



10

-Elements-

▶▶ accel world 10

川原 礫  
イラスト/HIMA

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電撃文庫

# アクセル・ワールド 10 -Elements-

川原 礫  
イラスト/HIMA  
デザイン/ピィピィ



「よ……用心棒!？」

「バウンサー用心棒を雇うんだ。

ポイントが、もう一度  
安全圏に回復するまで」

## タクム

ハルユキの親友。  
新生《ネガ・ネビュラス》メンバー。  
デュエルアバターは  
《シアン・パイル》。

## ハルユキ

スクールカースト  
中学内格差最底辺の少年。  
黒雪姫率いる新生《ネガ・ネビュラス》のメンバー。  
デュエルアバターは《シルバー・クロウ》。

"B... Bouncer?"

Haruyuki - A boy on the lowest rung of the middle school totem pole. A member of the reborn «Nega Nebulus», commanded by Kuroyukihime. His duel avatar is «Silver Crow».

"Hire a «Bouncer». Until your Points rise back up into a safe area."

Takumu - Haruyuki's best friend. A member of the reborn «Nega Nebulus». His duel avatar is «Cyan Pile».

「.....」

??????

とあるカフェでハルユキとぶつかった人物。  
細身で眼鏡をかけているが、  
少女か少年かわからない  
性別不詳の空気をまとっている。



"Ow... Oww..."

????? - A mysterious person who collided right into Haruyuki in a coffee shop. Possesses a slender body, wears glasses, and a exudes a neutral air that is neither distinctly male nor female.



「だって、  
姫ったら何度呼んでも  
気付かないんですもの!」

「め、めめ恵、  
なな何するんだいきなり!」

## 黒雪姫

《黒の王》  
ブラック・ロータスを操る  
梅郷中学副生徒会長

## 若宮恵

黒雪姫と同じく  
生徒会に  
所属している少女。  
役職は書記。

"Well, you kept spacing out, Hime, and didn't respond no matter how many times I called you."

Wakamiya Megumi - A girl who, like Kuroyukihime, is also in the student council. She is the secretary.

"M-Megumi, w-what the heck are you doing?!"

Kuroyukihime - Vice President of the Umesato Middle School student council, and controller of the «Black King» Black Lotus.



「わ、ま、待ってよ  
ルカちやーん」

「フラーワージ マチヨーケーヨー  
バカ。上で待ってろよ」



### コーラル・メロウ

ラグーン・ドルフィンと  
コンビを組む  
デュエルアバター。



### ラグーン・ドルフィン

黒雪姫に  
デュエルを挑んだ、  
沖縄在住の  
バーストリンカー。



"Wah, w-wait for me, Ruka-chaan!"

Coral Merrow - A duel avatar teaming up with Lagoon Dolphin.

"Idiooot. Just wait up there."

Lagoon Dolphin - A Burst Linker from Okinawa who challenged Kuroyukihime.

「なあ、あんた……  
シルバー・クロウ」

## キリト

どこからともなく  
学内ローカルネットに出現した、  
謎の剣士タイプアバター

「誰なんだ……!?!  
いつたい、どうやって梅郷中の  
ローカルネットに接続した!?!」

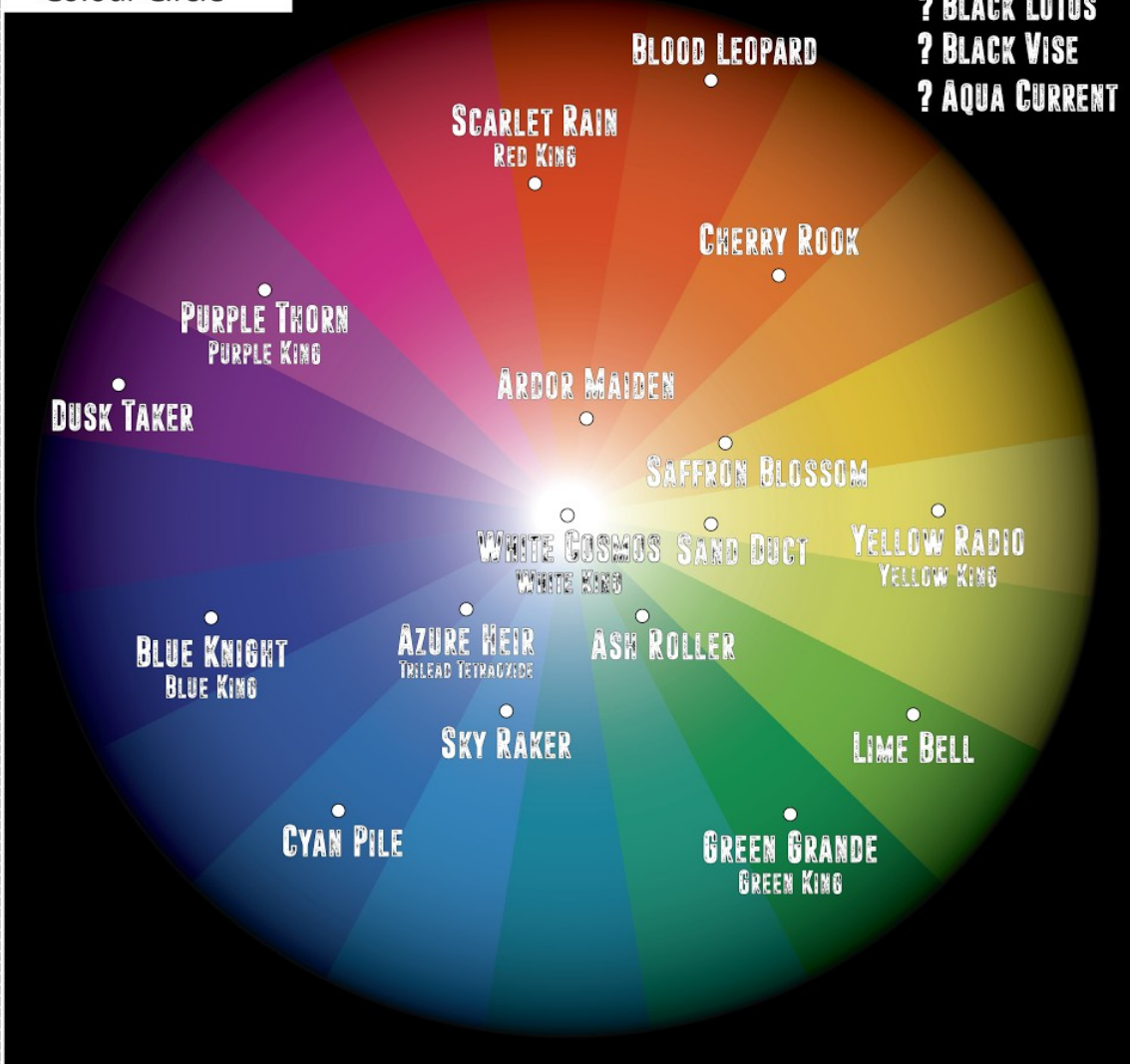
"Hey, you... Silver Crow."

Kirito - An enigmatic swordsman dive avatar who suddenly and mysteriously appears in the school Local Net.

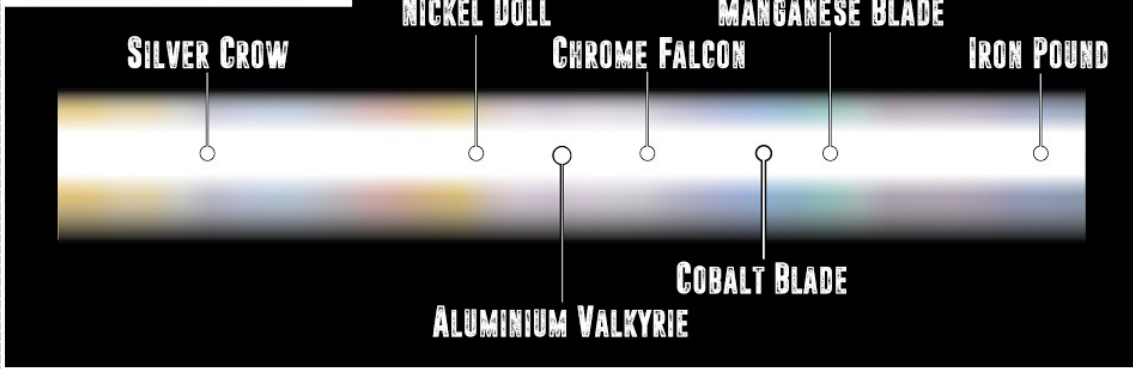
"Who're you...?! How did you get into Umesato Middle School's Local Net?!"

*The Definitive Guide to Duel Avatar Affinities in «Brain Burst»*

**Colour Circle**



**Metal Colour Chart**



Burst Linkers are automatically given a name in English, and it always contains a colour word. From the colour, an avatar's characteristics can be roughly understood. «Blue Types» attack directly at close range, «Red Types» have direct, long-ranged attacks, and «Yellow Types» attack indirectly.

Intermediate colours like Purple and Green have overlapping characteristics from two Types. Avatars which belong in the «Metal Colour Chart» are more specialised in defense instead of attack.

# ACCEL WORLD <sup>10</sup>

-Elements-

**Reki Kawahara**  
**Illustrator / HIMA**  
**Design / beep**



■ **Kuroyukihime** = The Vice President of the Umesato Middle School Student Council. A tidy, intelligent, proper young lady whose true identity is unknown. Her in-school avatar is a self-programmed “Black Swallowtail Butterfly”, and her duel avatar is the «Black King» “Black Lotus” (Level 9).

■ **Haruyuki** = Arita Haruyuki. A first year at Umesato Middle School. Slightly overweight, and a target of bullying. Highly skilled at video games, but an introvert. His in-school avatar is a “Pink Pig”, and his duel avatar is “Silver Crow” (Level 5).

■ **Chiyuri** = Kurashima Chiyuri. An energetic, “nosy parker” girl who has known Haruyuki since they were children. Her in-school avatar is the “Silver Cat”, and her duel avatar is “Lime Bell” (Level 4).

■ **Takumu** = Mayuzumi Takumu. Has known Haruyuki and Chiyuri since they were children. Skilled at kendo. His duel avatar is “Cyan Pile” (Level 5).

■ **Fuuko** = Kurasaki Fuuko, a highly experienced Burst Linker who was once part of the first generation of «Nega Nebulus». One of the four «Elements». For some reason, she had been living as a recluse, but under persuasion by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki, she has returned to the fight. Once taught «Incarnation» to Haruyuki. Her duel avatar is “Sky Raker” (Level 8).

■ **Uiui** = Shinomiya Utai. Part of the first generation of «Nega Nebulus». One of the four «Elements», and a fourth grade student of Matsunogi Elementary School. Can not only «Purify» with high-level curse release commands, but is also skilled at long range attacks. Her duel avatar is “Ardor Maiden” (Level 7).

■ **Neuro Linker** = A portable device that connects to the brain through a wireless quantum method and provides information for all bodily senses by way of video, audio, and so on.

■ **Brain Burst** = A Neuro Linker program transferred to Haruyuki from Kuroyukihime.

■ **Duel Avatar** = Avatars controlled by players when duelling in Brain Burst.

■ **Legion** = A group comprised of many duel avatars, with the goal of expanding territory and securing interest. Each legion is headed by the «Seven Kings of Pure Color» as legion masters.

■ **Normal Dueling Field** = A field for normal one-on-one battles in Brain Burst. Although they possess specifications close to reality, the system itself is still at the level of fighting games of the past.

■ **Unlimited Neutral Field** = A field restricted to duel avatars of Level 4 and above, targeted towards heavy players. Designed with a game system different from the Normal Dueling Field, with a degree of freedom easily comparable even to that of the VRMMOs of the future.

■ **Movement Command System** = A system that controls the avatar. The avatar is usually manipulated entirely through this system.

■ **Image Control System** = A system that controls the avatar by way of strongly imagining (Imaging) it. It possesses a mechanism that operates significantly different from the typical Movement Command System, and there are very few people who can use it. The integral part of the Incarnate System.

■ **Incarnate System** = An Image Control System that interferes with Brain Burst, a technology that induces phenomena transcending game boundaries. Also known as «Overwrite».

■ **Acceleration Research Society** = A mysterious group of Burst Linkers. They do not see «Brain Burst» as a mere game and have other plans. Members include «Black Vise» and «Rust Jigsaw».

■ **Disaster Armor** = An Enhanced Armament known as Chrome Disaster. As soon as one equips it, they will be able to use powerful skills such as «Drain» to absorb their target’s HP, and «Future Prediction» to prematurely calculate ways to evade enemy attacks. But Chrome Disaster will begin to corrode the wearer’s sanity, and dominate it completely.

■ **Star Caster** = A great, viciously-designed sword wielded by Chrome Disaster. However, its original appearance could be described as befitting of its name; it was once a dignified, gleaming sword that shined like a star.

■ **ISS Kit** = Abbreviation for Incarnate System Study. With this Kit, any Burst Linker can use the «Incarnate System». It presents itself in a set location on the avatar’s body with a red «eye», emanating a black aura — representing the «Over-Ray» of «Incarnation».

■ **Seven Arcs** = The seven most powerful Enhanced Armaments in the «Accelerated World». These include the great sword «The Impulse», the khakkhara «The Tempest», the great shield «The Strife», the amorphous «The Luminary», the straight sword «The Infinity», the full-body armor «The Destiny», and the amorphous «The Fluctuating Light».

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## Sound of Water from a Distant Day

1

YOU WIN!

Arita Haruyuki held his breath as the blazing words came floating up in the center of his vision, followed by an increase in his Burst Points.

Ten points were awarded in a two-versus-two tag-team duel with parties whose total level values were equivalent. It was soothing regardless of how many times the metallic sound echoed as the points increased. From 298—they increased to 308.

After a while, a system message that was not seen before popped up. [YOU CAN UP TO LEVEL 2] It said, «You can raise your level to 2».

"Ye.....Yeah.....!"

Haruyuki suddenly raised the solid arm of his silver avatar, «Silver Crow», and pumped his fist. Celebratory words from the Level 2 and 3 opponent team combination caught his attention.

"'Grats, man!"

"Make sure you think it through before you choose your level-up bonus."

Haruyuki hurried to bow as the two Burst Out. Applause and blessings from the Gallery slowly faded as they disappeared from the surrounding rooftops one after another.

Finally, the only one left was his Level 4 tag partner with heavy blue armor and a piercing-type Enhanced Armament, «Cyan Pile». He nodded and gave praise as well..

"Congratulations Haru. You did well holding out for two weeks."

".....Thanks, Taku."

Haruyuki wanted to properly convey the overflowing gratitude in his heart, but he did not know what words to use. Repeating the same phrase he said with a greater voice was the best he could do.

"Thanks, really."

In fact, he had received an immeasurable amount of help on almost everything from Cyan Pile, also known as Mayuzumi Takumu, during these past two weeks.

Everything from corresponding strategies on battle field attributes, armor structures, and colors of duel avatars to local rules, manners, and duels' active times and locations in each specific area were given. He didn't even stop at sharing information related to «Brain Burst», he even helped out on homework and reports in the real world.

Without asking for Takumu's kind help, Haruyuki— Silver Crow, would not be able to save 300 points in such a short period of time despite being Accel World's first «Full Flight Duel Avatar» in its seven year history. No, on the contrary, it was even possible to have lost all his points quickly.

Let alone dueling, Haruyuki's «Burst Linker Parent», the one who should be giving him guidance, could barely even connect to the Net due to being hospitalized. Haruyuki insisted she not FullDive and prioritize rest despite no longer needing 24-hour observation by the **Health Care Unit (HCU)**, but there was not a day where she did not complain about it whenever he called.

Anyway, being in that kind of situation, it was impossible to seek guidance from and meet his «Parent» Kuroyukihime— «Black King» Black Lotus in Accel World. Until she was moved to the general ward next week she would not be able to duel. As a result, Takumu retired from being a member of the blue Legion «Leonids» and transferred to the black Legion «Nega Nebulus», in order to become his temporary instructor, an act for which he could not really thank him enough for.....

Hearing Haruyuki's feelings in his small words, Takumu answered with a smile and a quiet voice from behind his face mask.

"—Still, it isn't enough to wash away all the guilt I have."

".....Taku....."

Haruyuki faltered and averted his eyes as Takumu looked up at the moon above the «Old Castle» stage.

"Moreover Haru, in the first place, Master..... if the Black King was not attacked by unacceptable means this would not have happened. Therefore, it is my obligation and responsibility to help you in place of the King."

—Indeed, back in autumn, Takumu's means of challenging Kuroyukihime over the Umesato Middle School Network was definitely unacceptable. Using a «Backdoor Program» in the Neuro Linker, he had used Kurashima Chiyuri as a stepladder to continually «Challenge» the Black King.

Using the hospital she had been transported in as a stage, Haruyuki, who noticed the deception, fought Takumu to protect Kuroyukihime, who was in a coma because of a serious injury. The potential of Haruyuki's Aviation model avatar was unlocked as Takumu fought him in a fierce battle that stretched both to their limits, where they threw their feelings at each other with all their might and, in the end, stopped and Takumu was forgiven for deceiving them.

In the long run, Kuroyukihime was finally freed from Takumu, who was not even able to take away one point. Although Takumu's direct attack was indirectly related to the reason why Kuroyukihime was hospitalized—

".....I-It's nothing, Taku!"

Haruyuki shouted while shaking both of his hands desperately.

"Kuroyukihime-senpai was badly injured because I'm a fool from head to toe! A-and if you weren't constantly challenging senpai, she would've closed

herself off in the Local Network and wouldn't have thought of making her «Child»... which means I wouldn't have become a Burst Linker, right? So it's all thanks to you that I'm fighting in the Accelerated World in the first place..."

Though such an argument was too forced to be logical, Takumu shrugged his shoulders while looking up at the pale moon.

".....Ha-Haha. You haven't changed, Haru. Not one bit since elementary school....."

*Hmm?* He tilted his head as the quiet whispers reached his ears.

"Then, I'll take that as a compliment.....is that okay?"

"Haha, of course."

Takumu's shoulders shook as he gave a short laugh, turning his back completely at that point. Haruyuki murmured 'Thanks' as he saw the same broad back that he had in the real world, then confirmed the time count in the upper part of the center of his vision.

*The tag duel ended unexpectedly fast, it began with 1800 seconds and still had around 200 seconds of time remaining. Operating the Brain Burst menu once the battle had ended would even save one point from the earned Burst Points. Three minutes of time was enough.*

With this decision, Haruyuki reached his hand to his health gauge, opening the main menu commonly known as «Install». Its strange name came from large-scale game storage, old fashioned amusement shops (what they called game centers at the time). It originated from paper manuals that were simply inserted at the upper part of the control panel, called «Instruction Cards».

The well-developed holographic window design that appeared in the center of his vision, accompanied by light sound effects, was widely used in VRMMORPGs.

A simplified silhouette of his duel avatar was shown on the initial screen. Silver Crow ignored the silhouette exhibiting common techniques and currently learned special moves while touching some buttons on the same screen, as it made him feel down.

The point management screen and storage screen tabs appeared on the top part. Ignoring the fact that there was no item in his possession, he continued to move to the point management screen.

The number [308] was evidently displayed in the upper center of the window. Naturally, it was all the points currently in his possession. A relaxed expression could be seen on the lips under his helmet, even if you looked at them a number of times. In the real world, it was like the pleasure of having more than 10,000 yen in one's bank account for the first time. These points were earned by having his hands and feet (and wings at times) literally put to work.

*—Would senpai be happy if she knew about this? No, with a calm face she would surely say 'You're still a young chick'.*

Haruyuki, while thinking this in his mind, pressed the [POINTS] button and a shining [LEVEL UP] button popped up, overlapping the screen.

A confirmation dialog in English appeared, confirming that 300 points would be consumed to raise his level to 2. Haruyuki, seeing the [YES] button, felt an unusual cold feeling on the base of his fingers, coming from the **User Interface (UI)** he was touching—

A moment. Cyan Pile, who was looking up at the sky, turned around to look at the place where he felt something strange. He took a full step and shouted after he recognized Haruyuki's fidgeting gestures.

"D-Don't do it, Haru! Stop!"

However, by the time he heard that scream, his fingers had already pressed the three character [YES] button.

A sensational and exciting level-up fanfare tune echoed in his hearing. A Level 2 message confirmation appeared in the center of his vision.

And finally.

The remaining Burst Points in his possession had dropped, from 308 points down to 8 points.

## 2

30 minutes after the battle ended, Haruyuki, realizing the mess he put himself into, woke up in the library reading booth in Shinjuku Ward he had used to Dive.

The door immediately opened from outside and a hand quickly reached for the dumbfounded Haruyuki, who was leaning on the reclining chair, and forcefully removed the aluminum-silver Neuro Linker from his neck. The virtual desktop displayed in his vision completely vanished.

Pulling off a stranger's Neuro Linker was a crime, and, similarly, doing such a thing to a close friend was the highest form of disrespect. But now, Mayuzumi Takumu— Takumu couldn't help but to barge into Haruyuki's booth by any means necessary, for a good reason. And Haruyuki painfully discovered that reason.

It was because Haruyuki now had only 8 Burst Points left in his possession. If he lost a duel, he would lose 10 points and Brain Burst would be uninstalled due to his point balance reaching zero.

Haruyuki, finally realizing this, opened both of his eyes in astonishment while looking at Takumu, in his blue-gray, collared school uniform. His best friend's lips trembled, letting out a hoarse voice.

“...For such a thing to happen....I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, Haru. I forgot to tell you the most important thing.... «Even if you have enough points to level up, you shouldn't do it right away»... As your instructor, it is important that I teach you this matter even if I forget something else.....”

—*Indeed.*

*Level Up in Brain Burst, unlike other games where it is automatic when experience reaches a fixed value, consumes the number of points in your possession that is required for it.*

*300 points are needed to raise your level to 2. That is to say, if the total points in your possession before leveling up are 308 then, obviously, even if it's not explained your remaining points will number 8. That's why «you shouldn't level up immediately». You should continue to earn points until you're above the safety margin. It is an absolute requirement for leveling up*

---

Haruyuki murmured in a similarly hoarse voice as he looked at Takumu, who was biting his lips.

“...Taku...I... was stupid. I should have given it a little thought...I was thrilled ...having 300 points saved up... I was....stupid...”

He was strongly aware that his «life as a Burst Linker» was now in an unstable state. Since the time Kuroyukihime gave him the program half a month ago, Haruyuki's points had been sharply reduced to 70. Now, it was

merely 8 points. Had Takumu not forcibly removed his Neuro Linker, if Haruyuki then lost a fight to a «Challenger», Haruyuki might have lost Brain Burst as well.

He slowly quivered while holding the armrest of the mesh chair. *What do I do? What's the best thing to do?* These thoughts ran around his mind. *The world changed, I thought that person had changed my world. But since then, I believe I've changed it myself little by little.*

“Haru.”

Unexpectedly, his right hand was gripped firmly. Takumu, whose cool, passionate eyes were filled with light, moved his body from the sliding door's side of the small reading booth and strongly whispered.

“Everything's alright, Haru. It hasn't ended yet. There's a way to recover from this. In the meantime, let's go to your place.”

“.....Taku.....”

Takumu, who left the Blue Legion to become Haruyuki's instructor after the «hospital Duel» two weeks ago, used to visit Haruyuki's home occasionally. Now, no matter how many times he was invited, he would only shake his head with a smile. It were as if he was saying that he didn't deserve the right to do so.

But due to the emergency situation, Takumu's restraint from before suddenly vanished.

“A-Ah, let's go. We can talk more about this there.”

He nodded a bit, stood up, and removed his bag from the provided wall hook.

Their «Duel» took place in a huge library facility that provided more than 200 seats of FullDive-capable e-book reading booths that they used after school.



Although it was convenient to see the duel field in reality, as it reduced the chances of getting split up, «Brain Burst» couldn't be discussed recklessly with the use of one's normal voice because it was after school hours, thus the place was crowded with students from neighbouring schools. Takumu had some hesitation about Direct Linking since a great number of students were there.

*—No, I don't care if anybody judges me, but Taku is, that is to say, he stands out, and if he's seen by a friend from school, a strange, shameful rumor might spread.....*

Increasing his pace to run after his best friend, who was ahead of him, the cold sweat spread over his back had dried while he was thinking. *Even with 8 points remaining, Takumu said it was somehow all right.* Haruyuki persuaded himself while deeply inhaling the slightly cold November air, and passed through the door.

The sky was fairly dark when they got off the bus at North Koenji, near Suginami Ward's Oume Highway after coming from the Tokyo Metropolitan Government building to their home apartment complex. The apartment complex had a resident-use elevator that needed authentication every time it was used.

Haruyuki didn't know exactly what time it was, since his Neuro Linker was still off, and Takumu paid his bus fare. Of course, there would be no risk of other Burst Linkers challenging him if the global connection was disabled after putting it back on, but after thinking of the «worst case scenario» he lost the courage to put the device back on his neck.

Takumu lived at the opposite A-building, so he couldn't remember how many years it had been since they got on the same elevator. They exited at the 23rd floor of the B-building and continued to the unattended apartment's door

lock, with built-in emergency intercom that used fingerprint and retina authentication to unlock.

“Sorry to intrude.”

Haruyuki continued into the entrance hallway, followed by Takumu, whose lips gave a faint smile upon realizing that this was the first time he had visited the Arita household in a long time.

“...How nostalgic. It's been a year and a half, hasn't it?”

“Eh.....It's already been that long?”

Haruyuki's hands stopped as he was about to take out some slippers, and he tried to recall the memories inside his head. Takumu last came to this apartment— to be accurate «stopped coming» after he and Chiyuri started dating each other in the spring of 6th grade in elementary school. It was currently the autumn of 1st grade in middle school; it had certainly been a year and a half since then.

“Here, I still have these slippers even.”

As he jokingly said those words, Haruyuki was at Takumu's feet lining up small, faded-yellow slippers. The ones used by Takumu had a green threaded embroidery of a cute elephant face on the cover parts. Haruyuki still even had the ones he used, which were embroidered with blue bears. Chiyuri used the ones embroidered with pink rabbits. The full sets of slippers had not been thrown out, despite rarely being used. They were left alone on the rack for a year and a half.

The three of them bought the same sets of slippers as presents to each other for Christmas, when they were in 4th grade in elementary school. In short, they should not only be in Haruyuki's home. The green elephant/blue bear/pink rabbit slippers mini-sets should also be in Chiyuri's and Takumu's homes.

Even the Kurashima household still had that mini-set, his having confirmed it when the two of them went to apologize for the «back door program» issue two weeks ago. Trying on the tight slippers, Takumu knew what Haruyuki was trying to say with his smile.

“...My mother threw these out of our home when I left sixth grade. I cried in front of my parents, but that was the end of it...”

“I see. Then, let's buy another set of slippers this Christmas.”

Haruyuki spoke with a straight face, and Takumu gave out a short laugh.

“Haha..... they will already be too small. How about a set of mug-cups instead?”

“Ooh, as expected of the stylish Mayuzumi-sensei.”

\*Don\* He exaggeratedly pretended to tumble as he opened the room's door since his back is tired.

Haruyuki's room was 6 tatami mats wide and had a south-facing veranda. In the past, before moving out due to divorce, his father used it as a study room. The east-facing wall's built-in bookshelves were a rare find nowadays. His father's hard-bound book collection from the last generation was still unchanged. Of course, not a single book in there belonged to him.

Instead of books, the things on the shelf were his alternative luxuries: old FullDive technologies that used game pads, and game pack-specific optical disks and memory cards. Some of them were given the age designation of Z at the time— meaning they contained excessive amounts of gore and violence— *Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime must never be allowed to enter this room. Of course, besides Chiyuri, I can't think of any situation where Kuroyukihime would ever have to visit the Arita household.*

Takumu wore a nostalgic look as he touched the backs of the packages near the shelf one by one with his fingertips.

“—On the day we couldn't play outside because of rain, this was the strange game the 3 of us were immersed with. That racing game.....ah! That fighting game. Haru, you're the most knowledgeable on most of the titles, but on this one game Chi-chan was so strong, like a demon, even if it was 2-1 we couldn't beat her.....”

“Ah- that's right..... Maybe, she can be a powerful Burst Linker.....”

Having the same thought of 'that isn't possible!', the two looked at each other and grinned.

Obviously, the three who used to play «games» every day 3-4 years ago were not using the vision-projected Neuro Linker models, FullDive models were used at that time.

However, games that contained anime- and comic-like components were rated with very strict standards. Elementary students could only play newly produced intellectual training group, puzzle group, or idyllic graphic adventure group games. Even if one asked an adult to buy a game, it wouldn't load on a child's Neuro Linker.

As the situation developed to this stage, Haruyuki simply used, as he had before, the undeleted account left on the Arita household server by his father --- of course, with the leftover lunch money given by his mother --- to purchase games from the last generation through mail orders from all over the place. The contents of these works were quite exciting: racing games filled with car crashes and explosions, as they should be; fighting games with everything from fists, to kicks, and even beams of light; RPGs where you could fiercely, sadistically kill adorable little animals and strip them of all their money and treasure. Even if it were only a 2D image, even if the fingers gripping the controller would cramp while playing, if he were really asked

about whether these works or those games designed to deceive children were more fun, of course he wouldn't even need to think about the answer.

Now that he was a middle school student, shooting and slashing Neuro Linker games rated 12+ could now be played. To relieve stress from school, Haruyuki played those bloodthirsty FPS and thrilling race games everyday until about half a month ago. But those startup icons didn't exist on his virtual desktop anymore. It was because he understood now. The ultimate duel fighter game takes place in another reality. That world's overwhelming information, exchanging pain on skirmishes was a one-time experience that could not be lost. He absolutely wouldn't want it to....

His reminiscing had caught up with the current critical situation. Haruyuki sat down on the edge of the bed with a thud and gave a long sigh.

Takumu noticed the situation and stepped closer after turning from the shelf. He put his bag on the ground and sat down nearby.

Haruyuki asked timidly while looking at the neat face of his best friend.

“...Taku, you said before that 'there is still a way to recover'. Besides a sink-or-swim duel, is there really another way...? I only have 8 points left...”

“Ah...don't worry. It won't be something that will lead you to a total loss.”

With a low nod Takumu said some unexpected words.

“Haru, you have an XSB cable for direct connection, right?”

“Eh..... A-Ah”

He pulled out the left-side drawer while nodding and took out a bundled silver cord. Takumu took the 2 meter long cable and inserted it into a port on his blue Neuro Linker. Haruyuki was then surprised by the words that came out of Takumu's mouth.

“Now, let's direct duel, and you take half of my remaining points. That way we can avoid the danger of total loss in the meantime. Then we'll choose a time and place where we can tag-team slowly, and then earn points until we return to the safety zone.”

“.....!”

He suddenly gulped. Certainly, in a direct link duel there was no limit on «challenging the same person in one day». The idea of taking a desired number of points by repeating the duel for any number of times was possible. It was a very simple and efficient crisis prevention plan.

Haruyuki was still stunned while Takumu held out the other end of the cable.

“Then, Haru.”

Insisting on putting the direct link plug into his Neuro Linker— Haruyuki stopped his hands. Merely 10 cm away from it, Takumu's face distorted slightly. He then let a smile show on his lips, as to endure whatever Haruyuki's reason may have been.

“Ah...of course, you think that you can't trust me. I'll deceive you, attack, and defeat you, then your Brain Burst at that instant...”

“N-No. That's not, that's not it Taku.”

Haruyuki suddenly grabbed Takumu's left shoulder with his right hand. Under the school uniform were strong muscles, as stiff as his feelings. Haruyuki earnestly argued.

“I wasn't thinking that you would betray me. That's not it, also I..... don't have the right to do such things to you.....”

“W-What are you saying Haru!”

Takumu turned his body while Haruyuki's right hand was still strongly grasping his left shoulder. Takumu's intellectual-looking face showed a wholehearted expression while he shouted.

“I don't care about those circumstances right now! If you are defeated by an enemy, it will lead to a 10 point loss. Your Brain Burst will forcibly uninstall! And to forget something important like that is my fault! So it's natural that we have to split my points...”

“But, I don't want your points to be bargained!”

Haruyuki didn't know that there would be a vigorous fight from the beginning and refused.

In the first place, Takumu depended on a «Backdoor Program» cheat tool because of the pressure of overusing his remaining Burst Points. For the past two weeks, Haruyuki's tag battles with him had helped to increase his points, but at the last moment they needed to recover to a safety zone. If Haruyuki transferred half now, it would without a doubt decrease to a dangerous level once again.

However, Takumu's tone indicated a refusal.

“You don't have to worry about such things. We can have another direct link duel and exchange again someday. This is an emergency escape. And if you totally lose here... the hospitalized Master will receive a huge shock. Didn't you think about that?”

“.....That's.....”

In fact— that's right. Even now, the HCU micromachines<sup>[1]</sup> were helping to cure «Master», Kuroyukihime's serious injuries from two weeks ago. To see her «Child»'s, Haruyuki's everyday growth was something to look forward to. Knowing about the increase of his level to 2 followed by a loss would

leave her in shock and make her condition worse. Takumu continued with an intense tone.

“I'm telling you, Haru! When you're Level 2, we can continue our «Nega Nebulus» territory takeover of the vacant area of Suginami! It will be after Master gets out of the hospital and we wouldn't worry about connecting to the Global Net. Didn't you say so yourself?”

“Uh.....”

Haruyuki was strongly grinding his teeth while thinking sincerely. *What should I do now?*

Eventually, his shivering lips let out a stuttering voice.

“.....Taku. But.....But, you know. Brain Burst has a «Draw» command, while not having a «Give Up» command. That's why, if you think about it, in a duel where you let me win I will have to attack for 30 minutes until..... your HP gauge lowers, and then continue a one-sided attack..... moreover, I can't land a fatal attack. That.....I don't want that.....”

As Takumu heard those words, the right hand on his shoulder lessened its grip. He then smiled a little.

“It's fine, I don't mind at all. For the sake of helping a comrade..... a friend, I wouldn't mind any hit I take on the general Duel field. Well then, hurry and insert the plug, Haru.”

Takumu's voice and facial expression were filled with his true feelings. After a while, he extended the XSB cable over Haruyuki's lap.

Two weeks had passed since he became a Legion companion, but even now all of Takumu's words and deeds appeared to be self-punishment. There was no assurance that there was something hidden in the things he did. The damage done in the hospital duel, when Haruyuki exchanged fists with him



with all of his power, was expressed without leaving anything behind as he continued to force out the feelings contained deep down within his heart for numerous years. After the battle, he apologized to Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime, and left the Blue Legion. Haruyuki believed that Takumu's sins were washed away.

That's why he couldn't rely on Takumu now. He and Takumu were permanent equals, as friends and comrades. Haruyuki himself had declared this at the end of their battle. Takumu relied on feelings to comply with the critical part he was involved in, that was why his words became lies.

And, more than anything else—. No matter what the situation was, to attack an unresisting friend one-sidedly to take points would be equivalent to stealing. Haruyuki's «Gamer Soul» wouldn't permit it.

“.....Even senpai.....Even the Black King, Black Lotus.”

Haruyuki moved his mouth while staring at Takumu's small, pale eyes.

“That person, to protect me from the rampant car, used the «Physical Full Burst» command. Her remaining Points became dangerously close to zero. But that person didn't say 'Let's split your points' even once to me. Even if I say it, she would surely get unreasonably angry. That person, I can't compare to her level, strength, or experience, but..... I want to be the type of Burst Linker senpai is.”

For a few seconds, Takumu didn't say anything.

“.....As expected, you really are one pleasant and stubborn guy, Haru.”

The hand that was gripping his shoulder was loosened, patting him as it moved away. Takumu removed the Neuro Linker cable and tied it in a bundle like before. Takumu changed his expression.

“—Indeed, my points, even if I transfer only a small amount, it will not be a basic solution. The problem is, with the points you have left you’re in danger, and that pressure will unconsciously call out impatience. Being impatient, your perspective in battle becomes narrow. The ability to react to situations is lowered. Before, I said 'win and survive battles', but to do that is really... extremely hard. «I want to win» is the feeling that is important and «I don't want to lose points» is a feeling that is somewhat similar. To be honest, in early autumn, when my remaining points dropped below 100, my average winning percentage in duels was at 30 percent.”

“.....Ah, but somehow, I understand. Me too, if I gamble in a duel, I will not be able to move because I'll lose confidence.....”

Haruyuki murmured. Takumu's bitter 'I wish it was just unusual confidence' smile changed to a serious look once again.

“Your way to escape the current situation—. There is something, there is one way left.”

“Eh..... there's still something, another way?”

He widened his eyes. Takumu hesitated to say it instantly, and replied in a low voice.

“Yes. It's quite risky.....I don't think the possibility is zero.....but maybe, the points that you could gain here might be stolen away from you if you're not cautious.”

Haruyuki held his breath, waiting for him to continue. Takumu then said more unexpected words.

“Hire a «Bouncer». Your points will recover to the safe zone once again.”

### 3

The following Saturday, 12:50 in the afternoon.

Haruyuki and Takumu were together on a train on the Chuo line.

Compared to the road traffic situation with cars and bikes, which greatly changed in the early 21st century, trains have still kept their basic structure for nearly 100 years. While the actual train operation was now left to an AI capable of automatically controlling everything, greatly reducing shakes and noises, however, it was an unchanging fact that the passengers were cramped in a single place on the cube-like rail vehicle.

—*Ah, this feeling, how nostalgic.*

Haruyuki murmured in his mind as he stood near Takumu.

Even if viewed from Haruyuki's eyes, the plain-clothed Takumu looked stylish and not stingy. The 175cm tall first year middle schooler looked refined in his faded black jeans with a knitted rough woolen bundle and an indigo blue mod coat on top, making a lot of women in the same car glance at him multiple times a while ago.

But those glances were suddenly filled with an abysmal doubt the moment they saw the mobile poyon-like creature, cozily standing at Takumu's side. Haruyuki couldn't think of anything about that kind of combination even if their positions were reversed. When he was still in elementary school, there was a time when he couldn't stand it anymore and wanted to dig a hole to be buried in, but fortunately, about a year ago, he gained the strength to resist that nostalgic, grim situation. And so, Haruyuki's composure didn't falter with strangers' downsizing gazes.

The risky situation where his life as a Burst Linker would be determined depended on the intention of the person they were about to contact.

The announcement of the train's arrival at the Ochanomizu station appeared in their vision. Takumu regretfully pulled the sleeve of Haruyuki's stadium jumper and murmured.

“We're getting off.”

“Ah.....yeah.”

He nodded as he rubbed his sweaty hands on the side of his baggy pants. *The meeting place designated for meeting the other party is at the terrace of a cafe in a large scale bookshop on Jinbouchou. It's a short walk from Ochanomizu station, but it will still take about 30 minutes.*

*Of course, meeting face-to-face wasn't necessary since the other person is also a Burst Linker. Then why would an appointment in the real world be necessary? That's because, the only «Bouncer» in the Accelerated World demands it as compensation.*

«Exposing one's reality»— the biggest taboo of a Burst Linker.

“B-Bouncer!?”

Haruyuki shouted after recovering from his speechlessness, repeating the words from Takumu in his room the day before.

Takumu nodded and began to explain it calmly.

“Even I, having only observed with the Gallery a couple of times, haven't had a direct conversation with this person. The avatar's name is «Aqua Current». Their armor color is unknown.”

“Aqua.....Current.”

He murmured the unfamiliar name. It wouldn't be surprising since there were about 1,000 Burst Linkers in central Tokyo, the problem was what followed.

“Armor color.....unknown? What do you mean by unknown?”

“You'll understand when you see it.....is what I want to say, but it would be better if you have a lot of background information. That's right.....what would be the best way to explain it.....”

The always-logical Takumu groaned unusually for several seconds, then uttered somewhat unexpected words.

“Haru. «Water» is «water-colored» right?”

“Uhe.....?”

A dumb voice leaked out and he began to think it over. *Speaking of water's color, typically it should be light blue.*

*But obviously, water is colorless and transparent. It would only look bluish depending on the situation.*

“In short, Aqua Current's armor is not water-colored but it is.....the color of water?”

“That's right. I don't think you can understand any more of this without actually seeing it. Also, rather than outward appearance, their play style is more important.”

Takumu cut his words there, and after Haruyuki brought grapefruit juice from the kitchen, which he moistened his throat with, then continued.

“—They are, Accel World's only «bouncer».....maybe that person makes it a business.....maybe role-playing as one.....but anyway, they are that kind of person. In addition, it's only limited to newbies. To be more specific, only for Burst Linkers who have yet to pass level 2 and have their remaining points in danger, will they wake as a client to partner in tag-matches until they are able to return to the safe zone. Rumors say that even up to now, there hasn't been a client that received a total loss during the mission.”

“.....S-Seriously.....”

Dumbfounded as he opened his eyes, Haruyuki earnestly tried to retain and understand Takumu's story.

“Uhm.....in other words, that Aqua-san tag-teams with a level 1 or 2 newbie whose points are on the verge of exhaustion, and that person is completely protected in duels until he wins?”

“That’s right.”

“A-Amazing, to do that kind of thing..... I'm sure he's a high-ranked, tremendous veteran.....around level 7 or 8, with a position near a king.....”

Takumu heard Haruyuki's admiration, smiled a little, shook his head, and uttered the most shocking words of the day.

“No. Aqua Current is commonly known as «The One». They are called that because their current level is.....1.”

He recalled yesterday's conversation as they headed south of Meidai Street and, after 15 minutes, a large intersection appeared ahead of them. Yasukuni Street is included in the so-called Kanda-Jinbouchou area—the world's largest «Book Town», which has existed since the last generation.

Needless to say, in the current year of 2046, «book» is a term used to refer to Neuro Linker-used electronic books. The sale of books now took place completely online, readers would purchase the books and use a dedicated viewer, for reading of course, in their virtual desktop; those who prefer them in their «book form» appearances could enjoy doing so in FullDive.

However, there are still many people who say that such e-books are just digital data, not like real books which are printed and carefully bound in the real world'. Even Haruyuki felt attracted to Kuroyukihime, who was reading

a beautifully bound hardcover book in the school lounge, and similarly felt nostalgic about a large encyclopedia in the collection owned by his father, whose face he couldn't remember.

The rise of the electronic book era wasn't really considered as a cause of extinction of real world bookstores, they have customer-specialized needs that ensure their survival. Rather than selling books, they switched to making books—the electronic books brought in by customers were printed on paper and then bound. In other words, the «bookstore» business that had never before had a print shop-like function, one of the few published-on-paper book marketers, and the former secondhand book sellers still crowded the Kanda-Jinbouchou area.

Haruyuki and Takumu were headed to a building with a big bookshop that faced Surugadai-Shita intersection. On the building's rooftop was a bearer of paper culture's pride; rather than using AR, a genuine large-panel advertisement with a picture of a character from a book intended for young readers was proudly displayed. This was the only business advertisement they had seen, as the two of them had disconnected their Neuro Linkers from the global net until now.

The mysterious bouncer «Aqua Current» had designated the building's top floor bookshop cafeteria establishment as the meeting place, after Haruyuki sent a job request to his only contact email the night before. Intuitively, before crossing the intersection in front of the bookshop, Haruyuki gently pulled Takumu's sleeve.

“It's fine here, Taku.”

“Eh.....but.”

His childhood friend shook his head and with a hushed voice strongly spoke.

“«Reality Break is the greatest taboo».....if real information spreads, there’s a chance of getting PKed. Me paying the price for being on the verge of total loss is unavoidable. But you shouldn’t put yourself in danger. This is not meaningless obstinacy.”

