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RETURN OF KINGS  
SUZUKI SUZU / GoRA

## TRANSLATION: NARU-KUN / K – PROJECT WORLD

### CHAPTER 9: NEKO'S DREAM

Awashima Seri let out a deep breath as she leaned back on the couch in the living room.

Ever since they were defeated in the decisive battle of Mihashira Tower, Awashima barely took a break. There was a lot to do. Pick up the injured, transport them to the hospital, rearrange shifts to fill in the gaps, contact and inform relevant parties, track down the missing "Dresden Slate" and gather information, while conducting normal activities such as crime patrol, in order to minimize the members' agitation due to defeat. She couldn't show even the slightest hesitation.

"Phew."

Awashima let out another sigh and rubbed her eyes.

"Please rest for a while." If Akiyama hadn't negotiated with a serious expression, Awashima would have kept working. And then she should have collapsed. Not to mention the physical exhaustion, the mental exhaustion was reaching its limit. Awashima still suffered from losing, and there was one thing that worried her more than anything else.

This is the case of Munakata and Fushimi.

It seems that there was an argument between Munakata and Fushimi in the early morning of the 25th. Even if she regretted not being there at that time, now it wasn't a big deal.

The most shocking thing was the fact that Munakata had an argument with someone. What that "King" made was a theory or a statement, even if there was, it would have been an argument, and it was unimaginable that he would fight violently with someone.

No, thinking so, Awashima smiled while she still covered her eyes.

She has only seen Munakata get angry once. How many years ago was that? When Suoh had just become the "Red King". Munakata tried to persuade Suoh and for some reason it turned into a battle.

At that time, Awashima could do almost nothing. When she became a member of the "Scepter 4" clan, she learned the entire history of supernatural powers. Among them, the clash between the predecessor "Blue King" and the "Red King", which is said to be the worst, and the "Kagutsu Incident" at the end. The clash between Munakata and Suoh seemed like a repeat of that.

Even Suoh couldn't have ignored that story. Despite that, that man easily kicked Munakata away. What made Munakata angry was Suoh's irresponsibility.

However, Fushimi is not a "King".

Even as capable as he is, he is just a member of the clan. He is in no way equal to Munakata. It was unthinkable that Munakata would have a fight with him and finally drive him out.

Could that also be because of the injuries he received?

Then...

"What I can do?"

Her gaze moved slowly, and settled into a gothic-style coffee table near the couch.

Awashima's saber was leaning there.

(Reisi Munakata's right-hand man is you, not me.)

The man who once said that to Awashima cut to his own "King". As a result, he saved this country. Habari Jin expected that? A clan member who is most loyal to himself brings death upon himself. Was that the right path for her?

What about Munakata?

Wait, who will be by his side when she drops his "Sword of Damocles"? Could it really be her?

Is it possible for her to kill the Captain...?

".....!"

The doubts that had been suppressed until now spilled over, and Awashima frowned as if she was enduring the pain.

Despite being defeated, Munakata is still alive and well. The Clansman are also desperately searching for the whereabouts of the "Green King". There is still a chance to get the "Slate" back. They did not lose completely.

Still, the second hand of doom is definitely advancing.

When "that moment" comes, she must draw that saber. That was the role of Seri Awashima, the Vice-Captain of "Scepter 4", which she couldn't cede to anyone else.

Lying back on the sofa she tried to catch her breath.

She didn't want to think about it anymore. She remembered that Akiyama took it from her when she tried to remove her PDA from her chest. Because if she does, she'll have to work.

From there, her thoughts turned elsewhere.

No one was able to contact Fushimi. All incoming calls from "Scepter 4" were blocked and in the case of "Homura" it was no different. Contact lost and gone. They have no idea where and what he is doing these days.

One of the reasons she wants him to come back is that Fushimi's disappearance is the cause of half of that hustle. He is a capable man. When it comes to information processing, there's no one better than Fushimi, and there are mountains of jobs that can't be done without Fushimi.

And she on the other hand is just worried about Fushimi.

Fushimi is not a nice person, even by flattery. Rather, to put it bluntly, he has a bad personality. He's the type of person people hate, and Awashima didn't like him either.

Still, there is something about Fushimi that cannot be left alone.

He is sharp as a knife, but has a brittle side like glass. Despite being extremely talented, he is fatally bad at trusting others. Where and what is he doing now that he has jumped from "Scepter 4"? Thinking about it makes her feel uncomfortable. Hopefully he doesn't get desperate and get involved in weird things.

Just as she was thinking about it, there was a knock on the break room door.

"Fu, Vice-Captain! It's hard!"

Awashima sat down heavily. A lot of hard things have happened in the last few days. Just adding one more thing now won't change anything, the voice from the other side of the door pushed away a careless thought.

"The "Jungle" clansman, Douhan Hirasaka has escaped from prison! It is believed that the missing Saruhiko Fushimi guided her!"

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Blade proof suit, tactical vest, heeled boots and combat gloves. Even when she got dressed and moved her body, there was nothing unnatural about it. The grenades, flashbangs, and shurikens that Fushimi always kept on hand were nowhere to be found in the cardboard box that Fushimi brought, but it couldn't be helped. Those clothes were just "trial items", and the ones in there were "dangerous goods". In any case, if she went back to the hideout, she could replace it.

Fushimi looked coldly into the rearview mirror as Hirasaka adjusted her equipment in the back seat. There was no light inside the van parked in the dark alley, and the only light was the unreliable interior lights.

While he pretended to manipulate a PDA, Hirasaka also watched Fushimi without letting her guard down.

In a way, that place was dead.

If one of them wanted to, a battle would break out in no time. Other than Fushimi, Hirasaka has no reason to keep him alive. If the freedom that was fortunately obtained was solidified, it would have been better to shut Fushimi's mouth there.

She wondered if she could.

She answered herself that she could do it. Dangerous goods have been seized across the board, but she's got a switchblade in her combat gloves. Make a hole and pick his throat. That would be enough.

"Do not think too much."

Leaning down from the driver's seat, Fushimi stabbed into the nail.

"I took the knife out of your glove. Right now you don't have anything you can stab or cut with."

Hirasaka tried to operate the glove. Shukon, a stupid sound resonated and the knife did not come out. Hirasaka shrugged as she gave him a cool look.

"You have quite a hobby going through women's clothing."

"I never thought of you as a woman, wall-breaker. I tell you, there's no use trying to escape. Next time, I'll sew your whole body to the back seat."

Before she knew it, a knife appeared in Fushimi's palm. When she thought about it, she remembered that this man was also a concealed weapon user.

"Alright."

Hirasaka raised both hands as if she was giving up.

"Cancel the plan to kill the enemy. It's impossible. So what do you want from me?"

Fushimi snorted and waved his hand, and the knife disappeared like a magic trick. Then, he said...

"I'm going to be a ranker. Help me with that."

As expected, she was surprised.

But once she got past the initial shock, a thought came to her: "That must be so.". Fushimi's actions were clearly a rebellion against "Scepter 4". In that case, Fushimi should have given up on the Blue Clan, so it was only natural for him to run to "Jungle".

Hirasaka said...

"If it's the second time, is betrayal something you're good at? Even I frown."

"Don't lie, you say it's wrong because it's against morality. Your parents seem to have seen through your true nature."

Of course, Douhan was not a name given to her by her parents.

But that didn't matter. Hirasaka asked.

"What are my benefits?"

"I got you out of jail."

"Do you want me to return the favor? Unfortunately, I don't remember turning into a crane."

"I know, you can't follow me without millet dumplings."

Saying that, Fushimi blurted out something.

She received it reflexively. Of course, it was not a millet dumpling. It was a wad of rubber-bound bills. 500,000, guessed by touch.

"Is it a deposit?"

"If the mission is successful, I will give you the same reward. In return, all the points earned are mine."

Hirasaka thought fast.

Exchanging points for cash violates the "Jungle" rules. However, there are loopholes in any rule, and even though two people completed the quest, there are often situations where only one person gets points. You can help one without accepting the quest. So if the other checks it with cash, he is effectively buying points with money.

A million per mission, not a bad amount. However, drinking only in "not bad" conditions would not be a business.

"A million, regardless of the difficulty of the mission. That's not worth it."

Fushimi responded flatly.

"I will generate incentives based on the difficulty level. When I rank up, it will come with a bonus."

1,000,000 is the minimum guaranteed amount and the incentive is negotiable. It was perfect, or rather, it was definitely a delightful piece of work. Hirasaka thought for a few seconds and decided that there was no point in throwing it any further. Instead of sticking around and getting concessions, it will be more profitable to stay in a short and long relationship.

"Alright."

Facing Hirasaka, who briefly agreed, Fushimi nodded and started the engine.

Hirasaka asked while she was a bit surprised.

"No way, from now on?"

"What do you think of that 500,000? I already sent you the mission details. It's an easy job, so there's no incentive."

Saying that, Fushimi started the van.

Inside the trembling car, Hirasaka pressed the switch on her neck. A full-face tactical mask covered her head. A glowing green HUD appeared in front of her and various information was projected onto her retina.

"Work.", she murmured into her mask.

Hirasaka is a professional. There is a precise calculation formula behind the action, and it is not moved by emotions.

Still, this situation brought a kind of excitement to Hirasaka. She could work. It was the only thing in her empty life that gave Hirasaka a feeling similar to joy.

Feeling the electricity of "Jungle" running through her body, Hirasaka slowly began to read the details of the mission.

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Neko was gone.

After the "Decisive Battle at Mihashira Tower" ended that day, and after she disappeared due to recognition tampering, she never appeared again. It was the same when he returned to School Island, and no matter how many times he called her, never got a single answer.

"Where did she go? No way..."

Shiro smiled and shook his head at Kuro who frowned in concern.

"No. Neko is close, because this island is her home."

Although there was no wind, he felt the rustling of the leaves and the branches of the trees. Neko was close. She was probably close enough to hear their voices.

"Then why doesn't she appear in front of us?"

At Kuro's question, Shiro made a slightly sad face.

"...I wonder if she is afraid of us."

Emotions are everything to her. Anger, sadness, joy and fear. Get closer to comfort and move away from fear. That's how she lived her whole life.

Not long ago, her peace was with Shiro.

It was different now.

Shiro has become an object of fear for her. That's because Shiro has realized the root of Neko's fear.

What Neko fears the most is "Ameno Miyabi".

Her real name. The real me of her. She is terrified of who she really is.

Not that Neko understands why she's afraid of him. Of course, Shiro doesn't know either. If Neko herself doesn't understand how she ended up in that state, no one can.

But at that moment, the image of a scared, trembling and cowering Neko broke his heart.

Shiro looked away from Kuro and slowly looked around him. Somewhere in that field of vision, Neko could be. Maybe not. Using the power of the "King", it is easy to remove the disguise from her. But doing so would not solve anything.

Instead, Shiro raised his voice.

"You should go to Kukuri. She's not scary, right? So, when you've calmed down, can you come back? I want to talk to you, Neko."

There was no answer. The trees were quiet. Kuro lowered his eyes pitifully.

Still, Shiro muttered under his breath.

"...I'll be waiting."

Then he walked away. To the student dormitory, to the place where Shiro was, to the place where Kuro and Neko should return.

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"Eeeh?!"

The reason she unintentionally let out a voice was because there was someone in her room, which should have been empty. A student dormitory where the students of Gakuenjima live. After classes were over for the day, Yukizome Kukuri found that "lump" when she returned home humming.

The lump was in her bed. She was using a futon. She knows that she is a person, but she doesn't know who she is. As far as Kukuri knows, however, there is only one person who would likely do such a thing.

That is to say...

"...Wagahai-chan? What are you doing?"

The "lump" collapsed. From the mouth of the futon, from the dark shadow, only a glimpse of blue eyes peeked out.

"...Alright."



"Eh?"

"I'm Neko."

Her voice was tinged with tears.

With a small sigh, Kukuri put her school bag on the ground. As she sat on the bed, the "lump" began to move. Kukuri asked kindly.

"Did you fight with Kuro-kun?"

The "lump" moved again. She shook her head. Kukuri continued, placing her palm along the back of the futon.

