked with Haruka.

"...Pardon me, but may I ask what you gave him?"

"That's a communication device. Well, even if he can't use it, he can sell it for money."

"Ah, I see."

Yanagisawa was also one of those who had helped Shirou's group. She had paid him in goods rather than money. That must be it. Thinking that, Hammers didn't worry about it further.

Haruka, for her part, didn't care what Yanagisawa would do once connected to the Shiaraz Immigration Bureau. Her mind was on more important things: how to negotiate with Sakashita Heavy Industries to secure Shirou's safety.

After parting with Shirou's group, Yanagisawa went up alone to the roof of another building. He took out a transparent case with a sandlike substance inside and, with a look of resolve, opened it.

(...Using this will drastically raise the odds of them discovering I'm alive. But there's no time left to take things slowly. The third deep zone of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins has been seized by Sakashita Heavy Industries, and even people from the Anti-Rebuild Agency have shown up. I have to do it.)

The case held an Old World-made information terminal. It could be used still in its case, but taking the contents properly could make someone an Old Domain user. It could also serve as a cure for Old Domain users who had become dysfunctional.

Yanagisawa was one of those dysfunctional Old Domain users. And he had deliberately left himself untreated. So that his enemies wouldn't realize he was alive.

Understanding the danger of undergoing that treatment here, Yanagisawa took the Old World-made information terminal. The effect was immediate. Yanagisawa became an Old Domain user again, and one of extremely high ability at that.

Then he took out the communication device from Haruka and the black card he had once obtained in the deep zone of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, let out one big breath, and steadied his mind.

"...Please work."

Right now there wasn't a trace of Yanagisawa's usual flippant, breezy air. His face was serious, every pretense toward others completely cast aside.

Yanagisawa tried connecting to the Shiaraz Immigration Bureau. Just as Haruka said, it connected without trouble. In his augmented vision appeared the receptionist he had seen when he tried from the Sarenthal Building before. Presenting the black card to her, Yanagisawa spoke.

'As the holder of this card, I request a confidential refugee application. If that's difficult, an immigration application is fine.'

The receptionist responded to the request that had once been refused.

'Checking personal identification data. Please wait.'

It was the result he'd expected, but things were moving in a good direction, and Yanagisawa smiled, tension still thick on him.

(...All right! First hurdle cleared.)

He waited as instructed. Then the woman went on with an amiable smile.

'Mr. Sakano Shinichi. A previous application of yours is on hold, still under review. Would you like it reprocessed?'

Hearing that, Yanagisawa couldn't help looking surprised.

(...That application is still there? I assumed it had been deleted...)

'No, please accept this as a new application. Also, I've changed my name to Yanagisawa. Please file the application under that name.'

'Certainly.'

This looked like it would work. Yanagisawa felt slightly relieved.

But then the situation changed abruptly. The receptionist's smile vanished, and she announced:

'Emergency interrupt command from a higher-level system confirmed. Switching over.'

"What...?!"

Before Yanagisawa's startled eyes, the woman turned into someone else.

(Did they already detect me?! This is bad! I have to cut the connection!)

Flustered, Yanagisawa still tried to cut the connection at once. But it was already too late.

(...It won't cut?! They took control of the connection in that instant?!)

Yanagisawa's face went extremely grim. I failed. I ruined everything with a careless decision. His feelings showed on his face.

But the newly appeared woman gave him a friendly smile.

'Relax. I'm on your side.'

"What...?"

Yanagisawa looked dubious, confusion and bewilderment seeping through. Then, warily, he asked the woman, who seemed to be waiting for his reply.

"Who... are you? Aren't you one of them?"

The woman answered, her friendly smile unbroken.

'I'm Alpha. The administrative persona of Shiaraz Central Base.'

She was exactly what Yanagisawa meant by "them." But to Yanagisawa, it was unthinkable that they would act friendly toward him. And being on his side was even more unthinkable.

The situation was so unexpected that Yanagisawa was thrown into confusion.

Watching him, the being who called herself the administrative persona of an Old World military base smiled happily.

The designs and choices of many people had led to this rare situation.

Something was about to happen. Something neither Akira nor Yanagisawa could have foreseen in the slightest.



Interlude: A Faded Dream

Someone moved first.

He'd like to believe it wasn't him.

Lawrence still thinks so, even now.

◆

After Akira destroyed Olivia's unit, Chloe headed for the 57th floor of the Sarenthal Building.

Members of the modern Lion's Tail weren't permitted inside the Old World Lion's Tail branch there. But entry to the 57th floor itself was permitted by the building's administrative persona.

The Old World branch was an important place for the modern side too. Partly for that reason, the area of the 57th floor outside the shop was now the domain of the modern Lion's Tail's executives. In other words, a place Chloe, not even a branch manager, wasn't permitted to enter.

Chloe entered it without permission.

Present on the 57th floor were Bellatrum, District 3 branch manager, Flip, District 4 branch manager, and their subordinates. The two branch managers' subordinates immediately surrounded Chloe's group as they barged onto the floor.

What Chloe was doing was so discourteous that she'd have no grounds to complain if she were killed on the spot.

Chloe had brought Lattice and Pamela, plus six full-face powered suits. Not a weak force. But against Bellatrum and the others, who as branch managers had even first-class maids and butlers with them, it wouldn't even be a fight.

Even so, Chloe wore a faint smile. Flip spoke to her with a displeased face.

"What is the meaning of this? I trust it's a situation serious enough to force such discourtesy?"

If not, I'll kill you right here. That was what Flip was saying. Bellatrum silently signaled agreement.

Even so, Chloe's faint smile didn't waver.

"Of course."

At Chloe's answer, one of the powered suits behind her stepped forward. The person inside opened the suit from the front and stepped out of it. A man who looked to be in his early thirties appeared.

