

Accel World Volume 11- The Carbide Wolf

By Reki Kawahara

ARS Translation Team wishes to emphasise that this translation is for review purposes only. We do not claim this intellectual property or any rights whatsoever.

If available to you, please do support the Yen Press official releases.



ワールド

アクセル

11

超硬の狼

川原 礫
イラスト/HIMA

accel World 11

「子ヨ: ▶ウ|||||コ|||||ウ||」
- |||||: ||||| ||||| ||||| ◀: ▼
|||||ガ||||ガ=||| ▶カ|||≡|||。o



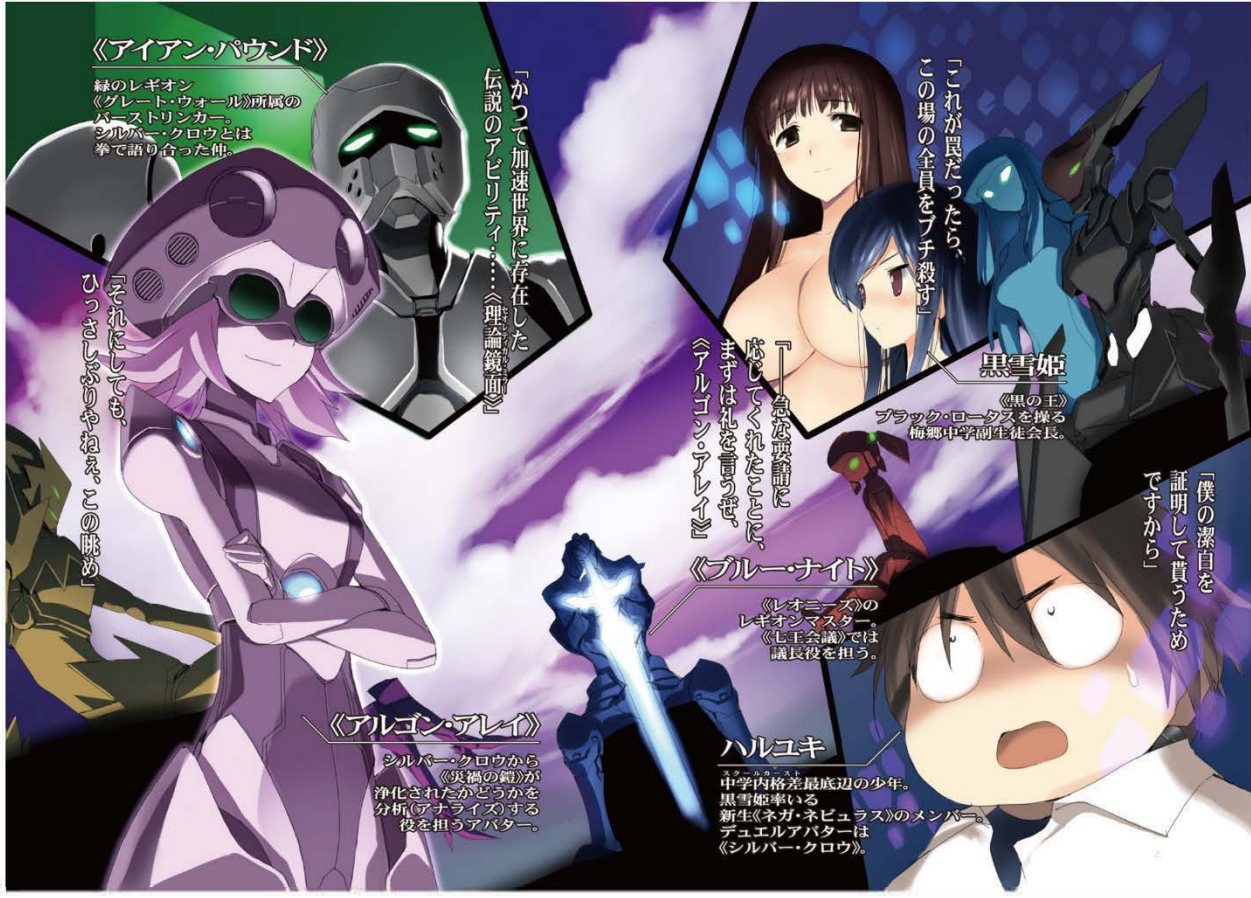
電撃文庫

アクセル・ワールド 11

超硬の狼

川原 礫
イラスト/HIMA
デザイン/ビィピィ





《アイアン・パウンド》

緑のレギオン
《グレート・ウォール》所属の
バーストリンカー。
シルバー・クロウとは
拳で語り合った仲。

「かつて加速世界に存在した
伝説のアビリティ……『理論鏡面』」

「それだとしても、
ひっそりおやねえ、この謎め」



黒雪姫

《黒の王》
ブラック・ロータスを操る
梅郷中学学生会会長。

「これが異なったら、
この場の全員をフチ殺す」

「……急な依頼に
応じてくれたことに、
まずは礼を言わせて、
《アルゴン・アレイ》」

《ブルー・ナイト》

《レオニース》の
レギオンマスター。
《七王会議》では
議長役を担う。

「僕の潔白を
証明して貰うため
ですから」



《アルゴン・アレイ》

シルバー・クロウから
《災禍の鎧》が
浄化されたかどうかを
分析(アナライズ)する
役を担うアバター。



ハルユキ

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》。



「そんなこと言いたがど、
脚フェチの血が騒いでんだろー？
んー？」

ニコ

赤のレギオン《プロミネンス》の
レギオンマスターである小学生。
デュエルアバターは
《スカーレット・レイン》。



「UIV 解りました。
では、私の家に行きましょう。
少し遅くなるかもしれませんが、
ご自宅にメッセージを残しておいたほうが
いいと思います」

シノ ミヤ ウタイ
四埜宮謡

黒のレギオン
《ネガ・ネビュラス》所属の
デュエルアバター。
ハルユキを導く小学四年生。
デュエルアバターは
《アーダー・メイデン》。



《マンガン・ブレード》

青のレギオン《レオニース》の側近のデュエルアバター。

「貴様に塩を送る義理はないのだが……。一っただけ、助言の真似事をさせて貰う」

「ここからは、逃げ隠れしなぬよ。格闘でケリをつけよう」

「さすがです、クロウさん。お噂は聞いてましたけど、想像してたよりずっと速いや」

《ウルフラム・サーベラス》

加速世界に突然現れた、最強最硬のメタルカラー・デュエルアバター。

[List of each Legion's Avatars]

(Parentheses) contain the Player's name

[Black Legion "Nega Nebulas"]

Legion Master / Black Lotus (Kuroyukihime)

-Elements-

Wind / Sky Raker (Kurasaki Fuuko)

Fire / Ardor Maiden (Shinomiya Utai)

Water / Aqua Current (Currently retired)

Earth/ Graphite Edge (Currently retired)

Silver Crow (Arita Haruyuki)

Lime Bell (Kurashima Chiyuri)

Cyan Pile (Mayuzumi Takumu)

[Red Legion "Prominence"]

Legion Master / Scarlet Rain

(Koudzuki Yuniko)

Submaster / Blood Leopard

Red Rider *Has left Accelerated World

Cherry Rook *Has left Accelerated World

[Blue Legion "Leonids"]

Legion Master / Blue Knight

-Lieutenants-

Cobalt Blade

Manganese Blade

Frost Horn

Tourmaline Shell

[Yellow Legion "Crypto Cosmic Circus"]

Legion Master / Yellow Radio

[Green Legion "Great Wall"]

Legion Master / Green Grandee

-Six Armors-

Third Post / Iron Pound

Ash Roller (Kusakabe Rin)

Bush Utan

Olive Glove

[Purple Legion "Aurora Oval"]

Legion Master / Purple Thorn

-Close Aide-

Aster Vine

Crimson Kingbolt (Currently retired)

[White Legion "Oscillatory Universe"]

Legion Master / ???

-Legion Plenipotentiary Representative-

Ivory Tower

[Acceleration Research Society]

Black Vise

Rust Jigsaw

Dusk Taker (Noumi Seiji)

*Has left Accelerated World

Sulfur Pot

[Others]

Nickel Doll

Sand Duct

Matchmaker

Chrome Falcon

Saffron Blossom

Azure Heir

Magenta Scissor

Cocoa Cracker

Lagoon Dolphin (Asato Ruka)

Coral Merrow (Itosu Mana)

Aluminium Valkyrie (Chigira Chiaki)

Orange Raptor (Hoori Yuuko)

Violet Dancer (Kuruma Kurumi)

Zircon Paladin

ACCEL WORLD¹¹

Carbide Wolf

Kawahara Reki
Illustration / HIMA
Design / Biibii



- Kuroyukihime = The Student Council Vice-President of Umesato Middle School. A well-mannered and intelligent lady. Her background is mired in mystery. Her avatar in school is her self-made program, the "Black Swallowtail Butterfly". Her duel avatar is the Black King, "Black Lotus" (Level 9).
- Haruyuki = Arita Haruyuki. A first-year student in Umesato Middle School. A bullied child with a plump appearance. He's good at games, but an introvert. His avatar in school is the "Pink Pig". His duel avatar is "Silver Crow" (Level 5).
- Chiyuri = Kurashima Chiyuri. A childhood friend of Haruyuki. A meddlesome, lively girl. Her avatar in school is the "Silver Cat". Her duel avatar is "Lime Bell" (Level 4).
- Takumu = Mayuzumi Takumu. An acquaintance of Haruyuki and Chiyuri since childhood. Skilled in Kendo. His duel avatar is "Cyan Pile" (Level 5).
- Fuuko = Kurasaki Fuuko. A burst linker that belonged to the old Nega Nebulas. One of the «Four Classical Elements». Started living a secluded life due to a certain incident, but returned to the front lines after persuasion from Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki. Taught Haruyuki the Incarnate System. Her duel avatar is "Sky Raker" (Level 8).
- Uuii = Shinomiya Utaï. A burst linker that belonged to the old Nega Nebulas. One of the «Four Classical Elements». A fourth-year student in Matsunoki Elementary. She is able to handle not only the high-grade disenchantment command, Purification, but is skilled at far ranged attacks as well. Her duel avatar is "Ardor Maiden" (Level 7).

- Neuro Linker = A mobile terminal that establishes a wireless quantum connection to the brain, supporting the five senses, such as sight and hearing.
- Brain Burst = An application within the Neuro Linker that Kuroyukihime transferred to Haruyuki.
- Duel Avatar = A virtual body controlled by players when battling in Brain Burst.
- Legion = Refers to groups formed by several duel avatars, with the aim of expanding their occupied areas and protecting their privileges. There are 7 main legions, with each of the «Seven Kings of Pure Color» tasked as their legion masters.
- Standard Battle Field = Refers to the field where normal battles (1 versus 1 matches) take place in Brain Burst. Although the specs it possesses are close to that of reality, its system is still at the level of fighting games of the past.
- Unlimited Neutral Field = A field restricted to duel avatars at level 4 and above, geared towards heavy players. It is designed with a game system different from that of the Standard Battle Field, with a degree of freedom easily comparable to even that of the future's VRMMOs.

- Movement Command System = A system used to control the avatar. The avatar is normally manipulated entirely through this system.
- Image Control System = A system to manipulate the avatar by imagining (Image) it strongly. With a mechanism that works considerably different from the usual Movement Command System, there are extremely few people who can handle it. The important part to the Incarnate System.
- Image Control System = A system to manipulate the avatar by imagining (Image) it strongly. With a mechanism that works considerably different from the usual Movement Command System, there are extremely few people who can handle it. The important part to the Incarnate System.

- Acceleration Research Society = A mysterious group of burst linkers. Considers Brain Burst to be not just a mere versus game and are up to something. Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw are affiliated to this.
- Disaster Armor = An enhanced armament called Chrome Disaster. When equipped, powerful abilities such as one to absorb the target avatar's HP, Health Absorption (Drain), or one to act before enemies' attacks, evading them, Future Prediction, can be used. However, the one equipping it will have their soul tainted by Chrome Disaster, and end up completely taken over.
- Star Caster = Refers to the large sword held by Chrome Disaster. Despite its sinister appearance, it was originally a famous majestic sword that shone like the stars, as true to its name.

- ISS Kit = Short for the IS Mode Study Kit. IS Mode refers to the Incarnate System Mode, and with the aid of this kit, any and all duel avatars are able to utilize the Incarnate System. While it's being used, a Red Eye will get attached somewhere on the avatar, with the Excess Light (Over-Ray) resulting from Incarnate released in the form of a black aura.

- «Seven Sacred Treasures (Seven Arcs)» = a series of 7 enhanced armaments which are the strongest in the Accelerated World. The items include the large sword, «The Impulse», the staff, «The Tempest», the large shield, «The Strife», one with an unknown appearance, «The Luminary», the straight sword, «The Infinity», the full body armour, «The Destiny» and another with an unknown appearance, «The Fluctuating Light».

- «Mental Scars Shell» = Refers to the shell encasing the scars of the mind, the Childhood Trauma that sets the foundation for duel avatars. It is said that children that develop exceptionally solid and thick shells will give birth to a metal-colored duel avatar.

accel World

↑ ↓ ← →

↺ ↻ ↷ ↸

⏪ ⏩ ⏴ ⏵ ⏶ ⏷

Prologue

Upon stepping through the supermarket's automated door, a tiny progress bar appeared at the bottom of his vision.

The bar was plain in its design, except for a single black swallowtail butterfly proceeding from its left to right that flapping its wings faster and faster as the bar filled up. Upon being completely filled, the progress bar vanished and the black butterfly took off without warning. The boy extended his right arm reflexively to catch the butterfly, but it slipped through his fingers, fluttered towards the ceiling of the supermarket almost exactly like a real butterfly, before vanishing, as if into thin air.

"... Putting so much detail into her applications? Sacchan is just being herself!"

The boy's attention was diverted upon hearing the voice from his right.

Standing there was a girl wearing a short-sleeved top and pleated skirt uniform. Her long, soft chestnut hair gently danced in the wind and light blue knee socks covered her legs. In her left hand, she carried a medium-sized tote bag.

That gentle, soft smile never left her face, but it changed dramatically according to the situation. In such an event the fear it induced was ten times greater than typical rage. However, this current smile was simple, light, and brimmed with affection for the aforementioned «Sacchan».

Arita Haruyuki grinned in agreement, replying to Kurasaki Fuuko:

"That butterfly is in all apps designed by Senpai, and it always will fly away when the loading is done. If you can be really quick and gentle in that moment, you can catch the butterfly.

"... What will you do once you've caught the butterfly?"

"Catching one butterfly is worth a point."

Haru's reply confused Fuuko even further.

"..... What if you get one point?"

"Senpai said to me, if I can catch one thousand butterflies, many wonderful things will happen, but she hasn't told me what yet, it's a secret."

"..... Maybe that's too much detail..."

Fuuko murmured with a dumbfounded expression as she said that. Clapping her hands together, she addressed Haruyuki:

"Well then, Karasu-san, let's hurry and buy the groceries. All those kids at home are hungry and waiting, you know?"

"O-Okay."

Haruyuki nodded, raised his right finger and poking a button that had appeared where the progress bar had been. A map of the supermarket's first floor appeared to the right of the virtual desktop, together with a roughly ten-line «shopping list».

A thin line ran along the aisles and shelves shown in the map, starting from Haruyuki's position and ending in a large blinking dot, marking their destination aisle. So the two of them followed the marker and headed towards the fresh produce section. When they neared one of the shelves, the first item on the shopping list lit up brightly [Potatoes 5x (May Queen) ¥ 198]. Sure enough, they were stacked full to the brim on the shelf right in front of them. Haruyuki and Fuuko picked up one of the packets, searching for mold or bruises on the potatoesthen pushing the purchase button in their vision.

With a *ding*, 198 yen was deducted from the electronic wallet in Haruyuki's Neuro Linker. Fuuko opened her tote bag, allowing Haruyuki to place the potato packet inside, and the first item on their shopping list dimmed.

It was then that Haruyuki finally realized something, and blurted:

"Ah, I, uh, let me help you with that!"

"Oh, really? I'll pay for the stuff then."

From Fuuko's outstretched hand, Haruyuki lifted the 500-gram-heavier bag, walked behind her, then headed for the next item on the list. The second item on the shopping

list was [Onions 2x ¥98].

This shopping list that established a connection with an indoor map of the supermarket was an app entirely designed by Kuroyukihime, named «Shopping Optimizer Ver. 2.0». It worked by connecting to the supermarket's Local Net, searching for the locations and prices of all the items one was shopping for, and projecting the shortest route to each one on the supermarket map. Of course, the application was not restricted to supermarkets, and was able to eliminate the need for searching back and forth for an item be it in an expensive furniture store or a very tightly stacked pharmacy.

If one were just looking for items, then some supermarket Local Nets already had this function available to customers. However, they almost would never be synced with customers' own shopping list — because generally supermarkets wanted people to not just buy only the things they were looking for, but also to stay a little longer and browse for other items they weren't searching for too! So the most powerful part of Kuroyukihime's application was its capability of easily rejecting an interface request from the supermarket Local Net. Haruyuki didn't dare ask for the specifics of the mechanisms involved

After the group had drawn straws to become testers, Haruyuki and Fuuko were chosen. Under its guidance, the two of them had used only around four minutes at night to find all 11 of their items, moving through the store at high speed, ending with the last item, [Top Quality Cured Curry Roux / Sweet ¥278]. Since they had already paid through the in-store network, they passed directly through the long lines of customers waiting for checkout and exited the supermarket.

Following the central path to the shopping mall's lift, Fuuko voiced another thought, mixed with a wry smile:

"This is my first time using this shopping application... although I can definitely see many hallmarks of Sacchan's impatient personality inside, right?"

"A-Ah ha ha... Senpai told me that starting with Version 3.0, even payments will be handled automatically."

"So does that mean you'll be able to dash into the store, throwing stuff into your bag, and just run right outside? I bet you 10 Burst Points that a police officer will stop you right at the exit."

"..... Y-You have a point."

Haruyuki suddenly remembered Kuroyukihime asking him, "*When the newest version comes out, will you please help me test it?*", and turned pale. When the lift doors to his apartment building opened, he hurriedly rushed out.

Chapter 1

Monday, June 24, 2047, 6:30 pm.

Suginami Ward was dotted with high-rise apartment buildings, and in one such building in North Suginami, every member of the Black Legion «Nega Nebulous» was gathered on its 23rd floor, in the living room of the Arita family home, each of them an important friend to Haruyuki.

At the dining table for six, seated at the very head of the table was Legion Master Kuroyukihime. The legion chief Mayuzumi Takumu and the pistachio-faced Kurashima Chiyuri sat on the side closest to the kitchen. Opposite from them, the conscientious chief mascot of the legion, Shinomiya Utai sat next to the reluctant, trouble-making machine Haru. Seated opposite Kuroyukihime was Sub-Commander Kurasaki Fuuko.

Only one week before exactly, Haruyuki was introduced to the sixth member Utai, and at subsequent meetings naturally got used to her presence. However, today an extra chair was placed by both Kuroyukihime's and Fuuko's side, and on the dinner table, two more plates had been laid out, making eight plates for a table with only six seated.

A pot set on the table emitted a sweet aroma of rice, while the induction cooker next to it with a large pot placed filled the room with the overpowering fragrance of herbs and spices. Words were unnecessary now; if Haruyuki was having trouble resisting, then it was even harder for the other five members; each of them had a tortured look on their face as they resisted the mouthwatering scent of the food.

"...I...can't go on like this.."

Haruyuki bowed his head while saying so, and next to him, Utai similarly stretched out her ten fingers, moving them with as much energy she could spare.

[UI» You must endure, Crow-chan. This is also a form of mental endurance training-desy]

While Utai might have typed that with a firm expression, her signed words said otherwise, and she was plainly close to giving in. Across from them, Chiyuri was eyeballing her empty plate, while Takumu was continuously cleaning his glasses to distract himself. On one end of the table, a creepy smile was growing at the corner of Fuuko's lips, and at the other, Kuroyukihime simply shut her eyes, not moving, displaying the demeanour of a legion master, until she could hold it in no longer and exclaimed loudly:

"...They're way too slow!"

It could only be a fake reaction to avoid showing her own hunger, but she slapped the dining table, and continued:

"They've been late by three and a half minutes already! If they were meeting in the Unlimited Field to plan, it's been fifty-eight hours now!"

"Heheh... You should guess better - it's actually fifty-eight hours and twenty minutes."

Fuuko lightly giggled while undercutting Kuroyukihime's point. As though he could actually see the sparks and killer intent flying between their eyes as they turned to face each other, Haruyuki desperately tried to assuage their heads and interrupted:

"Sen-senpai, don't get mad, Master too! I-i-i-mean, everyone is saying the curry should be very nice to eat..."

"Oh? Then, should you give me your portion, then? Skip your meals for three days and give me your food, let's try that."

"It's rare that Karasu-san is so generous. How about making the most of it, by accepting his meals for an entire week?"

"This..this is pushing the limits of any generosity!"

At this precise moment, with Haruyuki waving his hands in panic, everyone heard a long-awaited ringing sound.

Ding dong!

The two chimes of the apartment doorbell rang concurrently. Haruyuki's right hand instantly responded, moving up to click the virtual window in his desktop to open the guest peephole.

"Wel-welcome! I'll go to the elevator to wait, so just go straight to the 23rd floor!"

From his chair, Haruyuki shot up and sped away to the entrance hall like a bolt of lightning, leaving behind five people at the dining table. Raising her right hand, Kuroyukihime stood up and swiftly issued orders:

"Chiyuri, distribute the rice! Takumu and Fuuko, take out the salad from the fridge! Utai-chan, warm up the curry! Leave the preparation of the barley tea to me!"

Upon being brought to the entrance hall by Haruyuki, the first words spoken by the visitor were:

"Woah, what a nice fragrance! I sure feel hungry now!"

The person, unmoved even while killer intent was released by Nega Nebulus, looked up at Haruyuki's face, and asked,

“Where shall I sit, Onii-chan~?”

Facing that persisting, pure, innocent smile, Haruyuki frantically pushed on the shoulders of the red T-shirt, bringing that girl over to the seat next to Kuroyukihime. While this arrangement was inherently tense, there was no other more appropriate arrangement as the top seats were both at that end of the table.

After sitting down on the table with a thud, the young girl with twin red ponytails was now at the same position as Kuroyukihime. The Red King and Legion Master of «Prominence», also known by the nickname «Immobile Fortress»: Scarlet Rain, the avatar of Kōzuki Yuniko.

Haruyuki let out a sigh of relief when Yuniko sat down without further comment, and that was when the figure of a second person appeared in the entrance hall. This person was later than Yuniko for about 10 seconds, because she had to change out of her motorcycle wear: long gloves of black leather, paired together with her water-resistant riding jacket. After flipping her braids to behind her shoulder, with a soft and heavy voice she spoke:

“SRY. Accident Avoidance Jam on Seven Rings.”

The one who used the softest possible voice and fewest possible words, was the second-in-command of the Red legion, Blood Leopard, nicknamed Pard.

Just as Haruyuki was about to usher Pard to her seat as well, Fuuko, who was closer to her instead got up quickly.

“Ah, it must be really hard on you to have met with such a troublesome incident, isn’t it eh, Leopard?”

Fuuko inched closer to Pard even as she spoke smoothly.

Accident Avoidance Jam - it meant that when an automated car was about to meet an accident, the car's controlling AI's emergency protocols, as well as that of other cars in the vicinity, would broadcast a warning signal. But during the rush hour, this initial avoiding of an accident successively creates a series of accident avoidance responses down the highway, leading to huge swathes of cars coming to a halt or moving slowly.

Now at this moment, within the Arita home's living room, the two of them emitted unseen waves of enmity of such strength, Haruyuki's present actions slowed and stopped, and he couldn't help but become aware he was swallowing his saliva out of nervousness.

The dueller who earned the nickname «Bloody Kitty», Pard 'Onee-san', and Sky Raker, the «Iron Hand», controlled by Kurasaki Fuuko, were bitter foes from the days of the old Nega Nebulas, or so he had heard. Pard onee-san, who had continued to remain at Level 6 despite being a veteran Burst Linker, definitely had a reason deeply related to the half-retired Kurasaki Fuuko.

"...hi, Raker."

Pard, who was removing her gloves, uttered that short and simple greeting. Whether they had met before in the past, or this was their first meeting, Haruyuki obviously could not know.

At least, they should have had met and talked at the end of the «Hermes Vertical Cord Race» three weeks ago, but that was not only a multi-legion fight, that was before Raker returned from her semi-retirement as a Burst Linker and had not fought a single duel yet.

"*What, wha-what if they duel suddenly right here now,*" Haruyuki thought, and panicked. His palms became slick with sweat. But before that could happen, Yuniko's «Angel Mode» activated, and her sweet voice easily defused all the tension in the room.

"Sit down, you two~ otherwise, shall we eat already? I can't keep waiting for so long~"

"So says the punctual Red King?"

Kuroyukihime said sarcastically, and her reply seemed to awaken Fuuko, who took a step back, followed by Pard-san who took her seat as well. These opponents having taken their place, Haruyuki frantically returned to his own seat as well. Kuroyukihime then stood and opened her mouth to speak.

"No matter what, let's eat first. You may discuss things later if you like. Then, thanks for the food!"

"Thanks for the food!"

The seven other seated happily gave thanks and began a new battle - over the large bowl of curry in the middle.

For what reason did all six members of Nega Nebulas personally prepare curry and invite the top two members of Prominence to have dinner together at the same table?

The reason must be explained from events of yesterday - the 23rd of June, the «Seven Pure Colour King's Meeting» held over the weekend.

While he was chewing his food and trying to take some more peeled potatoes, Haruyuki began to recall bits of his memory from 20 hours earlier. Where even a single slip of the tongue or otherwise might have resulted in a death penalty from the Kings for him; his «Criminal Trial».

Chapter 2

He was flanked by two beauties. "*This can't be--it's not supposed to be a judgement--but it can't be said not to be either--*" Haruyuki's thoughts wildly fluttered.

The silver-coloured duel avatar, Silver Crow, stood on the highest tier of a tall circular platform. On the next level, two cute female avatars stood ramrod straight by his sides. Regrettably, they were neither there to guard him nor serve him; they were akin to prison guards.



"...if-if I may ask, is that sword a starting equipment? Or was it an Enhanced Armament you found?"

Haruyuki, unable to stand the tension any longer, asked in a soft voice to the avatar on the right, one of the two top lieutenants of the Blue Legion: Cobalt Blade.

The heavily-armoured blue female warrior avatar clanked as it turned to glare at Haruyuki, answering him in an irritated tone,

"These swords were our wish and soul to have; it goes without saying that they're starting equipment!"

Almost immediately, Manganese Blade, who stood to the left, spoke. Apart from a bit more green in the colour of her armor, she looked otherwise identical to Cobalt Blade, just like a pair of twins.

"'Picked' it up? Think before you speak, or I just might cut you down!"

Haruyuki, intimidated until he was shaking, quickly looked for an excuse:

"I-i-it's not like that! Not-not long ago, in the Unlimited Field I saw a sword very similar to that, so I couldn't help but ask---"

At this, the two female warriors exchanged glances, and in perfectly synchronised whispers asked Haruyuki:

""Where did you see such a sword in the Unlimited Field?""

"That..that is..."

What Haruyuki thought of was a response he need not say: that a mysterious blue avatar inside the nigh-impenetrable «Imperial City» right in the center of the Unlimited Neutral Field, was the holder of the Straight Sword; the Accelerated World's strongest Enhanced Armament, Fifth Star Epsilon of the Seven Arcs: «The Infinity».

But to leak such classified information to the lieutenants of a hostile Legion was unthinkable. With this in mind, Haruyuki replied sheepishly and rubbed his two index fingers together:

"Eh, hehehe... It's a secret."

Instantly, their eyes lit up fiercely and they grabbed the sword-hilts by their side. But by an infinitely fortunate timing, a relaxed yet firm and commanding voice sounded clearly across the field.

"Hey hey, Cobal, Maga. Don't kick him out before the trial has started."

"Yes sir!"

The female avatars answered loudly, standing straight up again. Haruyuki relaxed his neck, and from behind the mirror-like surface of his helmet's face stole a glance at his saviour.

Silver Crow stood at the centre of a large dais roughly 30 metres in diameter. At its edges, seven large stone pillars had been cut down to stumps to make improvised seats, their positions marking a half-circle surrounding Haruyuki. And seated on every one of them, was a Level 9 Burst Linker, the strongest in Accelerated World - the «Seven Pure Colour Kings».

On the seat furthest to his right, controlling the territory of Shibuya and leader of the Legion «Great Wall», carrying the nickname «Invulnerable», sat the Green King, Green Grande. Just like the week before, he brought no escorts.

To the side, the avatar Haruyuki admired as the Sword King, controller of the Suginami area and leading the legion «Nega Nebulas», Black Lotus, nicknamed «World's End» sat, with the exquisite figure of the sub-commander Sky Raker visible behind her.

On the third seat, representing the legion controlling the area from Nakano to Nerima, sat the Red King and leader of «Prominence»: Scarlet Rain. Naturally, she did not equip her Enhanced Armament for this meeting, choosing to remain in her usual appearance of a cute little girl with twin ponytails. By her side, Blood Leopard, an avatar that invoked the image of a leopard standing on its two hind legs stood quietly.

Seated on the fourth seat directly facing Haruyuki, the Blue King, Blue Knight, leisurely sat on it. The organiser of this meeting, nicknamed «Vanquish» and «Legend Slayer», who controls the territory from Shinjuku to Bunkyo, is also Legion Master of the legion «Leonids». Taking up positions by Crow's left and right were the two female Linkers serving as lieutenants of Leonids. Thus by deduction, the voice that had commanded them to stand down belonged to Blue Knight.

To the right of the Blue King's seat, an avatar that on first sight could only be described in the single word «Queen», sat upright on the seat. That avatar who controlled the area of Ginza, and was christened «Empress Voltage» - the Purple King, Purple Thorn. Behind her stood an avatar resembling a female officer, the whip user Aster Vine. Although neither of the two were moving, but the killer intent they emitted was more clearly focused on one person than anywhere else in the area, and that was Haruyuki himself.

Occupying the sixth seat was a bright yellow clown avatar, so pure and saturated to the point of hurting the eyes. The King that controlled the territory from Akihabara to Ueno, and head of the legion «Crypt Cosmic Circus», and nicknamed «Radioactive Disturber»; Yellow Radio, had brought no escorts within the area as far as one could see. The laughing mask on his face oscillated like a clock.

Finally, on the seventh and leftmost seat, sat an avatar in place of the «King» that should have personally appeared instead. Tall, thin, and tapering to a needle-fine point, that slender avatar bore the name «Ivory Tower». He hailed from Roppongi, an area

controlled by the White legion «Oscillatory Universe», also the jurisdiction of the White King. In other words, he is also the plenipotentiary of the White legion. Haruyuki still believed that today he would be able to get a glimpse of the one remaining Level 9 Burst Linker he has not seen personally, but he had no idea that that King was so shy...or another way of looking at it, was that he as a mere Level 5 Burst Linker was not worthy of his/her attention.

"-perhaps it's the latter. Although I'm very interested in that person."

The slightly crestfallen Haruyuki continued to look, past the surroundings of the «Demonic City» Stage, until his gaze came to rest at the huge, upright city in the foggy distance. That of course was the heart of Accelerated World, the «Imperial Palace». However, as this was not the Unlimited Neutral Field, but the normal duel stage created by Cobalt and Manganese Blade selecting to duel each other, it is inaccessible. Haruyuki and the other Kings were thus accelerated as spectators, and gathered in this area.

Hence, although neither Cobalt nor Manganese Blade were unable to directly duel Silver Crow, they can immediately remove him from the viewing gallery as an «Obstructing Spectator». Alternatively, despite the small chance, the duel mode can be changed to «Battle Royale» mode with all parties' consent, allowing everyone to freely attack one another.

"--Absolutely not, I will not select the "YES" option in my life, not over my dead body--"

Haruyuki had completely forgotten the last Seven King's Meeting, when he had thought of the exact same thing. Making that resolve within himself, he also examined his surroundings. At its basics, this was a court case against Silver Crow as the defendant, it was purely that kind of situation. And filling in the roles, would be Black Lotus as the «Defendant's Lawyer», their greatest rival Purple Thorn is the «Prosecution», Blue Knight the «Judge», and the rest of the Kings are «Jurors».

The gathered audience had maintained a dead silence since the beginning, This was because they were still waiting for one last «Witness» to «Debut». That person would use a special ability to thoroughly check Silver Crow for his innocence, determining if he

is «Guilty». Depending on his that person's word, it will make the final decision for Crow's fate - to remain as a Burst Linker, or to be punished by Uninstallation of Brain Burst.

Naturally, Haruyuki had complete faith in himself that he was innocent.

The main reason he was here as an accused was because of the incident some time before, during the «Hermes Cord Traverse Race», when he had summoned the cursed «Disaster Armour», the «Armour» that has caused numerous catastrophe since the early days of the Accelerated World. And Haruyuki who was its sixth-generation user-no, «host» had been given a week's reprieve. This had lasted from the previous King's meeting till today, where he would be judged if he was been successful in cleansing his duel avatar of the «Armour», and Silver Crow's head may or may not have a price put on his head. To the newly-levelled up Level 5 Silver Crow, this was tantamount to a death penalty.

Hence, over the past week, Haruyuki and his fellow Legion members had devoted their all, struggling in hopes of removing the parasitic Armour from Silver Crow. All of the curses had finally been removed successfully, after rescuing Ardor Maiden who possessed the «Purification» ability, directly facing off against the memories of the two Burst Linker who created the «Armour», and unlocking the hidden secrets of the logic that resided within the existence that is Chrome Disaster.

The two high-level Enhanced Armaments that had formed the «Armour» - the greatsword «Star Caster» and the full-body armour «The Destiny», had been physically separated from Haruyuki's body by Maiden's purification, and were now locked in a slumber in a certain location in the Accelerated World. Haruyuki's duel avatar should now not be in the possession of any object, and should not suffer a guilty verdict.

But while Haruyuki fully believed in his innocence, whether the audience would be convinced still made him uneasy. The nature of that «Witness» whom the audience and Kings are waiting for was unclear to him. Although both Kuroyukihime and Fuuko seemed to have some clues from their tone that that person may be one that can't be completely trusted.

In other words, there is a small probability that this Witness could have been bribed by the Prosecution, to arrive at a false conclusion and cry "*Guilty!*", and Haruyuki, unable to contest this verdict with a counter-argument, will certainly suffer.

The longer he stood here waiting in silence, the more Haruyuki was unable to help himself with this continuously expanding train of uneasy thoughts. He tried to strike up a conversation with the two female warrior avatars:

"If-if I may ask, Manganese-senpai..."

"...now, what?"

Haruyuki very cautiously cast a tortured-looking glance towards that avatar and asked.

"...about you and Cobalt, are the two of you siblings in real life...or maybe, identical twins?"

"...we are twin sisters."

"Uh, oh, oh! I see...but yet, in this situation, is your «Parent» different person for each...is it as such?"

"Ooh, some smart question you have there, kid,"

The other avatar Cobalt Blade spoke softly upon hearing that. Slightly leaning her face towards Silver Crow, she continued her explanation in a slight tone of pride.

"As you should already know, the Neuro Linker identifies the user by their brain waves. In such a case, what about two person's brainwaves, that are so similar as to be said to be identical?"

"Eh, the Neu..Neuro Linker's connection would be..?"

This time, it was Manganese Blade whose head swivelled around to chuckle softly.

"Hehehe, would you like to know more? Join our legion and work hard then, it's not impossible to become our subordinate if you prove to be a handy fella~"

“That said, it depends on how today turns out, hehehe~”

“Eh...um, thanks for the offer, but I will have to decline...”

“What are you saying?”

Once more their sword’s handles were tightly gripped, and the seated Blue Knight was shaking his head in resignation, about to again command them to stand down, when-

At that moment, amid the murky stage environment, a clear, vibrant voice sounded.

“Ya~ Sorry I’m late! I came out of the opposite side of the City by mistake!”

Distinctive clanging sounds of an avatar’s running footsteps on the floor of the Demonic City stage were heard. Haruyuki realised the footsteps were approaching from behind, and turned behind quickly. After a short pause, the two guards also followed suit.

A silhouette appeared from amid the dense fog. It was a slim and petite female avatar. Only her head appeared disproportionately large, but despite that, the latecomer didn’t seem to give much thought to her appearance, and slowed to a walk directly forward

“She’s here, Maga.”

“Don’t be careless, Cobal.”

This short exchange between the two female warriors carried a tension to it, making Haruyuki rather confused. The greatest precaution should be taken when duel avatars approach in the Unlimited Neutral Field, but this was a normal duel field. Even though he was sure that the restriction of «Spectators cannot approach Combatants closer than 10 metres» had been lifted by the system, but the fundamental rule that «Spectators do not possess any combat ability» was not lifted either.

Regrettably, Haruyuki had no chance to ask Cobalt and Manganese Blade what precisely were they on guard against. That is because the visitor appeared from the depths of the thick fog, leisurely walking past Haruyuki before slowing to a stop in front of the Seven Kings.

That duel avatar was dyed a very pale purple colour. Easily resembling the shape of a

delicate female, her limbs and body lacked any special characteristics, and the most prominent part was her head.. The head must have made up at least 30 centimetres of the 1.60m height of the avatar. As for the characteristic of that fan-shaped attachment, was it a hat-type armour, or part of the avatar itself? From Haruyuki's view of her back, he was unable to immediately tell.

The Blue King, Blue Knight, stood up from his chair and said to the avatar who had placed her hand on her right waist, and bowed slightly in greeting.

"...for you to be able to respond to our urgent request rapidly, I must first give my thanks to you, «Argon Array»."

"It's al~right, it doesn't really matter. I'm just here 'ta collect my pay, ah ha ha!"

This Burst Linker named Argon Array might appear unfathomable with her happy-go-lucky answer, apparently not feeling even a drop of anxiety from facing the Seven Pure Colour Kings.

"But never'taless, I've not seen this sight for a long time, yeah. How many years has it been since all~ the Kings gathered together, eh?"

The first to respond to this particular comment was Yellow Radio, the Yellow King.

"Oyah...it's kinda wrong of you to say that, 'Quad-eyes.' I remember, from the time we were crowned as Kings, there was only one occasion when all seven could gather...and wasn't that when the first generation Red King was unfortunately cut down? It almost sounds like you too were present at the time from the sound of that, no?"

This was quite clearly a provocative, yet scripted stab at Black Lotus, the Black King, disguised as a question directed at Argon. Haruyuki strongly gnashed his teeth at this. However, upon catching sight of Kuroyukihime and Fuuko looking completely unperturbed at this, he had little choice but to tolerate it.

Argon too had no reaction. Tilting her head this way and that, she merely shrugged her shoulders.

"Eh, is that so? Maybe I've messed up on my recollections, ya, 'though I remember lil' Radio-kun was only this small~"

Indicating by placing her hand horizontally at chest height, she carried on when even the Yellow King had lapsed into a deep silence.

“Ah~ nah, it can't be! From a long time ago I'd always crave for radio-yaki. whenever I saw you, Radio-bro. So, wanna come along later? There's a good place in lidabashi, though that's for places within Tokyo, ah ha ha!”

“...she hasn't changed at all, never will shut up as usual...”

Yellow Radio muttered with disgust, and sat back down. Blue Knight then spoke again:

“To catch up with old friends is always nice, but we should now move on to the main issue. Are there any more things to discuss?”

“Yea, I just came to 'see.' Alrighty, let's get this done with...”

With that, Argon, whose back had been facing Haruyuki until now, turned around.

Ah, it's a hat after all— That was the first thought that came to Haruyuki's mind. On the upper half of the F-type avatar mask, a pair of goggles with lenses covered it entirely. Above were two more circular parts, though they seemed to have shutters that were closed. The peculiar shape of her head was due to the fact that an attachment was fixed to the top of her head.

Haruyuki, deep in thought, watched Argon closely as she approached him. Keeping still where he was, he disregarded that Cobalt and Manganese were backing away.

Argon slowly made her way up on the first flight of steps, then the second, then unhesitatingly joined Haruyuki on the third flight. On this dais, the distance between the two avatars was less than twenty centimetres. The large lens-type goggles seemed to flicker from within. In this situation, Haruyuki couldn't help but try to peep into their depths, but all he could see was a mysterious darkness, unable to be discerned.

“...fuu-n. So this dude is the rumoured Karasu-kun eh~”

While saying that in a soft voice, she leaned her head to one side. Perhaps because of reflected light in her goggles, they appeared to blink like actual eyes.

“From the rumours I've heard, did you really depend on your strength to separate that

Armour? My companions all praised you immensely, and some have even said you've got a bright future ahead, eh!"

"Tha...thank you..."

Hearing Haruyuki's timid reply, Argon Array answered with a throaty chuckle.

Haruyuki knew very little about the role of this «Witness». All he knew beforehand was that she would use a skill to check his duel avatar's Status, able to determine if any parasitic objects were remaining, and that her nickname was «Quad-Eyes Analyst».

From what her manners and speech, it was obvious that she was a player with considerable history, though her actual duel avatar name was only known today; Haruyuki naturally is meeting her for the first time. Initially he thought that she would actually have four eyes like her namesake, but only two eyes were being covered by the goggles on her face. Just while he was closely examining her petite outline, wondering where was the last pair of eyes—

CHII.

Somewhere in a deep corner of his consciousness, he felt a small spark of recognition.

It was as if it was some memory that he shouldn't have, yet at that very instant something somehow connected. Momentarily wondering where he had seen it before, Haruyuki was unable to go any deeper than that. It was as if there was a faintly discernable silhouette of a message hidden behind a screen of static noise.