"So, Shiro-kun?"

She moved a little more this time. She denied it even more than before. Knowing it wasn't a fight between the two of them, Kukuri let her gaze wander through the air.

"Well, then..."

Saying that, Kukuri remembered that she didn't know anything else about Neko.

Both Kuro and Neko live in a different world than Kukuri. The two are not students at the school, but for some reason they are mysterious beings who have settled on that island. Recently, a boy named Isana Yashiro joined them. She knew they weren't ordinary people, but Kukuri didn't quite understand who they were.

When she was searching for the words, the "lump" came to her.

"It's frightening."

"Eh?"

Wide-eyed, Kukuri asked the futon.

"What are you afraid of?"

"....."

The futon moved. as if trembling After a brief silence, she heard a muffled voice.

"Ameno Miyabi."

She had no idea what she was talking about.

"Hmm, I see..."

Kukuri crossed her arms and thought deeply. It's like asking a baby. She didn't understand what Neko meant. She has no way of expressing what she wants to say. Or maybe she doesn't want to say it in the first place. The only way to fill in the missing information is by marking each one.

"Why are you afraid of that?"

After a while, Kukuri asked.

"There is a door."

A door. Is it some kind of metaphor? Kukuri blinked and waited patiently for the word of the "lump".

"I hear a voice coming from the door. It's calling me. Her name is Ameno Miyabi..."

Kukuri took a deep breath.

She calling her. Does that mean "Ameno Miyabi" is Neko?

As if she read Kukuri's thoughts, the "lump" moved violently.

"No! Wagahai is a cat! It's not like that!"

Neko is an emotional girl. Jumping, crying and laughing, she has seen that kind of thing many times.

However, it was the first time she had seen Neko deny something so desperately.

A conflict was born within Kukuri. She doesn't know much about Neko. She might be safe to say that she doesn't know anything. And yet, is it okay to say something to Neko now? Surely Neko is afraid of a fundamental "something". Also, is she okay if she carelessly touches her?

No.

It is neither good nor bad.

She wanted to do it.

This innocent girl is scared to the point of death. She wrapped in a futon and snuggled up. If so, she would love to help her. Those were Kukuri's true feelings.

"Well, the door is..."

As if groping, Kukuri twisted the words.

"Isn't it possible to throw it somewhere? How about we throw it in the sea or in the mountains?"

Neko shook her head at the trivial idea.

"Impossible..."

"Well, what about opening it? If you try to open it unexpectedly, you might wonder what it is."

Once again, Neko denied.

"No..."

Laughing softly, Kukuri patted Neko's back.

"I see. That's true. You can't open scary things by yourself. Fine, then..."

Kukuri said what came to her mind.

"What if you're with someone?"

"....."

"Kuro-kun or Shiro-kun. If it's those two, can you open it together? That way, it's much less scary than opening it yourself."

The "lump" didn't even move.

Just when she was wondering if she said something wrong, Neko whispered.

"You can stay?"

"Eh?"

"Even if I'm not a cat, will Shiro and Kuro still be together?"

She wished could tell her that it's normal.

But saying that, Kukuri was not irresponsible, nor was she familiar with those two. She doesn't know what kind of people Yatogami Kuro and Isana Yashiro really are.

That's why Kukuri said...

"What do you think, Wagahai-chan? So, do you think those two will break up?"

After a short pause, the "lump" began to move.

Seeing that, Kukuri smiled.

"I see. Good for you."

"....."

The mouth of the futon, from the shadow inside, peered out blue and gold eyes. When she blinked once and opened her eyelids, the tears had already disappeared.

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She heard a voice.

From inside the closet. through the door. The voice kept calling her name.

"Ameno Miyabi."

The owner of that voice was not alone.

An old man's voice yelled as if he was crazy.

The voices of a man and a woman cursing the monster and asking it to return the child.

The voice of a young man, intelligent and cold.

But they were all different. She knew it wasn't true.

"Ameno Miyabi."

Actually, it's her voice.

Wagahai's voice. Her voice.

She was the one who made the door and pushed everything through it. She forgot about it. After all, Wagahai is a cat. Cats do not think about anything, do not remember, do not worry, they just need to sleep comfortably in a safe place. Because that's all she wanted, she turned into a cat.

Even though that was all she wanted.

"Ameno Miyabi."

She heard a voice on the other side of the door. She heard her own voice. "Ameno Miyabi" is called "Ameno Miyabi". She was calling Wagahai.

Maybe she could open the door, because she was the one who closed it. Cancel recognition manipulation ability. It's easy because she's done it before with Shiro.

But then she doesn't know what will happen.

What would those two say if she was selfish? Will they accept her as she is?

Or like those people, will they fear her and turn away from her?

If that happens, she is certain that she will never be able to find peace again.

That's the only thing Neko was afraid of.

"Oh."

Her heart jumped a lot, and Neko reflexively jumped high.

With wide blue and gold eyes, she Neko saw him.

On the bedroom ceiling. A green parrot perched on a windswept water tower.

The entire body is covered with hair. A real cat would have curled her fat tail. Fear and chill numbed Neko's judgment.

Suddenly, the parrot spread its wings and screamed.

"Whoa! Stupid cat, scared, scared!"

Her face turned red. Anger overcame fear and Neko threatened Kotosaka with her entire body.

"There's no such thing as scary! Stupid!"

"Whoah, whoah, whoah, whoah!"

Kotosaka laughed triumphantly, and Neko shifted into a battle stance. Just when she thought she was going to catch him, rip off his wings, and dunk him in the sauce, Kotosaka's demeanor changed in an instant.

"Please stop, Kotosaka. I came looking for her today. Don't make her angry."

"Whoah!"

After a sharp cry, Kotosaka fell silent. Sensing a touch of intelligence behind his camera gaze, Neko braced herself.

"Eh?"

Of course, Neko knows the names of the others. Even so, the reason she asked was to delay the main topic, even if it was a bit.

The parrot nodded and answered.

"Right. It's my first time speaking like this, so let me introduce myself again. My name is Hisui Nagare. I am the "Green King". What is your name?"

A name. It's nothing, it was accompanied by the pain of spitting fire.

"Wagahai... I'm Neko..."

"Oh, really?"

Neko froze at the question which he immediately returned to.

"Is your name really Neko? No, that's not the right question. Do you really think your name is Neko?"

"....."

"In that case, I'll teach you. Your name is Ameno Miyabi. The only daughter of Ameno Taichi and Ameno Hinako, who lived on 1-3-21 Higashi Naebara, Naebara City, Kanagawa Prefecture."

Neko certainly remembered the feeling of something entwined under her feet.

"14 years ago. You were 2 years old at the time and miraculously survived the Kagutsu Incident in southern Kanto. Perhaps your super power was awakened at that time."

That grabbed a leg like it was mud, crawled like an ivy and tried to bind Neko's body. She was afraid and wanted to run away, but she couldn't move her body.

Neko knew what that was. The true nature of what she herself had confined and bound.

It's called "past."

"You lost your parents and used your cognitive manipulation to survive. Even so, you were still young, so maybe it was instinctive. You manipulated the perceptions of a couple, and underneath them..."

"Stop."

Neko said that to Nagare, who was talking about her own "past" with a machine voice that spoke clearly of the record nonchalantly.

Surprisingly, Nagare suddenly stopped speaking. Kotosaka tilted his head curiously.

"You really don't remember. I get it. Apparently, you can even manipulate your own perception."

"I don't know, Wagahai is like that..."

"Of course. You've even sealed the memory of sealing your memory. It's natural that you don't know. I also didn't come here to talk about the past. My origin is in the past, but I always look to the future."

Then Kotosaka spread his wings.

As if he extended.

"I came looking for you. Ameno Miyabi, or simply Neko. We are compatriots."

Neko blinked slowly, looked at Nagare and asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Let's put it another way. We are comrades."

At those words, Neko violently shook her head. She looked up with her blue and gold eyes like a kitten cowering in fear and threatening her enemies.

"No. I'm not your friend. You bully Kuro and Shiro! I hate those kind of people!"

"You don't like people bullying those two. Is it because they're your friends?"

"That's right! Shiro and Kuro are Wagahai's friends!"

"Even if they know your true identity, will those two still be your friends?"

Like an awl, Nagare's voice accurately pierced Neko's weak and soft parts.

"Ameno Miyabi. Or Neko. That's what you fear the most. Fearing your true identity would be known, you kept your true identity away from yourself. It must have been painful to be called a monster by those you believed in. I feel sorry for you."

Her chest ached as if she had been stabbed. Breathing became rapid and shallow. Not knowing why that happened, Neko's face twisted in pain and fear.

"Is there any guarantee that those two won't do that? Any guarantee that they won't run away from you after finding out who you really are?"

Yes. That was terrifying.

She was sure that she would be fine. That's what she wanted to believe. It was easy and logical to think so. Shiro forgave Neko. She gave him a fake personality and memories, manipulated him conveniently, even so, Shiro told her that she could stay by his side.

But, now, if that didn't happen...

Just thinking about it made her body shudder. Even if she knows it's impossible, it's like there's a physical obstacle and her thoughts stop moving forward.

As if he huddled against Neko's fear, Nagare whispered softly.

"I would not do that."

Neko looked at Nagare.

"Because I already know your true identity. How did you do that? Why did you do that? Because I know more than you do."

"....."

"Neko. Or Ameno Miyabi. We are compatriots. We are friends. If you are a monster, I am a ghost. I died because of that incident, and then I was reborn because of that incident."

Monster. The words that once drove her to loneliness strangely no longer scared Neko.

That's probably because Nagare is telling the truth. It's not because he's blaming himself or cursing, but because he believes he's a true partner.

"But I deny my own words. I am not a ghost, I am a human. You are not a monster either, you are a human. To survive, to pave the way, we will use all the power we have. If that is not human, then all the humans in this world would be inhuman."

With his intellectual tone intact, Nagare's words took on a tinge of warmth. It's as if he was silently revealing his hidden feelings that he had been thinking about for a long time.

Neko muttered in a weak voice.

"I am a cat..."

"Yes. You can also be a cat. That's what it means to be human. It doesn't matter if there is someone who will become the "King". It's okay to have humans turn into cats. It's okay to have a parrot to be your friend. That's the kind of world I'm aiming for."

At those words, Neko's eyes widened.

The first thing that came to her mind was a warm world. No one would harass Neko there. They would not throw stones at her or call her a monster. Because there is a world where everyone has turned into a monster. Manipulate people's memories, spit flames, and fly freely. In a world where everyone is like this, Wagahai, she could still be a cat.

She was sure she wouldn't feel alone.

Nobody would leave.

It was a lovely world that made her reel.

A parrot spread its wings to her. Hisui Nagare extended his hand.

"Ameno Miyabi. Or Neko. Please come with me. Be the key to open the door to a new world. I welcome you."

Before she could think of anything, Neko's paw stepped forward.

Neko doesn't know what awaits them in that world. But at least that guy on the other side of the parrot sees himself as an ally. He would never leave Neko alone. If the world he talks about comes true, no one will ever abandon Neko.

Like those people.

Like mom and dad.

Feeling a sharp pain deep in her chest, Neko slowly reached out.

"Neko."

His voice echoing from behind her made her jump and cringe.

Hesitantly, she looked back.

There were two boys.

One was a dark haired boy with a grumpy expression on his face.

The other is a white-haired boy with a soft atmosphere.

But now they both look the same.



They had a sad look.

"Neko. What are you doing?"

Kuro's voice did not blame Neko. It's that kind of voice that you can't say something he's afraid of, because if you say it, it's likely to come true.

"Are you going, Neko?"

Shiro's voice was filled with deep sadness. It was the sadness that Neko knows so well. A close friend suddenly leaves, disappears. The sadness at that moment was like a huge hole.

She felt as if the ground under her feet was distorted.

She felt that she was about to make a big mistake.

Neko was sad when Shiro disappeared. Shiro went somewhere even though he said he wasn't going anywhere. She was sad, she couldn't forgive him and couldn't give up, so she searched here and there with Kuro.