“.....I understand.”

Fortunately, Takumu, whose face was not fully convinced, nodded and pointed at a hamburger shop in the vicinity.

“Well then, I’ll be waiting over there. I expect a good report from you.”

Taking a step, this time Takumu grabbed Haruyuki's left arm.

“—Good luck, Haru. Whatever happens, it's still the beginning.”

*Supposedly, a tag duel with the contacted bouncer for the sake of restoring points can immediately take place, or possibly an initial duel where I am unluckily defeated and Brain Burst will probably be lost.*

With a slight shiver, Haruyuki nodded deeply.

“Ah, I understand. I don't have the intention of going down here. Don't worry! I'll come back with something.”

“.....Somehow, that feels like what a protagonist off to do something dangerous would say..”

His tense expression changed and a smile appeared on Takumu’s face after saying those words, Haruyuki was sure that it was to alleviate his feelings. *Certainly, movies make the protagonist's plan a success in a smooth way without even trying.* Haruyuki grinned and laughed, but he was truly grateful for his best friend's innermost concern and responded with bright voice.



“In a sense, you don't have to worry. Besides, those movies definitely settle with happy endings. Well then...I'm going now.”

With a step Haruyuki turned around, clenched his fist slightly, and ran into the pedestrian crossing right as the signal turned blue.

Inside the large bookshop, a nostalgic smell of paper drifted faintly.

Newly published books were sold on the first and second floors. Secondhand books were on the third and fourth floors. Electronic books were printed and bound on the fifth and sixth floors, while the seventh floor was a cafeteria where you could enjoy the newly purchased books.

Haruyuki used the elevator to immediately go up to the seventh floor, and first had an extensive look at the store's expansive interior while he was at the entrance. Approximately 2/3 of the 30 desk tables were occupied with customers, most of whom were flipping pages with one hand while drinking. Surprisingly, there were only a few middle and high school students as well as youngsters. Within the three four-person groups of intellectuals gathered to read small booklets and a person reading a small book collection, it would be impossible to know who «Aqua Current» was. —*No, it is also possible that he was inside the store earlier.*

*However, I prepared for the worst before coming into this store.*

Haruyuki stepped into the store exactly at 1:30 p.m., the appointment time, which was indicated in his lower right vision, and went to the front of the counter with the elderly waiter as was indicated in the mailed instructions.

“Um.....I have an appointment at table number 17.”

‘Right away sir!’ He was guided to the table, which seemed to be unattended. A faint steam rising from a coffee cup and a small shopping bag were on the natural-wood table. He sat opposite the two seats and took a glance at the

paper-made menu that the waiter handed him, ordering an orange juice in the meantime.

\*Fuu.\* He exhaled and glanced at his surroundings again to confirm. The table had its right side near the window, allowing a panoramic view of Jinbouchou to be seen through the organic light-control glass. At the front and on the left were tables with adult customers. There was no feeling as though anyone was looking, but Aqua Current was without a doubt watching Haruyuki from somewhere—

His thinking was interrupted by a faint \*chichichi\* electronic sound, which repeated after a few seconds. And then he noticed; the sound was coming from inside the white shopping bag on the table.

Hearing the sound for the third time, he timidly inserted his hand into the bag. Feeling a plank-like object on his fingertips, he gently pulled out a tablet-like device. It was a multi-purpose portable device that was released to the mass-market and became the next big thing before the Neuro Linker. The soft keyboard window was the only thing displayed on the 7-inch EL<sup>[2]</sup> panel. An [Input Name] command floated onto the window.

He reflexively entered his surname, Arita... then hurriedly pressed the backspace key and typed once again. The character string that was entered was, of course, [Silver Crow].

The screen completely changed as soon as he pressed the enter key.

“.....!”

A collection of a young man's poor hair, eyebrows in a timid angle, round eyes, and surprised cheeks— it was the face of none other than Haruyuki. A picture was taken by a small camera provided in the top part of the device. The photo vanished as soon as the next window floated into view.

[Your payment has been received. At 13:40, the mission request will commence. Be prepared and standby.] The new sentence appeared for merely 10 seconds. The device's power cut out on its own and the monitor blacked out.

While unconsciously putting the tablet back in its original place inside the shopping bag, Haruyuki couldn't help but think.

—*Why? Why would the mysterious bouncer Burst Linker «Aqua Current» do such things?*

He continuously chugged the orange juice that had just arrived for half a minute to fuel his brain for a full revolution. *For sure, a Burst Linker's full name and portrait is information that possesses unbelievable value in Accel World, which once leaked could not be retracted. At any time, one might be attacked by an outlawed PK - [Physical Knocker] - group, resulting in the loss of all one's points. As long as there was a way, good money could be had for such information.*

*However, as Aqua Current's client, one have to be on the verge of losing all your points and be a newbie with a level not exceeding 2. Such Burst Linkers wouldn't be prey to a real attack. Otherwise it would seem to be nothing other than «harvesting a raised crop», right? Will the portrait be sold to PKers when one's points increased enough to be restored to the safety zone?*

Though last night Haruyuki's words weren't like what Takumu said. *Aqua Current guards the Burst Linker, after that, there wasn't a single person who suffered a real attack. Conversely, Aqua Current's popularity as a bouncer would fall to the ground if there was such a case and there wouldn't be a request from anybody after that.*

*All in all, the reason he adheres to a bouncer play style and demands real information as compensation is, as usual, still a great mystery.....*

Thinking that far, the clock hit the 35th minute. His stomach was once again filled with an air of tension and, at the same time, another signal was transmitted.

“Not good.....”

Haruyuki hurriedly looked around the store and stood up when he found the toilet sign. To go through with things that have to be done is a Burst Linker's common practice, since during a duel the real body's physiological desires are fundamentally cut off.

He took off his stadium jumper, hung it on the back of the chair, and quickly headed to the toilet. *Good grief, in this technologically advanced society, leaking unnecessary moisture should also be done online soon, right.....?*

Perhaps because he was thinking something trivial, or because he habitually curved timidly to look down, or because of the Neuro Linker being globally disconnected, or possibly because all these were the original problems.

Haruyuki tried to enter the passageway with the toilet sign, but was a little too late to notice someone coming out from just around the corner. The other person stopped one meter away; the collision could've been avoided if Haruyuki had been looking properly. However, Haruyuki, who was lost in thought while looking down, only had the brown colored short boots' tips enter his vision. Barely sensing the situation at that time, a small voice was raised.

“Ah.....!”

He tried to stop abruptly. But, his real body was too sluggish and couldn't control the inertial mass. Haruyuki, who looked like he was stepping on a tatara, quickly moved a step to the left of the other person. Haruyuki advancing forward and lightly stumbling on his own— was supposed to happen. Unfortunately.

The other person moved at the same time, causing Haruyuki to foolishly try changing direction again. He tried to go back again to his original course while panicking slightly. Nevertheless, those actions caused a calamity, as he tripped over his left foot, which was about to step towards the left, with his right foot. The only thing he could do next was watch as the blue-lineage duel avatar's body was hit with an attack that couldn't be matched without rushing off—.

If a text was written, ‘donponyuwanzudenn’ or something like that, together with its consecutive sensation, would be there as Haruyuki fell down in the passage with all his might, dragging along the person in front of him.

—*At least. I hope at least, the other person isn't among the following: Among middle-aged-people. Among women. Among scary people.*

“U.....uuh.....”

A voice immediately passed the vicinity; it clearly didn't carry a ②, which was Haruyuki's body-and-soul prayer. His only wish now was that what was left was not ③. His body being in contact with the other person, he rolled to the left and raised his body as though rubbing his back on a wall. Most of the sound he made couldn't become a voice for apologizing.

“So.....Sorr.....Sor, Sorry.....!”

Sweat and tears blurred the center of Haruyuki's vision, his offset collision partner finally raised his upper body. Because the other person stopped, the careless/excessively-speeding/not-looking-on person in front was obviously to be blamed with a rate of 10:0. However, the other person, no matter how you looked at it, was a female around Haruyuki's age - the kind of person that he had much difficulty communicating with.

This person had quite a petite body. She was wearing a grey pea coat and slim jeans. Short haired, with its tips curling in. And a small face with a red

plastic-framed glasses, which looked like it matched a book - especially a hardcover book

Relieved that she was not the ③rd kind of person, Haruyuki once again bowed deeply.

“Um.....I'm really sorry, I didn't see you earlier.”

“.....It's nothing.”

The glasses girl stood up after saying those short words. Looking around, she soon tried to extend her hand near the floor where Haruyuki was. Before that, Haruyuki had already noticed a small shoulder bag that fell, and his hands reflexively extended to pick it up.

At that instant, the girl spoke with a small voice.

“Ah, you can't.....”

“Eh?”

Surprising Haruyuki, another mistake was made. The bag was raised from the bottom, the flap opened, and something small and plate-like slid out from inside.

“Sor, Sorry.....!”

A third apology hanging in his throat like a hiccup, Haruyuki extended his left hand again to pick up the thing that had fallen onto the floor.

“.....!”

At the same time, the girl took a short breath and quickly leaned over. However, Haruyuki, who was sitting on the floor, was slightly faster, picking up a portable net terminal that was rare nowadays. He tried to return the small machine that could be wrapped within a palm into its bag— but before

that could happen. The upside down terminal's monitor was caught in a passing glimpse.

“.....e.”

A small voice leaked from his mouth.

The motion sensor recorded the shock when it fell, cancelling its sleep and causing the monitor to light up. *That's great. The problem now is the photo in the window on the display screen.* He stared intently at the familiar face.

“Please give it back.”

The girl tried to take back the terminal after saying those small words. Yet Haruyuki, drawing back his hand unconsciously, prevented it. It was because the thing projected in the monitor, loose hair, rounded eyes, pure face, was really an unclear picture of a young man's face. That person, however you looked at it, was without a doubt Arita Haruyuki.

“What.....This.....How.....”

Holding the terminal devotedly, the dumbfounded Haruyuki looked up at the glasses girl. The girl's small face stiffened, her eyes twitched, and she snatched the pag away from Haruyuki's hands - but yet she did not leave.

It is possible that this girl fell at first sight and took Haruyuki's photo secretly — *it is not impossible. With that, the possibility that it is the truth and the possibility of a large meteorite dropping tomorrow and causing Earth's ruin is pretty much the same.* In other words, that is probably no doubt, a mistake —.

She, a book-loving glasses girl, fit the category of «②Women» from a while ago, and at the same time the category of «④Burst Linker».

Earlier, the tablet terminal was placed before Haruyuki sat at the table and this woman operated a portable terminal while on the toilet. The photo taken

by the portable tablet's camera was transmitted, and she left the bathroom and collided with Haruyuki, that's what happened. Then, in that case. She was, the «bouncer» that would help Haruyuki, the legendary Burst Linker nicknamed «The One»——

“.....«Aqua Current»-san.....?”

Haruyuki murmured, causing the glasses girl to pretend to look up at the ceiling and lean her back against the wall with a thud.

#### 4

For now, Haruyuki came out from the men's room, having finished things that needed to be finished, and unwillingly followed the glasses girl back to table 17.

They silently glanced at each other after sitting on opposite sides of the table. Haruyuki shrank his neck and shoulders to the limit when their eyes met, and peeked at the situation with flickering, upturned eyes.

Looking at the woman sitting there from a well-lighted area, she was wearing a pair of glasses with a conservative outfit and hairdo, and it was unknown whether the aura her eyes gave off was one of warmth or not, but it was somewhat difficult to see through. Furthermore, the pressure this person gave off reminded him of a certain someone...

Then, suddenly, the girl put her hands in the bag and pulled out a disk-shaped object. There were two silver plugs protruding from its sides. It was an XSB cable with a cord reel.

There was a soft sound as she pulled one side of the plug, lifted the inward curl of her short hair, and inserted it into a Neuro Linker, dark red like her glasses. After that, the other side of the plug was extended and held right in front of Haruyuki.



“.....Err.....umm.....”

Unable to move his hands, Haruyuki looked back and forth between the plug and the girl.

In this situation, there wouldn't be any other purpose aside from inserting it into his Neuro Linker. But if a «Direct Communication Cable» was used for direct connection in a public space, it would be like a declaration of an unusual relationship between two people. That's something that he had been unable to forget since the lunch break of his fifth grade in elementary school. A classmate, intending to play a prank on them, abruptly made a direct connection between a beautiful girl in class and Haruyuki, who was sitting at the back. The girl cried hysterically until the end. In other words, acts such as making direct connections in public places with Haruyuki was the kind of thing the Black King, the only person who had the courage to do so, would do—.....

*—I see. This person is like Kuroyukihime-senpai..... I don't mean the appearance, it's something like the presence, something like the strength.....*

With that thought in his mind, Haruyuki extended his hand and picked up the plug.

*Surely, this is the last time I will have a direct connection with a person besides senpai.* Considering this, he inserted the Neuro Linker connector.

A flickering red-lettered Wired Connection notice appeared in his vision, then disappeared. After a second, there was something very delicate and lovely inside his head— despite that, a thought-voice resounded in his mind.

[.....I am now considering two possibilities. You are either an impostor that's very good at acting, and to discover my identity you intentionally bumped into me... or you're an authentic birdbrain.]

[Haa.....]

Giving out a dumb voice first, Haruyuki hurriedly continued his words.

[It's true, the second one that is, but I don't know how I can prove it, I can't think of anything right now.....]

*Come to think of it, these words alone are fit for a birdbrain. Intentional blunder and the like could be said to be impossible, in this situation for example, so intentionally spilling the glass of orange juice won't be some kind of proof; it will only make the other person more suspicious.* He eagerly rubbed his index fingers together as his brain went into overdrive, finally inching out some words,

[.....Um, this may not be much of evidence, but the reason my remaining points are in danger, that is..... having my points go over 300 put a deep impression of power in my mind, and while engrossed in it I pressed the Level Up button.....]

There, he once again took a glimpse at the other person's face. This woman—probably «Aqua Current», wore a different facial expression and nodded lightly after a short while.

[That makes sense to some extent. I've wondered how would «Silver Crow», having maintained a win rate over 70% in the past two weeks, suddenly have ended up in a near-death state.]

[Y-you've heard of me?]

Unintentionally leaning his large body forward, his stomach hit the edge of the table; the shock made the remaining 1/3 of the glass of juice shake violently. The girl, unaffected, reached out her hands to support it and spoke at the same time.

[Right now in Accel World, the only person not hearing or knowing the rumor about you is the person himself.]

[Eh.....T-T-That, to that extent.]

Feeling embarrassed thinking such things, Haruyuki scratched his head as the cute thought-voice continued to stream in his hearing.

[The only person with the full-flight type avatar. While he relies on smarts to win, he gets rash easily. Very afraid of getting into close range duels with female-type avatars. Will not hesitate to use devious methods, but he himself doesn't seem to have much of a brain too.]

[.....]

Haruyuki's loose mouth froze as he glanced at the woman lifting her newly-ordered cup of darjeeling tea.

[Seems like the rumors are true then, so I guess your actions just now was because of the same stupidity.]

[.....]

—*I suppose this is one of the delightful scenes right? Yeah, for sure.*

As he told that to himself, for some reason, Haruyuki's eyes were blurred with sweat.

The glasses girl, noticing Haruyuki having an internal conflict, returned her cup to the table with a clack sound and stretched her back a little, then spoke.

[Well, this was unexpected, but I guess I should introduce myself first. I am «Aqua Current». As agreed, I will guard you until your very low points return to the safety zone with 50 points restored.]

[Ah.....y-yes, pleased to meet you! I'm «Silver Crow».]

He lowered his head politely. It might be a strange scene if viewed from the surroundings — actually, teenaged boys and girls were apparently flickering

their gazes — but he couldn't afford to worry. For Haruyuki, this strange lady was his only lifeline. Accel World's sole bouncer, a bodyguard with zero request failures.....

[Eh, ah, that.]

There, at last, the first thing that came to Haruyuki's mind was a contradiction.

[Um, I too heard rumors, about Aqua Current-san recently and wanted to ask something.....]

[You can call me «Karen».]

[T-Then me too, use «Crow» to cal-..... no I mean, I, believed that Karen-san was a guy..... a friend told me about you, and that's what I thought.....]

Yes, it's no one's fault but Takumu's; when he spoke about Aqua Current the pronoun «he» was used. Since then, Haruyuki thought of the capable bouncer as a macho guy in a flashy suit outfit — though there would be no middle schooler like that but — she pretty much fit the bookstore-dwelling archetype. Just what was going on?

But Aqua Current, Karen for short, just shrugged her shoulders lightly as if it wasn't a big deal.

[My duel avatar's appearance is an indistinguishable male/female type.....Also, me too, I haven't said a word that I am a woman.]

[.....Heh? T-That means.]



Haruyuki opened his eyes and mouth absentmindedly, first looked at Karen's face and then the part of her chest about twenty centimetres below. However, due to the tough cloth of the worn pea coat, it was hard to say with only this visual information.

*—No, several minutes ago, I, my face hit something. If the touch sensation can be played back, then it will be answered. Remember. Revive, my memories.*

Having such strange thoughts, though seemingly not conveyed through the cable, Karen said with a somewhat cold gaze.

[It is 5 minutes past the scheduled time, but the tag duel will start now. If we happen to reach the target point in the Chiyoda Ward, then we'll end there. If not, we'll continue with opponents at the neighboring Akihabara. Are there any questions?]

*To say that the notion of asking 'What is your bust size?' was not in Haruyuki's mind was a lie.* But fortunately, Haruyuki's will power succeeded and he quietly nodded.

[No, i-i-it's okay..... I-I-I'm in your care.]

[Then let's first register each other as tag partners. Once you're globally connected, accelerate immediately.]

[Y-Y-Yes!]

Nodding momentarily, Haruyuki first opened Brain Burst's console screen and registered «Aqua Current» as tag partner. Karen nodded to confirm, and the Neuro Linker's global net connection button was pressed. A connection notice was lit, which quickly changed to an earth icon when the connection was established, and then a voice shouted out.

“«Burst Link»!”

Finally, the time had come, the life or death final battle.

Nevertheless, in the world that went into a blue frozen moment, Haruyuki's thoughts were occupied with *Is this person a man? A woman?* and other abyss-like questions.

There were two ways of starting a «Duel».

The first was that, while connected to the global or local net and «accelerated», the Duel Avatar would be listed on a matching list. It was then possible to send duel requests through said network.

The second way was to monitor the matching list and challenge other Burst Linkers who were waiting for a duel. In simple terms, it was an «intrusion»—something like that.

With the former, choosing a favorable partner for compatibility or personality could lead to an easy-win. However, there would be point consumption at the first moment of acceleration, and if one lost the duel or there was a draw, points were also lost. Like in existing old-fashioned game centers where people met and played fighting games, it was called «paying and losing».

For the latter, you could play without points being consumed, however as the opponent would only select opponents based on how likely he was to win, he had the upper hand. Turning the tables was surely refreshing, but it was very tough in reality. Haruyuki, who went on duels for two weeks, had a winning percentage of nearly 80 when intruding and 60 when on standby. For a newbie like him to have an excellent ratio was due to partnering with the experienced and resourceful «Cyan Pile», but the «Flight Ability» that had appeared for the first time caught a lot of opponents unaware. In fact, Silver Crow's duel opponents had become somewhat accustomed to his wings recently, and as a result his winning percentage was falling.

Haruyuki understood that, for these reasons, the bouncer «Aqua Current » decided to choose their opponents for the first match even if it would consume points. This was because, in this battle, they absolutely could not lose. If an opponent of the same level won, 10 points would be stolen at that moment and Haruyuki would lose his life as a Burst Linker.

Thus Haruyuki examined the matching list carefully, thinking that the small chance of winning could go up if easier opponents were chosen, but—.

In the transparent blue space «Blue World», the otter with hanging glasses that Karen appeared in also had an indistinguishable avatar gender; ignoring Haruyuki's pink pig avatar, it glanced at the list and stretched his hand somewhere in the middle. At this point their avatars were set to common FullDive use, having any other preferences diverted, so the other person's gender and other information were impossible to know.

“Eh, um, h-h-he-w-w-wa-”

Haruyuki swung both of his hand-hooves and eagerly interrupted. Fortunately, the otter's hand stopped just before it touched the window, red framed glasses that looked like the ones from the real world were seen.

“U-Um, the matching list's level rank is ordered right? R-R-Right now, Karen-san, aren't you about to choose an opponent from the middle.....?”

“I was about to, is there any problem?”

“B-B-But, near the middle are strong people around level 3 or 4!”

Haruyuki cried gravely, and Karen shrugged and calmly replied.

“There is no merit in choosing a same-leveled opponent here. Your level is 2, and because my level is 1, we should choose a team that has at least a total level of 6 or above as opponents. That way, just in case you lose, your points won't become zero.”



“T-That, theoretically may be true.....”

Murmuring, a stunned Haruyuki once again remembered Takumu’s words.

*The legendary bouncer named «Aqua Current». With an alias «The One», the reason is that, while being a veteran, he still has a level of 1 —.*

*However, thinking about it, I wonder if such things are even possible. The level is only 1, to what extent will the client be protected with such strength? Why is it roughly 1? As you level, HP increases, special moves, abilities, and armaments can be acquired, and you can freely choose a bonus for strengthening attribute. As long as you are careful to leave enough points, there is no existing demerit to raising your level.....*

Thinking to that point, Haruyuki finally realized and opened both of his eyes in astonishment.

“Um, could it be.....Karen-san, you are level 1, so when you’re on a team the total level is low.....right? Whenever you form a tag team..... the total level is always high, so when you win the number of points acquired is lower, and when you lose the number points lost is higher. In order to prevent this..... In other words, without knowing your face, for the sake of the newbie that is likely to reach total loss, you stay at level 1.....right.....?”

Haruyuki asked with a hoarse voice, the glasses-wearing otter kept its face expressionless and once again moved its shoulder up and down.

“That is only half the reason. The other half... the day may come when it will be time to tell you, or it may not. However, if you lost all your points today, then that day might never come.”

“.....T-That’s how it is.”

The twitching pig’s nose was once again filled with tension, and Karen again stretched her right hand to the list and spoke.

“At this point, both of our names are also registered in the matching list. But talking about split-seconds, there still might be someone who, by chance, accelerates at the same time; there might be still someone to intrude on us. If that happens, your precious 1 point will be wasted.”

“Ah.....y-yes indeed.”

“This team consists of a level 3 and a level 4 player, but I’m familiar with them. They may not be the long-range red types you’re week again, but because there is still a considerable margin of points we should come out head-on in this match. If you show your true ability calmly, we will surely not lose... probably.”

*—This person, really knows about me. On top of that, she’s seriously trying to help me. Why level 1, why demand the compensation of real information, what kind of motives does this contracted «bouncer» have in the first place? I just don’t know..... but still..... I’ll believe. I’ll believe and fight with all my strength.*

*If I lose and Brain Burst is lost, at least there won't be any regrets.*

At this last moment, Haruyuki finally felt a modest but firmly concentrated resolve form inside him.

Taking a deep breath and tightly grasping his pig avatar’s hands together, Haruyuki nodded.

“I will do my best.”

“As always. This is a battle that can’t be lost but, the important thing besides winning.....”

“Have fun.”

Haruyuki interrupted her words, and Karen merely opened her eyes a little behind her glasses. Rubbing the tip of his nose while hiding his embarrassment, Haruyuki added one thing.

“My «Parent» told me. I should enjoy all of my battles.”

“.....Indeed.”

Slowly nodding, Aqua Current became mysterious for an instant— *Was it my imagination?* An expression of reminiscence appeared on her face as she touched the matching list.

“We’re starting.”

With that short phrase, the button to start the duel was pressed.

The frozen blue world and the two animal avatars vanished, dissolving in light as Haruyuki’s consciousness was brought into an unknown duel stage.

## 5

Aqua— «Water».

Current— «Flow».

Haruyuki, in this unusual situation, could not help but think the name was given to the Burst Linker because there were many things that directly represented the avatar’s appearance.

The silver winged avatar, «Silver Crow», glanced to the side as soon as he landed on the stage and glimpsed the thin silhouette of a slender figure.

*Crow was slightly taller. There was no armor equipped on the torso, nor on the slim arms and legs. Or, it could be said that the entire body was given special equipment.*

*This was because Aqua Current was covered from head to toe in a freely-running membrane of water. The avatar, with a thin cable of water beside the tips of its limbs, had the sound of flowing water coming from its shoulders, both hands, both legs, and from the chest to the hips, as well as having a large arc drawn on its back that wrapped around to the nape of the neck. To put it in another way, Karen's armor was in an endless loop of «Water Flow».*

*The water current was probably 2-3 centimeters thick, meaning that no matter how much you strain your eyes you wouldn't be able to see the avatar's interior substance. The radiant green environment of the «Corrosion Forest» stage was caught by the water current, giving it a light-green sparkle certainly explanatory as to what Takumu was talking about, «it's not water-colored but the color of water». Also, it was difficult to decide whether the avatar was M-type or F-type from its figure.*

Haruyuki finished observing after about two seconds, and Karen's low first tone was let out.

“Two minutes until contact. The opposing team will come from Meidai Street, which is south of the Ochanomizu Station area.”

Even with that voice, the gender could not be sensed because of a strong effective filter. In addition, the -nano<sup>[3]</sup> used to end her sentences when she used her real character disappeared. If there were an accidental attack in the real, like colliding in front of the restrooms earlier, there would be no reason to doubt that Karen was a woman.

“Y-Yes.....they'll come directly at us then.”

Haruyuki nodded and shifted his thoughts as a light-blue triangle, known as the «Guide Cursor», glowed in the center of his vision.

The two people were currently on a large bookstore building in the southwest corner of the Surugadai-shita intersection, Jinbouchou— standing atop a large tree.

Even the trees had nothing but excuse due to the deformed silhouette of partly-rotted wood, from the hollow trunk to the stretching leaves and branches that could not be compared to the vigorous hardwood trees of the «Primeval Forest» stage.

Far below was Yasukuni Street, from east to west, and Meidai Street intersecting it from north to south, making it a big intersection, however, 80 percent of the ground area was covered with a poisonous purple mucus. A pot which sometimes raised bubbles, it was literally a «Poison Swamp». This Corrosion Forest stage they stepped into had a poison swampland zone that carried the troublesome attribute of cutting down the health gauge.

The status of the two for the tag match was both indicated by the overlapping, north-facing guide cursors. They went southward from Ochanomizu to Meidai Street in a straight line with a relaxed descent. It appears that there was a grove of sick Baobab-like trees hindering but it seems like one from the tag broadly avoided the poison swamp and apparently dashed without worrying too much. The two lined-up bars, the opponent team's health gauge, on the upper-right side decreased bit by bit.

“.....C-Certainly, I feel the match just right in front.....”

While muttering, the opponent's names were finally confirmed. Level 4 «Nickel Doll» and level 3 «Sand Duct». Both of it were seen for the first time. *First, the high altitude advantage must be used to collect information or possibly, the surprise attack theory can be considered*, but Karen whispered easily betraying such expectations.

“Let's go down.”

“Y-Yes.”

Even if he didn't like what she said, he followed. The building originally had seven floors but from the tree top to the ground, it was probably 20 meters or more which the water-clad avatar advanced casually, tightly close to the vertical trunk like «flowing down». Haruyuki's eyes rounded for a while and hurriedly stepped a foot on the air.

Since the special move gauge is empty flying would be impossible but, gliding is possible with outstretched wings. Drawing a spiral with the fall, Karen arrived approximately at the same time. A place without a poison swamp was chosen to land the foot into.

Turning to face the uphill Meidai street, a heavy footstep arrived within ten seconds. It seems like at least one of them is considerably a heavyweight class. However for some reason, the guide cursor was pointing at the same direction but the second person's footstep cannot be felt.

That reason was soon identified.

The other one, which was an extra-small avatar, was sitting perched in the left shoulder of the large sports supply shop extra-large avatar with the expected height of nearly two meters that jumped out from the rotting Baobab shade.

“Thanks~ for the wait□ !”

The one on the shoulder cried a cute little girly voice. It was around a meter tall. Silver Crow's unfinished reflective armor smoothly reflected the green ambient stage. It was with a long hair part, extended skirt armor equipment and its size appearing evidently like a doll. Without a doubt, she is the level 4 «Nickel Doll».

The silver-colored doll's cheerful first words were continued after a brief pause with a little dissatisfied-like tone.

“.....is what I would like to say~, you «Intruded» us from there yet you just stood here, waiting for us to show up~!, You pointlessly wasted two minutes you know~.”

“S-Sorry.....because this area’s terrain is unfamiliar.....”

Haruyuki unintentionally put his hands on the back of his head and apologized making the giant, whose shoulder the doll was sitting on, gave out a severe laugh.

“fuh, no need to apologize. While you were idly standing there, we’ve been destroying objects to accumulate bonuses.”

“Uh-.”

Looking at the enemy’s gauge again, the blue special move gauge surely charged nearly 30% without being noticed. This is a big advantage.

*The giant would be the level 3 «Sand Duct» which is equipped with a rough sand-colored armor like its name. The most eye-catching was the surface of both wrists that have a large open rectangular hole. If that is the air-duct just as the name suggested, will it blow air? Or possibly, that could have the ability to suck it. In either case, caution must be in essence.*

Bearing it in his mind, Karen was standing behind before I could notice and gave a small whisper.

“I’ll handle Duct. You go with Doll. She can yield electric current from both of her hands. Be careful not to be grabbed.”

“Aa~, ta’ heck you’re spilling it~!”

The enemy shouldn’t have heard that with that volume however, Nickel Doll having a good hearing cried out her resentment. Sand Duct with his foundations gravely lifted his right arm.

“As expected, «Bouncer»-dono’s information skill shouldn’t be taken lightly. Sorry, strategy-time has to end here.

Foooo....., it was a low growl. The blowing flow of air was felt and thinking immediately—.

“«Sand Blast»!!”

Uttering the technique name like roaring, a swirling sand-color gust fired out from the right hand’s air-duct. Instincts went ahead that the poison swamp shouldn’t be stepped on and even though reflex was a bit slow, he jumped greatly to the right at once. The moment he realized it, the sudden gust swallowed him from the elbow to the left arm.

“Wahhhh!”

The attack feeling like being pierced by numerous pins, he couldn’t resist raising his voice. Looking at the left arm that barely escaped the wind, a part of the silver mirror armor glittered cloudy and looked like hanged sandpaper. *That wind probably contains fine sand particles which give damage to the metal armor of those who are metal-colored.* At that moment, the health gauge was shaved off by three percent.

*Did the left behind Aqua Current escaped safely?* Haruyuki thought as he was about to look and was surprised looking for the second time making him raise his voice.

“He-.....”

Karen, crossing both of her arms taking a defensive stance, stood upright in the sandstorm. However, there wasn’t even a slight tremor in her health gauge. Exceedingly straining my eyes, damaging sand particles of Sand Duct’s technique was swallowed by the water current covering Karen’s body making it unable to reach the avatar body and just circulates around.



Not too long, the sand storm stopped as the giant's special move gauge was used up and Karen lowered both of her arms like nothing happened then said.

“I am unaffected by particle-based attacks. —I can return.”

Casually putting up her right hand, the sand mixed with body's water current was gathered. A sand-mixed water formed into a thin spear on the tip of her hands and swung toward Sand Duct's left shoulder— attacking the place where Nickel Doll was sitting on.

“Kya-n!”

Doll jumped down from the shoulder having that cute, or probably unnatural, scream till now. 2-3 sand-flow spears were still aimed at the small avatar. Shouting ‘Ya-n!’ and ‘Kya-n!’, Doll was agilely evading surprisingly and avoided the ground areas dotted with poison swamp while hopping.

Haruyuki, looking at scene dumbfounded, noticed as he was taken aback. Karen was limiting her attacks to such extents intentionally so that the enemy tag will separate. In other words, my role here is to chase Doll.

*—Soon, it would be useless to struggle. I haven't forgotten that I'm only left with seven points so I'll fight with all I can. As per usual, «Duel» with all your heart.*

“WOO-!”

With that short scream, a violent 15 meter dash was aimed to Nickel Doll. The poison swamp was avoided carefully without losing sight of the enemy. And from the left side, Karen closed in with Sand Duct starting their melee combat.

Suddenly, there was countless of cheers coming from the sky one after another.

It's the «Gallery». Before the match typically starts, opposing players' converse with each other, loud voices are prohibited which is a standard manner so duel spectators restrained themselves till now. On those cheers, something like 'Crow-!' or 'Fly-!' were included. Even in Jinbouchou, far away from his Legion's home base, there are people who know about Haruyuki.

Like being boosted by those voices, Haruyuki threw a sharp roundhouse kick to Nickel Doll who was waiting on an acquired island.

“Yan!”

The doll avatar that was around a meter tall bent down to avoid the kick. However Haruyuki expected that behavior and changed the kick's trajectory in mid-air, dropping his heels below. Doll magnificently responded evading it, but the attack hit the stretched armor-skirt's right edge creating a dazzling spark, as they both had the same metal-color characteristic and was then followed by a decrease in the health gauge.

“How cruel~!”

Though her pitiful cry resembled the voice of Haruyuki's favorite old-generation game character, he is not in a position where he can afford to stop and bite his hands. At any rate the opponent is level 4— Just like what the master Kuroyukihime's words, they've firmly exceeded the «Foremost Barrier».

“Sorry!”

Despite apologizing, both hands and feet were uninterruptedly drawn out rushed. There wasn't any special technique besides the wing at the back making Silver Crow learn to use his light-weight speed and hard cover-armor as weapons on the past two weeks.

*That said, small lightweight/metal armored Nickel Doll was completely the same. Occasional shallow attack hits scattered flashy sparks without too much damage. As I have thought, a clean-hit can't be hoped for without doing some kind of drastic action.....*

Thinking at that moment, as if anticipating Haruyuki's impatience, Nickel Doll suddenly jumped at his chest. Haruyuki's left hand was tightly held by a right hand and a delicate left hand with his right hand.

*—Naive, I still have a head butt attack here!*

On the verge of bending the sturdy helmet covering the face with all might, Karen's voice was remembered.

*.....She can produce electric current from both of her hands.....*

“—uh-!!”

Head butt was instantly suspended and Haruyuki greatly leapt back. Almost simultaneously separating both arms, \*Bachii!\* an intense spark surged out from the spherical parts on the center of Doll's palm. Receiving an electric current, a shock instantly ran through the whole body.

The Health gauge's loss this time was suppressed within five percent and landed beside a small island.

“-ngerous.....”

Haruyuki murmured as Doll cutely stepped ranting and shouted.

“Aan~! Escaping unfair~ly! Numbing you at great pain when I only thought of holding you up in my arms~!”

“R-Refrain please”

He bouncily shook his neck and checked both of their health gauges once again. Haruyuki still have 90 percent remaining while Doll's fell below 80

percent. The battle from the place afar have Sand Duct amounting with 80 percent while Karen, somehow was still almost full-tank. *I want to see the legendary bouncer fight!* Thinking deeply, the opponent right before him must be taken seriously.

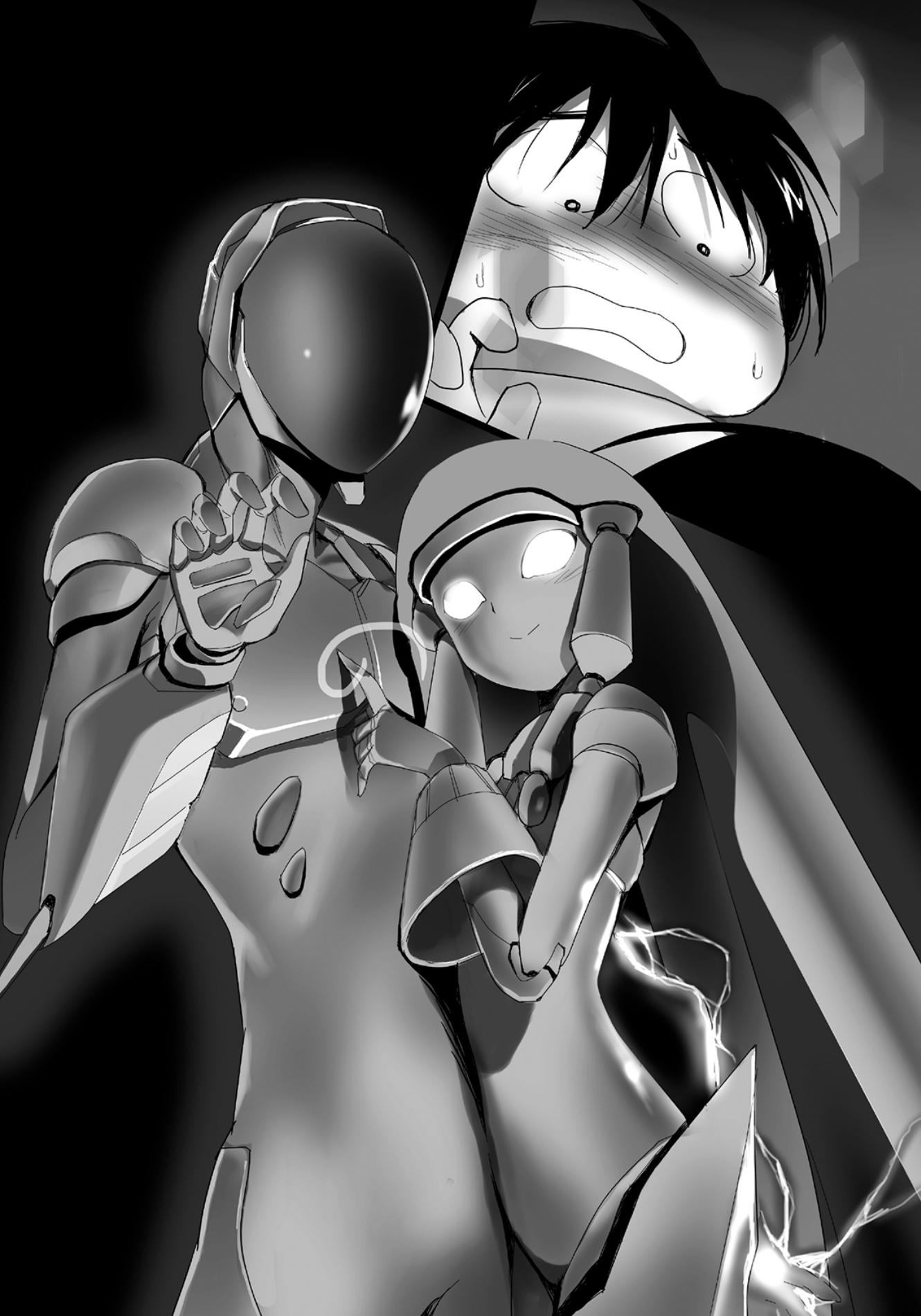
Nickel Doll's silver colored hair that was rolled in ringlets moved and her nose roughly ranged. Immediately after, the small face-mask had a coquettish smile.

“Hey~, Aren't you that~? The one that recently appeared at Shinjuku area, Full-Flight-Type-kun.”

“Y-Yeah, somewhat.....”

Nodding with precaution, the western made doll-like avatar with a more fascinated smile whispered.

“Why did you team up with «Bouncer»? Could it be~, Your points are in danger~? So~, is being a friend a N-O~? Then points will be lent to you as much as you like~.”



“Eh-.....”

Haruyuki stiffened involuntarily as Doll’s skirt gently shook when she jumped and moved on to the same island. From there, though she was unusually walking with a \*tsutsutsu-\* as she approaches, she still raised a sweet voice.

“And hey~, both of us, have matching skin color~. After forming a duo, the both of us will be the rumors’ hot topic won’t I-T~? And me~, the truth is I don’t like that sand-guy~, well he’s very rough ya’ know. But hey~, your skin is so, *SLIP-PE-RY* ♡”

Nickel Doll already approached right in front of his eyes without noticing, poking her left hand’s index finger in Haruyuki’s chest, moving as if writing a character. Feeling embarrassed, his thoughts came to a halt. \*Poya-\* A pale pink color dyed the left side of his vision and soon, something moved. It was Doll’s right hand. The focus of the extending index finger was to gently touch Haruyuki’s left-side waist.

“.....owa!”

Barely turning back as Haruyuki jumped vigorously, the fingertips from the both of Doll’s hand sparked nearly at the same time. Once again, there was a momentary shock attack that took away five percent from the gauge.

Haruyuki, who moved to a further behind island, shout angered for tampering with his man’s pure heart.

“S-Surprise attacks are unfair!”

The silver colored doll then laughed with a high-pitched \*kyahahah\* repeatedly.

“Aan~, is your man’s heart hurt~? Sorry~, but being friends you~, my Legion Master will be offend-ed~!”

That would be true. Haruyuki belongs to «Nega Nebulus», the most wanted Legion in Accel World led by the black king Black Lotus. However that is Haruyuki’s greatest pride. Snappily thrusting his index finger, he shouted.

“Same here, I refuse being friends with you! Also, I’m not hurt at all! I’m absolutely not!”

Thinking of it calmly, it was like the words of a man with hurt feelings, he switched his thoughts from nothing to something and jumped. It seems Nickel Doll’s playful acts stops here and with that change of expression, electricity was produced as both of her hands were brought together.

*Probably those hands, the right hand is the positive pole while the left hand is the negative pole.* Both hands were gripped at the same time, a large damaging electric current passed through the avatar as expected.

At an incomparable speed till now, the flash in Doll’s both hands was able to catch Haruyuki. However Haruyuki pretended to evade to the right, it was something that the opponent hadn't expected— he then jumped inside a poison swamp to the left.

The knee-level purple swamp swallowed both of his legs. Doll had her back completely facing Haruyuki. Haruyuki, submerged in the swamp, extended both of his hand toward the small avatar one meter away and held its thin waist then tossed her with all might at the swamp behind with a German throw.

“Kyaaaaa!”

This time, a real shriek was raised as Doll thrust head-first in the poison swamp with splash. Fumes of unpleasant color were raised and the health gauge started to decrease bit by bit.

Nickel Doll immediately jumped to her feet and confirmed that the only nearby island was behind Haruyuki, she then shouted sharply.

“Wait, wouldn’t it be the same for you? For your information, compared to the total HP amount of a level 2 like you, for a level 4 like me it’s more.....”

Then all of a sudden, it was silent. It seems like she finally noticed. Haruyuki being submerged in the poison swamp till now, his health gauge didn’t even decrease.

Borrowing some of Aqua Current’s words a while ago, Haruyuki thrust his index finger with a snap and shouted.

“A «Silver» like me unaffected by poison-!”

Just now, the Gallery above the Baobab trees from afar stirred up with an \*ohh!\*

Indeed. Even if it’s the same metal color, its characteristics is subtly different depending on what type of metal it is. Generally, precious gold and silver metals have a special attack while base steel and iron metals are strong at physical attacks making Haruyuki, which is among the silver, to have an absolute resistance on poison. Even in the real world, silver ions, that have strong antibacterial effects, are used for sterilizing equipment.

In this short confrontation, Nickel Doll’s health gauge was gradually decreasing. Therefore, although she has the same metal color with poison resistance, her delicate armor isn’t completely coupled with it. Even if Doll can par with having a melee combat inside the swamp, it’s obvious that she’ll run out of strength first.

“.....I see. You’ve been avoiding the swamps for the sake of leading me in to neglect the situation without being suspected.”



Looking down briefly at the purple swamp that swallows up to her waist, Doll whispered.

“As expected of being in the left end side of the «Metal Color Chart». But you know, I’ll be troubled if nickel is treated as fake silver. Isn’t there a variety of uses? Like how hydrogen takes up and generate power, right?”

Hearing those words at that moment, something flashed at Haruyuki’s mind.