Just as Haruyuki stared blankly, Argon suddenly took a step back and to Cobalt and Manganese standing at both her sides, spoke:

"Well, let's get started. But since me an' him are in the Gallery, if I'm 'ta use my ability, can the sisters add me to the duel?"

".....we know."

Cobalt Blade answered stiffly, opening up the Install menu, and quickly got to work. A

small window containing the message **[You have been invited to join Battle Royale Mode? YES / NO]** in English appeared immediately before Haruyuki and Argon.

Argon merely said “I’m pressin’ it now,” before selecting the ‘YES’ option, but Haruyuki instead reacted with “Ehh~!” If he joined the Battle Royale, he would leave the safety of being a Spectator and be promoted to a duel opponent, complete with Health Gauge—no, rather, wasn’t this a demotion? The samurai sisters Cobalt and Manganese could very well slice Haruyuki into countless pieces so long as they felt like it.

At this moment, Black Lotus finally spoke for the first time since the start of the meeting, breaking the tense silence.

“Don’t worry, Crow. If this is a trap, I will definitely slay them all.”

Sky Raker, who stood just behind Lotus, added on,

“Naturally, we’ll just hang them all on the Sky Tree, yeah.”

As these awesome lines caused the stage’s temperature to drop to around negative 100 degrees, Scarlet Rain, the Red King dropped yet another bombshell.

“Eh, Eh Lotus, let’s be clear about one thing. We from Prominence, are merely spectating! if you want to hang someone, then just those guys who look a little sick there will do.

Quite clearly the Purple and Blue Kings were the target of this remark of ‘looking a little sick.’ To say nothing of the Blue King, the killer intent behind Purple Thorn and Aster Vine immediately multiplied. Afraid that this would quickly worsen into another battle among the kings, Haruyuki immediately extended his hand towards the window, declaring:

“It’s-it’s-it’s alright! This is all to prove my innocence!”

With that, he braced himself and clicked the option. Upon receiving the confirmation that he had joined the Battle Royale, his Health Gauge appeared with a clang as he set himself down on the ground. the other three avatars’ indicators appearing in the top right corner in a smaller font.

It was not hard to believe that both Cobalt and Manganese were both the Blue King’s left

and right hand men since they were both Level 7. What was even more surprising was the fact that the display next to Argon Array indicated that she was Level 8. She was really was a great warrior. The tone of which she spoke with the Yellow King like old friends was finally understandable.

Yet, she continued to speak with a relaxed tone.

“OK! This is all part of the job. Let me have a good look at you. Are you ready, Crow-kun?”

Argon Array said as she moved really close to him. Haruyuki answered reflexively as he stood where he was like a good subject “Sor-sorry to trouble you.”

“Well then, starting~”

Upon saying this, from the hat - or at least what Haruyuki thought was a hat - two circular panels detached. They were roughly 1.5 times bigger than her eyes. Now Haruyuki could see why she was named “Quad Eyes” since there were effectively four lenses now.

Following that, her large head started making a whooshing sound, a small warm breeze began blowing out from the heat vents inside, and the entire apparatus glowed a bright purple. The light then engulfed Silver Crow much like how a laser would.

“...!!!”

Haruyuki uncontrollably tried to shield himself but he felt no pain. He looked up and realised that his health was still full. Even so, he felt somewhat odd, as though something was penetrating his body.

“..... Hmmm, his inventory is completely empty.”

Argon suddenly muttered softly. This probably meant that she was able to see the inventory which was normally hidden from the other players.

“There seem to be no buffs as well, no equipped armor, or any armor that can be made from items.....”

The cheerfulness in Argon’s voice was seemingly sapped away. What replaced it was a

cold business like voice that would come from an uninterested observer examining a specimen.

CHII

An even brighter spark once again emerged from the deep recesses of Haruyuki's mind. Another scene appeared, fusing with the one in front of him.

A steep cliff, where many figures were gathered. Instead of people, avatars were standing in their place. This scene was so familiar; Haruyuki had definitely seen it before, it was just a matter of when and where. Was it a dream? A dream he had a few days ago?

Haruyuki held his breath as he ransacked the fuzzy memory for answers. The sequence of events was somewhat out of order, due to dreams [merely being a telescope into events that have happened so long ago]. In fact, these weren't even Haruyuki's memories to begin with. These memories were sealed away along with a now lost Enhanced Armament. This memory once belonged to someone who had created that Armament in the first place, a Burst Linker who had long since left the Accelerated World.

Haruyuki focused all his effort into remembering. The memories became much clearer. What once was a cliff in that memory, was actually a steep slope - a dome shaped crater,. Standing on the edge of the crater was an avatar with a ridiculously large head and four shining eyes. A soft voice choppy voice could be heard in the background as Haruyuki tried to think.

"...uage complete recovery...no usage of...Special Gauge. ...no mistake, it's the Imagin-...Circuit causing...Override phenomenon..."



Where had he heard such a voice before?

A cold calculating voice replied to the first, that seemed to be reading out statistic.

“As expected...outburst...sentiments trigger...phenomenon much faster than...-
tion. ...controlled...another matter.”

The speaker was a rather tall and thin avatar. Perhaps it wasn't exactly accurate to say that - it was almost as if he was a bunch of metal plates lined side by side on top of one another. then, the voice spoke again.

“That's right. That...possessing a...Shell Of Trauma greater than a certain... allows
metal-...is pretty much confirmed.”

Just as he was in midst of draining his brain juice to remember all that has happened, a voice at his ear reeled him back into real life.

“Heh. As expected of a metal colour, with particularly thick «Shells»..it's nearly
impossible to examine them inside eh...”

At that moment, it hit Haruyuki like a ton of bricks, clearing the fog on his fuzzy memories. In a flash, all the static that had clouded his vision was gone. What remained was a crystal clear scene in his mind.

It was the same.

The silhouette who was observing with four eyes and the female-type avatar using her four eyes to examine Haruyuki now were the one and the same. And in that memory, standing next to the four-eyed avatar was an avatar that looked like a stack of metal plates lined up against one another; an avatar that had only appeared three times before Haruyuki's eyes. An avatar who had dealt extreme pain to Haruyuki and his friends; an avatar who was also the vice president of the Acceleration Research Society: the «Binder», Black Vise.

Which means to says....

Which means to say.

A cheerful voice once again entered Haruyuki's cold ears.

"Also, there seems to be no trace of any parasitic objects. Don't worry, dude. You are no longer a carrier of that Armour. I, Quad-eyes guarantee it!

Then, Cobalt and Manga who were standing by his side, relaxed their shoulders slightly.

Kuroyukihime exchanged relieved looks with Fuuko, followed by Niko who who clapped her hands together. Blood Leopard also gave him the thumbs-up, as if saying "GJ". The Green King also nodded his head slightly.

The Yellow King, who was sitting on the opposite side, opened his arms and started muttering "Aiya, aiya". The Purple King merely shrugged her shoulders. Standing behind the Purple King was Aster Vine who flung her whip on the floor. The representative for White King, Ivory Tower had no reaction at all. The Blue King in the center of the gathering deeply nodded, and with a sweep of his cape stood up from his seat.

Yet, Haruyuki hardly took notice of any of the king's reactions.

In his mind, there was only one sentence. A sentence that resembled that of an alarm continuously going off in his head.

It is her. It is her. It is her!!

The four-eyed avatar, Argon Array is—

Black Vise's comrade.

A member of the Acceleration Research Society.

Inside his helmet, Haruyuki's teeth chattered non-stop out of excessive fear. Had this been the real world, his entire body would surely be raining sweat by the bucketload, and even his tears could be flowing too.

“What a drag, so you were actually this scared eh, little fella!”

A voice mixed with laughter was heard. The four lenses of Argon Array that had almost completely lost their glow examined Haruyuki’s face from above.

“You can relax now buddy, nobody’s gonna put a price on your head now...”

Her voice cut off at this point.

The glow within her four lenses suddenly lit up slightly. Blinking like real eyes, they slowly drew closer.

Don’t let her find out. Don’t let her know what I know now.

If he was seen through by Argon right now, she could very well reverse her verdict and declare that the Disaster Armour was still on him. Silver Crow would be judged guilty, and as a criminal be chased out of here...no, it’s more likely his head will be personally cut down by Cobalt and Manganese on the spot.

But no matter what, he must push on past this crisis, and pass the information to Kuroyukihime.

Barely managing to steady his steps, Haruyuki resisted the urge to jump backwards with all of his might- as Argon Array used her slender fingers to stroke the sides of his helmet. And then, in a soft whisper, until it is only audible to the two of them:

“Lil’ fella...do you actually recognise me?”

If not for the fact that the mirrored faceplate of Silver Crow completely hid his eyes and mouth, the expression he made in that instant would have been immediately seen through by Argon. Keeping a poker face with all his might, he tilted his head to the side, as though to say “What’s up with that?” to Argon.

Fortunately, no sound was emitted – no, he wasn’t able to; Argon seemed content to examine Haruyuki from that distance without getting any closer.

“Nah...it’s alright, nothin’ to worry about.”

With those words Argon turned away from him. Briefly tapping on the top of her own headpiece, she slowly walked down the steps.

I can’t let my guard down yet.

Straining with all of his will, Haruyuki willed his mind to pretend to stand where he was with a blank expression. As he thought of this, Argon reached the last step and turned around, her laser-like glance flashing for an instant.

Upon the success of this last check, the glow of her four eyes vanished. The Quad-Eyes Analyst placed her hands on her waist and turned to Blue Knight:

“As just said, that Crow-bro ain’t have anything suspicious left, not even Enhanced Armaments. That is, he ain’t The Disaster anymore, that’s that.”

“It relieves me to hear that, Quad-Eyes. To speak truthfully, I was quite worried if you would have to duel that fellow.”

The Yellow King snickered with a ‘kekeke’ sound upon hearing that frank remark from the Blue King. Knight glared at Radio as though saying “Don’t you feel the same?” With a loud rasp of his armour, he announced loudly:

“So, the first topic of our agenda has concluded-”

“Excuse me, may I say something?”

The interrupting person was the White King’s right-hand man, Ivory Tower, the avatar which resembled a miniature tower who had neither spoken nor moved since the start of the meeting.

Raising his right hand which resembled a second small tower, he continued in a flat voice that lacked any special characteristics:

“I understand that Chrome Disaster has since been separated from Silver Crow. But,

isn't that to say that the Armour has since been sealed in Card form? Then, where have those Cards gone to?"

Even though Haruyuki's entire brain had been occupied by Argon Array, he can't help but focus on that question.

After the Armour on Silver Crow had been separated into two Cards by Ardor Maiden's purification ability, they were now residing in the Home of the two ex-Burst Linkers who were their former owners. The House Key had been locked together with the Cards, and therefore no one can ever enter their home again. To be precise, the House can't even be seen by others.

Naturally, he can't explain all this to everyone. That is because, in Accelerated World, a method unknown to the members of Nega Nebulas to forcefully enter the Home of others may exist. If the Yellow King or someone the likes of them was to obtain those two Enhanced Armaments again— who knew what kind of plans they could cook up, even if it was no longer possible to recombine them into The Disaster.

As the Kings' gazes turned to Haruyuki, he was at a loss for words— and then the Black King, Black Lotus stood up.

"The Cards have been sealed in a place such that nobody can get at them again. Neither me nor Crow have any way to reach them again— is that a sufficient explanation for you, Ivory Tower? Or do you mean to say you'd like to know the location and method of sealing as well?"

Hearing that ice-cold voice, the ivory-coloured avatar whose head tapered to a needle at its tip shook his head.

"No need, no need, that reply will suffice, Black King. Pardon my interruption, Blue King, it was quite rude of me."

Ivory Tower put down his hands after speaking and resumed his earlier silence, looking very much like an ornament.

Black Lotus took her seat again, waving her right hand as though to urge the Blue King to proceed. Nodding, the Blue King continued from the interruption.

“...so, the first half of the meeting has been concluded. Thank you for the trouble, Quad-Eyes. Regrettably, since you’re a battle participant, you’re unable to Burst Out at the moment. May I trouble you to stay until the meeting is concluded?”

“Ne’er mind, ne’er mind. I’ll just disappear to a corner an’ watch.”

Argon Array moved to the left of the area after that. Haruyuki’s gaze quietly followed after her.

Haruyuki was now certain that the one nicknamed ‘Quad-Eyes Analyst’ is a member of the Acceleration Research Society, one of the troublemakers in Accelerated World, and even at the same rank as the Vice-President Black Vise. However, the basis for such an accusation being «it was seen in a dream» would be an extremely shaky ground to argue on, so if he was to actually voice it out, the Kings’ reaction may well be more than he can handle.

Regrettably, he could now only do one thing – not to attract the suspicions of Argon again. In order to accomplish that, Haruyuki must last through the remaining duration of the King’s meeting without a hitch, recite the command ‘Burst Out’, and immediately inform Kuroyukihime and Fuuko of his experience.

Haruyuki steeled himself and exhaled, before putting his right hand up to speak.

—

“May I ask, if I may have permission to step down?”

Miraculously, Haruyuki was able to say that with naught a shudder nor sign of conflict. With a sweeping glance at Haruyuki, the Blue King nodded and gestured towards the Black King with his thumb. Haruyuki bowed once, and bowed once more to Cobalt and Manganese upon stepping down from the topmost platform. Jumping down again, making sure he did not stumble nor rush excessively, Haruyuki jogged towards the seat taken by Black Lotus.

Although he barely had enough confidence to act normally, upon standing by Fuuko’s side, the inherent relief of standing with an ally soothed him enough to stop trembling. However, Haruyuki could not let down his guard just yet – he stole a glance from where

he stood upright directly at the participants seated directly opposite himself: at Argon Array, or more precisely her manners, from where she stood behind Ivory Tower.

The «Analyst» had since closed the shutters of the two 'eyes' on her hat attachment, with her hands on her hips and tapping her foot casually. No matter how one looks at her, she doesn't appear to belong to «that» evil circle, but there is no margin for error here. Just like Silver Crow's mask, the goggles on Argon's face obscured her line of vision, so one cannot say for sure that she too, is spying on Haruyuki from the corners of her eyes while maintaining that relaxed posture of hers.

“Everything's alright, everything's alright...” Haruyuki quietly muttered while leaning closer to Sky Raker.

“Welcome back, Crow-kun.”

That short sentence, from the master Haruyuki so admired, filled his heart to the brim and lightened his mood. Black Lotus, who sat just in front of them, also turned behind to look at the same time.

“You've worked hard eh, Crow.”

Haruyuki was very nearly brought to tears with these warm words.

However, someone like Arita Haruyuki would break down immediately upon relaxing at this crucial moment. Hence, he held back himself to merely nodding two, three times. During this short exchange, Cobalt and Manganese also disembarked from the platform and crossed the stage to take their places by the Blue King's side.

After silence fell upon the congregation again, the Blue King spoke.

“There's still about 15 minutes remaining...well, I'll just get straight to the point. The second item to discuss...is contributed from «Great Wall» regarding the Midtown Tower...”

Pausing at this point, he glanced leisurely at the Green King seated to his left.

“...would you be so kind as to explain the situation, «Invulnerable»?

Every eye instantly fell upon Green Grande, and yet he remained a stony silence that was completely expected. With a small movement of his right shoulder, a signal of sorts maybe, a large silhouette emerged from the fog behind him.

A grey-coloured avatar with a deep metallic lustre appeared, a distinctively rounded helmet covering his head, and huge boxing gloves where his hands should be.

“Ah...Pound-san.”

Haruyuki lightly nodded at the avatar nicknamed «Iron Fist», occupying the Third seat of the «Six Layers Of Armour», the Level 7 Burst Linker affiliated with the Green Legion, Iron Pound. Striding past the Green King, he took the very same spot Haruyuki stood awhile ago in the centre of the circle, but with no trace of fear at all.

“... if I may speak on behalf of my King.”

That he was the sworn enemy of the similarly nicknamed Raker, «Iron Hand» in the past should therefore imply that he was a senior Burst Linker. It too, seemed that he was known to everyone else on the field as he skipped over introducing himself and began speaking.

“As most other Legions seemed to have figured out independently, in the western part of Akasaa ward in the Unlimited Field, a Legendary-class Enemy «Archangel Metatron» has appeared. From what we can deduce from sources, it is located at the topmost floor of the Midtown Tower, and is theorised to be the cause of the recent spread of the infected Enhanced Armaments in Accelerated World, the Main Body of the «ISS Kit»...”

Following that, Iron Pound spent another three minutes detailing the news clearly to the Kings present:

—Upon approaching within two hundred metres of the Midtown Tower, an ultra-strong laser attack would be fired from Metatron, vaporising the offender on the spot.

—The only way to negate the invincibility of Metatron is to wait until the field has changed to the «Hell» Stage.

—Despite several months of waiting in the Unlimited Field, that «Stage» has not appeared.

Silence followed the end of Pound's explanation for a few long seconds. Purple Thorn was the first to recover and speak:

“Ah...well, it is not illogical anyway, I guess. Regular field or Unlimited Field, even I have only seen it change to the «Hell» Stage a handful of times.”

That sweet and cute voice seemed to carry a highly charged will despite sounding slightly nasal, as though it wished to decapitate Black Lotus given a chance.

“That's really because it truly is hell on earth, or rather the Unlimited Neutral Field. When even «Beast» Enemies are upgraded to «Devil»-class Enemies, I...I can't even begin to think about it.”

And the person who spoke those words was none other than the Blue King himself. Numerous other members of different legions also nodded their heads in agreement.

Following the gloom that descended upon the scene, Yellow Radio piped up in his high-pitched voice.

“Ahem, is there something funny here? If I understand correctly, it's suicide to approach Midtown Tower from the exterior, is that correct? Then...what if, it was penetrated from the interior? By entering the Tower's highest level in the real world and then reciting the command to enter the Unlimited Field, isn't it possible to sneak past Metatron and invade the rest of the Tower, eh?”

“...ah!”

The revelation forced that exclamation from Haruyuki's mouth. Indeed as the Yellow King had described, it was indeed possible because when one dives into the Unlimited Field, their point of entry corresponds to the location of the Diver's body in the real world. Hence, by accelerating from the real Midtown Tower, an invasion of the enemy's headquarters is possible.

—The idea that Haruyuki thought was foolproof was immediately shot down by none other than the Red King.

“I say, Radio, Grande over there should have thought of this long ago. This plan undeniably would work if the enemy was based in the Hills Tower in Roppongi Area. Middle school students can definitely afford the five hundred yen entry fee to access the top floor of that Tower. But lemme tell ya this, I’ve done my homework too: Midtown Tower is largely a playground for the super rich clientele. There’ll be restrictions to entry for anyone who isn’t a guest!”

“Ah...!”

Haruyuki cried out yet again. Iron Pound nodded at Scarlet Rain’s comment, and elaborated on it:

“She is absolutely correct; even the cheapest room for two costs thirty thousand yen a night. Per person.”

A dead silence fell upon all the participants.

Even if they were the strongest «Seven Pure Colour Kings», or the highest-ranking lieutenants in the legions, they were still just Burst Linkers. In the real world, they were only middle and high school students living on a typical student’s allowance, so something like thirty thousand yen was something far out of their reach. At the very least, even if they were absolutely sure that the ISS Kit’s Main Body could be destroyed, everyone would have their own ideas of who to send in and what method to employ because everyone would be contributing their own money. But with limited information, it is unimaginably difficult for them to accept the idea of spending thirty thousand yen.

Like a razor cutting through the darkness, Black Lotus’ voice sliced through the silence that had fallen twice today.

“...it is an aberration to use real world methods and money to solve problems in Accelerated World. Those guys belonging to the Acceleration Research Society definitely did not use money to lure Metatron from «Country Cathedral» either; we as Burst Linkers should only be relying on our own capacity to solve this.”

“Oooh, how noble, how very noble of you, Black Lotus!”

The Yellow King clapped his thin hands slowly.

“But by putting it that way, Black King, what kind of tricks do you have up your sleeve exactly? It doesn’t seem to be in character to attack head-on, but a sneak attack, is it?”

At this clear attack on Lotus, Haruyuki and Fuuko stepped forward immediately, but Kuroyukihime shot back coldly before either of them could respond.

“Same to you too, who proudly deceives and bribes others fruitlessly. Enough of this – since we’re discussing plans of attack, let’s hear what Grande has to say then.”

Yellow Radio’s eyes narrowed at this rebuttal, but left it at that and simply sat down again, and all eyes turned to Iron Pound.

Surely, if all that was needed to do was to explain the situation, then sending a document to the various legions via their anonymous mailboxes would suffice. But the Green King was not satisfied by this, and surely had a proposal of sorts by bringing an escort, unlike the last meeting.

Haruyuki nervously swallowed some saliva and waited for Pound to continue.

But in the next moment, Haruyuki involuntarily leaned back upon predicting that that steel-coloured avatar would look around and at him. Pound swept the area with his gaze – and as expected, it came to rest on Silver Crow.

–ah, why do I have this sinking feeling suddenly.

That thought was only half-formed in Haruyuki’s mind. As though Pound could read it, he nodded in Haruyuki’s direction and spoke.

“Naturally, we do have an idea to get around this issue. Silver Crow...you, who have just cleansed yourself of that «Armour», I apologise for needing to trouble you again. But, we will need your assistance for this...”

“Eh, b-b-but wait!”

Haruyuki stuttered and shook his head at the same time.

” Me-Me-Metatron’s lasers should be able to hit anything, even a flying object, so long

as it's within its range! So what if I can fly close just to be to-toasted?!”

“Un, that is absolutely correct...”

Pound readily admitted the truth, but immediately continued.

“...but this time, we're not hoping to use your «Aviation Ability», but rather something else, that actually depends on your metal colour «Silver».”

“C-c-colour? Ev..even though I'm a metal colour, but shouldn't it have no special characteristics? ...at the most, it's resistant to Poison, that's all I know...”

“It is right now, yes. But in this gathering, only you have a small probability that—”

Here, Pound paused for a moment, and finished his declaration with a heavier voice for emphasis—

“—that you will learn a legendary ability previously used by an ex-Burst Linker; the ability that is completely immune to all light-based attacks: «Theoretic Mirror».”

Chapter 3

“Uu...stuffed to the max...I could turn into a yellow-type after eating all that...”

Niko moaned as she set her spoon down.

Having finished a few minutes before, with sweating palms Haruyuki awaited the appraisal of the Red King. Chiyuri's mother was behind the secret for the delicious curry, although Chiyuri and Utai had done most of the actual cooking. Haruyuki's stress level was no lesser than the feeling just before taking an exam, even though his only role was to purchase the vegetables and peel the potatoes.

In the silence of the packed living room, Niko closed her eyes for a few minutes, before opening them wide again and delivered her verdict:

“Eighty-five percent! A Just-Pass!”

With that, every member of Nega Nebulas heaved sighs of relief. Among them, Pard-san's quiet voice was heard, uttering a "GJ" in approval.

After the dishes and utensils were speedily kept, the eight of them gathered on the sofa set. While it was meant to seat only six people, everyone was able to squeeze onto it, because Utai and Niko combined were not even half of Haruyuki's mass. The sight of the sixth- and fourth-grader girls sitting together sipping tea had a calming effect on the rest, and Haruyuki, an only child for fourteen years, wondered, "Is this how it feels like to have little sisters?" But in Accelerated World, the latter was one of the strongest «Kings», and the former was the «Sacred Fire Shrine Maiden» who could control super-high temperature flames. But as they were both long-range attack Red types, a duel between them would surely be something to see, pondered Haruyuki.

"...eh, um, Niko and Shinomiya-san, is it the first time you've met each other? Um, it probably is in the real world, but what about in Accelerated World..?"

The two grade-schoolers locked gazes with each other briefly upon hearing Haruyuki's question, and shook heads in unison. Niko answered his question first:

"I became a Burst Linker just before the disbanding of the first Nega Nebulas, although at that time I've met Maiden no small number of times in our Territory Battles.

This was followed by Utai's swift typing on her holo-keyboard.

[UI>Since we are both Red long-range types, it is natural to suppose we have always been exchanging firepower at long distances]

"There was once though, «Iron Hand»-anesan threw Maiden right in the middle of our group from above! And right in my face at that..."

[UI>It was extremely rude of me then]

With the conversation ongoing in front of her, Fuuko leisurely continued to sip her tea, paying no heed to the mention of her name. Haruyuki involuntarily trembled and spoke his thoughts aloud.

"If that's the case...then, in the past we've fought Prominence many times in the past territorial battles. I wonder when we can battle again..."

At present, the current Nega Nebulas Haruyuki belonged to had negotiated a non-expiring peace treaty, and hence both did not engage each other in the weekly Territory Battles. This was no small help for the six-man legion, already burdened with the weekly skirmishes with Leonidz and Great Wall. But yet, the treaty removed the fun of playing a fighting game.

Upon hearing Haruyuki's comment, a mixed expression appeared on Niko's face. Turning to Kuroyukihime seated on her right, she asked:

"...Lotus, this probably shouldn't be my problem... but honestly, with all this talk of helping Knight and Grande with their «Midtown Tower Invasion», shouldn't the recovery of your full strength be a bigger priority? That is to say, the last two members of «The Four Elements», have they returned yet...?"

After a short silence, the Black King softly shook her head.

"...yeah. The two of them, Aqua and Graphite are still sealed in the Imperial Palace's Four Gates. Of course, I'm all for immediately mounting a rescue mission if I was in the mood to. But...it was already a one-in-a-million chance that we were able to rescue Maiden from the altar of Suzaku. At that time...it would be an expected outcome to lose her, or even both her and Crow..."

And her words were absolutely true. Although Haruyuki had managed to retrieve Ardor Maiden, they had actually failed to escape and were forced to retreat into the inner regions of the Imperial Palace. If not for the mind-boggling existence of the Burst Linker inside the palace, Trilead Tetraoxide, it would definitely be impossible to get her out.

Of course, this was not directly explained to Niko, but she probably was vaguely aware of some of it, at least. Not investigating further, she nodded and continued:

"So it's like that, huh. Still, I need to say this: Me, Pard, and the rest of «Triplex» look forward to Territory Battles with Nebulas, just like in the old days..."

Pard-san tilted her head in agreement.

Sub-commander Fuuko giggled lightly and fired a question:

"Red King, when the time comes, I'll throw Maiden at your head again."

At that, Utai choked slightly, while Haruyuki and Takumu shrunk into their seats. In contrast, the gutsy Chiyuri laughed out loud, and cackled:

“Ah haha, Fuuko-neesan, please throw me down too! It seems to be real fun to face the enemy face to face eh!”

“Ufufu, Chi-chan’s body is quite hard, so it should have some value in throwing it down.”

“...the three of you will be leaving me behind to fight? Seriously? Haruyuki-kun, will you carry me in front to fight them as well?”

“Ma-Master, then doesn’t that leave me as the only one staying in the back to defend?!”

Everyone cracked up upon hearing Takumu’s anguished complaint.

After the laughter had died out, Kuroyukihime cleared her throat, and spoke with a straight face:

“—I believe that there will be such a day in the future. No, it definitely will come soon. But for that to happen, apart from restoring Nega Nebulas to full strength, those evildoers in the Accelerated World must also be driven out first.”

“You mean...the Acceleration Research Society, right?”

Takumu asked softly. Kuroyukihime nodded, and continued:

“It’s just over a week since the ISS kit, the equipment that controls the Burst Linker’s minds and gives them powers of negative Incarnate System, has appeared. And the Kit is spreading terrifyingly fast at that. Right now, although it’s confined to Setagaya, Koutou, and Adachi, if the Kit spreads to the city centre, order in Accelerated World would definitely collapse. Even I, despite being labelled Accelerated World’s biggest traitor, absolutely cannot tolerate the erosion of the spirit of duelling!”

Following her outburst, Niko added on in agreement.

“I wholeheartedly agree with that point. In these two days, it’s confirmed that the infection from the Kit is spreading from Adachi to Kita wards. After that, it will be Itabashi, and then Nerima...if the culprits are not found out and dealt with within this

week, then Prominence has no chance of remaining free from the infection.”

“It’s just like how Setagaya is close to Suginami as well-”

Kuroyukihime stopped speaking at that moment.

In truth, Nega Nebulas already had a case of an «Infected Burst Linker» last week: Takumu–Cyan Pile. For the sake of becoming a guinea pig to try to destroy the Kit, he went over to Setagaya Ward, and from the Burst Linker Magenta Scissors, obtained the ISS Kit. At that time, the Kit was still in a ‘Sealed Card State’, but after entering a duel with the most ferocious PK group in existence, «Supernova Remnant», Takumu had equipped the Kit to destroy them.

Takumu easily defeated «Remnant» with the overwhelming strength of negative Incarnate System powers, but ultimately he had succumbed to the Kit’s overwhelming power filling his heart, pulling him into the darkness of negative Incarnation. Fearing that he would endanger his friends if he failed to do something, Takumu sought out Magenta Scissors again for more information, accepting that he might die in the process.

But Haruyuki, upon hearing of his childhood friend’s predicament, had rushed to Takumu’s home and entered a Direct Connect Duel with him. After a hard-fought battle of Incarnate techniques, Takumu returned to his old state of self, and that night, he, Haruyuki, and Chiyuri slept together in one room- and the three of them had a very strange dream.

Haruyuki and Chiyuri had woken up in a very unfamiliar part of the Brain Burst server – known as the «Main Visualiser», which they were not fully informed on. While chasing Takumu, who appeared to be in a daze-like state, they had seen what he was walking towards.

In a corner of the Main Visualiser that closely resembled the Milky Way, a huge body that resembled an inky black brain had been built. From it, an uncountable number of blood vessel-like appendages connected the large body to the ISS Kit users. Haruyuki had used his long-range Incarnate technique «Laser Lance» to fire at what he guessed was the main body of the ISS Kit, severing the vessel linking Takumu and the main body. After Takumu had recovered from his stupor, they woke up to find themselves back in the real world, and the ISS Kit had completely vanished from Takumu.

From this it can be speculated thus, that if one is able to destroy the Main Body of the

ISS Kit, the rest of the Kits that are equipped to infected users will also disappear. And to retain one's sense of self, it was necessary to accomplish the tremendously difficult task of «Direct Connecting with an infected user and sleeping together». It might be impossible to eradicate the Main body like this, but— that Main Body stored in Brain Burst's Central Server is merely a «Shadow» of its counterpart. That is to say, the true Main Body of the Kit is located in the Accelerated World's Unlimited Neutral Field.

In the Unlimited Field, Haruyuki had destroyed one such kit, and followed it as it flew back to where it came from. The Kit had flown towards a large tower, named 'Tokyo Midtown Tower.' But before Haruyuki could rush in to attack, the Green King, Green Grande and his right-hand-man Iron Pound had stopped him. Having conducted reconnaissance from the nearby Hills Tower in Roppongi for a long time, they had told Haruyuki that outside of the «Hell» stage, there was a completely invincible Legendary Enemy protecting it – «Archangel Metatron».

Haruyuki put aside his recollections for a moment, exhaled, and waited for Kuroyukihime to speak.

“—just last week, in the Third Battle Area of Suginami, Maiden and Crow met with and duelled two of the ISS Kit users, Bush Utan and Olive Glove. Utan was able to escape the clutches of the Kit...but as of yet we have no news on Olive. Clearly, there's much less time than we'd like if even Great Wall members are being infected. The need to protect our territory is the other reason apart from the other King's invitation why Nebulas is participating in the Midtown Tower invasion.”

“...ah, so it's just like Prominence. We also owe Nebulas one over the matter of the fifth-generation Chrome Disaster, so we can't say no...but...”

Niko folded her arms at this moment, and glared right at Haruyuki with what appeared to be light green pupils because of the ambient light.

“If you guys accomplish your target, then that Crow over there will then become one heck of a trump card against us! That's because among the Seven Great Legions, it's Prominence whom has the greatest number of light-based ability users!”

“And isn't that why we've activated all our strength to complete the supremely difficult tasks you fellas asked of us? And you now say you're not willing to help us after two helpings of food...”

“Agh, I know, I know! Didn’t I say it was good enough just now anyway....then, Lotus, if you say that cooking curry was a super-difficult task, what kind of culinary skill do you have, eh?”

The Red King asked that question with an air of complacency about her, causing Kuroyukihime’s face to turn red with fury. Utai and Fuuko unnaturally coughed several times while Chiyuri happily giggled, “Niko-chan, senpai, she... potato skin...” But just as she was about to reveal that information, she was struck by the absolute-zero coldness of Kuroyukihime’s smile, and fell silent.

After laughing loudly for a while, Niko resumed her normal expression and nodded.

“Ah...so it’s decided for now. Seeing as you’ve personally prepared three bowls of curry rice, I’ll assist you, alright? For the «Plan for Silver Crow to learn Theoretic Mirror».

-and that’s how it is.

At the King’s meeting yesterday, the Kings had invited Haruyuki to lead the attack against Archangel Metatron. According to Iron Pound’s plans, if Haruyuki was able to learn a certain legendary ability, he might be able to survive Metatron’s ultra-strong laser attack.

But to learn that skill, Theoretic Mirror, there was a need for help from Burst Linkers with high-energy light-based attacks – more than those existing. Besides Haruyuki, among the five members of Nega Nebulas there were no members using light-based abilities. To be clear about it, while it might that Takumu’s Level 4 special skill «Lightning Cyan Spike» appears to be a light-based attack, according to Takumu himself it was actually «Converting the steel stake into a stream of ions and firing». From this it should actually be categorised as a Physical attack, of the high-temperature/piercing through attribute.

Of course, in the real world Haruyuki has not yet learnt in class the definition of an ion stream or lasers. But in the Accelerated World, an ion stream would be akin to an attack firing countless numbers of high-temperature particles in a controlled movement, similar to a flaming attack. On the other hand, a laser-based attack is the gathering of parallel rays of light together to attack the opponent. Sword edges might be able to deflect an ion stream, but it is useless against the massless photons that make up laser beams.

Hence, Takumu’s skill was completely different from a laser ability, making it necessary

to look beyond Nega Nebulas for a suitable light-based ability users. After the Kings' meeting, the six legion members called each other in a Dive conference call, and had a very intense discussion with each other. The final conclusion was that if help was needed anyway, it would be best to ask the Burst Linker who possesses the strongest laser abilities from the ones present...that is to say, «Immobile Fortress», Scarlet Rain.

And for that request, the Red King had made an unexpected condition for her assistance.

That condition was «Personally prepare a satisfactory curry dish as a pre-requisite».

After everyone had had their fill of drinks and visited the washroom, the time was 7.30pm.

Among the eight gathered, the ones with the strictest curfew timings would be Niko, who resides in a dormitory for elementary students. However, it seemed that she had forged an external dormitory permit, and so there was no issue for her. Next strictest would be Utai's curfew. While it's set at 9pm, it was still rather late for elementary school students; even if travelling time is factored in, there is still about an hour or so of extra time. As for the head of the Arita household, Haruyuki's mother was unlikely to return before the date changed.

Once everyone had taken a seat on the sofa, using a coloured assortment of XSB cables borrowed from Takumu's and Chiyuri's house, the eight of them all connected their Neuro Linkers to a XSB hub placed on the tea table, in turn connected to the Arita family server. The hub was provided by Kuroyukihime; should an unexpected development occur, someone can simply disconnect the power supply from the hub to cancel everyone's accelerated state.

“...eh, if we're just duelling, then why are we specially preparing safety measures...?”

Only when the last XSB plug had been connected then did Haruyuki realise this belatedly, turning to Kuroyukihime. Up to this point, he thought he would be battling Niko in a practice demonstration and learn the skill during battles, while the other six spectate. While accelerated, the time elapsed in a normal duel is only 30 minutes, or 1.8 seconds in the real world, and then acceleration would end, thereby not requiring any other safeguards.

Kuroyukihime's eyes widened at his question, however, and then blinked several times

as though understanding something. Chuckling, she replied:

“You still need to ask, Haruyuki-kun? We’re not going to the regular duelling field, but the Unlimited Neutral Field, hehe.”

“Eh...ab, «Above»? Isn’t the regular duelling field sufficient?”

With a sinking feeling, Haruyuki carefully asked another question.

And his suspicions were answered very frankly.

“Yup, the normal duels won’t do. As for why, it’s because just dying once or twice won’t do for this kind of task. I estimate, you need to die five...no, maybe ten...?”

And then Pard-san’s voice quietly spoke up:

“If you can do it within 20 deaths, GJ.”

—I don’t wanna—!!

Just as he sprang up to flee, Haruyuki was restrained by Takumu and Chiyuri.

Just as they were overdosing him with reassurances like “You can do this, Haru,” “We’re coming along anyway,” the last XSB cable was plugged into his Neuro Linker.

Fuuko’s smiling face was the final nail in the coffin.

“If you let us wait for you «above» there...do you understand what will happen, Karasu-san?”

There was no escaping anymore.



Considering that Utai would have difficulty speaking the command to accelerate, Kuroyukihime began to count down from twenty. Haruyuki briefly thought “I die a lot anyway, everything will be fine,” and at the same time recited:

“”Unlimited Burst!!””

–I need to die twenty times.

As the sound effect of acceleration filled his senses, Haruyuki realised that.

Chapter 4

“...I guess the stage ain’t bad, eh.”

Haruyuki lifted his gaze upon hearing that curious quip by Niko.

Through his half-mirror helmet, his gaze fell upon countless rows of colourful neon-lit streets, twinkling under the night sky: the «Shopping District» stage.

Haruyuki had nothing to complain about this stage which closely resembles the E-shopping district in Akihabara. However, the ground of this stage is unusually hard, and the environment lacks open spaces; not entirely suited for events in a large group like theirs.

"Why would this stage be suitable?"

The petite F-type avatar dyed scarlet shook her twin ponytails as she replied to Haruyuki's question:

"That's 'cos Stages like «Stormy Weather» or «Misty Rain» negatively affect laser abilities. If it's a watery environment like the «Ocean» stage, then lasers would be absolutely useless."

"So that's how it is..."

Haruyuki nodded his head in understanding. And at that moment, Kuroyukihime and Fuuko returned from what must have been a speedy scan of the surroundings, and reported:

"There aren't any other Burst Linkers near the perimeter."

"However, there's a huge Beast-class Enemy slightly south of Seven Rings; we're better off moving north if we must."

"Ooh, then let's hunt that fella later then. We can't have Crow losing so many points, eh?"

Haruyuki still trembled even after Niko tenderly expressed her concern for him.

The group of eight had appeared in almost exactly the same position as the real-world Arita household, located in a high-rise apartment. However, as the «Shopping District» Stage forbids the entry of buildings, they had been moved to a different location upon Diving.

Since this was a large apartment building, the roof was an equivalent area. Looking around once more, Haruyuki suggested:

"If all we need is a large open space, then isn't the rooftop good enough? Even if there are other Burst Linkers, they can't possibly climb up from the ground..."

"That...well, no doubt about that, but..."

The white-and-crimson coloured shrine maiden avatar voiced her doubts a distance away from Haruyuki.

"If we use such flashy skills on such a tall building, the battle effects can be seen from a great distance. An Enemy-hunting party from the Blue Legion might see us all the way from Shinjuku and come over to us..."

"If it comes that...if they try to stop us, then Uiui, I'll depend on you, right?"

Maiden hung her head, muttering "...yeah," while Raker giggled.

"Well then, let's start! The «Silver Crow's Theoretic Mirror Learning Battle», shaaaaaall begin!!"

Pard-san, Takumu, and Chiyuri applauded as Niko grandly announced, as though starting a kid's class. Clearing her throat, the Red King took on a teacher's voice, and continued:

“Before Crow begins to die- excuse me, begins to learn, everybody is free to clarify their doubts! Does anybody have any questions-”

“Excuse me!”

Chiyuri thrust her hand into the air.

“That um, I don’t really understand even until now...what’s the difference between «abilities» and «Special Moves»? All I know is that I don’t have to call out the technique name to use an ability...”

“Ooh, that’s a good question. The answer to that...shall be given by Black Lotus-sensei, in charge of system questions!”

“Wha-what, me?!”

Coughing twice, Kuroyukihime raised up her right-hand sword like a pointer, and began her explanation.

“--the simplest difference is that abilities are ‘*passive skills*’ in principle, while Special Moves are thus ‘*active skills*.’

Terms like these were second nature to the net game-loving Haruyuki, but Chiyuri’s pointed hat tilted to the side as she repeated “Pas..sive...?” as though not familiar with the term. Trying to fully explain the term, Kuroyukihime continued from that one line,

“Passive skills would be...’supporting,’ wait, that’s not right, it’s...”

After muttering to herself for a few more moments, she abandoned all further attempts and pointed directly to the side of Chiyuri.

“Following up, will be Professor Takumu to help in times of need.”

As though expecting it already, the long-time Legion staff officer Takumu nodded and took up a spot next to Kuroyukihime.

"In Brain Burst, passive skills are skills always used for yourself, or sustained by yourself so long as you have Gauge remaining....active skills are targeted at others, skills that consume the Gauge and have instant effects.”

Thus, it was thoroughly explained by the one deserving of his title 'Professor.' And yet, Chiyuri still struggled to understand the difference, repeating over again to herself "Always used by myself...instantly affecting others..."

Takumu lifted the Enhanced Armament mounted on his right hand, the Pile Driver, and aimed skywards, firing the metal stake within with a metallic ring. The sharp stake extended for a metre, and immediately retracted back with clicking sounds, primed for its next firing.

"This ability of mine may appear like a Special Move, but in actuality is a perpetually active *passive skill* granted by the Enhanced Armament...that is to say, an «*ability*». It doesn't require Gauge to use. --eh, just like Master's swords, right?"

Looking at the gleaming obsidian swords she had in place of hands, Kuroyukihime nodded at the question directed at her.

"Ah, quite correct. The name of the ability is «Terminate Sword»...also a perpetually activated skill."

"Ooh...so that's how it is...I think I've got it!"