Shiro returned after all, but otherwise she believes that she would still be looking for him. To spend the rest of her life looking for him and to fit back into his pocket.

She now she would be causing the same pain.

"...Wagahai is a cat."

Muttering to herself, Neko looked at the ground. She suddenly became distorted. Neko didn't know from the dripping tears. It was hiding behind the door.

"But maybe I'm a monster."

"There is no such thing!"

Kuro yelled that out loud which surprised her. Looking straight into her round gold and blue eyes, Kuro raised his voice even higher.

"You're our friend! You're definitely not a monster!"

Shiro said otherwise. Despite his sad face, his smile was as warm as the sun.

"Even if Neko is a monster... Neko is my Neko."

"....."

That's all.

That's what she said. Shiro also recognized it. That day, at that time, a child fell from the sky. She's been there ever since she jumped onto his chest.

The warmth that gently enveloped Neko, that she was alone in the cold room.

The world doesn't have to be warm. She doesn't need you to be nice to her. If these two people are there, if Shiro and Kuro are there, Neko will be happy.

Neko blinked as if she had woken from a dream and turned to the parrot.

Snuggling into Shiro's warm arms, Neko said clearly:

"Because I'm Shiro's cat. I can't be your friend."

Saying that, Neko separated from Nagare.

"...Is that so."

Hisui Nagare didn't say much. He slightly tilted his head, he closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry."

After saying that, the parrot spread its wings and flew away.

Neko, Shiro and Kuro watched him carefully. After the green shadow got smaller and finally disappeared into the sky, Neko crouched on the spot.

"Neko? What's up?"

Kuro yelled in panic. Neko covered her face and shook her head. She couldn't stop crying. Neko muttered like an idiot along with heat running down her cheeks.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry."

Even Neko wasn't sure who she was apologizing to.

With Hisui Nagare?

With Shiro and Kuro?

With her mom and dad?

Was with the photo of that child that was at the back of the Buddhist altar?

She didn't understand. Shiro and Kuro gently hugged Neko's shoulders that she did not know. Wrapped in that warmth, Neko kept apologizing for something.

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That night she also had a dream.

XX was in the room. It was night. The porch shutters were closed, the kitchen and living room were deserted, and only icy cold filled the room.

Alone in a cold room. XX was sitting holding her knees.

Despite that, XX was not cold. Somewhere in her heart there was warmth. That was already a part of her. As long as she has it she won't be cold. That is now clearly understood by XX.

There was a Buddhist altar in front of her. She from time to time she could hear voices calling her.

"Ameno Miyabi."

She was no longer afraid. She just thought it was cute. Because of her, because of her cowardice, she was trapped inside her.

When she reached out and knocked on the door, she could feel the coolness.

(I'm sorry.)

XX apologized again. Even so, she couldn't open the door. She didn't have the courage to find Ameno Miyabi there.

At least not for now.

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Having broken the link with Kotosaka, Hisui Nagare leaned his body back and took a deep breath.

Various thoughts passed through his mind. With the addition of Ameno Miyabi, many plans that were scheduled to go live now fell through. Of course he had alternatives, but they wouldn't have as much impact as he thought at first. If it could have been incorporated, the "Chabudai Alliance" would probably have been almost destroyed, but...

"Don't get carried away, Nagare."

Iwafune, who was sitting cross-legged and drinking beer, said with a smile.

Nagare's eyes were half open and he stared at Iwafune.

"Iwa-san. Since when have you been there?"

"You've been there from the start, right? Well, you can't do that anyway. If she's a girl, you should have a little more ways to do it."

With a beer in hand, Iwafune shrugged. Nagare was silent for a moment and then said:

"I figured it was the best way to go, but it seems I was wrong."

"Well, I didn't get that kind of opportunity. I couldn't tell you either."

At that moment, Iwafune asked, "Hmm?"

"So does that mean it's my responsibility? This guy was careless. And to think that what I did didn't teach you a trick or two for hooking up a girl. That's too bad, Nagare."

He wanted to say that he didn't need to be taught such things, but it was an undeniable fact that he had just failed. Nagare listened silently.

"Listen, Nagare. A girl wants to be needed. You have to make her think you're useless without her. You don't understand that sort of thing, right?"

"It is necessary?"

"That's right. Reasoning and interests are second and third. Make that person think you need them!"

"But I need her."

"So! Don't say that!"

With a thump, Iwafune slammed the beer can down on the table. With that momentum, Nagare stepped back a bit.

"If you don't put it right in words, you won't be able to convey it! You're smart, calm, and trustworthy, but you lack humanity. So girls won't follow you! Even if you're a little silly, women are creatures who choose to be kind and they want to be with you."

"Uh..."

"Look at me. It looks like this and it's pretty popular. Why? Because I'm lazy!"

Saying that, Iwafune groaned into the beer and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his cassock.

"You are an apprentice to me too, Nagare! What is important is the "feeling of being left out". If you are square and rigid, not even the waiter will follow you."

Nagare stared at Iwafune's loose cassock with inorganic eyes.

Of course, Nagare respects Iwafune. As "Grey King", as his adoptive father, he doesn't think he would be where he is today without him, but other than that, he despises his neglect of his private life.

However, Nagare found a grain of truth in Iwafune's words. That is to say...

"People are drawn not only to what they need, but also to those who need them, right?"

"Uh, well, I didn't even talk about such a difficult topic."

"So the startup plan should include that element as well."

"What? Starter plan?"

With a thoughtful face, Iwafune pondered.

"Ah, umm, that's it. How about a receiver of the existing social system?"

"Yes. If I could add Ameno Miyabi to my companions, I could use her cognitive manipulation ability to speed up the boot, but now that's not possible either. It's a shame."

Saying that, Nagare moved forward silently.

The clothes that held him and kept him alive had already served their purpose. His arms, legs and his body, which were previously confined to sustaining his life, are now free to move.

And it's all thanks to that relic.

The "Dresden Slate" pulsed silently under Nagare's eyes.

Nagare, who was linked with the "Slate", felt the pulsation from it directly. As if in sync with lost heart, he squirmed a little. Each time he felt an enormous surge of power.

"Right now, the "Slate" is still asleep. However, this power will be greater than any power mankind has ever possessed."

Nagare crouched down on the spot and gently patted the "Slate".

"When the "Slate" really wakes up, unprecedented chaos will ensue. Assuming that time comes, we need to change the existing social infrastructure from the current stage. At the very least, we need to have an organization that can handle the disruption."

"Hm."

Iwafune raised the beer to his mouth with a difficult expression on his face, completely different from before.

"That is the minimum responsibility of those of us who try to awaken the "Slate". "Jungle" must not be underground anymore. We must rise."

Take humanity to the next level.

It is Nagare's dream. Ever since the Kagutsu Incident took his life, his family's, and everything else, he's been thinking about it. Why did that happen? What did that mean? Why did those who died at that time die? This is the answer.

It was a necessary sacrifice for the next age, a new step. This is how Hisui Nagare sees them.

And when the next age began, it was already visible that great confusion and misfortune would occur.

It is impossible for Nagare to anticipate and not take countermeasures. What he wants is human innovation, not unhappiness. If there are people spilling, you need a saucer to catch them.

"Iwa-san, thank you for your advice. The shape of the new "Jungle" has once again become clear. In the "next" age, not only those who need us, but those who "we" need, we will take everything."

Nagare activated a special ability and made several windows float in the air. Ranker Limited Quest.

An important order as a mission only for Mishakuji and Sukuna. When he stroked it, the window turned into a paper airplane and flew off into the darkness.

"Activate mission 5538. Let's raise a new "Jungle" with our own hands."

With a small murmur, Nagare slowly rose to his own feet.

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Cutting through the darkness of the night, the sound of the 750cc exhaust carried through the metropolitan highway.

As he made his way through the gaps between the trailers, the big motorcycle of "Kerun" ran like an arrow. With his full-face helmet he didn't feel the wind, but the landscape he saw melted at great speed and didn't hold a constant shape. If he made the slightest mistake steering the wheel, he would be thrown high and far and melt into one of the blobs of that landscape.

Inside the rider's gloves, his palms were soaked. Gripping the steering wheel over and over again, "Kerun" yelled.

"Hey, "Jema"! Persecution, what's going on?!"

He was sure that he had already gotten rid of them, it was okay to slow down. Disappear and reappear as if it had been blown away by the wind. As the lights streamed in from the edge of his vision, "Kerun" wished for him from the bottom of his heart.

"No! They're still chasing us! "Scepter 4" even sent a helicopter?!"

Thinking it was a joke, he felt a chill in his stomach. Thoughts and memories rushed through his mind as fast as the landscape passed.

It was supposed to be just a game. If you win, you get points, and if you use the points, you get super powers, it's a wonderful game. "Kerun" and "Jema" advanced by leaps and bounds. They weren't strong, but they were quick and wise. They only dabbled in safe, delicious missions, and they won handily. The power they gained there helped them change their lives. A lot of money, delicious food, fun trips, cute girlfriends, all of which are things that cannot be obtained as a student, all of which are obtained through "Jungle".

And now all of that was about to be removed.

The HUD that was displayed within the full face summoned even more despair. A map that reflected his location information, the destination was blocked with a red X mark. "Scepter 4" was shutting down traffic. The only way to escape was to go down the lower path. If so, it's the end of the series. "Kerun" was not so good at motorcycle technique that he could run freely on narrow roads.

University, family, girlfriend, finding a job, life. Several words came to his mind. There is a lot written on the "Jungle" forum about what happens to psychics trapped in "Scepter 4". Day after day, unspeakable torture would await him. According to one person, they were thrown into a special prison and never returned to society. According to another person, electrodes were implanted in their brains and they were forced to work permanently as a slave to "Scepter 4".

Even if those comments contained exaggerations, he would undoubtedly be branded as "criminal". He would drop out and live a long, dark life as a straggler.

He didn't like that. Why did he look like that? There are many guys doing worse things.

At the moment when his face distorted as if he was about to cry, a voice suddenly echoed in his ear.

"Do you want me to help you?"

Jiggle, the rider outfit trembled. He didn't know where he was hearing it from. When he entered the HUD, an unknown account was connected to the voice chat. "Kerun" he shouted agitated.

"Who are you?! Jema, what's going on?!"

"I-I don't know! Although it's supposed to prevent unauthorized accounts from entering."

"With that level of security? Are you serious? Well, it doesn't matter. Whether you want help or not, decide in 10 seconds."

The blocking net was closing on the map every moment. He didn't have time to hesitate. "Kerun" he begged someone he didn't know.

"Help me! I'll pay you!"

"Ok. Go down to the lower path."

Before thinking about it, "Kerun" slammed on the brakes, turned the steering wheel, and left the metropolitan highway. As he crossed at excessive speed, more voices echoed.

"Turn right at the first light. Go straight and stop at a convenience store. Just wait for instructions."

"Oh, hey! If I do something like that, I'll get caught by "Scepter 4"."

"If you want to be safe, listen to what I tell you in a low voice."

Gritting his teeth, he still did as he told him. At the same time, he activated "Whisper Command" and ask "Jema", who should be watching from afar.

"W-What's going on? Who is he?"

"Uh, I don't know! But he's quite an advanced hacker. Our conversation just now could have been overheard..."

Of the two, "Kerun" is mainly in charge of practical work and "Jema" is mainly in charge of information processing. Since "Jema" said so, it would be better to think that the network was under control.

While he was thinking about such things, "Kerun" stopped in front of a convenience store.

His vision was shrouded in darkness.

".....?!"

He panicked and looked left and right. He was pitch black for only a moment, and what jumped out at him were the exposed concrete and inorganic guide lights. Somewhere in the underground escape passage a thought came to him...

A voice came from the side this time.

"Let's hide here for a while."

A figure suddenly appeared in a space that should have been empty. The entire body was wrapped in black clothing, and the face was covered with a full face mask. It was a bit different from the camouflage mask they wore, but it was definitely a member of "Jungle".

"...Ah, are you the guy who contacted me?"

When he cautiously asked, the black clad shrugged slightly.

"I'm under no obligation to respond. My job is to get the target to safety."