In the current year 2046, electric vehicles were ubiquitous on the roads and of course, even almost the whole battery of Neuro Linker’s mobile machinery uses a lightweight/high capacity ailicon nanowire battery. However 20 years in the past, secondary batteries emphasizing safety were taught in science clases. The name certainly is — nickel-hydrogen battery. It was like the backbone of Nickel Doll’s electric attack ability.

The silver colored western doll was not even worried having the HP shaved off gradually by the poison swamp and lightly smiled.

“With that, silver has various special characteristics besides its antibacterial strength. Now, I’ll teach you that.”

As soon as it was said, both of her hands were thrust into the poison swamp with a splash. The decrease in the health gauge accelerated and at the same time, the special move gauge filled up exceeding 70 percent in an instant—.

“«Anode-Cathode»!!”

The technique name echoed as it was called. A radiating light-blue spark ran through the surface of the poison swamp with a part catching up to Haruyuki giving him no time to escape.

\*Pachii!!\* A fierce impact struck him. His vision was nearly whiteout, unable to get his voice out.

“.....uh!!”

There was nothing said about the avatar being stiff, instinctively, he jumped to an island behind. A white heat was in the upper left side of his vision with his health gauge grindingly shaved. Falling trapped in this situation, Haruyuki realized that his own strategy of «having a melee combat in the poison swamp» had hidden a huge risk.

The poison's so-called swamp was basically water. Being water with increasing impurities, its electrical conductivity increases. Diving into the swamp was like intentionally having yourself and the opponent be tied by wires.

However—.

*Nickel Doll who also has her waist submerged wouldn't be able to escape from the electric attack's damage. Brain Burst, a full-dive type fighting game which unusually have a self-attack, in other words, getting caught up and attacking oneself was possible in this ranged attack. Doll might have thought that she will survive the same damage dealt to her HP but, adding up the damage dealt by the poison swamp at the same time will have her gauge reduced empty.*

Concluding at that moment, Haruyuki looked at the opponent's health gauge while enduring the continuous electric shock. Immediately after, there was a further shock.

“Ufufu....., finally noticed?”

Doll's somewhat harsh voice clearly reached his ears.

“Exposed at the same electric current, you thought the damage was going to be bigger. After all, silver's electric resistivity is only a fourth of nickel at room temperature. Silver, **among all metals, is the best electricity conductor!**”

*—geh-, that means I am the most vulnerable to electric attacks among all metal colors!?*

*Such things, haven't been taught on science yet! In other words I'm at fault, no, it's the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's fault! This isn't the time to think about that, something, something, something to do.....*

Without taking out a voice or moving a single finger at that situation, Haruyuki rotated his brain gravely.

*That special attack won't last for an eternity. At this rate, the electric attack will eventually stop and at that time, the health gauge will be almost taken. Prior to that, Doll basking herself with electricity will consume her special move gauge and have to recharge. The moment this technique stops, I'll commence once again leaving her no place to run.....*

Haruyuki's HP just went below 50 percent making the gauge dyed with yellow. Seeing the special move gauge below was almost full-tank at that moment, Haruyuki finally came up with the next move.

Even if his body was paralyzed by the electric shock, Silver Crow still have a body part that only needs willpower to be operated.

“.....F-flyy.....y!”

There was a thin cry from the space between his clenched teeth. \*Jaka\* A promising metallic sound echoed as the fold on his back instantly unfolded ten sheets of metallic fins.

“Aa-.....!”

Nickel Doll's voice was raised at the same time as a strongly vibrating wing spread out from Haruyuki's back making the wind pressure blow the surrounding water surface away. It was immediately followed by Silver

Crow's rocket-like launch with a forceful takeoff. Shaking off the chasing sparks, he soared higher and higher.

AAAAA-.....!

Talks of seeing the «Flight Ability» for the first time began to stir the Gallery. Breaking off the floating green phosphorescent fog of the corrosion forest stage, Haruyuki flew. He passed through the Gallery atop the rotting Baobab and continues to rise. Finally breaking out of the forest miasma, the surroundings completely changed into a blue sky.

Flying up to this altitude, he was completely away from the ground. Receiving pouring sunlight, the silver body shone in a 180 degree turn. He then instantly changed to a nose dive.

Sharply pointing his extended right foot and using gravity as his wing's driving force, Haruyuki rushed like a laser. The compressed air was grinded to pieces as orange particles flew out of his toe. He rushed at the green miasma instantly and passed the Baobab tree top once again with the target at the tip of the guide cursor.

On a small island, Nickel Doll looked up at the sky surprised and tried to avoid by greatly jumping aside. However, Haruyuki used his arms and wings to finely tune his orbit,

“U.....AAAAA-.....!

Together with a loud roar, his toe tips hit the top of the small enemy's shoulder magnificently.

A giant flash of explosion along with its tremor shook the entire stage.

The small island changed into a crater with a diameter of five meters in an instant. Nickel Doll was blown away in one fell swoop as a repeated tail of a

high scream fly around. The health gauge with a nearly 60 percent remaining decreased below the red zone's 20 percent.

Just now, that was Silver Crow's greatest attack named «Dive Attack». In that make or break move, if it was avoided at that time the damage will be inflicted to himself because of being stiff for several seconds, so an attack directly from above out of the line of sight is nearly impossible to avoid. These two weeks, the nearly 70 percent winning percentages was hit solely because of this technique.

In the middle of the crater he made, Haruyuki raised his face while on one knee. If the force from crashing of the blown off Nickel Doll gives damage, the game might be decided here.

—However.

Two giant hands firmly caught the small avatar that was about to thrust around the middle of Surugadai-shita intersection.

It was «Sand Duct». It seems like he abandoned his fight with Aqua Current and came running to hinder Doll's crashing death. The Gallery got excited with the unexpected knight.

Duct's health gauge already fell below 50 percent and turned yellow. Speaking of Karen who was fighting him one on one, she still has not less than 90 percent. The compatibility was one-sidedly large or maybe it was a technique difference.

Aqua Current, bypassed the poison swamp from the south side of the intersection and glidingly approached Haruyuki stopping at his side. She whispered on Haruyuki's stood up ears.

“That was a good blow back there.”

“T-Thanks.”

Unintentionally shrinking his neck, Karen's words continued.

“However, it hasn't ended yet. Those two formed a combination for some kind of reason. I'm sure they'll pull out their trump card so don't lose focus.”

“Y-Yes.”

Haruyuki immediately nodded, Sand Duct was standing ten meters away with Nickel Doll on his shoulder angrily shouting.

“Maa□ □ F-.....From above! «Flight Ability» is unfair, too unfair~!”

“E-Even if you say such things.....”

Unintentionally objecting, Doll merely thrust an index finger on his unnecessary reply.

“Shut it, shu~t-it! At-this rate~, we'll hit the both of you together with our ultra-gorgeous super special attack~!”

“W-Wai.....”

*—I wonder if there's such a thing in the Brain Burst system. I'm sure there's none.*

Bearing it in his thoughts while thinking, Karen said there will be a «Trump Card» no doubt. Haruyuki's health gauge had 40 percent amount remaining, the technique's scope would probably be a one hit kill. The dive attack from before used up and consumed the special move gauge, he is unable to evade by flying. From below the waist, he concentrated on the enemy's behavior.

Nickel Doll had her right foot on Sand Duct's right shoulder and her left foot on the left shoulder then sharply shouted.

“Sandy, Let's do it!”

“Ou-!”

With a serious answer, the sand giant's giant air-ducts on both of his hands were raised and there was a roaring exchange right and left.

“Ouoooo.....Take this, «Turbo Molecular»!!”

They called the technique name in chorus and both of the equipped turbine screws inside Duct rotated in a high speed. However, the directions of left and right are opposite. Apparently, Duct's right hand is an exhaust and is paired with his left hand which has the ability to intake.

“I see, just like what you heard from our private talk before the fight, it seems like that left hand secretly sucks and draws the nearby air.”

Haruyuki nodded agreeing at Karen's murmurs. At that time, the air in the middle of Duct's hands moved with violent force. —However.

“But.....that, blowing from the right hand then sucking it with the left hand, making it to come and go.....what could it mean.....”

He leaned his head as he murmured, at that time.

Duct's hands were spread with a jerk and the gap was seen with a strange haze— thinking at that moment, Haruyuki was seized by a tremendous suction power.

“Uwa-.....I-It's pulling.....”

He hurriedly braced both of his foot, fighting it by all means. The small island was plowed minced, attracted to Sand Duct who was ten meters away. Aqua current was next to him. The whole body covered with water current moves little by little like being peeled off half-way.

“Ufu~n, So~, How's Sandy's «Turbo Molecular Pump»?”

Nickel Doll's triumphant voice reached the direction against the gust. It seems that the wind was intended to capture Haruyuki and Karen.

“I.....get it. The turbine of both arms kicks off gas molecules.....and is making a vacuum space.”

Karen calmly analyzed as she was pulled. Haruyuki suddenly screamed.

“T-T-This is not the time for admiration! A-A-At this rate-, W-W-We’ll be sucked-.....”

*—Speaking of which, when I was a child, I’ve read a scene in a «Saiyuki» full-dive picture book. On that scene, the air was breathed in that I got so scared I cried loudly making Chiyu laugh at me.*

Haruyuki thinking of an escape by going around an agitated Karen, making her say out loud,

“Don’t be scared. The wind power isn’t an attack itself. We’re only being drawn for a close quarter combat.”

“Heh.....”

His sight wandered in the space spontaneously, nodding moment by moment.

Indeed, being exposed in this intense wind, both of their health gauges didn’t even quiver. This technique probably is among the long-range type avatar that pulls in and brings the enemy into a close quarter combat. However, Haruyuki was a complete short-range type which Karen or Duct is overwhelmingly poor of on a one-on-one match. Going close as expected might be better.

*.....Alright, if it comes to this, might as well use the wind for a jump kick.*

Planning his intentions, Haruyuki began measuring the timing with his eyes seizing the unexpected.



Sand Duct continues to bring forth a vacuum with both hands— Nickel Doll standing on above his shoulder, showed a small smile. That is, the exact smile she had on the verge of trapping Haruyuki in a electric current.

Doll suddenly bent her body and touched the vacuum space made by Duct. At the same time, there was a technique name call.

“«Anode-Cathode»!!”

*\*Bachibachi-!\** An intense spark came out from both of her small hands. *Still, that technique is basically a zero range distance, without a conductor, the separated enemy wouldn't take any damage. What exactly is —.*

After that, Haruyuki saw an unbelievable scene.

From Duct's both hands, a violent vortex of spark stretched out through the vacuum space toward Haruyuki and Karen's location!

“Uh.....Ah.....!?”

Haruyuki was only able to raise a scream as he was grazed. The pulling gust as well as the unmoving avatar was wrapped in a dazzling lightning. Again, his sight was in dazzling like shock. His body stiffened, unable to let out a voice.

The storm of electric current mercilessly snatched the remaining 40 percent in the health gauge. In proportion, the special move gauge was re-filled which is not enough to takeoff against the wind.....

“«Glow Discharge»”

Suddenly, Aqua Current murmured.

“Under low pressure close to vacuum, electrode breakdown occurs, making electric current flow throughout the gas body.”

“Ufufun, you know well, Bouncer-san.”

Sparks came out from both of Nickel Doll’s hands as she gracefully smiled.

“This is the first debut of our ultra-gorgeous combined technique in publi~c. So~? Even without the purple hag’s high-pressured arc, we’re already splendidly effective right~?”

*Purple aunt.....Who?*

Thinking at that moment, his thoughts were blown away by angry sparks.

The combined technique in that dreadful place where the gust obstructs movement as the electric current’s damaging power passes was efficient, having an overwhelming low consumption rate on the special move gauge. If this was a single person technique, a full-gauge would only be continuously consumed for five seconds at best. However, with Duct and Doll’s special move gauge, Haruyuki’s few remaining HP would be devoured grilled with a mere change left.

In the end, here— a chill ran down on Haruyuki’s back.

*.....I am, losing? Lost, without any points left?*

However Haruyuki, sitting in despair tempted to give up like from before, gritted his teeth.

*—Even if I lose, I’ll lose thrusting ahead. That is, the only thing I can do now.*

*—Even if I have to fly above, I’ll fly like from before.*

*Pierce through the storm of lightning, there will still be HP left even if I get hit head on. I must fly. That person, I believe I’m sure. Then.....*

*Fly!!*

In response to Haruyuki's will, the wings at his back faintly shook, spreading —.

“It's alright.”

At that time, a calm voice touched Haruyuki's hearing.

A hand was placed at his left shoulder. From its palms, transparent water current flowed into Haruyuki's body as an armor covering. *sara, sarasara*. Calmly, he was wrapped with a nostalgic streaming sound from somewhere in the world—.....

*Fuh, all pain is gone.*

The enemy tag's combined attack is about to end, was what he first thought of. However, it wasn't that so. Sparks of glow discharge angrily filled the vortex of vacuum as usual. Despite that electric current, it will definitely not reach Haruyuki's body. It will just pointlessly crawl, perfectly intercepted by very thin water membrane.

However— such things are,

“Impossible!”

It was a shout coming from Sand Duct who continues to create vacuum flow from both hands.

“Water should have been a conductor! Why.....Why repel electric current?”

In return, Aqua Current quietly responded.

“My water, doesn't contain any impurities, a «Theoretical Pure Water»”

“Eh.....Ah-.....!?”

As if guessing something, Nickel Doll gasped. Karen nodded and continued.

“**Zero impurity water, a perfect insulator.** Shocks don't affect me.”

As Haruyuki repels, he confirmed the Health gauge in the upper left side of his vision. Silver Crow's gauge fell below to the bright red with 20 percent while Karen was still at the green with 90 percent left. Doll and Duct's dreadful combined technique didn't give any damage to the «Bouncer».

—*Strong. She was just Level 1, but was this strong.*

That's impossibly a newbie. Probably, she fought in Accel World for a long period of time, long enough Haruyuki could not imagine. Vast amounts of fighting experience, firm confidence in her «Water» attributes, thus a power that is able to blow away level difference easily.

Eventually, both of Doll and Duct's special move gauge almost ran out at the same time.

The protective water membrane from Haruyuki's body returned to Aqua Current with a \*Pasha\* when it reorganized as she stepped forward then spoke.

“—I was able to see what I wanted to see. It was a good technique, Doll, Duct.”

“Annoy-ingggggg!”

Just now, Nickel Doll shouted with a shrill voice. Sand Duct's feet were raised up and down stomping and thrusts of index fingers were then directed at Haruyuki and Karen.

“At-once~, battle fairly without tricks! Our pure-will from this last stage, you haven't seen it yet~!”

“Ouu-!!”

The two big and small avatars exchanged a serious straight-thrust fist at the same time.

In response, the water-current in the armor at Aqua Current's body circulated more violently as a strong answer.

“I ask you. Let's go, Crow”

“Y-Yes!”

Haruyuki nodded and chased after Karen as he kicked the ground.

This is the final climax to look at, the surrounding people from the Gallery cheered in excitement. Along those cheers, the four persons' avatar clashed as a dazzling light and scattered sound lingered.

Everything, the heat and excitement produced by the «Duel», dissolved into a vortex as it climaxed.

## 6

«Intruding» twice, defending twice.

Haruyuki had gained 70 Burst Points from winning all four of his tag duels. That was enough for him to be restored to a safe level.

[With this, the request is completed.]

Haruyuki's consciousness returning to the real world, there was a thought voice that echoed.

A girl with red glasses sits at the opposite side of the table with a finger extending to a white, half-clear exterior of a Neuro Linker.

Haruyuki also followed by disconnecting the global net at the same time. From the right edge of his virtual desktop, the earth figure icon disappeared. With that, both of their names will now be removed from the Chiyoda area's matching list.

“.....Fuu.....”

Looking from the XSB cable between the both of them that glittered as it swayed, Haruyuki spat strips of his breath. The indicated time didn't pass 30 seconds since the time from the start of the first duel. However those 30 seconds was much of a time for Haruyuki who was fighting many times as a Burst Linker these two weeks. The echoes of shock from harsh hits and beatings still lingered on his whole body.

Being in a daze for about five seconds, Haruyuki raised his face in surprise and looked at his lady savior, the «Bouncer» Aqua Current's real form.

Her pupil beyond the glasses was filled with light as usual and her lips without a noticeable clear expression.

*There was something I wanted to ask her which only increased since the start of the duel. But now, it is likely that I won't be able to do anything like before.*

Staring curiously at the pupil of the other person from the front for more than a second, all of his thought was passed across the direct connection cable.

[.....Thank you, very much. Truly.....Thank you.....very much.]

No matter how many times he blinked to bear it, unconsciously, tears spread.

Karen looking at Haruyuki showed an extremely faint smile and whispered.

[I had fun too. Also, thanks to your hard work, I was able to see a lot of Burst-Linkers' trump cards.]

[Y-Yeah.....]

*Indeed, Aqua Current, in the first match fought with Nickel Doll & Sand Duct, destroyed their so called «Super Special Attack» with a blade of stream from right in front of them when both of them brought in a close quarter combat. The development was the same for the preceding three duels, there was a pinch scene every time. Of course, the Bouncer at important times protects Haruyuki with confidence and strategies.*

Haruyuki, reminiscing about the high thrill fight, suddenly murmured.

[.....I can't think of which is better among the trump cards used.....]

[That's pointless.]

She said, and the slightly older lady had a mysterious smile.

Thinking of those words, *Knowing Silver Crow's ability beforehand, demanding «Real Information» as compensation for the request and above all, this woman evidently has a comprehensive Burst-Linker's complete information gathered. However, the purpose can't be even imagined till now. No, in the first place, she truly being a «She» is still unsettled like before.*

Haruyuki let out his breath once more being relieved for escaping the near death situation with Aqua Current's interesting mysteries mixed in his mind. He tried throwing a bland question since proceeding with a straight to the point question might not be answered.

[Umm, come to think of it, I've heard about this from my friends accelerating from Chiyoda area. That it is very wide and in the middle of it, there's a huge *no entry area*.]

[Basically that's true.]

The inward curls of Karen's short hair swayed as she nodded and once again took a sip from her steaming Darjeeling tea.

[Still, there are a lot of schools in the Ochanomizu to Jinbouchou area, thus making it inevitable for many Burst Linkers to make it their home.

Everyone's feeling in fighting at their home is the same and at Saturday afternoons, gathering to «Duel» in the neighborhood has become a customary.]

[H-Heh.....—That means, it wouldn't be strange that it is also Karen-san's home.....?]

Haruyuki just gave the question however, Karen naturally didn't answer. Instead, a calm thought of explanation continued.

[But I just chose this place today, if by chance you entered the no entry zone side run away from it.]

[Y-Yah—.....I see.....]

Greatly impressed, he let out a long sigh once again. Skillful Burst Linker such as Karen has already looked from the area selection before the fight starts.

*—I couldn't be pleased just because of escaping from a pinch. I have to learn a lot from here. My Burst Linker road has just begun.....first, my partner— I have to follow and reach the level 4 Takumu.....*

Thinking at that time, Haruyuki just remembered that Takumu was waiting a hamburger shop. Since it's just on the other side of the intersection, it wouldn't even take 20 minutes. Haruyuki restoring his points to safety, he wouldn't have to worry about total loss anymore for certain.

*I can't ask anything and really want to know about Karen but, I have to report to Takumu first. I'm sure I'll meet Karen again. Next time, it wouldn't be a client and bouncer but simply as fellow Burst Linkers.*

Thinking of that, Haruyuki took a deep breath and bowed his head once again.

[Umm, I have a friend waiting nearby. I'm sure he's worried, I'll leave soon.....—Karen-san, thank you very much for today.]

[.....You're welcome.]

Saying that, Aqua Current had her greatest smile since their collision in front of the comfort rooms. With that smile, in Haruyuki's ears— a voice continued.



[However, one more thing, there's still something I haven't taken from you.]

[Eh.....Y-Yes, what is it.....?]

Haruyuki put his elevated hips back to his seat and blankly blinked. Beyond Aqua Current's red glasses, her eyes narrowed and then whispered.

**[The deferred payments of the compensation.]**

Then, her lips faintly moved, reciting the accelerate command silently.

\*Bashiiii-!\* An impact sound struck Haruyuki's consciousness.

On his dim sight, a familiar series of font blazed red.

**[HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER!]**

The fifth duel field for today was pouring heavily with a pale light, it was the «Moonlight» stage.

The rooftop of the palace-like building was dyed with bone resembling color with Haruyuki, standing still in shock.

The Gallery didn't appear at the surrounding. It's because in here, there wasn't anything that is permitted to enter except the persons to duel, a closed «Direct Connection Duel Field».

On a bit further place, an incarnation of still standing water was dyed with the moonlight's abundant pale golden color. Scattering from both hands and legs as if arched wings from the limbs back to head, the water current raised a faint streaming sound.

The time count figure starting from 1800 going down to 1770, Haruyuki finally opened his mouth and said his words timidly.

“U-umm?.....What are the deferred payments of the compensation.....? Also, specially dueling for it is for.....?”

With water flowing in its back, a blue light slowly twinkled on its eyes once again.

“The payment, I’ll steal all of your remaining points right now.....didn’t you think about it?”

Her voice without the strong filter she constantly used on the four battles, it resembled Karen’s natural voice in the real world. With such things in his mind, Haruyuki slowly leaned his head.

“My.....points? But didn’t you just recover it.....?”

“Recovering it and at the same time gathering information, I analyzed your battle potential to steal and exhaust every root and branch. That way, I can earn points more efficiently than fighting solo.”

\*Topon\*

A light water sound was raised as the avatar made a step closer.

However Haruyuki who was standing still was able put the following questions out his mouth.

“.....Even if you exhausted roots and branches.....can you steal 70 points in one battle.....?”



“The scary thing about direct connection duels is, being unable to remove the cable immediately. Your consciousness returning to the reality after the battle, before your arm can move to remove the Neuro Linker cable, the opponent would have already accelerated once again.”

\*Topon\* Another step closer.

“B-But.....your failure as a guard, there wasn’t even a Burst Linker that had a total loss till now.....”

“For certain «there wasn’t a person with total loss among the usual duels with the Gallery around». After that, an unseen direct connection duel where the Burst Linker vanishes, why is there no talk of it?”

Trembling words came out of Aqua Current’s mouth as the flow of water returning to the body hastened and she then whispered to Haruyuki.

“Now, prepare. Show me your everything.”

Immediately, a fierce pressure surged from the thin avatar making Haruyuki hold his breath.

Haruyuki had only felt this kind of pressure once. It was when he was looking at the avatar of his master and parent Kuroyukihime, «Black Lotus», at that hospital rooftop.

Still in awe, he raised both of his hands and prepared for the consequences—.

However, Haruyuki immediately lowered it loosely.

“.....Giving up?”

Still pressured, Haruyuki shook his head a little and answered Aqua Current’s question.

“Umm....., a bit, closer”

Even in this situation, for some reason his consciousness was calm. He did not give up, Aqua Current's words were complete lies and cannot be trusted. Nevertheless, Haruyuki lowered his hands because of the important things inside him and whispered.

“You see.....I, from the time the first tag was fought with Karen-san.....No, before that, from the time we bumped in the cafe, to you, what I'm saying is.....I believed in you. This person is a good person, this person will surely save me.”

The water current on the other side had the blue eyes twinkle once again. Staring at the light in front, Haruyuki continued to talk.

“I mean.....even if you betray me, I won't fight you with hatred. —I, a while ago, really fought with a friend who's now waiting below. The feelings we held for each other for long years..... we fought hitting each other with anger and hatred. But, at the end of the battle I believed in him, and he believed in me. At that time.....I chose. Once I believed, I'll always believe. That's because.....I believe those myself.”

Below the silver mask a small smile appeared and he took a deep breath to continue his last words.

“.....Also, me, to you, what I mean is, I.....like, you. Even as a woman, even as a man.”

Aqua Current hearing those, blinked once again— the intense pressure coming out of her body vanished.

She crossed her arms as the water current on her body integrated and murmured.

“.....Sorry. The thing from before, it's a lie.”

The moment Haruyuki heard it, even if he has believed, he still somewhat stumbled.

Somehow gaining a hold of his footing, he stared blankly at Karen for a while and asked.

“Eh.....W-Well.....why, did you?”

“Since you’re left defenseless in a direct connection, I felt like threatening you a bit. But I think it wasn't that effective.”

“.....No, That was really nerve wracking deep inside.....”

Looking at the murmuring Haruyuki, Karen with her water current smiled gently at the other side— it was how it felt.

A sound of water rose as she stepped up, changed her body’s direction beside Haruyuki, and looked up at the large full moon floating at the night sky. Haruyuki looking at same sky, a small voice reached his hearing.

“Important friends, I want them too.”

“.....Eh, that means.”

“.....very long ago.....even I, have companions.....and friends. Also, believing more than anyone else, cherishing the «Master».”

A secretive voice and a calm sound of water streamed and flowed. Haruyuki felt the streaming sound for a very long time.

“But something happened, and everyone became apart. The master disappeared from Accel World, and every single friend, leaving only one alone as they went far away. However, I still believe. Once again, everyone will gather.....again, looking above at the beautiful night sky, the time when everyone walks together will come.....”

Suddenly—.

Haruyuki saw a vision.

Beneath a lovely starry sky, there was a lot of marching avatars. Busily talking, laughing, walking a distance without an aim.

“Ehh.....I’m sure.....that time will come.”

Haruyuki murmured, Karen gently placed her right hand on his shoulder.

She moved to the front from the left side, and also placed her left hand on the shoulder. From a very close distance, Haruyuki’s vision only had the face of the water avatar at that moment.

Aqua Current, firmly looking at Haruyuki’s eyes, had a smile and said.

“What I said earlier are mostly lies but, there’s something that’s true.”

“Eh.....W-What is it?”

“From you, I still haven’t received the deferred payment of the compensation.”

Blankly staring, Haruyuki’s whole face was drawn near as Karen whispered.

“That is, the *me* inside you. The memory of *me*.”

“Eh.....M-Memo.....ry?”

“Yes. For you and I to meet, it’s still a bit early. From here on , you must support your «Master» with your hands and do not walk one step at a time on your very long journey. Still from there, we «Elements» shouldn’t intervene.”

Haruyuki almost could not understand the meaning of Aqua Current’s words. Opening his eyes dumbfounded, the flowing transparent water and the blue eyes were filled with light.

“In the belief that someday she will draw her sword once again, that will be the time when I’ll step in - We will surely meet again. That’s why now, I’ll erase the *me* inside you.”

“.....B-But.....erasing my memories.....how will you do that.....?”

What came out of Aqua Current’s mouth was unbelievable. Trying to understand somewhere inside his head, the shaking light on the rustling stream covered his consciousness, flushing away his thoughts.

“I have.....I can do it. «People are filled with a circuit of water, all knowledge and memory that flows into this water can be passed».....That is my Incarnate skill.”

“Incarnate.....skill.....”

Haruyuki vaguely murmured as Karen pressed her forehead against his forehead.

The whole world was wrapped with a flow of water. Somewhere in the distance, a voice was heard.

“Then.....now, I bid farewell. Let’s meet again, Silver Crow. Your wings will lead you to the end of your journey, again, someday.....”

*sarasara. sarasara.* The water flowed into Haruyuki. His consciousness, thoughts and memories was filled and passed with it.

“—«Memory Leak»”

From a very far distance, the voice can still be heard. A white stream of light washed away everything— everything was drifting away.....

At the end, someone’s voice whispered softly.

*Count to fifty, and open your eyes.□*



.....*forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven.....*

With his eyelids remaining closed, he innocently counted.

.....*forty-eight, forty-nine.....fifty.*

He slowly opened his eyes.

*There is a white round table. Similar to what was in the school lounge. On the table, there was a glass with 1/3 remaining orange juice on it. Opposite of it was an empty chair.*

Haruyuki looked around blankly while twinkling his eyes.

*This is a cafeteria. On the other tables, there were same-aged youngsters and elderly customers enjoying the afternoons with their paper-media books.*

——*I.....*

——*I came here to duel, requesting to be guarded by a «Bouncer»..... to restore my merely remaining Burst Points, a tag was fought..... and won.*

Yes, a victory. The points went back to 70. With this, there wouldn't be any fear of total loss.

*The details of the fight were mysteriously fuzzy. On the contrary, it seems to flow away trying to remember from the start.*

However, Haruyuki clasped his hands and made a small guts-pose despite having mysterious thoughts.

“I will never level-up carelessly again.....”

Murmuring with a small tone, he panickedly lowered his head to avoid the surrounding suspicious gazes. With too much relief, he suddenly became

hungry and drank the remaining juice from the glass in one go but it wasn't enough.

*—I'll report this successful operation to Taku and get a hamburger.*

Thinking of it, Haruyuki stood up vigorously. The management of the bookshop's cafeteria still uses a glass tube where the paper bill was inserted. Picking it up to confirm, the only thing written was one orange juice for 380 yen.

He checked out at the register — only over the Neuro Linker of course — and went down to first floor using the elevator. He came outside through the new publication corner. The cold November breeze made him shrink his neck as he crossed Surugadai-shita intersection's crosswalk when the signal light turned blue.

Takumu was waiting at a fast food shop nearby. He ran like weaving through the crowd and was about to pass through a big automatic door. A female customer went out from inside at the same time, avoiding to the side, they passed each other. The curl of her hair that was about ten centimeters swayed on the sides with a faint drifting fragrance.

*.....sara, sarasara.*

Suddenly, Haruyuki felt like a light streaming sound was close to his ears and stopped, standing in front of the automatic door.

“Eh.....?”

Turning around, there was no flowing water naturally. The was clear and the walkways' tiles are dry.

He thought someone spilled a beverage bottle but that wasn't the case. There was an elderly with a paper bag with the bookshop's logo on it, a group of foreigners sightseeing in Jinbouchou's bookshops and a figure of a girl

walking away in a quick pace which doesn't seem like someone that have the same sound he heard.

*—I guess, it's just my imagination.*

Haruyuki turned and forgot about the sound of water as he quickly entered the hamburger shop through the automatic door.

Looking at the surroundings, his best friend's waving hand, who was sitting near the window at the left side, jumped into his view.

Haruyuki then had a sense of a successful operation from his expression. Also, Haruyuki had his right-hand thumb up—.

Seeing Takumu's ordered face, which had a crumpled smile that looked like he was crying in joy, he ran in a straight line.

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- Elements -

# ▧ The Distant Sound of Waves

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## The Distant Sound of Waves

### The Story So Far

April 2047. Arita Haruyuki, Mayuzumi Takumu, and Kurashima Chiyuri are now second year students at Umesato Middle School, placed in the same class. A few days ago, Chiyuri, after successfully installing Brain Burst, became Takumu's «Child», making them not just childhood friends from here on, but also sworn comrades as members of the Legion «Nega Nebulus».

However, the sudden appearance of the enemy «Noumi Seiji» in Umesato as a new Kendo Club member totally destroyed their bond. Beating up Takumu in a Kendo match, using Haruyuki's weakness to threaten Chiyuri — and taking away a great power, the «Flight Ability», from Haruyuki's avatar «Silver Crow».

Haruyuki fell into the depths of despair. Moreover, the Legion Master Kuroyukihime was far off on a school trip in the land of Okinawa. On a lunch break of a certain day, Haruyuki, clenching his teeth as he faced his perfect adversity, received a long distance call from Kuroyukihime.....

### 1

“.....I have to go now. Well then, I'm hanging up. See you.”

Quickly saying her piece, Kuroyukihime lightly waved her right hand and reached for the “end call” button on her virtual desktop.

The pink pig avatar's round face, visible via a window in the middle of her virtual desktop, vanished. She felt very lonely right after doing so, but had to put up with it.

Walking several steps toward the roasting-hot sandy beach, she entered the shade of the beach parasol, which kept out ultraviolet and infrared rays, and

lifted a small movie camera from above the table mounted on the shaft. Almost all Neuro Linkers now have built-in cameras, but people still used outmoded devices like this because of their remarkably good image quality. Even if it somehow increases the trip luggage, she wanted to send HD images to him who was left at Tokyo's Sugunami district no matter what.

She turned off the camera and kept it in a small pouch. Back at the table, she sat down on the deck chair fixed below the parasol and let out a light sigh.

*—I can't be like this and he also would wish that I don't get dejected on the trip, alright I'll count to three and cheer up, one, two-.....*

However, Kuroyukihime wasn't able to count to three. It's because she was unaware that there were two slender hands that came from behind her and of all things, she was hugged on her chest swimsuit—to be exact, she was rubbed.

“F-Fugyowaaa!?”

Jumping from the deck chair and landing as she turned ta hundred and eighty degrees in the air, she saw a girl wearing a one-piece type swimsuit standing there. Her short hair had a fluffy feel which matches her constant gentle smile and sweet-looking appearance. Her name is Wakamiya Megumi. Like Kuroyukihime, she was a member of Umesato Middle School Student Council, acting as the secretary.

“Me-M-M-Megumi, w-w-what was that all of a sudden!”

“Well, Hime was so distracted that she didn't notice no matter how many times I call. We'll soon be meeting for the sea kayak tour.”

“Y-Yeah.....I see.....”

Sitting on the deck chair once again, she thought for a mere two seconds then shook her head.

“.....Sorry, I’m cancelling the tour. The reason.....would «feeling unwell» be okay?”

From the virtual desktop, she pressed the «School Trip Schedule» shortcut icon, opened today’s schedule and clicked the «Sea Kayak Tour». She pressed the «Cancel Participation» button on the floating dialogue box and filled in her made-up excuse on the input reason form—

“If you put up feeling sick as a reason, following it up would be troublesome, Hime. I recommend something like «Student Council Related Business».”

Megumi grinning after what she said, Kuroyukihime suddenly had a broad smile on her lips.

"I see. I worked so hard to make preparations anyway, so it's not unreasonable to enjoy that bit of benefit."

She entered the words just as Megumi said and closed the window with a swoop of her right hand. Leaning her back on the deck chair, she exhaled a light sigh then turned her face to send her friend off— however.

Megumi, who was supposed to call Kuroyukihime for the tour, slipped under the parasol and laid her body on another deck chair to the right side, unintentionally blinking several times. The student council secretary aware of the gaze threw a wink forward and spoke.

“I’ll skip the sea kayak too. It has been a family rule for generations to never ride a ship without lifeboats.”

“.....Did that ancestor-sama board a luxury passenger ship that got shipwrecked?”

With a wry smile, she reached for the cooler box above the sand, took out two bottles of chilled Shīkuwāsā juice and handed over one to Megumi at the other side.

They put it in their mouth at the same time, had a sour face at the same time, and put the bottle back on the table looking at each other at the same time—they laughed shortly at the same time.

Tuesday, 16th April 2047.

120 third year students of Umesato Middle School, Kuroyukihime included, were on a school trip to Okinawa for seven days and six nights. Today was the third day, which means, tomorrow will be the halfway mark.

Selecting the itinerary from two plans beforehand, Kuroyukihime and Megumi registered for the course Naha → Henoko → Yorontou → Naha. Currently, the endless white sandy beach and emerald green sea right before both of them, they were in Henoko beach that was situated in the south central part of Okinawa. Some 30 years ago, there was a large dispute on whether the Futenma American Military Base was to be moved here, and in the end, an extra-large floating platform was constructed in a nearby bay where they decided to move the airfield facilities.

The blue sky was sometimes crossed by silver jet streams that came from US military aircraft taking off from this base. They were much bigger compared to the newly produced unmanned aircraft of the Air Self Defense Force usually seen in Tokyo's sky, the noise was tolerable since it was on a high enough altitude. Her classmates from Umesato Middle School, who were frolicking on the sandy beach before, went into the sea kayak tour



making the still air pocket, only come along with the returning sound of waves to reach her ears.

Having drunk some of the Shīkuwāsā juice once again, Kuroyukihime's fingertips shooed away the water droplets on the cleavage of her black bikini and lightly sighed.

—*Four days left.*

*Particularly, even if the trip was boring, it doesn't mean I didn't want to go. I understand the objective fact that the middle school's school trip is a once in a lifetime thing, considering the little complication back home, the next real trip for the mean time may be.....or may not be the school trip in senior high school.*

*That's why, to not regret later, I must strive on filling up my Neuro Linker's Photo/Video folder with lively memories—* and yet she understood clearly, no matter what she'll never be in a school trip mode from the bottom of her heart. The reason is obvious. It's because she thought of something for at least twice a day. She wants to go back to Tokyo quickly, coming back to «Him» and chatting like they always do.

Wakamiya Megumi, who was lying on the deck chair to the right with her eyes closed, seemed to have seen through this. Kuroyukihime slowly took a breath of seawater- and floral-laced air, and said,

“Megumi.”

Megumi's eyelids opened with an *N?*, Kuroyukihime leaned her neck toward her friend and lightly lowered her head.

“Sorry to get in your way..... The truth is you wanted to go kayaking right?”

“It's alright, this is work too.”

“W-Work?”

“It was written in the Umesato Middle School Student Council Handbook. The secretary’s jobs are ①Taking minutes of proceedings and ②Help out the mood swinging vice-president.”

“L-Lies, you lie..”

Seeing her pout her lips, Megumi laughed happily, then said while looking at the distant horizon.

“It’s really okay. I like using my luxurious time in a laid back way, you know that right Hime?”

— Indeed, Megumi frequently sat on a sofa in the Student Council Room, gazing at the courtyard but apart from being idle, she was also dealing with the Literature Club’s publications. While Megumi did have other friends besides Kuroyukihime, just to be with her, she had left her other friends alone and remained by the side of the student council vice-president throughout the trip..

“.....Sorry. Thank you, Megumi.”

Once again, she sounded a murmuring voice and continued to her thoughts.

—In a place unrelated to **that world**, to have a friend like you, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Since a long time ago, she had been aware that she was scared of being alone. Once, in the thriving days of the first «Nega Nebulus», both Kurasaki Fuuko — Sky Raker and Shinomiya Utai— Ardor Maiden, along with a lot of other comrades, had been around from the beginning. If she wanted to chat in the middle of the night, she could log on to a Legion private-use closed net made

by one of the Elements «Graphite Edge» and meet other avatars. They could even play normal duels, spectate on the Gallery or doing hunting quests on the Unlimited Neutral Field, all ways to forget her loneliness..

However, on that bloody night two years ago, and the tragedy at the imperial castle, everything was lost in the space of a week.

In order to avoid the six kings' (to be accurate, the red king's position was vacant for a while) assassins, she isolated herself from the global net for two long years, not mainly to gather the willpower to come back someday, but because of the great anxiety that the former bonds were completely severed. However, even in her last defense, the local net of Umesato Middle School, an unidentified hunter «Cyan Pile» appeared last summer, forcing Kuroyukihime to choose.

Should she release the seal on the duel avatar «Black Lotus» and repel it alone? Or use her last remaining option— use «Copy Install Authority» and seek a new friendship?

By choosing the former, Cyan Pile can easily be defeated and turned over with one blow. However, there was the possibility that if Pile gave up on hunting her himself, he could then sell her real information to the kings - a worst case scenario.

Eventually, Kuroyukihime bet on a one in a thousand miracle. In Umesato Middle School, she looked for a freshman student with qualities suitable for installing Brain Burst, and making him her first and only Burst Linker «Child» In order to discover Pile's real identity.

That plan was extremely difficult. With her privilege as the Student Council vice-president, she accessed the records of the whole student body, but just

on subject grades and physical education records, there wasn't anyone suitable to be a Burst Linker.

However one day, casually opening the game corner in the local net and looking at the high scores, Kuroyukihime was amazed at the numbers she discovered. Compared to the other games—the score was literally projected in a different column. Half-convinced, Kuroyukihime challenged the «Virtual Squash» game herself and she wasn't even able to reach half of the 2,630,000 score that had been reached by the handle name «HAL».

*Who on earth is this student?* she wondered, even forgetting her original aim and observed the local net for two days. On one lunch break, a short pink pig like avatar appeared on the deserted squash corner. Kuroyukihime quickly hid behind something, and watched with shock and awe as the pink pig raised the paddle and hit the ball as if he were taking it out.....

A few minutes later, she watched him beat the high score again and whispered without realizing.

*Eureka.*

*I found it.*

The pink pig «HAL», the Arita boy Haruyuki, gave Kuroyukihime the confidence that the suitability check will be cleared, and the Silver colored duel avatar «Silver Crow» was generated from the depths of his heart.

Initially, she only wished for «confirming the guide cursor's direction during Cyan Pile's attacks» however, he exceeded expectations, clearly showing his ability and potential. No, it may rather be inevitable. It's because the Arita boy before becoming a Burst Linker, possessed a huge battle experience that Kuroyukihime left behind in Accel World forever, reaction speed.

Now, he didn't just become Kuroyukihime's only «Child» and first member of the revived Nega Nebulus, there's something that's much more undeniably precious. Compared to always being protected because of extreme vulnerability, he has the ability to raise soothing feelings that someday might pass through, reaching high the waiting far away kings' painfully aching feelings, always packed deep within their chest. It's good if it can be said as dependence. This two years, the cold water surface of «loneliness» that continues to fall in her heart disappeared because he had finally stopped it. However that may be, Kuroyukihime still couldn't enjoy her one-week school trip from the bottom of her heart. Naturally, she saw his face on the video call a while ago and they can even come in contact with their avatars on a dive call. But their physical distance in the real world of about 1600 kilometers can be said disheartening even without thinking about it. Even without him, vulnerable to his obstinacy, she doesn't suffer her worries alone. Thinking in that kind of manner.....

“Hime's face, it's been a long time since I saw that.”

Suddenly, a whisper echoed close to her right ear as a slender finger continues to stroke her forehead, brushing her hair.

She raised her closed eyelids unaware that Megumi left the nearby deck chair and was beside her with a gentle smile.

“.....What kind of face do I have?”

She meekly asked and after a brief moment, an unexpected answer was returned.

“A *want to go back* face. Back to Tōky-, no.....somewhere, to a different world.”

“.....Megumi.”

Kuroyukihime suddenly took a small breath.

*Wakamiya Megumi is not a Burst Linker, I confirmed that two years ago when we met each other and were still freshmen. Rather that, I chose to enter Umesato Middle School because of one big reason, there weren't Burst Linkers among the enrolled students or examinees. If it does so, it cannot serve a role of a «Cocoon» to hide from the six kings' assassins.*

Peering into Kuroyukihime's opened eyes from about 15 centimeters, Megumi told something even more surprising.

“For Hime, I know that there is another invisible world. Probably, the real Hime may be on that «other side».”

“The real.....me.”

“Yup. Well Hime, from the time we first met, you always had a *lost child* face. Then last year's autumn.....meeting that boy”

To that word, her face became fairly hot. Kuroyukihime placed the Shīkuwāsā juice that was still in her left hand to her face while Megumi, resting her chin on her hand right beside Kuroyukihime, had faintly fogged pupils and spoke.

“.....you know, me too..... I understand that kind of feeling, just a bit though.”

“.....Is that so?”

“Yeah. When I was still very small, there was a book I really like. I’ve read it repeatedly day by day and yet, I never grew tired of it.....journeying in that book’s world, I was able to meet new adventures. However.....before I knew it, the book was gone. Even now, I can’t fully remember the title or even the writer of that book.....”

Closing her lips once again, Megumi focused both of her eyes, matching Kuroyukihime’s pupils and smiled a little.

“Maybe, if I join the Literature Club, I might be able to find that book again.”

“Find that book again.....you think so?”

“Well, not at all.”

She shook her head, laughing \*ufufu\* loudly. Kuroyukihime had noticed that Megumi’s usual gentle smile had a touch of loneliness behind it.