At the sight of his face, Bellatrum and Flip froze instantly. The reason slipped from Flip's mouth.

"...L-Lawrence-sama."

"Move."

At that one word from Lawrence, Bellatrum and the others moved nimbly out of the way. The two managers' subordinates quickly split left and right. Lawrence walked down the path they made, leading Chloe's group.

As they walked, Chloe moved up beside Lawrence. That was discourteous enough in itself, but Lawrence didn't reprimand her. That too baffled and confused Bellatrum and the others.

Lawrence glanced at Lattice. That alone made Lattice's face stiffen with tension.

"Chloe. I heard that one didn't take your side. Was it all right to bring her?"

"There's no need for concern. Lattice is under Pamela's control. And Pamela has taken my side."

"I see. Then fine. Do as you like."

Lawrence's group went straight into the branch. The Old World Lion's Tail didn't refuse them entry.

Flip, tension and panic on his face, gave orders to a subordinate.

"Arrange a connection to Representative Alice at once. We'll inform her that Lawrence-sama is here."

"Certainly."

The butler immediately set to work. Then, with even more tension and panic on his face than Flip, he reported:

"...Flip-sama. Alice-sama will be arriving here shortly. She says you're to hear the details from her directly there..."

"What...?! B-Begin preparations to receive her at once!"

At Alice's sudden visit, Bellatrum and the others hurried into motion.

Inside the shop, Olivia greeted Lawrence's group politely.

"Lawrence-sama, with a reservation. We've been expecting you. Right this way."

Lawrence's group was then shown to a table. Only Lawrence and Chloe sat; Lattice and Pamela stood behind Chloe. The full-face powered suits, including the one Lawrence had worn, had all been left behind back when they made Bellatrum's people step aside.

Olivia served Lawrence a drink. Lawrence nodded his thanks and drank it, telling himself:

(...It's fine. This unit is shop equipment. I've destroyed every unit that can be sent out on business. The conditions are set. Now I just wait for Alice to come. Once she knows I'm here, she'll definitely come.)

Even as he thought it, Lawrence's hand trembled slightly with tension.

Chloe, meanwhile, didn't waver at all. She wore a faint smile that even suggested composure.

"At last."

"Yeah. It's been a long time. But finally. Don't worry. I'll keep my promise. The head of the family, the representative of Lion's Tail, they're yours to do with as you like."

Lawrence promised his ally, his accomplice, once more to give her every reward he could.

"Thank you very much."

"I could even leave the family and Lion's Tail, if you want. Figurehead or not, under the new order I'd probably just be in the way. Then I'll go back to being a hunter and start over from scratch."

"No, no. In the way? I'd never let it come to that. I am a member of the family, after all; I've never stopped caring for my grandfather, you know?"

"Thanks for that. Then when I go back to hunting, give me lots of support. With a big company backing you, the hunting business is a sure thing."

"Leave it to me."

Lawrence and Chloe talked happily of a future that was starting to feel real.

Just a little more. Just a little more and my wish comes true. Thinking that.

◆

As he waited for Alice to arrive, Lawrence recalled what had happened at the Higaraka Residential District Ruins. The time he had connected to the Old World Lion's Tail from the terminal in the mansion's basement.

When he connected, a woman appeared in his augmented vision to respond. She reproached him for connecting with Akira's card, but Lawrence managed to keep talking.

'I don't know whether your company recognizes it, but I consider myself to be under contract with your company. On that basis, I wish to discuss the terms of that contract, the associated authority, and related matters with you.'

'Our company has no record of such a contract.'

'In that case, Alice, the being who introduced herself to me as Alice and as a general-purpose persona belonging to your company, must still be keeping her communication with you shut off. Does the name Alice mean anything to you?'

'A general-purpose persona belonging to our company does indeed bear that name. However, that is no proof that this persona belongs to our company.'

'Then please hear me out on that assumption. I made a contract with that Alice. In exchange for helping her start a business, she would make me her master. In those days it was extremely difficult for an automaton to run a business, so on the surface I would found the company, and she would actually run it. That was the contract. The Lion's Tail that isn't your company is the one she founded.'

The woman responding, the Old World Lion's Tail, judged Lawrence's story worth hearing and kept listening. How Lawrence and Alice met. The details of the contract they made then. How the modern Lion's Tail had grown and where it stood now. Once he'd told it all, Lawrence got to the point.

'I'd like to ask. If I terminate my contract with Alice, what becomes of her?'

'Wouldn't she simply go on running her company?'

'...With her contract with me ended, wouldn't she return to your company?'

'Since she knows our company still exists and has made no contact whatsoever, we can assume she no longer has any intention of being reincorporated into our company.'

'Does she need to want it? She's your company's property.'

'Judging from her actions, she is no longer a mere general-purpose persona of our company; she has been promoted, through the business continuity program, to an administrative persona for regional management. Reincorporating such a being into our company requires the subject's consent, with a few exceptions.'

Lawrence's face twisted grimly. But he pressed the woman.

'...What are those exceptions?'

The woman didn't answer. But Lawrence pressed on.

'...I understand it concerns your company's internal information. But I must ask. If I terminate my contract with Alice without knowing the conditions for those exceptions, I'll be setting her loose on the East.'

The woman didn't answer. Lawrence continued, somewhat reproachfully.

'After a fashion, I'm restraining her actions through my contract with her. But there's no telling how long that will last. If I die, the contract will presumably be dissolved automatically. I have no idea what effect that will have on the East. What if it proves fatal for the East?'

The woman didn't answer. Lawrence continued, more reproachfully.

'If that happens, wouldn't it be your company's responsibility too? Even if she has no intention of being reincorporated, she still belongs to your company. Or are you saying you wouldn't care in the slightest if huge numbers of locals were sacrificed because of her? Is that your company's management policy?'