Saying that, the black clothed one put his hand to his ear and began to communicate somehow.

He didn't know what it was.

But at least "Scepter 4" didn't seem to get there. When he looked at the map on the HUD, he could see blue emblems representing PCs with "Scepter 4" and follow-on helicopters moving back and forth around them. "Kerun" felt a cold sensation that they must be looking around.

"Eh?"

"Kerun" couldn't believe what he was seeing.



The map started to move, but he hadn't moved. However, the marker meaning "myself" on the map was moving at considerable speed. An old marker began to move in pursuit of him.

Like a hyena chasing wounded prey. "Kerun" looked at him in a daze and uttered words that weren't even a question.

"What's happening...? Am I here? Why is the map moving?"

The answer came out of his ear.

"What's moving is a discarded PDA I set up here. I hacked into your account and made you log in twice there. It'll take a while before they notice the clothes."

"Huh?! Hey, what are you doing?! Taking someone's account without permission!"

"Well then, shall we bring them back? The blue clothes will gladly come to pick you up."

He had no words. He didn't like it, but he had to listen. That guy certainly seemed to be an ally, but an ally in "Jungle" means nothing more than "an opponent who has the same interests". Depending on the situation, he could always become an enemy.

Before long, the mark of "Scepter 4" disappeared from the map, and "Kerun" patted his chest in relief.

"...Apparently, it seems to be fine. Thank you for your help."

"The reward is 10,000 JP."

The blood of "Kerun" was frozen at the ready-to-use request.

"What? 10,000 JP?"

"Ah. I won't lose a single point."

"Fu, don't be silly! Didn't you hear that story?!"

"You're the one who received the reward without checking. I've already done my job. Now it's your turn to pay."

"Kerun" was again stuck in the voice. He couldn't help but admit that there was a reason for what he said to the other party. No matter how impatient he was, he should have confirmed the reward and negotiated.

He didn't think so. At that time, he didn't have that kind of time. "Kerun" is just a college student. There was no way he could make a decent judgment or bargain in the ten seconds that would ruin his life.

In other words, this guy knew and extended a helping hand.

"I don't have that many points."

Feeling bitter, "Kerun" had no choice but to defend himself. He now he had about 4,000 points. He couldn't shake the sleeves.

"Is that so? If you combine it with your partner, you can prepare around 10,000."

By partner, he meant "Jema." First of all, that communication should be a private chat with that guy. Although he was listening to that conversation, he hadn't said a single word since before.

"Hey, Jema..."

He called out to his "partner" with a grasping sensation, but again there was no response. He was still connected. However, the fact that there was no reaction...

"You were abandoned."

The one in front of him, dressed in black, was the one who muttered. There was no tone of mockery in his words. It was a way of saying that he was only confirming the reality in front of him.

This time his blood boiled. The fact that he was the only one trying to save himself from it aroused his helpless rage. He raised his fists and shouted.

"Don't be kidding! Oh, I'm not paying, because it's just me!"

The angry voice that echoed inside his mask suddenly stopped.

A blade was plunged into "Kerun's" throat. It was the point of a sword drawn by the guy in the black armor. It was so fast that he didn't even know when he pulled it out. Anger withered and fear arose in its place.

"Is that so? Then let me take your life."

"Oh, hey..."

"Killing the target won't give you a penny, but if you throw it away, you won't be able to show anything else. Even "Jema" will pay what he owes if he finds out about the target's fate. Then, it will be completed."

"Wait, wait! I understand!"

Still rigid, "Kerun" let out a miserable voice. Tears clouded the HUD vision, out of fear and regret. The black robed guy's words were not threats. He really he would do what he said he would do. That is what "Kerun" knew intuitively.

"I will pay... all the points I have..."

Muttering, "Kerun" opened the account of "Jungle". The recipient politely accepted the mission issued by "Kerun" as a form, when all points were paid... 4000JP, Janpy appeared as a matter of course and announced that the account would be deprived of all points.

With that ceremony "Kerun" ended as a member of the "Jungle" clan. The career he had built disappeared and he went back to being an ordinary person.

The black robe held his swords and bowed their heads slightly.

"6000 points left. How will you pay?"

"Kerun" shuddered. Unfortunately, he is already insolvent.

And the person he called muttered cruelly in his ear.

"Bring me that motorcycle."

"I understand."

The black robe involuntarily poked at the throat of "Kerun" with the tip of the knife. He got off his motorcycle and backed up. Thus, in a very natural movement, the black robe straddled the motorcycle.

"If I sell it, it will be worth a lot. After that, I'll take it from your friend. So I'll let it go this time."

The black robe started the engine and the motorcycle began to work. "Kerun" was silently watching his back.

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"Rank up! Saruhiko Fushimi has been promoted to U-Rank of "Jungle". Congratulations."

Fushimi countered the spectacular statement of the parrot-like mascot, Janpy. He put the PDA down on the couch he was sitting on and muttered to himself.

"It's no game."

Hirasaka, leaning her back against the wall in the corner of the room, snorted.

"I can't say enough about cheating and being naughty."

"It's not a foul, it's a feat. If there's a hole, it's natural to use it, right?"

Hirasaka just shrugged and said nothing to Fushimi, who was listless. There is no objection to that, and Hirasaka has been supporting Fushimi in the first place. She had no intention of complaining from the beginning.

The two are in the hideout prepared by Fushimi.

A couch table, a laptop, a mattress and a blanket are randomly placed in a bare concrete room. It is really a room just to come home and sleep.

Only they and Hisui Nagare know that they are there. That "King" watches over everything. However, it is impossible for even Nagare to take a look at the contents of

this room. Both visual and auditory, it is designed to be completely isolated from the outside world. It is the first time that the PC is also disconnected from the network and the camera and microphone are physically crushed.

Therefore, this room was the perfect place for secret conversations.

"How much did the motorcycle sell for?"

Fushimi asked unexpectedly. It seems that he entered into negotiations to obtain compensation. Hirasaka handed Fushimi a small folded bill.

"Shibata NR750. It was sold at a good price because it was new. However, since they will be treated as stolen goods, the fee was deducted."

After taking a quick look, Fushimi took out a wad of rolled up bills and tossed it to Hirasaka. Before receiving it, she knew that it was smaller than what she normally receives. She assumed that means that if you sell a motorcycle, you should keep it as a reward. There were no objections. Dealing with Fushimi is always fair. She likes that he doesn't waste time.

After accumulating the bounty, Hirasaka walked away.

"What are you going to do with that mission?"

Fushimi's eyebrows rose. His stagnant eyes turned to Hirasaka.

"5538, huh?"

"The forum is full of repeated large-scale quests. Mission 5538, "Plan Startup". It's different from the quests I've done so far."

Hirasaka took out a PDA. In that electronically locked room, the PDA is just a record board, but you can still check mission details.

"We will attract VIPs from all walks of life to "Jungle", including entertainment, media, legal, political and financial sources and diplomacy. That seems to be the essence of the "starter plan". If this is accomplished, "Jungle" can become an organization that leads this country, both in name and in reality."

"So you got the treasure and finally set out to conquer the world? It's nonsense."

Fushimi muttered as if he vomited.

Hirasaka stared at that expression. In order to survive in the underworld, it is essential to have the ability to guess to some extent the feelings of others. Anger, frustration, fear, bewilderment. What the person is thinking, how he will act next, can be dimly seen when superimposed on the situation.

"This will be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Now that you've been promoted to U-Rank, you'll be able to take on more difficult missions. Isn't it possible to reach Ranker during this large-scale mission?"

Cynical and grumpy. Yet exceptionally capable. This is the human image of Fushimi Saruhiko, which she obtained from observing him over a short period of time. It seems a bit out of place with the current situation of a traitor who gave up "Scepter 4" after being defeated at Mihashira Tower and jumped into "Jungle".

Hirasaka only wants to know one thing.

"However, this quest can also be a final blow to your old nest."

Did Fushimi Saruhiko really betray "Scepter 4"?

"There are many voices from all walks of life who question the *raison d'être* of "Scepter 4", whose "Slate" has been stolen. In other words, "Slate" is like a brocade flag. Whoever owns it can claim sovereignty. Faced with what was stolen, you can become a traitor."

To find out, you have to delve into the emotions of this man. Why is he angry and what is he interested in? For Hirasaka, his "partner", the opportunities are endless.

And the observation shot from a moment ago...

"The reward is enough. There is no reason not to travel."

Looks like it's already out.

"Hirasaka. On this list, I listed the weaknesses of those who are likely to be interested in the proposal, who are likely to lose money even if they are not, and those who are. Compensation will be calculated separately."

"I understand."

Hirasaka nodded and immediately used "Wall Break" to escape from the room. She grabbed the edge of the window or gutter, land softly, and operate the HUD with her line of sight.

(As a result of the observation, Fushimi Saruhiko has no attachment to his former home. I will continue to monitor future trends.)

Attaching the collected video and audio recordings from the eye camera and microphone, Hirasaka sent the email to "H.N.".

The secret investigation on Fushimi was a requested mission from a fairly early stage. In order to faithfully fulfill the mission received from Fushimi, Hirasaka also faithfully fulfilled that mission.

In fact, Hirasaka doesn't care if Fushimi is a traitor or not. Truth is money. That was it for Hirasaka.

And one more thing. Hirasaka has a way to monetize that information.

Hirasaka straddled the parked motorcycle. The destination is Tsubakimon. She started the engine while she figured out the plan to invade there.

+++++

Kuro was walking through the winter city.

A green onion head popped out of the shopping bag on his chest, and at first glance, he looked like a student on his way home from an errand. Nobody pays attention to him. At least, that is what it seems if the circumstances are not known. But he was wrong.

Kuro knew more than anyone that it was a mistake. The senses that had been forged through years of training felt the piercing gazes from here and there.

(Hey, it's him.)

(He's worth 10,000 points!)

"What are you going to do?"

Actually, no such voice was heard.

However, the gazes that were directed from everywhere said so. Curiosity, animosity. The reason why they were so obvious was not because Kuro's senses were particularly good, but because the people looking at him didn't know how to hide their feelings.

"You can't be stupid!"

"Photos, photos. Even information alone will earn you points!"

He took a deep breath.

It wasn't even a problem and he didn't attack. He could have thrown it away, but he didn't like to take advantage of a reluctant enemy. "Jungle" is definitely his enemy. He doesn't know what to do with the photos, but he can't let them serve as a "mission."

His body submerged for a moment and Kuro jumped high.

From railings to streetlights, kicking over traffic lights and signs, moving in a zigzag trajectory. It was a very slight distraction that a normal psychic could detect, but there was a scream from behind.

"Ah, he ran away!"

"Damn, I couldn't take a photo!"

After all, "Jungle" is that kind of group of people.

Humans who can't even be called psychic to the extent that ordinary people have grown hair. He can't even fight a decent battle, and if he ever gets into that kind of situation, he'll run away as fast as he can. Originally, they were not Kuro's enemies.

He thinks that's why it's so troublesome.

They are not combatants. These are the countless eyes and ears of "Jungle". There's no point in destroying it, but if you leave it alone, it will deal damage. Kuro couldn't even imagine how Hisui Nagare, the core and brain of "Jungle", would handle the information he received from his eyes and ears.

This is happening more and more every day. Neither "Scepter 4" nor "Homura" were able to capture "Jungle". It's only natural that there hasn't been any movement since the decisive battle a month ago...

At that moment, an explosion sounded nearby.

Kuro took a deep breath and immediately went into a fighting stance. While he was holding a shopping bag, he placed his hand on the sword at his waist. In front of his gaze was a man with an unearthly light that seemed to have caused the explosion.

But...

"Oh, it's not me!"

The man was completely confused. Pushed by the surrounding gazes, he took a few steps back and put his hand on the fire hydrant. Then, the red light shining on his hand moved towards the fire hydrant, and in the next instant, the fire hydrant exploded, spraying a large amount of water.

"Kyaaaaa!"

A passing woman reached out her hand to block the fall of water. And this time, a blue light inhabited her hand, creating a distorted shield. The shield barely repelled the water, but its distorted shape spread the water over a wider area, drenching even more people.