“Occasionally.....really just occasionally, I try to write some image fragments that return to me but, writing and reading are different. I only remember well that the first page of that book had a charm written on it, but I’ve continued reading through it..... I’m sure, if I remember that charm, I wouldn’t struggle getting on that book’s world.....”

“Megumi.....”

Not knowing what to say, Kuroyukihime just mumbled. To remember completely was easy. However, she, who knew nothing herself, thought that she wasn’t capable of spitting out cheap words about the whereabouts of that «different world» Megumi was talking about.

There was silence, but it was broken after three seconds. Megumi was smiling, this time she had her usual smile, vigorously raising her upper body and said.

“Oh no, instead of cheering up Hime, the opposite happened. We shouldn’t have this gloomy shade in here.”

She reached her hand for the button provided in the shaft’s parasol and pressed it. The silver screen sheet rotated and coiled.

Immediately, an intense downpour of sunlight made Kuroyukihime close her eyes while Megumi, seizing the opportunity, toppled her over with both of her hands.

“Woah-, W-What are you doing?”

“Hey now, don’t be violent, I’ll just apply some oil on you, Hime.”

“I-I can at least do that myself!”

Violently struggling, Megumi’s fingertips pinned a point on her back making her unable to escape.

“And you know, it may stimulate your growth.”

“Where would that be!?”

“Ufufu, isn’t it obvious?”

At the same time as those words, a dripping viscous fluid splattered on her back while Megumi relentlessly struck her with both hands continuously. Kuroyukihime, who hadn’t experienced someone else applying sun oil on her, felt a different sensation—

“Nyuwaaaaa!”

A shriek that shouldn’t be heard by the Arita boy resounded on Henoko beach.





Three o'clock in the afternoon.

Joining the other students that came back from the sea kayak tour, Kuroyukihime and Megumi went back to the hotel. After using the shower, they changed into plain clothes in their shared twin room. Kuroyukihime wore a black camisole and three-quarter-length leggings while Megumi wore a pale yellow one-piece, and they took a shopping stroll before dinner.

The site of the US army's former Camp Schwab that used to be in Henoko some ten years ago was now being redeveloped into a large-scale marine resort. From the hotel to the beach, multicolored shops lined up from both sides of the road giving it a quaint southern feel. A while ago, middle school students on a school trip wouldn't be allowed to walk around without being accompanied, but with the social camera network, public safety was improved by leaps and bounds..

On this low latitude, the deep sky was blue even at this time and below it, Kuroyukihime slowly walked on the scene of exotic shops.

They occasionally ran into their classmates who were looking for souvenirs. There was a fun racket of balancing the items and budget but, to the independent Kuroyukihime, she didn't have any necessity to buy souvenirs for her family. For now, although it was somehow of her own choice, tagging along with Megumi searching things for the current Student Council's first year officers was only for obligatory souvenirs.

Consequently, she devoted all her energy to searching for a souvenir for that person — Of course, the Arita boy — which wasn't supposed to be obligatory, though it was unclear whether searching for his request of a «sātā-andāgī with a diameter of 30 centimeters» would be easy or difficult to find .

Walking around the shopping district, she would occasionally take a peek on andāgī stands and naturally, such thing isn't sold anywhere.

Even though it wouldn't be so much of «looking for it herself», she thought about looking up at the global net this time, thinking how long does those last in the first place and looking beside her, Megumi, who was cheerfully smiling, met her eyes.

Instinctively embracing her chest on the upper part of her camisole and moving backwards, she lightly cleared her throat and asked.

“..... Megumi, are you fine not looking for souvenirs?”

“Yup. I'll buy my family their souvenirs on the last day at the airport because I, unfortunately, do not have a gentleman waiting for me back in Tokyo.”

“.....O-Okay. Then.....nn..... that's right let's... maybe not. I have an idea. For this trip, let's buy each other a souvenir, and then we'll give it to each other back at school.”

Even though Kuroyukihime had never really thought it through, Megumi was unexpectedly taken aback with a bright look and nodded.

“That is a very splendid idea for Hime.”

“.....for me?”

Kuroyukihime strangely caught on that one part, Megumi added words unworried of the situation.

“But Hime, wouldn't that be a surprise gift? Then, we wouldn't accomplish anything shopping together. Then we'll split up, after 30 minutes..... how about we meet at the hotel entrance later at 4 o'clock?”

“R-Right. Then, let's do that.”

Kuroyukihime nodded while Megumi, after leaving the words ‘I’ll find something that will surprise Hime the most this year’, immediately disappeared into the crowd. Standing somewhat shocked from her friend’s unexpected response, Kuroyukihime resumed walking slowly again.

Excluding the relationship she made with people in Accel World, Wakamiya Megumi was the closest friend she had among the students of Umesato. Two years ago, since the day she entered the school where they talked, there wasn’t a single time that they fought — though she somewhat hates those too intense physical contact from her — and maintained their pleasant relationship.

However, she wouldn’t want to fully step into Megumi, which was what Kuroyukihime was thinking till now. Giving an evening call or occasionally, the two of them playing around on day offs but, they hadn’t visited each others’ home even once. In Kuroyukihime’s case, she lives alone in a residential town house in Asagaya not wanting to touch the reason behind it, considering Megumi this two years, Kuroyukihime has never invited her into her home.....far from it seems, they hardly talk about family or even bring it up. Kuroyukihime knows about Megumi, who lived in Honchou Nakano-ku with her mother, father and elder sister which was somehow similar to her family structure.

At the end of the second semester of her sixth grade in elementary, Kuroyukihime caused an incident in the family far exceeding a «Child’s tantrum, caused her to be banished from their home in Shirokanedai Minato-ku. An attorney was appointed to play the role of her guardian, and Kuroyukihime was almost completely cut off of any contact with her parents.

But having those circumstances to her till now, Kuroyukihime doesn't have any basis of imagining how Megumi lives with her happy, warm and harmonious family. However, thinking about it, there was no real problem existing in her family. The «Child» she had found last autumn, the Arita boy had divorced parents, his mother, who was in custody of him, often worked till late unable to come back home making him wait for the lonely evening to pass.

That is maybe why in Megumi's unfading smile, there may be a certain amount of something continuing to exist beneath it.....

Thinking of those things, she peeked at a shop's small showcase of shell work accessories on the right side of the road—

At that moment.

*\*Bashiiiiii!\** A dry and sharp thunder struck Kuroyukihime's consciousness.

The familiar sound made by the Neuro Linker installed BB program, was the tone marking the automatic acceleration of Kuroyukihime's consciousness by a thousand times compared to reality. In a word, someone did something to Kuroyukihime—the Burst Linker «Black Lotus» was «Intruded».

If this was in Tokyo, Kuroyukihime's consciousness sharpened up by a large combat experience would only need a lag of one second of a comma to completely switch to «Duel» mode but, she merely stiffened, unable to do so now.

After all, this is Okinawa. The limit of the Social Camera Network. This here is literally a border.

At present, 99% of all Burst linkers are concentrated within the 23 Tokyo wards so there shouldn't be any challenger.....unless, it is an unexpected

someone on a trip. However, when they had touched down at Naha airport and when they passed Nagoshi by bus, she accelerated to confirm on the matching list that she was the only one listed within the area. After dealing with the precautions, she left her Neuro Linker connected to the global net but, in this not that big town of Henoko, an intrusion is certainly possible. The veteran Kuroyukihime, struck by surprise saw the [HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER] character string bursting in flames right before her eyes, by the time the appearance of the surrounding scene began to change, her consciousness' mode change completed.

First, the street filled with tourist and shops' clerks suddenly vanished. Then, the stores at both sides transformed into a wall of piled gray rocks. This wall isn't something new, some having a collapsed part, some covered with green moss and creeping plants. At her feet, the ground was thinly covered with white gravel sand.

The creation of the stage ended and at the same time, a large blazing [FIGHT!!] font appeared bursting before her eyes then disappeared. Kuroyukihime, changed into a jet black Duel Avatar, confirmed the level of the opponent indicated in the upper-right of her vision. The figure was— 5. “.....fuuh”

She unintentionally sighed. If somehow the figure 9 was engraved, it will be an all-out-war without minding unfairness just to survive..... and the sealed «Incarnate Skills» would once again be unleashed. Her breathing was shallow as she prepared, her sword-shaped taper-pointed toes felt the white sand piled-up in the ground.

“This is.....is this the «Old Castle» stage? However, it seems the interiors are different. Maybe it was changed to match the Okinawa area’s characteristics.....”

She was lightly muttering, as if someone heard her talking to herself—.

“It’s not «Old Castle» ya’-know! This here is «Gusuku» stage ya’-know!”

And, a powerful speech came from the upper part of the slope on the right side. Raising her face there were two standing figures appearing above the gray castle walls as seen with the evening sky, no, it was avatars’ shadows that she saw.

From the front, reminiscent of the green sea color, a blue colored armor came out. Behind it, a bright coral colored armor was standing. Both of it had the curves and design of female type avatars.

Since the opponent didn’t immediately charge ahead, Kuroyukihime took a glimpse at the upper-right corner of her vision. She once again confirmed the avatar name indicated below the enemy’s health gauge. She read «Lagoon Dolphin LV.5», it was likely the sea colored avatar’s name. Since it’s a one on one duel, the coral colored avatar is supposed to be in the Gallery. At present, there is no information known about her name and level but, there is one little thing that is for sure. The gallery was not allowed within a ten meter radius of normal duels, however, the coral colored and the sea colored are close to each other meaning, those two are either «Parent and Child» or legion members— or even both.

“Hmm.....”

At the time Kuroyukihime let out a small voice, the sea colored Lagoon Dolphin forcefully jumped off from castle to the road. It was a height of five

meters, even with a bad landing, there wouldn't be any falling damage as all of her joints would absorb and minimize the impact to the body.

“Wah- H- Hold it~, Ruka-chan!”

The left behind coral colored avatar on the castle wall raising a somewhat miserable voice, jumped \*Eiya\* from the edge at the last minute after hesitating for many times. Don't come here! It was a grand fall, her health gauge doesn't exist since she was originally a spectator. Looking at the coral colored avatar patting his butt as she stood up, Dolphin shook her head and said.

“Stupid<sup>[4]</sup>. You should have just waited up there.”

“W-Well. Ruka-chan that's too absurd ya' know.....”

“Shut it!<sup>[5]</sup> I'm just trying this of course!”

*The coral colored avatar had a southern accent but she still uses standard Japanese however, Dolphin's words are core Okinawan dialect, it seems suspicious.....*Kuroyukihime thought and at that time. The coral colored avatar put her hands on Dolphin's shoulder and talked in a low volume.

“Well ya' know Ruka-chan, you've been using Okinawan dialect for a while now, that person wouldn't understand anything~. Now, the true purpose.....”

“.....Aa- nah-, enough!”

Shouting a voice, Dolphin took a big step on the white sand road, thrusting her right hand's index finger to Kuroyukihime, finally giving a somehow understandable language.

“Hey ya', you're a student on a trip staying at that hotel!”



Kuroyukihime taking a glance behind her, the resort hotel where the Umesato students stayed had changed into a huge stone pile ruin came to her sight.

Turning back to Dolphin again, she answered the question with a nod.

“.....Come to think of it, you two are not travelers..... aren't you resident Burst Linkers of this land?”

“Ryt-O.....I mean, that's right! My ancestors have been living in Okinawa for generations.”

“Ah, M-Me too ya' know.”

The coral colored avatar behind Dolphin was seen raising her hand, Kuroyukihime pondered.

The required program to be a Burst Linker, «Brain Burst 2039», was distributed to a hundred elementary students living within the Tokyo metropolitan area, eight years ago in the year 2039. With the condition of being directly connected by cable for a copy install, new programs were acquired by the children but, it was inevitable that it was only restricted to those who are living within the 23 wards. Kuroyukihime, who was playing for seven years, never knew any Burst Linker who was living outside the city center.

*However, speaking of possibility, a Burst Linker that once lived in Tokyo..... migrating to Okinawa and Hokkaidō is possible. After all, even if that person is a high level veteran, being an elementary or middle school student in the real world, that person couldn't be self-supporting. A parent's job transfer or divorce may lead to a change of residence situation which cannot be avoided. Also, any Burst Linker in Accel World's remote regions, will meet his «Gradual Downfall» without exception——— and that's what Kuroyukihime*

thought so far. At any rate, the other person cannot duel alone, take for example diving into the Unlimited Neutral Field if you reached level 4, independently hunting enemies wouldn't possibly be stable. The points must be supplied and if the remaining balance held from Tokyo was used up, forced uninstall was the evident result.

However, the sea and coral colored avatars standing before her eyes was born and raised in Okinawa.

There are two theories that may explain their existence. A Burst Linker from Tokyo that changed residence to Okinawa made a «Child» in this area and gave his own points, raising his child to a level where they can hunt enemies..... or, in the year 2039, BB program wasn't just distributed within the Tokyo metropolitan area. She couldn't help but be curious on which it may be.

“.....Interesting.”

The sharp-eared Lagoon Dolphin heard Kuroyukihime's unconsciously spilled murmurs and to top it off, she misunderstood its implications.

“Oh-, That's the spirit! 'Kay~ Ta' match will be decided with my one blow!’

The coral colored avatar behind her shook his hands and stepped back as she spread her foot, lowered his back and put up her hands. The blue lineage avatar surely having a daring hitting form, even the sea breeze around seems to blow some of her fighting spirit while Kuroyukihime, suddenly had a smile below her mirror goggles. Even if they had different meanings aside from before, it's still interesting, it was another long silence as she talked to herself.

Kuroyukihime, having her stance in front her opponent for the start of the duel, suddenly had her left-arm blade and her right-arm blade halfway near her chest. Then something was felt, the coral colored avatar separated for more than ten meters away had both of her hands near her mouth and shouted.

“B-Be careful, Ruka-chan~! Your opponent is level 9 ya’ know!”

“Heh-, it doesn’t matter! It’s only two from master’s are there, and nothing else!”

On the way they talked, \*hmm\* she started thinking once again. *It seems like those two doesn’t know what «Level 9» in Accel World means. It is not merely «two levels above Level 7». It is bounded to a cruel Sudden Death Rule, as those who carries it bear the title of a «King».....*

Her thoughts were led astray so she took a breath to get back. The moment you step on stage, the only thing on your mind should be nothing but «Duel».

“That’s right, levels are just numbers. Come and give it your all.”

It was a sharp question, Lagoon Dolphin’s smooth, streamlined eye-lens strongly shined.

“Ya’ don’t have to tell me!”

She deeply stepped on the ground making the white sand violently soar. Afterwards, she shortened a nearly seven meter distance like instantaneously gliding. This cannot be simply made by specifying on an avatar’s rushing power.

It is a proof of training where a smooth attack can be obviously connected from the dash.

“Haa!”

Along with a yell, she shot a halfway thrust on the right. From her back to her shoulder, the energy of her fist handing down a twisting motion, made an air vortex to be seen. If the speed was to be compared, it was unnecessary like Kuroyukihime's «Child» and her favorite pet Silver Crow's punch, for its weight was slightly heavier.

And so to say—.

Defending against that great fist-thrust, they both took damage, the opponent taking more while Kuroyukihime had less.

However, the punch's trajectory caused her left-arm blade to be raised. An avatar that is an embodiment of an «Absolute Cutting Property», the blade limbs of Black Lotus will cut any armor no matter how tough or thick it may be. Before, There were only three person that was able to repel Lotus' blades that were the only weapon and armor equipped on her body, the «Anomalous» one among the «Elements» Graphite Edge of the former Nega Nebulus, the legendary berserker «Armor of Catastrophe» Chrome Disaster, and the «Invulnerable» Green Grande.

If Lagoon Dolphin's right great fist-thrust somehow collided with Kuroyukihime's blade, her fist would have been split in half and she would lose her right arm up to her shoulder in a swoop.

However, Kuroyukihime didn't go that far, and received the powerful strike with the side of her left-arm blade instead.

The cutting portion of Black Lotus' four blades, while equipped with an absolute cutting power, came with a frail lateral rigid portion as a price.

When her level was still low, the blades' sides always broke after being hit for many times. To cover that weakness, the young Kuroyukihime spent a

long period of time in the unlimited field, training and coming up of a technique where she spins the opponent's attack in a spiral motion, the so-called counter-attack hits by turning the vector power around—it was named «Flexible Way».

By the time Dolphin's great fist-thrust grazed the blade, small sparks were produced and then swallowed by a jet black vortex—.

“Fuu-!”

With Kuroyukihime's momentary force, she repelled with a 180 degree turn. The small lightweight avatar was unable to stay in place, her body flew for more than five meters and her back hit the ground.

“Ouch!”

Letting out a small shriek, she immediately raised both of her leg, kicking to get up and considerably able to keep her cool. Her HP gauge decreasing by more than ten percent, she once again charged without minding the situation.

“—Seyaa-!”

A much furious yell was sent out along with the right fist's great fist-thrust. The technique was once again completely defended and it was repeated by switching right with left, *This shouldn't be underestimated even a little.....*

Kuroyukihime thought to herself as the «Flexible Way» was sustained again, at that time.

Dolphin's body quickly lowered, the body's axis started rotating and in that spin moment, her right foot let off a very low roundhouse kick. A faint thrust of water surface kick was seen. Judging the attack that made Black Lotus' limbs, all of her blades, taking a unique form of «a weak body balance», it was good in a sense. The white sand was blown off as the kick approaches

and she jumped to avoid it. Saying that the left-leg blade's side was directly hit, although it wouldn't broke, it was possible for her to stumble. And unfortunately, she was still studying on how to use «Flexible Way» on her legs.

Her left leg twisted 90 degrees outward, Dolphin's kick would hit Black Lotus' blade limbs— yet there's still a passive ability named «Terminated Sword» that she can collide it with, the techniques' power amputates a limb without any regard. However, Kuroyukihime didn't choose that defense method, but in return—

“Fuun-!”

A sharp yell and a downward thrust below her left-leg blade were launched at same time. A stiff feedback, along with an unpleasant foot response, her blade pierced to the stage's ground up to her knee.

Subsequently, Dolphin's water surface kick slammed to the exterior of the calf portion of Kuroyukihime's left leg. This time, a violent impact occurred, the piled-up fine sand at the «Gusuku» stage was blown away for more than a three meter radius.

Lagoon Dolphin's kick hid a magnificent power. Kuroyukihime's left-leg fractured, and she was unable to move even a centimeter. With her blade deeply buried, all the kick's power was absorbed by the ground making it an immobile stake.

“...You've got to be kidding me.....”

The water colored eye-lens opened dumbfounded while Dolphin, retrieving her kicking foot, slowly retreated and whispered further.

“A hole, ta' duel field was drilled.....”

If you look at it, the coral colored avatar that was looking from a very far place had a surprised expression with both of her hands covering her mouth. At most, it was only a leg that was pierced to the ground yet there is a reason why those girls are surprised. Almost all of the general duel field's terrain objects — buildings, natural objects and decorations — can be destroyed for the purpose of collecting bonus items in charging up the special move gauge however, only the ground was not restricted to that. The field's intervening power for the «ground's destruction» is too large and without the very thing itself, there wouldn't be any duels making it basically impossible, except for some stage-specific properties. Those some, take for example the «Ice and Snow» stage with the ground covered with ice which can be melted by heat attacks and the «Corrosion Forest» stage with poison swamps that can be evaporated, still have an inviolable real ground below the ice and swamp. Even in this «Gusuku» stage, a three centimeter pile of white sand covering the ground to be blown off before the indestructible stone-paved ground below it could appear— was supposed to be there, however where Kuroyukihime currently stands, the left-leg blade was simply forced and the stone pavement was pierced by more than 50 centimeters.

This is also an embodiment of the «Black King» Black Lotus' «Absolute Cutting Property» power, a veteran from central Tokyo who still surprises Burst Linkers till now. However, those two who were raised on Okinawa probably doesn't even know someone like Kuroyukihime. Retrieving the left-leg blade from the ground without a sound, the jet black avatar stands again as Dolphin and the far away coral colored avatar gazed absentmindedly.

“Now then..... I'll be the one attacking next, shall we still continue? Or possibly, you're still hesitating for a draw.”

Kuroyukihime speaking, near the mouth of the coral colored avatar, her fists were used as a megaphone and shouted.

“T-That’s enough already, Ruka-chan~! Let this person be~!”

Perhaps, that was what this Blue lineaged, F-type avatar’s short nickname for Ruka who was standing there for several seconds and before long, she shook her head and forcefully slammed her right foot on the ground.

“.....Not yet! As an Okinawan Warrior, I won’t lose to a mainland Samurai!!”

Those powerful obscure words partly had a good reason making Kuroyukihime lightly tilt her head.

“.....isn’t «Bushi» and «Samurai» not much different?”

“It does! A Bushi— fights by hand!!”

And so, Dolphin retorting for the third time, the coral colored avatar’s comments passed.

“Umm~, ta’ hands said, it’s Karate ya’ know~!”

“I see.....I understand. So the technique you used was Karate.”

Murmuring, Kuroyukihime had half of her body take an intercepting stance. With the remaining time, both of their Health gauge was still on a great margin, she had an intuition that this will be the duel’s climax and murmured. Kicking up the sand as Dolphin close in, she put her arms beside her and draw it back to its limits. Her fist making a stiff grip, it shined a bright marine blue light. The thrust coming from more than a meter away, she lowered her back and tensioned her chest—

“—«Tidal Wave»!!”



At the same time the special name was called, an attack shot from both of her fists.

The barrage speed and force was like of double-barreled cannon. Having a sea color light effect for more than five times a second, the far, double wave rush of the common technique was heard along with it. Any enemy and any armor can be crushed by those fists along with her obstinate yell, it was a good technique.

However, Kuroyukihime also started to act the moment the fast approaching attack begun.

She raised her right knee up high, the tip of her left foot was used as a fulcrum to turn to the left. She paralleled her upper body to the ground and dropped the right-leg blade facing the duel opponent.

Stretching her right leg, she uttered the technique name—.

“«Death By Barraging»”

The one-shot speed and power of the side kick may be something that the opponent hasn't seen before.

However, the next moment. The right-leg blade entirely had an intense blue-violet radiance and then, it went out.

No, it didn't go out. It split countless into a blur. The haze on the blade's tip spread into a cone, it can be said that a knife was shot out from a shotgun.

Black Lotus' level 4 special move «Death By Barraging» is a side kick technique that can be drawn on either left or right leg-blade with a 3 seconds X 100 hit per second rate. Anyone caught within the sphere of range will be seen horribly poured with infinite body of dense swords.

That said, the moment the special move was triggered, Lagoon Dolphin didn't have any room to stop and evade, seeming that it wasn't in her plan.

“See.....RYAA!!”

The girl's innocence and warrior's spirit didn't contradict as it coexisted within the roar she gave off, the high speed consecutive thrust on left and right were sent out within the edge of Kuroyukihime's blade thrusts. Her blue fist wearing a blue-green base turned into blue-violet as it touched the blade, at that instant.

A pure white flash was produced on the attacks.

If it was the power of each blow done by the fists and blades, Dolphin's move might have exceeded. «Death By Barraging», unlike Lotus' one-hit-kill level 5 special move «Death By Piercing» and level 8 special move «Death By Embracing» techniques, was a barrage style technique that focused on range and number of hits.

However, the number of consecutive attacks was way too different. Even if the marine blue fist completely countered, there were still ten blade hits and from the front, the Karate user's body caught the thrusts—

“UWAAA—————!!”

BAKKANN!! A shriek and a very loud collision sound remained as Dolphin was thrown up very high. At the part where numerous shots were fired, orange sparks scattered as she reached the top of the parabola, then spun as she fell. *Her health gauge suddenly dropped to less than ten percent, with her head about to stick on the ground, there was nothing else to be blown off.....*Kuroyukihime judged, and she pulled her right leg back and dashed

She pointed her left-arm blade toward Dolphin's landing spot. Laying down the side of the blade, the «Flexible Way» technique was used to break the fall's momentum as she touched the streamlined head at that moment. At the same time, her body turned 180 degrees and her feet were lowered to the ground.

“.....”

Lagoon Dolphin, who seemed to not understand why she was still alive for a while, eventually shook her head bouncily and immediately saw Kuroyukihime right before her eyes—.

“.....I give up!!”

On something that wasn't usually seen on Tokyo's duel scene, Kuroyukihime unconsciously had a simple smile and nodded.

“Un, it was a nice fight. On those two attacks, the first kick was good. It could have been better if you were able to connect the feint smoothly.”

“Alright! Let's train again, big sis!”

Shouting once again, she stood up, crossed her arm and bowed.

Kuroyukihime, big sis? Twisting her neck, she took several steps back raising her fist to her chest, waiting for the final blow for herself.....

“Wah- H-Hold it, Ruka-chan! We still haven't talked about the important part!”

Hearing the shouting voice that came ten meters from behind, Lagoon Dolphin suddenly stopped her hands. Seeing the coral colored avatar when she turned, she once again turned around to Kuroyukihime and lightly hit her own head with her hanging fist.

“Oh my! I completely forgot!”

*This is much more shocking*, now that it was mentioned she remembered. On the beginning of the duel, the coral colored avatar said some mysterious words for a few times. ‘The true purpose’, ‘let this person be’ and ‘important talk’. In other words, those two girls, instead of intruding Kuroyukihime, they were simply looking for a fresh fight— and besides the fight, there was some hidden goal in it.

Watching over, Lagoon Dolphin with one knee on the ground again and raised her water colored eye-lens directly at Kuroyukihime then shouted.

“Big sis! With the skill that I showed, I beseech you! Please listen to what we have to say!”

“That.....well, if I just have to listen then I’ll listen.....”

Confirming the time count at upper part of her vision, the duel ending with only three encounters, there were still nearly 20 minutes left. That would be enough for a talk.....

And so Kuroyukihime’s judgment was once again betrayed by the two intruders.

“Thank you very much!!”<sup>[6]</sup>

From that shouting voice, Lagoon Dolphin’s words unexpectedly continued.

“Well then big sis, if ya’ turn back and walk for a minute, there is a tea house called «Sabani» on the corner of this shopping district, let’s meet at the table in the store front!”

“.....Wa...eh...?”

The thing right before her eyes was the greatest surprise for Kuroyukihime in this duel— Dolphin raised her right fist to her head this time, and punched

her chest plate without any hesitation. The merely remaining health gauge was blown off, the blue splashing waves along the avatar disappeared.

It was really splendid as it scattered, Kuroyukihime saw the blazing [YOU WIN] characters and spoke once again.

“Meeting.....in reality?”

A reply came from the faraway place where the coral colored avatar was waving her hands, with her feet already ahead.

“Yes it is ya’ know! Let’s meet there, Onee-sama~!”

And immediately, the duel ended.

### 3

Kuroyukihime, returning to the real world, was still staring at the accessory shop’s showcase she was peeking at just before the duel started. However, the cute multi-colored shells manufactured into earrings and pendants weren’t coming into her view.

All of her thoughts were focused on thinking, *Is this an intricate trap?*— and something along the line.

A Burst Linker’s greatest taboo is obviously, «Reality Break». Face, name, home and school affiliation in the real world, those are the private information that will be known by other Burst Linkers. And in due time, it can lead to the worst possible outcome of physical attackers committing real attacks. Those deceitful Burst Linkers will threaten the physical body of helpless elementary and middle school students with real violence while in the background and in most cases, they were unable to resist at all. The ultimate acceleration command «Physical Full Burst» that was given to level

9 Burst Linkers bound to the sudden death rule was Kuroyukihime's only «way of opposing real attacks».....though she didn't consider it.

*In any case, a Burst Linker must be enough to protect such a thing like real information— they should be able to. However a few minutes ago, Lagoon Dolphin and the coral colored avatar whose name was still unknown were completely calm when they spoke about meeting in the real world. It was as if they haven't heard of the words «Reality Break» even once.*

Even within the duel, isn't it possible for both of their words and actions to be just a clever act? Knowing that Kuroyukihime is the «Black King» Black Lotus, wouldn't real information be asked about?

Her instinct tells her that those girls aren't two-faced but simply naive Burst Linkers, it's just that they truly enjoy the «Duel»'s game play. Also, she had a strong feeling that she should just believe.

However, with Kuroyukihime's position now, she absolutely wouldn't allow herself to leave because of a mistake leading to a total loss. With the black legion «Nega Nebulus» slowly reforming, the temporary rule of the six kings of pure color will be overthrown.

And more importantly— looking at a corner within Umesato local net, there was the only boy who was her first and last «Child». The dazzling silver wing spreading, someday flying to the unreachable height of Kuroyukihime and the other kings, now that he's halfway through, he'll absolutely.....

An intense hesitation suddenly shook her body at that time, unexpectedly, a hand gently touched her right shoulder— it was how she felt. At the same time, a voice faintly whispered near her ears.

.....*Senpai, believe in your instincts. Believe in yourself..... that's the important thing you taught me didn't you, senpai?*

“.....Fuh.....——that's right, Haruyuki-kun.”

Without letting out a voice, Kuroyukihime whispered with her left hand strongly holding her right shoulder, and as she straightened her back, she changed her body's direction.

The place Dolphin designated was immediately found. At the crossroad they pointed while on the duel stage, Kuroyukihime saw a raised boat like sign of an open cafe and still maintained her minimum caution as she approached from the other side of the road. *The store name was written with paint on the sign and certainly read as «Sabani». If I remember correctly, it means small ship in Okinawan dialect.*

Hiding on the storefront of a souvenir shop opposite the intersection, she looked at «Sabani»'s open terrace. Two of the three lined-up tables were empty, on the other one— two girls were sitting side by side.

“.....is it them?.....”

Sighing involuntarily, she did a one last check to make sure. If this was a series of intricate trap incidents that the two girls sitting in there wasn't Burst Linkers but a «Decoy», the real one might be observing the terrace deck from an unknown place in the surrounding area. In that case, the real one would naturally be connected at the global net. Leaving it at the matching list, the moment Kuroyukihime notice that it was a decoy and accelerate, she wouldn't be able to counter attack and prevent it.

“Burst Link”

Lightly reciting the acceleration command, the surrounding buildings and shoppers turned frozen blue. Kuroyukihime stepping into the «Initial Acceleration Space» with her black swallowtail butterfly avatar, opened the «BB console» from an icon on her virtual desktop and displayed the matching list. The lined-up names were— three. One was her own name, Black Lotus, while the other names seen were level 5 «Lagoon Dolphin» and level 4 «Coral Merrow».

“.....Coral Merrow, coral reef mermaid..... I see.”

From the name, she was the coral-pink colored avatar who had called Dolphin «Ruka-chan» on the gallery from the previous duel without a doubt. In other words, the fact that those two were still registered in the matching list even after the duel.....that means.

“The only thing left is.....to believe, I think.”

Whispering, Kuroyukihime lightly recited the «Burst Out» command.

Climbing the stairs to the open terrace of «Sabani» shop, her low-heeled mules sounded as she step towards the innermost table making the two girls biting their straws raise their heads.

Their ages looked like one or two year younger than Kuroyukihime. On that fine scorching day, an absentminded expression floated on their childish faces. Kuroyukihime, stiffened until now, reluctantly sat facing the two of them.

Without any delay, ‘Welcome!’<sup>[7]</sup> the store clerk jumped from inside the shop putting a cool drink and a wet towel on the table. At the same time, a menu was displayed in a holographic window through the ad-hoc connection, she



ordered a fresh pineapple juice. The store clerk vigorously shouting ‘Fresh pine for one!’, a ‘Fresh pine right away!’ reply returned from inside the store and a freshly squeezed fruit juice was poured on a large-sized glass from a groaning old style mixer, as it was brought to the table, \*Kachin!\* Kuroyukihime’s Neuro Linker showed a price of 280 yen and the same amount was taken from her wallet.

After most of those sequences had ended, the two girls still only have nothing but opened eyes and mouth.

Kuroyukihime, a straw in her mouth, took a sip of the fresh pineapple fruit juice then slowly said.

“.....I thought, you guys called me.”

Both of them immediately blinked fast, they blurted ‘Ah!’ and humming nodded. As soon as the unison ended, the taller girl on the right side scratched her reddish brown short hair and said.

“Sorry<sup>[8]</sup>... umm, big sis, you’re such a churakaagii.....”

Then finally, the girl with the ponytail sitting on the left side opened her mouth.

“U-umm, churakaagii means «Beautiful».”

“For me, I thought that ta’ only Burst Linker from ta’ mainland was our master, it was really surprising.....”

With that frank attitude, the few percentage of wariness left in Kuroyukihime was replaced by a light smile. With her mouth about to open, she first whispered to the short haired deep-tanned girl with a small voice.

“Are you Lagoon Dolphin?”

“Ah, Y-Yes!”

Then, she continued to the light-tanned ponytailed girl,

“And so you are Coral Merrow.”

“Y-Yes, that’s right.....b-but I haven’t gave my name to onee-sama yet.....”

Merrow had a really surprised face, quickly spoiling ‘I looked at the matching list before I came here’ made the girls raised a \*Hoo\* voice for saying something strange.

“I see now. As for me, I think of onee-sama as a saadagaumari.....”

“S-Saadaga.....?”

Kuroyukihime blinking, Lagoon Dolphin commented.

“With ta’ blood of Yuta. She is one too ya’ know.”

Apparently, she somehow remembered the word Yuta from her vocabulary. She happened to loosely read it at an Okinawa guide book while on the plane. To be exact, it was a word that means folk shaman. Naturally, Kuroyukihime don’t have such powers but, believing in Dolphins words, that’s Merrow’s talent.....

The ponytailed girl tilted her head to the left stared at the scene, and she hurriedly restored her thoughts.

Their master, in other words their «Parent», was really from mainland — or Tokyo, a Burst Linker that changed residence. Without any other person to duel in this land, a «Child» was made and trained up to level 4 and 5. That means, it was no doubt a veteran that possessed a massive amount of points. Apart from those two, she should still be wary about this master.

As Kuroyukihime sipped some more raw juice, the two girls who seemed to have taken back their composure, exchanged glances and nods. Straightening her back, Lagoon Dolphin who was sitting on the right as seen from Kuroyukihime's view, opened her mouth.

“U-Umm, I'm from Kube Middle School second year class two, Asato Ruka!”

Coral Merrow following it,

“U-Umm, I'm also from Kube Middle School, first year class three Itosu Mana!”

They said ‘Pleased to meet you!’ and lowered their heads at the same time, \*Buu\* Kuroyukihime blew the remaining small amount of pineapple fruit juice on her mouth. Wiping her lips, she hurriedly interrupted the two.

“.....W-Wait, stop. Hold it!”

“Yes?”

With Dolphin's large black pupils mysteriously opening, she confirmed whether if It couldn't certainly be what she was thinking.

“.....Just now, were those your real names?”

“Of course it is~!”



The reply came from Merrow who was also staring blankly. Kuroyukihime touched her right temple with a finger and timidly asked.

“.....That means, within the duel before, the «Ruka-chan» nickname Merrow-kun used to call Dolphin-kun wasn't a shortcut for Iruka.....but her real name instead, am I right.....?”

“Absolutely, of course it is~. Similarly for Ruka-chan, she calls me «Mana». She was just born three months ahead of me, she can't suddenly be like an onee-san.”

Immediately after saying that, Dolphin— Ruka, lightly pushed the base of Merrow— Mana's ponytail. ‘Ouch!’<sup>[9]</sup> A small voice was put out, Mana had a bitter face and her eyes darkened while Ruka, feigned ignorance and sip a deep colored juice.

Smiling once again from those two's situation, Kuroyukihime hurriedly strained the mood. After clearing her throat, she asked further.

“Well, right. Your master, both of you somehow.....I think that some rules concerning «Brain Burst» should have been told to you.....”

Actually, this conversation should have been made through direct connection. However, it is somewhat outrageous to think that these two are used to thought voices, also, she had left the XSB cable in the hotel room. Without somehow concealing the voice, the reason wouldn't be conveyed to these girls.

Ruka and Mana having a puzzled face at that moment, they soon nodded. Looking at each other's face, they used a ‘one-two!’ rhythm—.

“”First~, don't use «Acceleration» on bad things!””

“”Second~, don't recklessly speak of «Acceleration»!””

Saying in chorus with ringing voices, Kuroyukihime hurriedly persuaded them to lower their voices, and they closed their mouth tightly. Leaning above the table, she surprisingly confirmed.

“.....is that it?”

“Yes! That was it~!”

“.....”

Kuroyukihime silently sat back on her seat, she sipped some pineapple juice once again and exhaled.

*In other words, their «Master».....a proficient Burst Linker coming from Tokyo knowing that there are many risks «Brain Burst» will bring but nearly didn't discuss about. «In order to prevent Reality Break, you must not call out real names while on the duel stage». Tokyo Burst Linkers, even level 1 newbie, should know this great principle.*

“Well.....it seems like I must have a word with your «Master».....”

Kuroyukihime was so dizzy she almost fell unconscious—.

Ruka and Mana looked at each other's face for some reason and at the same time, they wore a bright smile.

“I-Is that true? Neenee! I'm glad, I've been wondering how I would ask that~!”

“Wha.....What?”

Suddenly backing out due to Ruka's unexpected words, Mana with a full bloom smile commented.

“We, like onee-sama, want you to meet our master~!”

Continuing for five minutes, Kuroyukihime somehow heard most of the situation from those two and goes something like the following.

First, Okinawa— Nago/Henoko area rather, have three Burst Linkers existing in the area. Just as what Kuroyukihime expected, their «Master» was a transfer student from Tokyo and had Lagoon Dolphin, aka Asato Ruka as a «Child» then, she had Coral Merrow, aka Itosu Mana as a «Child». Mana seems to not have yet used her copy install authority.

It would be nice to say that this is a little miracle. With the strict necessary conditions for being a Burst Linker and it cannot be checked prior on doing so, there are no more second chances if someone fails to give a copy of BB program. From their «Master» to Ruka, from Ruka to Mana, the possibility of the link not to be interrupted was considerably low. From now, Mana giving it next to someone, and then again.....the chain continuing without fail, Kuroyukihime has favored that this unrealizable «Acceleration Community outside Tokyo» might be possible to be born in this land of Okinawa.

*—That seems to be what Ruka and the others have dreamed for recently.*

However, that «Dream» was shattered by an incident.....a trouble that occurred this year.

Their «Master» tried to challenge it at first and almost gave up after over a few months now, having a negligent attitude. Ruka and Mana searched for Burst Linkers among the teenagers that came from Tokyo staying at Henoko resort at the very moment the season for school trip started, assessing their abilities by continuously challenging them. They were searching for someone that is able to forcibly open-up their master's unmotivated eyes—.

Kuroyukihime listened till there while groaning \*uumu\*, she then asked a question.

“.....How many were there before me?”

“You were the third person~. Ta’ other two were beaten by Ruka-chan into pulp without even talking.....”

“C-Can’t be helped ya’ know. Ta’ master is powerful you wouldn’t hear any talking.....”

Ruka giving her excuse to Mana while looking at her hands, both of her fists had an unbelievably hard callus. For sure, she was learning Karate with her flesh and blood since when she was young. Also, her duel avatar was still fairly pure «Bluish lineage»— furthermore, it’s a hand-to-hand striking type which can be said as an almost «Perfect Match». Seeing a heavy blow that can oppose the sharp techniques for the first time, it would be difficult even if she was only mid-level.

“.....Fumu. For now, I understand the situation..... The «Trouble» you are talking about is.....?”

Both of them strangely hesitated to answer Kuroyukihime’s question. After a few seconds, Mana replied with a small voice.

“That is.....I mean, the plot is too complicated that we honestly don’t understand it either..... Master said «Majimun»..... saying that a monster came.....”

“In other words, the details should be heard from this master of yours.....or something like that.”

Murmuring and reflecting for three seconds, Kuroyukihime nodded.



“Fine then. I’ll go meet your master.”

Immediately, the two young girls’ face was shining again.

“Thank goodness! It’s really like what Mana said~!”

“L-Like she.....said?”

“Mana said it ya’ know, ta’ person will meet from now will help us!”

It was as if Ruka’s words were saying that this encounter was already foreseen, instinctively looking at Mana’s face, only her usual smile and laugh can be seen. Kuroyukihime wondering if it would be better if the power of Yuta was to be explained, the two girls suddenly stood up.

“Well then~, without delay to my house.....”

“Wa.....Wait, stop!”

Hurriedly pushing them with both of her hands, they sat once again.

“Though I said I will meet up, I have to restrain from doing so in reality. I came from Tokyo, with that said, I may have formerly encountered that person in Accel World.”

“Yah, that maybe~. Yup~, that surely may not be good..... It will be difficult if the master saw a churakaagii like big sis ya’ know.”

Mana ‘Ahahaha’ laughed hearing what Ruka said while somewhat being anxious but for the mean time, this is closed for now. Without any more time left, they arranged to meet here once again at tomorrow afternoon—  
Kuroyukihime glancing at the lower right side of her vision, she saw the time display. It was three minutes before four o’clock, recognizing it, her head quickly got cold.

“Oh.....no.”

Suddenly blurting out, the blankly staring Ruka and Mana left the words ‘Well then, see ya’ tomorrow!’ and Kuroyukihime rushed out from «Sabani» cafe’s open terrace.

Going north from the shopping district, she continued to dash along the brick-paved sidewalk towards the resort hotel and by the time she arrived at the front entrance, the time had just been over two minutes thirty seconds at four in the afternoon.

At the quarried white-stone gatepost, she saw a leaning girl wearing a one-piece dress basking in the deep red setting sun, she slowed down her speed and walked forward.

Kuroyukihime saw Wakamiya Megumi’s smile as she raised her head when noticed the stepping sound of the mules. It was her always tenderly gentle smile— on the inside, there was something a bit different can be seen, Kuroyukihime had a small breath.

In Megumi’s left hand, there was a small violet paper bag that wasn’t brought out from the hotel. Kuroyukihime stopping at that moment, she lowered her head one meter away right before her from where she stopped.

“.....I’m sorry I was late.”

“It’s fine Hime, It’s just two minutes.”

Megumi had her smile again after saying that, with her voice and facial expression, there was an unusual hue that spread. Perhaps, something like— loneliness. Unlike Megumi, Kuroyukihime’s hands held nothing, that’s the reason for sure.

“No.....once again, I must apologize. Forgive me, Megumi..... I wasn't able to choose a present.”

That's right. Kuroyukihime and Megumi both agreed to choose a souvenir before parting 30 minutes ago and meet up here. However Kuroyukihime had a different action, the duel followed by the discussion in reality occupied her attention, using up all of the time.

Kuroyukihime lowering her head, Megumi lightly tapped her right shoulder and with a cheerful voice said.

“It's okay Hime, the trip isn't over yet..... there's still time to look for souvenirs from now.....but.....”

Her Shaking words was interrupted, Kuroyukihime was surprised as she raised her face.

Right before Megumi's eyes, the setting sun shined on two drops of tears that almost fell at the same time. Shining like an orange jewel, it fell one after another on the brick below and disappeared.

“.....Megumi.”

Kuroyukihime calling her name with a hoarse voice, Megumi stepped away and rubbed the corner of her eye with her right hand.

“H-Huh, why is it..... I didn't want this..... I'm sorry hime, I'm really..... It's nothing, it's just.....”

Megumi said it with her mouth about to open but, her tears doesn't stop. Before long, with her back turned back like giving up, a trembling voice emerged.

“.....Sorry, I'll go back to our room first.....Hime, slowly take your time until the assembly.....”

And then, Kuroyukihime was not able to do anything but watch her close friend's back as she was about to run away. After standing stiff for nearly ten seconds, she leaned the side of her body on the gate post and deeply sighed.