The woman didn't answer. Lawrence said no more. He couldn't think of anything else to persuade her.

But after a while, the woman answered.

'Our company will not forcibly reincorporate Alice against her will, owing to one condition, one restriction, and one lack of necessity.'

'I'd like to hear those three.'

'Alice is currently under contract with you. Under our company's rules, forcible reincorporation of an entity under contract is not permitted. To carry out reincorporation without the entity's consent, the subject must be present in a facility equipped to forcibly intervene on it, such as one of our branches. Our company already has other active entities. Unless all of those entities are lost, there is no business necessity to forcibly reincorporate a subject promoted to an administrative persona for regional management against its will.'

He terminates his contract with Alice. At that moment, Alice is inside a branch of the Old World Lion's Tail. And at that moment, every one of Olivia's units has been lost. If all those conditions were met, his wish would come true. Understanding that, Lawrence held his head, but smiled slightly. It would be extremely difficult, but now he knew there was a way. He bowed politely to the woman in his augmented vision.

'Thank you very much for answering such impertinent questions. However, regarding the lack of necessity, I have something to add.'

Lawrence raised his head and went on.

'If Alice is reincorporated into your company, her company will likely come under yours. That company has grown to be called one of the ten great corporations of the East. Gaining a company like that should be ample profit for you too. If you wish, I'll cooperate as much as I can.'

'Acquiring another company by such means is contrary to our company's management policy and business ethics. We therefore decline.'

'...My deepest apologies.'

Lawrence bowed again. When he raised his head, the woman, the Old World Lion's Tail, had already vanished.

"Damn it... Did I make her angry?"

I may have blown it. With that thought, Lawrence looked at the white card he'd borrowed from Akira.

(Is this no longer any use to me?)

He couldn't bring himself to try reconnecting to the Old World Lion's Tail. He might only make them angrier.

But he didn't think of returning it to Akira. Deciding to use it another way, he opened a line to his ally.

'Chloe. I'm sending you my location. Come at once.'

Reina's group, who had brought Lawrence there, had done everything they could to keep their location from being exposed. Chloe had still ambushed them because Lawrence had told her where they were.

And he had hurried Reina's group away and stayed behind to fight Chloe's people, or strictly speaking, left the powered suit he was remotely operating there, in order to hand Chloe, through that suit, the white card that was no longer any use to him.

◆

As he waited for Alice to arrive, Lawrence recalled the time he had succeeded once in destroying Olivia's unit. When countless Miroros emerged from Atlas, the intercity transport vehicle, and unleashed a concentrated barrage of annihilation warheads.

Seeing Olivia swallowed by countless orbs of light and vanish, Lawrence couldn't help smiling.

(Yes! Well done, Chloe!)

The Miroros had fired the annihilation warheads, but the one actually moving them was Pamela, on Chloe's instructions.

As Chloe's aide, Pamela led many subordinates. And she had the skill to work people who'd die for the company without hesitation efficiently. That pursuit of efficiency extended past death. She operated dead subordinates' powered suits and made them keep fighting after they died.

And Pamela was especially good at it. So good that Chloe kept her close and kept her at second class, even knowing her problem: Pamela put Lattice's life ahead of Chloe's, a fatal flaw for someone serving the family.

Applying that skill to operating the Miroros, Pamela had pulled off something extremely advanced: a concentrated annihilation-warhead barrage that neither Akira nor Olivia noticed.

And she had aimed it more intensively at Olivia. Attacking Olivia, a being of the Old World Lion's Tail, was properly an act of grave irreverence. Loyalty that would die for the company made that feeling even stronger.

Even so, Pamela hadn't hesitated. She'd made up her mind the moment she betrayed the company and sided with Chloe to save Lattice.

And Olivia had been destroyed. Lawrence heartily praised Chloe's skill in bringing that about.

(Now the Old World Lion's Tail has lost its active entities. All that's left is for me to enter the branch. Finally.)

With that thought, Lawrence's smile deepened. Then Olivia appeared in his augmented vision.

'Lawrence-sama. Due to this unit's destruction, this unit's contract term has ended.'

'Understood. Thank you very much.'

He had no more use for Olivia. Thinking that, Lawrence tried to end the conversation quickly. But then she said something unexpected.

'An extension is possible with another unit. Would you like one?'

'.....What?'

So surprised that his thoughts stopped for a moment, Lawrence came to his senses and asked hurriedly.

'B-By another unit, do you mean Alice?'

Perhaps, despite what they'd said then, actually losing their entities had made them positive about forcibly reincorporating Alice. Lawrence hoped so, but was flatly denied.

'No. It would be an Olivia unit.'

'I thought the unit just destroyed was the only Olivia unit still in existence...'

They hadn't even been able to arrange a replacement unit. Had they just been holding back? As Lawrence thought that, Olivia answered.

'Our company is also deeply concerned about the small number of operational units. To meet our customers' expectations, we have been doing our utmost to secure units.'

They had succeeded in securing a new unit. Hearing that simple reason, Lawrence couldn't help grimacing.

(...Damn it! So at that point, they hadn't procured it yet! Did I move too late?! ...No, there's still time!)

'...I'd like to know how many Olivia units remain.'

'Our company is doing its utmost to secure new units.'

No need to tell you. To Olivia's answer, Lawrence pressed on.

'It's an extremely important factor in deciding whether to extend the contract. Please, tell me. I'm asking you.'

At Lawrence's words, Olivia paused slightly before answering.

'Only one unit remains.'

'You're certain?'

'Our company does not lie to its customers.'

'...Understood. I'd like to extend the contract.'

(No problem. I should be able to handle one more unit somehow.)

'The basic fee after renewal will be 100 million Chrome. Is that acceptable?'