After that exclamation, Chiyuri pointed at Haruyuki:

"Haru, your Aviation *ability*, although it's a passive skill it isn't active all the time, but when in use it expends Gauge to be activated! Ash-san's Vertical Wall Climb and Raker-neesan's Boost Jump are the same too, right?"

"Oh...oh, so that's how it is..."

Having always relied on his own intuition to understand these terms, to hear them being explained so clearly by Chiyuri filled Haruyuki with overwhelming respect. The rate at which a net-game newbie like her absorbed information since becoming a Burst Linker was terrifying.

"That is to say...the issue is whether Theoretic Mirror is an *ability*, and whether it's also a perpetually activated-type depends on how it's being learnt..that would even cancel out continuous laser skills..."

With an small exclamation, Haruyuki swallowed back some saliva, and asked:

"Eh, but given what everyone said about learning...can, can it be done? Aren't special

moves and *abilities* obtained by Level Up Bonuses...? And when I've no way to go up to Level 6 yet..."

The wordless expression on Kuroyukihime's mask was plain to understand while Haruyuki frantically searched the crowd for answers.

"Hey, Crow, have you forgotten about something? Carefully think through back...to the time when you awoke the *ability* of Aviation."

When...when it came from? Grasping his hands momentarily, he suddenly recalled:

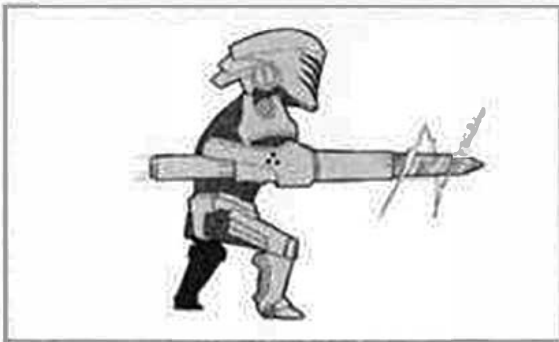
Indeed, when the duel avatar Silver Crow was first created, it didn't possess the characteristic of flight. Upon entering the Accelerated World, it was a simple metal colour without wings.

But during the end stage of the duel with Cyan Pile, when he stood up despite being heavily wounded-- Ten silver fins were generated from his smooth back, calling Haruyuki towards the sky. That is to say, the Aviation ability wasn't learnt when the avatar was created, nor when he ascended to Level 2, but:

"It was...during a battle..."

Normal Activation-type Ability

Passive skill that doesn't consume special moves gauge.
Can be learned not just from leveling up, but during battles too



Cyan Pile
«Pile Driver»'s stinging attack



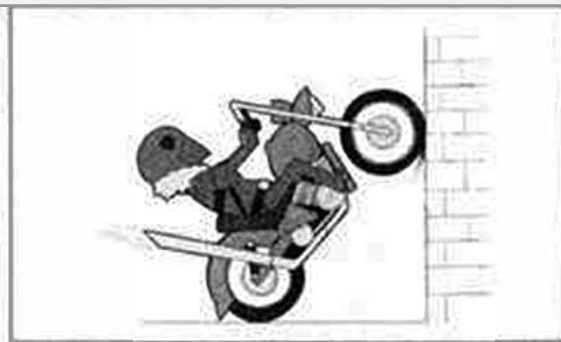
Black Lotus
«Terminate Sword»'s brandish

Limited Activation-type Ability

Passive skill that consumes the special moves gauge.
Can be learned not just from leveling up, but during battles too.



Sky Raker
«Gale Thruster»'s Boost Jump



Ash Roller
«Night Rocker»'s Vertical Climb

Special Moves

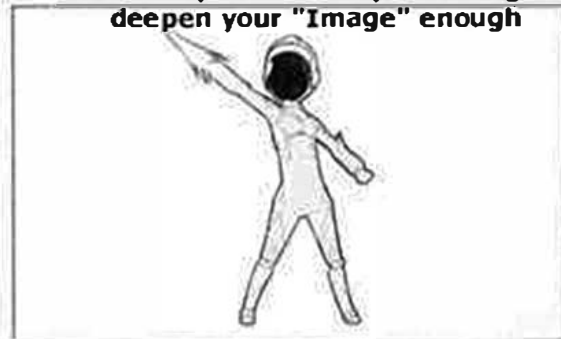
Active skill that consumes the special moves gauge.
Can only be learned from leveling up.



Lime Bell
«Choir Chime»'s Citron Call

Incarnate Moves

Overwriting of phenomena that does not consume the special moves gauge.
Can be acquired when you manage to deepen your "Image" enough



Silver Crow
Incarnate Sword's «Laser Sword»

To that reply, Kuroyukihime deeply nodded.

"Absolutely correct. Although special moves can only be learnt when levelling up, abilities don't have the same restriction. They may be learnt during normal battles or when Diving into the Unlimited Neutral Field, depending on a certain trigger. It's just like how new skills could appear in the middle of battles in the older generations of RPGs. If you opened your Installation menu the instant you awoke «Aviation», there should be a new record at the very top...but of course, it's an extremely rare phenomenon."

"Extreme...extremely rare?"

Reflexively parroting back her words, Haruyuki belatedly realised that that wasn't the main point.

"No, ah...then, that «trigger»...what on earth is it essentially?"

"Um...yeah, it's complicated..."

Answering in place of Kuroyukihime was Blood Leopard, who until now had remained silent, observing them from the side the whole time.

"---it's «**Adversity**»."

That one phrase attracted the attention of all the high-rankers gathered. At Pard-san's side, Fuuko giggled and elaborated:

"Yes, just that. To call on a new *ability*, one must confront an adverse situation to the point of desperation, yet balancing this against their will to resist...in this sense, it bears some similarities to the process of learning Incarnation..."

"While Incarnation is dependant on the training of your imagination, abilities would be triggered by an instantaneous action. Therefore Haruyuki-kun, no matter how strongly you form the image of a mirror, it's impossible to rely on that alone to acquire the *ability* «Theoretic Mirror»."

Finishing off that round of explanation, Kuroyukihime turned towards Lime Bell.

"Chiyuri-kun, do you understand that explanation of the differences between abilities, special moves, and Incarnation?"

"Yup, I completely understand, sensei!"

Haruyuki nodded his head with renewed vigour with that spirited reply from Chiyuri.

Hence, to learn a new power or ability, one must confront their adversity and press on forwards, just like eight months ago when Kuroyukihime was asleep in the hospital ward. Therefore, the hugely powerful laser abilities of the Red King is needed for assistance. Use his body to confront the attack, counter the laser skill, and advance. If that can be done, then Theoretic Mirror should come into Silver Crow's possession.

Steeling his conviction, Haruyuki stared at Scarlet Rain's avatar and the gleaming pistol Enhanced Armament by her side, and declared:

"There's no other questions, Niko...let's go."

"Ooh, even though your helmet covers your face, that's a nice expression you have there. Well then, we'll start."

Giggling, the Red King did an about-face, and walked off in the direction of the center of the rooftop. Towards her back, Haruyuki called out with a choice of words to invigorate himself.

"No need to hold back, Niko. Just come at me with that laser gun until all the ammo has been used up!"

————it's decided.

In his heart, Haruyuki thought to himself.

More than ten metres away, Niko turned back with an exclamation of "Eh?", and looked down at her handgun at her waist. Shrugging, she turned back to Haruyuki and said unexpectedly:

"Ah--I'm not using this; it shoots bullets, not lasers."

"Huh?"

It was now Haruyuki's turn to gasp in astonishment.

"Actually, I only have one laser attack.. Please wait while I call it--"

Niko gazed upwards to the dusk-coloured sky.

"Come, «Invincible»!!"

The instant she casually uttered the voice command, countless polyhedrons emerged from behind Niko with low rumbling noises. Detailed parts soon appeared, resolving into four machine guns, missile pods, heavy armour and hover thrusters.

Her avatar, miniscule in comparison, was swallowed up by the Armament in the blink of an eye just as two massive cannon barrels extended from its sides. The entire building trembled with the vibrations generated, and countless exhaust vents spewed a vast quantity of white smoke, creating an incredibly imposing figure that was on par with a Large Enemy. This was the true form of the Red King - Immobile Fortress.

“Wo-woah, it’s huge!”

Chiyuri bent her body backwards to take in the sight of Scarlet Rain and her Enhanced Armament in all its glory. In the centre of the control pod, Niko’s head and shoulders were the only thing visible. She looked to the side and said:

“Hey over there! You guys should keep your distance a little, ‘cause if you’re not careful, you guys will eat the splash damage, yo.”

Something about the way Niko said that sounded both considerate and intimidating.

As soon as Chiyuri and Takumu had retreated behind Kuroyukihime and the others at the south side of the rooftop, Niko turned to face Haruyuki.

“Alright then, I’ll take the first shot, ok?”

Haruyuki was thoroughly shaken out of his stupor as soon as he heard Niko speak.

“Eh, that is, surely... That uh, that laser skill, could it be that...”

“Whaddya talking about? This is the laser attack.”

As Niko started the right gun barrel with an impressive clank of machinery, the humongous barrel opening turned and pointed directly at Haruyuki.

“No way- No, wait a minute, weren’t we going to go slow, or just have a lesson...?”

“Didn’ I just say earlier? I’ve only got one laser attack. Don’cha worry, I’ll just use regular attacks and not Special Moves.”

The cooling fans at the back of the gun rumbled in unison with her voice. A shower of

fine sparks flew from the muzzle and a deep red glow flickered unsteadily in the darkness of the barrel.

“Here I go, firing in three, two, one-”

There was nothing Haruyuki could do as Niko counted down relentlessly, except to cross his hands before him in a protective gesture.

”-Fire!”

Haruyuki’s vision was dyed bright red in an instant before the ZZOOM! of the laser beam had even reached his ears and a peculiar feeling assaulted his senses. In the Unlimited Neutral Field where the sensation of pain was double that of the regular dueling field, and yet the pain he felt seemed to be more than expected. The beam felt so hot, the rest of his body felt oddly cool instead.

-I need to believe, I need to imagine!

Haruyuki shouted in his heart as he resisted the incoming light energy.

-My armour is Silver. Silver, the most reflective of all the metal colours. It’s only a laser - it will get reflected right back! I must be a mirror, a Theoretical Mirror that reflects everything shining on it!

From the deep red light obscuring his vision’s center, a tiny ray of white light shone, growing and enveloping him from all directions. The immense pressure and heat began to fade slowly, leaving nothing but his self-consciousness.

”...Ah, Niko, I see light... I see the light!”

But when Niko replied to him, she did so in her Angel Mode:

”...Ah, Onii-chan, I know. It’s because Onii-chan is melting!”

“Huh?”

A fraction of a second after he realised this-

Haruyuki vanished with a gentle ping.

Silver Crow took ten shots from the Red King’s main cannon.

He died ten times, and was revived ten times in total.

For the first sixty minutes of the death timer, Kuroyukihime and the others waited

patiently nearby. But they had grown restless by the third round, and by the fifth round they left to hunt Enemies. But Haruyuki couldn't blame them. If he were in their shoes, he would also be impatient. In fact, he should even be grateful that his companions had the heart to return every hour to the roof.

"...Hey..."

With a pitiful look in her eyes, Niko addressed the recently-revived Haruyuki:

"...What's up? Wanna continue? You know, I could go on another ten time or so, the curry rice was really delicious..."

Haruyuki said nothing. He was too gloomy to even open his mouth - instead, Kuroyukihime replied in his stead, albeit with an unclear tone:

"Uh, I feel that he'll get it soon enough, but on the other hand... Perhaps we should attempt something else too. What do you think, Raker?"

"You're right in that aspect... Should we try to up the level of adversity?"

"Oh? How do you suggest we do that?"

"Maybe if the Red King used both her main guns, or rather than just using regular attacks, up the ante with Special Abilities..."

"Nonono, please, anything but that!"

From where he had been sitting with his head down, as soon as Haruyuki overheard the discussion, he violently shook his head and voiced his protest.

"Ah, alright then... But still, what alternative methods are there?"

-Going straight to the real laser bombardment used by «Archangel Metatron» to train.

Ever since someone had suggested the strategy of flying to escape, Haruyuki had had his heart set to it. Luckily, Takumu seemed to understand his intentions and spoke up for him:

"Legion Master, we're not getting anything after many tries. Could this mean that the «Action» isn't enough?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"What I'm saying is that to improve his imagination, maybe it's the understanding of a «Mirror» that is the key..."

"...Taku, aren't mirrors just surfaces that reflect light rays?"

"That's how it works in reality, yes, but what about in the Accelerated World? Just like how your silver colour is a metaphor for your inner self, the metaphor for a «Perfect Mirror» in this world would then be..."

"...a conceptual one, correct?" Kuroyukihime said, as she thought deeply.

A few seconds passed in silence, broken by the raising of Chiyuri's hand. "Now I've thought of a question..."

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Haru needs to learn the rare ability «Theoretical Mirror», but wasn't it learnt by someone else before him? Why not approach that person to learn it from him... Wait, why not just invite him to fight Metatron with us?"

Haruyuki's jaw dropped.

Chiyuri was absolutely correct. It was because a Burst Linker had learnt this ability to begin with that allowed it to be named and known as such, but no one out of the group had thought about this player. Something was incongruent - and what made it even more depressing was, why didn't Kuroyukihime or Fuuko consider this?

Trusting that Takumu was sharing his sentiments, Chiyuri, Takumu, and Haruyuki stared at the assembled legionnaires.

Under their combined gazes, Kuroyukihime bowed her head and avoided eye contact, a rare sight indeed. She instead glanced to her right - towards the shrine maiden-style avatar a distance away.

Unlike when she usually stood upright, Ardor Maiden now hunched over, shielding her face from view with her bangs. That tipped Haruyuki off to the peculiarity that Utai had not spoken at all for a while, but he still had no idea why or what was happening.

At this moment, Fuuko spoke softly to the perplexed trio:

"Let's leave it here for today and carry on at a later date - just as Pile said, besides continuing with harsher training, more importantly we should think of alternatives from a theoretical perspective. Red King, Leopard, what do you two think about calling it a day?"

The two Prominence members exchanged a glance and nodded together.

"I've got no problem with that."

“NP.”

“Let’s proceed to Koenji’s Leave Point together, then. There’s a small Wild Enemy on the way there; for the sake of Crow’s lost Burst Points, let’s top him up with some compensation!”

Chapter 5

He forced his eyes open against the gravity of the real world.

The Arita household’s living room was still the same as it had been before diving in. That was to be expected, as twelve hours spent inside would only last a bit more than forty seconds on this side.

However, the fatigue weighing down his shoulders made it impossible for Haruyuki to sit up straight. Ever since he’d become a Burst Linker, he’d never «died» so many times in a row before. The Red King’s main laser cannon was just too powerful. Within a few seconds, Silver Crow would be vaporized, so he actually didn’t suffer too much pain or shock — but he couldn’t help but be ashamed by how the time it took to vaporize him the first time and the tenth time were no different.

Just as Haruyuki was dejectedly sinking into the sofa, Kuroyukihime unplugged the XSB cable from her Neuro Linker and gave him a warm smile.

“I appreciate all the effort you put in, Haruyuki-kun. You did a great job! But please forgive me for putting you through all that hardship.”

“Eh, no, not really...but in the end, I wasn’t able to learn the «Theoretical Mirror» ability...”

After his jumbled response, Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, Niko, and Pard-san looked at each other for a moment, and Niko ended up speaking as their representative:

“About that, Crow. To be honest, from the start we figured that the possibility of you awakening this special ability from just today’s training was really low.”

“.....Eh?”

“What Lotus requested from me wasn’t to help you learn «Theoretical Mirror», but to give you firsthand experience dealing with «Ray Attacks». These days, your dodging instinct has gotten a lot better, so during Duels and Territory Battles, you’ve only ever been hit by homing missiles or machine gun volleys, right?”

“Uh, yeah, I suppose...”

It was indeed as she said. Recently, while flying, Haruyuki could successfully evade almost every single-shot long-distance attack — from weapons like laser guns or rifles. Since opponents knew about this, they always prepared weapons like the ones Niko mentioned, which made it harder for him to encounter laser attacks.

“Whaaaaat, so everyone was just going for that all along...then, Haru, have you discovered any secrets of «Ray Attacks»?” asked Chiyuri, who stuck out her torso to lean in. Haruyuki gave a bitter smile as he shrugged and responded:

“Secrets...well, there’s this: even though they’re all red-type abilities, laser beams are still totally different from munition rounds or flamethrowers...”

“Really? How so?”

This time it was Takumu who asked with interest.

“Hm, let me think. There’s no explosive impact, and there’s no smell of fuel ignition. There’s just a dense burst of pure energy shooting over...like, with my armor, it’ll only reflect the torrent of energy for an instant. Then it gets roasted red-hot and melts away like that, vaporizing...that’s basically what it’s like.”

“So that’s how it is...but I remember that in the real world, silver is the most reflective out of all the metals. Uh, what percentage was it again?”

As Takumu quickly manipulated his virtual desktop, Pard-san beat him to it:

“Average reflection is 95% of visible wavelengths.”

“.....How do you know this kind of stuff?”

Responding to her Legion commander’s question, the trusted aide in the sailor uniform responded earnestly:

“I researched what I thought we would discuss. I don’t want to wait for the search engine.”

“.....I see.”

Just as everyone was sharing the thought that “Wow, this person really is impatient”, Takumu cleared his throat and continued:

“...Which, which is to say, no matter the light’s wavelength, silver should be able to reflect almost all of it. Put another way, it’s because of this that it has its silver color. Gold looks golden because its reflectivity for blue light is relatively low. But as for silver, the reflectivity is still not 100%. As long as there’s a tiny bit that hasn’t been reflected, that leftover energy will heat up and vaporize Silver Crow’s armor.”

“Aha, I see. So basically, Crow isn’t shiny enough, right?”

Hearing Chiyuri's comment, Takumu paused and nodded. The follow-up came immediately:

"Then we just need some polish. If it's like this, the only solution is to have everyone buff him up! Let's get some kind of brightener and give you a good waxing!"

Haruyuki couldn't stop himself imagining a scene where everyone went wild polishing his duel avatar. He repeatedly shook his head and said:

"I, I don't want to! You'll polish my skin away! And why would there be any brighteners in the Accelerated World anyway..."

"It's not like there aren't any." Kuroyukihime nodded seriously, and Haruyuki froze in place. Luckily, she followed with a negative conjunction.

"But, no matter how much we polish, I don't think the reflectivity will reach 100%. Even if we got it to 99%, he still probably wouldn't withstand Rain's main cannon. That remaining 1% is likely enough to melt his duel avatar."

"...so, Niko's ray attacks are just that strong, huh..."

Chiyuri sighed as she seemed to finally abandon her polishing plan, and the Red King wrinkled her nose in a self-satisfied way.

"It, it's nothing really. Anyways, for someone at your level to withstand a direct attack from my main cannon for almost five seconds...you're the first, Crow, so you should have some faith in yourself."

"That's true. Last time, I was only in the beam for a second, and my armor was burned to a crisp."

Kuroyukihime's words referred to the time when, after they'd teamed up to destroy the fifth generation «Chrome Disaster», Niko had thrown a tantrum and blown away both Black Lotus and Disaster with her main cannon.

"Tch, don't bring up those old matters. Either way, you're all black to begin with; does it really make a difference if you get all charred?"

Hearing Niko's mocking tone, Kuroyukihime immediately countered:

"Well, since you're so red, it shouldn't matter if we slather you in tomato sauce and cook you up, right? Then the next time we have a dinner party, we'll have spicy tomato-sauce spaghetti."

"I, I'm telling you, I'm not talking about the real world! And also, I don't eat spicy spaghetti! If you want spaghetti with tomato sauce, why not just have the normal kind with meat sauce?"

“Let’s get this out of the way first. I don’t eat squid ink pasta.”

“Nobody’s even brought that up—!”

If he let this go without intervening, it might even devolve into a direct duel between two Kings, so Haruyuki stepped in between them.

“Don’t, don’t be angry you two. If you want to eat tomato-sauce spaghetti, I recommend the seafood pasta that Chiyu’s mom makes. It’s full of the fresh taste of the sea and it’s super good.”

“.....Oh?” “.....Ah?”

It seemed like the two were imagining how delicious it would be, and they started settling down. So Haruyuki took the chance to get back to the main topic:

“Uh, so Taku, you’re saying my...Silver Crow’s armor, while being quite reflective, is still not perfect enough? So it won’t be able to stand up to a high-intensity laser attack?”

“Yeah, that’s what I think.”

The brains of the legion let the light reflect off his frameless glasses and summarized his argument:

“I believe the power of the «Theoretical Mirror» is to increase reflectivity to the 100% that’s impossible for any metal to achieve. Like I said inside, to learn this ability, perhaps relying on «adversity» with «action» is not enough, and the «imagination» derived from understanding is an indispensable trigger. To put it simply, there needs to be a deeper understanding of this object we call a «mirror»...that’s all I can surmise at this point...”

“—Mirror, huh...”

Haruyuki mulled it over, and he looked again at his good friend’s face and said:

“Thanks, Taku. I think I have a faint idea of how to keep going.”

“Really...then we’re counting on you, Haru. To eradicate the ISS Kit spreading throughout the Accelerated World, we’ll be relying on your power.”

“Mm...When I was fused with the «Armor», I had to rely on help from a lot of people...this time it’s my turn to help out.”

Just as he and Takumu faced each other and nodded—

“Alright alright alright, I don’t mean to intrude on the little world you two are in, but it’s almost time to go.”

Chiyuri interrupted them with a clap of her hands. Haruyuki hurriedly refuted “It’s not like that!”, but when he realized that his other childhood friend’s annoyed expression had a

bit of mirthfulness mixed in, he became even more flustered. He tried to cover it up by tidying the transfer cables on the table, but that only ended up pushing Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, and the others into laughing out loud.

Thus, the two legions' combined operations came to an end for the day.

There was a reason no one had brought up the «Quad-Eyes Analyst» — «Argon Array» during today's meeting.

After yesterday's conference, Haruyuki had of course immediately reported to Kuroyukihime and Fuuko the matter that "Argon is one of the core members of the «Acceleration Research Society»". After the two had finished listening carefully to his account, they said they would immediately begin looking into it, but they also decided to contain the intelligence within Nega Nebulas, not telling the two from Prominence for now. The reason was that once Niko and Pard-san took action on their own, the unseen hand of the Acceleration Research Society could possibly — no, more like extremely probably — move towards the red legion.

It wasn't that the two didn't have faith in Prominence's investigative capabilities or fighting strength, it was just that it was, after all, different from Nega Nebulas in that it was a large legion with over thirty members on the roster. It would be impossible for Niko to have full control over the situations of every one of her legion's members. However, seeping in from the grassroots of a legion was exactly the sort of tactic that the Acceleration Research Society was best at.

So, as Haruyuki watched Niko and Pard-san prepare to go home, he apologized to them in his heart for concealing something from them, and he rose to send them off.

Haruyuki was going to walk with them to the entrance to the apartment, but Pard-san stopped him when they got to the living room's exit, saying "Here is fine". Haruyuki's guess was that Pard-san would probably take quite a while to pull on her riding boots at the entrance, so he obediently bowed them farewell.

"Then let's meet up again some other day! Thanks for the curry, and remember to call me over when you guys have seafood pasta!"

Niko finished speaking as the living room door swung shut, and the sound of two sets of footsteps in the hallway faded away. After about ninety seconds, a dialog box popped up in his field of vision asking if he would like the entrance door locked.

After a few more minutes, the carpoolers Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, and Utai left together through the entrance — this time Haruyuki went with them to send them off — and lastly, Chiyuri and Takumu also returned to their homes on different floors of the building.

When he was the only one left, Haruyuki suddenly felt a powerful surge of loneliness and couldn't help sighing softly.

Even though it was definitely the same old house he'd gotten used to with, he felt like the white wallpaper and hard plastic flooring had become entirely unfamiliar. Since Takumu and them had helped clean up, there wasn't the slightest trace in the living room or kitchen of the laughter and joy that had taken place not twenty minutes ago.

Haruyuki glanced at the analog clock on the wall; it had just passed 8:15. From his virtual desktop, he turned off the living room's air conditioning and lighting, and after gently closing the glass window, he returned to his room at the end of the hallway.

In his eight-tatami European-style room, the entire wall on the left-hand side was taken up by a built-in sliding bookcase, and there was a semi double-size bed by the right wall. These two pieces of furniture weren't quite fitting for a middle-school student; they were in fact left behind by his father, who had divorced his mother and left a long time ago, so Haruyuki had ended up using them too.

He increased the lighting slightly to the illumination of a warm-colored LED lantern while walking to the writing desk at the south-facing window, and he sat down at the mesh chair that had also been left by his father. When he had first started using it, even after adjusting it to the highest setting, the surface of the writing desk was still far away, but now it seemed as natural as if the desk and chair had been custom-made from his measurements.

Haruyuki put his hands on the table and started up the memo app personally set up by Kuroyukihime. There was one item of classwork that was due tomorrow, but he had taken care of that earlier in the evening with Takumu and the others, so that was marked as completed. Besides that, there was another task relating to Umesato Middle School's founding anniversary celebration that was coming up next Sunday. The RSVP deadline for the reception for guardians, friends, and relatives was in two days, but his mother wouldn't be able to attend, and besides that there weren't any other friends outside of school he'd like to invite—

As Haruyuki thought this, a few faces popped up in his mind.

Those were precisely the two players from the Red Legion who he had seen just thirty minutes ago, as well as his old rival who belonged to the Green Legion.

Strictly speaking, Kurasaki Fuuko and Shinomiya Utai weren't students at Umesato Middle School, but he was sure that Kuroyukihime would definitely be in charge of inviting them.

However, if Haruyuki went ahead and invited Burst Linkers from Prominence and Great Wall, especially to participate in a celebration that had nothing to do with Brain Burst, would that be alright? After all, Haruyuki's relationship with them was entirely through

the medium of the Accelerated World. Even including today's activities, while they had met each other many times in the real world, every time was for the sake of Brain Burst-related matters.

Haruyuki mulled it over for a bit and decided to leave the problem for tomorrow, so he cleared his virtual desktop with his right hand. All of the windows vanished, and the icons were swept to the edges of his field of vision.

He reclined against the adjustable back of the mesh chair, rocking himself back and forth, as his train of thought turned to another item of «classwork».

“.....Mirror...”

As Haruyuki mumbled, he suddenly started wondering if he had a mirror, so he opened some drawers to check. The inside was stuffed with memory cards full of who-knows-what and cables to plug into who-knows-where, but there just didn't seem to be any sort of small mirror, and his room didn't have any makeup mirrors or dressing mirrors either.

However, he did find a chrome polishing card case. So Haruyuki pulled out the box, wiped it with the edge of his T-shirt, and stared at it, carefully studying the silver light...

“Come on, you've gotta at least have a little makeup mirror.”

Hearing the comment from behind, Haruyuki replied without thinking:

“Well, uh, middle school guys with those kinds of things are pretty rare.”

“Eh? But it seems like Pile should have one, right?”

“Ta-Taku is totally one of those rare guys.....”

The dialogue smoothly progressed to this point before Haruyuki noticed something wrong.

This wasn't a dialogue using the Neuro Linker's Voice Call, but rather a conversation using the physical mouth and ears. That meant that the person he was talking to was within speaking distance...

“——!”

Haruyuki quickly spun himself around with the chair, but he used too much force, and he'd already spun one and a half times before he could figure out the situation at his six o' clock.

The luxurious pale grey towel coverlet of the semi-double bed had someone's upper body peeking out from underneath, lying on the large pillow, laughingly swinging her red hair tied in twin ponytails—it was precisely the person who should have already taken

that large electric bike back to Nerima, legion master of «Prominence» Scarlet Rain. Kouzuki Yuniko.

“Wh-wh-why i-i-is”

Like a corrupted audio file, Haruyuki tried stuttering through “why is Niko here” as his mouth flapped open and shut.

If she had found some other way to get an instance key to the Arita household, then Haruyuki should have been notified in his field of vision when the main door opened. However, Haruyuki was sure that after everyone went home, no such window had appeared. If that was the case, how did she open the locked door.....

“.....Ah...cou-cou-could it be, Niko, perhaps...you didn’t even go back! When you left the living room, you closed the door, and only Pard-san walked towards the main entrance while you snuck into my room and hid under the covers...I’m right, aren’t I?!”

As expert detective Haruyuki uttered his solution to the mystery with full conviction, Niko blew it off with a simple confession of “how else could I have done it.”

“But you know, you should have realized it when you walked into this room. With such a thin blanket, you should have seen in an instant that I was hiding underneath, right.”

“Uhh...bu-but, why would I think someone would be in my room...”

“You know, you’re totally the kind of guy who’d get killed off in the first ten minutes of a horror film.”

“Lo-lots of people say that...wa-wait, that’s not what I wanted to say!”

Haruyuki took a few big breaths and straightened out his thoughts, and he figured out how he wanted to continue.

“But, why? Pard-san could definitely help you right? Wh-wh-why would you do this?”

“Let’s just say that I already came up with an excuse to get permission to stay overnight outside, so I can’t go back today. I only got into this situation because of the favor your legion asked from me, so of course it’s your responsibility now.”

Hearing these words spoken with such matter-of-factness made her argument rather convincing. Haruyuki subconsciously began to nod but switched to repeatedly shaking his head:

“Bu-bu-bu-but my mom’s coming home today! How am I gonna explain this to her?”

“It’d be fun to have you introduce me, but we should probably leave that for some other time. As long as I’m holed up in this room, nothing will be exposed, right? Oh, but first I need to borrow your bathtub and a change of clothes.”

“Expose...bathtub...changing clothes.....”

This time Haruyuki's thought circuits started overheating, and he could only repeat those few phrases over and over again. Before his eyes, Niko threw off the blanket and jumped off his bed, opening the wardrobe on the north side of his room in passing, and started picking carelessly through the dozen or so T-shirts hung inside.

“You really have no taste, huh, you don't have anything red? Something red...oh, how about this one.”

With a clatter, Niko pulled out a fire-red L-size T-shirt branded with the embroidered logo of an Italian motorcycle company. She walked toward the door, saying:

“Then, I'll be about twenty minutes ~ if your mom comes back, then I'll leave it to you to think of some way to cover it up.”

The door opened and shut, and Haruyuki was left alone in the room.

What just happened must have been a delusion. No, there would be problems even if it were a delusion, and how was he supposed to cover anything up? Was his only choice to use that old bluff of, this is my second cousin Saitou Tomoko? Just as these thoughts were uncontrollably spinning around in his head, a notification window appeared in the corner of his field of vision showing that someone was using the bathroom.

If he were to press on this little icon right now, he could enact emergency mode from the home server interface window that would pop up, and it would be possible to open up a surveillance window for the bathroom. But of course he would never think of doing such a—no, well, he did just think of it, but Haruyuki immediately rejected it, and he slowly exhaled in a ten-second long sigh.

He wasn't sure if it counted as lucky, but even though Niko took about five minutes longer than her original announcement, they had avoided the tragedy of having Haruyuki's mother come home during that time.

“Hoo-ee, the bathtub sure is big, just like I expected!”

The Red King returned to the room with those words. Haruyuki was about to toss her a bottle of water he'd just gotten from the fridge, but right before he threw it he averted his eyes. So, his aim was off, but Niko deftly snatched it just as it was about to smack into the bookshelf.

“That was close. How about you look carefully before you throw next time?!”

“How, how would I look carefully?! You're the one who should have put on enough clothes!”

After Haruyuki's hoarse yell, Niko looked down at herself, then spread her arms wide as if to say "you mean this?"

"Of course I'm wearing enough clothes."

The girl was indeed dressed, but all she had on was the red T-shirt she'd commandeered from Haruyuki's wardrobe, and her snow-white legs were exposed underneath. The T-shirt was big enough to cover all the way to just above her knees, but the shirt and jean shorts and other clothes she was wearing before were all in her hands, so it was too easy to imagine what it was like under the T-shirt.

"Y-you're obviously not wearing enough!"

Seeing Haruyuki make his retort while blocking 70% of his vision with his hands, Niko giggled twice, then lifted the hem of the shirt about three centimeters.

"That's what you say, but the truth is that your foot fetish is flaring up again, isn't it! Hmm?"

"Of, of course not...! I-I-I, I'm not interested in that!"

"Well, then what are you interested in?"

"Uh, um, well..."

Haruyuki stopped moving as a film screen appeared in his mind. What he couldn't understand was that the images appearing on the screen were sometimes Black Lotus's sword-shaped feet, or Sky Raker's high-heeled feet, and sometimes the beast's feet of Blood Leopard. Haruyuki couldn't help exclaiming "What kind of sick interest is this?!" while flailing his arms to get the images away.

Seeing Haruyuki like this, Niko put on her full Angel Mode smile and said:

"Onii-chan is such a huge pervert ♪"

Then she said, "Thanks for the water!", unscrewed the cap, and started chugging.

Seeing the girl with her damp hair hanging freely, Haruyuki couldn't stop his heartbeat from speeding up. Then he chanted to himself in his head "She's the Red King she's the Red King."

Niko took a big breath after finishing half the bottle, and she set her clothes and the bottle on the side table before leaping backwards onto the bed. Lying in a bed sized for an adult, she seemed far too delicate, and Haruyuki's heart started beating faster in a different way from before.

Niko lay with her slender limbs spread-eagled and closed her eyes for a full minute. Haruyuki was wondering if she had fallen asleep and started worrying about where he should spend the night. Just then, he heard her speak in a quiet voice:

“...If you don’t want to do it, you can definitely back out.”

“.....Eh? Back, back out of what?”

“You know, back out of being the vanguard for the «Metatron» attack strategy. To be honest, I’m really pissed at those kings. Have you thought about how before today’s meeting, they wanted to put a bounty on you? And then when they don’t have any evidence, right away they’re like hey, you should learn «Theoretical Mirror». Aren’t they just trying to take advantage of you? They...especially Purple and Yellow, those two, they definitely wouldn’t care even if you got put into Infinite EK by Metatron.....”

Niko’s tone of voice was tightly restrained, but there was a deep indignation buried within—as well as some sort of concern, and Haruyuki couldn’t think of how to respond.

All of a sudden, a recollection echoed in his ears. That’s right, after the Seven Kings’ Conference last week, Niko had suddenly appeared at this apartment. Before she left, she had also said this to Haruyuki...

—Say, Haruyuki onii-chan, if one day one of us...or even both of us were to lose Brain Burst, I bet we’d definitely forgot all about each other.....

—So, let’s make a promise. If one day one of us sees an unfamiliar name in their Neuro Linker address book, send a message before deleting the contact. This way, perhaps, there’ll be another chance to...

“...Niko.”

At long last, Haruyuki opened his mouth, and the girl on the bed opened her eyes a fraction in response. Haruyuki saw the dark green radiance in her eyes shining under her eyelids, and continued:

“Eh...th-thank you, but I think I’m alright. I’ve seen Metatron’s laser up close, and that move is just too powerful, so on the contrary there’d be no way to get close enough to fall into Infinite EK. Also, the fact that Iron Pound requested that I take up the vanguard role...it puts a lot of pressure on me, but I also feel a bit happy about it. Because...because...”

Just as Haruyuki was desperately seeking for his next words, he realized that unknown to him, Niko had already turned her line of sight to focus directly on him. Her youthful face looked both childish and full of deep deliberation, which reminded Haruyuki again that she was indeed a «King».

“...Because, even though everyone says I’m the only true-flight-type avatar in the Accelerated World, isn’t that also saying that I’m an outcast? Even if I weren’t a member of Nega Nebulas, to a lot of Burst Linkers I’m like an outsider they’re preparing to repulse...from another angle, I’m kind of like an Enemy. But...I feel that yesterday Pound-san was treating everyone equally and including me as a Burst Linker. So I was rather surprised...no, how should I put it...it was something really remarkable. So...so I...”

Haruyuki stumbled up to here in his awkward tone and couldn’t continue.

—So I hope that...

—If I can fulfill my duties as the vanguard in the «Metatron Attack Strategy», then maybe it will help Kuroyukihime mend her relations with the five kings who have been antagonistic towards her for so long. Just like how Niko and Senpai became friends.

Niko seemed like she completely understood Haruyuki’s thoughts, and she showed a warm, open, yet somewhat sorrowful smile.

“...How about this. Since you’ve already thought about it this much, I won’t try to hold you back. However...you gotta be sure to be careful, because the enemy is not just Metatron.”

“Huh...? What does that...?”

“Do you still remember what I said last week?”

Hearing her say this all of a sudden, Haruyuki blinked repeatedly, and he responded in a garbled voice:

“Um, uh...oh. Well, you said...if you see a strange name in your Neuro Linker address book...”

As he said this, Niko’s face immediately turned as red as the T-shirt she was wearing, and a huge pillow sailed over with a whoosh. Haruyuki heard a piercing yell through the pillow that had slammed into his face.

“N-n-not that! N-no, of course don’t forget about that...I wasn’t talking about that, it was what I said before that!”

“Be-before...?”

Haruyuki held the pillow with both hands after it dropped from his face and searched around in his memory again. In the end, an inconceivable word resurged through his mind.

“Oh, oh, you’re talking about that...um, was it that the Ori...«Originators» are truly monsters...?”

“Yeah, that’s what I meant.”

Niko nodded and switched to a serious expression, and Haruyuki gulped while still clutching the pillow.

“During last week’s conference I was too scared to be of any use, but this time I was carefully gauging each king’s «data pressure». After all, even though I don’t have any dedicated special abilities like the «Analyst», I’m still a red-colored avatar, so my eyes have a bit of scanning ability.”

Haruyuki almost reacted at the mention of “the analyst”, but he managed to stop himself and asked instead about something else:

“S-scanning...? As in like...like X-ray vision or something?”

“Are you stupid or something? It’s thermal scanning, or wind-direction scanning, those types of things. If you use it well, with a bit of effort you can see the amount of memory data a Burst Linker has accumulated. How should I put it...it’s like how a powerful gravitational force distorts space—at the meeting, the data pressure coming from their bodies was way more than the others. Most of all was...the Green King, Green Grandee.”

Niko raised a finger as she said a name that Haruyuki more or less expected.

That night four days ago, Haruyuki had clashed with Grandee when he was still merged with the «Calamity Armor». In that moment, a portion of the vast amount of time this king had spent in the Accelerated World—even if it was a miniscule portion—had flowed into Haruyuki’s mind.

“Mm...I also feel like the Green King is not quite the same as the other kings...”

“I mean, not only does he not talk to people, he doesn’t even duel people either.”

Niko grinned bitterly, then sobered up as she raised another finger.

“Then there’s the second one...it’s the Blue King, Blue Knight.”

“Eh?...It’s him? It seems to me he’s one of the more agreeable ones among the kings...”

“Well, his tone of voice and his attitude are pretty good-natured. However, that might not be his «true nature», you know. Even though I’ve only heard rumors about this myself...”

Niko seemed a bit hesitant, and she lowered her voice to continue:

“...I heard that when Lotus beheaded the last Red King, Red Rider...the angriest one of all was the Blue King. Apparently he started making savage attacks like a completely

different person, and not only the buildings, but the ground itself was split in two by his blade.”

“.....I-isn't the ground basically indestructible...?”

“So that's why I said it's a rumor. But I really can't tell if the easygoing chairman of yesterday's meeting is what the real Knight is like. I'm thinking he's probably just like the Green King in that they're Burst Linkers without a «Parent»...which is to say they're «Originators».”

“...Origi...nator....”

Haruyuki quietly repeated this word that he'd heard from not just Niko, but from the mouth of the Green King himself. The «Parent-Child» relationship was the first friendship that existed for Burst Linkers. The Parent would impart everything they had learned to the Child, and the Child would work hard to live up to the Parent's expectations. It was precisely because of this friendship that Burst Linkers could truly love the Accelerated World, or at least that's the way Haruyuki saw it. If someone really didn't have a «Parent», then all other Burst Linkers would become «enemies».

“...Even though my «Parent» is no longer around, even now I'm still really happy I was Cherry's «Child». He taught me a lot of important things, and I still remember all of them.”

Niko spoke softly while patting her chest with her right hand.

“But, because of that, I have no way of understanding. I can't imagine for the first group of Burst Linkers...for those Originators, what kind of place the Accelerated World is for them...I just can't imagine what it must have been like in the Accelerated World without a Parent, without any Legions, and with only duels among each other to fight for Burst Points. What kind of situation would that have been...”

Of course Haruyuki had no way of visualizing that scenario, but he still had a vague feeling of what it was like. Because the «Calamity Armor» that had been fused with Haruyuki up until a few days ago had been molded from the excessive love and grief of two Originators.

“...Even in that kind of world...”

Haruyuki looked at the cross-legged Niko sitting on his bed and spoke in a quiet voice:

“Even if it's a world where only fighting existed, I'm sure there were Burst Linkers who could open their hearts through their duels. Just like me and Niko.”

“.....”

As Niko listened, her expression looked like she was hesitating to decide if she should yell at him or launch another long-range attack. Finally, she smiled wryly.

“...I guess that’s true. Maybe there were guys like you among the Originators, who knows...but getting back to what we were saying, I think that it’s hard to tell what the Green King and the Blue King are truly like, like they’re hiding something really deep down. Of course, they’re way more straightforward than Purple or Yellow.”

“Then...were the only Originators at the conference the two of them...?”

When Haruyuki asked this, Niko looked down at the two fingers of her right hand she had stuck up already. She wiggled her thumb back and forth a few times, as if she was unsure if she should add another finger.

“.....Yeah, that’s about it. But...there’s a chance that...”

“Huh...?”

“No, it’s nothing. Basically what I wanted to say was to be careful of what’s going on behind your back when we’re dealing with Metatron. It’s not only Purple who’s got it out for Nega Nebulas, and no one knows what the Green King or Blue King might be planning.”

“Mm, mm, I understand. Thanks for looking out for me, Niko.”