“I was.....stupid.”

Squeezing that voice out from her nearly empty lung, it was surprisingly thin.

“.....I have been busy with stuff in Accel World that I've neglected the real world, prioritizing on instructing Haruyuki-kun and Takumu-kun..... this is a mess.”

Closing both of her eyes, the red setting sun was screened by her eyelids and some faces surfaced.

A lingering long chestnut colored hair and graceful smile of Kurasaki Fuuko — «Sky Raker».

Below her clean-cut black bangs, a young and resolute smile from Shinomiya Utai— «Ardor Maiden».

Though she hasn't met them in reality, an avatar with its body wrapped by transparent water «Aqua Current», and a silhouette glittering with graphite, «Graphite Edge», came after. Then, the following numerous duel avatars that appeared, vanished. They are everyone from the destroyed legion two and half year ago, members of the «First Nega Nebulus». It was an afterimage of bonds that wouldn't return again from Kuroyukihime's mistake, leading into tragedy with them falling apart.

“.....Am I.....qualified to seek someone's connection, even the truth is.....”

Muttering, she saw a white right hand on her mind. The fingers were shaking then disappeared, the next to appear was a jet-black blade. Cutting everything apart, unable to reject the edge—.

And, at that time.

The sharp edge appearing deep within the darkness, a small hand reaching from the front gently grasped it.

Immediately, the sword returned to the original fingers. A face appeared while clinging to the hand as it was grasped, standing there was the one year younger, round faced young lad. Shyly encouraging with a smile, the young lad said with a clear voice.

*I held out my hand for you, senpai.*

“.....Ahh, that’s right, Haruyuki-kun.”

Answering, she opened her eyelids and strongly clasped her right hand. Kuroyukihime pressed that hand on her chest and started to eagerly run, chasing after Megumi who went back to the hotel.

#### 4

The golden sunlight shimmered on the sea.

Blown by a westerly wind, the lines of ripples were swayed but, it wasn’t water. It was tall soft grass. Surveying the horizon of the sea of grass, this scale was something that didn’t exist on the real world’s Japan/Okinawa main island.

No artificial buildings could be seen at all. On the contrary, you almost can’t find large trees and rocks. The thing that can be said different was a small stream flowing between the loose hills. What stands out on the scarce

terrain's extreme slopes was the abrupt movement of a hemisphere shape, sticking out from the sea of grass.

The soft ellipse drawn on the hemisphere's major axis was more than four meters. On the top surface, there was a hexagonal panel— a «Deck», arranged without gaps. It was tinted with a greenish-gray metallic luster and seemed really hard.

There were six apertures at the bottom of the hemisphere, the stretching four of it were short, thick, sturdy supports/movement organs which is the «Foot». From the hole on the rear, there was a taper-pointed sharp «Tail». Stretching along the hole, it resembled the form of a dragon from somewhere, a «Head». Something cylindrical lined on it, a large pyroclastic cone tusk, the grass right before it was completely torn off and a crunching sound was raised as it chewed.

In other words, this large creature, if looked at wholly, is a «Turtle»— and can be said from a land tortoise family. However, just like this grassland itself, a large tortoise like that wouldn't exist in this modern Japan. No, for that matter, the largest tortoise, «Stupendemys Geographicus», became extinct on earth five million years ago with its large carapace length of 2.5 meters.

This grassland was not the real Japan/Okinawa main island, and so, this tortoise isn't a real living creature either.

The game program of mystery, «Brain Burst 2039», created another Japan, known as «Accel World», the concealed superior layer of the VR world. «Unlimited Neutral Field», it was the name of this infinitely continuing sea of grass. Also, along the land tortoise with four meter length carapace, those living in this field are just moving objects. Its species name is «Armor Clad Tortoise», a wild class enemy—.

The indicated inhabitants of this world, including the large tortoise, are referred to as common enemy and have their opponents, the visitors of this world, «Burst Linker». However small, however harmless the individual maybe is, without exception, the Burst Linkers within aggro-range will be assaulted without any question. And it is strong. It is outrageously strong. The level 4 Linkers who have just got the right to dive in the unlimited field have a 99 percent of impossibility to defeat wild class enemies by themselves, let alone the lesser class. Much less those higher beast class and legend class, at the time their silhouettes are seen on the horizon, they must be avoided or else, disaster and the likes will happen.

Though there are frightening enemies, they can only live in a place where there are no Burst Linkers present. In the real world's wildlife, it is the same —, no, it is much peaceful than reality in a sense. It's because the enemies do not compete with each other. Every enemy of the same class has their territory and nearly doesn't get close together. They roam this vast world with carefree, sleep and food to eat. Even the large tortoise, Armor Clad Tortoise, leisurely chewed grass.

—On the contrary.

In this peaceful grassland, a disturbed scent was carried by a blowing gust of wind. When the large tortoise raised its face, its long neck was stretched as it frequently glared southward.

Suddenly, it quickly moved towards the north, the earth grumbling as it stood up and started running. Even in the distant, the same type of tortoises and the elephant looking form of the large enemies started to move to the same direction simultaneously. It was as if they were trying to run away from something terrible.

After a few second, «It» showed up from the horizon in the south.

Its sleek silhouette had an overall length surpassing the large tortoise by more than five times. It has a certain kind of shell, with a blade-sharp body form, winded in a high-speed plunge like swimming in the sea of grass.

The large build spanning 20 meters swiftly galloping had four legs at the bottom of its body. Though it was small, its bulging swelling muscles can not be compared with the tortoise. As its thick, sharp claw firmly clutched on the ground kicks up, the large body looked like flying with the speed it gained. In its back, a long extending tail almost didn't leave the ground.

At the both sides of its spear like pointed snout, its lens like emotionless red eyes shines and its large mouth slowly open and closes below it. Every time its jaws move, dozens of white fangs with the size of a large sword appears.

Though its form is roughly close to a crocodile, the impression is obviously different. This one can also be called a «Dinosaur». Naturally, to the same enemy tortoise running away, this kind of large size presence is different. It surpassed the beast class and it can take the name of a legend class, it is Accel World's strongest tyrant no doubt.

The gapless large frame scale-armor shined bluish black as this dinosaur plunged at a terrible speed on the grassland. As it got close to the desperately running Armor Clad Tortoise, it made a big jump as it was almost right before the rear. In the air, ferocious fangs lined up on its jaw when it opened. Diving in a steep angle, a fierce impact sound roared as it landed. Dense dust fumes surged up and within it, a pointed snout appeared.

Inside its large mouth something was held, a pitiful land tortoise. Its carapace was tightly held and no matter how it flapped its limbs, it was unable to escape. The dinosaur's eyeball shined deep red and the surrounding muscles on its jaws swelled. The tortoise's metal luster carapace was pierced by its fang and orange sparks splashed like a waterfall.



\*Pishi\* There was a dry sharp sound. At the same time, the land tortoise stopped moving. On the thick shell, one, two tubes ran through the thin land tortoise. The tortoise's whole body was wrapped at once and a pale blue light leaked— on the next moment.

The wild class enemy, Armor Clad Tortoise, inside the jaws of its predator, changed into thousands of glass shards as it shatteringly disappeared.

The unclenched tip of the large dragon's mouth slightly strained, it started running on the grassland once again. The thirsty red eyes ascertained its next prey from the lower class enemy group running about on the sea of grass.

Gradually increasing its speed, a very high dorsal fin stood out on the large body's back, it looked like a sailing yacht. On the front of that dorsal fin, another small projection stood out.

It's not originally the dinosaur's organ. A foreign object— it was a different type of a moving object. Nevertheless, no enemy can be a parasite to another. With a length of one meter and a few ten centimeters, it was a silhouette standing with two legs and obviously, of a person— namely, a Duel Avatar. An enemy is by no means mutual to an opponent for it to stay on its head however, the dragon doesn't show any indication of shaking its head and continues to swim through the sea of grass.

The duel avatar's hands loosely hung, holding onto a thin chain. The chains extending for a few meters to left and right, the chains are wind together in the dragon's head from its jaws. On the way it looks, it was as if a jockey manipulating its horse with the two long reigns. As the mysterious Burst Linker rides on the back, the large dinosaur sought slaughter furthermore, charging toward the horizon.

After several tens of seconds.

The stillness returned to the sea of grass and from the bottom of it, a silhouette slowly stood up. It was another duel avatar. It has a linear scheme and simple design but, the armor color was deep red. Even though it really stood out within the green grassland, the large dragon overlooked it for some reason.

The avatar often continued to concentrate a stern look on the direction where the dragon runs to. However, it soon lightly sighed and turned around. He, or maybe she, walked away on an opposite direction from the dragon and the world was filled with only a calm sound of breeze once again. For the one who broke it, no longer appears.

## 5

Out of 120 third year students of Umesato Middle School, 61 people chose the Henoko/Yorontou plan and were accommodated at a large resort hotel with over 400 available guest rooms. The once called «Camp Schwab» was built facing the capes' beautiful and shallow beach, from the window to the north was the deep green Henoko peak and from the window to the south, there was the panoramic view of the grand Pacific Ocean.

However, for Kuroyukihime who just got out of the elevator, she jogged without even bothering to look at other windows as she advanced.

Approaching their assigned room, No.728, the door lock operating window appeared on her virtual desktop. An icon on the right of the window was lit indicating that a same room occupant was inside.

Standing before the solid natural-wood door, she took a large breath and knocked twice.

“Megumi..... It's me. I'm coming in.”

Kuroyukihime whispered facing the automatically opened intercom window and without waiting for a reply, she released the lock and pushed the knob open.

The little extravagant room with an ocean view where the middle school students are staying on for the trip was dim. What lightened everything were the melting setting sun and the golden lace curtain of the ocean, diffidently illuminating from the window on the south.

In this north to south long room, two beds lined up on the west side wall with only blankets piled on it. A small violet paper bag was on the side cabinet.

Kuroyukihime stepped on the carpet barefoot crossing the room and gently sat on the rear bed.

Megumi rolled under the blanket like a kid but, she wasn't sleeping for her twitching body movement was passed on the mattress. From what it appears, she seems like a hurt infant and Kuroyukihime's chest had a sharp throb once more.

*.....I really didn't even know anything about her, I didn't even try to find.....*

Reflecting along the recognized pain, Kuroyukihime opened her lips.

“.....I'm sorry, Megumi. I was a fool.”

Muttering those words, a fast reply unexpectedly came from below the cloth pile.

“That's not it. You didn't do anything wrong, Hime. I.....I just got ahead of myself. On this trip.....for seven days, I had Hime.....for myself.....”

There was silence for a moment, Megumi pulled the hem of the blanket and curled her small body even more.

“A-Ahaha.....what the hell am I saying. I’m sorry Hime, I’m only saying weird things. Forget it.....forget everything. I’m fine, just a little bit more and I’ll be back to myself from.....before.....”

Opposite to what her words were, she violently faltered her wet words.

Kuroyukihime tightly biting her lips and without any intention of turning her body back, gently placed her right hand on Megumi’s back above the sheet. She slowly caressed the quivering thin body and whispered across the blanket.

“Megumi. Listen to me.”

Changing her tone, she told her intentions.

“—What you said on the beach earlier was true. I.....besides the real world, I have another world where time flows differently.”

“.....”

“The first time I went to that world seven years ago, I was eight years old. Since then, for half a day.....no, I have spent more time than anyone in this country. At that time, I would get confused on which was the true real world.....”

She let out a small sigh without realizing. Unaware that Megumi’s body stopped shaking, Kuroyukihime continued her monologue that wasn’t revealed to anyone before.

“Particularly, when I left home and entered middle school.....whether where I belong, even the idea of my existence was vague. Megumi, you said before that I found my way again when I met the Arita boy fall last year.....that’s half wrong and half right. It’s because he is, **like me, a resident of that world.**”

For Megumi who was not a Burst Linker, this talk didn't matter. However, Kuroyukihime was hesitating. But if he was here in this place, he would definitely say that she should speak everything from the back of her mind sincerely.

Kuroyukihime took a deep breath once again and with more conviction, she continued talking.

“—Megumi. Immediately after entering Umesato, you saved me from being indecisive and just loitering around. Right after the entrance ceremony, from the time I heard a voice saying let's eat lunch together, you and I didn't stop and continued being firmly connected in the real world. Many bonds created in «that world» were lost and even now, are only being restored one by one.....the only bond I have connected to in «this world» was to my only friend, no other than you, Megumi.”

Her words were forged with all of her feelings, Megumi, who knew no details of Accel World's location, went along unknowingly.

It has meaning on its own way, though the words were too favorable for her condition. What said was similar to that Kuroyukihime was known to exist on two worlds and the bond with her friend Megumi was only connected with half of her.

However, she didn't want to lie to her close friend. Within Kuroyukihime, the once lost bonds in Accel World— she wants to meet Kurasaki Fuuko, Shinomiya Utai and a lot more other comrades once again and the wiped off feeling of fighting together will exist again. Yet those feelings aren't the same deep feelings she holds for Wakamiya Megumi. Kuroyukihime doesn't want Megumi to know her as Accel World's traitor, the Black King Black Lotus, but as a plain female middle school student—.

Kuroyukihime conveyed all of her feelings with her right palm to her skin through the blanket— if you put it in Accel World, it would be called «Incarnation».

Eventually, Megumi's body restlessly moved changing its direction and from her white cover, her fluffy short hair was exposed. Megumi, who wrapped the blanket to her body like a cloak, only had her face out and slowly raised her upper body, facing Kuroyukihime. Noticing her wet pupils and red swelling corner of her eyes, Kuroyukihime bit her lips— but, faster than that.

Megumi put her head on Kuroyukihime's right shoulder. At the same time, there was a nearly no sound whispering voice.

“.....Thank you, Hime. What you said just now, made me really happy. But....., but.....I'm sorry.....”

A voice with a hint of tears mixed, Kuroyukihime asked a question as she turned the slender body in her arms.

“Why are you apologizing? There's nothing that you need to apologize for. I'm the one who forgot our promise.....”

“That's not it.”

Megumi, above Kuroyukihime's shoulder, slowly shook her head.

“It's not about the souvenir. I.....the truth is, I should have apologized to Hime much more long ago.....”

From below the blanket two hands were extended and gently wrapped Kuroyukihime's arms. Her face away from the shoulder, large teardrops amassed on her eyes and she strongly blinked once it was near the limit. Drops fell down and made grey spots on the sheet.

“.....The truth is, I.....that time.....”

However, before those words could be finished, a mechanical alarm sound filled both of their hearing. At the same time, a school trip executive committee assembly window hid both of their faces. Before dinner, there will be a regular meeting with the advisor present in five minutes. The names of two student council officers and executive committee members were listed.

Megumi, firmly grasping Kuroyukihime's arms once again, soon loosen her grip and moved away her body. She took a tissue from the sideboard, wiped her eyes and said.

“.....As expected, I can't skip this one, Hime. Wait a little bit, I'll prepare immediately.”

Her tone returned to being the normal student council secretary. Megumi went out of the bed faster than Kuroyukihime's call to stop her and she vanished into the washroom.

“.....Megumi.....”

Swirling her sight as she faced the sheet, the spot where the tears fell just several moments ago had already completely vanished.

The reserved hour for the buffet dinner in the hotel's restaurant begun, Megumi was in her usual rhythm, grilling to take care of Kuroyukihime.

Normally, the independently living Kuroyukihime's diet was somewhat unbalanced due to her staple food of frozen meals from a suitable restaurant. Apart from it, though it didn't mean that she disliked the particular raw materials, there were just «things that somehow can't be understood» which she's not good at but, the too many unidentifiable objects of Okinawan cuisine should not be carelessly handled.

However, Megumi rapidly served food on Kuroyukihime's plate on her own, explaining stuff like 'This is stir-fried wheat bran with egg' and 'This

is sponge gourd soup', making words of gratitude come out of her mouth. Timidly putting out the delicious looking food on her hand, she firmly realized it once she has eaten them.

The bathing period followed an almost identical development, she poured shampoo on Kuroyukihime's back like a kid, on top of that, she didn't stop until Kuroyukihime went to the dryer making her feel somewhat dizzy once she got back to their room. Sitting down on her own bed sighing momentarily, a mineral water bottle was held out right in front of her.

"Here you go, Hime."

"T-Thanks."

Saying her gratitude as she accepted it, Kuroyukihime sipped the cold water three times and having to bear with it, she gave out a short laugh.

"F-Fufufu.....Somehow, I feel like that I went back on being a child that can't do anything."

"Ara, isn't it fine once in awhile? There's always many vice-president related work to do at school, it's good to relax as much during the school trip."

"Even if you say that Megumi, there are also a lot of secretary related work."

Looking at each other's face, they both laughed together this time.

Umesato Middle School's Student Council yearly re-election was held in October. Kuroyukihime and Megumi have been participating on this routine task as executives since their first year second semester. Kuroyukihime appeared going out with Megumi but, her true motive was still hidden till now that she cannot help but be ashamed of her innermost thoughts.

Kuroyukihime, apart from what she thought of trying to serve the whole student body as a student council officer, she merely wanted a higher level of access authority within the school's local network. On Umesato, getting a



hold of the school system to build a fortress to defend her from the six kings' assassins was an indispensable necessity— and that kind of reasoning. Of course, she can't neglect her officer duties however, there were no noble ideals.

*I must apologize to Megumi about it.....*as soon as she thought of that, the associated words some few hours ago returned to her mind.

When the first tear seen on Megumi started to flow, she spoke. There was something I should have apologized for long ago.

There were no such occasions coming to her mind. Worrying for their situation thinking if she would ask her right here and right now, she changed her facial expression and about to open her mouth— however. As if guessing a hint, Megumi moved straight to her own bed, turned her face and said.

“Well then, we have a lot scheduled for tomorrow, let's retire for the day.”

“.....A-Ahh..... that's right.”

Kuroyukihime nodded, Megumi run her finger through her virtual desktop and pressed the lighting.

From the window on the south with an open curtain, a moonlight far brighter than on Tokyo shining through it dyed the room pale blue. Moonlight of southern countries had a sort of sorcerous wavelength soaked on it, suddenly making her eyelids feel heavy.

She brought down her body lying in the bed and she felt like her thoughts were suddenly absorbed right below it. Closing her eyes, a blanket was gently covered on her body and a voice echoed on her ears.

“Good night, Hime.”

April 17th, the following morning, and a sunny day.

The vacation season just started on the early days of this month in Henoko Beach, with the humid temperature passing over 30 degrees in the afternoon, the great majority of Umesato students were on the sea. Drifting aboard the float moving along the water, they were having fun on their own way however, if one is to say, Kuroyukihime hid below the same beach parasol she was on yesterday.

“Fu~~.....”

Letting out a deep sigh, she lifted and took a sip from the glass of coconut juice from the nearby table. She lightly returned and extended her legs from her black swimsuit and pushed up her slipping sunglasses.

“.....Most of the students can't be seen anymore right, Hime.”

Megumi spoke like she was amazed on the nearby deck chair, Kuroyukihime was broadly grinning while playing with the large glass using her fingers.

“If this was a real piña colada then it would be perfect. It seems like this place is out of the social camera's sight, shall we try if we can order?”

“In that case, I would ask for one frozen margarita then.”

“.....No, I'll stop. Margarita is still way too early for us.”

*Ahem*, she cleared her throat and looked at the lower right side of her virtual desktop, the time was around 12:30 in the afternoon.

The very interesting and tightly scheduled trip on Okinawan colleges as well as trekking on Henoko dam organized for this morning almost emptied her health gauge. It is not just the body feeling heavy. Almost at the same time when she woke up at six o'clock in the early morning, she received a dive call from the Arita boy Haruyuki who was in Tokyo.

In the virtual space Kuroyukihime loaded, he apologized for the sudden call first and explained with the reason of 'it's painful that senpai was far away'. With those words, Kuroyukihime felt pain shooting out from inside of her chest, having an intuition that it wasn't just that. For sure, something is happening right now at Umesato Middle school, 1600 kilometres away. The Arita boy is being tormented and driven in a corner— perhaps, it was something brought from Accel World.

However, Kuroyukihime didn't ask him about it. The question 'What happened?' almost went out of her mouth but she desperately refrained from it. He doesn't want to say it himself, the Arita boy was working hard to deal with the trouble he was in with his own strength. If somehow he needed her help, she would immediately make up excuses so that she can fly home from Okinawa but, for him now.....she believed in her only «Child», leaving it to him this time.

And although that decision was in her mind, the anxiety still wouldn't go away. Kuroyukihime sigh her fear away, hanging both of her shoulders heavily, she then murmured on her mind.

*—Do your best, Haruyuki-kun. I too have things to do as a Burst Linker in this place. «Things to do» for the mean time is the mission request of the Okinawan girl Linkers contacted yesterday but, I still don't know the exact details at present. Some kind of trouble occurred on this land's Accel World, in relation with that, Kuroyukihime came up with an agreement with those girls to meet their «Master» and speaking of it, they'll move from Henoko to the far north Yorontou tomorrow morning. It would be better if the problem is resolved before that— Anyway, I'll hear all of the details from their master.*

Kuroyukihime raised her upper body and removed her sunglasses and raised her voice to her close friend, whose eyes were closed, on the nearby deck chair.

“Megumi.....”

Megumi, lifting up her eyelids, lightly leaned her head and facing her, she lowered her head once and said.

“I’m really sorry about yesterday. Today, I’ll surely buy a souvenir. I’ll search the whole shopping district from end to end until I find the perfect gift for Megumi.”

Megumi tried to open her lips a couple of times. However, she closed her lips at once and took a deep breath, and then she cheerfully smiled and muttered.

“Yup..... I’ll be expecting that, Hime.”

After relaxing without a care at the beach until two o’clock, Kuroyukihime left Megumi and went back to the hotel ahead of her.

She was meeting those two, Ruka and Mana, at the same cafe as yesterday at three o’clock in the afternoon. To have Megumi act differently, she used the reason of buying a surprise present at a heartbeat however, it doesn’t mean that she’s not going to do so. «Keeping secrets from her close friend in the real world» like this is one of the many curse given to a Burst Linker, the price to pay for the power of acceleration. BB program will only give the same dispossession— just like how veteran linkers such as Kuroyukihime say it, it will just be a negative gain in the end if you think about it.

*It’s because when all points are used up forcing Brain Burst to uninstall, the only thing left is a great sense of loss and an empty reality. There was a terrible rumor that Burst Linkers leaving Accel World will have all of their memories related to Brain Burst wiped out, if that’s the truth, then it’s not just a relief but also a punishment at the same time, it’s not that unthinkable.*

While pondering with her thoughts, Kuroyukihime changed from her swim suit to plain clothes, as she was about to leave the hotel once again, she stopped and her chest was bathed with the unlikely bright sunlight of April.

“.....Alright!”

She changed her mood with a short yell and marched quickly toward the main entrance. The time was still 2:10, there was still enough time to keep her promise to Megumi. Do not neglect the real world and be too concentrated in Accel World—. That’s the first law of legion «Nega Nebulus».

Kuroyukihime firmly stepped foot on the brick pavement and rushed to the shopping district adjacent to the resort.

The cherished souvenir chosen for over 40 minutes was placed in a tote bag, as Kuroyukihime approached the «Sabani» cafe, a voice in a large volume came from the terrace making her shrink her neck.

“Oi~ Neenee~, We’re here~!”

If you look at it, there was Lagoon Dolphin, Asato Ruka, who she fought yesterday and her «Child» Corral Merrow, Itosu Mana, buzzingly waving their hands at the table. *They were both wearing their middle school sailor uniform today. If you think about it, it is a weekday afternoon, to meet 30 minutes earlier than yesterday’s rendezvous, they might have come directly from school.*

Though there were no problems about it, pure white sailor uniforms are too noticeable in this shopping district with merely few tourist and foreigners. As a burst linker in hiding, she jogged towards the open terrace in a low posture and took a breath as she sat down at the table. Kuroyukihime ordered a guava

juice for today and took a sip from it after it arrived, she looked at the two girls before her once again.

*If I remember correctly, Ruka is a second year while Mana is a first year, furthermore, they said that they were three months apart, which means Ruka was born before April while Mana was born after. A normal Burst Linker is usually older than their actual age, and high leveled players have a strong tendency to be one but, there must be a reason for this level 4 and 5 prominent veteran girls to not have a sign of that.....*

And so as Kuroyukihime thought of those, Ruka and Mana took out their Neuro Linkers from their own accustomed school bags and installed it in their well tanned necks, looking faintly attached. Their necks have unexpected «Linker Burn» mark, it could be said that the students from Okinawan colleges from the trip this morning introduced VR classes only to a small part of Okinawan public schools in Naha. In other words, the girls used Neuro Linker for education and other reason since they were young.....

“Well then onee-sama, we are going «up» for today.”

Mana suddenly said that as she raised her face, ‘n?’ Kuroyukihime knitted her eyebrows. Those two, without minding the situation, took a deep breath and,

“Ready~, three, two, one, Unlimited Bu-.....”

\*Buu\* Kuroyukihime spewed the small amount of guava juice on her mouth and hurriedly reached, closing both of their mouth.

“Wa.....Wait, stopstopstop!!”

“Mmga mmgaa!?”

“You guys, don’t tell me that you’re going to dive into the unlimited field here!!”

“Mgo mgo!!”

“Y-You can’t, this is not good just as I thought!! Without any disconnection safety how could you behave like that, what would you do if you can no longer reach the portal!?”

“Mmgo.....mgomgo.....”

Then, both of their face turned pale and she soon let go of them. \*Buha\* Ruka and Mana with a breath, affirming that they won’t recite the command once again and she stood up.

Getting behind those two, Kuroyukihime strongly gripped the collar of their sailor uniform and spoke with her most scary voice.

“I’ll be the one to choose the dive location. There will be no complaints.”

The two hanging like a cat, buzzingly nodded their head.

Kuroyukihime took them away and guided them to the full dive space provided in the resort hotel she was staying in. It might be best to use the room on the seventh floor but, if she was found out taking in visitors, the school staff and the hotel staff would probably be angry.

It seems that those two, even if they habitually look at the hotel from the outside, they haven’t been inside of it and below the chandeliers on the high ceiling, they randomly says ‘Hoo’ as they look around the cafeteria on the first floor. Ruka pushed Mana’s back leading her to go up the staircase to the second floor for them to see more, an additional fee for two people was paid on the reception desk of the full dive space in the high class looking cafe. Kuroyukihime was free to use it since she was a guest.

The middle school students crammed in a four person booth, though it was late, they still said ‘It’s appropriately cool’ and ‘Don’t worry, there was a time when shoppers ended up unplugging our Neuro Linkers’, Kuroyukihime poured silent smiles which the Arita boy secretly (Kuroyukihime knows of it of course) named it as the «e cold Kuroyuki smile».

Kuroyukihime took out three XSB cables from the equipment rack, \*KachiKachiKachi\* she inserted them at the wired connection router installed at the long table in front of the sofa. When the two turned their Neuro Linker wireless global connection to OFF, she inserted the plug on the other side of the connector without any questions.

Ruka and Mana blushing and blurting out stuff like ‘Ah~’ and ‘Iyan~’ when they were connected, she ignored their reactions for the time was too precious and set the router’s automatic disconnection after five minutes. Even though if it is a safety measure, it’s still 5000 minutes inside—the calculated remaining time is 83 hours. If it is with that much they haven’t settled the trouble yet, then Kuroyukihime’s assistance wasn’t enough in the first place.

Finally, Kuroyukihime connected the third XSB cable into her own Neuro Linker, faced the two people seated at the opposite side and said.

“Listen, I’ll meet your master as promised, but I can’t guarantee on what will happen afterward. At the worst possible case, there could be a battle. You should be prepared.”

“”Okay~!!””

The two cheerfully raised their hands in unison, becoming worried if they really understood, Kuroyukihime opened her mouth to start the countdown.

“Well then, we’ll dive on the count of five. Five, four, three.....”

“Oh, Neenee wait!”

A voice was suddenly raised from Ruka like she was surprised and this time, she blocked Kuroyukihime’s mouth.

“W-What?”

Turning her face to Ruka, she had her index finger on her lips and pointing out her gaze towards Mana who was sitting at the left side.



A few seconds ago, the girl who was supposed to be cheerfully waiting for the dive timing— drastically changed.

Her ponytail tied hair was swaying and her upper body was slowly moving back and forth. Her pupils became faint, indiscernible on where it looks at, a very faint voice seems to leak out but its content was inaudible.

“W-What’s wrong?.....”

As Kuroyukihime was about to her body lean forward, Ruka stopped her once again and whispered near her face.

“Kandaari.....the blood of Yuta is out.”

“.....”

Dubiously stunned as she watched, Mana’s episode suddenly stopped just like at the time when it started. After blinking for a few times, she turned her face to the right and at that time, her usual expression completely returned. The girl, looking at Kuroyukihime with her deep sea color reminiscent pupils, spoke with an innocent voice.

“Onee-sama, one more please.”

“.....What?”

“This. A string.”

Pinching it as she spoke, it was the XSB cable connecting her Neuro Linker from the router. Kuroyukihime looked around inside the narrow booth, there were only three people and no one else naturally. The door was locked by Kuroyukihime’s electronic key, there will be no one else that can enter.

However, there was forcing color of confidence in Mana’s pupils.

Kuroyukihime extended her hand as if it was guided, she took out the fourth

XSB cable from the rack on the sofa and connected the one end at the router. All of the connectors or cables are now used up.

“.....So, where do I insert this plug?”

Mana smiled and replied to her question.

“Just leave it there please.”

“.....”

That something was for some reason but, problems in reality are of exception. Kuroyukihime laid the plug on the table then twist her neck for the last time and opened her mouth once again.

“Well then..... this time, will go in five counts. ”

Ruka and Mana nodded waiting for it, the countdown then started.

“Five, four, three, two, one, Unlimited Burst!”

The spell to open the gates of the real Accel World, «Unlimited Neutral Field», was released by the three’s lips. While their thoughts were severed and wrapped with a rainbow color as it was carried away from reality, Kuroyukihime murmured ‘Yare yare’ in silence.

The destroyer of order in Tokyo’s 23 wards and traitor to the six kings, the famous Black King Black Lotus has been swayed by the girls since yesterday. However, it also felt fresh and nostalgic at the same time. Just like very long ago, the time when the Burst Linkers dragged around the so called leader.

Kuroyukihime, captured in her deep emotions, was engrossed with the girls’ requests and her usual tight precaution loosens without her realizing it.

Specifically, going to the dive space with those two, someone was staring at their backs from the farthest pillar though she did notice that single glance.

The one who was gazing, came out of hiding after the three of them went into the booth and hurriedly headed towards the dive space.

## 7

Kuroyukihime, hovering out of the hotel, turned her duel avatar's goggles to look up at the half-crumbled building.

With the bare steel frame's deep red rust and the flaking concrete cracks, the entire structure and terrain almost completely followed the original hotel.

Henoko is not that large of a town in Okinawa and the social camera net also seems to have firmly run throughout this land. That means that the Unlimited Neutral Field has consecutively existed even in this place that is 600,000 kilometers away from Tokyo.

Feeling the extent of Accel World till now, Kuroyukihime once again looked at the surrounding desolate scene and murmured.

“This is..... the «Weathered» stage.”

This time, she wasn't corrected by Lagoon Dolphin and Coral Merrow, who were standing behind her.

Originally, the duel field's various attributes were given their titles— such as «Century End», «Demonic City» and «Purgatory», those are not set by the BB system. The prime Burst Linkers thought of an appropriate name from the field's outward appearance and named it. Even the «Old Castle» stage from yesterday was named by those duo's master, but for it to sound familiar

to the Okinawan locals Ruka and Mana, it was replaced with the word «Gusuku».

If that's how it is, I wonder if the «Sacred Grounds» would be «Land of the Gods»..... Imagining that, Kuroyukihime confirmed that it would likely be far, so she once again turned and spoke.

“So, where is your master?”

“This way~!”

Shouting cheerfully as usual, Dolphin turned around. Short fin-like projections protruded from various places in the streamlined armor of the blue avatar that was running off, ‘Wait for me!’, and the coral-colored avatar with a similar design but longer, more delicate fins went chasing.

There would be deep red cockspur coral flower blooms on the hotel's front yard in the real world, but now, only a dreary scene in a dilemma of rotting concrete flakes and rusted steel frames on the building stood out. The ground, also covered with red-tea colored dust, fluttering dusty wind rose at times when it blew, but the two girls cheerfully dashed over carelessly.

Kuroyukihime, partially leaning over her body, also accelerated her hovering movement.

The slightly cracked road was reached a few minutes later, and small aggregated buildings were seen on the way. In the real world, this would be the shopping district that Kuroyukihime and Megumi went shopping in. However, there were naturally no clerks attracting tourists. There was only dry wind blowing between the building's bare red-rusted steel frame——

Or not.

In the heart of the shopping district— possibly at the same coordinates where «Sabani» cafe was present, there was a single building with thin flashing neon pipes, a store. The characters on the irregularly flashing lights were written in a strange font but, the word «**BAR**» was not unreadable.

“Heh....., a «Shop» in a place like this, huh.....”

Kuroyukihime suddenly muttered to herself.

So-called «Shops», scattered throughout the Unlimited Neutral Field, were «NPC Stores». There were various types, from special effect card items to armor reinforcements, clothes and foods/drinks, and on top of that, even «Homes» which could be bought and sold.

In Tokyo, they were mainly in Ikebukuro, Shinjuku, and Akihabara, and it was rare for them to do business in a remote area with nothing surrounding it. Such «Hidden Shops» found were specialties, they could even be a group of hobby, rather, they certainly stretched their leg out even on the far way Henoko in Okinawa.

On the way, approaching the store, it seemed that the BAR signboard raised was from above a tavern. In the real world, middle school students could not order let alone enter such places, but both Dolphin and Merrow rushed into the store without any hesitation at all, shouting in a loud voice.

“Master, good afternoon!!”<sup>[10]</sup>

After a few seconds, a little lifeless male voice responded from inside the store.

“Yea.....afternoon.....”

“Tsk, that’s wrong! An ikigaman’s greeting should be ‘GOOD AFTERNOON!’”

At Ruka’s retort,

“Y-Yea.....afternoon.....”

Listening to his restating voice, Kuroyukihime suspected and leaned her head. Stopping her feet in front of the store, she peeked on the situation inside from the crumbling exterior wall.

“Ha~, it’s broad daylight yet you’re drinking..... Even in a place like this, master is really an Okinawan geezer~.”

Mana was speaking like she was disappointed, ‘I’m not a geezer.....I’m still in first year high.....’ he grumbled and continued with a voice, ‘Bar-Master, a three hundred year old sake on the rocks!’.

“Bleep”

An unidentifiable electronic sound responded and a full-metal robot robotically walked from inside the counter. Its design was fairly similar to a Duel Avatar, an NPC working as a shop clerk popularly known as a «Drone». Operated by the BB system in the same way as an Enemy, an inhabitant of this world.

Like transferring an adequate amount from an iron pipe, the drone placed a rustic tin plate cup on the table leaving the words ‘fwep’ and left. The cup was gripped by a hand coming from the other side of the table and a guzzling sound echoed.

“Come on, today is not ta’ time for drinking! Master, we’ve brought someone, someone who can help us!!”

Dolphin shouted with both of her hands on her hips and after some silence, an uncaring voice was heard as expected.

“Hwat~, ya’ really looked for duel in ta streets? Didn’t I tell ya’ it’s pointless?.”

At that point, Kuroyukihime arrived at a conviction and entered the store without making a sound. Coming in—between the lined up, rusted iron-plated tables, she proceeded inside.

The two’s master seemed to sprawl on a secluded ottoman at the end of the table. The figure still could not be seen from an angle on the other side. Not noticing the approaching Kuroyukihime, the virtual alcoholic drink was once again gulped, and he shouted.

“Pointless, pointless, it’s pointlessnesssss. Bringing along one or two helpers wouldn’t be much for that monster!”

“.....Oi, you there.”

“Ta’ exalted level 7 me, ta’ once called «Strongest in History» in Tokyo, even my hand and feet wasn’t enough. Cleaning up that guy, even a level 8 is insufficient, insufficient! There should be at least a level 9 «King»!”

“Oi you, show a little face.”

“No, no, even with a king it’s dangeroussss! You’d need a specialist in physical attacks like «Vanquish», or better yet «World End».....”

“I said oi.”

“Hwat ta’ hell is with you and your racket!? I’m telling you, Unless you bring the Black King here to this store, I wouldn’t.....even.....move.....”

With courageous caustic words, the «Master», finally raised his upper body from the ottoman, gradually slowing his words as he saw Kuroyukihime with his drunken eyes, and he eventually sunk into complete silence.

On the other hand, in Kuroyukihime’s direction, both of her arm blades raised a high sound as it were knocked together and she lively shouted.

“It really is you! How nostalgic, it’s been many years, «Crikin»!”

“.....Eh.....lies.....no.....time out.....”

The dumbfounded Burst Linker, with his body wrapped in a deep red armor, raised and lowered his yellow eye lens many times as he muttered.

“T-That form.....that leg.....and calling m-me.....Crikin, do-do-don’t tell me, you’re real? Ta’ monster Black King? Bla-.....? -ck Lo-.....? -tus.....?”«1»

Cutting Kuroyukihime’s name in a strange way as it came out of his mouth, the tin cup rolled down from the avatar’s right hand to the table, giving off a miserable metallic sound.

The «Master» sat back, sandwiched between Ruka and Mana, and Kuroyukihime also sat down on the opposite ottoman for the time being. Here in Accel World, even if you didn’t order a drink in the bar, the store clerk wouldn’t be angry.

“At any rate.....don’t go telling me that you moved to Okinawa.”

As she muttered, she looked at «Crikin»’s upper body again.



It was quite a distinct Duel Avatar form. A flat hexagonal part was placed on his head like a cap, and a cylinder at his face below as a piston. The thickness of his body was almost the same as his head, and his arms were semi-circularly flat. The most eye-catching features were the fine carvings in the body's armor surface, looking like a jagged mold.

As his elliptic eye-lens blinked bit-by-bit, Crikin nodded once and answered.

“It has been a little over three years already ya’ know. Well, my old man and my mother suddenly divorced. I was asked whom should I go with and ended up with my old man, but I didn’t think that he would suddenly go to Okinawa without tellinggg! When I came to, it was too late to say that ‘I should have gone with my mother’ and so, I was forcibly dragged to Henoko, now I’m here.....and that’s how it is. ”

“I see..... I’ve thought that you were PK reality-attacked and went into a total loss.”

“Well, I’m in a tough spot somewhat similar to that extent. I was expecting that of course in Henoko, but when I went on Naha and Nago, there weren’t any Burst Linkers in town eitherrr!”

His crimson body shook as he hysterically laughed.

He, in the olden days around three years ago— that meant at the time when the «foremost Nega Nebulus» was still in good condition, he was a member of a rival legion, «Aurora Oval». He was considered a veteran, they fought in duels and territory fights many times from when Kuroyukihime was still low-leveled and repeatedly hunted a common enemy as if they were comrades.

He reached level 7 at that time three years ago, if such a high-rank figure disappeared, it would be a «PK» in the real world or possibly, an unimaginable «Infinite EK» in the Unlimited Neutral Field or so— and things like that at those days are sorrowful memories, but that person could be certainly said to be on quite an adversity of «Forced Change address to Okinawa».

“It’s nice..... that till now, you’re still a Burst Linker.”

Words suddenly came out of Kuroyukihime’s mouth and Crikin turned his head’s hexagonal-prism like being embarrassed.

“Hehe, well, half of it was leaving it on its own. She.....”

Then, he pointed his thumb on Lagoon Dolphin, who was sitting at his right side,

“.....is my distant relative from my old man’s side. I stayed at her place and then decided to gamble. Install Brain Burst on her and if it’s a success, I’ll invest almost all ta’ Burst Point I have at that time to raise her to level 4. Then hunt on lesser Enemies but, it wasn’t that stable with a tag.”

“I see..... It seems like you won your gamble.”

“Pretty much. She’s been studying karate since she was young from her grandfather. Then she turned out perfectly relative to blue lineage, and really powerful.”

Quietly listening to those two talk till now, Lagoon Dolphin— Ruka, began to happily laugh ‘Nihehe’. But her behavior soon changed and tremblingly shook it off.

“No~, I’m still training ya’ know. I wasn’t even match to Neenee’s legs or arms.....”

“Of course ya’ won’t Ru-bou! This person ya’ know, is one of the «Seven Kings of Pure Color» that silence crying kids.....”

As Crikin said that, Kuroyukihime was smiling and interrupted with a clear voice.

“No, everything was a story in the past. More than that, I want to hear more of your story. After successfully making Dolphin your «Child», she reached level 4 and the two of you kept on hunting Enemies.....?”

“A-Ah.....but, just hunting on basic lesser class and occasionally aim at wild class when ta’ terms are good at a certain degree. Ta’ two of us steadily saved points and then went next on another gamble. Ru-bou’s friend studying karate with her, Ma-bou, Ru-bou attempted to do a copy install on her.....well, I thought it was 80 percent likely to fail.”

“Wait~, what do ya’ mean by that, master~?”

Ma-bou, Mana, Coral Merrow, protested sullenly, and Crikin hysterically laughed again on his ironic remark and continued his explanation.

“Anyway, it miraculously succeeded with her and we raised Ma-bou to level 4 with ta’ earned points from hunting.....and so on, well that’s how it is.”

“I see..... —You’ve done well holding out here on Okinawa, Crikin.....”

Kuroyukihime calmly murmured and Crikin held out his chest out high saying ‘It’s nothing’, Merrow suddenly raised her right hand.

“Uhm, Onee-sama—. There’s something I’m curious about.”

“Nn, what is it?”

“Well, master always tells us ‘I am called the «Strongest in History» in Tokyo’ and boasts around~, is that really true?”

“Ah, I also want to know that!”

Dolphin hung over and, in contrast, Crikin gave out a voice as he dragged his body up.

“N-N-No, you know, that, I just exaggerated it a bit, or rather an arbitrary interpretation of reality.....”

“Ahh, that’s true.”

Kuroyukihime calmly nodded and the three suddenly stopped their movements. As Crikin continued to be frozen, Dolphin and Merrow shouted ‘Eeh——!’ in chorus.

Kuroyukihime was positive, Crikin's alias «Strongest in History» had it’s other half omitted.

His formal avatar name was «Crimson Kingbolt».

He was strong. He was really strong. When he appeared on the duel scene, his form, abilities, and even just his name were the leading things running about in Accel World; Burst Linkers in the neighboring areas trembled in fear at the thought of such a veteran coming to their headquarters.

However, that was only till everyone knew of his real condition. Crikin's true nature was «Crimson» but not «King», yet a «Bolt»— in other words, he was just a «Screw» in one word. Even Kuroyukihime was convinced later on by looking at a dictionary app. 'Kingbolt' is even one word in English, a word pointing out a specific-use screw in the architecture and engineering fields.

When that truth was widely known, the Burst Linkers presented an alias for him. «The Man with The Strongest Name In History»— he only told his pupils a half portion, who on earth was responsible for that.

Apart from that, Crikin joined the purple legion «Aurora Oval»; the purple king «Purple Sheen», with the alias «Empress Voltage», jumped to the conclusion with Kingbolt's name that he used a very powerful lightning attack, recruiting him right away, and the story was handed down as if it were a true legend.

Containing some information within her chest, Kuroyukihime solemnly spoke to Ruka and Mana.

“Your master, when Burst Linkers hear the name «Crimson Kingbolt» in Tokyo, everyone gets frightened like rabbits. After all, he is the «Strongest in History».”

“C-Cooooool! Master isn't just a drunkard!”