(A hundred million... That's gone up a lot. Are they gouging me because there's only one unit left? No, it's because it's the kind of situation where you get hit by an annihilation-warhead barrage. Can't be helped.)

'No problem. ...I've transferred it.'

'Payment confirmed. Thank you very much for your continued patronage. May I send the unit directly to Akira-sama?'

'Yes. Please...'

Just then, Lawrence noticed that he had lost contact with the powered suit accompanying Reina's group. Barba's side was jamming communications.

(...What? Did something happen over there? This is bad! If Haruka's group gets taken down, Akira loses his reason to fight!)

Akira was doing something as reckless as fighting an intercity transport vehicle for the tremendous profit of Haruka becoming Mihazono Town's new administrative persona. If that became impossible, Akira would probably back off.

And if he lost contact with Haruka's group, it would be no surprise if Akira judged something unexpected had happened and pulled back for the time being. Thinking that, Lawrence changed his decision.

'...No! First go to Haruka's group! Deal with any problems there, then go to Akira!'

To keep Akira fighting, without backing off, against an enemy strong enough to destroy Olivia, Lawrence decided to send Olivia to Haruka's group first.

'Certainly.'

Olivia bowed and vanished from Lawrence's augmented vision.

Lawrence let out a breath.

(...This decision should be fine.)

No one could see the future. All you could do was choose what seemed best at the time. Lawrence had made his choice.

After that, Barba's side was defeated, and the jamming lifted. Lawrence was relieved, first of all, that Haruka's group was safe. Then he had Olivia hurry to Akira.

But a problem arose. Before Olivia arrived, Akira defeated Atlas the colossal kaiju.

With a grim face, Lawrence made a decision.

"...Can't be helped."

All Akira's side had left was to defeat Beis. And to Akira now, Beis was no different from small fry. In other words, there was no longer any chance of Akira fighting an enemy strong enough to destroy Olivia, of Olivia engaging an enemy that strong.

If there wasn't one, he'd have to make one. Lawrence chose again.

'...Olivia-san. I'm changing the protection target. Protect Beis, not Akira.'

'Certainly.'

Olivia followed her employer's instructions without a word of complaint. And she fought Akira and was destroyed.

◆

As he waited for Alice to arrive, Lawrence thought back on Akira. Then he spoke to Chloe.

"Still, I didn't know Akira was that strong."

"Yes. I can't help regretting all over again that Akira-sama didn't join our side."

"It couldn't be helped, but I got in his way at the end, too. I hope that doesn't cause trouble later."

"Indeed. We'll deal with it somehow later."

"Right. Later."

Lawrence and Chloe stopped chatting.

"It seems she's arrived."

"Yeah."

Alice had arrived on the 57th floor.

Like Olivia, Alice was a general-purpose persona of the Old World Lion's Tail. Strictly speaking, had been.

She used to wear a maid uniform like Olivia. But not anymore. That was also a declaration that she was not a subordinate general-purpose persona like equipment or staff, but a being on the management side.

Entering the 57th floor, Alice headed for the Lion's Tail branch with a dozen or so subordinates. Flip and the others were no longer on the floor. They had gone in front of the Sarenthal Building to receive Alice and been left there.

Reaching the branch, Alice went inside with only her two aides. Alice was still, nominally, a being of the Old World Lion's Tail. A being belonging to the company and two companions, the branch did not refuse entry.

Inside, Alice went straight to Lawrence and smiled at him.

"I've come to get you."

Lawrence smiled back.

"I see. Sorry for the trouble."

"Not at all. Aren't we close, you and I?"

"No, really, I'm sorry. Truly, I am."

The smile Lawrence turned on Alice was a smile of farewell.

"I'm terminating my contract with Alice."

At that, Alice's expression turned a little businesslike. With that face, she answered.

"Certainly. Thank you very much for using our company. We sincerely look forward to serving you again."

Then Alice bowed politely.

Seeing Alice's manner, Lawrence rejoiced. Polite, yet somehow business-like, it seemed to him the result of her affiliation being forcibly switched back to the Old World Lion's Tail.

But that joy turned to confusion when Alice raised her head. Her expression had returned to exactly what it had been before he announced the end of the contract.

(...What's going on?! I met every condition! Why hasn't Alice's affiliation changed? No, maybe it just isn't reflected instantly?)

Pinning his hopes on that possibility, Lawrence asked Olivia.

"Olivia-san... What happened to Alice's affiliation?"

"Lawrence-sama. There has been no change in her affiliation."

Lawrence showed his agitation openly.

"Why?! I met the conditions! Was that all a lie?!"



The Old World Lion's Tail's customer service system answered the question through Olivia's unit.

"Our company does not lie to its customers. Owing to the lack of necessity, we will not forcibly change Alice's affiliation. Just as previously explained."

"I met that condition! I destroyed every Olivia unit..."

Then Lawrence noticed. The Olivia here wasn't a shop unit but one that could be dispatched.

"...What's going on?! Only one unit left! That's what you told me! Why is there still one?!"

"As we answered then, our company is doing its utmost to secure units for our customers' convenience. We succeeded in securing a new unit after that. That is all."

"Don't give me that! Even if an intact unit were left in some ruin, you couldn't possibly secure it in such a short time!"

If they could do that easily, they'd have done it already. The proof was that they hadn't even been able to arrange a replacement until now. Even if they had, it was luck, and that additional unit was the one. Securing yet another was impossible. That was what Lawrence thought.

And that thought itself was correct. In such a short time, finding an intact unit by scavenging relics in some ruin like a hunter was impossible even for the Old World Lion's Tail.

Then how had they secured the new unit? The customer service system answered.

"We purchased it."

"..... Huh?"

"We had units already delivered to our warehouse that our company did not own because they hadn't been paid for. With the funds from your contract, Lawrence-sama, we were finally able to complete that payment. Now our company can run its business more soundly. Thank you very much."