"Wow?! What the hell is this?!"

"Ah, that guy! He's a psychic!"

Anxiety and fear created chaos that spread like an epidemic. It was as if he could see it in Kuro's eyes.

"What?!"

With the shopping bags still in hand, Kuro ran outside to clear up the confusion. There is no way that they, who until just now were ordinary people, knew how to calm down and control their supernatural powers.

Cursing Hisui Nagare in his heart, wondering if that was his purpose to unnecessarily sow confusion, Kuro extended his hand towards the people who had become makeshift Strains.

Overhead, the announcer from the street television was announcing with a serious expression.

"Next is the news about the incidents involving supernatural powers that are rapidly increasing across the country!"

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"Since the beginning of the year, the Cabinet has introduced a special emergency bill for countermeasures at the national administrative level in response to incidents involving singular abilities that have been occurring frequently throughout the Kanto region."

Underground temple, "Secret Base".

Hisui Nagare continued his work while listening to the voices of the news echoing through the six mat room.

In the same room, the executives of "Jungle" met. Sukuna was enjoying the game as always and Mishakuji was doing strange poses one after another on the yoga mat. And Iwafune was slowly drinking beer while he was watching the news on TV.

"Oh, the "Slate" test is going well, isn't it? Old Kokujoji's information control doesn't work anymore."

"Yes, everything is going well!"

Nagare stopped working and looked at Iwafune.

"Yes, the number of people receiving special powers from the "Dresden Slate" is increasing. It's working well."

Mishakuji muttered in ecstasy as he moved into the "pigeon pose" on the mat.

"Fufufu. A new age is coming where everyone will shine with their own individuality. A chaotic jungle age full of life. A paradise for the fittest."

"Paradise. Isn't that what people call "hell"?"

Iwafune laughed as he said that, but Nagare didn't let it slip that there was a cold, hollow feeling in his voice.

Iwafune is his ally. There is no doubt about that. However, if he were to ask if Iwafune affirmed everything Nagare wanted in the world, it would not.

Sukuna, who was still lying down, shot teasing words at him.



"Hm, what's wrong? Are you scared old man?"

"Old man, old man! You coward!"

Iwafune didn't resist and shrugged slightly.

"Not that I have any complaints. The hell I can see is a little better than the hell I can't see. That's my choice."

Iwafune lied and started drinking beer again, while Nagare operated the device in his wheelchair. A window appeared in the air behind him and a real-time image of the "Slate" was displayed.

"Currently, about 40% of the unlocking of the "Slate" has progressed. As a result, the people who become Strains are constantly increasing. There are probably some who have managed to control their powers and are cleverly hiding their supernatural powers, so that the actual number is much higher than the data. It doesn't seem to be directly proportional to the progress of the opening and the awakening of the supernatural powers."

Added various screens to the "Slate" of the video. Display of seals, mostly gold and some blue.

"The special protection that the "Golden King" had over the "Slate" was about to be released naturally. The "Blue King" reinforced that. As expected, he governs the "order" and precisely separates the supernatural powers surrounding the "Slate". But that will soon be fixed."

"If that happens, all 7 billion humans will become kings."

Nagare nodded to Mishakuji, who smiled in "bow stance".

"Affirmative. In order to make the arrival of the next era faster and safer, we have also issued a series of special missions for "Jungle" players."

The image in the window changed and an electronic map of Tokyo was displayed. The "Jungle" seal, which indicates the mission in progress, continues to move slowly.

After hearing about the mission, Sukuna stood up. He looked at the map skeptically and muttered to himself.

"Is that the "starter plan"?"

"Capture and scout newborn Strains, monitor and restrain other clans, and lay the groundwork for our future movements."

"Hmph, don't bother."

The reason why Sukuna pouted was probably because he wasn't involved in the "Boot Plan". Maybe he didn't like the fact that he didn't have the opportunity to participate in a mission that seemed interesting.

Mishakuji scolded Sukuna as he took the "Hero Pose".

"Delicious food requires preparation, Sukuna-chan."

"A moment ago you said: "Survival of the fittest". Winner takes all, right? Eat or be eaten?"

Sukuna manipulated the PDA into calling a certain news site. The person reflected there is none other than Mishakuji Yukari. Wearing an elegant suit, he smiled as if he were spinning on a potter's wheel.

"What the hell is this?! Why are you interviewing me without permission?!"

Sukuna looked at him and expressed his own impressions of him.

"It says here: "Beautiful CEO, Mishakuji Yukari. Member of "Jungle", which stretches into the future." Hey, you said something big."

"Oh, it's a cheap camera, but it looks pretty good. Let's spread it later."

"Hey, Nagare! Are you alright?"

Sukuna seemed to realize that he couldn't understand it and pointed at Nagare in a fit of anger. Nagare responded with an inorganic expression.

"Since the "boot plan" is a plan for us to make public, there is no problem in being exposed to the media. The method of exposure is entirely up to Yukari."

Mishakuji said confidently as he moved into the "Standing Tree Pose".

"In a group, something called a "flower" is necessary. That's right, the "flower" is me. With that, they will unite like bees attracted to honey."

"Don't say the same as the interview written here! Damn, the King of "Jungle" is Nagare! You're just a decoration!"

"I can't go to the "front" yet. If I make my whereabouts clear, it might invite other clans to intervene."

"Boot Plan" is a great mission to advance "Jungle" to the front. Since it was a plan to advance to the "table", a person was needed to be the representative. Nagare for the right reasons, Iwafune because of his personal beliefs and Sukuna because he is a boy, the white arrow was Mishakuji. That could be the reason why Sukuna was irritated.

However, Sukuna was right. In other words, it is a standing position, like a panda attracting customers, a clown. He was a little worried that it would go against Mishakuji's aesthetics.

"The decoration is not good. If it is a role that draws people's attention by beautifully decorating the whole body, I would appreciate it."

Surprisingly, Mishakuji was quite enthusiastic. Even if he is a clown, it might be a treat for him if he gets a lot of attention.

"I also really like the CEO position. There are many unique people among the VIPs in various fields, and various seeds are sprouting among the clan members."

As Mishakuji murmured in delight, the marker on the electronic map made a sound in response. A mission accomplished report. A great mission of 3000JP. What is shown there is a picture of a suspicious person wearing a black mask.

Iwafune reacted while he drank beer.

"Oh? Is this the ninja girl you mentioned?"

"That's right, Douhan Hirasaka. During the first attack on Mihashira Tower in October, she was captured by "Scepter 4" and lost a lot of points, but in the last month she regained points and returned to U-Rank."

"As expected of Douhan-chan. But she seems like she has recently become a good person."

It was a glamorous way of speaking that seemed to be typical of Mishakuji, but it was somewhat deceptive. Nagare tampered with the device and summoned a new person.

Iwafune put down the beer can and widened his eyes in surprise.

"Oh, this guy is..."

"It is rumored that he is a new face."

"Wow! News, new face!"

Everyone was staring at the person. He has a listless look and for some reason holds a knife in his mouth. It can be said that he is the person who is currently attracting the most attention within "Jungle". After all, his predecessor is his predecessor.

"Fushimi Saruhiko. Former number 3 of "Scepter 4". He has also rapidly increased his points since a month ago and has risen to U-Rank immediately."

"I know. This guy is a bounty boss."

Sukuna crossed her arms with a dangerous smile. Nagare, who understood what he was thinking, immediately stabbed him.

"Right now, the bounty on Fushimi Saruhiko has been suspended. I won't stop you if you want to fight, but I wouldn't recommend it. He is a promising player."

"Hmm."

Sukuna snorted and turned to the side. Iwafune asked as he stroked his beard.

"I for one am curious about the old "Scepter 4". If you think about it normally, he might be a secret agent, right?"

"Of course, we have the highest level of surveillance on him. However, no evidence of his contact with "Scepter 4" was found on any network. For now, we can only consider him as a target."

"Hmm, isn't it that kind of thing?"

The Fushimi icon made a sound signaling that the mission was accomplished. Seeing that point, Iwafune raised his voice.

"Hey, he has over 90,000 points!"

"It's not a point that can be earned in about a month. There's a chance some kind of trick will be used. It's fun."

"Hey, is that a trap?"

Sukuna clucked and Nagare quoted from the data Hirasaka sent the other day.

"According to him, it's not a trap, it's a glitch. If there's a hole, use "Jungle". I agree."

"....."

Sukuna's disgust grew stronger. But unfortunately, there was no adult there to calm him down. Mishakuji said happily as he gradually turned his body into "Hero Pose 2".

"If he completes the next big mission, he might even go up to J-Rank."

"Very likely. I have high hopes."

"Wow. This room is getting a bit lively."

The elders said what they wanted and Sukuna stood up as if he had been frustrated.

"Hmph, this is always not a big deal."

"Oh? Where are you going, Sukuna?"

"I'll catch some small fish."

Saying that, Sukuna headed towards the exit. Mishakuji cast a mocking voice behind him.

"OMG, a newcomer caught me and I got nervous~♪"

"Hey!"

Is it a sign from the stars that they looked at it? Sukuna, who must have realized that, didn't say anything else and left the room with wild steps.

Nagare bowed his head.

"I have a question. Why is Sukuna angry? An increase in our combat strength should be a joyous thing for us."

Iwafune laughed out loud, but did not answer the question. Instead, he fixed his gaze on Mishakuji.

"Yukari-chan, don't have fun and provoke the child. You are mean."

"Even if it's bad, it's love."

Smiling charmingly, Mishakuji made a heart symbol with his hand and, seeing that, Nagare bowed his head again.

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"I am at home now."

When he opened the door to his room in the student dormitory, two voices greeted him at the same time.

"Welcome home~"

"Sorry to bother you."

One voice belongs to Isana Yashiro, who is a roommate. And then, the owner of the other voice left the room. Kukuri Yukizome. A common friend of Kuro, Shiro, and Neko. The smile she had on her face turned into a surprised face when she saw Kuro drenched.

"What? Is it raining outside? Towel, towel..."

Saying that, she retreated to the bathroom and threw down the bath towel. With a wry smile, Kuro accepted it gratefully.

"No... today I also had some problems with supernatural beings in the city."

Saying that, as he dried his hair, Kukuri frowned painfully.

"Oh, yes, there's a big ruckus here and there. I know, it's pretty scary when you first see it."

Kukuri crossed her arms and nodded. A year ago, she too experienced a similar situation when the school was occupied by "Homura". It was there that Kukuri first touched a supernatural power the world did not know.

Kukuri quickly waved her hand away.

"Ah! Sorry, I wasn't talking about Kuro-kun, okay? Kuro-kun and Wagahai-chan aren't scary at all!"

"I understand. Thank you, Kukuri."

"Hahaha... Ah, I have to go to the student council. Kuro-kun, I'll leave you some cookies, so please eat them."

In response, Neko's voice echoed from the living room.

"Wagahai is eating! It's delicious!"

"Well then Shiro-kun too. Good luck with your studies~"

"Yes, thanks."

And so, leaving only a bright smile, Kukuri lightly left.

Kuro put the used bath towel in the laundry basket and entered the living room. There, Shiro and Neko were sitting next to each other. A small table was placed on the raised tatami and a large amount of materials was spread out on it. With chimaki wrapped around his head, he looks like a student in the middle of a race.

"Thank you for shopping, Kuro. How is it outside?"

"The security situation is getting worse and worse. A month ago, the "Slate" that fell into the hands of the "Green King" surpassed the clan's boundaries and began to grant special abilities to common people."

After encountering a supernatural incident along the way, Kuro calmed down the panicked new Strains and then handed them over to "Scepter 4". Of course, they didn't cause it on purpose, so it shouldn't be a crime, but the confusion and fear that flashed in their eyes were vividly etched in his mind.

"Fortunately no one appears to have been injured, but that is within visible range. I've heard there's damage elsewhere."

For a moment, Shiro's movement stopped. He slightly tilted his face.

And Neko next to him took a cookie.

"Shiro!"

Out of reflex, Shiro opened his mouth. Neko tossed a cookie there and Shiro nodded slightly as he munched on the cookie.