“W-What a surprise! For me, I've thought he's just a glutton!”

The expression of the two's words were a little sensitive to the teacher's honor; Crikin, intensely taken aback, gave out an unnatural laugh.

“Na, nahaha, NAHAHA! Tha-t’s right young’uns, you should respect me more from now on, I’m like ta’ appetizer to your main dish! Ah—, excluding Naabera! Also for me, the leek on this island is not very.....”

Those words did not continue till the end.

Suddenly, a tremendous tremor pushed up the whole bar and it violently shook. Crikin, with his chest held up high, helplessly tumbled down onto the floor, Kuroyukihime, Ruka and Mana stood up right away.

After a second, the next shock hit. Kuroyukihime immediately changed her thoughts, sharpened her senses, and sensed where the tremor came from. The field itself was not shaking. Something, a huge destructive phenomenon was occurring very near.

“Outside!”

With a sharp shouting voice, she dashed from the bar to the main street. Her left-leg blade tip carved a deep arc on the ground as she turned west, and then «it» came into her view.

At the end of the long and narrow shopping district, two uprooted big buildings soared as it collapsed. However low the terrain object endurance in this «Weathered» stage was, nothing could completely demolish buildings in such a short period of time. Holding her breath, she strained her sight below the glassy goggles.

Beyond the swirling dense red cloud dust — some kind of silhouette was moving slowly. It was big. It was impossible to be the size of a Burst Linker.

“That is.....”

Kuroyukihime leaked out a voice and Rune, who ran off to her side, responded.

“T-That’s it Neenee. The big monster.....that guy ate everyone.....”

“T-That.....ate.....?”

“The other Enemies, ya’ know. But, it didn’t appear on the far hunting grounds till now.....”

Behind Ruka, Mana let out a trembling voice. There was no reason not to be frightened. The squirming shadow beyond had its head over 5 meters high already and there were no clues as to the whole span of it from here. If this were a beast-class enemy.....no, it should be the worst-case scenario—

“D-Damn.....! Why even this town.....no, t’is not the time to be saying that. I beg you Lotus, hurry up and take Ru-bou and Ma-bou and to escape on the hotel’s «Leave Point»!”

Crikin, who was the last one to run out, shouted as Kuroyukihime glimpsed at the small-build avatar.

“—Immediate withdrawal? Do we really need to go that far?”

“Yah! If that guy captures us here, we, specially Ru-bou and Ma-bou, will be in danger of Infinite EK!”

“But.....this is a town, it’s impossible for Enemies to go over territories! Also, it’s impossible to be Infinite EKed in a territory.....”

“That’s not it, Lotus. It’s not just a mere Enemy.....”

He cut his words there for a moment, Crimson Kingbolt, squeezing out a low hoarse voice, spoke like he could not admit it himself.

“That.....**That legend-class enemy has been tamed.**”

## 8

Enemy taming.

Kuroyukihime had heard information on existing ways to do so. There were two ways. A Burst Linker could use a taming-specific exclusive ability — she had never once met a person holding such a rare ability — or use an exclusive Enhanced Armament. For the latter way, she had seen something like that once a long time ago, but it only came from a treasure chest and was taken by a party member after the owner lost on a dice game roll at that time, she didn't know whether it had been used after that.

On such very vague information, there was still one thing that can be said certain.

Taming a Legend-class Enemy was impossible. It was because they were Accel World's rulers and could be even said to be absolute warriors. Common attack techniques could kill if it were a mid-level Duel Avatar, and if it were a high-ranked group they'd be easily kicked off with a special attack.

In addition, in able to use a tool, it would be necessary for the Enemy's health gauge to be shaved till it was nearly extinguished in order for the tame to be successful, in other words, you shouldn't try and break a legend-class opponent to a near-death rage.



The mere thought was enough to send shivers down the spine, it was nothing but a suicidal act.

Enclosed with more thoughts at that instant, Kuroyukihime turned to Crikin who was standing beside her and raised her unconscious question.

“.....Who is it? The guy who perpetrates such acts, his name is.....?”

However, the answer was still something surprising.

“Never had ta’ idea.”

“What!? If you look at the matching list one time.....”

“That’s.....no matter how many times I look at ta’ list, there’s no name.....”

It was Mana who murmured. The coral-colored, slender avatar’s long hair part slowly shook as she stood still. Ruka whispered lowly as she tightly embraced her shoulders.

“That’s why..... the guy riding that is also a majimun. A guna majimun.....”

Almost the same time as those words reached Kuroyukihime’s ears—

Three fierce impact sounds roared.

Two abandoned buildings on the west of the village were crushed together. The distance from the destroyer has been cut by a 100 meters. She must hold out until she saw the true identity of that «Monster» before the immediate withdrawal Crikin was saying. Kuroyukihime’s indecisive moment lapsed as she decided and opened her mouth.

“Crikin, I set up a hung-up timer for me, Ruka, and Mana when we dived.”

“How long?”

“83 hours inside.”

“.....Well if that’s calculated, those two won't go as far as total loss but.....  
— that means, Lotus..... ya’ feel like fighting, right?”

“The Enemy’s face is not seen from here and withdrawing is not my style. It doesn’t matter if the three of you go ahead and withdraw.”

“.....Ya’ haven’t changed at all eh, «World End». Well then, I’ll go out with ya’. No matter what monstah is there, we have a «King» here, we’ll make it somehow.”

Ruka and Mana stared intently as they embraced each other and soon shouted, having been overwhelmed by the fast conversation of those two.

“S-So CoooL!”

“Master and Onee-sama are so wonderful~!”

“Eh.....really? Well whatever, but I’m still on to older women.....”

Crikin, who was reluctantly down, was hit by Kuroyukihime’s right elbow.

“Here it comes!!”

After that, the last building that separated the four people and the destroyer vanished as if it exploded from its foundation.

Seeing it with their eyes as it appeared through the dust cloud, Kuroyukihime blurted out.

“D.....dragon.....!?”

It had a pointed snout. It had a very large jaw. It had red glowing eyeballs from both sides. It had a shelled body supported by short, thick legs along with a long tail. Its appearance resembled the ancient carnivores seen in a FullDive biology class.

“It’s formal name is legend-class Enemy «Nidhogg».”

A voice suddenly descended, Kuroyukihime quickly shifted her view upward.

On the back of the giant dragon, a fin sharply stretched out like a yacht’s sail and in front of it, there was a small human figure — a standing Duel Avatar was seen. Was that it, the small monster Ruka was saying..... that was no doubt the Burst Linker that didn’t appear in the Matching List.

“You there.....Who the hell are you!”

The giant dragon’s rider lightly moved his right hand on Kuroyukihime’s sharp question. That hand was grasping a thin chain that glittered silver as it shook. Looking closely, the chains enclosed the dragon’s snout like a band of leather tied together. It appeared exactly as a «Rein», that meant it was an Enhanced Armament used to tame the legend-class Nidhogg.

“My name would be unnecessary, it’s a club rule.....”

The absurd and melodious voice was cut short, shrugging his shoulders once again, the rider continued.

“.....No way, I didn’t think that I’d come across a big-shot at the ends of the earth like this. Nick sniffed out a smell of a huge prey and I came along to check it out to make sure, it turns out to be a big yes. At the very least, shouldn't I leave something like a self-introduction?”

Kuroyukihime quickly analyzed the information contained in the words just now.

Of course this was just a rumor, but tamed Enemies would exhibit various abilities for their master. That dragon «Nidhogg» could find the target's place from a long distance with its radar-type ability. In other words, the rider summoned the legend Enemy in this small town where Kuroyukihime herself was.

—As if sharply sensing her thoughts, Crikin lowly whispered beside her.

“It's not your fault ya' know. I mean..... we can rather say this is our chance, my sensing ability says so.”

“.....I'll be expecting that.”

At the same time Kuroyukihime replied her short words, the mysterious Burst Linker at the dragon's back lowered his head.

“Nice meet you, Black King. Also, to you locals. My name is «Sulfur Pot».....a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“.....Heh, finally identified yourself huh? I have been waiting for this day ya' bastard since three months from when ya' appeared! Listen well, Ore-sama-chan's name is—”

Crikin stepped his half-cut column shaped simple foot as he was returning his introduction. But just before that,

“Ah, you don't have to tell me. I'm not interested, you'll all meet your end soon anyway.”

As the humiliating words descended, the «Strongest Name in History»'s misfiring ended. Crikin's hands stirred as he trembled in anger and Kuroyukihime was once again in a high-speed thinking.

The avatar name «Sulfur Pot» was not familiar. That meant that this person became a Burst Linker between the two and a half years of Kuroyukihime's half-retired status. However, this overwhelming confidence demeanor was of a veteran that even made a bold move of taming a legend-class Enemy, it was naturally an impossible act for a newbie or a middle ranker. With a very dense combat experience, it was possible that he was a large-scale legion's back-up.

“——!!”

As her thoughts reach there at that moment, Kuroyukihime was finally able to remember the first memory inside her head like a wick lit by a spark.

«Guna majimun». That was how Ruka and the others called Sulfur Pot. The reason was because he didn't appear in the Matching List. It was absolutely impossibly normally. One must be connected to the Global Net to dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field, the connected Burst Linker would definitely be registered on the list because it was Brain Burst's fundamental principle.

However last year's autumn, Kuroyukihime suffered greatly when the enemy disregarded the very principle. It was the current Nega Nebulus' reliable member, Silver Crow's tag partner Cyan Pile — Mayuzumi Takumu. He used a program given by his Burst Linker «Parent» and haunted Umesato's local network like a ghost.

The situation was very similar. No, she could even say it was the same.

Kuroyukihime sharply inhaled, faced the avatar glaring at everyone from five meters above the sky, and threw that word.

“—«Back Door Program».”

“.....”

Sulfur Pot’s shoulders shook in surprise.

“.....I wonder what that is?”

The emanating voice kept calm and his upper body merely pitched forward. In that movement, the avatar that was in the dorsal fin figure of the dragon till now was exposed to the sunlight of the Weathered stage and various shapes were exposed.

Sulfur — «Sulphur», bearing it in his name, the armor color was fairly bright yellow. If it were to be compared with the King of pure yellow color, «Yellow Radio», it would be a little pale. Its thin body had an orthodox form but the shoulders, chest, and waist were open with big, eye-catching holes.

As the equipped mask and goggle face design looked like it was glaring, Kuroyukihime added to her words furthermore.

“No, that program should’ve been unavailable after the server update. However, you used a similar cheating technology no doubt. That means..... Sulfur Pot. Rather than being here in Okinawa, aren’t you remotely diving from Tokyo!?”

On that instigation, there were three sets of initial reactions from the Okinawan group including Crikin.

“W-W-What ta’ hell!?”

“Akisamiyo!!”

“No way, unfair!!”

Hearing three shouting voices in succession, Sulfur Pot didn't even move a muscle. He slowly put back his body eventually and whisperingly spoke.

“.....I see, indeed. Even though you've shut yourself in a hole for many years, your fangs didn't fall out yet. I guess it can't be helped then, it wasn't it my plan but you'll go out here, Black King. In a place like this, you're just a disappointing hindrance to our «Frontier Farming Experiment».”

Kuroyukihime had a low murmur in her mouth. The word that came out from Sulfur Pot's mouth was farming, «Agriculture» «Farm» in a dictionary and in addition, it also had a meaning in net-game terminology. A round-the-clock monster hunting to acquire a large quantity of gold and experience points. That was certainly the act that he was continuously doing in this land of Okinawa by making use of the giant dragon «Nidhogg».

To reiterate, it would be like this.

Sulfur Pot three months ago was probably the same as Kuroyukihime who visited Okinawa for a school trip and used the opportunity to devise some kind of cheat tool here in Henoko suburbs. Upon returning to Tokyo, he, who tamed Nidhogg beforehand, and companions remotely dived on Okinawa's Unlimited Neutral Field to hunt every living wild-class and lesser-class Enemy. Eventually, he protected himself with the same logic as the former Cyan Pile that why no matter how many times Crikin and the others looked at matching list, there was no name in it. If the same was done in Tokyo, you'd be a target of large legion's suppression in a blink of an eye but in the far

away Okinawa, you didn't have to worry about it. Even during the stay of Kuroyukihime, Ruka and Mana risked their lives attempting to contact her and if she hadn't come, she wouldn't have thought on something such as diving in the unlimited field.

“—Here are some once-in-a-lifetime words, Sulfur Pot. I have a great personal grudge on cheating tools, I'll open-up all of your petty secrets here and render that unusable.”

*Jakki!* Kuroyukihime's right-arm blade cleared away and she shouted with dignity.

“—Don't think that Blue King is the only one that holds the title «Legend Slayer»! Come on, I'll cut that thing into three pieces.”

As if her eloquent instigation were a raging fire, Sulfur Pot also changed his presence. With both eyes burning inside the round goggles, he responded in a voice with a low tone.

“.....Let me tell you this. Even my «Parent» doesn't speak like that. I think I won't kill you normally.....I'll have Nick bite you off limb by limb and I'll see if you can still stick with your bluff.”

The field's atmosphere suddenly became tense and the temperature rose. They held their breath as the gust feature of the Weathered stage gave a sense of clash feeling.

Kuroyukihime took a glimpse at Crikin, who was preparing for battle beside her, and hurriedly whispered.

“Crikin, let's do **that.**”



“Got ya’”

With the crimson avatar’s short response, he changed to lively tone and instructed Ruka and Mana, who were on the back.

“Young’uns, Lotus and I will be the starting opponent of this big ball. It’ll be a big fight, ta’ surrounding buildings will break into rubbles one after another. So Ya’ guys, collect metal objects from those rubbles and gather them in this shopping district.”

“Ehhhh, we want to figh—.....”

A disappointed voice was raised from Ruka’s mouth but Mana quickly blocked it.

“We understand, master! It’s just picking up scraps, leave it to us~!”

“Ya’ better do it right, ta’ amount of iron ya’ll gather will decide this bout! —Here it comes!!”

Immediately afterward—.

“Haaa!!”

Sulfur Pot gave forth a yell along with the sharp hitting sound made by clasping the chains with both hands. The dragon-type Enemy’s eyes that were on standby till now glared red and exposed its numerous lined up ferocious fangs on its jaw—.

“Gruuoo!!”

The growl gushed like the rumbling earth and the giant dragon’s 20 meter span began to fiercely charge.

Let's try a head-on clash to test his strength.

As Kuroyukihime decided this, she faced down the dragon Nidhogg as it charged straight at her, and she coiled down, readying her blade arms.

Of course, even for someone like her who had reached Level 9, one wouldn't be able to withstand the head-on impact from a charging Legend-class Enemy. In addition, Black Lotus was specialized in offensive stats and had sacrificed much of her defensive capability.

She wasn't planning on just standing there and relying on brute force to gain the upper hand; rather, she wanted to lure the Enemy to charge towards her and dodge away with a quick slash at the last instant. While Nidhogg's charge was quite intimidating, it wasn't much faster than a Giant-class enemy, and she could definitely make it—

But the one who wrecked her strategy turned out not to be the enemy, but the one striking a pose next to her, Crikin. "Take this, you bastard!" he yelled, extending his left arm and calling out his skill. "«Tapping Screw»!!"

Five blasts resounded as his fingers shot out. Just like his body, they were covered in lateral serpentine grooves—in other words, a spiral pattern. As they sailed through the air, the fingertips changed into sharp screw tips, and flames burst out of the cross-shaped sockets at the bottom. They flew forth like missiles and connected with their target, the dragon's head.

His aim was impeccable even though he'd been drinking himself silly at the hotel just then, and his prudence in filling his special attack gauge shortly after diving was rather remarkable, yet...

The five screws that hit the dragon's shark like head stuck in but still continued rotating at high speed, grinding out sparks. After a few seconds, they simply—dropped. They had only managed to leave a few scratches.

“Huh?”

By the time of Crikin's blank reaction, the dragon was already bearing down on him, and Kuroyukihime had lost her chance to counterattack. All she could do was haul the screw-shaped avatar out, diving to the left. They avoided Nidhogg's charge by a hair's-breadth as it immediately rushed through the gap between her and the two girls, stopping after it smashed the ruins behind them to pieces.

In the Unlimited Neutral Field, the «Shops» run by the system's drones are set to be «indestructible», but if this continued, all the buildings besides that shop would be demolished. While fighting a large Enemy, using complicated terrain for hiding spots is the most basic battle strategy. It would be best to decide victory before the surroundings were razed to the ground, but it seemed like that was no longer possible.

However, while Kuroyukihime was devising her tactics, she had taken into consideration the possibility that all the buildings would be destroyed. For her plan to succeed, though, she had to ensure the survival of Crikin, who would play a pivotal role.

“Oi, do you really expect such measly long-range attacks to have any effect on a heavily-armored Legend-class Enemy?!”

As Kuroyukihime hissed at him, Crikin wrung his hands while grumbling. New screws refitted themselves into his empty finger sockets.

“Well... what can I do?... It’s already been three years since I’ve fought in a proper battle...”

“Then stop messing around! You’ll have your chance to shine when we’ve gathered enough «iron».” She turned around and called to Ruka and Mana, who had already started running:

“We’re counting on you!”

The two girls gave her a thumbs-up and rushed towards the ruins to the north that Nidhogg had destroyed earlier. The terrain objects of the «Weathered» stage were an even mixture of rotten concrete and rusted steel. It would have been best to get the «Factory» or «Steel» stages, where the ground and buildings were all metal, but this was still better than the «Wilderness» or «Primeval Forest» stages that didn’t have any metal at all.

Ruka and Mana began pulling huge steel bars from the debris with a monstrous strength that didn’t match their slender avatars. Seeing that they were getting along okay, Kuroyukihime turned to face Nidhogg again.

The dragon had just finished turning around. As expected, its large body made maneuvering rather difficult. In these circumstances, the back is usually the weak point, but its long, thick tail covered in spikes looked too suspicious. It would be better to stick with the original plan of avoiding its attacks while damaging it in the instant before impact. .

As the dragon got into position to charge again, Sulfur Pot kept up an easygoing discourse from its back:

“Go ahead and use your special attacks as you like, Black King. However, according to our Society’s materials, your fighting style is made up of only

close-range attacks. Why don't you try and see if you can repulse Nick's attacks? I'm sure we'll have a great deal of fun."

——Our Society?

Sulfur Pot's words struck her as strange, but she quickly cleared it from her mind. Analyzing this new intelligence could wait for after she'd won her battle.

That being said——what was frustrating was that Sulfur's words weren't off the mark. Almost all the Special Attacks that Black Lotus had learned were meant for close combat. The skill with a slightly longer range, «Death by Piercing», could be extended to a mere five meters. With this kind of attack range, even if she managed to cause damage to the dragon, she would take a direct hit from its charge during the after-activation lag.

Of course, if she used «that power», it would be a different story.

A certain logic hidden within the Accelerated World. Using the power of imagination to interfere with the world's laws and overwrite phenomena, the ultimate ability — «the Incarnate System».

If Kuroyukihime utilized her Incarnate attack «Vorpals Strike», although the actual effect would vary with her emotional state, she could conceivably extend her range to about fifty meters, similar to the range of red avatars. Just using this skill would let her keep a safe distance from the dragon's charge while still being close enough to run it through.

But using that power was out of the question. The absolute rule of the Incarnate System that must be followed was «do not utilize Incarnation unless you have been attacked with Incarnation first». This wasn't a

psychological matter, as if whether it was contemptible to use them or not. Once one breaks the rule and uses the Incarnate System to get ahead, abandoning the pact between fellow duelers, the user's heart will be dragged into the dark side of their Incarnation, without exception. This path will unavoidably lead to tragedy. Including the fifth generation Chrome Disaster who Kuroyukihime fought just three months ago, she'd seen too many Burst Linkers who, because they were consumed by their negative Incarnation, brought destruction to themselves and their loved ones. She would absolutely avoid going down such a path no matter what.

So, Kuroyukihime glared at the smirking Sulfur Pot and said:

"I'll save my Special Attacks for when I knock you off. Just wait, you'll have plenty of opportunities to experience them for yourself soon enough."

"Hahaha, just the attitude I'd expect from a King! Then as you wish, let's have Nick trample you into mincemeat!" Sulfur shook his reins again, and the dragon braced its front foot, readying for a charge.

As Kuroyukihime faced down the dragon, she positioned herself in front of a large building, and she crossed her sword arms in front of her.

She didn't plan on utilizing Incarnate attacks, but since her opponent had such an overpowered ally, a Legend-class Enemy, on his side, then——

"——Just this much is reasonable, right? Haaaaaaa..."

She focused her resolve and shouted:

"«Overdrive»! Mode Green!"

Immediately, the seams of Black Lotus's armor began glowing with green rays of light. The «Overdrive» command was not a system-specific ability or skill, but it also wasn't an Incarnate power. It worked by the same logic as the uncontrollable negative emotions which cause «Overflow» and the complete lack of fighting spirit which lead to «Zero Fill», and it could be said to be a kind of «positive self-suggestion». To put it plainly, it was just a manifestation of increased fighting spirit, but Kuroyukihime had ingeniously tweaked it and set three modes to mimic abilities which she lacked that were inherent to other colors. «Mode Red» shifted her duel avatar's performance compass towards more of a long-range type avatar, «Mode Blue» increased her short-range ability, and «Mode Green» increased her defensive ability. Although these abilities didn't have the biggest characteristic of Incarnate abilities — an absolute power that could only be blocked by other Incarnation, they would definitely come in handy. Besides, Incarnate attacks weren't as effective against Enemies in the first place.

Sulfur Pot laughed when he saw the small changes Black Lotus had effected: “Hehehe...If you think those party tricks are gonna work on this guy, you're just wasting your time — Get her, Nick!”

With the boldness of a bullet train, the dragon charged forward as Kuroyukihime silently fixed her gaze on its nose. This time, Crikin was ready to dodge, but the dragon's trajectory remained fixed; in other words, its target was only Kuroyukihime.

If she were to get hit by that ferocious charge, she would probably lose over half of her HP gauge. She ground her teeth, willing herself to stay still until the last instant. Not yet... not yet..... now!

“Hyaaaah!”

Kuroyukihime jumped to her left, bringing her right leg around in a roundhouse kick.

One of Nidhogg’s innumerable massive teeth collided with the tip in midair. The intense pressure numbed her from the knee to the waist, but perhaps thanks to the reinforcement from «Mode Green», the blade took the impact without breaking. The sword rang out with a “ping!” as she finished the sweep of the kick, and the dragon continued its charge past her right side and slammed into the building behind her.

A severed dragon’s tooth flew up in the air. Checking that one of the Enemy’s three health bars had decreased just a bit, Kuroyukihime did a backflip in the air and landed on the ground.

The next three minutes and thirty seconds passed in the same way.

Kuroyukihime barely dodged Nidhogg’s attacks, using the split seconds when it grazed past her to cause some small damage. This would also lure the Enemy into colliding with a building behind her, and she would get into her next position while it was turning around. Of course, she did not escape unharmed; every time she touched a tooth or a scale, she would take some damage, but always less than what the monster would take. However, while



her HP decreased at a slower rate than the Enemy's, she had much less to begin with. If she kept this up, she would probably lose.

It seemed like Sulfur Pot had also figured this out, since he continued with the same old charging strategy without letting up. Even though he seemed calm and at ease, he quite clearly knew he was dealing with a «King», so he was actually being very careful. If he were to use a trickier strategy like jumping off the dragon and attacking with his own skills, he might get cornered by Lotus and lose in an instant to her Special Attacks. Which is to say, his apparent simple-mindedness was in fact proof of his good judgment.

... There was definitely something off about it.

Even in battle, Kuroyukihime couldn't help but think. In her two years as a recluse, she had used a spectating avatar to collect information in the Accelerated World. She should have at least heard the name of someone as cunning as her opponent, who had the knowledge and ability to tame a Legend-class Enemy. The key to unraveling this mystery was in that mention of the «Society» earlier. There was a powerful organization supporting him, yet it probably wasn't one of the Six Color Legions...

While thinking this, she had already made over a dozen successful counterattacks. As she landed lightly, a huge attack rushed by behind her, accompanied by the rumble of a building collapsing. She turned around, seeing that most of the small town from the east side had been reduced to rubble. Further away, a small reddish-brown road which led towards the large hotel in the distance was visible.

Almost all the buildings in the town had been destroyed — the next stage of the battle had come.

“Go on, Crikin.” she said, in a low voice. The small red avatar that had been skulking around her gave her a nod. “I was getting tired of waiting” were his parting words as he ran to the rear. Kuroyukihime also backed up while keeping her sights on the dragon.

Standing on the back of the dragon as it turned around, Sulfur Pot said in his easygoing voice, “Whew, it’s finally cleared out. Nick and I prefer wide open spaces. Now we can start having some fun.”

“Good for you, then...but it’s not just you guys that have it better off. There’s nothing in the way, which allows me to dodge more easily. Your attrition tactics won’t work too well now.”

“Hahaha...calling it attrition tactics makes it sound so cowardly! I don’t like using these petty tactics, either. However, there is indeed a reason I have to act like this. After all...Nick’s Special Attack gauge takes such a long time to fill up!”

“——!” Kuroyukihime couldn’t help but gasp in astonishment at Sulfur Pot’s words. “...Special Attack...gauge...”

“Hrmph, well, I can’t blame you for being surprised, the average person wouldn’t know of it. Tamed high-class Enemies can gain their own special move gauge too. Unfortunately, it’s only visible to its owner, that is, me. I’ve been destroying all these buildings, and it’s only now just filled up. As for what’s going to happen next...well, you should understand, right, Black

King!’ Sulfur Pot raised his silver reins high and cracked them. In his loudest voice yet, he yelled, “Get her, Nick! «Scorching Inferno»!”

The giant dragon opened wide its gaping maw.

Kuroyukihime saw orange-red rays of light flickering in the dragon’s throat. At the same time, the surroundings were infused with a sulfurous smell—the smell of flammable gases.

Realizing what was going on, she immediately turned around and ran. Half a second later, she was overtaken first by orange flashes of light, then a scorching sensation, then a thundering roar. This was the dragon Nidhogg’s «Dragon Breath». Black Lotus’ translucent obsidian armor started making crackling sounds, like what happened when you preheated a pan.....no, that was exactly what was happening. Even though «Overdrive Mode Green» increased her defense, it was only effective against physical attacks, not things like heat damage. Tongues of flame soon reached her left and right, and her HP gauge began burning away. The health bar, which had started above 90%, dropped in the blink of an eye below 80%, close to 70%. If she got swallowed up by the flames, her health would drop to the danger zone in an instant.

“—Lotus! Over here~!” Kuroyukihime’s head jerked up.

Crikin stood with arms crossed in front of her, where the path from the hotel almost reached the main road. A small mountain had piled up behind him, an awe-inspiring mountain of scrap metal. About halfway up, she could see the exhausted Lagoon Dolphin and Coral Merrow.

For a moment, Kuroyukihime stopped thinking about her own problems as she spoke softly with words of deep gratitude.

—Ruka, Mana, you've really done well.

—Just watch. Your efforts will turn the tables yet again.

Kuroyukihime put all her effort into sprinting faster to escape the incoming fireball. Only a hundred meters left to the intersection.

Crikin drew in his stubby legs, then kicked off into a ridiculously high jump, far above the top of the pile of scrap behind him. He extended his arms and legs, and called out a skill. “Metal, be dyed in my color! «Mega Machine Awakening»—!”

His small avatar was bathed in a red light, and it began transforming. His chestplate shrunk to the same diameter as his head, and his arms also folded into his body. His two semicylindrical legs each spun out 90 degrees and clashed together, and finally, his sharp toes turned to point straight down. What stood there was no longer a humanoid avatar but rather a giant red screw.

This was probably the first time his two disciples had seen this move, too. As the awestruck young girls looked on, the screw began rotating at a very high speed. By the time it was spinning so fast the eye lenses were indiscernible, the screw plummeted straight down and stuck halfway into the pile of scrap. It drilled in with a metallic grating noise, spewing out sparks, until it disappeared from sight.

As Kuroyukihime charged forward towards the edge of the heap, she heard Sulfur Pot behind her yelling: “Whatever flashy tricks you small fry are

planning won't help you now! Watch as I roast you along with the Black King!”

At the same time, the flames behind Kuroyukihime grew stronger as Nidhogg began advancing while still breathing fire. At this rate, the two girls staying at the intersection would also be engulfed by the flames. Yet Kuroyukihime didn't tell them to escape, as she had faith in the strength of the Burst Linker called «the one with the strongest name», the level 7 Crimson Kingbolt.

The entire mountain of scrap metal began shining with red light.

Countless steel bars and iron plates floated up, as if gravity had vanished there. They came together and interlocked, as if they were parts custom-made for this, and gradually built up into a huge figure.

At first, it was two heavysset legs. They came together as the waist built up, then a round abdomen and blocky chest followed. Next, two long and powerful arms attached themselves to the left and right shoulders. Lastly, a head that appeared exactly like Crikin's was built up, and the transformation finished.

An eight-meter high fiery red «Gigantic Robot» towered over them. It raised his hands, and with a “kachang!” struck a pose with an impact that seemed to change the world into another game. “So...so...so fricking huge!” “Master's actually a giant!”



As Ruka and Mana cheered, the giant robot's eyes lit up, and with a resounding stomp it leapt into the air. It passed by the approaching Kuroyukihime in the air and landed directly in front of Nidhogg. Yet where he stood was the exact center of the dragon's spewing flame.

The torrent of flame struck the massive torso of the robot directly, and it turned into a fiery pillar that rushed up to the heavens. Once Kuroyukihime was sure the high-temperature attack had been blocked, she pivoted 180 degrees, drawing an arc out on the ground, and stopped.

The scene that appeared to her was the silhouette of the robot wavering in the haze from the flames, while further away Nidhogg continued breathing fire. It had been continuously using the attack for around thirty seconds, so its special attack gauge must really be colossal. However, its teeth were turning red-hot from the long exposure to the flames, and it seemed like the dragon itself was in a bit of pain.

But the rider on its back didn't seem like he had any intention of stopping the breath attack. He yanked the reins repeatedly, and for once he sounded impatient as he yelled: "Relying on this sort of slapdash junk...I'll burn you till there's not even ashes left! More, Nick, more firepower!"

Upon receiving its orders, Nidhogg opened its jaws even wider and spewed out even more intense flame. Several of its teeth shattered, unable to withstand the heat, and the corners of its mouth started charring too. Since the dragon's HP gauge was slowly decreasing, these were not just superficially rendered effects.

After a few seconds, Nidhogg's seemingly inexhaustible special gauge ran out. The flames died down, then stopped, and soon the roiling pillar of flame also dissipated into the sky.

What emerged from the flame was a giant metal robot crouched in a defensive stance, arms crossed in front. Although it hadn't been totally incinerated by the flame, its entire body had been scorched black, and some parts had melted, dripping down like stalactites.

“Big sis, the giant's done for!”

Upon hearing Mana's despondent outcry behind her, Kuroyukihime responded firmly:

“Don't worry, Crikin won't go down so easily.”

Then, as if the robot had heard those words—

Its eyes suddenly lit up with yellow light. The charred robot began moving stiffly. It uncrossed its arms and extended its fingers, aiming them straight at Nidhogg.

Ten lines of fire shot out from its hands, and innumerable casings discharged from its wrists. The dragon roared and backed up as bullet sparks shot across its face and shoulders.

“Wh, what the heck is this!” Sulfur Pot yelled incredulously as he ducked, crouching on the dragon's back. He seemed to have lost control of the Enemy in this position, unable to prevent its retreat. While the robot continued its machine-gun fire from its fingers, it opened its shoulder plates and fired salvos from the triple missile launchers that had appeared from underneath.



Next, it opened its chest plates to reveal an array of large-caliber cannons, which also started firing explosively.

In the blink of an eye, Nidhogg was swallowed up by countless small explosions, and its health gauge began dropping at a visible rate. This robot was truly one to be reckoned with, with firepower capable of dealing so much damage to a highly armored legend-class Enemy. However, this was to be expected — after all, before the appearance of the Red King, «Immobile Fortress» Scarlet Rain, he was hailed as the Burst Linker with the strongest long-range attacks in the Accelerated World.

As long as he participated in a Legion battle, the strategy would devolve into a contest: “Will you be able to collect enough metal or will we end up stopping you from getting enough?” Which is to say that once Crikin turned into a huge robot, the opposing team would be helpless with no chance of victory. When he mentioned before the battle that «with my abilities, this may turn out to be a good opportunity», he was talking about luring the enemy into this town area, where there was a lot of metal.

After fifteen seconds of the giant robot’s full-on assault, Nidhogg’s HP had already dropped halfway.

If the dragon were still «untamed», it probably wouldn’t have stayed in place obediently while enduring enemy fire head-on. Only because it was under restraint by an item, unable to move without direct orders from its master, did it receive such heavy damage.

Surely Sulfur Pot had seen the irony of the situation after the robot’s onslaught.

He slowly stood back up on the dragon's back, with no trace of his earlier levity. Loathing brewed in his goggle-like eye lenses as he growled.

“How dare... how dare you hurt Nick like this!”

Indeed, the dragon was covered with scorched or broken scales dripping purple blood. Its health would probably run out if it took another full-on assault. That being said, the robot would need quite some time to finish reloading its artillery. She should at least aggro a bit to buy some time for him to reload —

As Kuroyukihime thought this, just as she was about to step forward...

“Nick, one more time!!” yelled Sulfur Pot, as he tugged at his reins hard. The dragon slowly raised its head and opened its jaws, which had already been injured from the repeated flame attacks earlier. It seemed like he wanted it to perform another flame breath attack, yet they had seen earlier that fire-attribute attacks were ineffective against the giant robot. The robot could also use the time he was defending from the attack to replenish his ammunition, so this was actually beneficial to Kuroyukihime and her allies. Crikin surely thought the same way, as the robot crouched down and crossed its arms in a defensive position once again.

The dragon prepared to spit scorching flame —

Just before the flames poured out, Sulfur Pot thrust his arms forward and called the name of a new skill:

“«Charcoal Smoke»!”

Black smoke started spraying out of the holes in his palm, quickly enveloping the giant robot. Soon, even the area Kuroyukihime was in had been covered in smoke, and her field of vision was instantly obscured.

She jumped back reflexively, but her health gauge had not been affected, and her armor did not feel any different either. So was the black smoke just as the skill name said, like a smokescreen? If so, she should take advantage of the diversion and launch an assault under cover...

—Hold on.

“This odor...”

Kuroyukihime murmured as she concentrated on the sense of smell that was rarely of consequence in the accelerated world. This pungent smell of sulfur is...

“.....! No! Crikin, run! This smoke is —”

Her yell overlapped with Sulfur Pot’s call of his second skill.

“«Scorching Inferno»!!!”

“—It’s gunpowder!!”

Flames leapt out of the dragon’s open jaws, and the instant it shot into the black smoke.

A flash. A deafening blast. And the world shook. Kuroyukihime felt as if she were being blasted into the air by a giant’s fist, but she still forced her eyes open to take in the scene before her. She watched as pillars of flame spewed

out of the massive robot before the metal body blew up and scattered in pieces all around, which were in turn enshrouded by blossoms of red flame. She could hear Ruka and Mana screaming in the distance.

The explosive force had tumbled Kuroyukihime around so much she couldn't tell up from down, and she crashed to the ground flat on her back. Together, the explosion and the fall had taken away over 30% of her HP, and her health bar had turned yellow.

The second burst of flame seemed to only last two or three seconds, but that was all that was needed.

The flames subsided, and the gray smoke was blown away by the wind. What was revealed could only be described as the «site of an nuclear explosion». The wreckage of the robot lay in the middle of a patch of scorched earth, and the surrounding rubble had been blown away without a trace. At the intersection a little distance away, Lagoon Dolphin and Coral Merrow dropped to the ground in each other's arms, and Kuroyukihime was also unable to stand after the aftermath.

“... Crikin...?” She squeezed out in a raspy voice. Shortly afterwards, she saw something falling from the sky with a whistling noise, and it landed a few meters to her left, rolling on the ground. It was a large screw — no, it was Crikin who had been ejected from within the giant robot. His eyes flashed on and off irregularly, and it seemed like it would be a while before he could move.

Such wanton destruction made even the great robot's full arsenal look like children's toys.

Sulfur Pot's special ability of venting black gunpowder smoke, paired with Nidhogg's special ability of wide-range fire breath. These two moves had become a terrifying combo that had completely turned the tide of the battle.

"Heh...hehe, hahaha!" Hearing that laughter like a broken record, Kuroyukihime willed her unresponsive avatar to turn its line of sight, and she saw a huge silhouette appear from behind the clouds of black smoke.

"I never thought I'd be using «this move» in this kind of place. After all, I'll also take damage from it, so I didn't really want to use it..." Indeed, the giant dragon and its rider that had materialized from the smoke were covered in fresh wounds. As this was the Unlimited Neutral Field, she was unable to see Sulfur Pot's health gauge, but Nidhogg's second health gauge was all but depleted.

"...But, with this, you should understand now. Why I've been destined to be chosen as Nick's master. We are, man and dragon, of the same mind and body, and we're perfect for each other."

".....Hmph. You know what...don't kid yourself."

Kuroyukihime responded in a low voice as she fought the pain going through her entire body just to stand up. The sensation of pain in the Unlimited Neutral Field was already raised to double that of the Normal Dueling Field, and the heat and impact damage exacerbated the pain sensation even more. But she still forced herself to stand up firmly and continued taunting Sulfur Pot:

“I think that dragon has something to say to you. If you call yourself its master...then maybe you should work on your riding skills.”

“...Oh-ho, just what I’d expect from a king. So unwilling to admit defeat. Now I’m looking forward even more...to the sight of you crying and begging for mercy. But first of all, let me tell you, Nick still has a bit left in his special gauge...”

As he spoke, he tugged at his reins, and the dragon let out a low roar as it opened its mouth.

If she were to withstand another flame breath attack, even without combining it with the black gunpowder Kuroyukihime wouldn’t last ten seconds. If she fled at top speed, she might be able to make it to the portal in the hotel, but she absolutely refused to leave the helpless Crikin, Dolphin, and Mellow to their certain deaths. The only way out was to stay there and come up with a solution while using her high-speed hit-and-run tactics...

Just as Kuroyukihime had settled for having such a slim chance of victory, in that moment...

Feeling something indescribable occur, she raised her head to stare into the sky.

Nothing was changing in the rusty sky of the «Weathered» stage, but she definitely perceived a consistent high-density accumulation of information, as if the world was being rewritten. Is this an enemy attack? Or is it reinforcements from an ally...?

A small voice reached her from behind. “It’s fine, big sis.”

“.....?” She turned around and saw that Coral Merrow — Mana had sat up at some point and was gazing fixedly straight up into the sky. She looked a bit strange, though, and it seemed like the light in her eyes had changed color. That’s right, it was like just before they were about to dive together, when she had asked for a fourth XSB cable from Kuroyukihime.

“.....It’s coming.” said Mana again, as she lightly raised her right hand towards the sky.

## 10

Approximately 60 minutes of time in Accel World was equivalent to 1.8 seconds of real time.

The shadow of the person watching from the pillar at the side of the elevator hall ran toward the dive space of the resort hotel’s second floor after the three people, Kuroyukihime, Ruka and Mana, went inside the booth.

The reception was automatically online, user’s can be viewed from the booth’s drawn layout and was meant for choosing a private vacant space to rent. However, the pursuer checked for the location of the only booth for four that was occupied and went toward it without hesitation.

Far back at the place there was a closed door and naturally, it was locked. No voices can be heard from inside. The three users were probably in full dive. The pursuer touched the door and an electronic key input request dialog was displayed.

A white finger came from the sleeves of the thin parka and pressed the dialog’s OPEN button. Originally, the door shouldn’t have opened, but the lock was released along with a light sound. The finger did not move as the door pulled open. The slender body smoothly slipped inside the booth, the door closed once again and was locked.

The electronic key of this dive space was the same as the one used for each of the hotel rooms. Hence, strictly speaking, there was another person that holds the same key as Kuroyukihime. Sharing the room with her was Umesato Middle School Student Council Secretary, Wakamiya Megumi—.

What the booth intruding Megumi saw were three powerless bodies of girls with their eyes closed on the reclining chair facing each other.

Sitting alone on the left side was, of course, Kuroyukihime. And on the right side, there seemed to be two younger girls. The tanned faces were not familiar at all and they were wearing sailor uniforms with a common design, they weren't Umesato students but children attending a school in Henoko.

Being aware at that instant, Megumi's face was strained crumpled and she bit her lips tightly.

The Kuroyukihime that Megumi knew is sociable, but in reality, the wall in her heart was fairly tall and thick. She basically wouldn't allow any interaction with someone, hidden within her beauty was something terrible and a very restrained cynical and childish face that people knew.

That girl probably met these local kids through direct connection and full dived through a wired connection using a router. There were no other reasons that can be thought of except one.

«Another World».

The living half of Kuroyukihime, the real side, was concealed in a foreign place. The two girls were inhabitants of that world and probably as of now, they visited that place together with Kuroyukihime. Megumi foolishly stepped into the world which she was not even allowed to know the name, let alone to take a glimpse of it. The time was supposed to be used for choosing a souvenir for Megumi.



Her left hand was trembling, as she raised it and moved to Kuroyukihime's Neuro Linker.

She touched the XSB cable with her fingertips from the piano-black exterior shell and stiffly pinched it.

.....If I pull this out, she'll come back. Probably, it will be something important that will hurt her forever, but she'll come back to me from that place that I couldn't reach—.....

□ Don't do it! □

Suddenly, she felt someone's voice ringing inside her head.

Blinking in a flash, she looked at the trio's faces, all still in full dive. Their eyelids were tightly closed and there wasn't even a quiver in their lips. On the built in router on the low table, the indicator shows that all three lines were still in contact with global net.....

At that time, Megumi finally noticed. There were not only three cables. The fourth XSB cable extends from the router, but the plug on the other side was left on the table.

□ That is.....a door. Just for once, the door is inviting you to their place. Now then..... □

Guided by a young yet mysteriously dignified voice, Megumi moved away from Kuroyukihime's cable and reached for the low table with her right hand. She picked up the fourth XSB cable and brought the plug near her neck.

A wired connection using an unknown cable is an act that causes large security problems. Megumi knew enough about that but, there wasn't a hint of hesitation just now. The plug was connected to her floral pink Neuro Linker and a wired connection notice rose on her vision, and then.

On the table right in front of Megumi, a book visually appeared without making any sound. Though that object looked real, it was not even a 3D object, but there was certainly something there.

“Haa.....”

A faint sigh spilled from her lips. This is..... This really is the book that I loved long ago. I have read it for so many times, but this is the book with a story that I can't remember. Suddenly vanishing and unable to find it again, this important book.....

Megumi sat down next to Kuroyukihime and softly reached her hand to the large hard covered book. There was no title on the cover. However, there were countless colors combined in an arabesque like pattern.

Timidly, she flipped the cover.

On the first page, there was only a horizontal text written in English. Written in deep black ink, it was a charm. It was the magic word to visit the book's world. Megumi took a deep breath, as if she was to sing, as if she was to pray, she spoke of the phrase that consisted of two words.

«Unlimited Burst»

## 11

Hearing Mana's words, “It's coming”, Kuroyukihime once again looked up at the sky of the «Weathered» stage.

Countless wispy clouds flowed by in the sky, and she could not even see the shadow of a person. There would not be anyone here anyway. At this point in time, at this frontier of the Unlimited Neutral Field, only Kuroyukihime, Ruka, Mana, and Crikin were actually there. The invader Sulfur Pot had used some special method to dive here from Tokyo, a method no other Burst

Linker could use of their own free will. That is to say, the only other persons who could appear would be Sulfur Pot's accomplices, and that would only make things worse...