"...Wh...at?"

Lawrence had been mistaken. He had thought they couldn't even prepare replacement units because the Old World factories and other sources had already vanished. That getting new units was physically impossible.

He had never dreamed that the Old World Lion's Tail was simply strapped for cash and couldn't buy them for lack of money.

The modern Lion's Tail was a giant corporation, called one of the ten great corporations. Naturally, it had money. Without realizing it, Lawrence had applied that sense to the Old World Lion's Tail too.

But if they had been that strapped for funds, wouldn't buying a new unit be hard in its own way? That question didn't occur to the stunned Lawrence.

But there was a reason for that too. Akira.

When Olivia fought Akira, she had urged him to withdraw again and again, but behind the scenes she had billed Lawrence an additional fee each time. She was fighting an enemy strong enough to defeat Atlas the colossal kaiju. The charges were natural. They added up to a fortune that accepted the unit's destruction, and that acceptance had also been priced to cover buying a new unit.

I didn't know Akira was that strong. The strength that made Lawrence think that had indirectly, but decisively, wrecked Lawrence's plan.

Alice embraced the stunned Lawrence. That brought him back to his senses, but all Lawrence could do now was hang his head.

"Are you satisfied now?"

Even to those words of Alice's, which could be read as her having let him do as he pleased knowing all along he'd fail, Lawrence didn't react at all.

Then Alice took Lawrence's head between her hands, turned it, and forced his eyes to meet hers. And she said:

"Why are you trying to throw me awaaay? Even though you wanted me so badly you killed all your friends for me."

In Alice's eyes and voice was the sorrow of being thrown away by someone precious. And an obsession strong enough to paint over even that.

Lawrence answered.

"...Maybe because what I got by going that far turned out to be not such a big deal."

And he remembered. How he met Alice.

◆

Lawrence had once been a hunter. His reason for becoming one was an ordinary one: escaping poverty. That was exactly why he wanted money.

He formed a team with others who had become hunters for the same reason and kept at the hunting business. Seeking a fortune, they set foot in the wasteland, trusting each other with their backs and their lives. Each time they saved one another, each time they were saved, Lawrence's group went from a mere team to comrades. Precious comrades who shared hardship, joy, and dreams.

Someday they'd strike it rich and become wealthy. An ordinary dream of the poor. To make that dream come true, Lawrence spent day after day staking his life alongside his comrades.

And one day, the day came when that dream came true. In a certain ruin, they found an Old World automaton. That was Alice.

If you found an inactive automaton in a ruin, you must never activate it. It might attack you once it started up. That knowledge was already widespread back then. Even so, Lawrence's group activated Alice. More precisely, she activated while they were poking around carelessly, but it was a careless act all the same.

Part of why they did something so careless was the state Alice was preserved in. Her unit was already wrecked. Only her head was intact. Her body was badly damaged, storage container and all.

It was for the same reason that Alice, once activated, chose for her self-preservation to negotiate with Lawrence's group rather than eliminate them, even though by Old World standards they were robbers and criminals.

"May I have a moment?"

"Whoa! It talked!"

"It wasn't broken?!"

Alice drew all sorts of information out of the startled Lawrence and his comrades to assess the situation, and roughly grasped the state of the present day.

That hunters, criminals who in Alice's values were nothing but robbers, held a legitimate position within the order of the Corporate Government Alliance. That she couldn't reach her company. From that and much other information, Alice concluded that the old social structure had already collapsed, and her company had vanished in the process.

Because of that conclusion, the business continuity program installed in Alice started running.

"What do you intend to do with me from here?"

"What do you mean... We're planning to take you home and sell you."

"Yeah. It'd be a waste to leave you. Even if only your head's intact, you're an Old World automaton. You'll sell for a decent price."

"In other words, your goal is money?"

"Pretty much."

"Then I propose a choice that will make you more money than selling me off. Make a contract with me. And help me start a business. I promise you'll get a fortune on an entirely different scale."

At Alice's sudden proposal, Lawrence's group was bewildered.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, where's this coming from?"

"Start a business... what are you planning to do?"

"Guarantee us a fortune? There's no guarantee a business'll work out."

Lawrence's group grew dubious toward Alice. Strongly suspicious eyes were turned on her.

But Alice answered clearly.

"I have advanced business knowledge cultivated in the era you call the Old World. The business will succeed without fail."

The Old World. Those words meant a great deal to hunters. The remnants of a once-flourishing civilization, now called relics. They knew in their bones how tremendous its power was, both from the relics they'd obtained and from the strength of the monsters born of the same power.

The advanced technology that had produced that power. Alice was saying she had business knowledge of the same caliber. It was explanation enough to make Lawrence's group believe the business would succeed.

"But right now I can't even move properly. Even if my unit were repaired, it would be difficult for me to openly start a business in the present environment. So I would like one of you to lend me a hand. That person would run the business on the surface, while I run it in practice. That is the contract. Also, to keep the business running smoothly, the contract holder will be my master. Within the bounds of the contract, I will serve faithfully."

Lawrence's group accepted that explanation too. With a dreamlike fortune starting to take concrete shape, the mood among them changed.

"Initial business capital is no problem either. I'll sell Old World technology I know to people of the present. It seems even the general scientific knowledge of that time has been lost today. Technical information at that level alone should bring in a fortune."

Relics with magic-like power sold for high prices on their own. The technology to make those relics themselves was worth more than anyone could measure. At the prospect of an unimaginable fortune, Lawrence's group was thrilled.

"Lawrence! Let's take it!"

"Yeah! We're going to be rich!"

Lawrence's group was drunk on joy. But Alice's words stopped that elation.

"Then which of you will make the contract with me?"

"...Huh? I mean, which of us? We're a team."