"Yes. Take immediate action. We have to complete this investigation as soon as possible."

"No, I don't blame you, but you have a very auspicious attitude."

Shiro looked at Kuro and smiled with concern.

"Ahaha... I completely failed in the Christmas matter. But I can't give up. This time we have to properly stop the "Dresden Slate" and the "Green King" Hisui Nagare."

A month ago, the "Decisive Battle of Mihashira Tower" ended in complete defeat.

Although no one was killed, the "Dresden Slate" was captured and its subsequent whereabouts are unknown. "Scepter 4" continues to search with all its might for it, but due to the frequent incidents of supernatural powers, it seems that he is not going smoothly. It was only natural for Munakata to reject Shiro and Kuro's offer of help. Dogs are fond of "tracking."

However, it seems that Shiro didn't take the news of the force knocked out seriously.

There are things that only Shiro can do. How to deal with the "Dresden Slate" stolen by Hisui Nagare. Only Adolf K. Weismann, who discovered the "Slate", can come up with it.

"When I was a child, my sister scolded me a lot. "If you make a mess, clean it up yourself", she said."

Suddenly, Shiro looked into the distance and stared at the photo frame on the dining table.

There are sepia-toned photographs of three people, two men and a woman. Adolf K. Weismann, Shiro's predecessor, his sister Claudia Weismann, and a young Daikaku Kokujoji.

"I'm the only one who can clean it up. If I don't finish it properly, they'd both get mad."

Kuro has no way of knowing how Shiro feels about his late sister and best friend. He just looked down at the ground and speak with a vague thought.

"You've been doing great for the past month. I can't do anything, so I'm not worthy."

Right now, the only thing Kuro can do is calm down the commotion caused by "Jungle" and Hisui Nagare. It's not even a symptomatic treatment, it's just a cleaning. Even while he was doing that, the thought of Nagare constantly breaking the seal made him feel more and more impatient.

And while Neko nodded to that Kuro.

"That's right, Shiro is fine! Kurosuke is the useless one!"

"I don't want you to tell me that...!"

Kuro was a bit upset by her cheerful words, but he still felt relieved somewhere in his heart.

Because Neko had fully recovered.

Even after learning her true identity and choosing to stay with Shiro and Kuro, Neko still showed signs of depression from time to time. Neither Kuro nor Shiro clearly know the cause, because Neko didn't want to talk.

Maybe it's due to Neko's past. Shiro speculated that she had sealed her own memories due to some kind of trauma. She was very scared because it was about to be resolved.

She couldn't face the past that was so painful that she had to abandon it and be reborn as a different existence. Therefore, the only thing Kuro can do is be by her side. Together with Shiro, he snuggles up to Neko. That's all he can do.

A series of thoughts arose again, but...

"Kuro cooks for us every day."

Suddenly, Shiro said that. Kuro shook his head with a bitter face.

"Don't mix things up. It's serious."

Shiro smiled.

"It's a serious story. If Kuro doesn't cook for us, we'll die. If I don't do something with the "Slate", humanity will be in trouble. That's why I have to complete the countermeasures against the "Slate", and Kuro has to cook for us."

"That's right!"

Kuro smiled wryly at Neko to which she nodded. Just when he was wondering if she really understood, Neko nodded and said happily.

"Kurosuke works hard on his food! Shiro works hard on his studio! Wagahai works hard on supporting them! It's fine!"

Neko then took Kukuri's cookie and threw it at Kuro. As he looked at the cookie that he received, he thought that it was correct.

Do what you can. Step by step, move on. Ultimately, that's it. There is no point in rushing and if you try to find a way out, you may fall into a trap. She seemed like she was saying something irrelevant, but what Neko said was definitely the truth.

"That's right. I think so too."

Shiro reluctantly agreed and turned to the mass of material.

"I think I'll go with the "Sounding Hammer" plan for the "Slate". The Sanctum, which is deployed in a special state, causes an irreversible transition into the Weismann phase of the "Dresden Slate". This is an application of my sister Dr. Claudia Weismann's "Schwert Second Control Methodology", and it looks like this."

Shiro showed him a notepad with a diagram of arrows and spirals. No matter how you look at it, it's a child's doodle, but it's probably imbued with immeasurable meaning.

"Fufu, yes, that's good."

After all, Neko nodded. Looking at him, Kuro said.

"I see. For dinner, it's curry."



"Hurrah!"

"Curry! Yes!"

Neko and Shiro jumped for joy and clapped their hands. With a quick smile, Kuro headed to the kitchen to put on his apron.

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Fujinouchi, Tokyo. Millennium Hotel.

New Year's Day is over, and the neighborhood, back to normal, was tremendously lively that day. Luxury limousines and stylish sports cars arrive one after another, spitting out beautifully dressed people. The relaxed and dignified appearance was exactly that of the upper class, and they entered the hotel one after another while chatting in groups.

Among the crowd were a couple of familiar people. A man and a woman.

As for the man, he is quite handsome with a soft gaze and a sweet mask. The elegant figure standing in a suit looks like a model somewhere.

The woman is a beauty with her glamorous limbs draped in an evening gown. Her chest, daringly open, is adorned with a pearl necklace.

It is about Izumo Kusanagi and Seri Awashima, number 2 of "Homura" and "Scepter 4".

They talked in secret.

"Still, I didn't expect to receive a date invitation from Seri-chan. And at a celebrity party like this."

"We are currently understaffed. In the first place, it was you who brought the information about this party."

The way they link arms and whisper in each other's ears is like a perfect lover. However, the sharp glances that Awashima occasionally displays as she watches the guests cannot be attributed to those of the upper class.

With a smile, Kusanagi brought his lips to Awashima's ear and pointed it out.

"Seri-chan, Smile, smile. Here, the daughter of the president of R&B Corporation, "Kusakabe Lise", I want you to behave appropriately."

"...I know."

After answering briefly, Awashima gave an awkward smile. The dress that makes movement difficult and the smile that hides her true face are far from the usual Awashima. She's not used to it, but work is work.

It was none other than Kusanagi who got the information that "Jungle" was planning a large-scale party.

The party, dubbed "Jungle Bootup Reception", was to be hosted by a new company "Jungle", which operates an advanced SNS, and invited celebrities from various fields. Many celebrities accepted the invitation, although they were not that famous, because they were starting to get the hang of it.

Concepts like clans and supernatural powers were hidden by "Tokijikuin". But that's just on a general level. It was an open fact for people who extended their antennae, even a little. And the recognition of "Jungle" was proof that the story of the capture of the "Dresden Slate" was widespread.

When she told him that information, Kusanagi said something reluctant.

"Those big boys have light footwork. Riding the winning horse, he's too cheeky. I wonder if that's the case."

That comment resonated with Awashima, from "Scepter 4," with a sense of coldness.

After they were defeated in the "Decisive Battle of Mihashira Tower", the loss of "Scepter 4" was clearly visible. The information provided by other public institutions stagnated and some began to blatantly ignore their requests. Even when she informed Munakata, all she could hear was a single word: "Are you sure?" That weakness was going to produce the result of being despised again.

Hearing such insults being openly uttered by some people about youths trying to seize hegemony in a country without knowing where they stood and were left on their knees after clumsily failing, Awashima felt her blood rise again.

However, Awashima said nothing. She is the deputy commander of "Scepter 4" and is in charge of all practical matters. Undercover investigation into this match was the "practice's" top priority. "Jungle, who hadn't been caught by his tail until now, dared to appear on the surface... No matter what, it was necessary to capture the information there.

Awashima said with a sigh.

"If Fushimi was here, I wouldn't have bothered you."

Fushimi Saruhiko left "Scepter 4" after the "Battle of Mihashira Tower", and his whereabouts were unknown.

The last time Fushimi was seen was in the "Scepter 4" detention center, when he escaped with Hirasaka Douhan.

She kept it inside "Scepter 4" and didn't tell other clans about it. Even Kusanagi shouldn't have known either.

"I see. Fushimi hasn't been found yet. What about Munakata-san?"

"I don't know. The chief's thoughts, Fushimi's feelings."

Awashima frowned as if to bear the pain. Kusanagi gently hugged Awashima's shoulder.

"Well, that's a disappointing face. It's a fun party, Seri-chan."

"Don't be silly."

Reflexively she tried to push his hand away from her, but she stopped. Actions that inadvertently attract attention should be avoided. Awashima looked at Kusanagi with an angry smile, and Kusanagi, with an unfamiliar attitude, continued to escort Awashima.

The receptionist at the "Jungle Bootup Reception" place was wearing a mechanical mask.

Awashima frowned. She has seen that mask many times. For Awashima, it was a symbol of a coward who wants to hide his true identity while he commits crimes. Awashima is frustrated and righteously outraged that such a coward would openly work as a receptionist at a luxury hotel.

Kusanagi gave Awashima a light pat on the back and stepped forward.

"Please sign in on the spot."

Kusanagi brought his face closer to the PDA that was outstretched. The PDA made an electronic beep and scanned Kusanagi's retina, displaying his ID. The receptionist smiled; although he couldn't see his face, he reached out and pointed to the door of the place.

"Kusakabe Izuru-sama and his wife. Welcome. Please head to the entrance there."

"Ok."

Awashima looked at Kusanagi as she walked arm in arm.

"So, I'm your "wife"?"

"Yes, my love."

Kusanagi doesn't feel uncomfortable at all. Awashima sighed softly, put on the domino mask she was given, and entered the venue.

The party venue was quite big. It is probably the most prestigious place in this hotel and you can see the night view of Tokyo from the windows that stretch along the wall. Under the luxuriously shimmering chandelier, celebrities in domino masks converse and are entertained by tuxedo-clad members of the "Jungle" clan. The only strange thing was that they were wearing a mask that covered their entire face.

"Hmm, this is a celebrity party that's better than you've heard."

In response to Kusanagi's admiration, Awashima quickly determined the customer's physiognomy.

"Senior government officials, businessmen, movie actors, writers, even the current prime minister."

The anger rose again. It is a well-known fact that it is none other than the current Prime Minister Kanichi Samukawa who is spearheading the condemnation of Munakata. First of all, "Jungle" is a terrorist, and it could be said that the Prime Minister's attendance at a party organized by that terrorist was a serious problem.

"Seri-chan, smile, smile."

"I know."

When she answered in a tone that he didn't understand at all, a voice suddenly blared from the ceiling speaker.

"I would like to thank everyone here for coming to the "Jungle Bootup Reception". On behalf of the organizers, "Jungle" Corporation CEO Mishakuji Yukari would like to greet everyone."

The lighting dimmed and a spotlight shone on the person who appeared on the stage. Both Kusanagi and Awashima are well acquainted with the man, with his hair slicked back and dressed in a smart suit.

"Everyone, welcome to the new era!"

The dignified behavior of him is almost the same as when he faced Kusanagi and Awashima in the "Decisive Battle of Mihashira Tower". Kusanagi muttered bitterly.

"Mishakuji Yukari from "Jungle", both his face and name are exposed. How bold."

"So he doesn't even feel the need to hide anymore."

As Mishakuji extended his arms, the screen behind him projected a huge "Jungle" logo. A confident speech echoed throughout the room.

"Everyone here is very lucky, because we can be the pioneers of a new era! Our information network "Jungle" will go beyond mere communication tools to redefine human beings as a next generation social infrastructure. The possibilities that before us are, yes, infinite..."

For Awashima, it was excruciating nonsense. No, her job is to make a fool out of it. Awashima winked softly at Kusanagi, leaving him and slipping into the crowd of people hanging out here and there. The voices of them gossiping whispered in Awashima's ear.

"The supernatural incidents that have been going on for a while have become a tailwind, haven't they?"

"It seems that the "Jungle" system will also be introduced to related ministries and agencies."

"There are rumors that that power will be ours."

With the power of her will, she hardened the expression that was about to turn hard. She knows there will be a headwind. She came all the way here to do something about it.

Then, she saw a middle-aged man waving his wine glass and laughing out loud.

"Well, it's a very happy day! Now that disgusting young man can't play any role! Is this the first year of "Jungle"? Hahaha!"