“!!!”

Suddenly, she saw light.

Innumerable tiny pink flashes appeared at one spot in midair, spinning in a vortex, as though they were flower petals being caressed by warm spring wind. The pink vortex rapidly expanded, and soon the whirling petals filled the entirety of Kuroyukihime's vision.

Two feet landed silently dead center of the vortex. High heels comprised of glass shined brightly as a very wide, light pink armored skirt materialized. The newcomer was very slender, her back ornamented with a large ribbon. The shoulders of her dress protruded roundly upwards, and she grasped a beautiful staff with both of her slender hands.

Her mask's design was graceful beyond description; her sharply defined platinum-blonde hair accessory blew slightly against the light breeze, making a rustling noise.

It was a duel avatar Kuroyukihime had never seen before. But at the same time, she was hit with an extremely intense realization — *I know her*.

This pale pink avatar slowly descended from on high without any sense of weight at all, and her glass high heels landed in front of Kuroyukihime. She smiled warmly at her from behind its mask... and said *those* words in *that* voice:

“Hime. I'm... here.”

“...! It c-can’t be... M-Megumi... is that you...?”

Using the real name of a Burst Linker was the greatest taboo in the Accelerated World, but in the heat of the moment, Kuroyukihime had forgotten that. She might be meeting this avatar for the first time, but that voice, and most importantly, the calmness that seemed to be emanating from her entire body, was unmistakable. She — this Burst Linker was none other than her best friend Wakamiya Megumi.

But this ought to be impossible. Megumi did not have the Brain Burst program installed, which was obvious from the fact that she did not appear on the Matching List within the Umesato Local Net. Moreover, she also could not have become a Burst Linker during the trip, as only Level 4s and above could dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field, and it was impossible to become Level 4 in just one or two days.

Then, Kuroyukihime noticed something.

The entire body of this duel avatar resembling Megumi was translucent. Especially the hem of her dress and the edges of her hair, which appeared to be wavering like a mirage. When she noticed this, realization flashed through her mind as though by way of divine providence.

— From the past?

Was Megumi a Burst Linker long, long ago? Long before Kuroyukihime had founded Nega Nebulus, when she was still a training Burst Linker in Minato Ward, Megumi had already left the Accelerated World, and lost Brain Burst... But now, because of some sort of operating logic, she has stepped foot into this world once more...?

She did not voice this conjecture.

Because a hoarse voice came from behind them, carrying within it a wave of enormous rage and annoyance.

“What’re you doing...?! What the hell are you doing?! I’m not gonna... let even more strange guys come and get in my way...!”

Kuroyukihime spun around and was met with the intimidating sight of Sulfur Pot standing astride his dragon, Nidlogg. His lens-eyes burned with the hues of hatred, staring at the five avatars congregated at the intersection —

“Enough of you people. Vanish, all of you, burn to ash!”

Sulfur Pot spat in a taut voice, and immediately pulled on the reins in his hands. Just then, a light haze began pouring from not the holes in his palms, but also holes on his shoulders, chest, and his waist.

“«Charcoal Storm»!”

As he shouted the name of the skill, the yellow duel avatar suddenly vented forth several times more smoke than before. The aimless plume, formed a whirlpool and covered the entire area. It seemed that he intended to blow apart the entire city.

“N-No...!”

Kuroyukihime staggered, preparing to start forward, but a hand laid on her shoulder.

“Don’t worry. I... will protect you, Hime.”

Megumi declared warmly, raising the staff in her right hand.

The large jewel embedded in its tip shined a kaleidoscopic glow, soon enveloping her entire avatar and continuing up into the sky.

With a swift flourish, Megumi spoke the incantation as though she were singing:

“«Paradigm Revolution».”

All of a sudden, an impressive column of light appeared and towered high.

Continuously shifting between the colors of the rainbow, the light pillar shot up between the clouds, then expanded outwards in a radial motion. The halo wavered and fluttered like a curtain, flowing into all that was visible.

This was Kuroyukihime’s first time seeing a skill like this, but she had seen an extremely similar phenomenon many times in the Unlimited Neutral Field. When the attributes of the entire Stage underwent a change, no, when the entire world was reborn, there would always be multicolored aurorae. In other words... In other words, this skill was——

“Forced... Transition...!”

Kuroyukihime yelled in a trembling voice.

«Transition» overwrote the appearance of the entire Accelerated World; one could say that it fell in into territory controlled only by divine providence. It was ultimately hard to believe that this could be triggered by a merely Burst Linker through their own free will, but yet it was the only explanation for what she had just seen.

Because even the very color of the sky was being changed within the halo of aurorae expanding endlessly beyond. The bleak covering of the Weathered stage had transformed into into an azure yonder, and the dusty gale had changed to a dry southern breeze——

“Wh... What.....?”

Sulfur Pot let out a cracked yelp of shock from Nidhogg’s back, ceased releasing the gunpowder, and tightened his hold on the reins.

“Light it up, Nick! We’ll blow them to pieces! «Scorching»...”

But he was unable to finish his command.

Because the ground had suddenly vanished.

Strictly speaking that was not entirely true; the sandy wilderness had transformed into cerulean water in the blink of an eye. Kuroyukihime, Ruka, Mana, Crikin lying on the ground, and even Nidhogg and his rider, were all swallowed.

Kuroyukihime hastily spread out her arms to halt her descent, then broke her head above the surface and looked around, but she could no longer see any sign of land. The 360-degree horizon around her had been completely engulfed, with only a couple of tiny rocks and islands scattered in the far off distance. This was the ultimate natural water-type Stage — «Ocean».

“... Hime.”

At this, Kuroyukihime spun her head around and saw something she did not expect.

What ought to be Megumi’s duel avatar was not submerged in the water at all. She was stepping lightly on its surface by the tips of her glass heels, spreading tiny ripples wherever she stepped.

Alighted on the ocean surface, Megumi explained calmly with a smile:

“The magic’s time is about to run out, so I have to go... Hime, you have to keep walking straight forward on your own path. I won’t look back anymore either...”

Kuroyukihime did not expect to understand the meaning behind those words right now, but she nodded hard and replied:

“Got it. Thanks, Megumi.”

Megumi nodded slightly and began to ascend. Kuroyukihime watched the pink duel avatar as it slowly returned into the sky, murmured “Thanks”, then inhaled deeply and submerged herself.

The emerald-green ocean water was unusually clear; she was easily able to ascertain the situation.

A short distance away, the great dragon Nidhogg was paddling its stubby limbs as its rider Sulfur Pot desperately grasped pulled the reins, as if he were attempting to pull the dragon to the surface. But this Enemy’s design was not suited for water. Bubbles spurted continuously from its maw, indicating that it was no longer able to breathe fire. The black flaming smoke that Sulfur Pot had released earlier was also completely dissipated.

Ruka and Mana looked around beside Kuroyukihime while treading water, appearing to not understand what had just happened. Crikin was flailing about wildly beneath them, letting out muffled voice, or rather, scream.

*“Heeelp, heeelp! I can’t swim!”*

Sure enough, the dense-looking screw-shaped avatar was sinking slowly. But metal items that Crikin could use were extremely rare in the «Ocean» stage. While there was a very slim chance that they could find a sunken ship at the bottom of the sea, they hardly had time for that.

“Sorry, Crikin, but I’m going to have to ask you to keep sinking for now. You did beautifully.”

Kuroyukihime said calmly, while Ruka and Mana said “Bye, Master~” and waved.



“Well... Dolphin, Merrow. This is the critical moment. We’ve got to get him before he gets onto an island!”

“Got it~!!”

“I’ll rush over and try to get the dragon occupied. You two find opportunities to attack from the sides, making sure you’re not targeted...”

Kuroyukihime instructed. The girls exchanged glances, and smiled proudly.

“No worries, big sis, this is the ocean~!”

“In the water, you can count on us~!”

With that, before Kuroyukihime could stop them, the two girls had already begun swimming ahead of her. Their avatars were truly befitting their names of dolphin and mermaid; their movements were very nimble, but that was not enough against the Enemy...

Just as Kuroyukihime was thinking of that.

Dolphin and Merrow spun once the water and shouted in unison:

“One, two! «Shape Change»! «Marine Mode»!”

Their bodies became wrapped in an azure and coral-colored gleam.

The tiny fins on Lagoon Dolphin’s arms and waist swelled to great size, and her legs adopted a streamlined design with large caudal fins at their tips.

Coral Merrow changed much more dramatically — her legs fused together, becoming a fish’s tail. She twisted her body within the water, her sharp caudal fins giving her a striking appearance just like that of a mermaid.

Having completed their transformation into Marine Mode, the two of them nodded at each other and began swimming in a straight line towards the enemies.

They moved at frightening speed, far faster than when they were running on land. The two of them navigated through the dense ocean water with great ease, approaching the great dragon like two fish.

Sulfur Pot seemed to finally notice the two of them approaching.

“—Get back, weaklings!” he yelled, tugging hard at the reins. In great pain, the dragon spun its head around, opening its large jaw of sharp teeth at Ruka and Mana.

Just as the two girls were about to be sucked into the dragon’s open maw, they suddenly made a nimble turn, swimming above the dragon, and began shooting in circles around Sulfur Pot. The ocean water immediately began to vortex, quickly swelling into a huge whirlpool.

“... Urgh... W-What are... you doing...?!” cried Sulfur Pot from the middle of the vortex. But as he spoke his body had already begun to slowly float away from the dragon’s back. At this point Kuroyukihime understood what Ruka and Mana were trying to do. They were attempting to use the rotation and suction of the whirlpool to prise the rider off the Enemy’s back.

“Rrgh... Rrrgghh...!”

Sulfur Pot clutched at the reins with all his might, but a yellow-type avatar lacking in basic physical strength was no match for the current. After all of five seconds his hands finally released the reins. Sulfur Pot was through into the spinning water tornado and almost thrown above the surface.

“Waghahhhh!”

Dolphin and Merrow ceased their rapid rotation and gave chase to the screaming avatar, intending to finish him off. But as for the Enemy... just as Kuroyukihime was thinking of it, Mana turned around to yell:

“Big sis! Cut its reins!”

“... Got it, leave it to me!”

Even if the roles had been flipped between the one giving and the one taking orders, Kuroyukihime immediately responded anyway. After all, those two girls had grown up on the beaches of Okinawa; this patch of sea was their world.

While not as fast as the other two, Kuroyukihime charged forward, using her swordlike legs as fins to shoot through the water, and soon she was near the Legendary-class Enemy Nidhogg, struggling without effect.

Now without a rider, the dragon seemed to have lost its ability to move. If Kuroyukihime were to attack its weak points now, such as its throat or eyes, she may be able to kill it, but she did not consider that choice at all. Instead she remained fixated on the leather muzzle around the dragon’s nose.

Ten meters... eight meters... when she was six meters away, Kuroyukihime flipped her body upwards and pulled back her right arm-blade with full strength.

“Ohhhhh... «Death by Piercing»——!”

With that fiery shout a purple blade shot forward at great speed, creating a blinding flash against the seawater, precisely severing the dragon’s muzzle.

The straps broke apart and the stiff ropes loosened from the dragon’s snout. Even after being freed from the confines of its Enhanced Armament, the Enemy remained still for a while, only moving its legs — but suddenly its eyes shined a vicious scarlet.

Alarms went off in Kuroyukihime’s head, but she suddenly realized something strange — the dragon’s target was not Black Lotus. Its sharp snout suddenly turned upwards and it began paddling its four limbs against the water, dragging its thick, violently swishing tail, swimming upwards at a

speed that made one wonder what its rigid movements just now were all about.

Watching Nidhogg swim over, Sulfur quickly shrieked:

“N-Nick, yeah, I’m right here! Eat those annoying weaklings!”

But neither Ruka nor Mana showed any intention of fleeing when they noticed the approaching Enemy, as though they knew full well about what was to happen.

Released from captivity, the dragon swam straight upwards with the magnificence of a submarine, towards the avatar which, seconds ago, had been its master. Sulfur Pot opened its arms wide as if to welcome it, saying complacently:

“Look, weaklings! Even without those reins, Nick knows that I... only I can be its master! Watch, I’ll have him tear you to pieces now, and turn you into fish food.....”

But he interrupted himself mid-sentence.

He stretched forward his open arms, and shook his head slightly.

“Hold on... This can’t be real, how, why... Nick, why are you...”

And without even sparing a glance at Dolphin and Merrow — the dragon swam right past them. In a flash it opened its jaws wide, showing its rows of pointed teeth to Sulfur Pot.

“Lies, lies, Nick, I’m your master! Lies, no, NOOO—!”

The shrill screams abruptly halted as Sulfur Pot’s head was swallowed by the gargantuan mouth. Countless teeth crushed into his yellow torso. The armor lasted but a moment against the pressure, before hairline cracks covered the

entire avatar, and it shattered into thousands of pieces and scattered away. His death had been much too easy, yet much too cruel.

Kuroyukihime, Ruka and Mana looked silently at the Legendary-class Enemy. The dragon turned its head around in a spellbound manner, watching the two girls, and Black Lotus floating a moderate distance away from them, and simply looked at them for a while...

Then it turned around and swam towards the east. The dragon departed from them at great speed, as if it had been a denizen of the sea all along, and its trails in the water slowly began to dissipate, die down, and finally completely disappear, leaving no trace of the Enemy behind.

Kuroyukihime gently paddled her legs, arriving at the girls' side.

“You did well, Dolphin, Merrow. You fought brilliantly.”

As soon as she said that, they suddenly reached out their arms and caught Kuroyukihime in an embrace, their small bodies trembling slightly. It had been their first time facing a Burst Linker as their opponent instead of an Enemy, and the thrill of battle had just begun to evaporate.

Kuroyukihime gently hugged the two girls, and continued swimming upwards.

Upon breaking the surface of the water, they could see a variegated curtain of light closing in onto where they were. The forced Transition that what ought to be Megumi's avatar had brought onto the Stage had already ended, and the world had returned to the way it was.

“Big sis.”

Kuroyukihime heard Ruka utter quietly. She turned to face her.

“Hmm? What's the matter?”

“... Listen. I will become stronger. I will keep training more, learning more, and getting stronger. And then... one day...”

The young Burst Linker pinched her lips shut, and Kuroyukihime gently caressed her head with the flat portion of her blade-arm.

“Yes, become stronger. I’ll wait for you... I’ll wait until we meet once again in this world.”

“Wow, Ruka’s mean. Me too, big sis!” yelled Mana, and with her other blade-arm Kuroyukihime patted the other girl’s head. The aurorae pressed closer, and the azure «Ocean» stage had once again returned to the «Weathered» stage.

“But come to think of it... I keep thinking that we may have forgotten something...” said Kuroyukihime with her head tilted, but then shrugged and decided to wait for the ocean to disappear first.

What she had forgotten about came back to her once she saw the screw-like Avatar lying on the ground of the Weathered Stage, a couple of steps away.

Crikin, who had been abandoned not only by Kuroyukihime, but even by his two disciples, had returned to the bar from earlier and the first thing he had done was to order aged wine with his giant mug, ranting drunkenly, “S’all right, s’all right, I’m just a screw anyway.”

Kuroyukihime tried to suppress her laughter, and leaned in to say something next to Crikin’s ear in a small voice. “Sorry, but could you bring Dolphin and Merrow back through the Portal? I don’t want them to see how cruel this world can be.”

Crikin immediately understood what she meant. He nodded, finished his drink and stood up.

“Oi, kids, let’s go home. ... Ah right, before that... Lotus, take this.”

Kuroyukihime caught something he had flicked over with the pointed tip of her arm. It was a card.

“I found this at the bottom of the ocean. I don’t have any use for it, so consider it as thanks for your help.”

“Oh...?”

Thin letters were carved into the silver surface of the card: **[Enhanced Armament: Mystical Reins]**.

“Enhanced Armament «Mystical Reins»...?”

Kuroyukihime murmured. Then she understood how this card had come to be. These must have been the reins used to bind the Legendary-class Enemy Nidhogg. When the Enhanced Armament had been severed by Kuroyukihime, it had returned to a «Field Leave State», had returned to its ownerless sealed card form.

“Um... I don’t really know how to use it...”

“Don’t say it like that. I hear there are some really interesting Enemies in the northern parts of Okinawa, like flying horses.”

“Hmm... Well... Since you insist, I’ll gladly and gratefully accept.”

Kuroyukihime opened her inventory, stored the card, and Crikin smiled proudly.

“Right! Come on, Ruu, Maa! If you sleep here again you’re not going to be able to sleep properly!”

He roused the two girls who had somehow fallen asleep in a corner of the bar, and dragged them outside. They groggily waved goodbye at

Kuroyukihime, who raised her own right arm-blade in response, then murmured:

“All right, next...”

While the battle had been fought, she still had something to do. She got up and left the bar, and after confirming that Crikin’s group had gone in the direction of the hotel, she herself headed a hundred meters west.

There sat a small ball of wavering yellow flame, the «Grave Marker» of Sulfur Pot left after he was devoured by the dragon Nidhogg.

Kuroyukihime knew that Sulfur ought to be watching her from close by in his Phantom State, so she said to him quietly:

“Sulfur Pot, when you are revived, if you tell me all about the cheating method you used to dive in long-distance from Tokyo, I will let you go just this once. If you don’t...”

The girl pressed her voice slightly deeper.

“... I’ll keep killing you until you feel like talking. Even if it takes hours or days.”

## 12

“Neenee~! Come to Uchina<sup>[11]</sup> again ‘kay~!!”

“Onee-sama~, take care~~~!!”

At the main entrance of the resort hotel, the two girls wearing sailor uniform who almost shred off their waving hands, took a deep breath, prepared their timing,

“Njichabira~~~!!”

And shouted.



Kuroyukihime, who was waving her hands from the bus' window, returned to her seat as the two's figure disappeared into the cock spur bushes, 'Fuuuh' and she let out a long breath. Perhaps, the young man with the shīkuwasā(probably) juice can that looked like a high schooler leaning on the bench a little far away from the two of them was the real Crikin, I think, I'll stop the in depth investigation here.

“Even in this place you've made some cute fans out there, that's just like you, Hime.”

As the smiling Megumi said that on the seat beside her, \*ehem\* she cleared her throat in refute.

“T-They are not like fans or sort but.....it's something like, a school cultural exchange.....”

“Okay fine, I'll write it on the Student Council Log then.”

“Uh, no, that's a bit.....”

Thursday, April 18th, 10 o'clock in the morning.

The 61 students of Umesato Middle School were on two large EV buses separately moving from Henoko heading to Yorontou. Though the return to Tokyo was scheduled for Saturday evening, the school trip had finally reached its latter half. The other students were feeling more excited toward the climax of the journey, but however, for Kuroyukihime, who was dead tired, she felt like resting only for today at least. Anyhow, the battle with the legend class enemy in the land of Henoko wasn't something expected to be experienced as an optional tour.

That also applied to Wakamiya Megumi, who was sitting at the left-side but, she was completely in her usual smiling face while flipping through the Yorontou virtual guide. It seemed like that Megumi, let alone the incident on

the Unlimited Neutral Field, it was like that she could not even remember visiting the booth that Kuroyukihime used to five in with Ruka and Mana.

Yesterday evening, Kuroyukihime, bursting out after accomplishing her goal, discovered Megumi with her eyes closed beside her on the sofa instead of Ruka and Mana who has left. She shook her for the time being and the girl soon opened her eyes, with a puzzled face, she curiously said ‘Why am I here?’.

After that, they went back to their room, changed clothes to eat dinner, went into the bath and till they were about to sleep, Megumi didn’t mention anything about Accel World even once, Kuroyukihime felt that she appeared to have modestly changed.

After dinner, upon returning to their room, Kuroyukihime directly connected to Megumi for the so titled ‘Student Council related important file synchronization’ and secretly confirmed if she have it on her local memory. However the BB program did not exist there. After all, this girl was once a Burst Linker and with a some kind of logic, she once again opened the door to the Accelerated World using a way that I still don’t understand even now.

However Kuroyukihime feels that it is okay. Surely that meeting given by this mysterious island of Okinawa is a moment of pure miracle.....

Those thoughts were broken by the blinking incoming text mail icon at the upper part of her vision. Kuroyukihime opening it, the sender was Crikin and its contents are information about the discovery of a deserted dive cafe at the town’s outskirts.

Sulfur Pot confessed that during his visit in Henoko on January for a School trip, he hid an illegally remodeled Neuro Linker with unequipped startup and global net connection function, provided by the higher-ups of their

«Organization», on the sofa of a dive cafe. Perhaps that Neuro Linker was a custom «Backdoor Program» device. The program should now be disabled after a BB central server patch, but in the case that patch somehow examines the existence of BB program inside the Neuro Linker, there is a possibility that it has a way to bypass it.

In that Neuro Linker, not just the backdoor, but the real brain burst installation would be cleared.

For such an unreasonable boldness, it is a chilling terrible way. It's because in order to prepare on putting the BB program in a Neuro Linker, there would be a real attack extortion..... also, a «Child» would be made without any explanation because there is no way to have a Neuro Linker immediately accept it.

Sulfur Pot also talked about the remote diving plot, but in relation with their «Organization», he didn't even try to crack his mouth. Furthermore, the moment Kuroyukihime was thinking of killing him continuously, the automatic disconnection safety activated, that's where he got away.

According to Crikin's mail, by the time he found the ownerless Neuro Linker, the power was cut off with the memory and even physically self-destructed. They're truly a very bold and cautious «Organization». Either way, there will be a time where I'll be able to hit them from the front.

—Well, I'll mercilessly crush them when that time comes.

Muttering in her thoughts, Kuroyukihime closed the mailer and a cup with rising steam was held out beside her. From the its aroma, it was black tea with citrus flavor additive. She gratefully accepted it and expressed her thanks.

“Thank you, Megumi.”

“You're welcome.”

Her close friend softly smiled, slightly changed her facial expression and continued with a low voice.

“Hey, Hime.”

“N?”

“I think, I’ll write a story with Okinawa as its setting when we get back to Tokyo. A story about the sea, a dragon, mermaids..... and a swordsman wearing a black Kimono. You know yesterday, I dreamed about that.”

“.....I see.”

Kuroyukihime smiled, Megumi softly placed her right hand over her own left hand.

“Of course, I’ll be the first reader right?”

“Fufu, then you should be prepared. ‘Cause it will be quite long.”

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it. Also, I’m looking forward for the souvenir Megumi bought for me. What could it be.....uumu, my cosmic intuition says.....”

“Ah, you can’t do that Hime! What will you do if you really got it right?”

“Mmmm.....I see it! It is.....!”

“No, I said you can’t! If you say any more, I’ll give you a rub!”

Above the heads of the two girls who were having fun, two carry bag were lined up at the luggage shelves above their head.

Inside Kuroyukihime’s bag, there was a Sakuragai in a cherry blossom flower form handicraft necklace.

And in Megumi's bag, a black Choukai in a black swallowtail butterfly handicraft necklace was inside.

The two of them presented it at the student council room, there was a big surprise to their magnificent agreement, followed by lots of smiles on their faces with stories about the several days that had passed.

▶▶ accel World  
- Elements -

# ▨ Versus

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## Versus

*(Roppongi, April 2026)*

“Heh..... So this is the «Fourth Generation FullDive Experimental Machine».”

I muttered while looking up at the huge enshrined hexahedron in front of me.

The bare aluminum surface was shining dully, with growling sounds from several of the large cooling fans that were lined up . One side of it was linked to the gel bed, the headrest was covered by a protruding crude helmet-based interface.

“So huge, weren’t the machines used in the early days of the amusement parks smaller than this, Higa-san?”

I turned around and said to the man at the control console. The operator raised his face, shrugged and replied,

“Even so, Kirigaya-kun, this is already compact compared to the original estimate. Besides, the specs of the first generation at the olden days’ game centers weren’t much different from Mega Drive or Dream Cast.”

“.....I never saw either of the real machines though.....”

“Well, then let’s have life songs! This time at my apartment, it’ll be a strictly reggae camp.....”

And the man who blurted out strange things was —— Higa Takeru, the researcher responsible for the development of the world’s state-of-the-art VR machine. Looking at him from the outside, it would be hard to believe, as his hairstyle stuck out thinly like a pin holder, he wore big rounded glasses, and his T-shirt had a game character printed on it. It would be hundred times

more matching for him to be in the vicinity of the shops in Akihabara than this gloomy hi-tech room.

But even though I say that, I was still in uniform after school time too.

Why was I — Kirigaya Kazuto, here at the harbor ward in Roppongi, in the laboratory of a certain venture company? The reason was simple, it was just a part-time job.

From the first-generation of the large scale amusement machine, to the second generation NerveGear or AmuSphere, then to the third generation medical equipment, the FullDive machines have evolved. Of course, anyone can use it, but there were some with a certain degree of adaptability. That is, their brains could connect to the machine with a high efficiency rate. And in addition to the innate aptitude, the experience could be improved during a long Dive.

Then in Japan, no, the entire world, the group of people who held the longest Dive time was without a doubt, the «Survivors» from «SAO incident» which concluded one and a half years ago.

This fourth generation machine has been developed under the leadership of Higa Takeru, the level of connection precision was overwhelming compared to the machines up until now. That high specs led to the unexpected problem. Because the amount of information that had to be exchanged with the brain was too great, even with all the staff including Higa-san himself, they were unable to collect data from the test Dive to a satisfactory level due to the «VR Sickness» — was what he said.

At that point, Higa-san used a certain connection to request one of the «Survivors», me, to be a test Diver as a part-time job, I came here to Roppongi after I confirmed the daily wages, and that was it.



“——Anyway, I am to FullDive with this, then once in there I just move here and there, right?”

I asked for affirmation while stroking the chilled aluminum exterior, Higa-san nodded in consent.

“Oh, I need to warn you that I can see the graphics inside just as you do, like a voyeur. As I’m still developing the mechanism to adjust the connection depth in accordance to a Diver’s ability, someone has to dive, or else I can’t get the data, hahaha.”

“.....Well, because I get paid, doing anything is fine.....but before that, I need affirmation for one thing please.”

I glanced at the strong headgear interface and continued,

“Erm, there won’t be any danger during the Dive..... Is that right?”

“Of course of course of course!”

Higa-san nodded deeply after saying that three times.

“Kirigaya-kun is an SAO survivor, I understand your feelings. It’s alright, danger from the machine developed by me, there’s only a little!”

“Is that so, I’m relieved to hear tha...”

Swallowing the words I was about to say, I looked at Higa-san again.

“.....«there’s only a little»?”

“Nonono, It’s alright It’s alright It’s alright!”

After saying that three times each, Higa-san continued in a rapid whisper.

“.....Just that, if the power dropped during the Dive, then ‘that’ for a moment.....”

“What is ‘that’.....?”

“Nono, no problem! We have two support power sources, and an emergency battery is already equipped too!”

“Please explain ‘that’ instead.....”

“Nonono, no problem! There’s no real harm! It just, erm, a bit, how to say it.....”

Higa-san rolled his eyes behind the rounded glasses while stepped closer, my glance was fixed on him.

“.....How to say it, well, it might appear, just that.”

“.....What will appear?”

“Hahaha, it’s not good Kirigaya-kun. There are things we must not talk about, like bonuses or toilets. In a place like this, the thing that will appear is of course ‘that’, hahaha.”

After saying that, Higa-san hung both hands loosely in front of his chest. That behavior finally let my brain realize what ‘that’ means.

“Hah.....? G..Ghost.....?”

*What is this person saying?*, I thought while still staring at Higa-san, who shook his head again and said,

“It’s real, very real, Kirigaya-kun! I actually saw it! .....Well, as you can see, this experimental unit is still the only machine in the world, so there is

only a single person during the Dive. But..... the staff saw a silhouette of a person on the grass many times during the test field dive.”

Higa-san said with an expression that should have the thin vertical lines over his forehead if this was a manga.

I had a serious look for a moment, then it was replaced by a bitter smile. I shrugged my shoulders.

“It must be because of the VR sickness, probably the illusions from light effect? Or it could be a bug in the shader program.”

“No—! There is no way such a bug could appear in the program this genius Higa had participated in creating!”

For some reason, his tone suddenly changed to be like a foreigner’s, but I ignored it and moved my shoulders again.

“Still, the ghost didn’t even come out to this room..... About ghosts appearing in the VR world, while in Aincrad when I heard rumors and went to check, it was just an NPC anyway.”

That of course, was about the existence of the top-down AI «Yui» who was my and Asuna’s «Daughter». She would get angry if I tell her that I was searching for a ghost at first.

“.....In other words, everything seen in the other side is all digital code, the existence must be written somewhere in the memory address. By examining the log of the corresponding test Diving time, you can see what the Diver saw.....”

After I said that, Higa-san made a pointed mouth like a child.

“Of course I checked it, but there was nothing in the log. Which means, it was certainly not an object from the main program of the experimental machine. Then it was really a ghost, or.....”

“.....Or?”

“.....Err, this talk is at the level Kirigaya-kun is not supposed to know, so don't let anyone know you heard it, alright?”

With a strict preface, Higa-san continued,

“At the heart of this experimental machine is «Quantum Operation Circuit», the so-called quantum computer.”

“.....That was also Higa-san's creation?”

“Oh yea, was what I wanted to say, but its basic foundation was actually what Kayaba-senpai left behind. Well anyway, it is possible that the quantum computer could interfere with a parallel world , well..... the Sci-Fi world.”

“.....That..is really true?”

The tone in my question had changed, Higa-san, half agreeing and half disagreeing, shook his head.

“I hope I know that for certain too, but if it's true, then it would explain the ghost phenomenon. That is, this experimental machine, for some reason....., interfered with the same kind of the machine in the past or the future from a different time flow, then it could be possible to see the shadow of another Diver.....”

“.....Somehow this is very different from a real ghost, isn't it”

I shrugged my shoulder again, then glanced at the clock at the wall.

“Appearing or not, we will only know during the Dive anyway. ....Today my little sister will make something, I will be in trouble if I came back after dinner time. So let’s start.....”

“Heh, Kirigaya-kun has little sisters!? How many!?”

Higa-san’s reaction made me feel a strange sense of déjà vu, I ignored the question and sat on the bed of the experimental machine. I lay my body to fit its recesses then slid my head inside the headgear.

“OK, I’m ready.”

I said to Higa-san, whose face still showed lingering disappointment. Closing my eyes, the sound of a motor could be heard, the final explanation reached my ears,

“.....Then, commencing connection. Avatar will be Kirigaya-kun’s «Self-image» that is automatically generated, so it won’t cause discomfort.”

“Understood.”

I raised my left thumb in response. At the same time, a low growl could be heard from the back of the experimental machine.

\* \* \*

—————*Again.*

Feeling strange fluctuations in his field of vision, Arita Haruyuki narrowed the eyes of his pink pig avatar.

«Burst Link» command allows one to enter the world dyed in transparent blue, the basic accelerated space «Blue World».

Equipped in Haruyuki’s neck was the quantum communication device «Neuro Linker». And installed even deeper inside was the mystery

application «Brain Burst». When FullDiving in this transparent blue field, the BB program accelerates Haruyuki's command reactions one thousand fold.

The basic accelerated space was for searching the matching list to find opponents, or to start external applications to do various work, the reason for Haruyuki being «Accelerated» was for the latter. That was —— for the submission of today's homework, to be more precise, the postponed time left was fifteen real life minutes. The Japanese history class during the fifth period had given out the report homework, and of course, the storage region of his brain had forgotten about it even after he registered it in the scheduler application.

Because this was neither mathematics nor English homework, the last resort of asking Takumu or Chiyuri for their homework photograph in order to copy it wasn't an option —— Even though the costly loan, without a doubt, would be collected later —— it was better than having to write the essay report.

Therefore, consuming a precious one burst point to «Accelerate», he battered intently at the holographic keyboard. However,

His thoughts shook and swayed when he lifted his face due to the odd observation reflected in his field of vision, in the middle of the empty blue classroom,

“.....What.....?”

He muttered when his avatar dropped from the chair. He stared ahead a few steps between the rows of the desk, and part of the blackboard waved faintly again. It was —— like there was something transparent moving between Haruyuki and the blackboard.

In fact, this wasn't his first time coming in contact with such phenomenon. Recently, here —— about a month ago, sometimes during FullDive he could

see the strange fluctuations as well. Moreover, it wasn't in the normal VR world, only while «Accelerated».

However, today's clarity of the phenomenon was unusual. Haruyuki had forgotten about his homework, he stared intently.

Then he immediately noticed something.

“.....A person?”

Yes, a fluctuation at the spot in the classroom looked like the silhouette of a human, as if there was a completely transparent human standing there.

But that shouldn't be the case.

The blue basic accelerated space was, as a general rule, the world only for a person who uttered the «Burst Link» command. For two or more to Dive at the same time, both sides must be using a direct connection on the Neuro Linker and use the accelerate command at the same time. But of course, at the moment, Haruyuki wasn't directly connected to anyone.

.....That means.

“.....G..Ghost?”

Scared by the word he inadvertently murmured. Haruyuki tried to retreat to the back of the classroom, but at that time.

The clear shadow started approaching him at the same time!

“Hi,hiiii—!!”

Screaming, while dashing back at a high speed, he unconsciously tried to shout the acceleration halt command.

“B-B-B-B-Burst Ou.....”

But he stopped his steps at that point.

*This is not the real world, it is the polygon world created by the image of the Neuro Linkers from the social cameras. Everything reflected in the eyes are all the digital data which could be substituted with the code. Therefore, there must be a reason for the existence of that shadow too, there is no ghost, ghost is just a lie.*

Haruyuki thought recklessly while hiding behind the last row of the desk. *Something that looks like human shadow — what is it? There must be a way to verify it. Assuming it is just another human, this is not a normal VR space but the accelerated space, I didn't Burst Link with that «Someone». Then if I connect to the network with the same Burst Linker—*

“T-That's right..... T-T-The name will come up from the Matching List.”

Haruyuki murmured with dry lips. He then quickly hit the «B» icon displayed at the top left of the virtual desktop, the Brain Burst Console screen expanded, he moved the tab to open the Matching List.

*On top of the list is my name, then it should be the classmates Takumu «Cyan Pile» and Chiyuri «Lime Bell». In addition, at the lounge of the school cafeteria, is Kuroyukihime «Black Lotus». These four are the only existing Burst Linkers in this Umesato middle school.*

Yet.

Floating on the fifth row, the wriggled set of dots was blurred like it was written in ink.



That spot of light, for some reason, didn't take form of the characters immediately. Haruyuki held his breath and watched while trembling intensely, then, he blinked — a few alphabets finally formed.

There was a fixed form to the Duel Avatar's name, but that name didn't take the «Color Name» form, it was just a row of six characters.

“K.....I, R, I....., T.....O.....?”

——*Kirito?*

*Who is he.....?*

As if to trace his thoughts, Haruyuki's right hand automatically moved.

He hit the mysterious Burst Linker name, «KIRITO», causing the «DUEL» option to pop through the window, then touched the «YES» affirmation dialog.

The blue classroom melted and disappeared as if it collapsed.

While passing through the space of darkness, Haruyuki's pig avatar was surrounded by the light and changed its shape, The big helmet with thin limbs, silvery white Duel Avatar «Silver Crow».

On both sides of the upper part of his vision, green stamina gauges extended, and the «1800» time count was engraved in the middle.

And finally the flaming text «FIGHT» shone brightly before exploding.

Once his stiff feet touched the surface of the battlefield, Haruyuki quickly raised his face.

‘Someone’ stood in front, slightly away from him.

*Duel Avatar* — no, that isn't it. He thought.

As far as Haruyuki knew, the avatar of each Burst Linker had the appearance of a robot-like hardness. While some wore cloth, there were no flesh and blood faces across the board.

But this 'someone' who stood in front of him clearly had a human's appearance.

A male, with slightly long hair, his sharp eyes were jet black. He seemed to be slightly older than Haruyuki, wearing a black leather longcoat, thimble gloves on his hands, and boots on his feet. Then — suspended on his back were two long swords.

“.....Swords!?”

Murmuring in a hoarse voice, Haruyuki put some more distance between them.

There was no mistake, it was familiar in the fantasy game genre, the so-called «Long Sword». The handles were black and silvery white respectively, although they were polygons, he could tell from the radiance of the texture that they would be very heavy. He felt that the presence of blades within those scabbards were genuine.

That was not a Duel Avatar, but he didn't think it was the harmless FullDive avatar either.

While cautiously observing his opponent, Haruyuki took a deep breath and shouted,

“Who are you.....!? How exactly did you connect to the Umesato Local Network!?”

The voice tinged with effect echoed throughout the field, but the black dressed swordsman was still motionless.

Disregard that —— rather, it was as if the voice wasn't received in the first place.

Looking closely, the outline of the swordsman avatar was misted like smoke, was it disembodied? —— Was it just the image being sent from somewhere? Haruyuki thought that, and to verify it, he took a step closer.

At the same moment, the swordsman made his move too. The black shiny boot made a step forward, it stepped on the small pebble on the stage ground, causing a sound.

“————!!”

*Not the virtual image!*

Haruyuki jumped backwards in panic again, he raised both hands in a guarding stance.

As if being induced by that movement, tension ran through the face of the swordsman, his right hand quickly grabbed the handle of the black sword behind his back.

\* \* \*

——*Where exactly is this place?*

——*And, who is that!?*

I earnestly kept repeating these two questions in my mind.

The prior lecture from the operator, Higa-san, was that the Dive field would be a peaceful grassland, but the scenery spread around me was the complete opposite.

The cracked ground, the concrete buildings that had partly collapsed, flames came out of their openings, And —— the starless night sky. It was just like the world after civilization had collapsed.

If the only existence here was me, it would be just an error in the quantum circuit, which I suspected caused my consciousness to jump to the future Tokyo. But fortunately, there was a human shadow just a few meters in front of me.

The silhouette was surely human's, the head was like a big helmet, all of the body was covered in metal armor. The reflection from the bonfire sparkled on that silvery body, which was very slender compared to its big head. It was unthinkable that there would be a human inside it. Furthermore, its back was carrying something that looked like the radiating fins.

“Robot.....?”

I murmured. As I stepped closer to verify it, the sole of my boots stepped on some rubble causing a sound.

At that moment, the silvery robot quickly jumped backwards —— both hands moved forward into a guarding position.

*It had no weapons, but the tip of its sharp fingers glittered. It would be plausible that it had some strong weapons hidden.* When I thought that, my right hand moved automatically over my shoulder, grabbing the grip of the sword hung on my back.

——Sword?

Then I finally realized that I wasn't Kirigaya Kazuto, the high school student in the real world, but Kirito, the swordsman from the nostalgic SAO period.

Higa said that when I dive, the avatar would be created from my self-image. In other word, currently I wasn't in my own flesh and blood body, but the «Black Swordsman» which shouldn't exist anywhere anymore, I almost made a bitter smile at this thought. However, I wasn't in the situation to do that. Why did the mysterious robot make that stance with both hands? Right, I also grabbed the handle of my sword. I was in a somewhat dangerous situation with this robot.

*If I pulled out the sword like this, the robot would attack without a doubt. But it would be hard to prevent that while I'm standing in this awkward form anyway. The fighting spirit is emitting from it and such things don't exist in soulless NPC or monsters. In other word, there must be a real human moving it.*

Within the intense atmosphere, I decided to take a chance with words,

“.....Um, who are you? This place is my company's closed network. Where are you from and for what purpose are you connecting here?”

*But there was no answer, Looks as if that thing can't hear my voice, then how about gesturing? But to do that in this situation would be difficult. If I move my right hand even slightly, the robot in front of me might jump immediately. The tension of the atmosphere in the space between us is so tense.*

—*Yeah, I was in the wrong the moment I grabbed my sword, but you are a bit too aggressive too!*

That was what I complained in my mind. The silvery robot had penetrated the company's protective firewall into the experimental machine, it was clearly illegal hacking. Then wouldn't it be more appropriate to be a bit more sneaky.....

When I thought to this point.

After a long time, I finally noticed the indicators fixed at the top of my field of vision.

At the center was the digital figure, the current [1740] had been decreased by one second. Then on both sides, the green shining bars, lined up in parallel with the thin blue bars.

Under the left side bar was the engraved character string [KIRITO]. No matter how I look at it, it was my name — The Login ID I passed to Higa-san before the Dive.

Then under the right bar was the brightly shining [SILVER CROW] name.

“Silver.....Crow.....”

I soundlessly murmured that, it was no doubt the name of the silvery robot in front of me.

*The components of this ‘screen’, and this situation.*

I widened my eyes to the revelation that I suddenly realized.

*This is — this world is clearly not the peaceful test field at all.*

It was a «Battle Field». Currently I was in a nostalgic game, I Dived into the so-called fighting game!

*Higa-san said there was a certain degree of possibility that the quantum circuit mounted within the experimental machine could interfere with the world on a different time flow. If so, then this place may be the world in 1990’s era when fighting games were at its peak? No, it can’t be. For that era, the ‘F’ of the FullDive didn’t even exist yet. Then is this the future? I don’t know how many years into the future, but fighting games will be back in the spotlight in the future?*

“Hey, You.....Silver Crow.”

Forgetting the fact that my voice wouldn't reach my opponent, I continued saying,

“Is this place within a fighting game? What is the title.....?”

While I was asking,

I carelessly stepped forward while my hand was still on the grip of my sword.

The reaction was —— immediate.

The left foot of the silvery robot avatar kicked the ground, and while I was surprised, the thin body closed in on my bosom like a streak of lightning.

\* \* \*

The left foot had decided due to its own reflexes, and a corner in Haruyuki's head yelled *Crap*—.

The approaching action of the opponent might not have been for attacking purposes, as the sword wasn't pulled out, and he wasn't even in a proper stance with his bosom wide open.

But it was no longer possible to cancel the ultra high speed attack command set by Haruyuki's consciousness. The Silver Crow avatar rushed in at full speed, and threw a preemptive right middle kick aimed towards the flank of the swordsman dressed in black.

Originally, Haruyuki's fighting style wasn't this decisively aggressive. Looking at how he fought his early opponents, he seemed to be gradually changing based on attributes and techniques he gained over time.

In addition, the one in front of him, the strange duel avatar without a color name and with his exposed flesh and blood face, his only feature was the

black covering his entire body. If it were red or blue, he might have been controlled from somewhere close by, however, this wasn't the case for black. He should have asked Kuroyukihime-senpai for the characteristics of «Black», but since he was already in the confrontation, it was too late now.

Even against an opponent with unknown characteristics, Haruyuki's preemptive attack with just an insignificant action was — clearly, the swordsman in black, «KIRITO»'s tremendous pressure's fault.

If anything, his slender physique, the still developing face that could be called a boy's, but just how he was standing with his hand on the sword grip made Haruyuki's throat dry from the constant feeling of intense pressure. It was likely from a level 7 or 8 High Ranker — no, higher than that, probably the tension of facing those «Kings» one-on-one.

If the mysterious swordsman had opened a small chance, Haruyuki would rather retreat to hide and ascertain the situation in the narrow path of the «End of the Century» stage. But there was nothing that could be called an opening from the swordsman — «Kirito». Haruyuki was afraid that his head might fly off from a sudden attack if he tried to retreat, however slightly.

Therefore, as soon as Kirito had taken a casual step, Haruyuki charged ahead with all of his outburst energy.

— *But, things have already reached this point, then there's no other choice!*

Haruyuki swallowed the depressing thought the moment he drew up the kick.