Haruyuki bowed his head in appreciation. And so the red-haired girl chuckled in a self-satisfied way as she laid her dainty body back onto the bed. With a big yawn, she lightly waved her right hand.

“I’m gonna sleep now, give me the pillow back.”

“Y-you were the one who threw it at me...”

Although Haruyuki grumbled, he obediently stood up and stuck the pillow into the space under Niko’s raised head. Then he asked the question that he’d been holding onto for the last several minutes:

“.....Then, where should I sleep?”

Niko set the pillow under her head while rolling onto her left side and said while closing her eyes:

“Good night, onii-chan...”

With that, an empty space inevitably emerged on the right side of the bed, but that in no way meant that Haruyuki was ready to launch an assault across enemy lines.

“Uh...well, anyways I should take a bath first...”

With those mumbled words, he left the issue of where he would sleep open for the moment as he hurried out of the room.

After twenty minutes, Haruyuki came back from the bathroom and saw that Niko was already making cute little snoring noises.

Haruyuki picked up the half-finished plastic bottle from the side-table and finished the rest of the lukewarm water before examining his options for dealing with the situation. Getting another blanket and sleeping on the sofa in the living room was the gentlemanlike choice, but he'd be discovered by his mom when she came home. Furthermore, if his mother asked why he was sleeping there, he could only think of terrible reasons like "my room is haunted", and there was no way his mother would believe that kind of excuse. But that said, directly sleeping on the wood flooring of his room would be far too miserable.

".....Even though it's from another legion, I suppose it's still by command of a king..."

Haruyuki murmured to himself as he used this flimsy excuse to cross the moral threshold and decided to kneel on the side of the bed. He tried his best to keep the maximum distance between himself and Niko, and he ended up lying on his back on the very edge of the bed, where he dimmed the LED lights to nightlight level.

Even in this sort of situation, once Haruyuki was enveloped by the dusky rays of dim orange light, he immediately felt his eyelids drooping heavily. Just as he was about to fall into dreamland—

He heard a soft voice from Niko, who he had thought was already deep asleep:

"I hesitated for a long time, but I think I should still tell you."

"Uh.....te-tell me what.....?"

"The ability you're learning, «Theoretical Mirror». The last person who had this ability....."

The next words seemed to come to Haruyuki in his dream.

"...His name was «Mirror Masker», and he was Ardor Maiden's...«Parent»."

Chapter 6

"Yeeeeee---haaaa!"

Along with that shrill cry, the loud roar of a V-twin engine came from behind him.

Even though Haruyuki did not have time to respond, he could still feel the heat from the high-speed turning of the tyres, only a few centimetres away from him. He stretched both his hands forward, using the thrust provided by both his wings to escape.

June 25th, Tuesday, 7.50AM.

Koenjiminami 1-chome, Sugunami Ward, otherwise known as «Sugunami 2nd Battle Area», where he was right now in the middle of a battle that had become habit. Ash Roller of the Green legion versus Silver Crow of the Black legion - in short, the «Ash Crow Battle». Even though it was not a daily occurrence, somehow or rather a set of rules had been created, that is to say every other day - Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, whoever won the previous battle would initiate the duel with the opponent..

The battle of the motorcycle rider Ash against the flying avatar Crow generally had its first halves fought on the ground in high speed close combat. Once both parties had roughly maxed out their special attack gauges, the battle easily became a three-dimensional duel. Not only was their hand-to-hand combat very worth watching, it also looked beautiful.], hence their fights slowly gained a bigger and bigger following. Thinking that the audience were also waiting for the duel to begin on their own way to school, Haruyuki perked himself up, in the hopes of letting the audience see an «interesting and exciting fight». But...

Today's atmosphere was rather different from previous fights. Ash Roller had inexplicably... or perhaps, was already in a state of burning rage from behind the skill mask.

“Oi! Stupid Crow, you better stop!” To the loud cursing, Haruyuki replied pitifully, “No, no! If I stop, I'll get run over!”

“Do you think it's done if I run you over? I might just cause a fatal accident and knock a few points off your license!” “Th, that's wrong, the demerit points will come from Ash's driving license!”

The two of them were duelling on a residential road that branched west from Kannana Street. The church on the right and the library on the left - of course they did not look like what they were supposed to, but rather had the appearance of countless metal pipes put together - flew past. About twenty spectators, who had set themselves to automatically follow the battle, appeared along the rooftops of the building ahead, and disappeared once the two passed.

Seeing that there was a bigger intersection ahead, Haruyuki leaned his body to the right, getting ready to make a sharp turn. He first leaned towards the left, and using every available inch of space to build momentum, then with a kick against a utility pole ten metres ahead of the intersection, he used the momentum to reverse direction. At the same time as Silver Crow's wings made sparks as it made contact with the floor, he quickly turned right.

"Whoa..." As he sped towards a wall, Haruyuki hastily tucked in his chin and chest to use resistive incarnate power. He successfully passed it with a few centimetres spare, and sighed in relief as he recovered his straight-line flight path.

That turn just now surpassed his own expectations. The weight of Ash and his bike far exceeded crows, and definitely could not make that kind of high speed turn. He had to use this opportunity to get away, turning the tables as compared to before when he was on the losing end.

"Whoaaaa!" Haruyuki's musings was interrupted by a cheers from the audience. Turning back, he saw a large building get devoured by a fireball and collapse... but from beneath it emerged a large American motorbike, which quickly dodged the falling debris, and remained on in pursuit of Haruyuki unharmed.

By the looks of it, Ash had guessed that he was not able to make it past the intersection, and so had used the missiles on his bike to destroy a building to his right, forcibly opening a shortcut. "Th... this-!"

Haruyuki involuntarily cried out, and quickly regained speed, however it was not easy to regain the speed he had lost. The engine noise had pretty much caught up to him, and

the front wheel had even managed to make contact with his foot. A sound like a belt sander could be heard, and his health gauge was ruthlessly shaved down.

“Hot hot hot hot hot! Y, you, why are you so ruthless today!” cried Haruyuki helplessly. Ash Roller’s reply was completely unexpected. “Still needs sayin’! All your fault! How dare you leave my little sister! Out! Of! The! CURRY! PARTY! EHHHHHH?!”

“Wh, whaaaa?” A shocked Haruyuki lost his balance, and his geet was ground once again by the wheel. Hanging on desperately to make sure he was not brought to the ground, with some difficulty he regained his buffer again.

Flying to the right, Haruyuki passed the many shrines that had a terrifying appearance, and quickly racked his brains. The «curry party» Ash referred to was most likely the event held at the Arita house last night, with homemade curry. And the «little sister» Ash referred to was probably his real-world «controller», that is Kurasaki Fuuko’s «Child» Kusakabe Rin.

As for why Ash would refer to his controller as his little sister, it was a very complicated reason that even Haruyuki could not explain. Basically, the young girl Rin had two Neuro Linkers, and the one with Brain Brust installed had originally belonged to her brother Kusakabe Rinta, in a coma after a motorcycle accident.

She was only able to become a Burst Linker when wearing her brother’s Neuro Linker. Thus, the personality of the avatar Ash Roller in the accelerated world did not think of himself as Rin, but as Rinta. How this actually worked, Haruyuki had no idea.

But there was something he was sure of - that Ash really loved his little sister, and in this moment, he was extremely angry because he assumed Haruyuki was bullying her.

“N, n, no!” Since they were moving at high speed, the audience should not be able to hear them, but just in case, Haruyuki lowered his voice. “Y, yesterday there were people from other legions there, so it wasn’t convenient to have your sister there...”

“Excuses? Nuthank-you! So you think there ain’t a prob from the beginning eh?”

“I, I don’t have that time! A, and master already explained the situation to your sister, asking for her understanding?”

“Fool! My sister said okay, but in her heart she was crying! You dun’ understand this feeling, do ya? The angry growl, which sounded not unlike the ominous clang of a metal gong, caused Haruyuki to glance back.

By the sides of the wheels of the American-style motorbike, there was a rather rough-looking conical object each. One side was empty, but the other still had two sharp-pointed anti-air missiles - and the red lenses on the tips had locked onto Haruyuki and were blinking.

“Eh, eh-!” cried Haruyuki for an unknown time. He was already in flight, but his hands were still able to wave wildly as if he were swimming. If he flew straight upwards into the dark clouds overhead, he should be able to avoid the missiles, but he could not do that. This was because this was a natural wind-type «Thunder» stage. Countless bolts of lightning criss-crossed each other across the sky, and if he even slightly raised his altitude, he could possibly encounter a rather merciless bolt of lighting. As a flying-type silver avatar, which had a very high electrical conductivity, the «Thunder» stage was one of the least advantageous stages for Silver Crow.

Of course, if he fired his missiles at such close range, Ash himself wouldn’t be unaffected. But he had over seventy percent of his health gauge left, as compared to Crow who had only about half. He would still be able to hang on even if he was affected by the explosive blast. And right now, in his mind, he wasn’t thinking about such things.

Even so! Haruyuki concentrated his hearing on the locking-on sound effect from behind him, and prepared to make his move. “Stupid Crow! Watch as I destroy you! «Machine Roar»!”

As the name of the skill was cried out, Haruyuki flipped his body and with his back towards the front quickly used his hands to dodge. “C, critical! Missile into empty hand!”

With a course yell, Haruyuki used his hands to stop the missile that flew towards him, and with the force from the missile pushing him forward, redirected the missile's search upwards.

Silver Crow let go and with a trail of smoke the missile began to fly upwards. Seeing such an unexpected spectacle, cheers came out from the audience. This was a good opportunity to counter attack, but Haruyuki couldn't resist looking up at the ascending missile, along with Ash and the viewers. The white missile... no, rocket, closed into the darkening sky, watched my countless people.

Then, it was stuck by quite a few thunderbolts, and broke into pieces with a loud clap.

"...ah." cheered Haruyuki softly. "...oh." said Ash ruefully. Next, the electrically charged fragments of the missile rained towards the ground, enveloping both Burst Linkers directly below in a rain of purple light. As both of them said "Aiyah..." at the same time, the outlines of two skulls could be seen shining.

"...whew..." Returning to the real world after the battle, Haruyuki leaned on the railing of the overpass of the intersection in Koenji, and let out a deep breath. "... from that kind of situation to a draw, that must be good work..."

Comforting himself, he wrote what he had learnt today into the «duel diary» in his head. In the «Thunder» stage, if an easily destroyed metal object was hurled into the sky, it could possibly attract lightning; also, just after a projectile-like object was shot, there was a chance to change its trajectory.

"... still many things I don't know..." Be it battle techniques, or the history of the accelerated world, thought Haruyuki to himself as he sighed again.

This morning, the Red King Niko had openly walked past his mother's bedroom where she was sleeping, and returned to Nerima. Just as she was about to sleep last night, she told Haruyuki something...

The creator of the special move «Theoretic Mirror» was a Burst Linker named «Mirror Masker» who was at the same time the Parent of one of Nega Nebulas' Four Elements - Ardor Maiden.

This was something he found hard to believe. If this was the truth, then why didn't Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, and Utai tell them that? But thinking about it, when they were discussing the matter yesterday, they were a bit hesitant. Perhaps there might be some reason why they didn't mention it, perhaps related to the legion... no, perhaps something to do very closely with Utai's past...

"... well, we'll ask Shinomiya-san about that today." decided Haruyuki. If there was some reason that couldn't be revealed, perhaps Niko wouldn't have told Haruyuki. Perhaps she wanted to give Haruyuki a push by telling him this.

Looking at the clock in a corner of his view, it was almost seven fifty-five. Even though he did not have to worry about being late, he still quickened his footsteps, but just as he was about to run down from the underpass, he saw a large electric public bus heading north, and stopped. Perhaps Ash Roller's controller Kusakabe Rin was on this bus. She did say that every day after the «Ash Crow Battle» she would look up at the bridge from this bus, and often saw Haruyuki standing there. That was how she recognized him as Silver Crow. Of course, leaking his real world identity like that was a certain level of foolishness, but since she already knew, there was no more point in hiding.

Standing in the middle of the overpass, Haruyuki looked down on the approaching bus. In his head, he thought "Hopefully that battle can appease the angry brother", as he waited for the bus to pass. Its left turn indicator lights came on, and stopped at an alighting point not far to the north.

The bus stop beneath the Koenji Flyover was not near the school or the bus terminal, so it was often skipped by buses. Just as Haruyuki's curiosity struck him, the bus quickly sped away. A lone female student got off, and she wore a uniform not familiar to Haruyuki.

"Ah, R... Rin." The girl looked straight up at Haruyuki who was stuttering, her right hand slightly moved, then she began to move. Haruyuki also headed towards the escalator

that was closer to her. Running down the steps, Haruyuki landed at the foot of the overpass, and the girl also began to move faster. She sprinted towards him, lost her footing, and after regaining her balance with a mad wave of her hands, she reached Haruyuki's front with some difficulty.

Looking at each other from less than a meter apart, they were at a loss for words. Should they talk about the battle that just passed? Or apologize for not inviting her to yesterday evening's curry party? N, no, perhaps, wish her a good morning first? Just as Haruyuki had such notions...

"Th, that, just now, sorry for, brother's rude language..." The girl opened her mouth, then her short curly hair was suddenly lowered.

"Eh, no, no way, I should be the one apologizing for yesterday!" He bowed as well. Both their heads collided together, and Haruyuki thought, "That's no apology, that's an attack" and quickly raised his upper body, and ended up nearly falling over.

Kusakabe Rin grabbed his school bag, while he regained his balance, then smiled at him with tears in her eyes.

Rin said, she had alighted from the bus just now, in order to apologize for Ash Roller's conduct just now in battle. In that case, she would need to catch the next bus to Shibuya, so Haruyuki suggested they return to the bus stop.

"Erm, are you, rushing for time?"

"No matter, there's still some time before the school gates close." As he talked, Haruyuki also checked the bus arrival information in his view. Looks like the next bus would arrive in four minutes, so there was not much time to talk, but at least enough to make apologies.

Haruyuki quickly turned towards Rin who still held onto his school bag, and bowed deeply. "Kusakabe-san, I'm really sorry for yesterday. I wanted to invite you too... but,

it's not so much of a good idea for you and the Prominence leadership to meet in the real world..."

"Ah... this reason...master already explained, and I... accepted. But brother... he treated you... like that..." Saying to this point with a small voice, Rin's tears steadily increased. On her neck was a burnished steel Neuro Linker that was slightly too big for her and on it was a lightning bolt-like crack.

This Neuro Linker Rin was using had originally belonged to her brother Rinta, a motorcycle racer. Only while wearing this Neuro Linker was she able to «duel» as a Burst Linker. However, the moment she removed this one and replaced her own Neuro Linker, her memories of battle would begin to fade, and in about half a day it would be almost gone, as if it were all a dream.

In a way, this also meant that right now, Rin very clearly remembered what Ash had done and said in the battle just now. "Aha, hahaha, what a nice brother you have. A battle once in a while isn't a bad idea, and it ended spectacularly isn't a bad idea, it pleases the audience too."

"Really...?" Being watched by the big pair of greyish eyes, it was inevitable that Haruyuki's heart rate and breathing rate had increased. Even though he had just met Kusakabe Rin five days ago, as had been said when she had stuck herself to him - she loved him.

...no, that was only because of the situation then, I planned to die along with the armor, which was a situation of disobeying orders. Normally, the legion would just return to normal.

Using such curious words to calm himself down, Haruyuki nodded and continued, "Y, yeah. I was really looking forward to Ash. Since our win rates are both fifty percent, and we both know each other well, we can plan ahead."

"Is... that so?" Haruyuki saw that the mouth on Rin's lowered head had formed into a "happy" expression, and his heartbeat shot up again. The problem was, if Rin got more

emotional, the chances of Ash in the accelerated world remembering this was higher, and if it continued, there was no guarantee Ash wouldn't erupt in a rage of "How dare you lay your scummy hands on my sister" in the next battle. Like when they left Rin out this time, and the brother got angry too. It didn't make sense...

At this point, Haruyuki remembered something. "Ah... right, Kusakabe-san."

"...yes?" Rin raised her head, and Haruyuki tried his best to put on a nonchalant voice. "Next week is my school's culture festival. If... if you're free, want to drop by? I can still invite some guests."

Hearing that, Rin's face brightened, but she then asked in a softer voice, "Is... this okay? If so, I'd really, really like to go."

"Is, is that so? Great." Haruyuki nodded in reply, sweat rolling down his back. «Taking the initiative to invite a girl» was, to him, one of the hardest things in the real world. Even inviting Chiyuri, whom he had known from young, to tag battle with him, he still needed half an hour to mentally prepare himself.

Fortunately, the notification that the bus was arriving suddenly appeared, and looking along the road, the large bright green vehicle among the small passenger cars looked like a mother goose leading its flock. "Then... I'll email you the details later. He, help me say hi to your brother."

This last sentence was for Ash Roller in the accelerated world, as well as the person Rin went to visit every day after school in the real world, Kusakabe Rinta. Understanding what he meant, she nodded and said "okay", and unwillingly let go of Haruyuki's bag.

As she was about to walk towards the slowly approaching bus, she suddenly stopped, and said something Haruyuki completely did not expect to hear.

“Erm... I think, next time shall I increase the amount of missiles on the bike to four, what do you think?” Haruyuki tightened his neck, but still managed to squeeze out a reply with a smile, “Th, that isn’t a bad idea. Not at all.”

Hearing that, Rin let out a bright smile. She waved her hand in goodbye, and boarded the bus. Watching her bus leave with a low motor noise, Haruyuki let out a long sigh.



Last night, he was also rather troubled too, on whether he should invite Rin to the School festival that was completely unrelated to Brain Burst, but thinking that this would calm Ash's anger, perhaps that could be a reason too. After all, he was a key loyal member of the Legion Great Wall, and staying on good terms with him was important too, no doubt.

The only problem was that the school festival of Umesato Middle not only involved exhibits and activities in the real world classrooms and gym, at the same time people were also encouraged to take part in full dive activities within the school network. To let her really enjoy herself, there would be a need for her to connect to the school network. However, there was a small problem with allowing Burst Linkers from other legions to connect to the network, a really small issue regarding the safety of the legion...

"...Then again, Kusakabe-san has met everyone in Nega Nebulas, so..." So as Haruyuki reached that No Problem solution, he once again ran up the escalator onto the overpass.

Reaching school with five minutes to spare before the gate closed, when Haruyuki entered the 2-C classroom, Takumi and Chiyuri were already at his seat.

The kendo and track teams would be taking part in the Tokyo Tournament to be held in mid-July. Hence, in order to practice, Takumu and Chiyuri would arrive at school an hour before Haruyuki. And after school, they would first go to club activities before participating in legion tournaments. Haruyuki would hence be concerned about whether they were tired.

But both of them had agreed that the experience gained in the accelerated world could also be used in real life. This of course did not refer to them using «acceleration» in competitions, but the effects of concentrating on something and the mental fortitude needed. As Takumi often said, as long as he recalled the decisive battle with Dusk Taker, no matter what high-level opponent he faced, he would not be afraid. And hearing how Takumu had given Noumi Seiji, formerly Dusk Taker, extra-tough training as a member of the first-year kendo team of Umesato Middle, Haruyuki had mixed feelings.

Haruyuki also wanted to use the abilities he had trained in Brain Burst into the real world, but he was not in a sports or arts club, but a member of the animal raising committee, so that was not easy. On the other hand, he felt that Hou-san, the bird raised in the small wooden hut, had taught him the necessary state of mind needed to fly in the accelerated world.

No matter, his goal is to see the end of Brain Burst together with senpai. All the duels fought in the accelerated world, all the time spent, is all for this goal. Learning «Theoretic Mirror», attacking the Archangel Metatron, destroying the ISS Kit Main Body in the Tokyo Midtown Tower, all these goals were all for heading towards that far away horizon, he could not forget that.

Comforting himself so, Haruyuki walked to his seat, and the school bell rang right on time. Sugeno, the teacher in charge, entered through the front door, and the class rep gave the instruction to stand. Pulling back the thoughts that had begun to drift towards the accelerated world, Haruyuki together with his classmates greeted the teacher “Good morning.”

Chapter 7

With a “clack”, he opened it.

Looking inside, with a “thump” sound, he closed it again.

Haruyuki repeated these actions about ten times, then sighed softly.

He was sitting at the small hut in the west side of Umesato Middle School’s backyard, on a wooden bench that had just been installed this week. This was not a new bench - it had laid dormant in the storeroom of the second school building for over ten years, but had a very sturdy construction. This was the gift of the mighty student council vice-president, who had cleared its data from the school servers before bestowing it upon the animal raising committee. And since there was leaf cover overhead, he would not be wet even if there was a drizzle.

The papers in the shed had been changed, the bathing tub cleaned. Hou lay sleeping

on a branch inside the wire mesh. Haruyuki looked at it, and just as he was about to open the board-like tool in his hand...

“Sorry, Chairman! Did you finish cleaning up?” said a voice, causing Haruyuki to freeze on the bench. Shocked, he dropped the item he was holding, and a white hand was first to help him pick it up. He blinked at high speed, for a moment not daring to take the item held out to him - a makeup mirror he had purchased at lunchtime, which had the Umesato logo on it.

“What’s the matter?” The very shocked person who held the mirror, was a fellow Animal raising committee member, Izeki Rena of class 2-B. Her curled hair, brightly drawn eyebrows, and the embellished Neuro Linker, all showed that she was of a class completely apart from Haruyuki.

“- Why would you of all people carry a makeup with you?” Haruyuki expected her to ask that, but Rena only cocked her head. He thought, if he were to be asked that, he would reply “so I can signal for help if I’m marooned on a remote island”. He then moved his frozen right hand to pick up the mirror.

“Th... thank you, Izeki-san.” With a scratchy word of thanks, he put the mirror into his uniform pocket. “Un.” Rena replied, and turned to the hut, waving at Hou-san. The owl also very politely waved its wings in reply.

“Ah, right, are we planning to show anything at the school festival?” It took Haruyuki a full five seconds to understand that the “we” in Rena’s statement was referring to the animal raising committee.

“Ah, erm, yeah. I was thinking we get an empty classroom and let the visitors see Hou-san. But since he just got here, it might be stressful for there to suddenly be so many people looking at him. So not this year, perhaps.”

“Ah, as expected of the chairman.” Rena nodded in acknowledgement, took a few steps, and sat down on the bench as well. She looked at Haruyuki out of the corner of her eye, and had somewhat of a sly smile -

“... so, why are you always looking at the mirror. Perhaps... you’re going on a date?”

“No... no no no, definitely not!” Haruyuki waved his hands and face madly, thinking about whether to use the excuse he had prepared. But Rena beat him to it by nodding with an expression that said “no need to answer”, and then with a face showing she had suddenly thought of something, added, “But, the mirrors our school co-op sells are made of acrylic, so I don’t recommend them.”

“Eh... a, acrylic? What’s made of acrylic?”

“What else... the mirror, of course. Let me see.” Hearing her say that, Haruyuki removed the mirror from his pocket and opened it. Rena gently struck the surface of the mirror with a long fingernail, and said, “This. It’s made of acrylic, so what it reflects will change shape. The color are also a bit off.”

She then looked in her own bag, and took out what looked like a high-class mirror. Deftly opening it, she handed it to Haruyuki. “This is made of high-quality glass. See the difference?”

Doing as she said, Haruyuki looked at the mirror in his left hand with the school logo on it, and the one in his right which had a rather notable fashion brand.

A few minutes ago, the many times he had opened and closed the mirror, was because looking at the mirror meant that he had to look at his own round face. But, he now put that at the back of his mind, and focused on comparing the images of his face in the mirrors.

“Oh.. oh oh, they’re completely different...” There was an obvious difference between the two mirrors, which he exclaimed. The one in his left had a cheap plasticky feel, while the one in his right was so clear one would think they were looking at the real thing.

As he looked at the mirrors, he felt some kind of [moving to a different world] feeling in his mind. In other words, something like a mirror had to be perfect...

Thinking to this point, the feeling dissipated from his mind. He raised his head, and Rena continued explaining. “Didn’t I say it was different? Let’s not talk about contortion, if one got the wrong colour on while doing makeup, it would be bad. Like the big mirrors in the beauty salons, which are about fifty thousand a piece.”

“... Ah, I see.” As Haruyuki felt a deep sense of respect, he also realized that that was something he had no use for, and as such returned the high-class mirror in his right hand to Rena.

“... So, who’s the chairman going out with?”

“Th, there’s nothing like that!”

“Ah, so it’s the supreme leader?” The [supreme leader] she referred to was ranked above the chairman, in other words Hou’s real owner and the mastermind behind the animal raising committee.

“Um! Well, it’s a bit odd with a fourth grader, right?”

“No, no no no no not like that...!”

“Ah, she’s here.” Haruyuki raised his head, seeing a small human figure walk in their direction from the school gate. This figure wore a white pinafore, carried a coffee-coloured leather school bag, and a bag in her right hand. Without even looking, one would know that she was Shinomiya Utai, supreme leader of the animal raising committee.

“Hey! Supreme leader! Just now, Chairman, he...”

“No, no -” As Haruyuki cried out, Hou approached Utai, and beat his wings loudly.

After the animal raising committee’s most exciting time, feeding, was over, everyone signed their names in the daily log, and with a “Please make yourselves comfortable”, Rena left for him.

[UI> What did she mean by that?]

Looking at Utai type that, Haruyuki tried to explain: “Maybe... she means sending the log? Because the school doesn’t give a lot of leeway.” Saying that, he wiped the sweat off his brow. Utai didn’t pursue it, nodding and keeping the coolant box that was placed on the bench. Looking at her small frame, a voice reverberated in Haruyuki’s mind.

- His name was Mirror Masker. He’s Ardor Maiden’s «Parent».

Haruyuki had initially planned to ask Utai about the information Niko had given him immediately after committee activities ended today. But the opportunity had come and gone, and he did not ask.

Thinking about it, Haruyuki still did not know just who the «Parents» of the three old Burst Linkers of Nega Nebulas - Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, and Utai, were. About Kuroyukihime’s, she had just said “I’ll tell you when the time comes”, and Haruyuki had never raised it again. But for Fuuko and Utai, he had never asked, going so far as to suppress his curiosity.

One thing he was sure about, if they were still in contact with their «Parents», Haruyuki would have been introduced a while ago. But since none of that had yet taken place, and not even a name was mentioned, perhaps it meant that they had a reason to do so - or maybe that they just did not want to.

Hence, Haruyuki hesitated as he watched Utai. As if she had felt his gaze, Utai stopped

what she was doing and turned around, looking at Haruyuki with slightly red-tinted eyes. Feeling as if he were about to be sucked into those eyes, a few words subconsciously flowed out of his mouth...

“Erm... Shinomiya-san...” But he could not continue, Utai watching his face silently.

After a while, she raised her hands, and a line of text appeared on his virtual desktop,

[UI> Doesn't Arita-san already know? About my «Parent».]

He took a gulp of air, and stopped. Then he made up his mind and nodded. “Yeah. The Red King told me yesterday. She told me Shinomiya-san's Parent, was the creator of «Theoretic Mirror».” Hearing him say that, Utai did not react, keeping quiet for about five minutes. Then a small smile was formed by the sakura-coloured lips.

[UI> Sorry to worry Niko-san then. No... Sacchin and Fuu-nee too. Senpai, don't blame them for saying nothing yesterday, they were waiting for me to make the decision. And Niko-san, through Arita-san, gave me a push.]

Confused for a while, Haruyuki reread the text in his virtual desktop a few times, then he understood it. Perhaps to Utai, discussing her Parent must be quite a monumental task for her. Never mind Kuroyukihime or Fuuko, Niko must also have guessed that Utai had her issues, only after thinking about it would she make the decision - tell Haruyuki the truth, to get Niko to take that step.

Haruyuki closed his mouth and waited. After a few seconds, Utai made her decision, and the words she typed out were far deeper than Haruyuki expected.

[UI> My Parent, Mirror Masker, was my brother. But, he's long left the accelerated world.]

And after a pause,

[UI> And the real world too.]

She packed up her things, to allow Haruyuki to sit on the bench, then sat next to him.

The cloudy sky began to turn shades of red, and the baseball team in the field could be heard in the background. In the school building, many students were probably still preparing for the school festival, but all that noise would not reach the backyard.

Haruyuki looked at the moss-covered ground, not knowing what he should say - or whether he should even speak at all. The words Utai had typed into the chat window still remained there. No matter how many times he read it, it had a clear meaning.

Utai's Parent was her brother, and he was no longer around. Not that he had run out of points and left the accelerated world, but that he had passed on from the real world.

Haruyuki, who had only turned fourteen this year, had not yet experienced the feeling of parting with a close friend. The closest he had been to that was probably last year, where Kuroyukihime had gotten injured saving Haruyuki from an oncoming car. Even now, just thinking of that night in the hospital he had spent praying for her recovery, Haruyuki's heart rate would jump and he would break in a sweat.

But, if -

Haruyuki did not want to think about that, but what if that time Kuroyukihime had succumbed to her injuries, he did not want to think about what he would be like now. At the very least, he would not be able to laugh like he was now, and partake in battles daily...

[UI> Sorry.]

That word appeared in the chat window, causing it to scroll up by one line, and Haruyuki blinked.

He did not know how to respond, only seeing Utai's fingers knock against her knees, covered by the white dress.

[UI> I know, my silence only makes things difficult for Arita-san. But, my head's in a mess.]

"No... no worries. If you don't want to talk, saying nothing is fine." Haruyuki allowed the words to escape from his mouth. "I should be the one apologizing. Maybe I shouldn't have spoken. I am older than you by four years... yet I can't say anything."

[UI> Putting it that way, I am Senpai's senior by two levels.]

Hearing her say that, Haruyuki turned his head, to see that Utai's face had once again regained its usual peaceful smile. But he felt that inside that smile was some kind of sadness.

In his mind's eye, he saw something. That was when he and Utai had accidentally intruded into the «Forbidden City», in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Under the watchful eyes of the passing sentry Enemies and breaking into the main keep, Ardor Maiden had said something.

- It feels like on this side, Crow-san's become more dependable. Like... like a brother." That time, Haruyuki had heard it and asked, "Mei-san has a brother? How old?" But she did not respond, only smiling sadly.

As if she had been able to see what memory had awoken in Haruyuki's mind, Utai moved her fingers lightly.

[UI> Since your colours were pretty close, Crow-san at that time really did remind me of my brother. Like at all times he was warm and strong, as if channelling my brother... Mirror Masker. Perhaps it's because of that... I was scared. Scared that learning Theoretic Mirror would make you more like him.]

"... Shinomiya-san..."

[UI> I really would like to apologize to Arita-san. Actually, I've known from the beginning. Just being able to take such a strong light attack would not be enough to obtain the desired ability. Because the «mirror» in brother's heart is not made of glass or silver.]

Reading to this point, Haruyuki could feel something reverberating in his mind. A few tens of minutes ago, when he was comparing the mirror bought from the school co-op against Izeki's, he had dispelled this notion. Now, he struggled to recall it.

"Un... I understand. If a mirror is perfect, it becomes [nothing at all]. So... if a mirror can reflect light perfectly, we can't tell that it's a mirror. We can only see what the mirror reflects. That means... erm, erm..." That represented the limits of Haruyuki's verbal ability. But hearing him say that, Utai opened her eyes, showing a smile that was different in meaning from the ones before.

[UI> Whoa, that scared me. Looks like Arita-san managed to get to this point only by his intuition.]

"Eh... this point? What point?" Haruyuki unconsciously asked such a off-topic question. But Utai never changed the smile on her face, and stopped the movement of her fingers. Then, after a while, as if she had made up her mind, she nodded, and began knocking her hands on her kneecaps.

[UI> Arita-san, would you like to personally see the «mirror» in my brother's heart?]

The meaning of those words would cause someone to pause, but Haruyuki nodded his head. "Yeah, I'd like to. I think that if I see it. I'll be able to get my answer."

[UI> Understood. Then let's go.]

“Go...? To the Unlimited Neutral Field?” Hearing Haruyuki ask that, Utai opened her eyes wide, and shook her head roughly.

[UI> No, to my house in the real world. We might end late, though, so Arita-san might want to leave his family a message first]

Chapter 8

If one were to describe the place in somewhat abridged terms, Tokyo's Suginami Ward resembled a rhombus that had been slightly rotated clockwise.

The residential building Haruyuki lived in, along with Umesato Junior High School, resided in Kouenji: comprising the eastwards vertex of the shape. Kuroyukihime's Asagaya residence lay westwards, and to the southwest was the area where Utai attended elementary school: Matsunogi. Utai's house itself ought to be in Oomiya, which lay more to the south.

Haruyuki walked together with Utai, who was wearing her white uniform, towards the pedestrian crossing at the south of Umesato Middle School. Thinking back, they had walked this very path when they had first gotten to know each other.

At the time, they had entered into a Tag Team battle on a bench by the pavement when they had entered Oomiya Ward. Their opponents were Bush Utan and Olive Glove from the Green Legion. Utan had then activated the «ISS Kit», using its power to pummel him into a corner. Fortunately, Utai could repel Olive without a scratch with a similar power of hers, and even summoned a huge firestorm to burn Utan to a crisp.

...Was that going to happen today, too?

Luckily, Utai merely strolled forwards even as Haruyuki considered the possibility, and she did not say anything like, “Let me see your true strength,” or the likes. And even though Haruyuki was plump to the point of resembling a packet of takeaway food, the way Utai walked did not give off the feeling of a difference in height. She walked upright and took footsteps with fast, fluid movements, almost as though she had taken classes in walking.

The navigational app on his virtual desktop displayed that their destination, Oomiya, was just about two hundred metres ahead. The two of them turned and headed East from the pavement. This neighbourhood was filled with a great many traditional buildings, and markers indicating shrines and temples hovered over the map of this area.

“I get the feeling... It’s completely different from Kouenji.” Haruyuki couldn’t help but remark in a soft voice. Utai nodded her head in acknowledgement.

[UI > When I was young, I was afraid of walking here alone at night.]

Listening to Utai, who was just ten years old now, 14-year-old Haruyuki found himself unable to reply in kind, “*It’s still scary even when we’re walking together.*” Still, the blowing wind, neither warm nor chilly, making rustling sounds among the many aged trees on either sides of them... Frankly, he felt just as nervous whenever he rolled the Cemetery Stage in duels.

No other passersby could be seen on the streets despite the time being before six in the evening. If not for the Social Security Cameras installed on streetlights alongside the roads, Haruyuki would have begun to suspect himself of having entered the world fifty years ago. They walked along this gently-curved road, and just as Haruyuki was beginning to wonder if they had made a spectacularly wrong turn that not even the navigation app could save them from - an old sukiya-style Japanese gate came into view.

The door, painted a flat black, was made of real wood just like the roof above appeared to have real ceramic tiles on it. The double doors were shut tight, with no gaps through which anything could be seen. But to the right of these doors was a little sign that showed that this was an extraordinary house.

Utai came to a stop at the front of this house, and a moment later, Haruyuki joined her and tilted his head towards the sign. Several black characters were carved in rigid strokes: “Suginami Noh Theatre”.

“Suginami... Noh Theatre?” Haruyuki read aloud. Utai nodded and typed her reply:

[UI > This is my home. Please, come in!]

She walked towards the side of the double doors where she waved her hand before a metallic door, apparently an alternative entrance. Of course, she was simply operating her virtual desktop, but it appeared as though she was using some supernatural ability to command the door to open with a low rumble as it unlocked immediately.

Utai opened the door and gestured for Haruyuki to enter first. Feeling nervous, Haruyuki softly murmured, “Pardon the intrusion,” as he walked through the doorway. The instant he saw the scenery inside, however, his jaw fell to the floor in astonishment.

The landscape inside was almost exactly like the Forbidden Palace in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Although it wasn't as large-scale as the latter, the stately Japanese-style buildings and countless aged trees reaching all around, no matter how he looked at it, the scenery looked unreal. Furthermore, two types of buildings seemed to be present - on the right were places of residence, but to his left was a mysterious hall of some kind. Hazarding a guess, Haruyuki thought it was the aforementioned Noh theatre as described by the sign at the entrance.

As the door locked again, Haruyuki turned to Utai and asked in a small voice:

“Shinomiya-san, about Noh... Um, is it similar to Kabuki^{note}...?”

Despite the obtuse question, Utai simply simply smiled and nodded her head.

[UI > They are undoubtedly the domain of cultural arts. Arita-san is quite the knowledgeable one, isn't that so?]

“I-I'm so sorry! That's all that I know about...”

Even as he apologised profusely, Haruyuki's voice quavered as he asked another question.

“...If I may ask, w-what are the differences between Noh and Kabuki?”

Of course, Haruyuki could find numerous webpages devoted to the topic if he would surreptitiously search for his question on the Global Net via virtual desktop. But in this dire moment of his failed pretense, having been immediately exposed once, he would surely be caught out again, and that was a certainty if he tried to fake it in front of Utai again. He might as well truthfully confess to his ignorance. With this determination in mind, he asked that question, awaiting her detailed response, but instead Utai simply wrote back:

[UI > Fuuko-nee described it as, Noh is boring and Kabuki is stupid.]

As she caught sight of Haruyuki's dumbfounded expression, she laughed noiselessly and wrote another line of text:

[UI > I will explain the real differences later when we're at the stage. Please, this way.]

Of course, the stage she was referring to was a large wooden building constructed along the west side of the wall.

On a closer look, it had a rather interesting design. The two buildings were connected

by a walkway, but the larger of the two did not have any walls on three sides. On the sole wall, facing inside, was a rather beautiful artwork of a tree. The entire building had a dated, little-used feel to it. To the left of the structure was a covered walkway about ten metres long, extending to a smaller building.

Taking a path through the courtyard buildings, as numerous as trees in a forest, they reached the back of the small building, where Haruyuki could see a door that appeared to open outwards. Taking out an antiquated metal key from her pocket, Utai inserted it into the lock, turned, and used both hands to pull the door open slowly. She gestured for Haruyuki to enter with a little nod of her head.

“..P-Pardon the intrusion.”

Haruyuki uttered the greeting a second time as he stepped through the doorway. Utai followed him and shut the door before flicking the light switch on a wall.

Old fluorescent lamps on the ceiling flickered to life, and the resulting sight left Haruyuki at a loss for words in amazement:

The room was luxurious. Despite it not being all that large at three tatami mats in size, the floors, walls and ceiling, and even the furniture were all made from gleaming, polished natural wood. This style of construction might have been fairly common during its heyday, but if this was to be done in the present day, it would surely cost an arm and a leg to make.

Removing her shoes, Utai took two pairs of slippers from a shoe rack on the side, and offered one pair to Haruyuki. Giving thanks, he put it on before stepping further inside.

On the right-side wall, an antique cabinet and a backless chair was arranged. On the far wall opposite was a large furniture of an unknown type. At first glance, it looked like it was made of thick wooden boards, running vertically, that could be slid to the left and right, but it was clear that this was more than just a simple piece of furniture.

As he examined the interior of the room in every direction, a sentence appeared in his chat window:

[UI > This is the «Mirror Room».]

Haruyuki stared at the message before turning to ask Utai a question softly:

“Mirror... Room?”

[UI > Correct. I will let Arita Senpai experience it in a moment; please take a seat on this chair.]

Haruyuki took a few steps as instructed and sat on the round wooden chair, facing that mysterious furniture opposite him. Utai walked towards it, undid a simple metal clasp on it, and then tugged aside the outermost set of boards open to either side. She then pulled a board above to the right, before walking back to stand behind Haruyuki.

“--It’s not a furniture, but they’re doors?”

Haruyuki briefly thought for a split second, but it immediately became clear that that was not the case as soon as a round-faced middle-schooler boy came into view.

Haruyuki reflexively tilted his body backwards, and the middle school student in the mirror followed suit. Fortunately for the elementary school student who stood behind them, did they manage to avoid a fall.

There were few such clumsy overweight middle school students. This was to say, Haruyuki was looking at himself, and this mysterious piece of furniture was an extremely large set of mirrors.

Usually, when Haruyuki looked at a mirror, he did not dare to look at his likeness for more than a second. But now, because of the shock that had kept him looking directly ahead. He had never seen such a large and grand mirror before. The largest mirror in the Arita household was the dressing mirror in his mother’s bedroom, but the mirror in front of him was probably at least ten times larger than that. In short, it looked like a small room with mirrors on three walls.

“...”

He looked at the mirror silently for more than 10 seconds, soon realizing that what was unique was not only its size.

The quality of the mirror, that is to say the transparency of the glass layer the reflectivity of the silver backing, was also very exquisite. It probably exceeded even the high-quality mirror Izeki Rena had lent him earlier in the morning at school. It managed to let someone feel that it was more than a mirror, becoming a door to a strange world where everything was flipped.

[UI> There are a lot of differences between Noh and Kabuki...]

Words suddenly appeared in the holographic window, which was the only thing not reflected by the mirror.

[UI> The greatest difference is that, while kabuki performers apply makeup on their faces, Noh performers have to wear a mask, called the <omote>.]

It took Haruyuki a few seconds to understand that sentence. He then said, “Ah, so that’s the case... is that the so-called <Noh-men>...?”

[UI> Yes. The Noh performer who wears the omote, must have his senses fuse with it, dance and sing as something that may not be human. This «mirror room» is to allow a performer to focus, to help a performer reach that mental state. The large mirror Arita-san is looking at, is the border between reality and the otherworld.]

“Border...” Haruyuki once again had that thought - a belief and anxiety that he was extremely close to the core, He gathered his senses, got up, and approached the mirror.

The image of him in the mirror also approached with identical motions. His shadow shook, like water when disturbed. Somehow, the image that stood before him changed to that other self of his - clad in silver armor, and with an opaque mask covering his face - Silver Crow. Haruyuki raised his right hand, and Crow did the same. Both their fingers approached each other, looking as if they were about to touch.