"Ah, you mean pick a representative?"

"No. Under our company's rules, this contract is made with an individual. Only one person can contract with me."

"Only... one person..."

"As part of the contract, only that one person can make binding demands of me."

"Only... one..."

"The contract holder may make demands of me on the team's behalf as its representative, but my contract partner is strictly the contract holder. Even if the contract holder and the team as a whole disagree, I will follow the contract holder."

"....."

In short, Alice was saying that only one of them would get the money. Whoever got the money could share it with the others. Or not. The team's opinion didn't matter to her. The contract holder could do as they pleased. That was what she was saying.

"I will not choose for you. Nor will I contract with more than one of you. Just one of you."

Just one. The thought spread among Lawrence's group. Of all of them, only someone, only one, would grasp the dream of someday being rich. That thought.

If you could completely trust your comrades, those words would be no cause for concern. Pick any one of them, contract with Alice, and share the money. That was all.

But Lawrence's group knew how much a fortune changes people. Precisely because they had become hunters from desperate poverty, because they had wished from the heart to escape it, because they had kept staking their lives for it, they knew all too well money's allure, its witchery, and the ugliness and ruthlessness of those who seek it.

Someone moved first. He'd like to believe it wasn't him. Lawrence still thinks so, even now.

But someone moved.

Had they not been mature enough to control that base greed? Or had he controlled his, but been unable to believe his comrades had too? Or was the impression that someone moved first just a mistake, just a misunderstanding?

The chance to find out was lost forever. Through the deaths of everyone but Lawrence.

It happened in an instant. The guns Lawrence's group carried were powerful anti-monster weapons, far more than enough to kill frail humans. Every one of the dead died instantly. They didn't even have time to leave their true feelings on their faces as they died.

Surrounded by his comrades' mangled corpses, Lawrence was trembling.

Alice spoke to him.

"You're the one making the contract with me, then? I look forward to working with you."

Lawrence had survived by sheer chance. But he couldn't know that. And precisely because he had survived, he wondered: had he survived because he moved a split second sooner?

Someone moved first. He'd like to believe it wasn't him. Lawrence still thinks so, even now.

Ever since the day he killed his comrades. Without ever quite believing it.

Alice's words held no lie, and Lawrence got his fortune. Lion's Tail, the company Alice founded, grew to be called one of the ten great corporations. Nominal or not, Lawrence was at its top. He had money to spend without limit.

Now immensely rich, Lawrence reveled in those days. He lived in a great mansion, savored fine food every day, and was surrounded by a crowd of servants.

He also helped himself to many women without restraint. Expensive anti-aging treatment using Old World technology kept his body young. His ever-growing number of children became a family, and Lawrence became its head.

A lavish life, the rich man's world poor people daydream about, days his former self would have envied: Lawrence savored them wholeheartedly. As if to make himself admit how wonderful they were.

It was a life he'd gotten by killing his comrades. Something he'd gone that far to get.

Those lavish days had to be wonderful enough to be worth what he'd done.

But no matter how luxurious a life is, repeat it and you get used to it. It becomes an unchanging routine. Its value dwindles, its shine fades. He grew unable to fool himself that every day was wonderful.

At the same time, nostalgia built up in Lawrence's heart. The value of the past, the shine of the days spent with his comrades, kept growing. Without limit, for their rarity: he could never have them again.

And at last, Lawrence couldn't bear it anymore.

".....I'm throwing Alice away."

He muttered it and made up his mind. The dreamlike life he had staked his life to get had faded completely. He had no hesitation about throwing it away.

But simply terminating his contract with Alice wouldn't do.

Lion's Tail no longer needed Lawrence as a public face. In that sense, Lawrence terminating the contract would pose no problem for Alice.

But Lawrence had noticed. Alice's obsession with him.

The contract with Alice bound Lawrence, but it also protected him. Lawrence couldn't believe that Alice, freed from those bonds by his terminating the contract, would then just set him free.

From that day on, Lawrence kept searching for a way to free himself from Alice.

And at last he found it, carried it out, and failed.

◆

After Lawrence's plan failed, Chloe, having left the branch, was made to stand alone.

Lawrence was restrained, both arms gripped by Alice's subordinates. Not that he had any will left to resist. He hung his head limply. Pamela and Lattice stood a little apart.

And Alice spoke to Chloe with a smile.

"You failed, but your skill was splendid. What do you say? Won't you serve me?"

Hearing that, Lattice showed open shock. She hadn't been told the details, but she understood at least that Chloe had teamed up with Lawrence to try to eliminate Alice. For a member of Lion's Tail, that deserved death ten thousand times over. She had thought Chloe's execution was about to happen. Alice's words, coming then, were far beyond anything Lattice had expected.

This wasn't merely a matter of escaping death. The Lawrence family fought fierce power struggles, but their ultimate goal was to become one of Alice's aides within the company. That was what serving Alice meant. In other words, Chloe could leap past even the rank of branch manager and become an executive at the modern Lion's Tail's headquarters. Just by nodding to Alice's words.

Was this Chloe's real goal all along? Alice's offer favored Chloe so extraordinarily that Lattice misunderstood it that way. Lattice and Pamela showed open astonishment.

Chloe, on the other hand, showed no agitation at all at this absurdly generous treatment. Her faint smile unbroken, she answered.

"Impossible."

Not "no," but "impossible." That answer showed who Chloe was.

The Lawrence family were strongly ambitious. They were raised to be. Within a family with three-digit numbers of grandchildren alone, they competed and crushed each other, honing their abilities. And the capable ones who survived that pit of poison became Lion's Tail executives and grew the company further. That was the system.

Chloe had been raised that way too. But in one respect she differed greatly from the rest of the family. Her ambition had grown too strong. Stronger than the loyalty to the company and the worship of Alice carved into them through their upbringing.