After stepping on the foot of the current Prime Minister with all her might with her heel, Awashima proceeded smoothly. It would be a lie to say that she couldn't stop drinking when she heard the screaming behind him, but Awashima quickly forgot. Because the target appeared right in front of her.

She pretended to trip in front of an attendant wearing a mechanical mask and then fell. The attendant immediately held Awashima up with one arm, and Awashima dared to press her chest against her arm.

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

From the other side of the mask, she could clearly feel the turmoil within. Awashima frowned in annoyance and looked at the staff with moist eyes.

"Excuse me, I'm a little dizzy."

"Oh, customer? Are you okay?"

"I wonder if I had too much to drink. I want to go somewhere quiet."

The attendant's throat rose and fell at the charming whisper.

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And the officer collapsed on the ground.

He went down unconscious with a blow to a vital point, but it shouldn't be a lasting injury. Kusanagi turned to Awashima, who was next to him, after apologizing with a single bow.

"Seems more like foul play, Seri-chan."

"I'll do whatever it takes to get the job done."

Awashima knelt down and touched the staff member's body. She quickly found the PDA on his chest and tossed it at Kusanagi. Kusanagi activated it, used a connector hacking tool to breach the security, and started viewing the data on it.

When he searched the history, he found what he was looking for in one go.

"There is a list of participants in the party. If we take this..."

"We will be able to identify influential people who have been touched by "Jungle"."

Once again, Awashima's gaze returned to the sharpness of a bird of prey. Who is leading the various acts of sabotage that "Scepter 4" is currently suffering in public and the plans to introduce "Jungle" into ministries and agencies? In the end, they are probably just Hisui Nagare's limbs, but if they are raised, their movements will slow down. The disqualification of "Scepter 4" may be stopped.

Seeing Awashima look at the PDA, Kusanagi shrugged and laughed.

"Hey, let's go. If we stay too long..."

At that moment, he heard someone's voice under his feet.

"D4, answer me. The retinal response disappeared. What happened?"

Awashima and Kusanagi saw it at the same time. Communication voices leak from the mask of the lying down staff member. The retina response means that the skin has the function of notifying the user when something goes wrong.

"Come on."

"Yes."

He turned quickly on his heel and opened the door. Almost at the same time, a loud voice echoed from the end of the hall.

"They are there!"

Three clan members with mechanical masks. It is not a number that he cannot win in a direct fight, but it is troublesome to draw a pistol. With a click of his tongue, Kusanagi turned and ran. Awashima did the same.

"I don't care, shoot!"

Along with the incredible words, gunshots and live bullets were fired. Kusanagi lowered his head and rounded the corner, turning around and cursing.

"Are they crazy?! There are some VIPs though!"

"Even if you delete one or two, you should be able to get rid of them...just leave them there!"

"I understand!"

The elevator was about to reach the end of the hall. He pressed the button as if to slam it shut, look back. Almost at the same time the doorbell rang and the elevator doors opened.

From inside, a burly man wearing a mask stretched out his arms.

"Kya?!"

"Seri-chan!"

With his log-shaped arm choking Awashima's throat, the giant man drew a gun with his other hand and fired at Kusanagi. A bullet grazed Kusanagi's hair, but he jumped undeterred, daring to jump into the narrow elevator shaft.

"No!"

The big man raised an annoyed voice and his muzzle twitched. He pulled the trigger two and three times, but Kusanagi bounced inside the box with a masira-like movement, preventing him from aiming. Using the springs in his body, he jumped near the floor display panel and delivered a strong kick to the big man's head.

"Uh...!"

The giant staggered, but perhaps it was because of the protective mechanism of the mask, or because of the resistance of his physique, that he stopped in a moment. A hail of bullets rained down on Kusanagi, who was crawling in a crouch. Kusanagi dodged it with a breakdancing move and raised her voice.

"Seri-chan!"

"Eh!"

Awashima wriggled free of the kick-loosened restraint and jabbed her elbow into the pit of the giant man's stomach. Awashima grabbed his arm, which had gone limp in pain, and twisted with all her might. By the principle of leverage, the giant man's body leaned forward, Awashima's palm sank into his neck, and Kusanagi's kick that slipped on the ground swept across his foot almost at the same time.

Kusanagi let out a huge sigh after delivering the final blow to the face and crotch of the giant man who had fallen on his back.

"Don't throw him at me in such a small space. If he bounces, he'll hit you."

"There's no way this kind of idiot would think of such a thing, right?"

Saying to spit it out, Awashima reached for the gun, pulled out the magazine, and fired the last shot remaining in the chamber at his feet. With the quickness of a soldier, Kusanagi whistled. At that moment, the elevator reached the underground parking lot. While he was wary of an ambush, he immediately jumped.

The underground car park, where many luxury cars were parked, was not popular. Awashima warned him as they ran.

"The exit is closed."

"Let's do it. But with this...!"

Kusanagi quickly searched for the stolen PDA. In a hotel where "Jungle" is alive, the security system should be able to work through an electronic network. Sure enough, security-related applications were quickly found. Continuing the operation, the blind at the rear of the parking lot was finally opened and light from the electric light came in.

"Ugh, looks like we managed to escape."

It was then that he took a deep breath and felt relieved.

A green flash appeared, brushing against Kusanagi's hand.

"Kusanagi-kun!"

Awashima let out a surprised voice. Kusanagi couldn't even do that and stared at his empty hand. The valuable evidence that could identify the collaborators stolen from the "Jungle" PDA was pierced by the thrown knife, destroyed without a trace, and fell to the ground.

"Damn...!"

With a bitter groan, Kusanagi turned his hostile gaze into the darkness at the rear of the parking lot.

"Emergency mission accomplished! You get 3000 "Jungle" points!"

An electronic voice sounded like a reward for completing a game that doesn't fit the scene. A flash of green lightning pierced the darkness, revealing someone standing there.

Awashima took a deep breath.

"Who is...?!"

In contrast to the annoying Awashima, the person only had a mechanical, expressionless expression. He pulled out two knives from his chest and wrapped them in green supernatural powers. That glow, this time clearly, began to illuminate the man's face.

"Rank up! Saruhiko Fushimi has been promoted to J-Rank of "Jungle". Congratulations!"

"Fushimi!"

The moment he called out his name, Fushimi threw a glowing green knife at him. Kusanagi stepped forward and crushed the knife with the flames from his lighter.

He wasn't allowed to say the many "whys" that were going through his head. Kusanagi said in a suppressed voice, the red eldritch wrapped around his lighter arm.

"Fushimi. I will listen to your story at the hospital."



The next moment, Kusanagi created multiple fireballs. A direct hit would inevitably cause severe burns, but he unleashed it at Fushimi without hesitation. Fushimi looked at him with an expressionless face.

Suddenly, a man emerged from the ground behind him.

The person emerged from the ground and grabbed Fushimi's shoulder. Fushimi was sucked into the ground as if he was repeating the moment when he appeared upside down. The fireball went through an empty space, hit the rear wall of the parking lot and exploded.

Kusanagi clicked his tongue and muttered.

"Green clan member...!"

"Fushimi! Why, Fushimi?!"

Awashima's agitation was no match for Kusanagi's. With grief more than anger, she called out the name of her former subordinate who had already disappeared. Her feelings were too difficult to guess. Because he showed her his betrayal in the cruelest way possible.

That's why Kusanagi couldn't afford to be carried away by his emotions. He put his hand on the shoulder of Awashima who was standing up and urged her on.

"Seri-chan, that's all for today."

Awashima bit her lip, but nodded clearly. From somewhere far away, the roar of the enemy guards approached them. Kusanagi and Awashima fled from the voice and headed towards the exit of the parking lot.

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"Congratulations!"

An unexpectedly bright voice greeted Fushimi as he entered the room.

Hotel Milenio, VIP room. Sitting on a long couch in the center of a room so large it could be mistaken for a hallway, the man slowly clapped his hands. The easy smile that floated on his lips seemed welcoming and ridiculous at the same time, at least to Fushimi's eyes.

The CEO of "Jungle" Corporation, Mishakuji Yukari. Until just a month ago, this man was his adversary. Mishakuji knows this too.

Even so, he calmly pointed to the couch opposite.

"Please make yourself comfortable. Saruhiko-chan. You have the right to."

Fushimi obeyed his words and pursed his lips in a bow.

Mishakuji reached out and took the champagne from the wine cellar. He poured the two glasses of wine onto Fushimi's side and then poured. Raising his glass slightly, Mishakuji winked at him.

"To the birth of a new classifier. And to your free soul. Let's make a little toast."

"Freedom?"

Fushimi didn't even reach for the glass. He doesn't know what's in it and drunkenness slows his judgment.

Mishakuji didn't seem to mind that, and he calmly raised the wineglass to his lips and tilted it.

"Isn't that so? Izumo Kusanagi and Seri Awashima, whom you defeated, were your acquaintances. The reason why you can throw knives in front of your former comrades without hesitation is because you are free."

"In short, are you saying that I am a traitor?"

"It's up to you how you take it. But I don't mean to disrespect you. I mean it, I don't hate it. The determination of people to do what they want without being bound by rules or ethics is beautiful."

Mishakuji narrowed his eyes and stared at Fushimi. Like to see through his thoughts.

Fushimi clicked his tongue sharply in response.

"I don't care about your assessment. Instead, would you let me meet the "Green King" quickly?"

Mishakuji raised the champagne to his mouth again and chuckled.

"Oh, you're pretty impatient, aren't you? You've become the classified you've always wanted, so why don't you soak in the glow a little more?"

"It's not my wish and it's not like I'm immersed in the afterglow. I just did what I could."

"That's not cute. If Sukuna-chan heard that, he'd be mad."

As he said that, Mishakuji put down his glass and got up from the couch. With slow steps, he walked towards the cabinet placed in the corner of the room. When he touched the elegant wooden door with his palm, a scanning light swept up and down, and an electronic voice resounded.

"J-Rank confirmed, Mishakuji Yukari. I'll open the door."

The cabinet was lifted without a sound and opened to the left and right. Beyond is a stout freight elevator. Mishakuji entered and called out to Fushimi.

Fushimi sighed and got up.

"Is it a spy movie or something?"

At that irony, Mishakuji smiled brightly.

"Because it's our "secret base". Without that trick, it would be boring."

Fushimi entered the elevator and looked inside. There were no floor numbers or buttons like in a normal elevator, just a palm-shaped interface on the side of the door. As Mishakuji put his hand on it, the door closed and the elevator began to move silently.

From the acceleration applied to his body, he knew that he was descending at considerable speed. After several tens of seconds, the elevator slowly came to a stop, and the doors opened to the left and right.

The place he entered was a dimly lit corridor. A motion sensor was activated, the lights came on, and a blind appeared, blocking the way.

While Mishakuji was in front of him, a scanning light was directed at his face. Retina authentication. After that, the shutter began to open vertically.

He did not know that such an underground passage existed in the middle of the city. The locks are tight and it's pretty deep.

Behind the shutter was a vast underground space. Stone pillars that look like temples stand side by side, and the light falling from far above illuminates the two in front of them in white. As he walked by, Mishakuji chatted casually.

"It is a secret passageway to our hideout. There are more than 100 exits in Tokyo alone. In the main subways and underground floors of skyscrapers. It is one of the most important secrets that no one knows except the top of our "Jungle"."

Fushimi raised an eyebrow. As a member of "Scepter 4", he knows better than anyone how important current information is. By exhaustively searching the main subway stations and skyscrapers with underground floors, and discovering them from the entrances leading to their hideouts, it is possible to invade the "Jungle" headquarters, which has been hidden until now.

"Is it okay for you to tell me that?"

"Of course. You're already a classified. A companion who shares secrets with us."

Or, Fushimi thought. Maybe they think it's okay to be located. Will they believe "Scepter 4" is lost and no longer has the power to defeat "Jungle" head on?

As if he ignored Fushimi's thoughts, Mishakuji continued with a light tone.