Suddenly, his shirt was tugged from the back, causing him to come to his senses in shock. In the blink of an eye, the duel avatar in the mirror had disappeared, returning back to the round middle school student. Looking back, Utai was holding onto his shirt with a light smile, typing with only her right hand:

[UI> Senpai has seen enough, we’ll talk about the rest in my room.]

The two of them walked out of the «mirror room», once more across the garden, towards the main building to the east.

As they walked, the hazy feeling in his mind slowly faded away, but the anxiousness caused his stomach to hurt. What if he met Utai’s family, how should he introduce himself? There was quite the age gap between a fourth-grader and an eighth-grader, and worst come to worse, the police could even be called and he could get arrested.

Just as he pictured the scene in his mind, as if she had seen through what he was thinking, Utai said,

[UI> No need to worry, Grandfather and Father are not at home. When there’s a grand public performance, they’re rarely at home.]

“P, public? Noh performance?”

[UI > Yes.]

Hearing that, Haruyuki once again caught up with the present.

There was a great big Noh performance stage at home, her grandfather and father were Noh masters, that meant that Shinomiya Utai was not only a student of the art of Noh, she was also «the child of a Noh family». And so was her late brother... Mirror Masker.

Seeing Haruyuki remain silent, Utai remained quiet too, silently opening the door of the main building.

The room Utai brought him to was not built out of wood, but equally quaint. It was a Japanese-style room floored with tatami. Inside there was only a wooden writing desk, a shelf and a bookshelf, and no bed. So did that mean that Utai would lay out a futon on the tatami to sleep? This kind of sleeping environment was rather alien to Haruyuki.

Placing her bag on the shelf, Utai then took out a seating cushion for Haruyuki, then saying - or rather, writing, a [Excuse me], walked out of the room. Haruyuki thought about it, realizing that he had never been in such a traditional setting in the past few years. He first tried to sit in a formal kneeling position, but after ten seconds realized that it would cause damage to his legs, so he could only distribute his weight to withstand the pain. Fortunately, just three minutes later Utai returned with a tray.

Looking at Haruyuki's state, Utai immediately let out a look like as if she were trying to prevent herself from laughing. She first put the tray down on the table, then typed with both hands,

[UI> Senpai, please make yourself comfortable.]

“... Oh, okay. Then I shall... oblige, or... ah- ow, ow, ow...”

Haruyuki adjusted his quickly-numbed legs to the side, and then released a breath of air. Utai sat down opposite him with a perfect posture, bringing the cleanly-fashioned porcelain cups, along with a small plate of red bean jelly, from the tray to the table. The sight moved him to the core.

“Th... thank you.”

With a word of thanks, looking at Utai gesturing at him to drink with her hand, he drank it first. The tea was probably green tea brewed with real tea leaves, and then cooled. Hence, there was a bit of a sweetness in the bitter-tasting tea. Haruyuki, taking a sip of the tea that tasted very much unlike bottled tea, once again understood something.

That Shinomiya Utai could remain calm in a way uncharacteristic of someone her age,

was not only because of her experience as a Burst Linker. What had molded her now, and the Duel Avatar Ardor Maiden, was also the time she had spent growing up in this expansive and traditional Japanese household.

And besides that, he had also noticed, that there was one thing that this place had in common with the twenty-third floor apartment in Koenji North that Haruyuki called home. They were both «quiet». Even when the kids came home after school, there was no one to say “You’re back.” What this place had, was that kind of depressing silence.

“May I ask... Shinomiya-san, do you have any other relatives?”

He carefully asked that question. Utai took a drink of her own tea, then reached for her keyboard and began typing.

[UI > I mentioned it earlier. Grandfather, Father, and my big elder brother, are in Kyoto for a public performance. My mother is also working, and won’t be back until very late.]

“Eh... Then, is there only Shinomiya-san in this house...?”

[UI > There is a maid who helps do the housework, but she should be finishing work soon.]

“... th, that’s the case.”

Up until now, Haruyuki had been somewhat intimidated by the ambience of this house. But now that he had understood the many special circumstances, he had just belatedly realized that was he in the situation where he was alone with a girl at her house? Although his heartbeat and breathing had unconsciously quickened, he still relied on his willpower to keep a steady mind. Although, to be particular, last night not only had Niko been alone with him, they had also slept in the same bed; and a few days ago, Kuroyukihime had even brought him to her place to spend the night. Reason said that he should have at least had some experience, and not begin panicking here. Should.

Utai did not notice - or maybe she did, but did not show it - Haruyuki’s internal conflict, deftly scooping a bite of red bean jelly with a wooden spoon to eat. Haruyuki followed suit, mimicking her actions, allowing the cooling red bean jelly to slide down his throat, cooling down his own emotions.

She had mentioned a [big elder brother]. This meant...

“You originally had... two brothers?” Haruyuki asked in a small voice, then saw the ponytail move back and fro.

[UI > Yes. My big elder brother is older than me by nine years, so we didn't play with each other a lot. Second brother... Kyouya-ni-san, who took me into the Accelerated World, was four years my senior. He died three years ago... back then, I was only seven, and he, eleven-]

Utai was a typing powerhouse far better than Haruyuki, but at this point her fingers had stiffened. She lowered her head, making it impossible to see what expression she had. Haruyuki had wanted to stop her, to tell her there was no need to continue, but her delicate fingers pushed on.

[UI> In the world of Noh... no, Kabuki and Kyōgen too. For families that practice such traditional arts, their children aren't given the opportunity to choose in the first place.”

“To choose... in the first place?”

[UI > That is, if they want to enter the world of performing arts or not. Kids don't have the right to make such choices. From when they're little, they come into contact with the performances of their parents, brothers, and relatives, form a kind of bond with the performance, and begin their study. Then, at four, five, they make their stage debut as child performers. Up till this point, everything has been decided from when the child is born into a Noh-performing family.]

“From... from so young?”

Haruyuki asked, unable to say anymore. He tried to imagine what he was doing at four years old, but only had some hazy, distant memory of running around in kindergarten.

Utai lifted her head up and smiled lightly as she elaborated:

[UI > Of course, not every child will continue to practice being a Noh musician. Those that do are very few in number. Of the child performers that reach middle-school age, more than half will quit. But, Elder Brother did not give up... And neither did Younger Brother nor I. Both of us had grown to love the world of Noh, grown to love that stage-sized space in which we lived in our little universe.]

Haruyuki read in silence as the little cherry blossom-coloured characters slowly appeared in his vision.

He still did not have a good understanding of the world of Noh, and he had never attended a performance in person before. The most he knew about it were from 2D drawings and sketches from Social Science classes.

But even if he was late in realising it, Haruyuki was now aware of this:

That when Ardor Maiden - The Shrine Maiden of Destructive Flames - had activated her Incarnate abilities with song and dance, it had all originated from Noh. Shinomiya's transformation and appearance in Accelerated World were intimately related to the arts she had spent her all of her life studying and practicing.

With that, Haruyuki came across a question.

A duel avatar is the reflection of its user's trauma.

Then, Utai's avatar, the shrine maiden clothed in white and red, should have been made from her traumas, expressing them, reflecting her connection to the world of Noh she loved...

[UI > When I was three years old, I remember my first stage performance. Even though I was just a toddler, I clearly remember the anxiety and emotional feelings I had.]

Again, Utai resumed typing while Haruyuki watched in silence.

[UI > From that day onwards, I believed that I could become an accomplished Noh musician just like Grandfather and Father, and I diligently practiced everyday. But unfortunately... On the first day of elementary school, Father stated that I would only ever be a child performer... And then when I grow up, I would no longer be allowed to perform on-stage again,]

"What- How, how could this be?!"

Unable to control himself, Haruyuki burst out in a shout. For the children to be given no choice in the beginning, forcing them into the performing arts, and then kicking them out after a few years, did this not amount to bullying?

But a small smile from Utai calmed him down, as she continued to type in silence.

[UI > It can't be helped. That's because Kabuki, Kyōgen, and Noh, too, are all male-dominated industries. For example. Have you ever seen a female Kabuki musician?]

When she said that, it awakened Haruyuki to the truth. In Kabuki, the female roles were called "onnagata," and in spite of that they were indeed very rare.

[UI > There have been many female Noh musicians recently, but not always for each school of arts. The school of arts that the House of Shinomiya belongs to does not recognise female Noh performers. When I knew of this, I was quite broken-hearted. I thought, it's pointless to keep training if I will never ascend the stage ever again. But I didn't know of anything better to do when I have been training in Noh for all of my life...

And it was at that time when my brother brought me into another world. My brother, who had already become a Burst Linker, gave me Brain Burst.]

Pausing for a beat, Utai's fingers danced as she resumed typing.

[UI > The traumas that created the original form of Ardor Maiden... Even I am unable to express it adequately with words. But there is an incident that can be speculated from... I believe, the reason why I could create an avatar coloured both light red and white is because before I became a Burst Linker, there were two worlds in my heart, and two selves. Such was the case for my brother's avatar, Mirror Masker, as well. His colours were silver and white...]

The phrase "light red" gave Haruyuki pause for thought; something was off. Ardor Maiden's lower half was crimson in appearance, which should be a deep red colour. But his attention was immediately drawn to the second half of her sentence, further piquing his curiosity.

"Silver... and white. In other words... He was only half a metal colour? So there was such a thing too..."

[UI > I too, only ever saw it with my brother.]

Utai's reply gave Haruyuki food for thought. If Mirror Masker, wielder of the skill «Theoretic Mirror», was a unique duel avatar as such, then how certain was it that even if he was also silver in colour, the regular metal-coloured avatar Silver Crow, could learn this rare ability?

Haruyuki felt somewhat disheartened, but Utai shook her head and cleared him of these thoughts. He shouldn't be figuring himself out now, but earnestly listening to what Utai had to say. As soon as he refocused his attention on his virtual desktop and the wireless chat screen, the text cursor was moving again.

[UI > ... When I could only live a life of studying Noh and have no friends to play with, I was able to meet many Burst Linkers in Accelerated World. It was jovial and carefree world. I would wear this special mask of mine, Ardor Maiden, and dance like I was in a dream.]

"Uh... This was when Shinomiya-san was in her first year of elementary, right? Duelling... Wasn't it scary?"

Haruyuki couldn't help but interrupt the topic. The 4th year elementary schooler simply grinned and wrote:

[UI > There were already plenty of troublemakers, murderers, and ghosts in the songs of Noh.]

“S-So that’s how it was...”

[UI > Duels make me happy and let me meet all sorts of friendly people. It’s just... It ran contrary to my brother’s intentions. The more I danced in Accelerated world, the more my heart longed to return to the other world, the Noh stage. From another point of view, these two worlds were the same to me... Everything I saw, learnt, and achieved in that world, I wanted to perform the same onstage. And this desire of mine only grew stronger.]

“...I see. So, Shinomiya-san’s duel avatar could be a «Perfect Match», I guess...”

[UI > Hm... I think so too. Kyouya didn’t seem to expect this either. But when he knew that I was using Brain Burst, originally to help me forget about Noh, for the complete opposite... He decided to take responsibility. One year after I became a Burst Linker, which would be three years ago from today, on that day in summer]

At this moment, Utai suddenly stopped typing.

At some point in time, the sky outside had turned a bright red, dyeing Utai’s uniform the colour of the sunset. Since the lights in the room were switched off, it steadily became gloomy inside it, and the only sounds that could be heard were the wave-like sounds of leaves in the courtyard.

Utai lowered her head and made no movement for a long time, before abruptly looking up and staring at Haruyuki with her light red eyes. Her fingers danced like shadows as they typed.

[UI > Kyouya, he approached Grandfather - Seigorou, the head of the Shinomiya household, seventh-generation of the Kanze-style of Noh, to make his request in the Mirror Room and let me officially continue training to be a Noh musician. However... It was a foregone conclusion. Brother shed tears and begged Grandfather, who just kept shaking his head and saying no... Even after I told him to stop, he still wouldn’t give up... It was after when Elder Brother intervened to pull him away, then that incident]

“In...cident?”

[UI > Kyouya was pushed into... Into the large mirrors of the Mirror Room, which fell upon him. The mirror broke into pieces... And the pieces....]

It was at this point Utai stopped typing and her fingers froze.

But Haruyuki knew enough to easily imagine what had happened next. Utai had said earlier that Kyouya, her brother, was 11, older than Utai right now by 1 year. Those huge 3 panels of mirrors falling down on a small child, the consequences would be unimaginable. No, the worst had happened. Three years ago, Mirror Masker - Shinomiya Kyouya's young life had been lost in this place.

At some point in time, Utai had hung her head and balled her hands into fists. Catching sight of her hands trembling ever so slightly, Haruyuki searched himself for something to say in condolence. And yet, he somehow felt that whatever he said would be shallow and meaningless, so in the end he simply remained quiet and said nothing.

From his side of the table, Haruyuki extended a hand and lightly nudged Utai's left hand. As he did so, her fist trembled fiercely, before relaxing and slowly opening up and gently covering Haruyuki's fingers with her own.

Utai slowly resumed typing with her right hand while remaining in this state.

[UI > In the end... Kyouya's final wish came to naught because of me. Afterwards, I couldn't even perform as a child performer.]

Two crystal clear droplets fell onto the wood grain of the table noiselessly.

[UI > That was because, from that day onwards, I was unable to speak even a single word. Not even the use of the BIC was able to treat it.]

From the first day he had known Shinomiya Utai, Haruyuki had known that she would never speak due to her condition, movement-type aphasia.

But even until now, he hadn't thought about why she had this condition. As far as he had thought, it was something like the common cold which would get better with time.

Full of himself with self-blame and resentment for being so shallow, Haruyuki bit his lip. He should have known ever since long ago that Shinomiya Utai, a Burst Linker bearing such intimidating power, was in fact a symbol for tangible things she had lost in the real world. Even though he had noticed them, and despite not being in a position to do anything about it... At least he should have thought of this.

"Sorry... I'm sorry, I... Anything..."

With considerable difficulty, Haruyuki croaked a few words, but Utai gently squeezed his right hand.

[UI > There's no need for Arita-san to apologise. Rather... I'm happy that you're willing to listen. That's because the details about the incident with my brother, I've never related those to anyone... No one, not even Fu-nee or Sa-chan...]

“... If it was Master, or Senpai, I think they would definitely... They’d definitely say what needs to be said, but I... All I can do is listen...”

[UI > That too is Arita-san’s outstanding talent.]

Even if her eyes were brimming with tears, Utai still smiled happily as she said this, and that was all that was needed to get Haruyuki to relax the corners of his mouth. This prompted him to pluck up the courage to change the topic and ask a question:

“So, about Hou the owl...He’ll go back to being in the care of Matsunogi Elementary School... Would there be by any chance, a reason...?”

The question itself was somewhat sudden, but Haruyuki figured that Utai’s desperate need to find Hou a new shelter was not unrelated to her trauma.

At this question of his, Utai blinked owlishly, smiled, and nodded her head. Letting go of Haruyuki’s hand, she resumed typing with both of hers.

[UI > That is correct. This is a good opportunity to speak to you as President of the Caretaker Club - Is Arita-san aware of the revised procedures of taking care of animals?]

“Ah, um, I remember... It’s that all pets must now carry an electronic tag, right?”

[UI > Yes, it is. To be precise, it’s for pets that exceed a certain size. Regardless, the legal owner must attach one such tag to prevent incidents from happening, such as those owners who tire of caring for pets, finding them to be a nuisance, and then wilfully abandoning them. The latest tags even have the ability to connect to the Global Net, so even animal abusers who would... work insidiously in their home will no longer go unpunished.]

As text appeared in the chat window line by line, her expression twisted in pain, and yet she persevered in typing on the keyboard.

[UI > However, there are still a loophole in this. Hou is most likely a regular pet sold in stores... But as Arita-san is well aware of, feeding him is no easy task. Not only does he require a cage of sufficiently large size, his feed is also rather special. The former owner of Hou could not raise him properly despite buying him. In this case, he should have commissioned the shop from which Hou was purchased to take him back, or searched for a new owner...]

Utai took in a deep breath before continuing:

[UI > Hou's former owner chose to exploit the loophole to simplify matters. He extracted... No, he cut out the electronic tracker in Hou's right leg, and abandoned Hou outside his home...]

"...How could he do that?"

At Haruyuki's soft-spoken question, Utai smiled momentarily before reverting to her sad expression from earlier.

[UI > Birds are terrified of bleeding, and Hou all the more was incapable of living independently. There was no way he would survive in Tokyo. In a weakened state, he took shelter in Matsunogi Elementary's First Building, and thus the Caretaker Committee was formed to accommodate him. He was rushed to the vet immediately and it was nothing short of a miracle that he lived. But... It's likely that he has an extreme fear of humans due to his horrible experience...]

"I... I understand. After all, his owner mistreated him...."

[UI > The veterinarian said, if he had any worse than this, then there might have been no option but to put him down. But I... I did not want to see Hou die needlessly. If he had to be euthanized just because someone does not want him anymore, if just for these reasons, it would be absurd beyond belief.]

As Utai poured her innermost thoughts into the holographic window, while Haruyuki could certainly imagine it, he was unsure about talking about it. Instead, he decided to talk about his original thoughts.

"Even if... Even if one person says you're necessary and a hundred people don't need you, that alone is enough reason to stay in this world. Lately, I've been thinking like this, that I'm like Hou."

As soon as he said that, Utai looked at Haruyuki and nodded after a moment, her eyes brimming with tears.

[UI > Fortunately, after many attempts to feed him, Hou has finally begun to accept bait. He's slowly begun to improve... Even his leg injury, so we'll need to bring him to have a new electronic tag implanted. Originally, we believed he would always be in the care of Matsunogi Elementary, but after the issues with the closure of the Caretaker club.... Well, Arita-san is well aware of those.]

"If that's the case... I too will work hard to have Hou settle down at Umesato Middle School!"

[UI > I'm counting on you, Caretaker Committee President.]

Brimming with happiness, Utai smiled as she typed her reply to Haruyuki. As he looked at her, he realised something: if someday they couldn't duel, or even Accelerate together, Utai had achieved her objective while inviting him to her house - she had told Haruyuki all that he needed to know about her history.

Several low, metallic gongs rang throughout the house at this instant, which startled Haruyuki. Utai quickly signed that "It's seven in the evening," which led Haruyuki to conclude that that sound was simply the tolling of the clock.

As it is, the time on the clock in the corner of his virtual desktop read 19:02. If that was indeed a clock's ringing, it was a little slow. In any case, Haruyuki deemed it unimportant and stood up from his cushion.

"S-Sorry, it's getting late... I think I should be going..."

Utai tilted her head to one side as she listened, then began to type her reply.

[UI > Does Arita-san need to return home immediately?]

"Yeah... Maybe I'll Duel someone along the way too..."

[UI > Shall I accompany you?]

"Um, well... I, uh..."

Just as his train of thought was becoming a muddled mess, Haruyuki realised that there was almost no trace of the sunset outside of his window. It might be the summer solstice now, but to be with an elementary schoolgirl on the streets at this time might invite unnecessary suspicion.

"It's getting dark out, I think I'll pass for today. Or else, I might get a scolding from your family..."

Utai chuckled at Haruyuki's words.

[UI > Neither Mother nor Father will be overly concerned about what I do, so long as I return home before nine 'o clock.]

"..Like, like this, then..."

No matter how much the Social Security Camera Network has developed, or how much the crime rates in urban areas have been reduced, this method of upbringing was far

too relaxed... Or so Haruyuki thought. He had no right to comment on this anyway, not that he had any reservations about it.

Still, Haruyuki shook his head once more and smiled politely as he said:

“Even if your parents are fine with it, I think Master and Senpai would throw a fit if they knew about it. So... let’s talk about duelling tomorrow then.”

Blinking several times rapidly in succession, Utai smiled, the brightest smile she had yet, and typed her reply quickly.

[UI > You have a point. If you were found out, then Ku-san might be punished with ropeless bungee jumping from Shinjuku Town Hall.]

Utai brought Haruyuki to the gates via a side pathway, where Haruyuki waved goodbye to her. At the same time, he brought up his navigation app to locate the closest public bus stop along Seven Rings Road. He set off towards the east, following the route as displayed via Augmented Reality on the display in his vision, walking in the dusky neighbourhood.

Shinomiya Utai had told him a lot of things, the pieces of which drifted around in his head as he walked for around fifteen minutes, until he came to a dazzlingly-lit trunk road. Consulting the map, it seemed that this was the junction near to Hounan Road. The bus stop to Koenji was a little further north, and that was where Haruyuki wanted to go, but then he halted.

He was close to the eastmost side of Suginami Ward; another 300 metres along Hounan Road, and he would have reached «Nakano Area Two»¹. Area Two was an unaffiliated Area as compared to Area One, which was under the control of the Red Legion, Prominence. To the east of this buffer zone Area lay Leonidz territory, and Great Wall was towards the south. As a result, this Area had become a holy ground² for free-for-all duels. Even on a normal day, there might be over fifty Burst Linkers online at this time.

“T-Then, let’s have a look...”

Without anyone to warn him against it as he softly murmured, he jogged across Seven Rings Road to the pedestrian crossing.

Suginami Ward is the territory of Nega Nebulas, so even if Haruyuki connected to the Global Net with his Neuro-Linker now, he would be able to refuse challenges issued to him to enter duels against other Burst Linkers. All he needed was but one step onto the other side of the border of Nakano Area Two and this privilege would be lost. He calmly stepped beyond the red boundary line floating in his vision. His location on the

navigational app's map also moved from Hounan Road in Suginami to Yayoi Street in Nakano Area Two. Nearly everyone in the area, it doesn't occur to them that they cross the boundaries of twenty-three districts regularly - but to Burst Linkers, these boundaries are tantamount to borders. Haruyuki could now roughly picture the borders of these twenty-three wards of Tokyo in his mind's eye reasonably.

In this instant, the name 'Silver Crow' should have appeared on the Matching List of anyone in Nakano Area Two, and he could be challenged by anyone at any given moment. So, in order to not cause issues when automatically Accelerating, he walked to the edge of the sidewalk - even if it was 1.8 seconds in real life, it was best not to come to a stop in the middle of the walkway with people left and right.

About 50 metres in front of Haruyuki, he spotted a children's park. He decided as such as he walked - if he wasn't challenged while walking to the park, then he'd look for someone to challenge on his own. Then, he has to challenge red-type duel avatars, and even moreso he must choose opponents with laser abilities. After viewing the Mirror Room and listening to Utai's story of her brother, he could slowly begin to form the «Mirror's Image» in his head.

A real mirror was not just a surface that reflects light, but more like an entrance for light. Thinking carefully, «The Destiny» which Haruyuki had possessed just a few days ago was a mirror-like armour which was almost immune to laser attacks, and was even compatible with its wearer and accept certain properties. The armour had a certain tenderness and warmth to it... And because of that, Chrome Falcon's hatred and despair could absorb it, even distort its entirety...

Just as he was remembering this, he was just about ten metres from the park, when suddenly-

BASHII! He heard the familiar sound of acceleration, rooting him to the spot. His perception of the real world shattered like glass as he was brought into another world sped up a thousand times.

Burning red letters blazed across his vision, but they did not begin with [HERE COMES...] as he expected. [A REGISTERED DUEL IS BEGINNING!] - he was about to spectate a duel here in Nakano Area Two.

Spectating was part of the fun of duels even if he wasn't a part of it. Drifting down towards a gate coloured like the rainbow, Haruyuki's heart was filled with expectations.

Chapter 9

Silver Crow's hard feet stepped onto the metal ground.

As Haruyuki lifted himself up, he looked at the two HP bars in the upper part of his vision. On the left, the respondent, was a name he was familiar with. Frost Horn, level 5, an avatar from the Blue legion that used ice-type attacks. This was the person that Haruyuki was spectating. By the looks of it, he wasn't tag-teaming with his buddy Tourmaline Shell today.

And to the right, was a name Haruyuki was seeing for the first time. The Latin letters displayed beneath the HP gauge spelled [Wolfram Cerberus], and level... one. That was to say, a Burst Linker who probably hadn't been around for long was up against the somewhat expert Horn.

"Whoa, scary... like when I was level 1, I wouldn't have dared to challenge someone even one level higher..." Unconsciously muttering to himself, Haruyuki looked at the name again. "Hm, Wolfram... Severus?"

He read out the two words, and immediately heard a voice from behind. "It's [Wolfram Cerberus]."

"Ah, thanks, thanks... wait, whoa!" As he turned behind to bow in thanks, he was scared to the point of jumping a meter away. Standing there was a female fighter-like avatar covered in deep blue heavy armor. That was, a few days ago, when he had stood very close to them... or perhaps when he had been scared non-stop. Haruyuki had felt some regret, that had he known such a thing would happen, he would have switched to an avatar for use when spectating. But if he did so, then when he was challenged he would have to switch back to his avatar.

Putting aside his mental struggle, he bent down in a deep bow. "Ah, y-you're Manganese... no, Cobalt... no, should be Manganese..." The reason why he was unable to confirm the other party's name, was because she wasn't with her usual partner. If they were both here, it was just a matter of seeing which one was more blue or green. But since there was only one, it was difficult to tell in the dim light of the Purgatory stage.

The female warrior glared at Haruyuki with sharp eyes, and said in a low voice, "Fool, were we in a duel you would have lost your head. I'm Manganese Blade, besides the colour difference, Cobalt has two horns. Remember that."

"Oh, oh, I see!" Hearing her say that, Haruyuki noticed that on the warrior's helmet was a decorative part that extended backward. "... I remember. Cobalt-nee has two ponytails. Manganese-nee has one ponytail..." "What ponytails! Also, only our King has the

right to call me “nee”! After this battle, I’ll challenge you to one, to wake you up from your idea!”

“Wah, wah, s-s-sorry!” As Haruyuki turned his neck, a cheer erupted from not far away.

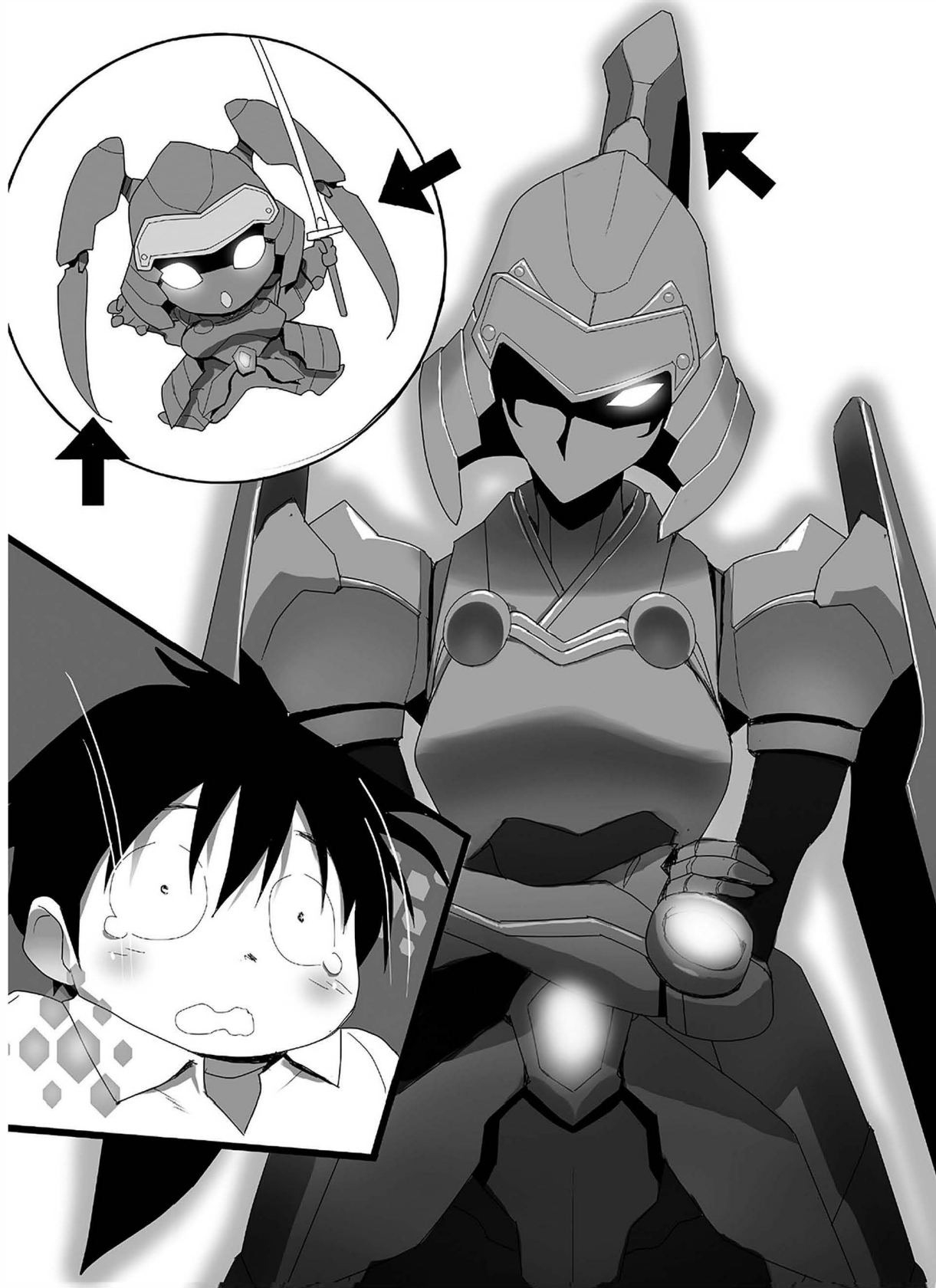
“Fight them, Horn!”

“Don’t let the newbie defeat you, harden up-~” Thinking there was not an opportunity to be missed, Haruyuki turned and saw that on the rooftops of the buildings flanking the wide road were over thirty spectators. Even though this was the popular Nakano 2nd Battle Area, a battle with so many spectators wasn’t as common.

“Ah, as expected of Horn, how popular...” muttered Haruyuki to himself. The lieutenants of the Blue Legion, and the Blue King’s direct assistant Manganese Blade stood by his side, and said with a different tone of voice, “No... probably at least half of the audience are registered to spectate Cerberus’ battles.”

“Eh? B, but he’s just level 1?”

“Crow, you haven’t been doing your homework. These few days, Cerberus...” At this point the female warrior shut her mouth, and turned her vision towards the south.



“is here. See for yourself, and you’ll know why that rookie has such a big following.”

“Is, is that so?” replied Haruyuki dazedly, as he looked at the unfolding situation.

From Honan-dori, where Haruyuki had begun acceleration, there was already a distance from there. They were almost at the northernmost area of the Duel Area, that was in the vicinity of the Chuo line’s Nakano station. The road that stretched north-south in front of him was Nakano-dori, and the large shopping mall across the road was [Nakano Sunshine Plaza], and further to the right was the Nakano ward office. And to the right was probably the shopping area [Nakano Broadway].

In the Purgatory stage, these three buildings adopted the appearance of a biological organism. But, to Haruyuki who often came here, he could recognize them - mainly because Nakano Broadway was home to many retro game shops. Right. On the way back he should go take a look, oh wait, my master’s still somewhere to the south -

With this kind of thought, Haruyuki saw a large figure, emanating the loud sound effects of heavily punching bricks, head towards him. This avatar had armor that looked like as if it was made of icicles that were a translucent light blue. On its head was an especially large horn. He was one of the foremost members of the Blue Legion Leonids, Frost Horn, who need not run, but bent his waist and skated at high speed. By the looks of it he was creating a thin layer of ice on the ground, and skated on it.

At the start of the month, when Haruyuki had duelled him near the Government Building, he should not have been able to use such a method of movement, though without a doubt it was practical. Silently giving respect, Haruyuki thought no wonder he was a vanguard, how fast he moved.

But including Haruyuki, only a small number were watching Horn’s ice skating prowess. The other thirty or so spectators were all concentrating towards the south of the road for an unknown reason. Everyone was tense, and curious, Haruyuki too looked towards the left.

To the south was the Chuo line viaduct that crossed the road, and Nakano Station, which had taken the appearance of a satanic cathedral. In the vision of the audience was a two-dimensional arrow that indicated the location of the duellists. One of them pointed somewhere in the darkness beneath the viaduct, and Haruyuki focused there too. Not long after, a figure slowly emerged from the darkness.

This figure was small and skinny, a large contrast to Horn. No visible protrusions could be seen on his limbs, and he held no weapon in his hands. In the dim light of the Purgatory stage, his armor gave off a coffee-coloured ash tone.

Seeing that, Haruyuki thought. According to what Manganese-san beside him had said, this avatar's name was «Wolfram Cerberus». According to the rules of Brain Burst, the word [wolfram] should have been an English word used to denote a colour. But not only did Haruyuki not know what colour it was referring to, he didn't even know what the word meant.

Making a mental note to check a dictionary app later, Haruyuki continued inspecting the Level 1 avatar he was seeing for the first time. At a glance, only the beast-like mask stood out. From between the helmet that looked like it was made from two rows of teeth, a black goggles-like visor could be seen. The avatar did indeed look fearsome, but animal-like avatars weren't exactly rare. Like Blood Leopard of the Red legion, whom Haruyuki was very familiar with, who had a face that looked like a leopard's, and of course Bush Utan of the Green legion who look like an orang-utan.

Wolfram Cerberus really was an avatar that was unassuming both in colour and in shape. Not knowing what the word [wolfram] meant... if it was because of this word that he had a wolfish appearance, then [Cerberus] must be his colour. This was in direct opposition to the rules.

No, the word Cerberus sounds familiar... which game was it from...

As Haruyuki was about to raid his own memories, a young boy's voice was suddenly heard in the battle arena. "I'll be in your care!" This voice came from Cerberus, who stood right in the middle of the intersection in front of the Nakano Ward office, after walking out from beneath the railway viaduct, both hands tightly against his thighs, bowing down sharply. Be it angle or force, this bow was a perfect one.

"O.. Oh?" Haruyuki unconsciously made a noise. When he was Level 1, his mind only thought about how to attack the enemy, and would never make a greeting like that. Even at Level 5, he did not change.

"How courteous... who's his «Parent»?" he muttered to himself, unconsciously glancing amongst the crowd. For a Level 1 newbie, it would not be strange for the Parent to be here... and usually, Parents often blatantly used the special rule of being ten metres away to give advice.

As he looked around, the female warrior's voice said, "That kid's Parent isn't here. In fact, no one knows who the Parent is."

"Eh... no one?" Haruyuki glanced to the side, and Mangan's glare was directed at him under the mask, "Cobalt and I thought it would be you... but from the looks of it, probably not..."

“Eh, me? Wait... eh, EH?” Unable to hold it, Haruyuki cried. “Me, me as his Parent? D-d-definitely not, that’s nonsense, it’s a thousand years before I take a Child, and why do you guys even suspect me?”

“This...” Just as Manganese was about to reply, a rough shout came from the road below. “Not even an Armament, how daring!” The speaker was Horn, as he skated rapidly, charging. He leaned himself forward, gaining speed, and yelled, “But! You are plainly disdainful of me, and I can’t be wrong! Don’t think you can get all cocky just because you beat Den!”

“This... is a bit too much isn’t it~!” yelled his buddy Tourmaline Shell from the rooftops. Haruyuki, shocked, thought “eh, he won the Level 4 Den?” And in this time the distance between them rapidly shortened...

At about twenty metres away, Horn spread his hands out in a cross shape, a white light coming from his forehead and shoulder tips. “Blow, on target, «Frosted Circle!»” With a *clap*, the ring spread out with Horn at its center. The ground and surrounding buildings were taken into the ring, and soon covered with a layer of snow.

A shocked Haruyuki, forgetting that he had been talking to Manganese, stretched out. He was shocked, not only because of the effect of this move, but also because of Frost Horn having previously charged his special attack gauge for one critical hit.

The tactic of [charging the special move gauge before meeting the enemy] was in a way a basic battle tactic. But hiding and stealthily breaking all kinds of environmental objects at the start of the battle seemed kind of amateur, so when a high-level Burst Linker faced a lower level opponent it was not needed.

For Horn, who had a philosophy of “just charge” to do this kind of thing, did it mean that he was only superficially arrogant but actually wary of the level 1 Cerberus?

“WHOOOO! Eat my manly shoulder crush!” Yelling, Horn stuck out the horn on his right shoulder, in an impact position. Haruyuki, spectating, could see everything crystal clear, except for that «icy place» that was wholly a white fog. The opponent Cerberus should not have been able to see Horn’s surroundings, and waiting to see the attack trajectory then dodging should be impossible, leaning only to take a chance on which way to evade.

Or that should have been the case, but the grey level 1 player did not evade. He lowered his body, as if stretching out the wolf-like head. His fists collided in front of his chest, and the two parts of his visor bit down together, completely covering the goggles on the face. This reminded Haruyuki of a painful memory, but he could not think of a reason before Cerberus began to yell loudly.

“AWWOOOOOOOO!!” It sounded like the young boy’s perseverance mixed with the cry of a ferocious beast, to the point that it could be beautiful. The whole space shook, and the audience unconsciously moved back.

The ground frozen beneath Cerberus cracked with a loud clap, and the small avatar too short forward with the force of a bullet. Its trajectory... was the same as Horn’s. “Don’t... Don’t tell me he wants to have a head on collision?” asked Haruyuki in a scratchy voice. At the same time, Manganese swore under her breath.

“That idiot...” Then -

A sharp and loud collision sound rang, so loudly it shook the space again. The shockwave from the intersection in front of the Nakano Ward office was so strong that it caused all the windows of the Sunshine Plaza building next door to break.

The layer of ice created by the snowy world had also dissolved into bits, becoming white smoke that obscured the entire intersection. Over thirty spectators swallowed their breaths, watching the fog disperse in the wind.

“Oh, Ohhh...” said someone.

Once the fog dispersed, what appeared in the intersection, were two avatars completely unmoving at point blank distance. Frost Horn’s right shoulder and Wolfram Cerberus’ sharp forehead were only just barely touching each other. The metal road beneath their feet had countless cracks crisscrossing it, which just showed how shocking the collision was.

Crack.

Haruyuki heard that sound

Ping, pang. The sound of something hard breaking. For a moment it sounded illusory, like the sound of glass breaking. It did not come from the Stage, but from the sound of an avatar slowly shattering.

“He... couldn’t withstand it...” said Haruyuki, sighing. The sight before him could be said to be a miracle. A Level 5, furthermore a heavy close-range type like Horn, using a charging attack, being withstood by the level 1 Cerberus. Not being knocked flying was already an achievement. Manganese calling him “fool” might have been a bit harsh.

From quick inspection, one of the two health indicators in his vision was three-quarters filled with red. After checking the name beneath that bar, Haruyuki, stunned, cried out loudly, “This...”

Just as he looked back onto the battlefield, Frost Horn's right arm, from the shoulder to the fingers, had completely shattered. Seeing this, Haruyuki lost his balance, his right knee falling onto the icy ground, then he understood what Manganese really meant.

That was the evaluation of her own legion member that she, as a high-ranking lieutenant Leonids, had derived. That was to say, she had predicted this outcome even before this collision. "How... this... why..." A shocked Haruyuki was beyond belief.

Brain Burst had the principle of "equal level, equal potential". In reverse, separate levels should have separate abilities. Perhaps a difference of one or two was still okay, but against an opponent four levels higher, and furthermore colliding with a close-range avatar, and being able to stop it... no, being able to be victorious, this was an impossible situation. If no kind of illusion had been used in the white fog, it meant that this Wolfram Cerberus had a very high close range defense skill, so high it could stop an avatar four levels higher.

"Enhanced Armament...? Or... don't tell me..." Incarnation? Manganese hurried to stop Haruyuki's blathering. "No, that's just the kid's... Cerberus' own attribute from his color."

"C, colour...? Cerberus, what colour does that word mean?" Haruyuki replied in a shaky voice while the battle continued on beneath. Perhaps it was because of losing a hand, that even his most powerful critical attacks had been broken, leaving Horn's movements somewhat wanting. Cerberus was unafraid of his large size, and attacked daringly, shaving off his health gauge a bit at a time.

"His color is wolfram." said Manganese, looking at the battle with a sharp gaze. "Eh, so it has nothing to do with wolves? Wolfram... a color...?"



“That’s right. But... to be precise, it’s a metal color. Like us.” Manganese Blade said to this point, and turned to look at Haruyuki. “The word [wolfram] refers to a kind of metal. But in Japan, the Swiss word is more often used. By the way, same for [cerberus]. In Japan we use the Greek letters. That is to say, this boy’s name can be translated as...”

Frost Horn finally exhausted himself, his large body collapsing on the ground and breaking into pieces. The victory screen, with Wolfram Cerberus’ name on it, filled Haruyuki’s vision. Just as the sound effect for the winners and losers played, Manganese said in a low voice,

“Tungsten Cerberus.”

Since his own avatar was a metal-type, Haruyuki had previously done some research on the common attributes of metals. For example, gold was very dense, and rather chemically stable, but it was soft enough to be malleable with a hand. Magnesium was rather light, and after forging will attain enough strength, but easily oxidized. Aluminium was light and soft, but once forged with gold was shockingly tough. And silver, while not as much as gold, was also very stable, and had the highest electrical conductivity amongst all the metals. And as Takumu had found out yesterday, it was also the most reflective to visible light.

Of course, these were the properties of the metals in the real world, and was not guaranteed to translate properly onto a metal-type avatar in the accelerated world, but at least the key property should also appear.

Then, what about an avatar with “tungsten” in his name, what properties... or rather, abilities, would he have? In the real world, tungsten was used to manufacture armor for tanks, or protective pads on bulletproof armor, or even to add on to drills or blades made with other metals. That meant that it was hard like a diamond, its hardness exceeding the metal category.

So an avatar of tungsten - in English, [Wolfram], would probably also have this property.

“... the hardest... metal...?” said Haruyuki unconsciously, and Manganese Blade, who stood to his right, nodded. “At this point, we can say that.”