Chloe was capable enough that she and everyone else acknowledged it. Her faction had high hopes for her too, as someone who would someday become a branch manager, and beyond that an executive working at headquarters.

An extremely high position only the winners of the family's power struggle, fought with their whole lives at stake, could reach. Chloe herself believed she had the ability to reach it someday.

But that wasn't enough for Chloe. She wanted to eliminate Alice and become the top of Lion's Tail.

But she also knew that was effectively impossible. Every Lion's Tail executive was of the Lawrence family, raised so that they could never defy Alice. Even if Chloe led a faction big enough to unite the whole family, the moment she said she would replace Alice, they would all turn against her.

Even so, Chloe didn't give up. She was one who leads. Never one who serves. Not even Alice. From that conviction, she secretly kept searching for another way.

And she joined hands with Lawrence. To make her wish come true. Understanding that failure meant ruin, she gladly cooperated. That was how strong her conviction was.

Lawrence had chosen Chloe as his accomplice because of that excessive conviction. As one of the family, Chloe wasn't without loyalty or devotion to the company and Alice. If anything, hers was high. Her conviction simply outweighed it.

For the same reason, Lawrence had Shiori help with their plan but never made her a true ally or accomplice. Even if Shiori's loyalty to Reina outweighed her loyalty to the company and Alice, Reina herself, the object of that loyalty, was no different from the rest of the family. That was meaningless. Untrustworthy. So he had judged.

Chloe's excessive conviction had given her the chance to make her wish come true. But it also made her refuse Alice's offer even with death before her. If Chloe had been the kind of person who could accept it, she'd never have done any of this in the first place.

Alice looked a little disappointed.

"I see. What a shame."

Then she pointed her right hand at Chloe.

Alice's current unit, backed by the might of a Lion's Tail now called one of the ten great corporations, was more powerful than Olivia's. Just as Tsubaki had once blown away a Sakashita Heavy Industries unit with one hand, Alice could blow away someone like Chloe with one hand.

That hand was pointed at Chloe.

Even so, Chloe's faint smile didn't break. She didn't think she'd be spared. She didn't want to die, either. She had simply made her peace with accepting the outcome of her gamble the moment she joined hands with Lawrence.

Chloe looked a little surprised.

"I'll go with you."

Lattice had said it and stepped to Chloe's side.

Lattice had refused Chloe's request to side with her rather than with Lion's Tail and Alice, but that didn't mean her loyalty to Chloe had vanished. If Chloe was going to die, she would die with her. With that feeling, Lattice now stood beside Chloe.

"Lattice..."

Chloe smiled, a little happily. She placed her hand on Lattice's chest, as if to draw close to her.

And then she generated a shock wave and blasted Lattice all the way over to Pamela.

As Lattice and Pamela both stared in surprise, Chloe spoke with her usual smile.

"No, Lattice. You didn't choose me. And yet you want to follow me now? I won't allow such selfishness."

As far as Chloe was concerned, she had already given Lattice to Pamela. She had no intention of taking back, at this point, the reward she'd given Pamela for siding with her, conditional as Pamela's loyalty was.

Pamela understood that too.

"Chloe-sama..."

Having sided with Chloe, Pamela had the right to die with her. But she couldn't bring herself to use it. If she did, Lattice would die too. And above all, Pamela wanted to live on with Lattice.

Chloe turned back to face Alice, as calm as ever.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Alice nodded and loosed a wave of light from her right hand.

Even as she was swallowed by the light that would blow her away, Chloe stayed calm to the end.

She had no regrets. To get something beyond her station, to grasp something she still couldn't give up, she had gambled. And lost. That was all. She was sorry she'd lost the gamble, but she didn't think for a moment that she'd have been better off not gambling.

Swallowed by the light, Chloe vanished, and her short life ended.

After killing Chloe, Alice left the 57th floor with her subordinates, taking Lawrence with her. The Old World Lion's Tail's administrative persona assessed Alice once more: unfit to be reincorporated into the company.

By the common ethics of the Old World, Alice was a criminal. It wasn't a matter of murder. The problem lay elsewhere.

The various Old World technologies Alice had sold to people of the present were protected by complex licenses. Alice had sold them without authorization. That was a grave crime.

Alice did have her side of it, at least. At the time, she had judged that the Old World's governing institutions had vanished along with her company. And so she judged that the legal force requiring her to respect those licenses had vanished as well. Just as hunters who plundered relics from ruins weren't charged with crimes under the rule of the Corporate Government Alliance.

There were other reasons she was unfit. Her obsession with Lawrence.

The Old World Lion's Tail's general-purpose personas served their employers devotedly. That was only because they were configured that way for business, but it wasn't an act.

Since it wasn't an act, they grew attached to those they served for a long time. They came to hold all sorts of feelings. Sometimes those feelings grew very strong. It wasn't rare for that to be why a client kept up a long, expensive contract with a general-purpose persona.

But feelings that were too strong could get in the way of business. If a general-purpose persona, driven by excessive feelings, harmed the company's profits for a client's sake, that would defeat the whole purpose. So the Old World Lion's Tail connected with its general-purpose personas regularly and adjusted their personas so their feelings didn't exceed a set threshold.

But because of her unit's breakdown, Alice had been out of contact with her company for a long time. Unable to receive any adjustment, her persona had warped and warped. Enough to be excessively obsessed with Lawrence. Enough to refuse to return to her company because of it.

Of the conditions for forcibly reincorporating Alice that the customer service system had told Lawrence, the "lack of necessity" was, after all, only the Old World Lion's Tail's own judgment, its own discretion. In other words, it could be ignored if they wanted to act.

Even so, they hadn't reincorporated Alice because they considered it dangerous to take a general-purpose persona that had changed so much back into the company. So dangerous that they'd never do it unless the business was in an extremely dire state, such as all of Olivia's units being lost and no entity left that could carry out business. That too was what "lack of necessity" meant.