"This time it was a great achievement, Saruhiko-chan. Against "Homura" and "Scepter 4", the number 2 of both clans, fighting alone. Fufu, you should have called for reinforcements, don't exaggerate."

"I don't like cooperative play or anything like that."

"You're lying."

Saying that lightly, Mishakuji looked at Fushimi. The color of his smile and his purple eyes, which had a bit of a piercing light, stared at Fushimi.

"You personally recruited U-Rank Hirasaka Douhan, monopolized the "Jungle" points for two people, and thought of achieving a quick rank rise. You cheating child."

Fushimi didn't bother even though he was caught off guard. That's because he expected the title to have been fulfilled. Faithless whispers.

"It was possible in the system, but couldn't it be done?"

"No way. It's selfish and wonderful. Besides, my Nagare-chan doesn't care about fouls."

Fushimi's eyebrows twitched at the name.

"The "Green King" Hisui Nagare."

"Our King I think likes people who think like that."

The words rang in Fushimi's ears as if they had various meanings.

Fushimi doesn't know anything about Hisui Nagare. But still he knew very well what he was thinking.

Did Saruhiko Fushimi really betray "Scepter 4"?

If so, "Jungle" deliberately invited internal disease. The information that Fushimi, who became a J-Rank, can obtain at his base of operations is immensely important. If that information can be brought to "Scepter 4", the situation can be reversed.

If Fushimi were in Hisui Nagare's position, he would be the first to be suspicious. He would not be promoted to J-Rank. Even if he made a mistake, he couldn't invite it to his base.

But Hisui Nagare does.

Fushimi doesn't like that. Because he makes him feel like a monkey dancing in the palm of Hisui Nagare's hand.

He sometimes he feels that he is swimming.

But the really important things only exist in the tiger's den.

"Come here."

Mishakuji stopped in front of a huge wall.

A thick old door was attached, resembling a shelter, which blocks the underground space. Facing that door, Mishakuji calmly spread his arms.

"Welcome, Saruhiko Fushimi. The "secret base" of "Jungle" welcomes you."

It was unlocked. The door opened slowly with a heavy sound.

Once he set foot there, there will be no going back. Will he fulfill his purpose or leave as a corpse? One of two. He had been prepared for that for a long time, so he did not hesitate to take the plunge.

Still, the moment he stepped forward, the face of a man flashed across his mind.

(Will he get here?)

He may not come. Anyway, he's crazy. He is an idiot who shoots 0 points in a row. It's possible that he doesn't understand what he was saying and it's all over while he's going back and forth.

However, there are times when he gets 100 points.

Fushimi's lips twitched slightly, but when he took the next step, he was gone. With a bored expression on his face, he advanced into the darkness of the tiger's den.

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The glass fell to the floor and shattered with a screeching sound.

But Yata didn't notice that. The fist that hit the counter table trembled. His blood seemed to drain and he squeezed his voice through the cracks in his teeth.

"What the hell is he thinking?!"

Kamamoto and Anna looked at Yata as if holding their breath. Kusanagi, standing behind the counter, called out to him in a low voice.

"Calm down, Yata."

However, those words did not reach the current Yata. Yata yelled his anger at that man, Saruhiko Fushimi, who is somewhere.

"You betrayed us, and this time you betrayed even the blue ones, so what are you going to do? What the hell is going on beyond that?"

There is no response to the words that he spits out with passion. Nobody should have known. What Fushimi is thinking and what he is trying to do, the answer can only be found in Fushimi.

He is a traitor.

Those words came to mind and Yata carelessly scratched the mark on his chest.

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It's been a long time since she finished her report.

Every time the second hand ticks, a drop of anxiety runs through Awashima's heart. Beyond the office desk, Munakata's expression seemed to be the same as always, but Awashima wasn't sure if that was really the case. After being defeated in the "Battle of Mihashira Tower", something in Munakata decisively changed. That fact has turned into a stagnation of anxiety, and there is always pain within Awashima.

"I see."

Suddenly, Munakata opened his mouth.

"With this, Fushimi Saruhiko's secession became decisive. It's like having your dog bite your hand."

There was also no change in tone from him. Quiet and young, everything is in the palm of his hand, and his eyes say that even if someone like Fushimi leaves him, it will have no effect.

(Is it really so?)

Awashima lowered her head to suppress the voice that seemed to come from within.

"Sorry. It's my responsibility to supervise."

Munakata narrowed his eyes as if he was considering whether he was listening to the apology or not.

"Anyway, we have to fill the void he left as soon as possible. To reinforce the front line, we will transfer several personnel to the Special Forces. 2 people from the Mobile Division general platoon, 3 people from the Information Division and 1 person from the Reference Room of the General Affairs Division."

General affairs section.

She thought she heard it wrong. General affairs departments are often staffed with non-combat fit personnel. There are no adequate personnel for the most elite "Special Forces Corps" in battle.

No. It's also different.

Awashima knows that there is only one suitable person.

"Excuse me."

At that voice, Awashima trembled and turned around.

With a slimy movement, the demon entered the office.

"You...!"

Like flowing water, demons never stop moving. With very natural steps, he advanced to the center of the room.

At that moment, the demon exploded.

Awashima's eyes could not capture the moment when the stillness turned to action, just as the murmur turned into a torrent in an instant. Within a few meters of a single step, the saber running from Zenjo's waist was perfectly positioned on Munakata's neck, beyond the office desk.

"....."

Awashima not only acts as the vice commander of "Scepter 4". Her swordsmanship is the best of the Special Forces and she has never been behind most of the members.

Even she, far from stopping Zenjo's outrage, couldn't even react. It was the demon who had his hand on the hilt of his saber.

Munakata did not lose his composure. A white blade approached the nape of his neck, literally a piece of skin. From there she saw something fall.

It was a mistake. It was cut in half and twitching nervously.

With one arm, he swung the long sword around and Zenjo returned it to his sheath.

"I'm sorry."

"Amazing."

Now that he had picked a fly out of his clothes, it seems that was it. Thinking of that, Awashima cleared her throat.

"Gouki Zenjo, the "Zenjo Demon" who killed the predecessor "Blue King" Habari Jin. From now on, I will have you behind me."

The "King Killer" would be behind.

Awashima understood exactly what that meant.

When Weismann's deviation from the "King" reaches a critical point, the "Sword of Damocles" that was looming over his head falls, bringing ruin to the land. However, if the "King's" life disappears before it drops completely, that is not the case. Yes, if someone can kill the "King" before that happens...

Just like Zenjo did with Habari Jin.

Just like Munakata did with Suoh Mikoto.

Placing that sword behind his back meant that he had his own destruction in sight. To drop his own head before the sword above his head falls. As a sword for that purpose, Munakata chose Zenjo.

Awashima bit her lip and lifted trembling fingers from her saber.

Various emotions swirled and she couldn't contain a single shock.

And she, smart, knew it. That tremor, that fluctuation, was the main reason why she was not chosen.

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Pan-pan-pan, a somewhat silly sound resounded.

Ribbons and confetti fluttered and piled above Fushimi's head as he stood in the doorway. Fushimi didn't even pay, he just stood under the board that said "Welcome Fushimi-kun" with an inorganic expression on his face.

"Hey, nice to meet you Saruhiko-kun! Welcome!"

"Thank you for coming, Saruhiko. Welcome."

"Kwah! Welcome!"

Iwafune, Nagare, and Kotosaka greeted him. Even so, Fushimi did not lose his iron expression and answered in a low voice.

"...Thank you."

His line of sight moved slowly, scanning the room.

It was a room like a cheap apartment. The kitchen is full of soot and a rickety fridge has a note telling you when it's your turn to take out the trash. If you look all over Japan, there are probably tens of thousands of one-room apartments with six mats that you can find anywhere.

No one would believe that this is the home of the "Jungle" Green Clan.

But Fushimi knows it's true. This show, which seemed like a practical joke, would be "like" if you know "Jungle" well. The one in the middle, a man in a wheelchair, has that hobby.

The "Green King" Hisui Nagare.

He was younger than he had imagined and more disturbing than he had thought. Even now, he looked at Fushimi with a mysterious smile.

"Okay, let's not just stand up talking. First of all, sit down."



The cheerful middle-aged man is Iwafune Tenkei. His other name is Otori Seigo, the "Grey King". It was the trump card of the Green Clan that won the last battle of Mihashira Tower.

The trump card put a plate of sushi on the table with a happy-go-lucky smile.

"This lazy Iwa-san went all the way to town and bought it. Real sushi! Not one of those food stalls. Look, what would you like? Tuna? Sea urchin? Salmon roe or shrimp?"

Despite the familiar welcome, Fushimi insisted on not placing orders.

"Okay, eggs."

"Heh, are you a boy?"

The only one who whispered was Sukuna Gojou, a boy who had his back to Fushimi. Sukuna's disgusted attitude from the moment Fushimi entered was, on the contrary, easy to understand and comfortable for Fushimi.

Iwafune rebuked Sukuna.

"Hey, you're the kid, aren't you? Oh, yes, there's more than just sushi! Eat chicken! Fried chicken!"

"Eat chicken! Eat chicken!"

"Don't say that, you silly bird!"

Sukuna punched Kotosaka, who spread his wings and made a racket. Seeing that, Iwafune frowned in embarrassment.

"What's up, Sukuna? You've been acting weird for a while now. Are you shy? Huh?"

Sukuna snorted and turned around. Iwafune looked at Fushimi and shrugged slightly.

There, Nagare intervened.

"Saruhiko, you've risen five ranks in just one month. This speed surpasses Sukuna's previous speed. It's really amazing. It's a new record."

Immediately, Sukuna's disgust turned visibly darker. Fushimi observed the situation emotionlessly.

"Nagare... let's talk about that another time."

"Eh, why do you say that, Iwa-san? I'm confused."

"Why? Sukuna, it's okay, so put yourself in a good mood. The beginning of a relationship is important and a smile is essential. You can't do well if you keep getting angry like this. Isn't that right, Saruhiko-kun?"

Through his observations up to this point, images of each person and their relationships have emerged, albeit vaguely.

Hisui Nagare, despite all the brilliance of him, seems to have a simple childishness. It seems that the blunt way of saying that something is awesome honestly doesn't fit with the intricately twisted conspiracy of "Jungle". Or maybe that distortion is the reason why he is called the "Green King".

Sukuna, on the other hand, was unmistakably just a child. His desire to be recognized by Hisui Nagare is transparent. That's probably why he's hostile towards Fushimi. Fushimi can be seen as a rival that threatens his position.

On the other hand, Iwafune is an adult. It must be said that he is suitable for his age, he is trying to mediate in the place of the pure and somewhat unsympathetic Nagare. Including his ability, he can be the base of this "secret base".

While he was thinking about those things, Fushimi responded with a single answer.

"No, it's fine. It doesn't matter."

"Oh, really?"

Iwafune relaxed and sat down on the couch. He raised a beer and made a toast.

"Ok, if you want to act cool, that's fine by me."

"I didn't come here to make friends."

"Then why are you here?"

Mishakuji Yukari, who had been silent until then, whispered.

He could feel the air in the room warm for a moment. Fushimi Saruhiko. Former number 3 of "Scepter 4". Why did a man who used to be his enemy get promoted to Ranker? Even if he didn't put it into words, everyone including Fushimi was probably thinking about it.

Fushimi said it nonchalantly.

"No reason. It's a game, right? I'm just trying to see what happens when I push my score to the limit and if I see something new. I don't think a "sushi party" is the goal, right?"

Nagare narrowed her eyes and answered that question.

"Of course. Our plan starts here."

"Ready, go ahead!"

"I have high hopes for your work. Saruhiko Fushimi, Rank-J, the elite of our "Jungle"."

Everyone present looked at Fushimi.

Expectations, irritations, doubts, curiosity, and various other emotions, Fushimi took for granted. From the moment he took off his blue clothes, he was prepared to be seen with those eyes. Deserter. Traitor. There is no point in trying to remove the labels that have been placed on him. If so, he would make the most of it.

That's why Fushimi smiled fearlessly and said calmly.

"Please, just tell me what to do. I'll show you how to complete any mission. It's much easier than interpersonal relationships."