Beneath them, on the intersection facing the Nakano Ward office, the small tungsten-armored avatar was once again bowing deeply to Frost Horn, who had exited the stage, and with a clear voice, said “Thank you for your guidance!” It was rare to see an avatar with such manners in the accelerated world, which caused the audience, who usually did not behave like that, to break out in loud applause.

Just as Haruyuki was about to clap, Manganese continued speaking. Hence, he stopped his hands to turn and listen. "... this Wolfram Cerberus guy has appeared in Shibuya 1, Shinjuku 3, and now Nakano 2, and it hasn't even been three days. You probably didn't recognize this since you were busy purifying the «Armor»."

"Y, yeah... I hadn't even heard of his name until today..." "But the shockwave he caused is greater than that Dusk Taker from two months ago, who made trouble in the Shinjuku and Shibuya area. His «long-distance firepower» and the «flight ability» he took from you was really a fearsome combination that has to be seen to be believed..."

"T, this... I'm very sorry." Haruyuki did not expect to hear that name, and unconsciously apologized, giving him an odd look from Manganese. "You too are obviously a victim okay - but anyway, Cerberus isn't like Taker, his abilities are too great to be measured."

"Eh...? Isn't it just because he's made of tungsten, the hardest metal, so he's just really hard?" "Yes he is, but his battle skills aren't inflexible at all. Usually, level 1 newbies tend to focus too much on their abilities, and their battle skills are quite inflexible. Just like you, Crow, you focused too much on flight, and always got shot down by those long range red-types..."

"Y, yes... really, really sorry." Haruyuki apologized reflexively again. With a "hmp", Manganese continued, "However, while hardness is Cerberus' best strength, he only uses it in stages where he can make the most out of it. The reason why this battle ended so quickly was because that stupid, rash Horn just charged head-on. But... assuming he were up against a regular level 1 player, no matter how much confidence he may have in his hardness, honestly he wouldn't just attack head-on without any hesitation."

"...indeed, Horn-san's shoulder attack is so strong, and he's not one bit afraid, even using his head to take the attack... if it were me at Level 1, probably twenty-five minutes of the battle I would be running all over the place."

Haruyuki felt something wrong with what he had just said, and turned his head to look at the countdown timer in the top middle of his vision. From 1800 seconds it had counted down to nearly 1000, which shocked him. Looking around, over half the audience had already logged out, and Cerberus was still on the road operating his menu. Unless time expired, or he Burst Out, this space would not disappear.

Manganese too looked at the road, squinted her eyes with a strict expression, lowered her voice and said, "This kid has no «Parent» with him, nor is he in any legion. Then, where

did he learn that kind of battle sense? Or perhaps, from the start, he alone managed to do so well, then perhaps his true power is not the hardness of tungsten...”

“...not the hardness...?” Haruyuki swallowed, waiting for her to continue. “... and he’s some kind of «genius». That’s to say, he alone has the battle... no, has all that a Burst Linker needs. He has some god-given genius.”

Genius.

Hearing that word, Haruyuki felt the softest parts of his heart tense up. Because that was the word that had the least to do with Arita Haruyuki.

Kuroyukihime often said “because you’re able to be faster than anyone else”, but that word “fast” - referring to his reaction speed in VR - was definitely not something he had been born with, which he was painfully aware of.

In order to escape the unhappiness of the real world, from young Haruyuki had hidden in the virtual world, relying on countless VR games to kill the amount of time he had, and his reaction speed was just the result of a lot of training in such worlds. What had initially caught Kuroyukihime’s eye - the high score set in the virtual squash game in the Umesato Middle School Local Network - was just the result of hiding from bullies in there.

It was a fact that this «speed» had granted his Accel World duel avatar the unique «flight» ability. But in order for Haruyuki to not completely deplete his points, and barely holding on past various crises until today, was thanks to the assistance of many... really, countless people. He had not yet managed to find a problem that he could solve by himself. This also applied to his learning the «Theoretic Mirror» special skill, and it was only thanks to the help of Niko, Utai and others that he had barely managed to find a vague clue...

“... can’t take it, too many things happening at the same time!” yelled Manganese suddenly, interrupting Haruyuki’s train of thought. Shocked, he raised his head and asked,

“At... the same time?”

“No? Like that stupid «ISS Kit» spreading, the movement of the «Archangel Metatron» and «Wolfram Cerberus» appearing, all of that happened in this week alone.”

“Ah, right, yes...” “That we managed to deal with your «Disaster Armor» issue the day before is already lucky. Had you become a criminal, and everyone had to send people to deal with you, I shudder to think how busy I would be. Of course, no thanks to you!”

“Ah, yes. Definitely.” Haruyuki muttered, lowering his head, and suddenly thought of

something. The matter of the «Disaster Armor purification» was something he had tired himself. Of course, he did get the help of many people, but along the way once or twice he had had to deal with things himself. He may not have any natural born talent, but he believed he was steadily growing. This thought helped him regain a bit of self confidence, and he subconsciously turned to Manganese Blade, lowered his head again, and said:

“This... thank, thank you.” “Now it’s your turn to thank me.” “Ah, right, that makes sense, haha.” As they had chatted, Cerberus who remained on the road had probably finished with his menu. He raised his head, looked at the approximately ten spectators who remained, and in a bright, clear voice, said, “Then I shall be making a move! Thank you all observers!”

Usually, spectating a duel was to enjoy the spirit of battle, or to collect information on an opponent one was to face eventually. It was not common for the duellist to thank the audience. But Cerberus’ warm attitude caused the audience to applaud in reply.

The grey metal-type avatar once again took a deep bow, yelled “Burst O-” but stopped halfway. Haruyuki felt the gaze of the wolf-like mask upon him, and thought of hiding behind Manganese, but the young man’s cultured voice reached the rooftops first.

“Please

hear me out! I apologize if I have the wrong person! May I ask this good sir here... might you be Silver Crow of Nega Nebulas?”

Haruyuki tensed up. If it was only the two of them, he would have shook his head and said “You have the wrong person.” But including Manganese, everyone who remained behind would know that the person who stood here was Silver Crow, so he couldn’t fool anyone. He could only answer in a very contrasting, fumbling voice,

“This, erm... yeah...”

Hearing that, Cerberus jogged to the bottom of the building, and said in a more energetic voice, “A pleasure to meet you! I’ve always wanted to meet Mr. Crow! Originally I planned to go to Sugunami once I reached Level 2... but to think that I would meet you today, I’m so moved!”

“This... I don’t know...” Previously, people often said “it’s great to defeat you” but no one ever said “it’s great to meet you”, putting Haruyuki at a loss for words. He could only tense his neck, and thinking whether to escape or say something...

What Cerberus said next completely pierced through Haruyuki.

“Mr. Crow! I have a request! Please duel me, right now!”

Chapter 10

There were two methods in the system to allow a new «Duel» to begin directly, before ending the current «Duel».

One method was changing modes during a regular one-on-one duel to a «Battle Royale», allowing multiple spectators to join the duel. Because changing to this mode required all invited spectators to agree before starting, it wasn't easy to do this.

Another method was for the winner of a regular duel to challenge a spectator to a match, which would immediately start a new match. This would seem rather convenient at first glance, as one would save the trouble of going through the process of halting acceleration and re-accelerating, but barely anyone used this method either. The reason was that the challenger would still have to spend one Burst Point...as well as having to deal with the depletion of one's concentration that came with consecutive duels.

Fighting in the Accelerated World was much more demanding than regular Full-Dive fighting games. This wasn't because of time accelerating by a thousand times, but rather because of the high level of tactical difficulty arising from the combination of three factors: the overwhelming freedom of one's movement, the diverse variations of duel stages, and how every fighter was a completely unique duel avatar. A fighter would have to rack their brains even before engaging the enemy, and once they began their actual fight they'd need to have their utmost concentration. Even though Haruyuki had been a Burst Linker for eight months already, when he returned to the real world after a full twenty minutes of fighting, he would collapse with fatigue. Even the world's most feared berserk warrior—each generation of Chrome Disaster—would suffer defeat after the unbearable exhaustion caused by unceasing consecutive duels.

This was why almost every Burst Linker would disconnect their Neuro Linker from the Global Net for at least a few minutes of rest right after a duel. Although Wolfram Cerberus was still Level 1, it certainly wasn't his first time dueling, so it was impossible that he wouldn't know about this.

But he still challenged Haruyuki to a duel without the least bit of trepidation. That puny duel avatar was brimming with the innocent resolve to have a duel with Silver Crow regardless of the outcome. All he was waiting for was Haruyuki's reply.

—Well, under these circumstances, do I have a right to refuse? Of course not.

As Haruyuki mumbled this in his head, he looked to the HP gauge that showed up in the top left of his field of vision. The name under the gauge was Silver Crow, and Wolfram Cerberus was on the right. There were still a whole 1700 seconds left in the countdown in the center.

That meant that Haruyuki had accepted the duel offered by the prodigy newbie possessing the ultra-hard Tungsten armor, who had been declared to be a «Genius» by Leonids high executive Manganese Blade.

He did indeed come to this Nakano 2nd Area to duel, and even before connecting his Neuro Linker to the Global Net, he was already prepared to accept a challenge from whatever opponent he was matched up with. However, if the opponent were the kind of overpowered Burst Linker that could straight up crush a Level 5 player at a mere Level 1, that was a whole other story. Haruyuki hoped to watch him duel another two or three times...no, maybe five or six more times before fighting...

“—No, that won't do now that things have come to this point. I can't pull back now!”

Haruyuki quietly berated himself as he glanced at the guide cursor in the center of his field of vision.

From Cerberus's attitude, even if he didn't encounter him here, the moment he saw Silver Crow's name in the matching list he'd most likely challenge him immediately. Instead of running into a duel all of a sudden, it was lucky enough that he at least knew a bit of his opponent's specialties. Since Cerberus had challenged Haruyuki frankly and openly, the just and proper thing was for Haruyuki to forget about the level difference and just meet his opponent with all his strength.

Haruyuki spent about 100 seconds before he succeeded in calming down the chaotic and unstable thoughts in his heart, and he examined his surroundings again.

The group of buildings that looked almost biological just a few minutes ago had changed into structures composed of straight steel bars and smooth, leveled steel surfaces. At the same time that this Crow vs. Cerberus duel had begun, the duel environment's attribute had also changed from «Purgatory» to «Steel». The characteristics of this attribute were that all the terrain objects were very hard, electric and magnetic effects would be amplified, and footsteps would be very loud. Silver Crow was very weak to electric attacks, so if he were against those kinds of avatars, he'd have to be very careful of the opponent shocking him through the terrain, but he wouldn't have to guard against those kinds of things this time...hopefully.

What he should pay attention to instead were perhaps the sound of footsteps. Compared to regular duel avatars, metal duel avatars had the disadvantage of having rather loud footsteps. Whether it was Haruyuki or his opponent, neither could run anywhere in this Steel stage in total silence. Furthermore, the terrain here was extremely complex, so the sound of footsteps would definitely end up being the deciding factor for victory. The audience that had again increased to over thirty members most likely understood this point, as they were quietly spectating from the roofs of the surrounding buildings instead of making a racket like they had during the Horn vs. Cerberus duel earlier.

“.....Oh, he’s coming.”

Haruyuki couldn’t help commenting to himself as the guide cursor vanished from his field of vision.

When the duel began, the two were randomly put in different locations. Right now, Haruyuki was located at almost the northernmost point of the whole map, the road to the east of «Nakano Broadway». Cerberus on the other hand had been approaching in a straight line from the west since the match started, but since a huge shopping center towered in his way, he could only pass it by going around from the north or the south. Within the Steel area, duelers were permitted entry into buildings, but since the only entrance to Nakano Broadway was on the east side, it didn’t make a difference anyways.

—If it’s not the north then it’ll be the south, Haruyuki told himself in his mind. He put all his concentration into his sense of hearing.

The battle plan he was drafting was extremely straightforward. By putting a huge indestructible terrain object in his enemy’s way, he limited his movement to only two routes. Then, he’d use the sound of footsteps to determine which route was being taken, and then attempt to gain the initiative with a surprise attack. Even though his footsteps would resound just as loudly, Silver Crow had the advantage in that he could use his wings to make long gliding jumps. If he were just to move to the southernmost or northernmost corner of the building, the distance would be just enough for him to cover by gliding silently.

—Let’s see which side you decide on!

Haruyuki was backed up against the south-facing heavy steel wall of the building as he waited for his ears to register the sound of metal clashing on metal.

After a few seconds, he heard the sound he was hoping for.

However, the sound wasn’t coming from the north or the south, but from the east. Which was directly behind Haruyuki.

Gagyaa—! With the harsh clatter of something smashing, a grey fist punched through the steel wall and connected with Silver Crow’s right shoulder. Haruyuki was hit with a force that felt like the impact of a cannon round, and he was blown forward, tumbling in the air and crashing to the ground on his back.

Sparks flew up as Haruyuki ground to a halt, and he stared blankly as the fist that had penetrated through the building’s outer wall quickly withdrew. Before he could recover from his shock, another even louder crash was already resounding. This time, the steel wall, which was at least five centimeters thick, tore apart in a radial pattern, and a duel avatar pounced out from inside.

Using a single headbutt, Wolfram Cerberus had destroyed a building in the Steel-attribute stage, which was normally indestructible. He stood up slowly as Haruyuki watched on. Dark grey goggles appeared as his jagged, tooth-like visor snapped open.

Although he couldn't see the glow of the eye-lenses that should have been underneath, Haruyuki could excruciatingly sense his gaze focusing directly on him, piercing him like a laser. A voice bounding with youthful vigor projected towards him loud and clear, reverberating with the echo characteristic of the stage attribute:

"This is my second time happening upon the «Steel» stage. It really is quite hard to break, huh? I'm still seeing stars!"

With this cheerful line, Haruyuki recovered from his dumbstruck state. He got up swiftly while making sure his opponent wasn't trying to catch him off guard.

This was his first time getting a glimpse of Cerberus close up. Although his avatar's form and color weren't particularly remarkable, he nevertheless exuded a distinct sense of presence. The reason laid in the faint, slender grooves in his metal armor, a finish so rough it seemed to say that after all the trouble put into finally crafting such an intractable material, it just wasn't worth the effort to work on polishing the surface. Although they were both metal colors, compared to Crow's smooth mirror-like armor, they were two completely opposite extremes.

"...Can I ask you something? How did you determine my location so precisely? That couldn't have been by chance, could it?"

These weren't words that a Level 5 player should be saying to a Level 1, but Haruyuki couldn't leave it unasked. Even if he had anticipated Haruyuki's attempt to ambush him, he shouldn't have had any way to see Haruyuki's position from the other side of a dense steel wall.

When Cerberus heard his question, he stood up straight and then inexplicably gave a bow before saying:

"Please forgive me for sneaking up on you like that! I didn't really know where Crow-san was, but I just attacked there because it happened to be the exact midpoint of the wall of the building. I'm rather fond of centers."

When they heard this reply, the audience members broke the solemn silence they had been maintaining and erupted in astonishment, and Haruyuki also stared dumbfounded at the wall behind Cerberus. The hole he had jumped out from indeed seemed like it was exactly the same distance from the north and south sides. Rather, it should be said that Haruyuki had put himself in the exact center, waiting to be able to deal with Cerberus no matter which direction he came from. So if he had deviated even a single centimeter, then perhaps he wouldn't have been struck by this first blow?

Haruyuki glanced at his HP gauge and realized that the hit he had taken on his right shoulder had knocked off almost 10% of his health. The close-range attack power afforded by his armor's hardness really could not be avoided.

But, to put it another way—as long as he avoided all his attacks, he'd be fine.

“.....So that's how it was. I'm a more veteran player than you, yet I was still planning on ambushing you. I'm the one who should be saying sorry.”

Haruyuki responded to the apology with an apology of his own, and slowly raised his hands into a pose, holding his left hand out in front while his right hand pulled back.

“I won't be hiding around anymore. We're both close-combat avatars, so let's settle this with a face-to-face struggle.

“Great! That's just what I was hoping for. I look forward to our fight (yoroshikuonegaishimasu)!”

Haruyuki stood with his body askew while Cerberus faced him directly. He crossed his arms in an X in front of him before whipping his elbows to his sides with a clang. His avatar was roughly the same height as Silver Crow, but as for weight, Cerberus, with his angular, blocky avatar, was probably heavier.

Since he had seen how the last fight with Frost Horn had basically been totally one-sided, Haruyuki definitely hadn't suggested a close-combat showdown because he took his opponent lightly. But he was still rather self-assured that in a battle of punches and kicks, he wouldn't be at a disadvantage. Because his speed was a trait that even the King of Blades Kuroyukihime had put her faith in, and it was Silver Crow's greatest ability.

The tension mounted rapidly between the two combatants, and it stretched taut, electrifying the air with fighting spirit as the steel ground beneath them flattened in response. In this instant, Haruyuki made his move.

“Chyah...!”

With a piercing yell, he abruptly charged forward, and in a breath, he closed in and sent out a straight right punch.

Cerberus stood his ground and moved to block it with his left hand. It appeared that he really had the utmost confidence in his defensive capabilities. That armor pocked with rough carving marks looked insanely tough, and if we were to hit it directly, it might end up being his own fist that would be injured.

But Haruyuki suddenly braked with his right wing just as his fist was about to contact his opponent's hand. His body spun hard, retracting his fist and using the angular

momentum to launch a sudden low kick with his left leg. He aimed the kick at the most lightly-armored part of Cerberus's lower body, the side of his right knee.

With only an avatar's four limbs, it'd be impossible to follow a feinting right jab with a left low kick without telegraphing one's intent ahead of time. However, by using his wings to control his posture, he made it impossible for his opponent to predict what was coming.

Even so, Cerberus displayed a superhuman reaction speed as he tried to raise his right leg to block...but Haruyuki was still a bit faster, and the kick connected.

Metal clashed on metal with a grating shriek as countless sparks lit up the steel flooring.

Cerberus countered with a right hook even as he was thrown off-balance by the kick, but Haruyuki had already dashed backwards two meters. Of course, while he was retreating, he had activated his wings for less than a second to add some thrust.

Haruyuki glanced at the HP gauges. The kick just now had taken off about 5% of Cerberus's HP. For a clean hit, the amount that was lost was really too little, but it looked like as long as he only attacked the crevices in his armor, he'd still be able to damage him. Since he was definite about his plan of attack, all that was left was just one thing...

—Rush forward!

“Wuu...oohhh!”

With a great roar, Haruyuki charged ahead again.

He started a right high kick out of range and boosted forward on the impulse of both wings. The curved trajectory suddenly turned into a straight line as his outstretched foot became a silver spear, which slipped through Cerberus's cross-arm block and scored a direct hit on his lightly-armored throat. This kick took away almost 10% of his HP gauge, and Cerberus was knocked almost off his feet.

Now normally, after such a heavy kick, Haruyuki would be unable to maneuver until his foot touched the ground. But while he withdrew his outstretched right leg, he began vibrating his left wing.

Using the leverage created by the wing, his left leg shot out in a middle kick. This kick went straight for the opponent's defenseless right abdomen, and even the incomparably sturdy Cerberus couldn't help but stagger until he knelt on one knee. Haruyuki twisted diagonally in midair and brought his right heel down straight onto Cerberus's neck, slamming the small-statured avatar's head into the ground.

Haruyuki used the counterforce on his heel to backflip to a distance of about three meters before landing, and the spectators lining up in the gallery on the roof of the building again went into an uproar.

“What kind of maneuvering was that? I couldn’t read his movements at all!”

“Don’t you know? That’s what they call Crow’s «Aerial Combo».”

“I haven’t seen Cerberus fall to the ground in forever...”

Haruyuki overheard the audience’s conversation as he let go of the breath he had been holding.

The direct hits from three consecutive kicks had dropped Cerberus’s HP gauge to 70%. But for the damage a Level 5 player should be causing on a Level 1, it was really far too little. If these were normal circumstances, it wouldn’t be strange for his health to be in the yellow area by now.

At this pace, knocking down the remaining 70% definitely wouldn’t be easy—but on the other hand, Haruyuki still saw a chance for victory. Although his defensive capability and perhaps even offensive capability were no match for his opponent’s, he had a great advantage in his speed. As long as he didn’t get distracted and lower his guard, he could keep up the pressure using his «Aerial Combo»...

“—But Cerberus’s Special Attack gauge should be filled by now. What happens next will decide the match.”

Just then, a comment from the gallery caught his attention, and Haruyuki took another look at the top of his field of vision. With the object destruction bonus from punching a hole in the wall of Nakano Broadway as well as being hit by several continuous kicks, Wolfram Cerberus’s Special Attack gauge had filled up to over halfway.

Could it be that, besides his ultra hard tungsten armor, he had some Special Attacks up his sleeve?

Just as Haruyuki gasped in shock, Cerberus got up slowly from where he had fallen on the steel pavement. He shook his wolf-like head a few times and said in that same easygoing tone:

“Wow...quite impressive, Crow-san. I’ve been hearing rumors about you for a while now, but even so, you’re much faster than I imagined...”

“...You’re also much harder than I imagined.”

Hearing Haruyuki’s reply, the grey avatar bowed in appreciation:

“Thank you for your praise. However...my apologies, but this is still nothing.”

Haruyuki couldn’t understand what this meant and could only repeat it dumbly.

“Still nothing...? What’s still nothing...?”

“I’ll show you in just a moment.”

After this matter-of-fact reply, Wolfram Cerberus balled his hand into fists and punched them together in front of his chest with a clang. This movement seemed to activate some kind of switch, and his visor closed over his face with a metallic screech, interlocking together and covering his goggles.

Nothing else happened. So far, Haruyuki had also seen his armor open and close several times already, but Cerberus's physique hadn't changed, and no new weapons appeared either.

"...Then, what the heck...?"

The reply to Haruyuki's comment was an abrupt, fierce dash.

Cerberus charged directly forward in earnest, throwing Haruyuki off guard for a moment, but he immediately got himself back into battle mode. If his opponent wanted to settle the fight decisively, then it was fine by him. Silver Crow's wings unfolded with a "gasha", and he went to meet him head-on.

First, use a low kick to hinder the opponent's movement, then launch his combo again. With this intention, Haruyuki swiftly kicked out with his right leg. He aimed for the same place he had successfully injured before, the side of his knee. Adding in the thrust from his wings, his kick flashed towards Cerberus's left leg with lightning speed.

Up till now, the fight was the same as it had been before.

But in the next moment, Haruyuki's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

His right foot should have struck its mark perfectly, but instead, as if it had hit an impenetrable barrier, it was deflected away. Not only was it deflected, a huge dent appeared in the silver armor, and a crimson damage effect arced into the air like a spurt of blood. This wasn't just a visual effect, as almost 10% was shaved away from Crow's HP gauge.

"Wha....."

While he gasped in alarm, he lost his balance in midair, and Cerberus's sharp helmet closed in on his field of vision. Silver Crow desperately brought his arms up in a cross-block, and a violent impact followed immediately. The force was like taking a head-on collision from a Beast-class Enemy, and it easily blew away his defense.

The tip of the bulky tungsten armor hit—no, buried into Haruyuki's defenseless chest.

"Gu....haa!"

Haruyuki cried out as if the wind had been knocked out of him, and he was thrown backward by the blow.

In a blink of an eye, he soared across a five-meter wide highway, and his back slammed heavily into a mid-rise building. Although the walls in the Steel stage were especially resilient, they still caved in a few centimeters from the impact, and his field of vision whited out.

The damage from the gaping wound in his chest along with the secondary damage from smashing into an object had taken Haruyuki's health bar from around 90% down into the yellow zone in an instant. This kind of explosive attack power was simply too fearsome...no, it could be described as unbelievable. Moreover, Cerberus had resolutely borne the knockback from his fierce headbutt and continued charging forward without the least hesitation.

—If I take another hit now, it'll be over for me in an instant (I'll lose all my health in one go)!

Haruyuki's intuition told him this, so he wriggled his avatar out of the dent in the iron wall and went to meet him head-on. He concentrated all his focus and watched as Cerberus swept out a formidable right straight punch. The special effect of the surrounding air scorching up was enough to show the considerable might within that fist, but compared to the boxing of Green Legion's Iron Pound, this punch was not only much slower, but also much more predictable.

“Kuuoo...!”

Haruyuki's outcry hissed through his clenched teeth as he punched out from a low posture with his left fist. He planned to turn away Cerberus's punch from the inside with his wrist armor and follow up with an attack on the side of his head—in other words, a sort of cross counter.

The gray fist followed its predicted trajectory exactly, so Haruyuki intercepted it from the inside with a hooking left punch. Silver Crow hit Cerberus's thinly-armored inside elbow joint with his heavily-armored forearm, and sparks flew.

What was deflected...was still Silver Crow's hand. Although Haruyuki put all his strength into this counterpunch, Cerberus knocked it away as if it were nothing, and his punch slammed into the left side of Haruyuki's face. Again, his field of vision along with his consciousness faded out from the impact. Haruyuki fell back on the instantaneous thrust from his wings in a desperate attempt to counter the force that threatened to blow him backwards.

—Why?!

Haruyuki cried out in his mind as he saw out of the corner of his eye that his HP gauge had only about 30% left.

Why was it that his perfectly timed counter punches and kicks had been deflected so easily? Even though his opponent's tungsten armor was indeed extremely hard, Silver Crow's armor also had the strength bonus inherent to metal colors. He couldn't understand how this was the result even after targeting his opponent's weak points.

—No, it's not over yet, so I can't give up. Even though my armor might not be as hard as his, I still have my speed...and the wings on my back!

—If it's like this, then I'll use up the whole special gauge that's been filled by taking these heavy attacks. One dive attack from the highest altitude to decide the match. I'd like to see you try to deflect this kick, Cerberus!

“Uuu...ooooohh!!”

Haruyuki gathered his remaining fighting spirit into a battle cry. With a spinning backdash, he just barely avoided the follow-up left hook his opponent fired after the right jab, and crouched low while he cut around from behind. The metal wings on Silver Crow's back unfolded all the way, and his strength went into vibrating the ten flying fins.

With a ferocious effort, he kicked off the ground with his right foot and launched straight up into the sky like a rocket...

“—?”

But in that moment, Haruyuki saw something that he couldn't possibly have predicted.

Cerberus had bent over slightly with the exact same timing as Haruyuki's and, with his bent legs grinding from the strain, kicked off the steel surface of the road.

Gaaahn!! A tremendous crash echoed as a shockwave rippled through the ground. The little avatar became a bullet shooting straight up, and his body twisted in the air as he overtook Haruyuki, who had taken off a moment before him.

Just as he saw him suddenly rear his whole body back, the helmet, with its visor clamped shut, smashed directly into Silver Crow's head.

Overlapping with the sound of Crow's mirror-like visor shattering into smithereens was the sound of Haruyuki's remaining HP gauge dropping to zero.

【 YOU LOSE!! 】



As the color drained from his field of vision, flaming words floated in front of him, much dimmer than they would be for a victory, and the results screen showed up next. But Haruyuki could only stare unheedingly.

Since he had lost to an opponent a full four levels lower than him, his current Burst Points were plummeting at a jaw-dropping rate, but Haruyuki didn't even have the energy to notice. His duel avatar had blown apart into polygonal fragments, and only his consciousness remained in a Phantom State floating at his death coordinates. He faced the duel stage and gazed vacantly at the aftermath.

Only a few meters away, Wolfram Cerberus opened his visor again and faced Haruyuki (or where he ought to be) and took up a proper, upright posture. He gave a deep bow and greeted him in an innocent, earnest tone:

[Image]

“Thank you for all your hard work! (taihenosewaninariarigatougozaimashita) I enjoyed our fight!”

After the results screen appeared, the defeated Haruyuki had only to say the command «Burst Out» to leave the stage whenever he wanted. But now, he didn't even have the energy to speak this command, and he could only stare in a dumbfounded trance at this rising star of a Burst Linker.

Of course, he'd lost to opponents many times before. Whether it was times that he'd lost to someone lower-leveled than him or times that his opponent had reversed the tide of battle after being reduced to a bit of health, they weren't unheard occurrences. But then, the impact of his loss had never been as heavy as this time.

There were two reasons that Haruyuki's spirit had been shattered so thoroughly he hadn't even the energy to be dejected.

First of all was Wolfram Cerberus's overwhelming «hardness». Among the Burst Linkers Haruyuki had fought before, the one with the greatest defensive power was the Green King, or the «Invulnerable» Green Grandee. Even then, although Haruyuki had been merged with the Calamity Armor “The Disaster”, he was still able to make a tiny crack on the massive shield the king wielded—the legendary Enhanced Armament «The Strife».

However, in a certain respect, this Level 1 player Cerberus, who shouldn't be comparable in any way to a Level 9 king, was somehow tougher in certain ways [harder] than even Grandee...no, this was truly something inconceivable (bizarre). For the first half of the duel, Haruyuki was still able to injure him by aiming for the weak crevices of his armor, but for the second half, after Cerberus had clamped his visor together, even his weak points had become so hard it seemed like he had an «Invincible Body». Even when Haruyuki poured his body and soul into his attacks, it would be for nothing, as

every time they would be deflected by Cerberus's armor. What he was feeling had already gone past astonishment straight into a deep despair.

The second, bigger reason why Haruyuki was so distressed was because of «speed».

By the end of the fight, Haruyuki had given up on deciding victory through a ground battle and had pinned his hopes for reversing the tide of battle on a dive attack from his maximum height. He'd even made sure to cover for his takeoff time by waiting until after he dodged a slow, heavy attack from his opponent and flying away in the shortest time possible.

But in that moment, although Cerberus had undoubtedly sprung up after Haruyuki had, he'd still managed to overtake the flying Crow. The proof was in how Haruyuki had been knocked down by that headbutt while still on his vertical line of ascent. In other words, even it was just for that last moment, his speed had surpassed Haruyuki's.

His hardness as a metal color couldn't compare, and he was inferior even in his greatest advantage, speed. Furthermore, he'd lost to a newbie who had supposedly only been a Burst Linker for a few days...

Over ten seconds had passed since the duel ended, but Haruyuki was still unable to believe the results screen before his eyes, and he floated vacantly at his death coordinates. Looking through the light purple semitransparent window, he could see the small grey avatar walking slowly into the distance. Several watchers from the gallery were in his path, and it seemed like they were talking to him—probably inviting him to join their legion—but Haruyuki couldn't hear what they were saying.

Watching Cerberus from behind being approached by all those veteran Burst Linkers and still answering them in that proper, upright manner, Haruyuki finally recovered some of his mental capacity and began grasping at the vague fragments of a conjecture.

The great principle of equal levels, equal potentials.

Had this principle finally been broken by this person? Did Wolfram Cerberus possess the sort of powerful ability that no Level 1 player should have begun with? It was hard to believe it when he put it like that, but no matter how Haruyuki approached it, this seemed like the only possibility. No, rather he wanted to think of it this way. He wanted to believe that the only reason he lost was because he had been matched against an exception beyond the principles of the Accelerated World...against a game-breaking opponent. Otherwise, there was no reason he should have lost...

“—Silver Crow.”

All of a sudden, a quiet voice called his name from behind, and Haruyuki instinctively curled up his invisible body. He timidly turned his head and saw green-tinted blue armor, the female warrior avatar Manganese Blade.

Her sharp eye lenses glinted as the Blue Legion «Leonids» top executive continued.

“I have no responsibility to ease the troubles of my enemies...but since we’re about to launch the Metatron attack strategy, it’ll be pretty bothersome for us too if you go around being depressed all the time. So I’d better give you some advice.”

Manganese shouldn’t have been able to see the defeated party, yet her gaze directly caught Haruyuki’s eyes, and her voice similarly cut into his consciousness like the blade of a masterpiece sword.

“First of all, you need to acknowledge Cerberus’s strength. If you don’t start from this step, you’ll never be able to find your way. His ability...«Physical Immunity» indeed gives him an overwhelming advantage, and you’d probably want to believe it’s cheating somehow. But just eight months ago, many Burst Linkers also had the same though—when they saw the one and only «Aviation» ability.”

“.....!”

Haruyuki gasped. Manganese softened her tone of voice and murmured:

“Crow, you need to return to your origin. Great power comes from deep wounds; you should understand this already. I can only say this much...the rest, you should find Cyan Pile and ask him.”

With this rather mysterious conclusion, the female warrior turned away with a martial flourish. She probably muttered the command to Burst Out while walking, as her tall, slender silhouette swiftly vanished without a trace.

Although Haruyuki’s mind was still half-numb, he carved Mangan’s words into his memory, and he took one last glance at the gauges above him.

Wolfram Cerberus’s gauge still had about 70% left, and this duel had only taken eleven minutes.

Haruyuki clenched his incorporeal fists and tightly squeezed his eyes and mouth shut. He quietly uttered “Burst Out”.

Upon returning to the real world, his flesh body naturally assumed the same movements he’d been making before. He didn’t open his eyes, but strenuously unclenched his trembling fists and switched off the Global Net connection on his Neuro Linker. The disconnection icon showed up, and only when it vanished did Haruyuki open his eyes.

The nightscape of Hounan Avenue was different from when he was accelerated, as it seemed a bit blurry. Haruyuki wiped at the corners of his eyes with his right fist and cursed softly.

“.....Damn it.”

Standing on the dusky pedestrian path, he cried out again:

“Dammit!!”

The shock of suffering a crushing defeat had slowly transformed with the passage of time into frustration. “The opponent’s avatar was way too overpowered” was already an invalid excuse. If that was really «Physical Immunity», it was indeed an extremely powerful special ability...but then again, Silver Crow’s «Aviation» ability was the same. Even using the wings that only he possessed in the whole Accelerated World, he’d completely lost to a Level 1 opponent.

“Acknowledge the opponent’s strength”. Manganese Blade’s words reawakened in Haruyuki’s mind, but he just couldn’t bring himself to follow her advice so readily. Acknowledging that Wolfram Cerberus was strong was the same as acknowledging that Silver Crow was weak. He couldn’t accept that no matter what. He’d broken through the guard of one of the «Four Gods», the Super-class Enemy Suzaku, returned alive from the depths of the «Emperor’s Castle», and even successfully resisted the control of the «Calamity Armor»...if now he was supposed to just throw away the self-esteem he’d slowly accumulated little by little, he’d be unable to bear it...

At that moment. Mangan’s last words echoed from the recesses of his brain.

—For the rest, you should find Cyan Pile and ask him.

Why did she leave these words with him? Why would she abruptly bring up Cyan Pile—Takumu’s name? Takumu was indeed a former member of the Blue Legion «Leonids», but eight months had already passed since he withdrew from the legion after fighting Haruyuki—

“Ah...!”

Only as his thoughts reached this point did Haruyuki finally remember this occurrence, and he gasped in shock. His step faltered, and he leaned against the wall to the left of the walking path.

Suffering defeat at the hands of a Level 1 opponent with a gamebreaking ability.

From Takumu’s perspective, Silver Crow’s and Cyan Pile’s first duel in that «Showdown at the Hospital» was exactly the same as the situation now. Takumu was Level 4 then, and Haruyuki, possessing the flight ability, had punched through his avatar’s chest and flown him up, hanging him in the sky...at that time, Haruyuki had asked him.

Taku, will you admit it?

Do you admit that you’ll never be able to beat me in this Accelerated World?

Takumu couldn't not have been frustrated, but he nevertheless conceded his loss, and he even withdrew from the legion he belonged to in order to make amends for his actions. Afterwards, he gave patient guidance to Haruyuki, who as a beginner still had a long way to go. When Haruyuki almost lost all of his Burst Points due to a careless mistake, Taku had shared his burden and worried along with him. All the way up to now, eight months later, he still continued supporting Haruyuki.

“.....Taku...”

With his back still against the wall, Haruyuki squeezed his eyes shut tightly again and called his best friend's name.

—This matter is more important than both learning the «Theoretical Mirror» ability and purifying the «Calamity Armor», and I should have taken care of it first, yet I totally forgot about it. Only when I had to experience the humiliation of losing to a Level 1 opponent myself, did I finally remember about this...or maybe, it's because I forgot about this that I ended up losing that match.

Haruyuki took in shuddering deep breaths. Inhale, exhale, and his back left the wall.

He turned towards the 7th Ring road where he had just come from, and his pace soon sped up to a sprint.

Chapter 11

Haru hopped on the (electric?) EV bus near the Honancho road intersection, northbound along the 7th ring road, getting off at the Kōenji North stop, which was closest to his house.

The time was 7:50PM. He left Shinomiya Utai's house at just past 7, afterwards heading to the Nakano battle region to watch one duel and participate in one. Consequently, the time it took for him to get back was considered really fast. This was an advantage of games like “Brain Burst”, but if one was unable to let go of their previous failures, and let it affect the real world, then acceleration technology would lose its meaning, so that's why it's necessary to try to recover from these emotions — his senpai Kuroyukihime always strictly told him so.

However, it was only today where Haruyuki could not do so. While on the bus, he felt unwilling, focused upon the scene from the battle with Wolfram Cerberus. But at the same time he also focused upon the battle against Cyan Pile eight months ago, undertaking a vigorous reflection.

From a certain point of view, the situation in the two battles were very similar, so Haruyuki would feel upset, and Takumu should have the same feelings. Regardless of

the reason that started the fight, at the very least Haruyuki should not have said words like that. Those words must have left an unerasable scar in Takumu's heart.

Manganese Blade wanted him to return to the original point. For Haruyuki, there was no doubt that the battle with Takumu was one of the causes. Having not started from this step, presumably the level required to learn "Theoretical Mirror" can never be attained.

While rushing into the entrance hall of a home apartment, Haruyuki launched the mailer and sent a short text message to Takumu who should have come home already. A few seconds later, he received a short reply: "Understood".

"——Sorry, Taku!"

Haruyuki stood next to the dining table in the Arita family living room and then deeply bowed, making the seated Mayuzumi Takumu blink his eyes in surprise.

His friend's fingertip touched his sharp pointed chin, and gave the appearance of deep thought. He raised his head then fearfully asked:

"Haru, what kind of good did you do again? Shouldn't be leveling up without saving some burst points, right?"

"No... it's not, it's not like that... besides I'm still very far away from level 6... "

"Then... does it have to do with Chiyu? Did you do anything that made her angry per se, want me to accompany you to apologize?"

"No... it's not, it's also not like that... besides if it were that way, I would've hidden myself... "

Haruyuki remained bent forward, then lifting his head and made an ambiguous answer. His good friend then returned a large wry smile.

"Even if I keep on guessing, you only keep apologizing. Well Haru, sit down first. Let's talk while eating, you still haven't eaten yet?"

On the dining table, there were six neatly made rice balls, arranged carefully on a square plate. In addition to that, there was a plate filled with chikuzenni and pure Japanese dishes such as silver cod marinated in Saikyo miso. Two portions were brought from the Mayuzumi's dinner after Takumu visited his mother. Haruyuki certainly wasn't planning for this when deciding to contact Takumu because his heart was filled with apologetic feelings. However, his stomach kept urging him to hurry, blatantly ignoring Haru's wishes, since he only ate mizuyoukan at Utai's.

"... Sorry, Taku."

For apologizing for a matter different than any past ones, Haruyuki then sat down, facing Takumu directly.

“No worries, I also feel relatively happy being able to eat dinner with you, Haru. Our family only discusses two things at the dinner table, if it’s not the prospects of the global economy, it would be my most recent grades.”

“Takumu made a hearty smile after finishing. Though he only wore a simple printless T-shirt and jeans, it did not hinder his youthful demeanor. Haruyuki thought, that he had to change many things about himself, because he could not forget why such a good person would continue to be his friend to this day. After saying “Let’s eat” at the same time with Takumu, he lifted his chopsticks and first ate a tea colored taro head.

He heard Takumu say in the past, that both of the Mayuzumi’s were working, so the dishes on the table were basically frozen, half-completed foods. Even so, compared to Haruyuki’s dinner of frozen pizza, it was still much better. After Haruyuki selflessly ate a rice ball, as well as half of dishes and fried fish, his stomach finally could be considered settled——

At this instant, a single phrase was let out.

“... I lost.”

Takumu stopped eating, then directly staring at Haruyuki. Haruyuki glanced at him briefly, and then repeated.

“Just now... I went to the 2nd Battle Area after I got off school... and there, I was completely defeated by a player whom I met for the first time. The battle only lasted for eleven minutes, and the opponent’s health gauge had 70% remaining.”

His hands, which were holding his chopsticks, dropped limply onto the table. Once his stomach was filled, the disappointment rushed to his head, making him naturally clenched his fists.

“... Moreover, the opponent, was a new Burst Linker... a level one player...”

Afterwards, Haruyuki spent ten minutes, recounting exactly what happened at the Nakano 2nd Battle Area, from spectating Frost Horn’s battle onwards. Including the astounding appearance and abilities of the genius newbie Wolfram Cerberus, how he was defeated, in detail.

Takumu remained silent for a while, despite hearing everything. Afterwards, he didn’t say a word, but only extended his left hand, forcefully grabbing Haruyuki’s clenched right fist on the dining table.

“Haru, it’s just a battle, you never know what’s going to happen.”

Haruyuki lifted his head reflexively. Takumu held his hand less forcefully, and lightly patted the back side of Haruyuki’s hand, before pulling back his hand.

“No, even if you fight one hundred battles and lose one hundred times, the results of the hundred and first battle would still be unknown. Aren’t games like Brain Burst just like this? Besides, Haru you seem to be bothered by the fact that your level is higher, however in this information war you completely lost. After all your opponent knew that Silver Crow is a flying avatar, yet Haru with regards to... Wolfram Cerberus’ “Physical Immunity” ability, you were completely clueless.”

Takumu’s words filled with deep concern, felt really warm.

But as Takumu’s response became increasingly kind, Haruyuki felt his guilt pierce ever more sharply into his chest. Since Haruyuki had previously said completely opposite things to Takumu. He said something that no Burst Linker should ever say, regardless of what situation they were in.

“... Sorry, Taku.”