When facing a fellow Burst Linker, do not «Battle» earnestly. That was what his teacher, and at the same time his 'parent', Black Lotus had taught him. If the middle right kick strikes, it would disrupt the opponent's stance, then the rest would be just to continue rushing at close range without giving any



chance for him to pull the sword from his back. And finishing him off with an aerial dive attack when the special move gauge had accumulated to the halfway point.

The first attack loaded with those kind of intentions passed through the opponent's abdomen like a silvery arc in the dark night——

With a light sound, only a button of the coat went flying into the sky.

“Wh.....”

While adjusting his balance, Haruyuki forcibly exhaled.

*It's impossible. Given the short interval, and that he wasn't in a proper stance, blocking should be difficult enough, but he evaded it completely.*

Haruyuki eyes wide opened in confusion. At the same time, the boy's right arm flashed, and with a bright metallic sound, he drew out his jet black long sword.

\* \* \*

It was at an amazing speed.

The silvery white avatar «Silver Crow»'s rush with his middle right kick slipped past my abdomen, its movement was ultra smooth as if it had been repeatedly practiced thousands of times.

However, due to its smoothness, I could feel where the first attack was aimed at.

The one moving Silver Crow was a living human, there's no mistake about it. Then, when the human operates the avatar, there will be the tiny bits of information exposed from its movement which didn't exist in monsters. The significant ones are heart beats, toe direction, waist height, and gaze.

For a duel in SAO, it would be fatal to get hit by a single strike, so it was very important to read the opponent's movement in advance. Therefore when needing to fight with an evenly skilled person, any move fired from a long distance must be avoided at almost a hundred percent rate. Jumping moves need to be blocked, as evading might leave an opening, and a favorite special move is sure to be inserted in between the flow of continuous attacks that followed.

From that perspective, the Silver Crow's middle kick speed was, without a doubt, marvelous. But its movements gave out too much information at the initial moments, I could feel the intention to hit my left flank, so I dashed backwards with all my strength. Settling it with just a single coat button sent flying was already considered lucky.

It seemed like Crow didn't expect the attack to be evaded, the swing caused the upper part of the body to lose its balance. That was a good opportunity, because, even though I positively thought it wasn't a situation I should fight in, my right hand automatically moved to pull out one of my beloved swords — «Elucidator».

“Shi.....”

While feeling the nostalgic weight in my hand, I quickly swung down the sword. With a thin band of blue light, the blade cut into Silver Crow's right shoulder.

\* \* \*

“Ah.....”

Haruyuki let leak a weak sound, staring at the looming sharp edge.

Unable to evade, and it couldn't be blocked with an arm either. Kirito's motion from drawing the sword until slashing didn't look powerful at all, it

looked so natural, yet the enormous amount of power that was put on the blade made Haruyuki feel like receiving an electric shock through his avatar.

The metallic colors, like Silver Crow, had some resistance to slashing attacks. But he felt it was of no use against this sword, so in that case, he had to make sure to take minimal damage from it.

Although the battle had just begun, Haruyuki's consciousness had started to «Hyper Accelerate» as if he was already at the edge of the jaws of death. The closing blade seemed to slow down slightly, Haruyuki bent his knees, dropping his avatar down at the same time as the incoming slashing vector. The black shiny blade touched his right shoulder's armor, causing pretty orange sparks to fly in all directions. As he had expected, the sword wouldn't stop there, the crack ripped apart Haruyuki's silver armor faster than the speed at which he descended, one centimeter, two centimeters was cut by the blade. At this rate even if he fell down to the ground, the sword wouldn't stop and his right arm would surely be cut off. ——But,

“.....Now!!”

The HP gauge was reduced by the damage to the shoulder, and a similar proportion of the special move gauge had filled up with a shiny glow. Haruyuki then converted it to flying force, the silver wings took shape in the form of commas on his back.

At that time, the falling posture gained backwards thrust——

Silver Crow body had only slid by fifty centimeters, but the sword had separated from the cut in the right shoulder.

“.....Ooooo!!”

Roaring, Haruyuki kicked the ground with all his might, and jumped a large distance back.

\* \* \*

—*What happened!?*

Feeling the impact from the point of sword biting into empty ground, I held my breath.

The black blade of the Elucidator had caught the shoulder of Silver Crow, there was no mistake about it. It hit the seams of the armor I aimed at, and I was sure just a breath more and it would have been cut off. But the silvery robot suddenly gained backwards momentum and fled away with a cut wound about two centimeters deep.

Such behavior wouldn't be possible in that situation. That completely different movement, it was as if it was being pulled from the back with some wires.

I looked up quickly, staring at the more than ten meters in distance the avatar took in just the blink of an eye.

Of course, there were no wires attached to its body, and I couldn't see any opening Jet holes either.

—*No.*

Folded on the back of Crow were thin metal fins. Did they tremble a split second before the back dash?

*If the secret behind the impossible maneuver was those fins, then my initial assumption that they were radiating fins was incorrect — It must be some sort of propulsion system. But if that was the case, why didn't it use them from the start?*

When I thought up to that point, I noticed a slight change from all sorts of information displayed in my field of vision.

First, the Silver Crow's stamina gauge on the upper right had decreased a little, around three percent.

Then, my stamina gauge on the upper left was still full, and the thin blue gauge beneath it had slightly emitted light.

So this field was in compliance with those antique fighting games like I expected, the meaning of the blue gauge was obvious. The «Special Move», no doubt about it. Then this gauge probably charges based on the amount of damage taken. In other word, when Silver Crow was damaged by my sword, the gauge began to accumulate at the same moment, I suspect consuming it created a driving force from the fins on its back. Conversely, if it couldn't charge the special move gauge, Silver Crow wouldn't be able to use those fins anymore.

——But, in that case, what was my «Special Move» when I didn't have that kind of equipment on my back?

Now that I was using the avatar of «Dual Blades» Kirito and with the two beloved swords, my self-image —— In other words, it was created from my memory. If they worked in this fighting game's system, the special moves should be awakened from my memory as well. Then, asking what I will take as special move, I can promptly reply. It's nothing other than «Sword Skill».

I put my right foot forward, set the sword behind, and assumed a basic one-handed straight sword skill «Sonic Leap» stance. Doing so caused the sword to growl faintly, at the same time the shining part of the special move gauge blinked, and then abruptly stopped. This meant the gauge wasn't enough to use the move.

“.....I get it now.”

I murmured while looking again at the opponent in front of me.

From the reaction of Silver Crow, and from the scene composition, I was apparently the trespasser in this situation.....no, «Intruder» was a more suitable term. It seemed Crow played in this game stage daily, and I, no, the fourth generation experimental machine’s quantum circuit had interfered. I wanted to immediately log out and complain a great deal to Higa for making such a dangerous thing, but there was no log out button in the field of vision, and I didn’t know any commands for those purposes either.

But since this was inside a fighting game, once the «Battle» had ended, the connection should be cut off.

If that was the case, it wasn’t my hobby to stand still eating the attacks until my stamina gauge was completely depleted either.

Why? I was the «Intruder». It is an appropriate manner to break through using my full power, isn’t it?

Since I have been thrown out into this stage, my mouth made a faint smile for the first time.

The switch inside my head made a ‘click’ changing sound.

\* \* \*

The moment the unknown identity Burst Linker «Kirito» made a little smile, Haruyuki felt goosebumps on his virtual skin. The pain from his right shoulder’s wound suddenly disappeared.

Holding his ground against the intense pressure that blew by, the desire to retreat rose up within him.

Kirito had intruded the Umesato Local Network, but it was Haruyuki who saw the name in the matching list and applied the duel mode. Picking the fight then retreating wasn't an option for him, as a member of the legion «Nega Nebulas».

*—This is not a situation to be scared of! If we can't talk, then the only way to collect information from him is to use fists directly — but since that side has a sword — is there any other way?*

At the same time he heard himself saying that, he felt something burning deep inside him.

Kirito's reaction to avoid his full speed middle kick was the fastest he had ever seen fighting with duel avatars up until this point. Wanting to see that movement again, and then surpassing it.

Clenching both his fists hard, Haruyuki decided to rush in again while lowering his body.

The big moves from long distances absolutely wouldn't hit. In addition, the sword had the advantage in reach. If he could slip into the zero distance, he could use small moves to disrupt the opponent's stance.

The sword which looked very heavy shouldn't be able to be swung consecutively. There should be a chance to close in if he could avoid its attack and match it with a counter.

*—Keep focusing. Prepare to evade the attack coming from the point of the sword.*

The gear in Haruyuki consciousness stepped up, at the same time, his field of vision narrowed down to focus on just the center. All his senses focused onto the tip of the shiny black long sword.

“.....Nowww!!”

Yelling, Haruyuki kicked the ground.

Lowering his posture to the limit, he shortened the ten meters distance at once.

Kirito’s sword slid down halfway from the beginning middle position.

*From the bottom.* The point of the sword sent sparks flying over the ground while it slashed upwards to intercept Haruyuki, who was leaning forward. It was like the lethal fangs of the jet black snake——

Haruyuki opened only his left wing, causing his body to rotate almost ninety degrees and avoiding the attack. Even without the gauge, he can still use it to control his posture.

The sword groaned as it was raised, as it made a shallow cut on Silver Crow’s chest armor. Heat and light that were at the tip of the sword disappeared shortly. At that moment Haruyuki stepped using his right foot with all his strength, his body raised for a right uppercut, a silvery light covered fist went straight for Kirito’s abdomen——

It was parried just before it could strike. The right fist flowed to the outside, only grazing the shoulder.

But that was still within the calculations. Now both Kirito’s hands couldn’t return in time. The left short hook was thrown into the body that was left wide open. ‘Don’, he felt positive feedback. The body wrapped by the coat had stopped.

——*It hit!*

*Now rush!!*



“Oooo!!”

Haruyuki shouted and at the same time attacked using his right knee, which also hit. The damage wasn't good as the result of the distance which was too short, but it was good enough. Judging the conditions using consecutive moves while the opponent's movement was sealed, then deciding with a blow.

Pinning opponent's left arm with his right, and aiming short strikes with his left. The long sword was useless at this close range, in other words, the opponent's right arm was already considered dead.

At least, that was how it was supposed to be.

The smashing sensation that came from his left fist had dissipated because something pushed it from above. It was Kirito's open right hand, with all his fingers spread.

“Wha.....”

*W-Where is the sword!?*

When that question arose, the next phenomenon had already happened.

The smooth, but terribly fast movement of Kirito's right fist, now touched Haruyuki's chest, suddenly emitting an orange light.

*S-Special.....move!!*

*But, without a weapon——!?*

The development was far beyond his expectations, his reaction was just a moment late. But it was too slow in the ultra speed battle.

Don!! With a great impact against the chest, Haruyuki was repelled backward.

However, there the damage was no big deal. It was probably just a move to create some distance. *Just to use this, he chose to drop the sword? Then, I won't give him a chance to pick it back up.*

To Haruyuki, who was hastily closing the distance back in, a further unexpected development happened in front of his eyes.

The empty handed Kirito made a big jump forward. While in the air, Kirito's right hand brandished over his head.

*He is trying to pull another sword from his back? No, there is not enough time for that. Then he's going to attack using his hand to chop? Such an attack won't be able to pierce my armor.....*

No.

The light which wrapped the right hand still didn't disappear. It meant the special move was still ongoing——

Both Haruyuki's legs went stiff, stopping the retreat he succeeded in earlier. In front of Haruyuki's eyes, Kirito's right hand grabbed on to something.

It was the sword grip. He didn't drop the sword on the ground. He threw it up above.

By the time Haruyuki realized it, the long sword was already wrapped in the color of blinding flame, and it cut down in a straight line.

He couldn't avoid or guard this time. A huge shock went through his chest from the attack on the left shoulder, Haruyuki was swallowed by a light effect and an explosion, then flew diagonally to the back and right.

\* \* \*

“Body-sword composite sword skill, «Meteor Fall». . . . .But even saying so, he wouldn’t hear it anyway.”

I muttered while rubbing my abdomen which was hit earlier.

While it wasn’t at the same level as if it happened in real world, the strength of the feedback from the pain should be enough to be considered illegal. Just from this pain alone proved this place wasn’t in any game operated in year 2026 Japan.

But, with the big move finally making a clean hit, Silver Crow who was blown away in a flashy fashion and whose body was currently half buried under the rubble should have felt more pain. Of course, if a nervous system existed under that metal armor, that is.

Confirming with a glance at the stamina gauge, eating the punch and the knee at that close range took about fifteen percent, and Crow’s was reduced by nearly thirty percent. Even though it looked like a metal robot, its defense wasn’t that high, just like how fighting games were supposed to be.

Then for the fighting game, this difference in damage isn’t enough to decide the outcome of the battle. It is not the situation I can relax in just after I got an attack in. Once I decided that, I kicked the ground to follow up with a sneak attack.

Suddenly the silvery body trembled——

The round metal helmet quickly lifted.

I could feel the strong light emitting from both eyes inside it.

Immediately after that, the rubble which buried half the silvery avatar had scattered violently in all directions.

Curling clouds of dust blown up by the wind covered the surroundings. I corrected my sword stance at this distance, waiting for my vision to clear up.

The chilled wind from the bottom of the stage carried the dust away.

Several seconds later, the trace of collapsed buildings appeared again —— but there was no trace of Silver Crow.

“What.....?”

I quickly looked left and right, my sides and my back was a huge open space, in front of me was the wide three-storey building. If it wasn't so tattered and decayed, this could be seen as a small scale school.

All the windows and entrances of the building were blocked with the metal plates, there were no stairs at the outer walls, so I'd notice if Crow cut across my left or right side. In other words, there should be nowhere to go during the brief moment my vision was blocked by the dust. In that case, where exactly did that silvery robot hide?

——No.

*It isn't hidden. The special move gauge below Silver Crow's stamina gauge is around thirty percent charged, and even now it's still slowly decreasing. It means he's using the special move. I guess it was the reason he disappeared from my vision. Probably the power to go under the ground? Or the power of transparency?.....*

I tensed up all my senses from below my feet, front, back, left, and right. Lowering my waist, softly setting up my sword, I readied my stance to intercept an attack from any direction, waiting for an action.

But.

Where Silver Crow appeared from was beyond my expectations.

Noticing something shining above my head, I quickly looked up

Then I saw it, the protruding sharp right toe, swooping down as if it was a spear from the silvery white avatar, with the big metal fins expanded to the left and right, shining dazzlingly on its back.

So that was really its propulsion equipment. But it shouldn't have the high-speed mobility to move its body above the ground to that degree.

*Then those fins are — wings!*

I kicked the ground with as much force as possible to jump to the right.



□ □

But the Crow diving in a straight line used the stabilizers on both arms to change its angle, perfectly matching my movement.

“Guh.....”

While I let leak the voice, the sword in my right hand tried to parry the sharp toe.

But, defending against the attack with that degree of weight wasn't possible. Just like when receiving a heavy rush from the Salamander in ALO — No, with greater force than the sword at that time, the dive kick directly hit my right shoulder.

\* \* \*

For Silver Crow, who spent all of his level-up bonuses on expanding his flying ability, his greatest weapon is a swooping attack from high altitudes.

Just that would allow it to hit? Over the long period of time, Haruyuki had earnestly researched the technique for the half a year since becoming a Burst Linker. Although it was still too soon to be considered complete, it had become a very important asset of his.

Power, or descending speed, and accuracy, or homing capability, both present together.

All the power of the wings was used for acceleration, while the arms and body did the orbit adjustment. To get the hang of it, he couldn't count how many times he had bitten the ground in vain.

However, the effort wasn't fruitless. He was able to capture Kirito, despite his formidable reaction speed.

—No.

Haruyuki shook the head in his mind. The dive kick directly hit the right shoulder, while on the ground, unable to escape, but his eyes could still follow Haruyuki's action.

Apparently, Kirito didn't know Silver Crow was an aerial type Duel Avatar. For those Burst Linkers he fought on a daily basis, the moment they lost sight of Haruyuki in the cloud of dust, they would be cautious above their heads, rather than the surroundings. But Kirito did the opposite, which opened the opportunity for Haruyuki's kick to hit. Thinking about it, the reaction ability to attempt to step and parry at that moment was really frightening.

Glancing at the HP gauge to confirm, Kirito's HP was just below fifty percent and had changed to yellow. Although the amount of damage had reversed the situation, but because the opponent already knows of his flying ability, it would be difficult for Haruyuki's kick to get a clean hit again. If that was the case, then he couldn't stop his hand now.

Haruyuki spread his wings for the second time, he started a low altitude dash towards the shadow crouching on the ground.

Kirito's sword manipulating arm was hit with the big move. The shock reverberating in his nerves should remain for at least ten more seconds, he wouldn't be able to swing the sword at full speed till then. Then, with this rush, the result of this battle will be decided!

“U.....oo!!”

With a short roar, Haruyuki got close to Kirito, then swung a big roundhouse kick diagonally upwards.

The method of using wings wasn't just swooping from high altitudes. At short range melee, the three dimensional actions, ignoring the gravity and inertia, was possible. This kick was also impossible to deal with.



The growl released from his right feet, which looked like a laser cutting across the space.

Of course, Kirito's right hand didn't move.

*Sure hit——!!*

While Haruyuki felt confident, at that moment,

Both of Kirito's eyes behind his long bangs shone brightly.

The left hand wrapped behind the black leather coat became hazy and disappeared.

KIAaan!! The high-pitched crashing sound. The blinding spark. Then the searing heat sensation.

The mid-air kick was repelled, then Haruyuki slapped down to the ground due to the returning momentum. He understood what had happened at that point.

In Kirito's left hand, which was still on his knee, raised high with the bright white shining like cat's eye, was a second sword.

The swordsman dressed in black stood up while still swaying, in both of his hands were the white and black long swords moving in an arc——

With a JyaKiiin!, Both hands let out the clear sound.

\* \* \*

I must admit.

I just had witnessed the opponent, Silver Crow's, endless power.

That name was so suitable with its meaning, the avatar's potential was mostly based on its flying ability. In other word, in ALO, it was what allowed me to

press my advantage over the air raid ability specialists, Sylphs, in the aerial combat.

If that was the case, I would like to settle this battle with a mid-air combat. However, now my avatar isn't the Spriggan Kirito in ALO, but the SAO's Dual Blades Kirito. There were no wings on my back, and of course I couldn't fly.

In that case, if I don't squeeze all I have to use in this fight, there would be no chance of winning.

Thoughts about this battle being the result from the abnormality of the quantum circuit had disappeared from my mind. My whole body was wrapped around with the tension I've tasted dueling with truly formidable foes.

It had been one and a half years since feeling the trustworthy weight of the Elucidator in my right hand, and the Dark Repulser in my left. I slowly stood and stared wordlessly to the silvery white avatar.

The pale sparks scattered all over the deep wounds at its chest and left foot, around forty percent of its HP bar remained. Thin smoke smoldered from the right shoulder, my bar had a similar amount.

However, there were still some tricks under the sleeves on both sides, the victor shall be decided by the following clash.

The wings on the back of Silver Crow stretched wide.

\* \* \*

Watching the mild silhouette of «Kirito», who was carrying two swords in standing position, Haruyuki finally realized the true identity of the pressure he felt since the beginning of the battle.

It was similar.

To the pressure from the Black King, «Black Lotus».

More than the form of both swords, or wearing color on the whole body, the most similarity was the «Immeasurable».

Truthfully, Haruyuki almost never watched Kuroyukihime fighting at her full power. From his memories, once conducted in the unlimited neutral field, in the battle against the similarly level 9 Yellow King, that time had left him with the impression that both sides still had spare energy left.

That feeling of bottomless strength. If this person had become seriously serious, just what kind of fury would be unleashed?

The same thing could be felt here, what this Burst Linker Kirito had behind his back.

—*What if this guy really is as strong as Kuroyukihime-senpai, I won't have any chance to win.*

Haruyuki's mind was so determined.

But why was the inside of his chest armor full of wounds burning hot? It wouldn't cool down at all. Far from that, it even blazed more and more, sending heat to the tip of his limbs.

*I want to fight. Burn all of Silver Crow and then all of Arita Haruyuki to the exhausting limit, I want to beat this strong foe.*

Recalling the moment when the slowly walking figure of the dual blades swordsman caused him to unintentionally shout Burst Out in fear, a subtle smile floated under the silver mask.

It might seemed like the difference in numerical potential of avatars was big, but he was bad at manipulating his consciousness efficiently. Kirito was one step ahead in the ability to analyse situation and ability to react. Even though it was just their first meeting, Haruyuki had ended up behind on everything.

In that case, the only way was to bet on the cornerstone of his humble self-confidence, his «Speed».

*Believe in the wings on the back, produced from the craving for speed.  
Concentrate.*

“.....Cross it. Go beyond it.”

Just as he murmured, the hue of his field of vision had shifted slightly.

The background noise disappeared, and the movement of the sparks drifting in the air became gradually slower.

However, he didn't sense these changes, as all of Haruyuki's spirit was focused on his dual bladed opponent.

\* \* \*

«Silver Crow»'s spirit's state had changed, I felt that fact.

Probably, the opponent also determined this as the climax of the battle. The wings on the back opened wide, but he didn't take off, just slowly lowering his waist and setting up both his hands, a natural posture to receive my attack.

Betting everything on the line, where all hope was placed.

I finally noticed I made a blurred thin smile on my mouth.

I really longed for this kind of battle. I might have been in many serious battles in ALO or GGO, and even have trouble surviving in a few of those,

but up until now there was never a time I tasted the pain from the sense of tension before.

It was really strange. I wasn't sure why Silver Crow and I were fighting in the first place. It was only the experimental machine's troubles that had led to the accidental encounter with him but——

.....No.

That is why, how to say it? The battle wasn't in the well known game, and everything was wrapped under mysterious circumstances, causing me to feel excited.

It wasn't just that. Carrying the [KIRITO] name tag, holding my beloved swords in both hands, being half hearted was not allowed.

“.....From here on, you'd better go all out.”

I uttered in a low whisper——

My right foot made a big step forward, readying the sword skill motion.

Both swords were bathed in a vivid orange light.

At the next moment, I started a long distance charge, aiming at Silver Crow like a bullet fired from a cannon.

Dual blades rush sword skill, «Double Circular».

\* \* \*

The shape of Kirito, who was controlling the trajectory of the twin shining swords which penetrated the depth of the darkness, like a flame from a fire dragon.

He kicked his fear of wanting to flee to the sky away, Haruyuki just waited.

His consciousness had been geared up to the limit, but it all happened in just the blink of an eye.

In front of Haruyuki, Kirito's body rotated upward. The black sword in his right hand pulled the helix of the flame from below and slashed straight up furiously.

The point of the sword split Haruyuki's left hand's armor open and bounced it upwards.

Silver Crow's wrist armor possessed the highest strength of the entire body. Despite that, the sword ripped the arm apart in the middle, the pretty sparks from the slash wound flowed into the night sky.

“Ku.....!”

Haruyuki leaked a voice that came from his throat through his mouth, but the lethal attack would be the following strike.

Following right behind the slashing trail remaining in mid-air, the white sword in Kirito's left hand thrust in a straight line. The tip was aimed with fearful accuracy at his neck, it was much faster than the attacks from any previous confrontation with Burst Linkers — be it bullets or laser.

Haruyuki's aim was to catch hold of that blade.

However, he couldn't see any possibility of success at all. Even avoiding it wasn't allowed, it would be accurate to say it was an attack at the speed of god.

Therefore, Haruyuki decided to spread his palm, at the risk of losing his right hand — used the center of his palm to catch the tip of the sword.

He felt all the resistance of the sword piercing his hand, but continued stretching. The speed of the thrust dropped just slightly, however, it gave Haruyuki a moment of opportunity to twist his neck away. The weak vibration transmitted from the right side of his neck, the blade deeply cut there and split out at the back.

*Stamina gauge is, ten percent remaining.*

*This bet is——*

*My win!!*

As his consciousness shouted, Haruyuki used his right palm which was penetrated by the sword to grab Kirito's left hand.

“U.....oooo!!”

Yelling, both feet kicked the ground, both wings slapped the air, Haruyuki's fully charged special move gauge was burnt to exhaustion to let him fly into the night sky.

In the midst of full acceleration, he turned his body around. The momentum of inertia was still positive, he then threw Kirito's body above down with all his might.

The sword was extracted from the palm, along with a thin line of sparks. Without the violently built up momentum, the dual blades swordsman without wings was no longer ascending.

In that situation, what surprised him was, there was no sign of struggle from the swordsman at all. His limbs weren't twirling, both hands and feet were spread out, trying to control his posture.

However——

*Once this happened, there was nothing he could do.*





Most Burst Linkers might not be aware of the basic rule governing physical attacks, which was the reaction to the action.

Be it a punch or kick, sword or blunt weapon, the foot must be firmly planted, without a ground of mass to place a foot onto, power wouldn't arise. This was the reason melee attacks were weak in the «Ice and Snow» stage, where the ground under the feet was abnormally slippery.

Then in mid-air, there was no ground.

Even if Kirito swings the sword, the blade will not have that formidable power anymore.

On the other hand, Haruyuki could use driving force from the wings to kick the air. So even if both strike each other, he should be able to do a lot more damage.

“Now.....”

Losing the ascending momentum, staring at Kirito's silhouette once it reached the topmost point, Haruyuki yelled.

“Is the endddddddddd!!”

Douuu, the sound of air rang in the ears.

He put his right foot as the pivot point for the rushing momentum, and shot off a long ranged roundhouse kick.

Kirito tried to intercept it using his left sword, however his defence was abruptly bounced back with a high-pitched sound, the kicked pierced deeply into his flank.

Haruyuki then dashed after the black dressed figure which flowed down through the air like a bullet. His next attack was deflected by the crossing

hands, he then headbutt using his helmet. Along with a heavy impact, it violently hit the center of Kirito's chest.

At this point, the stamina gauge of both sides had ten percent remaining.

The aerial gauge had less remaining. But it was just enough to spend on the next decisive attack.

Exerting as much power as possible in his right fist, Haruyuki began the final rush.

At that moment——

Both Kirito's eyes suddenly widened. Haruyuki noticed his longcoat which was streaming violently over the entire body, wrapped in a thin red aura.

The black long sword in the right hand was enveloped in a blood-like crimson light.

——*Special move!*

——*I don't fear it!!*

Haruyuki clenched his teeth, and continued straight in. *That was just a long range thrusting attack, but during mid-air with no ground to step on, with the body flowing backwards. That kind of move wouldn't go through Silver Crow's armor!*

“U.....o.....!”

Haruyuki roared. In front of his vision,

Kirito's body turned around.

Giiiiin! With a loud jet engine-like sound, the tremendous power could be felt vividly from the straight thrusting move fired from the right hand, brightly penetrating the night sky.

——Approaching Haruyuki, in exactly the opposite direction.

“Wh.....”

Kirito’s body received reaction from the strong thrusting attack and retorted ferociously towards a gasping Haruyuki.

The sword in his left hand glazed the glistening pallid crescent moon in Haruyuki’s vision——

Cut into the center of the chest. Haruyuki could feel both hot and cold at the same time where the point of the sword touched.

———*What’s with this guy.*

All the remaining special gauge was used not on the attack but to get the driving force for a single moment.

Admiration crossed his mind. But at the same time, Haruyuki’s consciousness attempted a final counterattack.

The right fist pushed straight across the sword trail. But the reach wasn’t enough. He then reflexively stretching his fingertips, making the shape of a hand-knife. The sharp fingers lined up, glistening white like a sword.

———*Reach it!! At least, I’ll convey my final struggle until the end!!*

The white sword pierced through Silver Crow’s chest.

Silvery fingertips touched Kirito’s coat.

At that moment, Kirito's avatar soundlessly changed into white light particles.

The sword which lost its substance went past Haruyuki's body, Haruyuki's right hand also passed through Kirito's body.

Both of them made contact in mid-air, the bodies blended together.

In the passing moment, Haruyuki felt a sound within his head. A soft, yet dignified, and comfortable voice resounded.

□ It was a good duel. Someday —— let's fight again. □

Then, the mysterious Burst Linker «Kirito» body vanished from the imagination field.

In Haruyuki's center of vision, for the first time he sees, the system message [DISCONNECTION] blinking.

\* \* \*

“.....iichan. Onii-chan!”

I raised my gaze to the source of the voice, on the other side of the table, from the sharp lips of Suguha.

“Ah, s-sorry. What was it again?”

“Since just now that your hand hasn't moved much at all, isn't the food good? That was what I asked!”

To Suguha who made a sully look once more, I quickly shook my head.

“T-That's not it. It's delicious, this oden.”

I filled my large open mouth with a potato, and showed a nodding gesture, but Suguha's mood wasn't getting better.

“.....This isn't oden though, it's Pot-au-feu.”

——*Pot-au-feu with whole eggs only, huh*, of course that thought didn't leave my mouth. I quickly emptied the plate and asked for a refill, trying to settle the mood.

Our mother was late as usual, so today's dinner was just me and Suguha. At that point I went back into silence, causing the table to be quiet again. But while eating seconds of the french-style oden, my thoughts were pulled back to the experience of the strange incident which occurred this afternoon once more.

It was about four hours ago, at the mysterious battle game field, the serious battle with the unknown avatar «Silver Crow» had unfolded, but regrettably just before the result would be decided, my connection was cut off.

I told Higa Takeru about what happened after jumping out of the experimental machine.

However, Higa had a doubtful face about the fact, so I connected back into that game, this time for the exchanging of information rather than sword and fist.

What I saw in the second Dive was —— as described in the beginning, just a scene of a lovely forest. There was no stamina gauge nor time count on the field of vision, the battle opponent also wasn't present. After we took the data as planned, Higa and the other staff also Dived just in case, but no one saw the mysterious human shadow at all.

So, the quantum circuit of the experimental machine was somehow «Fixed». It could be said that the machine was thoroughly satisfied from my battle with Crow.....

That battle was probably just a dream I had from FullDiving in the fourth generation machine for the first time. And for now, the part-time job was over, Higa told me that just as I was about to leave the laboratory.

However, I couldn't believe such explanation, from the Silver Crow's splendid movements, the flame of fighting spirit burning at an ultra-high temperature, to the duel which was like to burn each other down, it couldn't be just a dream.

“What are you thinking of for a while now?”

I woke up from my thoughts after hearing Suguha's voice.

So as not to offend her again, and also to get her involved in what was in my mind, I used my fork to pick a Vienna into my mouth, and said,

“Hmm..... Today, I dueled with an amazing opponent. But due to circuit irregularity, I can't say I won.....”

“Heh? Onii-chan's battle with an unknown player ended up in a draw? Does such a person exist?”

Attracted to my story, Suguha's body leaned forward. Apparently she thought it had happened in ALO, I left it that way in order to keep the contract I made to not disclose information about the experimental machine.

“How to say it..... Amazing, naturally flying. It was like seeing a real voluntary flight.”

“.....? What do you mean?”

Suguha tilted her head, while still holding her fork.

“Well, for the voluntary flight in ALO, you really don’t just use thoughts to control the wings, it actually requires the use of shoulder blade movement too. During acceleration would be like this.....”

I pulled both arms backward, causing both shoulder blades to get closer.

“Then, during deceleration.”

This time the arms was stretched out in front, the gap between shoulder blades opened wider.

“With experience, the actual movement can be minimized, but I don’t mean it can be completely eliminated. That’s why it interfered with the attack during the air raid.”

Suguha gave a big nod at my words.

“That’s right. When swinging the sword, stretching the arm cannot be avoided and at the same time, it acts as a brake command to the wings too. The attack which completely kills the momentum of a full speed flight, only the lance type weapon is an exception due to its stance being based on the waist. But that can’t be helped anyway, because humans don’t have real wings, so we have to substitute it with some part of the body.”

“Yeah..... But that guy could move his limbs without causing any conflict with the wings at all. Even during the fierce full speed dash, he could still accelerate while throwing the fist forward.”

“Ehh—, something like that can’t be possible.”

I show a slight smile to Suguha who made the rounded eyes.

“Yeah, it’s not possible. Maybe it was too fast to notice..... Or he wasn’t human but a birdman so he could operate the wings separately, something like that.....”

—————In that world, something exceeding my understanding of a man-machine interface existed.

Yes..... Perhaps, unlike the AmuSphere which picked up the body’s movement commands from the medulla oblongata, it read the image directly from the brain, no, the consciousness.

It couldn’t be possible. Consciousness, or rather, to access such things as the soul itself.

But without thinking that way, Silver Crow’s movements couldn’t be understood.

Changing the image power, that is the human mind, into data, which was the actual power in the real world. Yes, if we think about it, hadn’t that experimental machine read my «Self-image» and created the swordsman Kirito’s avatar? In other words, Higa’s fourth generation FullDive machine communicated with the soul rather than the brain cell..... It could be said that, in that world, there’s the possibility that the Diver can pull out and use the ultimate kind of power, which is the «Mind Power».

I closed my eyes tightly once, then looked at Suguha and finally smiled.

“.....W-What are you smiling for, Onii-chan?”

Towards the discomforted Sylph swordswoman, who acts like a possessed speed-holic in the sky, I said,



“By some chance, one day.....no, in the surprisingly near future, we might be able to really fly. Not a pseudo-voluntary flight.....but flapping the wings created by the mind.”

Suguha blinked in surprise——

Her whole face smiled cheerfully.

“Yeah, that would be great.”

I nodded in return, and bit the Vienna, my mind returned to that figure once more.

Flying across the dark night sky, the beautiful silvery white crow.

\* \* \*

“.....yuki-kun. Oi, are you listening, Haruyuki-kun?”

He lifted his face in a hurry at the call, as Kuroyukihime emitted a perilous glare on the opposite side of the round white table.

“Ah, s-s-sorry! I was just thinking about something.....”

“Ho, I wonder what kind of important consideration has distracted you during this discussion with me.”

Haruyuki gulped, and drank iced latte from his paper cup to stall for time.

There were no other students in the quiet cafeteria lounge after school. But Haruyuki still looked around just in case, affirming the conversation wouldn't be heard by anyone else, before mumbling the answer.

“Erm, well, the truth is.....I had fought with a strange Burst Linker.....”

Those words intentionally omitted the ‘during today's lunch break’ part. Furthermore, the lunch break when the unidentified enemy showed up in the

school's local network, was comparable to the big «Dusk Taker Incident» which happened in spring. Actually, after that battle, all the members of Nega Nebulas must be warned immediately, but Haruyuki didn't do so as he felt the enemy wasn't real.

Because he felt neither maliciousness nor hostility from that battle opponent. All he could feel from him was excitement and joy. Despite waging a fierce battle, Haruyuki was left with some sort of freshness in his mind.

*Maybe he won't show up again.*

While he still didn't know why he was so convinced about that, Haruyuki started speaking piece by piece.

“.....It was weird, but he was amazing. His weapons were two swords.....Which he could swing as if they were weightless, I was almost unable to track his special moves.”

“Two.....swords.”

Kuroyukihime furrowed her small eyebrows while murmuring to herself. But she stared blankly at Haruyuki then immediately returned to her normal facial expression while encouraging him to continue.

“No, there's nothing. Then? Did you win?”

“Ah, well.....he was disconnected just before the conclusion.....but, if it continued, I am sure I would lose. My final attack probably couldn't reach him.”

“Ho. Being able to defeat you in close combat. What's the color and level of that person?”

Haruyuki shook his head with a troubled face to Kuroyukihime's question.

“About that, either it was a system error or he used some kind of a filter..... color name and level were both not shown. Just the color of his appearance was, well....., really black.”

Towards the «Black King» who narrowed her eyes again, Haruyuki didn't think too deeply into her reaction, and threw the question he had thought of during the battle at her.

“Oh, senpai. I wanted to ask this for a long time now, what are the characteristics of the «Black»?”

Kuroyukihime blinked blankly then showed a big bitter smile.

“Suddenly asking such a question...Haruyuki-kun.”

“Eh? No, erm, s-sorry!”

Haruyuki unintentionally shrank the upper part of his body, this time a smile which was like from an intelligent older sister towards her younger brother, floated on Kuroyukihime's face.

“No, there was no need to apologize. Because, to that question, «I also do not know».”

“.....Heh?”

“That said, there will be a certain degree I'll have to guess.”

The glass containing iced tea made a ringing sound, Kuroyukihime stared at the pale afternoon sunlight, then explained,

“The three primary colors on the upper part of the color circle..... «Neighboring Blue», «Remote Red», and «Indirect Yellow». And then there are properties in the middle «Green» and «Purple». With the exception of

metal colors, almost all of the Duel Avatars are classified somewhere between those links. As the purity of the color goes higher, the characteristic purity also increases.”

Up until that point was what Haruyuki already understood. For example, his friend Cyan Pile had a fairly bright blue color which slightly tilted in the purple direction. So his initial equipment «Pile Driver» was combined with the ranged attack power.

Seeing Haruyuki nod in response, Kuroyukihime continued,

“Conversely, as the color purity lowers so does the characteristic purity. For your friend «Ash Roller», he is more like the green than the grey type. That is because he spent most of his potential into strengthening the exterior of his unique bike. At the same time the purity of his color had declined. But why an avatar’s color is darkened, while another is brightened, I still can’t give a proper explanation yet.”

“Become darker.....or brighter.....”

Repeatedly murmuring, Haruyuki finally understood. When an avatar’s color rapidly darkened, the destination was surely black —— the «Pure Black». And conversely, white existed, the «Pure White», when going brighter as well. It was probably very unique on both extreme ends, but he couldn’t understand clearly the reason behind the divide of both black and white being the exact opposite.

While Haruyuki twisted his neck, Kuroyukihime suddenly murmured,

“«Black» is the «Rejected Color» —— It’s what I’ve been aware of for a long time.”

“Eh....., r-rejected.....?”

“Yes, refused to be dyed in any color, the color of possessing nothingness, it couldn’t go anywhere else other than that, the bottom of the deep well of color.....”

With those desolate words, Kuroyukihime shook her head before Haruyuki could speak. Then her light colored lips showed a faint smile.

“But....., just but. Maybe it isn’t really that way, recently I started to think like that, thus.....”

Suddenly she moved her delicate right hand over the luxurious table, and grabbed hold of Haruyuki’s left hand, causing him to be taken aback.

“.....Because you had held my hand many times. This me who couldn’t interact with other people, always reminding me.”

Haruyuki’s face was red to his ears from the unusually gentle pupils gazing at him, he gripped her cold hand in return and would not let go. His heart throbbing, but unable to say a decent line, he just grabbed her hand as if trying to pass his earnest feelings from his heart with the touch of the fingers.

——*Black is absolutely not the rejected color. Because it was you, without a doubt, who stretched her hand to me who was alone in the bottom of the well, who gently wrapped and healed my wounds.*

——*That’s right, that guy was the same.*

——*That black swordsman was also had a similar tranquility. Receiving everything, both giving great support and strength.*

Haruyuki felt the «Kirito» inside his mind was pushing his back, he timidly lifted his face, and somehow managed to speak.

“Erm....., well, black objects don’t reflect any light, causing it to look black. That’s what I learned in class. So.....so, it surely isn’t the lonely color. I think it’s the warmest color, more than any other color.”

Kuroyukihime widened her eyes for a moment—— then,

A beautiful smile floated on her face like a blooming lotus bud.

## Afterword

Hello everyone, I am Kawahara Reki, presenting to you readers «Accel World 10: Elements».

... I only just realized, after writing for so long, that it's already been the tenth volume. This story originates from a very simple concept: "If there existed a fighting game using the real world as the stage, that would be very interesting"; then I thought about, "but if you just relaxed and played for several minutes, you'd get hit by a car", so I added the element of «acceleration» and began writing from there, and everything else about the setting was added in turn after I started.

I owe everything to the support and love you readers have given, for this sort of haphazard story to actually be able to reach its tenth volume, and moreover, authored by someone lazy to the extreme like myself.

But having said that, you only need to take a look at other works, also stamped with the Dengeki Bunko tag, and never mind ten volumes; you can find many series that go beyond twenty volumes, so this isn't really the time to feel like I've hit my swan song (LOL). The background of the entire story has finally been set up, and the war between the Legions of the «Six Kings of Pure Color» and the «Acceleration Research Society» will only steadily intensify from now on... Or so it should be, but it's just that even I have to actually write this part to know what the real thing develops into... This story resigns itself to a fate like that, but I still look forward to your continued love and support, readers.

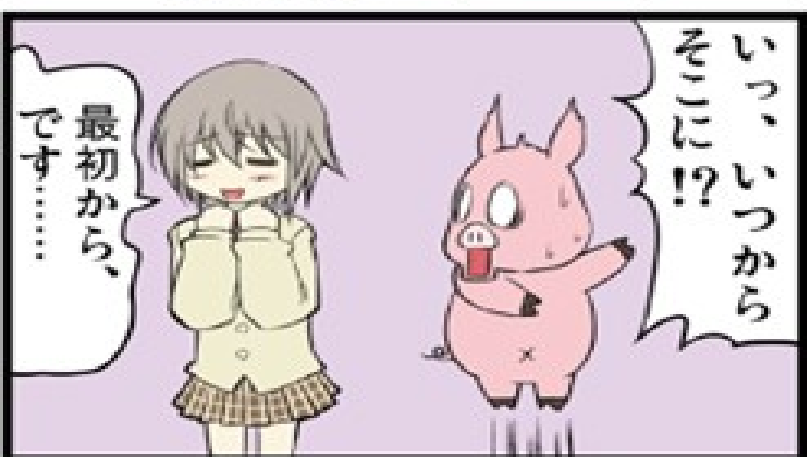
Volume 10 is comprised of a short story collection inserted between the main plot. The three stories in it are all somewhat experimental: They are, firstly, “Sound of Water from a Distant Day”, which looks back into the past, “The Distant Sound of Waves”, which switches to Kuroyukihime’s perspective for the first time, and a crossover with my other work, «Sword Art Online», “Versus”. As for “Versus” at the end there, its content will afford people lots of room for imagination regarding the connection between the two series, but as the author, for the time being I still uphold the stance that «there is no clear connection between the two works». If, readers, you can speculate like SAO protagonist Kirito did in the story that the author was using drastic excuse of «parallel worlds being interfered with by a quantum computer» in order to come up with an anniversary celebration-type short story, I would be very gratified. I deeply apologize for raising such stubborn requests every time... If things go according to plan, Volume 11 next time will bring the story back to the main plotline, and will begin with Haruyuki-kun being summoned to the «Seven Kings Conference» as a witness.

The huge tsunami of the anime adaptation, a video game, and even a radio show has caused me to utilize a fleeing ability rivalling that of Black Vise. To my editor Miki-san, who has no choice but to shoulder everything by himself as a result of that, and HIMA-san, who has a crazy schedule soon that involves releasing books in October *and* December, along with abec-san, a guest illustrator for this volume, thank you so much! And readers, I ask for your continued support in 2012 as well!

A certain day in October 2011    Kawahara Reki



# アケセル弁当 ⑧ れき



## Accel Bento 8 by Reki

(top-to-bottom, right-to-left)

Haruyuki: About time to go to bed —

Rin: G-Good night...

Haruyuki: W-When did you get here?!

Rin: I've been here, since the beginning...



## Translator's Notes and References

1. [↑](#) Health Care Unit
2. [↑](#) electroluminescent
3. [↑](#) Japanese suffix – 子
4. [↑](#) Okinawan: Fura
5. [↑](#) Okinawan: Kashimashi
6. [↑](#) Okinawan: Nifeedeebiru
7. [↑](#) In Okinawan dialect, Mensooree
8. [↑](#) In Okinawan dialect, Waasaibiin
9. [↑](#) Okinawan: Aga!
10. [↑](#) Okinawan dialect: haidai
11. [↑](#) Okinawan term for the island

## **Credits**

**Author:** Kawahara Reki

**Illustrator:** HIMA

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