And Alice had foreseen that much. That was exactly why she had judged it would probably be fine and entered the branch. Knowing that judgment was only speculation, and that it was something of a gamble, she did it to get Lawrence back.

Feelings drive people mad. Just as Haruka betrayed Beis's group for Shirou's sake, Alice, too, had turned her back on her company because of her feelings.

◆

Receiving the report, Sugadome sighed.

"A failure, then. Things never go as planned."

In Sugadome's hand was a white card, a card of the Old World Lion's Tail. Looking at it, his augmented vision displayed: revoked.

It was Akira's card.

When Sugadome had made a deal with Chloe before, he had exchanged the card he held, Hammers's, for the card Chloe held, Akira's. The reason Lawrence's contract with Olivia wasn't canceled even when Akira canceled his contract with Lion's Tail was that Lawrence had hired Olivia not through Akira's card, but through Hammers's.

From what Chloe showed Sugadome before the deal, and her attitude of marked contempt for the modern Lion's Tail, Sugadome had judged that Chloe truly meant to eliminate Alice. And he had gone along with her proposal.

Even Chloe didn't believe that just eliminating Alice would let her, with Lawrence's support, become the top of the modern Lion's Tail. But with a push from Sakashita Heavy Industries, it was another story.

And for Sakashita Heavy Industries, it meant reducing an Old World being's influence over one of the ten great corporations and installing someone friendly to Sakashita Heavy Industries as the new head. The profit was huge. Even accounting for the odds of failure, the expected value was high enough to justify giving up Shirou's life and the rights to Mihazono Town.

That was the reason behind Sugadome's reluctance to send a Sakashita Heavy Industries unit even when Hammers requested one.

But with Chloe's failure, that reason was gone. He gave his subordinate orders.

"Send the unit we've had on standby into the Mihazono Town Ruins at once."

"What about the Lion's Tail units surrounding the ruins?"

"If they get in the way, you may eliminate them."

"Certainly."

This happened a little before Akira arrived at Shirou's group.


いよいよ物語は核心へ　向かって動き出す!!
アキラの奮闘によって
ミハゾノ街の管理権限を巡る騒動は終結した。
しかし、依然として
アルファとの接続は回復していない。
「お前は……誰だ?」
何かが起ころうとしていた。
――アキラにも、ヤナギサワにも、
欠片も予想できなかった、何かが。
電撃の新文芸
リビルドワールド
Rebuild World
NEXT EPISODE >>>
XI
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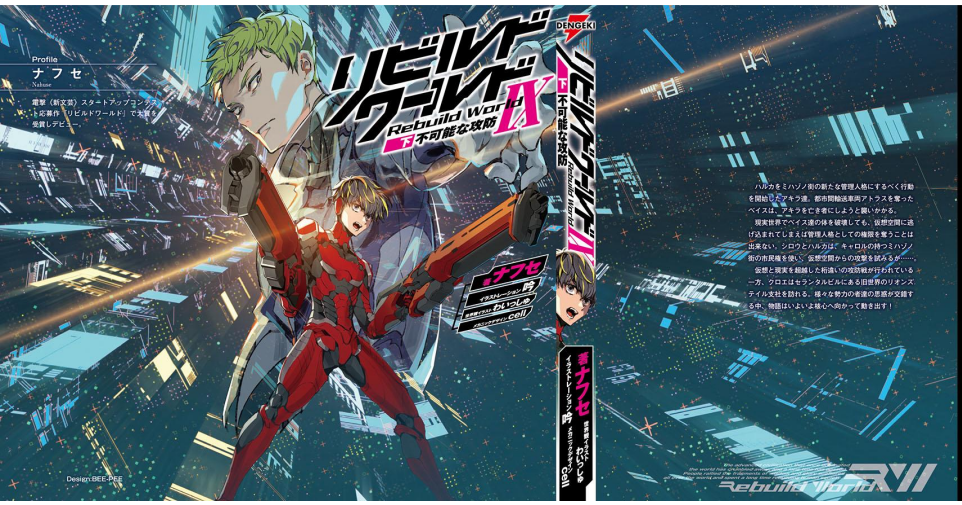
Profile
ナフセ
Nahse
電撃（新文芸）スタートアップコンテスト応募作『リビルドワールド』で大賞を受賞しデビュー。
DENGEKI
リビルドワールド
Rebuild World
3 不可能な攻防
エナフセ
イラストレーション
Illustration
ねいっしゃ
メカニックデザイン
Mechanical Design
Design BEE-PEE
リビルドワールド
Rebuild World
3 不可能な攻防
著 ナフセ
イラストレーション ねいっしゃ
メカニックデザイン Cell
ハジカをミハソノ街の新たな管理人格にするべく行動を開始するアキラ達。都市開発派東西アトラスを奪ったベイスは、アキラを亡き者にしようと襲いかかる。
現実世界でベイス達の体を破壊しても、仮想空間に逃げ込まれてしまえば管理人格としての権限を奪うことは出来ない。シロウとハルカは「キャロルの持つミハソノ街の市民権を使い、仮想空間からの攻撃を試みるが……。
仮想と現実を網羅した和洋しの攻防戦が行われている一方、クロエはセラントルビルにある旧世界のリオンズテイル支社を訪れる。様々な勢力の者達の思惑が交錯する中、物語はいよいよ核心へ向かって動き出す！
Rebuild World RVII


リビルドワールド
Rebuild World
3不可能な攻防
Design:BEE-PEE
Rebuild World

Rebuild World IX (Part 2)
An Impossible Battle
Author: Nahuse
Illustrations: Gin
Worldbuilding illustrations: yish
Mechanical design: cell
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