Haruyuki bent his head deeply, then repeating this. This time he didn’t stop just here, instead he desperately tried to convert his heart filled emotions into words.

“I... never had the right to let you say this to me. Because... at that time, I only defeated you just that once, and I spoke to you in that way, wasn’t it?”

Then he took a deep breath. “... That time I said: ‘Do you admit, that you can never beat me in this Accelerated World?’ ”

Even from repeating that this one time, his tongue felt like there was a blade cutting it, but Haruyuki still reluctantly finished, then lifting up his head.

Even where Takumu heard this, his smile still did not fade. But, the color of his eyes had become slightly paler, which showed his pain that was previously not present. Takumu’s lips opened, closed, and opened again. But the words he said, were not ones that blamed Haruyuki.

“... Haru, at that time, you did have the right to say things that were a hundred times more serious. After all I was using illegal methods to spy on a legion master... spying on your most important, and irreplaceable “Parent”, yet I lost to you — someone desperately trying to protect her. At that time, you could have thrown me onto the

ground, to win my remaining burst points. But you did not do that, but instead forgiving me. Thinking about this, I feel that these words were not enough rather.”

“No, it’s not like that. Taku, it’s not like that.”

Haruyuki desperately cut off Takumu’s self-blaming words.

Then, Cyan Pile got his eyes on the Black King, Black Lotus, who had hidden herself, because he was almost running out of burst points. Haruyuki knew well early on that Takumu had begun to blame himself for that “Backdoor Program incident”.

But Takumu’s sins had since been repented. He did not hesitate to switch legions to serve as the sub-commander, afterwards in the Chrome Disaster and Dusk Taker incidents, had been repeatedly wounded in battle. Now, he is an integral part of Nega Nebulus, and most importantly, Kuroyukihime had forgiven Takumu already.

The sins that had not been repented, were those of Haruyuki. Once again, clinging onto this belief, one word at a time, Haruyuki turned his writhing emotions into sound:

“The reason why I needed to apologize... was certainly because I said that, but at the same time it was also because I forgot about this from the beginning. I should have made an apology for myself earlier... earlier than the time you left Leonids and joined Nega Nebulus, so please pretend I never said that. But I kept hearing Manganese Blade to go back to where I started... that’s when I remembered this. It must be because I said that to a friend, and still easily forgetting that it happened, that made me lost to Cerberus...”

Haruyuki pushed his chair backwards and stood up, both hands slapping the table and suddenly bowing, and said:

“Taku, I said those kinds of... hurtful words, belittling the dignity of Burst Linkers, and forgetting all all along about this, I am truly very sorry, please forgive me.”

—I’m just too terrible of a person, being so selfish. Believing that this world only contained my own frustrations, pain, and bitterness... constantly whining, and being jealous of others. Inconsiderate of how others feel, only to constantly reinforce and thicken the barrier to his heart, trying to keep everything outside...

That’s right, just like Silver Crow’s imperfect mirroring armor. Even though it could reflect physical attacks to an extent, extreme heat, or even light beams, but if it were to encounter truly powerful attacks such as Cerberus’ hammerhead or Niko’s radar, it would not be able to serve its purpose. I am just a half-complete existence...

“I’ll forgive you — but I have one condition.”

Haruyuki suddenly heard such words, trembling as he raised his gaze, only to see Takumu's gentle smile, no different from the usual.

He also put down his chopsticks and stood up, detouring around the dining table to move in front of Haruyuki. He gave a vigorous pat on Haruyuki's bent back with his calloused hand from using a bamboo sword.

"How about a jumbo parfait from Enji House. How does that sound Haru?"

"..."

Haruyuki desperately suppressed his ravaging emotions, and asked:

"... All you can eat?"

"Hahaha, one portion will be enough. Afterall, unlike Chiyu, I don't have the spirit to compete."

After Takumu cheerfully smiled, he changed his expression, and placed his hands on both of Haruyuki's shoulders, forcing him to be serious about himself, then speaking in a genuine tone:

"Haru, just as I said earlier, no matter how badly you criticized me then, it wouldn't be considered unreasonable. However... now that I won't focus on debating about this, since you don't seem like you want to either. So, I want you to agree to one thing. Agree, that when we both reach level 7... once we become ranked amongst other high-level players, you need to duel me again, with your utmost best."

"... Taku."

A little surprised, Haruyuki opened his eyes wide. Standing a bit taller, Takumu's eyes only revealed a serious looking radiance.

"You've gone through many obstacles, becoming stronger each and every time. So, this time it's my turn to work hard, to figure out how to defeat you. Haru, how does this condition sound to you?"

Haruyuki finally figured it out.

This is Takumu's kindness. He is basically declaring, that Haru's claim that '[he] could never beat [Haru]' would become naught. At the same time, as a burst linker, swearing to never capitulate to a single defeat, but to continue to pursue the victory of tomorrow.

“... Okay, I promise you, Taku.”

Once Haruyuki replied, Takumu forcefully nodded and let go of him, saying:

“Sure, now hurry up and eat up. Besides you must be planning to finish dinner with me then incidentally doing homework with me?”

“Oh you... you figured it out long ago? Living up to your name Professor Mayuzumi.”

After Takumu pushed Haruyuki's shoulder once more, he returned to the opposite side of the dining table. While Haruyuki faced his back, Haruyuki said to himself:

—Thank you, Taku.

Then, his best friend turned around, seeming to have somehow heard what he was thinking, and said some somewhat unexpected things:

“Haru, you just mentioned what Manganese Blade said. If she asked you to find a starting point... I think, compared to the battle you fought with me, your starting point should be even before that.

“Eh... ? W-where is it?”

“This you will need to figure out for yourself... however, I never would have thought that Miss Manganese would give you such advice. Haru, older females seem to truly...”

“N-no, it's not like that!”

Haruyuki hastily cut off this phrase that he seemed to have heard before, and sat back onto the chair. He took his rice ball, and chewed off a large bite, then unmannerly speaking while eating:

“... But Taku, I wanted to ask you. You knew Manganese Blade? Don't tell me, when you were in Leonids, you had a good relationship with her...?”

“How's that possible? She is the elite of the elite... she's the Blue King's right hand man. However, when I left the Leonids I had some interaction with her...”

“So, if you finish your homework before 8 o'clock, I'll tell you.”

“Well... t-then I want to start writing as I eat.”

Seeing that Haruyuki still unmannerly holding the rice ball with his left hand, and operating the virtual desktop with his right, unable to react to it, Takumu let out a bitter smile. Haruyuki looked at Takumu through his virtual desktop, deeply expressing his gratitude towards his good friend next to himself. The pain from the disastrous loss to Wolfram Cerberus, seemed to have faded away a bit now.

Chapter 12

The next day, on Wednesday June 26th, at 12:30 PM.

Haruyuki finished his tonkatsu sandwich and milk at top speed, and he Full Dived into the Umesato Junior High Local Network Virtual Squash Court. Takumu mentioned that Haruyuki had an origin even more worth visiting, and after examining this suggestion from various angles, he figured maybe this was the place.

Haruyuki might as well have chosen to dive in from the men's bathroom on the third floor of the second school building, but he decided there shouldn't be any point in reliving those pitiful memories to that extent, so he picked a reading booth in the library to dive from. After all, neither the response speed nor the content of the school's internal network would be affected by the part of campus you dived in from.

He stepped into the squash court as his pink pig avatar, touching the "Game Start" holo-panel and firmly grasping the racket that appeared shortly after. He lightly waved it back and forth a few times, relishing in the nostalgic feel of the racket in his hand.

The last time Haruyuki played this game was in the autumn of last year, and it had already been eight months since. In other words, he hadn't played ever since he had become a Burst Linker, which on the one hand surprised him while also seeming rather natural.

After all, at that time this was his only safe haven at Umesato Middle School, so he'd hide here every day. Who knew how many liters of virtual tears he had shed onto the polygon-tiled floor? Not wanting to revisit that state of mind while also wanting to preserve the place that had sheltered him for so long: that was why Haruyuki had avoided this place ever since.

And yet after all these days, as he stepped into the game court, the atmosphere spreading around him was no different than it had been eight months ago. That was to be expected, as there was no way such an unpopular game would be updated. But in this case, the situation cheered Haruyuki a bit, and he couldn't help but murmur "I'm back". At the same time, he reached over to touch the "Start" on the holo-panel.

A countdown appeared in the middle of the court. When it reached zero, a ball dropped from above. Haruyuki lightly hit the ball with the paddle in his right hand, causing it to

rebound against the floor then against the wall directly in front. He thus increased his strength, and the ball let out a light sound effect and returned to a position a metre to the left. This time, he sent it back with a backhanded serve.

Just now, he had had some rather harrowing experiences, but he quickly rediscovered his groove from previously, causing the small pig avatar to fly about in the air, focusing on catching the ball. Every time his game level increased, the ball's speed also increased, its rebounds becoming less and less logical. But at the end of the day this was just an Education Ministry-approved game installed in the school local network, and was much slower than the bullets fired by red-type avatars in the Accelerated World, or the kind of feint moves used by blue-type avatars.

After about ten minutes of play, the ball had become a mere streak of light, but Haruyuki managed to follow along due to his instincts. He had reached this point already, he thought, perhaps he could continue on forever... at this point, as if reading his mind, the system raised the level again.

“Woaah!” Now, Haruyuki had no choice but to stop his avatar's movements. This was because the ball suddenly split into two, and were coming from both the left and right. He could not decide which ball he wanted to catch, and in the end missed both. The eight letters that spelled GAME OVER, as if waiting for this moment, dropped onto the ground.

“Really... what a trick...” he muttered to himself, staring at the score display that had just appeared. Since this was the first time he had seen the phenomenon of the ball splitting, he had initially thought he had already made a new record. But the display of [HAL LV160 SCORE2806900] did not have any indication that it was a new record.

“Strange...”

Not knowing what was going on, Haruyuki operated his virtual desktop, calling out the list of high scores. Above the display that showed his top five scores, was a very ludicrous line of words - level 166, a score of over three million. Thus, Haruyuki did not recall when he had hit this kind of score.

“...ah... ah, right!” Remembering what had happened eight months ago, Haruyuki cried out.

This was not a record that he himself had created. Initially he had thought that since he had been logged out abnormally, other students had used his open game to continue playing, and easily creating a new record. This student was none other than the widely respected Umesato Middle School student council vice-president Kuroyukihime, or...

“Do you want to accelerate even faster, boy?”

From his back, there was a sound, making his entire avatar jump. In the air he turned a full 90 degrees, landing on the ground facing a different somewhere else.

A figure stood at the elevated entranceway to the squash court, head lowered towards Haruyuki. The long, floor-length gown that it wore, along with her hair that fluttered in the wind, were a deep black. Her hands were covered with a pair of long black gloves, and they held a closed parasol. But what was most unique about the figure were the pair of giant black butterfly wings that grew from its back, interspersed with pink stripes, that let out a flame-like glow against the sun at its back.

“If you’re interested, be at the lounge at lunchtime.” He thought he had seen that person say that and then disappear, but in reality that was not the case. The other party descended the short steps and came onto the court, looked around, and then said with a smile:

“How nostalgic. To think that it’s been more than half a year ago...”

“Yeah. To be accurate, it’s eight months and a day. Because senpai talked to me here... on the fourth Thursday of last November.”

“Ah, you do remember it well.”



The black butterfly avatar - Kuroyukihime gently laughed, walked over, looked at the high score window that was floating in the midst of the court, and with a satisfied expression laughed again and said, "By the looks of it, my high score still remains untouched."

"But... but didn't senpai say she used [Acceleration] to get this high score..."

"Ah, is that so? What's wrong with that, eh? It's a goal for you to pursue, perhaps it might mean even more if you beat it?"

"Eh... eh.... senpai wants me to use my own ability to beat this high score?"

"Yeah. If you can do it, I'll give you a hundred butterfly points." Such oddly-named [butterfly points] were given when one such butterfly, which appeared in the apps Kuroyukihime designed herself, was caught. Right now Haruyuki had less than three hundred, so when he heard that he would get a hundred more, he did try to think about it. But Kuroyukihime did not say anything, because he didn't know what would happen when he got a thousand points.

"I... will try my best." Clenching his trotters, Haruyuki saw Kuroyukihime crease her brow - then break out in a big smile. "It's been awhile since I saw you like that. I know I said it before, but I pretty like this avatar. Since you haven't been on the school network often, I was starting to feel a bit lonely." Somehow, she relieved herself of the parasol in her left hand, and took large steps towards him. Before he could react, her hands had sandwiched the large head of the pig avatar, lifting him up completely.

"Eh, this... that..." Haruyuki rapidly moved his ears and tail, but that was not enough to resist. The girl took him into her embrace, and he immediately felt something that was very much unlike the warmth and softness conveyed by a virtual avatar. This caused his mental bandwidth to drop to 30% of its usual rate.

... Odd, virtual avatars aren't supposed to be able to touch each other in the school network.

... Oh well, that kind of rules won't stop senpai.

Just as he had that kind of notion in his dazed mind -

A soft voice entered the large pink right ear on the pig's head.

"... You came... to get your origins clear?" "...eh...?" Haruyuki took quite a moment to understand the meaning of that, his eyes blinking rapidly. Kuroyukihime's approached his, shining with a deep red light that did not exist in the real world, as if they were a pair of onyx crystals with an inner flame. As Haruyuki looked at the two beautiful jewels, he asked softly,

"S... senpai, did you hear that from Taku?"

“No, I happened to come across it... something to do with your battle in Nakano Ward last night.”

“-!” Haruyuki’s entire avatar froze on reflex, but he immediately let loose. Not only were there over thirty spectators in that battle, as a closely-watched newcomer, information on Wolfram Cerberus spreading in the Accelerated World was a matter of course. Though...

“S... senpai really is well-informed.”

In Haruyuki’s words there were a form of surprise, because it had not even been 24 hours since that battle. Kuroyukihime gently patted the the head of the virtual pig avatar in her embrace, smiled, and said, “Of course. If it’s about Haruyuki-kun, I know everything.”

Her words were said somewhat naturally, then with a sound from her high heels she walked to the steps at the side of the court, and sat down noiselessly on the bottommost step. Kneeling down, she placed Haruyuki on her knees.

“... In this kind of place, have you found any kind of clue, that can be used against your opponents?” Hearing her ask such a pointed question with a smile on her face, Haruyuki blinked repeatedly. He then recalled that he was here to find his origin... to find some kind of clue to defeat Cerberus, but in the end had gotten distracted with the virtual squash game. Even though he had managed to make a new personal best, he still felt some regret, and was unable to find any sort of clue.

“Erm... I think I’ve improved in terms of speed... but...” It may be just through their avatars, but to be put on Kuroyukihime’s knees and hugged was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. However, even this situation had temporarily vanished from Haruyuki’s mind, his pig snout lowered. He recalled that crushing defeat with pain in his heart.

“But... perhaps he may be even faster than me now. And frankly speaking, when I fought him, speed was not at all a factor... since he was so absurdly hard anyway, and Silver Crow could only do material attacks. No matter how fast, there was no way to cause damage on him, is that right?”

Haruyuki finally complained, looking at his Legion Master with prying eyes. But Kuroyukihime’s expression did not change, only nodding and asking, “So that’s the case - this Wolfram Cerberus is as tough as the rumours say?”

“Yeah... Manganese Blade-san said, this was a unique ability «Material Conduction».” “Oh. So if that’s the case, he really is a strong opponent.” “Then, Manganese-san told me to «return to my origin». I looked for Taku after I got home last night, and he said «there’s a place you need to go back to», so here I am to play squash and see...”

Saying that, Haruyuki sighed. Then Kuroyukihime used her both hands to clamp his pig face, letting him face her again. What appeared in front of him was not that peaceful smile from before, but the strict expression of a master of swords. "I understand. Then let me give you some advice too."

"Al... alright. Senpai, please instruct me!"

"You're too far back. Your beginnings should be one step ahead of here."

"Wh... what? One step? Which way?" Haruyuki looked around, but the virtual squash court was surrounded by walls in all direction, leaving there nowhere to go. Just as he dejectedly tilted his head -

"This is a special treat. I'll bring you there myself." Saying that, from Kuroyukihime's lips came a phrase Haruyuki was completely not expecting.

"Burst Link!"

Wh, whaaaaaat? While Haruyuki was momentarily shocked, a familiar noise shook his auditory senses, as his senses were transferred from the virtual world to someplace else.

Including the Umesato Middle School network, when someone moved from a full-dive VR environment into Acceleration, like when accelerating from the real world what one saw would be dyed a deep blue, forming a virtual «Initial Acceleration Space». With some exceptions, all kind of VR game functions would also decelerate to a thousandth of the speed, that was how Kuroyukihime had managed to get a high score of three million in the squash game.

But, Haruyuki could only catch a glimpse of the blue world. This was because his vision had immediately turned black, and flaming letters appeared in the midst of his vision. It was of course the familiar [HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER!]

From the pink pig he transformed into the silver Duel Avatar, and landed on the battlefield after passing through rainbow-coloured rings. Stretching his body, he looked around, and made a noise of suspicion. Because this was not the spacious virtual squash court, but a room lined with tables and shelves. He thought for a while, then said, "... oh right."

This was the library on the second floor of the second building of Umesato's campus. The real-world Haruyuki lay in this very room. Unless the Stage's properties forbid entering buildings, when a battle began one would otherwise appear where his real body was.

"Then... where is senpai..." Saying that, Haruyuki looked around, but could not find the sword master that had been holding him. This probably meant that she did not log in from the library, but rather from somewhere else in the school. Somewhere more likely

would be the third year classrooms, the lounge near the school canteen, or the student council room. Looking at the guide cursor in the top of his vision, it pointed south unmoving. From its relative position in the school, it was most likely that she was in the student council room.

He finally looked up at the health gauge in his top left corner. The avatar name written was [Black Lotus]. Haruyuki looked at the line of English text that gave out a sense as though it was supposed to be there, and muttered to himself, “Why suddenly a battle...? She just said she wanted to bring me there personally, but...”

To where?

Thinking that, Haruyuki took a few steps, and saw the fiery-red sunlight reflect a beautiful colour off his avatar. From the windows it was possible to see the gigantic sun that had almost set under the horizon. On closer inspection, it was possible to see that the desks and floor of the library no longer had their original wood-grain construction, and were now some cracked, dulled... stones. This was the low-level sacred stage «Twilight».

Realizing this, a scene played back in Haruyuki’s mind, causing him to raise his head in shock.

Umesato Middle in the Twilight stage was the first scene Haruyuki had seen when he had first entered the Accelerated World with his «Parent». That was to say, the place where Kuroyukihime wanted to bring him to was...

Here.

A thin ray of red light shone down just a centimetre to his left. After a while, he heard a clear clang sound. “...?”

Blinking, wondering what it was, Haruyuki prepared to move towards where the light was.

In the end, the school building gave out a low thundering crash, tilting towards the side and sliding down. The stone floor and pillars also showed clear division lines, splitting into two halves. And Haruyuki was on the half that was right now sliding down.

“Woah, woaaaaah!”

Crying out, he desperately tried to run up the steadily sloping floor. Managing to reach the side with the glass-free windows, he jumped without hesitation, opening his wings in the air and gliding towards the first school building. In the next moment, he saw a flash of red light -

It slashed across the first school building with a “Clak” sound. But it did not rest, cutting across a second, then a third time, and every time it did, the large stones were cut into small pieces like tofu, and began falling in various directions.

“Ugh, ah, waaaaaaa-!” Haruyuki pitifully cried out again. If he had maxed out his special move gauge, he could ascend how he wanted, but right now he could only glide downwards. Hence, he was on a collision course with the collapsing first school building. As he glided, even his lateral movements were restricted, so he could only shrink himself, avoiding the falling blocks of concrete and passing through into the sky above the field. Only then could he sigh loudly.

He landed on the grass, dyed a deep red by the setting sun. Trepidatedly looking back, he saw that all of the Umesato Middle buildings had collapsed with a loud bang. And as for who was responsible, one could see that there was a filled special attack gauge in the top right hand corner. The answer was thus obvious. Because, the fact that this person, who should only have close-range attacks, had managed to cause such wanton destruction with red-type attacks, meant that the forbidden «Incarnate System» was behind it.

Standing dazed, Haruyuki heard a very displeased sound by his ears. “What a good view. Besides, tall buildings ruin the atmosphere of the Twilight stage, blocking such a beautiful sunset... don’t you think?”

Saying these kind of words was a figure slowly approaching from the direction of the student council room. It had four sharp blade arms, an armored skirt like that of flower petals, and half-translucent armor reminiscent of black crystals. She was the beautiful and incomparable Duel Avatar, the Black King Black Lotus.

Haruyuki once again looked to his right, at the school building that had collapsed into a rather sad state, and then to his left, at the fire-red sunset, from an awkward position, and said, nodding, “Ye, yeah... that’s not wrong... but why is senpai only doing this much?”

“Ah, because...” She slightly lowered her voice, using a sharper tone to say, “Because I’m a little bit angry.”

With - with just that “little bit”, she would cause such great destruction? Haruyuki resisted calling that out, standing straight. If he were to pursue the topic of why she was angry under such circumstances, which could be only be blamed on Haruyuki? Because he lost to Wolfram Cerberus? Or that he had not yet learned Theoretic Mirror? Or...

“Haruyuki.” With a peaceful, strict, and somewhat annoyed voice, Kuroyukihime said, “When you heard the words ‘return to your origin’, you should have thought about me first. Going to Takumu... I can try to let that slip... but why squash next!”

“Eh... no, this, because...” She pointed her right sword-arm at him, motioning him to be silent, and continued, “your ‘origin’ as a Burst Linker, is none other than me. You should have thought about that immediately! I thought of it within a second! Had you come to me first, asking me to go easy on you in training could be negotiated! But since you’ve taken the scenic route, how about some extra-hard mode training!”

“Eh... h, hard mode... what kind of training is that?”

“What else but -” Haruyuki’s Parent and Legion Master, the Black King, swepted her right arm, and said clearly, “- Strategies to use against Wolfram Cerberus!” That was indeed what Haruyuki had been seeking.

But, after walking to the middle of the field, he still could not resist beginning with a question. “Erm... I initially thought that even if I asked senpai, you’d just say “Go think about it”... Since I’m already level 5, and the opponent is still level 1, may, may I ask... why?”

“A Parent helping their Child, is there any other reason?” said Kuroyukihime matter-of-factly. He shrugged his shoulders, continuing, “- but, I’m too overprotected. If it was Master, she’d reply as you did, with “Think about it yourself~”. But... I feel that something’s off with this new opponent...”

“Something off...? Is it because he has too much raw power?”

“That... and probably because the time has come.” Saying until here, a pair of bluish-purple eyes hidden behind the black-tinted mask on Kuroyukihime’s mask lit up, and she asked, “Haruyuki, three days ago, after the Seven Kings Conference, you told me and Raker something - you said, that the Four-Eyed Analyst «Argon Array» was a core member of the Acceleration Research Society.”

Haruyuki drew a breath of air, then slowly drew a breath of air and said, “Y, yeah. I did say that, but without any proof... the only evidence seems rather convoluted, which is the memories from when I played host to Chrome Disaster. But I’m fairly sure, from a really long time ago she was working with Black Vise of the ARS, and she’s also got something to do with Chrome Disaster.”

“Yeah, Raker and I believe you - Fuuko, is that correct?”

“Yes, Karasu-san doesn’t lie.”

“Th... thank you two. But... what has this got to do with Cerberus?”

“Allow me to explain.” Hearing that, Haruyuki looked to his right. Standing there was a sky-blue coloured duel avatar. On its head was a flowy hair-like ornament that was rarely seen in the Accelerated World. A pure white dress fluttered in the blowing wind. Haruyuki bowed and said, “Ah, okay, sorry to trouble... wait, eh, ehHHHHHHHH?”

Haruyuki jumped about two metres in the air, and with a beat of his wings landed slowly. Thinking that he had been through similar situations before, he still tried asking.”

“Eh, eh eh, it’s, it’s Master? Right?”

“Of course. Do I look like a ghost? Want to touch if you don’t believe me?” Hearing that, Haruyuki’s hand was about to drift to the right... before he felt the killing intent from his left, and quickly kept it back. There was no need to feel, for standing in front of him was the Deputy Legion Master of Nega Nebulas, «Iron Hand» Sky Raker.

Then Haruyuki realized that she had entered this space as a spectator. But even so, it was a bit absurd, since Raker, Kurasaki Fuuko, studied in a high school in Shibuya Ward, and it was a weekday afternoon so she should be in school. To spectate in this battle, she would have to move to central Suginami Ward...

“Ah, right, right, I forgot. This battle isn’t on the Global Net, but within the Umesato Middle intranet, so even if you came to Suginami you wouldn’t be able to spectate... don’t tell me, Master, you’re actually on school grounds...?”

“I’m sorry, even though I understand how badly you want to see me, you’re wrong.” Saying that, she let out a Vacuum Power Raker Smile. Haruyuki fuddled for a while, before hearing Kuroyukihime clear her throat.

“There’s no time, so I should just get to the point. I opened a remote access account in the intranet, so Fuuko can join us from Shibuya, then allowed her to spectate.”

“Ah, ah ah, I see... wait, remote access account? Won’t that get you in trouble if found out...”

“Even with the access rights of the student council vice president, making an undiscoverable secret passage isn’t exactly easy. I only managed to do it recently. Had I done it in April, I could have gotten rid of Dusk Taker already... but, it’s because of the lesson learnt then that I put in place this arrangement.”

“Oh, oh... so, even if senpai is attacked while not in school, she can relax...”

“Problem is, it doesn’t work if I’m not on campus. More importantly, the «Analyser».”

Haruyuki’s reassurance was knocked down a notch, and he froze against the background, Kuroyukihime patted his shoulder, and said, “Like we said, Raker and I trust you fully. Besides, that Argon Array always seemed a bit too secretive, so we were always on guard dealing with her.”

“Yeah, while this person has been around longer than us, but yet they joined no legion, nor does anyone know who their Parent is, and there are few battles they’ve been in... we can’t see how she rose her level up so quickly.” Hearing to this point, Haruyuki banished the shock of Raker connecting from long distances to a side, and continued,

“Y, yeah. But, if they really are part of the ARS, then such doubts can be answered thanks to all the shady experiments the ARS does which gets them points...”

“Oh, and that shady Acceleration Research...” Saying to that point, Kuroyukihime faced her visor towards the unmoving sunset. After a moment of silence, a rather off-topic question came out of her mouth, “Haruyuki, have you ever thought about the meaning behind «metal colours»?”

“Eh... metal colours?” He reflexively looked down at the silver on his own avatar - which was currently shining a bright red due to the sunset - and then replied, “Senpai is referring to the color names of metals... right? For example, my «Silver», Manganese and Cobalt of Leonids, Iron Pound of Great Wall. They mostly have high defense, use melee-type attacks... but are weak to liquids or electrocution...”

“In terms of special traits, you’re correct.” Sky Raker nodded her white wide-brimmed hat-clad head, though she immediately added a “But.”

“But, there’s already a green-type of avatars with high defense. In reality, in legion battles one can see green-type and metal-types doing pretty much the same jobs. Again, in terms of the avatar’s physical traits, there aren’t any metal-type avatars weaker than Green-type ones, or any green-types harder than metal-types. Then... why would Brain Burst have metal-type avatars not following entirely the colour scale...?”

“The reason why.... metal-types exist...” Haruyuki repeated, slowly shaking his head and saying, “Sorry... I’m obviously a metal-type myself, but never thought about it... As for why I’m «Silver», I think it’s probably for one reason, and the rest is due to luck...”

“Yeah, when the system picks a colour, there is a very strong element of randomness. If it wasn’t inevitable, I too would want to think of the reason why I was given the Black colour... but, one time someone proposed a theory, attempting to explain what you just said about “one reason”, it only applies to metals though.”

“Th, theory?” “That’s right. It’s called «the shell of the soul’s wound». And if I remember correctly, the one who proposed it, was Argon Array.”

“-!” Under the silver mask, Haruyuki drew a deep breath. He was this shocked, partly because he hadn’t expect to hear the [Analyst]’s name here, but more importantly at the words «shell of the soul’s wound».

That’s right... from the scene in Chrome Disaster’s memories, someone with a figure suspiciously similar to Argon Array’s had said that. In addition, at the conference three days ago, when she had analyzed Haruyuki, she had said that too. And last week, in Umesato Middle’s back yard, when Haruyuki had been subject to Chrome Disaster’s [Spillover] effect and managed to break free, what had caused Shinomiya Utai to be so shocked was that phrase as well.

“This... this «shell of the soul’s wound»... just what is it...”

“As it says, it’s a shell that covers the mental scars within... or so it appears to be.”
Fuuko took a step forward, replying silently. Her night-blue eyes looked straight at Haruyuki, saying to him with a warm yet determined voice,

“We Burst Linkers are no exception. Everyone has their scars inside their souls. Mine... was that I had an inadequate pair of legs since birth. This kind of scar, is what created Sky Raker, the avatar with a soul to chase the skies... and even to higher stars.” The sky-blue avatar looked at Haruyuki, standing dazed where he was, and continued,

“-While no doubt the mental scars are what determines an Avatar’s appearance, there are some Burst Linkers whose scars are not easy to depict in colour and appearance. You may already have guessed it... I’m referring to metal-type avatars. Metal-type Avatars commonly have average figures, nor do they have any special enhancements. Yes, it is that the mental scars are being covered by an opaque and hard metal outer layer. ...A long time ago, the [Analyst] named this as the «shell of the soul’s wound».”

“Covering... the mental scar... outer layer...”

“That’s right. Children with such outer layers that are especially hard... so hard that even they themselves can’t see what their scars are, perhaps they create metal-type Duel Avatars... this is the meat of the «shell of the soul’s wound» theory.”

- Even they themselves cannot see their own scars.

Kuroyukihime had said it especially warmly and quietly. Even so, Haruyuki could feel a pain within the heart beneath his metal armor.

... That’s right... why did I become Silver Crow... why did I have an avatar with the [Flight] ability, even I don’t understand.

... But... it’s not because I can’t see the scar, but I don’t want to. That’s why I’ve always stayed away from the light... Actually, I already knew... when my parents already said they didn’t want me -

Suddenly, he felt as if his body was enveloped in a warm feeling. Hence, he opened his eyes that had been shut since sometime before. He saw Black Lotus and Sky Raker’s bodies standing near him, two of them gently hugging Haruyuki. Voices from around him said softly,

“Sorry, Haruyuki-kun. Fuuko and I already knew that mentioning this would bring you great pain. But... the time would come eventually.”

“Karasu-san, since you’re a metal type, there will be one day where you will have to face your «shell». So Sacchan and I agreed, as compared to letting bad people do it... it’s better if we tell you.”

Hearing that, Haruyuki finally understood why Kuroyukihime had done the audacious act of opening a remote access account, it was to bring Fuuko into this space. She feared that even as a Parent, she could not do it alone, and had to call on Haruyuki's respected Master, Fuuko. This was to reduce the psychological impact caused to him by explaining the wound's shell theory. The hands of theirs at his back let out waves of warmth, proving this.

- I'm too blessed.

- Never mind not being able to learn Theoretic Mirror, never mind losing badly to a level 1 player, what kind of pain lies beneath the shell of my soul, I must never forget.

Haruyuki resolutely told himself that, took a deep breath, and said, "Thank you senpai and Master. I am fine... my «wound's shell» will not be so easily broken."

"That's a weird sense of self-confidence, Haruyuki-kun."

"I'll take that to mean that you can hold on, then."

Saying out what they felt, Kuroyukihime and Fuuko then let go. The three of them looked at each other, and laughed for a while. Once the laughter had subsided, Fuuko's expression became stricter, and she continued explaining,

"It sounds rather rough, but that's the gist of the «wound's shell» theory. When this theory was proposed, many Burst Linkers accepted it, since it explained to some degree the reason why metal-types existed. But... from some time on, no one mentioned it again, letting it become some form of taboo."

"T... taboo...? But, isn't this just explaining how metal-types came to be? Shouldn't it cause no harm?"

Looking at Haruyuki's confusion, the two of them did not respond immediately. A short breeze of wind blew past Black Lotus' sword arms, making a soft sound against the blades. Kuroyukihime again crossed her arms in front of her body, and continued with an even stricter voice.

"Actually... there's a second part to the theory. Nobody came up with this part, and it's kind of a rumour that just started to spread... Apparently, if this theory is correct, then there should be a way to apply it..."

"Apply...? Just how would it be applied...?"

"Applied to deliberately create a metal-type avatar."

"...!"

Seeing how shocked Haruyuki was, to the extent that his helmet had completely leaned back, Fuuko continued in a somewhat tense tone,

“This way of saying goes, that if a child with a mental scar that’s covered with a shell gets a metal avatar, then it should be possible to cause this kind of scar, then allowing the child to become a Burst Linker, which should be able to make them into metal-type avatars. Physically, that would mean resorting to things like... maybe hypnosis, or even more extremely, even installing a Brain Implant Chip in their heads. After sealing the child’s mental disturbances, Brain Burst can then be installed for them. In a way, it’s a form of «artificial creation of metal-type avatars». In the early days of the Accelerated World, there were whisperings that such a plan existed.”

“This... this plan, did someone actually try it?”

“Don’t know. Apparently one couldn’t check out where the rumour came from either.” Kuroyukihime shook her head, and continued, “... but, a while after the rumour spread, a metal-type avatar appeared in the Accelerated World. His name was «Magnesium Drake»... an avatar with very strong metal armor and a very impressive fire attack. He quickly rose up in level, and was well-respected among players.”

The name was unfamiliar to Haruyuki, but something niggled at the back of his mind, and he creased his brow. “Senpai said “once”... does that mean this person is already gone? He sounds pretty awesome...?” he asked trepidatedly, and the two of them nodded.”

“But, he did not leave the accelerated world because he ran out of points alone.”

“He was attacked by countless Burst Linkers, entered into dozens of bloody battles, and eventually was hunted to death.”

“Eh, this... isn’t it... what senpai mentioned to us before...”

“That’s right. Drake was a well-respected Burst Linker, but he became the second Chrome Disaster.”

Haruyuki did not only have cursory knowledge. When he had become the sixth Disaster, he had used «Fire Breath», an attack that allowed him to spray fire-hot flame from his mouth. This was an ability left behind by the second Disaster. In other words, it had been created by Magnesium Drake.

Haruyuki tried to hold in the shock that had caused him to forget to breathe for a few seconds, and squeezed out a scratchy voice from this throat,

“That means.... that means this Magnesium Drake was the «deliberately created metal-type avatar» by applying the wound’s shell theory...? Is that why he became the second Disaster...?”

From the way the conversation had been going, there was only one conclusion. But Kuroyukihime and Fuuko had not yet confirmed it.

“Karasu-san, these are only all rumours. What we can confirm, is only that Drake was in the Accelerated World, many people were awestruck at his abilities, but in the end he fused with the Disaster Armor... and after causing untold bloodshed and being hunted, he disappeared.”

“And one more thing. After this incident, the phrase «the wound’s shell» became taboo. But from what Haruyuki-kun said, it seems like Argon Array doesn’t know about it’s taboo...”

“... So that’s the case...”

After hearing the long explanation, Haruyuki sighed a breath of air. He looked at the counter, which stated eight hundred seconds remaining - or about thirteen minutes.

In that case, then why did they mention the wound’s shell at first? Haruyuki began playing back his memories, searching. The person who had come up with this was Argon Array, who was most probably an old member of the ARS. Kuroyukihime had felt that that person had appeared at an uncanny time, at just about when something had appeared -

“...Ah!” At this time Haruyuki remembered that this battle had not been called to have a meeting, but for «special training». Kuroyukihime had brought him to this space, to pass on to him how to go up against the super-hard tungsten-armored Level 1 newbie that had spectacularly defeated him

“Eh... but... well, please wait...” The overload of information in such a short time had caused Haruyuki’s brain to become fuddled. Using a finger to support his head, he said, “Senpai said that something was off. Was it about... Wolfram Cerberus and Argon Array’s appearances being too coincidental... or not? Then... maybe senpai...”

He raised his head, looking at the black lotus-like avatar... “Senpai thinks that Cerberus may be an «artificial metal avatar»... does she?” Haruyuki had pushed his thought processes to the maximum before getting this hypothesis. And Kuroyukihime replied him with a short phrase:

“- I don’t know!”

“Wh, what?”

“How would I know? I’ve never come up against him, nor even spectate. I’ve been thinking about meeting him... maybe even having a battle. But, he shows up mostly near Blue or Green legion territory, so there’s no way I can.”

“Y, yeah.”

“And, since he’s only level 1, it’s not to convenient for me or Uui to go challenge him.” Hearing Fuuko’s addition, Kuroyukihime nodded and said, “So, Haruyuki, it’s down to

you to get to the bottom of this, and also your chance to earn your redemption. To get this clear, you must force the opponent into using all his power - that is, push him into the corner. Push strategy and tactics to the back of your mind. We've had a pretty long pre-battle chat, but this is all to set the stage for the special training. And even with such low-hanging hints, you haven't even found them... so I will go all out!"

Eh, eh?

Haruyuki resisted yelling out, saying with a croaky voice, "But, but, this, there's only ten minutes left, and also, there's no need for a real battle, perhaps a training battle is enough..."

"No need to worry, there's plenty of Burst Points and lunch break time left!"

"Bu, bu bu bu but, thinking about it, before my redemption battle, I should first learn «Theoretic Mirror»..."

"That won't be a problem, all effort will eventually reach the same goal!"

"And if there's a need, I'll pitch in too~"

Haruyuki looked at the Level 9 and the Level 8, and said the only thing he could in such a circumstance,

"... then, then I'll be in your care..."

A full five battles of thirty minutes each had been fought. The last was a battle royale mode that even Fuuko had joined in.

Finally, the strenuous training that he had not had in a long while had ended, and he awoke in the library's reading room. Exhausted that he could not stand for a while. Haruyuki felt that he could only see little birds flying and jumping in circles around his head, allowing his body to sway against the back of his chair.

After about ten seconds, his dizziness had subsided, and he finally said a word, sighing, "H, hungry..."

Having gone through the two-and-a-half hour long training, he felt as if all the energy had gone from his stomach, making him feel rather empty. But the feeling was false, as in the real world just a few tens of minutes ago he had had a cutlet sandwich, and could not just eat again.

Shaking, he walked out of the space, uneasily making it to the water cooler along the corridor, and took large gulps of water, as if it could satiate his false hunger. In this condition, he would not be able to handle the afternoon's classes, but it was all for the sake of regaining his stolen dignity. As compared to being filled with shame over a level

1 wiping the floor with him, perhaps it was better for him to be tired to the point that he was just drifting.

And, be it Kuroyukihime or Fuuko, it must be because they understood Haruyuki's nature of pushing himself to the limit, yet choosing to give him one hell of a training. It was unknown whether they were actually angry or not.

In the corridor with no one else, Haruyuki first bowed in the direction of the student council room, then in the direction of the faraway Shibuya Ward, and said softly, "Thank you senpai, thank you master. Next time, I will... Whether I can win, nobody knows. But it definitely will be spectacular."

That's right.

Whether the opponent was a [genius] or had «Optical Conduction», it was not important. Forget about the wound's scar theory, or artificial metal avatars, as well. What was taken must be regained. This kind of simple willpower, was the foremost principle of Brain Burst... no, every versus game.

Haruyuki felt that, it was because of how he had got to where he was now that he had been able to accept yesterday's gruesome defeat and his own weaknesses. Now, accepting the original truth, he must move forward from where he fell. This way, the road ahead would seem infinite.

"... Okay!"

Haruyuki clenched his fist, and began walking to his own classroom.

Chapter 13

In the afternoon two short lessons and homeroom while trying not to fall asleep, taking the elevator to go outside, a drop of rain hit the top of his nose.

Looking at the sky, dark clouds filled the sky, like in the «Stormy Weather» stage. On the virtual desktop's weather forecast, starting 3:30pm would have 2.5mm of rain every hour. The sports teams would cancel their outdoor trainings under this kind of rainfall, but of course breeding committee work was unaffected from this.

Haruyuki strolled towards the backyard, first greeting Hou-san inside, then he started cleaning the cage at 1.2 times his normal speed. It could be an unfortunate thing that, fellow member Iseki-san, sent a colorful email message, explaining that she couldn't clean the cage because she had to prepare for the school cultural festival, absolutely not due to being lazy because it was raining.

After washing the water basin that Hou used to shower, the sound of nimble footsteps came behind Haruyuki's back. Face to face, a red umbrella dazzled into view, and as it approached, the figure of a young girl came into sight. Chairman of the breeding committee Shinomiya Utai, however she looked slightly different today. As she came closer, it became obvious, her fire red boots also came into view.

"H....Hello, Shinomiya-san"

He held the water basin in hand while greeting, Haruyuki couldn't help but stare at those waterproof breathable boots. That reminds me that I used to wear the same thing when I heard the sound of rain, since when did I stop wearing it... If you think that way,

[UI> Hello, Arita-kun. If you look at me like that, I'll be a little embarrassed.]

A string of words appeared floating in a translucent chat window, the pair of boots walked forward.

"Ah...S-Sorry, I'm sorry!"

He panicked. At that rate he'd be branded with a "foot fetish", and panickly screamed.

"Those, um, boots, I thought they looked cute!"

Silence.

It was silent in the backyard except for rain. As Utai lowered her red face, Haruyuki froze as he couldn't figure out what to say to save himself,, what finally saved him was the sound of Hou flapping his wings in protest of his hunger.

From Utai's hand, the scops owl ate an entire box of shredded meat that Utai took out from the small cooler, it swirled around flying excitedly and after showing off, returned to its perch.

Haruyuki looked up towards Hou, who had dozed off quickly, and lightly said:

"It seems that he has gotten quite used to this little wooden cage."

Utai took off the safety glove from her left hand, then nodded and flicked her fingers

UI: Yes, it's only been a week since he moved here but he has calmed down, I couldn't believe it myself. This too, is all thanks to the hard work of the breeding committee.

“ Yes, but, without Shinomiya-san’s hand Hou would never eat... Hou, Iseki-san likes Hou but...”

The conversation moved to a sour topic, Utai with a smile on her face typed.

[UI> Of course not. Hou-san, trusts Arita-kun’s place a lot you know. After a while, I think I can teach you to feed him by the hand as well.]

“Yes, but, Hou san only eats bait from Shinomiya-san’s hand...”

Going over what he just said, Haruyuki closed his mouth. A second later, he asked another question.

“Shinomiya-san, don’t tell me, your reason... Hou, hurt the previous owner because...”

After this Utai, stopped cleaning up the feeding set, looking straight into Haruyuki’s eyes. She stared at him for a moment with her large eyes, and slowly nodded.

[UI> Look at Hou-san’s left leg, you can see the scars from when the microchip was removed.]

After reading this, he looked up. Lowering both ears, squinting his eyes to see the Scops owl’s left leg — to confirm, probably from using a knife to slice vertical strips, a two centimetre scar existed.

“... How terrible... What a wound...” His lips quivering, he clutched both hands.

Surely, a bird of prey African Scops Owl is difficult to keep. Special bait was needed, and a large cage is also required. When buying it at the pet shop, those kinds of details are already considered. No matter what the circumstances, some expenses are inevitable but the microchip must’ve made the cost unbearable, a wounded pet would eventually be considered for throwing away.

Hou’s life is on the edge, as things are now with him energetic can be seen as a one in a million miracle. Realising this again, Haruyuki muttered.

“I’m sure, because Shinomiya-san, you’ve worked hard all this time...”

There after, a moment stood, the cherry blossom coloured font stopped on the display.

[UI> Never again, in my hands, do I want to see a life lost.]

What she meant with those words, over those brief seconds was understood, Haruyuki exhaled heavily.

So that is to say — at one point, her hands had lost life. Moreover, Hou is not really her pet. Human ... Utai's real older brother Shinomiya Kyouya as a burst linker and 'parent' is not so different.

Yesterday, according to what Utai had said, Kyouya lost his life when the huge trihedral mirrors of the Noh theatre "mirror room" fell on him. Utai happened to be there, probably that was not just it. The pieces of the broken mirror scratched and bled to cause the wound, Young Utai had tried to stop it. But, as a result, Kyouya was killed.

The tragic scene was created in Haruyuki's mind, abruptly became aware of it, both eyes opened wide.

Shinomiya Utai's duel avatar, "Shrine Maiden of Fire" Ardor Maiden. Upper half snow white, lower half scarlet in that figure... that purity, but that deep and heavy red color, must have come from...

Haruyuki looked away from Hou, he saw Utai was standing right beside him. Wearing the pure white uniform of Matsunogi school, wearing her small red boots.

Haruyuki felt as though his eyes could read all of her thoughts, Utai had a faint smile, she nodded approvingly.

UI: At the end of that day, my dual avatar, little by little the hakama changed colour. Light pale red at first... becoming a deep scarlet colour. That is, probably the colour of big brother Kyouya's blood.

After that, the two of them continued to work in silence. The garbage collected from sweeping the hut was finally finished, and the diary file submitted.

All duties completed but, Haruyuki found it difficult to open his mouth.

Every duel avatar is a personality symbolised with a colour, on the surface the two tone colour design is not something that many have. For example, Haruyuki's Silver Crow, divided into silver metallic armour parts and matte grey body parts.

That's why, If the upper body was white, the lower body would be pink how the avatar would be shown, the difference in color would not be questioned by others. Colour circle would classify as " Ultra long distance White type" would be the closest fit.

Ardor Maiden's uniqueness, Original and scarlet color creation giving two colours to the body. Yesterday, Utai's reason was, «Original image» and «Child of Noh Image» explaining why there was a dual nature. But, that was not all of it. Receiving the scar

from her brother with her little hand, the flow of blood she desperately tried to stop that day, Utai's half is a deep red stain.

That's why, the duel avatar's hakama colour changed — therefore probably, that's why Utai lost her voice...

“... I'm sorry, Shinomiya-san”

Haruyuki suddenly apologises, in front of the bench Utai carrying a school bag turned around, small neck tilted.

“Yesterday, so many things you shared... That was to help me obtain «Theoretic Mirror»...But I, starting last night, I had all these things filling up in my head.”

Yesterday evening, from Utai's house if he had gone straight home, If he had thought more carefully during Nakano area's battle. Such that Haruyuki's encounter with Wolfram Cerberus, if he hadn't lost so completely, he could've thought more carefully on the theory of a “Mirror”. And Utai telling him the extraordinarily tragic story of her brother's death. To repay that - he could only learn to master the mirror ability as quickly as possible — and since last night's defeat, it was the only thing he could care about.

“... I am so sorry. But... But... I...”

There was nothing else to say, Haruyuki went into a deep depression.

Then Utai, curtly carried her school bag on her back, red boots stepping straight forward through a puddle. Stopping right right in front of him, smiling happily.

[UI> There is no need to apologise. Because, since earlier I was having fun working here you know?]

“U..m. Fun. To, about what...?”

[UI> Of course... Ku-san is, planning to get revenge on Wolfram Cerberus-san's, from the special seats I get to observe it.]

“...H, huh?”

[UI> It's about time isn't it. Then, let's hurry over.]

After that, no more words were shared with an open red umbrella in front of Haruyuki. Haruyuki then absent-mindedly took his bag from the bench, unfolding the umbrella and open it. Opening it made a small noise, as if on cue, the rain became stronger.

“Umm, that... about Cerberus, from Kuroyukihime-senpai...?”

The sound of rainfall was not going to lose, when the small volume had to be raised, Utai naturally just nodded.

[UI> Yes. In the place of Sa-chan and Fu-ne, I am to watch Ku-san's Battle.]

“Oh, is that so...”

---Stiffly, everything had to go well today, or else tomorrow's special training menu is two times... no three times more. Shivering in his head, doubt still creeping and still clinging to the legs. Walking with Haruyuki, Utai looks up from the edge of the umbrella, right hand's fingers outstretched excitedly.

[UI> Arita-kun, My thought is... Yesterday, Ku-san, meeting Cerberus-san was a divine intervention.]

“Meeting... on purpose?”

[UI> Yes, the power to completely counter a light attribute attack «Theoretic Mirror» ability, the power to completely return a physical attack «Null Physical» ability, being opposites of the same power made it very powerful, it felt that way to me. Therefore, the fight with Cerberus-san surely, Ku-san's understanding the importance of the «Mirror» will grow, it is something important.]

“Is... that so...”

Haruyuki muttered, at that moment. Thinking Hou was fully asleep, inside the hut the sound of large wings struck, it cried out a rare “Gyu”. Quickly Utai reacted,
UI: Oh, Hou-san is also saying good luck.

With a bitter smile, Haruyuki looked to the scops owl's breeding hut, next nodding to Utai under her red umbrella.

“..Yes. If I did not come here, using «Theoretic Mirror» as an excuse, it would've looked like running away from a rematch. Eventually every effort comes together, Senpai told me that before.”

[UI> That's right!.

She hit the enter key emphatically, that hand held on to Haruyuki's left wrist. Turning around, her boot-clad feet stepped into the rain.

Going to the front of the backyard, through the school gates to the left. A short distance away walking into the wide Oume road.

Yesterday, entering the south of Nakano-ku from Minami street, Haruyuki's group was currently at the second Nakano battlefield Suginami's second largest area stretching north and south, as long as you headed east you can go anywhere.

While walking side by side with Utai along the east sidewalk, Haruyuki opened a navigational map on his virtual desktop. Adjusting the magnification of the map, displaying the fight with Cerberus near Nakano station he muttered to himself.

"Walking like this for 1.5 kilometers gets you in the middle of the 2 areas but... If you go into Nakano station, I wonder if starting on a train from Koenji is better. Shinomiya-san would be coming from the opposite direction..."

Then, a calming voice from behind.

"From the train, I guess coming up from Oume road would be faster, I forget to use it usually..."

Head hurting from staring at the map, again, a voice startles him.

"You know, never noticing things as you go out of the school. Seriously Haru, anything that you aren't interested in might as well be invisible."

"Hmm, that's not it, he remembers the face of a same class student 80% of the ti...me"

Finally Haruyuki, noticed he was talking to a real voice, suddenly jumping. Spinning 180 degrees around his right hand holding the umbrella, looking back at him were the existence of two familiar faces.

"U...m, Taku! Chiyu!? Why are you here!?"

"You know Haru, we've been trying to get your attention, but it's like ordering at Yoshinoya..."

"Well, Then Chiyu, Taku... ---but that was, it looked like ???"

As he spoke, he imagined a beef bowl with extra sauce, then shook his head to say that he was not talking about that.

"S, so why are you here?"

Then, the shinai hanging from the left shoulder, a tall man holding a blue umbrella on his right hand ---Mayuzumi Takumu, deftly answering the question.

“Because of the rain, Chiyu and I finished club activities early, we thought of waiting at the school gate to support Haru.”

Continuing to walk near them, a girl carrying a large sports bag and wearing a shortcut --- Kurashima Chiyuri, smiling with an open mouth.

“While waiting, I made a bet with Takkun. Haru being preoccupied with the battle, whether you would notice us. The result happened perfectly! You know, you don’t have the eyes for it!”

“U...m, incidentally, which bet was which?”

“Isn’t obvious, me and Takkun won and Haru lost! Grab some banana soy milk with tapioca pearls on the way home okay!”

“Ch...o, what was with that one-sided request...”

Haruyuki was gulping bubbles, Chiyuri basks in the moment like a beam of light.

“In this rain, a close friend who wants to support you all the way through, such a thing is only natural!”

Damn, being silent, so far the sound of the cheerful exchange to which Utai remarked.

[U!> Of course I, was aware of them.]

Haruyuki apologised while touching both index fingers, as always Takumu’s nice timing help shows up.

“Here, the bus has come everyone.”

“Oh, yeah! Let’s run!”

Quickly, heading for the bus station passing Haruyuki, from Chiyuri’s back “Cmon, run already!” cried out.

Getting on the EV bus, luckily the rearmost row had been left vacant. There, starting from the right Haruyuki, Utai, Chiyuri and Takumu sat in that order, breathing a sigh of relief. Level of discomfort was better compared to the maximum rain of June. The airconditioning in the vehicle was heavenly.

“By the way, did Chiyu and Taku’s seniors tell you? I am going to Nakano”

From over Utai Chiyuri asked a question, shaking the childhood friend.

“No, I was listening to Takkun, Takkun was...”

“Guessed from experience, I guess. Thinking about Haru’s condition yesterday, I figured it out today that you would go out for revenge.”

And, saying that his childhood friend pushed his glasses up with his fingertips.

[UI> As expected of the combination.]

Utai had a look of admiration while typing this, “Haru is just easy to understand” Chiyuri said making a comment.

While having this conversation, the bus crosses over the Koenji intersection--- every other day Haruyuki would have a battle with Ash Roller in this place ---- consistently, the boundary to Nakano ward was approaching. The moment they changed areas, two more stops. Chiyuri’s face became more stern, in a loud voice Haruyuki confirmed.

“What do we do now, do we find a place to sit near Nakano station, or...”

“It’s raining, staying in the bus is enough, when we enter Nakano, start immediately.”

On Haruyuki’s instruction, the three people nod their heads at the same time. Completely leaning back into the seat, preparing in the seat, Haruyuki inhaled heavily.

Coming this far, getting scared can’t be helped. This thing, needs to be done.

The bus crossed the red boundary line in the AR display.

Waiting a second, keeping the volume low, but the burning feeling of determination building up inside, Haruyuki chanted the command.

“--- Burst Link!”

Chapter 14

The virtual battlegrounds produced by the Brain Burst program were completely unrelated to the time, season, and weather in the real world.

Hence, when Haruyuki turned into the duel avatar Silver Crow and entered the

accelerated world, he was somewhat shocked when it was also raining on the ingame Ome Street.

The bus had of course disappeared, so he fell from the height of his seat to the ground, disturbing a puddle. Looking up to the sky, there were grey clouds all around, similar to the «Thunder» stage, but the turbulent clouds were zooming towards the east from the west, and water droplets continuously fell. This was the «Rainstorm» stage.

The unique properties of this stage was that the intensity of the rain often fluctuated, and winds strong enough to have a small chance of causing objects onstage to self-destruct could blow all of a sudden. Some thinner buildings could even break apart, hence it was important to be cautious of one's surroundings.

In two breaths, Haruyuki had identified the Stage and revised its unique traits. He then looked at the opponent's HP Gauge in the top right hand corner of his vision. The name «Wolfram Cerberus» was written there. He had accelerated on the bus, sorted the Matching List by level from lowest to highest, then immediately selected to duel the name that was listed right on top of the list.

It surprised him somewhat to see that Cerberus was still Level 1 today. From what he knew yesterday, the victories against Tourmaline Shell (level 4), Frost Horn (level 5) and Silver Crow (also level 5), should have given him a large amount of points considering the levels between him and those opponents. Perhaps he was trying to avoid a situation like what Haruyuki had been through, and planned to save up enough points before going up to level 2 -

“But, that's not important right now.” Haruyuki finally looked at the guide cursor. The arrow pointed to the northeast, towards the Nakano Station area. There was also no audience in the vicinity, so looks like there was some distance between them. The three other people that were on the bus with Haruyuki should have automatically been moved to a point between Crow and Cerberus along with the audience when the automatic acceleration to spectate a duel began.

Shaking off the waterdrops on his visor, Haruyuki said again, “Alright, let's go!” He began running in the rain towards Nakano Station. Soon, Silver Crow reached his max speed, kicking up large amounts of spray behind him.

Yesterday, he had tried to use a ground attack, but had been stopped by the opponent, so he didn't plan to do that today, instead facing the opponent head on. But seeing that figure standing resolutely in the middle of the road, his back towards Nakano Station, he unconsciously felt some form of hesitation.

This battle was one that Haruyuki had started, so it was only polite that he seek out the opponent. But looking at the opponent so readily accepting the challenge, it made him feel as if the opponent was an old hand and he the newbie.

No, perhaps the way he should look at it was, since Cerberus wiped the floor with him yesterday, he's the challenger today. Comforting himself so, Haruyuki slowed down, stopping along Nakano Street at a point fifteen metres ahead of Cerberus. What differed from yesterday was that this was the south side of Nakano Station and as such there were no high-rise buildings. The audience that sat on the rooftops of the buildings flanking the road had also increased in number.

In the corner of his eye, Haruyuki confirmed the presence of the tall Cyan Pile, the petite Lime Bell, and the even smaller Ardor Maiden, at the same time gathering strength within himself, stood under the rain and said to his opponent:

"It's somewhat rude to come knocking so soon... but let me say this. I don't like losing all the time." Hearing that line, which to Haruyuki was already very provocative, the audience let out a small cheer. Once that was over, Cerberus replied in his same smooth voice,

"It's not, it makes me happy. Because so few people would come challenge me again so soon after a duel." In a way, those words also had an aggressive tone. The audience again exchanged whispers, and the temperature of the battlefield rose.

"Then let me put this on the record, if I lose today, I'll be back again tomorrow - but I hope there's no need for that." At Haruyuki's words, Cerberus laughed slightly - or at least that was what he thought.

"...Mr. Crow, you truly are excellent, just like everyone says. No, better, I don't mind having a few rounds with you too."

"Are you saying that I'll just be throwing myself to the wolves every time?"

"No... I'm saying that if I lose, I too will come looking for a rematch soon. I hope there won't be a need for that." His reply was respectful yet cold. But Haruyuki could feel that their mutual exchange had made the atmosphere even more tense. Apart from the claps of thunder, Haruyuki could feel another kind of spark across his entire body.

It seemed that Cerberus felt the same thing, and he lowered his head to look at his armor, then looked up again and said, "Then, I think we should start." He then raised both his hands, yelling to his left and right, "I'll be in your care!"

To this gesture, Haruyuki had bungled up a response yesterday. Today, he resolutely yelled back, "Same here! Now... take this!"

He lowered his posture, right foot on the slippery ground, feet raised, barely touching the ground, then charged forward.

At the same moment, Cerberus charged too, and at the points where the silver and grey armor had been, the raindrops were blasted away into small droplets. The two metal avatars dragged afterimages of white behind them, and in a split second shortened the fifteen-meter distance.

“Ugh!” Cerberus issued a punch with his right fist that moved his entire body,

“Ha!” So did Haruyuki.

At this point, both their special move gauges were empty. Since Cerberus could not use his «Material Conduction» ability, Haruyuki also did not need to use the «Sky Barraging Attack» that required the use of his wings.

Both their fists displaced the raindrops, closing in towards the opponent’s heads. But Cerberus showed no signs of dodging. He probably felt that since he had not yet shown his special ability, there should still be a very big difference in the strength of their armors, so getting hit too was not a problem.

His guess was right. If both their punches hit, the amount of damage Haruyuki would take would be around double his, but this was not Haruyuki’s intention.

He quickly moved away from the trajectory of the punch, used his palm and fingers to collect some raindrops, and with a flick of his wrist splashed it on Cerberus’ face. The water splashed all over the deep grey mask. Cerberus reflexively moved his head, resulting in his punch going off course.

“...!” Biting his teeth, Haruyuki tilted his head left with all he could. The super-hard fist brushed across the left of his mask, creating some white sparks. His HP gauge had dropped a few pixels, but he ignored that, using the left-turning momentum his body had in order to kick out his right leg.

A low sound of metal being struck could be heard, and some damage effects could be seen on Cerberus’ left knee. His HP gauge dropped by around five percent. This meant that he had indeed struck the opponent first.

“First blood is mine today!” Haruyuki cheered inside, but he did not retreat, instead using his left palm to deal another water attack on the unsteady Cerberus in order to take out his vision. Then he attacked the right leg, and this time he hit the side of the torso where the armor was weaker, dropping the HP gauge by another seven percent.

At this point Cerberus lowered his body, and using the same trick with his legs as yesterday, took a big jump backwards. He did not react immediately, deciding to first escaping the opponent's close range attack, showing some form of battlefield awareness.

Haruyuki could also choose to charge ahead to close the gap, but only with vision tricks and regular attacks, there was no way to easily take the almost ninety percent of held that remained. And since the opponent had the «Material Conduction» ability, even the weak parts could also turn into invincible armor. The battle would only really begin once he did that.

Hence, Haruyuki had also decided to retreat, instead of pursuing Cerberus. The two of them separated about ten metres apart, and chatter could be heard from the rooftops.

Cerberus, ignoring what the audience said, raised himself from the ground, his vision constantly focused on Haruyuki, and said, "... I didn't expect that rain could be used in that way."

"It's not easy to gather rain in your hand without dispersing it." replied Haruyuki. Cerberus stretched out his right hand, his palm moving in the air. But the palm only just caused raindrops to scatter, and could not collect a pool of water, unlike Crow. Actually, this trick used a method Kuroyukihime had taught Haruyuki.

"Ah, I see... Looks like it isn't so easy to copy after all."

"If it was, I wouldn't have it easy. I trained quite a while to be able to do this." Hearing Haruyuki say that, Cerberus lowered his right hand that had been held out, and tightened it into a fist. Haruyuki thought that he had finally become sad, but...

"... I'm happy. There's still so many things to learn in this world, so many things to train!" Hearing his refreshing yell, Haruyuki was speechless. This Wolfram Cerberus was probably one of the toughest Burst Linkers that Haruyuki had ever faced, and at the same time was the most optimistic. Under that hard armor, there probably wasn't a single negative emotion at all.

Regrettably, there could be no such thing like that.

Great strength could only come from an equally great mental scar. Like what Manganese Blade had said yesterday, that was the fundamental rule of the accelerated world. Cerberus' strength was the manifestation of his «inner wound», and the fact that he himself had not realized the existence of that wound, was the same.

Thinking about that, the words «mental scar» caused Haruyuki's brain to hurt a bit. But he quickly shook his head to dispel the notion. Now, apart from battle, he should not think about anything. Now the only thing to do was to expend all his effort and defeat the enemy. That was the entire reason why he stood here.

Cerberus probably resonated with Haruyuki's thoughts, and the mood he had somewhat changed. He tightened his left hand, straightened his body, and with a clang throughout his armor, the wolf-like mask said in a more serious voice,

“Then... it might be a bit early, but please allow me to demonstrate my skill!” Both his fists were raised to the front of his body, the posture took when one was activating a special move.

“Alright, come, Cerberus!” yelled Haruyuki too, at the same time crossing his fists in front of his chest.

Cerberus' fists collided with force, and the sparks from the collision caused the visor to fully enclose. Once the visor was fully closed, the part of the face that previously looked like ferocious fangs now looked like nothing special, but the systematic changes it hid was far from normal. He was now under the protection of the «Material Conduction» ability. Never mind kicks or punches, even a close range weapon like a sword or a hammer could be fully deflected. Haruyuki had not noticed it yesterday, but looking at Cerberus' special attack gauge, it was slowly decreasing, indicating that this defensive attack was not one of the «Incarnate System».

At the same time as Wolfram Cerberus activating his ability, Silver Crow too quickly moved his crossed arms to his sides.

The metal wings folded into his back let out a loud sound and opened. This was the preparation of the «Flight» ability, though his special attack gauge had not begun to decrease - it would only do so when he was actually flying. But since the burn rate of «Flight» was slightly faster than that of «Material Conduction», if both sides fully exploited their abilities, the actual burn rate should be somewhat equal.

From 1800 seconds, the countdown was now still above 1000, but the dozens of spectators all felt that this was the highlight of the battle and fell silent. If the tension between them was reflected in the system, perhaps even though the rain still fell, there would be a small part of ground where it would quickly boil over.

Haruyuki kept his eye unwaveringly on Cerberus, but he could feel that out of the watches focusing on him, the feelings of his three comrades stood out. No, even those that were not there, their emotions were also in his heart.

Taku, Chiyu, Shinomiya-san... as well as Master Fuuko and Kuroyukihime-senpai, just you watch. I will now... give my all to this battle!

-- Whoa!" Haruyuki roared, and moved.

The step of his right foot, along with the thrust from his wings, was at least thrice as fast as the charge previously. The jet stream was enough to blow away the rain droplets in the sky, closing the ten-meter gap in the blink of an eye while charging forward. But this was just a feint, and he would quickly deflect to the right just before Cerberus and attempt to get to the opponent's back.

But, faced with this kind of «aerial continuous attack», the genius newbie had managed to react. Yesterday, when they had fought, he had been slightly incapable of keeping up with Haruyuki's three-dimensional movement, but today he quickly pivoted on his left foot, keeping his front towards his opponent, and using his momentum to kick with his right foot.

Such quick developments in battle had been expected by Haruyuki. In his mind, he replayed the special training he had had with Kuroyukihime during lunch break.

"Whatever you showed Cerberus yesterday, don't even think of using it today!"

"But, this doesn't mean that the move is useless! With some thought and adaptation, all moves can be changed... no, improved, to fit the situation!"

"Yes, senpai!" yelled Haruyuki in his mind, using the armor of his left arm to obstruct Cerberus' rapidly moving right leg. From where metal and metal clashed, bright sparks could be seen, and his forearm felt as if it had been crushed.

If things were that simple, considering the original thickness, the difference in weight, and «Material Conduction», pretty much only Silver Crow's armor would be destroyed, and he should hence take a large amount of damage.

Even while he tried using his left hand to catch the kick, he was not rebounded, but rather tried to synchronize his and Cerberus' turning, hence easing the force. It took quite a large amount of accuracy to match it with his limbs and wings, but Haruyuki had enough concentration to match every action.

This «block» that had almost caused his arm to split apart actually only took half a second, but to Haruyuki it felt like forever. Even though his brain cells were almost fried, he still managed to make it through this harrowing experience, and successfully

managed to build up enough momentum from this sure-kill kick in order to move on to the next phase.

“Ah...!” Haruyuki quickly took a deep breath, and added an additional moment force to his left hand that was grabbing Cerberus’ right leg. Aiming the leg he had kicked out, which interfered with the turning momentum, forcing it from outward in. As long as it was aimed properly, Haruyuki should be able to relieve himself of Cerberus’ leg without taking damage.

This was what he had not bothered with yesterday... or to be precise, he forgot. It was also what Kuroyukihime had taught him, «guard reversal» . His trick of using his hands to collect the falling raindrops was also such a trick. And at lunch today, in five successive battles, Kuroyukihime had taught him this. Again, in his mind, he heard her voice, “Haruyuki, this is only stage one. But of course there are still many stages ahead!”

“Not only must you be able to block while avoiding damage, if you can even dodge in the first place, you take much lesser risks. These skills are not only for defense, if you can convert it to an attack to it becomes more useful!”

“- Yes, senpai!” said Haruyuki in his mind, as he focused on attacking. As a rather unexplainable sound could be heard, the sensation of acceleration came, and there were some changes to the world’s colour palette. To Haruyuki, even the ceaseless rain seemed to have stopped in the sky.

He silently named the skill he had just performed «Guard Reversal». But thinking about it, that sounded too pompous. Because previously, Haruyuki had only been able to follow his opponents’ moves, and was not able to fight back. If he was unable to send the force back, there was no place for self-praise.

Wolfram Cerberus’ turning axis had already been moved to the point where his right leg connected with Haruyuki’s left arm. This resulted in him losing balance and falling away. But if this was the case, the other side would only be thrown down onto the ground, and probably would not be able to get up again after falling to make the next attack. As Kuroyukihime had said, it thus lost the meaning of using a risky defense skill like Guard Reversal.

“Whoa!” With a short howl, he quickly performed the contrasting move of using his right wing to lift himself while descending with his left wing. This would cause his entire body to tilt left. But no, it wasn’t that simple. A force that threatened to turn him over nearly crushed the entire avatar.

Haruyuki transmitted this entire force to Cerberus’ right leg, touching his left hand.

“...!” From below the closed wolf-like visor came a rather shocked feeling. Looking at

Silver Crow's body, which was turning like a screw, his own leg still stuck inside, it was no wonder he was shocked. But the move had not yet ended.

"Ugh... ah!" Haruyuki stood up again after flipping left, raised both his hands, letting out the turning momentum. Cerberus, sucked in by this turning momentum, was sent flying.

He landed on the road about ten metres away, splashing plenty of puddles. After rolling for a while, he finally hit the roadside barrier and stopped.

After a long silence.

"Whoaaaaaa!" The audience cheered in unison. The masses were shocked not because of Haruyuki's beautiful move, but because they had seen Wolfram Cerberus' HP bar drop by a full twenty per cent.

"Why... is it still dropping? Didn't that kid turn on «Material Conduction»?"

"Don't ask me! It's because of the water on the roadside... no, it can't be." "Of course, water doesn't have any effects on metal avatars, does it!" The audience that had erupted in animated conversation soon fell silent. Because with nimble movements, Cerberus had stood up again, and once again got into an attack position.

"It's still early!" he said, in his cheery voice, tearing apart the rain as he jumped to five metres ahead of Haruyuki. It was almost as if he had thought that, since his leg was being turned, that it was because the kick itself was a turning action, so this time he used a jumping attack that did not involve any turning on his avatar.

His judgement and adaptability were truly amazing, even this flight-like kick was full of charm, almost as if it could jump between two or three cracked buildings in the «Thunderstorm» stage.

But...

"...FOOLISH!" yelled Haruyuki, this time catching Cerberus' leg with his right palm, and immediately moving his wings to use himself as a pivot. He caught the enemy's entire body in this fearsome action, causing the opponent to once again fall onto the ground. As the angle at which he fell had been sharper, Cerberus' small body let out a low banging sound, causing a crack to form on the asphalt road. His health bar lost another twenty per cent, and since he had taken more than fifty per cent of damage, the bar turned yellow.

"How... how marvellous, he turned Cerberus yellow..."

"Will Crow really have his revenge?"

“But... why would there be damage? Isn't the road a material?”

A soft yet stern voice spoke up from the audience. “...ah, so I see. It's the difference between «direct» and «indirect» attacks?”

Harruyuki looked to his right, to see a deep-blue coloured female samurai avatar standing in the rain. She had a single horn on her helmet, so she must be Manganese Blade. And today, standing beside her, was the twin-horned Cobalt Blade.

“...Manganese-san really isn't simple.” thought Haruyuki to himself, as he quickly pulled away from Cerberus, unmoving on the ground.

Just now one of the audience was correct. Roads or structures were only hard objects. Using these objects to deal damage was considered material damage, which should have no effect against the «Material Conduction» enabled Cerberus. Even if he was hit upon a building, or attacking him with concrete blocks, should have no effect on Cerberus.

But, with the roads, it was different. Firstly, in the virtual battle spaces of Brain Burst, the ground, including roads, could not be destroyed. From another perspective, this meant that the ground shared Cerberus' attribute of «no effect against materials».

Also, in all fighting games from the previous century until now, hitting and tripping were considered different attacks. The old 2D fighting games Haruyuki collected were also the same, where even all kinds of defenses were unable to block a tripping attack, with almost no exceptions.

Of course he had not completely understood in. But in training with Kuroyukihime, he had noted that even hitting attacks that did not hit but caused the opponent to trip could also cause damage. Hence, he had proposed re-learning «Guard Reversal». And in that one day and one night, he had not been able to learn how to single-handedly reverse the opponent's attack, but as long as he used his «Aerial Barrage» skill, and merged it with the «Guard Reversal» techniques, he might be able to redirect the opponent's attacks, hence learning the true deflection skill.

Haruyuki did not know how many times his armor had been cut by Black Lotus' sword arms to get to this stage. After meeting that fearsome blade, named «Terminate Sword», even Cerberus' extremely hard kicks and punches also felt a bit soft to him. To achieve a guard reversal, one did not think of just forcing the attack back, but rather, to accept and meld with it. If one's heart fell vulnerable, they would not be able to succeed.

... if yesterday's me tried Guard Reversal, he probably couldn't make it work.

Thinking to himself, Haruyuki watched as Wolfram Cerberus slowly crawled up. The rain water falling down the tungsten armor's chinks did not make it look hard at all, but rather soft on the contrary. The sharp-edged helmet, and the shoulders adorned with sharp protusions, looked like fearsome weapons yesterday, but today it looked like they were signs of his insides.

Maybe... Maybe, yesterday's defeat was... because I was trying too hard to hit back? Maybe all the fundamental principles are the same? To take the attack, meld. Maybe this isn't just the principle of Guard Reversal... but more basic...

Haruyuki thought such things in his head. But he was interrupted by Cerberus's low yell after getting up: "It's still... still early!"

The young wolf had finally put aside all decorum. He lowered his body, and with a crack sound lifted his feet and began to make an unchanging forward charge.

He probably intended to use his strongest weapon - the headbutt that had broken Haruyuki's helmet yesterday. The strength of that attack was really shocking, and in another situation the differences in their health bars would be immediately swapped. But... "If the enemy attempts a grant attack, you welcome it! Because this means the opponent is afraid!"

- Yes! "Whoawhoawhoa!" yelled Haruyuki, as he too charged towards Cerberus. Only that he didn't plan to use a headbutt to meet the opponent's headbutt. At the point where they connected, he used his wings to provide some thrust, lowering his body until it nearly touched the ground, and snuck into Cerberus' lower parts. Then using his right hand to grab the opponent's neck, he hastily turned right.

"DONG!" The loudest sound so far shook the entire space. A great area of raindrops immediately turned to steam, causing the entire space to fog up. Once the steam had dispersed, what Haruyuki and the audience saw was -

Over half of Wolfram Cerberus' head and shoulders was buried into the supposedly undamageable floor, his person lying prone. Haruyuki used a judo supine flex to cause the opponent to fall downwards, causing the entire momentum of the headbutt to be redirected into the ground.

Cerberus' HP bar had only ten percent remaining and was dyed red. His four limbs, raised towards the sky, fell onto the ground, and Haruyuki too flipped so that he stood on one knee.

At this point, a low voice could be heard in the rain.

“... I admit defeat... really, you have your revenge. But... I'm happy. In this world, there must be many people as strong as you...” Haruyuki was unable to reply. From point-blank range, he looked at the visor of Cerberus who could not get up from the ground. Both parts of the visor were still joined together, but from close it looked like it was not completely closed, leaving an approximately one-centimetre gap. Thinking about it, if there was no gap, maybe he could not see out. But inside was darkness, and no light could be seen.

“...but, I won't always lose. I'll get stronger. And next time, it'll be me who sees through your skills.” Even in this situation, Cerberus' words bore no ill will. His attitude still remained bright, cheery, and full of youth.

But -

Was [duelling] really like this?

When someone who had absolute confidence in himself was seen through, and furthermore beaten to a pulp in front of such a big audience, with more time remaining than yesterday. Even though Haruyuki had only had his helmet scratched in the beginning, it looked like he had incurred some big wounds.

Even so, Cerberus had still readily admitted his loss. This might be the truth, but perhaps...

“... is this what you really mean?” Haruyuki couldn't stop himself from asking that question.

The storm got even more intense, and the rain battered down mercilessly on the two metal avatars. Like this, the audience would not be able to hear their conversation. Still, Cerberus who remained half immersed into the ground did not move. He let the rain batter down on him, as if he had become a metal statue.

Then suddenly -

In front of Haruyuki's eyes, Cerberus' helmet let out a loud clang, the one-centimetre gap closing and leaving only a teeth line thinner than thread. That way, he would not be able to see anything outside.

Haruyuki, not knowing what it meant, creased his brow.

What happened next was even harder for him to explain.

Cerberus' left shoulder let out a metal clanging sound too. From the looks of it, what was originally a thread-like teeth line, had expanded to about a centimeter wide.

It looked like... as if the head had swapped with the shoulders.

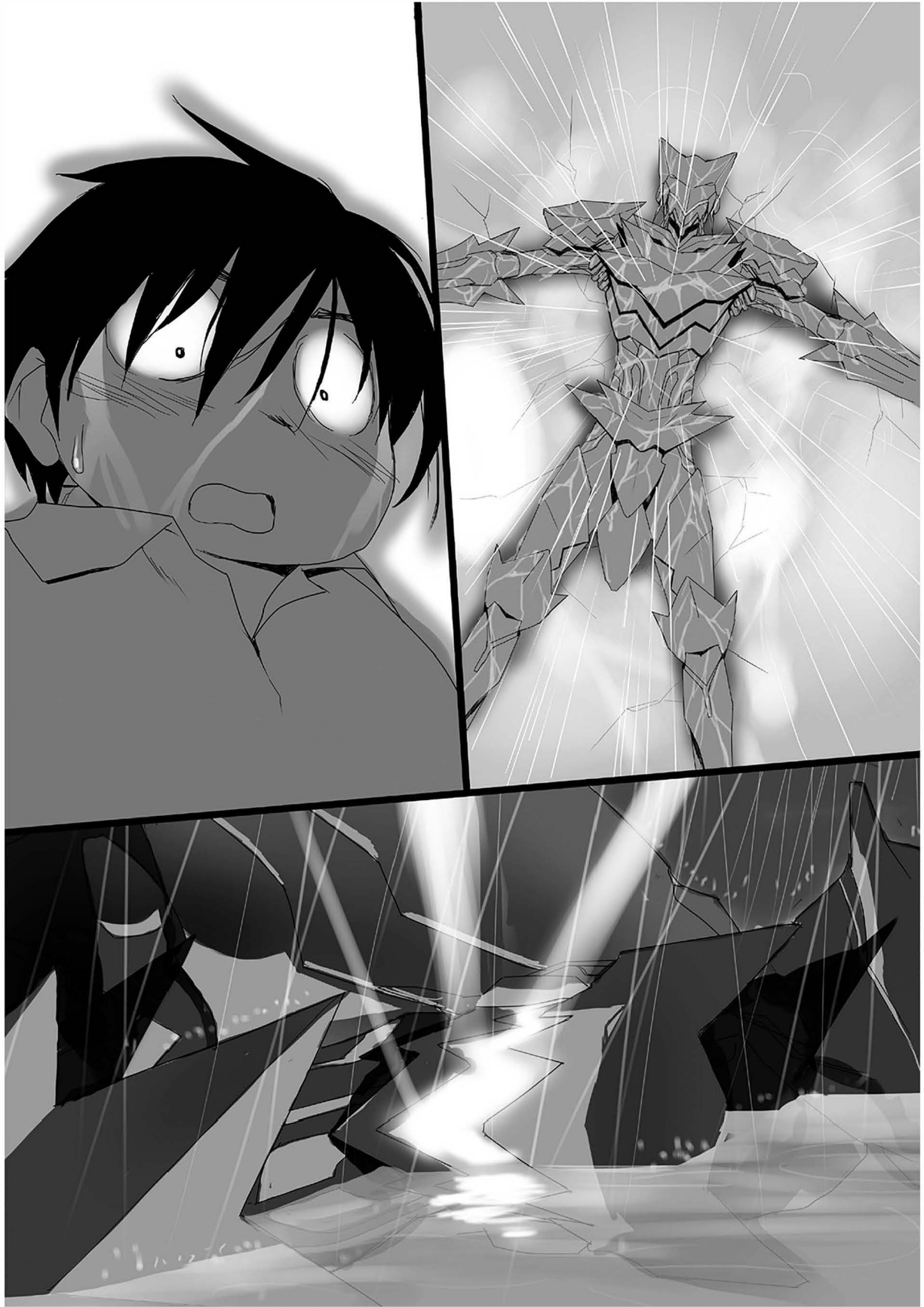
Then, as Haruyuki thought that.

The gap that had opened in the shoulder armor let out a red light.

As Haruyuki watched, the teeth-like gap in the shoulder began to [talk].

“... finally, it's my turn...”

(to be continued)



Author's Notes

Hello everyone, I am Kawahara Reki, once again presenting to my readers this book, «Accel World Volume 11: Carbide Wolf».

To tell you something, this volume is my twentieth one if we count my other series. And this “20” volume milestone was the goal I set myself in the beginning.

I started with my debut back on September 2, 2009 and have been releasing a book every other month, so it would be a total of three years and two months since then. Looking back, it feels like it has been a really long time, but at the same time it feels like it has passed in a flash. Fortunately, I haven't encountered any major problems or serious setbacks, and successfully reached my goal of twenty volumes... but why did I set my goal at twenty books? Because I initially thought that “if I were able to write so many volumes, I would probably be able to see a conclusion for Accel World (and the other series)” (haha).

But, as you can see, never mind the ending, even how far the story has progressed is in this vague state... Even though Haruyuki the main character has grown a lot, there hasn't been any progress between him and the female lead Kuroyukihime, the legion only managed to get up to six members, and it hasn't expanded its territory from Suginami, this is a bit out of my expectations. I obviously thought that was bad so I originally intended to make a lot of plot progression in this volume, but no matter how much I wrote and rewrote, it didn't come up, and at the end I still had to write the words “to be continued”! I believe everyone must be getting tired from this too, but if you allow me to make some excuses for a bit, when a story continues on for this long, it could be said it becomes a bit hard to control, or rather it's like the writer can only get pulled over to the route the story itself wants to take. Of course, that's from my perspective.

But from another angle, I believe that being able to serialize so many volumes, be it for the author of the story, is a very fortunate thing, hence even after reaching this goal, I won't slack off, and will continue to bring what I can write to all you readers.

Sorry to mention this last, but being able to reach this 20 volume goal, is thanks to the support and love given by the readers. I would like to take this opportunity to once again thank everyone, at the same time I seek your continued support, so that I can go towards the next twenty volumes.

On a side note, for the [Accel World Duel Avatar Creation Competition] that took place in November 2011, thank you all for the many submissions we received.. Looking at the over 450 fascinating Duel Avatars that were sent in really made me squeal happily, and after careful deliberation, I would like to announce the three Duel Avatars that will be used in this work.

Firstly, from a “Satohyo Yamaneko”, «Peach Parasol», the uniformity in the Duel Avatar design, and the idea for the parasol-type Enhanced Armament (on it, it said [Hopping Shoot]) immediately caught my eye, like now I’m thinking “this guy is definitely joining the Red legion” kind of thoughts.

Secondly, from a “Nagomi”, «Chocolat Puppeteer», that delicious-sounding armor material KOed me instantly (LOL). I’m still thinking of which Legion he’ll be part of, but I hope that when it’s time for his appearance this avatar can let everyone have a lickin’ good... no, a really good time!

Lastly, from “Alt”, «Tungsten Wolfram», if I were to give a prize, it would be a [miracle] prize? As for why it’s a miracle, it’s because by the time the contest started, I had already written big parts of this volume 11. But, the character concept on the entry was largely similar to Wolfram Cerberus who had shown up in this volume! This really did surprise me (LOL). Though in reality their design and abilities are a bit different, from volume 12 I plan to also use some of “Alt’s” ideas, which hopefully can help Haruyuki’s new opponent Cerberus be more awesome.

As I write this afterword in February 2012, a new round of Avatar design competition is open for submissions, and we’ve received a lot too. We plan to use some more characters in this work, so please look forward to it!

I guess when this volume 11 is released, the TV anime Accel World’s first episode will have already aired. This is the result of the various staff and voice actors working at accelerated speed to make it possible. So readers, please do give your support to the upcoming anime and game versions of Accel World as well.

Also, thanks to the artist HiMA-sensei for so passionately drawing the newly-debuting Cerberus, also Utai who plays a major part in this volume. Thanks too to my editor Miki-sensei, whose immense workload makes me worry for when he can sleep, and to the sub-editor Tsuchiya-san. I will work hard too!

A certain day in February 2012

kawahara Reki

Special illustration (page 71 SD avatars): Kurusu Tatsuya

Credits

Author: Kawahara Reki

Illustrator: HiMA

Translation and editing: ARS Translation Team

Illustration: ruranobe.ru

We do not take any credit for this translation. Please support the official release.

アクセル弁当⑨ れき

